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Dallas ISD uses GPS technology to reduce truancy

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For Joshua Cervantes, the black pouch clipped to his belt is a daily reminder of where he was, and where he's now headed in high school.



JIM MAHONEY/DMN

Joshua Cervantes is one of nine Bryan Adams High School students ordered by Dallas County Truancy Judge Rey Chavez to wear a GPS tracking device to curtail chronic truancy.

Inside is a black Global Positioning System device that allows a truant officer to zero in on his location 24 hours a day. As a result, Joshua is now in school every day and, he said, thinking seriously – for the first time – about where he's headed in life.

“The main thing is it got me thinking about my future,” said Joshua, a freshman at Bryan Adams High School. “What’s going to happen to me if I don’t care?”

Judge Rey Chavez, a county truancy judge, ordered Joshua and eight other students at Bryan Adams High School to wear the GPS unit. The school is completing its second year in The Attendance Improvement Management Program, which is funded by a mix of county, nonprofit and private funds.

Last school year, 46 “chronic truants” were ordered into the program. Results were surprising: Their attendance improved from 84 percent to 97 percent during the six weeks they wore the GPS device.

“We have witnessed changes in some students that are almost beyond belief,” Bryan Adams Principal Cynthia Goodsell wrote in a letter to the project’s supporters. “What has

amazed us is the number and type of students who responded so well to the program's intensive supervision and coaching."

Despite the promise, funding shortfalls required the project's managers to scale the program back to only nine students this year and to eliminate family counseling services that were integral to last year's success.

And despite the accolades and recent publicity in The New York Times, the program has no guaranteed funding for next school year, said Paul Pottinger, the program's co-director.

Program managers are seeking a combined \$615,000 from the Dallas Independent School District and Dallas County, which operates local truancy courts.

Dr. Pottinger said school district officials told him they would include funding for the project in a pending federal grant application, but Thursday night a district spokesman said the district has not applied for the money.

"We're still evaluating the program," said Jon Dahlander, citing cost concerns and the number of students currently enrolled in the project.

While county commissioners have expressed enthusiasm for the program, 2009 is shaping up to be a tough budget year.

Dr. Pottinger said the proposed funding is a pittance considering that truancy costs DISD an estimated \$10 million annually in lost state aid, and that Dallas County spends an additional \$6.5 million a year on truancy courts and related juvenile justice programs.

The project's use of GPS tracking devices is unusual but not unique.

Last year, Maryland lawmakers proposed something similar for truants in Prince George's County, but the measure went nowhere. And this spring, a Midland, Texas, judge created a GPS-based monitoring program for 15 truants in his court.

In Dallas, the program exists only in Judge Chavez's court, and so far has touched just 55 students. Judge Chavez places teens into the program only after their truancy becomes so bad that they face the prospect of being sent to juvenile detention.

The students in the program averaged 55 missed school days year, and were the bottom 1 percent of the approximately 9,000 students adjudicated by Dallas County Truancy Court last year. If the students continue to skip school, they end up back in Judge Chavez's court and face a misdemeanor contempt of court charge.

Each day upon arrival at school, Joshua is required to punch a three-number code into his GPS device to signal a project monitor that he is on campus. He punches the code again at lunch, and a third time at his 9 p.m. curfew.

The device also contains a cellphone programmed with voice recognition software to prevent Joshua from giving it to a friend to take to school in his place.

“Basically, it makes me come to school,” said Joshua.

Kyle Ross, Bryan Adams’ director of alternative education, spent the first half of his career working with convicts in federal prison, so he knows how difficult it is to get people to change ingrained behavior. That’s what makes the turnaround in students like Josh so remarkable — if it can be sustained.

“They see the [GPS] monitor as an ever-watchful eye that they can’t beat,” Dr. Ross said. “And that solves the hardest problem we have: Getting them here.”

Years ago, the criminal justice system discovered that Global Positioning System devices are useful in tracking parolees and those under house arrest. GPS proved to be an inexpensive and effective alternative to incarceration.

Using the technology as a truancy deterrent has raised eyebrows.

Debates on technology-related blogs and among civil libertarians center on whether GPS devices are too invasive for misdemeanor truants.

Dr. Pottinger said GPS is a tame option compared to boot camps or ordering families into counseling programs.

Those who work with the program’s participants say the GPS devices are only one small piece of the project — and it might not even be the most important part.

Dr. Pottinger, a former director of the Dallas Challenge Truancy Enforcement Center, says support from teachers is critical — things such as remedial tutoring, so-called “credit recovery” programs to help them graduate on time and social services to support families after truants leave the GPS program.

“You can put a kid back into school, but most of these kids are smart enough to know that they can’t just jump back into it after missing so many days,” said Mrs. Goodsell, the principal. “You can’t just drop them back into school and expect success.”