

Alameda County truancy court works to keep children in school

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Posted: 09/01/2015 01:15:31 PM PDT



Teresa Drenick, deputy district attorney for Alameda County, right, talks with parent Audrena Jones, center, about her son's truancy issues. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

OAKLAND -- Alameda County prosecutor Teresa Drenick weaved between a drove of parents huddled in a third-floor courtroom, hugging some, consoling others, grinning at a baby in a stroller and searching for a translator who spoke Punjabi.

Beneath the Great Seal of the State of California on the wall was a poster with a multi-colored starburst exploding into the phrase: "Every day counts."

It was a Friday in mid-August in the courtroom of Superior Court Judge Gloria Rhynes and neither murder, rape nor robbery were on the docket.

Instead, Rhynes and Drenick were teaming up to tackle truancy.

As parents begin shuttling their kids back to school, the Alameda County Truancy Referral Program intends to make sure they stay there.



Judge Gloria Rynes gets an update on how the son of Audrena Jones, left, and Mason Gilbert is doing in truancy court Aug. 28, 2015, at the Renee C. Davidson Superior Courthouse in Oakland. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

The program, entering its 11th year, uses a carrot-before-the-stick approach when it comes to habitually absent students.

According to Drenick, the results are dazzling: almost 90 percent of the roughly 200 kids who come through the program each year start

attending class again on a regular basis.

Students are considered truant under state law if they have more than three unexcused absences or tardies per year. At that point, they will typically have an intervention within their school district.

If they continue to pile up absences, their case will be forwarded to the District Attorney, where their parents face a \$100 fine.

In Alameda County, parents are offered the option of pleading guilty and entering a one-year probationary period. All fines and charges are dropped if their kids begin to attend school regularly.

"Sometimes it's just shining the spotlight, saying 'Hey, you have to do this,'" said Drenick, whose been overseeing the program since its genesis.

But more commonly kids who aren't getting to school have families facing pressing issues, such as homelessness, mental illness or transportation problems, Drenick said.

For this reason, seated in the front row of the courtroom are representatives from a variety of community agencies who provide services ranging from counseling to health care assistance to parents in need.

Drenick said once kids start attending school more frequently, the results are readily apparent to parents.

"Suddenly the kids are getting good attention, smiley faces on their homework and invited to birthday parties," she said.

On a recent Friday, parents in truancy court hailed from Livermore to Oakland. One woman said working three jobs made it tough for her to get her kids to school. Another mom, with two young boys in tow, broke down in tears before being taken into the judge's chambers to talk.

According to Drenick, the lion's share of cases come from the Oakland, Hayward, San Lorenzo and San Leandro school districts.

Andrew Kevy, director of child welfare and attendance for the Hayward Unified School District, said his district forwarded about 40 cases to the District Attorney last year. He said the program often reaches parents who are unresponsive to interventions at the school or district level.

"It changes things when they are standing in court and the DA is presenting the case and the judge is going over the things that the parents have done and saying this has to stop," he said.

Kevy said the county's resource-oriented approach is one of the more progressive in the state.

"Alameda County has really taken the lead in that it's more than a legal issue, it's more than a school issue, it's a public health issue," he added.

Drenick said that parents often give her a cool reception at their first court appearance. But when the probationary period ends, many are appreciative.

Dana Mendes was one such mom.

She was referred to the program after her fourth-grader, Tyler, missed 26 days of school and racked up 100 tardies while going to school in the Pleasanton Unified School District.

Mendes was poor and homeless. In addition, Tyler was suffering from asthma.

Tyler was linked up with the Asthma Starts, which ensured that he had proper treatment at home and school.

In the 2014-2015 school year, he missed six days of school -- five which were excused by a doctor's note-- and was almost perfect when it came to making it to school on time.

The turnaround earned him and his mother a round of applause from the courtroom during their final court appearance in July.

"You guys are here for the best interest of the kids and that's all that counts," Mendes said to the prosecutor and the judge, moments before Rhynes dismissed her charges.

Rhynes, who has been overseeing the court for the last four years, said getting kids back in school is essential to ensuring their learning isn't interrupted.

"If you can't add in the first grade, you won't be able to multiply in the third," she said.

According to the judge, the stakes in truancy court are high. She said there's a clear link between habitual absenteeism and those who take on a life of crime down the road.

"You can see the ghost of Christmas future if the kids don't make it," she said.

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