

Models for Change – Spokane County

A Project of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Survey of Schools on Truancy Issues – Final Results

[Survey Concluded in June, 2009; report concluded August, 2009]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This survey of schools provides an assessment of truancy and its response from the perspective of 44 school administrators in Spokane County. The report is organized into five sections—significance of truancy problem, causes of truancy, existing truancy procedures, resources available to attend to truancy, and conclusions and recommendations. Findings indicate that truancy is a significant problem in Spokane County, and that existing resources are insufficient in alleviating the multitude of causes identified by respondents. Recommendations include providing appropriate resources to deal with the variety of causes of truancy at each level of schooling, with special emphasis given to holistic programs such as community truancy review boards.

Important findings include:

- Nearly half of respondent indicated truancy was at least somewhat of a problem. One-in-five survey respondents indicated that truancy was a *significant* problem (see pages 2-4).
- A variety of causes of truant behavior were identified by respondents. Most prominent among these was drug and alcohol use and lack of attachment by youth. Ineffective parenting was also listed frequently, yet lack of social services was identified least frequently (see pages 5-7).
- Most respondents (86%) believed that Becca Bill limits were appropriate, but were split between whether uniform policies or individualized discretion would best reduce truancy (see pages 8-9).
- Overall, schools varied greatly in their current application of truancy law. The majority of the time, respondents identified that schools were less likely to comply with existing procedures. For example, less than 10% reported parent conferences always occurred after 2 unexcused absences per month. Nearly half noted that truancy petitions were not filed for every student who met the legal criteria for being truant. Around two-thirds reported that no students with Becca petitions were suspended for 20 consecutive days of nonattendance (see pages 10, 13-16).
- Respondents provided a dismal view of the successfulness of the petition process—with 14% believing filing petitions was very successful in reducing truancy, 13% believing that filing contempt was very successful, and only 5% believing the purge process was very successful (see pages 11-13, 16-18).

- More than three-quarters of respondents had heard of community truancy review boards and over half of respondents desired training on them (see page 19)
- Only one-third of respondents believed they had sufficient resources to combat truancy. Fewer than half had specific individuals dedicated to relieving truancy problems, nearly 40% had no programs for truant youth, and 75% had no programs for the families of truant youth (see pages 21-25)
- In separate analyses, the use of an individualized approach emphasizing prosocial intervention (such as the use of a community truancy review board) was more successful in reducing truancy than the use of a “one-size-fits-all” approach relying on the petition process (see Appendix)

REPORT

This survey of schools provides an assessment of truancy and its response from the perspective of school administrators. Initial contact was made with schools within the Spokane County school district to request their participation in a brief, focused survey about *truancy in their respective schools* and to identify the individual best able to complete the survey. Schools that agreed to participate received a self-administered survey to be completed by the principal or vice-principal (the individual identified at the initial contact). The survey included questions about perceptions of truancy, its causes, and its potential remedies. In addition, the survey asked about current Becca procedures and the extent to which the schools adhered to established state-wide policies. Finally, questions about the existence of structured programs or support services for truant youth and their families were asked. The surveys are intended to provide a brief, concrete picture of truancy within the schools in Spokane County.

