

Press Clippings 4/29/2022

Chicago Tribune/The Courier-News

Students: Prioritize mental health. More resources needed for U-46, they tell board --- 4/28/2022

By Mike Danahey

School District U-46 needs to provide more mental health resources for high school students but things are starting to be more positive in general as the COVID-19 pandemic starts to wane.

Those was among the key points made by several high school seniors during a presentation made at this week's school board meeting.

Jessica Pearce, of Bartlett High School; Graham Hunt and Kylie Mertinat, of South Elgin High School; and Mariam Ali, of Streamwood High School, are four members of Superintendent Tony Sanders' student advisory board.

"Students desperately need more resources, especially given in the wake of the pandemic, many students are struggling with more anxiety, more depression," said Pearce, who also serves as the school board's student advisor.

The student representatives attended the annual student summit on March 3, where about 200 attendees talked about issues that are important to them and things they'd like to see the district change, add or improve. At the board meeting, they shared the topics on which there was major consensus.

Among them was a need for more staff to help guide struggling students.

"Having only two to four social workers in schools with thousands of students does not cut it," Pearce said.

One beneficial thing some schools already use are QR codes on student IDs and on posters, which inform students on how to make appointments and access crisis hotline phone numbers. There was agreement such efforts should be expanded, she said.

Pearce suggested the district do more outreach, perhaps by email, to let students know how to reach their respective social workers. Teachers might benefit from more training on how to recognize signs of mental health issues and how to make students feel OK about getting help, she said.

Assuring students of confidentiality when they do reach out for help should remain a top priority, Pearce said.

Hunt said students would like to see therapeutic sensory rooms — the type currently used by special needs students — be made available to the general student body or for the district to create safe spaces where students could take breaks.

He also suggested schools hold information sessions for parents so they can learn more about mental health issues and related resources to help.

Students also said at the forum that they'd like to see guidance counselors remain with a student through all four years of high school, Ali said. Also, planning for life beyond school and job shadowing are the kinds of things that could be happening before students start high school, she said.

As for student life, Mertinat said, "It's not necessarily that we lack extracurricular activities. It's that we lack advertisements for them."

To improve that, summit attendees suggested that ways be found to make students better aware of when activities are happening and transportation resources made available for those who want to participate in them, Mertinat said.

An open house earlier in the school year would help make students more aware of extracurricular activities available, and faculty should be more involved in promoting what's available, she said.

"Having these activities, you want to encourage students to have fun in high school," Mertinat said. "I think that's a huge part of it. These activities can completely alter your high school experience. I know it definitely enhanced mine."

District staff already is pursuing some of what's been proposed, Sanders said, looking at how they can budget for an increase in the number of social work counselors available.

"We do listen and we encourage our school leaders to listen to your voices, because you do matter. You're our number one customer," Sanders told the students.

He also agreed with the students about the need for school to be fun through extracurricular activities.

"School should be some place where there is the academic side to it, but school should also be a place that is a welcoming, warm environment where you feel safe and where you can have fun," Sanders said. "I feel the fun is starting to come back."

"It is, slowly but surely," Hunt said.

Pearce said, "It's really exciting to see people getting more involved and finding their communities again."

Chicago Tribune/The Courier-News

Elgin News Digest --- 4/28/2022

By Mike Danahey

Elgin middle school students take 1st at bowl event

A team of four 7th graders from Elgin's **Larsen Middle School** were recognized at Monday's **District U-46 School Board** meeting for taking first place in the Illinois Future Problem Solving Bowl.

Team members were Michelle Cardozo, Nishi Sheth, Katelyn Wong and Svanik Yachavaram participated in the event April 1-2 in Normal. It was held by a nonprofit educational group that challenges contestants to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills to future hypothetical scenarios.

For more information, go to www.illinois-fpsb.com.

Chicago Tribune and Propublica

The price kids pay: Schools and police punish students with costly tickets for minor misbehavior --- 4/28/2022

By Jennifer Smith Richards, Jodi S. Cohen, Armando L. Sanchez and Laila Milevski

The courthouse lobby echoed like a crowded school cafeteria. Teenagers in sweatshirts and sneakers gossiped and scrolled on their phones as they clutched the yellow tickets that police had issued them at school.

Abigail, a 16-year-old facing a \$200 penalty for truancy, missed school again while she waited hours for a prosecutor to call her name. Sophia, a 14-year-old looking at \$175 in fines and fees after school security caught her with a vape pen, sat on her mother's lap.

A boy named Kameron, who had shoved his friend over a Lipton peach iced tea in the school cafeteria, had been cited for violating East Peoria's municipal code forbidding "assault, battery, and affray." He didn't know what that phrase meant; he was 12 years old.

"He was wrong for what he did, but this is a bit extreme for the first time being in trouble.

He isn't even a teenager yet," Shannon Poole said as her son signed a plea agreement that came with \$250 in fines and fees. They spent three hours at the courthouse as Kameron missed math, social studies and science.

The nearly 30 students summoned to the Tazewell County Courthouse that January morning were not facing criminal charges; they'd received tickets for violating a municipal ordinance while at school. Each was presented with a choice: agree to pay a fine or challenge

the ticket at a later hearing. Failing to pay, they were told, could bring adult consequences, from losing their driving privileges to harming their future credit scores.

