

## Court takes truancy seriously

Posted: Tuesday, May 24, 2011 5:02 pm

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SOUTH BEND – Truancy, having unexcused absences from school, is taken very seriously in Pacific County. Students are allowed 10 unexcused absences as defined by each of the five school districts in the county in one school year before they are truant. If they have five in one month they are also deemed truant.

The law (RCW.28A225030) says school districts “shall report excess unexcused absences.” The prosecuting attorney then schedules a hearing between the student, the parents or guardian, and a school district official, usually the principal or vice-principal.

The judge can then give a court order that the student must attend school. The judge may also file charges against the parents if the school district names them in the petition. Should the student again be absent for unexcused reasons they may be placed in custody at a juvenile detention center in either Grays Harbor or Cowlitz County with contempt of court charges. The parents pay a \$25 per day fine if the student has more unexcused absences plus \$100 court costs. Once a student has been deemed truant the threshold for unexcused absences drops to five for any one school year.

“Several years ago we sat down with the commissioners, the judges, and school officials and decided that truancy in our county would be a criminal offense. In some counties it is a civil offense due to the cost of the procedure, but we felt it was very important for students to be in school,” juvenile court administrator Wayne Leonard explained.

“It is expensive for the county and for the school districts to go through the process, but we take it very seriously that students must be in school in Pacific County,” he said.

While in detention students may earn early release for doing school work. Sentences are often for five days and probation is usually for one year. Detention is “like jail” according to Leonard in that the student’s behavior is regimented. School is offered, there is time for physical activities, points are awarded for good behavior and rewards are given. Students in detention for long-term sentences also may receive counseling for drug and alcohol issues or anger management.

School districts may waive the absence rules for students over 16 years of age who are actively seeking a General Equivalency Diploma. At age 18 the truancy laws are no longer in effect for students, although many are very close to graduation and attendance may be an essential part of their earning a high school diploma.

In 2010 in Pacific County Raymond had 11 truancy violations, South Bend and Valley each had three, Ocean Beach had two cases, and Naselle none. Raymond and Ocean Beach districts are about twice the size of the others. “Raymond school officials realized they had a problem with attendance and they addressed it,” Leonard said.

Washington ranks 37<sup>th</sup> nationally in graduation rate, which puts our State in the bottom one-fourth of the country. The truancy laws are part of an effort to increase that performance and are part of the “Becca Law.”

The Becca Law was passed by parents and legislators who said they wanted to save their kids. The law was named for 13-year-old Becca Hedman, a teenage runaway, who was murdered. Her father, Dennis Hedman, went on a mission to radically change Washington juvenile laws.

Besides making the reporting of runaways a legal requirement, the Becca Law also set up a statewide network of lock crisis shelters to hold runaways for up to five days, and in a dramatic

turnaround, the law scrapped provisions in juvenile law that required the consent of teenagers before they were put into mental health, drug, or alcohol therapy. Under the new law the parents do not need consent before committing their children.

Working in the juvenile department in Pacific County with Leonard are probation officers Jim Noren, Julie Charaska, and Scott Jacot and legal assistant Shannon Pettit.