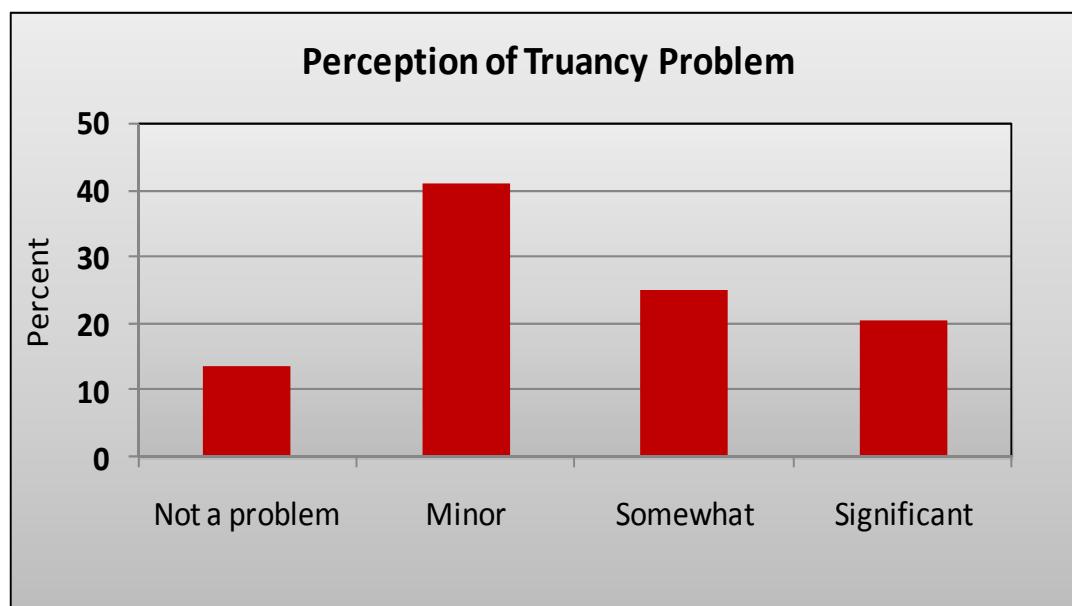
The survey was administered electronically and responses were received from 44 of the 67 surveys sent (response rate = 66%). Eleven school districts were represented — Spokane (8), West Valley (7), Central Valley (5), Mead (5), Cheney (3), East Valley (3), Deer Park (2), Medical Lake (2), Nine Mile (2), Freeman (2), and Riverside (1). Also included were responses from 4 schools from the Catholic Diocese of Spokane. Responses were received from the elementary/middle school level (19), the high school level (18), and from alternative schools (5). The respondents were mostly principals (55%) or assistant principals (22%), with attendance clerks, counselors, and teachers comprising the remaining survey respondents. Completed surveys were received mainly from male respondents (77%), and respondents were primarily white (91%), and none were of Hispanic origin. Age of respondents ranged from 30 years to 62 years old, with an average age being 48 years. Finally, respondents had spent an average of 6 years at their current position.

The remainder of this report is organized into the following five sections. First, a brief overview of the significance of a truancy problem as perceived by administrators is assessed. Included in this section is the perceived importance placed on reducing truancy by higher level administrators (superintendents, OSPI, etc.), as well as the significance of reducing truancy for the overall operation of their own school. Second, the causes of truancy (as identified by administrators) are analyzed.

Special attention is given to the age at which problematic behavior is presented and whether the causes (and therefore the remedies) vary across student age groups. Third, the existing truancy responses employed at each school are assessed. This includes any potential informal responses to the problem made prior to the use of truancy petitions, the use of truancy petitions and when they are least/most likely to be used, the use of contempt petitions and when they are least/most likely to be used, and the overall effectiveness of the petition process. The fourth section presents programs and resources outside of the petition process. Included in this section are whether the school had programs for truant youth, programs for the family of truant youth, and whether the school had personnel dedicated to truant youth specifically. Respondents were also asked what they believed to be the most promising approach toward reducing truancy, and whether a specific time in a child's life was best for this approach. Finally, the last section provides conclusions and recommendations based on the current findings. An appendix is provided which includes the survey instrument and also an analysis of two separate school districts within the data. The West Valley School District and Spokane School District were selected based on their size and current use of truancy boards. Comparing these two schools together, along with the overall findings of the report, allows for a more complete understanding of the current issues associated with truancy in Spokane County.

