

\$6 million grant to help school district expand Family Resource Centers

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MUSKEGON — A nearly \$6 million federal grant awarded to Muskegon Public Schools will expand "Family Resource Centers" that connect families with local agencies.



Linda Wierenga

The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative grant will provide \$1.43 million to the school district for each of the next four years.

The grant will bring Family Resource Centers to McLaughlin and Nims elementary schools and Muskegon High School.

The money primarily will be used for staff, including three caseworkers to be hired by the Department of Human Services, one caseworker to be hired by Community Mental Health and a family court liaison that will be hired by the court, said Linda Wierenga, executive director of elementary education for Muskegon Public Schools.

Muskegon Public Schools will hire a director for the program, a social worker/counselor and a parent coordinator, Wierenga said.

"The whole idea is to do a better job of providing support to our students and families so they can be successful in school," Wierenga said.

All the staff will work to link students referred to the centers with the services they need. Family Resource Centers, which are located in 10 area schools, work closely with other local social service agencies, though they initially were established by the county DHS office.

The newest resource centers will provide services beyond the current centers -- services dictated by terms of the grant.

The grant requires the program address school violence; drug, alcohol and tobacco use; behavioral and emotional issues; mental health needs; and the needs of young children.

"It's very ambitious," Wierenga said. "There's a lot of detail in there about the kinds of things we've committed to doing."

For example, the district's parent liaison will identify young children receiving child care from unlicensed providers and get those providers some training with the goal of improving young children's school readiness, Wierenga said.

The district also will work with police to identify safe routes for children to walk to school and with dispute resolution mediators to develop a school "culture where there are better ways to resolve conflict than through violence and aggression."

The district's new social worker/counselor will work with students in the district's four elementary schools without Family Resource centers, which are Bluffton, Moon, Oakview and Nelson, and refer those who need service to one of the centers.

"Basically all the students in the district should have access to a Family Resource Center," Wierenga said.

The grant also will pay for security cameras at the district's M-TEC building, which houses alternative and adult education and preschool and child care programs.

The federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grants are used to design "a network of effective services" to promote healthy childhood development, and prevent violence and alcohol and other drug abuse, according to the U.S. Department of Education, which administers the grants.

For fiscal year 2008 only, 61 grants totaling \$74.6 million were awarded. Muskegon will get \$1.4 million in 2008-09, and subsequent years' grants are dependent on lawmakers approving grant funding and progress in meeting the grant's goals.

One other grant, to Waterford School District, was awarded in Michigan.

Muskegon Superintendent Colin Armstrong said the Family Resource Centers "change the life of the child."

"What they do for kids is what they need to survive the life they are experiencing," Armstrong said.