



PRESS-REGISTER

Tyson's Helping Families program gets national ink

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The Mobile County Public School System is receiving national recognition again, this time through the efforts of Mobile County District Attorney John Tyson Jr.

Tyson's Helping Families program -- which sends social workers into the schools to try to help troubled students before they land in the juvenile justice system -- was just featured in Education Week, a magazine distributed nationally.

Tyson, who is campaigning for Alabama's attorney general, has drawn both praise and criticism as he's crossed the state promoting the program.

"We're doing everything that we can to make sure that a Columbine-type event does not occur," Tyson said.

Tyson said that if he defeats incumbent Troy King for that position, he would like to implement Helping Families throughout the state.

King, though, has been a vocal opponent of Tyson's social initiatives such as Helping Families. King said last week that while he is not against such programs, he believes such projects should be left to social workers, not attorneys general or district attorneys.

King called it a "fuzzy, feel-good, liberal social program."

"It is not the attorney general's job to run social programs," King said, adding that he has heard Tyson say that the purpose of such initiatives is to keep people out of jail. "If the attorney general is not going to put people in jail, who is?"

Tyson, a Democrat, is running against King, a Republican, in the Nov. 7 election.

Tyson countered King's remarks, saying that under the 1927 Mandatory School Attendance Act of Alabama, district attorneys are charged with enforcing school attendance rules.

"We're going after it on the basis of that statute, and lo and behold, to everyone's surprise, it's working," Tyson said. "We're going to keep it going."

The Education Week article about Helping Families is titled "The Long Arm of the Law." It takes up three and a half pages, including color photos of Tyson, social workers, counselors and Barton Academy, which houses the school system's central offices in downtown Mobile.

Students who are frequently absent from or tardy to class, or who often misbehave, are identified through school records as needing assistance through the Helping Families Program.

Counselors and social workers interview those students and their family members and are charged with

trying to find the root of the problem. Sometimes, officials have said, the child comes from an abusive home or has a medical condition that is not being treated.

Outside agencies work with Helping Families to provide services to these children in their families.

Counselor Jayne Carson, who works for Tyson, gave an example: A girl who once made good grades in an unidentified middle school started racking up an excessive number of absences. Her grades began to suffer.

Carson said that she soon learned that the girl was missing class because her mother was home, sick with lupus, a chronic and sometimes debilitating disease. When her mother needed to go to the hospital, the girl would stay at home to take care of her pre-school aged sister.

Through Helping Families, the family was referred to a local church that offered emergency daycare service as the mother needs it. The girl is now back to attending class regularly and her grades have improved, Carson said.

The Education Week article mentions a 6-year-old boy who showed up at a local elementary school with two handguns, one of which was loaded. The boy had no intention of using the guns, case officer Cheryl Turk is quoted in the article as saying. Upon investigation, Turk learned that the boy's mother was unemployed, young and single, raising four other children.

The guns belonged to an adult cousin.

The mother was counseled and told that she could have been charged with child-endangerment. Instead, Turk worked with the mother to get training on basic parenting skills and services for the young children, including health insurance.

Andrea Barbour, an assistant superintendent with the Mobile County Public School System, said Helping Families has been instrumental in improving the lives of students and their families. In addition, she said, the initiative has helped teachers and entire schools that no longer have to deal with some of these problems.

"Being able to help one child in a classroom very often affects all of the children in that classroom" Barbour said.

Helping Families is a partnership between Tyson's office and Mobile County public schools that began in 2003 at a cost of about \$215,000 a year. That money comes from state funding sent to schools and designated to help troubled students.

Last year, officials announced that nearly 400 students have received direct assistance through the program.

According to the Education Week article and statistics provided by Tyson's office, 80 percent of the students who participate in Helping Families were not suspended again.

"What I see is kids getting the help that they really need and parents getting the help that they really need," Carson said. "It's the school, the social service agencies, all on the same page, all working toward a common goal. And that is making a difference."

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