

STAY IN SCHOOL

by Youth Services Team, Racine County Workforce Development Center

"Stay in School, if you want to have a good life!"--that's the message parents, agencies, judges, law enforcement officers, teachers, and counselors want to impress on Racine County high school students through a coordinated effort called the School Engagement Program. Data available from the Workforce Development Center (WDC) indicates that students who finish high school will earn higher wages and have lower unemployment than those who do not.

The School Engagement Program was launched in 2005. One part of the program includes Truancy Informational Seminars, which are offered at the beginning of each semester. Parents and students attending the Seminars hear from a panel of speakers, including a Judge handling juvenile cases, representatives from the District Attorney's Office, Racine County Human Services Department (RCHSD), the WDC and Professional Services Group (PSG), as well as a Social Worker and the Directing Principle from the school where the Seminar is held. The speakers stress the importance of regular attendance at school, personal accountability and academic achievement and how these factors impact future employment. In addition, participants learn what happens if students are truant, and how the entire family is affected by the process. An abbreviated version of the Seminar is offered to incoming freshmen each year during the Freshman Orientation/Mentoring program.

The other part of the program involves one-on-one interaction with truant students. An engagement specialist at Park and Case High Schools monitors the attendance of students with a history of truancy. The specialist works with the student and with his or her teachers and parents, as well as with community agencies, to address truancy the same day it occurs. Previously, students might be absent for weeks before an intervention would occur, and that intervention would involve a court-ordered referral to RCHSD. Studies show that the longer students are out of school, the more difficult it is to reengage them in the educational process.

Although truancy reduction is the primary focus of the School Engagement Program, staff also assists in determining and alleviating the underlying problems that contribute to the student's academic, attendance and behavioral issues. To do this, students participate in an after-school homework group and an assisted study hall. They are also encouraged to attend the Tuesday Social Skills Group, a collaborative effort of Workforce Services for Youth, PSG's Independent Living program and the School Engagement Program. Students are invited to enroll in the Workforce Services for Youth Program for additional employment skills training.

Funding for this program is provided by the WDC, RCHSD, and Racine Unified School District (RUSD). It is administered by PSG, a local social service agency. For further information contact Dan Baran at 638-2000.