

California Parents Asked to Pay Up When Kids Miss Classes

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SCOTTS VALLEY, Calif. — Tired of parents pulling their kids out of school for a ski trip or a visit to Disneyland, the local school system is billing them for the missed class time at \$36.13 per day. That is how much the Scotts Valley district calculates it loses under a state formula that doles out school funding according to daily attendance.

In truth, the bills are merely a request; no one is actually required to pay. But some parents in the well-to-do community 30 miles south of Silicon Valley are paying up to ease their guilty consciences. Others are refusing, saying the request is offensive in a state where nearly half the annual budget — \$66 billion — already is devoted to education.

"I tossed it. It's a public school. I'm ain't going to be told to pay no bill when I have my kids out," said Helene Handy, who received the explanatory letter three times, once for each of her children. "We've got to have a better way to pay for our schools." School officials said the purpose is twofold — to discourage parents from aiding and abetting hooky, and to recoup money lost to absences.

The 2,800-student district — which is populated with a large number of high-tech specialists and managers and had a median household income in 2000 of more than \$72,000 — sent a letter of explanation in January to parents. It was titled "If You Play, Please Pay." "Are the ski slopes calling? Is the beach beckoning? Are you taking the kids to Disneyland midweek to avoid the crowds?" the letter asked. "If so, we would encourage you to reconsider. When your child misses school, there are consequences for the student and the district." In California, under a formula that dates to the 1930s, how much a school receives in tax dollars is based on how many students are in class on any given day.

"Elective absences," or days missed for reasons other than illness, cost the Scotts Valley district \$223,000 during the 2005-06 school year, according to the school system. On average, it says, a Scotts Valley child misses 2.3 days because of elective absences. Within two weeks after the letter went home, the district collected more than \$2,000, said Brenda Spalding, assistant to Superintendent Susan Silver.

Stan Wilson took his two children to Hawaii for a week earlier this school year. Connor, 6, and Courtney, 8, missed five days of school. When the family returned, the Wilsons received a note from the school system asking for compensation. The letter did not specify how much, but it would have totaled more than \$360. Wilson happily gave even more, writing a check for \$500. The tax-deductible "donation" was a bargain compared to the private school tuition he and his wife were prepared to pay before they decided to keep their children in public school, Wilson said.

The 10,000-student San Mateo-Foster City elementary school system started doing the same thing a few years ago, when Silver was an administrator there. Representatives of the associations representing state and national school boards said they had not heard of any other districts trying to recover costs when students miss class.

"Our schools are duct-taped together and they're in portables. It's a shame. We need every penny we can keep," she said. "If you can afford to go to Disneyland or go on a ski trip, maybe you can afford a donation."

1. Assuming Henry County School System adopted a similar policy, requiring parents to pay when their children were absent, how much would one spend if his/her child were absent every third Monday and every sixth Friday throughout the duration of the school year?
2. In paragraph form, explain the pros and cons and such a policy requiring parents to compensate schools for student absenteeism.
3. Given this formula, how much more would a nine calendar day (five school days) vacation cost for one third, two fifth, seven sixth, and five eighth grade students if the trip was already valued at \$119/day per child?
4. Do your parents support the "If You Play, Please Pay" policy? How much would you have cost them since your academic middle school career began?
5. Given the average number of absences per Scotts Valley student and the \$223,000 they cost the district, how many students are there?
6. In paragraph form, compare and contrast the Scotts Valley and San Mateo-Foster City school districts.
7. Identify and explain the differences in opinion of Stan Wilson, Brenda Spalding and Helene Handy.
8. Henry County currently has roughly 38,500 students whereas Mr. Daughtry's previous employer, Bethel School District (Spanaway, Washington), has about 18,300. If each school system experienced a mean of each student missing 3.76% of the school year (180 days), what would the differences in "If You Play, Please Pay" policy monetary values be?
9. In the passage above, in paragraph form, explain at least five ways using the "Four-Step Reading" poster simplifies understanding of the material. Be specific.
10. In complete sentences, using contextual clues only, explain the meaning of the italicized words: *doles*, *merely*, *devoted*, *abetting*, *twofold*, *recoup*, *beckoning*, and *compensation*. Additionally, use each in a sentence to demonstrate further comprehension.
11. In paragraph form, explain at least five legitimate and educational purposes behind The Daughtry Times.