

Health

Parental consent—TeenScheme sets the record wrong

By Evelyn Pringle

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July 19, 2005—On July 6, TeenScreen's website posted the following statement: "Recently, TeenScreen has seen growing amounts of inaccurate, intentionally deceptive misinformation about mental health screening and the TeenScreen Program proliferating primarily through one or two individuals on the Internet. Some of this inaccurate information has been posted on other websites."

In its own defense, TeenScheme addressed several points. In this article, I will limit my remarks to its responses to whether it endorses Bush's plan to screen all school kids and whether it actually does seek parental consent before screening children.

Here is TeenScheme's response to the question: I have heard about active vs. passive consent. What does this mean?

"Active consent requires parents to sign and return a consent form if they want their child to participate in screening. Passive consent, which is also referred to as waiver-of-consent or opt-out consent, requires parents to return a provided form only if they do not want their child to participate in the screening. When using this type of consent, letters must be mailed directly home to parents to ensure that they reach the intended readers. Local TeenScreen programs often adopt the consent procedures used by their local sponsors or school districts for similar activities. Parental consent must be obtained in order for youth to participate in the TeenScreen Program. The Columbia University TeenScreen Program recommends active consent as a best practice. Currently 85 percent of TeenScreen programs use active parental consent."

This response almost sounds like TeenScheme is appropriately concerned when it comes to protecting parental rights. However, if it truly does promote active consent as the best practice, a person has to wonder why the Fall 2003 Teenscreen newsletter is devoted to explaining ways to outfox parents when it comes to the laws that govern parental consent.

The newsletter explains how TeenScreen may be able to get around the "Protection of Pupil Rights Act" (PPRA) that requires written parental consent, by having the boards of education approve the survey as a part of the educational program.

"PPRA is a federal law that protects the rights of parents by making instructional materials available for their inspection if the materials are to be used in connection with a survey, analysis, or evaluation in which their child is participating and which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The law also requires written parental consent before minors are required to take part in such a survey, analysis, or evaluation.

"If your local mental health screening program is approved by the Board of Education as part of the educational program, you are not required to get active parental consent under PPRA. Passive consent is sufficient in this circumstance."

The underlying inference in the newsletter is that the process of obtaining any consent is a pain-in-the-butt nuisance, but unfortunately, necessary for covering-your-own-butt under the law. For instance it says: "It is best to recommend that, if passive consent is obtained from parents, then active consent should be sought from participants as a safeguard."

The newsletter goes on to say that if schools would screen all children as a matter of policy, the survey could be administered without parental consent:

"Active parental consent must be obtained, however, if a child is going to be removed from an instructional activity for screening. However, if the screening will be given to all students, as opposed to some, it becomes part of the curriculum and no longer requires active parental consent (i.e., if all 9th graders will be screened as a matter of policy, it is considered part of the curriculum)."

But of course we know that this will never happen because, on its website, Teenscheme says it does not endorse screening all kids in response to this question: Does the Columbia University TeenScreen Program endorse mandated mental health screening for all teens?

"No. The Columbia University TeenScreen Program does not endorse or support government mandated screening. The TeenScreen program is offered only to communities that want to sponsor suicide prevention and mental health check-up programs," it said.

Boy, finding out that TeenScheme did not support the plan to screen all school kids sure made me feel better. Or it did until I decided to go check out a few other TeenScheme newsletters and read about what they pulled in Pennsylvania in order to screen every 9th grade student in record time.

The Spring 2004 newsletter states: "By implementing the screening process through the Student Assistance Program (SAP) already in place within the district's schools, the Erie TeenScreen Program was able to quickly conduct close to 1,000 screenings using the computerized Diagnostic Predictive Scales (DPS) screening tool."

"After completing the pilot," the newsletter said, "the Columbia University TeenScreen staff and the Erie School District immediately designed a proposal to administer the assessment to every 9th grade student in the district."

"Our goal was to screen all four high schools in the district in 12 weeks," Christiansen notes. "This meant screening an average of 100 to 250 students per week."

According to the newsletter, "The Erie TeenScreen program accomplished its goal. The team screened almost 1,000 students by the end of the 12-week time period."

And it gets better. Teenscheme really hit pay dirt in Pennsylvania. According to the newsletter, in December 2003, representatives of the TeenScreen Program provided the sole testimony before Pennsylvania legislative committees in favor of a resolution that states that "every child should be screened for mental illness once in their youth in order to identify mental illness and prevent suicide among youth." The resolution passed.

In directing people on what to say while pushing the TeenScheme agenda to lawmakers, under talking points, the newsletter told its promoters to specifically tell them: "We need to ensure that every American teen receives a mental health check-up once in their youth."

And here's how the newsletter says TeenScheme got around that pesky little legal matter of obtaining parental consent before screening kids in Pennsylvania:

"Erie was able to use waiver of consent with 1,200 parents of 9th graders by sending the letter on the superintendent's stationery, providing one centralized number for parents' concerns, keeping a copy of

the survey available for review, and making the principal's office aware of the significance of returned consent forms," the newsletter said.

Below is TeenScreen's answer to the question: "Are individual screening results shared with Columbia University?"

"Individual screening results are not shared with TeenScreen staff at Columbia University. Only aggregate data (e.g., total number screened at the site) and qualitative information (e.g., feedback on how the program is working) are shared with Columbia. The aggregate data and information we collect from local TeenScreen sites are used solely for program evaluation and quality assurance purposes."

Do not buy that line for one second. It claims to need numbers for "program evaluation." I say it needs the numbers for legalized drug dealing.

The truth is, the results from the surveys will be fed to the pharmaceutical industry and sales representatives will be dispatched at record speed to specific areas where doctors will be writing out the most prescriptions. There will be a well-beaten path leading to each area of the country identified.

Student names are not needed for this marketing scheme, all that is required for success are the total number of kids labeled mentally ill and the specific areas where they live and thousands of new customers will sprout up all across the county. It's a brilliant scheme.

So who are we to believe? TeenScheme swears it always obtains parental consent and that it does not provide students with a diagnose of a mental illness.

However, a family in Indiana disputes both of those assertions. Michael and Teresa Rhoades claim that the TeenScheme survey was administered to their daughter in a public school without their consent.

They also claim that, in December 2004, their daughter came home one day and informed them that she had been diagnosed with an obsessive compulsive disorder and a social anxiety disorder, after she was screened at school.

When things go as planned with this scheme, parents are supposed to head to the corner drugstore to buy pills each time a new student-customer is recruited. However, things did not go according to plans with the Rhoades family.

Michael and Teresa Rhoads were outraged, and instead of heading to the drug store, they filed the nation's first notice of intent to sue after learning that their daughter had been tested, diagnosed, and labeled mentally ill by a public school without their consent.

A notice that is sure to be the first of many such lawsuits that will be filed as TeenScheme fans out across the country, causing local school taxes to rise as legal fees accrue.

I'm afraid that now that I have seen firsthand what lengths TeenScheme will go to in order to outfox parents and label kids mentally ill for profit, I shall have to decline any invitation for jury duty on the case because I have already decided that the young Ms Rhoades is, without a shadow of a doubt, the injured party in this action.

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