ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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50 look at truancy, find it vexing (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

It isn't uncommon for Douglas Ponce to spot a few teens playing basketball at 11 a.m. on a school day in his neighborhood.

He watches a police car pass by the ball court without stopping before he approaches the teenagers and asks why they aren't in school. Ponce, a consultant with youth-intervention group Ministry of Intercessions, calls their parents, then calls the school.

But neither the parents nor school officials know the teens aren't in class.

That scenario was one of several truancy issues in and around Little Rock that about 50 community leaders who participated in a workshop on the topic Saturday aim to solve. The Coalition of Greater Little Rock Neighborhoods hosted the nearly four-hour event with city leaders, law-enforcement officials, judges, parents and social workers.

"When children fail to go to school or otherwise get educated, everybody suffers," said Judge Wiley Branton. "Parents need to convey the importance of education to their children."

The problem of students skipping class or not attending regularly wasn't pinned on any one reason or group. There were different opinions on where the issues begin, including the lack of attention at home, the failing education system and the inefficiency of the handling of truancy cases in courts.

In the Little Rock School District, an elementary or middle-school student is declared truant when he misses nine or more classes. At that point, a case file is prepared and sent to the prosecuting attorney's office and then referred to a juvenile-court judge. At the high-school level, once a student acquires seven absences he is declared truant and the same process occurs.

More than 1,200 such cases on Little Rock students were referred to the court system in the past school year, most of them high school students. Even more are pending, said Ellen McLemore, a truancy case coordinator.

What happens from there varies. Sometimes it is difficult to track down the student and his family to bring them to court. At court, most truant students are fined.

Other times, when a student is found outside school during school hours he is taken to the Truancy Center in the old Garland Elementary School at 3615 W. 25th St. and kept there until noon, at which time a family member picks him up or he is returned to school.

In some situations, students receive out-of-school suspension for missing too many days.

“Why are you sending kids home for being at home?” asked Paul Kelly, senior policy analyst for Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. “It’s real easy to push them further away, but that’s not going to solve the problem.”

There seemed to be a consensus among several people at the workshop that current procedures criminalize truancy. Some pointed out that when a student is fined by a court, it is often the parents who pay that fine, which may have no real effect on the truant.

“I’m not for it - criminalizing truancy,” said Debbie Priebe, a parent of three. “It’s very important that these [school truancy] monitors monitor it. It looks like we are leading to the criminalization of truancy instead [of prevention] and I’m not for that.”

But those who work with truancy programs, the schools and the city to combat the problem said that there are a number of efforts focused on preventing truancy.

New computer software allowed school officials to better track attendances and absences, said Angelia Tolbert, executive director of Arkansas Community Dispute Resolution Centers, Inc.

She also noted that one city high school participated in a pilot truancy prevention program that had an 88 percent success rate.

“We cannot arrest our way out of crime. We have to do prevention,” Assistant Little Rock Police Chief Eric Higgins said. “Not every kid that is not going to school is a criminal, but every kid that is not going is not getting educated and is limiting his ability.”

Saturday’s workshop was meant to make community leaders aware of truancy issues and start a discussion, said organizer Annie Abrams.

But participants called for action and more involvement from students, teachers and parents.

“Where are the students?” Priebe asked as others nodded in agreement. “Why aren’t they here?

A woman a few chairs away said educators should be participating in truancy prevention and another asked why there weren’t more programs for parents.

“If parents start doing their job, y’all will not have to work as hard [preventing truancy,]” said Mike Daugherty, a former member of the Little Rock School Board.

No definite solution to fix the truancy problem in and around Little Rock was decided on at the workshop, but people said it was helpful to get the conversation started.

“The hope is we don’t let this just end with a conversation because in the meantime we have all these young people in need of what we’re talking about,” said Bro. Wayne, the lead agent with Little Rock-based Mentors in Blackness.

Virtual Academy out to hit higher student cap (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Arkansas’ 10-year-old, publicly funded, online homeschool program for children in kindergarten through eighth grades is poised to grow to six times its current 500-pupil enrollment, making it the state’s largest independently run charter school.

