

# WASHINGTON STATE CENTER FOR COURT RESEARCH



## Truancy in Washington State:

Trends, Student Characteristics,  
and the Impact of Receiving a  
Truancy Petition



This project was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The author thanks the Models for Change partners in Washington State for their participation and contributions to this and other projects designed to reform juvenile justice. Special thanks to the Washington School Information Processing Cooperative (WSIPC), the Becca Task Force, and the participating courts and school districts for their contributions and commitment to improving the lives of youths and their families.

Citation: George, Thomas (2011). *Truancy in Washington State: Trends, Student Characteristics, and the Impact of Receiving a Truancy Petition*. Olympia: Washington State Center for Court Research.

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# Summary of Findings

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Truancy is a pervasive problem in Washington State. Each year, tens of thousands of youths are chronically absent from school without a valid excuse. Continued truancy takes a tremendous toll on youths, their families, and society at large. Truancy has been linked to both current and future problems such as substance abuse, dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, marital instability, criminality, and incarceration.

Since the passage of the Becca laws in 1995 (E2SSB 5439, Chapter 312, Laws of 1995) Washington State has taken an aggressive approach toward reducing truancy-related problems and promoting positive outcomes. A series of mandated actions on the part of schools has been implemented in an attempt to better monitor attendance and track youths' whereabouts, communicate with parents, provide early interventions, and re-engage youths and families in the educational process. In addition, schools are required to file a truancy petition in juvenile court when their efforts fail to substantially reduce a youth's unexcused absences. Within the context of civil proceedings, courts engage in a variety of activities—from issuing orders to attend school to assigning youths to detention for repeated non-compliance—in an effort to compel school attendance.

Using multiple research methods, this study examined recent trends, student characteristics, and the impact of receiving a truancy petition on youth outcomes over the past several years and from a variety of perspectives. It draws on numerous published reports, a newly created educational research database containing nearly one million student records, over 1,000 responses on a recently developed risk and needs assessment administered to youths and their parents, and a comprehensive court contact and recidivism database detailing youths' court histories.

## Trends

### *Attendance and Graduation:*

- From 2004-2009, first through eighth graders averaged 8.6 excused absences and 0.9 unexcused absences per year; high schoolers averaged 8.6 excused absences and 4.2 unexcused absences.
- Over the past decade, the percentage of first through eighth grade students who exceeded the statutory threshold of ten unexcused absences in a year declined from 1.7% to 1.1%, but increased for high schoolers from 8.8% to 13.6%. This corresponds to approximately 10,000 truant younger students and 45,000 truant high school students every year.

- The on-time graduation rate has remained relatively stable for the past ten years. For the Class of 2009, 73.5% graduated on time; 19.4% dropped out, had an unknown status, or completed a different program; and 7.0% continued with high school after four years.

#### Court Filings and Juvenile Crime:

- Approximately 16,000 truancy petitions were filed in juvenile courts each year from 2006-2008, but the number declined to 12,856 in 2009, possibly in response to a court ruling in which it was decided that petitioned youth are entitled to legal representation at the initial hearing.
- The percentage of eligible students (based on ten unexcused absences per school year) who received a truancy petition decreased steadily over the past decade from 50% in 2001 to 28% in 2009.
- Juvenile criminal charges continued to decrease. Misdemeanors have decreased 32% from their high in 1996, and felonies have decreased 47%.

#### Characteristics of Truant Students

##### School Functioning:

- Court-petitioned high school truants averaged approximately 16 unexcused absences and 10 excused absences per year. These students earned approximately half of the credits needed each year to graduate, and had a D average in school.
- Half of all truants (49%) reported that they did not expect to obtain any additional education beyond high school.
- Twenty-seven percent (27%) of all truants were suspended or expelled during the year in which they received a court petition—a rate three times higher than their non-petitioned peers—and 40% had accrued three or more suspensions and/or expulsions during their schooling.

##### Physical and Mental Health:

- Truant students were found to have many negative childhood experiences and a complex array of current social and emotional difficulties. Parents of court-petitioned truant students reported a rate of physical or sexual abuse for the students ten times higher than the general population (18%); approximately one-third of the youths had been exposed to substance abuse (35%) or domestic violence (29%) in the home; and one-quarter (25%) had a parent who had been incarcerated. Twenty-four percent (24%) had experienced three or more adverse childhood events.

- Truant students were four to six times more likely to have run away or been kicked out of their home on multiple occasions in comparison to other students.
- Thirty-nine percent (39%) of truants had a history of a psychological disorder or learning disability, and truants reported a higher level of depression-anxiety, aggression-defiance, substance abuse, peer deviance, school disengagement, and family problems than non-truants.

#### Court Involvement:

- Truancy has often been referred to as a “first step” or “gateway” to more problematic functioning including criminal conduct. However, 26% of all court-petitioned truants had already been charged with a misdemeanor (24%) and/or a felony (7%) prior to their first truancy petition. Half of all truants (50%) ended up with a criminal charge by the time they turned 18 years old.

#### The Impact of a Truancy Petition

- To evaluate the impact of receiving a truancy petition on youth outcomes, a sample of several thousand non-petitioned truants were matched with court-petitioned truants using a method called propensity score matching. The two groups were then examined across time with respect to attendance, grade point average, graduation, and juvenile crime. This study did not find any evidence that court-petitioned truants fared differently than non-petitioned truants on any of the assessed variables.
- Of those students who received a truancy petition in ninth grade, only 15% went on to graduate on time.

This study confirmed that chronic absence from school has tremendous personal and social costs. Truant youths are at considerable risk of psychological maladjustment, school failure, criminal behavior, and other negative outcomes. Because of the complexity of issues facing many truant youths and their families, effective interventions will likely require a greater understanding of, and attention to, these issues by trained professionals over time. Simply sending these students through a court system with limited therapeutic options is not likely to have much positive impact. Dedicated specialists who can accurately identify and assess students in need, develop appropriate intervention plans with youths, their families, and the school, and follow-up with those involved on a regular basis, may be able to provide the necessary supports. Innovative collaborations between school districts and juvenile courts to fund, train, and implement these specialists have begun in several counties in Washington State. Future research will be needed to evaluate these programs in order to establish their efficacy and determine what role, if any, they should play in Washington’s public policy.



## Introduction

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In 2007, Washington State was selected by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to participate in the *Models for Change* initiative—a major nationwide effort to reform juvenile justice. One of the primary reform efforts in the state has focused on promoting alternatives to formal court processing and secure confinement, especially for truant youth.

In Washington, truancy is considered a status offense, and school districts are required to file court petitions on students with excessive unexcused absences from school. As a result, thousands of youths are becoming court involved each year, some of whom are incarcerated because of civil contempt orders issued in response to repeated truant behavior or because of failing to appear at court hearings.

As part of a coordinated statewide effort, the Washington State Center for Court Research (the Center) received MacArthur Foundation funding to conduct research studies that further our understanding of truancy and the impact of the truancy petition process on youth. This publication first describes the background and provisions of the state’s truancy laws and prior truancy studies conducted in the state. Next, recent trends in school attendance, school completion, court filings, and juvenile crime are examined. Research is then presented on the characteristics of truant youth in comparison to non-truant youth. Finally, this publication describes and discusses the results of an evaluation of the impact that receiving a truancy petition has on a variety of social, behavioral, and academic outcomes.



# Background

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In 1995, the Washington State Legislature passed a law known as the “Becca Bill” to reduce the risk of harmful outcomes among runaways, truants, and other at-risk youth. The main goals of the bill were to develop better structures for tracking problematic youth behaviors, provide parents with increased options for dealing with at-risk youth, and ensure adequate assessment and treatment services.<sup>1</sup> In addition to changing the state’s compulsory attendance laws, the bill established or modified how truancy, At-Risk Youth (ARY), and Child in Need of Services (CHINS) petitions were handled by the juvenile courts and related parties.

Although truancy was not the main focus of the original bill, the significant impact of the truancy provisions on schools, juvenile courts, and families quickly created a major public policy issue. Prior to 1995, public school districts had the option of filing a truancy petition on children in violation of the state’s compulsory attendance laws. After the Becca Bill, however, districts were *required* to file a truancy petition if a student accumulated seven unexcused absences in a month or ten in a school year. As a result, truancy petitions increased from less than 100 per year prior to 1995 to approximately 15,000 annually from 1997 to 2009. The dramatic increase in the volume of cases and the additional responsibilities on the part of the schools and courts required substantial changes. These included improving the capacity of data systems; providing a variety of documents, services, and hearings within a specified time frame; providing services and sanctions that could effectively address

the truant behavior; and addressing the legal requirements and issues within the context of civil proceedings.

## *The Truancy Process*

The truancy petition process is one component of a system of steps designed to reduce unexcused absences from school and promote positive outcomes for youth.<sup>2</sup> The first statutory requirement, which is to occur after a student’s first unexcused absence, is for the school to notify the parents of the absence and inform them of the potential consequences of continued truancy. After the second unexcused absence, the school is required to hold a conference with the parents and student to analyze the causes of the truant behavior and to take steps to improve attendance. Not later than the fifth unexcused absence in a month, school districts are required to either enter into an attendance agreement with the student and parent, refer a student to a community truancy board, or file a truancy petition in juvenile court. If the actions taken by the school district do not substantially reduce a student’s absences, it must file a petition in juvenile court not later than the seventh unexcused absence in a month or the tenth in a school year.

Once a petition has been filed, a variety of approaches to truancy case processing is available to Washington’s juvenile courts. In the more traditional approach, students and parents attend a fact-finding hearing at court before a judicial officer. If the youth is found to be truant by a preponderance of the evidence, the court assumes jurisdiction and orders the youth to attend

school.\* Other options available to the court include ordering the youth to attend a different school or educational program, referring the youth to a community truancy board, ordering drug and alcohol testing and treatment, or imposing a fine of \$25.00 per unexcused absence on the parents.

While a youth is under court jurisdiction, the court may hold one or more review hearings or engage in other activities to monitor his or her progress (e.g., requiring the submission of attendance reports). If the youth fails to comply with the court order, a civil contempt proceeding may be held. Sanctions can then be imposed to “coerce” the student to attend school. Possible sanctions include up to seven days of detention or alternatives to detention such as community service. If a youth is confined to civil detention, he or she may purge the contempt through the completion of court-approved activities such as writing an essay or book report, completing homework, or returning to school.

Another common court-based approach is a variation of the traditional process and was designed to expedite the large volume of truancy cases. In this approach, groups of students and their parents attend an educational class or workshop at court. At these meetings, it is typical for the statutory requirements to be discussed, as well as social, educational, and legal consequences of continued truancy. Students and parents then have the option of signing a voluntary

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\* Typically, jurisdiction is assumed either through the end of the school year, through the current school year and part of the following year, throughout all of high school, or until the youth’s eighteenth birthday.

attendance agreement or an agreed court order, depending upon local practice, or scheduling a fact-finding hearing before a judicial officer. Judicial officers may or may not be present at the conclusion of the session to remind students and parents of their responsibilities, discuss potential sanctions, and sign court orders.

A third approach involves the use of a community truancy board. Truancy boards may be used before or after a petition has been filed in juvenile court, but are most often used after the petition is filed but before a formal court hearing.† Truancy boards are operated either by the juvenile court or by a school district under the authority of the court. Typically, boards involve three or more members from the school district, juvenile court, local service agencies, law enforcement, or the local community. Individual meetings are held with students and parents in an attempt to identify and resolve issues related to chronic absences, and they most often result in attendance agreements. Failure to comply with an agreement generally results in formal court hearings. In addition, some districts and courts provide additional case management activities after truancy board meetings to facilitate services, monitor progress, and provide additional interventions.