Across Illinois, police are ticketing thousands of students a year for in-school adolescent behavior once handled only by the principal's office — for littering, for making loud noises, for using offensive words or gestures, for breaking a soap dish in the bathroom.

Ticketing students violates the intent of an Illinois law that prohibits schools from fining students as a form of discipline. Instead of issuing fines directly, school officials refer students to police, who then ticket them for municipal ordinance violations, an investigation by the Tribune and ProPublica has found.

Another state law prohibits schools from notifying police when students are truant so officers can ticket them. But the investigation found dozens of school districts routinely fail to follow this law.

“Basically, schools are using this as a way to have municipalities do their dirty work,” said Jackie Ross, an attorney at Loyola University Chicago’s ChildLaw Clinic who specializes in school discipline. “It’s the next iteration of the school-to-prison pipeline. Schools might be patting themselves on the back and saying it’s just the school-to-municipality pipeline, but it’s the same philosophy.”

At the assembly-line hearings where many of these cases are handled, students have no right to legal representation and little chance to defend themselves against charges that can have long-term consequences. Ticket fines can be hundreds of dollars, presenting an impossible burden for some families, and administrative or court fees of up to \$150 are often tacked on.

Unpaid fines are sometimes sent to collections or deducted from parents’ tax refunds. And, unlike records from juvenile court, these cases can’t be expunged under state law.

No government entity tracks student ticketing, either in Illinois or nationally. Though a handful of communities in other states have sought to limit the practice, Illinois has not tried to monitor it, even after lawmakers attempted several years ago to stop schools from fining students as discipline. The Tribune and ProPublica quantified school tickets through more than 500 Freedom of Information Act requests to school districts and police departments, focusing on nearly 200 high-school-only districts and large K-12 districts.

The principal is listed as the complainant on this ticket written to a girl at Orland Junior High School for possessing “tobacco or an alternative nicotine product.” (Gray redactions and orange highlights added by ProPublica.)

In all, the investigation documented more than 11,800 tickets issued during the last three school years, even though the COVID-19 pandemic kept students out of school for much of

that period and even though records show no students were ticketed in the state's biggest district, the Chicago Public Schools.

The analysis of 199 districts, which together encompass more than 86% of the state's high school students, found that ticketing occurred in at least 141. In some K-12 districts, tickets were issued to children as young as 8.

Though school officials and police say ticketing keeps students from facing more serious criminal charges, the process routinely draws them into a legal system for infractions that would never be considered sufficiently serious to be heard in juvenile court. Many parents noted angrily that their children already had been suspended, given detentions or otherwise disciplined at school for their behavior.

The quasi-judicial hearings for these tickets often take place at police stations or village halls, and they're presided over by lawyers who are not judges. Even when tickets are handled at a courthouse, as in central Illinois' Tazewell County, local prosecutors resolve most cases informally before getting a perfunctory signoff from a judge.

Tribune and ProPublica reporters attended more than 50 hearing dates, observing hundreds of cases around the state. Some communities hold as many as three sessions a month, with students making up the vast majority of cases.

The revenue from the student tickets goes to the municipalities, not the schools, and essentially funds the ticketing system, including the employees who manage the hearings, lawyers who prosecute the cases and hearing officers who rule on them.

With few watchful eyes on the school ticketing system and few rules to govern it, inequities have gone undetected. The investigation examined the race of students ticketed in dozens of school districts and found that police had issued tickets disproportionately to Black students. Even in predominantly white schools, Black students sometimes received most of the tickets. In some communities, Latino students also were ticketed at disproportionate rates.

The fines and punishments, which are set by local governments, vary widely. That means the penalty for disorderly conduct violations might be \$450 in one town, \$50 in another and community service in a third. Towns also have different policies about whether and when they pursue unpaid ticket debt.

Some police departments choose not to ticket students at school; they say it's not an effective way to change behavior or help young people. Some schools have police officers on campus but direct them to stay out of minor disciplinary matters.

At schools where police routinely ticket students, officials argued that some young people need consequences beyond school discipline. They said students returning to school after pandemic closures have shown an increase in troubling behavior that has been difficult to manage.

That's reflected in recent patterns of police ticketing.

At Pekin Community High School near Peoria, police issued 62 tickets totaling more than \$10,000 before Halloween. Officers wrote 13 tickets for truancy on a single November day at Dundee-Crown High School in suburban Carpentersville. At McHenry Community High School this fall, police issued dozens of tickets for disorderly conduct, property damage, or possession of e-cigarettes or cannabis.

One woman kept track of students' fines and hearing fees in a notebook while accompanying her 15-year-old daughter to a packed December hearing in the McHenry City Council chambers. The total came to more than \$5,000, including her daughter's \$450 ticket for disorderly conduct.

"Merry Christmas," the hearing officer said sarcastically as he handed down the punishments.

"Instead of counseling these children, they are giving them tickets," said the mother. "When they are handing out citations in this volume, you have to stop and say, 'What's going on here?'"

