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Kids who skip school are tracked by GPS

By ERIC CARPENTER Published: Feb. 17, 2011
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ANAHEIM – Frustrated by students habitually skipping class, police and school officials in Anaheim are turning to GPS tracking to ensure they come to class. The Anaheim Union High School District is the first in California to test Global Positioning System technology as part of a six-week pilot program that began last week, officials said.

Seventh- and eighth-graders with four unexcused absences or more this school year are assigned to carry a handheld GPS device, about the size of a cell phone. Each morning on schooldays, they get an automated phone call reminding them that they need to get to school on time. Then, five times a day, they are required to enter a code that tracks their locations – as they leave for school, when they arrive at school, at lunchtime, when they leave school and at 8 p.m. The students are also assigned an adult coach who calls them at least three times a week to see how they are doing and help them find effective ways to make sure they get to class on time.

Students and their parents volunteer for the monitoring as a way to avoid continuation school or prosecution with a potential stay in juvenile hall. "The idea is for this not to feel like a punishment, but an intervention to help them develop better habits and get to school," said Miller Sylvan, regional director for AIM Truancy Solutions. The GPS devices cost \$300-\$400 each. Overall, the six-week program costs about \$8 per day for each student, or \$18,000. The program is paid for by a state grant.

Students who routinely skip school are prime candidates to join gangs, police say. Because schools lose about \$35 per day for each absent student, the program can pay for itself and more if students return to class consistently, Miller said. It has been well received in places like San Antonio and Baltimore. Where the GPS technology has been implemented, average attendance among the chronically truant jumped from 77 percent up to 95 percent during the six-week program. That attendance rate dips slightly once students no longer carry the tracking device, Miller said, but many learn new habits that help them. The coaches continue talking to them for a year.

Local school administrators say they are thrilled by the concept. "This is their last chance at an intervention," said Kristen Levitin, principal at Dale Junior High in west Anaheim. "Anything that can help these kids get to class is a good thing."

In all, about 75 students from Dale and South junior high schools are taking part in the pilot program. District officials will decide later whether to expand it to high schools and other junior highs. Earlier this week, parents and students came to the Anaheim Family Justice Center to get the devices and talk to police and counselors. Not all parents were supportive. "I feel like they come at us too hard, and making kids carry around something that tracks them seems extreme," said Raphael Garcia, whose 6th grader

has six unexcused absences. Chronically truant students in grades 4-6, and their parents, also were required to attend and, while they won't be required to carry a GPS device, they were warned about what they could face if they continue to skip school. "This makes us seem like common criminals," Garcia said.

Police Investigator Armando Pardo reminded parents that letting kids skip school without a valid reason is, in fact, a crime. If the District Attorney chooses to prosecute, truant students could be sentenced to juvenile hall and parents could face up to a \$2,000 fine, Pardo said. Hoping to keep their child at Dale Junior High, the Cruz family brought their son, Juan, to get a GPS. He's has five excused and five unexcused absences already this year; his recent report card showed his highest grade is a C and he's failing several classes. Miller, who showed Juan Cruz, 13, how to operate the device and tried to encourage him, asked why he wasn't going to school. "Sometimes I'm sick and, other times, I just don't feel like going," he said. "This will be good," Miller told Cruz. "You looking forward to it?" "No," Juan Cruz said, shaking his head. "I'm going to keep it in my pocket, though, so I don't lose it."

Parents will be responsible for paying for lost devices. But Miller said that rarely happens. They are tracking devices and typically can be found immediately. Juan Cruz's mom, Cristina, said she supports the program and hopes it helps her son get to school – and stay there. "I understand that he's been missing class. He's one of six children, and we can't always keep an eye on him," she said in Spanish. "I think this is a good idea that will help him."

