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OPINION

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FOR THE RECORD

If our children could grade us, they'd give us an 'F'



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BY PEGGY TERHUNE

Special to the Observer

As the mother of seven children and foster mom to so many more, I'm here to tell you we, all of us, are failing our kids.

Two of my adopted children have special needs. My family has fostered more than 100 children, many of them with mental illness or developmental disabilities. Almost all of them came to us after having experienced significant trauma — abuse, neglect, the effects of parents who battled drug and alcohol addictions or

who experienced abuse when they were kids. You name it.

What keeps me up at night is knowing that we are failing our children. Parents, teachers, counselors, doctors, institutions. Failing. How else do you explain the facts?

- In Mecklenburg County, 26,000 children are battling a mental illness.

- The number of students receiving suicide assessments has jumped 300 percent since the 2011-12 school year, according to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The number is shocking and sad, but I suppose the positive is that more kids are being identified as at-risk before they can harm themselves, except...

- In 2016, 11 teens in Mecklenburg County committed suicide, up from six in 2015 and four in 2014.

- 1 in 5 children experience a significant mental illness, the same as for adults.

- And yet, Mecklenburg County has a "severe shortage" of practicing child and adolescent psychiatrists, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Imagine being the parent of a child experiencing a mental health crisis. Assuming you know where to go for help, there are too few doctors and too few facilities equipped to help these young people, especially those with special needs.

The emergency room is great for medical traumas, but no place for a child in crisis. I know, because I've been there. I've been in the ER with kids who've tried to hurt themselves.

I'm encouraged by the opening of the SECU Youth Crisis Center Univer-

sity City. At this 24-hour facility, run by Monarch, 600 young patients a year can be assessed outside of a standard emergency department.

It's a start.

But it's not enough.

I'm encouraged that mental health issues seem to be on more people's radar.

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But it's not enough.

We need to realize children are important. They're not bad or criminals or mini versions of our adult selves. They are kids. They hurt, and don't know what to do. They deserve mental health care that is easy to get, affordable and addresses their needs. And they need it now.

We need to understand that mental illness can hit anybody — wealthy or poor, educated or uneducated, all races, all genders. And you don't always see it coming.

Teachers and parents need to tell children they are good and they are loved, no matter what. Approve of the child; disapprove of the behavior. We need to stop telling kids to "stop the drama" when what they're fighting is depression or anxiety.

We need to remove the stigma of mental illness. It's as serious as physical illness. There is no shame.

We need to stop failing our children. Today.

Dr. Terhune is President/CEO of Monarch, which provides services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental illness and substance use disorders. For more: www.MonarchNC.org.