

By: Turner, Blackmon, Simmons, Johnson  
(38th)

To: Education; Juvenile  
Justice

SENATE BILL NO. 3043

1 AN ACT TO AMEND SECTION 37-13-91, MISSISSIPPI CODE OF 1972,  
2 TO PROVIDE THAT CERTAIN LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS SHALL BE  
3 AUTHORIZED TO INVESTIGATE AND FILE PETITIONS IN THE PROPER COURT  
4 AGAINST PARENT OR CHILD UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF THE MISSISSIPPI  
5 COMPULSORY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE LAW; AND FOR RELATED PURPOSES.

6 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI:

7 SECTION 1. Section 37-13-91, Mississippi Code of 1972, is  
8 amended as follows:

9 37-13-91. (1) This section shall be referred to as the  
10 "Mississippi Compulsory School Attendance Law."

11 (2) The following terms as used in this section are defined  
12 as follows:

13 (a) "Parent" means the father or mother to whom a child  
14 has been born, or the father or mother by whom a child has been  
15 legally adopted.

16 (b) "Guardian" means a guardian of the person of a  
17 child, other than a parent, who is legally appointed by a court of  
18 competent jurisdiction.

19 (c) "Custodian" means any person having the present  
20 care or custody of a child, other than a parent or guardian of the  
21 child.

22 (d) "School day" means not less than five (5) and not  
23 more than eight (8) hours of actual teaching in which both  
24 teachers and pupils are in regular attendance for scheduled  
25 schoolwork.

26 (e) "School" means any public school in this state or  
27 any nonpublic school in this state which is in session each school

28 year for at least one hundred eighty (180) school days, except  
29 that the "nonpublic" school term shall be the number of days that  
30 each school shall require for promotion from grade to grade.

31 (f) "Compulsory-school-age child" means a child who has  
32 attained or will attain the age of six (6) years on or before  
33 September 1 of the calendar year and who has not attained the age  
34 of seventeen (17) years on or before September 1 of the calendar  
35 year.

36 (g) "School attendance officer" means a person employed  
37 by the State Department of Education pursuant to Section 37-13-89.

38 (h) "Appropriate school official" means the  
39 superintendent of the school district or his designee or, in the  
40 case of a nonpublic school, the principal or the headmaster.

41 (i) "Nonpublic school" means an institution for the  
42 teaching of children, consisting of a physical plant, whether  
43 owned or leased, including a home, instructional staff members and  
44 students, and which is in session each school year. This  
45 definition shall include, but not be limited to, private, church,  
46 parochial and home instruction programs.

47 (3) A parent, guardian or custodian of a  
48 compulsory-school-age child in this state shall cause the child to  
49 enroll in and attend a public school or legitimate nonpublic  
50 school for the period of time that the child is of compulsory  
51 school age, except under the following circumstances:

52 (a) When a compulsory-school-age child is physically,  
53 mentally or emotionally incapable of attending school as  
54 determined by the appropriate school official based upon  
55 sufficient medical documentation.

56 (b) When a compulsory-school-age child is enrolled in  
57 and pursuing a course of special education, remedial education or  
58 education for handicapped or physically or mentally disadvantaged  
59 children.

60 (c) When a compulsory-school-age child is being  
61 educated in a legitimate home instruction program.

62 The parent, guardian or custodian of a compulsory-school-age  
63 child described in this subsection, or the parent, guardian or  
64 custodian of a compulsory-school-age child attending any nonpublic

65 school, or the appropriate school official for any or all children  
66 attending a nonpublic school shall complete a "certificate of  
67 enrollment" in order to facilitate the administration of this  
68 section.

69 The form of the certificate of enrollment shall be prepared  
70 by the Office of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement of the  
71 State Department of Education and shall be designed to obtain the  
72 following information only:

73 (i) The name, address, telephone number and date  
74 of birth of the compulsory-school-age child;

75 (ii) The name, address and telephone number of the  
76 parent, guardian or custodian of the compulsory-school-age child;

77 (iii) A simple description of the type of  
78 education the compulsory-school-age child is receiving and, if the  
79 child is enrolled in a nonpublic school, the name and address of  
80 the school; and

81 (iv) The signature of the parent, guardian or  
82 custodian of the compulsory-school-age child or, for any or all  
83 compulsory-school-age child or children attending a nonpublic  
84 school, the signature of the appropriate school official and the  
85 date signed.