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† Some jurisdictions immediately stay the truancy petition while attempts are made to remediate the student’s truancy. If attempts are unsuccessful, the stay is lifted and a court hearing is held. Other jurisdictions do not stay the petition while the students and parents proceed through initial remediation attempts. Local court processes have changed recently in many jurisdictions in light of a state Court of Appeals ruling (*Bellevue School District vs ES*, No. 60528-3-1, 2009) in which it was decided that petitioned youth are entitled to legal representation at the initial hearing.

# Prior Truancy Studies in Washington State

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## *Implementation Studies*

Over the past 15 years, several studies have examined various aspects of the truancy petition process across the state. In 1998, the Washington State Institute of Public Policy (WSIPP) conducted a study in ten school districts and found that in the years immediately after the Becca Bill was passed, schools began strengthening attendance monitoring and enforcement as well as developing partnerships with the juvenile courts for truant and at-risk youth. The study also found, however, that only 37% of students who met the statutory threshold for unexcused absences received a truancy petition. Also apparent at the time was the fact that both school districts and the courts had insufficient resources to meet the requirements of the Becca Bill given the large number of students with unexcused absences.<sup>3</sup>

In 2004, a study conducted by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) also found that the majority of school districts and courts were working collaboratively to meet legal requirements, and many were developing innovative programs and processes to address truancy-related issues.<sup>4</sup> However, the study also highlighted several areas of concern with respect to implementation. Among the

concerns were: (a) the majority of students eligible for a truancy petition did not have a petition filed in court, and the rate of eligible students to petitioned students was declining over time; (b) many school districts did not file any truancy petitions, failed to provide necessary interventions or documentation, or did not adequately follow up with attendance reports or contempt filings; (c) many students and parents failed to appear at required meetings or hearings; and (d) sanctions and purge conditions for contempts were inconsistently applied by the courts. The conclusion was that, while the truancy laws were effective in bringing high-risk students to the attention of the schools and courts, the lack of funding and resources needed to address the large numbers of students and their issues limited the impact of the laws.

Finally, with respect to implementation, two recent WSIPP studies again found considerable variation in truancy-reduction practices and services within the educational and juvenile justice systems.<sup>5,6</sup> Schools reported that the most common targeted interventions were alternative schools and credit retrieval programs for truants and at-risk students,

though only 29% of schools offered these services. Schools did, however, engage in a variety of interventions as part of a more general approach toward students in need. Common activities included counseling, life-skills classes, adjusted curricula, behavioral contingencies (both rewards and punishments), and specific accommodations (e.g., transportation).

In addition to the courts' general approach to truancy case processing mentioned above, specific practices also differed substantially across juvenile court jurisdictions. For example, the average number of court hearings per truancy case ranged from near zero to almost seven, and contempt motions were nonexistent in several counties while averaging more than one per case in others. Sanctions and services also varied. With respect to detention, many courts rarely or never incarcerated truants even after repeated contempts, while other courts averaged more than one detention day per case. Other sanctions included attending school at the local detention center, weekend programs, work crew, and electronic monitoring. Fines of up to \$25 per day for parents were almost never imposed. As for services, 43% of truants received some form of case management, 10% were drug tested, and 42% were referred by the courts for community services such as counseling, tutoring, or anger management classes.

### ***Outcomes Studies***

The variation in truancy practices raises an important question regarding the overall effectiveness of the truancy laws: Have schools and courts developed policies and practices that capitalize on limited resources, address the idiosyncrasies of

local culture, and effectively meet the needs of their highest risk students? Or are schools and courts struggling to meet the demands of a large at-risk population with a disparate patchwork of services that does little to address the underlying causes of truancy, the risk of future deleterious outcomes, or the exigent behavior itself?

In 2000, a WSIPP study examining the outcomes of petitioned students in the Seattle Public Schools found that filing a petition had no effect on whether those students remained in school.<sup>7</sup> The average number of unexcused absences, however, did decline across the district, lending some support to the notion that the truancy provisions in the Becca Bill had a modest deterrent effect. Two years later, WSIPP released another study that suggested the Becca Bill did increase high school enrollment across the state.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, WSIPP was again asked by the legislature to evaluate the impact of the truancy petition process on students' outcomes. Results from this study indicated that petitioned truants were much *more likely* to experience academic failure and to commit future crimes in comparison to non-petitioned, chronically absent students.<sup>9</sup> However, because of the substantial differences between the two groups prior to their absenteeism, as well as other research considerations, it could not be determined how the truancy process impacted these outcomes. Furthermore, a reanalysis of the impact of the Becca laws on high school enrollment using more rigorous statistical methods and a longer time period found there was actually no reliable effect of filing a petition on enrollment. The WSIPP studies aside, little other research in the state has examined

the effectiveness of schools' and courts' attempts to reduce truancy and future negative outcomes.

The following sections attempt to add to our understanding of truancy and the impact of the petition process by focusing primarily on the truancy process *after a petition has been filed in juvenile court*. As noted above, many other interventions may already have occurred by the school district prior to the filing of a petition. These school interventions may include parental notification of absences, conferences, warnings of a potential truancy petition, course adjustments, school reengagement programs, and sanctions. The variation of these practices across the state and the limitations of available data precluded an evaluation of school-based interventions. As such, the social and academic histories of students who received a truancy petition, and the degree to which they were previously exposed and engaged in various interventions, are extremely varied.

This study examines the post-petition truancy process by addressing several key research questions:

- How widespread is truant behavior and how has it changed over time?
- How many youth in Washington State meet the statutory threshold for receiving a truancy petition?
- What are the social, emotional, and academic characteristics of truant youth?
- What is the impact of receiving a truancy petition on subsequent school attendance, academic performance, and juvenile delinquency?

In order to address these questions, this evaluation used multiple research methods and data sources involving many statewide agencies, court jurisdictions, and school districts. A brief description of the methods and sources is provided within each report section.



# Current Trends in Attendance, Graduation, Court Filings and Juvenile Crime

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To examine current trends in the educational and juvenile justice data, two new databases were created within the Washington State Center for Court Research: the Court Contact and Recidivism Database and the Educational Research Database. The Court Contact and Recidivism Database contains detailed records on an individual's court history in the State of Washington, including both civil cases, such as dependency and truancy, as well as criminal cases. Information on the type of case, criminal referrals, dispositions, and dates of cases and charges from 1985 to September 2010 were available for this analysis.

In addition, the Center partnered with the Washington School Information Processing Cooperative (WSIPC) to create the Education Research Database. WSIPC is a collaboration among school districts and Educational Service Districts which, in part, manages school data systems for over 280 of the 295 school districts in the state. This Education Research Database contains information on a variety of indicators such as students' absences (both excused and unexcused), grades, credits, graduation outcomes, as well as a host of demographic variables. Data were obtained on over 890,000 K-12

students from the 2003-04 school year through the 2008-09 school year. Data for this study were available from 205 districts covering approximately 60% of all public school students in the state.<sup>‡</sup>

## *Trends in School Attendance*

While all absences from school are a concern because of missed educational opportunities, the Becca laws place a heavy emphasis on *unexcused* absences. Unexcused absences are of particular concern for a variety of reasons. Often parents are unaware of their child's failure to attend school; the youth's defiance toward school and parents is often indicative of other concurrent behavioral, emotional, and academic issues; truant behavior is predictive of future social and educational difficulties; and youth have greater opportunity to engage in harmful and law-violating behavior while not in school.

Unexcused absences are defined differently across the state according to

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<sup>‡</sup> Notably absent from the Educational Research Database are some of the largest urban school districts such as Seattle Public Schools, Tacoma Public School, and Spokane Public Schools.

school district policy. RCW 28A.225.020 defines an unexcused absence as one in which a student “has failed to attend the majority of hours or periods in an average school day or has failed to comply with a more restrictive school district policy, and has failed to meet the school district’s policy for excused absences.” Some districts calculate unexcused absences on a per period basis, while others distinguish only among entire school days. Information in this report is based on data extracted from school information systems, and therefore is based on each district’s own definition.

through twelfth graders using data from 2004 through 2009. On average, students missed 10.6 days of school during a school year—8.6 excused days and 2.0 unexcused days. While the number of excused absences was relatively similar across grades, unexcused absences increased steadily beginning in the sixth grade when they averaged 1.0. By the twelfth grade, unexcused absences averaged nearly five (4.7; See Exhibit 1). It is important to note that considerable variation existed in unexcused absences, especially among high school students.

Exhibit 1 presents the average number of excused and unexcused absences for first

**Exhibit 1**

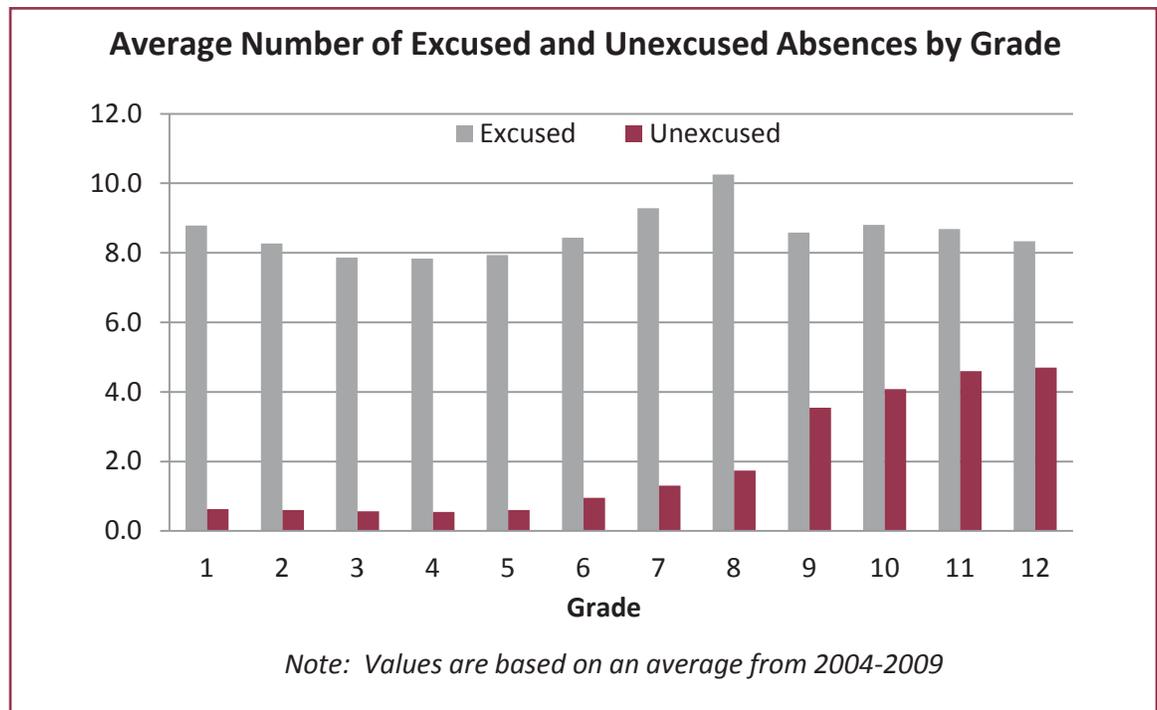
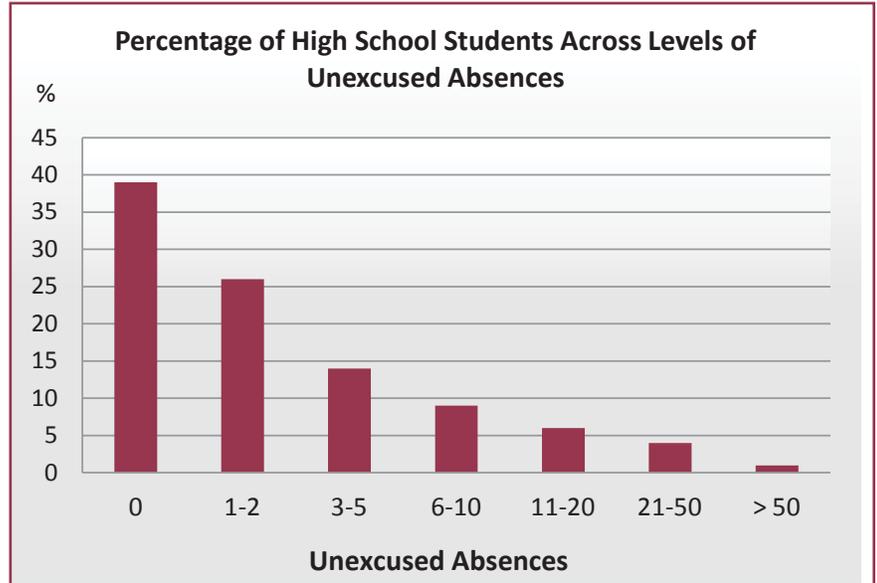


Exhibit 2 displays the percentage of high school students with different numbers of unexcused absences. The most common occurrence was for students to have no unexcused absences (39%). Nearly two-thirds of all students (64%) had no more than two. Each year, however, 5% of students had more than 20 unexcused absences, equating to roughly 16,500 high school students in the state who were chronically truant.

