

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times People rarely describe truancy court as a good thing. Yet that's exactly where the subject appeared at Monday night's USD No. 480 school board meeting. As part of the regular "Good Things" presentations, Adolescent Support Services' director Ivanhoe Love and three of his truancy officers presented an update to the board. The stars of the show were undoubtedly the three former truants who spoke as well.

Isaiah Rodriguez, a senior at LHS, shared that the truancy program and his case worker Kala McCroskey, turned his life around.

"My senior experience has been great," he said. "The truancy program helped me take responsibility in and out of school. Last semester, I had Ds and Cs, and this semester I got them up to As and Bs. I make better choices in life now."

Case worker Will Ponder brought former truant Rojelio Garcia, currently a sophomore, to address the board. Garcia shared that his experiences in the truancy program turned his attitude about school around. "I have learned to be motivated by verbal praise, and sanctions, even though I don't really like the sanctions," he said with a smile. "I'm more responsible with other stuff, too. I help my younger brother with his homework so he won't get behind like I did."

Ponder described working with Garcia, who aspires to become a chemical engineer, as "an absolute joy."

The presentation was a small sample of the program's scope, which currently handles about 70 active cases. According to Love, the truancy program has worked with 148 truant students during the present academic year. Of that number, only 12 have been referred to the legal system because of noncompliance.

"At this time last year, you had filed 150 cases," Love told the board.

In addition to the reduction of worst-case numbers, the truancy program has boosted the best outcomes as well.

"We'll be graduating 26 students from the program this spring," Love said, "and that is absolutely outstanding."

Board member Steve Helm sits on the truancy panel, along with representatives from the city and county commissions, a municipal judge, and faculty and staff from LHS. During the panel's weekly meetings, individual students and their truancy officers check in so that the team can monitor their progress. It's a formally-structured occasion that underscores what is at stake for the young people.

Helm recalled the first few panels he attended, and the transformations that took place over the year.

“If you all would have seen the kids then, you wouldn’t believe the difference now,” he said. “The first thing the judge requires is that they stand up straight and speak up. Everyone on the panel holds them accountable — sometimes they really nail ‘em.” The stringent requirements are upheld for a purpose that transcends school performance, Helm said: “We’re making betting individuals of them.”

Student Gabi Bacardo, a senior at LHS, agreed.

“Not only did my grades improve drastically,” she said, “it made me realize I needed to focus on what I wanted to do with my life. I’m enrolled now at Seward County Community College, where I will take summer courses.”

Bacardo’s case manager Jennifer Harvey, smiled as the soon-to-graduate student shared her goal of becoming a civil engineer.

Board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott asked if the truancy program had improved the students’ home lives.

“Gabi’s father is here tonight,” Harvey said. “You can ask him.”

Bacardo agreed that home life holds less conflict now that his daughter has completed the program.

“Thank you,” he told the board. “It’s much better now.”

Love gave credit for the program’s success to his truancy officers.

“They have an absolute commitment and devotion to these kids. I’m so proud of the students they brought to speak tonight,” he said.

The former truants shared that sense of accomplishment.

“Through this program,” said Rodriguez, who will graduate in a week, “I learned to push forward, and I am finishing high school strong.”