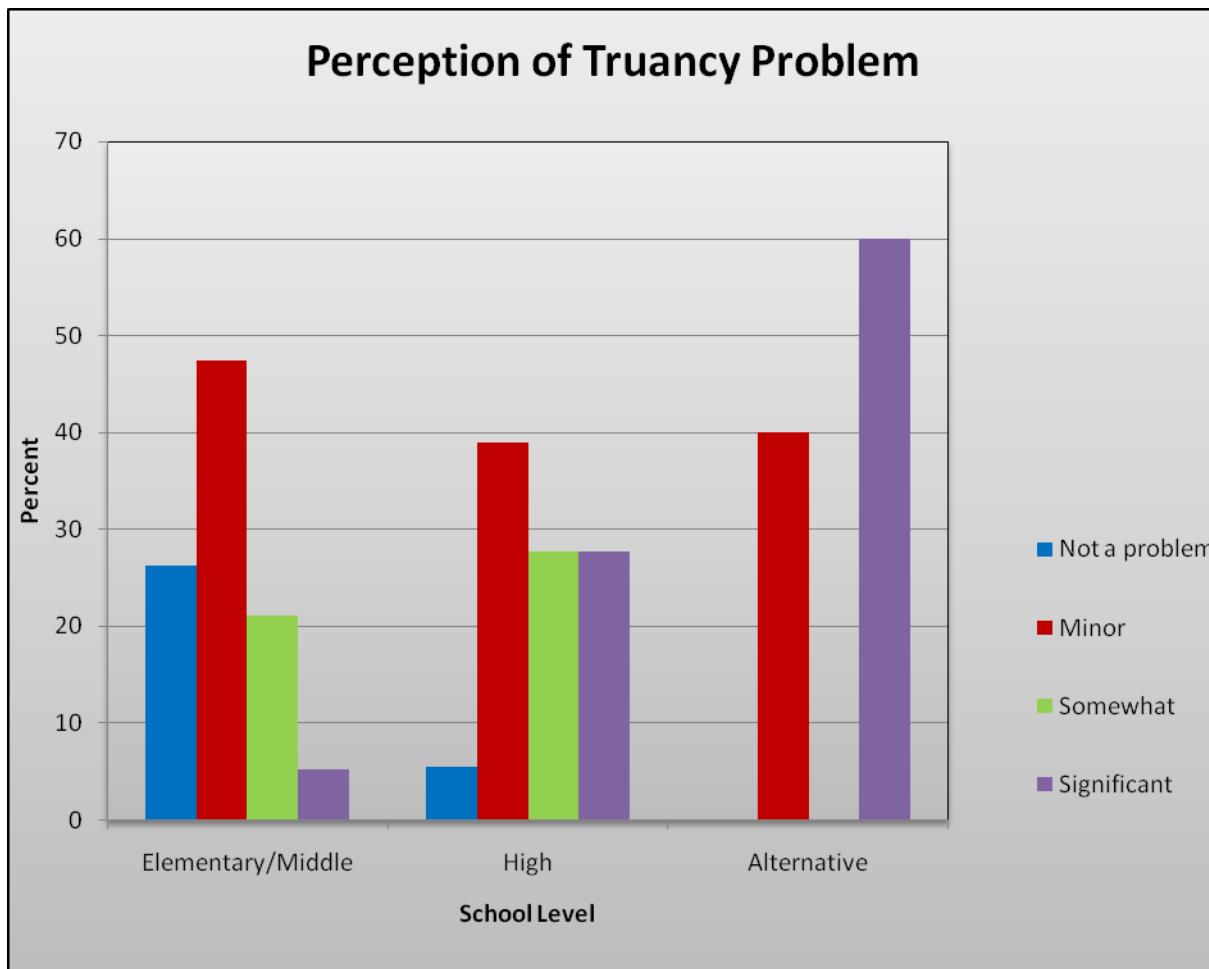
I. OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF TRUANCY

Respondents were split on how much of a problem truancy was, as 46% indicated that it was at least somewhat of a problem and the remaining respondents reported that it was only a minor problem or not much of a problem. One-in-five survey respondents, however, reported that truancy was indeed a *significant* problem. Only six respondents indicated that truancy was not a problem at all in his or her building. As such, truancy is seen to be an important issue by nearly half of those surveyed, and the causes, effects, and their attitudes about potential remedies to the occurrence of truancy are clearly worthy of further exploration.



These perceptions of truancy as a problem varied by school level. Elementary/Middle schools tended to view truancy as less of a problem than the higher levels of school. High schools and alternative

