

Assessing the Impact of Washington's Truancy Petition Process **An Exploratory Analysis of the Seattle School District**

The 1995 Washington State Legislature passed a truancy law requiring school districts to file a petition in juvenile court for students who have excessive unexcused absences. This paper describes whether the truancy requirements work to keep truant youth (from the Seattle School District) enrolled in school. While the petition process may also affect other behaviors, such as student attendance and disciplinary incidents, this paper looks exclusively at enrollment outcomes for truants students. Based on our analysis, it does not appear that the *filing* of a truancy petition increases the chances that a petitioned youth from the Seattle School District will stay in school. The petition *process*, however, may have a deterrence effect among non-petitioned truant youth who were more likely to stay in school following the implementation of the "Becca Bill".

I. Background

At the request of its Board of Directors, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy is studying the impact of the truancy petition process in the Seattle School District. Revised truancy procedures in Washington State school districts took effect in 1995 as part of the "Becca Bill."¹ The truancy component of this bill requires school districts to file a petition in juvenile court when students accumulate seven unexcused absences in one month or ten unexcused absences in a year. If the court upholds the petition, and the truancies continue, the student can be held in contempt of court and ordered to serve up to seven days in juvenile detention.

This working paper assesses the outcomes of Washington's truancy law in the Seattle School District. The Seattle School District was chosen for this study for two reasons:

- The district is one of the few in the state that maintains historical records of student attendance, permitting a comparison before and after the truancy law went into effect.

The large number of students enrolled in the district permits a statistically valid comparison of student outcomes *within the district*. The findings presented in this study, however, cannot necessarily be generalized to other school districts in Washington State.

¹ RCW 28A.225.020

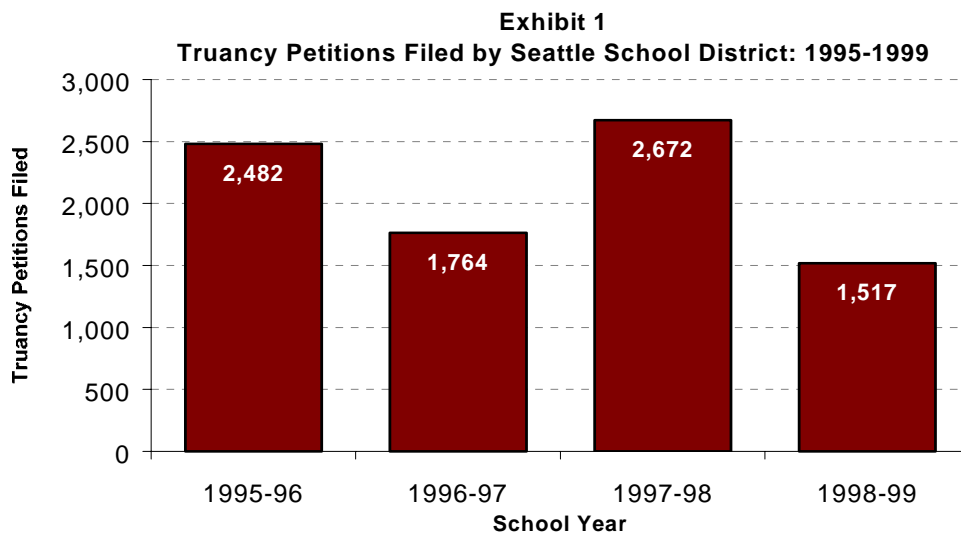
II. Approach

The truancy petition process is intended to improve educational outcomes for students with excessive unexcused absences. This study examines whether the Becca law improves the chances that truant students will stay enrolled in the following school year.² To make this assessment, we compare outcomes for truant students enrolled in the Seattle School District during the 1994-95 school year (pre-Becca group) with truant students enrolled during the 1996-97 school year (post-Becca group).³

Before analyzing differences between truant students in these two school years, it is important to examine overall trends in truancy and attendance. These trends help distinguish between pre-existing *patterns of change* and *one-time events* (such as the enactment of petition requirements) that may influence outcomes. This section looks at trends in the rate of truancy petition filings, absences, and enrollment levels in the Seattle School District.

A. The Number of Truancy Petition Filings Has Varied

Exhibit 1 shows that the number of truancy petitions filed in the Seattle School District has fluctuated since the passage of the Becca Bill. These fluctuations are the result of procedural changes that occurred between the school district and court. The existence of these variations in the petition filing process indicate that a longer time frame is required to draw firm conclusions about the effect of the Becca law.

