

# Program seeks to help at-risk students stay in school

By Michael J. Card

Students at Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington, Vt. are more likely to drop out of school, or skip school for prolonged periods of time, than students from schools elsewhere in the state. According to state Department of Education data, one out of every four ninth graders at MAU will not make it to graduation, a statistic that does not bode well for the future of many young people in the community.

With a 25 percent dropout rate, Bennington ranks ahead of all other communities in the region, as well. Arlington High School's dropout rate is at around 12 percent; Burr & Burton in Manchester, below 4 percent.

While these statistics may be easy to cite and remember, they do little to show the human side of the problem: why a teenager (or younger) decides that school is no longer an option. Students, in fact, have many reasons for leaving school, and most of them have little to do with academic ability. The problem could be lack of self-confidence, lack of support or structure at home, parents who do not value education, friends who have dropped out, or even a transportation problem.

With the causes so varied, the solutions have to be approached on an individual basis. And a unique, successful program that was established by a local judge and is organized by two Bennington College faculty members, has helped to change the minds of some of these students so they can get back in the

classroom.

Quantum Leap is the name of the program started by Superior Court Judge Robert Rosenfield, who has seen firsthand the problems with truancy. Not only is there a problem with high dropout rates, but a problem of high truancy rates — the first signs that a student might be on the path to dropping out. As truancy escalates, a student becomes more disconnected with the classroom activities, his peers, and the day-to-day routines of learning.

Unfortunately, when Rosenfield looked in to the problem of truancy, he found an antiquated statutory scheme that held parents criminally liable, with fines of up to \$1,000. Moreover, with more pressing cases on the dockets, truancy cases were seldom heard. In response to this, Rosenfield drafted a revised statute that decriminalized truancy and encouraged a series of meetings where children, parents, and the school each have equal weight.

In spring, 1999, Rosenfield's proposal was referred to a state legislative committee for a year of review. Not willing to wait a year, Rosenfield turned to Bennington College faculty Susan Sgorbati and Danny Michaelson to launch a program and show the state how it could work.

Sometimes all an "at-risk" student needs is individualized support and a little perspective, to understand that problems they see as insurmountable are in fact manageable — that they can address their own problems with the help of a friend and mentor. Quantum

Leap first identifies the students at risk, and then pairs them up with a Bennington College student. The Bennington students are trained in mediation and advised by faculty members Susan Sgorbati and Dan Michaelson.

Under the program, the high school students sign a contract, agreeing that they will go back to school as part of the program. The advisors work to get the students interested in going back to school, overcoming fears, surmounting problems. Many times the problem is lack of confidence. Students who have been harassed by their peers because they are different need to understand that dropping out of school is not a good solution. Taking charge of one's life, whether through an alternative mode of transportation, a different academic schedule, or a new sports activity, can be the difference between a dropout and a successful graduate.

So far, the success rate of Quantum Leap has been remarkable, so much so that other communities are citing it as a model for addressing similar truancy and dropout problems they are facing. Some of the following shows how important this program has been:

- Quantum Leap's guiding principle is to deal on an individual level with each child to discover what motivates each student and incorporate that into the development of a strategy to encourage the child to return to school.

- Bennington County's dropout rate is nearly 7 percent a year — one-quarter of students are lost during the four years of high school.

- The number-one indicator for dropping out of school is truancy, according to George Carpenter, assistant superintendent for the Southwestern Vermont Supervisory Union, the governing body of area school districts.

- The overwhelming majority of students in the first phase of the Quantum Leap truancy project have returned to school.

- The program's success has sparked interest from school superintendents throughout Vermont and New Hampshire. Discussions are under way to help launch a program, modeled after Quantum Leap, in Brattleboro.

- All 17 of the pilot program's truant children, aged seven to 16, are back in school.

- The Bennington Community Justice Center had received two small grants to support its programs with children, including Quantum Leap.

- College students practice mediation in local schools and courts, often resolving small claims before they escalate to litigation.

"The success has been phenomenal," said Judge Rosenfield. "This has proven that you can get results by showing interest in children and letting them participate in the process. They've motivated these kids with one-on-one conversations about the value and importance of staying in school."

With the program now well established, *The Advocate* will be interviewing some participating students for next week's issue to see firsthand how Quantum Leap has been working.