

1 REAL-TIME NEWS FROM AL.COM

Want to boost students' success, Gov. Ivey? Fund this program

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HFI's Curry and Niven (Roy S. Johnson)

27

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Tarrant Elementary

Samantha, 15, is smart, gregarious and funny. She changes the oil on the family car, tinkers with electronics, and wants to be a lawyer. She also recalls dates like a personal calendar reminder.

She came to Birmingham from the Northeast last fall--on Oct. 17, she tells me--to live with Diana, whom she now calls her mother, driven the 1,042 miles by her birth father, whom she had not met until the week before.

Samantha is bi-racial. Her father is African American and her birth mother, with whom she was living before moving South, is white. Until she met her father, Samantha thought he had died in a "war" because that's what her birth mother told her.

So, she had no contact with him or any other African Americans, it seems. "Her mother tried to raise Samantha as a white child in an all-white world," says Diana, who once dated Samantha's father, lives in north Birmingham and is disabled. Diana is also African American. "There were constant clashes," she says.

Because she is bi-racial, Samantha says she and her birth mother were "kicked out" of their church when she was a young child. "Later, they tried to get us back when they saw how beautiful I had become and the kind of young women I was growing up to be," Samantha says. "I couldn't go back, though, because there had been too much hurt.

"I didn't want to be uncomfortable while trying to have God enter my heart. [My new church] was the only peace I had in my life, other than school."

Discomfort at school

Indeed, Samantha had always been a good student and continued to earn high grades at her new middle school in Birmingham, except in the one class that should have been a sure "A": physical education.

Samantha did not feel comfortable in the PE uniform, particularly so since there were boys in the class. "I can't do tight shorts," she says. "Just couldn't do it."

Rather than oblige, she simply refused to change clothes; she was given "Cs" and "Ds" for the class.

It was mid-April by then, and Samantha had already come to the attention of Kim Curry, a caseworker with the Helping Families Initiative (HFI), which operates out of the office of Jefferson County District Attorney Pro Tem Danny Carr--as well as other judicial jurisdictions across the state--and seeks to address the root issues that typically result in chronic student absenteeism and behavioral issues in schools.

Issues that are often themselves rooted in the debilitating manifestations of poverty, mental health, and domestic matters.

By Alabama law, schools must report absenteeism (five unexcused, 10 excused) and suspensions to local DAs, who are mandated to "vigorously enforce" attendance and "proper conduct" requirement.

"It does not even say 'vigorously' in the murder code," says HFI program administrator Melissa Niven.

In Birmingham, HFI was launched as a pilot program last November in [Tarrant's elementary, middle and high schools](#), and five Birmingham schools. Its two full-time staffers seek to "listen to" (not prosecute) families to identify the root cause of the child's absenteeism or behavior.

The pair meet weekly with a 15-member committee that includes representatives from education, law enforcement, the judiciary, medicine and various non-profits, and seeks to connect families with children experiencing suspensions or high absenteeism with one of the myriad resources in the city created to help citizens in need.

Many factors at home manifest in school behavior

"There may be mental health issues, past trauma or parents themselves who never has a good parenting model," says Niven. "Addressing these and other areas help stop the cycle of crime and poverty data has shown to emerge with students and families with school absenteeism or behavioral issues.



Kay Warfield

"[HFI] is the middle piece that our education and criminal justice systems don't offer: the social system that really helps families," says Kay Warfield, education administrator at the Alabama State Department of Education.

Before HFI, students with chronic absentee or suspensions--which are proven to be early indicators that a student will likely fall behind in reading, drop out of school and perhaps commit at least one crime--and their families usually found themselves standing before a Family Court judge, often three months or more after the initial absentee or suspension issues arose.

"Which effectively kills the entire school year," says John Tyson, the former Mobile County District Attorney who [launched HFI in Mobile in 2003](#). "HFI can respond in days rather than months. It can identify students and families in trouble, or heading for trouble, and respectfully offers help.

"That is the key. This is not the usual TV version of law enforcement: cuffing and stuffing people. HFI recognizes and preserves the dignity of the people it deals with."

Samantha came to Curry's attention because of five unexcused absences. Diana says the absences were for doctor's visits to address her various health conditions as well as Samantha's. Her daughter is bipolar, she says, and also suffers from depression and ADHD.

"We were bringing in doctor's notes but they weren't getting to the teachers," Diana says.

The unexcused absences triggered a letter from the DA's office, signed by Carr, which usually prompts parents to remedy the absentee or behavioral issue. "They don't want to have to deal with us," Carr says.

Home assessment reveals issues

HFI followed up, however, with a family assessment because, besides Samantha, Diana's two birth children live in the home--an older brother, 27; and a younger brother, 13, who also suffers from depression and ADD. Moreover, Samantha was already receiving treatment at [Choices of Alabama](#), which offers behavioral health programs to children and adults.

While clearing up the unexcused absences, Curry was stuck by Samantha's grades; she was getting Cs and Ds in Physical Education classes while earning As and Bs in other subjects.

