Notes from the Chair

By Scott Hollander, Esquire, vice chair of the Children’s Rights Committee and executive director of Legal Aid for Children.

Welcome to the first Children’s Rights Committee newsletter of 2001! This issue reflects the growing presence of our committee by highlighting our members’ diverse efforts to expand and improve the resources available to children. You’ll read about new initiatives such as the Montgomery County Child Advocacy Project effort, expansion of the PBA Project PEACE program for conflict resolution in schools, a new truancy project in Lackawanna County, and an innovative program to encourage divorcing parents to focus on their children’s needs.

I am particularly proud of our committee’s growing role as a source of education and communication for child advocates. We’ve established a listserv to allow our members to find answers to questions or share information, strategy and updates on the law. To participate in the listserv, just follow the directions as described on page 2.

On the education front, we’ve expanded our CLE programs to twice a year. Our most recent program — the October analysis of the new GAL law — earned favorable evaluations and a terrific turnout of more than 80 people. Don’t miss the April 20 CLE which promises to continue our tradition of providing ever-better programs for child advocates.

This newsletter is another means of educating ourselves, the public and the PBA about opportunities to improve a child’s life. I’m grateful to Joan Smith, our newsletter co-editor and immediate past-chair of the committee, for again coordinating the regular publication of our newsletter and for her comments about pro bono advocacy; and to Doreen Graziano, newsletter co-editor, for collecting and contributing articles for this edition.

Advocating for children means hard work in a difficult system on tough cases. Not everyone can do this work or handle the emotional toll it exacts. This is your committee. Your participation helps to create a community and a resource for everyone involved in this important work. You can help determine the direction and activities we pursue by joining the listserv, participating in a subcommittee, attending a CLE, or simply by completing the survey so that we’ll know what will be helpful to you as we plan future events and training. I look forward to seeing you in Mechanicsburg on April 20.

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Editor’s Comment

By Joan M. Smith, Esquire

Much has been written in recent years about the need for attorneys to provide pro bono services. One need only harken back to the days of “welfare reform” to remember the call from the Pennsylvania Bar Association to assist in filing appeals for those threatened with the loss of their social security disability benefits. While there are many opportunities through the PBA, the local bar or other organizations to help with legal services to the poor in any number of venues, the latest buzz in larger law firms is mandatory pro bono.

Such requirements seem both laudatory and sad. Obviously, requiring employees to volunteer some time helping those in desperate need of representation responds to the increasing numbers of people who are too poor to access legal services. Modifying the billable hour structure and providing logistical support are commendable changes. Yet, mandatory pro bono also highlights the fact that the majority of lawyers in practice do not see it as their duty or responsibility to volunteer.

On the one hand, I am angered by the reality that, for the most part, it is women and children who are relegated to selling cookies or cakes or who are dependent on volunteers to obtain programs to meet their needs. On the other, I have sold those cookies and baked those cakes and now do pro bono legal work in response to the call to reach out to those who are less fortunate. My volunteerism grows out of my gratitude for the many privileges that culminated in my law degree and I feel fortunate to be able to use my legal skills as a political step up from reliance on my culinary skills.

For young attorneys, pro bono can be an invaluable training ground. For experienced counsel, helping the less fortunate keeps the true function of the law in perspective. Providing pro bono services should become a regular part of our professional lives from the time we begin to practice. We will be better lawyers for the effort.

PBA Listserve Update

A growing number of PBA committee/section members are keeping on top of the latest news through committee/section listservs.

Are you confused about what a listserv is, or how to subscribe? Here are some answers to commonly asked questions about listservs:

What is a listserv?

A listserv is an electronic mailing list that allows subscribers to exchange information with the entire list of subscribers. Joining a listserv is like having a continuous conversation with a group of people, only all comments and responses are sent through e-mail. When you subscribe to a listserv, you are able to e-mail all listserv members via just one e-mail address.

How does it work?

A subscriber posts a question or shares information by sending it via e-mail to the listserv address (childrenrts@list.pabar.org). All subscribers will then receive the first subscriber’s e-mail, and they may answer the question, or comment on the information simply by replying to the first subscriber’s e-mail. All responses are received by all the listserv subscribers.

I’m a PBA member. Can I subscribe to any listserv I want?

No. Only members of a particular committee or section can subscribe to that committee or section’s listserv.

How do I subscribe to my committee or section’s listserv?

