

**Publication:**The Dominion Post;**Date:**May 4, 2005;**Section:**Local;**Page Number:**7

## Program helps at-risk students

### State BOE would like Marion plan to go statewide

**BY JANET L. METZNER** *The Dominion Post*

FAIRMONT — Marion County Schools have created a new program to help at-risk students — a program some state Board of Education officials want other districts to copy.

Marion County Schools and Fairmont General Hospital created a therapy program to help students with behavior problems before they get out of hand — and before they are sent out of the state.

The program is unique to West Virginia, said Sen. Roman Prezioso, D-Marion. “We’ve built a program with Fairmont General Hospital that prevents youth from being placed in any facility — in or out of state. It helps us deal with at-risk youth before they get in trouble with the law.”

The program is called Outpatient Adolescent Treatment Service, or OATS. It’s one more way the school system can relieve one of the state’s problems: At any given time there are nearly 400 West Virginia children in residential treatment programs out of state, said Prezioso, administrative assistant of adult, community and alternative education for Marion County Schools.

OATS includes “intensive therapy” such as daily group therapy sessions for adolescents experiencing emotional, mental or behavioral problems, such as truancy, and disruptive or inappropriate behavior.

“The goal is to re-integrate students into traditional school, instead of interfacing with the court system,” said Charles Hlusko, district attendance director.

Fairmont General Hospital pays for a psychotherapist on duty at the schools, a psychiatrist who visits twice each week, and administrative management services. The school district provides the location, furnishings, transportation and equipment.

The program garnered state support Tuesday during a meeting of school district, state Board of Education and Fairmont General Hospital officials held at Marion County Schools’ alternative education center.

“I think this is really, really impressive with the interagency cooperation,” said Frank Andrews of the state Board of Education.

Begun last fall, OATS has already served 25 students, with 14 referrals from school, probation, Department of Health and Human Resources and court officials pending, according to program documents.

In October 2004, Region I, which encompasses the state’s 16 northwestern counties including Monongalia and Marion counties, had 128 children placed across state lines for treatment. That included 17 students from Mon County and 14 from Marion County, according to DHHR documents. In October 2004, Preston County, which is part of the northeastern counties of Region III, had 10 children placed out of state.

Statewide, there were 350 students placed out-of-state.

“It’s a big number (statewide) that costs the state \$22 million each year,” said former House of Delegates member Barbara Evans-Fleischauer, who led the Juvenile Foster Care, Detention and Placement Task Force. The human costs are even greater, she said. “It means children are separated from their families.”

