



City, school leaders aim to turn a violent area of Oakland into a safe haven

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OAKLAND -- Coliseum College Prep Academy, a middle and high school in one of East Oakland's most violent neighborhoods, has had one fight on campus all school year, Principal Aaron Townsend said. But off-campus criminal activity has disrupted that sense of calm, threatening the safety of his students and those at three other schools near 66th Avenue and International Boulevard.

Sometimes the chaos breaks out in the middle of the school day. The schools underwent six "lockdowns" in a 12-week period last fall because of what was happening in the streets outside. In December, middle-schoolers from Roots International were outdoors for P.E. when a shooting occurred in an adjacent park, Townsend said. No one was hurt, but the possibility was chilling.

As 16-year-old Akeem Hayes put it, "Who's going to protect us from the gunfire around us?"

In the aftermath of the Oakland Police Department layoffs, ongoing city and school district budget cuts and a bad economy, local agencies have fewer resources at their disposal to tackle such pervasive problems. But on Tuesday, Oakland's mayor, superintendent of schools and police chief said they would work together on a new initiative to protect those four schools, pay extra attention to students

who are at risk of dropping out, and build trust between students, families and the police.

"We're going to change the future of this city and give the kids back their dreams," Mayor Jean Quan said.

The Youth Safe Haven

initiative was launched at Coliseum College Prep and its three neighboring schools: Roots, Community United and Futures Elementary. It aims to add 50 mentors to existing after-school programs, including seven Oakland Police Department officers and 18 high school students from Coliseum College Prep.

Ronell Johnson, 16, has been training for weeks to become a mentor for the program. "I just think I could be the big brother that some kids don't have," he said.

To keep the streets around the schools safer, the Oakland school district's police department will devote a full-time officer to the area until 6 p.m., said Alicia Perez, public relations officer for Safe Passages, an intergovernmental partnership that runs student and family support programs at Oakland schools.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, which is providing about \$110,000 per year for the Youth Safe Haven effort, has supported similar initiatives in Columbia, S.C.; Irvington, N.J.; Jackson, Miss.; Providence, R.I.; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Toledo, Ohio, and Tuskegee, Ala. The foundation's president and CEO, Alan Curtis, said while the funding amount is small, other communities have seen a significant reduction in crime.

Curtis said his foundation is carefully evaluating its programs and collecting evidence to show national

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policymakers how police and community leaders can help residents who need it the most. If and when the political will in the United States shifts, he said, the model can be adopted in communities throughout the nation.

"This is a focus on the truly disadvantaged," Curtis said. "We're trying to add another dimension to the political debate that's so focused on the middle class."

Hayes, a mentor from Coliseum College Prep, said students may begin to see the police differently once they begin to know them as human beings -- "not just another cop that's going to arrest my cousin and put him in jail for no reason."

Akeem said he wants to convince younger students of the possibilities they can create for themselves if they stay in school and away from crime. "If we can lead by example, they might actually fall in love with being good," he said.

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