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## **New Truancy Program Launches in Kent County**

**GRAND RAPIDS** – The State of Michigan 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court launched a pilot project to address absenteeism in Kent County schools today. The new Truancy Court pilot program will provide up to 20 attorneys working pro bono for the students and will initially focus on the Wyoming and Godwin Heights school districts. Students and their families will also have access to numerous community services through Network180 and the Circuit Court’s Crisis Intervention Program. The goal is to get students the services they need to overcome attendance barriers to get them back in school.

The Kent School-Justice Partnership (KS-JP), a group of local stakeholders representing schools, courts, police officers, prosecutors, DHHS, community mental health, and restorative justice representatives, was formed in 2013 per the request of Governor Snyder. The KS-JP aims to reduce chronic absenteeism in Kent County and reduce the high school dropout to prison pipeline that is common across the country.

This project is based upon Ingham County’s Truancy Court. The Ingham County program was founded in 2001 by Judge Rick Garcia and Judge Economy and has significantly reduced the number of truant students. The program has also created the Ingham Academy, where suspended and expelled students can attend school. The Academy is funded through local millages and strong community support.

Over the past four years, the KS-JP, chaired by Kent County Circuit Court Judge Kathleen Feeney, has met monthly to gather information about truancy and absenteeism. “Our first goal was to change the definition of truancy and chronic absenteeism in Kent County as not all schools had the same definition,” said Judge Feeney. “Now every public school district in Kent County agrees that truancy can be defined as 10 or more unexcused absences in a school year and chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10% of school days to that point in the school year. These common definitions allow the court to treat truancy the same in each school district and to track the effectiveness of truancy programs.”

With this program, the KS-JP hopes to keep students off the streets and out of the juvenile justice system. Much like the Ingham County Truancy Court, the Kent County Truancy Court pilot program aims to decrease the number of truant students in the area and raise awareness about the importance of school attendance.

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