



Finding solutions for York County's dropout problem

ANDREW SHAW *The York Dispatch*

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There's no doubt the freshman orientation program Link Crew has been a success at Susquehannock Senior High School, said seniors Jessica Boles and Ashley Chilcoat.

Freshmen know there's an upperclassman mentor looking out for them, the students told an audience at Dover Area High School Monday night at a meeting held by YorkCounts and United Way of York County on truancy and dropout prevention.

That mentoring helps keep those Susquehannock freshmen -- the grade likeliest to drop out or be truant in York County -- in the classroom.

"I make sure they know I know they are there," Boles said afterward.

Link Crew might be one of the solutions to get decreases in truancy and dropouts in York County, said officials with YorkCounts and United Way.

The agencies held a discussion about the YorkCounts and United Way "Stay in School" study on the topic and solutions the groups are proposing to fix it. Truancy means a student has habitual unexcused absences.

One tool: The Link Crew program, now in place in York City and South Western after Southern first implemented the nationally known program, is not the only Band-Aid to fix what ails York County schools, YorkCounts officials said. More must be done.

"You can't do it in one big gulp ... but you have to start somewhere," said Don Gogniat, a co-author of the dropout and truancy study and former Penn State York chancellor.

The "startling statistics" show a dire need to start finding solutions quickly,

Gogniat said, as the officials pointed to a bleak future for dropouts and a likelihood of a life of crime and/or poverty for habitually truant students.

"These kids have no hope and no future if they don't graduate high school," Gogniat said.

The figures: According to the study:

---Four students dropped out of school every school day in the past decade, on average, about 6,400 in all.

---About 78 percent of students who entered high school in 2005-06 graduated last spring, slightly higher than the national average "but nothing to brag about," Gogniat said.

---The 720 York County students projected to drop out this year represent a long-term loss of about \$91 million to the county, due to lost tax

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revenue and increased spending on programs to aid those students.

In 2006-07, the most recent year available, 13 percent of first-graders and 31 percent of ninth graders were habitually truant.

"We cannot afford to miss any opportunity," to address the issues, said Rob McIlvaine, a Dover Area School Board member.

About 14 percent of Dover students were truant in 2007-08, and 22 percent in 2006-07, the second-highest marks in the county behind York City, which has hovered around the 35 percent range.

That's why Dover is "fully behind" looking at new ways to fix the problem, McIlvaine told the audience, such as considering using Link Crew.

The truancy problem: York County has had one of the highest truancy rates in Pennsylvania over the past few years, according to the study, as high as ninth in the 2006-07 school year.

Along with statistics, the study offered solutions. Some countywide efforts are already under way, but should get more focus and more funding to expand those efforts, officials said.

One of those ongoing efforts to get more attention is York County Truancy Task Force, led by York County Common Pleas Judge John Uhler, which has been around since 1998.

The task force works with every York County

district, collecting data, establishing truancy protocols and working with truant students.

Officials with the study believe the task force should work more with York County Human Services and school districts to fix problems that cause students to be truant. The task force also hopes to hire a full-time coordinator.

Other proposals: The study also recommends businesses start encouraging employees to get their high school diplomas, and that schools expand use of Link Crew and similar programs that keep students engaged.

Also, United Way has made dropout prevention a national campaign, said Bob Woods, executive director of United Way of York County. That should lead to more money in York, he said. The York County chapter is awaiting word on a \$100,000 grant it would use on the issue.

Truancy levels

York County school district truancy percentages, 2007-08, according to Stay in School study by YorkCounts and United Way:

Highest:

---York City: 36 percent

---Dover: 14

---South Western: 4

Lowest :

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---Northern: 0.4 percent

---Northeastern: 0.6 percent

---Southern: 0.6 percent

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