

**LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE
BILL ANALYSIS**

Bill No: HB 301

48th Legislature, 2nd Session, 2008

Short Title: Las Cruces High School Drop-Out Prevention

Sponsor(s): Representative Mary Helen Garcia and Others

Analyst: Peter van Moorsel

Date: January 29, 2008

Bill Summary:

HB 301 requires the Public Education Department (PED) and Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) to design a four-year pilot dropout prevention pilot project to be instituted at Las Cruces High School. The pilot must test a variety of dropout prevention and academic improvement strategies that, if proven successful, can be used to lower the dropout rates in other school districts throughout the state. The pilot project must include an annual evaluation phase that:

- identifies students at risk of dropping out and relates specific strategies used to keep those students in classes and in school;
- provides other data sufficient to determine the efficacy of the strategies used; and
- uses the Student Teacher Accountability Reporting System (STARS) for data collection and reporting.

The bill requires that PED and LCPS provide an annual written report to the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) that includes findings and recommendations.

Fiscal Impact:

\$1.0 million is appropriated from the General Fund to PED for expenditure in FY 09 for distribution to the LCPS to implement a dropout prevention pilot project. The bill contains a reversion clause.

- The program funded in HB 301 is a four-year pilot; however, the appropriation would revert at the end of FY 09.
- HB 2 et al., the *General Appropriation Act of 2008*, includes \$1.0 million for truancy and dropout prevention programs statewide.
- Since FY 05, the Legislature has appropriated approximately \$2.2 million, including \$1.0 million for FY 08 to PED for truancy/dropout prevention.

Issues:

The National Center for School Engagement links truancy and dropping out of school; specifically:

- truancy has been identified as one of the early warning signs of students headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation or educational failure via suspension, expulsion, or dropping out;
- truancy is considered to be one of the top 10 problems facing schools. 80 percent of dropouts were chronically truant before dropping out. 90 percent of youths in detention for delinquent acts were chronically truant;
- if the attendance rate continues to decrease, the graduation rate will be affected. Further, dropout and truancy have been correlated to an increase in juvenile crime; and
- the underlying issues for dropout and truancy are often associated with social, family, and health barriers that prevent students from achieving. These barriers contribute to closing the achievement gap.

During the 2007 interim, the LESC heard a presentation on HJM 40/SJM 36, *Study Truancy and Delinquency Notices*, during which truancy was identified as an early identifier of a student at risk for dropping out of school. The report presented to the LESC noted that there are inconsistencies in current law pertaining to truancy reporting and intervention, and that unexcused absences and habitual truancy rates are not reported in a consistent manner statewide. The report recommended strengthening the *Compulsory School Attendance Law*, and thereby reducing both the prevalence of truancy and the risk of students dropping out, by:

- rectifying inconsistencies with other sections of law;
- requiring consistent reporting of unexcused absences and truancy rates statewide; and
- requiring improved oversight of school district attendance policies.

Two related bills - HB 302 and HB 304 - have been introduced that would also establish a four-year pilot for dropout prevention in LCPS. HB 302 focuses the pilot on summer intensive instruction; and HB 304 focuses the pilot on extracurricular activities.

The PED analysis makes several recommendations with the intent of improving the program created in HB 301, as well as the programs created in the two related bills, HB 302 and HB 304. PED recommends:

- combining HB 301, HB 302, and HB 304 to allow for a single comprehensive dropout pilot project;
- allowing funding to extend for all four years of the pilot (currently, the appropriations in all three bills would revert at the end of FY 09);
- including rural and alternative schools, schools with higher concentrations of American Indian students and schools with graduation rates lower than Las Cruces High School in the pilot;
- piloting research-based interventions at Las Cruces High School. Starting with interventions that have documented protocols and a prior record of success will provide some assurance that the interventions can be faithfully and successfully implemented in other New Mexico schools; and

- providing for an independent evaluation of the interventions. An experienced program evaluator can provide valuable assistance and objectivity by selecting standardized, valid, and reliable measures for determining the effectiveness of the pilot project. The funding for the pilot should provide for this evaluation, which should include a report with recommendations.

Related Bills:

HB 302 *Las Cruces High School Summer Pilot Project*

HB 304 *Las Cruces High School At-Risk Project*

SB 410 *Las Cruces Schools Truancy Reduction*

SB 477 *Las Cruces Schools Truancy Reduction*