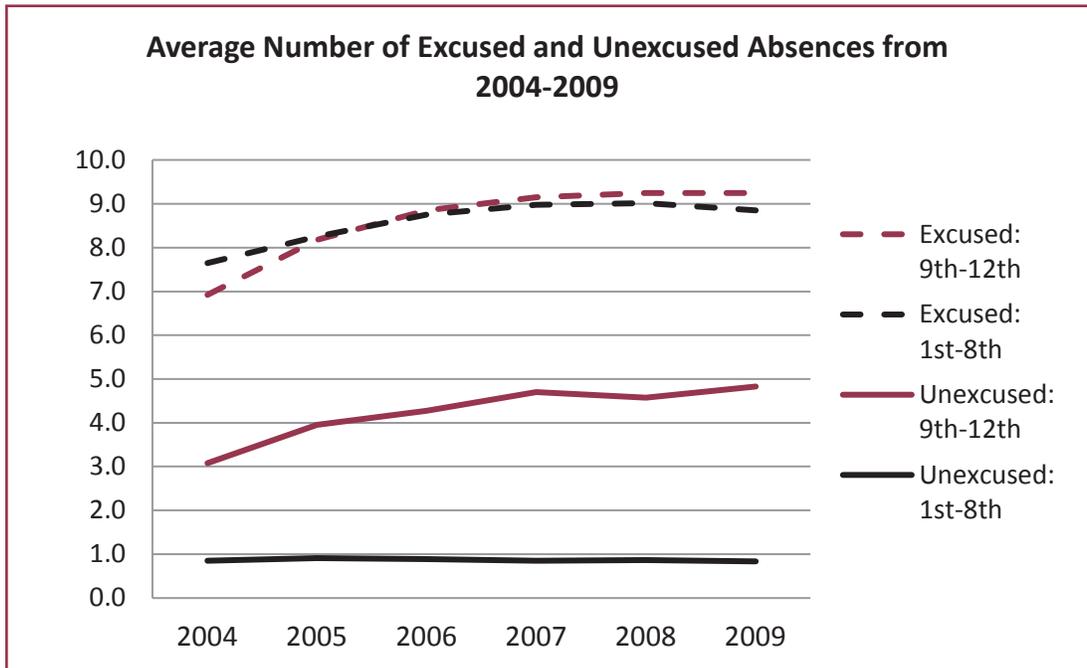
Exhibit 3 presents the average number of absences across time from 2004 to 2009. Younger students (first through eighth graders) missed, on average, 9.5 days of school per year, although the vast majority of those absences were excused (excused = 8.6, unexcused = 0.9). The overall number of absences has remained fairly stable for this age group since 2004. High school students also averaged 8.6 excused absences, but 4.2 unexcused

**Exhibit 2**



absences (total absences = 12.8). Both excused and unexcused absences increased for high school students from 2004 to 2007, then remained stable through 2009.

**Exhibit 3**

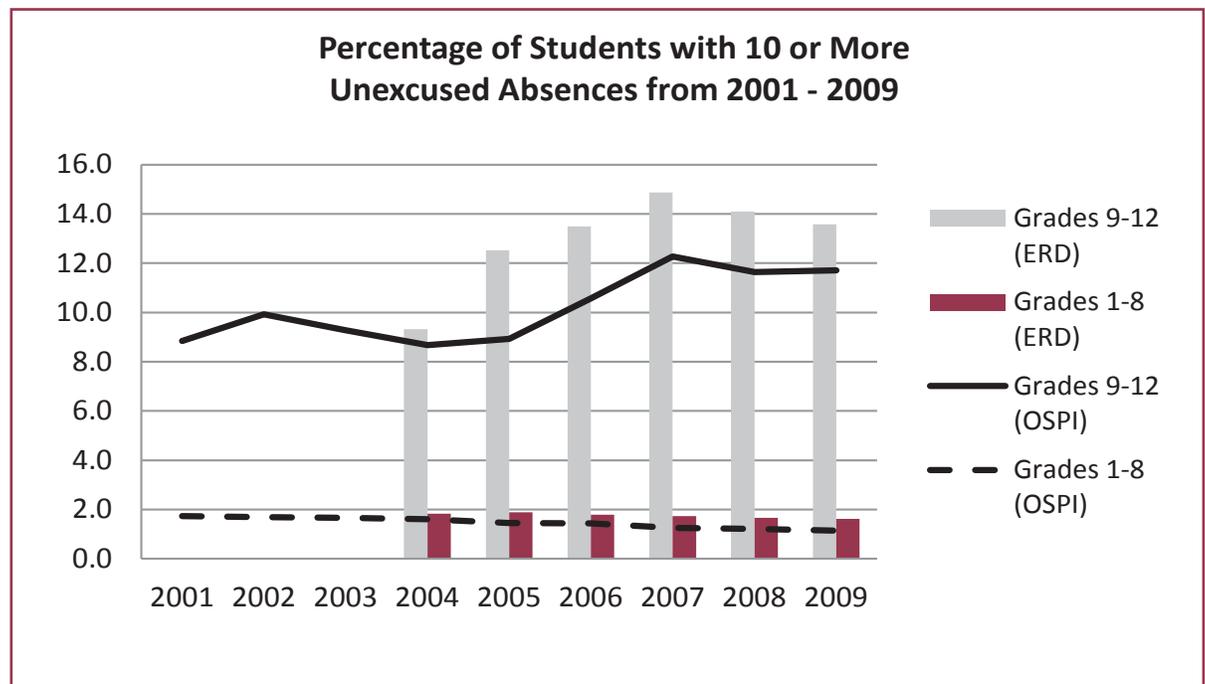


Of particular relevance to Becca laws is the percentage of students with ten or more unexcused absences in a year—the statutory threshold for filing a truancy petition. According to data published by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI),<sup>10</sup> the percentage of first through eighth graders exceeding the threshold decreased slightly from 2001 through 2009 from 1.7% to 1.1%. For high school students, however, the percentage increased from 8.8% in 2001 to 12.3% in 2007, then decreased slightly to 11.7% in 2009 (see Exhibit 4).

with slightly higher rates. While the percentage of students with ten or more unexcused absences decreased slightly over time for younger students, it increased substantially for high school students. From 2004 to 2007, the rate increased from 9.3% to 14.9% of students, an increase of 60% during the three year period. Since 2007, however, the rate changed course and decreased from 14.9% to 13.6% (see Exhibit 4). Using figures for 2009, the current rates corresponded to approximately 10,000 truant first through eighth graders and over 45,000 truant high school students every year.

Data from the Educational Research Database (available since 2004) used for this study found a similar trend but

**Exhibit 4**



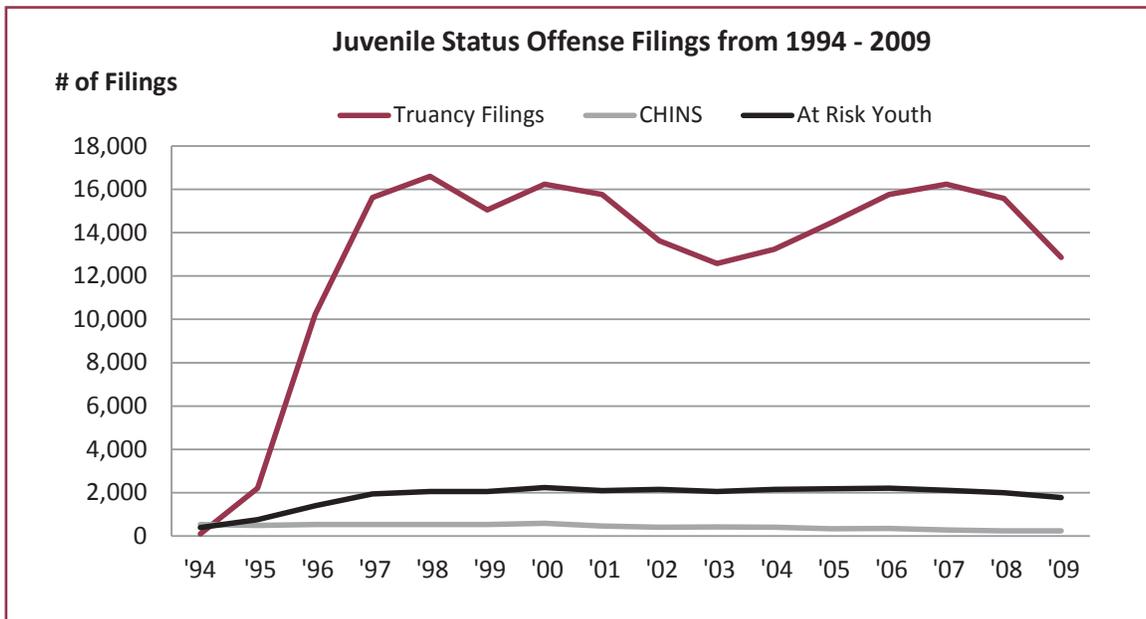
## Trends in Court Filings

Prior to the passage of the Becca laws in 1995, truancy cases were relatively rare in the state. In 1994, for example, only 91 truancy petitions were filed in the state's juvenile courts compared to 393 ARY petitions and 532 CHINS petitions. After the laws were enacted, however, truancy petitions skyrocketed to over 16,000 by 1998. Although not as dramatic, ARY petitions also increased significantly to over 2,000 (see Exhibit 5).

Available data suggest that truancy petition filing rates have generally mirrored attendance patterns. Both the percentage of students with ten or more unexcused

absences and truancy petition filings decreased from 2002 to 2003, increased from 2004 to 2007, then began decreasing again after 2007. The sharp decline in truancy filings in 2009, however, is not reflected in attendance data and may be due to the recent Court of Appeals case (*Bellevue School District vs. ES*, 2009) which ruled that youth with a truancy petition are entitled to legal representation beginning at the initial hearing. The added challenge of both providing legal representation for youth, and working with the attorneys, has likely increased reluctance to file and process petitions.

Exhibit 5



By combining the data on unexcused absences and truancy filings, the proportion of eligible truant students (i.e., those who exceeded the statutory threshold of ten unexcused absences) who received a truancy petition can be calculated. As seen in Exhibit 6, the percentage of eligible to petitioned students declined from approximately 50% in 2001 to 33% in 2008, and most recently to just 28% after the Court of Appeals ruling.

### ***Trends in Dropout Rates and Juvenile Crime***

Because the intent of the Becca laws, in part, is to improve social and educational outcomes for youth, annual changes in dropout rates and juvenile crime are

examined for an indication of the laws' impact and to provide context regarding the current state of affairs.

According to OSPI, a dropout is defined as "a student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completing school with a regular diploma and does not transfer to another school." Dropouts include students with an unknown status (i.e., those who leave a district and the district is not contacted by another district for student records), as well as students who complete another type of school program such as a GED or IEP diploma. Dropout percentages reflect the number of dropouts divided by the number of enrolled students after subtracting out those students who transferred to another district.

