

## Local schools focus on truancy

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### Fact Box

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Total referrals for 2008-09 for not attending school

- o Belpre City Schools: 90.
- o Fort Frye Local Schools: 55.
- o Frontier Local Schools: 90.
- o Marietta City Schools (students in county programs only): 29.
- o Warren Local Schools: 138.
- o Wolf Creek Local Schools: 9.

Source: Ohio Valley Educational Service Center

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When school starts in Washington County again in less than two weeks, educators hope to see each seat filled and a decrease in the more than 400 students who had to be referred to the county attendance officer last year.

Those referrals led to 33 complaints filed against parents in the court system, 16 referrals to Washington County Children Services and a gap in the education of many young learners.

"They really miss out when they miss a lot of school," said Harmar Elementary teacher Todd Caltrider. "We use a lot of technology in classes now, like the Smartboard, and you just can't make that up. We're beyond worksheets today."

There were 411 referrals last year from the county's school systems, not including Marietta City Schools, which didn't contract out services to the Ohio Valley Education Service Center for use of the attendance officer.

In the 2007-08 school year, there were 427 referrals and there were 525 the year before that.

The referrals come from schools, law enforcement and other social service agencies, said attendance officer Lynn Doebrich.

"It could be a student who didn't show up at the beginning of the school year and there were no records requests for them to go elsewhere, or oftentimes it's students missing more than the minimal amount of school," she said. "We do our best to work with the families and address the problem head on because truancy isn't usually the problem. There's usually something underlying if a child is missing a lot of school."

Doebrich and school administrators throughout the county have spent the past year working to streamline the attendance policies and make them more understandable to parents.

"There's now common language across all the buildings and all the districts," she said. "We want to start the school year off with all the parents knowing the policies and starting out on the right foot."

In Ohio, if a child misses five consecutive or seven school days in a month or 12 in a school year without a legitimate excuse, the child is considered to be a habitual truant.

There were 10 juvenile complaints filed with the courts for that last year, as well as 14 for chronic truancy, measured by being absent seven consecutive or 10 days in one month or 15 in one school year.

There were also four complaints filed for habitually truant students who been ordered by a court to attend and violated that order, as well as three complaints for habitually absent students that are classified by law as unruly children.

In addition, there were 25 complaints filed against parents for failure to send their children to school and eight complaints against parents for contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Failure to send a child to school is punishable by up to a \$500 fine and 70 hours of community service, while contributing to the delinquency of a minor has a maximum sentence of \$1,000 or six months in jail.

"Unfortunately, we have some parents who have been to court for this for the second, third or fourth time and the court steps it up," said Doebrich. "We have had parents and do have parents serving time in jail for this."

Many of the cases are able to be cleared up with a little education and notification, however, and don't have to go to the courts.

Letters are sent out to notify parents when a child has been reported to have an attendance concern, parents are warned when their children are close to the limit of days, and registered letters are sent to notify if charges are filed on either the parents or child.

Doebrich said the numbers dropped significantly last year for habitual absences in the Frontier Local district after she was invited to speak to parents and students at two open houses before the school year began.

The district saw total referrals drop from 117 and 135 in 2007-2008 and 2006-2007 to 90 last year.

"More people got the information and understood the information," Doebrich said.

Of the 411 students referred for attendance problems countywide during the 2008-09 school year, 294 were high school students and 117 were elementary students.

Many with the attendance problems are siblings, said Harmar Elementary School Principal Cheryl Cook.

"There are always a handful of families that have these problems, and you'll often see it in more than one child in the family," she said. "It takes its toll on the overall academic experience."

There's not a problem if a student is legitimately sick or injured and misses a day once in a while, Cook said, or makes proper arrangements if there must be a long-term absence.

"It's when a child is out one day this week, one day next week and then another day - that's the real problem," she said. "And often in those situations, the homework isn't getting done. The misconception is that you can send the work home and they get caught up, but that doesn't happen. They miss the modeling, talking and direct guided instruction that you can't send home."

Marietta City Schools didn't track attendance problems in the same manner as the Educational Service Center but building principals - who serve as attendance officers - said there are typically a few students at each building who have chronic attendance problems each year.

Many times all that's necessary is parents taking responsibility, learning the rules and following them, said Doebrich, something all families will have a chance to start anew within the coming weeks.

"It's very important to read the information coming home and to know the rules and your rights and responsibilities," she said. "There are so many times when a parent is told the rules and they say, 'Oh, I didn't know that.' Ultimately it is their responsibility."