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Juvenile Probation in the Schools

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Patrick Griffin

If you are a delinquent kid placed on probation while attending Westinghouse High School on Pittsburgh's tough east side, you'll be seeing a lot of your juvenile probation officer, Reid Hustwit. And she'll be seeing a lot of you. At the prom, for instance. (Ms. Hustwit chaperones.) At all the football games. (She helps with concessions.) In her office next to the school counselor's, every day. (Be sure to sign in.) In your classes (she likes to observe), and in the hallways during exchanges (she likes to wander, too). During your lunch period, planted conspicuously between the crowded tables in the school's windowless basement cafeteria, Ms. Hustwit will be sure to catch your eye—not that she's going to eat with you. "There's no lunch in school-based probation," she explains to a visitor, serene above the clamor. So what is she doing here, exactly? "Just being in the room," she says.

But a little more closely. "It's just a natural," as one California chief deputy explains, "because that's where the kids are."

But as simple and natural as the arrangement sounds, many veteran probation observers say school-based probation yields some surprising benefits: not just more effective probation monitoring, but more impact on delinquent and at-risk kids, better communication between key youth-services institutions, and safer and more orderly schools.

At the same time, substantial questions and doubts about the innovation are being raised by critics. Does school-based probation sacrifice individual privacy to administrative expedience—stigmatizing probationers in the one setting where they can least afford it? Does it

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dangerously confound the correctional and educational missions? Both advocates and opponents of school-based probation recognize that it represents a sort of starter hole in the traditional wall between the juvenile justice and educational systems—and one that is likely to widen over time. But is that good or bad?

That could serve as a motto for some 150 juvenile probation officers now working in Pennsylvania's public schools. It's the deceptively simple idea behind similar programs in California, Arizona, and Maryland as well. All across the country in recent years, juvenile probation officers have been moving out of traditional district offices, and into middle, junior high and high school buildings. There they are doing what PO's have always done—supervising their charges.

There is no way to begin answering these questions without examining the work of school-based probation officers more closely. And there is no better place to do that than Pennsylvania, which has made the nation's most extensive investment in

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school-based probation to date. Since 1990, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges' Commission and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency have provided more than \$5 million in funding support for school-based probation programs in 50 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. Through this initiative, some 150 probation officers, working in about 300 schools, have served more than 16,000 juveniles. In 1998, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge provided additional support to this successful program model by appropriating \$5 million in the state fiscal year 1998/99 budget to the JCJC to support specialized and school-based probation services.

The largest and most active school-based probation program in Pennsylvania operates in Allegheny County (Pittsburgh). Beginning in 1994 with probation officers in 2 city schools, Allegheny County's school-based probation program has since grown to include 26 participating urban and suburban schools. Visits to several of those schools reveal some marked differences between traditional and school-based probation supervision—differences affecting not only the physical circumstances and settings in which probation officers and probationers meet, but the way they see and understand one another as well.

Unexcused absenteeism is not only a violation of a key probation condition—it can be a sign of trouble, too. So Johnson makes every student on his caseload report to his office every morning before classes begin.

ALL DAY, EVERY DAY

Mark Johnson, Arsenal Middle School

"It's the frequency," school-based PO Mark Johnson says, summing up the most obvious difference between traditional and school-based probation supervision from his sparsely furnished office overlooking the playfield at Arsenal Middle School in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville section. (The school is rough, by the way, but not that rough: it takes its name from the old Allegheny Arsenal, which originally stood on this site.)

While standard probation supervision in many juvenile jurisdictions may entail no more than one or two scheduled meetings a month, it is not uncommon for school-based probation officers to see at least something of their charges—every one of them—every school day. As a matter of fact, Johnson says, "I saw 'em all this morning."

You can be sure that they saw him, too. At 6-foot-4 inches and 220 pounds, the former Marine Corps reservist and Edinboro College football player is roughly triple the size of many of the kids he works with. And size does matter, Arsenal teachers say.

One of them tells a story about an uncontrollably disruptive student in his seventh-grade math and social sciences classes last year, who was caught and adjudicated for some after-school burglaries and ended up with Johnson on his case. "That boy did a three-sixty," the teacher says flatly. His conduct improved. His grade point average jumped two full points in one year. And, most

astonishingly of all, the teacher marvels, "He's nice. You can sit and talk with him now." But no amount of coaxing would have brought about the change, the teacher says. It took "something serious"—and that something serious was Johnson: "He did not want any part of Mark."

