

Supervisors using grant for Fresno Unified truancy program

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A program to reduce truancy in Fresno Unified School District is expected to be approved by Fresno County supervisors on Tuesday.

The program, which was supported by Fresno Unified School District trustees in August, already is underway, said Stephen Wright, an assistant Fresno County district attorney.

The 10-month program allows for appointment of a deputy district attorney at a cost of \$143,884, paid for with a grant from Fresno Unified School District. The program includes employee training, meetings with parents and students, letters to families and prosecution, if necessary.

State records indicate that Fresno County had among the highest elementary school truancy rates in the state, with nearly 27 percent of students labeled as truant during the 2013-14 school year – a 5 percent increase from the prior year.

Under state law, students are considered truant if they have three unexcused absences or are at least 30 minutes tardy three times in a school year. A report last month by the state attorney general said that students who miss school are more likely to struggle academically and eventually drop out.

In Fresno Unified, nearly 42,500 students were considered truant during the 2013-14 school year – more than half of all students.

The state attorney general's report said more than 230,000 elementary students in California missed 18 or more days of school last year. The report only tracks student attendance up to the fifth grade.

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Stephen Wright, assistant district attorney, Fresno County

The goal of the program is to alert parents to the dangers of truancy, such as juvenile crime and drug abuse.

"Early on, we will start with intervention by meeting with parents about the negative effects of your children not going to school," Wright said.

If students continue to miss school, the alternatives are prosecution and arrest for parents and guardians.

"Hopefully," he said, "it doesn't get to that point."

Supervisor Henry R. Perea said the program is a positive way for the county to partner with schools.

"We know schools can't do it alone and we can't do it alone," he said. "Maybe working together, it will impact families in a positive way."

A similar four-year truancy program that paid for a deputy district attorney ended in 2002.

Supervisors also will consider an agreement with the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools for the Truancy Intervention Program to reduce truancy in schools around the county. The superintendent of schools will provide

\$137,067 and the county will chip in \$64,368 in state Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act funding for the program.

Raising cap on pot cases

In other matters, supervisors will consider increasing the financial cap for legal actions related to the supervisors' ban on medical marijuana cultivation, which started in early 2014. Supervisors placed a \$210,000 cap on legal expenses, but the cap will rise to \$550,000 if supervisors approve a proposal on Tuesday.

The county already has paid \$220,000 under the previously approved cap and owes another \$135,000 to Best, Best & Krieger, the law firm retained for individual legal cases.

The county fines residents with medical marijuana at a rate of \$1,000 per plant after sheriff's deputies issue citations. The county has dismissed some cases while others are in Fresno County Superior Court or at some point in the legal process.

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