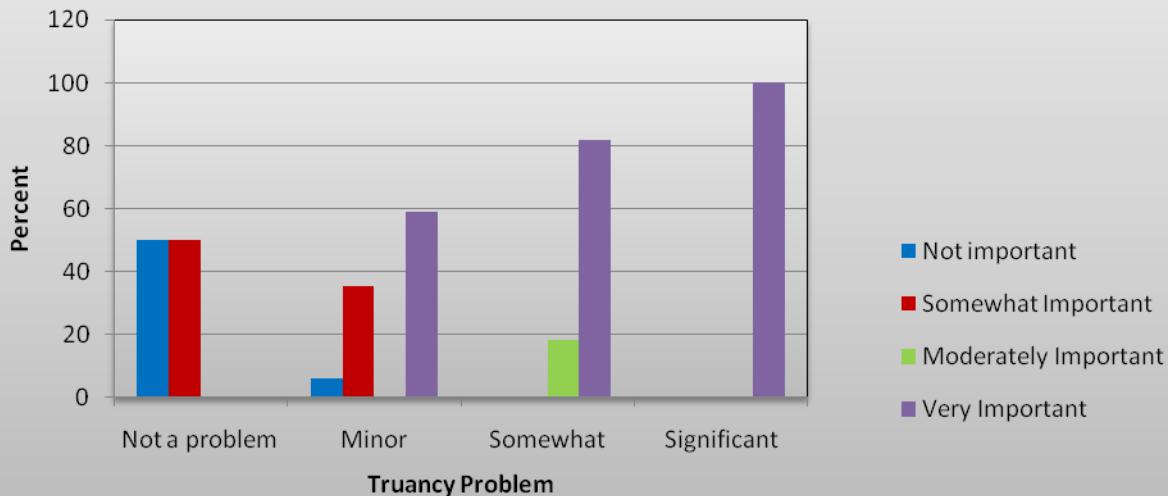
schools rated the severity of the truancy problem more highly. Over half of those at the high school level indicated that truancy was at least somewhat of a problem. This pattern reflects a statistically significant relationship between school level and perception of truancy problem.



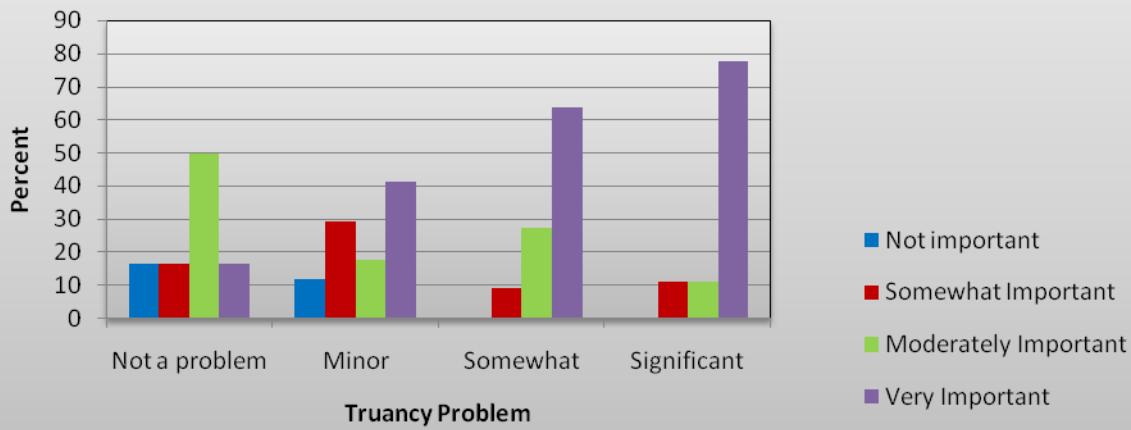
A majority of schools (70%) believed that it was either moderately important or very important to the operation of the school to reduce the occurrence of truancy among their students. Broken down by perceived truancy problem — schools whose representative considered truancy to be a significant problem were unanimous in saying it was very important to reduce truancy for the successful operation of the school.

While still seen as important, the reduction of truancy became less vital for the successful operation of schools as the representative-perceived truancy problem within a school lessened. Those schools that consider truancy to be a minor problem were less likely to consider reduction to be a very important goal, but the pattern remained the same. This represents a statistically significant relationship between the two variables of extent of problem and importance of the goal of truancy reduction. No such statistically significant relationship exists between importance of reducing truancy for school operation and school level.

Importance of Reducing Truancy for School Operation



Importance of Reducing Truancy to Higher Level Administrators



A slightly higher percentage of school representatives (74%) believed that it was moderately important or very important to higher level administrators to reduce truancy. Again broken down by school level — school representatives who considered truancy to be a significant problem believed it was very important to higher level administrators to reduce truancy. Those who considered truancy to be either somewhat of a problem or a minor problem were ambiguous in perceived importance of truancy to higher level administrators. There is no statistically significant relationship between these variables. Additionally, no significant relationship exists between importance of reducing truancy to higher level administrators and school level.

