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# Arkansas program aims to notify schools of children traumatized by crime

State program aims to spot, respond to traumatized kids

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A program rolled out statewide by the University of Arkansas' Criminal Justice Institute this fall aims to create partnerships between schools and law enforcement agencies to provide support to students traumatized by crime.

The initiative, called Protecting Arkansas Youth Check, or PAY Check, is designed to make educators aware of traumatic events in a student's life outside the classroom so that they can provide resources instead of discipline for a child who is acting out.

When children experience crime-related trauma -- whether it be from acts of violence in their home or neighborhood or police arresting a family member -- it can be difficult for them to return to school and act as if nothing happened, said Cheryl May, director of the Criminal Justice Institute.

"There's a lot that happens in a kid's life outside of school that the school doesn't know about," May said.

Some students lose sleep or are preoccupied with what happened, affecting their attention, while others may act out in response to the upsetting events, May said. When that happens, teachers who are not aware of the root causes of the behavior are inclined to discipline, which can create a harmful cycle rather than addressing root causes.

PAY Check, which is modeled on a similar program pioneered in West Virginia called Handle With Care, tries to address the problem immediately after the traumatic event, sometimes before a student even returns to school, May said. Police officers who recognize that a child at a crime scene may have been negatively affected can fill out an electronic form that will be emailed to relevant personnel at the child's school.

The emails only inform the educators that a student may have been traumatized, and under the program school personnel are instructed not to ask the student what happened. But if the child acts out, it gives teachers or other school staff the awareness to offer mental health care or other support instead of punishing the student.

"It's critically important that they don't probe the kid, that they just keep an eye on them," May said.

The program encourages educators to pay special attention to the student and check on them often, hence the name, an October news release announcing the program states.

One of the reasons Criminal Justice Institute staff wanted to move away from the Handle With Care name is that Arkansas already has a program by that name that addresses restraining students, May said.

Starting in October, the Criminal Justice Institute made available all the necessary training materials available for educators and law enforcement to adopt the program, May said. Both have to go through some online trauma-informed training and learn how to use the system.

One advantage for law enforcement is that the forms can be filled out on-scene from their patrol vehicles, which is meant to make it easier to incorporate the program into existing paperwork officers do after incidents, May said.

"We didn't want it to be so burdensome that they wouldn't want to do it, no matter how much they like the program," May said.

It's vital, May said, that both schools and law enforcement in a community work together.

"If either of them don't want to do it, it can't be done," May said.

Since October, the rollout of the program has been slow, May said, but numerous smaller and rural school districts have already started participating, giving all parties the chance to get used to implementing the program in preparation for when larger districts buy in.

"They're trickling in, which I'm kinda glad, because this takes some time," May said.

After the start of 2024, May said, she expects the Department of Education to pitch in further support for the new program.

When the program launched in October, Department of Education Secretary Jacob Oliva promoted the program as a component of ensuring student safety, one of the core values of Gov. Sarah Huckabee-Sanders' LEARNS Act.

LEARNS stands for literacy, empowerment, accountability, readiness, networking and safety.

"The department will continue to coordinate with CJJ to identify opportunities to promote the program and share information with school districts," department spokesperson Kimberly Mundell said in an email last week when asked about how the department planned to promote the PAY Check program.

Mundell did not address questions about if the department planned to specifically promote the program to some of the state's larger school districts in Northwest Arkansas and Pulaski County.

As of last week, seven school districts, a private school and seven law enforcement agencies had signed up for the program, May said. Those were the Conway, Bald Knob, Bauxite, Guy-Perkins, Heber Springs, Midland and Perryville school districts, the Thaden School in Bentonville, the police departments in Guy, Heber Springs, Perryville, Pleasant Plains, Russellville and Searcy and the Cleburne County sheriff's office.

Spokespeople for the North Little Rock School District and the Pulaski County Special School District told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette they weren't aware of the program. A spokesperson for the Little Rock School District couldn't be reached after several attempts, but May said they weren't yet participating.

Little Rock schools were at one point using the Handle With Care program that May said originated in West Virginia.

In an August 2022 school safety forum, Little Rock police Maj. Troy Ellison, who at that time oversaw the department's school resource officers and has since risen to assistant chief, spoke positively about the Handle With Care program and expressed an interest in expanding it to Pulaski County Special School District schools.

PAY Check is part of the Criminal Justice Institute's wider Maltreatment and Drug Endangered Children Initiative, which uses similar techniques to serve as

an early warning system for dangers to children living in homes with parents or other people who abuse drugs, May said.

"When these cases reach the point where there's a child abuse allegation, usually it's too late to really do anything," May said.

Having educators and police working together to detect early signs of trouble in the home is intended to prevent them from falling into an abusive cycle, May said.

"These kids grow up in these homes, thinking their abuse is normal, and they mimic what they see," May said. "Sometimes they're able to break that cycle on their own, but sometimes not."

In the same way, May thinks that PAY Check will help schools and law enforcement identify and address some of the symptoms of negative home lives aggravated by crime.

"By doing this program and doing it the right way, we're able to identify these kids much earlier," May said. "We're able to hopefully help them break the cycle."

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