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Stories We Liked in 2014: Project Rebuild

Contributed By: The 411 News

June 13 ... Project Rebuild aims to connect families to their communities

As high school graduates are being celebrated during the month of June, a group of middle school students from Gary City Court's Project ReBuild received a step up to follow in their path.



PROJECT REBUILD TEAM

But at Project Re-Build's graduation ceremony, parents receive honors along with their children. Instead of a graduation list with student names, the program listed the name of the parents. Twenty-two families were on the list.

Project ReBuild began as a truancy court to address chronic absenteeism among middle schoolers. City Court Judge Pro Tem Inga Lewis-Shannon, originator of the truancy court, was alarmed by Gary Police arrest records showing a large number of property crimes committed by young teens during the hours when they should have been in school.

Just as alarming was the number of young adults coming to her courtroom who had dropped out of high school. The judge saw that a path to prison, for many, was connected to low education attainment.

Project ReBuild works with students in grades 6-9 who have a high number of school absences, a signal they're on the road to becoming a dropout. Participation so far includes charter schools in Gary, but none from the Gary Community School district.

Indiana state law places responsibility on parents to maintain school attendance for their child until the age of 18. If not, the parent can be charged with a failure to educate, which can result in fines or a jail sentence.

For the first two years of the program, parents were allowed to voluntarily enter the program. Now in year three, it is mandatory. When a student accrues 10 unexcused absences, the school notifies Project ReBuild and Gary Police deliver a citation with a court date for the parent and student. The parent can plead not guilty and get a trial date or plead guilty. With the guilty plea, the parent can pay a fine or enroll in the program.

Judge Lewis-Shannon realized that a resolution had to involve the community. Parents are required to attend parenting classes provided by the Indiana Parenting Institute. First, those classes focus on developing trust between the program providers and the families and between parent and child. Parents are shown how to improve communication skills with the student.

Students not achieving in subjects have to attend tutoring sessions provided by Clark Road MB Church. The church picks them up from school and gives them a ride home.

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Every two weeks, students and parents return to the judge's courtroom for progress reports. Students bring a record of their school attendance. The report includes an appraisal from each of their teachers. Parents report on their experiences in parenting classes.

At Tuesday's graduation, a Roosevelt student said her constant tardiness put her in the program. Asked how her daughter was back on track, the mother replied. "I just had to be a mother. The parenting classes showed me that."

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