

The Newport Daily News

Sunday, April 13, 2014

NEWPORT

Middle school cuts absenteeism almost in half

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

The number of chronically absent students at Thompson Middle School in the current school year is running at 8 percent, nearly half of what it was two years ago, according to Rhode Island Kids Count data.

That figure was the statistic that attracted the most attention at the 16th annual meeting of the Newport Partnership for Families held Friday at the Hyatt Regency Newport on Goat Island.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 18 days during the school year. In the 2011-2012 school year, 15 percent of Thompson students were chronically absent, according to the Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook. In the 2010-2011 school year, 19 percent of Thompson students were chronically absent.

School Superintendent Colleen Jermain was asked what could explain the dramatic drop in truancy.

"My best guess is the culture and climate at Thompson," she said. "Principal Jaime Crowley and his staff are out walking the corridors every day — they know the children and their families."

Newport Partnership for Families is a coalition of 35 social service organizations, nonprofit agencies such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Newport County and businesses that work together to develop comprehensive responses to social problems.

The Partnership, whose director is Sharon K. Carter and program assistant is J. Niko Merritt, is currently focusing on two core issues in the community: chronic early absenteeism/truancy in the schools and underage substance abuse.

Robert Archer, a director of family

care at Child & Family Services of Newport County, is the chairman of the work group addressing chronic absenteeism. Ben Ellcome, coordinator of the Newport Substance Abuse Prevention Task Force, is chairman of the group addressing substance abuse. Both gave reports at the meeting.

Archer presented the most recent chronic absenteeism data from the School Department that included numbers from September to this month. Chronic absenteeism is currently 30 percent at Rogers High School and 14 percent at Pell Elementary School, he said.

At the high school, chronic absenteeism was 38 percent in the 2011-12 school year, and 43 percent in the 2010-11 school year, according to Archer, who drew from Kids Count statistics for the past school years.

At the elementary grade levels, chronic absenteeism was 13 percent in 2011-12 and 16 percent in 2010-11, he said.

Reducing truancy rates in early grades can affect high school dropout rates, Archer said.

"Research shows that chronic absenteeism is a strong predictor for dropping out," Archer said.

School officials and teachers are working on keeping students interested and involved in school curriculum and activities, and drawing in the families as much as possible.

Archer said his group is researching "promising practices" that have been used in other school districts around the country. They want to develop a model that pre-

vents absenteeism and provides intervention for at-risk and high-risk youth.

"We'll first develop a one-year plan, and then a three-year plan," he said.

School Committee Chairman Charles P. Shoemaker said he believes pre-kindergarten programs that involve both the child and parents should be part of the solution.

"The child-parent relationship starts in the pre-kindergarten years," he said. "Those are the formative years and the key reason for introducing universal pre-kindergarten programs. We can send a truant officer to the homes of some of our families now, and it doesn't have an effect."

The keynote speakers at the meeting were Deborah S. Linell, program officer for the van Beuren Charitable Foundation, and Ines Merchan, grants program officer for the Rhode Island Foundation. Both organizations have provided funding that allows the Newport Partnership to address problems in the community.

Linell and Merchan entitled their shared presentation, "Collaborative and Collective Impact."

They said their foundations are more likely to fund initiatives that involve many different groups and organizations. The groups should have a mutually reinforcing plan of action and "backbone support organizations," as well as meeting other conditions for collective success, such as a way to measure results, they said.