**GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THE “BECCA BILL”, THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTENDANCE & PREVENTING TRUANCY**

**TRUANCY:** In our state, the law requires that children ages 6 to 17 who are enrolled in public schools, attend school Monday through Friday, unless there is a good reason for being absent. In this case the parent or legal guardian must excuse the absence by notifying the school.

When students miss school and their parents have not excused the absence, they can be considered truant. Truancy is defined as being absent from school or from the majority of a student’s classes without a valid excuse.

School districts around the state have different rules and regulations about student attendance and how parents should excuse absences. Be sure to read the attendance policies in your school district and discuss them with your student.

**SCHOOL ATTENDANCE MATTERS:** School attendance is essential to academic success, but too often students, parents and schools do not realize how quickly absences — excused as well as unexcused — can add up to academic trouble. Chronic absence — missing 10 percent of the school year, or just 2-3 days every month—can translate into third-graders unable to master reading, sixth-graders failing courses and ninth -graders dropping out of high school.

**THE BECCA BILL:** The “Becca Bill” is our state’s truancy law. It is intended to reengage the student and stop truancy before it becomes a problem. Schools and families should work together as a team to ensure school attendance and student safety. However, if a student has unexcused absences, this law requires that schools and school districts take the following actions:

**1. One (1) unexcused absence.** The school must inform the parent when there is one unexcused absence. This is often done by a phone call home.

**2. Three (3) unexcused absences**. After the third unexcused absence, the school is required to schedule a meeting/conference with the parent/legal guardian and student to discuss the causes of the unexcused absences and find solutions to prevent further absences. This is a team effort.

**3. Between the second (2) and fifth (5) unexcused absence.** After the second and before the fifth unexcused absence, the school is required to take data informed steps to address barriers to attendance pursuant to RCW28A.225.020(C).

**4. Five (5) unexcused absences within 30 days.** The school must enter into a written agreement with the family, where the parent, student and school agree on the necessary steps to resolve the student’s attendance problem, refer to a Community Truancy Board, and/or file a petition in juvenile court.

**5. Seven (7) unexcused absences during a month or at the tenth (10th) unexcused absence within a school year**. The school district MUST file a petition in juvenile court. Once the court takes jurisdiction over a student, the court can order the student to attend school. If this court order is violated, the court will call for a Contempt Hearing and the student could be ordered to do community service, nonresidential program with intensive wraparound services, attend a community based program, meet with a mentor for a specified number of times, electronic home monitoring, or other services and interventions the court deems appropriate. If a student continues to violate the court order and no less restrictive means are available, then the student could also be ordered to spend time in juvenile detention. The parent may be fined up to $25.00 for each day of unexcused absence. (**Ask your truancy school district representative about the specific petition and education reengagement process in your county**).

The school district may also refer the family to a Community Truancy Board (CTB) as part of the reengagement process. A Truancy Board is a group of citizens in the student’s community who help resolve truancy cases and reengage the student outside the traditional court process.

Schools must send the student a notice of the truancy court petition by certified mail with return receipt or by in-person delivery. The petition includes many important dates and deadlines that must not be missed by the student and the family.

**EVERY ABSENCE MATTERS AT EVERY GRADE LEVEL:**

By third grade, chronically absent students, especially those who have experienced multiple years of poor attendance, are less likely to read on grade level. By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes an early warning sign that a student may drop out of high school. By ninth grade, it’s a better indicator than eighth-grade test scores. Children with certain risk factors—

including poverty, homelessness, frequent moves and disabilities—are especially hard hit since they can least afford to miss school.

* Every day missed is a day of instruction missed, a day of classroom interaction with students and teachers that can’t be recovered.
* Attendance matters as early as kindergarten. Studies show many children who miss too many days in kindergarten and first grade can struggle academically in later years. They often have trouble mastering reading by the end of third grade.
* Students are at risk academically if they miss 10 percent of the school year, or about 18 days. Once too many absences have occurred, they can affect learning, regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused.
* Chronic absence, missing 10 percent of the school year or more, does not just affect the students who miss school. If too many students are chronically absent, it slows down instruction for other students, who must wait while the teacher repeats material for absentee students. This makes it harder for students to learn and teachers to teach.
* Sporadic, not just consecutive, absences matter. Before you know it – just one or two days a month can add up to nearly 10 percent of the school year.
* Preschool is a great time to start building a habit of good attendance. Young children with poor attendance in preschool also lose out on valuable learning time and if chronic absence continues into kindergarten, it can pull down academic achievement.
* By middle and high school, chronic absence is a leading warning sign that a student will drop out, get involved in criminal activity, and fall behind academically.

**PREVENTING TRUANCY**

Student safety, future, and academic progress are important to both parents, educators and the community.

Here are some tips to prevent absences:

**PARENTS:**

* Talk about family expectations regarding school attendance.
* Praise positive behaviors and achievements in school.
* Look for attitudes from your youth that indicate unhappiness with school or fear of attending school. Listen to what they say and ask questions.
* Avoid unnecessary absences. Some absences are unavoidable. Occasionally, children get sick and need to stay home. What is important is getting children to school as often as possible.
* Families should avoid extended vacations that require your children to miss school. Try to line up vacations with the school’s schedule. The same goes for doctor’s appointments.
* For younger children, you can set a regular bedtime and morning routine. Make sure they get 9 to 11 hours of sleep. You can lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.
* For older children, you can help them develop homework and bedtime routines that allow for 8 ½ to 9 ½ hours of sleep. Make sure that when the lights go out, so do the cell phones, video games and computers.
* Above all, set an example for your child. Show him or her that attendance matters to you and that you won’t allow an absence unless someone is truly sick. Avoid asking older students to help with daycare and household errands.
* Seek help from the school or community if you are facing tough challenges related to access to health care, unstable housing, poor transportation, or lack of food. More schools and community agencies are working together to offer help for the whole family.
* Are you currently homeless or in temporary housing? Contact your school district representative and they can put you in touch with your districts McKinney Vento Liaison, for information regarding your rights and support available to you!

***Communicate with your school frequently***

* Get to know the teachers and administrators. With younger children, make sure you introduce your child to teachers before school starts and keep in touch with the teachers. For older students, school officials can help you stay on top of academic progress and social contacts to make sure your child is staying on track.
* Ask the school about their policy and procedures on excusing absences from school.
* Respond quickly when the school notifies you of an unexcused absence.
* Learn how you can check your student’s attendance.
* Immediately address issues of concern about your student with the school. Start with the teacher or counselor.
* If you feel your district’s truancy or discipline procedures were not addressed properly, inquire about your district’s appeal process.
* If you feel your school district policies are inadequate, speak with the Superintendent and school board members.
* Complete an Attendance Agreement with your student and school.
* If you need assistance causing your student to attend school regularly, contact your school to request an attendance conference.

**STUDENTS:**

* School is your first and most important job. You’re learning about more than math and reading. You’re learning how to show up for school on time every day, so that when you graduate and get a job, you’ll know how to show up for work on time every day.
* Students who attend school regularly are more likely to graduate and find good jobs. In fact, a high school graduate makes, on average, a million dollars more than a dropout over a lifetime.
* School only gets harder when you stay home too much. Sometimes it’s tempting to stay home because you’ve got too much work or you don’t understand what’s going on in class. But missing a day only makes that worse.
* Communicate concerns that may affect your school attendance to parents, school staff, and/or your school district representative. Work with them to develop an attendance agreement, outlining things you can do, your parents or guardians can do, and your school can do to help improve your attendance.