

## Program that places students as jurors over their peers getting results

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COLLIER COUNTY — Sometimes a punishment means more if it comes from your peers, not your teachers.

At least that's the basic idea behind School Accountability Boards, which place Collier County students as jurors over their peers when they commit an infraction at school.

The School Accountability Boards were developed by Sandra Pavelka, the director of the Institute for Youth and Justice Studies at Florida Gulf Coast University, and are modeled after Neighborhood Accountability Boards. The boards use "restorative principles," where the victim and community are integral parts of developing an individualized, comprehensive case plan.

The School Accountability Boards' plan addresses the risk factors and needs of youth and tries to keep them in school and out of the juvenile justice system.

The program was first piloted in 2004 in Immokalee. It is now part of five schools: Immokalee Middle School, Barron Collier High School, Golden Gate High School, Immokalee High School and Lely High School.

Last year, 91 students of varying socioeconomic status, ethnicity, grade level and academic and behavioral backgrounds served as School Accountability Board members, with four or five students at each school sitting on the board during each conference, according to Lesley Medley, coordinator of the program, who spoke to the Justice Committee of the League of Women Voters of Collier County on Tuesday.

Medley said the program has also helped flesh out risk factors that the school might not have known about. She spoke of one case involving a teenage girl. The girl's mother, who brought the girl and her sister over from Honduras, went back to Honduras after their father was murdered, leaving her children alone. The girl's sister was pregnant and dropped out of school to stay home with her baby. The teenage girl, who was before the School Accountability Board for tardiness, was cleaning offices at night and had a vision problem that kept her from reading properly.

"We didn't know any of this was going on until we started to talk to her," she said.

The students are trained before they can serve as a member of the board, Medley said.

"We train the students that these are not bad kids," she said. The difference between the kids on the board and the kids coming before them is that the kids coming before the board have made some poor decisions."

In fact, some students who have been before the board have asked and been accepted as board members, Medley said.

The board also has the support of a coordinator, a faculty facilitator and a Youth Relations deputy.

As of June 2008, a total of 43 cases were referred to the boards. The largest number of referrals — 15 — were for insubordination or disruptive behavior. The boards also heard cases for tardiness, truancy, abusive language, leaving class without permission and theft.

As of June 2008, 38 of the 43 cases referred to the School Accountability Boards were successful and five, or 12

percent, were unsuccessful. To be deemed successful, the student offenders had to complete and turn in all assignments on time and in a professional manner, and could not reappear before the School Accountability Board.

Barron Collier High School Assistant Principal of Attendance and Discipline Mike Richardson said some problems such as fights, drugs or alcohol in school or weapons have prescribed punishments and those students do not appear before the School Accountability Boards.

Bernice Schmelz, the committee chair of the Justice Committee of the League of Women Voters of Collier County said the program seems to be about preventing issues of tardiness and insubordination from happening.

"It's great from my point of view," she said. "It's nice to see it at the school level."

Medley told the League of Women Voters that the program has been approved for the county through the 2009-10 school year. She said the biggest challenges for the program are getting more people involved and funding. The School Accountability Boards had funding cut by the Collier County School District and rely on other sources to keep them going.

"The school district, like every district in Florida, is having a difficult time and we were not included in the budget this year," she said. "But we have permission to run the program in the schools."

She encouraged the League of Women Voters to help by volunteering to mentor the students or to help the organization raise funds. She also encouraged them to speak to their legislators and encourage them to support legislation that would give students who serve on the boards volunteer hours for their work. The students do not currently receive volunteer hours because the boards meet during school hours.

"I'm personally biased, but I think it is important," she said of the issue.