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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**TEN PARENTS ARRESTED FOR FAILING TO SEND THEIR
KIDS TO SCHOOL**

Ten parents were arrested last week and charged with failing to send their kids to school as part of a countywide truancy sweep coordinated by the Merced County District Attorney's office and the Merced County Office of Education, District Attorney Larry D. Morse II announced today.

The District Attorney's office and the County Office of Education launched a new truancy prevention program in August in which a District Attorney Investigator has been assigned to work exclusively with Merced County School Districts to ensure that children are regularly attending school. The cost of the new program is being shared by the District Attorney's office, the Merced County Office of Education, and the school districts, Morse said.

The sweep on August 30th was only the first, Morse said. "Countless studies have shown that students who are chronically absent from school fall behind their classmates and are at greater risk of dropping out of school. Similar studies show that high school dropouts are at least eight times more likely to be in jail or prison. They also earn less money, pay fewer taxes and are more likely to collect welfare. We fail our children, we fail public safety and we fail our communities if we do not do everything in our power to see that kids graduate from high school," Morse said, adding that more sweeps would follow.

The 10 parents arrested last week were charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor, a misdemeanor. Nancy Benitez, 42, Ana Luzania, 34, Rosalind Hardin, 46, Jose Gonzales, 45, Ana Salas, 43, Bernadette Thomas, 45, Vanessa Montufar, 32, Fabiola Higareda, 44, and Jennifer Villa, all of Merced, were all taken directly to court by the arresting officer and arraigned before Merced County Superior Court Judge Mark Bacciarini. Kristen Jacobs, 35, was booked into Merced County jail and held overnight, according to investigators.

Steve Tietjen, Superintendent of the Merced County Office of Education, emphasized that the arrest warrants are sought "only after every other effort to get these kids to school has been exhausted." Many school districts have School Attendance Review Boards (SARB), he noted, and parents who are not sending their kids to school go through a SARB process in which meetings are held with the parents and school officials to try to determine

why a child is missing school. It is only after the parent has failed to comply with the terms of attendance set forth by the school district that the case is referred to the District Attorney's office for prosecution.

"Obviously, the District Attorney and I take no pleasure in prosecuting parents for willful failure to send their kids to school. It is truly our last resort. But the stakes are simply too high for these kids and we owe them our best efforts to see that they receive the education they deserve," Tietjen said. He noted that as part of the SARB process, school officials often identify other issues preventing kids from regular attendance and the Office of Education is working closely with other agencies such as Merced County Behavior Health Services, and Merced County Child Protective Services to eliminate any roadblocks to regular attendance.

Other agencies who participated in the sweep were the Merced Police Department's school resource officers, the Merced County Sheriff's Department, the Merced County Probation Department and Merced County Human Services Agency's Child Protective Services.