

Push to curb truancy pays off in Racine

Municipal fines, police officers help lower rate dramatically in 2 years

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State schools Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster on Wednesday heaped praise on Racine County and offered more financial support for a community that has lowered its truancy rate from 21.7% to 9% in two years.

"You've taken this to an exemplary level," she said to educators, judges, social workers, principals and law enforcement officers who had gathered at the Wingspread Conference Center for Racine's third Truancy Summit.

Burmaster said that the idea of truancy being a community issue was not catching on in other places, and that Racine would "serve as a resource and model for others

around the state" as programs to curb students' skipping school expand to Madison, Kenosha, Janesville and Beloit.

The original program to address habitual truancy began in Milwaukee a few years ago with the Alliance for Attendance initiative and the TABS truancy abatement program. The rate of habitual truancy, defined as being absent without excuse five or more times per semester, still hasn't changed much in Milwaukee.

But Racine, with a smaller main school district and cooperation among administrators, law enforcement and courts, has cut the rate in half in the past year alone.

The ability to prosecute truancy offenders is one key to Racine's success, said Dennis Barry, a Racine County circuit judge. The county summoned 424 students into court last year though a random se-

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Racine police Sgt. Kurt Maurer

TRUANCY, From 1B

lection system targeting students with 20 or more unexcused absences.

"We also have new ways to handle truancy in municipal court as well as juvenile court," Barry added. While moving a kid through juvenile court can be long and tedious, he said, assessing a fine in municipal court for skipping school has proved to be quicker as well as, in some cases, a more stinging punishment. Barry said they also started suspending the driver's licenses of teens who failed to pay their truancy fines.

Local law enforcement officers accepted the challenge of getting students in court in the first place.

In February of this year, two Racine police officers started duty as "truancy officers," a two-year assignment for which they volunteered. Prewritten citation narratives cut down on hours of paperwork and afforded the officers more time to patrol the streets, as they simply

filled in the name and time and identification information of dozens of students they started picking up.

"These helped, too," said Racine Police Officer Robert Bojic, holding up a thick binder provided by area high schools, which included laminated pages of almost every student's photo, personal information and class schedule. "They can lie to us and make up a name and a birth date, but nobody memorizes someone else's schedule."

Since February, the officers have issued 945 truancy tickets to first offenders, compared with 1,201 such tickets in the entire 2005-'06 school year. Police Sgt. Kurt Maurer expected the number for 2006 to at least double by the end of the school year.

Efforts to reduce truancy pay off in Racine

The new tactics are not only lowering the rate of daytime burglaries in the area, Maurer said, but also enabling police to consistently enforce the tobacco ordinance with those under 18 because everyone gets searched before their squad car ride to school. Racine's city attorney and city council also created an ordinance against those over 18 giving tobacco to minors.

"They also made it possible for us to issue citations to those over 18 for contributing to truancy," Maurer added. As a result, angry calls from neighbors about students loitering in their yards have stopped, and much of the petty crime Maurer said his officers used to chase has dissipated since they started focusing on the lives and actions of habitual truants.

"This program has been successful beyond anyone's dreams," he said.

Examining the root issues of truancy in Racine has been the job of social workers, education consultants and the truants

themselves.

Three 16-year-olds who each skipped months, semesters and even entire years of school in Racine came to the conference Wednesday to present surveys they had conducted at the Transitional Education Program at the Human Services Department.

Their project was court-appointed, but the responses from truants who took the survey mirrored their own: They skipped mostly because school was boring or because they wanted to hang out with friends. Yes, they knew that if they stayed in school they'd make more money. Yes, they often skipped because they were getting high or drunk. No, they didn't feel like teachers cared about them, or spent enough time explaining problems to make the effort worth their energy. Yes, financial incentives, or even just more interesting teachers with "better field trips" and opportunities for real world learning would motivate them to come to school.