

# Bill Linking Welfare, School Attendance Comes Under Fire

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But opponents of the bill say a better approach would be one providing positive incentives, rather than negative consequences.

"I think the bill is on the right track," Aslanian of the Welfare Recipients League said. "But it uses the approach of a whip rather than sugar."

Marjorie Swartz of the American Civil Liberties Union agreed: "You've got a single mother who has got to worry about feeding the rest of the family just because one kid won't go to school. I think we're picking on people that we have a particular hook over and that's finances."

And Casey McKeever, co-counsel for the Western Center on Law and Poverty, said that the center opposes any condition of aid that is unrelated to a family's needs.

"If problems occur with school attendance, there are better ways to get incentives for the child to stay in school," he said. "You are using family support as a whip to obtain behavior that the state thinks is appropriate."

Even educators and social workers are concerned about the practicality of the bill.

The state Department of Education has not taken a position on the bill yet, but Superintendent of Schools Bill Honig has been meeting with Leonard, the legislation's sponsor, to discuss the measure, said Deputy Superintendent Dave Gordon.

Gordon said that the bill was greatly improved with amendments made last week calling for "more orientation on assisting the family in getting the children to stay in school." Honig has promised Leonard "that he'll take a closer look at it," Gordon said.

Kevin Gordon, director of governmental relations for the California School Board Association, said that despite the amendment's focus on assisting and counseling families, the association still opposes the \$50 withholding. "We think it's a very difficult thing to try to have the actions of one child take away from the well-being of the whole family," he said.

"We're all for encouraging attendance and parental responsibility," agreed Mary Bergan, lobbyist for the California Federation of Teachers, AFT, AFL-CIO, said. "But we don't think withholding money from what already is a subsistence amount is the answer."

And social workers already are stretched to the limit, said Steve Larson, chief of the Welfare Policy Development Branch of the state Department of Social Services. The department has not yet taken an official position on the bill, he added.

"Overall, we're sympathetic with the goal (of educating children) but we see some practical difficulties due to the heavy involvement of social workers," Larson said. "This could be a sizeable effort."

And Janette Holman, past-president of the California Association of Black Social Workers, said, "I think it may be too much of a simplistic approach to a very complex and serious issue."

Although several opponents raised issues of discrimination and unequal protection, McKeever pointed out that the bill would have to face a legal test before those could be determined valid.

"But whether legal or illegal, it's just bad public policy," he said.