To subscribe, members of the Children’s Rights Committee should send an e-mail to childrenrts-subscribe@list.pabar.org. Do not type anything in the subject line or the message body — they should both remain blank.

For more information, contact PBA Internet Coordinator Traci Klinger at (800) 932-0311, ext. 2255.

Children’s Rights Committee Listserve: childrenrts@list.pabar.org
To subscribe: childrenrts-subscribe@list.pabar.org (Leave subject line and message body blank.)

2
Speaking Engagements by Committee Members

Children’s Rights Committee member John Bradley recently addressed social workers in central Pennsylvania (State College, Oct. 6), and in the southeastern part of the commonwealth (Fort Washington, Oct. 13) about preparing adolescent foster children to assume the legal rights and responsibilities of adulthood. The presentations were sponsored by the Independent Living Project, based at Shippensburg University.

Each fall the project sponsors four regional conferences focusing on a particular topic and a statewide conference in the spring. Both county and private provider staff working in independent living programs participate in these informative and didactic programs. The focus of the regional conferences this year was on the legal issues facing foster care children. While most of the children served are in foster care, all are in the process of learning to live independently.

Mr. Bradley’s topics covered both citizenship issues, such as registration, voting and jury duty, and personal issues, such as marriage, contracts and housing. Each presentation included a broad outline of legal issues, followed by an extensive question and answer session. Two other presentations, in Butler (Sept. 29) and Hazleton (Oct. 20), were given by other attorneys. The Independent Living Project intends to make these presentations a regular feature at their annual seminar, and is considering developing a handbook on legal rights and responsibilities of adulthood.

Nomination Sought for 2001 Child Advocate of the Year

The Committee is seeking nominations for the fourth annual Child Advocate of the Year. The award was established in 1998 to recognize the accomplishments of lawyers who advocate for Pennsylvania’s children. The recipient must have the highest degree of professional excellence and have advanced the rights of children at law.

Previous award recipients are Frank Cervone, Support Center for Child Advocates, Philadelphia; Heidi Ulrich Dennison, Brookville; and Judge Max Baer, Allegheny County.

Deadline for nominations is Feb. 23. For nomination materials, contact Louann Bell at the PBA, Phone (800) 932-0311, ext. 2276, Fax (717) 238-7182, or e-mail lbell@pabar.org.

Clip and Send Survey

CLE programming opportunities for child advocates are increasing dramatically. Would you be interested in two consecutive days of programs with dinner the intervening evening? Or, would it be more convenient and economical to schedule programs in addition to the spring and fall training we currently sponsor? Let us know your preference. Also, please let us know if there are any specific topics you would like to see covered at future CLE programs.

Clip and return to Louann Bell, PBA, P.O. Box 186, Harrisburg, PA 17108, Fax: (717) 238-7182. Or e-mail your comments to lbell@pabar.org.

______ A two-day program would be great! _______ Several one-day programs are better for me.

Comments: ____________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Name:__________________________________________________________________

Phone/e-mail__________________________________________________________________
What does the district attorney do when a sexually abused child misses scheduled appointments because the non-abusive parent identifies more closely with the abuser than with the child victim?

Recognizing the need for the child to have separate legal advocacy, the Montgomery Bar Association has approved a task force to explore establishing the Montgomery Child Advocacy Project (MCAP) to involve pro bono representation of abused and neglected children in different aspects of the legal system. Task force members have begun to identify and address organizational issues such as malpractice insurance, training, incorporation, funding, publicity and garnering support from bench and bar alike. Details of the project were introduced to potential volunteers via a CLE program in November. Similar activity is underway in Bucks, Lehigh and Dauphin counties as well.

When a child is victimized, is your district attorney able to focus on the myriad needs of the child while simultaneously trying the case? Is the defender’s association overwhelmed with the representation of dependent/neglected children? Does a children’s law project exist in your jurisdiction? Frequently, where there are a handful of lawyers for hundreds of cases, the system is crying for help. Across the country, children’s law projects focus on such issues as domestic violence and children, special education needs of foster children or juvenile offenders, children who have or are living with someone with disabilities, and immigration. Services offered by these programs may be direct representation, pro se clinics, impact litigation, policy advocacy and community education.

The Children’s Law Committee was established by the American Bar Association Section of Litigation to inspire and assist lawyers to undertake the direct pro bono representation of children and to train, support and multiply the number, reach and quality of children’s legal projects throughout the country. Members of the committee assist local groups in starting or improving children’s legal programs. In addition to organizational materials, expert assistance is available to help in designing a program to meet the specific needs of children in a local community. This advice ranges from guidance and leadership to start-up of a new law center to helping in recruitment of volunteer attorneys for already existing programs.

