

# Bill to slow school dropout rates moves to Assembly

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SACRAMENTO — The state Senate has unanimously passed a bill to attempt to keep children in school in order to prevent them from entering — or returning — to the juvenile justice system. The bill goes before the Assembly when the Legislature returns from its summer recess next week.

Despite apparent legislative support, the measure, SB 1112 by Sen. Robert Presley, D-Riverside, faces a possible veto because it is opposed by the state Department of Finance, which has estimated that it would cost \$4.5 million over the 5-year life of the proposed pilot program.

The bill's supporters strongly dispute that figure, contending that it is exaggerated and fails to consider the long-term cost-effectiveness of reducing the number of young people in juvenile detention or those who "graduate" to adult prison.

Jane Henderson, consultant to the Senate Select Committee on Children and Youth, which Presley chairs, said the bill is ultimately cost-effective "if you have kids who are educated and

not on the dole and not in the Youth Authority or the Department of Corrections."

The bill is based on a pilot program undertaken to reduce a serious school dropout problem in Mendocino County. The rural Northern California area has become an attractive haven for school dropouts, Henderson said "presumably because of all the dope and whatever."

Three years ago, the Mendocino County Office of Education began an intensive dropout-prevention program that emphasized tutoring, counseling and part-time jobs for young people. The program has succeeded in reducing the county's dropout rate by 20 percent.

The Presley bill would create a pilot program based on the Mendocino model in five California counties. The five-year pilot may be reduced to three years in an effort to neutralize Finance Department opposition, Henderson said.

The bill is aimed at the growing population of juvenile "status offenders," young people who are runaways, truants, neglected and/or abused. By law, they cannot be housed with juvenile criminals and are often found in various kinds of foster care or on the streets because there is

nowhere else for them to go, Henderson said.

Status offenders, she said, require "some sort of multi-disciplinary approach" to steer them away from anti-social or even criminal behavior.

"They may have been abused or neglected, or they may have a problem with drugs," Henderson said. "They may be out on the streets. They've fallen through the cracks in the system. They are kids who don't fit within the mainstream."

The current dropout rate in California high schools is 25.8 percent, with some counties much higher and others lower. Since the pilot program was introduced in Mendocino County, the dropout rate has been reduced from 30 percent three years ago to 24 percent now.

Most of the young people assisted by the program were involved in some way with the juvenile justice system — many as status offenders, but often because of more serious infractions, she said. More than 80 percent did not return to the judicial system.

"There is a great deal of community involvement that is necessary for the program to work

effectively," Presley said. The cooperation of teachers, counselors, probation officers and parents in anti-dropout programs provides students with intensive individual instruction and guidance. The service helps with family as well as academic and drug problems which prevent young people from finishing school, he said.

Henderson said some of the young people in the proposed pilot program would live at home or in foster care. They would be taught in the community school program operated by county offices of education, separate from juvenile hall education programs but not part of local school districts.

"The goal is that most of these kids will be with their families," Henderson said.

The program will attempt to identify kids at risk of dropping out at the junior high school level, so that intervention can begin early.

The measure has been passed 12 to 1 by the Assembly Education Committee and comes before the Ways and Means Committee Aug. 26, before going to the Assembly floor.