



## York County prepares to tackle truancy

By **ANGIE MASON**  
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After being a juvenile court judge for more than 20 years, York County Senior Judge John C. Uhler said it's not surprising that students who have had significant issues with truancy wind up before the delinquency courts.

Few recognize the significant impact truancy has on "the whole fabric of our community," said Uhler, who heads the York County Truancy Task Force.

"The stakeholders are far and wide," he said. "It is such an acute and chronic issue, not only with the York community but statewide and nationwide."

Those stakeholders -- parents, students, judges, educators, child welfare workers, medical professionals and others -- will be brought together Tuesday during the first York County Truancy Summit.

The summit features a number of sessions geared towards parents, kids, service providers, educators and others. Part of the idea is to increase communication between parents, schools and students about the subject, said Leigh Dalton, director of the York County Truancy Prevention Initiative.

"The focus is to get schools all on the same page about how they handle truancy, students who are late and students who are absent," she said.

A youth panel will include students who have had a history of truant behavior and turned things around, and other sessions will focus on issues such as what the law says, how schools collect data, alternatives to fining families, and solutions to truancy problems.

Uhler said the hope is that those groups will become the catalyst for future discussions.

"The summit's not going to be the end all and cure all," he said, but rather "the beginning of our community-wide effort coordinate all of the stakeholders."

### Citation alternatives

As incentive for some students and parents to attend, there's a chance truancy fines and citations can be waived, according to Dalton. Whether that happens is up to the individual district judge, she said.

District Judge Ronald Haskell said he has eight to 11 kids with truancy cases before him. Their cases are at different stages, so he's handling them differently.

Some first-time offenders might get their cases wiped out for attending the summit, he said, but if they land back in front of him in November, he won't be happy. For a repeat offender, he might suspend payment obligations until January, then check back in.

"The goal is just going to get them back in school," Haskell said. "It's not about making money for the Commonwealth."

Haskell said he's meeting every other week at

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Lindbergh Academy, the city's alternative school, with students who are on the verge of getting citations, trying to intervene before the citation occurs. He's referred several to the summit.

"It's driving home the point to the kids that their education is important to them," he said.

One of the summit's sessions will look at alternatives to citations.

Valerie Perry, assistant superintendent for pupil personnel services for the York City School District, said many groups are working on truancy in the city.

"We're trying to do everything possible we can with all of the organizations and the city and county to really prevent getting to the point of citation," Perry said. "Nobody wants the citation, but certainly it is a part of the law."

Uhler said the law recognizes the opportunity for alternatives to fines, and the community needs to develop a system to offer appropriate resources.

"Just wishing we had alternatives isn't going to be enough," he said.

### Tracking numbers

Another part of the summit will look at data collection.

School districts report truancy data to the state Department of Education.

The city had the highest truancy rate in the county, 34.5 percent, in 2008-2009, according to that data.

South Eastern was next, with 8.2 percent, and Dover ranked third, with about 6 percent truancy.

But, Dalton noted, the definition of truancy is up to each district. Those at the summit will look at what data should be collected and how it can be used.

Dover Area Supt. Robert Krantz said the district is honest in its reporting. The district is always working on truancy, he said.

Krantz and several district officials will be attending the summit, he said. The district has several programs aimed at helping with truancy.

"Our goal is to make kids successful in school," he said.

The York City School District has had a committee meeting all summer to work on truancy and attendance issues.

Perry said the group, which included parents, board members, judges, educators and child welfare representatives, studied the law to ensure the district's policies were in line and identified several areas to work on.

One was increasing staff. For the school year that just began, the district added an attendance supervisor and an additional attendance officer for the high school.

The group decided to remove a provision that said a middle school or high school student who was more than a half-hour late must have a parent call or write a letter or else not be admitted, she said.

A new program will assign mentors to work with chronically truant students and their families, she

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said, and the number of truancy intervention sessions has been increased at all schools.

The sessions, now monthly at the high school, involve parents, students, judges and others when a student has been truant often enough to require an intervention plan.

City school board member Margie Orr, who serves on the committee looking at truancy, said there will be more policy changes coming before the board in November.

Parents have to take a role in fighting truancy, she said.

"They have to take an active part with this," she said. "Our biggest struggle is keeping in touch with parents, (who are often) changing addresses. That's a big issue."

Communication from parents and within the school will help, she said.

Perry said at least 20 district staffers will attend the summit, which was also advertised to many families.

"If we all work together, I think we can really get handle on truancy," she said. "All of us want our kids in school, every day, on time."

**If you go**

What: York County Truancy Summit

When: 4 to 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: York County School of Technology, 2179 S. Queen St., York Township

What's happening: The event will focus on the problem of truancy and give stakeholders -- parents, students, teachers, judges, businesses, and other community members -- the chance to help shape solutions. Dinner will be provided. Youths will share their own stories, and breakout sessions will focus on various issues, such as the law, alternatives to fines, and kindergarten and first grade attendance policies.

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