There are also a number of ways the expertise of child advocates can help the Children’s Law Committee. One might help create and increase awareness of the issues facing the nation’s children or provide content to the committee newsletter. Additionally, attorneys might organize, host and present programs relevant to juvenile law issues at local bar association meetings. By joining the Children’s Law Committee and becoming active in its activities, attorneys are provided a national and well-respected platform for their talents and leadership. To join the Children’s Law Committee or for information in starting a children’s law project in your jurisdiction, contact the ABA at (800) 285-2221. For information on MCAP, contact Wendy Demchick-Alloy at (610) 278-3136 or Michael Kleiman at (215) 239-6056.
On Oct. 16, 80 child advocates gathered in Mechanicsburg for the second committee-sponsored standards of practice CLE. A distinguished list of eminent lawyers, judges and professionals involved in the dependency system from around the state gathered to participate in a lively discussion, both programmed and spontaneous, of Act 18 which imported the role, powers and duties of the child’s attorney from the Child Protective Services Law (23 Pa. C.S.A. §6380) into the Juvenile Act at 42 Pa. C.S.A. §6311 and repealed §6380. For several years, we have debated whether this law is good or bad. However, it seems clear that either way, there are some real benefits to children if the guardian ad litem (GAL) performs the duties outlined by the new law. Difficulties the GAL may have with finding the time and funding to meet regularly with the child client and explain the proceedings; to participate in all hearings, meetings and reviews; and to conduct investigations and prepare witnesses for formal proceedings were addressed with several creative solutions. While it appears clear that there are serious questions about the constitutionality of the law, for the immediate future, no legal challenge is expected.

Nevertheless, Eleanor Bush of the Juvenile Law Center in Philadelphia outlined the constitutional challenge as to whether the act regulates activities that constitute the practice of law, and further, whether the Supreme Court has dealt with the conduct which Act 18 purports to regulate — confidentiality (Rule 1.6), representing conflicting interests (Rule 1.13), and the scope of representation (Rule 1.2). It is within the purview of the General Assembly to supplement and explain the disciplinary rules. Thus, the question is framed as to whether Act 18 is a regulation or merely an explanation of lawyer’s activities on behalf of dependent children. A constitutional challenge can be raised in several ways. A declaratory judgment can be sought directly from the Supreme Court with the attorney general defending the commonwealth. An original action can be brought in Commonwealth Court. Or, a decision of the lower court in a dependency matter can be appealed — for example when a child complains about the lawyer GAL and is denied a request for counsel, when a conflicted attorney’s request for appointment of counsel is denied, or when a parent complains that the GAL’s recommendation is not what the child wants. Such cases have yet to be identified, but the Juvenile Law Center will consider such cases when they arise and is in a position to challenge the law at some future date.

There are some funding streams which most counties have not tapped to pay for court appointed legal work. Scott Hollander of Legal Aid for Children in Pittsburgh outlined how funding under CAPTA (42 U.S.C. §5106a(b)(1); 42 U.S.C. §5106a(b)(2) (A)(ix) - Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act) is underutilized statewide. His program, however, has been able to expand and is looking to further growth as a result of successfully accessing these grants. More information on creative funding solutions will be provided at future training programs.

Concerns practitioners may have over the time demands of increased meetings have been successfully managed by programs which utilize support staff working with the attorney — either a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) or a social worker. In such cases, the support person attends meetings scheduled in conflict with court appearances and can do much of the investigation and interviewing now required of the lawyer. In consultation, both can prepare the case for trial with the support person appearing as a witness in later proceedings.

Other players in the dependency system — solicitors, foster placement agencies, parents’ attorneys, and Children and Youth Services — believe that the new law will foster better advocacy for children.
between agencies and the guardian ad litem was encouraged. Representing a variety of jurisdictions, Judges Elizabeth Ehrlich (Berks), Kathleen Mulligan (Allegheny) and Barry Feudale (traveling among several jurisdictions) seemed particularly attuned to requests for appointment of another attorney when a serious conflict arises. All would likely decline to openly chastise an attorney for failure to fully comply with Act 18. But, all expect serious and contentious advocacy in their respective courtrooms and agreed that Act 18 encourages such advocacy. It was mentioned that the order appointing counsel can help to facilitate obtaining agency records and results of examinations if it states specifically that the GAL must have access to them. An example of such an order is available from Meredith Schalick of the Support Center for Child Advocates in Philadelphia.