**Exhibit 6**

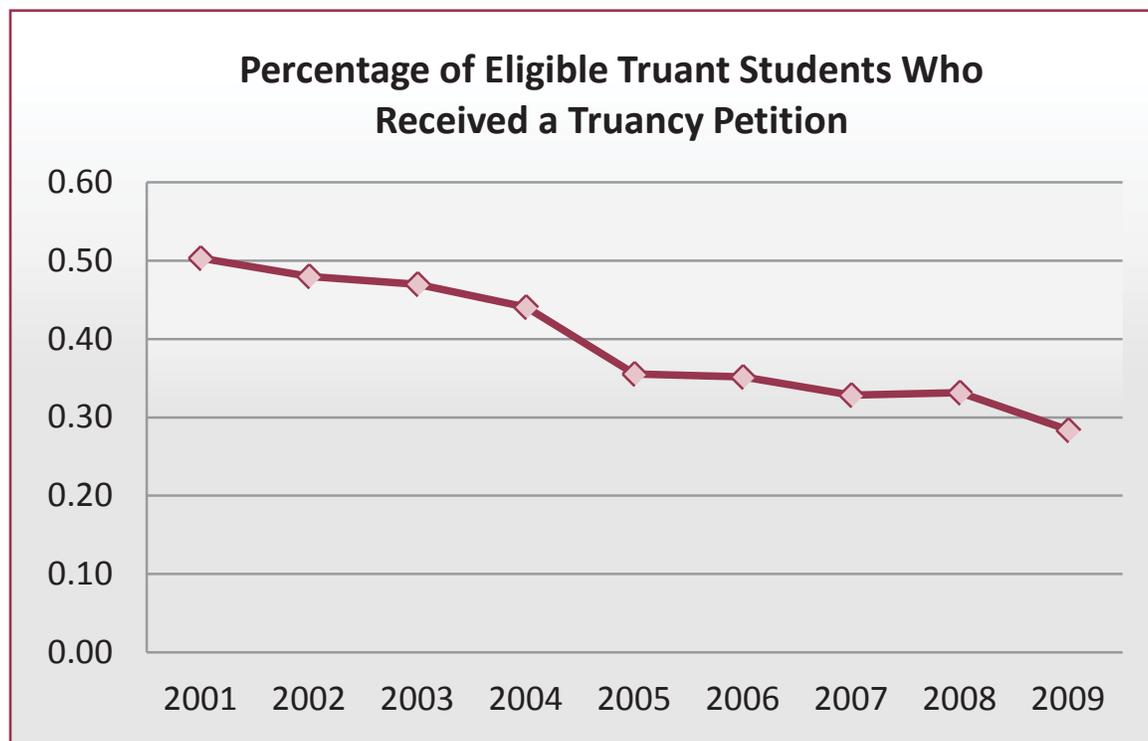
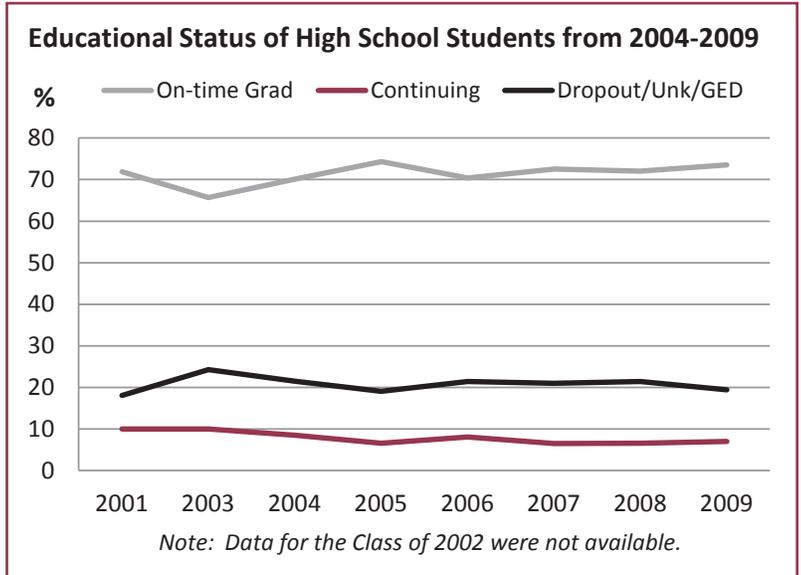


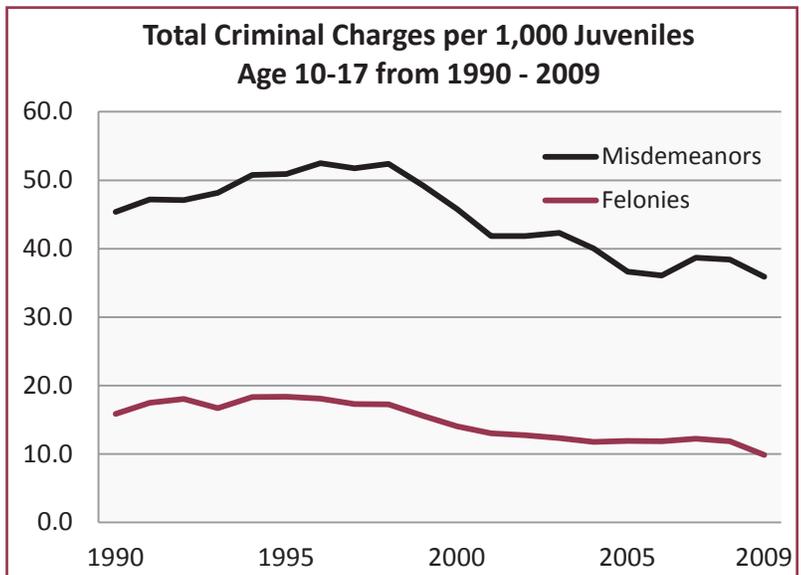
Exhibit 7 displays *cohort rates* for entering ninth-grade students four years later as published by OSPI. For example, of all students who entered ninth grade in the fall of 2005, the outcomes of these students (i.e., the Class of 2009) are presented for the year 2009. Over the past decade, the on-time graduation rate has hovered around 70% (average = 71.3%). The percentage of dropouts per cohort has also remained stable at just over 20%. For the Class of 2009, 73.5% of students graduated on time, 19.4% dropped out, had an unknown status, or completed another type of program, and 7% were continuing students. Data from the Educational Research Database were also examined for the available years and all obtained values were within two percentage points of the OSPI data.

**Exhibit 7**



Trends in juvenile crime were analyzed using the newly constructed Court Contact and Recidivism Database. Exhibit 8 displays the rates of misdemeanor and felony charges per 1,000 juveniles in the state for the past two decades. Similar to national trends, juvenile criminal charges increased during the 1990s, then began a steady decline that has continued to the present day. With respect to misdemeanors, approximately 25,500 juveniles were charged with a misdemeanor in 2009 (35.9 per 1,000, or 3.59%). This rate reflects a 32% decrease from a high of 52.5 misdemeanors per 1,000 juveniles in 1996. Felony charges have declined even more dramatically. Since their high in 1995 (18.4 felonies per 1,000 juveniles), felony charges have declined 47% through 2009 (to 9.8 per 1,000).

**Exhibit 8**



### *Summary on Current Trends*

Although an examination of current trends does not allow for causal statements about the impact of the Becca laws—especially in light of the absence of data prior to their passage in 1995—they provide important context about how cohorts of youth and the educational and juvenile justice systems have adjusted over time. The findings present a mixed picture. With respect to high school students, it appears that truant behavior has increased over the last decade, although the most recent data suggests more stable rates during the past two years. In addition, the percentage of on-time graduates and dropouts has remained

stable for many years. Despite the apparent lack of progress on these indicators, school districts have been increasingly reluctant to file truancy petitions. The percentage of eligible students who have a petition filed in court now stands at just 28%. Juvenile crime, however, has continued to decrease significantly since the late 1990s. The steady decrease in offender cases during the period of increased truancy and less reliance on the truancy petition process calls into question the link between current truancy reduction efforts and reduced juvenile offending.

## Characteristics of Truant Students

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The social science literature is replete with studies documenting a link between truancy and maladaptive social, emotional, and academic adjustment. Truancy has been associated with both current and future problems such as poor school performance, dropping out of school, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and delinquency.<sup>11</sup> Studies also suggest that truancy predicts poor adult outcomes such as violence, marital instability, low job earnings, criminality, and incarceration. In Washington State, WSIPP found that students with truancy petitions as well as those who were chronically absent without a petition were more likely to have a low grade point average, drop out of school, and have a criminal conviction.<sup>12</sup>

In order to fully comprehend the complexity of issues facing truant youths and their families, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive picture of their life events, current adjustment, and potentially critical developmental experiences across a variety of contexts. Further, successful assessment and intervention efforts will require service providers to be aware of these complexities and address them

appropriately. One aspect of effective interventions for juvenile offenders is that they aim to address conditions in the youth or the youth's environment that increase the chances of law-violating behavior; one measure of Washington's truancy interventions is whether they bear any relationship to the conditions associated with greater risk of truant behavior.

Toward this end, multiple data sources were examined to develop a comprehensive picture of truant students and their families. In addition to using available data elements from the previously described databases, this section draws on data collected using the recently developed *Washington Assessment of the Risks and Needs of Students (WARNS)*.<sup>13</sup> The WARNS is an 80-item self-report instrument administered to youths and/or their parents that assesses a variety of past experiences and current needs that impact students' social, emotional, and academic adjustment. The majority of items on the youth and parent versions are identical, although the parent version contains more items regarding the youth's past family experiences.

Two samples of students who were administered the WARNS are described below. In the first sample, the WARNS Youth Survey was completed anonymously by the entire student body in one mid-sized high school in a small city in western Washington (see Appendix A for additional demographic characteristics of the sample). Because the survey was completed anonymously, it could not be linked to either of the existing databases. Therefore, to determine truant behavior, students were classified according to their responses on one item related to truancy. Students who indicated they never or rarely skipped class (i.e., at most, “a few times all year”) were classified as *non-truant*. Those who said they skipped class at least once or twice a month, which would generally qualify them for a truancy petition, were classified as *truant*.

In the second sample, the WARNS Youth and Parent Surveys were administered to court-petitioned truants and their families in five juvenile court jurisdictions (six counties) across the state: Benton-Franklin, Clark, Pierce, Thurston, and Spokane. Surveys were administered by staff either at court, at a community truancy board meeting, in a secure detention school, or in a case management setting, depending upon the county.

### ***School Functioning***

Data from the Educational Research Database on nearly a half-million students were analyzed with respect to current school functioning. During the year in which they were petitioned to court, truant students accumulated a significantly greater number of both unexcused and

excused absences in comparison to non-petitioned students in the same grade. Petitioned truants averaged over 15 unexcused absences and ten excused absences during the school year while all other students averaged one unexcused absence and six excused absences (see Exhibit 9). These absences correspond to missing approximately 15% of class time for truants and 4% for other students.

Given that petitioned truant students have come to the attention of the courts because of an excessive number of unexcused absences, it is not surprising that they were struggling in other areas of school performance and behavior. The annual grade point average (GPA) and number of credits earned by petitioned truants were significantly lower than non-petitioned peers. Truant students earned only about half of the credits that would be expected in order to graduate and had roughly a “D” average during the school year. Petitioned truants were also much more likely to be suspended or expelled, both during the school year and in the past.

Information from the WARNS indicated that half of all petitioned truants reported receiving mostly Ds and Fs, and half didn’t expect any additional education beyond high school (see Exhibit 10). In addition to the low expectations on the part of the students, nearly half of all parents (41%) did not expect their child to obtain any additional education. The biggest specific barriers to attendance were transportation difficulties (34%) and providing care to someone during school hours (23%). Self-identified truants in the high school sample were significantly different from non-truants on every school-related measure assessed by the WARNS. Truants from both

samples, as well as parents, confirmed that the students were significantly disengaged from school, as evidenced by the high scores on the School Engagement scale of the WARNS.

