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KEEPING KIDS IN SCHOOL: *The Impact of the Truancy Provisions in Washington's 1995 "Becca Bill"*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1995, the Washington Legislature passed a law known as the "Becca Bill."¹ The Becca Bill addresses several areas of public policy, including those affecting at-risk, runaway, and truant youth.

This report describes the Institute's evaluation of the truancy provisions in the Becca Bill.² In passing the bill, the Legislature recognized that truancy is linked to poor academic performance, dropping out of school, substance abuse, and criminal behavior. The legislative intent is to keep kids in school and thereby avoid some of the undesirable outcomes associated with truancy.

The Becca law requires a school to inform a student's parents of unexcused absences and to meet with the student and parents if unexcused absences continue to accumulate. The school *may* take legal action in juvenile court when a student has five unexcused absences in a month. If a student has seven unexcused absences in a month, or ten in an academic year, the school district *must* file a truancy petition in juvenile court. If the truancy continues, the court can take several actions, including ordering a youth to a county detention facility and ordering the parents to perform community service and pay fines.

The Institute analyzed whether the truancy provisions of the Becca Bill have had an effect on one of the main goals of the Act: keeping kids in school. Specifically, we examined whether the bill has increased high school enrollment rates. To do this, we analyzed county-level data several years before and after the Becca Bill went into effect, while statistically controlling for other factors that affect high school enrollment rates.³

Findings. We found that the truancy provisions of the Becca Bill appear to result in a statistically significant increase in high school enrollment. Thus, the bill seems to be achieving one of its intended outcomes: helping to keep youth in high school.

¹ The bill was named for a 13-year-old runaway girl who was murdered in 1993 in Spokane.

² The Becca Bill's truancy provisions are in Chapter 28A.225 RCW. Earlier Institute reports on the truancy provisions in the Becca Bill include M. Burley and E. Harding (1998) *Truant Students: Evaluating the Impact of the "Becca Bill" Truancy Petition Requirements*; and C. Webster (1996) *Truancy: Preliminary Findings on Washington's 1995 Law*. The Institute has also reported on the non-truancy aspects of the Becca Bill, see M. Burley and J. Mayfield (2001) *At-Risk and Runaway Youth in Washington State: Outcomes for Youth Admitted to Secure Crisis Residential Centers and Mandatory Chemical Dependency Treatment*. All Institute reports are available at <<http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/pubs.html>>.

³ The technical details supporting the analysis are described in the appendix to this report, beginning on page 5.

We estimate that about 2,664 additional high school students are enrolled today as a result of the Becca Bill. The state spends about \$3.5 million a year on the truancy petitions, an amount equal to \$1,314 per program success (\$3.5 million divided by 2,664 enrolled youth).

Limitations of This Study. It was beyond the scope of this short study to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the Becca Bill's truancy provisions. Such an analysis would need to quantify the benefits of high school graduation and estimate all state and local costs associated with the bill's implementation. A systematic review of other evidence-based approaches that keep students in school was also beyond the scope of the study.⁴ Thus, an unanswered question is whether there are other less expensive ways (cheaper than \$1,314 per program success) to get the same benefit.

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⁴ For an example of research on other approaches, see D. C. Gottfredson (2001) *Schools and Delinquency*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.