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Upgraded DA's Anti-Truancy Program Partners with 12 School Districts

Houston, Tx – District Attorney Patricia Lykos announced Wednesday that an upgraded Stay in School Program will partner with 12 school districts to fight truancy in the new school year, after it was used with 33,400 area truants and their parents during the 2008-09 academic year.

The prevention program relies initially on warning letters from Lykos herself to parents and students. More unexcused absences trigger early intervention to attack underlying problems. Convictions may be avoided through closely supervised diversion plans that can include counseling, related assistance and community service work.

Those who fail to honor their commitments face full prosecution. Students and parents may be subject to fines of up to \$500 and other penalties, including criminal prosecution for contempt.

Michael Moore, chief of the DA's Truancy Section, said most students and families get the message clearly with the DA's warning letter. Four of every five avoid truancy charges.

"We've had proven success with this program," Moore said. "By keeping these kids attending their classes, we can cut the drop-out rate, reduce more serious juvenile crime, and get these youth back on the path to becoming productive citizens."

High-tech allies are part of the effort. Advanced computer programs will closely track each case this year. The DA's unit has also been evaluating the potential use of GPS truancy monitors and advanced counseling regimens for chronic truants.

Participating with the Truancy Section are 12 area school districts, four alternative schools and – for the first time – a charter school, the Richard Milburn Academy in north Houston. Other partners include seven Justices of the Peace, six Harris County Constable's Offices, and five supporting educational and social service agencies. (See below for the complete list.)

During the last school year, the District Attorney's Office sent 33,397 warning letters. There were 7,681 students and/or parents charged with truancy. Of those, 3,343 signed pretrial diversion agreements. There were 2,566 convictions, and 78 truants were charged with contempt of court for failing to follow judicial sanction orders.

The program covers kindergarten through 12th grades. Ninth graders had the largest percentage of truancy warning letters – 16.6 percent of the total.

(See partnership list below)

2009-10 Academic Year:

Stay in School Program Partnerships with the District Attorney's Office

Aldine Independent School District
Clear Creek Independent School District
Deer Park Independent School District
Galena Park Independent School District
Klein Independent School District
La Porte Independent School District
North Forest Independent School District
Pasadena Independent School District
Sheldon Independent School District
Spring Independent School District
Tomball Independent School District
Waller Independent School District
Richard Milburn Academy charter school
Harris County Department of Education (Highpoint Schools)
Harris County Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (Excel Academy)
TRIAD Prevention Program
Community Youth Services
Communities in Schools
Harris County Juvenile Probation Department

Judge Dale Gorczynski, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 1, Position 1
Judge Jo Ann Delgado, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 2, Position 1
Judge Mike Parrott, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 3, Position 1
Judge J. Kent Adams, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 4, Position 1
Judge Zinetta Burney, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 7, Position 2
Judge Holly Williamson, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 8, Position 1
Judge Louie Ditta, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 8, Position 2

Harris County Constable Jack F. Abercia, Precinct 1
Harris County Constable Gary L. Freeman, Precinct 2
Harris County Constable Ken Jones, Precinct 3
Harris County Constable Ron Hickman, Precinct 4
Harris County Constable May Walker, Precinct 7
Harris County Constable Bill Bailey, Precinct 8