

# The Newport Daily News

Tuesday, November 5, 2013

## NEWPORT

# Official proposes crackdown on truancy

The School Committee chairman recommends pursuing criminal action against parents of truant elementary school students.

By Sean Flynn  
Staff writer

When students in Newport's elementary schools have been chronically absent in past years, Eddie Merritt, the School Department's truancy officer, has met with the families, or tried to, before referring the matter to the state's Family Court, which has a separate "Truancy Calendar."

"The Family Court doesn't do anything about it," School Committee Chairman Charles P. Shoemaker said Monday. "They don't want to bring a 7- or 8-year-old child into court when it is clearly the parents' responsibility to make sure the child is going to school."

The court has intervened in cases involving middle and high school students. Shoemaker said it is crucial to make sure elementary school students get in the habit of going to school regularly if chronic absenteeism is to be curbed and student achievement is to be boosted.

Students from the city's four former elementary schools were consolidated for the first time in September at the new Pell Elementary School.

Shoemaker proposed Monday that the School Department make a criminal complaint against the parents of chronically truant elementary school students. The complaint would be turned over to the city solicitor's office, which would file it with Family Court.

### TRUANCY AID

The recommendation came out of a recent meeting between school officials and Family Court Chief Judge Haig-nush R. Bedrosian. Shoemaker said he, Merritt, School Committee Vice Chairwoman Jo Eva Gaines, former Sullivan School Principal Marie Mare-Schulz and Mark McKenna, an elementary

school family services coordinator, were at the meeting. Senate President M. Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport, requested the meeting and she also attended, Shoemaker said.

He made the proposal at a meeting of the City Council/School Committee Liaison Subcommittee led by Council Vice Chairwoman Naomi Neville.

Neville asked Shoemaker to submit a written proposal to be put on the agenda of the subcommittee's next meeting, scheduled for Monday, Dec. 9, beginning at 11 a.m. in the Newport Area Career and Technical School, Room 954.

Shoemaker requested that City Solicitor Joseph J. Nicholson Jr., or one of the assistant city solicitors, Christopher Behan or Girard Galvin, be present.

Truancy has been an ongoing concern in the city's schools in recent years, and the School Department held a "Truancy Summit" in August 2011 with educators, social service professionals and community leaders to develop initiatives to improve school attendance.

School officials explained to families at the time that it was not so much a program as a "person-centered support system" that "will help their child find success and may help a family to avoid Family Court." Many parents were not responsive at the time, officials said.

"Nothing seems to have worked," Shoemaker said Monday.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 18 days during the school year. In the 2011-2012 school year, 104 Newport elementary school students in kindergarten through third grade were chronically absent, according to the 2013 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook. That was 13 percent of the 771 K-3 students enrolled that year, the Factbook said.

Shoemaker said he did not have more recent data immediately available.

Kids Count is a nonprofit organization that focuses on issues and policies affecting children in Rhode Island. "During the early elementary school years, children develop important skills and approaches to learning that are critical to ongoing school success," Kids Count says in its commentary on the statistics for each community.

"Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten show lower levels of achievement in math, reading and general knowledge in the first grade. Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten can predict low education achievement at the end of the fifth grade."

The Factbook statistics show the problem progresses as children get older. During the 2011-2012 school year, 15 percent of Thompson Middle School students and 38 percent of Rogers High School students were chronically absent.

"A reduction in truancy has been shown to decrease crime, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use as well as to change attitudes to enhance school readiness," says the Rhode Island Family Court on its website.

Chronic absenteeism and high absentee rates really affect all students, Shoemaker said.

"Chronic absenteeism affects all students in a class because teachers may backtrack or slow the learning pace to review lessons for students who have missed out," Kids Count notes.

Bringing parents into the Family Court on a criminal charge might have limited impact, Gaines said, because the punishment is a fine for each day the student has missed school without an excuse.

"People are reluctant to fine parents who are living on the edge anyway," she said.

Non-payment of court-ordered fines though, can lead to brief incarceration, the threat of which may be a deterrent, Gaines pointed out.

"Maybe parents will send their children to school to avoid becoming guests of the state," she said.

---

*Flynn@NewportRI.com*