

## **Des Moines Register Opinion, Sunday, January 12, 2020**

Voices & Commentary, Your Turn

Carl R. Smith, Guest Columnist

I read, with a great deal of interest and sadness, your articles on classroom disruptions and its impact on teaching ("More Teachers Leaving Amid Rise in Stress," Dec. 8). While there will always be a tendency to come up with easy solutions to complex issues, I do believe that there are several critical questions that we all need to ask when considering the steps we need to take.

The two questions I raise are:

To what extent are our schools providing a continuum of programs and services for students with significant emotional/behavioral or mental health needs?

Is our Department of Education asserting its responsibility in assuring these program and services are available throughout Iowa?

This is more than just an academic question. I am currently in contact with a parent in eastern Iowa who has a high-school-age son with significant mental health needs. She was given the choice of having her son attend a large comprehensive high school of over a thousand students at which he has run away, leaving her in a panic, or herself finding alternatives without assistance from the school.

She has chosen to home-school her son and has shared with me that several other parents of students with mental health needs have chosen the same option.

I am also trying to support a family in a Des Moines suburb whose son is currently being served in residential treatment under a court order. In this latter situation, the parents were offered a one-to-one paraprofessional aide to assist their son in a large comprehensive high-school as the primary educational intervention for their son.

I share these stories not with the goal of affirming my good intentions but to suggest that there may be a number of Iowa families facing a lack of options for meeting the needs of their children. Historically there were efforts that were intended to address the issue of special education options for families and their children, many of whom may have significant emotional/behavioral or mental health needs.

In 2002 the Iowa Department of Education assembled a Continuum Task Force that recommended the development of a process for districts and parents to access services outside of their resident district. Furthermore, it was recommended that the Area Education Agencies and Department of Education use a monitoring process to ensure the availability of a true continuum of programs and services for these youth.

In a more recent document disseminated by the Iowa Department of Education (May 2010), an outside consultant hired by the department confirmed that, under federal legislation, the Iowa Department of Education has the oversight responsibility for assuring options for special education eligible students across our state.

In summary, I believe that the quest for full inclusion of students with emotional/behavioral and mental health needs has gone too far and is creating a lack of appropriate programs and services for these students as well as adding to the possibility of other students being exposed to traumatic events in their classrooms. Furthermore, unless this concern is addressed, I believe that our desire to create a comprehensive children's mental health structure will fall short.

*Carl R. Smith is professor emeritus of education at Iowa State University.*

# Voices & Commentary

## Some students need support beyond typical classroom



### Your Turn

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Guest columnist

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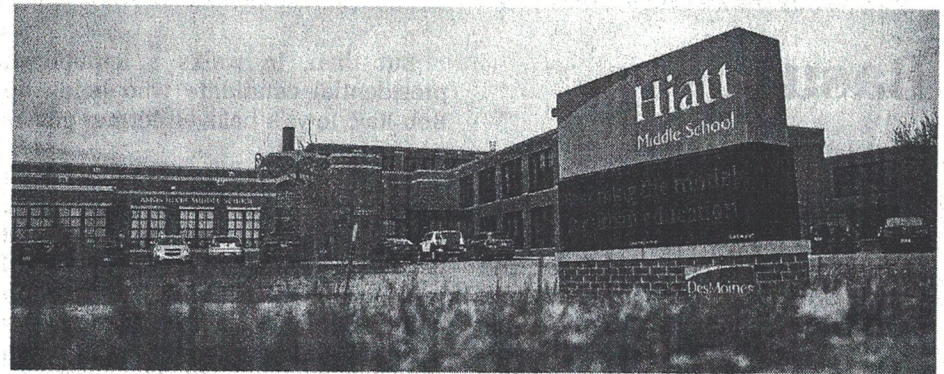
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Increased disruptions and other elements of classroom environments are adding to stress on teachers. ZACH BOYDEN-HOLMES/THE REGISTER

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