

District

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Tackling Truancy at the Source

Court Program Delves Into Family Issues That Keep Kids From School

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The judge looked around the library at Garnet-Patterson Middle School. Everyone was there. Everyone except the students and their parents.

This, Lee F. Satterfield thought to himself, was going to be tough.

Not that he expected it to be a breeze. The 11 students the D.C. Superior Court judge was awaiting were chronic truants, repeatedly absent from school and many facing the prospect of court sanction if they continued to skip out.

The judge was their last shot at straightening out before matters took a serious turn.

So how was it that not one of them — not a single student or parent — was there on time, at 8 a.m., for the weekly hour-long meeting with the judge, the school staff and the social workers assigned to help the families?

In a public school system in which 21 percent of the students are chronically absent without an excuse, Garnet-Patterson is about average — far from the worst but a long way from the best.

The new program, started last fall by the court, the mayor's office and D.C. public schools, is a pilot effort to curb truancy by not only attacking the absenteeism itself but also by dealing with the family dynamics that often foster it, such as a relative's chronic illness or a lack of reliable child care.

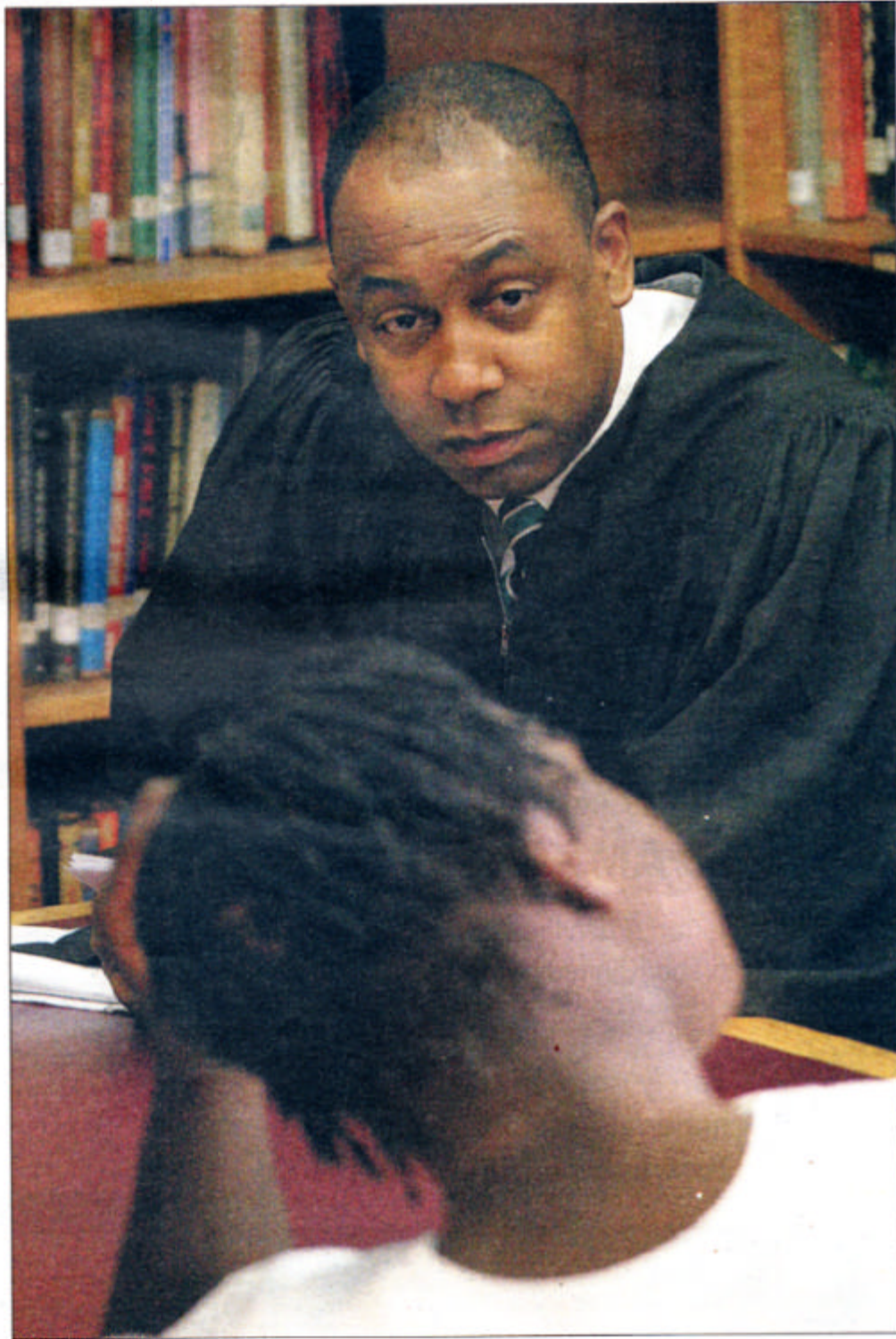
Parents are counseled, too, and not just in the 12 weekly meetings at the school. Social workers visit the families between meetings to help them find a job or a GED program or child care, whatever is needed to bring some stability and accountability to the families' lives.

