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Truancy prevention programs take holistic approach

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It's Friday morning in Department Three, Alameda County [Superior Court](#). The Great Seal of the State of California hangs on the wood-paneled wall behind the judge's bench. A cart is filled with red folders containing defendants' files. The bailiff sits at his desk. It looks like any court in the building, except the defendants are not charged with burglary or assault. They're charged with being the parents or guardians of an elementary- or middle-school student who is habitually truant.



A family appears before Superior Court Judge Gloria Rhynes during a truancy court session at the Alameda County Courthouse in Oakland, Calif. on Friday, June 17, 2011. More than two dozen parents prosecuted for their children's truancy had their cases dismissed after the family completed a program and the students raised their school attendance records. Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle / SF

"When has my daughter not been in school?" one mother asked.

"You were here last on March 23. She missed March 26, 27, half of the 28th, April 3 and 5," responded [Teresa Drenick](#), Alameda County deputy district attorney and the architect of the Alameda County Truancy Referral program.

"I put her on the bus," Mom replied.

"That's not good enough," said Superior Court Judge [Gloria Rhynes](#). "She missed four out of 10 days of school. You don't know where she was." The judge ordered her to ride the bus with her daughter and sit with her in class. The mother asked if she was supposed to take her baby along; she said she had missed a previous court-ordered appointment because her sister got shot and she was at the hospital with her.

If the woman's difficulties seem daunting, they're not unusual in the truancy court. As the attorney, judge and family counselors in the program point out, chronic truancy in elementary school is a symptom that the child is not being raised in a healthy environment.

It could be health issues - asthma is high on the list. It might be a transportation problem. The family might be homeless, or the parent might suffer from emotional problems or mental illness.

"For elementary-school children, it's never their fault if they are not in school," Rhynes said.

Parents don't land in truancy court after a few missed days of school. On this particular Friday morning, children had missed 22 days, 26 days. One student had missed 52 days the previous school year. And on the days they get to school, they're frequently late.

In a surprising statistic, the Oakland Unified School District reports that the highest incidence of truancy is in kindergarten and first grade.

The next highest is in ninth grade, when the problem is more like what most people imagine - teenagers ducking out of school.

"There's a direct line between chronic absenteeism in elementary school, falling behind, not being able to keep up in middle school and drop-out rates in high school. When you read the probation reports of juveniles and adults convicted of criminal activity, the common denominator is the lack of [education](#)," Drenick said.

If the school can't resolve a problem of chronic truancy, the case is referred to the truancy court. The court usually files an infraction against the parents and imposes a \$500 fine that it stays for a year. The parents plead guilty and return for periodic updates. Those who make immediate progress return less frequently.

"We're not trying to criminalize the parents," Drenick said. "We're trying to get their kids back in school."

The judge makes it clear that if the parent abides by her instructions, the charges and the fine will be dismissed in 12 months. One of her main instructions is to work with the counselors at the Lincoln Child Center, a family services organization in Oakland.

"We provide wraparound services, including individual therapy, family therapy and case management," said Andi Tesoro, community liaison at [Lincoln Center](#). "Sometimes there has been resistance to ask for help, or they didn't know how to get the resources they need. We develop skills within the family around getting the child to school on time and the family back on track."

The [Alameda County Health Department](#)'s Asthma Start program also works with families, assessing the home environment.

In court, Drenick, Rhynes and the Lincoln Center counselors offer a combination of penal codes, fines, encouragement, counseling services and lecturing. In Rhynes' words, some people respond to sugar, others to the whip. She makes a direct connection between her work the other four days of the week - presiding over felony and homicide cases - and her caseload on Friday mornings.

"If they don't go to school, they will end up in prison," she said, pointing to the fact that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation looks at the third-grade truancy rate to determine how many beds it will need in the future.

"We have to get you some parenting tools," she scolded a mother and father, who said they couldn't make their son go to school. "If he stays home, he loses. We all lose. We can give him a jail cell right now with his name on it."

The court is a 10-year-old joint project of the Alameda County district attorney's office and the [Alameda County Office of Education](#). It works closely with the Oakland Unified School District and the [Oakland Housing Authority](#), which has its own initiative to reduce truancy. The approach has been effective. The court reports that last year 96 percent of the students had improved attendance; 82 percent had a 50 to 100 percent increase in attendance.

A district attorney for 20 years, she said in the last several years she has noticed that law enforcement has shifted from taking a purely punitive view to understanding the importance of intervention.

Back in court, a mother reported that her 13-year-old has been lying about completing his homework, but she has gotten him a tutor.

"At least he's in school. All right, my dear, you're doing fine," Rhynes said.

Every June, the court has a graduation ceremony for successful parents. "This is the most unusual criminal courtroom," Drenick said. "At the end of the year, the moms are hugging me. Where else are the defendants hugging the prosecutor?"

Truancy is a statewide problem

District attorneys are paying more attention to truancy, recognizing it as a harbinger of later criminal behavior. Truancy rates (the percentage of students with three unexcused absences or tardies in a school year) in Bay Area elementary and middle schools for the 2010-11 school year range from below 1 percent, typically in wealthy areas, to as high as 79 percent, illustrating an uneven playing field for students at an early age. A surprising number of elementary and middle schools have a truancy rate of 20 to 25 percent. The average for California is **29.76 percent**, according to the state [Department of Education](#). Here is how anti-truancy programs work in some Bay Area counties:

Alameda County

Truancy rate 34.92 percent

After reviewing the information from the school attendance review board in cases of elementary- and middle- school chronic truancy, the district attorney files an infraction against the parents. They come before a Truancy Court judge, who imposes a fine. Most parents plead guilty, and the court orders them to work with the Lincoln Child Center, which identifies and provides services the family needs. Parents' progress is monitored. At the end of 12 months, if they are in compliance, the charges against them are dismissed and the fine waived. The office charges between 150 and 200 parents a year.

Contra Costa County

Truancy rate 32.35 percent

Parents of truant students receive a warning letter on Contra Costa County district attorney letterhead. Student attendance review boards provide mediation to identify needed services. If the truancy continues, parents receive a letter from the Juvenile Court warning they can be subject to prosecution. This year, the district attorney has filed misdemeanor charges against two parents under the new misdemeanor law covering K-8 students. Parents can sign up for the county's program that locates students who aren't in school via their cell phones.

San Francisco County

Truancy rate 24.61 percent

In 2006, the San Francisco district attorney and the San Francisco Unified School District began a Truancy Court program that starts with warning letters, continues with mediations conducted by prosecutors and, if needed, prosecution involving court monitoring and family services. The district attorney reports that elementary school truancy has declined an average of 20 percent. For help keeping your children in school, call the Truancy Hotline, (415) 701-7829.

San Mateo County

Truancy rate 25.07 percent

If a first notice to the parents isn't effective, a second letter from the school district offers interventions and outlines consequences. With a third letter, the case is referred to the District School Attendance Review Board, which involves child welfare and social services agencies. If truancy continues, the case goes to the county School Attendance Review Board. Finally, the probation officer forwards a request to the district attorney for court action.

Santa Clara County

Truancy rate 23.14 percent

The Truancy Abatement Team works with schools and parents and includes prosecutors, police and counseling agencies. After a second letter to parents, mediation is arranged to identify needed services. A third letter refers the case to the district attorney. Students are warned that if they don't go to school, they will be prosecuted. A student can't receive his or her driver's license until the citations have been cleared.

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Read more: <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/Truancy-prevention-programs-take-holistic-approach-3498513.php#ixzz24rIRQNtt>