

Teen inmates continue education in prison

By Lora Hines

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RAYMOND — William Dinkins and his classmates catch up on lessons they could have mastered years ago if they had gone to school.

Before, school didn't interest them. Now they have little else to do. Dinkins, 17, is among at least 16 teenagers held at the Hinds County jail awaiting trial. Teacher Cynthia Corkern recently taught him paragraph construction.

"She's like a mother to us," said Dinkins, who faces auto theft charges. He has been in jail since Dec. 31.

Sheriff Malcolm McMillin expects teens younger than 18 held at the jail to go to class.

"It's my obligation to provide for their education while they're in my care," he said.

Demarious Banyard, 14, is among the teenagers held at the jail. Banyard faces a capital murder charge in the Feb. 26 shooting death of Domino's Pizza deliverer Robin Ballard.

Banyard's attorney, Tom Fortner, said he's not pleased his client has been held almost a year in jail without bond. But he commends McMillin for separating juvenile inmates and trying to educate them.

"He makes a sincere effort to improve their situation," Fortner said.

State law doesn't require sheriffs provide special confinement or education for incarcerated children charged as adults.

In Mississippi, children as young as 13 charged with such serious crimes as murder, kidnapping, robbery and rape automatically are charged as adults.

"If a kid can commit an adult crime, he ought to stand trial in adult court," said Assistant Hinds County District Attorney Philip Weinberg, who is also president of the state Prosecutors' Association.

Teens convicted of felony crimes are held at Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility. Unlike the state corrections department, however, sheriffs usually don't have separate facilities for children. But many sheriffs try to separate younger defendants from adults.

"We must all realize that the need to house a young defendant is only going to increase," said Lauderdale County Sheriff Billy Sollie, president of the state Sheriff's Association. "Society seems to be going down that path."

Sheriffs usually try to separate children from adults to keep children safe and prevent lawsuits, Sollie said.

Oktibbeha County Sheriff Dolph Bryan said children charged as adults shouldn't expect special treatment.

"There are no in-betweens," he said. "Juveniles charged as adults aren't juveniles. We try to temper the sword of justice with common sense."

Tyler Edmonds, 14, has been held in Bryan's jail since May on a capital murder in the shooting death of Joseph "Joey" Fulgham, 28, of the Longview community outside of Starkville.

The only teen in the jail on a capital murder charge, Edmonds is being held in an area set aside as an inmate infirmary, Bryan said.

"I don't have any other place to put him," Bryan said. "He's near the jailer's booth. They can keep an eye on him."

Bryan wouldn't say if accommodations have been made for schooling Edmonds while he is in jail.

"Let's just say he's keeping up with his school work," Bryan said.

Rankin County Sheriff Ronnie Pennington said he isolates children in one-person cells in a separate section of his jail.

He recently said he is not holding any children.

Madison County Sheriff Toby Trowbridge said he tries to keep children and adults separate at his jail. He didn't know how many children were being held.

"They're just a name to us over here," Trowbridge said.