

Skip school, skip driving: tough truancy laws slam the brakes on teen drivers

Current Events, a Weekly Reader publication, October 8, 2004

If you're like most teens, there's a test you actually look forward to taking: your driver's test. You carefully memorize the difference between K-turns and U-turns, dotted white and solid yellow lines. You rack up the requisite hours driving with your jittery parents. And you wouldn't think of missing a drivers ed class. Anything to get your license.

But now, for an increasing number of teens, there's one more requirement to meet before getting a driver's license: not skipping school.

Georgia and New Mexico recently joined the growing number of states that link student attendance to driving privileges. Truancy definitions vary by state, but teen driving laws in those two states and 16 others boil down to this: Miss too much school and you miss out on driving.

New Rules of the Road

Officials hope the laws will drive home the point that attending school is important. "Students who don't attend school regularly don't learn, and they don't ultimately succeed academically," said Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who recently threatened to deny licenses to teens who have more than seven unexcused absences.

Pawlenty and others in favor of attendance requirements say the rules will help steer kids in the right direction. "We know truancy ... directly impacts the long-term growth of students and their future earning potential," said Loretta Lepore, a spokesperson for Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue.

Sheila White, a truancy officer in Utah, thinks the laws may ultimately keep kids from going down the wrong road in life. "It's probably the number-one thing that has happened to most criminals," she said. "They stop going to school and then they get into trouble. If we catch them while they're young ... sometimes we can turn them around."

Wrong Way to Go

Critics say the laws are an accident waiting to happen. "Expanding traffic laws to solve social ills ... seems dubious at best. Once adopted, such an approach could theoretically (and wrongly) be expanded to achieve other socially desirable goals, such as getting a college degree," read an editorial in The Detroit News, in response to Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm's attempt to introduce a truancy measure.

Karen G. Derrick, a former member of the Salt Lake City School Board, says such measures don't take into account the cause of truancy, such as family or learning problems. "You need to look at each

child. Sometimes the reason kids are truant is no fault of their own."

Florida parent Rebecca Marek thinks the truancy driving law in her state infringes on parents' rights to discipline their children the way they see fit. "It is a school's responsibility to educate the child, to do all they can. But in the end, it is the parent's responsibility," she said.

Skip Driving

Get Talking

Ask students: Why might some states link student driving privileges to school attendance? Do you think such measures would increase student attendance? Why or why not?

Background

* The following states have laws requiring students to stay in school or maintain a certain grade point average to earn or keep their driver's licenses: Arkansas. California. Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana. Mississippi, New Hampshire. New Mexico. Ohio, Tennessee. Texas. Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

* In 1988, West Virginia became the first state to impose an attendance requirement on teen drivers. According to Mary Lopez, a spokesperson for the Department of Motor Vehicles, the program has been successful. In the 2002-2003 school year, the department threatened to suspend the licenses of 2,159 students. Of the 589 students who actually had their licenses revoked, 493 had their driving privileges restored after improving their attendance.

* According to Loretta Lepore, spokesperson for Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, nearly 14 percent of Georgia's 1.5 million students missed more than 15 days of school last year and 36 percent of students missed more than six school days. Lepore said tougher truancy measures are needed because the state ranks 48th among states in the percentage of high school graduates.

Doing More

Ask students to discuss why some students might miss a lot school. Have students brainstorm ideas to help solve truancy problems.

Take part in a CE poll on this News Debate. Go to www.weeklyreader.com/co.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2004 Scholastic, Inc.
<http://www.scholastic.com>

Source Citation

"Skip school, skip driving: tough truancy laws slam the brakes on teen drivers." *Current Events, a Weekly Reader publication* 8 Oct. 2004: 3+. *Opposing Viewpoints in*

Context. Web. 16 Sept. 2015.

Document URL

http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/MagazinesDetailsPage/MagazinesDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=OVIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Magazines&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=OVIC&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CA125487791&source=Bookmark&u=mhlin_c_tantrhs&jsid=0ccb02c875559fd7ea119d3c7f1fabb1

Gale Document Number: GALE|A125487791