AN ACT TO AMEND SECTION 37-13-91, MISSISSIPPI CODE OF 1972, TO INCLUDE IN THE DEFINITION OF THE TERM "COMPULSORY-SCHOOL-AGE CHILD" THOSE STUDENTS WHO ARE ENROLLED IN PUBLIC SCHOOL KINDERGARTEN AND THOSE STUDENTS WHO TURN SEVENTEEN YEARS OF AGE DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR; TO PROVIDE THAT SCHOOL DISTRICTS MAY NOT WITHHOLD KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS FROM PROMOTION TO THE FIRST GRADE BASED UPON AN EXCESS NUMBER OF ABSENCES; AND TO REVISE THE DATE BY WHICH CERTIFICATES OF ENROLLMENT MUST BE RETURNED BY PARENTS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE OFFICERS; AND FOR RELATED PURPOSES.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(d) "School day" means not less than five (5) and not more than eight (8) hours of actual teaching in which both teachers and pupils are in regular attendance for scheduled schoolwork.
(e) "School" means any public school in this state or any nonpublic school in this state which is in session each school year for at least one hundred eighty (180) school days, except that the "nonpublic" school term shall be the number of days that each school shall require for promotion from grade to grade.

(f) "Compulsory-school-age child" means a child who:

(i) 1. Has attained or will attain the age of six (6) years on or before September 1 of the calendar year, beginning in the school year that commences during the year the child attains the age of six (6) years; or

2. Has not attained or will not attain the age of six (6) years on or before September 1 of the calendar year but who has enrolled in, and not formally withdrawn from, a public school kindergarten program; and

(ii) Has not attained the age of seventeen (17) years on or before September 1 of the calendar year; and

(iii) If the child's birthday occurs during the school year, who has not completed the school year during which the child attains the age of seventeen (17) years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The parent, guardian or custodian of a compulsory-school-age child described in this subsection, or the parent, guardian or custodian of a compulsory-school-age child attending any nonpublic school, or the appropriate school official for any or all children attending a nonpublic school shall complete a "certificate of enrollment" in order to facilitate the administration of this section.

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

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

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

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

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

The certificate of enrollment shall be returned to the school attendance officer where the child resides before the beginning of the eleventh school day of each year. Any parent, guardian or custodian found by the school attendance officer to be in noncompliance with this section shall be provided a certificate of enrollment form and notified by the school attendance officer, by certified mail, of the legal requirement that the certificate of enrollment be completed and returned to the school attendance officer. If the parent, guardian or custodian does not comply, within the two (2) school days or five (5) calendar days, whichever is less, after receipt of written notice of the noncompliance, the parent, guardian or custodian shall be deemed to be in violation of this section. However, in the event the child has been enrolled in a public school within fifteen (15) calendar days after the first day of the school year as required in subsection (6), the parent or custodian may at a later date enroll the child in a legitimate nonpublic school or legitimate home instruction program and send the certificate of enrollment to the school attendance officer and be in compliance with this subsection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

(d) An absence is excused when it results from the
death or serious illness of a member of the immediate family of a
compulsory-school-age child. The immediate family members of a
compulsory-school-age child shall include children, spouse,
grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, including
stepbrothers and stepsisters.

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

(f) An absence is excused when it results from the
attendance of a compulsory-school-age child at the proceedings of
a court or an administrative tribunal if the child is a party to
the action or under subpoena as a witness.
(g) An absence may be excused if the religion to which the compulsory-school-age child or the child's parents adheres, requires or suggests the observance of a religious event. The approval of the absence is within the discretion of the superintendent of the school district or his designee, but approval should be granted unless the religion's observance is of such duration as to interfere with the education of the child.

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

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

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

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

(6) If a compulsory-school-age child has not been enrolled in a school within fifteen (15) calendar days after the first day of the school year of the school which the child is eligible to attend or the child has accumulated five (5) unlawful absences during the school year of the public school in which the child is enrolled, the school district superintendent shall report, within two (2) school days or within five (5) calendar days, whichever is less, the absences to the school attendance officer. The State Department of Education shall prescribe a uniform method for schools to utilize in reporting the unlawful absences to the school attendance officer. The superintendent, or his designee, also shall report any student suspensions or student expulsions to the school attendance officer when they occur.

(7) When a school attendance officer has made all attempts to secure enrollment * * * or attendance, or both, of a compulsory-school-age child and is unable to effect the enrollment * * * or attendance, or both, the attendance officer shall file a petition with the youth court under Section 43-21-451 or shall file a petition in a court of competent jurisdiction as
it pertains to parent or child. Sheriffs, deputy sheriffs and
municipal law enforcement officers shall be fully authorized to
investigate all cases of nonattendance and unlawful absences by
compulsory-school-age children, and shall be authorized to file a
petition with the youth court under Section 43-21-451 or file a
petition or information in the court of competent jurisdiction as
it pertains to parent or child for violation of this section. The
youth court shall expedite a hearing to make an appropriate
adjudication and a disposition to ensure compliance with the
Compulsory School Attendance Law, and may order the child to
enroll or reenroll in school. The superintendent of the school
district to which the child is ordered may assign, in his
discretion, the child to the alternative school program of the
school established pursuant to Section 37-13-92.

(8) Unlawful absences by a kindergarten student in excess of
the number allowed by a local school district may not be the
reason for a school district's determination to withhold or
recommend the withholding of the student from promotion to the
first grade.

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

(10) Notwithstanding any provision or implication herein to
the contrary, it is not the intention of this section to impair
the primary right and the obligation of the parent or parents, or
person or persons in loco parentis to a child, to choose the
proper education and training for such child, and nothing in this
section shall ever be construed to grant, by implication or
otherwise, to the State of Mississippi, any of its officers,
agencies or subdivisions any right or authority to control,
manage, supervise or make any suggestion as to the control,
management or supervision of any private or parochial school or
institution for the education or training of children, of any kind whatsoever that is not a public school according to the laws of this state; and this section shall never be construed so as to grant, by implication or otherwise, any right or authority to any state agency or other entity to control, manage, supervise, provide for or affect the operation, management, program, curriculum, admissions policy or discipline of any such school or home instruction program.

SECTION 2. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after July 1, 2002.