

1st class passes anti-truancy program in D.C.

By Gary Emerling
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Ten seventh- and eighth-graders yesterday graduated from the District's first truancy-diversion program in a ceremony that highlighted efforts to combat school absenteeism.

"It talks to us about character and how, if we don't have good character, nobody's going to want us for a job," said Lawanne Johnson, 13, a program graduate who graced the ceremony with an impromptu rendition of Whitney Houston's song "Greatest Love of All." "We should want to hang with people that want to be something in life."

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Success: Lawanne Johnson (right) graduated from the District's first truancy-diversion program yesterday at Garnet-Patterson Middle School in Northwest. Participants attended meetings with Judge Lee F. Satterfield (center).

TRUANCY

The 15 students who originally enrolled in the 10-week program all attended Garnet-Patterson Middle School in Northwest, where yesterday's ceremony was held.

Each had between 11 and 35 unexcused absences during the spring semester last year.

In the program, the children and a parent or guardian attended meetings every Tuesday morning with Judge Lee F. Satterfield, a former presiding judge of D.C. Family Court, to discuss how to improve their attendance, grades and overall behavior.

Four social workers also regularly visited the students' homes to help their families address issues leading to the unexcused absences. Students had to attend the meetings and improve their attendance to graduate.

"They started coming to the house and told us we needed to start coming to the program," said Naphtali Young, 14. "It got me up early and used to getting to school on time."

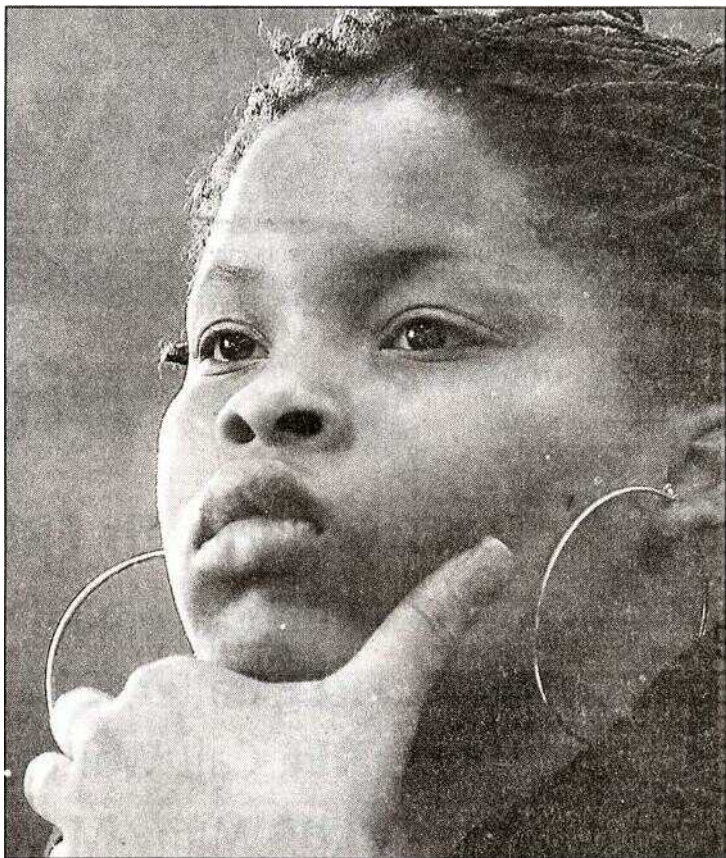
Lawanne's mother, Janice, said her daughter often was late to school because of safety concerns as she traveled alone from their home in Northwest. The program helped Lawanne realize that others had the same difficulties.

"It wasn't just the parents getting them here; it was them wanting to get here and taking the initiative," Miss Johnson said.

The D.C. public school system has been plagued by high truancy rates, which officials say stem from problems at home or simply students' lack of interest in getting an education.

According to school policy, a student is truant if he or she has at least 15 unexcused absences.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act requirements, the school system reported



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Lakia Young, 13, was among the students who completed the District's first truancy-diversion program. Students enrolled in the program were required to attend weekly meetings and improve their attendance in order to graduate.

20,845 chronic truants and a 23.5 percent overall truancy rate during the 2003-04 school year, which was more than four times the national average of 3 percent to 5 percent.

School officials could not provide current truancy statistics yesterday.

Officials did say that an enhanced enforcement program operated by the court, schools and other agencies targeting parents of elementary school children resulted in a 40 percent decrease in truant students between fall 2003 and fall 2004.

According to the school system's strategic plan on its Web site (www.k12.dc.us/dcps/home.html), officials hope to have an 18.5

percent overall truancy rate by the end of this school year and a 5 percent rate by 2014.

Officials said yesterday's culmination of the program — a collaboration among the school system, city agencies and D.C. Superior Court — is a way to meet that goal without imposing on parents or students penalties such as fines or imprisonment.

"It's a non-sanction-based program," said Diane E. Powell, the school system's assistant superintendent for support services. "When we look at the return, it's worth any investment."

Officials said the program will resume at Garnet-Patterson and another middle school next month.