Leaders of the ArkansasVirtual Academy are working this summer with prospective students and faculty candidates for the coming 2013-14 school year after Arkansas lawmakers in April increased the school’s enrollment cap to 3,000 and freed the school to expand into the high school grades.

Scott Sides, head of the school that is based in NorthLittle Rock but serves students and families statewide, said Friday that the school has received about 1,300 applications to date. He is projecting an enrollment of at least 1,500 pupils in kindergarten through eighth grades starting this fall, and possibly as many as 2,000.

That projected enrollment is comparable to the e-STEMPublic Charter Schools system in downtown Little Rock, which had a total enrollment of 1,485 last school year and has been the largest of the public, independently run charter school systems in the state.

The enrollment cap for what the Virtual Academy leaders call “a radically different education delivery”system was increased despite objections from Arkansas Department of Education staff members who wanted all charter schools to be treated the same - with amendments to the charter agreements subject to approval by the state Board of Education or the state Department of Education, not legislators.

The state Board of Education had turned down the Virtual Academy’s earlier request to expand.

“This is not in any way delivering education in a traditional mode,” John Riggs IV of Little Rock, vice chairman of the board of directors for the Arkansas Virtual Academy, said about the academy’s program.

The school provides teachers, online lessons, textbooks, workbooks, software, tests, art supplies, science materials and field trip opportunities for students. A computer and Internet access also are provided if they are not already available to a student.

The school receives the standard aid per student that all public schools receive from the state - $6,237 per student this year. Also, the students are required to take the state-mandated exams that other public school students must take.

The Virtual Academy education program - including the approximately 100 pounds of supplies delivered to each student's home every school year - is managed by K12, a for-profit, Virginia-based company.

K12 has contracts to manage online and blended online and traditional school programs in 32 states and the District of Columbia in partnership with school districts and nonprofit charter boards, Jeff Kwitowski, senior vice president for corporate communications, said in an e-mail. The company is the largest provider of online education programs in the nation, he said.

Each Arkansas Virtual Academy student is aided by an on-site "learning coach," who is usually a parent or a grandparent, but can be anyone 18 and older who is committed to conferring with teachers and otherwise helping the student who has to be logged into the state-financed instructional program for 30 hours a week.

Riggs, a former Little Rock School Board member and a former state senator, said he was drawn to the academy by the benefits that technology can provide.

"Every child can have an individual education plan," he said. "Education is tailored to the child rather than the child having to be shoehorned into the educational system. That's all because of the technology."

Academy leaders were motivated to expand the school for different reasons, including a waiting list of 600 or more pupils who had little hope of being admitted otherwise, Riggs said.

"Our parents were telling us that we needed more spots," he said.

By the time siblings of current students in the school were admitted to the school's rolls, as is permitted by state law, there were only 22 open seats available to be filled in a lottery drawing. The lottery is used only when there are more student applicants for acharter school than there are available openings.

Additionally, school leaders were eager to increase the school size to be able to offer students and their families an online high school program that would complement the elementary- and middle-school academy, Riggs said. There is no other state-sanctioned virtual high school in Arkansas.

The Virtual Academy won't offer any high school grades in 2013-14 but plans for at least a ninth grade and possibly a ninth and 10th grade in the 2014-15 school year, Riggs said.

The increase in the kindergarten-through-eighth-grade enrollment will require more teaching staff members, said Sides, who is a former Lonoke School District teacher and a past administrator at Episcopal Collegiate School in Little Rock. He anticipates hiring 18 general education teachers and three special-education teachers to augment what hasbeen a state certified teaching staff of 13.

Sides and members of his staff have been conducting informational meetings with parents and students in recent weeks.

In July, academy leaders will begin training programs for the parents or other learning coaches for the new students. Those sessions are about 1 ½ hours long and are designed to explain to the learning coaches what will be required of them by the school.

More information about the school program and enrollment is available by calling the K12 toll-free number (866) 339-4951, or by viewing the Virtual Academy website, www.k12.com/arva.

