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Another day in court

Truancy cases continue legal path, as parents contact district justice's office with promises to pay fines

By KEITH PHUCAS
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EAST NORRITON — The roundup of parents of chronically truant schoolchildren Wednesday got the community's attention, and several more cited individuals called Judge Ester Casillo's district court office in East Norriton on Thursday, vowing to pay fines.

However, only one person came to court to pay the \$300 penalty Wednesday.

But the judge's main concern is getting people help with the problem, not collecting fines.

"The bottom line is, it's not (about) the money; it's getting parents and kids into counseling," Casillo said. "Nobody wants that money."

A total of 48 arrest warrants were issued. Thirty other parents are still at large, according to Norristown police.

Those apprehended Wednesday include Avis Sawyer, 52; Khalif Oden-el, 46; Wendy Wilson, 34; Khadija Harrell, 30; Amy Lynn Meacham, 36; Rosa Rodriguez, 50; Kaamilya London, 29; Ruby Thomas, 22; Charles Williams, 32; Robert Howley, 53; Nakia McDaniels, 33; Randy Welch, 43; Teresa Welch, 45; Luis Cabezas, 39; Katasha Price, 32; Benita Bates, 42; Marquita Kegler, 22; and Rochelle Jackson, 48.

Wednesday afternoon and evening, Norristown police and Montgomery County Sheriff's Department deputies picked up 18 parents of Norristown Area School District students and hauled them into district court.

◆ NASD

The parents cited had disregarded at least five hand-delivered letters from schools, the school district and the court about their children's chronic truancy, according to authorities.

Some students had as many as 15 unexcused absences.

After a schoolchild has a first unexcused absence, the school sends a letter home. After a second incident, the school district sends a letter. If parents fail to contact school officials, a third and final notice goes out.

And if this notice goes unheeded, the court orders a Truancy Elimination Plan meeting be held with truancy officials, the child and a parent to work toward solving the problem.

If the court gets no response to this notice, Judge Casillo issues a truancy citation and arrest warrants are issued.

In court Wednesday, parents offered variety of reasons why the notices went unheeded.

"Some lied saying they never got notices, but we know they did (receive them)," Casillo said.

Thanks to Weed and Seed grants since 2005, Norristown's truancy program has made significant strides in curbing unexcused absences.

The school district's unexcused absences have dropped from 56,000 in 2005 to 40,000 currently, according to Norristown police.

Two years ago, the school district, social services agencies and police formed a part-

nership, Norristown Truancy Abatement Initiative, to aggressively attack the problem.

Since 2005, the truancy effort had received about \$230,000 in grant funding.

Funding for the truancy effort is also provided by William Penn Foundation and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

In 2005, the program targeted high school students. Two years later, officials focused on keeping middle school students in class; more recently, the effort has concentrated on elementary school students.

"You've got to get them in school, or you're killing their future," Casillo said.

The parents of truant children brought to court Wednesday are scheduled to appear again Sept. 24, about two weeks after Norristown Area School District's fall semester begins.

"I want to check to see if there are any more (unexcused) absences," the judge said.

Besides police and the school district, other truancy partners include Norristown Area Communities That Care for Youth, The Salvation Army, Norristown's Police Athletic League, Audubon YMCA, Family Services, Montgomery County Mental Health/Mental Retardation/Drug and Alcohol/Behavioral Health Department and other agencies.

For more information on the truancy reduction effort, call Norristown police Lt. Kevin McKeon or truant officer Meaghan Kerper at 610-270-0977.