

# The Newport Daily News

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OUR VIEW

## Schools could target parents of truant kids

With the opening this year of a new unified elementary school in Newport, school officials have a unique opportunity to step up their fight against truancy.

Thirteen percent of the students in kindergarten through third grade in Newport are considered chronically absent, meaning they have missed more than 18 days during the school year, according to the latest Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook. That's more than 100 of the youngest students in the city.

And that is a problem that is only likely to get worse as they get older, as School Committee Chairman Charles P. Shoemaker pointed out earlier this week.

Shoemaker, who has been a staunch advocate for programs for the city's youngest learners, made the remarks at a City Council-School Committee Liaison Subcommittee meeting during which he proposed that the School Department file criminal complaints against the parents of chronically truant elementary school students. The complaints would be turned over to the city solicitor's office, which would file them with Family Court.

The recommendation came out of a recent meeting between school officials and Family Court Chief Judge Haiganush R. Bedrosian, Shoemaker said. The state's Family Court has a separate Truancy Calendar, but primarily deals with middle school and high school students. Cases involving elementary students typically have gone now'here,

Shoemaker said.

"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," Shoemaker said of Family Court officials.

Rhode Island law requires that every child between the ages of 6 and 18 attend school. Under the law, school districts can bring legal proceedings in Family Court against children who "willfully and habitually absent" themselves from school in an effort to compel those children to go to school.

That may work with older students, but in cases involving the youngest students who are missing too many days of school, parents or guardians must be held responsible.

If a summons to Family Court isn't a serious enough wakeup call on its own, perhaps the threat of fines for each day a student misses school without an excuse will get parents' attention. Further, non-payment of court-ordered fines can lead to incarceration, the threat of which may be just the kick in the pants some parents need to make sure their children are going to school. Or as School Committee Vice Chairwoman Jo Eva Gaines put it, "Maybe parents will send their children to school to avoid becoming 'guests' of the state."

The problem only worsens as children get older: During the 2011-12 school year, 15 percent of Thompson Middle School students and 38 percent of Rogers High School students were chronically absent, according to the Kids Count Factbook.

At any age, adult involvement — parents, grandparents and guardians, teachers and truant officers — is key to addressing truancy.

But sometimes legal action must be taken. Newport school officials are right to pursue whatever legal means are available to them to try to nip this problem in the bud, at the earliest ages possible. In the long run, it will be better for the individual students as well as their classmates — and for the schools' overall achievement.