

**NEW EFFORTS TO REDUCE TRUANCY**

# An epidemic to be tackled

**O**maha-area schools have avoided a flu epidemic this year, but they've been hit by another major worry — an epidemic of truancy.

This year, school districts in Douglas County have referred a record 640 students to the justice system after those youths had missed more than 20 days of school.

It's hardly a secret that prolonged truancy sets the stage for academic failure, leading to stunted job opportunities and, in many cases, an adulthood of frustration. The academic requirements for stable employment are on the rise, and any young person who fails to complete high school clearly is at an enormous disadvantage.

Last year a World-Herald investigative series found that the habits of truancy often start early. Of the more than 3,100 high school freshmen in Omaha Public Schools in 2003, one-third of them had missed, on average, at least one day out of every two weeks during eighth grade.

The World-Herald series found that OPS eighth-graders who missed at least 20 days of school wound up having just a one-in-three chance of graduating.

Overall, the World-Herald analysis found, about one-third of high school freshmen in OPS fail to graduate in four years. For black males, the figure is more than half. The tremendous fallout from this problem harms individual lives as well as the Omaha area itself.

Rather than surrender to the problem, leaders and organizations are working to tackle it. Douglas County Juvenile Court Judge Elizabeth Crnkovich and local organizations including the Urban League have created a truancy diversion program offering counseling and other services.

That initiative — involving an impressive cooperative effort across a range of government agencies, law enforcement and nonprofits — is a sound alternative to the traditional policy of automatically placing these young people in the juvenile justice system.

At the same time, the Building Bright Futures effort is using incentives at 15 schools to encourage good attendance. The Omaha Housing Authority is considering incentives too, though discussion of a penalty — mandatory expulsion of families from OHA housing if a student is chronically truant — remains understandably controversial.

There is no panacea, but the efforts outlined here — which will be refined over time — are a significant improvement over past approaches.

Ultimate success will depend on reaching families and changing the mind-set that says chronic truancy is acceptable when, in fact, it offers a child only disastrous consequences.