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City gives update on truancy program



John Luke The Times

Laura Smith-Wynn, executive director and founder of the Indiana Parenting Institute, speaks during a news conference Tuesday at the Gary Public Safety building updating the Gary Schools "Project Rebuild" program. Next to her is Debra Morrow, a parent who successfully completed the program, and Gary Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson.

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GARY | Gary parents will be held more accountable for their children's attendance in school — or face the possibility of jail.

But that's not what Gary officials want to see happen, they said during an update Tuesday on the city's truancy court program, Project Rebuild.

The focus of the program is to reduce truancy among youth in grades 6-9 through parent and youth accountability, parent and youth activities and the engagement of community stakeholders in the development of positive parent/youth oriented programs.

After 10 unexcused absences Gary schools will refer students and parents to the Gary Police Dept., which will then hand deliver a citation of the city ordinance for neglect of a dependent to the referrals at their address on file with the school.

Parents must make the initial court appearance at which time they will be given the option to enter a plea of not guilty and receive a trial date or plea guilty and either pay a fine or participate in the Project Rebuild program.

Gary Judge-Protem Inga Lewis-Shannon said, among other things, parents are taught about the importance, interaction and involvement with the school system. They are also taught to effectively communicate with the system. The program helps restore relationships with parents and children and gives them the tools to develop healthy relationships based on respect and order. They also must perform community service hours and make weekly court appearances.

Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson said the program is about more than education, it's about accountability.

"It's about holding the parents accountable for the actions of their children and the parents holding the children accountable for their education," she said. "More importantly it's about providing assistance and support so everyone can be successful. That's what we want to achieve here. It's not a desire to put anybody in jail, but we will if we have to. It's not a desire to be punitive; it is a desire to be supportive."

A bench warrant will be issued for any parent who ignores the citation and does not appear for the citation hearing. Failure to comply could mean spending 180 days in Lake County Jail and a \$1,000 fine.

"If your children are not properly educated, there lies crime, there lies the inability to have a good job and sustain employment," said Gary Judge Deidre Monroe. "We're looking forward to working with families to strengthen this community."

Gary Police Cmdr. Kerry Rice said since school began this year he has received 151 referrals.

"One of the biggest things I've noticed is most of the children and most of the families we come in contact with have long-term problems," he said. "Project Rebuild reaches out on many different facets. It not only concentrates on education but improving the quality of life in this city. It helps reduce the crime rate in the city."

Laura Wynn, executive director of the Indiana Parenting Institute, a partner in Project Rebuild, believes the program comes at a good time.

"I think the community, having experienced all the challenges it faces with children, are now ready to look at what can we do to really fix it and not put a band aid on it," she said.

Debra Morrow, a parent who successfully went through the program, said it helped her a lot and wants it to see it continue.

"I thought I knew everything about parenting," she said. "I didn't."