**Annual Student Counseling Notification for Hartselle City Schools**

You may know that in 2022, the Alabama Legislature adopted a law which provides for parental opt-in regarding certain mental health services for students under the age of fourteen. We have found that there remains some confusion as to what services require parental consent under the Opt-In Law. Our district leaders wish to clarify the extent and operation of the law with respect to counseling services offered by our schools.

Under the Opt-in Law “mental health services” includes services, treatment, surveys, or assessments relating to mental health; however, it does not include instructional activities designed to educate students regarding topics related to mental health (l) contained in the school system's approved curriculum or (2) otherwise required to be taught by law (e.g., Erin's Law; Jamari Terrell Williams Student Bullying Prevention Act). “Ongoing school counseling services” for purposes of a required Opt-In shall not include those school counseling services which are split into domains not requiring a mental health therapist or other mental health therapeutic license.

Based on guidance from the Alabama State Department of Education, the law does NOT apply to the following activities:

**Large group guidance**- includes school counselor, teacher, or other professional visiting the classroom, advisory class, or grade level to discuss and work on topics such as attendance, bullying, class scheduling, showing empathy, stress management, test anxiety, setting goals, anger, making good choices, career exploration, substance abuse prevention, grief, healthy coping skills, and kindness.

For example: the counselor or counseling professional may talk to a 5th grade homeroom about possible classes for next year when planning for middle school or the importance of being kind to everyone and treating everyone with respect.

**Small group guidance** - includes a small group of students with school counselor or professional to discuss and/or review topics covered in large group guidance but in more depth.

For example: A small group might consist of 5 students in second grade that are all new to the school and feeling nervous about the new environment. The counselor or professional would meet with those students in a small group to help those 5 students make their new school home, and to enhance their opportunities to be successful.

**Individuals** include the student and school counselor discussing topics such as grades, friendship, future plans after high school, grief, anger, wise choices, kindness, safety, stress, and setting goals not in a large group setting. (This is especially helpful for students that might be new to a school or shy about speaking in front of large groups and is NOT therapy.)

**Mentoring** - Peer Helpers or volunteers working with students in school on topics such as friendships, healthy relationships, anger management, career choices, grades, and making good choices.

**Crisis intervention** – Immediateshort-term assistance by a school counselor or professional when there is an imminent threat to the student or to others.

The Opt-In Law does apply to the following activities, and for students under the age of fourteen (14), participation in these activities will require your opt-in on the form at the end of this notification:

**Assessments or Surveys** - includes questionnaires provided to students related to social behaviors and feelings that help the school counselor and principal know how to best help students.

For example, some students may not eat before coming to school on a regular basis or may have lost a close family member recently. In both situations, a student may not feel like him/herself and need a little more time with classwork or a meal to be successful during the school day.

**Crisis intervention** - short-term, immediate assistance by school counselor or professional for a specific crisis situation in situations in which there is no imminent threat to the student or to others.

**School-Based Mental Health** - On-going therapy services by school professionals or private practitioners in the school setting that require insurance or private pay. Hartselle City Schools partner with Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama to offer School-Based Mental Health Therapy Services. These services are only for students whose parent/guardian completes formal paperwork with the mental health center to have their child seen at school rather than leaving school and traveling to the clinic for therapy. Parent or legal guardian’s permission will always be obtained before services are provided regardless of the student’s age and a parent or legal guardian will attend the initial intake meeting.

**Review of Materials**

You may request to review any materials used in the guidance and counseling programs available to students by contacting the principal or school counselor.

**Information Regarding How to Allow, Limit, or Prevent Your Child’s Participation in Mental Health Services**

Under Alabama law, no student under the age of fourteen may participate in ongoing school counseling services including, but not limited to, mental health services, unless (1) the student’s parent or legal guardian has submitted a written “opt-in” granting permission for the student to participate, or (2) there is an imminent threat to the health of the student or others. Therefore, if your child is under fourteen years of age, they will only be allowed to participate in the services listed if you opt-in for your child to participate.

If you would like the school system to be able to offer and/or provide these services to your child, you must check the box located adjacent to the description of those services on the Opt-in form provided below. Otherwise, those described services will not be made available to your child, except, as noted above, for services offered in situations in which there is an imminent threat to the health of your child or to others. Such services may be offered without parental opt-in.

Parent of students with disabilities should note that the opt-in process is not applicable to any school counseling services or “mental health services” contained in a student’s IEP or 504 plan. Consent for those services will be obtained and information regarding your child’s mental health services will be provided through the usual special education process.

**OPT-IN FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

As of today’s date, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, my child, [print name] \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, is under the age of 14. I consent and opt-in to making the services checked below available to my child while at school. [In the event, you have a question about one of the items below; please do not hesitate to contact your school counselor for information.]

**Assessments or Surveys** - includes questionnaires provided to students related to social behaviors and feelings that help the school counselor and principal to know how to best help students.

For example, some students may not eat before coming to school on a regular basis or may have lost a close family member recently. In both situations, a student may not feel like him/herself and need a little more time with classwork or just an extra snack to be successful during the school day.

**Crisis Intervention-** short-term, immediate assistance by school counselor or professional for a specific situation.

**School-Based Mental Health** - On-going therapy services by school professionals or private practitioners in the school setting that require insurance or private pay. Hartselle City Schools partner with Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama to offer School-Based Mental Health Therapy Services. These services are only for students whose parents sign formal paperwork with Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama to have their child seen at school rather than leaving school and traveling to the clinic for therapy. Parent or legal guardian’s permission will always be obtained before services are provided regardless.

I understand that I may rescind permission for a student under the age of 14 to participate in these services at any time by providing written notice to the principal or school counselor in writing.

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Parent/Guardian Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name (Signature)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_