

Cutting Off Assistance to Families Won't Improve School Attendance, Will Drive Up Poverty

Pushing families further into poverty will not increase school attendance rates. The Michigan Legislature is considering House Bill 4041 that would codify current Department of Human Services policy that terminates Family Independence Program, or cash assistance, for an entire family if a child between the ages of 6 and 15 is considered to be truant by their local school district. An entire family is punished for the actions of one child. If the student is 16 or older, only the truant child is removed from the case. The bill will not boost school attendance rates, but it will increase the number of children and families living in extreme poverty.



DHS policy should have the goal of helping families, not driving them deeper into economic crisis. The cash assistance program helps families living in extreme poverty (income under half of the poverty level, or \$9,385 for a family of three). Families receiving FIP have very few resources and already face a number of challenges, including inconsistent work schedules; lack of access to quality, affordable child care; and reliable transportation. Eliminating their cash assistance will do nothing to address these challenges and will make life more difficult for their children. The League has the following concerns with HB 4041:

Codifying current DHS policy ties the hands of the department. It becomes much more difficult to change policy after it is made into law. The department would lose any flexibility to adapt its policy to better serve the needs of the people.

Barriers to attending school are not addressed. Four of the top 10 reasons for missing school, as identified by the Michigan School-Justice Partnership, deal with transportation, child care, and lack of appropriate clothing for the weather. Eliminating a family's cash assistance will only make these issues worse. Working one-on-one with families to identify and resolve the underlying issues—without reducing their resources—

Most Participants are Kids

The vast majority of people receiving cash assistance are kids with an average age of 7 years old.



73% of recipients are kids

is a much better route to ensure that a child is ready and able to learn at school. HB 4041 does not include any type of required intervention.

Lack of due process to appeal a decision. At times, an illness or other situation results in a high number of absences. These could be excused absences depending on the school attendance policy. Individual situations should be recognized, and families should have a clear process for appealing a decision that terminates their assistance. While DHS policy does include an appeals process, this proposed law does not.

Full-family sanction for families with children between 6 and 15 years old is severe. There may be cases in which a parent is doing everything in their power to get their 14-year-old to school, but the child—for whatever reason—does not arrive or stay in school. Terminating assistance for the entire family for the actions of one child could make it more difficult for other children in the family to get to school.

Unclear definition of truancy or attendance policy.

Without a statewide definition of truancy and the variances across school districts in how truancy is defined, there will be inequitable impact on children and families.

Child poverty remains unacceptably high. From 2006 to 2012, the rate of children living in poverty in Michigan grew by 35%. The economic recovery has not touched everyone. More than 70% of program participants are children with an average age of 7. Cutting off assistance will undoubtedly harm children in these families the most at a time when the governor's dashboard calls for reducing childhood poverty.

House Bill 4041, and the related DHS policy, is not the way to improve attendance rates or the lives of these families in either the short or long run. Codifying this DHS policy will only contribute to increasing child poverty and the number of families living in extreme poverty.