Johnson has ways of staying in close touch with reluctant probationers. One is the morning sign-up. Unexcused absenteeism is not only a violation of a key probation condition—it can be a sign of trouble, too. So Johnson makes every student on his caseload report to his office every morning before classes begin. It gives him a small amount of face time with each of his charges, a way of touching base quickly, and an early warning when, for whatever reason, somebody isn't showing up.

Johnson also requires his probationers to carry a "behavioral assessment/referral form" from class to class throughout the day. The form has a blank horizontal row for each class period, with vertical columns headed "Talking," "Noisy," "Sleeping," "Out of Seat," "Refused to Work," and "Incomplete Homework."

After each class period, the teacher fills out and initials the form, adding pertinent comments, favorable or unfavorable, and gives it back to the student. At the end of the day, just before the buses leave, Johnson touches base with his charges again, collecting the completed forms in his office and scanning them on the spot to get a quick read on how the day went: who has been having attitude problems, who may need a talking-to, and so on.

AN ALTERED CONTEXT

Bill Holt, Allegheny Middle School

But some of the differences between school-based and traditional probation monitoring appear to have less to do with the quantity than the *quality* of the contacts between juvenile probationers and their PO's. Bill Holt, the probation officer at Allegheny Middle School—across the Allegheny River from Arsenal, on Pittsburgh's north side—is in as good a position as anyone to understand those qualitative differences: he's seen both sides. After a stint in the Air Force, Holt spent his first three years as a juvenile probation officer serving caseloads of up to 60 kids—“running around putting out fires,” he calls it now—before moving on to an experimental high-impact probation unit with smaller caseloads, and eventually to school-based work. He is now in his third year at Allegheny, where he currently supervises just 20 students.

The “assessment” isn't exact, of course—the categories are rough, the teachers' comments perfunctory. Even the photocopying is crudely done. But it's possible that the mechanics of the process—collecting the signatures, enduring the eye contact—may help to reinforce the message that somebody (besides the teacher) is watching. And over time, the daily assessments provide Johnson with a level of detail regarding each individual's progress and adjustment in school that is completely unavailable to traditional PO's.

In between the morning sign-up and the afternoon send-off, of course, there are routine meetings, ad hoc disciplinary conferences in the dean's office, quick huddles in classroom doorways, near-collisions in the corridors—all kinds of day-in/day-out contacts between Johnson and the kids assigned to him. “When I have time, I walk up and down the halls,” he says. The idea is to position himself “right in your face,” as he cheerfully puts it. “At this age,” he says, “out of sight, out of mind.”

“I don't like traditional PO work,” he admits. “You don't get to know people.” It's not just a matter of too many kids, too little time, he says. It's the context, or lack thereof, in which probationers appear: “School is a perfect forum to catch kids the way they really are, with their peers.”

It's where most of their time is spent, most of their challenges faced, most of their struggling and growing done. You can stuff them into a government-issue folding chair in a district probation office once a month, and ask them questions. But if you want to *know* them, according to Holt—who their friends and enemies are, what pressures they're under, what matters to them and why—you have to see them in their natural habitat.

It may help if you keep some watermelon sour in your desk drawer, too. Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders are in and out of Holt's office by the gym all day, he says, looking for candy. And looking to talk: “If they see you're genuine, they'll come and talk to you.” What about? “Girl problems,” he says dryly. But sometimes about “hypothetical things,” too—trouble they might be getting into, crimes that “I *think* they already did.” Holt listens calmly, and then talks about what could happen to them—hypothetically. “There's some kind of hidden value in that,” he says. “I don't know how to measure that.”

