

Long Beach parents of truant kids may be punished

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LONG BEACH: Prosecutor says some adults could face criminal charges.

By Paul Eakins Staff Writer

LONG BEACH - Parents, do you know where your children are?

If they're not in school when they're supposed to be or are getting into trouble, it could cost you.

Last week, Long Beach City Prosecutor Doug Haubert announced that he is teaming up with police and school officials to crack down on truant students - and the parents who enable them.

Haubert's new initiative is called the Parent Accountability and Chronic Truancy, or PACT, program. It sets up a process for filing criminal charges against the parents of "chronic truants" and youths who continually break the law.

"Today's truants are tomorrow's dropouts, and they're tomorrow's inmates," Haubert said. "Anything that can be done now to keep kids in school will hopefully save hundreds of prosecutions later on."

Long Beach Unified School District has unusually high truancy rates.

In the 2009-10 school year, LBUSD's truancy rate was 48.87 percent, while the rate for Los Angeles County was 28.71 percent and the statewide rate was 28.15 percent, according to the California Department of Education. In 2008-09, the disparity was even greater, with Long Beach's truancy rate at 47.93 percent, compared with 16.3 percent for the county and 24.15 percent for the state.

Children are considered truant under state law when they have three or more unexcused or unverified absences, or when they arrive to school late or leave early by more than 30 minutes without a valid excuse, over the course of a year.

Parents face fines, jail

The PACT program is designed to remedy this by using state juvenile delinquency and truancy laws.

One law, Penal Code 270.1, went into effect Jan. 1. It allows parents to face up to one year in county jail and a \$2,000 fine if their children who are in kindergarten through eighth grade miss 10 percent or more of school days without a valid excuse.

The other law, Penal Code 272, has long been on the books, but has limited use in enforcing truancy, Haubert said. It allows parents to be prosecuted, and potentially face up to one year in jail and a \$2,500 fine, if their actions or lack of action encourage a minor to continually break the law.

"Before, you only had one vehicle, and that was contributing to the delinquency of a minor," Haubert said. "With (Penal Code) 272 it's very difficult. You have to prove that the parent is committing an act that is resulting in the child not getting to school."

Richard Tebbano, the administrator of LBUSD's Child Welfare and Attendance Office, said it is hoped that the new law and the PACT program will put more children on the right path early on.

"We try to focus our energies on the younger ones, because those are the ages when you can make a difference and really make an impact," Tebbano said. "Once the patterns develop, they're hard to break."

Although there isn't a specific truancy law for high school students, Haubert said he can and will use Penal Code 272 if necessary to prosecute parents whose children are skipping school.

"In theory, if a freshman in high school is missing a lot of school, I could use 272 against the parents of that student," Haubert said.

But, he said, "It is harder to hold parents strictly accountable for kids when they get into high school."

The law is especially handy for repeat juvenile offenders.

"We're going to be looking at the kids committing crimes, and then see what kind of participation and involvement is at the adult level," Haubert said.

Repeat juvenile offenders

Cmdr. Galen Carroll, who oversees Long Beach Police Department's North Division, had set up the first meeting between Haubert, police and school officials to see how they could work together, the city prosecutor said.

Carroll said last week that he had noticed that many crimes were being committed by the same youths over and over again.

The North Division alone has 40 repeat offenders who have had multiple arrests each for crimes such as burglary, robbery and automobile theft. Because they are juveniles, they usually end up on probation and later get into trouble again, Carroll said.

Carroll said that if parents don't discipline their children, the youths will continue to commit crimes. When the parents enable the crimes, that's when the parents themselves could be prosecuted, he said.

For example, Carroll said police recently stopped two youths who were breaking into a house and had a laptop computer. When one of the boys was taken home, his mother said the computer had been given to him by a relative.

However, once police checked the computer, they found photos of the robbery victims. Clearly, the mother had lied to protect her son.

"You can't just stand by and let your kid bring stolen stuff into your house," Carroll said.

The mother wasn't arrested in that case, but she could have been.

Under the PACT program, police are looking for parents who have repeatedly encouraged their children, by action or inaction, to commit crimes. For the truancy component, parents and their troubled children will go through a series of meetings with school officials and police before they are charged.

Parents in both situations might be offered parenting classes, counseling and other aid.

"I'm not necessarily looking to arrest them and lock them up," Carroll said. "I'm more interested in giving them resources."

Haubert said that by working together, school officials, police and the prosecutor's office can be certain that they have done everything they can to help parents and have enough evidence to warrant taking them to court if the children continue to be a problem.

"We're going to look at cases on a case-by-case basis," Haubert said. "We want to make sure that the program is flexible enough that we're only directing our focus on the parents that are most involved in their children not attending school."

Tebbano said he doesn't want to see parents fined or jailed, but PACT does send them a message.

"We hope the parents will take school attendance more seriously and make more of an effort to make sure their children are in school every day on time to make sure they get the best education possible," Tebbano said.