Joliet Municipal Building, 9 a.m., Nov. 9

"Morning, your honor," Angelique Adams said, holding the ticket her 16-year-old daughter had received at Joliet Central High School. The ticket, for disorderly conduct, was issued after a school worker had spotted pepper spray dangling from the teen's backpack, next to hand sanitizer.

"The spray caused alarm to the school environment," the ticket states. (A district spokesperson would not comment on the case, citing student confidentiality, but said school employees contact police when a chemical spray is discovered.)

"Ms. Adams, what would you like to tell me?" asked Michael Knick, a lawyer hired by the city to hear such cases.

Adams said she'd given her daughter the pepper spray to keep the girl safe while walking to school.

"She doesn't have the pepper spray to attack another student. She was walking. I'm not sure how she alarmed or put the school in a deadly environment," Adams told Knick. "Instead of telling her, 'You can't have it, you're not supposed to have it,' instead you hit her with a \$150 fine? I don't have \$150. I can barely pay her school fees."

Knick wasn't swayed. He waived the \$50 in hearing costs but handed down a fine of \$150. The student would owe \$350 if the fine wasn't paid by the end of the year.

"Y'all is crazy," Adams told him before walking away.



(Laila Milevski/ProPublica)

Schools aren't allowed to fine students for misbehaving in Illinois. When legislators passed a broad overhaul of school discipline in 2015, they specifically banned fines as a "disciplinary consequence." That change was inspired by a Chicago charter school that had been fining students for issues like tardiness and uniform infractions.

But the law, still known to educators as Senate Bill 100, doesn't apply to police. Some school officials argue they are following the rules as long as police officers write the tickets and municipalities issue the fines.

"We're not the issuer of the ticket," said Marjorie Greuter, superintendent of East Peoria Community High School District 309. One of the deans there pointed out that the high school also does not make money from the tickets.

But families and advocates for children see little distinction — they just know there's a financial consequence for misbehavior at school.

"If the school is involving police, the school is issuing the ticket. There really is no difference between the officer and the school," said Jessica Gingold, an attorney who encountered the ticketing system while representing a child through Equip for Equality, the federally appointed watchdog for people with disabilities in Illinois.

In an emailed statement, the Illinois State Board of Education's spokesperson said it is unfortunate that state law doesn't clearly prohibit using police to ticket students at school, adding that the board is committed to helping lawmakers "eliminate ineffective and harmful practices that have no place in our schools."

The lawmakers who wanted to put an end to school fines said they were troubled to learn that police were issuing tickets to students.



Illinois Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford, a Democrat who was a chief sponsor of the legislation, said it's "totally shocking" that schools are still creating financial penalties for children and families. "Unfortunately we have school districts and systems that, no matter what, will not follow the law, will find that loophole to get around being responsive to the law," she said.

The chief sponsor of the discipline legislation in the House, Democratic Rep. William Davis, called school-related ticketing "in opposition" to the law. Current House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch, also a sponsor, agreed and said legislators should revisit the law.

"The whole point of Senate Bill 100 was about keeping kids in school, keeping kids on track to graduate, on a path for success by not creating a pipeline of discipline that creates these records that will follow kids for the rest of their lives. That's not the goal," Welch said in an interview.

"Certainly double punishment was not intended by the law either," Welch said of adding a ticket to suspension or detention.

The Tribune-ProPublica investigation found that school employees and police often work hand in hand to discipline students. In many cases a police officer, called a school resource officer, is already stationed in the building.

At Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School, 10 school security workers patrol the hallways and stand guard outside the bathrooms. If they spot vaping devices, fights or other trouble, they alert school administrators, who decide whether to share the information with the school resource officer.



A ticket book sits on the desk of the school resource officer at Bradley-Bourbonnais.

On the school police officer's desk is a book of blank tickets.

“We will do our discipline, but it is up to the officer to ticket,” said Principal Brian Wright. For disorderly conduct tickets, a school official signs as the complaining witness. Wright said he thinks the school is obligated to report students to police if they may be breaking a village ordinance. He also said he thinks the practice doesn't conflict with state law as long as the school isn't writing the ticket and has a separate process for imposing its own discipline.

“The bottom line is correcting behavior,” Wright said. But he also acknowledged: “I don't know how effective this is.” He noted that the village's relatively new ordinance on vaping hasn't deterred students from bringing the devices to school.

Greuter and other school officials say that while the tickets can be costly, young people need consequences. “It's a product of their decisions — poor decisions,” she said. “While it might be expensive in the short term, the consequences of not stopping that behavior in the long term has much more serious consequences.”

That kind of thinking goes against research that has found that involving law enforcement in school incidents is harmful and [counterproductive](#). Illinois officials just last month urged schools to reevaluate punitive disciplinary policies; the [guidance](#) did not address police citations.

Kip Heinle, a spokesperson for the Illinois School Resource Officers Association, said he thinks ticketing is uncommon and used as a “last resort.”

At the high school where he works in Madison County, Heinle said he's probably written 10 tickets in 16 years. The other school resource officers he knows across the state have the same philosophy, he said: “Let the school handle as much as they can. ... We don't want to hem up a kid with a court date and fines and stuff like that.”

