

A Student Calendar Project That Shows Why Staying in School Matters
By St. Louis County Attorney Melanie Ford
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Another school year begins, students settle in with their new notebooks, and everyone is looking forward to what the year will bring. It's a great time as well for me to extend a message from my office to students, families, teachers, and residents across the County about why staying in school is so critical to the future of students and the future of our communities.

My Office of St. Louis County Attorney is currently distributing "Stay in School" contest calendars to every elementary school family in St. Louis County. These calendars feature art work created by students who, in their own words and art, talk about why they think school is important.

The project is part of my office's multi-pronged undertaking to decrease truancy, reduce juvenile detention, and cut county costs by keeping children in school. It's designed to give kids a creative way to think about the importance of staying in school and give their families a vehicle for reinforcing that message at home.

This is the First Annual "Stay in School Calendar" project. It began in my office and then blossomed as a concerted community effort involving students, teachers, businesses, and community organizations. Fifth- and sixth-grade students and their teachers focused on talking about why school is important, not solely for getting a good job but also in terms of how each student contributes to his or her family and community. Businesses and organizations contributed money toward printing and distributing the calendars as well as for purchasing medals for the County's top 22 poster artists. Volunteers from the community and agencies in St. Louis County helped with fundraising and judging the posters.

The messages on the posters are inspiring and hopeful. One student's poster, for example, features a globe with the message, "You can do it, stay in school, the world needs you." Another shows ten good reasons to stay in school, including "You can make good friends, get a good job, and help your community."

Preventing truancy, or more positively, focusing on students staying in school, will help children achieve their best as well as reduce costs to communities—both the costs in human terms with the loss of children's potential as well as financial costs to the community. This stay-in-school focus by my office looks at the root causes of truancy, gathering together all of the organizations and agencies who work with children to focus on prevention so that down the road intervention will not be necessary.

By statute, the County Attorney has the authority to enforce truancy laws and may seek intervention from the courts if a child's education is being neglected by his or her family or if students are truant. There are a number of excellent programs in our County that focus on intervention, when students start missing school and are truant. My goal, however, is to help avoid truancy in the first place.

A 1998 survey of all Colorado school districts indicates that as early as second or third grade most teachers and school administrators believe they can identify students who will eventually develop chronic truancy problems. They also find that these same students are often those who later become disengaged with school and eventually drop out or are expelled. Much of the research indicates that truant behavior manifests itself in junior high students. For these reasons, we are focusing on younger children and are working to establish a culture in which it is the norm to “go to school each day, every day, all day.”

The Second Annual “Stay in School” poster and calendar contest will be starting soon. This 2009-2010 school year, fourth- and fifth-grade students will be invited to submit posters. Last year, over half of the schools in St. Louis County participated, and this year we expect to exceed that number and come close to 100 percent participation.

We will be seeking contributions to print and distribute the calendar to all the elementary school students in the County. I hope you will consider supporting this important campaign of getting the message out to our children to stay in school. Please contact me at (218) 726-2311 or fordm@co.st-louis.mn.us

A traveling exhibition of the top posters will be made available for display at various locations in St. Louis County. For further information or to view the calendar online, go to www.co-st.louis.mn.us/county_attorney