A few weeks into the program, accountability, it appeared, was having a hard time taking hold.

A couple of students straggled in a few minutes after 8 a.m., and a few more eventually found their way there by about 8:20.

Satterfield could only shake his head in frustration.

"I'm not into ordering stuff, but we have to be here on time," he told the students. The tardiness would not go unpunished, he said. Each of them would have to write an essay for the following week on the importance of being punc-



BY JAMES M. THRESHER — THE WASHINGTON POST

Judge Lee F. Satterfield leads sessions at Garnet-Patterson Middle School clad in his judicial robe, a reminder that truancy can land a family in court. The program's objective is to keep that from happening.

Program Targets Truancy Factors at Home, School

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tual. None of them looked at all fazed by the judge's admonition, and the ones who arrived even later, at 8:30 and 8:40, were spared it.

Maurice Downing's mother, Gail, walked into the Garnet library earlier this month for a truancy session, uncomfortably short of breath and desperate to sit down. She has asthma and diabetes. She used to be in even worse health, bad enough that Maurice, 16, was held back a couple of years ago because he was absent so much caring for his mother.

Now in the eighth grade, Maurice says he did what he had to do. "It was hard for me to fail, but my mother needed me more than my school," he said. But even after his mother's health improved, his attendance troubles persisted, which is how he ended up in the truancy program.

In January, the program graduated its first class at Garnet, a school of about 350 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders on 10th Street NW, just north of U Street. This semester, the program is working with Downing and 10 others at Gar-

net and with a group of students at Kramer Middle School in Southeast.

Every week, the students gather at the school for an hour before regular classes begin. They are encouraged to talk about their talents and goals and to think about responsibility and consequences.

Some of the students have skipped school seven or eight times. Others have been truant more than 20 times, according to

Satterfield. At Garnet, the judge leads the session, clad in his black judicial robe, a reminder that truancy can land a family in court. The objective of the program is to keep that from happening.

But if a student keeps skipping school, the case can be referred to the family court truancy calendar at D.C. Superior Court. If a parent appears to be largely at fault, he or she can be charged with neglect or with violating the Compulsory School

Attendance Act. And if the child appears to be beyond the parents' control, he or she can be deemed in need of supervision, which allows the judge to take any number of steps to rein in the child.

The problem, though, isn't just complicated home lives, and it isn't just about a handful of children with particularly bad attendance records. When dozens of students are arriving 10, 20, even 30 minutes late, sauntering up the block as if

they don't have someplace to be, the problem is bigger than the domestic difficulties of a few troubled families.

The collective complacency about school can only feed other problems among juveniles, such as crime and drug use, which is why the court's truancy diversion program is part of broader effort by the District to focus on the needs of young people who are already in trouble or are headed in that direction.

D.C. police Inspector Lillian Overton, commander of the department's youth division, said truancy is trouble at any age, even in elementary school, when it can be a sign of abuse or neglect. Among older students, it is often a sign of problems to come, she said. "With the older ones," Overton said, "it tends to be a gateway to delinquent behavior." And middle school is where they are most at risk for falling into such behavior, she said. "We want to get a hold of it before it becomes chronic."

If truancy is not yet chronic at Garnet-Patterson, lateness, not surprisingly, already is.

