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# Obama initiative to keep kids in school kicks off in Miami-Dade

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The new year has barely begun, but gun violence in Miami-Dade has already [claimed the lives of at least three teens](#).

On Friday, national and local leaders rallied in a call to keep kids safe through more mentoring programs that keep students in school, and by passing tougher gun laws and protections for witnesses.

U.S. Acting Secretary of Education John King came to Miami to launch a national attendance campaign through My Brother's Keeper, an initiative started by President Barack Obama that aims to help boys and young men of color succeed in school and later in life.

My Brother's Keeper is partnering with city leaders, the Miami-Dade County school district and U.S. Congresswoman Frederica Wilson's mentoring program, 5,000 Role Models of Excellence, to improve student achievement by making sure kids come to school.

The toll that violence has taken on young people in the community was a common theme.

“We’ve got to make sure that our communities are safe from violence, are places where our young people can grow up with a sense of safety and confidence,” King said. “What would it take for this community to say, ‘We are going to wrap our arms around the kids who are making mistakes?’ We’re not going to throw any child away.”

The attendance campaign will start in 10 U.S. cities and rely on mentors to work with students in sixth and ninth grade. Federal work study dollars will be used to train Miami Dade College students to help high school kids stay on the path to college. The mentor program will be paired with a multimillion dollar ad campaign about the importance of school attendance.

Every day in Miami-Dade, 20,000 students miss school. The district in September [launched a campaign to get them in class](#), deploying more counselors who can zero in on why kids are absent and even going door-to-door when necessary.

“Today we hope to answer President Obama’s challenge to change the tide. We can do this,” said Congresswoman Wilson.

Black male students in Miami-Dade are less likely to graduate and more likely to be suspended. They also make up 70 percent of the [30 teens killed in Miami-Dade through November last year](#). Almost 100 kids and teens have been killed in Miami-Dade in the last three years.

The support and activist group Parents of Murdered Kids also rallied on Friday outside of school district headquarters for tougher gun laws and more protections for witnesses as a way to keep their kids safe. They were joined by Miami-Dade school district leaders.

“Very few parents receive justice. And they don’t receive justice because witnesses are afraid to come forward,” said Tangela Sears, who started the parent group after her own son was murdered.

The group is [calling for Tallahassee lawmakers to take up Senate Bill 1314](#), a witness protection measure that has stalled this session. The bill would shield witness’s identities from public disclosure until after a murder case is closed, something open government groups have opposed.

“The witness protection bill is very important,” said Anabel Herrera, whose son Bryan was killed in 2012. “There have been many phone calls with tips on Bryan’s case, but no one is willing to testify. They’re scared.”

Sears said parents also want to see higher bond requirements and harsher penalties for criminals who use a gun near a school, just like there are for drug offenses. This month, [two different Miami-Dade schools were hit by stray bullets](#) in a span of less than 24 hours. There were no serious injuries, though one bullet sailed into a classroom with special needs students and their teacher inside.

“We need these laws enforced so parents can stop crying, so killers can be put away,” Sears said.

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