

January 1998

## Evaluating the "Becca Bill" Truancy Petition Requirements A Case Study in Ten Washington State School Districts

The 1995 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). As part of this evaluation, the Institute conducted a case study of truant students in ten school districts<sup>1</sup> in Washington during the 1996-97 school year. This report provides a statewide summary of Washington's truancy petition process and describes the major findings from the one-year case study. A complete report of this evaluation is also available.<sup>2</sup>

### Study Findings

- 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 also created **partnerships** to develop programs for truant and at-risk students.
- Truant students have a significantly **higher mobility rate** than non-truant students. In this case study, 48 percent of truant students transferred, withdrew, or dropped out of school compared with 17 percent of the entire student population.
- The number of petitions filed during the 1996-97 school year **increased by 29 percent** over the 1995-96 school year. In many areas, school districts and juvenile courts have **insufficient resources** to meet the petition requirements.

### Washington State's Truancy Petition Process

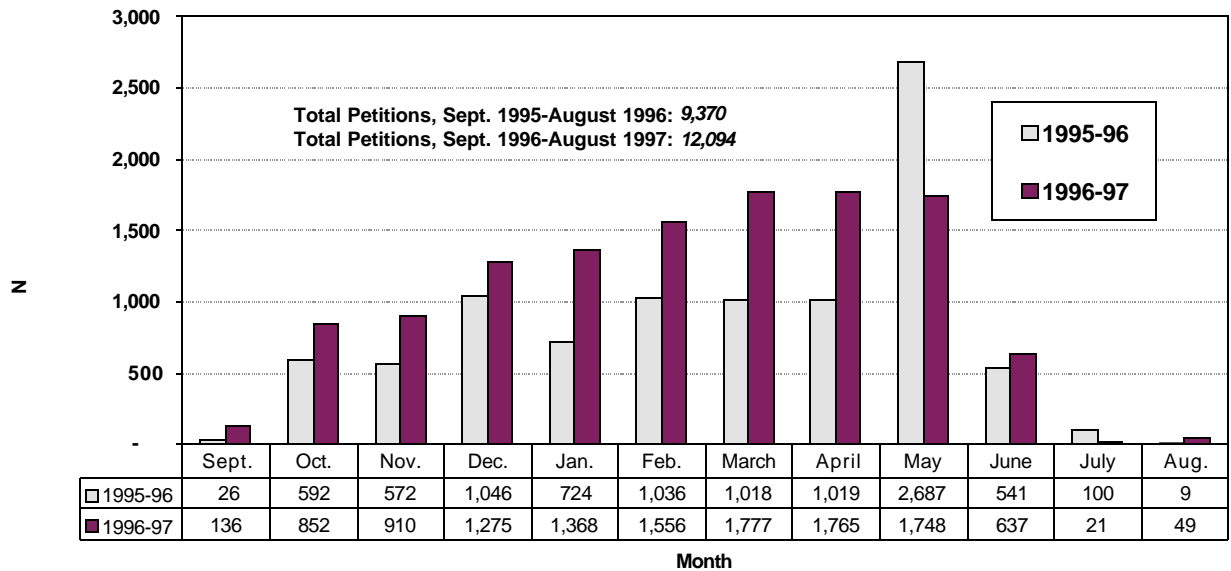
According to the state's truancy law, if a student accumulates at least five, and not more than seven unexcused absences in a month (or ten in a year), the school must file a truancy petition in juvenile court. The court must schedule a hearing on each petition. Following a fact-finding hearing, the court may assume jurisdiction over the case and order the student to attend school. If the student fails to comply with the order to attend school, the court can impose a variety of sanctions, including detention, fines, or community service.

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

<sup>2</sup> *Truant Students: Evaluating the Impact of the "Becca Bill" Truancy Petition Requirements*, Mason Burley and Edie Harding, Washington State Institute for Public Policy, January 1998.

During the 1996-97 school year (September 1996 – August 1997), school districts in Washington State filed **12,094 petitions**. These truancy petitions were filed on approximately **1.2 percent** of the state's enrolled students. The number of truancy petitions filed by districts in 1996-97 represents a **29 percent** increase from the number of petitions filed during the previous school year. Figure 1 shows the number of petitions filed statewide by month between September 1995 and August 1997.

**Truancy Petitions Filed in Washington State Juvenile Courts:  
September 1995 - August 1997**



Note: High number of petitions filed in May 1996 occurred primarily in the Seattle School District.

Source: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, December 1997.  
Petition counts from Office of the Administrator for the Courts.

