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News

## Teamwork key in reducing schools' absenteeism rate

 February 28, 2019  Victoria Metcalf, Assistant Editor

 I wasn't old enough to go to school yet, but I remember peaking around the corner into my brother's bedroom and seeing him still asleep in bed. Even at a young age, I knew he should be up and getting ready to go to school. School is important, my

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grandmother frequently told me. I could hardly wait until I was old enough to attend myself. I wouldn't be late.

But even with this memory of my brother frequently not bothering to get up and go to school, I don't remember considering why my parents didn't make him. They were up and around, but I never remember anyone going in and making Jimmy get out of bed.

I sort of remember when he was allowed to quit school — this was the late 1950s so laws about mandatory attendance were far different from today. Although he was 10 years older than I am, I do remember thinking it wasn't good.

Somewhere along the way, my brother's attitude or understanding of school must have changed — perhaps it was his wife's influence or life's hard lessons of what it's like trying to get certain employment without a high school diploma. All three of his daughters graduated.

### New local program

I found myself thinking about this following a recent interview with the District Attorney's Investigative Assistant Gary McFarland, and Cynthia Roper, a social worker III with the Plumas County Department of Social Services. Roper works child protective services cases.

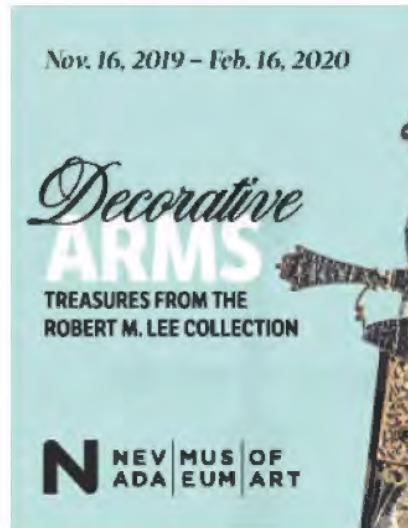
The two have formed the Truancy Prevention Team through the district attorney's office and Social Services in an effort to keep children of all ages in school.

For McFarland, it's personal, he readily admits. He was the one who wasn't interested in school and missed a lot. He can relate to many of those he works with using a gut-level approach others might lack. And he's honest.



District Attorney's Investigative Assistant Gary McFarland, and Cynthia Roper, a social worker III with the Plumas County Department of Social Services, have formed the Truancy Prevention Team in an effort to ensure that children go to school.

Photo by Victoria Metcalf



McFarland knows he must be honest or his message, his efforts are for nothing.

For Roper, it's the brightest part of her day when she gets to help a child come to understand why school is important, or get parents to a point where they care what their child or children are doing each day.

As a child protective services worker, she's genuinely interested in the lives of the people she comes to work with. And she would far rather find a solution early in the process rather than see others wait until a truancy problem has grown into a monster and another problem for the system.

"It's easier to deal with a mole hill than it is a mountain," McFarland said. And what he noticed before he began the new program was a lot of mountains.

For both, there are many reasons why this new program has become an important part of their careers. For both, it's a proactive program not a reactive program. For schools, it's become a much appreciated collaborative aimed at making life better, more workable for all involved, said Kristy Warren, Plumas Unified School District assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

### Leading up to the team

For McFarland, the instigator of the Truancy Prevention Team, it all started two years ago after attending a SARB hearing.

SARB has become the readily used term for the School Attendance Review Board. Under the California Education Code Section 48320 of 1974, it's become the enforcement arm for compulsory education. It's meant to kick in when school attendance issues and behavior problems are in danger of heading toward the juvenile justice system and possibly beyond.

And both parents and students are reminded there are legal ramifications for both parents and students when school is ignored, McFarland emphasized.

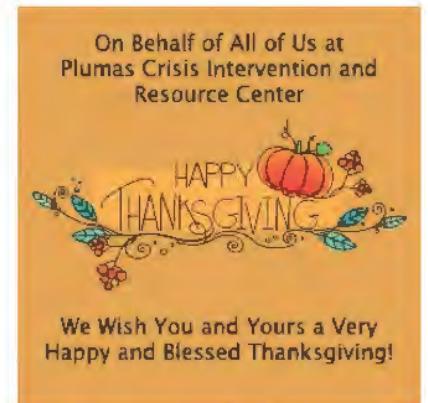
SARBs are made up of local people who work with young, school-aged students. Their role is to "help truant or recalcitrant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of available school and community resources," according to information from the California Department of Education.

Essentially, that's why McFarland as a district attorney's investigator ended up at the hearing. "After leaving (the) hearing I was overcome as to the overwhelming amount of work it would take to get the student back on



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track," he explained. "I asked myself why we were taking so long to get involved."

The kinds of students McFarland had in mind are those who have missed a lot of school or show signs that they might be heading in that direction. For them to succeed it isn't just a matter of making up missed lessons, it can come down to them making up months, possibly grades worth of missed learning opportunities.

