

**Shreveport, LA – Shreveport Times**  
**Editorial: Juvenile justice reform finding increased traction in salvaging troubled youth**

**July 11, 2010**

Louisiana juvenile justice reform has become a persistent light that has survived the floodwaters of Katrina and the red ink of a state budget shortfall.

The shift continues from centralized criminal prep schools to community-based rehabilitation that can better convert troubled youths into productive adults. Thank a series of governors committed to change and lawmakers who left the Office of Juvenile Justice with at least a standstill budget amid harsh cuts across state government.

Caddo Parish especially has worked to convert its standing as one of the largest producers of juvenile offenders for state institutions to a parish finding more alternatives to incarceration. Dual initiatives work both to keep troubled teens out of the justice system and those who do wind up in court out of state-run secure care centers. An offender may get help coping with emotional or substance abuse issues, while wraparound services bolster families unable to create a healthy home life.

Though Caddo has had an array of services, not so long ago matching an offender to the right program was more like throwing darts than a systematic determination of the right fit, says Steve Snow, alternative detention site coordinator.

Five years ago, 30 percent of offenders who were removed from their home were youths making their first appearance in court, or on their "first referral," Snow said. That number is down to 10 percent.

The parish's detention center became a crowded triage collection point even for youths who didn't need to be there. But no longer are 45 youths being held in a center built for 29.

Funding from local government, the Community Foundation and other sources have helped address truancy and create a misdemeanor center that tries to keep minor offenders out of the court system.

Collaboration with the national MacArthur Foundation has resulted in a better presentencing system of evaluating youths, determining who is a real risk and those who are better served with local services. A website is even in the works that not only will

help the system track cases but provide resources to help youths handle bullies or parents to map out what services are in their neighborhoods, said Caddo Commissioner Matthew Linn.

None of this would be possible without judges, the district attorney and Caddo commissioners being open to innovation. Stronger collaborations with the school system could drive success even further.

**Statewide, there is a need to revisit zero tolerance policies that automatically push schoolyard combatants into the juvenile justice system, said Mary Livers, a Shreveport native who is deputy secretary for the state Office of Juvenile Justice.** Of the 340 youths referred to Caddo's Misdemeanor Referral Center last school year, 300 were for school fights, said Snow. And that doesn't include students released to their parents. Neither should truants or children deemed ungovernable by their parents be pushed prematurely into the system.

More effective programs and services at the campus level for students and their families can head off problems. Underwriting family service officers and expanding collaborations for diversion and other programs would be wise investments for Caddo schools and cost-effective strategies for the taxpayer. "Prevention is cheaper than disaster response," said Kathie Boyett, Learning to Finish coordinator for Alliance for Education.

The community needs to encourage education innovations such as expanding summer school beyond simple remediation, says Scott Hughes, Alliance executive director. School volunteers, in fact, may be needed more in the summer to help students stay on track than during the academic year.

For all the success in juvenile justice, it remains a huge issue. But the thing about reform is that once you start, it's hard to stop.