### State Allocations for Truancy

During the 1995-97 biennium, the Legislature appropriated \$8.3 million for programs serving truant and at-risk youth:

- \$3 million to reimburse schools for the cost of filing petitions;
- \$2 million to implement alternative school programs;
- \$1 million for community truancy boards; and
- \$2.3 million (yearly) for juvenile courts to process truancy, children in need of services, and at-risk youth petitions.

For the 1997-99 biennium, schools and juvenile courts received the same funding allocation for truancy petition reimbursements as the previous biennium. Funding for alternative school programs was reduced from \$2 million to \$1 million, and state funding for community truancy boards was eliminated. The state's reimbursement rate for truancy petitions changes from year to year based on the number of petitions filed by school districts.<sup>3</sup> Many schools cannot establish long-term funding plans for truancy prevention. Furthermore, districts are only reimbursed for truancy interventions *after* a petition is filed.

<sup>3</sup> During the 1995-96 school year, the OSPI reimbursement was \$193 per petition; in 1996-97, it was \$128 per petition.

Through this system, districts that expend sizable resources preventing a petition from going to court receive less reimbursement than districts that file a large number of petitions with little primary intervention.

## **Cost Survey**

The Institute conducted a cost survey for the school districts and juvenile courts participating in the case study on truancy.<sup>4</sup> The survey collected personnel and other operating costs incurred as a direct result of filing truancy petitions. School districts typically experience costs related to the truancy petition process at the central district office and at individual school buildings. The survey found that state allocations for truancy expenditures covered the costs incurred at a school district's central office, but did not begin to cover the cost of filing truancy petitions for individual school buildings in a district.

Juvenile courts also incurred costs for monitoring and assisting with filing petitions, court time, attorney time, and detention days. On average, state funding covered 67 percent of the total cost of filing petitions for the six juvenile courts responding to this survey.

## **Truancy Case Study (1996-97 School Year)**

To examine the *effectiveness of the truancy petition process in reducing unexcused absences*, the Institute conducted a case study in ten school districts (and their respective juvenile courts) for the 1996-97 school year. The study participants included one high school and one middle school in each district.<sup>5</sup> Districts were selected based on their ability to provide accurate information on students and their use of innovative interventions to improve attendance and address truancy related issues. In addition, consideration was given to selecting schools with varying enrollment sizes and geographic locations.

The findings from this case study offer valuable information on outcomes for truant students. However, the study participants *are not randomly selected school districts, and are not meant to portray information about all Washington State school districts.*

A total of 21,228 students were included in this case study for the 1996-97 school year. Data from participating schools found that **10 percent** (2,212) of all students were found truant.<sup>6</sup> Not all of these students had truancy petitions filed, however. An examination of court data found that **37 percent** of truant students had a petition filed in juvenile court. Figure 2 describes the outcomes of truant students in this case study.

According to the law, the school district may refer a truant to a community truancy board or enter into an attendance contract with the truant student and his or her parent. If either of these interventions is successful, legal action may prove unnecessary.

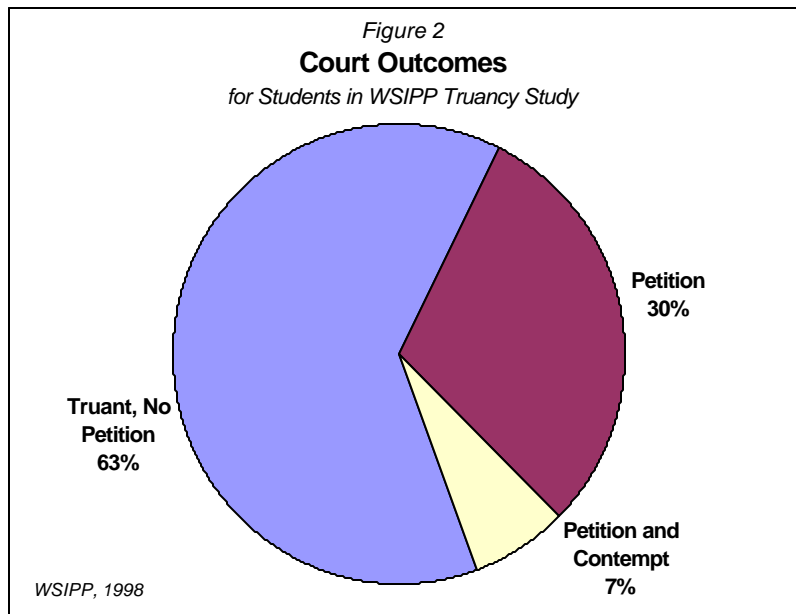
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<sup>4</sup> Five school districts and six juvenile courts completed the survey.