"How is this possible?" Curry asked. "We knew something was going on there."

Samantha and Diana are not their real names. I agreed to protect their identity, along with the name of the city she lived in prior to Birmingham and her current school because the source of Samantha's anxiety over the PE uniform was found to be the sexual abuse she experienced while living with her birth mother.

"Her [birth] mother created an environment for predators," is all Diana would say. "It was not a safe environment for her."

"I started lashing out to get out of the situation," Samantha added. Curry, with the family's blessing, shared the information with the authorities at Samantha's school and provisions were made for her to do "PE-like activities" in the library during that period without changing clothes. The accommodation came too late in the year to raise Samantha's final PE grade; the 'D' she received prevented her from achieving the honor roll.

Nonetheless, Samantha is excited about entering high school in August, where she will participate in ROTC rather than PE--and she credits Curry for helping her to address the source of her anxiety.

"Miss Curry is the reason I am able to cope with all the issues I had," Samantha said. "I still have my self- battles, but Miss Curry inspires me."

Other successful interventions

Niven and Curry cite other examples of HFI's success last year, including a middle-school male. "Trouble was just all around the kid, and he had too much time on his hands," said Curry. He loved playing basketball so HFI persuaded a local basketball camp to sponsor him this summer. "Suddenly, he wasn't spending time in the streets and he's waking his mom up at seven a.m. to make sure they get there on time."

Another woman whose children were chronically absent revealed that she was not receiving child support and was stuck in a minimum-wage job that constantly changed her shifts. "She couldn't always get up" in time to get her children to school. HFI got her enrolled in a job-training program to help her qualify for a better job and implemented a backup transportation plan to ensure the children got to school on time for days when their mother was too tired to stir.

Carr often shares the story of a student who skipped school regularly because he was ashamed that his uniform was not clean.

The solution? A donated washer and dryer, provided by a local non-profit. "Sometimes major problems only require a small solution," Carr says. "We get into some homes and realize kids didn't have beds to sleep in," said Niven.

"I've gone into homes where there are no tables and chairs," added Curry. "We sat on the floor. People don't have some of the basics most of us take for granted."

"And most often they don't feel like they can tell anyone," continued Niven. "Or don't know where to go."

A local church partner provides furniture for some families, as does the Community Furniture Bank.

A custody battle addressed

In one instance, a woman whose elementary-school son was having behavioral problems wanted to regain custody of her oldest daughter but was afraid for DHS to do a home inspection because she didn't have an extra bed for her to sleep or much other furniture. Community provided her two queen beds (along with other furniture and kitchen essentials). "Now she's ready," Curry said. The son was also provided with treatment to address his behavior.

David Seale, the principal at the Tarrant intermediate school, says the behavioral change in a student who received HFI services last school year was palatable. "She's less likely to fire off at an adult," now," he says. "There's more peace in the valley."

"We put most of our money and focus on academics, rightfully so," says Warfield. "But when you drill down, it's evident that the biggest obstacle keeping kids from being successful isn't due to incompetent teachers or that our students are less-than-globally successful. Its social and emotional issues."

Overall, HFI in Birmingham alerted 700 students of their absentee infractions last school year, and ultimately assessed 26 families that included 51 children, within the eight schools served. "Those are 51 kids," says Carr, "I hope to never see again."



Tyson (second from left) accepts an award given to HFI

Tyson knows the Helping Families Initiative works, and not just because he conceived and launched it. He previously served on the State Board of Education for 14 years, providing him with two unique vantage points on the relationship between school absenteeism and suspensions and dropout rates and crime.

"Our teachers always knew who was going to be in trouble before they were in trouble, as early as pre-K and kindergarten," says Tyson, who served as DA until 2011. "As DA I was frustrated that we didn't do anything about it until a crime had been committed, and that's too late. I thought: 'Can't we intervene and change the trajectory of behavior?'"

"We can sit back and not try to do something and result is basically what you see all over Alabama and, frankly, all over the United States: overcrowded prisons with minority populations overrepresented, burgeoning costs and prison systems being declared unconstitutional.

"This program works on future problems. If we can avoid some of them in the future, why in the world wouldn't we do it?"

Absenteeism diminishes future success

Warfield calls absenteeism "the number one indicator of our students not being successful in school."

She says research conducted by John Hopkins University found it was the top predictor of dropout rates. Studying the impact of days missed by 9th graders across the state between 2008-2013, researchers learned that missing 10 or more days of school dropped by 40% the student's ability to graduate on time.

Alabaster City Schools, which became a system in 2013, says its graduation rate increased from 94% to 97% in 2015-16, which it attributed to the "support our students and families receive" under its Strengthening Families Initiative in Shelby County (a version of HFI). In a letter to Tyson, Student Services Coordinator Dorann Tanner cites a student who dropped out of school five credits short of graduation to earn money. He "was homeless and hopeless," Tanner wrote.