The Arkansas Virtual Academy started as a pilot project in January 2003 with a multimillion-dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The state Education Board later that year attempted to make the school a charter school with no enrollment cap, but lawmakers blocked that move, overriding a gubernatorial veto to do so. The school continued to operate with funding from grants.

In April 2007, the state board approved the virtual school as an open-enrollment charter school with a 500-student cap.

In 2011, and again in 2012, the state Education Board turned down requests to raise the enrollment cap to 1,500. The board did approve a three-year renewal of the charter last year, although the school had asked for a fiveyear renewal.

Earlier this year, led by Sen. Johnny Key, R-Mountain Home, lawmakers approved special language in what became Act 233 of 2013 that enables the school's enrollment to grow to 3,000 in grades kindergarten through 12.

Legislators raised the cap despite state Education Board concerns and over the objections of Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell.

The Education Board had raised concerns about the amount of fees paid to theK12 company and whether the virtual school's increased enrollment would siphon money from traditional school districts. Kimbrell argued that the legislative action defied the Education Department's efforts to treat each charter school the same.

On Friday, Kimbrell said the state agency "will maintain proper oversight" of the charter school while continuing to work to improve traditional public schools.

"My goal is to lead public education to higher levels of academic achievement whatever delivery system is in place," he said in a prepared statement, and added, "charter schools provide options for many students in our state, and parents should be afforded that choice."

The special language approved by lawmakers requires that the students who fill the 2,500 new slots be those who were enrolled in public schools last school year. Thestate aid will follow those students from their previous schools to the virtual school. That should prevent an increase in education costs to the state, lawmakers said.

Riggs said Friday that lawmakers were familiar with the school's program and understood what the virtual school was attempting to do when they approved the 3,000-student enrollment cap.

“We can demonstrate that our kids are progressing. There is value in educating kids this way,” Riggs said about using specialized teachers and “world class” curricula to better tailor an education program to students in places where resources are scant.

“This is going to change education. Will it change next week? No,” Riggs said. “Will it change it next year? Probably not. But in five years, we won’t have this discussion. Something will have happened by then. That’s just a hop, skip away.”

U.S. cuts squeezing Head Start (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Head Start and Early Head Start organizations across the state have cut budgets by shortening their school years, furloughing workers and eliminating positions as a result of federal budget cuts.

Some programs anticipate reducing the number of children their programs will serve in the 2013-14 school year either by closing classrooms or ending services for families who can’t provide their own transportation.

The Budget Control Act of 2011 required a series of federal spending cuts, called sequestration, starting March 1 that reduce federal spending by $85 billion, including $42.67 billion in nondefense spending. Sequestration amounts to a 5 percent reduction for most nondefense discretionary funding, according to the federal Office of Management and Budget.

The 22 agencies overseeing Head Start and Early Head Start adjusted their annual operating budgets to reflect a 5.27 percent cut that went into effect with the automatic cuts. Many agencies closed centers early for the2012-13 year, but more changes will hit in August.

The White House estimated that up to 70,000 children nationwide would lose access to Head Start and Early Head Start, including as many as 600 children in Arkansas.

“As the son of a former Head Start director in Arkansas, I understand the value this program provides our children,” U.S. Rep. Tim Griffin, R-Ark., said in a statement provided by his spokesman. “It is unacceptable that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources chooses waste over kids by refusing to cut wasteful spending and instead shifting the burden to preschool kids.”

Head Start is a federal program that helps preschool children from low-income families prepare for kindergarten with services that focus on education, health, nutrition, and social and emotional development, according to the national Office of Head Start. A related program, Early Head Start, focuses on pregnant women, infants and toddlers.

The programs are administered through the federal Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Office of Head Start operates on an annual budget of about $8.1 billion, with the 5 percent cut reducing funding by about $405,000, said Kenneth Wolfe, spokesman for the Administration for Children and Families. Wolfe said the number of slots affected by sequestration likely will be lower

than the estimate from the White House. The White House estimate is based on Head Start organizations achieving budget reductions by eliminating slots for children.