This program was the second CLE offering by the Children’s Rights Committee dealing specifically with the standards of practice for attorneys that represent children. With the six credits offered, it is now possible for children’s attorneys to fulfill their PACLE board requirements with topics pertinent to their practice. Those unable to travel to Mechanicsburg may purchase an audio tape of our programs from the Pennsylvania Bar Institute.

### Upcoming Conferences

- **APRIL 20**  
  *Current Issues for Child Advocates*  
  The 5th annual seminar at the PBI Conference Center in Mechanicsburg. For registration information call (800) 932-4637.

- **APRIL 23 - 28**  
  *Faces of Change: Embracing Diverse Cultures and Alternative Approaches*  
  13th National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Albuquerque, NM. Contact PaL-Tech, Inc., North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 301, Arlington, VA 22209 or call (703) 528-0435.

- **MAY 1**  
  *Law Day: “Protecting the Best Interests of Our Children”*  
  Planning is underway for a myriad of activities nationwide focusing on children. The ABA will provide a free planning guide. Phone (312) 988-5735, fax (312) 988-5494, or get updates year round by subscribing to the listserv at listserv@abanet.org with a line “Subscribe lawday-list [your first and last name]” or via e-mail at abapubed@abanet.org. Also see PBA-sponsored Law Day information on page 7 of this newsletter.

- **MAY 9 – 11**  
  *Pennsylvania Bar Association Annual Meeting*  
  William Penn Hotel, Pittsburgh. Information on the PBA Web site (www.pabar.org) or call (800) 932-0311.

- **MAY 9 – 12**  
  *Conflict Resolution, Children and the Courts*  
  AFCC 38th Annual Conference at the Westin Hotel, Chicago. Contact AFCC at (608) 251-4001, fax (608) 251-2231 or e-mail afcc@afccnet.org.
Current Issues for Child Advocates Seminar Planned

Mark your calendar for Friday, April 20, for the next committee-sponsored training program and presentation of the Child Advocate of the Year Award. Topics, trainers, and format are still being discussed and confirmed. If you have suggestions or would like to participate in planning, contact Jim Flower at (717) 243-5513.

Update on the Law

Bartell v. Lohiser, 215 F.3d 550 (6th Cir. 2000)

Mother who did not allege that she was denied services or custody because of her disability did not have her rights violated under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act. Termination of parental rights was based on evidence of a history of abuse in addition to her intellectual disability.


Child member of a minority group is eligible for state adoption assistance even though she did not meet all federal eligibility requirements. Federal requirements only apply to whether state will receive reimbursement, not whether child will receive benefits.

“Protecting the Best Interests of Our Children”
Law Day — May 1, 2001
Rights + Responsibilities = Freedom

Drawing upon the American Bar Association’s Law Day theme “Protecting the Best Interests of Our Children,” the Pennsylvania Bar Association is bringing together judges, lawyers and schools this year to help children learn how their rights and responsibilities truly “equal” our country’s freedom. The theme of the PBA’s second annual statewide Law Day effort is “Celebrate Your Freedom: Rights + Responsibilities = Freedom.” Because Americans are afforded freedoms that are unmatched in the world, it is important for our children to recognize that these freedoms are based upon the rights and responsibilities they exercise everyday. Similar to last year, the PBA and county bar associations will provide you with the new and improved Law Day 2001 K-12 Lesson Plan Guide and, if you would like, work to find you a classroom to visit in May.

April 20: Law Day Registration Deadline
May 1: Law Day 2001
May 1-3: Judges and Lawyers Visit Schools

To register for Law Day 2001, call the Law Day Hotline at (877) 329-7621.

Law Day is funded by the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation.
Family law practitioners are finding that collaboration in the divorce process helps focus clients on the interests of children. A form of marital dispute resolution, Collaborative Divorce™ is not mediation and differs from the conventional legal process in several ways. It utilizes a team approach of experienced family law practitioners, mental health professionals and financial advisors to find fair and pragmatic solutions to problems arising when one family is changing into two interdependent family units.