86 The certificate of enrollment shall be returned to the school  
87 attendance officer where the child resides on or before September  
88 15 of each year. Any parent, guardian or custodian found by the  
89 school attendance officer to be in noncompliance with this section  
90 shall comply, after written notice of the noncompliance by the  
91 school attendance officer, with this subsection within ten (10)  
92 days after the notice or be in violation of this section.

93 However, in the event the child has been enrolled in a public  
94 school within fifteen (15) calendar days after the first day of  
95 the school year as required in subsection (6), the parent or  
96 custodian may at a later date enroll the child in a legitimate  
97 nonpublic school or legitimate home instruction program and send

98 the certificate of enrollment to the school attendance officer and  
99 be in compliance with this subsection.

100 For the purposes of this subsection, a legitimate nonpublic  
101 school or legitimate home instruction program shall be those not  
102 operated or instituted for the purpose of avoiding or  
103 circumventing the compulsory attendance law.

104 (4) An "unlawful absence" is an absence during a school day  
105 by a compulsory-school-age child, which absence is not due to a  
106 valid excuse for temporary nonattendance. Days missed from school  
107 due to disciplinary suspension shall not be considered an  
108 "excused" absence under this section. This subsection shall not  
109 apply to children enrolled in a nonpublic school.

110 Each of the following shall constitute a valid excuse for  
111 temporary nonattendance of a compulsory-school-age child enrolled  
112 in a public school, provided satisfactory evidence of the excuse  
113 is provided to the superintendent of the school district or his  
114 designee:

115 (a) An absence is excused when the absence results from  
116 the compulsory-school-age child's attendance at an authorized  
117 school activity with the prior approval of the superintendent of  
118 the school district or his designee. These activities may include  
119 field trips, athletic contests, student conventions, musical  
120 festivals and any similar activity.

121 (b) An absence is excused when the absence results from  
122 illness or injury which prevents the compulsory-school-age child  
123 from being physically able to attend school.

124 (c) An absence is excused when isolation of a  
125 compulsory-school-age child is ordered by the county health  
126 officer, by the State Board of Health or appropriate school  
127 official.

128 (d) An absence is excused when it results from the  
129 death or serious illness of a member of the immediate family of a  
130 compulsory-school-age child. The immediate family members of a

131 compulsory-school-age child shall include children, spouse,  
132 grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, including  
133 stepbrothers and stepsisters.

134 (e) An absence is excused when it results from a  
135 medical or dental appointment of a compulsory-school-age child  
136 where an approval of the superintendent of the school district or  
137 his designee is gained before the absence, except in the case of  
138 emergency.

139 (f) An absence is excused when it results from the  
140 attendance of a compulsory-school-age child at the proceedings of  
141 a court or an administrative tribunal if the child is a party to  
142 the action or under subpoena as a witness.

143 (g) An absence may be excused if the religion to which  
144 the compulsory-school-age child or the child's parents adheres,  
145 requires or suggests the observance of a religious event. The  
146 approval of the absence is within the discretion of the  
147 superintendent of the school district or his designee, but  
148 approval should be granted unless the religion's observance is of  
149 such duration as to interfere with the education of the child.

150 (h) An absence may be excused when it is demonstrated  
151 to the satisfaction of the superintendent of the school district  
152 or his designee that the purpose of the absence is to take  
153 advantage of a valid educational opportunity such as travel  
154 including vacations or other family travel. Approval of the  
155 absence must be gained from the superintendent of the school  
156 district or his designee before the absence, but the approval  
157 shall not be unreasonably withheld.

158 (i) An absence may be excused when it is demonstrated  
159 to the satisfaction of the superintendent of the school district  
160 or his designee that conditions are sufficient to warrant the  
161 compulsory-school-age child's nonattendance. However, no absences  
162 shall be excused by the school district superintendent or his  
163 designee when any student suspensions or expulsions circumvent the

164 intent and spirit of the compulsory attendance law.