### Physical and Mental Health

Physical and mental health issues have been identified in the existing literature as a significant area of concern among the truant and court-referred populations, and this study supports that concern. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of parents indicated that their child has been diagnosed by a professional as having a mental health problem, behavior disorder, or learning disability. According to parents, one in five (20.1%) petitioned truants had a history of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD). Physical health problems were also identified as hindering school attendance by one in five truants (20.0%) and parents (23.7%; see Exhibit 10). On the

WARNS Social and Emotional Needs scales, self-identified truants were significantly higher than their non-truant high school peers with respect to Depression-Anxiety, Aggression-Defiance, and Substance Abuse problems.

Past traumatic events experienced by youths are receiving increasing attention among educators, court staff, and service providers. Although it was expected that the students exhibiting current problematic functioning would also be more likely to have problematic histories, the large numbers of students in general dealing with a recent or past traumatic event was somewhat surprising. Over one-third of *all* students indicated that either someone close to them died within the past year, that they had experienced an event in which they thought they would be very badly hurt or killed, and/or they had witnessed someone very badly hurt or killed in person. In addition, one in five truants (19.6%) experienced a divorce or

**Exhibit 9. Educational Characteristics of Students during a School Year.**

	Non-petitioned Students (n = 470,604)			Court-petitioned Truants* (n = 18,182)		
	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Unexcused absences</b>	0.6	1.0	1.3	15.8	15.8	15.5
<b>Excused absences</b>	6.0	6.2	7.0	10.8	11.0	9.5
<b>Credits</b>	6.0	6.0	6.0	2.0	2.5	3.0
<b>GPA</b>	2.7	2.7	2.8	0.7	0.8	1.2
<b>Suspensions/expulsions (1+)</b>	8.9%	8.2%	7.0%	31.9%	27.4%	19.7%

*Source: Educational Research Database. Figures for court-petitioned truants are for the grade in which they were petitioned. All within-grade comparisons of non-petitioned students and court-petitioned truants were statistically significant at  $p < .001$ .*

**Exhibit 10. Characteristics of truant students on the Washington Assessment of the Risk and Needs of Students (WARNS).**

	<i>High School Sample (anonymous)</i>		<i>Court Petitioned (identified)</i>	
	<b>Non-Truants (n = 567)</b>	<b>Truants (n = 93)</b>	<b>Truants (n = 523)</b>	<b>Parent Report of Truants (n = 365)</b>
<b>School:</b>	%	%	%	%
Mostly Ds/Fs or not enrolled	4.1	22.8 *	51.5	--
Retained one or more times	14.9	23.9 *	24.9	--
Educational expectations: HS diploma or less	18.7	44.1 *	49.1	41.2
Suspended/expelled three or more times	12.6	50.6 *	40.1	--
<b>Barriers to Attendance:</b>				
Transportation problems	14.2	25.8 *	34.4	--
Provides care during school hours	13.1	26.9 *	22.6	--
Has own children	2.6	9.7 *	3.6	--
Works at a job 20 or more hours per week	4.1	10.8 *	2.2	--
<b>Health and Traumatic Events:</b>				
History of psychological or learning disability	18.5	22.0	28.6	39.0
Health problems	7.0	12.9	20.0	23.7
Witnessed someone seriously injured or killed	36.8	60.2 *	42.9	--
Recent death of someone close	34.5	37.6	32.0	--
Personal safety seriously threatened	35.9	57.0 *	30.5	--
Physically or sexually abused	--	--	--	17.7
Other serious trauma	--	--	--	21.0
Currently receiving treatment	--	--	--	23.8
<b>Family:</b>				
Recent divorce/separation of parents	11.3	21.5 *	19.6	--
Homeless	1.8	3.3	1.5	.5
Two or more foster homes or with relatives	7.9	14.0	10.8	--
Ran away or kicked out of home: two or more	5.5	31.6 *	20.0	--
Some or all of siblings dropped out	17.6	25.0	34.6	32.9
Exposure to domestic violence in home	--	--	--	29.3
Exposure to substance abuse in home	--	--	--	35.0
Parent incarcerated	--	--	--	24.7
Parental education: HS diploma or less	--	--	--	68.4
<b>Criminal History</b>				
Arrested one or more times	13.7	43.1 *	40.5	--
In detention overnight one or more times	6.0	27.9 *	18.6	--
<b>WARNS Social and Emotional Needs Scales:**</b>				
Depressed-Anxious	.77	1.0 *	.82	.82
Aggressive-Defiant	.44	.81 *	.61	.57
Substance Abuse	.18	.75 *	.29	.15
Peer Deviance	.81	1.4 *	.86	.62
Family Environment	1.1	1.5 *	1.2	1.1
School Engagement	1.3	1.8 *	1.6	1.8

\*Statistically significant difference between high school truants and non-truants at  $p < .01$  based on chi-square or ANOVA tests.

\*\* For all WARNS Social and Emotional Needs scales, higher scores indicate more problematic functioning. Average correlation of Youth and Parent versions on the same scales = .56 (range .52 - .60), all significant at  $p < .01$ .

separation of their parents in the past year, nearly twice the rate for non-truants. With respect to more serious trauma, nearly one in five parents (17.7%) reported that their truant youth had been physically or sexually abused as a child, and 21% indicated other serious trauma such as extreme violence or the death of a relative. The reported rate of child maltreatment was ten times higher than recent figures for the general population.<sup>14</sup>

The research literature indicates that the greater the number of adverse or traumatic events experienced by an individual, the higher the risk for a variety of problems. Therefore, the number of events as measured by the WARNS was summed across the following seven variables: physical abuse, sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, exposure to substance abuse, parental incarceration, recent parental divorce, and recent death of someone close. Because these experiences are captured through the use of both the youth and parent surveys, data were available from 365 court-petitioned youth and their parents. Results indicated that three quarters (74%) of all court-petitioned truant youth experienced one or more adverse childhood events, while one quarter (24%) experienced three or more (see Exhibit 11).

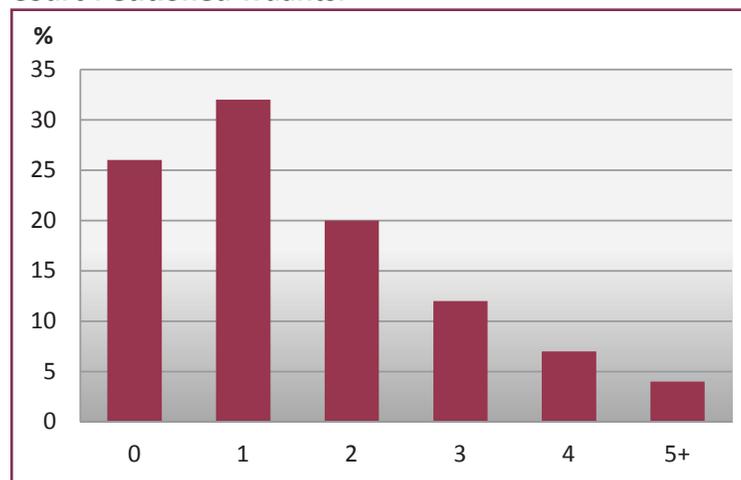
### ***Family Functioning***

From a developmental systems perspective, problematic youth behavior can be viewed as a symptom of maladaptive relationships within and across salient developmental contexts such as family, peers, and school. Dysfunctional family relationships have been implicated in many social and

psychological problems, and truancy is no exception. As mentioned previously, truant students were reported by their parents to have been abused as children at a much higher percentage (17.7% vs. 1.7%), and truants were more likely to have experienced a recent parental divorce (21.5% vs. 11.3%).

To further investigate past and current family environments, several questions on both the WARNS Youth and Parent Surveys inquired about past family life, and both surveys contained a Family Environment scale to assess current functioning. Nearly one third (32%) of self-identified truants and one in five (20%) court-petitioned truants reported they had run away or been kicked out of their home two or more times. By comparison, these rates were four-to-six times higher than for non-truants (5.5%). In addition, approximately one-third of the parents of the court-petitioned truants indicated that the youth had been exposed to domestic violence (29%) and/or substance abuse (35%) in the home, 33% indicated other children in the family had dropped out of high school, and

**Exhibit 11. Adverse Childhood Events Experienced by Court-Petitioned Truants.**



one quarter (25%) reported that a parent had been incarcerated for at least a month.

Current family functioning as assessed by the Family Environment scale on the WARNS indicated more conflictual family relationships among self-identified truant youth, although information provided by court-petitioned truants and parents suggested more research is needed in this area. The scores provided by the court-petitioned youth were similar to the non-truant youth in the anonymous high school sample. Given the different methods of administration in the two samples and the context in which court-petitioned youth and parents were completing the surveys, conclusions regarding current family functioning could not be made.

### Court History

Truancy has often been referred to as a “first step” or “gateway” to more problematic behavior, and ample research indicates truancy does predict both short and long-term problems.<sup>15, 16</sup> This study, however, found that many court-petitioned truants not only evidenced early signs of maladaptive family relationships and behavior, but one quarter (26%) had already come into contact with the criminal justice system (see Exhibit 12). Prior to receiving their first truancy petition, 24% of the students had been charged with a misdemeanor and 7% had been charged with a felony. In addition, 4% had a prior At-Risk Youth (ARY) petition, and 5% had a prior dependency petition. And, unfortunately, juvenile justice system contact did not end with the first truancy petition. Twenty-three percent (23%) of the petitioned youth

**Exhibit 12. Juvenile court contact of truants and non-truants.**

	Non-truants (n = 378,789)	Truants (n = 23,434)
<b>Pre-Truancy Juvenile Court Contact</b>		
	%	%
At-Risk Youth petition	--	4.4
Dependency petition	--	4.6
One or more misdemeanors	--	23.5
One or more felonies	--	7.2
Any juvenile criminal charge	--	26.3
<b>Any juvenile Court Contact (through age 17)</b>		
Dependency petition	1.4	4.9 *
At-risk Youth petition	.9	9.4 *
One or more misdemeanors	10.7	45.4 *
One or more felonies	3.3	17.5 *
Any juvenile criminal charge	12.1	49.6 *

\*Statistically significant difference between truants and non-truants at  $p < .001$  using chi-square tests.

went on to have multiple truancy petitions throughout their schooling, and one-third (33%) were charged with a criminal offense after the first petition but before turning 18 years old.

A comparison of court contact of truants and non-truants at the time they turned 18 years old is presented in Exhibit 12. Truant youth were much more likely than non-truant youth to have a dependency petition (5% vs. 1%), an At-Risk Youth petition (9% vs. 1%), and/or a criminal charge (50% vs. 12%). Half of all court-petitioned truants had a misdemeanor or felony during their juvenile years.

### ***Summary of Characteristics of Truant Youth***

This study found that truancy is often just one indicator of problematic functioning across a variety of contexts. Truants were not only struggling in the school setting

and exhibiting early signs of school failure, but they often had complex issues related to physical and mental health needs, substance abuse, family problems, and justice system involvement. A significant proportion of truant youths experienced traumatic events and dysfunctional environments during their childhood, and many continued to have maladaptive relationships with peers and adults. Service providers must be aware of the numerous issues facing these youths and adequately prepare for a variety of past experiences and current symptoms. Of course, not all truants will have troubled pasts, mental health issues, or difficult family lives—but many do. Schools, courts, and communities will need to continue investing in efforts around early prevention, identification, assessment, and intervention in order to effectively address the complex needs of youths and families.