Seeing a kid this age only once a month is like chopping a film down to a series of still photos; it may reveal something, but not motion, not direction. Not life. For that you need the continuous picture. As Holt's own father—Ernie Holt, who happens to be the long-time school social worker at

SCHOOL-BASED PROBATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY

BAKERSFIELD, CA

While Pennsylvania is currently well ahead of the rest of the country in implementing school-based probation, the concept did not originate in Pennsylvania, and is not unique to it. Indeed, in Bakersfield, CA, the Kern County Probation Department's Office of Community Partnerships and Prevention Services operates what may be the nation's longest-running school-based probation program. The first Kern County juvenile probation officer was placed in a Bakersfield high school under a Juvenile Justice Advocacy Grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in 1975. Now the department has what it calls “prevention specialists” in each of the 9 high schools in metropolitan Bakersfield, sharing office space with school administrators and counselors, supervising caseloads (including younger students attending feeder schools as well as those at the high schools where the probation officers are based), handling referrals, and conducting teacher training and law-related education classes. The program is paid for out of the county budget.

Preliminary research suggests that, at a minimum, school-based probation has a favorable impact on the school attendance and day-to-day school conduct of probationers.

Allegheny—puts it, “Some of the most delicate development can take place during these middle years.”

That’s why being on the spot is so important, the elder Holt says: “There are subtleties that you have to be here to understand and appreciate.”

A NEW KIND OF RELATIONSHIP

Reid Hustwit, Westinghouse High School

Of course, there are other benefits to being on the spot. “See that?” Reid Hustwit says quietly, keeping her eyes on a student in a loose-fitting red jacket who is just now strolling out of the Westinghouse High School cafeteria with a group of friends. The student is on Hustwit’s caseload. And there is a faint ridge visible through his jacket in back, at about shoulder-level. It’s a bullet-proof vest. Hustwit is silent for a moment, turning this bit of information over in her mind. And then she puts it away. She will be talking with him, certainly. But later.

The lone probation officer here, Hustwit is, as she herself puts it tersely, “pretty busy.” Arrests are an almost daily occurrence at Westinghouse, a stately old granite-faced building with a proud past (the celebrated jazz composer Billy Strahorne attended here, as did the

pianist Errol Garner), which now serves about a thousand students from Homewood and Lincoln, two distressed, virtually all-black neighbor-

hoods on Pittsburgh’s fraying eastern edge.

Many of the girls carry babies here in the morning—that’s the reason for the “Family Support Center” up on the second floor. Some of the boys carry guns—that’s the reason for the metal detector in the front hall. Only yesterday there was a shooting incident out in front of the building. So far this year, searches conducted by the school’s three full-time security officers have turned up mostly drugs, not weapons, according to Hustwit. “It’s only September, though,” she adds.

Hustwit is in her third year of school-based work, after serving a couple of years as a regular PO out of the nearby district office in Homewood. During that time, she hasn’t seen many of her charges receive diplomas, much less go on to college or land jobs. “They’re so not ready for that,” she says. She brightens momentarily at the memory of last year’s graduation ceremony—one of her probationers graduated, she says, and the girl’s proud family dragged Hustwit over to be in the picture. But that was last year. “Now she’s pregnant, of course.”

Still, she wouldn’t trade places with her old colleagues now. Her caseloads may be on the high side—in “the mid-forties” already, she says, and likely to climb to as many as 60 kids by winter.

(And all of them, remember, with access to her all the time: “If I try to do paperwork, kids are coming in here all day.”) Her workplace may be noisy, chaotic, and occasionally dangerous. (Visitors using the stairways are advised to keep close to the wall side, away from the inner railing: “People drop things” is Hustwit’s deadpan explanation.) On days when she’s due in court, she may have to come in at seven in the morning to sign her kids in personally. (“If they *see* me,” she says, “there are less suspensions.”) Nevertheless, “I think it’s more rewarding,” Hustwit says of school-based probation. “It’s a lot harder work. But I get to be around the kids every day. They’re the best part of the job.”

This isn’t just talk on Hustwit’s part. “These are *my* kids,” she says, and you have only to watch her work with them to see that she means it. Listening to and rejecting their excuses from behind a small cluttered desk in her otherwise Spartan office on the main floor, writing them notes, giving them reminders, calling attention to their lapses, asking them pointedly about restitution obligations and job interviews, gently and not-so-gently chiding them for the way they behave, the way they dress, the way they *sit*—Hustwit could hardly be tougher on these students; but it’s not an impersonal, officer-of-the-court sort of toughness. It’s too familiar, too affectionate for that. And the prompt, well-meaning, abashed way probationers seem to respond to it—the way, at least, they take their hats off, they stop that *slouching*—does not seem rooted in the usual sullen fear, but in the desire to please, to measure up.