165 (5) Any parent, guardian or custodian of a  
166 compulsory-school-age child subject to this section who refuses or  
167 willfully fails to perform any of the duties imposed upon him or  
168 her under this section or who intentionally falsifies any  
169 information required to be contained in a certificate of  
170 enrollment, shall be guilty of contributing to the neglect of a  
171 child and, upon conviction, shall be punished in accordance with  
172 Section 97-5-39.

173 Upon prosecution of a parent, guardian or custodian of a  
174 compulsory-school-age child for violation of this section, the  
175 presentation of evidence by the prosecutor that shows that the  
176 child has not been enrolled in school within eighteen (18)  
177 calendar days after the first day of the school year of the public  
178 school which the child is eligible to attend, or that the child  
179 has accumulated twelve (12) unlawful absences during the school  
180 year at the public school in which the child has been enrolled,  
181 shall establish a prima facie case that the child's parent,  
182 guardian or custodian is responsible for the absences and has  
183 refused or willfully failed to perform the duties imposed upon him  
184 or her under this section. However, no proceedings under this  
185 section shall be brought against a parent, guardian or custodian  
186 of a compulsory-school-age child unless the school attendance  
187 officer has contacted promptly the home of the child and has  
188 provided written notice to the parent, guardian or custodian of  
189 the requirement for the child's enrollment or attendance.

190 (6) If a compulsory-school-age child has not been enrolled  
191 in a school within fifteen (15) calendar days after the first day  
192 of the school year of the school which the child is eligible to  
193 attend or the child has accumulated five (5) unlawful absences  
194 during the school year of the public school in which the child is  
195 enrolled, the school district superintendent shall report, within  
196 two (2) school days or within five (5) calendar days, whichever is

197 less, the absences to the school attendance officer. The State  
198 Department of Education shall prescribe a uniform method for  
199 schools to utilize in reporting the unlawful absences to the  
200 school attendance officer. The superintendent, or his designee,  
201 also shall report any student suspensions or student expulsions to  
202 the school attendance officer when they occur.

203 (7) When a school attendance officer has made all attempts  
204 to secure enrollment and/or attendance of a compulsory-school-age  
205 child and is unable to effect the enrollment and/or attendance,  
206 the attendance officer shall file a petition with the youth court  
207 under Section 43-21-451 or shall file a petition in a court of  
208 competent jurisdiction as it pertains to parent or child.

209 Sheriffs, deputy sheriffs and municipal law enforcement officers  
210 shall be fully authorized to investigate all cases of  
211 nonattendance and unlawful absences by compulsory-school-age  
212 children, and shall be authorized to file a petition with the  
213 youth court under Section 43-21-451 or file a petition or  
214 information in the court of competent jurisdiction as it pertains  
215 to parent or child for violation of this section. The youth court  
216 shall expedite a hearing to make an appropriate adjudication and a  
217 disposition to ensure compliance with the Compulsory School  
218 Attendance Law, and may order the child to enroll or reenroll in  
219 school. The superintendent of the school district to which the  
220 child is ordered may assign, in his discretion, the child to the  
221 alternative school program of the school established pursuant to  
222 Section 37-13-92.

223 (8) The State Board of Education shall adopt rules and  
224 regulations for the purpose of reprimanding any school  
225 superintendents who fail to timely report unexcused absences under  
226 the provisions of this section.

227 (9) Notwithstanding any provision or implication herein to  
228 the contrary, it is not the intention of this section to impair  
229 the primary right and the obligation of the parent or parents, or

230 person or persons in loco parentis to a child, to choose the  
231 proper education and training for such child, and nothing in this  
232 section shall ever be construed to grant, by implication or  
233 otherwise, to the State of Mississippi, any of its officers,  
234 agencies or subdivisions any right or authority to control,  
235 manage, supervise or make any suggestion as to the control,  
236 management or supervision of any private or parochial school or  
237 institution for the education or training of children, of any kind  
238 whatsoever that is not a public school according to the laws of  
239 this state; and this section shall never be construed so as to  
240 grant, by implication or otherwise, any right or authority to any  
241 state agency or other entity to control, manage, supervise,  
242 provide for or affect the operation, management, program,  
243 curriculum, admissions policy or discipline of any such school or  
244 home instruction program.

245 SECTION 2. This act shall take effect and be in force from  
246 and after July 1, 2000.