But the news organizations' investigation found that ticketing was the most likely outcome when school officials involved police in student incidents. In the roughly 200 Illinois districts examined for the investigation, police were involved about 17,800 times in the last three school years, records show. Sometimes police arrested students; sometimes they took no action. In more than half the incidents, they issued a ticket.

In 66 of those districts, police ticketed students at least 50 times in three years, the Tribune-ProPublica investigation found. Police issued at least 100 citations to students in 36 districts.

Across the state, police ticketed students most frequently — about 3,300 times — for possessing tobacco, e-cigarettes or other vaping materials. Many towns have passed new vaping ordinances in response to concerns about underage use. Students were ticketed for possession of drugs or drug paraphernalia — almost always related to cannabis — about 1,900 times.

Fights among students led to more than 700 tickets, and police issued more than 1,200 tickets to students for disorderly conduct, which could include anything from using profanity to slapping someone.

The investigation also found that police had issued more than 1,800 tickets for truancy across at least 40 municipalities. More than 1,000 of those tickets were issued after Jan. 1, 2019, when a state law went into effect that prohibited schools from notifying authorities about truant students so police can ticket them.

Carpentersville police issued 649 truancy tickets to students at Dundee-Crown High School between January 2019 and December 2021, the most truancy tickets issued in any district the reporters examined. The fines totaled nearly \$50,000.

Police and school officials in the city of Harvard, near the Wisconsin border, have worked together to issue 105 truancy tickets since the law went into effect.

“It’s all on what the school wants to do,” said Harvard Deputy Chief Tyson Bauman. “The school official has to be the person who says, ‘Yes, issue a ticket.’”

Sixteen truancy tickets were issued to Harvard high school students on March 1 alone. Administrators at the Harvard school district and at Dundee-Crown did not respond to requests for comment.

“It is illegal and it shouldn’t be happening,” said Eve Rips, a former Loyola University ChildLaw Clinic fellow who has studied Illinois’ 2018 truancy law. “Schools should be following the law here, and it is a serious concern if they aren’t. Parents should be able to get these tickets dropped if they’re getting improperly ticketed.”

Superintendent Tony Sanders of School District U-46 in Elgin, the second-largest district in the state, said he was upset to learn from reporters that dozens of students in his district, including some at a middle school and two high schools, had been ticketed for truancy after the state ban took effect. He said principals and school resource officers have now been told to stop.

“It was clearly done against state law,” Sanders said.

For years in East Peoria, students were ticketed for truancy by the school’s truancy officer, who is not a police officer but had been given a book of police tickets. The high school handbook says students are considered truant if they repeatedly arrive more than five minutes late to school and warns tickets could be issued if phone calls, letters and home visits aren’t effective.

The tickets ordered students to the Tazewell County Courthouse, where they faced fines and court fees of \$200.

After the Tribune and ProPublica questioned school officials in February about why the employee was writing truancy tickets in violation of state law, attorney Katherine Swise said in March that schools had stopped issuing the tickets. She declined to comment further, citing attorney-client privilege.

“We had been proceeding under this practice for a long time,” said Swise, whose law firm represents both the city and its schools. “Tickets are no longer being written.”

Tazewell County Courthouse, 1 p.m., Sept. 27

Jennifer Fee leaned against the payment counter. Her 16-year-old, Blake, owed \$350 for being found with a vaping device — considered drug paraphernalia by police — at Morton High School near Peoria.

“You know how much money this is? This is how much money I make for the week,” said Fee, who was working as a school janitor.

Fee initially was going to sign an agreement to pay off the ticket gradually. Then she decided to put the full amount on a credit card. The court clerk told her it would be an additional \$9.62 to process the credit card payment.

“Imagine how much money they’re making off of kids,” Fee said.



(Laila Milevski/ProPublica)

Confronted with hundreds of dollars in fines, parents often plead for extra time to pay or ask whether their children can do community service instead. They say the fines would eat up their entire paychecks and point out their children have no income.

But in most cases, families have only two choices: admit wrongdoing and agree to pay the amount offered by a prosecutor, or fight the ticket and risk paying a much higher penalty.

In the Tazewell County Courthouse last spring, Morton village prosecutor Pat McGrath sat at a long table at one end of the lobby telling a teenage girl that she could resolve a ticket for an e-cigarette for \$25, plus \$100 in court costs: “\$125 out the door,” McGrath said.

They could fight back by hiring a lawyer or they could go to trial without one. The family chose to pay.

“She doesn’t have another option. She can’t hire an attorney,” the girl’s aunt told McGrath.

At the opposite end of the lobby, East Peoria prosecutor Austin Nichols told each family “I would be willing to offer you ...” and then named a fine: \$75 for tobacco, \$250 for disorderly conduct, \$100 for truancy. Plus \$100 court costs in each case.

Susan McCoy’s son took one of Nichols’ deals to pay \$350.50 in fines and fees for consumption of alcohol. The 17-year-old later said school workers had questioned him after he threw up at the bus stop, and he admitted that he’d drunk whiskey at home during the night.

