



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Taking big 'STEPS' to promote teen mental health

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I want to thank the representatives of mental health agencies and non-profit organizations in Orange and Rockland for participating in a recent forum on the “STEPS” program (Screening, Treatment, and Education to Promote Strength), a first-of-its-kind virtual mental health initiative for teens and their parents. Funded through a \$500,000 state grant I was able to secure, New York University’s Christopher P. Lucas, an Associate Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, at my request, created the STEPS program to reduce risk of suicide and school violence through online education, self-help and screening. The voluntary, school-based program features a Web site for both teens and parents accessible at school or at home. On each site, visitors can find scientific information, chat around the clock with online clinicians and with each other, and participate in a confidential suicide questionnaire.

Since its launch last fall in a number of Rockland and Orange County schools, STEPS is already showing signs of success – with membership numbers nearly doubling. Dr. Lucas says he hopes the program will attract at-risk teens not only with its wealth of information, but also with its edgy style and interactive features.

Dr. Lucas is an associate professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine and an attending physician at the NYU Child Study Center. He is also an accomplished researcher at the Nathan S. Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research in Orangeburg.

The STEPS program was recently featured on a PBS show about teens and suicide. The show highlighted several schools, including Clarkstown North High School, and the steps that they have taken to identify teenagers at risk.

Students are given a password that enables them to access online resources, including tests designed to see if a youngster is suffering symptoms of anxiety or depression. They can also log on to moderated discussions of such issues as drug

and alcohol use, sexuality, eating disorders, depression and other topics. The chats are moderated by staff members at Nathan Kline.

For more information about the STEPS program, go to www.promotestrength.org.

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