Early parental involvement is key to proposed truancy laws

By James Carroll

Studies have shown that student truancy is a red flag for future problems. Children with low-attendance records often become high school dropouts, who make up a substantial percentage of states’ prison populations. In Michigan, for example, two-thirds of the people in prison did not finish high school. But while the consequences of student truancy are clear, solutions on how to curb the problem have been elusive.

A few Midwestern legislators are recommending the passage of new laws that would signal a more aggressive statewide approach to combating low-attendance rates among students. Bills have been proposed this year in Michigan and Ohio that would raise the stakes for students who are considered habitually truant.

“A child’s success is directly linked to his or her school attendance,” says Michigan Rep. Gilda Jacobs, a Democrat from Huntington Woods and co-sponsor of truancy legislation in her state.

Jacobs and Sen. Gary Peters of Bloomfield Township have drafted a four-bill package for the House and Senate that calls for the state to bolster school attendance policies, in part by increasing the amount of pressure placed on the parents of truant students.

The penalty for the parents of truant children includes jail time. Opponents of such a measure insist that imprisoning the parents is not a solution to the problem, and that it would force some young people into alternative housing.

The measures contain much more than just parental punishment. The legislation establishes a procedure for dealing with children and their families when chronic truancy is reported. The process is intended to address and curb the problem, not initiate punishment, says Peters and Jacobs. For example, the bills — which as of last month were being considered in committee — call for meetings between school officials and the families of truant students.

“Truancy is a symptom of a more complex problem, and no one bill is the solution,” says Peters, a Democrat.

Proposed Ohio legislation is similar to the bills in Michigan in at least two significant ways: it introduces a process for addressing a child’s truancy in the early stages of the problem by having conferences with parents and, as a last resort, punishes parents. The Ohio bill, sponsored by Sen. Robert Spada, passed the Senate late last year; as of February, it was under review by the House Criminal Justice Committee.

“Truancy is a precursor to criminal behavior,” says Spada, a Republican from Palma Heights. “And we want to bring about early intervention to keep kids in school.”

As it stands

Michigan law currently contains provisions for dealing with truants and their families, and it includes the possibility of punishing parents. This law received a great deal of attention in Detroit late last year when prosecutors threatened to carry through with parental punishment.

The legislative package in Michigan includes three major components.

• A procedure for addressing each case of truancy — This process involves parental notification and the implementation of an attendance agreement, among other measures to combat truancy.

• A provision to restrict the driver’s license privileges of a habitually truant student — The court may suspend a juvenile’s driver’s license or delay a driver’s license issuance to a child not yet eligible to drive.

• The inclusion of protective services by the justice system to levy penalties on the parents of truants — Penalties include any combination of a fine between $50 and $500, imprisonment for two to 90 days and up to 50 hours of community service.

“Our plan is to enhance penalties, but it is more than just sanctions,” Peters says. “We put forth a comprehensive plan that promotes more community involvement to save kids that might otherwise end up committing crimes.”

The most progressive portion of the legislation might be the taking away of a student’s driver’s license. A teenager’s access to a car can limit parental control over the attendance situation. The bill tries to address this problem.

Sponsors of the legislation say the most effective punishment for parents would be community service, which would likely involve volunteering time at their child’s school.