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## Judge: Put youth before potholes

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**By Charlie Smith**  
News Editor

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Youth Court Judge Kevin Adams says he believes Leflore County could become a model for the entire country in how it treats troubled children.

But as long as the public thinks fixing potholes and locking up adults is more important than rehabilitating youth, "we're doomed," Adams said in an interview Wednesday at the courthouse.

The newest initiative in youth court is juvenile drug court, which began in mid-February. Seven children between 14 and 16 are participating.

Court is held twice a month and involves parents and counselors along with the juveniles. The offenders also go to group therapy with a counselor from Life Help.

The program has sanctions for the youth if they get in trouble but focuses on getting to the bottom of what caused their problems, Adams said.

He said it's off to a promising start and the participants are beginning to open up in group discussions.

Also, Adams recently started sentencing youthful offenders to an alternative to what he calls a "ridiculous after-school program" in the Leflore County district.

In the schools' program, students who get in trouble — even if it's for cutting class — are suspended from regular school and instead attend only for two hours, from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m.

Adams has begun sentencing those students to go to school at the Juvenile Detention Center, which is required to have at least 5½ hours per day of instruction.

Another sentencing option also will be added soon: reading tutoring.

Greenwood attorney Kitty Stuckey, who also holds an advanced degree in teaching reading, has volunteered to help.

"I'm very excited," Stuckey said Wednesday. "I love to teach kids to read."

Adams said he believes youth court is moving in the right direction but potential budget cuts could stall the efforts. He criticized Gov. Haley Barbour for proposed 35 percent cuts to the Department of Human Services next year, calling it "an absolute travesty."

He said the reduced DHS budget would greatly reduce the capacity of the state training school in Jackson and thus greatly increase the number of youth court cases locally because treatment won't be available for those who get in trouble.

"I firmly believe no terrorist organization, no foreign threat can destroy this country the way cutting programs to our youth will," Adams said. "If we don't have adolescent programs to divert these youth from the path they're taking, they have no choice but to continue in their criminal endeavors."

For many of them, their father was incarcerated when they were born and their whole lives they've been told "you're just like your daddy," Adams said.

Children who make it to youth court aren't just misbehaving, he said. Instead, they're raising themselves because their parents are working two jobs or have too many problems of their own to help them.

Youth court is a civil — not criminal — court, and Adams said the only time he sends youth to the detention center are to let them cool off after a domestic dispute, to give them distance from the wrong crowd and when public safety is at stake.

"The sole purpose of youth court is rehabilitation," the judge said. "Punishment should not come into it."

"There is not a current study of which I am aware that shows that punishment in juveniles has any deterrent effect."

Mentors and positive role models are what troubled youth need, not punishment, Adams said.

Other new ideas include STD testing for every child who goes into the Juvenile Detention Center, and a reduction in the standard probation sentence from one year to six months, an idea that came from a privately paid trip Adams and others recently took to see Portland, Ore.'s juvenile program. The idea is to better relate punishment to the crime instead of taking it back nine or 10 months on a probation violation.

Ultimately, Adams said he would like to start a charter school under jurisdiction of the youth court. It would allow the Greenwood and Leflore County districts to close their alternative schools, Adams said.

The school could use innovative techniques such as separation by gender and could better control class size, Adams said.

He said the idea needs partners, grants and time to become reality, but he thinks it can happen.

"I really believe that eventually people will come to us and say, 'Leflore County takes care of its kids,'" Adams said.

- Contact Charlie Smith at [csmith@gwcommonwealth.com](mailto:csmith@gwcommonwealth.com).

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