



Gary judge, police focusing on truancy



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GARY | Gary City Court Pro Tem Judge Inga Lewis-Shannon sees hundreds of high school dropouts, charged with everything from smoking weed to selling drugs.

At least 80 percent of the people who come before the judge don't have a high school diploma and don't have a job, and the judge believes at the core, the problem is that parents have lost control.

"It's horrible," Lewis-Shannon said. "What I realized is that we were working backwards trying to get them back into school."

Lewis-Shannon created Project Rebuild, a collaborative effort between the Gary City Court and the Gary Police Department to address the growing problem of truancy among Gary students. Students and their parents are asked to sign an agreement to participate in the 90-day program.

Gary police Cmdr. Kerry Rice said any child found outside of a school campus during school hours will be detained and returned to school. After 10 unexcused absences, the matter will be referred to the Gary Truancy Court program.

Rice said the program is open to any student who lives in Gary and attends the Gary Community School Corp., Lake Ridge Schools, private school, charter school or the Merrillville Community School Corp.

Every state has compulsory school attendance laws with regulations describing how state education and juvenile justice agencies should respond to truancy. While the school is often the first responder to student truancy, truancy ultimately involves the possibility of action by juvenile or family courts ranging from detention of the children to a fine or jail for the parents. Compulsory school attendance in Indiana is guided by IC 20-33-2.

Rice said a parent is initially charged with a city ordinance violation of parental neglect, which is no more serious than a traffic ticket. To date, Rice has more than 600 referrals from local schools.

"We get them in here and try to find out what the problem is and work with them," Rice said.

Parents are offered an opportunity to participate in Project Rebuild and are required to attend parenting classes, students are required to attend all school and complete any homework assignments assigned by their teachers, as well as the judge, and make a weekly status report to the court, including showing their school attendance report.

If the court finds improvements are not made or the truancy continues, the parent will be charged with violating the state law. Failure to educate, which is a Class B misdemeanor, is punishable by 180 days in the Lake County Jail and a fine of \$1,000.

"If they don't show up to court, if they are not willing to resolve the issues, the next step is the Class B misdemeanor, but we try not to do that. We really try to work with them," Rice said. "Once they are charged with a Class B misdemeanor, they can lose their housing. They can lose food stamps. They can lose any financial assistance. Many of these parents live in housing provided by the Gary Housing Authority."

Last year, Rice said three formal Class B misdemeanor cases were filed in Gary City Court. Those cases are pending.

Rice said reducing truancy is critical because police often arrest students breaking into houses during school hours, many of them still in their school uniforms.

According to the Indiana Parenting Institute, research indicates that habitual truancy is invariably reflected in future criminal behavior. In addition, chronic truancy has been linked to a wide range of social problems including substance abuse, poverty and poor physical and mental health.

"Early this year, we buried 18- and 19-year old brothers in a crime committed by 16-year-old and 17-year-old suspects," Rice said. "We are losing our children. That's why we are working so hard to combat this. Stay out of trouble. Live. Don't get caught up and get killed or get incarcerated for a felony."

Parents, students offer myriad excuses for truancy

Truancy problems for elementary-age students have more to do with the parent rather than the student, officials said.

Rice talked about the case of a first-grader who the nurse repeatedly sent home because the youngster had dental problems and came to school with a swollen mouth.

"The boy had a couple of abscesses," Rice said. "The father didn't do anything about the boy's dental issues until a cop showed up at his door with a subpoena for truancy court. Then the father took the kid to the dentist, got some teeth pulled and the boy got some antibiotics and was OK. The boy could have had a sepsis infection or anything. We still have to follow up on that case and make sure that youngster is in school."

During court, Lewis-Shannon sternly told a parent the parenting class is not an invitation. "You must go to the parenting class. You have an obligation to make sure your children are in school. It's not a request or an invitation. It's an order of this court."

One parent complained it was difficult to make the classes and court because of her job. Another parent said she was suspended from her job because of missing so many days to see about her child. The judge offered to write a letter to her employer if it would help.

A parent told the judge her daughter was suspended because she was involved in a verbal altercation with another student. A sibling came to court with a note from the parent asking that the mother be excused from the weekly truancy court.

One student, whose mother said he repeatedly goes to his grandmother's house rather than coming straight home, walked out of court before he was officially excused. The parent looked up and saw that her son left. She sat in a corner of the courtroom talking to staff about her issues.

Lewis-Shannon said some of the children are remorseful and feel bad about putting their parents through this ordeal and causing them to have to attend court, and some aren't.

At the same time, Rice said they also have challenges to work through with school staff who are trying to maintain order in school, so suspending students is the quick answer.

"We are not always on the same page," he said. "They are trying to maintain order. If a kid doesn't take off his hoodie, he may get five days suspension. That circumvents what we are trying to do. We're trying to work with the school system to iron out some of the problems and come together for the benefit of students."

Rice said he also works with the Lake County truancy program, which is under the auspices of the Lake County prosecutor's office. Ronna Lukasik-Rosenbaum is the truancy officer. Any school administrator in Lake County can refer truancy issues to that office.

In Porter County, the truancy program is called Project ATTEND. Project ATTEND, which stands for Aiming Towards Truancy Elimination and Non-Attendance Decrease, focuses primarily on elementary students but also accepts referrals from the secondary level.