

EDUCATION with Student News

Afterschools tap school records to get to know students

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Schools usually keep outsiders away from student records. Not in Louisville, Kentucky.

With the blessing of students' parents, the Jefferson County public school system lets private afterschool centers tap directly into the school database to see grades, attendance, disciplinary problems and details of life at home.

The thinking goes like this: If schools and afterschools share a mission of helping students succeed, why not share school data about who these kids are and what they need?

"I like to say we're a good open school system that works well with partners," deputy superintendent Martin Bell said, explaining the Jefferson County school district's unconventional openness with outside groups.

"We all have the same goal. We want kids to achieve in school," Bell said.

The Louisville project has caught the attention of educators in other states. It may turn into a national model of how schools can work with community groups, particularly as afterschools take on a greater role in helping students read and do math.

An estimated 6.5 million children are in afterschool. Most middle and high school students regularly take part in activities after school and on weekends, a survey by Public Agenda found.

In the Louisville partnership, technology has made sharing data much easier. No longer do afterschool workers have to bug parents to drop off their kids' report cards.

Now each child is tracked by KidTrax, an ID system developed by the nFocus software company. It connects to the school system through a separate software program.

When students show up at an afterschool facility, they swipe their bar-coded ID cards through a reader, much like a credit-card scanner. The ID cards look like a driver's license, and they light up computer screens with data about the students.

Afterschools can find out whether their students' families receive food stamps, or whether the student can swim, has applied for college scholarships or got into trouble for rowdiness.

"The schools have the kids for six hours a day, but we have those same exact kids the minute they leave the building, and I'm open until 8 each night. I've got them for the next six hours," said Don Shaw, executive director of the Salvation Army Boys and Girls Clubs in Louisville.

"I mean, my goodness, why shouldn't we work together?" he said.



Sky-Toria Lowe hands her identification card to secretary Peggy Galloway after swiping it past the scanner.

Having access to personal information has allowed Shaw to tailor his programs to students' needs. For example, he ran a check to see which students were a grade-level behind in reading so he could get them extra help.

In another case, when a computer query found that more than half the kids in one club were living with people other than parents, a program was created to help grandparents and guardians raise the kids.

Overall, about 12,000 Louisville school children are involved through more than two dozen afterschool organizations with centers in at least 50 different locations.

The school system has seen a rise in attendance among kids in the program. The academic gains so far are only anecdotal, but they are promising, Bell said.

The model could catch on if people see that kids end up benefiting, said Jen Rinehart, vice president over policy for the Afterschool Alliance, a national advocacy group.

"A number of afterschools work independently, and they still do a good job," she said. "But it's really hard to have any kind of academic focus if you're not connected to the schools."

About 3,500 scattered after-school programs nationwide use KidTrax. The Jefferson County, Ky., system is the only to take it on a district level, although Chicago has shown interest.

The idea could be a hard sell in some places.

Districts may be skeptical about having to buy the right software or ensuring that afterschool employees know how to use it. The biggest concern tends to be about jeopardizing the privacy of student records, an area sensitive enough to merit protection under federal law.

"I think it would add a whole layer of responsibility on the school district, to get parental waivers to release all that information," said Claudia Mansfield Sutton, spokeswoman for the American Association of School Administrators. "I'm not sure that a lot of school systems would feel comfortable doing that. I guess it would depend on the community."

In Jefferson County, afterschool workers with authority to see student records must agree to keep it private. Only a few parents out of several thousand have refused to give permission.

"People who oversee those documents are more concerned about it than the parents are," Bell said. "Parents have the attitude, 'If it's going to help my kid, why wouldn't I want the information to be known?'"

That's how Torrace Lowe sees it. She raises her granddaughter, Sky-Toria Lowe, who gets some tutoring help each day at one of the Salvation Army clubs in Louisville.

"You still have an opportunity to say, no, you don't want anyone tapping into the system about your child," Torrace Lowe said. "But every parent I know -- including me -- says if it makes my child better than where she is now, then it's a great idea."

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