

Listening 2

Kind: captions Now our continuing look at the drop out crisis in America. A number of school districts in Texas are sending tens of thousands of students into the criminal justice system every year for violating school rules. Hear our correspondent TB's story as part of our American Graduate series. 17 year-old Diane Tran is still upset after spending 24 hours in jail for missing class. The eleventh-grade honors student was locked up for contempt of court after being warned by a Justice of the Peace to stop skipping school. The judge who issued that warning in April sentenced her to jail last month when the absences continued. If you let one of them run loose what do you wanna do with the rest of them? Let them go too? But after Houston's KHOU reported her story the international spotlight fell on Tran and Texas's truancy laws. Laws that were originally crafted in the mid-19th century to keep kids in class and prevent parents from pulling them out to work in the fields and the later in factories. But for students like Tran life is more complicated than it used to be. She is a straight-A student who holds two jobs in order to help support her younger sister and another sibling in college. The judge had warned me about missing too many days of school but I just couldn't help it. Tran says that schedules led to more than ten unexcused absences in six months which under Texas law can warrant criminal class-C misdemeanor charges fines up to \$500 and potentially jail time. After the news spread the judge ended up removing her citation from her record but the case sparked a new debate about the merits of criminalising student behavior. There is absolutely no research that would support using ticketing as a deterrent or as a method of addressing childhood misbehavior. Attorney Deborah Fowler has studied the issue extensively and authored a report for Texas Appleseed a public interest law center in Austin. A lot of people assumed that it was just after Columbine but the reality is that we started to see a movement toward zero tolerance school discipline practices earlier than that and it was related to a lot of the fear around the rising rate of juvenile crime in the late 80s or early 90s and in Texas in 1995 we passed our zero tolerance laws. The report, released last December examines the ticketing practices in 22 school districts across Texas. Fowler found that, on top of cutting class thousands of students, sometimes as young as five were facing criminal misdemeanor charges for behaviors that in another era would have resulted in detention or a trip to the Principal's office.