Suicide prevention practiced at EBR schools

By LORI CHANDLER
Advocate staff writer

Competition for grades at Scotlandville Magnet High School often creates enormous stress for students and school officials have taken steps they hope will blunt the potential for suicide.

Students have been slow to participate in the school's new support group, begun in January. But counselor B.J. Posey believes the group will prove useful in countering an environment of grade competition and peer pressure that often leads to depression and, occasionally, to suicide.

Counselors in the East Baton Rouge Parish school system would like to see similar groups started in middle and high schools throughout the district.

Billie Andrews, a counselor at Broadmoor Middle School for 23 years, believes that programs on stress and suicide can only help young people.

"East Baton Rouge Parish has a real problem," Andrews said. "You won't find a school in this parish that hasn't had a suicide attempt. You have to assume that it's not for attention only."

Parish schools now present films and programs in psychology and physical education courses.

Representatives from The Phone have discussed suicide and its warning signs at Scotlandville for the last three years so students can recognize whether they or their friends have a problem.

But budget restrictions and tight schedules limit the amount of exposure students receive.

Posey said high school students have tight schedules because state graduation requirements leave little time for extracurricular activities.

"The problem with support groups is that the only time for social interaction is during lunch period," Posey said. "It can't be before or after school because the students cannot miss their bus, and some students don't want to give up their lunch period."

Posey said, "It's unusual for a family member to call us."

After receiving information that a student might be suicidal, the counselor talks extensively with the student to find out why he feels that way.

Lance Chauvin, a counselor at Park Forest Middle School.

Andrews added that he thinks a support group at Broadmoor would be a good thing.

"But no one's taken that particular bull by the horns, and a lot of people don't believe that there are those kinds of problems here," Andrews said.

"I can't say for sure, but I suspect some students and parents don't believe that there are those kinds of problems here," Andrews said.

"We've had kids that will threaten to commit suicide daily," Andrews said. "It's just a matter of doing it. They themselves can pull in 50."

"We can get a group together. It's just a matter of doing it. They themselves can pull in 50."

To fight the program, school counselors said they receive extensive training through the school's seminars and programs, and follow a general procedure to help students.

Posey and other counselors said the suicide problem in East Baton Rouge Parish is not as severe as it is in many other communities.

"I don't believe the problem is any higher here than at other high schools," Posey said. "We have a group here."

"I don't believe the problem is any higher here than at other high schools," Posey said. "We have a group here."

We've managed to hang on to them. We never treat lightly one who talks about it."

Andrews said some children encountered additional pressure at home. "There are two extremes," Andrews said. "Either their parents are alcoholics or drug addicts, or they expect perfection out of them. Here's a budget limit that.

Poyse agreed, noting that students can receive guidance early in their school career because the parish has elementary counselors.

The elementary guidance sessions do not mention suicide, but are designed to build self-esteem and teach values, said Betty Addison, the school district's supervisor of guidance.

The school system also has a districtwide Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Program, which works with teens who are chemically dependent, but may be a year or less.

"It's so alarming the magnitude of their problems," Posey said. "This parish, I believe, is doing more in this area than any other school system in the state. But we always could do more."