

# New truancy laws: right or wrong?

*Current Events, a Weekly Reader publication, October 14, 1996*

After the homeroom bell rings, 16-year-old Marcus hands his teacher a note. He wants to be excused after second period so he can go to the doctor. His teacher doesn't know that Marcus has forged his mother's signature.

Marcus and a few buddies plan to meet for a day without teachers, classes, or homework. Although he's not known as a troublemaker, Marcus doesn't like school and has already missed five days in the marking period.

If Marcus lived in Maryland, Virginia, California, or one of a growing number of other states, he or his parents could be severely punished for his skipping school. In Virginia, for example, students who don't attend school regularly can have their drivers' licenses taken away.

Parents of school skippers in Maryland can be fined as much as \$500 and be sentenced to as much as 30 days in jail.

Although no one questions the importance of going to school and getting a good education, many people say such laws are too tough on young kids. Critics believe they are also unfair because they punish parents for kids' actions. Supporters believe the laws effectively curb teenage crime and keep kids in school.

## A Gateway to Crime

"Truancy is ... a gateway to crime," says President Clinton, who recently announced \$10 million in grants to fund antitrtruancy programs in schools. "When young people skip school, they are telling their parents and the community that they need our help," said the president.

Opponents, however, object to police detaining possibly innocent children. "We have better use for our police officers than to just pick up idle kids on the street," says school activist Gayle Cloud, of California. Other critics think punishing parents for their kids, wrongdoing is unfair.

What do you think? Are tough laws a fair way of keeping kids in school? Should parents be punished if their children are habitual truants?

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