Tom Weber from the Massachusetts Office of Education spoke on Friday at a meeting held by the Boston Private Industry Council addressing the Massachusetts Dropout and Prevention and Recovery Commission. Mr. Weber made it clear there is a dynamic transition in approaches to reducing the dropout rate in Massachusetts. The problem is no longer being addressed from the dropout disaster backwards. Rather, the new approach focuses on intervention strategies that address predictors of dropping out: tardiness and truancy, a before a youth gets to the point dropping out of (high) school.

One of the most influential “sparks” in causing this change in approach was Professor Andy Sum, of Northeastern University’s Center For labor Market Studies, report – An Assessment of the Labor Market, Income, Health, Social, Civic and Fiscal Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Findings for Massachusetts Adults in the 21st Century. The study demonstrates life expectancy is lower for dropouts, in-kind services are used more frequently, earning potentials are dramatically decreased for dropouts. The number of drop outs who go into criminal behavior and the resulting higher levels of incarceration for drop outs was a point made very clearly in the report.

Now intervention and prevention at the early stages predicting “danger” are now being scrutinized at all educational levels including and particularly in middle schools. The Commission reports in Massachusetts there were 9,959 dropouts in 2007-2008 school year. The focus on students displaying early signs of truancy, falling behind academically, domestic issues and lack of parental guidance are reliable predictors of dropping out.

In an article in the Boston Globe on October 21, 2009, "Law urged to make teens stay in school," the statewide dropout rate was shown to be 3.4% a year with Boston having a 7.6% annual dropout rate. Other areas in Massachusetts are higher, Lawrence 12.9%, Fall River 12.5%, Holyoke 11.6% and Springfield 9.7%. This means, in Boston, if you consider a four year high school graduation rate with an
annual dropout rate of 7.6% multiplied by the four year graduation cohort you have 30.4% of all Boston high schools students dropping out before graduation in a four year period.

Boston Public Schools have addressed this problem aggressively. The newly initiated Boston Public School’s Re-engagement Center at the Shelburne Center in Roxbury opened quietly this year and has a growing enrollment for those who have been left behind and those who have been aggressively sought out for re-entry to get their high school diploma. Leading this endeavor at the BPS Re-engagement Center from the private sector are Marvin Moore and Manny Allen, both ardent dropout outreach workers from the Boston Private Industry Council.

As police we have finally seen the “Rosetta Stone.” There has been a much clearer understanding of the correlation between dropping out of school and crime. Police joining forces and partnering with other non-traditional allies such as public officials, teachers, school administrators, clergy, street workers and youth mentoring advocates should are now considered essential for the front lines in crime prevention. Yes, crime prevention, partnering and networking is the alternative to a passive approach and an effective method to unite against cutbacks and reduced funding. It is not necessarily the long term answer but it is a good pragmatic approach and it beats having each agency trying to address the entire program on its own without the necessary resources required in times of severe cutbacks.

Now with new executive police leadership have the foresight to look beyond the traditional “911” response to a more traditional community policing approach. Police hierarchies see the problem and know they need to strategize inclusively and be long term oriented and predictors of social dilemmas to provide the new social “911” response.

Our StopWatch and Truancy Watch programs have revealed to participating partners and their networks a clear understanding of the effects of dropping out and crime. The programs are not definitive solutions and have been based on trial and error as well as an enlightened degree of empathy, care and perseverance to be crime the prevention models of the future.

Throughout the 2009/2010 school year members of our “watches” have noticed and been told by observers in the local business communities of a reduction in the number of truants found around MBTA facilities and abutting neighborhoods. Public school officials have noted a 53% reduction in truancy within the Boston Public Schools this year to date. Certainly, there is no clear explanation of this perceived reduction other than the unified strategies addressing this issue simultaneously. We all stand to benefit in joining this strategy.

As Tom Weber stated, dropout prevention begins with early identification and
intervention methods targeting trouble signs leading to dropping out and subsequent aggressive intervention.

The BPS Re-engagement Center was not the brain child of the Boston Public Schools alone. Several vested members from both private and public sectors have been diligent for years and have done their homework. The approach has been all encompassing as every stone is being turned. The Center was an immediate success and has been blessed with Karen Cowen as the Director.

The police with their diverse partners, in StopWatch and Truancy Watch approaches have been diligent. Police have crossed the imaginary line and gone beyond the scope of their prescribed functions. Police have passed off the information gathered in their “up close and personal encounters” with troubled and truant youth. The information has been forwarded to those who are empowered to discover the causes of youths’ decisions. Knowing and accepting their limitations, police partnerships have gained the new respect from academia through the genuine interest in preventing crime by addressing the dropout rates.

This upcoming week partners in Truancy Watch are initiating another attempt at reducing truancy by addressing its’ predecessor - tardiness. “Tardy Watch” is designed to be an interventive strategy. It will commence at South Boston High School this Wednesday, November 18th at 8:00am until 9:15am in the abutting neighborhoods to South Boston High School. All the partners of StopWatch and Truancy watch are encouraged to participate. If successful, this will be a method of clearing the streets of tardy students who are found around certain specific high schools with higher tardiness and truancy problems. This interventive measure is to insure those students who have been addressed at the “Watches” are doing more for themselves that just going to the particular school’s boundaries yet not attending classes.

The approach will be to encounter youths lingering around the schools in the neighborhoods and questioning and counseling them about their tardiness and the effect tardiness has on their classmates. As we have found, students need to be encountered and advised about the fundamentals of getting their educations – nothing can be taken for granted with adolescent students. Too often tardiness is not addressed and students arrive late as matter of routine without being addressed about this beaming early warning sign.