Instead, Head Start organizations are using different approaches to reduce budgets, Wolfe said.

ENDING SERVICES

In Arkansas, 22 agencies oversee Early Head Start programs for 1,000 children and Head Start programs for 10,000 children in Arkansas, said Jacqualine Dedman, director of the Arkansas Head Start State Collaboration Office in Little Rock.

Many agencies closed programs early for the 2012-13 school year, have staff on furlough and are cutting back spending on supplies, travel and training, Dedman said. They are reducing staffing by combining positions and job duties.

Agency directors are working to maintain services for as many children as possible, Dedman said. Some programs are seeking grants to offset some of the loss in federal funding.

“They won’t be able to pick up any new children,” Dedman said.

They are required to maintain high standards of quality required by the federal government, Dedman said.

A cut of $333,946 out of a budget of $6.33 million is prompting the Families and Children Together Head Start/ Early Head Start based in El Dorado to end home-based services for 81 children, said Brenda Holder, Head Start director. Other budget reduction plans include the elimination of eight full-time positions and five part-time positions.

“It’s going to hurt,” Holder said. “It’s not one of those things you’re going to be able to tell in the next year or two or three. Every time there’s a child who’s not going to get services, that child’s not going to enter school quite as ready.”

The agency has provided services for more than 800 children, but now will serve a little more than 700 children in Calhoun, Columbia, Dallas, Ouachita and Union counties,she said. Officials weighed whether to close centers or shift the cuts to home-based services for families who aren’t able to get their children to a center, Holder said.

“There are several centers where we are the only preschool in town,” Holder said. “If we closed a center there, the parents would have no preschool for their children.” ‘MORE WITH LESS’

Agencies in Northwest Arkansas are working with their governing boards on making decisions for 2013-14.

Northwest Arkansas Head Start Human Services anticipates cutting enrollment by at least 75 children, said Jerry Adair, Head Start director. The agency oversees Head Start programs for 558 children in

Benton, Carroll and Madison counties. The agency is cutting about $190,000 out of a $3.7 million budget.

“It’s a matter of money,” he said. “There has to be money to provide the services.”

Ozark Opportunities, which serves 481 children in six counties in Northwest and north-central Arkansas, will close one of two classrooms in Marshall, which will reduce space for children by 10 slots, said Toby Atkinson, executive director. The agency is cutting $138,532 from a budget of $2.63 million.

With closing the classroom in Marshall, “We tried to lessen that blow by making sure there were other providers,” Atkinson said.

“We’re doing our best to keep the children insulated with the cuts,” he said. “We’re digging into anything we have, reallocating materials. It’s the staff that are having to do more with less. We’re keeping that quality high for children and families.”

In central Arkansas, the Community Services Office of Hot Springs/Garland County is managing a cut of about $70,732 out of a budget of $1.34 million with a 2 percent pay cut for all employees, a reduction in spending for supplies and by postponing planned upgrades of equipment, said Mary Jean Daniel, Head Start director. The organization serves 223 children in Head Start.

“It’s not sustainable in the long-run,” Daniel said. “There’s no cushion. We need more money next year or we’re going to have to relook at everything.” STATE RESOURCES

A mix of federal and state programs provides education for young children from low-income families in Arkansas.

“The sequestration really is hitting all programs with young children,” said Tonya Russell, director of the division of child care and early childhood education for the Arkansas Department of Human Services. “We’re going to be serving fewer children.”

Head Start and Early Head Start accept children from families earning at or slightly more than the federal poverty limit, $15,510 or less for a family of two or $23,550 or less for a family of four.

A larger state program potentially could make room for some children who will no longer be served by the two federal programs, but the state pre-kindergarten program also has concerns over funding, Russell said.

State lawmakers have appropriated $111 million annually since 2007 for the Arkansas Better Chance program, which has provided services for about 25,000 children in families earning up to 200 percent, or $47,100 for a family of four, of the federal poverty limit, Russell said. Operating costs rise each year, however, and officials with the state pre-kindergarten program have to trim budgets to pay the rising costs of rent, utilities, insurance, salaries and food.

