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## Hillsborough schools' suicide policy questioned

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Sitting in the principal's office, Hope Witsell signed the "no-harm" contract the school social worker had given her, agreeing not to commit suicide.

The next day, Sept. 12, 2009, the 13-year-old hanged herself with a scarf in her Wimauma bedroom.

A year and a half later, Charles and Donna Witsell are still asking questions.

Why didn't anyone from Beth Shields Middle School call them when their daughter was called in for counseling?

And why did they only learn about the contract days after finding her body?

The Witsells filed a federal lawsuit against the Hillsborough County school district Monday, arguing school officials should have done a better job of protecting their daughter.

They knew Hope was being bullied by classmates, who were passing around a partially nude photograph the eighth-grader had texted to a boy she liked.

"It's still unbelievable," Donna Witsell said. "It's still very unbelievable."

Many questions that linger for Hope's parents surround the no-harm contract.

It's a suicide prevention technique experts say fell out of favor years ago because it doesn't do enough to protect people considering suicide — especially children at risk whose parents aren't part of the process.

"If a kid tells you he is thinking about suicide, contracts are not effective because you are not a mind reader," said Ana Leon, an associate professor of social work at the University of Central Florida.

"To do this without the involvement of parents really puts the child at risk because they are pretty isolated. There's nobody there to be a support system to figure out what should happen if they become suicidal, or if things change and the risk factors go up."

Traditionally, schools have not been as quick as clinical mental health providers to involve parents, Leon said. In clinical settings, parents need to give their consent for treatment, but the school culture is different.

"Historically, school systems have not wanted to look at these mental health issues because it has not been part of their domain, their primary mission," Leon said.

As a result, schools may not have clear protocols or any about how school officials should work with mental health providers and parents to deal with students' mental health problems, she

said.

Donna Witsell said she has been asking school officials for months to explain how they could have had her daughter sign a contract without her parents there.

"They told me they tried to call me," Witsell said.

She has asked for the school district's policy concerning suicide prevention and, in particular, no-harm contracts. So far, Witsell said, she hasn't gotten any answers.

Such a policy didn't exist when Hope died, according to school district spokeswoman Linda Cobbe.

Seven months later, the school board approved its current suicide policy -- a five-step approach that includes risk assessment, communication with appropriate parties and follow-up.

Nothing in the policy addresses no-harm contracts.

Hillsborough County school officials didn't want to discuss their suicide-prevention protocols or no-harm contracts, because of the Witsells' lawsuit.

Their counterparts in neighboring counties say they use no-harm contracts sparingly â□□ if at all.

"We use the contract as a conversation tool," said Pam Stein, senior manager of psychological services for Polk County schools.

So far this school year, school counselors, psychologists and social workers have reported 147 risk assessments involving suicide discussions.

The contracts provide an opportunity to get students talking about their thoughts, Stein said. They also include a hotline number to call for help and other resources.

Typically, parents are contacted to participate in the assessment, and students aren't sent home until a parent is notified about school officials' concerns. If parents can't be reached, the school resource officer steps in to find them or stay with the student. Principals also are notified, and there's usually a witness available when a parent is called -- "to make sure we cover all the bases," Stein said. Pinellas County doesn't use no-harm contracts.

"My belief is if it rises to the level of harm that you need a contract, I feel you have to Baker Act," said Donna Sicilian, supervisor of school social workers.

The Florida Baker Act allows psychologists and other trained professionals, including school social workers, to hospitalize someone considered a risk to himself or someone else for a mental health assessment.

Last school year, 121 of 279 suicide risk assessments led to students being sent to mental health centers under the Baker Act, Sicilian said.

No-harm contracts, sometimes called "suicide contracts," were used more in clinical settings during the 1980s and early-1990s, Leon said.

For mental health professionals, the contracts were a useful tool for helping children with low risk

factors, especially if they didn't need to be hospitalized. The contracts also were a way of empowering adolescents and encouraging them to take responsibility.

Nationally, though, the no-harm contracts began falling out of favor with mental health professionals and social workers in the mid-1990s, Leon said.

"It's really a safety contract, a contract to refrain from hurting yourself for a specific amount of time," said Nina Cillo, the suicide prevention manager for the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay. "What they were, in a way, was deflecting liability."

Instead of a no-harm contract, the Crisis Center uses a safety plan, which the client makes with help from a licensed clinician, Cillo said.

Safety plans focus on what a person can do, instead of what he shouldn't do. For example, a person might agree to call his therapist every day, or to attend more counseling sessions.

"It becomes a plan of action, as opposed to something you sign promising not to do anything," Cillo said.

"That's why a no-harm contract doesn't work. It's too generic."