Overall, it can be said that truancy is indeed a problem for schools in Spokane County — with spokespersons for 1-in5 schools identifying it as a significant problem. This perception of problem salience varied by school level, as alternative schools and high schools were more likely than middle schools to identify truancy as a problem. Those who believed truancy was a significant issue in their school were unanimous in noting that reduction of truancy was important for their school.

II. CAUSES OF TRUANCY

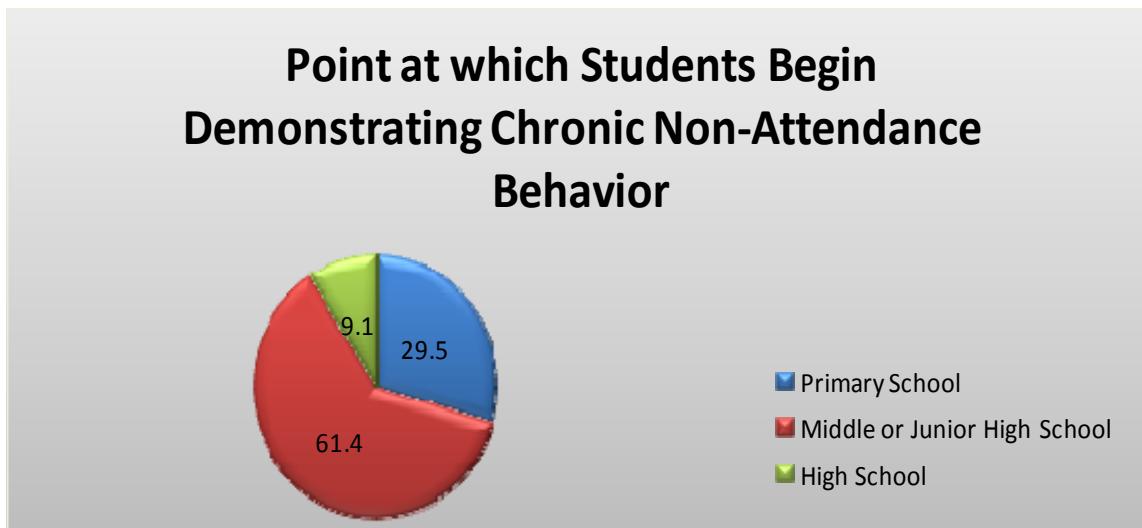
Respondents were presented with 13 possible causes of truancy and asked to identify whether each was a “major cause,” “plays some role,” or is “not a cause.” The causes identified most frequently as a “major cause” were youth’s lack of attachment to school (72.7%), youth drug/alcohol problems (72.7%), and parenting (61.4%). Abandonment (46.5%) and parent drug/alcohol problems (38.6%) were rated as a major cause by a noteworthy number of survey respondents as well.

Approximately a third of respondents viewed low achievement by youth (34.1%), poverty (31.8%), bullying/victimization (31.8%) or child abuse (30.2%) as a major cause. Youth mental illness (27.3%) and parent mental illness (20.5%) were less commonly identified as a major cause, and lack of social services was the least frequently caused identified as major (20.5%).

