

Montgomery County tests anti-truancy pilot program

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A new anti-truancy program in Montgomery County is trying to reach out to students before they miss too much school, a month-old effort that advocates say already is yielding results.

Educators and county officials lauded the program Wednesday at Francis Scott Key Middle School in Silver Spring. The partnership, which arranges for judges to meet with students who have repeated unexcused absences and develop plans to keep them in school, is being tested at Key Middle and at Neelsville Middle School in Germantown. They have the highest habitual truancy rates of county middle schools.

"Students who do not listen to adults will often sit up and take notice with a judge," said Montgomery County Council member Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring). Students skip school because they don't feel as though anybody's paying attention to them, she said. "What's missing is the relationship piece."

The program, which is being conducted under a federal grant and led by staff from the University of Baltimore, is targeting just 25 students for now. But organizers plan to expand it to more schools in the fall and intend to establish programs in Prince George's, Anne Arundel and Baltimore counties.

Students in a similar five-year-old program in Baltimore have reduced their unexcused absences and lateness by 50 to 75 percent, said Gloria Danziger, a fellow at the University of Baltimore School of Law who is one of the administrators of the program.

In Montgomery, Danziger said, there have been improvements already.

"The majority of students have zero tardies," she said.

Each student meets once a week with a team of people that includes Danziger, the judge and representatives from the school. Parents are encouraged, but not required, to attend. The student talks with the group about the causes of the absences, and administrators try to come up with solutions.

[A report](#) released this month by the Montgomery Office of Legislative Oversight found that in 2009, less than 1 percent of the county's 142,000 students were habitually truant. Defined by Maryland, a truant is someone who has unexcused absences for more than a fifth of the school year, or 36 days.

Officials acknowledged Wednesday that the state standard is lax; most states label students habitual truants after fewer absences. The new Montgomery program works with students who have between five and 20 unexcused absences in a school year.

At Key Middle, 2.2 percent of students were habitually truant during the first part of this school year, according to the report.

At Neelsville Middle, 3.4 percent were habitually truant in the same period.

The report notes that low-income African American or Hispanic boys are at greatest risk of absenteeism, and officials said that a variety of factors can contribute to the problem: lack of transportation to school, fear of bullying and a need to stay home to care for an ill sibling or parent, among others.

The report found that almost two-thirds of the county's habitually truant students attended high school, but officials said Wednesday that reaching out to youngsters in middle school could correct behaviors before they become routine.

"We're trying to get on truancy early," said Jerry D. Weast, Montgomery school superintendent. "This community is being proactive."