# The Impact of Receiving a Court Petition

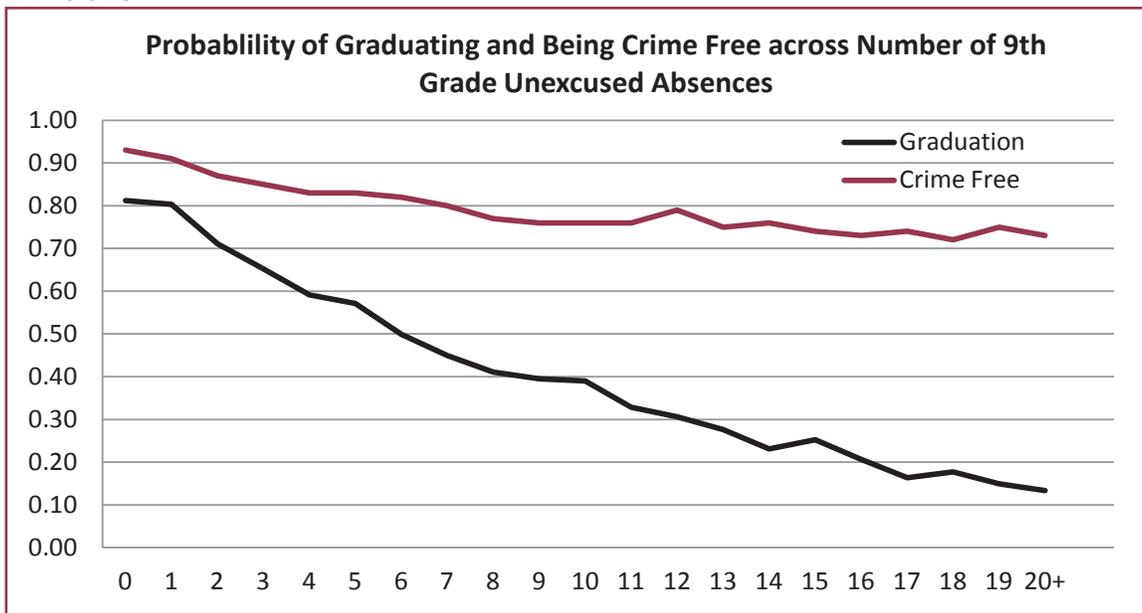
Not only are truant youths more likely to have experienced difficult childhoods as well as have current social and emotional issues, they are considerably at risk for future problems. Consistent with prior research, this study found that unexcused absences were a good predictor of failure to graduate or delayed graduation. Analysis of data from the Educational Research Database showed that, across all students, the probability of on-time graduation was 71%. The analysis also indicated that the number of unexcused absences at the conclusion of the ninth grade was significantly negatively correlated with on-time graduation ( $r = -.34, p < .01$ ). To illustrate, the probability of on-time graduation was 81% for students with no unexcused absences, which fell to 57% with five unexcused absences, and to 39% at ten absences. Just 13% of students with

20 or more unexcused absences at the end of ninth grade went on to graduate after four years (see Exhibit 13).<sup>5</sup>

Unexcused absences were also found to be predictive of future juvenile criminal offenses ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ). This relationship held even after controlling for the number of prior offenses (the single best predictor of future crime). For example, the probability of being crime-free between the end of the ninth grade and one's eighteenth birthday was 87% for all students, ranging from 93% if a student had no unexcused absences during the ninth grade to 75% with ten or more unexcused absences (see Exhibit 13).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that unexcused absences are just one of a host of variables that predict on-time graduation. Other variables include credits earned, GPA, suspensions/expulsions, criminal offenses, gender, minority status, and grade retention.

**Exhibit 13**



Clearly—given the past, current, and future difficulties of truant students—focusing attention on this high-risk group is an important endeavor. Further, using ten unexcused absences in a year as a criterion appears to be a reasonable choice (although using multiple indicators would improve identification of high-risk youth from a statistical perspective). A critical question, then, is whether current intervention efforts are effective in reducing risk and improving short and long-term outcomes.

### *Outcomes Evaluation*

Across Washington State, the practices for identifying and intervening in the lives of truants and their families are extremely varied.<sup>17</sup> Existing state laws mandate a series of actions on the part of the schools ranging from parental notification after one unexcused absence, to parent conferences, school-based interventions, and finally a court petition if previous efforts failed to keep a student's absences below seven in a month or ten in a year. This study did not attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of these various school-based efforts. Instead, it focused on the impact of receiving a court petition on educational and juvenile justice outcomes.

Court-based approaches for dealing with petitioned truants are also quite varied.<sup>18</sup> Some juvenile court jurisdictions rely heavily on formal court hearings, some begin by providing group-based educational classes to parents and students, some involve community truancy boards, and some make referrals to or provide more therapeutic approaches or case management. Because of these varied approaches, this study examined the impact of court involvement

on student outcomes in general—that is, as an average impact across all approaches—as determined by a truancy petition filing. Assessment of outcomes associated with particular approaches is beyond the scope of this study, which seeks to address in broad terms the effectiveness of existing policy in the state. A more detailed evaluation of the relative impact of different approaches will be needed if Washington is to contribute to the development of evidence-based truancy interventions.

Regarding past research, nearly every contemporary review of truancy interventions laments the fact that very few scientifically rigorous studies exist regarding the effectiveness of strategies to improve school attendance or other longer-term outcomes.<sup>19, 20</sup> The research studies that do exist, including the few that directly assess traditional court-based interventions, have generally concluded that intervention programs may improve school attendance in the short-term (e.g., for a semester following the intervention), but longer-term outcomes and outcomes in other contexts (e.g., delinquency) remain relatively unchanged.<sup>21, 22</sup>

To assess the impact of court intervention in Washington State over a longer time span, data were examined for students who entered the ninth to eleventh grades beginning in the fall of 2003-04 school year. Data were examined at the conclusion of each year until a final educational outcome was determined (i.e., high school graduate, dropout or alternative diploma, or a continuing student).

One difficulty in conducting research in this area is the fact that truant students cannot be randomly assigned to either receive

a court petition or not receive a petition. The challenge, then, is to control for as many potentially confounding variables as possible (i.e., those variables which could theoretically explain the difference or lack of difference between the treatment and control groups). By creating two groups with very similar characteristics, many of the threats to the validity of the findings can be ruled out. This gives us greater confidence in the results of the study.

With respect to this research, controlling for potential confounds is complicated by the fact that the characteristics of court-petitioned truants are typically very different than the pool of non-petitioned truants (as noted in the previous section). Creating a reasonably matched sample of non-petitioned truants typically requires a very large pool of individuals from which to draw. Fortunately, the large number of students contained in the Education Research Database (nearly one million) allowed for a well-matched control group on many relevant variables. To create the control group for the petitioned truants, a statistical method called *propensity score matching* was used. Propensity score matching uses predicted probabilities of group membership in the treatment versus control conditions to match the two groups on a large set of observed variables. This ensures that the groups are similar in terms of the available information related to the likelihood of receiving a truancy petition.

In this study, court-petitioned truants were matched to non-petitioned truants in the same grade on the following variables: excused absences, unexcused absences, credits, grade point average, criminal offenses, suspensions and expulsions, gender, race/ethnicity (minority vs. non-

minority), and overage for grade. To select the appropriate control cases, the closest match to each court-petitioned truant was chosen based on the predicted probabilities derived from logistic regression. The following illustrates the result of the matching process. Prior to matching, petitioned ninth graders averaged 15.8 unexcused absences, 2.0 credits, and had a GPA of 0.7. The non-petitioned ninth graders, however, averaged 0.6 unexcused absences, 6.0 credits, and had a GPA of 2.7. After using propensity score matching, the two groups were very similar on these characteristics: unexcused absences were 22.7 and 20.0, credits were 2.5 and 2.4, and GPAs were 1.0 and 0.9 for petitioned and non-petitioned students, respectively. Data for the two groups on all matching variables both before and after the matching process are presented in Appendix B.

## **Attendance**

One of the central aims of the Becca laws is to reduce students' unexcused absences and improve school attendance. As the number of unexcused absences triggers both school and court actions, it is arguably the outcome upon which the truancy laws would be expected to have the most direct effect. To investigate the effect, the number of unexcused absences by students who received a truancy petition in ninth grade was compared—at the conclusion of grades nine through twelve—to the matched high-risk control group that did not receive a truancy petition in ninth grade. The same analysis was conducted for the tenth grade petitioned and non-petitioned truants. As seen in Exhibit 14, the cumulative number of unexcused absences continued

to increase for both petitioned and non-petitioned truant students after the ninth grade. During the ninth grade, petitioned and non-petitioned truant students averaged approximately 20 unexcused absences (20.0 and 22.7, respectively). Following the ninth grade, unexcused absences accrued by more than ten per year for those students who continued to be enrolled in school.<sup>¶</sup>

By the time students completed twelfth grade, the average number of unexcused absences was 59.8 for petitioned students,

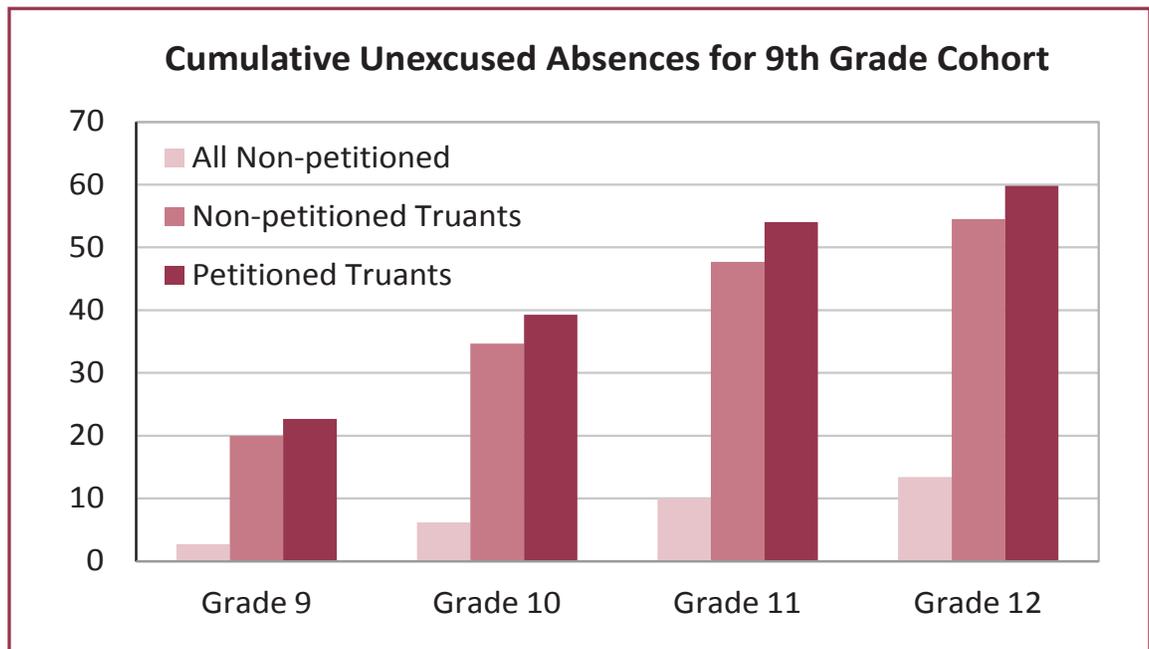
54.5 for matched non-petitioned students, and 13.4 for the non-petitioned general student body.<sup>\*\*</sup> Similar results were obtained for the tenth-grade cohort; the average number of unexcused absences at the conclusion of twelfth grade was 46.9 for students who received a petition, 47.6 for high-risk truants who did not receive a petition, and 11.0 for the non-petitioned student body. Some evidence indicated that petitioned tenth graders decreased their absences more quickly than the comparison group during eleventh grade, but the difference was not substantial.<sup>††</sup>

¶ Exhibit 14 displays the average number of unexcused absences for the ninth-grade cohort that remained in school for each successive grade level. Because students with the highest number of unexcused absences tended to drop out each year, the graph does not accurately reflect the average within-individual change from year to year for remaining students.