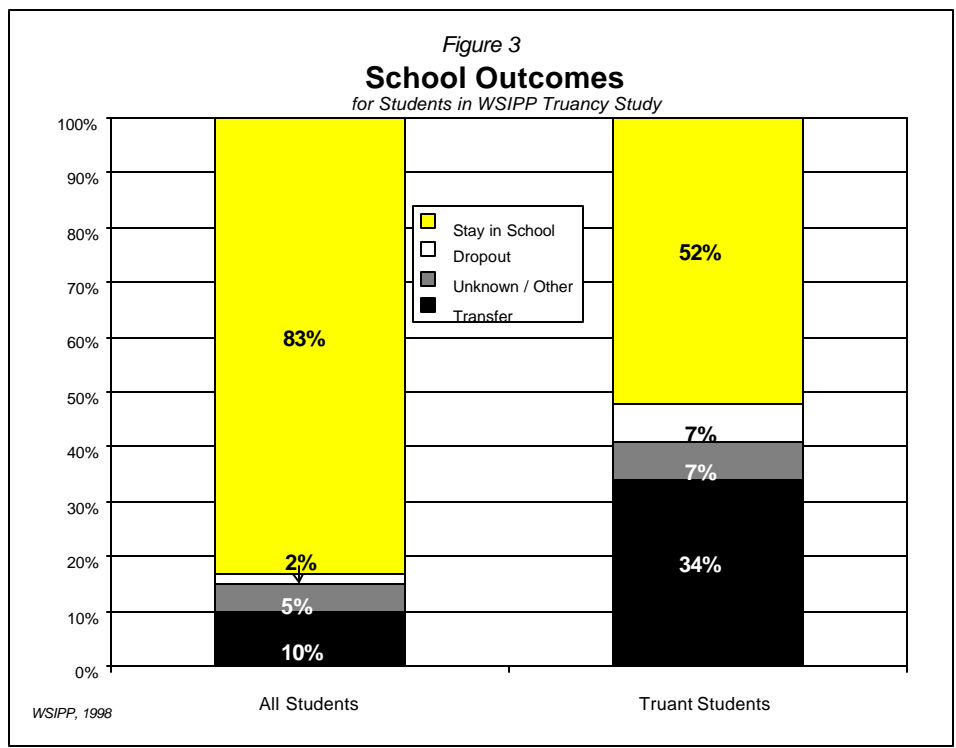
<sup>5</sup> Study school districts (and county juvenile courts) included: Yelm (Thurston), Tacoma (Pierce), Port Angeles, Quillayute Valley (Clallam), Mount Vernon, La Conner (Skagit), Yakima, Wapato (Yakima), Spokane, East Valley (Spokane).

<sup>6</sup> In this report, a "truant" student refers to a student who has met his or her school district's definition of truancy due to an excessive number of unexcused absences.

Figure 2 illustrates that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of a school's truancy intervention efforts solely by the number of students who appear in court. In this case study, a large number of students accumulate excessive unexcused absences, without receiving court intervention.



While school interventions can improve the attendance of truant students, many truant students leave school before the school district can file a truancy petition. Figure 3 shows that truant students from this case study were more likely to transfer, withdraw, or drop out of school than non-truants. Among the **total students** in this study (truant and non-truant), **83 percent** stayed in school for the entire school year. Only **52 percent** of **truant students** stayed in the same school for the entire school year. **Forty-eight percent** of the truant students transferred to another school (either in-district or outside the school district), dropped out, or withdrew for other reasons.<sup>7</sup>