"Tardiness is the biggest problem," said Veda Usilton, Garnet's principal. "They come to school so late. Many parents don't seem to understand that school starts at 8:45."

Instead of demanding punctuality and punishing lateness, the school has largely accommodated tardiness by not starting morning announcements until shortly after 9 a.m. "We're not helping the situation," Usilton acknowledged.

Instruction doesn't begin until close to 9:15, which means that the punctual students — and there are many — who arrive as early as 8:15 often languish for the better part of an hour, doing little, if anything, productive.

The less studious are only too happy to linger outside school until the last minute, or even later. Standing by the door, the attendance counselor, Darryl Thompson, hustles in the latecomers. Only those who are really late will need a tardy pass from him. Thompson, who's been at school in one capacity or another for almost 20 years, seems to know every student by name. And more important, he knows who was in school the day before and who wasn't.

"Baby, you've been out three days, and only one note," he tells one girl.

It is just the beginning of another long day of figuring out who's in school, who's not and why. After issuing a string of tardy passes, Thompson heads to homerooms to collect attendance sheets.

Once he has entered everything into his computer system, he will



Maurice Downing was held back because of truancy.



Temptist Johnson likes to stay home and listen to music.



Temptist Johnson and Juan Fabian, both 13, work on a problem given to them by Satterfield. The judge also encourages them to talk about their talents and goals.



PHOTOS BY JAMES M. THRESHER — THE WASHINGTON POST

Maurice Downing, 16, was held back a couple of years ago because he logged so many absences while caring for his mother, Gail. Now that she's doing better, he's still missing school.

start making phone calls to the homes of those who haven't shown up and whose parents haven't called to say why. On a given day, he may make 20 to 40 calls, he said.

Just as important is what happens away from the school, in the homes, where the social workers meet weekly with the families to try iron out issues that might seem to have nothing to do with school but often have a lot to do with why a child is absent.

Last term, they found that a child was missing school to accompany her illiterate mother on frequent trips to government offices, Satterfield said.

The program's first go-round was a good start. Of the 14 students, 11 completed the program. A couple of them have fallen into their old habits, but overall, most of the students and their families now are more focused on school, the judge said.

The latest group is proving to be more of a challenge, Usilton said.

Most of the families in the first group just needed a little encouragement, a little support. But the students this term are "hard-core," said Usilton, who has been principal since 1997. "They have real attendance problems."

Sitting in her office, she said she is puzzled by her students' lack of enthusiasm. "I used to run to school," she said. "They walk so slowly. There's no excitement about coming to school."

"Maybe that's the school's fault," she said.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, attendance is a key measure of school performance, and many schools have taken to raffling off prizes or offering other inducements to encourage good attend-

ance. Garnet has gotten into the act, too, with pizza parties for classes with the best attendance and prizes for individual standouts, Thompson said.

But he knows that unless the parents step in and unless the school steps up, gimmicks will go only so far in steering students toward

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DARRYL THOMPSON, Garnet-Patterson attendance counselor

school and away from trouble.

The kids in the program are not "bad kids," said Thompson, the attendance counselor. "They are not the kids out stealing cars or rob-

bing people," he said. "They're just kids who need someone to give them some focus and encouragement. They have dreams and aspirations, but they don't see how school figures into those dreams."

Temptist Johnson, 13, is starting to see that.

The soft-spoken eighth-grader knew she was supposed to go school, but with her mother already gone to work in the morning, it was more fun to skip. "I liked to stay home and listen to music," she said.

And her mother's efforts didn't go anywhere. "I tried everything myself, and it wasn't working," Sharon Johnson said. "I took away different things, like her CD player and CDs, different activities

she couldn't go on, and it didn't work."

But after she was placed in the truancy program, Temptist's attendance improved, and she's thinking about high schools, in particular about attending one with an ROTC program, her mother said. Temptist would like to be a nurse in the Navy. "Before, it was nothing but music," Johnson said, "but now she's really getting it."

Some of the other students apparently aren't — at least not yet.

After showing up late a couple of weeks ago, most of the students didn't even bother turning up for the last session before Easter break. Perhaps it was the essay about tardiness that scared them away.

Whatever it was, of the 11 families in the program, only four students and their parents showed up.

The next meeting, the judge said, wouldn't be for the students. The next meeting would be just for the parents.

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