And perhaps also the desire, half-formed, half-conscious, to be kids again—rather than, say, Young Mafia Soldiers. That is what the “YMS” stands for on Jerome’s stocking cap. A skinny sophomore with a blank expression and a coat that is much too big for him, called into Hustwit’s office for a brief morning meeting. Jerome is either a “sweet kid” who has suffered “a serious caring deficit” at home (Hustwit) or a dangerous gangster (Jerome, or at least his cap). The cap itself is stuffed into his pocket, out of sight, but at one point, as though absent-mindedly, he pulls it out part of the way, just enough so that Hustwit can catch sight of the insignia. She demands it at once. He turns it over with a show of reluctance, and into Hustwit’s desk drawer it goes. But after he is gone, Hustwit says, “He wanted me to take it away.”

All this suggests a possible third dimension to the difference between traditional and school-based probation: beyond upping the frequency of PO-probationer contact and enabling PO’s to observe probationers “alive” rather than “stuffed,” basing people like Hustwit at places like Westinghouse

may sometimes change the way *kids see PO’s* as well. Over the time she has been a probation officer here, Westinghouse students have, in effect, promoted Hustwit to some higher office. And she knows it. “Mommy,” she suggests. “Job coach. Shrink. Dear Abby.” Those are the “hats” she wears on the job, she says. And she might have added any number of others—tutor, protectress, mentor, nag. Whatever kids need.

“I don’t think you choose” a job like this, Hustwit says. “I think it chooses you.”

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

According to Ray Bauer, a member of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission and Pennsylvania Department of Education’s School-Based Probation Advisory Committee—and, as Supervisor of Allegheny County School-Based Probation, Hustwit’s, Holt’s, and Johnson’s boss as well—the recent rapid expansion of school-based probation in Allegheny County and throughout Pennsylvania is “based on the impression that we are

getting more bang for the dollar” out of the program than out of traditional probation. Although school-based probation is not yet a thoroughly tested program, Bauer’s impression does have some empirical support.

Preliminary research suggests that, at a minimum,

school-based probation has a favorable impact on the school attendance and day-to-day school conduct of probationers. Following a school-based probation demonstration project in the middle schools of Lehigh County (Allentown), Pennsylvania during the 1990-91 school year, for instance, school district staff concluded that absenteeism among students on probation had been reduced by 15%, that instances of tardiness in the same group were down almost 10%, and that the group’s dropout rate had fallen by 29% (Clouser, 1995). Probationers’ grades had improved by an average of 4%. Detentions and suspensions among probationers were down 4% as well.

A subsequent larger-scale study of school-based probation in Pennsylvania, conducted under the direction of Dr. David Metzger of the University of Pennsylvania beginning in 1996, found that school-based probation officers, school administrators, and students on school-based probation across the Commonwealth strongly believed that the program was effective in boosting attendance and academic performance and reducing misbehavior in school (Metzger and Tobin-Fiore, 1997).

According to the study’s published results, probationers participating in the program did not differ in terms of race or criminal history from those assigned to regular probation, although they were somewhat younger and more likely to be female. Nevertheless, a comparison of 75 randomly selected school-based probation clients with 75 regular probation clients matched on age, race, gender, crime, and county of supervision revealed that school-based probation clients spent significantly more time in the community without

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SACRAMENTO, CA

The Sacramento County Probation Department sends juvenile PO’s into area schools under a variety of special programs. Apart from direct probation supervision, Sacramento County’s school-based probation officers are involved in gang identification, truancy reduction, conflict prevention, intensive counseling, and teacher training. Some are paid by the county, some by the school district, and some under special grants with their own funding sources.

being charged with new offenses or placed in custody. When new charges were filed against juveniles on school-based probation, they were less likely to be for serious crimes, and more likely to be for status offenses and probation violations—just what you'd expect, given the program's closer supervision. The resulting placement cost savings were projected at \$6665 per school-based probation client.

