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Mobile DA offers school-violence intervention plan

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By **CHALLEN STEPHENS**
Times Staff Writer challens@htimes.com

Little Johnny, just 10 years old, climbs atop his school desk and lets loose a stream of obscenities at his classmates. He then threatens to kill everyone in the classroom.

"In the old days, we would have sent him home," said John Tyson Jr., the district attorney for Mobile and a candidate for Alabama attorney general.

But suspension wouldn't have fixed the problem, Tyson said. That's because little Johnny would still be psychotic.

And, according to Tyson, Johnny is a very real little boy, now a sort of poster child for the early intervention program Tyson has been championing around the state. On Thursday, he pitched the Helping Families Initiative at a meeting of the Huntsville school board.

It's a program Tyson said can head off troubled children before they turn to violent crime in later life.

"We think we can predict who is going to end up in the system," Tyson said to nods throughout the board meeting. He said even kindergarten teachers can make accurate predictions.

His program has seemingly gained popularity among school and city officials in Huntsville. Board President Doug Martinson Jr. thanked Mayor Loretta Spencer, city council representatives, business leaders and others for coming to hear Tyson's brief presentation.

Tyson told the board that through the Helping Families Initiative in Mobile, Johnny wasn't simply suspended. Instead, the suspension was only a first step. These days, the Mobile school system flags all the most serious suspensions, for drugs or weapons or arson, and forwards them to the district attorney's office.

That's followed by a warning letter from the district attorney. If there's a particularly troublesome offense or if the student is suspended again, then begins a collaborative process among the district attorney, the school system and 150 public and private agencies.

The process starts with what Tyson calls a family assessment.

For Johnny, Tyson said, the mental health center became involved and prescribed medicine. But the behavior didn't stop. Eventually, caseworkers on follow-up home visits found the boy's 79-year-old grandmother couldn't read and couldn't administer the medicine.

So, the assessment team arranged for the school nurse to handle that duty most days and a social worker to handle other days. Tyson said charitable groups also provided an oven, washer and dryer. He said the clean clothes eliminated some of the teasing that had helped trigger the initial outbursts.

The program draws together resources from police to social workers, from churches to the Boy Scouts,

from the Department of Human Resources to the YMCA.

Last school year, Tyson said the Mobile County school system made 3,268 referrals to Helping Families. He said those students were served by 198 programs through 150 agencies. In the following nine months, 70 percent of those students were not suspended again, he said.

"I just think we can do a lot of things to settle down school systems," Tyson said.

He received a round of applause.

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