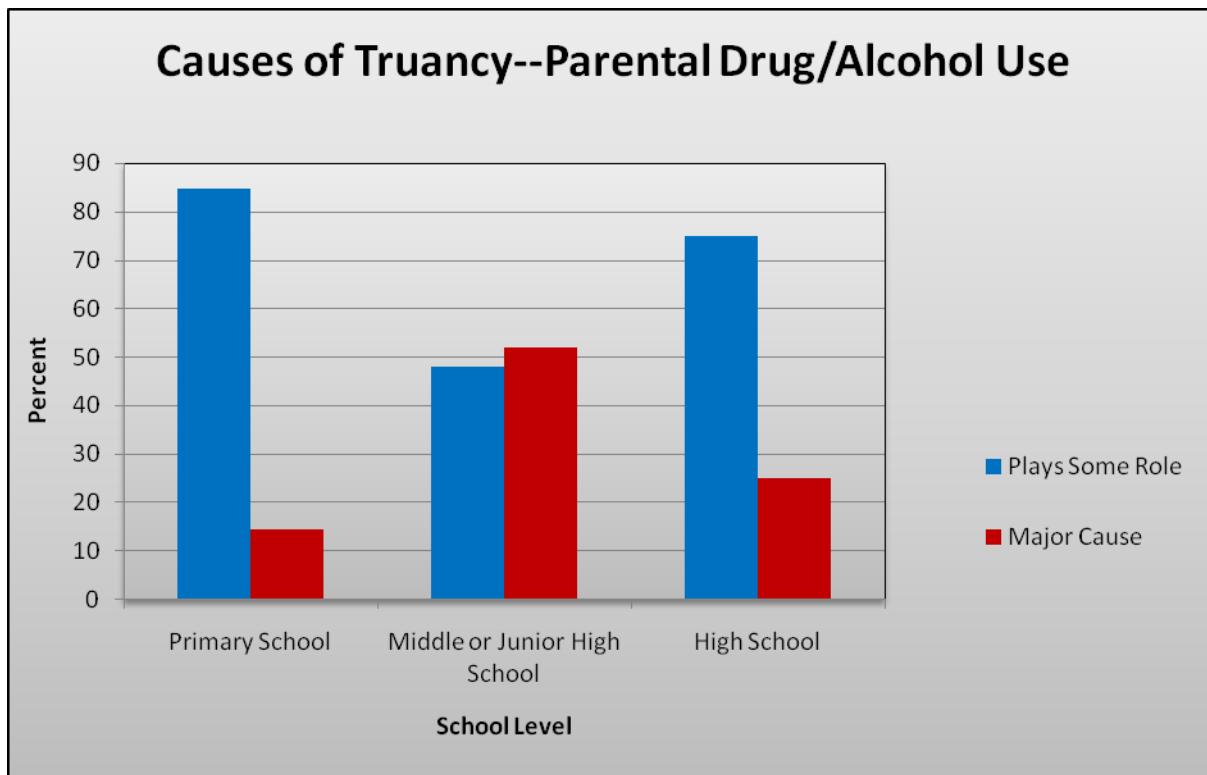
A few possible causes of truancy were identified by multiple respondents as “not a cause.” These included: bully/victimization (6), lack of social services (5), youth mental illness (4), parent mental illness (4), low achievement by parents (3), and child abuse (2).

Other causes identified in addition to the thirteen above options included: learning attitudes and behaviors supportive of truancy from friends and peers, a need for students to take care of younger children at home (often mentioned as part of a cultural expectation), and the inability of the current system to manage truancy.

Responses were varied on when chronic truancy behaviors begin. Over half of respondents (61%) believed that chronic truant behavior begins at the middle or junior high school level. Primary school was identified as the beginning by less than a third of respondents (30%), while only 9% of respondents identified high school as the beginning point of chronic truant behavior.