OTHER BENEFITS, OTHER ROLES

As impressive as these preliminary findings sound, they may significantly underestimate the actual social benefits of the school-based approach. For one thing, they don't take into account the effects the program may have on students who are *not* on probation. Some veteran observers are convinced that the real, hidden value of school-based probation is the way it brings seasoned probation officers into routine contact with at-risk youth—formally and informally, as mentors, speakers, role models, and cautionary advisors. At Allegheny Middle School, for example, where Bill Holt is often asked to give classroom presentations, he invariably brings along a sort of photo album he keeps in his office. "They always want to know what it's like up at Shuman," he says, referring to the county's juvenile detention facility. "My friends say it's *nice* up there...."

It isn't. Holt shows them. His stark Polaroid tour of the county's detention center starts at the main entrance, continues through the area where your clothes are taken from you, takes you into the shower room, past the stripped beds... narrated all the while by Holt himself, who

Is it a sensible use of juvenile probation resources? The answer seems to be, not always, and not everywhere.

actually works intake several times a month at Shuman, and can speak knowledgeably about what he calls "the dark stuff. Lice, crabs... You don't even wear your own underwear... You shower in open stalls..." "It's not a good place to be," he concludes quietly.

At Arsenal Middle School assemblies, Mark Johnson also gives a presentation on "the Shuman Shuttle," as he calls it: "How to Get On and How to Stay Off." But Johnson has other, more subtle ways of getting through to students at risk of running afoul of the law. One of them is basketball. "If you're just a PO," he says, "everything is punitive." But as the assistant coach of the school's basketball team—that's last year's city championship trophy he has proudly displayed in his office—Johnson is a different kind of authority figure for the kids around him. "I'm not just the PO," he says. "Kids say, 'There goes

the *basketball* coach.' Kids approach you."

That includes kids in trouble, or well on their way to it. Shortly after making this point, Johnson is passing through the near-empty cafeteria at mid-morning on the way to Arsenal's administrative offices when he happens to notice a group of students in the corner, enduring an "in-house"—a kind of day-long detention, imposed in lieu of suspension. After tossing off a friendly greeting to the teacher in charge, Johnson recognizes one of the boys in the group and stops. It's not anyone on his caseload. It's his point guard. Johnson calls him over.

The boy approaches, shambling, miserable, eyes on the floor, and begins, almost before he is asked, explaining what he has done wrong, and why it isn't as bad as it sounds. Johnson puts a hand on the back of the boy's neck to draw him in, listens skeptically for a moment, then cuts him off with a playful cuff and a reprimand before moving on. It is a gruffly affectionate, lion-to-cub interaction. It took all of 10 seconds. But from the look of the boy's back as he slowly returns to his table in the corner, it appears he will remember it.

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PHOENIX, AZ

In Maricopa County (Phoenix), AZ, the Safe Schools Program, which has been in operation since 1995, currently assigns 24 juvenile probation officers to full-time work in the schools. The Safe School Program's overall purpose has more to do with prevention and law-related education than with direct probation supervision, however: most participating probation officers carry minimal caseloads or none at all, merely serving as liaisons for the PO's who are assigned to supervise students in their schools. Instead, they concentrate on making class presentations and providing teacher training, counseling individual students, moderating support groups, overseeing conflict resolution activities, and smoothing communications between the educational and court systems. A total of 35 schools in 12 school districts participate in the program, which is paid for by a state grant.

According to Ray Bauer, Johnson's supervisor, school-based probation officers are "strongly encouraged" to develop connections like these through involvement in school activities. In Allegheny County, school-based PO's have become involved in sports, cheerleading, tutoring, fundraising, and after-school clubs of various kinds—sometimes volunteering their time and sometimes being paid out of school district funds. Like their counterparts throughout Pennsylvania, they also work alongside social workers, counselors, teachers, administrators, and other school professionals in "Student Assistance Program" teams, evaluating the needs of students referred to them with behavior and school performance problems, and making service recommendations.

SCHOOL SAFETY

Does the presence of probation officers in schools—and the restraint that this arrangement presumably imposes on the behavior of students under their supervision, if not on their classmates as well—contribute to a safer and more orderly school environment? On-site observers think so.

