

# EDITORIAL

## Child support law pays off for kids

Finally, a new Oregon law is making dead-beat parents accountable to their children.

The law, which went into effect July 1, allows the state to suspend the occupational vehicle licenses of plumbers, electricians, truckers and other workers if they fall behind in child support payments. So far, the state has threatened to take away the licenses of 900 workers. Ninety percent of them have agreed to begin making full child support payments.

Any law that results in more support for Oregon's children should be considered a godsend. For too many years, children have suffered the most when parents split up, when Dad "forgets" to mail his monthly check and when Mom and Dad declare war over child support.

Parents, not children, should be punished when they don't take responsibility for their sons and / or daughters. This law aims to do just that. Child support money belongs to children, and the state should make every possible effort to make sure children don't pay for the mistakes of their parents.

The new law provides an overdue answer for delinquent child support payments. For years, state officials have been debating ways to make parents accountable. Although it's impossible to legislate accountability, any measure that forces people to put their children first is crucial.

The threat of losing one's license to work is a powerful incentive for repaying child support.

However, more needs to be done to protect children and punish dead-beat parents. The law shouldn't stop at blue-collar workers. Doctors, lawyers, businesspeople and other professionals have the same responsibility to their children as truckers and plumbers do.

In the next legislative session, the state will consider expanding the law to include all driver's licenses and all state-licensed occupations. The revisions are necessary to make the law applicable to all parents, resolving any problems of discrimination that may result from a law that punishes only blue-collar workers.

Maine passed a law similar to Oregon's but gave state officials the authority to revoke the driver's licenses of any parent who does not pay court-ordered child support. Maine also was given the power to revoke the professional licenses of doctors and lawyers. Warning letters to affected parents resulted in \$11.5 million in back child support payments.

Oregon should follow Maine's example and take this new law further. All child support-paying parents should face penalties if they do not pay.

Oregon also needs to make sure this new law is carefully implemented. Don't let it become just another warning that people will start to ignore. Exact the threatened punishment.

Making sure Oregon's children have a chance at a decent future is the least we can do.



### OPINION

## Free speech includes everyone

Freedom of speech is one of the most important civil liberties in this country. It is something most Americans take for granted until that freedom is taken away.

While I was working on my high school newspaper, I discovered how crippling the loss of freedom of speech could be. The problems began when the editorial board of the Tigard High School newspaper, the *Hi-Spots*, endorsed the right to freedom of speech for an underground newspaper.

The underground newspaper, *Low Spots*, published an issue that provided student criticism of various topics, including the school administration. One article criticized the principal and contained the phrase "Fuck the principal." This statement was considered obscene by the administration and, therefore, unfit for school distribution.

The editorial by our school paper acknowledged that obscenities were not appropriate for the school paper, saying, "even though their mode is not appropriate for *Hi-Spots*, we appreciate an underground newspaper's special opinion and angle."

This viewpoint was unacceptable to the school administration.

The school district administration told the members of the newspaper that we lost our right to freedom of speech when we entered the school — meaning that the freedom of speech was against school policy and that we couldn't endorse an underground newspaper.

The administration censored the editorial, saying that as an extension of the curriculum, we couldn't go against district policy.

Several members of the paper thought the administration was trampling our freedom.

I decided to call the American Civil Liberties Union to see what



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we could do. I was told we could pursue legal action.

At that point we had to determine how important this issue was to us. Four of us decided it was important enough to contact lawyers. We met with two lawyers who explained our rights to us. They also told us what we could do to try to save our freedom of speech.

We, along with three members of the underground newspaper, filed a civil suit in Washington County Circuit Court. All of us spent hours in depositions telling our sides of the story. Then we went into the courtroom to testify.

Meanwhile, the Tigard School District implemented stricter regulations concerning student publications. District administrators could now look at any issue the students produced. They could also pull any story they did not like.

At the circuit court level, the court said the Tigard School District violated our rights under the Oregon Constitution. However, the court also ruled that the district could operate under the new guidelines. Regarding the underground paper, the court said that the school district had no right to censor the publication.

The seven plaintiffs, along with the ACLU, appealed the decision to the Court of Appeals. The appellate court overturned the case, claiming that it was moot because we (the students involved in the action) had graduated. The decision said that because we could no longer be harmed by the dis-

trict's regulations, the case should be dismissed. However, this ruling ignored the fact that other students could be harmed by the strict publications policy.

Two years later we are still embedded in the legal system. While the members of the group have gone our separate ways, we are still anxious to hear the outcome of the next step. Two other University students also are involved in the case.

Today the Oregon Supreme Court is hearing our appeal at the University's School of Law. The justices will decide how important the freedom of speech is for people who have not yet graduated from high school.

The problem is that most people sitting on the courts with which we have dealt are adults. Some do not remember what it is like to be in high school and to be developing beliefs and ideas. It is very disturbing that these students are not able to express their opinions just because they are in the public school system.

Article I, Section 8 of the Oregon Constitution says that no law shall be passed restraining the free expression of opinion, or restricting the right to speak, write or print freely on any subject whatever. It is a shame that some people don't think that right applies to everyone.

Freedom of speech is extremely important to a Democratic society. How would people on both sides of the political spectrum be able to express their opinions if freedom of speech were not allowed? How would President Clinton know what the public felt about health care or gun control?

It is absolutely essential that all people, at every age, in every place in the United States be able to practice their freedom of speech.

Marcelene Edwards is the community editor for the Emerald.

## Oregon Daily Emerald

P.O. BOX 3159 EUGENE OREGON 97403

The Oregon Daily Emerald is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year and Tuesday and Thursday during the summer by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co., Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

The Emerald operates independently of the University with offices at Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union and is a member of the Associated Press.

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