

Press Clippings 5/14/2022 to 5/16/2022

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Elgin News Digest --- 5/13/2022

By Mike Danahey

18 graduate from Elgin Area Leadership Academy

The Elgin Area Leadership Academy recognized 18 graduates from its 10-month program at a ceremony May 7 at Elgin Community College.

Graduates were Sergio Anaya; Laura Bedolla; Fabiana Bertoncello; Lulu Blacksmith; Alex Brotsos; Lejewel K. Crigler, Michelle Esquivel; Mikala Larson; Tina Linkl; Jennifer May; Taylor Noble; Nicholas Piekarski; **Sara Rabe**; Anthony Ramos; Susan Taylor-Demming; Maria Topete; Lisa Utley and Jordan Wildermuth.

Sponsored by the Elgin Area Chamber of Commerce, the program involves participants attending once-a-month Saturday morning sessions set up to build their leadership skills and develop community service projects. More than 550 individuals have graduated from the academy since it was first offered 31 years ago.

For more information, see elginchamber.com/leadership.

Chicago Tribune

Illinois' top finance official: Stop sending debts from truancy for collection --- 5/13/2022

By Jennifer Smith Richards and Jodi S. Cohen

Illinois' top financial official has banned local governments from using a state program to collect debt from students who have been ticketed for truancy, eliminating a burden for families struggling to pay steep fines.

A number of school districts around the state, meanwhile, have begun to scale back and reevaluate when to involve law enforcement in student discipline, among them a suburban Chicago high school where Black students have been disproportionately ticketed. That school, Bloom Trail High School in Steger, said Thursday that it will stop asking police to ticket students and move to other methods of discipline.

The moves come after an investigation by the Tribune and ProPublica, “The Price Kids Pay,” found that school officials and police were working together to ticket students for misbehavior at school, resulting in fines that could cost hundreds of dollars per ticket. When students or their families failed to pay, local governments sometimes turned to the state for help collecting the money.



Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza, shown in 2020, has decided to prohibit collections on truancy ticket debt, according to a spokesman. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

The state told municipalities that beginning June 11 they no longer may submit truancy ticket debt for collections, according to an email from the Illinois comptroller’s office to municipalities that participate in the state’s Local Debt Recovery Program. Through that program, the state helps local governments collect on unpaid penalties for ordinance violations, unpaid water and sewer bills and other municipal debts by withholding money from people’s tax refunds, their lottery winnings or even their paychecks if they are state employees.

School and police officials have also responded to the investigation. Among those districts is Elgin-based U-46, the second largest in the state, which has stopped working with police to fine students for truancy and is reviewing whether police should be involved in fewer situations overall.

The U-46 superintendent, Tony Sanders, said he thinks the widespread school-related ticketing revealed by the Tribune and ProPublica should prompt “school leaders across Illinois, and across the nation, to reflect on our current systems related to student behavior” and find alternatives that keep students in school and don’t punish families financially.

The investigation found that punishing students with tickets violates the intent of a state law that bans schools from issuing fines as discipline. While not fining students directly, schools have been involving police so students can be ticketed and, in most cases, fined.

Another state law prohibits schools from notifying police about truant students so officers can ticket them. The investigation found dozens of school districts where students received tickets for truancy since the law went into effect in 2019.

A spokesperson for Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza said her office decided to prohibit collections on truancy ticket debt because state law is clear that schools aren't allowed to seek fines for truant students. At this point the comptroller's office has not stopped collecting other types of student ticket debt, the spokesperson said.

Officials at Bloom Trail High School in Chicago's south suburbs, featured in "The Price Kids Pay" for its [racial disparities in ticketing](#), said they will work with students to resolve differences when they get in trouble instead of calling the police to request that tickets be written.

The school "is committed to no longer seeing students receive police citations," according to an emailed response on behalf of the district. "In order to prevent this, we are developing alternative approaches that will reduce the number of circumstances in which we will involve the local police."

Police had issued 178 tickets to Bloom Trail students from the start of the 2018-19 school year through March. Almost all of the tickets were for fighting, and almost all went to Black students.

The police chief in the village of Steger said that if the school asks for help with a more serious matter, officers with juvenile training will work with students and try alternatives such as requiring community service. Until now, students who have gotten tickets have been required to attend municipal hearings, and they typically got fined.

"They are going to try to do more in-house with the kids, which is good for us because we are there all the time," Steger police Chief Greg Smith said. He also said that after receiving the comptroller's directive, Steger will not submit to the state collections program any unpaid debt from truancy tickets.