“That’s a lot of money to certain people. It is a lot to me,” said McCoy, who worked at a shoe store at the time. The family couldn’t pay it all that day, so they agreed to a plan to pay \$60 a month. Nearly a year later, McCoy had paid only about \$100. “I hate to say I have more important bills that have to be paid, but I do.”

When several families asked Nichols for community service instead of a fine, he told them the city doesn’t offer that option.

“He is 14. He can’t even get a job,” one boy’s guardian said to Nichols, frustrated with the \$175 the freshman was charged for vaping at school. “I’m not paying it. I already lost \$160 today losing work.”

Many municipalities add as much as \$150 in administrative costs, mimicking court fees, to each fine. Some have made the hearings mandatory, making it impossible for students to avoid the fees.

Other communities don’t require students to enter a plea in person, allowing them to admit liability and pay the ticket cost ahead of a hearing date. But municipalities often penalize families who don’t pay promptly, and in some communities, the amount they owe can quickly grow.

That’s the case in Manteno, where Amanda Piker learned her son’s \$100 ticket for tobacco possession would double if not paid within 48 hours. After two weeks, the penalty could increase to \$750 plus a \$50 fee.

“We were just absolutely shocked, but you had no choice. You have to pay,” said Piker.

“People don’t believe me when I say Manteno does this.”

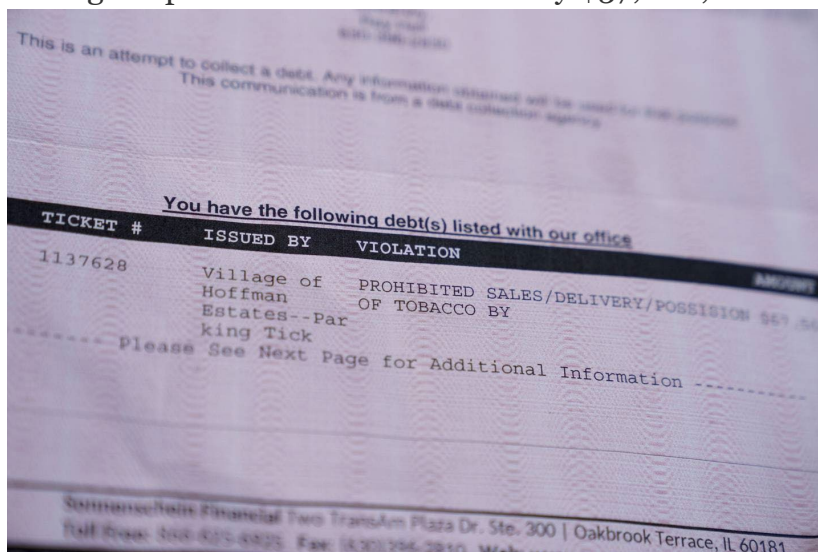
Piker’s sixth-grade son was ticketed in 2019 after a friend gave him a vaping device and he put it in his backpack. School officials found the device after they searched his bag while he was in physical education class, she said.

The financial harm can trail students after they leave school, the Tribune-ProPublica investigation found.

Kathryn Patterson’s son Chris was 16 when he was ticketed for possession of tobacco and drug paraphernalia at Hoffman Estates High School. She said she told village officials the family didn’t have \$200 to pay for the tickets and asked that Chris be allowed to do community service instead. That wasn’t an option, she learned.

About three years later, her son got a letter from a collections agency. The amount due had grown to \$270. “They waited until he was 18 and threw him into collections as he was trying to start his own life,” Patterson said. He has yet to pay, she said.

The cost of tickets issued to students at the village’s two high schools from August 2018 through September 2021 totaled nearly \$37,000, records show. About \$13,000 was unpaid.



In 2018, a 16-year-old boy was ticketed at Hoffman Estates High School for possession of tobacco. Three years later, he received a notice that Hoffman Estates was seeking to collect his unpaid debt.

At least 38 municipalities try to collect on juvenile debt, either through parents or from the students themselves once they turn 18, the Tribune and ProPublica found. Some use private collections companies. Others employ the state’s Local Debt Recovery Program, which allows the comptroller’s office to deduct money for unpaid debts from individuals’ tax refunds and payroll checks.

The village of Bradley has tried to collect unpaid fines from about 40 tickets issued to high school students from 2018 through 2020, totaling about \$10,000. The village uses both a

private collections company and the state comptroller's program; Bradley has collected about \$1,800 in student debt through the state program, records show.

Samantha Corzine and her daughters were living in a motel when the girls were ticketed at Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School for truancy and possession of cannabis. She said she told Bradley officials she didn't have the money to pay the fines.

"They told me you have to figure out something because if they go to collections, they automatically get garnished from your wages and your tax forms," she said.

And they were. Just as Corzine was trying to move into a home, she learned that \$800 would be deducted from her tax refund in 2020, interfering with her plans to put that money toward a down payment. The family had to spend several additional months in the motel.

"I was devastated," she said. "I could finally get my kids out of the motel situation and into an actual home, and it was down the drain because they took what I was expecting to get."

