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News Writing and Reporting

News Story 2 - Georgia GNETS Programs

HEADLINE: South Georgia's special education/behavioral institution set to close after the 2025 school year

The Georgia Network for Educational and Therapeutic Support (GNETS) programs are closing soon due to loss of state funds causing an influx of behaviorally unstable children to flood public classrooms.

The GNETS program for Coffee County, Harrell Learning Center in Waycross, GA, is estimated to close after the 2025 school year.

GNETS programs have served students ages 3-21 with severe emotional and behavioral disorders for over 50 years.

Recently, schools in Coffee County have experienced what education systems may look like without these special instruction programs in place.

"The behaviors of these students can be extremely disruptive," said Michelle Woodward, Referral Coordinator of Special Education Services for a Coffee County elementary school.

"They run, scream, have tantrums, leave the classroom or even school property, are often physically aggressive to others (hitting, scratching, kicking, biting), are verbally aggressive (cursing, yelling) and often destroy school property."

According to the Georgia Department of Education, the primary goal for GNETS programs has been to provide intensive therapeutic support for students so they can eventually transition to their home schools or districts with improved behavior and educational preparedness.

A member from Coffee County's Board of Education explained that closing the GNETS program will greatly affect traditional school systems; if closed, approximately 44 students with these severe behavioral disorders will be sent back to their home districts for traditional instruction.

"More resources will be needed to help GNETS students' transition, starting with smaller group settings," said the board member.

"Often, student behaviors require significant assistance from administrators, academic deans and student resources officers which is why we need trained professionals who can provide proper intervention."

Enrolling students in the GNETS program is not easy.

“All options and resources must be exhausted from a student’s home district through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) before determining if the student meets criteria for placement,” said the board member.

The removal of GNETS programs will deeply hinder the educational, emotional and behavioral benefits for students enrolled.

“If anything, we should be adding supports for our students and educators, not taking away things that have been beneficial,” said Woodward.

GNETS programs are funded through a separate grant appropriated by the Georgia General Assembly, the Georgia Department of Education reported.

The exact reason for closing the GNETS programs is unclear, but reliable sources have shown the state’s significant drop in the program’s budget.

“\$39,200 Reduced for funding allocated but not spent on Georgia Network for Educational and Therapeutic Support (GNETS) study,” reported the Voices for Georgia’s Children 2024 on Feb. 26.

Since the Gainesville, GA student hanging erupted in 2016, GNETS programs have maintained a less than positive stature with the State.

Rumors have surfaced that GNETS programs across Georgia may harness a “punitive reputation” and “rob students of equal education opportunities” but these are loose accusations that linger with no real evidence.

Sources

Voices for Georgia’s Children

<https://georgiavoices.org/legislative-update-02-26-24/#budget>

Georgia DOE Network for GNETS Programs

<https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Special-Education-Services/Documents/GNETS/FY14%20Operations%20Manual.pdf>

Phone interview with Michelle Woodward, 2-28-24.

Referral Coordinator of Special Education Services for Coffee County school (Indian Creek Elementary).

Phone interview with Anonymous Source, 3-1-24.

Board of Education member and previous principal for Coffee County school (Satilla Elementary).