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## Bill would help identify troubled students

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WASHINGTON -- Bucking the current trend toward cutting social programs to reduce the deficit, Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-Calif., introduced a bill Thursday that would provide \$200 million for schools to hire mental health professionals to diagnose and treat psychologically troubled students before they become involved in violent or criminal behavior.

What gives Napolitano at least a glimmer of hope that her proposal, approved last year by the Democratically controlled House, might have a chance now that the budget-minded Republicans are in charge, is that violence by individuals whose emotional problems surfaced in school is a concern that cuts across party lines.

"We were hoping that because of the recent incident in Arizona, that people would be more willing to get it out there," Napolitano said, referring to the shooting in which six people were killed and 13 others were injured, including U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. The accused shooter had repeatedly come to the attention of school officials because of his disturbing behavior.

Grants could total up to \$1 million each and would be distributed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The current budget being debated in the House, however, would actually cut funding for mental health services and substance abuse by more than \$200 million, and members of Congress are looking for more places to cut, not add, similar programs.

Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the Cato Institute, a conservative Washington, D.C.-based think tank, said although the bill is well-intentioned, it's unlikely to pass, and even if it does, it's unlikely to be successful.

Napolitano said she doesn't expect easy passage of the bill, but she hopes its timely subject matter will help it gain support from those remembering incidents involving potentially disturbed young people such as the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 and Columbine High School in 1999, as well as the more recent Tucson case.

"Most students who ultimately commit violence demonstrated signs of maladjustment prior to the violent act," said Dr. Tony Beliz of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. "Violence is an evolutionary process that develops usually over an extended period of time."

Beliz added that starting counseling early can "significantly reduce the development of maladaptive behaviors."

Among supporters of the bill present at a panel Thursday were boxer Mia St. John and Los Angeles Lakers forward Ron Artest, who raised more than \$650,000 for mental health charities last year by auctioning off his 2010 championship ring.

St. John said before medication for obsessive-compulsive disorder changed her life, she had an extremely troubled childhood.

"My mother barely spoke English, I was raised with an alcoholic father -- by the time I was 10 years old I was an

alcoholic myself," she said. "By 11 or 12, I was on drugs, by 13 I had my first overdose."

St. John, now 43 and sober, has two children including a 21-year-old son with schizophrenia, who demonstrated signs of mental health problems, that reminded her of Jared Lee Loughner, the Arizona shooting rampage suspect, she said.

(EDITORS: BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM)

"He was a victim himself -- a victim of a mental illness," St. John said of Loughner. "All the signs and symptoms were there. These were signs that I saw in my son for many years. I started complaining to the school when my son was 5 years old that something was wrong.

"My son was not tested until he was in the 11th grade, and not voluntarily -- the school was court ordered," St. John said. "By then it was too late. My son spent his graduation in a psychiatric hospital."

(END OPTIONAL TRIM)

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"Based on looking at the success of other education programs, I'd say it's a bad idea," McCluskey said. "Rarely do we see these programs demonstrate any meaningful success.

"It's a small number of people who have very big benefits from these programs," McCluskey said, referring to those who are employed by similar programs. "They are the ones who are paying attention to that program and making a lot of noise if someone threatens to cut it, but the average taxpayer can't possibly follow it all.

"The intentions behind programs like these are often very good," he said. "It's that people need to look at the reality of what happens with them before they decide to go ahead and do it."

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