For those students who are faced with the extremes of the truancy system this feeling can be so overwhelming it can feel that it's too much to go on.

McFarland said that a SARB hearing is held with the parents, the child and the school staff, along with other applicable county services, when a child has been absent to the point of being known as truant.

Those who fall into the 60 to 70 percent attendance range are in the "highest danger of dropping out," McFarland said.

#### Taking action

Now through Roper's and McFarland's program, a principal can notify them with concerns and they step in.

"With the approval of DA Hollister I approached the school about early intervention," McFarland said. Key was "addressing the issue while it was still manageable, taking a proactive instead of reactive approach to truancy," was part of McFarland's concept.

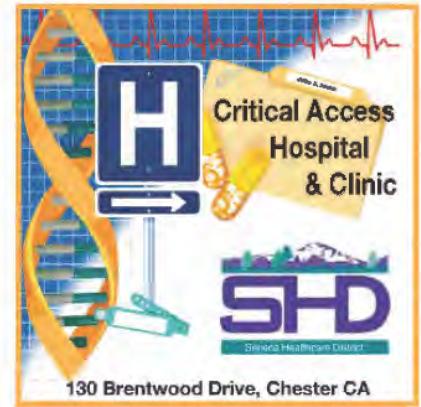
The district attorney was all for McFarland's idea. Hollister sees the aftermath in the courtroom of those who haven't been provided opportunities early in their schooling. He understands that sometimes the root cause of truancy is lack of parental support. Through his Alternative Sentencing Program, he's come to look for the tripwires of lives going wrong.

Hollister's wife, Lara Hollister, is the principal at Quincy Elementary School and this adds another layer of understanding to the issues.

In fact, at the front desk at Quincy EI for all to see is posted the week's absentee percentage log — it's that important.

McFarland said that as he and Hollister discussed the proposal McFarland asked about the new program, "Do you mind if I make it my own?"

With Hollister's full approval he had a new program to develop. "My goal was to sit down with the school (anyone involved in the keeping students in the classroom) and be a presence at meetings with the parents and children early on when truancy is just getting on the radar," McFarland said.



"Letting the parents know that I am there because the child's poor attendance is becoming an issue, which needed to be addressed," McFarland said he knew about what was needed. "I would then follow up with the schools weekly to get updates on the students."

In carefully considering what was needed for his new program, McFarland realized there are a myriad reasons why a student misses school. The reasons were far more involved than just thinking a talk with parents, with students and follow-ups would cover the problems.

McFarland realized early that there were issues that were "outside my skill set." That's when he contacted Roper.

"This made all of the difference," he explained. "She has access to services I was not even aware of."

"Together we started attending hearings, which got people's attention," McFarland said.

Roper is right there to link children and their families to all the support services the county and the state has to offer. Right next-door are the public health program, veterans' services for parents and their families, and behavioral health for those with mental health or substance abuse issues.

Roper also has access to state records. For instance if a family moves from Plumas County, she knows if they enroll their children in school and when. The same holds true for children moving into Plumas County.

They also have instant access to court records, can liaison with the sheriff's office and victim witness, and other applicable resources.

### **Supporting links**

"The support and outreach from the schools have been amazing," McFarland said. At this point he has visited all schools within the county. This includes getting involved with public schools as well as charter schools and their staffs.

"They have some really good people there who genuinely care for these children and just want the best for them," McFarland said. "I look at our role as supportive and doing what the schools sees best in dealing with the students and their families."

When Roper and McFarland are provided information about a child not attending school they meet with the parent, parents or caregivers. Roper said that it depends on what services are needed when it comes to taking the lead. Roper does the talking when CPS or any of the county's social programs are involved. McFarland takes the lead when the situation involves the law and the courts system.



The approach to parents or caregivers is as important as it is to students. When Roper and McFarland visit a home usually the only thing they need to say is who they are and where they're from.

For some parents it's a relief to have support. Some have a problem with a child or teen that chooses to stay up late on social media and is then too tired to go to school. This is just a matter of providing a little education to the parents.

First, as parents they are in charge. Sometimes parents need to be reminded of that fact, Roper explained. There are simple ways to help parents manage access to social media. If taking away the device isn't successful, there are ways to turn it off. Another approach is to have a password and change it daily.

Parents and caregivers don't have to do everything alone. Roper and McFarland let parents know that they have an entire network of people who are available to help.

Occasionally Roper and McFarland run across parents who don't care if their child goes to school or not. There are a variety of reasons why this might be happening and the pair examines alternatives in an effort to get children back in school.

For some parents it's become a habit. Getting up and getting the child off to school has become too much to deal with. This could be due to drug and/or alcohol use, mental health issues or economics. It could be a learned behavior. School wasn't important to the parents of the parents — the grandparents — therefore, it isn't important to the next generation.