Of 52 Pennsylvania school administrators surveyed by Metzger, 33 (63.5%) said that school-based probation officers had been "very helpful" in maintaining order in their schools, and another 16 (30.8%) found them at least "somewhat helpful" (Metzger and Tobin-Fiore, 1997). The principal at Arsenal Middle School, where Mark Johnson has been stationed for the past 4 years, is personally convinced: "Having a

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MARYLAND

The Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice recently inaugurated its state-funded Spotlight on Schools program, which has placed a probation officer in at least one school in each of the state's counties. Spotlight on Schools is based on a pilot program operated in a cluster of schools in southern Prince George's County during the 1996-97 and 1997-98 school years. A preliminary evaluation of the pilot program—under which juvenile probation officers supervised students on probation, handled intake for new referrals, and conducted staff development classes, among other activities—found a significant decline in absenteeism, disciplinary referrals, and suspensions among probationers during the program's first year.

school-based probation officer has an impact because the children know that Mark doesn't have to play by the rules of school law. He plays by the rules of criminal law. The two are different."

Indeed, according to the Allegheny County Juvenile Court Policy and Procedures Manual, one of a school-based probation officer's formal duties is "to process all delinquent behavior that occurs on school grounds, before, during or after school hours, including when students are going to and from school." That is the "cop-like" part of the job—and school-based probation officers, by and large, do not seem to shrink from it. When a juvenile offender has to be taken away from Allegheny Middle School in handcuffs, Bill Holt even makes a special point of walking out of the building with him. It's a statement to the rest of the students. "People know who I am, and what I can do," Holt says. "They're saying, 'Whoa—he's got some juice.'"

"SOMETHING TERRIBLY WRONG"

There are those who object to all this. Sometimes passionately. Following news of a recent expansion

of Allegheny County's school-based probation program, for instance, an indignant *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* editorial columnist declared himself against allowing "our public schools to morph into reform schools": "How in heaven's name can a juvenile delinquent who needs a probation officer be allowed in school? While sentencing them to school may save the criminal justice system some money, what's the cost to our children? Are you telling me we have nothing to worry about just because little Johnny has a probation officer and maybe an electronic ankle bracelet?...There is something terribly wrong here. How can we expose our children to such insanity?" (Vassilaros, 1998)

Even among observers who recognize the obvious—that the vast bulk of juvenile probationers have always attended ordinary schools while on probation, and always will, whether or not their probation officers follow them there—school-based probation is not without its critics. For the time being, given the program's relatively brief history, they are still scattered. The questions and doubts they raise are still provisional. Some reflect little more than healthy skepticism regarding claims that have yet to be thoroughly

tested. But others go to the heart of the program, and challenge its most fundamental assumptions.

Generally, opponents of school-based probation raise four pertinent questions:

Is it a sensible use of juvenile probation resources? The answer seems to be, not always, and not everywhere. In mostly rural Lackawana County, Pennsylvania, for example, Chief of Probation Tony Gach says frankly, "I can't afford it." The school-based probation arrangement may make economic sense in urban and suburban areas where probation cases are concentrated in a few schools, Gach says. But "in a county where you don't have that many [probationary] kids in any one school, I see an awful lot of downtime for a PO."

Even in areas where probation cases are sufficiently concentrated, there are some practical drawbacks to school-based probation that administrators would do well to ponder. In Allegheny County, for example, where Ray Bauer says over 25% of the juvenile probation officers are already school-based—with average caseloads on the light side, between 25 and 35 kids—the remaining PO's are picking up plenty of slack. Bauer himself estimates that non-school-based PO's in Allegheny County are supervising between 55 and 75 kids at a time. Presumably, as more and more resources are committed to school-based probation, non-school caseloads will get even higher.

"It spreads me too thin," says one district PO in Allegheny County, describing the effect that the move

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A MONTEREY COUNTY VARIATION

One variation on the school-based probation idea that deserves mention here is the Community School program run by the Monterey County, CA Office of Education in cooperation with the Monterey County Probation Department. Under the program, juvenile probation officers are assigned full-time to 4 local "schools"—but the schools themselves are operated solely for students who have been expelled from or otherwise cannot be accommodated by the county's regular schools. Community Schools are essentially "one-room schoolhouses," in which an average of 17-19 students receive individualized, no-frills academic instruction during each of two half-day sessions. Besides the probation officer, each Community School is staffed by a teacher, an instructional aide, and a special education teacher. Students remain in the Community Schools for up to a full year—until they are ready to be readmitted to their regular school districts. According to the Monterey County Probation Department, the schools provide difficult students with a safe, structured, and supportive learning environment, and many respond with dramatic academic and behavioral improvements.

toward school-basing has had in his area. "It's taken two people out of the mix in my office." His current caseload is over 70 kids, he says—and "everybody in here is close [to that level] or higher." The possibility that the quality of traditional probation supervision may be suffering in areas committed to school-based probation is especially disturbing from a public safety perspective. After all, not all juvenile probationers are in school. As

a rule, those that aren't probably bear more watching.

