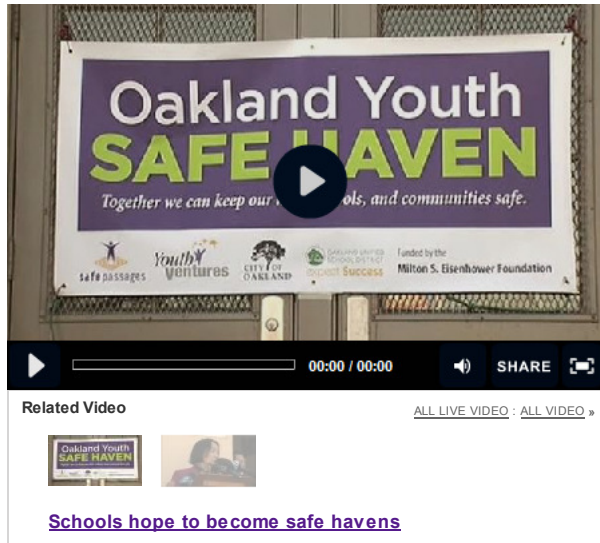


East Bay News 

Mentoring program hopes to cut crime in Oakland

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OAKLAND, Calif. (KGO) -- The city of Oakland is reaching out to help keep kids in school and out of trouble. Only 35 percent of Oakland's African-American boys graduate from high school. The hope is that they can turn schools in some of Oakland's toughest neighborhoods into "safe havens."

"Just living in the streets of Oakland it's hectic out here. I know a lot I know a lot," says student mentor Ronnell Johnson.

Johnson already knows more about the realities of Oakland than any 16-year-old should. The initials on his hat are a reminder of a friend who was killed trying to leave a gang; that's exactly the path Johnson plans to avoid.

"If I just want to sit at home, doing no bad things, going to jail and stuff, so I really just want to do something with my life," says Johnson.

He's starting by being one of 50 mentors to students in four East Oakland schools, students who are headed down the wrong path.

"There are a lot of very truant students at this school. A high percentage of students are truant. So one of the things is just trying to find out why and try to keep them involved in the school and give them, quite frankly, hope," says Oakland Mayor Jean Quan.

Thanks to a \$350,000 grant, it's not just students mentoring other students. It's also community members and the one group often trusted least on these streets police officers.

"The level of violence in this city is unacceptable. We need to create protective spaces all over this city that creates opportunities for kids," says Oakland Unified School District Police Chief Pete Sarna.

The goal is to turn schools into safe havens after the bell rings, a place where students get help with homework and the support they need to stay alive.

The Havenscourt neighborhood has some of the highest rates of violent crime, domestic violence and child abuse in all of Oakland and that is why the focus is there.

"We're still friends, but they're in gangs," says student mentor Luis Reyes.

Reyes came close to going the route many of his friends did.

"I want to be someone in my life. I want to stay in school," says Reyes.

Now he hopes to teach a younger generation that sometimes the hardest choice is making the right choice.

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