McHenry Municipal Building, 1:30 p.m., Dec. 9

Nathan, 16, stood with his father at a lectern, ready to defend himself against a disorderly conduct ticket related to a fight on a school bus. This was his second appearance; Nathan had already entered a "not liable" plea in October and had been told to return for a hearing.

When his father, Joe Nepras, started to explain why Nathan shouldn't have been ticketed, hearing officer Harry H. Semrow Jr. interrupted and noted Nepras wasn't Nathan's attorney. "I'm his father and that's the next best thing," Nepras said.

"Is it?" Semrow shot back.

"Do you know what an opening statement is?" Semrow asked. Nepras said no. "You don't?"

Semrow told Nathan to raise his right hand but got distracted and never swore him in, leaving the student with his hand in the air.

Joe Nepras asked to share a letter a school dean wrote for the hearing that said Nathan had never been disrespectful to anyone at school and he "in no way initiated the fight on the bus." The city prosecutor said the letter was hearsay and he would want the dean to testify.

Semrow decided to continue the case until another day so both sides could call witnesses. Nathan would have to come back yet again.

Hearings for municipal ordinance violations in Illinois were created to deal with parking tickets, then were expanded in the late 1990s to handle any violation of local laws: excessive noise, jaywalking, lawns overgrown with weeds.

Barack Obama, then a state senator, sponsored [the legislation](#) that empowered Illinois municipalities to broaden the use of the hearings, with a goal of easing the strain on the circuit courts. The law also allowed cities and towns to keep the fines and fees that tickets generate.

Around the same time, the mass shooting at Columbine High School prompted schools to start bringing in police to keep students safe, putting many more young people in contact with law enforcement.

These seemingly unrelated changes had an unanticipated outcome: students being ticketed by police and then funneled into systems designed for adults, not children.

At the hearings, students have little or no opportunity to explain the circumstances surrounding a school incident. There's often no counseling or other help offered to kids who may need it, only punishment. And cases are decided by lawyers who are not trained to work with young people.

In fact, there are few requirements for the lawyers who oversee hearings. They must have been a lawyer in Illinois for at least three years and must complete "a formal training program" that includes studying the hearing rules and municipal code, observing other hearings and taking part in hypothetical cases. But there's no certification process to ensure the training takes place.

Few cases are decided in students' favor. The hearings use a lower standard of proof than criminal cases. Students can be found liable if the allegation is more likely to have occurred than not, and a ticket is itself considered evidence.

In hundreds of cases the Tribune and ProPublica observed, it was exceedingly rare that a student was not found to be at fault. Data obtained from suburban Crystal Lake showed that of the 1,888 ordinance violation cases on the city's docket from May 2018 through December 2021 — which includes both adults and minors — only seven people were found not liable.

Students are frequently confused by the process. Hearing officers are not courtroom judges, yet they are often called "judge" or "your honor." The hearing rooms often have a bailiff, and students sometimes are sworn in at a lectern.

"Is this a courtroom?" a McHenry High School freshman asked as he walked into the city council chambers where his hearing was held. That afternoon, Semrow presided over a full docket in which nearly every case involved a student. He told the crowd they could be there for a while.

“I don’t care,” Semrow said. “I get paid by the hour.”

Records show he gets paid \$150 an hour.



Hearing officers like Harry H. Semrow Jr., shown at the McHenry Municipal Center in February, are not courtroom judges yet are often called “judge” or “your honor.”

Students have the right to appeal the hearing officers’ decisions to a circuit court, but they are not always told about that option. At all but one of the four McHenry hearing dates reporters attended, Semrow did not inform students they could appeal.

Even though the city code calls for it, McHenry also no longer records the proceedings, having abruptly stopped in December soon after reporters began attending. McHenry Deputy Police Chief Thomas Walsh said state law does not require a recording, and he and the police chief decided it “created an unnecessary record.”

Contacted by reporters, Semrow declined to discuss the hearing process or the investigation’s findings. The principal at McHenry High School, Jeff Prickett, defended the use of municipal tickets for school incidents, saying it is a way “to restore justice.” Walsh said the ticketing process keeps young people out of criminal court while still providing consequences. But he said he and the police chief are evaluating the cost of the fines, including the \$400 fine set by the city council for disorderly conduct.

Other local officials also say young people should be glad their misbehavior is being handled with a ticket instead of through the criminal justice system.

“I could refer it to juvenile court. You could face charges there,” John Grotto, a hearing officer in DeKalb, told a student with a ticket for cannabis possession. “Do you understand the seriousness of this?”

But it’s unlikely that a state’s attorney would prosecute a scuffle in the school hallway or underage possession of a tiny amount of marijuana. When matters are serious — if a weapon is involved, for example — police can and do arrest students.

“For the most part, these are not going to be prosecuted in juvenile court for truancy or tobacco. If they’re receiving a ticket, that’s in every case a net widening, not a diversion” from the legal system, said Stephanie Kollmann, policy director of the Children and Family Justice Center at the Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law.

The local hearings do not provide young people with legal protections that are common in juvenile court. Children do not have a right to an attorney or an interpreter, for example.