\*\* The statistical tests of the interaction of Petition Status x Grade for new unexcused absences on each successive grade level lag using repeated measures MANOVA were not significant: p values > .05, partial eta-squared values < .01.

†† Repeated measures MANOVA:  $F(2,3545) = 3.93, p = .02, \text{partial eta-squared} < .01.$

**Exhibit 14**



Excused absences showed a similar trend to unexcused absences for all groups. By the end of the twelfth grade, petitioned and non-petitioned truants accumulated an average of 40 excused absences in addition to their unexcused absences.

### Grade Point Average (GPA)

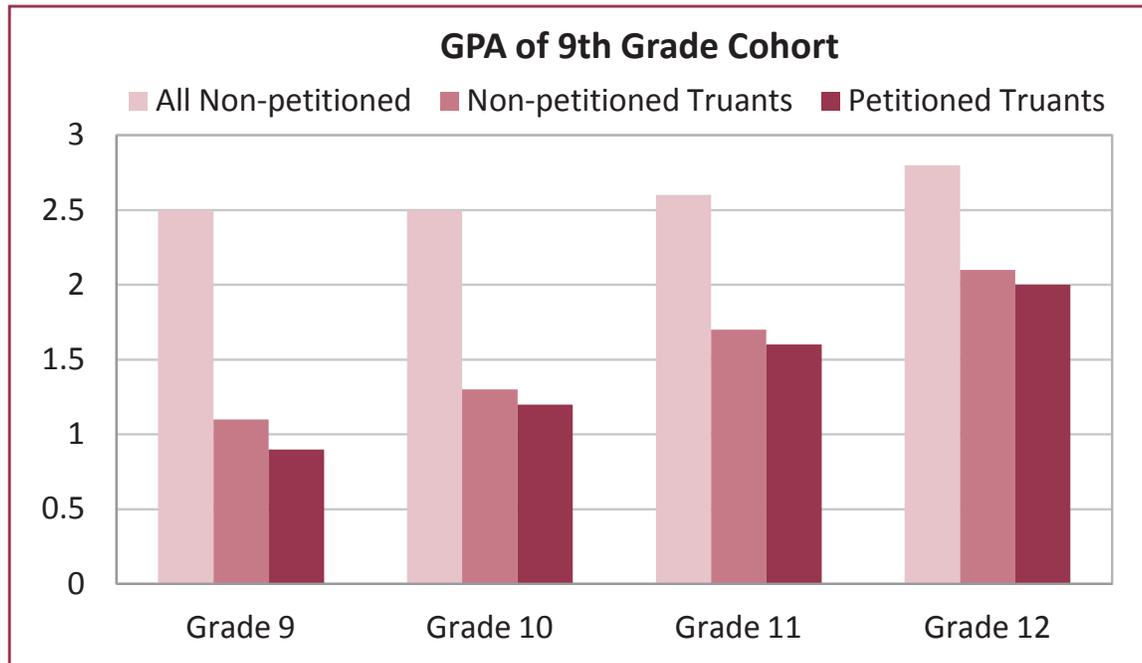
Another measure of educational engagement or success is a student's GPA. Although it is not typically the most powerful predictor of longer-term outcomes such as graduation or future success, GPA does provide an indicator of a student's level of engagement with his or her course material. Presumably, if a truancy petition is successful in reengaging students in school, GPA should increase at a significantly higher rate for petitioned truants than for non-petitioned truants.

As with unexcused absences, however, this did not appear to be the case. Although the relative improvement of high-risk students (petitioned and non-petitioned) was greater than for the general student body, petitioned truants fared no better than non-petitioned truants (see Exhibit 15). During the ninth-grade year, petitioned and non-petitioned truants had the equivalent of a D average in their courses. By the twelfth grade, of the approximately 25% of high-risk students that remained enrolled in school, the GPA of students during that year was a C average. Analysis of the tenth-grade cohort revealed identical results.

### Graduation

If the truancy petition process were effective in improving school attendance and reengaging students with school,

Exhibit 15



a reasonable expectation would be that graduation outcomes would also improve. To investigate this possibility, the educational status of the study cohorts was examined at the conclusion of the year that represented “on-time graduation.” That is, for truants who received a petition during ninth grade, the educational status of these students and their non-petitioned peers was examined four years later (petitioned tenth graders were compared with their cohort three years later).

For all ninth graders in Washington State, regardless of truant behavior or a truancy petition, approximately 70% graduated from high school on time (see Exhibit 16). Of the remaining students, roughly 20% dropped out, and 10% continued on in high school. For high-risk petitioned and non-petitioned students, however, it was apparent from this study that educational outcomes were much more dire. Of the students who received a truancy petition in ninth grade, only 15% went on to graduate on time, while fully two thirds (67%) dropped out of school or had an alternative outcome such as a GED or IEP diploma. The graduation

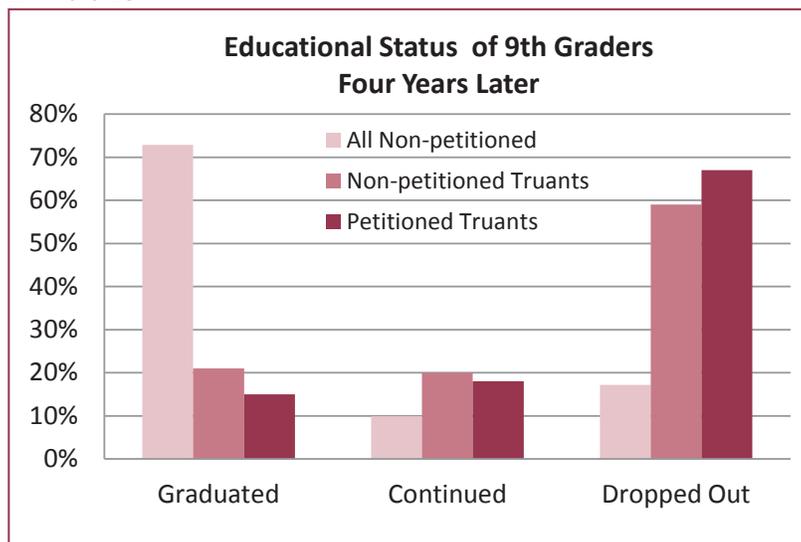
outcomes were actually slightly *better* for the non-petitioned control group (21% graduated on time and 59% dropped out), although the outcomes were much worse than the general student body and far from desirable.<sup>‡‡</sup>

Because students exhibiting signs of school failure at an earlier age would be expected to have poorer long-term outcomes, the graduation and dropout rates were also examined for students who received a truancy petition in the tenth grade, but not the ninth grade. For both petitioned and non-petitioned tenth grade truants, outcomes were slightly better than those of students with earlier problematic behavior, but overall were still very poor. Approximately one quarter of the students in both groups graduated on time (25% petitioned truants, 27% non-petitioned truants) while three out of five (59% in both groups) dropped out of high school.

### Delinquency

One of the motivations behind the Becca truancy laws was to reduce delinquent behavior of school-aged youth. Multiple provisions of the Becca laws—requirements for schools to better monitor students’ attendance, to communicate with students and families, and to act to address attendance problems, as well as mandates for courts to engage with students and parents—were expected to have both direct and indirect benefits on juvenile crime. The reasoning for a direct benefit on juvenile crime was that if high-risk students are in school during the day,

**Exhibit 16**



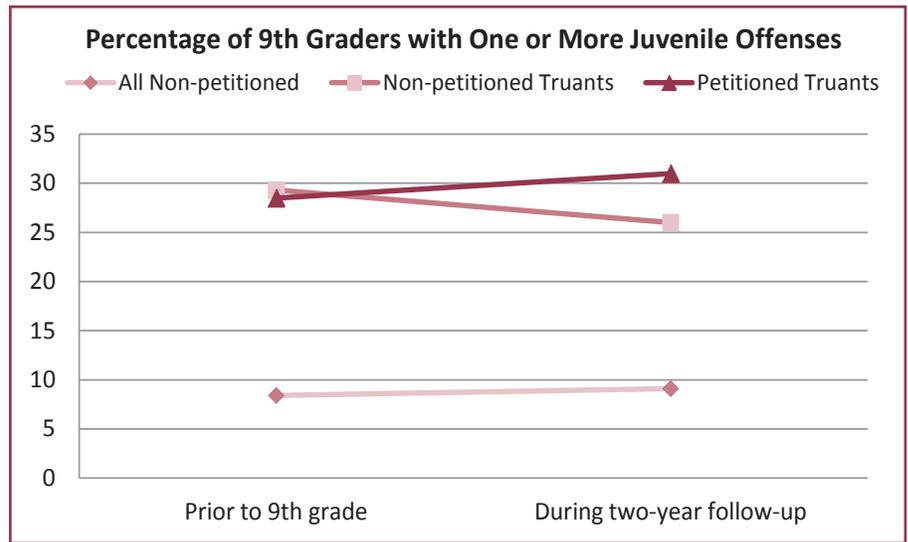
<sup>‡‡</sup> Chi-square results:  $X^2(2) = 25.9, p < .001$ ; Cramer's V = .09.

fewer are wandering unsupervised around the community engaging in delinquent behavior. The indirect benefit was based on substantial research literature linking school engagement and performance to future criminal behavior.

The findings discussed previously, in which students who received a truancy petition fared no better on educational outcomes than their non-petitioned counterparts, dim hopes for a positive impact of petition on juvenile crime. However, the possibility remains that the act of being petitioned to the juvenile courts, either by itself or together with an actual court appearance, could reduce the chances that students will engage in delinquent behavior.

To investigate the impact of the truancy petition process on juvenile offending, information from the AOC's Court Contact and Recidivism Database was used to

**Exhibit 17**

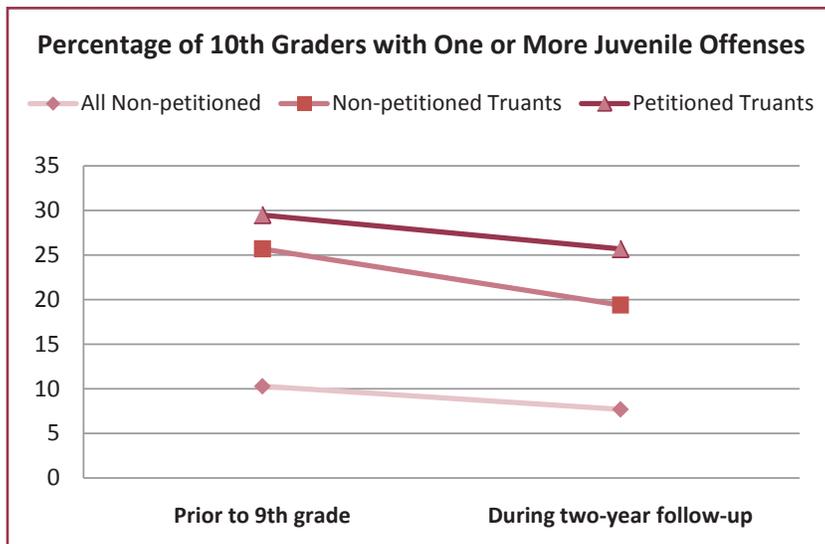


determine whether students had been charged with a crime, both before a point in time and during a two-year follow-up period. For petitioned truants, criminal charges were tabulated before and after the date the truancy petition was filed in juvenile court. For non-petitioned students, criminal charges were counted before and after April 1 of their cohort's year (i.e., April 1 of their ninth grade year if they had been

matched with ninth grade petitioned truants, and similarly for the tenth-grade cohort).

