

School absenteeism law changed again

By JOANNE YOUNG
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The Legislature has been wading around in the busyness of school districts and excessive absenteeism of students for several years now. It has crafted laws, added requirements and then changed them incrementally to help districts, county attorneys, students and families comply with the state's age-old school compulsory requirement.

But with all the Legislature's work, school districts across the state struggled to implement the law. Policies were not particularly clear. They were arbitrary and subjective, said

Omaha Sen. Brad Ashford, who led the excessive-absenteeism process.

So, many districts, when absences reached 20 days, would turn all of those students — whether their absences were excused or unexcused — over to the county attorney, he said.

"We didn't want them to do that," he said.

It should have been more clearly defined, Ashford said.

Ashford offered a new amendment Tuesday that would reorient the emphasis on addressing absenteeism away from the county attorney and back to the schools and their boards, he said.

It would require schools

to document specific steps before turning a case over to a county attorney. School officials would have to meet with parents and engage in meaningful communication about the absentee issues. A plan would be developed as a result of the talks to address barriers to attendance and to improve attendance.

The plan would have to consider illnesses of the student, educational counseling and evaluation, referral to community agencies for services, family or individual counseling. Only after the student's plan is put in place and is not successful, and absences are not excused, then the matter

creation of the Council on School Attendance, which would include parents, school officials, a student, a member of a community or advocacy organization, a county attorney and others.

Ashford said he is hopeful the state has found a place in which parents, schools and the juvenile justice system can work together to identify children in need of significant help.

"They exist. They are a minority of students but they exist," he said.

Lincoln Sen. Colby Coash supported the amended bill, but cautiously, he said.

"The phrase of 'be careful what you wish for, you may

get it' comes to mind as we talk about this change proposed to how we deal with children who are absent from school," he said.

By amending the bill, the state will now have 249 school district attendance policies that will need to be interpreted, Coash said.

Parents who complained about the current state law need to know that a school board could enact an attendance policy more restrictive, he said.

"We're washing our hands here, colleagues," he said.

The amendment was adopted and the attached bill (LB464) advanced to final reading.