“It is especially troubling that in the United States of America, where we see young people as a vulnerable population that deserves protection, that they are going toe-to-toe with a prosecutor with no help from someone who understands the law,” said Mae Quinn, director of the Youth Justice Clinic at the University of the District of Columbia law school [who has studied the impact of municipal courts](#) on juveniles.

The records created by the ticketing process also can follow a child. Reporters found details of some students’ violations in online case dockets and municipal records, including the offenses they were accused of, how much they were fined and even information about debt collection efforts.

While Illinois allows juvenile arrest and court records to be expunged — meaning they are erased from a person’s record — state law considers ordinance violations to be “[adult offenses](#)” that are ineligible for expungement.

“These records are visible to a lot of people,” said Hannah Berkowitz, a staff attorney with Legal Aid Chicago who has tried to find ways to get children’s citations expunged. “They can be seen. They can be used to make decisions that would hurt kids.”

The process overall is at odds with the goals of the juvenile justice system, which seeks not to punish students but to help them get on a better path. It also is out of step with a national trend toward [eliminating juvenile justice fines and other costs](#).

For many students pushed into this system, the closest thing to help that’s available to them is the well-worn advice of hearing officers.

“Show me your friends and I’ll show you your future,” Grotto, in DeKalb, likes to say.

“You run with the crows, you fly with the crows, you get shot with the crows,” Semrow told one McHenry student. “Think about that.”

Bolingbrook police station, 9 a.m., Oct. 20

Middle school student Malachi bounced his leg and cracked his knuckles as he waited for his case to be heard in the Bolingbrook police station. The 12-year-old wore a button-down shirt he had picked out that morning.

Police had written him a ticket for battery after he got in a fight before school. He also was suspended for three days and had to enroll in a community program designed to “help keep the cuffs off kids.”

Malachi arrived at the police station, which serves as a branch of the county court, with his mother, his grandmother and his aunt, who is his guardian.

His grandmother gave the boy a hug and rubbed his back. “Take a deep breath,” she told him.

Malachi later said he was terrified. “I didn’t know at my age stuff could happen like that for doing what I did at school,” he said. “I felt like I was living an adult life and I didn’t want to be in that moment.”

About 3,700 students attend Evanston Township High School. But in at least the last three years, the two school resource officers have not written a single ticket, records show.

The school, one of the largest in the state, offers a reminder: Police have discretion. They don’t have to ticket young people.

“There are times when staff or administration has said, ‘Can you arrest this student? Can you cite this student?’ The question isn’t can we, but is it best? It is not,” said Officer Loyce Spells, who has been stationed at the school for five years.

It’s not that students aren’t vaping or fighting. But when they do, school workers decide the consequences: detention, suspension, mandatory counseling.

“We cannot enforce our way out of these situations,” Spells said. “That does not foster and build stronger or positive relationships.”

In the Rochester school district near Springfield, school and police officials have agreed that the officer working at the high school shouldn’t be involved in routine discipline.

“That’s not the environment we want. That’s not what we want for kids,” said Rochester

Superintendent Dan Cox. “We’re trying to create a better person. They need consequences, but we’ve got to have ... teachable moments. I’m not being soft here. There’s discipline.”

Cox said that if there’s a fight at school, for example, “the principal is going to be the disciplinarian.”

In Chicago, the school district and police say they believe officers should not play a role in everyday disciplinary issues. A spokesperson for Chicago Public Schools said the district’s student code of conduct advises school administrators “against contacting police in non-emergency incidents.”

If there is criminal activity at school, such as a fight that involves a weapon or leads to an injury, “that is where we get involved” and maybe arrest a student, said Director Glen Brooks of the Chicago Police Department’s Office of Community Policing.

“If it is a disciplinary issue or behavior or noncriminal offense, it is really the school’s purview to handle those kinds of incidents,” Brooks said. “The idea here is not to fine children. We don’t go around trying to collect money from children.”

In California, the Los Angeles Unified School District’s police department [said in 2014](#) that it would stop ticketing students at school for fighting, possession of tobacco or small amounts of marijuana, and other minor offenses, instead referring them to school administrators, counseling or other programs.

In Texas, citing concerns that police were ticketing students too often for misbehavior, lawmakers [passed legislation in 2013](#) that prohibits ticketing for some offenses at school. Police in some Illinois municipalities continue to write tickets, but young people are required to do community service or participate in counseling or an educational program rather than pay a fine.

Students at New Trier Township High School in Winnetka aren’t fined because village officials decided options such as community service and apology letters are more beneficial to everyone involved. Nonetheless, the village still requires students to pay a \$40 administrative fee. Round Lake, Glenview and Roselle, among other places, also offer community service in lieu of fines.

Police in Elgin recently began offering counseling with a social worker instead of imposing fines for tickets, part of the police department’s [rethinking of how to best help younger residents](#).



Michele Nepras and her son Nathan, 16, talk with McHenry city prosecutor Michael Fioretti, center, and adjudication hearing officer Harry H. Semrow Jr. in March. Nathan had received a ticket for disorderly conduct related to a fight on a school bus.

