

## OBSERVATION POINT

# School Attendance Hassle Illuminates Conflicts In Society's Rule Making

By Philip H. Power  
Publisher

What with the war in Vietnam winding down, high schools and college campuses quiet, and protest movements going out of fashion, it seemed a little out of place when this newspaper "two weeks ago broke" the story that some 500 kids in Livonia schools were staging a sit-in and class boycott.

Evidently, the kids were troubled by a new district attendance policy that the board passed earlier this year, setting an upper limit of seven unexcused absences or tardinesses for continued course credit. The policy replaced an indefinite one which allowed students unexcused absences up to roughly one-third of the number of course hours, which board members and school officials had found was posing problems when kids would save up their absences and just not attend school much at the end of a term.

The demonstrations were orderly, although a few firecrackers were thrown at Bentley High School. Livonia school officials seemed to be making efforts to assure concerned students that they had a right to make their views known, while also pointing out that the district has in being a detailed appeal system for students to get a hearing all the way up to the board level.

Other suburban school districts in this area reported no demonstrations or problems, probably because the majority - Southfield and Plymouth, for example - have no rigorously defined attendance policy for kids' to protest against. The rule of thumb in these districts seems to be that if kids skip "too many" classes, they talk to teachers and counselors about the problem; if that fails, they probably won't do very well on their tests and have to take the course over again.

THE LIVONIA sit-ins are interesting because they seem to be so out of tune with these quiet times. No local school official quizzed expected to see the demonstrations spread, and Livonia officials themselves expected the movement to quietly fizzle out after a while.

But the points raised by the kids are interesting and, at minimum, worth considering.

The first is: Why be required to attend a class, if the student's own work is sufficient to keep up with the class and pass tests? If that's so, then what in blazes are the teachers doing in that class that attendance has no bearing on learning the material?

And further, if there are some bright kids in the class who find what's taught to be below their level, can't some way be found to give them more challenging

work? (We all know the answer to that one: state aid money just isn't adequate.)

The second is a point voiced by a Livonia parent with a child in the school system, who said the school board was "acting like little tin gods" in making arbitrary and excessively restrictive attendance policies. That may be true, but the board has every legal right to do it, and given the conservative swing in national mood, I'm surprised that they didn't do it before.

THE HEART OF the matter, of course, is that in trying to set up rules in our society - attendance in school, civil rights in voting, equity per pupil in education financing - we have in general tried to make the rules uniform for everyone, uniformly applied. This seems like a good principle, since it gives everybody equal treatment under the rules and establishes a government of laws and not of men.

The problem comes in that not everybody is just the same, nor is everybody in equal need of having rules to govern his conduct.

Many of the kids objecting to the Livonia attendance regulations, for example, are bright students who genuinely feel that being required to be in a slow, boring class is a pointless waste of time. Other students, perhaps less interested in the class or less bright, may well need some kind

of attendance regulation if they are to complete the academic work required.

Two different kinds of kids, but one rule. Of course, some object.

The solution, obviously, is to have some kind of rule that takes account of differences between kids. But that is very difficult to write in plain English and harder to administer so that the test of overall fairness of application is met. Plymouth and Southfield are trying this method, leaving the problem up to individual teachers and counselors, and it seems to be working reasonably well - perhaps because for these schools, outside attractions such as the Detroit Race Course are far away.

THERE IS, however, another interest group in this hassle. The ordinary suburban taxpayer, who has been paying ever-increasing taxes and is beefing about it.

We all are required to pay our school taxes; if we don't, we go to jail. No seven excused absences; even tardiness in payment causes a penalty.

We are all required to pay our taxes because as a society we have decided that providing education for our children helps us all and in the long run is a worth while investment in each of our futures.

For a taxpayer to see a high school student protest against attendance rules - which, from the taxpayer's standpoint, simply require that students use the

educational system which the taxpayer has paid for - is like waving a red flag before a bull.

I'm inclined to sympathize with the troubled taxpayer, but I'm also inclined to feel that the

students who are protesting against attendance regulations, ought to be devoting their energies to making the school system have courses and teachers who are so tough and so good that

they really want to be in class.

If they don't, and then can't get their high school graduation, and then can't get a job, they'll find out too late that there is a real point to attending classes.

TAKE THE BULL BY THE HORNS - BUT FOR BETTER EDUCATION



## Decision-Making Process Unveiled

We have something positive to report about improved public access to governmental decisions in this dark age of Nixon-Agnew philosophies which hold that the public shouldn't know anything about their elected leaders other than what the elected leaders want them to know.

