‘We’re tired of putting your kids in jail’: Attucks Middle School launches new diversion program

By Keri Blakinger

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At a school with the most arrests in the district, in the county that imprisons the most kids in the state, officials on Tuesday announced the launch of a yearlong pilot program designed to keep young people out of the criminal justice system.

Houston ISD’s Attucks Middle School will soon be home to the first Youth-Law Enforcement-Assisted Diversion program, an initiative that gives campus police the option to refer kids for support services instead of arresting them for low-level offenses.

“The idea is to drive down the connection between the school and the Juvenile Justice Center, to really break that school-to-prison pipeline,” said Charles Rotramel, CEO of ReVision, a Houston ministry that helped launch the program.

Though other communities and schools have implemented similar pre-arrest diversion programs for youth, this is LEAD’s first time branching out to help kids with the program that’s already heralded as a success with adults.

To some, it seems like an obvious solution; a return to a less-punitive past where kids could be kids — and something officials could have started years ago.

“There are basically things we’ve criminalized that folks of my generation called ‘growing up,’” said Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg. “We’re tired of putting your kids in jail.”

A forward-thinking diversion program, LEAD got its start in Seattle in 2011. Framed as a harm reduction-focused approach to tackling a bloated criminal justice system, the program routed low-level drug and prostitution offenders to support services and treatment instead of sending them through the courts and into jail.
Unlike pre-trial intervention, LEAD stops the legal case before it begins, diverting would-be arrestees before they’re booked, according to the LEAD National Support Bureau. It’s an approach that appears to pay off: A 2015 LEAD Recidivism Report found participants were 58 percent less likely to be arrested when compared to a control group. But as the diversionary program has expanded — to more than 40 cities — it’s mostly stayed focused on the adult side of the system.

In 2017, the local Youth Justice Council heard a presentation on LEAD and tossed around ideas about whether it would be a good idea here, maybe looking at the 17- to 24-year-old demographic, according to Janis Bane, a juvenile criminal justice consultant for the city of Houston Health Department.

That wouldn’t have been groundbreaking for the nationally expanding program. But then at one meeting, Bane recalled, county and city stakeholders trotted out a different idea: Why don’t we try this with kids? Houston ISD police and the Harris County District Attorney’s Office were both on board, so the next step was picking out a school.

Attucks seemed like a natural target. The Sunnyside school had seen more than 40 student arrests in the past year, Rotramel said, more than any other campus in the district. And suspending or arresting kids can have outside consequences. There’s the missed classroom time. The increased likelihood of dropping out. And, according to a 2018 peer-reviewed study in the journal Youth & Society, suspended kids have a higher likelihood of arrest more than a decade later. “There’s no evidence that locking a kid up helps,” Bane said.

Now, when they catch a child committing a misdemeanor or even some felonies, campus police have the OK not to make a collar. Although there’s still a report generated, it’s never filed and the kids are instead referred to support services. There’s no suspension and no arrest. “There will be no consequences for them,” Rotramel said. “If they agree to participate in LEAD, they go about their business as normal.”

To kick off the program, financial support is coming from ReVision and Harris County Precinct 1 Commissioner Rodney Ellis’s office. The ministry is funding one full-time position for a programs administrator, while Ellis’s office is backing a full-time case manager. Officials hope that will be enough to handle 35 to 45 cases. That’s just a fraction of the more than 11,000 juvenile cases the district attorney’s office handles every year, but stakeholders are optimistic about the possibility of expansion.

“We are building a model, and we would like for it to be replicated,” Bane said. Harris County accounted for roughly 25 percent of the kids sent to juvenile prison last year, according to state data. But the program already has the support of prosecutors, police and some courts — all parties interested in the reform-minded approach that could change that statistic.

“There’s a lot of cases that end up utilizing a lot of judicial resources unnecessarily,” said Juvenile Court Judge Michael Schneider. “There’s so many cases where it doesn’t benefit the community or the kids or their families to get them sucked into a system that can take them down a bad path.”

Part of it, admitted John Jordan, the district attorney’s juvenile division chief, is about changing the culture. “What we’re trying to do is get back to where it used to be and not criminalize youthful misconduct,” he said. “We hope to charge less and help more.” keri.blakinger@chron.com @keribla