Results of the analysis indicated that, for ninth graders, the percentage of students charged with at least one crime *increased* for truants after a petition had been filed in court (see Exhibit 17). Prior to a petition being filed, 28% of truants had been charged with a crime. During the two-year follow-up

**Exhibit 18**



period, 31% were charged with a crime. For the matched, high-risk non-petitioned truants, 29% had been charged with a crime prior to the spring of their ninth-grade year and 26% were charged during the two-year follow-up.<sup>§§</sup> By comparison, for the general non-petitioned student body, 8% were charged prior and 9% were charged after the spring of their ninth grade year.

For tenth graders, receiving a truancy petition, again, did not appear to have a positive impact on subsequent offending behavior in comparison to not receiving a truancy petition. For both petitioned and non-petitioned truants, although a smaller percentage were charged with a crime during the two-year follow-up period, the decrease for the two groups was similar and mirrored the decrease in the general student body.

### ***Summary of the Impact of Receiving a Truancy Petition***

For the court interventions in operation from 2004 through 2007, results of the outcomes evaluation did not find any evidence that court-petitioned truants fared significantly better than the matched group of non-petitioned truants on any of the assessed variables: attendance, grade point average, graduation status, or juvenile offenses. Particularly striking was the continued accumulation of unexcused absences for all truants, as well as the extremely poor prognosis for graduating on time with one's classmates. Fewer than one in five high-risk ninth-grade truant students graduated after four years of high school.

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§§ Chi-square results:  $X^2(1) = 14.2, p < .001$ .

## Conclusion

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Over the past 15 years, Washington State has taken an aggressive approach toward truancy and other behaviors that portend serious negative outcomes for youth in both the short and long term. With the passage of the Becca laws, schools and juvenile courts have engaged in greater collaborations and made substantial changes to policies and practices in order to meet statutory requirements, as well as promote more positive outcomes for youth. New or enhanced information systems for tracking data, communication systems for frequent parental notifications, additional student and parent conferences, and a greater array of early interventions to address problematic behaviors have, in all likelihood, undergone significant development in part because of the Becca laws and the increased efforts toward effective prevention, identification, assessment, and intervention.

The lofty goals and the onerous requirements of the truancy laws, however, have also come at a significant cost—both financial cost and cost to program efficacy. The dramatic increase in truancy filings from a few hundred per year prior to the Becca laws to approximately 15,000 annually has stressed schools and courts from the

beginning. Considering the volume of filings together with insufficient funding to support these efforts, it is not surprising to find a patchwork of policies and practices across the state. Within the school system, the lack of resources to upgrade systems, hire personnel, manage data, engage in interventions, prepare and file court documents, and attend court hearings—all in the context of other pressing demands such as student assessments and school safety—have led to varying levels of commitment to the truancy requirements. While some districts have engaged in innovative truancy reduction efforts, many districts currently have no specific truancy interventions at all. Further, many districts file very few, if any, truancy petitions, and only about one third of all truant youth in the state receive a petition even after they exceed the statutory threshold for unexcused absences.

Similarly, the juvenile courts have struggled to process the volume of cases and develop effective interventions. Some courts have specifically limited the number of truancy cases, while in others jurisdiction over the child simply ends before a case is ever heard or sanctions imposed. Group-level educational classes and community truancy

boards have also gained in popularity as approaches to process a greater number of cases, but their efficacy is unknown. It is easy to understand how myriad approaches have come to exist, given that 1) as civil cases, the sanctioning options are limited, 2) the legal landscape for child representation and the use of detention changes frequently, and 3) the persistence of larger philosophical arguments over the role of the courts as therapeutic or social service agencies continues.

The goal of this study was to add to our understanding of truancy through an examination of current trends, student characteristics, and the impact of receiving a truancy petition. With respect to recent trends, it appears that the truancy problem in the state has improved slightly for younger-aged students, but worsened for high school students. Over the past several years, the percentage of high school students meeting the statutory threshold of ten or more unexcused absences in a year has been 12-14%, which equates to 40,000-45,000 students per year. Meanwhile, the graduation and dropout rates have been relatively stable, though juvenile crime continues its significant decline with no clear relationship to truancy policy.

While truancy has been known for quite some time to be a risk factor for problematic outcomes such as school failure and criminality, the characteristics of truants—especially in relation to court contact—have been less well known. This study is one of the largest to date to provide data on a host of social, emotional, educational, and court-related characteristics. Results confirm that truant youths have a high risk

of serious negative outcomes, especially dropping out of school. Two thirds of youths who receive a truancy petition during the ninth grade fail to graduate with their classmates. Nearly one third will also be charged with a criminal offense within two years.

What are the issues that result in truant behavior and place many youths at such high risk? They are often severe, long-standing, and complex. Court-petitioned truants are much more likely than the general student population to have been maltreated as children, to have grown up in a home with domestic violence or substance abuse, to have had an incarcerated parent, or to have experienced other traumatic events. More than 40% report multiple adverse childhood events. These experiences may be intertwined with other commonly occurring complicating factors, such as recent parental divorce, low parental education and expectations, physical and mental health issues, learning difficulties, and family discord. When considered with more mundane concerns, such as the need to provide care to a family member or reliable transportation, the challenge of providing effective intervention becomes readily apparent.

The Becca laws have attempted to promote effective interventions for this high-risk population of youth for over 15 years. Unfortunately, the absence of baseline data from the period prior to the implementation of the laws, the wide variation in truancy reduction efforts, and other research limitations make it difficult to determine the precise impact of each of the numerous truancy provisions on school

attendance and other outcomes. This is especially true with respect to the earliest mandated interventions such as parental notification and conferences between schools and families. However, as seen in this analysis, it was possible to examine the outcomes of court-petitioned students with a similar group of high-risk students who did not receive a truancy petition.

Although no evidence was found to indicate that receipt of a truancy petition significantly improved any outcomes for truant youth, a few key caveats must be noted. For one, a critical question remains as to why some high-risk truants do not receive a truancy petition. It is possible that the non-petitioned students and families had some positive factor that kept the schools from filing a petition. For example, schools may have encountered an engaged and responsive parent, they may have seen recent improvements on the part of the student, or perhaps other extenuating circumstances existed in the student's history that were not captured by this study. If non-petitioned truants were actually at lower risk than petitioned students, then in theory the finding of no differences between the groups could be evidence of moderate success with the higher-risk court-petitioned truants. In addition, because both the control group and petitioned students may have received a variety of school-based interventions, it is not possible to determine what the groups would have looked like if they had not received any interventions at all. It also could not be determined if a general deterrent effect had occurred for any or all students because of the truancy laws. Without the Becca laws, it is possible that

the population of truants would have been larger and the outcomes worse. That said, given the poor outcomes for both petitioned and non-petitioned truants, any positive impact on high-risk truants likely has been minimal.

Second, the data for the study was largely on students who received a truancy petition between 2004 and 2007. As such, the study did not assess the impact of receiving a petition for more recent truants. There was some indication from the data that unexcused absences and chronic truancy in the schools improved slightly over the last few years. In addition, schools and courts around the state continued to develop new truancy procedures. The use of community truancy boards has increased, and substantial truancy reduction efforts have been made in several counties, particularly those participating in the Models for Change initiative (Benton-Franklin, Clark, King, and Spokane).

The use of community-based approaches, especially those that incorporate targeted needs assessments and vigilant case management, has shown promise around the country. Contemporary efforts in Benton-Franklin, Clark, King, and Spokane counties all incorporate these aspects. It will be critical for researchers to conduct methodologically rigorous evaluations of these efforts if Washington is to contribute to the development of evidenced-based truancy interventions. Rigorous quantitative evaluations will require detailed social, emotional, and academic data for all students over a substantial period of time. Qualitative research methods documenting participant and

stakeholder perceptions will also be necessary. As data accumulate, specific truancy and dropout prevention practices will be able to be compared and relatively effective practices will be advantaged.

A second avenue for future research is the examination of the role of race, ethnicity, and gender. Substantial differences among racial/ethnic groups and the genders in truancy, delinquency, and dropping out of school are well documented in the literature. What is not well understood is how these differences come to exist. In addition, how do individual and family factors intertwine with socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations to affect not just truant behavior, but the response of students, families, service providers, and the community at large? Effective strategies, for example, for affluent, suburban females will likely be much different than those for rural, Hispanic males or students living in poverty on a reservation. Substantial research is needed in this area to advance our understanding and intervention efforts.

In sum, truancy is a widespread problem in Washington State, as it is around the country. It is yet another indication of

the considerable challenge that schools and society face in successfully engaging and educating a diverse and dynamic student population. Some truancy is due to transient circumstances that may abate on their own or be easily addressed. Lower-risk students and their families are likely those who respond to earlier, less intensive interventions such as conferences, warnings, or educational classes. Other students, especially those who are chronically truant or previously have come to the attention of the court, are more likely to have one or more serious social, psychological, or learning problems that require more intensive intervention. Issues such as high family conflict, substance abuse, past trauma, depression, or even the care of a chronically ill parent are not likely to be effectively resolved with a brief, occasional intervention, regardless of the source or its authority. Complex needs require intensive, on-going intervention by trained professionals. In order to have a significant impact on truancy and associated outcomes, schools, courts, legislators, and other stakeholders must continue to collaborate to develop and improve methods of early prevention, assessment, intervention, and evaluation.

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## Appendix A

### Demographic characteristics of the high school sample administered the WARNS.

	HS Sample	Statewide*
<b>Gender:</b>		
Female	48.6%	48.4%
Male	51.4	51.6
<b>Race/ethnicity:</b>		
American Indian/Alaska Native	3.9	2.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.7	8.7
Black	2.1	5.6
Hispanic	18.2	16.0
White	69.3	63.8
<b>Socio-economic status:</b>		
Free or reduced-price meals	42.6	41.8

*\*Source: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*

## Appendix B

	Before Matching		After Matching	
	Not Petitioned	Petitioned	Not Petitioned	Petitioned
<b>9th Graders</b>	<b>(n=190,238)</b>	<b>(n=6,905)</b>	<b>(n=4,095)</b>	<b>(n=4,095)</b>
Unexcused absences	0.6	15.8	20.0	22.7
Excused absences	6.0	10.8	15.3	16.3
Credits	6.0	2.0	2.5	2.4
GPA	2.7	0.7	1.0	0.9
Suspensions/expulsions (1+)	8.9	31.9	32.6	31.9
Criminal offenses (1+)	4.8	27.2	23.1	27.8
Female	48.4	47.5	46.3	49.3
Racial/ethnic minority	26.2	36.1	36.7	36.8
Overage for grade	12.5	35.6	27.5	23.8
<b>10th Graders</b>	<b>(n=184,092)</b>	<b>(n=6,239)</b>	<b>(n=2,958)</b>	<b>(n=2,958)</b>
Unexcused absences	1.0	15.8	18.2	18.6
Excused absences	6.2	11.0	11.3	12.7
Credits	6.0	2.5	2.0	2.5
GPA	2.7	0.8	0.8	0.8
Suspensions/expulsions (1+)	8.2	27.4	26.2	25.5
Criminal offenses (1+)	5.4	23.6	15.8	17.2
Female	48.7	45.8	45.4	47.9
Racial/ethnic minority	24.9	33.3	35.2	37.1
Overage for grade	12.2	24.5	15.1	14.8
<b>11th Graders</b>	<b>(n=96,274)</b>	<b>(n=5,038)</b>	<b>(n=3,487)</b>	<b>(n=3,487)</b>
Unexcused absences	1.3	15.5	17.7	18
Excused absences	7.0	9.5	10.5	11
Credits	6.0	3.0	2.5	3
GPA	2.8	1.2	1.3	1.2
Suspensions/expulsions (1+)	7.0	19.7	17.3	16.2
Criminal offenses (1+)	5.2	18.7	12.7	14.2
Female	49.0	47.0	46.3	49.1
Racial/ethnic minority	22.3	29.9	31.5	31.9
Overage for grade	9.3	16.3	9.6	9.2

*(Note: Unexcused absences, excused absences, credits, and GPA are the median values)*







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