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## **Judge involves families to help tackle truancy**

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By Fiona McCrone, The Legal Intelligencer

If Pennsylvania wants to eliminate truancy, the first step is to take it out of the courtroom.

"I hate the word 'truancy' -- it implies criminal behavior," said Judge Joan Byer of the Family Trial Division of Jefferson Circuit Court in Louisville, Ky.

Judge Byer spoke last month at the Children's Roundtable Summit in Philadelphia, where truancy was among the issues discussed.

She created a 10-week program in her county that has reduced truancy, and similar programs in Pennsylvania are following her model. Truancy, she said, is not an issue of a few bad kids not showing up for school but rather is a systemic issue within the community.

She challenged the audience to reason why it makes sense to suspend or expel a student for not attending school, particularly since these children, once suspended, are rarely able to make up the work they have missed. The question, she said, becomes how to keep kids in school and enable them to keep learning.

In 1997, Judge Byer helped create the Truancy Court Diversion Project, which takes a "whole family" approach to truancy. Judges, social workers, teachers and parents are all involved because Judge Byer and others realized that more often than not, the child is not the one making the decision not to go to school.

Many of the children Judge Byer has worked with come from low-income households where domestic violence is common and parents may have drug problems or are homeless. The program provides GED classes for parents who are uneducated and gives them access to resources such as drug and domestic violence counseling. In addition to the initial 10-week program, after-school care is offered.

Many of the children Judge Byer has worked with have not become truant again.

A similar program was presented to the panel by Rick Saylor, administrator of Children & Youth Services of Lycoming County, where caseworkers have been placed in every school to deal directly with students and help "truancy elimination plans" with children and their parents. The presence of the caseworkers has led to a significant decrease in truancy referrals, Mr. Saylor said.

Cynthia Stoltz, an administrator for the Children's Court of Allegheny County Common Pleas Court, and Judge John Kuhn of the Adams County Common Pleas Court presented the Juvenile Justice Court Committee's report, "Truancy: A Call to Action." The two, co-chairs of the committee, insisted upon the same fundamentals as Judge Byer and said blame cannot be placed on one person or institution.

Fiona McCrone: [FMcCrone@alm.com](mailto:FMcCrone@alm.com). For more articles like this, visit [www.thelegalintelligencer.com](http://www.thelegalintelligencer.com).

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