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Editorial: Learning from Racine

From the Journal Sentinel

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Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett made the obvious but still critical point during a radio show the other day that students who aren't in school can't learn. Barrett understands that truancy in Milwaukee is a very real problem that affects not only the schools but the economic health of the entire region.

Advertisement After all, kids who don't learn can't get jobs. And there is no greater disconnect in the region than the huge gap between unemployed workers in the central city and employers in the city and surrounding areas who are searching for educated workers. Closing that gap has to start in school, and it has to start with kids being in school.

In that regard, Racine may have some lessons to offer Milwaukee and other communities. In two years, the Racine Unified School District lowered its truancy rate from 21.7% to 9%, a remarkable achievement and testament to the hard work of police, district officials and teachers, social workers and community members.

The effort included designating two officers from the Police Department to work on truancy and enforcing new ordinances. Dennis Barry, a Racine County circuit judge, said the ability to prosecute truancy offenders was a key to Racine's success. The county summoned 424 students into court last year through a random selection system that targets students with 20 or more unexcused absences.

Authorities also started running some of the cases through municipal court rather than juvenile court, a process that proved to be quicker and, in some cases, more effective because of the fines assessed in municipal courts, according to Barry.

Police work was also essential. The two police officers started their truancy duty in February. Prewritten citations cut down on hours of paperwork and afforded officers more time to patrol the streets.

Since starting their assignment, the officers have issued 945 truancy tickets to first offenders. Sgt.