Students strike in Gary

GARY, Ind. (AP) - School officials were offering prizes and rewards - even free clothing - to entice youngsters back to class and combat a 2,000-pupil enrollment drop since last school year.

Enrollment in the Gary Community School Corp. has fallen from about 15,000 students in June to 13,000 in the wake of a two-week teachers strike that ended earlier this month, district spokesman Eric Johnson said Wednesday.

Alarmed administrators and school board members have launched campaigns to get classrooms filled again before Friday, when the state will take its crucial annual average daily membership count. Officials base per-student budget approvals on that figure.

The drop also comes just before this year's ISTEP testing, which begins Monday and continues through Sept. 22.

At Tuesday's School Board meeting, Superintendent Mary Steele asked for the public's help.

"Our schools are open for business. We want parents to go to the nearest school and enroll your child," Steele said, noting that there are incentives for signing up and attending.

Depending on school, the tokens range from free clothing to entertainment and activities or snacks.

Vanessa Jackson, who oversees student support services for the district, has asked that agencies adopt schools and provide uniforms or stipends for them since some elementary and middle schoolers who cannot afford the clothing were staying home.

Gary serves more impoverished students than anywhere else in Lake County. A total of 64 percent of Gary's students receive free lunches, one of the highest percentages in Indiana.