Collaborative Family Law Affiliates is a network of independent professionals who have been trained in the collaborative process and are now serving Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties. A cross-disciplinary team is composed of an attorney and same-sexed mental health counselor/coach for each side, a mutually selected financial advisor and a child specialist. The parties contractually agree to avoid litigation and to fully disclose assets and income. The professionals are released to speak to each other and obtain what authorizations are necessary to fulfill their respective ethical obligations. If no agreement is reached and litigation is initiated, both attorneys must resign.

Complementing the role of the lawyers, other team members have specific roles to play in the collaborative process. Mental health coaches help clients distinguish emotional from practical issues. They aid the process by explaining the client’s concerns and interpreting his/her reactions for the team and by teaching communications skills which are useful to the family after the divorce is final. The same-sex paring is calculated to diffuse any “gender war” between the parties and to reduce conflict. The financial advisor is neutral and acts to assure that full disclosure and adequate valuation of assets actually occurs. The child specialist helps the child to cope with the break-up of the family and gives the child a voice in the process. The specialist can teach parenting skills and give practical advice on visitation schedules in addition to assessing problems and making referrals to other specialists as needed.

Collaborative Divorce™ differs from mediation and the traditional adversarial model in that it provides emotional support for the family and focuses on effective team development as a goal. Through the process, divorce feels safer and may become open, honest and more civilized. For information or a list of members of the Collaborative Family Law Affiliates network call (610) 337-8400 or visit them at www.collaborativefamilylaw.com.
Taking a Closer Look at Schoolyard Bullies

By Doreen M. Graziano, Esquire, co-editor of the Child’s Advocate newsletter. Doreen practices in Lackawanna County.

The problem has existed as long as there been schoolyard recess periods and cafeteria lines. The problem has ranged from name-calling to excluding classmates from schoolyard games, but today’s schoolyard bullies have gone far beyond name-calling and teasing to more violent acts, and teachers, counselors and administrators are paying more attention to such acts.

The problem is widespread and serious. In fact, according to a recent survey, 17 percent of junior high school students admitted to being victims of in-school intimidation, physical assault or robbery and investigators suspect the numbers are actually much higher. (National Center for Education Statistics)

The problem is not just an inner-city phenomenon. A recent study indicates that nine percent of suburban students reported being victims of in-school intimidation, physical assault or robbery and investigators suspect the numbers are actually much higher. (National Center for Education Statistics)

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Most experts believe bullying is learned behavior and intervention can help children alter their behavior.

common characteristic is the lack of empathy bullies feel. They tend to dehumanize their victims and in their minds, that makes it OK to do whatever they want.” (Hazler)

At the Enterprise Elementary School in Wichita, Kansas, a conflict resolution program focuses on developing empathy in students who have been caught doing such things as calling classmates names. Jennifer Miller, principal, has said about bullies, “If they don’t feel bad after what they have done, it doesn’t matter what you say to them.”

At Pray-Woodman Elementary School in Maize, Kansas, school counselors conduct regular sessions on anger management with second-through fourth-graders as a way of heading off potential conflicts. The sessions teach children to make better choices when they get upset about things and the training can help both the bullying student and the victim. (Julie Mah, Knight Ridder Newspapers)

Parents can help by assuring their children that they will be there to support them until the problem is solved, but at the same time help their children to solve the problems themselves. Children who have been victims of bullying need help in understanding what they can do to prevent being bullied and why it is happening in the first place.

Parents should encourage their children to make friends. Bullies tend to pick on students who are shy and loners. In some instances a child can also ignore the bullying and walk away. Parents should work on developing their children’s social skills, self-confidence and assertiveness. Parents should also know what is going on in their children’s lives by finding time to talk to their children and to listen, as well. (Paula Fried, clinical psychologist and co-author of “Bullies and Victims: Helping Your Child Through the Schoolyard Battlefield.”)

Most experts believe that bullying is learned behavior and intervention such as the programs in the Kansas elementary schools can help children alter their behavior.

In Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Bar Association, Attorney General Mike Fisher and Temple/LEAP are working together to offer Pennsylvania schools specialized training to bring about violence avoidance through Project PEACE (Peaceful Endings through Attorneys, Children & Educators). For more information about Project PEACE contact the Pennsylvania Bar Association at (800) 932-0311 or visit their Web site at www.pabar.org.

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Truancy Effort Gets STARS

By Kristin Winterman, staff writer for the Scranton Times. Kristin has covered county and federal courts and has written previously about truancy.

Nearly 90 percent of the offenders in adult prisons started out with juvenile records. For a similar percentage of juvenile offenders, their troubles started with truancy.