From 2017 through 2020, Elgin imposed fines for disciplinary matters at the city's three high schools in 78 cases, city records show; the penalties ranged from \$50 to \$1,000. In 2021, the city issued no fines for school tickets but ordered counseling in 14 cases, including for an **Elgin High School** student cited for disorderly conduct for pulling a fire alarm. She completed the counseling. Young people can still be fined if they don't show up on their hearing date.

"When I took over, it was 'fine, fine, fine,'" said Jeff Adam, a retired police lieutenant who began overseeing the city's administrative hearings a decade ago. Gradually, he began to doubt that the fines helped children.

"When you slap a fine on a family trying to get by, you are not helping them," he said. "The whole thing is to get these kids to come around. The fine doesn't do that. Especially when kids can't work. There had to be a better way."

The aftermath

In Joliet, the hearing officer who fined a girl for carrying pepper spray on her backpack said he overturned his decision hours later, after questions from a reporter prompted him to research the law.

"It doesn't matter," the mother said. "I wasn't paying it anyway."

In Pekin, Blake, who'd previously been ticketed for having a vaping device, was back at the Tazewell County Courthouse in March, this time for tobacco possession at school. He took the prosecutor's plea offer to pay a \$50 fine, plus \$100 in court costs, and waited while his mother swiped her credit card for a total of \$154.¹²

Blake is paying off the ticket debt with paychecks from his new fast-food job.

In McHenry, Nathan finally got a resolution in late March for his ticket related to a school bus skirmish in September.

He had to leave school early again and headed to the city hall, this time without his dad, who was traveling for work. The day before, the family had decided to stop fighting the ticket; Nathan's mother, Michele, said she was too fearful to speak in public, particularly in front of Semrow. The pair stood nervously in front of the hearing officer and agreed to plead liable and pay the \$450.

Semrow didn't remember the case right away and asked if the fight happened at school.

"On the bus," Nathan said quietly.

"Close enough," Semrow said.

Nathan was glad to be done. It was his fourth trip to city hall for the ticket. He was sick of missing school.

Daily Herald

Baseball: Streamwood rallies for extra-inning win over South Elgin --- 4/28/2022

By Craig Brueske, Daily Herald Correspondent

Streamwood's baseball team kept scratching and clawing during Thursday's Upstate Eight Conference game against **South Elgin**.

Falling behind 2-0 after 4 innings, the Sabres (9-6, 8-4) scored 3 runs in the fifth to take their first lead, only to watch the Storm (12-3, 10-2) push the tying run across in the bottom of the seventh and force extra innings.

Streamwood, however, answered with 3 runs of its own in the top of the eighth, highlighted by Joey Lunz' RBI groundout and a 2-out, 2-run single off the bat of Miguel Rodriguez. Junior reliever Nick Weaver escaped a bases-loaded, 2-out jam in the bottom half of the frame during the Sabres' 6-3, 8-inning triumph in South Elgin.

"My job was to throw strikes -- I know my guys got my back," said Weaver, who caught for the first 6 innings before being summoned with a runner on first and nobody out in the bottom of the seventh.

"Nick texted me last night and said he wanted the opportunity to shut the door," said Sabres coach Dan Jennings. "It's tough to come in (in the seventh) without a clean inning but he shut the door when he needed to."

In the eighth, Sabres junior Josh Wilder led off a walk and Antonio Alanis (2 for 4) followed with a single.

After an infield popup, Richard Santiago (3 for 4) laid down a bunt single to load the bases for Joey Lunz.

Lunz, who had struck out in his two previous at-bats, drove in the eventual game-winning run with a groundball that South Elgin third baseman Ben Karpowicz made a diving stop and throw to first for the second out of the inning.

"Joey is sometimes a defensive replacement but he's getting more at-bats as a junior," said Jennings. "He needed to make contact there and he did."

"Our approach at the plate has changed because we were a big strikeout team up until the Larkin series. We're doing things with two strikes, and we're doing things against certain pitchers. Our guys have really responded."

Following an intentional walk, Miguel Rodriguez (2 for 4, 3 RBI) delivered a clutch 2-run single to extend the lead to 6-3.

"Heck of a job by Joey, and by Miguel to get those two more runs," said Jennings. "We needed them."

South Elgin had tied the game at 3-all in the seventh on a bases-loaded walk to Karpowicz (1 for 2, 2 RBI) before Weaver fanned the next two Storm batters to force extra innings.

"We didn't come through," said South Elgin coach Jim Kating. "Our mental approach toward things -- you've got to put that ball in play, and we didn't execute."

"We had our opportunities, and we didn't take advantage of them."

Streamwood, which opened the 3-game series with a 3-2 victory Tuesday before dropping a 7-0 decision Wednesday, gained the series win with Thursday's triumph.

"This is a huge program win," said Jennings, whose team received a strong 6-inning start from Eric Arroyo (4 walks, 7 strikeouts). "You want to downplay some things but they're (Storm) the tops in our conference. Jim (Kating) does a great job with them so for us to beat them twice, it's big."

"They (Sabres) did a very good job in two of the three games against us of executing and coming up with two-out, two-strike hits," said Kating. "They beat us twice with good pitching."

"We're a work in progress. We've got a lot of work to do, and I look forward to the challenge of the kids meeting it."