



## Truancy Court class helps parents, students alike

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GARY — Marvis Webb-Ross is 52 and, prior to completing Project Rebuild, the Gary City Court truancy class, thought she knew everything she needed to know about parenting and then some.

It was the program's inaugural class, and she just didn't want to be there, she told the group of 20 new parent-student teams during their commencement Tuesday evening. Today, she's grateful for every new skill she learned and she had a special message for the students.

"Know that you are loved, and you are loved no matter what," Webb-Ross said. "The people here aren't paid to be concerned about your future. They're here to help you."

Started in May 2012 to get middle and high school students back in the classroom, the program's case managers have seen just about every reason for truancy, said Judge Inga Lewis-Shannon, the program director. The kids are bored, victims of bullying, become pregnant or, the most common reason of all, not supervised at home.

The program takes a two-pronged approach, she said. First, it deals with the parents by giving them the tools they need to help with their children's education. The parents go through the Indiana Parenting Institute and learn strategies such as meeting their children's counselors and teachers to ensure the children are in school.

The students, meanwhile, have reports submitted on their behavior to the case managers and are required to read books outside of school, case manager Pam Brown said. As well, the case managers, when creating the program, took into account the parents' concerns, too, so they would feel they had ownership in the process.

Gary Police Cmdr. Kerry Rice, who works the program from the Police Department's end, said he and his officers go to the schools each month to get referrals. Currently, there are 652 referrals waiting to get into Project Rebuild, he said.

"It's not just public schools, and it's the Gary schools. We have brand new charter schools that are failing because we don't look at the students' home life," he said. "We can't punish our way out of the problem."

John Sweet, a 17-year-old who graduated Tuesday, admitted he was just being lazy when he wasn't going to school. His mom, Jeanett Campbell, admitted she let him get away with more than he should have.

Now, the two have a great relationship and thank Project Rebuild for its help.

"We talk a lot more," John said. "We'll watch the game together, and I know now that when she lays down the rules, it's because she loves me."

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