

Expanded truancy intervention shows results

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CHARLOTTE — An Eaton County program is reducing the level truancy among troubled students.

The third year of the program saw more than triple the number of student referrals compared to its first year.

Polly Brainerd, prevention specialist at the Eaton Intermediate School District, presented statistics demonstrating that students in



Brainerd

the program showed decreases in tardiness, absences and suspensions, and an increase in grade point average following involvement in the program.

Truancy, or absence from school with no valid or documented reason, is a crime, and historically school districts have referred truant students and their parents for prosecution.

Eaton County's Truancy Intervention Program, or TIP, is designed to give schools and courts an alternative to traditional criminal sanctions.

Since the inception of TIP, students whose cases are heard in the Eaton County probate court may enter into

a diversion program, where prosecution is deferred, and cases can be dismissed when students and their parents participate in the TIP program and resolve the child's truancy problem.

Other problems

Brainerd said truancy is often a symptom of other problems in a family, and an array of services may be required.

In addition to being a critical indicator that a child is at risk of educational failure, truancy may be associated with mental health issues, and there is a correlation between truancy and substance abuse, violence,

criminal and sexual activity, according to program staff.

Programs are tailored to the truant student's age and circumstances. Students in middle and high school participate, along with their parents or guardians, in educational sessions, are assigned adult mentors in their schools, and may meet with mental health professionals.

Elementary students receive home and school visits by program staff, and their parents may attend parenting classes.

If truancy continues to be a problem, the court may impose sanctions, up to fines and jail time, although in the history of the program so far, Brainerd

said that no parent has been prosecuted.

Brainerd reported to the Eaton County Commission that the number of students served during the 2005-06 school year increased to 157 from 93 year before. In 2003-04, the program's first year, 51 students participated in the program.

Beginning in 2005-06, funds from the juvenile justice tax levy, approved by county voters in 2005, were available to expand the program, through the addition of case managers and increased counseling services.

The 2006-07 budget for the program is \$139,000.