DARE program expanding rapidly in Louisiana

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Three years ago Tangipahoa Parish Sheriff Ed Layrisson wanted a youth anti-drug program "that really worked."

"I sent Bud Cason, who was my executive assistant at the time, all over the country. He went to California and found DARE," Layrisson said of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program he imported from the Los Angeles Police Department.

Tangipahoa sheriff's deputies now teach DARE classes in all of the parish's fifth-grade classes. A test course is under way at the high-school level, Layrisson said.

"I'd like to see it in all the fifth- and eighth-grades and in high school," the sheriff added.

Since Layrisson began the program in Louisiana, DARE has spread rapidly. Some law enforcement agencies say they simply can't afford the program, while others say they can't afford to be without it. The East Baton Rouge Parish School Board turned down a 1990 proposal to introduce DARE on a test basis in five schools, but the board last year allowed the program in seven parish schools.

Zachary Police Chief John E. Wales Jr. said he and other Zachary officials were concerned when only one of Zachary's two elementary schools was included in the pilot group.

Their consensus was that if DARE was taught in one, it would be taught in the other, Wales said. The Zachary City Council appropriated $6,000 for additional supplies, and Northwestern Elementary joined Zachary Elementary in the program.

Wales is among the many Louisiana law enforcement officers who believe educational programs such as DARE are the key to solving the nation's drug problem. "The DARE program gives law enforcement a two-sided sword, education on one side and enforcement on the other," he said.

"I've been in law enforcement for 17 years, and I look at the drug problems in three areas - enforcement, education and treatment," added Baker Police Chief Sid Gautreaux. "Education is the biggest key. As long as the demand is there, we're going to have a drug problem."

Gautreaux began DARE in the Baker area with the two elementary schools included in the pilot program, Park Ridge and Brownfields, but expanded it to private schools - St. Isidore and Brownfields Baptist Academy - in the second semester.

"But I'm only reaching half of the schools in my area with two DARE officers," Gautreaux said, adding that he plans to ask the City Council for more manpower to eventually include all Baker-area schools.

Zachary police officer Keith Cranford enlists the help of Lekeisha London, 12, to demonstrate techniques used by police in testing the sobriety of drivers.

DARE programs in kindergarten and grades 1-4. "It gets them ready for the fifth-grade program," Zachary Officer Keith Cranford said. Baton Rouge City Police introduced DARE last semester in Brookstown, Greenville, University Terrace and Wildwood elementary schools. "We're going to continue the program, try to add three or four more next year and continually add some schools each year," said Lt. Walter Smith of the department's crime prevention section.

"Smith said city police face a disadvantage in fully implementing the program. The department has 39 public elementary schools in its jurisdiction plus numerous private and parochial schools. "Right now, the pressure is on putting more officers on patrol," he said.

DARE began in East Baton Rouge Parish as a recommendation from the law enforcement committee of Mayor Tom Ed McHugh's 400-member Anti-Drug Task Force, said Bobby Gaston, the group's drug coordinator.

Funds for DARE training were included in a $1.4 million federal grant, Gaston said, while a $10,000 state grant to the School Board's DARE program helped buy T-shirts for DARE graduation programs.

Sandy Oursos, Gov. Edwin Edwards' director of the Partnership for a Drug-Free Louisiana, said federal guidelines require that 10 percent of the money flowing to states for drug abuse programs be awarded to DARE sponsors.

"We Feliciania Parish Sheriff Bill Daniel said manpower and funding shortages prevent him from joining the DARE program. "From all I've seen and heard, it's highly recommended, but I just don't have the manpower to implement it."

Daniel said he's impressed with the rigorous DARE instructor training. "They want a volunteer officer with two years' line experience, but you don't just sit there, look around and get a certificate."

East Feliciania Parish Sheriff Randy Maglione estimated his office spent $50,000 to train a deputy and start the program this year in the parish's one private and three public schools.

"As long as the funds are available, I'm going to continue the program," Maglione said. "In years to come, you're going to see a change. I can see it now in the attitude of the kids."

Pointe Coupee Parish Sheriff Preston Chusts said his office has discussed the program with drug-free schools coordinator Marcie Finsenat, and he hopes to find the money needed for a full-time DARE instructor next school year.

In Iberville Parish, three officers will attend the certification program and teach in the public school system. Sheriff's Chief of Uniform Patrol Johnny Blanchard said Deputies Joe Williams and Mike Sparks and Plaquemine Officer Tommy Favarro will attend the classes.

The Ascension Parish School Board recently appropriated $30,000 to begin DARE classes next year, and Sheriff Harold Tridico said he applied for a $70,000 state grant.

Officials in Livingston, St. James and Assumption parishes said they hope to implement the program next year, while West Baton Rouge Sheriff-elect Randall Andre has assigned an officer to deputy for training.