



Local

DEVELOPING

GRADD receives grant to fight school absenteeism

 By Renee Beasley Jones Messenger-Inquirer

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The Green River Area Development District has received a \$50,000 annual grant for up to five years to partner with public schools in an effort to curb unexcused absences and keep families from being charged with educational neglect.

The Educational Neglect Prevention and Family Engagement Program hopes to decrease the number of families referred to child protective services, improve school attendance and student success, identify risk factors that lead to unexcused absences and assist families by removing barriers to attendance.

The GRADD program is expected to kick off March 1 and begin by serving three Owensboro elementary schools. They are Owensboro Public Schools' Estes Elementary School and Daviess County Public Schools' Burns Elementary School and Meadow Lands Elementary School. They were selected for having higher truancy rates.

During the 2017-18 academic year, Estes Elementary's unexcused absenteeism rate was 17 percent, according to school officials. The next highest OPS elementary school rate was 13 percent at Cravens Elementary School.

The average truancy rate at Burns and Meadow Lands is about 6 percent, DCPS officials said.

The new program will assist families of students ages 5 to 11 who have been referred to the program for having unexcused absences. The students must live with their primary caregiver on a regular basis, and the family cannot have an open case with child protective services.

DCPS started a new attendance initiative at its middle and high schools this year, said Scott Taylor, student services director. The GRADD program will broaden that effort to include elementary schools, Taylor said.

"We are excited to partner with GRADD," he said. "It's nice to have an outside community agency to work with."

Shari Holzmeyer, principal of Estes Elementary, agreed.

GRADD has access to a lot of resources and will be a good partner, Holzmeyer said. She looks forward to the program's implementation.

"It benefits our families to involve other groups," Holzmeyer said.

The Owensboro program will mirror one that has operated six years in Jefferson County. Centerstone, a large mental health organization, administers the grant in a seven-county region.

"Truancy is a big issue in Louisville," said Grace Harrison, parent meeting facilitator for the Centerstone program.

About 25 percent of students in Jefferson County Public Schools struggle with unexcused absences, Harrison said. That percentage includes all schools in the district.

But the Centerstone grant program is making headway. Last year, 84 percent of families served by the program had their absentee issues addressed and did not need referrals to child protective services, Harrison said.

"Numbers like that don't exist in the social work field," she said. "That is a rate of success that is astounding."

To her knowledge, the Jefferson County program is the first of its kind in the nation. Owensboro's will be the second.

Centerstone officials have been invited to an upcoming Washington, D.C., conference to present the concept to officials from other states.

When a child is referred to the Centerstone program for unexcused absences, a meeting takes place. It usually includes at least one school official, a child protective services official, Centerstone meeting facilitator and the parent.

"We want it to be as few people as possible because it can be intimidating," Harrison said.

Parents often start out with a defensive attitude, she said, but they soon realize the group wants to help.

Parents may fear "they are going to be punished, but they walk out feeling like they got a big hug," Harrison said.

Starting the program at the elementary school level can have a big impact on the rest of a child's public school career, she said.

Kristy Clark, lead case manager at GRADD, will be the parent engagement meeting facilitator for Owensboro's program. Next week, she will spend a few days in Louisville, shadowing Harrison as part of the learning process.

Grant funding for the new program came through Eastern Kentucky University, which has a contract with the state. State officials are eager to see how the program will perform in a more rural setting, Clark said.

GRADD is starting with three schools but hopes to expand the program to other districts and counties in its service area, she said. "We are thankful to have this opportunity."

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