The SFI case manager contacted the student's employer and worked it out so the student could return to school in the mornings and work in the afternoons. Agencies were also engaged and provided the student with food, mental health counseling and a "safe place to stay." The case manager also became a mentor. Tanner says the student finished the five credits in two months but also obtained a full-time job and his own apartment.

"He has not been involved with the legal system," Tanner wrote.

Indeed, graduation rates, researchers have discovered, can be directly correlated to crime, health care costs, and future earnings.

A five percent increase in the male graduation rate statewide would save Alabama \$82 million in annual incarceration and crime-related costs, according to James J. Heckman, a Nobel-winning economist at the University of Chicago.

Heckman wrote: if one year's high-school dropouts were converted to high-school graduates, Alabama households would have an additional \$67 billion in accumulated wealth over the lifetime of those students.

And those students would be less likely to commit a crime, which also has financial benefits.

The Alabama Center for Insurance Information calculated that the reduction of a single violent crime would save Alabama taxpayers \$81,191 in health-care costs.

Think about those numbers and the savings it could mean for cities, like Birmingham, where crime is a persistent issue.

Success in Mobile

Tyson says Mobile County experienced "stunning results" with HFI.

Unexcused absences were reduced by 24.5% since 2012-2013 and suspensions declined 30%. Moreover, Tyson said, 82% of the students

whose families were aided by HFI were not arrested during the following year, which 55% had previously possessed an active or disposed juvenile record.

"It worked better than we thought," Tyson said.

Effects of the recession depleted the program in Mobile, Tyson says, adding that his successor, [Ashley Rich](#) "has done her best to keep it going".

By the end of September, however, HFI (or a version of it, such as SFI) will exist in eight judicial circuits, Tyson says, representing 293,267 students. Although all students are not yet covered, due to costs, that total would represent 40% of the Alabama's public school students.

Tyson says 37 of the state's 42 District Attorneys have said they would implement HFI in their districts "if they could get a little bit of funding."

"That is a big deal in showing how DAs have expanded their thinking on their role in promoting dignity and elevating citizens versus just prosecuting them through the justice system," Tyson says.

The program has the support, Tyson says, of (currently beleaguered) state superintendent Michael Sentance and attorney general Steve Marshall, and adds the program has been endorsed by the state's Board of Education.

Tyson estimates it would cost \$10 million to fund the program state wide, which, he points out, represents pocket change (a little more than one percent) relative to former governor Robert Bentley's once-proposed \$800 million request to build new prisons. "That makes this a no-brainer decision to me," he says.

Warfield says state funding for HFI is "definitely a priority." During the last two years, she says, the program has been a line item in the legislature's school budget allocation, at \$500,000 annually.

Her goal is that HFI had a statewide hub with sufficient caseworkers in each judicial district to service the needs of families in those communities.

"Five hundred thousand is not going to support that," she acknowledges. In the short term, she hopes current HFI programs help reduce absenteeism statewide by 50% in the upcoming school year.

"It's very doable," she says, adding that September is Attendance Matters Month. "I'd like to see parents and students more aware of the consequences of not coming to school. But also all of the stakeholder--including mayors--to come together and work collaboratively. Education cannot do it alone."

Will the Governor respond?

Tyson says he's trying to get the ear of Governor Kay Ivey on the initiative. On Wednesday, Ivey announced a new education initiative focusing on three areas: early childhood, teaching computer science in middle and high school, and post-high school workforce preparedness.

The Helping Families Initiative, which will be most effective when it can address behavioral issues and absenteeism during a child's earliest years, was not mentioned.



Ivey launches education initiative

Calling this her first formal initiative as Governor of Alabama, Kay Ivey said "Strong Start, Strong Finish" calls for various existing education groups to work together in a collaborative way from pre-kindergarten through workforce development.

So, for now, DAs are charged with raising their own funds to support HFI. In Birmingham, Carr has raised enough monies to support the program's current annual budget (\$113,000, a relative pittance in a city with a \$428 million budget) through about two-thirds of the upcoming school year, he says.

The program currently received no funds from the entity it most directly benefits: Birmingham City Schools. But Carr and the HFI team met Wednesday with Dr. Lisa Herring, the new school superintendent.

"She is totally on board," Carr said afterward. "She is very knowledgeable about this type program from her previous experience."

The "no-brainer" Tyson sees regarding state funding should also apply to eventual financial support from BOE and perhaps a collective exploration of grants and other funding sources.

For the time being, Carr is confident he will be able to garner enough funds to sustain HFI until the end of the school year and beyond.

"It's a great program," he says, "Everyone in the community has a stake in seeing it succeed. Not only do the families in the program win, but we all do. Its success will be Birmingham's success."

Samantha, meanwhile, says she's still adjusting to some things about the South. "The weather is the thing I love most," she says. "I like life down here. It's peaceful. I'm finally able to come into being the proper person I want to be. Without mom saving me, I would have been on this train wreck to disaster."

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