Citywide Effort to Combat Truancy Paying Off

School attendance for chronic truants up 33%

August 12, 2010 (San Francisco) – As San Francisco’s public school students prepare to head back to school on August 16, Mayor Gavin Newsom, District Attorney Kamala Harris and San Francisco Unified School District Superintendent Carlos Garcia announce that they are committed to further reducing truancy this coming school year and remind students that every day in school counts.

“Getting a good job in the 21st century means getting a good education,” said Mayor Newsom. “Closing the ‘graduation gap’ so our young people can succeed is our shared responsibility, and combating truancy and chronic absences through an aggressive, focused and coordinated effort must be our shared priority as the new school year begins.”

Mayor Newsom shared his support for a new SF Truancy Assessment and Resource Center (TARC) located at 44 Gough Street that will serve as a one-stop location where truant youth can be reconnected with school and an array of community services. SF TARC, staffed by an SFUSD counselor and Urban Services YMCA case managers, will assess each youth to determine the best steps to reengage the youth and their family in the educational process and connect them to support services in the community.

Last year, school attendance nudged upward for SFUSD, with 4,500 fewer days of school missed by “habitual” and “chronic” truant students district-wide than in the year prior. At the elementary level, there was a 17% decline in missed school days, and a 33% reduction in absences for previously chronic truants over the past two school years. (Under the California Education Code, a habitual truant has unexcused absences totaling 10 or more days of school. A chronic truant has unexcused absences totaling 20 or more days.)

“The 33 percent reduction in chronic truancy at the elementary school level is a result of the carrot and stick approach we’ve adopted here in San Francisco,” said District Attorney Kamala Harris. “Working with the school district and our other City partners for the fifth year in a row we have created a blueprint for the state that shows that combining support and services with strict accountability yields results. Building on the success of our elementary school efforts, we will focus this year on fighting truancy at the high school level because our young people should be racking up course credits not prison tattoos and gunshot wounds.”

(more)
“Success in school starts with being in school. Those students who are struggling academically are often our students who miss the most days of school,” said Superintendent Carlos Garcia. “The Mayor and the DA are showing the kind of leadership we need if we are going to address the achievement gap that continues to afflict our most vulnerable youth in San Francisco.”

Welcome back letters from the District Attorney and the superintendent are being sent to over 575 families who took part in the School Attendance Review Boards (SARB) process last year for extreme cases of chronic truancy. The letters will offer encouragement and support and remind the families that SFUSD is serious about requiring school attendance. (Over 60 percent of those students showed improved attendance following SARB hearings.)

The superintendent said that the district is determined not to let budget reductions set back efforts to make sure students are in school. The district has enlisted a cadre of retired teachers to begin calling the families of students who do not return to school next week in order to intervene on absenteeism immediately.

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