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STRATEGIES/PROGRAMS

Hawaii program combats gangs and truancy

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Hawaii students who miss four hours or more of school without a valid reason may be required to attend a four-hour Saturday program with their parents. Failure to attend the program may lead to stiff penalties, including arrest for truancy, police counseling or referral to Family Court.

This pilot program is part of Positive Alternative Gang Education (PAGE), a joint project of Hawaii's Department of Education and law enforcement from the islands. PAGE is a major thrust at educating at-risk students about alternatives to gang activities.

Hawaii police estimate that the island of Oahu alone has about 45 gangs, and at least six murders in the past three years have been attributed to gangs. Officials from other islands report less gang activity, but say that it is on the rise. "Gangs are only as strong as the community allows them to be," Honolulu Police Officer Harrison Gomez commented.

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PAGE, a cooperative partnership developed between law enforcement and schools, requires an ongoing relationship between both agencies. For example, the school's role includes keeping accurate attendance records; supplying police with a list of offenders each week; and providing a large, clean assembly area for the Saturday meetings. The police coordinate the program.

Both agencies receive mutual benefits. The program is designed to keep students in school, and juvenile crime and gang activity is reduced as a result. According to officials at the Honolulu Police Department (HPD), an apparent correlation exists between juvenile crime and status offenses — crimes such as truancy that are not illegal for people over 18.

"We feel it is a chain reaction. If we can prevent kids from committing status offenses, it will reduce juvenile crime," said Major David Benson, head of HPD's juvenile division.

In the PAGE program, juvenile crime officers work with public school teachers on a regular basis, presenting the PAGE curriculum and providing the Saturday morning instruction as well. The PAGE curriculum is designed to provide information on youth gangs, laws and drugs; increase decision-making and critical-thinking skills; improve self-esteem; and offer positive alternatives to gang membership. The Saturday sessions inform students and their parents about status laws and include activities designed to help students reconnect with school.

PAGE was adapted for Hawaii from a program developed and funded by the City of Paramount, California. The highly regarded "Paramount Plan: Alternatives to Gang Membership" unites the school district, law enforcement agencies, parents and youth-serving agencies in an effort to eliminate gangs. The plan stresses disapproval of gang membership and provides constructive alternatives for preteen youths and their families through an effective community outreach program.

Community meetings are led by bilingual leaders at parks, schools, churches and homes in neighborhoods identified as "under gang influence." The meetings describe the negative aspects of gang membership and provide families with information on gang affiliation and prevention. Suggestions for alternatives are offered, including positive parental direction, recreation activities, school programs, and family and community unity.

A similar anti-gang message is delivered by the Paramount Unified School District to students in the second and fifth grades. Fifteen weekly lessons, taught by a neighborhood counselor, cover issues such as peer pressure and the impact of gang membership on families, as well as gang-related topics such as tattoos and graffiti. A follow-up program for seventh-graders includes presentations made by former gang members about how gang activity has negatively impacted their own lives.

Each of these programs exemplify an interagency approach that works to keep children in school and out of gang activity. Additional information about these programs is available from the following sources: **Positive Alternative Gang Education**, Honolulu Police Department, Juvenile Crime Prevention Division, 1455 South Beretania Street, Honolulu, Hawaii, 96814, 808/943-3111, and **The Paramount Plan: Alternatives to Gang Membership**, Human Services Department, City of Paramount, 16400 Colorado Avenue, Paramount, CA 90723, 213/220-2140.