What about confidentiality? A much more fundamental and troubling objection to school-based probation centers on confidentiality—one of the cornerstones of the juvenile court system, once upon a time—and the way the arrangement tends to compromise it for probationers. Even Pennsylvania's *School-Based Probation: Manual of Guidelines* concedes that confidentiality in the school setting "has proven to be one of the most difficult issues to resolve" (Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges' Commission, 1996). If there is any place where the public label of criminality can endanger a kid's opportunity for a second chance in life, it's in school. And yet when that kid's past court-involvement literally follows him there each day—like Mary's little lamb—what else is to be expected?

Officials can restrict access to probationers' records, of course, and craft information-sharing protocols between school and probation staff. But for those who oppose school-based probation on confidentiality grounds—like Herb Heolter of the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives (NCIA), a Washington, DC-based advocacy group—measures like these are beside the point. What about "the obvious stigma" that attaches to being on probation in the first place, Heolter asks? Realistically, how can school-based probation officers hide what they're doing—and with whom?

Bill Holt recognizes the danger that his efforts to help his charges could hurt them, too. That's why he doesn't publicly post attendance sign-in sheets outside his Allegheny Middle School

office on days when he has to be in court—he doesn't want teachers and other students to see the names of the kids on his caseload. "Why advertise?" he says. But other school-based probation officers scoff at the notion that any amount of discretion on their part will suffice here. Mark Johnson—remember the "behavioral assessment" forms he requires his probationers to carry from teacher to teacher at Arsenal Middle School—smiles broadly when asked about the confidentiality problems posed by his day-to-day operations: "Most of my kids, as soon as I walk into the classroom, [call out] 'There's my probation officer!'" "It's a status thing," he adds.

Will school-based probation officers sweep more kids into the criminal justice net? Another worrisome possibility raised by the breach in the wall between the juvenile justice and educational systems, according to critics, is that it creates an opening through which more kids may be drawn into court-involvement. "If in fact what we're doing is widening the net," Herb Heolter says, "that's another problem with it."

Justice institutions are already "called upon to handle [too many] social problems," he adds, and accelerating the process by posting more juvenile court representatives in schools will only make matters worse for kids. "Do they need more law enforcement or do they need more help with the problems in their lives?"

"I don't think you're going to get a school administrator to say, 'Don't give us a resource!'" Heolter admits.

But "from a helping point of view, I would rather see a social worker in the school than a probation officer in the school."

Of course, plenty of schools have both. At Allegheny Middle School, where Bill Holt works, his social-worker father Ernie says many of the students need something social workers can't give them: real limits. "Power-wise, we have nothing here. Education is not a high priority with these kids. They respond to CYS [Children and Youth Services] and the juvenile court." Those are the only institutions that are "in a position to alter their lives."

Ernie Holt sympathizes with Heolter's distaste for the flexing of criminal justice authority in an institution that is supposed to be devoted to the education of children. ("I just never liked that part," he admits.) What he is arguing, in effect, is that some entry-level "law enforcement" may be precisely what at-risk kids need—if they're going to avoid deeper involvement with the juvenile justice system later on.

But juvenile probation officers bring more than mere power into the school, Holt points out. He describes his son as an "intercessor" and "advocate" for some difficult, marginal kids who are not always made to feel particularly welcome in school. At Student Assistance Program meetings, for example, Bill "helps people understand that there are certain things that kids are working on." "A lot of times," he adds, "the PO is a link between the *parents* and the school. They get real frustrated with us....They think we don't want their kid."

Whose job is this, anyway?

Everyone likes the idea of more early intervention with predelinquent kids, safer schools, more effective discipline, and so on. But what do these and other claimed and projected benefits of school-based probation have to do with *probation*?

