



YorkCounts, local leaders continue to tackle truancy

Senior Judge John Uhler said truancy starts early, and many kids who drop out of school end up in the prison system.

By NICHOLE DOBO
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The last four children York County Senior Judge John Uhler saw had missed a combined 534 days of school.

"I look into the eyes of those kids and see the future isn't there for those kids," Uhler said Tuesday during a town hall meeting organized by YorkCounts.

The meeting was to talk about truancy and drop-out rates, two issues that are not just city problems, said James DeBord, director of YorkCounts. The group released statistics that show 6,429 York County students have dropped out of school in the last 10 years.

Many of those children enter the prison system, Uhler said. It costs about \$23,100 to incarcerate a child for one year in York County. It costs an average of \$7,835 a year to educate that child. Uhler aims to help students stay out of prison, he said, by working to help children stay in school.

The problem starts early, said Uhler, founder of

the York County Truancy Task Force. Last year, there were 215 habitually truant first-grade students in York County, he said. That's the equivalent of seven empty classrooms.

"That sets the ball rolling," he said.

The United Way International recently started a program that aims to decrease the nationwide drop-out rate 50 percent by 2018, said Bob Woods, executive director of the United Way of York County. Locally, \$50,000 was given to William Penn Senior High School for a program that engages families to help children.

"There are significant costs of inaction," Woods said.

Solutions proposed by YorkCounts include:

--- Enhance the effectiveness of county schools by gathering accurate data on at-risk students, enrolling students in research-based programs and getting districts to work with the York County Truancy Prevention Initiative.

--- Expand the work of the York County Truancy Prevention Initiative by promoting collaboration with social services, schools and families.

--- Promote and foster supportive communities by expanding effective programs, holding meetings to educate the public and encouraging local legislators to support policies that promote high school graduation.

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--- Engage the business community by building a task force of local leaders and encouraging businesses to adopt programs to help employees obtain GEDs.

The best way to reach out to children who are having a hard time is to listen to them, said Ginia Moorehead, a 17-year-old junior at William Penn Senior High School.

She had problems at school two years ago and was failing. But she now has high grades, plans to attend college and created a group to help other troubled teen girls, she said.

"Now, I have goals," Moorehead said.

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AT A GLANCE

YorkCounts, a nonprofit that aims to find solutions to quality-of-life issues in York, has been holding a series of public town hall meetings to talk about truancy.

In York County, there was a truancy rate of 21 percent in the 2006-07 school year, according to the group. About 13 percent of first-grade students were truant. About 31 percent of ninth-grade students were truant.

A habitual truant is a student who has missed more than 10 days of school without an excuse.

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