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**HELPING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES SUCCEED: PILOT TRUANCY COURT  
LAUNCHES NEXT SCHOOL YEAR IN CITY OF ST. CHARLES SCHOOL DISTRICT**

*St. Charles County* - When County Executive Steve Ehlmann saw the 2013 Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) score for the City of St. Charles School District last fall, he became concerned. The program reviews and accredits Missouri's 520 school districts and while the score, at 86.8%, is considered high, other St. Charles County school districts had scores in the 90th percentile. The St. Charles High School graduate and former educator and legislator discovered that part of school district's score was the result of attendance – the district had only 75% of students attending 90% of the time.

“The debate continues on how to improve our schools. One group thinks the schools need more money, another wants better teachers, administrators and school boards. Both sides should be able to agree that students cannot learn if they aren't in school,” said Ehlmann. “Under the state constitution, county government has no powers in the area of public education, but if attendance impacts the score, I wanted to see what could be done about it otherwise.”

Ehlmann heard of Truancy Courts in the City of St. Louis, and he, along with City of St. Charles Mayor Sally Faith, attended a session. Afterwards, Ehlmann brought his concerns and discussed St. Louis City's court with Tim Lohmar, Prosecuting Attorney for St. Charles County.

Lohmar, along with Ken Simmons, Juvenile Officer for the 11th Judicial Circuit Court's Family Court Juvenile Division, and Dr. Jeff Marion, Superintendent of the City of St. Charles School District, sat down in January 2014 to develop an organized effort to improve school attendance. The result is a pilot Truancy Court Program through the 11th Judicial Circuit Court, set to launch for the 2014-2015 school year in the City of St. Charles School District.

“State law requires minors to go to school at least until they are 17,” said Lohmar. “Right now, if a student is found to be excessively truant, only the student goes through the Juvenile Court process. However, parents and guardians are also liable by state law and we did not have a process to enforce their responsibilities. To help the families and students in our community, and to keep this from becoming a bigger issue in the future and further impacting the school district and districts across the county, we decided to launch this program.”

The purpose of the Truancy Court Program is to improve school attendance, but its goals go beyond enforcement of the law. “I want to stress that this is a diversionary program. We want to see families and students succeed, so the goal of the program is to first get to the root of the attendance problem. If attendance issues are resolved and programs and services given through the program are successfully completed, parents and guardians will avoid Class C misdemeanor charges and the student will avoid going further in the Juvenile Court process,” said Lohmar.

In the new Truancy Court program, a student (under 17 years of age) and his/her family begin the process after the student has five (5) absences. The Deputy Juvenile Officer (DJO) assigned to the school may open an informal case and start an informal process first to work with the family and student to resolve the truancy issue without having an actual referral go to court. The DJO will hold Truancy Diversionary Conferences and involve school counselors, social workers, and other resources to help the family and student. The DJO will also be available to meet with school officials and families outside of the conferences regarding any concern. Currently, DJO's follow a similar process after a student has eight (8) absences. With the new program, the process going forward also involves more monitoring of the situation.

“We want to compel families and students to accept services and confront the issue,” said Simmons on the purpose of these first steps. “We’re hopeful and confident that we can keep families and students from going any further in this process by offering them the services and help they need.”

Dr. Jeff Marion, Superintendent for the City of St. Charles School District, looks forward to seeing the impact of this program. “I’m sure everyone agrees that students cannot learn if they are not at school on a consistent basis,” said Dr. Marion. “We have to send a strong message that education is important and that if you do not go to school, there will be consequences - for students and parents.”