



Bill: Keep kids out of court for minor trouble

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Indianapolis - Arresting students for behavior that used to earn them a trip to the principal's office can put kids on a path toward dropping out of school and going to prison, a Georgia judge told an Indiana legislative committee on Tuesday.

"When you slap the handcuffs on a kid, you increase the risk that they're not going to graduate," along with the odds of later trouble with the law, said Steven C. Teske, a juvenile court judge from Clayton County, Ga., who testified before the House Judiciary Committee.

Teske was one of the nearly 12 officials who spoke in support of a bill that would create a study group including police, judges, principals and others who work with children to recommend better methods for handling juveniles who get into trouble at school.

The bill also would require all police and security officers stationed in schools to be trained in interacting with youth, and schools would have to submit annual reports on student arrests.

The committee approved the bill on a 10-0 vote, sending it to the full House.

Supporters of the bill say zero-tolerance school policies clog juvenile courts with arrests for classroom disruptions, fights and other minor offenses without improving school safety.

Russ Skiba, a professor of counseling and educational psychology at Indiana University, cited the arrest of 25 middle school students for a food fight at a Chicago charter school.

"I assume the resource officers who arrested the kids at the food fight were doing their job as they understood it," he said.

"But the key words are 'as they understood it.'" That highlights the need for training, he said.

"There absolutely is no contradiction between doing all we can to prevent violence in schools and protecting the rights of students - especially their right to an education," Skiba said.

Teske said the introduction of police in local schools led to a dramatic increase in misdemeanor arrests in his Atlanta-area jurisdiction while more serious offenses didn't decline. He said he got school officials, police, child advocates and others to sit down together and figure out new approaches that led to decreased juvenile arrests, including a 70 percent drop in weapons-related ones.

The decrease in minor arrests at schools freed campus police to do more serious enforcement, Teske said. Several communities - including Middlesex County, Mass.; Columbus, Ohio; and Madison, Wis. - have copied the approach, he said.

The bill sponsored by committee chairwoman Rep. Linda Lawson, D-Hammond, would establish a statewide 24-member commission to recommend steps that could then be adopted at the local level. Teske said he believes the legislation is the first of its kind at a state level.

Some Indiana counties already are taking steps of their own.

Marilyn Moores, a juvenile court judge in Indianapolis, said her court has held talks with school officials and police about which offenses should be handled by school discipline and which should lead to juvenile court.

She said Lawson's legislation would aid such efforts.

Officials from the Indiana Black Caucus, the Fraternal Order of Police, the Indiana Public Defender Council, the Association of Public School Superintendents and the Indiana Sheriffs Association said their groups support the bill.

Rep. Ralph Foley, R-Martinsville, expressed concern over the possible economic impact of the bill on school districts, but supporters said that would be minimal.

"I think developing a protocol to grab kids ... before they get into the system is a positive thing," Foley said.

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