

New Program To Take Early Action to Help Those Failing

Many Agencies Joining In-Home Counseling Effort

By V. Dion Haynes
Washington Post Staff Writer
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[Mayor Adrian M. Fenty](#)'s administration plans to introduce early intervention programs next month that extend beyond the classroom for students who display academic and behavior problems. The pilot program includes in-home substance-abuse counseling, solutions for public-aid problems and other programs for students' troubled families.

Urban educators have long recognized that the academic failure of many students can be traced to dysfunctional homes. Intervention programs offered at such schools focus mainly on academic support, such as after-school tutoring and Saturday classes.

In the new program, called D.C. START, which was formed in cooperation with 17 D.C. agencies, specially trained school counselors will seek to uncover the root of students' classroom problems, city officials said. If the problems are determined to stem from the home, counselors could get involved in trying to solve a range of issues, including substance abuse, domestic violence, job training and illiteracy.

The pilot program, formally known as the Student Assessment and Resilience Team, will begin next month at Truesdell and Barnard elementary schools in Northwest Washington, said Deputy Mayor for Education [Victor Reinoso](#), whose office is overseeing the program.

In the fall, Reinoso said, the program will be introduced at Leckie Elementary in Southwest and four Southeast schools: Simon, [Malcolm X](#) and Ferebee-Hope elementary schools, and Hart middle. If the program succeeds, he said, it would be offered across the city.

The program would cost \$500,000 for Truesdell and Barnard, and \$750,000 for the other schools

"Remaking public education in the District isn't just about governance or what happens in the classroom," Reinoso said.

Fenty (D) and his education team have moved aggressively on plans to close 23 under-enrolled schools, downsize the central office by firing 98 workers, and overhaul instruction at 27 schools where students repeatedly failed to meet federal academic targets. But in launching this social experiment in the high-poverty, 49,600-student school system, they are entering largely unchartered territory.

Reinoso said the program is aimed at bringing city agencies together to solve family problems early and avert tragedy.

Planning began last summer, he said, before the [Banita Jacks](#) case. In January, Jacks was accused of killing her four daughters and leaving their bodies for months in her Southeast apartment. Fenty fired six child welfare workers and criticized the city for failing to follow up after the girls stopped going to their public charter schools.

The city needs to support students "in all areas of their life so they can succeed in school," he said. "There is an immense need for this kind of implementation throughout the city."

Sixty-one percent of the students in the school system are poor. At least 50 of the city's 140 schools have at least 80 percent of their students classified as impoverished, and many need a range of academic and social supports. Only 38 percent of elementary students are proficient in reading.

Reinoso said some of the students with family problems act out by disrupting classes and becoming violent. According to school system data, more than half of secondary school students in 2007 and 2006 were in buildings with a sufficient number of violent incidents to be considered "persistently dangerous" under D.C. standards.

"This is long overdue for a school district which hasn't had a strategy for dealing with these issues," said [Michael Casserly](#), executive director of the Washington-based Council of the Great City Schools, which represents urban districts. "When done well, programs like this can be positive and effective."

In the program, teachers would alert counselors about students who have behavior problems or display other actions that could indicate important problems at home. The counselors would conduct preliminary assessments to determine the extent of the problems.

If the problems are serious, the counselor would obtain permission from parents to intervene on their behalf with public aid, child welfare, juvenile justice or other agencies. Reinoso said the goal would be to resolve the problem within 21 visits.

The D.C. pilot program is based on a model introduced in the Auburn, N.Y., school district in 2000, officials said. The [New York](#) program resulted in a drop in classroom-behavior problems and a steady climb in student achievement, said Philip Uninsky, executive director of Partnership for Results. Uninsky administers the Auburn program and is working as a consultant for Reinoso on the D.C. program.

Reinoso said, however, that Auburn is a tiny district, with 5,000 enrolled and a much smaller proportion -- 40 percent -- of low-income students.

"When a child has antisocial behavior," school officials can only assume why, said Barnard Elementary Principal Shirley Hopkinson. "Maybe there are drugs in the home."

The experimental program should help, she added, because "to reach through, you've got to reach into the home."