

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Truancy court in Oakland is for parents

Elementary school: When students repeatedly miss class, adults are charged

April 17, 2010 By Matthal Kuruvila, Chronicle Staff Writer



One by one, mothers stepped forward to face Alameda County Superior Court Judge Cecilia Castellanos and explain why their children have repeatedly failed to show up to elementary school.

One mom said she couldn't find her son's school. Another blamed traffic. One said her son was repeatedly tardy to class because he had difficulty opening his locker.

To each, Judge Castellanos said, "That's not an excuse," and ordered them back to truancy court for a follow-up.

Castellanos' court on the third floor of the René C. Davidson Courthouse in Oakland is where, every Friday, parents from cities throughout Alameda County are prosecuted for failing to get their children to elementary school and sometimes middle school. The children generally range in age from 6 to 15.

Under state law, a child is truant if he or she has three unexcused absences of 30 minutes or more at least three times a year. Schools do the early intervention. The truancy court generally sees parents whose kids have missed 20 or more days. Older children who miss school face truancy charges in Juvenile Court.

429 parents charged

Some 429 parents of mostly elementary school children were charged in this Alameda County truancy court between January 2004 and December 2010, said Deputy District Attorney Teresa Drenick. More than 85 percent of the parents greatly reduced their children's truancy by 75 percent or more.

Truancy is gaining greater attention locally and around the state as cities and counties find ways to get kids back in the classroom. In Richmond, city leaders last week approved a curfew that bans school-age kids from the streets during school hours.

In Oakland, Police Chief Anthony Batts says he believes that curbing truancy will help reduce crime. State lawmakers, meanwhile are considering two bills, including one by state Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, that would increase penalties for parents of truant children and allow districts to better track habitual truants.

The parents coming into Alameda County Superior Court on Fridays represent the promise and the limits of the truancy court.

One of them was Ericka Edwards.

Her daughter was enrolled in school for 174 days last year, when she was a first-grader. But she missed 79 days of school. Edwards' son, then a fourth-grader, had a similar record.

After Edwards pleaded guilty in truancy court in January and started her probation, neither child has had an unexcused absence, Drenick said.

Edwards said the court helped. She said she had struggled with depression, but the threat of arrest and fines of up to \$500 prompted change.

"Going to see the judge, you've got to get it together," Edwards said in an interview. "I figured this is the time, 'be strong now.' I guess it was something God was telling me to do and forced it upon me."

Truancy damages schools in a number of ways, said Troy Flint, a spokesman for the Oakland Unified School District. Lower attendance means less money for the schools. If the district were to increase its 94.5 percent attendance rate to the statewide average of 95.5 percent, that would mean an estimated \$1.4 million more in state funding.

'They can't learn'  
But it's not just money.

"If students aren't in school, they can't learn," Flint said. And those who don't regularly attend bring social ills back to schools. "Students more likely to be involved with drugs and gangs are disenchanting with school."

Oakland police Lt. Michael Johnson said truant teens are often at the center of crime. Getting them back in school is vital. But government agencies can't be expected to handle truancy by themselves, he said.

“If you see somebody at a store, the store owner needs to call and help,” he said. “It just can’t be handled by the Police Department and the district. It takes the whole community.”

Drenick said the majority of parents she’s seen with truant children are single parents, particularly single mothers. Some have mental illnesses. She estimates that 20 to 25 percent of the mothers are victims of domestic violence.

Even though the court has largely succeeded with those who come in, Drenick knows the problem won’t ever disappear. That hasn’t diminished her faith in the court.

“For every little kid who we get an education for, that means we’ve won,” said Drenick. “Just because this problem doesn’t go away doesn’t mean you give up on the individual kids.”

[http://articles.sfgate.com/2010-04-17/bay-area/20853623\\_1\\_truancy-court-parents-of-truant-children-habitual-truants/1](http://articles.sfgate.com/2010-04-17/bay-area/20853623_1_truancy-court-parents-of-truant-children-habitual-truants/1)