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Truancy issue in Nebraska Let's tackle this problem

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Make no mistake: Nebraska needs to acknowledge and address the truancy problem. A bill now before the Legislature focuses on the issue, and the measure deserves passage. We live in a hyper-competitive global economy, and we need an educated work force and citizenry. Our communities need young people who live stable, productive lives.

Excessive truancy short-circuits Nebraska's interests in all those regards.

So, the more Nebraska can effectively address the truancy problem, the greater the long-term benefit for the state.

The problem reveals itself as early as elementary school and certainly in middle school. World-Herald news coverage has long examined this issue in depth. One article noted that of the more than 3,100 high school freshmen in **OPS** in 2003, one-third of them had missed, on average, at least one day out of every two weeks during eighth grade.

As that article explained, "those frequently absent eighth-graders had less than a 50 percent **graduation rate** in high school."

That's a huge problem. And the fallout from it won't affect those students alone. On the contrary, over time the brunt will fall on our entire society.

The Omaha area is hit hard by this problem, but don't think that it's limited only to one part of the state. During the legislative debate on the truancy bill, the example of a Grand Island middle school was cited. To its credit, the school system has used smart strategies to tackle the problem and can serve as a national model. Hastings, too, has pursued strategies with encouraging results.

The central idea of the legislation - sponsored by State Sen. Brad Ashford and introduced at the request of Gov. Dave Heineman - is to establish a statewide process to detect truancy problems as early as possible.

The legislation also aims to keep as many at-risk children out of the juvenile justice system as possible unless those young people truly are in extreme circumstances warranting such a step. The proper approach is for schools, government agencies and nonprofits to provide support to students and families to get the young people on a positive track.

Such a farsighted, multi-party approach has brought promising early results in Douglas County after the farsighted effort begun by Douglas County Juvenile Court Judge Elizabeth Crnkovich.

Among the legislation's provisions is a requirement that the 11 school districts belonging to the Learning Community in Douglas and Sarpy Counties participate in a pilot project to share information regarding at-risk youth. This, indeed, is a crucial need, and the districts should energetically work together to nail down an effective plan.

We've highlighted this need for information-sharing for years. An editorial here in April 2007, for example, stressed that schools need to "coordinate effectively with each other so that when students move from one school to another (as is frequently the case for a large segment of low-income youngsters), the academic status of each student would be effectively tracked and monitored."

During floor debate, lawmakers across the philosophical spectrum asked sound, practical questions about a variety of concerns. Above all, school districts and county attorneys who contact parents about a student's absences need to show common sense and distinguish between students who were absent for legitimate reasons and those who weren't.

The bill as a whole, though, is sound. It can help Nebraska make progress in addressing a huge problem. It deserves passage.

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