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## Lakewood seeks tough truancy law

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*Plain Dealer Reporter*

LAKEWOOD — The city may join Cleveland and a few suburbs by adding a greater penalty for students who cut school.

Beyond police hauling truants into school, a new daytime curfew law proposed by the mayor will mean a misdemeanor for parents and juvenile court for the student.

Mayor Ed FitzGerald presented the proposed law to council Monday night. It bans anyone under 18 from being on the streets during school hours on school days other than under certain exceptions.

Parents will be charged with a minor misdemeanor on the first offense and a fourth-degree misdemeanor for added offenses.

"This is basically an old-fashioned truancy ordinance," FitzGerald told council. "We want to give law enforcement the tools they need when they find juveniles out in the street, and they should be in school instead."

The proposed law is supported by Lakewood Schools Superintendent David Estrop, who joined FitzGerald at the council meeting.

"Anything we can do to improve attendance is a plus from our perspective," Estrop said before the meeting. "If students are not attending school, we can't teach them."

Council members, who referred the bill to their public safety committee, praised the proposal mostly for holding parents accountable. Councilwoman Mary

Louise Madigan said when problems with youths occur, people often ask: Where were the parents?

Councilwoman Nickie Antonio said she was surprised the city did not have a law already and FitzGerald said he, too, was surprised.

Cleveland added a daytime curfew in 1993 that can fine parents if school-age children are out during school hours. Lorain added one in 1997 and Painesville and Maple Heights also have similar ordinances.

Akron, Cleveland and Columbus all had daytime curfews when a 1997 survey by the U.S. Conference of mayors found few had such laws. All cities that had them, however, reported that they cut truancy.

Tracking how much the laws are used is difficult as few curfew cases end up in the juvenile court system. Patti Oakar, spokeswoman for Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court, said however, that many cases of truancy end up in the court.

In the last year, Cleveland sent 407 cases of unruly behavior with truancy to the court, the suburbs 320.

Estrop said Lakewood's problem is not widespread, but still serious.

The law proves exceptions for students who:

- Are accompanied by their parent or guardian.
- Have written permission from the school or are attending a work-study program.
- Are dealing with an emergency.