

Youngstown Vindicator

Vindy.com

Published: Sun, August 9, 2009 @ 12:00 a.m.

The data bear out Mahoning County Juvenile Court Judge Theresa Dellick's contention that being "smart on crime" gets better results in dealing with young offenders than merely being tough on crime: 118 homicides and assaults in the first eight months of this year, compared with 296 in 2004; 108 drug charges this year, 198 in '04; 45 sex offenses, compared with 151 in 2004.

A similar picture emerges in the other categories: kidnapping, arson and weapons.

"We're not soft on crime, we're smart on crime," Judge Dellick says. "That's how you get better results."

Last Tuesday, Dellick hosted the first juvenile-crime summit in Mahoning County, and about 200 officeholders, including area congressmen Tim Ryan and Charlie Wilson, state officials, police brass and educational, child-advocacy and social-service agency leaders attended. That's what success brings — individuals eager to learn and to offer their assistance.

The summit was significant for another reason: It was held in the Mahoning County High School (the former Sheridan Elementary School), which opened last fall to provide a lifeline for students facing expulsion from their regular high schools for misbehavior.

As we noted in an editorial last summer, without the school, such delinquents and truants faced a future that was bleak, at best. The job prospects for an individual lacking a high school diploma were slim to none, while for a good many, the chances of their becoming a statistic in the criminal justice system were a sure thing.

With between 900 and 1,000 young people facing expulsion for a variety of reasons, the need to keep them from becoming society's dropouts was evident.

The high school is an example of the collaboration that was the theme of last week's juvenile crime summit. The idea for the school was conceived by Dellick, Dr. Harold Yiannaki, an administrator emeritus at Youngstown State University and Cynthia Cairnes, an administrator with the Mahoning County Educational Service Center. It is designed to serve the entire county.

Congressmen Ryan and Wilson can play an important role in the expansion of the school. One of the questions that must be answered is this: What should be done to students who come from dysfunctional homes where they are in harm's way?

President Obama has talked about developing innovative ways of dealing with the challenges faced by many young people, especially those in the inner cities.

At-risk students

Having a residential component to the Mahoning County High School where the at-risk students would be exposed to a “normal” home life would go a long way toward addressing some of the underlying causes of their misbehavior. A federally funded pilot project under the auspices of the county juvenile court can be justified.

After all, the programs that have been launched by the court have received national and state acclaim.

As Tom Stickrath, director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services, put it, the Mahoning County Juvenile Court is a “go-to court” with an innovative attitude.

“She’s always one of those first people I call if we’re trying to float a new idea,” Stickrath said of Dellick.

We have no doubt that he would be willing to sell the idea of a residential component to the high school to Gov. Ted Strickland, who also has voiced concern about the growing divide between the children in urban settings and those in the suburbs.

Indeed, the data released by Judge Dellick about juvenile court detention admissions for 2008 tell the story: Youngstown, 465; Boardman, 57; Struthers, 49; Campbell and Coitsville, 39; Lake Milton, 13; Poland, 12; Sebring and Goshen Township, 12; all other communities, less than 1 percent each.