

## **New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson Announces Comprehensive Plan to Reduce Truancy**

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SANTA FE- Governor Bill Richardson today announced a bold and comprehensive new plan to reduce truancy in New Mexico Schools. The program attacks truancy by making parents more accountable for their children, and provides for the possibility of tough legal sanctions, including the possibility of jail time, if children repeatedly fail to attend school.

“Truancy is a gateway crime that has been neglected far too long,” said Governor Richardson. “To our children, my message is you can’t learn if you don’t show up. To parents: if you don’t send your children to school there will be a price to pay.”

Initial incidents of truancy trigger a counseling program with parents. If truancy persists, the parents can ultimately face legal sanctions even jail time, for failure to get their children to school. The emphasis is on changing the behavior -- and the program makes use of other social services to help families deal with other problems that may be contributing to the truancy behavior.

--Keeping kids off the street is an obvious deterrent to juvenile crime. Study after study shows that truancy is a so-called "gateway" behavior, directly linked to experimentation with drugs, alcohol, gang activity and even criminal behavior such as burglary, auto theft and vandalism.

--Skipping school is the threshold behavior for dropping out. If children learn early on that the state is serious about their attending school, they are more likely to stay in school through graduation.

“Clearly, the more children we can keep in school, the better society's chances of seeing them mature to productive, law-abiding adults,” said Governor Richardson.

The program is already being successfully implemented in New Mexico. Four years ago, Silver City, Lordsburg and Deming started a program to deal with truancy. Juvenile authorities, the district attorney, school superintendents and social service providers established a cooperative program to deal with truant children and their parents.

In 1998, the Silver City area had 72 truancy referrals and 1,399 delinquent referrals.

In 2002, following implementation of the truancy program, there were 1,395 truancy referrals -- truancy isn't tolerated anymore -- and only 718 delinquent referrals. That's almost a 50% reduction in delinquent referrals.

School absenteeism decreased by 75%. (Attendance 78.6 percent in '98, 96.4 percent in '02.)

The dropout rate dropped by 78% from 11 percent in 1998 to 2.5 percent in 2002.

Governor Richardson will allocate \$1 million of the new federal funds New Mexico will receive in connection with the federal tax cut legislation to implementing the Crackdown on Truancy program.

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