

Bossier outlines development, job training programs for teens

BY APRIL REYNOLDS • AREYNOLDS2@GANNETT.COM • JULY 31, 2009



District Judge Bruce Bolin, Richey Jackson, director of the Bossier-Webster Parish Truancy Assessment and Service Center, and Airline principal Kim Gaspard chat during a gathering and breakfast at the Palmetto Country Club. (Jim Hudelson/The Times)

Education professionals and leaders are forging a partnership to benefit students of all ages.

The Bossier Parish truancy program held a back-to-school breakfast Thursday to bring together education groups and nonprofits to collaborate to help at-risk children.

Attendees, who will work together on future truancy projects, included Bossier-Webster District Attorney J. Schuyler Marvin, Bossier Parish Community College Chancellor Jim Henderson and Bossier schools Superintendent D.C. Machen.

This was the first time the entities were brought together, and each will work at the different levels to help children and adjudicated teens, director Richey Jackson said.

"Everybody seems excited to work together to do something for the good of kids and our community. All of us want to help kids, where we can really come together and make an awesome program."

Voted as the top truancy and dropout division in the nation in 2007, Jackson said Bossier's program hopes to reach those ages 15-22 through various development programs.

A pilot program in the works will be a collaborative effort involving BPCC, the court system, Goodwill Industries and the truancy program.

"My vision is to take 17- to 22-year-old kids who are in the court system, not for violent or sexual crimes," Jackson said. "In lieu of whatever punishment they may get, they would be ordered to go to BPCC for GED training and work ethics courses if they don't have their high school diploma, and most of them don't. Then Goodwill will help them find a job."

The plan is to monitor participants at their job site, where they will be scored weekly by their supervisors. "When they go back to the judge for their court date, they'll take all that with them."

Jackson said this will help with work force development for those of college age.

"When we start talking about education and how it helps the economic problems, work force problems and mainly how it helps people improve their quality of life "» there's not a solution. There's a whole group of solutions," Henderson told the crowd Thursday at Palmetto Country Club in Benton.

Bossier's truancy program, under the district attorney's office, is responsible for notifying parents or guardians, referring them to counseling programs and facilitating informal voluntary family plan agreements in cases of truant children. Notifications of truant children in kindergarten through 12th grade prompt the office to action once they are recorded by individual schools following a student's fifth unexcused absence.

Last year, the office received about 14,000 referrals from Bossier and Webster — some regarding the same child.

When the program began around 2001, the Bossier school district recognized "the viable resources that it could provide in helping us provide the message to our parents and students about the importance of school attendance," Machen said.

He acknowledged the program has helped change attitudes and make educators' and administrators' jobs easier. "Because now we can tell them there are consequences and the state has laws."