It is a problem faced by every school district in the nation, but many are not adequately equipped to fight the battle. Getting a child back on the right track is a feat that cannot be accomplished by the truant officer alone.

It takes a whole host of social service agencies, school administrators and courts to determine the needs and problems of a delinquent student, but a cohesive effort among those groups is not always found.

Lackawanna County in northeastern Pennsylvania began that kind of effort two years ago, and is beginning to see success. Under the leadership of Family Court Judge Chester T. Harhut, a team of school, court and social service officials pioneered a program called STARS (Stop Truancy And Really Succeed).

Earlier this year it was selected by the Juvenile Court Judges Commission as the best community-based program in Pennsylvania.

It is a program that is more about prevention than punishment, although the penalty in the most serious cases can be harsh — jail time for parents. Indeed, STARS found itself in the national spotlight in March 1999, just six months into its existence, when the judge imposed the first jail sentences — two week terms for two different parents after repeated failures to get their children to school.

Typically, though, the outcome of a STARS case is the development of a plan to help the child and his or her family. School officials notify truant officers if a student starts missing too many days — the number may vary from school to school — and a hearing is scheduled. At that point, a special team from the Court Liaison Intervention Program (CLIP) joins the case. If the problem persists, a magistrate gets involved. A hearing is conducted in the student’s school, with the parents, the magistrate and representatives such as counselors from various agencies. Together, they assess the problem and develop a plan.

Often, parents are ordered to attend parenting classes. If the student continues to rack up absences, the matter is referred to the county’s family court, where jail may be a possible sanction. Public defenders are present to represent parents who may not have their own lawyers. Generally, these parents are people with long histories of problems, said Michelle Clifford, the Scranton school district’s truant officer.

“These are difficult cases for judges. These parents have filtered through the system and most of them are not willing to accept social services. These are the really hardcore individuals, incapable of change,” Judge Harhut said. “You are always trying to balance what kind of sanctions to impose.”

If the parents are doing everything they can and the student is still missing school — this scenario usually involves older students — the court may begin dependency proceedings.

Principals also observed improvement in communications between parents and school officials and in students’ attitudes.

Judge Harhut believes STARS is beginning to take hold in the community. After a pilot year in the Scranton school district, the program was expanded for the 1999-2000 academic year to include all districts in Lackawanna County. Initially, STARS focused on kindergarten through sixth grade, to nip the habit of truancy in the bud. It has since expanded through 12th grade.

According to a STARS report for the 1999-2000 academic year, magistrates cited 509 students in that time period. Ninety-three of those students, or roughly 18 percent, continued to miss school even after the magisterial hearing and development of a plan to help their families. The other 82 percent of the students cited attended school regularly after that.

The 93 students who continued to be absent went on to appear before family court, and 54 were found to be in contempt. Judge Harhut jailed nine parents, issued suspended sentences for 30 others, ordered 13 students to boot camp and ordered other types of remedies for the rest.

Perhaps most importantly, the students whose cases made it all the way to family court did not have any additional truancy contempt, the report said. School administrators have been pleased with the program so far. According to a STARS survey of local principals, districts have reported reductions in truant behavior in general, and a slight

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increase in overall attendance. The principals also observed an improvement in communications between parents and school officials and in students’ attitudes.

Scranton Superintendent John R. Williams, Ed.D., said, “If you look at the number of cases actually going before magistrates, what we have found is that the number has not reduced significantly, which was initially disturbing to me, but, although we are still bringing large numbers before the magistrates, those students have far fewer days truant. When we first began cracking down, we might have had a child who was truant for 100 days out of the first 120 days of the school year. But now, we are nipping that situation in the bud, and getting those kids before a magistrate before they start to develop a pattern of truancy. So, this is something we can point to that is showing the success of the program. We are getting to these kids before they become totally lost.”

Mrs. Clifford agreed, “Our program has been one of the few that involves all of the different agencies available ... Now we are seeing people who were on the verge falling back in line.”

Addressing the problem in its earliest stages with the students and their parents is the key, Judge Harbut believes. But it is a step that few courts have gotten involved with. “Courts have been the weak link,” he said. “Truancy is still not a subject that many judges are interested in ... The whole society is that way — we don’t pay enough attention to families.”

That mindset may be starting to change. Members of the STARS team have received inquiries from other municipalities about the program. Mrs. Clifford noted the team has made presentations to other counties in Pennsylvania and at a national conference last year.