To date, McFarland said that he hasn't had to threaten legal consequences. He recently spoke to one parent quite sternly and now her child is in school. In another situation he's tried just about everything and is still being met with resistance from the parent or parents. He knows it's time to act in ways he hasn't had to, but there are legal consequences in not sending a child to school.

"The results this year have been overwhelming as families have been provided services and students are going back to school," McFarland said. "As a result, we are realizing that combating the issue is going to require a community collaborative approach and our team is still evolving to hopefully include other county agencies and community member."

### **Identifying issues**

McFarland outlined some of the process.



They talk to families in an attempt to identify issues at the school or in the home that may contribute to truancy.

They refer them to other county agencies that can address specific needs including housing and other programs.

They follow up weekly with the schools and families and offer preventable support.

They have the ability to access law enforcement as needed.

They have the ability to refer for criminal charges against the parents and spell out the consequences for the students.

And they have the ability to involve CPS if it is apparent there is imminent risk or danger in the household.

In explaining how they come up with approaches to help solve problems that might be a little different, McFarland said that sometimes it's a simple fix.

For instance at one elementary school in the county some students regularly don't attend school. In examining the reason, McFarland said, "I'm now anticipating a new bus stop going in."

Although the distance to the elementary school isn't great, it's a hard walk in bad weather. By adding another bus stop, all children within that area can ride to school, avoid the nasty walk and get on with attending school.

Roper said that what they're looking at is a generation of children who don't understand what previous generations saw as part of life. While past generations were prepared for the walk, donned snow or rain gear or just flat had to put up with it, the present generation isn't programmed that way.

### **Word from the DA**

"I have to tell you I'm so impressed with these two," Hollister said.

It's hard to bounce back once a student has become identified as being truant and attempting to correct the situation. Hollister said that in all likelihood that those who were truant in school will end up in prison or have substance abuse problems.

"I am very grateful for the DA's partnership with the school district, social services and the sheriff's office," Hollister said. "DA Investigative Assistant Gary McFarland has demonstrated an incredible drive and passion in this area."



Hollister said that studies published in the Journal of School Health and the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs found that truancy is linked to school dropout and poor academic performance.

Truancy increases the likelihood that youth will engage in drug and alcohol use, fighting, theft and more serious forms of delinquency, Hollister explained.

"Over the long term, adults who were chronically truant as adolescents are more likely to have poorer health outcomes, lower paying jobs, and a greater chance of being incarcerated during their lifetime," Hollister said.

As an example, the San Bernardino District Attorney's Office reports that 78 percent of prison inmates were truant. This is the first entry on their arrest record, Hollister explained. And 82 percent of the prisoners are school dropouts.

"In addition to the overwhelming evidence of dangers to the student who is truant, truancy also negatively impacts the truant student's classmates and teachers," Hollister said about additional consequences.

"While we maintain the ability to use California's laws making a parent criminally liable should their child be truant, we have found it more effective and more efficient to address the issue at an earlier stage and undertake a proactive approach to assure the truant child gets to class," Hollister said. "The Truancy Prevention Team (TPT) has done an outstanding job to this end and we look forward to expanding these efforts to make Plumas County as healthy and safe a community as possible."

#### **A word from PUSD**

Kristy Warren said that the success of the new program is that everyone's working together to find solutions to the age-old problem of truancy.

Giving just one example, Warren said that Indian Valley Elementary School had a chronic absentee problem of more than 30 percent. Now that's down to 21 percent. So the new program is getting results.

## **Plumas Charter School**

Plumas Charter School is dissimilar from Plumas Unified School District in many ways, but one way is that the schools don't take attendance, said Taletha Washburn, PCS superintendent.

That doesn't mean that students aren't held accountable.

What PCS looks for is the work a student completes. Washburn calls this a time value of work. Every week students must check in with the school and turn in their work, Washburn explained. That's part of the contract they sign



with PCS. If they don't check in with their completed work then they are truant.

PCS has changed enormously in the last few years. Students, especially in upper grades, can attend school four days a week if they choose. Or they can drop off their work at a scheduled time each week, she emphasized.

If a student fails to live up to the contract with the school and doesn't complete schoolwork, that individual is counseled and a new contract can be devised, according to Washburn.

There are a lot of interventions available, she added.

If PCS' best services don't work, then school representatives can turn to the local SARB. Washburn also has the services of Gary McFarland and Cynthia Roper from the District Attorney's Truancy Prevention Team. "I've had to call Gary four or five times this year," Washburn said.

Unlike public schools, charter schools can ultimately choose to dismiss a student, she explained.

In some cases PUSD offers services through Michelle Abramson, the district's community resource coordinator. Among other programs she oversees the district's adult education program and the Community Day School. Or in some cases perhaps the best solution is having the student attend high school again, or possibly for the first time.

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