

January 1996

**TRUANCY:  
Preliminary Findings on Washington's 1995 Law**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In the 1995 legislative session, E2SSB 5439 (known as the "Becca Bill") was passed by the legislature and signed into law. Its purpose is to give parents, police, schools, and courts the ability to intervene earlier in the lives of at-risk youth. Sections 66-74 of the new law address truancy. The new law requires the school district to file a truancy petition directly with the juvenile court if a juvenile has five unexcused absences in a month or ten in a school year.

The Becca Bill directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to:

- Review and evaluate the need to develop a statewide definition of excused and unexcused absences.
- Review and evaluate the need to prohibit school districts from suspending and expelling students as disciplinary measures in response to unexcused absences.
- Review and evaluate the process of filing truancy petitions.

This report describes how the law has been interpreted and implemented in school districts and juvenile courts from September through November 1995.

**Preliminary Implementation Findings:**

- 1,189 truancy petitions have been filed in juvenile courts statewide.
- 9 prosecutors are directly involved in the truancy petition process.
- 10 juveniles have been held in 3 juvenile detention centers for violating a court order to return to school.

**Options for Creating a Statewide Definition of Unexcused Absence:**

- Delay the decision to create a statewide definition of unexcused absence until more information is available.
- Do not create a statewide definition of unexcused absence, but clarify the compulsory attendance law and sections of the Becca Bill.
- Adopt a statewide definition of unexcused absence.

**Options for Prohibiting Suspension and Expulsion from School in Response to Unexcused Absences:**

- Do not create a law prohibiting suspension and expulsion for truancy.
- Delay the decision to create a law prohibiting suspension and expulsion for truancy until more information about the effects of the new law is available.
- Adopt a statewide prohibition of suspension and expulsion for truancy.