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## Antioch school district fixes problems in tracking missing students

By Paul Bugarino  
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ANTIOCH -- School officials have implemented new policies to track down students who stop attending class without explanation in response to the high-profile torture death of a former student.

Jazzmin Davis was found dead of extreme malnutrition in an Antioch home in September 2008. Foster mother Shemeeka Davis has been charged with killing her niece and torturing her and her twin brother. After Jazzmin's death, it was discovered that she hadn't attended school for 15 months.

Antioch Unified now uses a state identification database, called the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, to track student movement. If the student is traced to a new school district, Antioch sends the student's records.

Administrators make phone calls twice a week and home visits to those students with an extended absence.

"We're going to great lengths and exhausting every intervention method we have to make sure these kids are accounted for," said Tony Shah, the district's director of student support services.

Shah said he makes about a dozen home visits each month to find absent students.

Before the Jazzmin Davis tragedy, Antioch Unified relied on a manual system where student information folders were handed from school to school, district officials said. The district also was less aggressive in checking on children who stopped going to school, Shah said.

Jazzmin was automatically enrolled as a high school freshman

at Antioch High School in fall 2007 after middle

school, but she was purged from the system when she didn't show up or register for classes.

Jazzmin's twin brother attended the school that fall and told inquiring friends that she had moved.

"None of us realized how flawed the follow-up could be. We assumed it was more systematic and relatively airtight," school district trustee Walter Ruehlig said.

Board vice president Claire Smith added: "I don't know if we really thought about it before, because nothing bad like that had ever happened."

Ruehlig and Smith are the only current Antioch trustees who were on the board in September 2008.

The state's compulsory education law requires children to be enrolled in school between ages 6 and 18. Schools, districts and the courts must intervene if a child becomes truant.

School districts are increasingly using the state database to monitor student movement and transfers to other state public schools, said David Kopperud, a programs consultant with the state Department of Education.

Each district is responsible for creating its own procedure for tracking missing students.

When a student advances to a new grade level, all information is entered in a district database, Antioch Superintendent Donald Gill said.

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If a student doesn't show up the first two weeks of the school year, district staff members call the home and contacts listed on the student's emergency card.

If a student doesn't show up for 10 straight days, he or she is monitored in the district database. Officials make regular attempts to locate the student, including visits to their last known address.

A log of all phone attempts, home visits and certified letters is kept in the student's cumulative record.

Antioch tracked down a family with five children last spring that hadn't attended district schools for more than three years because of cultural issues, Shah said.

District officials point out that multiple social service agencies failed to connect in the Jazzmin Davis case but acknowledge that they bear some responsibility.

"We could have done a better job, and we will do a better job," Smith said.

Antioch Unified paid a \$750,000 settlement through an insurance carrier last month to Jazzmin's twin brother. The city of San Francisco also recently agreed to pay the 18-year-old a \$4 million settlement for negligence by the social worker assigned to the case.

District leaders are cautiously optimistic that the new plan is sufficient.

"Can I guarantee it will never happen? I don't think anything is a 100 percent guarantee, but we can put in all the safeguards we can," Smith said.

State budget cuts to resources and positions such as counselors and secretaries will add to the challenge of tracking truancy, Kopperud said.

Ruehlig has asked the district for a report on what is being done at each school site to monitor possible child abuse cases.

Jazzmin told friends in secret that she was beaten by her foster mother. She hid her wounds with long clothing, while passing off wounds on her neck as cat scratches.

Teachers are trained each year on how to report

suspected child abuse if it is noticeable or if students tell them they have been abused, but they don't actively look for signs of abuse, Shah said.

The law protects school districts civilly and criminally, he said.

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