



County hires expert to help solve truancy problems

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A lawyer specializing in education policy, with experience working with Baltimore city schools, is coming to York to help the county solve its truancy problems.

It's the next step in the ongoing process by several county organizations to address what they say is a "significant" problem: dropouts and truancy.

Leigh Dalton will become the county's new Communities That Care coordinator, funded by a grant from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. She'll work 30 hours per week, starting in May.

Communities That Care is a program to combat delinquency, substance abuse and other problem behaviors in young people.

Dalton has experience working as a truancy court program manager in Baltimore, as well as working in various community improvement capacities in Maryland. She is working on her doctorate in education policy from the University of Maryland.

Her position will be under the York County Bar Association, although she'll work extensively with the county's Human Services department,

YorkCounts and United Way, as all are involved in the recent effort to reduce truancy and dropouts in schools. YorkCounts is a nonprofit, quality-of-life group.

Dalton said one of first tasks will be getting one standard definition for truancy, as it can vary by district or organization. In general, it means unexcused tardiness.

"With a different definition of what truancy is, your protocol is going to be implemented differently," Dalton said.

Dalton said she believes "truancy is a symptom" of larger issues, such as substance abuse, that will all be addressed as part of her work.

'Wow, this is a problem': Her hiring comes on the heels of the final town hall meeting from YorkCounts and United Way, which did a joint report, "Stay in School," that showed data highlighting the truancy and dropout issue.

About 6,400 York County students dropped out in the past decade, according to the report.

"People did not argue with what's being shown . . . we got more of a community agreement that, wow, this is a problem. We need to do something about it," said Bob Woods, executive director of United Way of York County.

Now the groups will take that information and try to implement ideas that will tackle the problem, using Dalton as a catalyst to bring

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people together and help secure funding.

They'll also soon get results back on a countywide survey of students on risk factors that affect truancy and dropouts.

"Kids don't just wake up one day and drop out," said Bev Mackereth, executive director of York County Human Services. "It's the first time we've really tackled prevention."

Some changes may be implemented right away, Woods said. One example: Getting more school districts to use the Link Crew program used by high schools in districts such as Southern York, South Western and York City.

The program uses upperclassmen to help ease the transition for freshmen, who are at the most peril of dropping out.

And the initiative will also help expand on the work of the York County Truancy Task Force, led by York County Common Pleas Judge John Uhler. The task force has helped collect data and provide a link between the court and school systems.

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Highs and lows

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 percent

---South Western: 4 percent

Lowest :

---Northern: 0.4 percent

---Northeastern: 0.6 percent

---Southern: 0.6 percent

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