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Project Rebuild: Rebuilding the community one family at a time

Contributed By: The 411 News

Truancy is not the child's fault; it's a problem in the family

Not many judges get a happy birthday serenade and gifts from defendants in their courtroom. Last week, Gary City Court Judge Pro Tem Inga Lewis-Shannon had her turn.

Tuesday was graduation day for Project Rebuild, a specialty court set up to address the problems of truancy in the Gary schools. Instead of the usual call of court cases with parents and their children standing before the judge to give their status reports, the judge said, "I'm coming down off the bench today to hear from you. Tell me what you like about the program and what you don't like; what can we do better."

Project Rebuild handles violations of Indiana's compulsory education law. It is unlawful in this state for a parent to fail to make sure their children, between ages 7 and 18, attend school.

Truancy is not the student's problem, it's a family problem – is the belief of Project Rebuild. Since its beginning 6 years ago, the focus on rebuilding families has been undertaken by the Gary City Court, Gary Police Department, Lake County's Juvenile Court and Prosecutor's Office, and social service agencies.



PARENTS LILLIE COULTER (LEFT), VIRGIL COULTER (RIGHT) WITH THEIR CHILDREN TIFFANY AND BOYZIE

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Parents Lillie Coulter (left), Virgil Coulter (right) with their children Tiffany and Boyzie.

Overcoming emotions and wiping tears, Anita Faye Dixon told Judge Lewis-Shannon, "This program really helped me to strive to be a better person. I haven't missed any days. I got to know my son. I got to know all my classmates and I couldn't have made it without you." Dixon said she wouldn't make any changes.



Parent Anita Dixon, "This program really helped me to strive to be a better person."

Michele Bailey learned how to communicate with her sons and "I learned it's important not to keep your children out of school for too long."

Another parent asked the judge to help families who need transportation to court.

Parents receive an invitation from Project Rebuild to come in and talk about their child's absences from school and if they don't respond, they are informed a warrant will be issued for their arrest. Schools in Indiana must notify the juvenile court or department of child services when a student has 10 or more unexcused absences within the school year.

Project Rebuild focuses on students in middle school, that's when truancy begins showing up. It's a critical time in a child's education and truancy increases the chances that a student will be a high school dropout.

It's all about trust, said Linda Clark of the Lake County Juvenile Court. "Families are confused, defiant, and suspicious at the start but then testify about improved school attendance, grades, and attitudes." The truancy reduction program is 12 weeks of parenting education, family counseling, tutoring, incentives and sanctions designed to change the behaviors that brought the families to the attention of the Gary City Court.

Clark pointed to a family where the children graduated but the parent didn't. "The kids completed all they had to do, but the mother didn't."

A partnership with Sandra Cotton and the Genesis Family Center offers students homework help, tutoring and life skills training.

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Parenting education workshops are provided by the Indiana Parenting Institute. Its founder Laura Wynn says parents are learning things they hadn't been taught before about what it means to be a parent. New parents in the program don't want to be here, Wynn said, because they think truancy is the child's fault.

"We work with them to show that their opinions matter. Kids don't want to look at other people as their heroes; they want to see parents as heroes," Wynn said. "We don't try to tell people what to do. We offer alternatives to what they're already doing. So, if they try the alternatives and it works for them, then they begin to believe we know what we're talking about."

Ceean Cohill's Harambee Corp: Student and Community Partnership performs case management for the state's child services department and teach life skills to students ages 13 and over. Harambee does the school visits, checking on students' grades and attendance.

Parents and students are brought together for family counseling with Lisa Johnson, program director for Capitol City Family Education Services. Counseling includes mental and behavioral health services for the entire family.



Judge Inga Lewis-Shannon, sitting, hears from Michele Bailey and sons Robert Austin and Jeremiah Dixon.

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