"We will stop doing that," Smith said.

The investigation [documented at least 11,800 tickets](#) issued over the last three school years to students in public schools across the state. Most of the tickets identified were for violating local ordinances against fighting, tobacco or vape possession or use, having small amounts of cannabis or truancy.

The Tribune-ProPublica investigation documented 1,830 truancy tickets issued during the past three school years across about 50 school districts. Police continued to ticket students for truancy in more than 40 districts after the 2019 law went into effect.

For instance, at Dundee-Crown High School in Carpentersville, police issued 649 tickets for truancy from January 2019 through Dec. 7, 2021, the largest number of truancy tickets that reporters documented. At \$75 each, the tickets totaled nearly \$50,000, police records show.

A spokesperson for Community Unit School District 300, which includes Dundee-Crown, did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

At nearby Wauconda High School, almost all of the nearly two dozen truancy tickets issued to students came after the state banned schools from referring truant students to police. One student got a ticket after leaving “to go to McDonald’s and go home,” according to the ticket. Another was ticketed for missing the first three class periods, and a group of boys were ticketed after they “left and tried to return to school for lunch,” the tickets stated. Each ticket came with a \$50 fine that doubled if not paid within a couple of weeks. District officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Local governments can try to collect debt from unpaid student tickets through private collection agencies or the state collections program. Municipalities that use the state program send debt information to the comptroller’s office without indicating the reason for the fine or the age of the debtor. Since the state does not know if it is pursuing debt from a young person or whether it was related to truancy, the onus is on local governments to follow the comptroller’s directive.

The ban on truancy debt collections applies to tickets issued by police to students or to their parents or guardians.

“The General Assembly has made clear its intention that schools not fine students for misbehavior, though they did leave the door open for schools to let police fine their parents for some activity,” comptroller’s office spokesperson Abdon Pallasch wrote in an emailed statement. “But the legislators put serious restrictions on schools’ ability to let law enforcement fine students’ parents for truancy. We agree with that policy.”

Samantha Corzine had about \$800 withheld from her state tax refund in 2020 because of debt owed by her daughters for tickets — including for truancy — that they received while students at Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School in Bradley. She said the comptroller’s decision to stop collecting on some student debts is a step in the right direction.

“I’m glad they actually did that,” she said. “The state should not be able to take any money from parents.”

A clerk at the village said debt from students’ truancy tickets would not be pursued through the state program. The Bradley-Bourbonnais high school principal has said that it’s school administrators’ responsibility to alert police if students violate local ordinances.



A ticket book on the desk of the school resource officer at Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

Just hours after the investigation was published last month, Illinois' top education official, Superintendent Carmen Ayala, [told school leaders](#) to “immediately stop” working with police to ticket students, saying that “the only consequences of the tickets are to impose a financial burden on already struggling families and to make students feel even less cared for, less welcome, and less included at school.” Gov. J.B. Pritzker, meanwhile, said conversations were already underway with legislators “to make sure that this doesn’t happen anywhere in the state of Illinois.”

One district superintendent contacted by reporters, however, said he would continue to support involving police to either arrest or ticket students when their behavior is violent or extremely disruptive.

Without police intervention, “schools will become the most violent, drug-filled places students attend,” said Jacksonville School District 117 Superintendent Steve Ptacek. “We owe it to our communities to keep schools safe, free from drugs, and focused on our academic atmosphere.” Officers wrote about 20 tickets at Jacksonville High School, west of Springfield, in the past three school years, according to Jacksonville Police Department records. Most were for student fights, though some were for truancy. None was for drugs.

But several other school districts have begun to make changes in response to the investigation and Ayala’s plea.

In Harvard Community Unit School District 50, northwest of Chicago in McHenry County, Superintendent Corey Tafoya wrote in an email that an internal review of practices was underway. The deputy police chief in Harvard also said officers would immediately stop ticketing students for truancy.

Police had ticketed students at the high school and junior high at least 231 times over the past three school years, according to police records. At least 67 of the tickets were for truancy, and most of those had been issued since the state banned schools from referring truant students to police for fines.

“In light of the article being written, we decided we are not going to issue truancy tickets anymore. The school can handle it,” said Harvard Deputy Chief Tyson Bauman. He said school resource officers — police stationed at the schools — will still write citations for other local ordinance violations, including possession of tobacco or vaping materials and fighting.

Superintendent Jesse Brandt of Hall High School District 502, a one-school district of about 400 students in rural Bureau County, said school employees will no longer refer truant students to police. At least 10 truancy tickets were written to students there after the state truancy law was enacted.