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Truant Students: Evaluating the Impact of the "Becca Bill" Truancy Petition Requirements

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Washington Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to evaluate the effectiveness of the truancy petition process implemented under the 1995 "Becca Bill" (E2SSHB 2640). This report examines the following issues: (1) a statewide summary of Washington's truancy petition process, (2) a case study of truant students in ten school districts¹ during the 1996-97 school year, and (3) a national review of truancy literature and programs.

The ten school districts in the case study were selected to demonstrate how some Washington State schools are approaching truancy prevention. While the experience of these districts can provide valuable insight and information, this case study is not meant to portray information about all Washington State schools.

Study Findings

Statewide Findings

- Approximately *70 percent* of the state's school districts filed petitions on truant students, with a total of *12,094* petitions filed during the 1996-97 school year.
- Truancy petitions were filed on approximately *1.2 percent of the state's enrolled students* during the 1996-97 school year.
- The number of petitions filed during the 1996-97 school year *increased by 29 percent* over the 1995-96 school year.

Profiling Truant Students From the Case Study

- In this case study, an average of *10 percent of all students were truant* with unexcused absences.
- School administrators emphasized that *excessive excused absences* are also a problem. *Fifteen percent* of all students in this case study had 20 or more absences (excused *and* unexcused).
- A higher percentage of truant students (*32%*) had *records of suspensions* than non-truant students (*16%*); truant students (*48%*) also *transferred, withdrew, or dropped out* of school more often than non-truant students (*17%*).

¹ One middle school and one high school from each district were selected to participate in the study.

- *Thirty-seven percent* of the truant students had a truancy petition filed in juvenile court. Approximately *seven percent* of all truant students had a *contempt* order filed for continued trancies.
- Data from this case study revealed that truant students have *recurring attendance problems*. Approximately one-third of the students with petitions filed during the 1995-96 school year had *another* petition filed in the 1996-97 school year.

Responses to Truancy

- Many schools have strengthened their attendance monitoring and enforcement policies in response to the new expectations created with the truancy petition requirements.
- Juvenile courts and school districts have created *partnerships* to develop programs for truant and at-risk students.
- The truancy petition *sanctions* have caught the attention of parents and students. In many cases, they are *changing behavior patterns*.
- Students who have serious family or personal issues are much *less likely* to respond to the truancy interventions.

Resources

- Schools and courts are *stretched thin* in resources to meet the petition requirements, particularly in the larger urban school districts.
- It is difficult to measure the success of truancy interventions based on the number of truancy petitions filed by a school district. Many districts spend considerable resources on truancy intervention *before* the student accumulates excessive trancies.
- *Courts* continue to experience a *heavy workload* at the end of the year when an increased number of truancy petitions are filed.

National Review of Truancy

- Students who are *beginning* to experiment with truancy are more likely to be affected through interventions than students who have long established patterns.
- Selected schools and juvenile courts in Washington are implementing programs similar to other nationwide efforts that address truancy. Success of such programs is dependent upon several factors, including: stable funding, collaboration between the schools and the legal system, clear communication with parents and students on attendance expectations, and parental involvement.

Potential Areas for Action

- Consideration should be given to expanding the population of students covered by truancy petitions to include enrolled students ages 5 to 8.
- The transition years of middle school are critical in setting student behavior patterns and thus are a good target for intervention programs.

Currently, school districts are only reimbursed for the number of truancy petitions filed with the juvenile court. One alternative would be to provide reimbursement to schools based on the number of students with 5 or more unexcused absences in a month (or 10 in a year) whose attendance problems are resolved without a petition process. These funds could provide schools with resources to address truancy problems early. The most difficult truancy cases could then be reserved for the courtroom, thus conserving juvenile court resources.