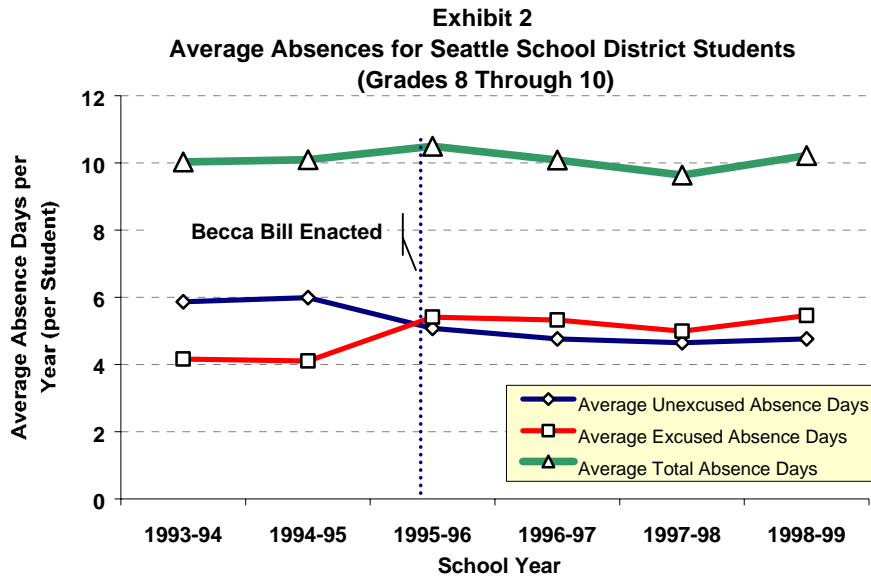


² For the purpose of this analysis, a successful outcome occurs if students are in school for at least 155 (of a possible 180) school days in the year after meeting the truancy criteria (seven unexcused absences in a month or ten unexcused absences in a year). By using statewide enrollment data, this analysis accounts for students who may leave the Seattle School District to enroll in another district within the state.

³ Both pre-Becca and post-Becca groups are limited to 8th, 9th, and 10th graders for two reasons: (1) statewide enrollment data are limited to grades 9-12, which prevents an analysis of students in earlier grades, and (2) data from 8th grade assessment tests (an important controlling variable in the analyses) are not available for students who were in the 11th grade during the 1994-95 school year.

B. A Decrease in Unexcused Absences May Reflect Recorded, Not Actual Absences

Unexcused absences decreased in the Seattle School District between 1993 and 1999, but *total* absences remained relatively unchanged (see Exhibit 2). One explanation of this trend may be that the recording of unexcused absences has become more accurate. The legal consequences established by the Becca Bill encourage parents, students, and educators to ensure that legitimate absences are properly excused.



While improved recording of absences can be viewed as a positive result of the truancy legislation, such a change makes it difficult to compare truancy rates before and after the petition requirements took effect. Nonetheless, with this important limitation in mind, the analysis presented in Section IV will estimate the impact of the truancy petition requirements on school re-enrollment for a group of pre- and post-Becca students.

III. Truancy Rates

Exhibit 3 (next page) presents the percentage of students who were truant in the pre- and post-Becca study groups. Truant students are those who met the law's petition-eligibility criteria (seven unexcused absences in a month or ten in a year). As noted, however, changes in the recording of unexcused absences since 1995 may account for some of the difference in truancy rates between the pre- and post-Becca students discussed here.

Approximately 11,000 Seattle School District students (grades 8 through 10) were enrolled during each time period. Truant students represented 18 percent of the student population in the 1994-95 school year and 14 percent of students in the 1996-97 school year. Additionally, among truant students in the post-Becca group, 730 (45 percent) had a truancy petition.

Exhibit 3
Truancy Rates in the Seattle School District

	All Students (Grades 8-10)	Truant Students	Petitioned Students
<i>(Pre-Becca Group)</i>	10,974	1,988 (18% of all students)	
<i>(Post-Becca Group)</i>	11,480	1,634 (14% of all students)	730 (45% of truant students)

IV. Findings: Multiple Effects of the Truancy Petition Process

After examining overall trends in absences and petition filings, we conducted a separate analysis that estimated how various factors (including truancy petition filings) influence the probability that truant students remained enrolled in school. Results from this analysis indicate:

A. Truant students enrolled in the post-Becca group (1996-97) were 18 percent more likely to stay in school compared with ‘truant’ students in the pre-Becca group.

While the Becca law appears to influence the likelihood of truant students’ re-enrollment, this finding must be considered cautiously. In addition to improvements in the recording of unexcused absences, other unobserved changes that occurred in the district may also have influenced enrollment patterns.

B. Filing a truancy petition does not significantly affect the probability of a truant student staying in school.

While our analysis found that the *act* of filing a truancy petition did not influence the likelihood of petitioned students staying in school, the *threat* of potential court action may have deterred other students from accumulating unexcused absences. These responses are difficult to measure but remain important considerations when assessing the effectiveness of this law.

This research brief compares outcomes for truant students following the implementation of the truancy petition requirements. Future research efforts aimed at evaluating the impact of *specific* truancy interventions may provide a more reliable look at effective strategies for students with attendance problems.

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