Russell said her division will determine in July the number of slots the Arkansas Better Chance program will cover forthe 2013-14 school year.

If families are not able to access Head Start, they should apply for a spot in the Arkansas Better Chance program, Russell said.

Her division encourages child-care officials to maximize state and federal resources for families with children, so that Head Start programs serve the poorest families and the Arkansas Better Chance serving families who earn too much to qualify for Head Start.

With some Head Start programs cutting slots and no new money to expand Arkansas Better Chance, even more children eligible to receive services will not have access to them next school year, Russell said. The state program reaches about 60 percent of the children eligible for services.

"It is obviously a concern when we have programs having to make cuts," Russell said. "These children are in high quality programs. If that limits their access to a high quality comprehensive program and their ability to affect the achievement gap … it creates economic deficiencies for all of us."

Education notebook (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

State's graduation rate rises to 72.3%

Arkansas' high school graduation rate improved 2.8 percentage points, from 69.6 percent to 72.3 percent, between 2000 and 2010.

Nationally, the graduation rate went from 66.8 percent in 2000 to 74.7 percent, up 7.9 points.

The statistics are from the newly released, eighth annual Diploma Counts study produced by Editorial Projects in Education, the same organization that publishes Education Week, a national newspaper on pre-collegiate education.

In Arkansas, there were 37,067 ninth-graders in 2009-10, according to the study. Of that number 26,675 were projected to graduate in the just-ended 2012-13 school year, leaving 10,392 as non-graduates. That equates to 58 students lost a day.

The report showed that 60 percent of Arkansas' young adults who are out of school without a diploma are not working, compared with 39 percent of young people who are high school graduates.

The percentages of black students, Hispanic students and American Indians who graduate from Arkansas high schools exceed the national graduation percentages for those groups.

LR's Adams seeks 2nd term on board

Little Rock School Board member Greg Adams announced last week that he will run for election to a second three-year term to the board's Zone 4 seat.

Candidates for school boards can begin circulating petitions to be placed on the ballot this week . The deadline for filing with the Pulaski County clerk as a candidate is noon on July 9. The annual school board election is Sept. 17.

Zone 4 encompasses northwest Little Rock, a growing part of the city where some residents have been lobbying the board to build a new middle school and high school.

Other Little Rock School Board seats that are up for election this year are the Zone 2 seat held by Michael Nellums and the Zone 6 seat held by Tommy Branch Jr. Branch was appointed to the seat by his board colleagues last year and must run for election if he wants to fulfill the remainingtwo years of the term. Branch filled the vacancy created by the death of Michael Peterson, who was elected in September.

NLR district takes 2nd look at designs

The North Little Rock School Board is exploring campus design options after a state agency in May approved only $26 million of the district's $66 million request for state help with the district's plans to consolidate, build and renovate campuses across the city.

Auditorium plans for what is now the North Little Rock High School, West Campus, are under scrutiny.

The campus is going to be expanded to house some 3,000 students in grades nine through 12. The current design for the expansion includes the construction of a new 1,000-seat auditorium on the northeast corner of the campus. But with the state decision on building aid, district leaders last week pondered whether the auditorium in the landmark North Little Rock High School building could be made like new at a lower costthan a new auditorium.

No final decisions were made, but the School Board is likely to act later this month to authorize its architects to produce designs that would make use of the current auditorium and reduce total building costs.

Arkansan selected for national honor

Linda Moore, a Little Rock native who graduated from what was then Horace Mann High School in 1964, will be inducted into the National Alliance for Public Charter School's Hall of Fame on July 1 at the National Charter Schools Conference.

Moore is the founder and executive director of the Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., an elementary school named for Moore's mother.

The school started with 35 pupils in a church basement. It now serves 350 with a bilingual immersion program.Each child in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade is required to learn to speak, read, think and write in English and in either French or Spanish.

Others being inducted to the Hall of Fame include the Walton Family Foundation of Bentonville and Lisa Graham Keegan, the former Arizona state superintendent.