

LOCAL NEWS



Laura Wynn

Truant students can mean fines and jail time for parents

By Carmen M. Woodson-Wray

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With the start of school this week, it is important for parents to make sure their children attend as many days as possible. If they are excessively absent it could result in them receiving a court citation, being fined or even having to serve jail time.

Under the Gary City Truancy Court's Project Rebuild Program, children who miss 10 unexcused days of school could cause their parents to be fined up to \$1,000 and serve 180 days in the Lake County Jail.

Project Rebuild, which began in 2013, is a 90-day program designed to reduce truancy within the Gary School District. It gives parents and students a second chance in assuring that students will no longer miss school, refocus on getting an education and develop a stronger relationship with their parents.

The program allows parents to attend parenting classes at the Indiana Parenting Institute, under the direction of its founder Laura Wynn. They recently held a graduation ceremony for 13 families that were enrolled in the program.

The mission of the Indiana Parenting Institute is to deliver parenting education programs, support services and resources, and public awareness initiatives that educate and engage parents and the community in advocating for the prevention of the parental maltreatment of children, a precursor of the social, health, and behavioral outcomes that prevent children from reaching their full potential.

The parents are required to go to parenting classes. "What we do is teach the parenting component and connect the parents with the needed resources," said Wynn. She added, "it's a class they come to two days a week for 1 1/2 hours for 10 weeks. It is mandated so they have to be there. A lot of the parents don't want to come to the classes, but once they get in the classes it's hard to get them out because they find a new way of relating to their children but also learn ways to achieve their own goals. We see parents going back to school and looking to get their GEDs. It is a very healthy outcome for both the parent and the child."

Each parent, upon completing the program, gets a certificate of completion through Indiana Parenting Institute. There are no more than 12 people per class but sometimes it's more than that because they bring their children, Wynn said. "We don't turn them down if they bring them. Sometimes there may be information that the parents want their children to hear. So it's a positive environment and a great experience for everybody."

Wynn said the Indiana Parenting Institute has worked with about 80 parents in Project Rebuild. "What we see coming out of this program is the need for us to see if the parents are repeating the program and if the children are still going through truancy issues. We want to see if the parents are engaging in a better relationship with the child, the needs of the child, whether the child is doing better academically and if the child is out of truancy and no repeat occurrence. So far we are not seeing any repeat occurrences."

"We see things happening in the class that you wouldn't expect in terms of how parents bond with each other, exchange numbers and bring each other to classes and help each other. I think the reason that the program works so well is because the parenting classes work as an anthropic moment because you have to get rid of the old things for the new things in your life," Wynn said.

Gary City Court Judge Deidra Monroe said the city's truancy program, Project Rebuild, has a city code and if a parent refuses to cooperate, there is a criminal statute that they could be charged with. It is a Class B Misdemeanor with a penalty of 60 months in the Lake County Jail.

The parent who registers the child in school is the one that has to appear in court. The judge said, "Sometimes both parents come. Among the reasons parents give for their child missing school is because of the district's bus issues. At the beginning we didn't count those. Most say their child was sick, but didn't take them to the doctor. Some say the child didn't feel like going. Some say they are being bullied and didn't want to go. Some say the child is being raised by grandparents and didn't need to go."

Once the judge gives the parent the option to either participate in the program or pay the fine and serve the sentence, some feel they need to see if the program would work for them. Judge Monroe said, "Some say they can't go through the program so I tell them I will fine them and hold them in contempt of court and they will do jail time. Some say they will opt to do the jail time, but they come back and change their minds."

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"If you don't send your child to school you are giving them a disadvantage. Education is the way to succeed. It's unbelievable how some of them address this matter," she added.

This rule applies to all grade levels with more emphasis on middle school students. The judge said this is true because once some students get to the 6th and 7th grade level and they decide they don't want to go to school and that carries over into high school. "If they don't want to attend and it becomes erratic during those grades it dooms them once they get in high school," Judge Monroe said.

Since Project Rebuild started, close to 100 parents have come through the program, unfortunately in that number there are some repeat offenders. The judge said, "Some come through with some of their other children, but we hardly ever have any duplicates offenses with the same child. We find parents are dealing with several issues at home between the disconnect from the program. Some we find dealing with bullying, while others are overwhelmed with 7 to 8 children in the home and no husband. That's when the Indiana Parenting Institute comes in and teaches them how to deal with their issues."

Judge Monroe said she thinks the program is working. She said, "When I first heard of Project Rebuild, I said really—people don't send their kids to school? Now I see the need for it and the parents come for every class."

Gary Police Commander Kerry Rice is the police department liaison for Project Rebuild. Commander Rice says the biggest problem they have with the program is that the address the parents have on file with the school is not updated. He said, "The problem is when a parent registers their child for kindergarten they don't let the school know that they have moved and the child will go all the way to their senior year with the address on file from when they first started school. Sometimes the family will have moved two to three times by then."

Commander Rice said he has spoken to the schools about the situation. He also mentioned that the bulk of the referrals they have to deliver come from Roosevelt Leadership Academy and the charter schools. He said, "We do public, private and charter schools, but the bulk come from Roosevelt and the charters. The public schools are not notifying us about truancy like they should."

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