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Keep kids in school, cops say, or they may end up in jail

By DARCIE MORAN
Capital News Service

LANSING — Michigan police officers are hoping to lessen the frequency of suspensions and expulsions in the state's schools to help fight crime.

The problem with out-of-school suspensions is students might not be supervised when they are told not to come to school, said Grand Rapids Police Department Lt. Dave Schnurstein.

"Sending them home can be an adequate punishment but in many households, and certainly in many lower income households, the kids are just home alone," Schnurstein said. "Some kids, that's what they're hoping for.

"When they're not at school then they have the opportunity to get in criminal acts," he said.

Finding alternatives is a challenge that Michigan school and police groups are attempting to tackle.

The number of Michigan school suspensions is up from about 107,000 in the 2009-2010 year, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education.

The department reports that about 110,000 students in Michigan were suspended from school in the 2011-2012 school year. Now law enforcement groups are encouraging schools to find alternative forms of discipline to keep kids in school and away from a life of crime.

The Michigan chapter of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a national organization of law enforcement officials and crime survivors, recently issued a call to reduce school suspensions and expulsions. But they are only the latest organization to raise this issue.

Earlier this year, the Michigan Department of Education and a Michigan School Discipline Task Force developed a policy to prevent behavior issues and avoid the need for suspensions and expulsions.

The policy, which will be up for approval in May, suggests using a tiered approach to discipline starting with prevention and progressing to counseling, conflict resolution, mediation and group interventions.

The Obama administration also recently recommended that schools not use policies that require police to deal with routine discipline. That action was also aimed at avoiding racial disparities in punishment. Black students are punished more frequently and more harshly, according to data compiled by U.S. Department of Education.

Alternatives to suspension could include involving parents in discipline or providing family counseling when disciplinary problems start at home, Washtenaw County Prosecutor Brian Mackie said. But schools might not have the funds to make it happen.

"The biggest thing, when we talk about spending money, is we have to think about the consequences of not doing the right thing," said Mackie, who is a state co-chair for Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. "If I get worked out of a job, I'm comfortable with that."

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids advocates the use of the Good Behavior Game, in which a class is split up evenly and the team with the best behavior is rewarded at the end of the day.

Other suggested programs included the Functional Family Therapy, which is a 12-session behavior intervention program.

While Schnurstein said there is no "one size fits all" solution to discipline in schools, options other than suspensions and expulsions should be investigated.

Alternative schools for struggling students appear to have been successful in Kent County, said Schnurstein, also a member of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.

High schools in the Harbor Springs area send students to alternative schools during their suspension, something Harbor Springs Police Chief Dan Branson said has been effective in keeping students out of trouble and caught up on schoolwork.

Branson, also a member of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, said he was unaware of concerns with the number of suspensions in the state until the group issued a press release.

Mackie knows firsthand that there is a connection between students who become criminals and students who had disciplinary issues in school.

"We see a lot of kids that have dropped out of school," Mackie said. "It's something that starts very early."

Frequent suspensions makes school uninviting for children and makes dropping out more likely, said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, the director of the Michigan League for Public Policy's Kids Count in Michigan. The program is part of a national effort to improve children's well-being.

"If we don't address the problem within the education system, they end up on the streets (and) they become a law enforcement problem," Zehnder-Merrell said.

She said part of the issue lies in lack of mental health and support services in schools, as well as teachers dealing with larger classes.

The challenge is balancing the needs of problem students with those of other students, Schnurstein said.

"(School) is the only place that will give them any chance to succeed," Schnurstein said. "At the same time the school has to have the ability to remove a distraction from everyone else in the classroom.

"We cannot arrest our way out of some of these problems," he said. "It costs more later on to incarcerate them than to educate them."

Getting a job after 55 may require 'Shifting Gears'

By BECKY McKENDRY
Capital News Service

LANSING – If you're 55 or older and hunting for a job, good luck. Michigan is one of the worst states for your employment prospects.

Governing Magazine recently reported data showing nationwide employment-to-population ratios, a common economic measure of what proportion of a state's eligible working-age population is employed.

Michigan is the third worst in the nation for older workers, just behind Arkansas and West Virginia, at 32.3 percent of residents 55 and older employed.

The report suggested a link between stronger agricultural economies and better employment ratios for older workers. Nebraska has the highest ratio, at 49 percent.

So does that mean Michigan's poor employment ratio is the result of a struggling agricultural economy?

Not at all, says Jeremy Nagel, media relations specialist for the Michigan Farm Bureau.

"That notion just runs contrary to where our state's agricultural economy is right now," he said. "We're incredibly prosperous right now."

Agriculture is Michigan's second largest industry, making up almost one fourth of the state's jobs, according to the Michigan Farm Bureau.

Additionally, the average age of a Michigan farmer is 56 years old, suggesting agriculture contributes favorably to the employment ratio of older workers.

Moreover, the industry keeps growing, Nagel says – five times faster than the general economy.

"Truth is, agriculture has been one of the bright spots in our economy," he said.

So what else could explain Michigan's poor employment numbers?

It's a two-part story, said Charles Ballard, economist at Michigan State University.

"The biggest part of the story is that the whole Michigan labor market is struggling," he said. "We're still a full percentage point above the national unemployment rate…at 7.8 percent."

The second part of the story, Ballard said, is that older workers make up a demographic that's especially vulnerable when the overall economy struggles.

"If you lose a job at 59 or 62, what are you going to do?" he said. "The notion of going back to college or retraining for a new job makes sense when you're in your thirties or forties, but not six years away from when you planned to retire."

Ballard also said the decline of Michigan manufacturing left many older workers out in the cold.

When workers in their fifties and sixties found themselves jobless with only manufacturing skills in hand, many were eligible to withdraw from their 401Ks or IRAs, or even qualify for Social Security – even when they didn't want to leave the job market just yet.

"If they're of average health, most people prefer to work later into their retirement years," he said. "But if your skills don't translate to a new job, what else do you do?"

There are some state programs to aid older job seekers, especially those who seek to transition into a new career. One of these such programs is the Michigan Shifting Gears Program.

Shifting Gears aims to help older, unemployed professionals translate their skills to a new field.

"The landscape of job searching is so different than what it was, and we're trying to avoid them going down the resume black hole," said Rhonda Pierce, program manager.

The program, subsidized through the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, offers mentorship, networking advice and internship opportunities for displaced older workers. The program fee is around $500 for participants.

"We're not a job placement program, but we have had participants even find jobs through their internship opportunities," Pierce said. "Some have started their own consulting or contracting companies. It's about connecting them with their passions."

And although the job market can be discouraging, there's plenty of talent to spare among older workers, Pierce said.

"This is a generation with commitment and loyalty," she said. "Employers can benefit from that kind of maturity and wisdom."

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