The good news for the day is the opening of Westland City Council study sessions to local newspapers, a practice only rarely used by other public bodies.

THE OPENING OF the doors comes without any formal pronouncements or fanfare - just a simple request by The Observer - met with a positive answer by city councilmen.

The reasons for Westland's opening up its study sessions on

public issues are the same we have been citing for years.

We feel the public and press should know as much about how and why officials come to arriving at important public policy decisions, not just what they did, which we can learn from reading the formal minutes.

In most cases, city councils, township boards or school boards hold study sessions (something called "work" sessions, "executive" meetings, or "caucuses") to discuss in detail public business.

Specifically, these meetings allow officials to ask questions about proposed land developments, administration proposals, and - in some cases - figure out how they will vote on the issue in public.

Some councilmen admit that the major points raised in private meetings aren't revived in public.

ONE OFFICIAL pointed out that he asks questions about a development in public only when the same question asked in private isn't answered to his satisfaction.

ONE ADVANTAGE of opening the former closed sessions is the stopping of officials saying one thing in private and taking an opposite position in public for political reasons.

Another is that the public and press will learn more about the decision making process of their public officials instead of learning only how they voted.

We don't feel that everything in city hall, township hall and the school board offices will be wide open as far as public access of information is concerned, but the Westland City Council took a first step in the long journey of improving communications between government and the public.

## Attendance: Wrong Issue, At Wrong Time

Perhaps if some Livonia high school students hadn't cut so many classes, they would read the speech in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" that goes:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures."

So advised, they might have avoided the ineffective and generally useless boycott of classes which five per cent of the student body recently attempted.

AS I WADE through their canned political rhetoric, I gather they seek both long-range and short-term gains. The long-range issue is a voice for students in the policies that govern them. The short-term issue is the tighter attendance policies that went into effect this school year.

The long-range goal makes some sense, but the tiny group picked the worst possible issue in seeking it. Fighting the attendance rules is as smart as calling for the repeal of Medicare or a renewal of the Vietnam War.

Any industrial plant manager will tell you that in the last half of the 1960s, worker absenteeism often ran as high as 25 per cent, particularly on Mondays and Fridays. Most car buyers have heard that you should "never buy a car made on a Monday or Friday."

The reason is that high wages and plenty of overtime made a lot of people lazy. With poor attendance, production schedules went awry, and unit costs rose: costly overtime became necessary.

It became almost a national illness. Output per man-hour remained practically stagnant in the last half of the 1960s. Poor productivity in the face of rising wages and costs has been one major cause of America's declining position in world markets and the huge blobs of red ink in our balance of trade.

ONLY IN THE last year have industrialists summoned up the nerve to talk about it out loud. General Motors even produced a short film, aimed primarily to employees, arguing that their jobs depended on buying American, taking pride in their work, and getting to work every day.

Livonia School District found that students were abusing the

previous, somewhat permissive attendance rules by storing up their allotments of unexcused absences, then knocking off a good portion at the end of a semester.

The new, stricter rules have resulted not only in higher attendance; they also have seen an improvement in students' test scores. Granted, not every class is interesting or even instructive every day; there is nevertheless a positive virtue in attendance.

The 500 of Livonia's 10,000 high school students who boycotted classes to protest the new attendance policies were swimming against the tide. They picked a poor issue at this time in history.

With the seas against them, they not only lost their case with the board of education and the public, but they probably did much harm to the long-range students' rights movement as well.

## Sense And Nonsense

(A Correction)

Last week an item in this space chastized the Farmington school board attorney for advising the board against telling the public why it forced the superintendent to resign. We had the right principle, but the wrong lawyer. Robert

Kelly, the regular school board attorney, was erroneously blamed. The bad advice was actually given by Thomas Schwarze, a special counsel whom the board hired at a clandestine meeting, bypassing Kelly. Bob Kelly is innocent, and Schwarze gets the blame.

## Editorial & Opinion

OBSERVER NEWSPAPERS, INC.

Philip H. Power, Publisher

The Livonia Observer - The Redford Observer  
The Westland Observer - The Garden City Observer  
The Plymouth Mail & Observer - The Southfield News & Observer  
The Farmington Enterprise & Observer



Member  
NATIONAL  
NEWSPAPER  
ASSOCIATION  
FOUNDED 1885



Published by Observer Newspapers, Inc.  
36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, Mich. 48150

Serving the communities of:

Livonia, Plymouth, Plymouth Township, Canton Township, Farmington, Farmington Township, Redford Township, Garden City, Westland, Southfield, Lathrup Village, Bingham Farms