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Expand truancy partnership

The Caddo School Board recently approved \$60,000 to help continue funding a truancy prevention program through Volunteers For Youth Justice (VYJ) for the remainder of the academic year. We want to applaud this decision and encourage expansion of this partnership.

ACT Now! — which stands for Abolish Caddo Truancy Now! — has been an ideal model of how the community can work together to find a better solution to issues. It also has been a successful and beneficial partnership to the Caddo school system.

The project began as a series of luncheons hosted by the Learning To Finish campaign, a partnership of The Community Foundation and Alliance For Education, around the idea of how we can work together to keep more children in school. The data on dropouts were fairly clear that truancy is an early indicator a child is getting into academic trouble. The data also are clear that children who do not attend school often develop many other social and legal problems that further impede their ability to learn and graduate.

Monthly lunches were held and attended by representatives from Caddo Schools, the Juvenile Courts, Caddo Juvenile Services, the District Attorney's office, the Caddo Sheriff's office and the Shreveport Police Department, the Caddo Parish Commission, area non-profits who are active in truancy prevention and other commu-

**D. SCOTT
HUGHES**
OPINION



nity partners. Key was the personal participation of Juvenile Judge David Matlock, District Attorney Charles Scott and schools Superintendent Gerald Dawkins.

The community team worked to develop a new model using the parts we already had in Caddo. Each part brought something to table and found ways to improve efficiency and outcomes. In the end the group selected VYJ as the best to serve as program administrator and be the home for the expansion of more Families In Need of Services (FINS) officers, who serve the court and are vital to working with truant children. The Community Foundation agreed to fund the first year of operations with a \$208,000 grant to seed the program and allow it to prove its success. And succeed it has.

As of March, the program has received 4,355 truancy conference referrals. When the program began in January 2009, it was common practice to see participation at the initial conference level, the best place to intervene the fastest, hovering at the 10 percent level. Since the new process has been put in place, VYJ has seen this number steadily increase to a level that now reaches 65 percent participation

at the initial conference with an overall rate over the 15 months now up to 40 percent, four times what is was previously.

What does this mean in real terms? As reported in The Times, this means a 2-point rise in Caddo daily attendance, or about 1,000 more students a day who weren't in school a year ago now attending. This rate is as much as a 10-point rise in alternative schools.

The program is working and children are attending school. That ultimately translates to more children learning and being prepared to succeed in life, fewer social and legal issues for children and, yes, dare we say, better test scores. It is a win-win-win for Caddo children.

It is worth noting that this partnership expands on all the good work being done in Caddo. Rutherford House continues to offer high-quality services for the schools it serves. Caddo schools' child welfare and attendance office continues to reach out to help children. And Caddo and Shreveport continue to fund FINS officers to help address the problem.

The School Board's decision to help push truancy efforts in the parish even higher is a strong commitment to help children that will continue to pay huge returns for years to come.

D. Scott Hughes is executive director of Alliance for Education. Also contributing to this column was Paula Hickman, executive director of The Community Foundation.