Again, Lackawana County's Tony Gach counts himself one of the skeptics. "I don't see the probation officer walking the halls of a school as any more 'preventative' than hiring a security guard," he says. While any Lackawana County school might be more orderly with one of his probation officers working there, Gach says, "They're [already] *paying* someone to be a disciplinarian." Likewise, though school-basing might give his field officers a valuable opportunity to work with predelinquent kids as well as those who are already court-involved, "to me that's the job of CYS"—an agency that has more than 80 employees in Lackawana County to Gach's 11. Gach acknowledges the good intentions behind the school-based probation movement, and the value of what it aspires to achieve. But in Lackawana County, it's a question of priorities. "We have enough trouble taking care of the burglars, the arsonists, the rapists," he says.

Those working in school-based probation are at least as wary as Gach about the "role confusion" danger inherent in the arrangement. In fact, most of the school-based PO's surveyed in Pennsylvania by Metzger reported a significant disconnect between their own and others' perceptions of their proper role in the schools (Metzger and Tobin-Fiore, 1997). Their job, as they saw it, was primarily

to serve and supervise their probation clients; but it seemed to them that teachers and administrators regarded them as, in effect, school security people. Or even super-disciplinarians.

Teachers "come to me about absolutely everything," says Reid Hustwit at Westinghouse High School. She knows that conferring with school staffers is part of what she's there for. But their expectations are unrealistic, she says. "They think you can change the world. They think you can send kids to Shuman for looking at them the wrong way." Mark Johnson at Arsenal also sometimes feels himself being drawn into school-disciplinary matters that are not a probation officer's business. "We have to walk a fine line," he says. "We have to stay within our role."

The problem is that, at least for now, there is no single, simple, prescribed role for Johnson and his colleagues. In fact, Pennsylvania's *School-Based Probation: Manual of Guidelines*, under the heading "Role of School-Based Probation Officer," lists no fewer than 37 separate items—and it's obvious that, while lines of responsibility have been firmly drawn in some instances, others have barely been sketched in. So, though a school-based PO is not supposed to be a school disciplinarian, he or she "can augment the school disciplinary structure" (Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judge's Commission, 1996).

The PO is "not answerable to nor supervised by school officials," but "functions as a member of school staff" anyway. The PO has no primary responsibility for students who are not on probation, but is supposed "to deter potential conflicts involving the general school population" and may also

"divert at-risk youth from formal juvenile court involvement." In other words, Supervisor Ray Bauer says, the position calls for a certain amount of finesse: "It takes a special kind of probation officer that can walk between both systems [and] understand the needs of both."

SUCCESS ON THE GROUND

Even as they acknowledge some of the problems associated with school-based probation—the questions it raises, the adjustments it requires, the new safeguards it may call for—those directly involved in the work could not be more thoroughly convinced of its overall value. "It's the best program I've been involved in in 20-some years," volunteers one veteran probation official in Arizona—and the comment is typical of those heard from interviewees across the country.

With regard to most aspects of school-based probation, Metzger's survey of school officials in Pennsylvania found program satisfaction ratings approaching unanimity (Metzger and Tobin-Fiore, 1997). "I've never heard, since 1990, one bad word from anybody," swears a long-time Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges' Commission member, who still finds the popularity of school-based probation "amazing." The real value of school-based probation, according to Ray Bauer, is that it "creates opportunities" for skilled probation officers. It affords access, insight, and leverage to professionals who know how to make use of them to reach kids. And, he adds, "The kids are still reachable."

Bill Holt at Allegheny Middle School agrees. "We catch kids at the right age," he says. "Their parents will work with you. They still have hope." That's why most of the young probationers on his caseload don't reoffend, he says. They come to school. They get passing grades. They complete their community service, and otherwise meet their probation conditions. And then they move on.

Sometimes he encounters his probation "alumni" on their way home from the nearby high school, and is gratified to see that they haven't dropped out. It gets tougher as they get older, he knows. But they're still trying. "I guess maybe that's success," he says.

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The National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) was founded in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1973 by U.S. District Judge Maurice B. Cohill, Jr. NCJJ is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of justice for children and families. This mission is pursued by conducting research and providing objective, factual information that is utilized to increase the juvenile and family justice systems' effectiveness. NCJJ is the Research Division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, but has its own charter and policy board and is responsible for raising its own operational support. The Center concentrates its efforts in three areas of research: applied research, legal research, and systems research.

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