

Alameda County truancy court provides boost for students' success

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Parents and guardians approached the Alameda County Superior Court judge one by one not to be condemned but to celebrate the success of their children in attending school.

Forty children and their families graduated from truancy court on Friday after their parents completed a yearlong probationary period. Most of the students were in elementary and middle school.

Among those in attendance was Carmila Garlow and her two daughters, who just completed the fourth and first grade.

"It was a long journey, but it made me aware of what I needed to fix," she said before Judge Gloria Rhynes, who dismissed the truancy charges of Garlow and the other parents who had pleaded guilty.

Garlow's daughters were among 35 percent of children in Alameda County who were considered truant in the 2010-2011 school year, according to the California Department of Education.

Students need only three unexcused absences to be listed as truant by the state organization, but they need to miss weeks of school before their parents must meet Rhynes and Deputy District Attorney Teresa Drenick, who heads the county's truancy unit.

"This isn't just you missed four or five days of school. Kids who came in here were missing a third or half of the school year," said Drenick, who added that about 100 families per year go through the truancy correction program.

It's not the children's fault for missing that much class, she said. The reasons for their unexcused absences range from extreme poverty to domestic violence to home issues.

The graduation was as much for the parents and guardians as it was for the children. The families were able to attend because they completed required court appearances, counseling and their children were able to greatly improve their attendance.

There is no standard requirement for the families because it depends on student in-class success.

"I think as parents we don't realize how important it is for them to be in school," Garlow said. "I could see what they needed to achieve."

According to the county, 96 percent of the students improved their attendance after their parents completed the program last school year. Among this group, many had perfect attendance and one fifth-grader was elected class president.

For Rhynes, this was the outcome she wanted. As a judge who also oversees felony convictions, Rhynes wants this to be the first and last time she sees the children in her courtroom.

"There is such a direct correlation between those who are not in school and those who end up in our criminal justice system. In this case, it's really rehabilitative and more therapeutic in that we try to support the parents and get the students back to school," she said.

"When they are in school, they are successful and we all win."

For at least one day, the kids did. Children are not usually allowed in court rooms, but they were allowed to pick up new backpacks filled with school supplies in the jurors box.

Some parents teared up as Rhynes and Drenick complimented the families on how far they have come.

"You all should be excited," Rhynes told the families, " ... because you've gotten the gauge right, and your kids are going in the right direction."