

LIVE3 to 4 PM: Listen to TU Sports Talk [More](#)**News / Metro****Grant to target at-risk girls at two Duval schools**

Initiative will benefit from \$500,000 in funding.

Posted: July 28, 2010 - 7:05pm

Subscription OfferBy [Deirdre Conner](#), [Topher Sanders](#)

Overlooked and often invisible, troubled elementary-age girls are one group that anti-crime efforts rarely target.

But organizers of an innovative new program hope that will soon change, thanks to an initiative that could have up to \$1 million in funding.

Starting in January, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency Center for Girls and Young Women will work with disruptive girls age 5 to 12 in two Duval County schools. The idea is to start early in an effort to keep girls out of the juvenile justice system.

The initiative, announced Wednesday, was awarded a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It will run over four years and provide \$500,000, which must be matched dollar-for-dollar by the community. At the end of the four years, the program will continue.

The Weaver Family Foundation is matching the first year of funding. "For too long, young girls in trouble have been almost invisible," Delores Barr Weaver, founder and trustee of the foundation, said in a statement.

Lawanda Ravoira, director of the center, said a study group, including Weaver and other local leaders, studied the issue of girls at risk since 2008. What they found was an overlooked but pressing trend of girls and young women getting in trouble.

"These things aren't really talked about," she said.

Last year, the group found, about 850 Jacksonville girls in grades kindergarten through fifth grade got in enough trouble to receive out-of-school suspensions. That amounts to nearly three in 100 elementary school girls. That rate increases exponentially among sixth- and seventh-grade girls. The findings took even the study group by surprise, Ravoira said.

The project, called "Girl Matters: It's Elementary," will begin in George Washington Carver Elementary and North Shore K-8. The schools were selected because they showed a need for early intervention among young girls. Leaders of the schools say

"I'm very happy because our girls will receive some immediate attention," said Tarsha Mitchell, principal of North Shore K-8.

The grant's funding partners toured Mitchell's school and were able to see during their visit that most of the students in the administrator's office for disciplinary reasons were girls, Mitchell said.

"They got to see first hand a great need for North Shore and the girls that we serve," she said.

North Shore's female students, Mitchell said, will now have access to more interventions, including tutoring, counseling and mentoring. There may even be group sessions for female students to talk and share experiences. Mitchell said the program will continue monitoring some students as they matriculate. Mitchell credited Ravoira for pressing the need for more attention on girls.

"We never really recognized a greater need for females as opposed to males until it was brought to our attention," Mitchell said.

In the adult system, women are still the minority of state inmates. But their numbers are increasing at a rate far faster than men. The center has tracked the trend and found educational failure puts girls at high risk of going into the juvenile justice system.

Staff and interns from the University of North Florida, the University of Florida and Edward Waters College will provide care management, and girls from the PACE Center for Girls of Jacksonville will be teen mentors for the younger girls.

School Board member Betty Burney represents the district George Washington Carver is in. "As someone who spends a lot of time talking to young people who are incarcerated I think that this is a wonderful step to show people an alternative," Burney said. "I think it's a necessity."

The program, which was one of 10 selected from 181 applicants by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Local Funding Partnerships, will be formally introduced at a gathering Monday.

deirdre.conner@jacksonville.com, (904) 359-4504

topher.sanders@jacksonville.com, (904) 359-4169