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Colbert systems to adopt program for at-risk students

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MUSCLE SHOALS -- Jeff Wooten, Muscle Shoals superintendent of education, occasionally sees familiar names when he reads published reports about local crime suspects.

"I'll see the name and say, 'That doesn't surprise me,' " Wooten said.

Other local superintendents, as well as teachers, nodded in agreement as Wooten made the comment Tuesday during an announcement about the adoption in Colbert County of a program called the Helping Families Initiative.

The program helps law enforcement officials, schools and agencies identify young people who seem to be on the path toward legal problems, said Colbert County District Attorney Bryce Graham.

"It's designed and developed to help children who are at risk, who are apt to become a juvenile offender if some measures aren't made in an effort to curtail that," Graham said.

The program is patterned after one in Mobile County.

"In Mobile County, a wide range of law enforcement agencies, health, mental health and social service agencies have learned how to work together effectively to save kids from taking the wrong path," said Mobile County District Attorney John Tyson Jr., who developed the program in his county.

The idea is for the court system to get involved when students are suspended for serious matters.

Those can include violating school policies on serious issues such as weapons, drug use and conduct, as well as criminal acts, or repeated offenses of lesser policies.

Tyson said judicial officials didn't get involved in those matters, with the exception of those involving criminal acts, because they thought they were out of their legal realm.

A close look at the state's mandatory attendance act, however, found a way law enforcement could become involved, Tyson said.

"Alabama law requires parents to make sure that their children attend school and that they behave themselves appropriately in class," Tyson said.

The part mandating behavior means if a student doesn't behave in school, he or she is breaking the law. That's how law enforcement is able to get involved, Tyson said.

Then, law enforcement, the school and other agencies, such as the Alabama Department of Human Resources or mental health organizations, can work together on the problem. That could involve going into homes.

He said school is an ideal place for the judicial system to find at-risk youths. "Teachers can tell you who will end up in the justice system."

That also gives school systems more legal clout in reversing a student's at-risk direction.

"Identification of an at-risk student is the easy part," Hammond said. "Once we identified students, we didn't have the authority to intervene, and that's the beauty of this program."

Tyson, who is running for Alabama attorney general against incumbent Troy King on Nov. 7, said the program works.

He said 92 percent of students in Mobile County who have been suspended for a serious matter did not repeat the behavior. "And we're showing a 20 percent reduction in the juvenile-offense-arrest rate with our HFI students."

Wooten said he would like the program to be replicated throughout the state and nation. "We believe this program can make a real difference in the lives of our at-risk students," Wooten said.

He said the superintendents in Sheffield and Tuscumbia city schools and the Colbert County system are working together on the project.

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