

Parents focus of roundup

Police haul in guardians who failed to respond to children's truancy notices

◆ *Norristown*

By KEITH PHUCAS
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Wednesday for truancy violations.

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

ties.

Some children had as many as 15 unexcused absences from school.

"Yet (parents) continued to ignore these letters," said Meaghan Kerper, a Norristown truant officer.

The parents were picked up at their homes and handcuffed by Norristown police officers and Montgomery County Sheriff's Department deputies and brought to district court in East Norriton.

"That's a good way to get the word out (to others parents)," said District Judge Ester J. Casillo.

A total of 48 arrest warrants were issued. Police will continue to look for the other 30 parents.

Chronic school absence is unlawful and increases the likelihood students will drop out of school, turn to illegal drugs or other criminal activity, according to the Norristown

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EAST NORRITON — Police hauled at least 18 parents of students enrolled in Norristown Area School District into district court



Andrea J. Stanley/The Times Herald
Lt. Kevin McKeon, of the Norristown Police Department, walks out of District Court on Wednesday in East Norriton with Luis Cabezas, whose child was allegedly chronically truant from school.

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Police Department.

For Norristown police Lt. Kevin McKeon, reducing truancy should pay a larger social dividend in the future.

"The whole goal of this effort is revitalizing Norristown," he said. "We have to educate our youth."

Improving social conditions is intrinsic to the police department's mission to prevent crime, he said.

"And our crime is down 11 percent," the lieutenant said. "(The truancy program) is not the sole reason, but one of the reasons."

Thanks to Weed and Seed grants since 2005, the Norristown's truancy program has made significant strides curbing truancy in the school district, but officials constantly struggle to keep families from falling through the cracks.

William Penn Foundation and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency through Norristown Weed and Seed also provide funding for the truancy effort.

Two years ago, the school district, social services agencies and police formed a partnership, Norristown Truancy Abatement Initiative, to aggressively attack the problem.

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

That first year, the program targeted high school students. By 2007, officials focused on keeping middle school student in class; more recently, the effort has concentrated on elementary school students.

"We feel if we get to them

now, we won't see the problem at the middle school level," said Oglatha Pinkney-Ingram, a social worker with Family Services.

The school district's unexcused absences have dropped from 56,000 in 2005 to 40,000 currently, Kerper said.

The school sends out letters for a student's first two unexcused absences; the school district sends out the third and final notice.

If this final notice is ignored, 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, Casillo issues a truancy citation.

The last truancy hearing for the last school year was held June 5. At that time, about 40 families had been notified in writing of this final court date. Arrest warrants were issued for parents who failed to appear.

Police have truancy patrols that provide door-to-door pickup of truant youth as well as patrols of neighborhood locations frequented by students during school hours, according to police.

"It's very important that we get our kids back in school," McKeon said.

Besides police and the local school district, other truancy partners include Norristown Area Communities That Care for Youth, 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.