

New early intervention program for chronically truant kids

January 31, 2018

DA hopes it will help students succeed, curb future crime

By Blenda Copeland

While there are multiple reasons students are chronically absent without excuse from school, there's a common link between high truancy rates and increased at-risk behavior among students in grade school.

“We know poor attendance is directly related to drop outs,” said Phenix City Schools Superintendent Randy Wilkes. He added that there's also a correlation between attendance and incarceration, and, that retention from one grade to the next also can be a warning sign. Behavior is also linked, because when students get behind in their studies, they become frustrated and may consequently act out, he continued.

Going beyond that, “Common sense would tell us in careers, if someone is not committed to going to school, he or she is probably not going to be committed to going to work,” Wilkes said.

That's where a new program through the District Attorney's Office hopes to help.

It's the Helping Families Initiative of Russell County.

Assistant DA Justin Clark is helping organize and introduce the program. In its pilot year, it is being introduced at the middle school level (grades 6-8) in the city and county school systems.

Clark explained that the program will help identify excessive truancy.

The process works like this: after three or more unexcused absences, the DA's Office will send an "alert" letter to the student's parents/guardians. If the student reaches five or more unexcused absences, the DA's Office sends another letter, this time informing the parents/guardians they are expected to participate in the program to prevent further unexcused absences. What that means is that there will be an in-office assessment of the family; a tailored intervention plan made; and also, an in-home visit. The intervention plan brings in a team of about 20 people from interdisciplinary fields such as law enforcement, public health agencies, United Way-type social agencies, faith-based and private partnerships and more from within the local community to help strengthen the family and hopefully change the student's behavior. The follow-up aspect of the program includes a re-assessment and re-examination of the progress that has been made.

"The entire point of this is to prevent kids, ultimately, from ending up in prison," Clark said.

In short, it's an early intervention program – another resource to help schools, families and society try to help students on to the path toward success.

Every case will be different, and not all cases involve students with behavioral issues.

Florence Bellamy, director, noted during a Russell County Board of Education meeting Jan. 23 that in one case, the excessive absences were related to major health crises within the family. In this and other cases, the community has a valuable opportunity to help a family in need.

While noting this program is an early intervention one, it is not Department of Human Resources-connected, Bellamy pointed out. The in-home assessments will be kept confidential, as will all records; lawyers in the DA's Office won't have access to the information pertaining to the families helped by the program, and neither will the DA, Bellamy said.

The Helping Families Initiative originally began in Mobile through (now-retired) DA John Tyson's office.

In Russell County, the program began its pilot session after the DA's Office reached out last summer to the city and county school districts. The need was present, and both school systems joined in.

Although the program is in its pilot stage, Clark said the DA's Office is committed to expanding and growing the program, as opportunity allows to other schools and grade levels.

Clark noted that while there is currently no memorandum of agreement with local private schools, that does not mean that this program is only for public school students.

"Nothing prevents individual walk-ins," Clark said, meaning access is open to any parents/guardians with school-age children who are struggling with attendance/behavior issues.

Again, Clark stressed the point is to intervene early to change student behavior "before a trigger is pulled. Before somebody's door gets kicked in. Before a life is lost.

"This is about ending it before it ever starts," he said.

Both the city and county school superintendents are excited about this new partnership. Schools already have effective policies in place and automated calls, texts and emails to alert them when their children have missed school, as well as data portals online where parents can see student discipline and grade records. They also have attendance monitors and reach out to parents.

"This is another resource for us to increase every day attendance," city superintendent Wilkes said.

Russell County Schools Superintendent Dr. Brenda Coley echoed Wilkes'

comments on attendance.

“It’s one of our biggest challenges sometimes, and we have to hold the parents responsible,” she said. Sometimes, there are problems and situations that are beyond the school district’s control, she explained. That’s where the initiative will be asset, she said.

“It’s a preventive measure,” Coley said. “It’s, ‘What can we do? What’s the problem?’ I’m expecting great results.”

Coley hopes to see an increase in student attendance in association with the program’s implementation.

Wilkes has high expectations also.

“Ultimately, it’s the parents’ responsibility to get their children here,” Wilkes said. “We need some help. Everything matters. Attendance matters. Every class matters.”

Truancy has been flagged as a potential early warning sign regarding students’ future success.

State law requires children ages 6-17 in Alabama to be enrolled in school, regularly attend and behave in accordance with school policies.

Parents/guardians are held legally responsible for their children’s enrollment attendance and proper conduct in school. In connection, DAs are mandated to “vigorously enforce” this law.