Figure Alabama's Judicial Circuits

The mission of the Helping Families Initiative is to change the trajectory of at-risk youth by significantly reducing truancy and providing effective alternative pathways for students who are suspended from school.

One of the unique elements of the Helping Families Initiative is the leadership of the District Attorney of each Judicial Circuit in which the School System(s) resides. The partnership between the District Attorney and the School System deals proactively with children whose behavior is a predictor of future criminal activities, and forges a relationship between the School System(s) and other helping agencies.

Indeed, HFI is a comprehensive community-based approach to preventing crime by leveraging the full power and authority of a District Attorney’s office to react to problem student behavior and to bring existing community resources to bear on that behavior.

The role of the District Attorney in the Helping Families Initiative is defined clearly by the Mandatory School Attendance Act of the State of Alabama. Section 16-28-12(c) states:

Every child between the ages of six and 17 is required to attend a public school, private school, church school, or be instructed by a private tutor certified by the state of Alabama for the entire length of the school term in every scholastic subject under the compulsory attendance law…

*Code of Alabama 1975 §§16-28-3, 16-28-1, 16-28-7*

The purposes of this article are to secure the prompt and regular attendance of pupils and to secure their proper conduct, and to hold the parent, guardian or other person in charge or control of a child responsible and liable for such child’s nonattendance and improper conduct as a pupil…

*Code of Alabama 1975 Section 16-28-2*

The district attorney shall vigorously enforce this section to ensure proper conduct and required attendance by any child enrolled in public school.

*Code of Alabama 1975 Section 16-28-12(c)*

It should be noted that education is such a vital part of our society that school is our only required institution. The Legislature decided that education was so important to the future of this State and its people that it imposed criminal sanctions on those who fail to attend and behave in school. Enforcing the Mandatory School Attendance Act is completely consistent with the district attorney’s primary duties to seek truth and justice, while placing the rights and interests of society in a paramount position and, simultaneously, protecting the rights of all individuals.

This policy and the role of the chief prosecutor as a key leader to motivate entire communities in this regard are recognized across the nation. The *National Prosecution Standards* (NPS), promulgated by the National District Attorney’s Association, declare that a district attorney should:

“be mindful of opportunities to engage school officials, community youth organizations, social service agencies, neighborhood crime watch groups, and other such organizations with law enforcement agencies, including the prosecutor’s office, in efforts to prevent and detect crime. NPS, 2-1.4

“be involved in local entities established and maintained in his or her jurisdiction for the purpose of enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency, and fairness of the administration of criminal justice,” NPS, 2-1.1

“provide such criminal justice entities with information, advice, and data pertinent to the solution of problems identified in the jurisdiction, and should consider the implementation of appropriate proposals designed to address and resolve such problems,” NPS, 2-1.2

“provide leadership in their establishment, …where there are no local inter-agency entities.” NPS, 2-1.3

*National Prosecution Standards, by the National District Attorneys Association, 3rd Edition, with Revised Commentary.*

The Helping Families Initiative delivers on all levels of these justice standards. It represents the most comprehensive, inclusive, and effective approach to protecting ourselves from the ravages of crime by preventing crime from occurring in the first place. It gives our schools and all who attend, including the most seriously misbehaved students, the best chance of realizing their potential by assisting our teachers in establishing school environments that are appropriate for the delivery of education services. The District Attorney is in a unique position to infuse our principals and teachers with the full authority and power of our collective communities.