

Students could get \$2,500 for turning in bad classmates

By Jonathan Menard - May 15, 2008

Next year, school children in St. Charles Parish could be taking home as much as \$2,500 for alerting authorities to criminal activity through Crimestoppers' Safe School Hotline.

The school system currently uses WeTip, which is a similar service to Crimestoppers that rewards students and their families for reporting unsafe activity such as violence,



St. Charles Parish Public Schools will use Crimestoppers next year in an attempt to stem criminal acts on campus.

drugs or possession of weapons. However, the WeTip hotline has not seen a lot of activity, and St. Charles Parish Sheriff Greg Champagne approached the school district about Crimestoppers' relatively new school program.

The biggest reason for the change though was that Crimestoppers not only has greater visibility, but is free of charge. WeTip cost the school district \$2,000 a year.

Superintendent Rodney Lafon said that he believes Crimestoppers would be better advertised through Channel 1 and that the rewards that are offered could attract more students to the safe school cause.

"We gear the program to what's happening at the schools," Crimestoppers Executive Director Darlene Cusanza said. "The kids have really responded to the program well and we have never had anyone retaliated against or had a tipsters' identity uncovered."

Crimestoppers' Safe School Hotline seeks to ensure that students in the area have a safe environment for studying

and learning by attempting to solve and prevent serious crimes. The hotline does this by providing students with cash rewards for anonymous information concerning crime on campus. Since the inception of the program in 2003, tips from the school hotline have helped solve more than 75 crimes and has led to the removal of weapons and narcotics from school campuses.

So far, more than \$14,500 has been paid in cash rewards.

The program is currently active in middle and high schools in Orleans, Jefferson and St. Tammany Parishes and provides a secure hotline through which students and teachers can submit anonymous information concerning crime. The hotline is answered off-campus by a Crimestoppers' operator, who is a trained security expert. The information is then routed to the appropriate person, whether that be the designated school resource officer or a member of the school's personnel, such as the principal or disciplinarian.

The caller is never identified to police or school personnel, and if the caller's information leads to the arrest of a suspect, confiscation of illegal drugs or a weapon, or prevention of a planned act of violence, the caller will be eligible for a cash reward.

That reward can be picked up from a local bank.

The program has already been highly successful in Orleans Parish. In the 2004-05 school year, which was the program's first year at the school district, Crimestoppers assisted school officials in solving some major crimes. These included the removal of one gun and two knives from campus, the solving of one act of arson and one act of vandalism and the prevention of five gang-related incidents.

This year, Crimestoppers received 80 tips from students in Jefferson Parish. Only three were reported this year to WeTip in St. Charles Parish.

The new hotline will be focused on middle and high school students next year. In the future, Crimestoppers plans to allow students to text information about possible crimes.