
Public defender's office guides Northaven students

By Sherri Drake Silence

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A new mentoring program at Northaven Elementary School joins female students in need of guidance with professional women from the Shelby County Public Defender's Office.

Attorneys, office personnel and investigators will serve as mentors and tutors for the girls, with the hope of guiding them on a path to success and steering them away from any trouble.

"I'd love to get to know them here and never see them in my workplace," said Asst. Public Defender Jennifer Case, who will serve as a tutor in reading.

Tutors from the public defender's office will help girls who are struggling academically. They'll assist teachers during class and meet with girls in smaller groups.

Mentors already have started meeting with the fourth- and fifth-graders for an hour every other week at the Title I school. They talk about things like peer pressure.

"We're trying to just build self-confidence," said Asst. Public Defender and mentor Jennifer Johnson. "Just teaching them how to be young ladies."

Fifth-grader Teraney Hull said she has enjoyed talking to the ladies from the public defender's office. "If I have a problem, I can trust them.

"It makes me feel like I can be a successful young lady if I stop fighting and stop talking about people," said Teraney, 11.

With a student turnover rate of nearly 50 percent at Northaven, it's important to make an impression with students quickly, said principal Louis Padgett.

"With that type of turnover, we have to equip them with as much as we can," Padgett said. "We're trying to catch them prior to (negative outside influences). If maybe we can head off some things ... help them realize that they can continue to hope for a high school diploma."

Students celebrated the partnerships at a program at the school Wednesday.

Northaven is also working with Hope Community Credit Union, Memphis Area Legal Services and the Shelby County Sheriff's Office to provide mentors for students and assistance for parents.

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