

Support groups at Pennridge address

By Ryan Phillips

Staff writer

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For many students, school equals stress, isolation and a list of any other problems that could keep them from meeting their full potential, both in an academic and social sense. It is because of these emerging problems that people like Judith Higgins, director of guidance and student support groups for Pennridge school district, felt a system of support groups needed to be designed for students to overcome their problems.

"Overall, support groups can help students with problem solving skills, they reduce isolation and the kids make friends in the group," said Higgins, who surveyed common problems in the district two years ago so support groups could be formed. "A lot

of times that one friend will be enough to get them through."

Higgins oversees school counselors from all schools in the district who reach out to students who may come from abusive or neglectful families, have severe emotional problems or have trouble coping in a general school setting. According to Higgins, support groups like those set up in the district not only improve academics, but help achieve a positive atmosphere in which students can grow.

Each marking period, topics for support groups like stress and anger management, diversity and grief and loss are selected based on the needs and interests of the students. At Pennridge High School, counselors meet with students during the school day, but rotate the meeting times so the students doesn't miss more

than one class a month. Students must get signed permission from their parents before they attend a support group and only the administration and main office have a list of those students enrolled in support groups, for class attendance purposes.

Rick Cobb, school counselor for Pennridge High School, has been mediating support groups for 10 years and although he seldom gets to see the end result of his guidance, he said the benefits of these groups are many.

"One of the main benefits is that these kids find out that they're not alone with the feelings and issues that they're dealing with," said Cobb, who now mediates an after-care mental health group.

In the after-care mental health group, Cobb helps kids who have been hospitalized for

variety of student problems

depression, suicide and other emotional problems. As many as 10 students meet with Cobb once a week to work through their difficulties.

"A lot of people have written these kids (in no particular group) off as unreachable or as losers," Cobb said. "It's good to have people who can see beyond all that."

In her decisions group for girls, Tracy Hill, also a PHS counselor, deals with girls who have made poor choices regarding sex, sneaking out and choice of friends. Most of the students Cobb and Hill see are from unstable families and as a result have a hard time with keeping up with their schoolwork, said Hill.

"A lot of these girls have been suspended, kicked out of their homes or are in trouble with the law," Hill said. "We usually start by rating everyone's week from one to five, then usually there is a dire issue with someone that needs to be addressed. The average is a two, and I've never got

ten a five from anyone."

Hill works closely with Alicia Krier, the school's social worker, with these girls to help them learn a better sense of judgment. After a weekend, many of the girls come to the support group and talk about staying out until 4 a.m. or getting into cars with strange men, said Hill. If a student is involved in a situation where their life is threatened or endangered in any way, the counselors are obligated to notify the student's parents.

However, despite these troublesome obstacles, students from the support groups are able to take tips from the counselors and participate in helping others.

"The insights that some of these kids gather are surprising," Cobb said. "Sometimes it gets very emotional."

Hill also sees the same connections being made between students. She made reference to a girl who has been in a support group of Hill's for three years and who has watched out for the

newer members in the group.

The support groups in the middle and elementary levels are more activity oriented to give the groups more direction, said Edward DeViscio, eighth grade counselor for Penn Central Middle School, who uses a working model steam engine to demonstrate accumulating anger in his anger management class.

"The students in the anger management group have learned skills, but it doesn't mean it won't pop up again," DeViscio explained. "I try to get them to put a label on their anger and teach them different ways of handling anger."

Not every student who passes through the doors of a support group is going to overcome his problems in a series of weekly sessions, and many times the fruits of the counselor's labor goes unrecognized, but Cobb said he's helped students who tell him at graduation that without the support group, they wouldn't have made it through.