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Truancy Court having positive impact at city middle school

By RUSS OLIVO
Staff Writer

WOONSOCKET – The new Truancy Court at Woonsocket Middle School is already starting to show positive results, officials say.

After just two months, 21 students under the supervision of Family Court Magistrate Angela Bucci are going to school more often and doing better academically, according to Chief Family Court Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah, who spearheaded the project.

When students entered the program, they were attending school in a range of 17 to 88 percent of the time they were scheduled to be there. Since their cases were turned over to Truant Officer Andrew Barnes, the range has increased from 63 to 100 percent, Jeremiah said in a prepared statement yesterday.

Eight of the 21 students petitioned to Bucci's courtroom – which meets in an old library annex at the middle school every Thursday – have not missed school once since they entered the program, he said.

"These statistics are an indication that we are making a difference in the lives of students," said Jeremiah. "Having a weekly presence at the middle school has made all the difference."

Before the project got under way, truant students were routinely arraigned in Family Court on a docket that put them on a priority list with juveniles facing more serious and often violent offenses, from vandalism to rape and robbery. Often it took up to 90 days for students with repeated absences from school to face a judge, a delay that undermined the goal of getting students back into school quickly.

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>
> – Jeremiah Jeremiah, Chief Judge

Social workers complained that by the time students were returned to class, the school year was almost over, and students were in an academic hole they couldn't climb out of.

The key to the new Truancy Court is not only that students are arraigned quickly, but that the presiding magistrate assigns each child in the system to a social worker to find out what might be at the root of the absenteeism. Often, truancy is linked to family issues, including domestic violence and drug abuse. And while it may seem harmless in comparison to more violent offenses, truancy may be the first sign of an emerging pattern of lawlessness that continues to adulthood, prosecutors say.

Bucci says that not only are students in the program attending school more often, many have told her their grades are improving. She says guidance counselors agree with her.

"The Woonsocket Middle School administration, teachers and guidance teachers were instrumental in the effective operation of the court," she says. "I believe we work well together."

Students don't necessarily have to be under the supervision of the court to benefit, according to Schools Superintendent Anthony L. D'Acchioli – just the presence of the court in school is having a positive impact.

"The Truancy Court has not only curbed the behavior of the truant youth brought before the court, but rumors about the court have been spreading and the school has noticed a decrease in absenteeism," he said. "Both the court and the administration at the middle school should be commended for the positive results."

Launched by Jeremiah, the Truancy Court is part of a $1.5 million initiative that began last year at Hope High School in Providence, where officials saw similar results. An arm of Family Court, the tribunal held its first session at the Middle School on Nov. 16.