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### **Childish behavior; criminal behavior**

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For The Times

*Let's find a better way to deal with kids who act up at school*

Safe schools are a priority for all of us. But schools don't have to become juvenile booking stations to keep learning environments safe. We can maintain order and address misbehavior without handing our institutions of learning over to the criminal justice system.

According to a recent article in *The Huntsville Times*, schoolyard tussles that were once handled internally by school administrators are now often the subject of juvenile court hearings.

School resource officers (SROs) serve the important purpose of protecting students and school personnel from people coming into the schools for harmful purposes. And although SROs and school administrators certainly have the right to respond to aggressive adolescent behavior, the steadily rising numbers of referrals from schools to the juvenile justice system for childish misbehavior is not the answer.

School referrals for minor incidents of childish misbehavior not only clog the courts and consume law enforcement time that could be spent on public safety, they also create serious and lasting problems for young people. Court referrals often lead to incarceration, which keeps students out of the classroom and leaves them hopelessly behind peers. Even without incarceration, arrest and court appearance are damaging.

Research shows that a first-time arrest during high school nearly doubles the chances of a youth dropping out of school. A court appearance nearly quadruples those chances. High dropout rates mean reduced enrollment, which means fewer federal dollars for our schools.

In 2003, community leaders in Clayton County, Ga., voiced concerns about the numbers of children being sent to juvenile court by schools. When police officers were placed in the county's schools, referrals to juvenile court suddenly skyrocketed, jumping from 36 referrals in 1995 to 264 referrals in 1998 - a 600 percent increase.

When school referrals peaked at 1,262 in 2003, they accounted for almost a quarter of the total referrals to the juvenile court.

School safety was unaffected during this time period. Felony referrals from school have always remained fairly constant in Clayton County. But referrals for misdemeanors like disorderly conduct spiked out of control.

Troubled by these numbers, community leaders from schools, law enforcement, the juvenile court, the district attorney's office, child-serving programs, parents and other local stakeholders came together in 2003 to explore ways to improve school safety and reduce referrals to court.

After several months of study and negotiation, the group emerged with a unique collaborative agreement now referred to as the School Offense Protocol.

This protocol zeroes in on low-level misdemeanor offenses like disorderly conduct and affray, which had accounted for a majority of school referrals in Clayton County. For those offenses, the protocol establishes a system of graduated sanctions to standardize consequences for youth.

On the first offense, an SRO issues a formal citation to document the behavior and to "start the clock." The SRO has discretion to issue two more citations before moving to the next level - a requirement that the student and his parent attend a mandatory workshop conducted by the juvenile court.

If the student commits another offense after the workshop, the SRO may then refer the child to juvenile court.

Clayton County saw immediate results from the collaborative process, which was eye-opening for everyone involved. Even before the protocol was finalized, referrals had already begun to drop as a result of the process itself.

Once the agreement was signed in August 2004, school referrals dropped by 45 percent in 2005; 2007 saw only 523 referrals to juvenile court - a 59 percent drop from the high water mark in 2003.

Everyone has seen tremendous gains from the School Offense Protocol. SROs are no longer required to spend time arresting students for every minor infraction. As a result, the students' trust in the SROs has increased, making it more likely that students will confide in SROs to warn them of genuine safety threats.

For example, the number of serious weapons brought on campus has fallen 70 percent since the implementation of the protocol - a drop attributed to students' increased willingness to share information with police.

Schools are not only safer places to learn, but now that fewer students are being referred to juvenile court, instructional time has increased and graduation rates are expected to follow.

Moreover, the juvenile court now has more time and resources for youth who need intervention from the juvenile justice system.

The protocol didn't demand big grants or millions of dollars in state funds. It simply required local leaders to come together and think about the best way to use existing resources to create safe, healthy schools, and communities.

The process wasn't easy, but it was well worth it.

Understanding the negative consequences of treating childish behavior as criminal behavior is the key to unlocking the door to detention for minor school offenses.

Only through collaboration can we use this realization to improve school safety and the learning environment for the benefit of each child.

This community, and many others across Alabama, are blessed with dedicated leaders who care about children. It's simply a matter of coming together to create strong and safe communities for our children and for our future.

<http://www.al.com/opinion/huntsvilletimes/index.ssf?/base/opinion/1212311744303710.xml&coll=1>

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