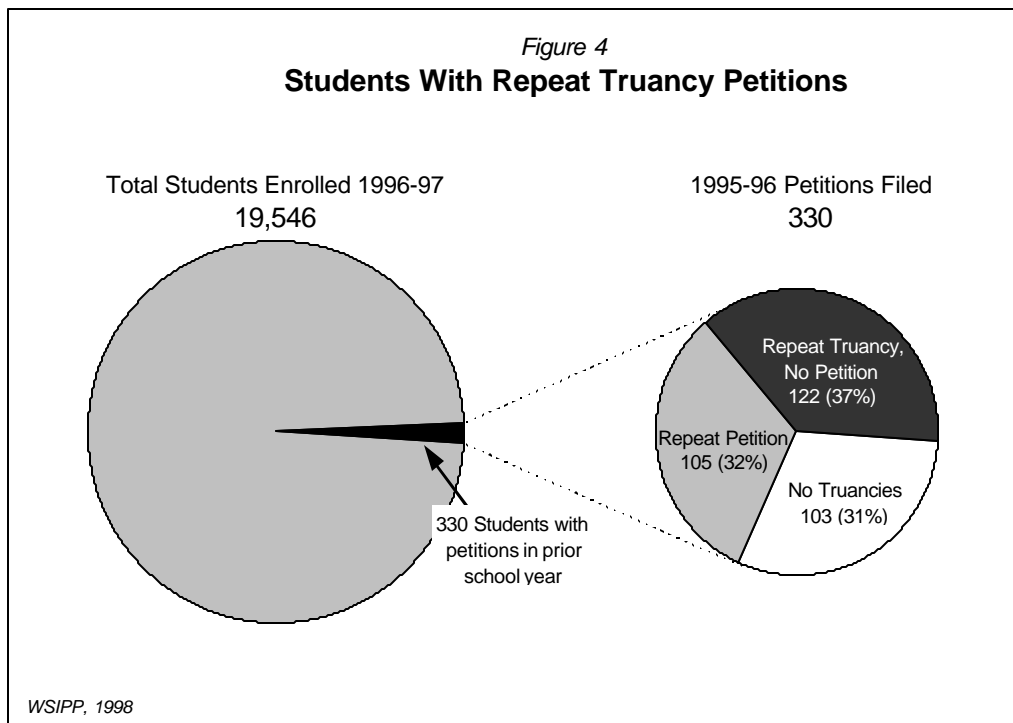


<sup>7</sup> Mobility categories are based on classifications reported to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Data from the case study was also used to compare the characteristics of truant students to the entire student population (truant and non-truant). In addition to a higher mobility rate, truant students differed from school averages in the following areas.

1. A higher percentage of truant students (**37 percent**) had records of **suspensions** than non-truant students (*16 percent*).
2. **Thirty-six (36) percent** of truant students lived with **both parents**, while *56 percent* of all students in the case study lived with both parents.
3. **Forty-two (42) percent** of all truant students from this case study were in the **eighth or ninth grade**. (Eighth and ninth graders totaled *34 percent* of the total sample.)

The primary goal of the truancy petition process is to improve the school attendance of truant students. With this goal in mind, investigators examined the number of *repeat truancies* among students in the case study. Case study schools identified 330 students who were enrolled during the 1996-97 school year **and** had a truancy petition filed during the previous (1995-96) school year. Figure 4 displays the outcomes for these 330 students. Thirty-two percent (105) of students petitioned in 1995-96 had another petition filed during the 1996-97 school year. An even higher percentage of petitioned students continued to have attendance difficulties.



## **Potential Areas of Action**

Data from the first two years of Washington State's truancy law show juvenile justice and education professionals are increasing their efforts in holding students accountable for school attendance. In this case study, the majority of students who had truancy petitions filed returned to school. However, many students may need additional assistance to be successful in school.

To address certain gaps identified in this case study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Consider expanding the population** covered under the truancy process to include enrolled students from ages 5 to 8. National research reveals that elementary truancy is a predictor of high school truancy. During the interviews conducted for this study, school administrators stressed the need to reach families with young children regarding the importance of good school attendance habits. Parents with younger students exercise more control over the school attendance of their children. If young children (ages 5 to 8) are frequently truant, the court should determine if the parents are contributing to the truancy of the child. In such cases, it may be appropriate to order court sanctions for these parents.
2. School districts may want to **target students in 8th and 9th grades** with attendance problems. In the data collected for this study, students in these grades seemed to be struggling the most with attendance issues. Special programs such as those in East Valley, Port Angeles, and Forks middle schools are potential models for other districts to examine.
3. Long-term truancy solutions will require a **stable funding commitment** to develop the programs and resources necessary to improve school attendance. The current reimbursement system does not provide fixed revenue to establish lasting truancy programs. Because the current reimbursement system is based on truancy petitions filed, school districts that invest in programs which target truants before they go to court receive lower compensation than districts that provide little intervention and file a higher number of petitions. A fixed truancy grant, or reimbursement tied to student outcomes may provide a more equitable system of financial support for truancy efforts. One option would be to reimburse districts based on the number of students with five or more unexcused absences in a month who stay in school and do not have truancy petitions filed. This funding could serve as an additional allocation to assist school districts that implement truancy interventions designed to reduce the number of petitions filed.

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