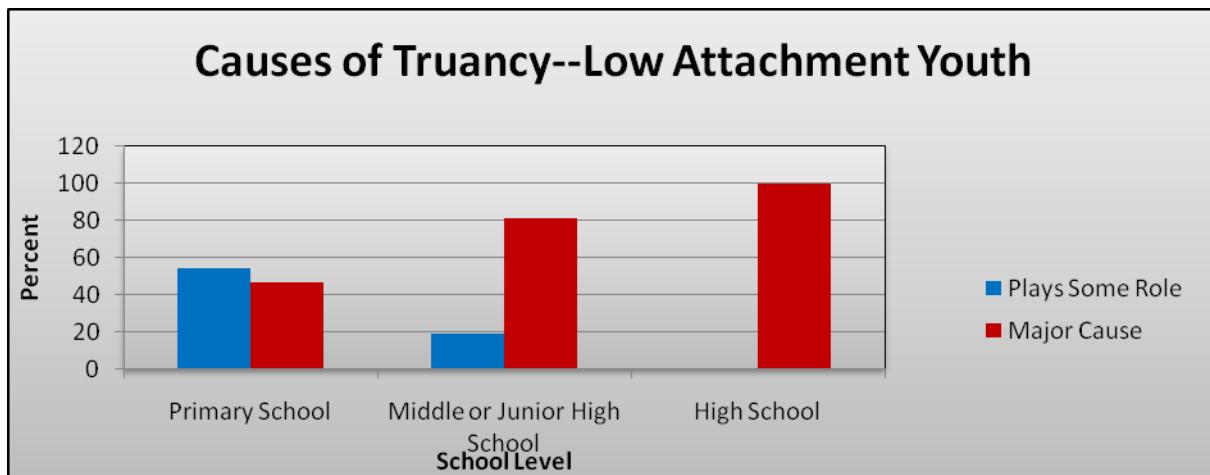


Four potential cause variables were related to a statistically significant degree with respect to when school survey respondents believed chronic truant behavior is typically initiated. Parent drug and alcohol use was identified as a major cause by only 15.4% of respondents who believed that chronic truant behavior began in primary school. Recall that 51.9% of respondents believe that chronic truant behavior begins in middle or junior school, not in the elementary school years. Among those who believe problem school avoidance behavior starts in middle or junior high school (the primary group identified above), they were quite likely to view parental drug/alcohol use as a cause of that behavior.



Both youth mental illness and parental mental illness are believed to be significantly related to when chronic truancy behaviors begin. For both causes of truancy, school survey respondents who believed chronic behavior began in high school were less likely to identify mental illness as a major cause as compared to those who believed it began in middle/junior high or primary school.

Finally, the cause of low school attachment youth was significantly related to when school spokespersons thought truancy problem behaviors begin. The later the onset of school avoidance behavior is believed to be, the more likely it is for low attachment youth to be selected as a major cause of truancy. All 4 respondents who believed chronic truancy began in high school identified low school attachment by youth as being a major cause. A high percentage (81.5%) of those who thought it began in middle/junior high school believed it to be a major cause, while only 46.2% of those who believed chronic nonattendance behavior began in primary school identified it as a major cause. As such, many respondents believed low attachment to school to be a prime cause of later-appearing truant behaviors.



Finally, school survey respondents were asked if they believed that the causes of truancy were different at different ages. A majority of respondents (88%) felt that the causes of truancy are not the same across all age levels, but rather that they change as students mature.

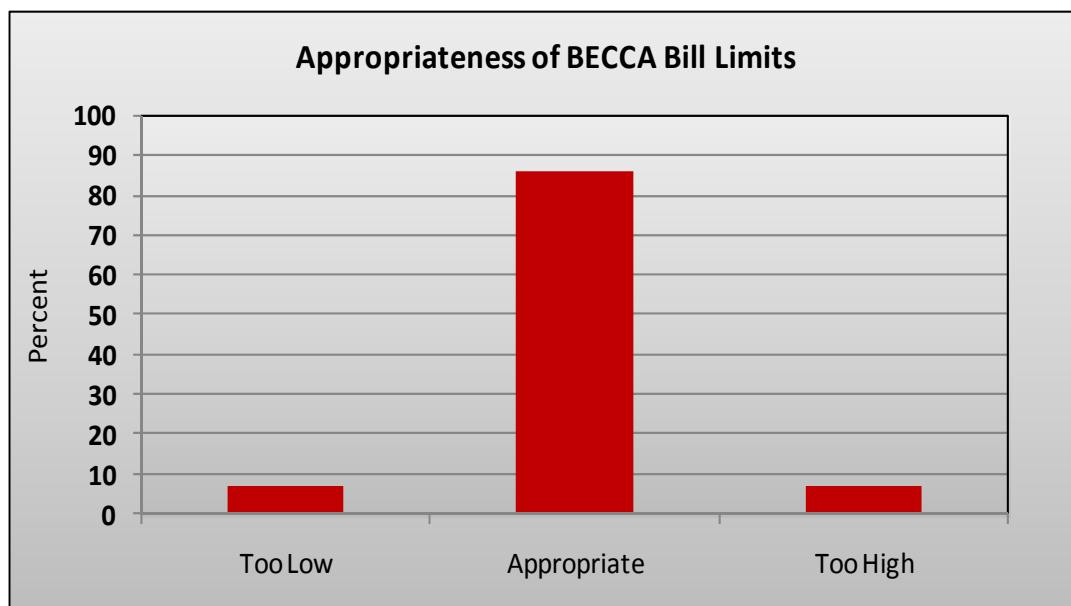
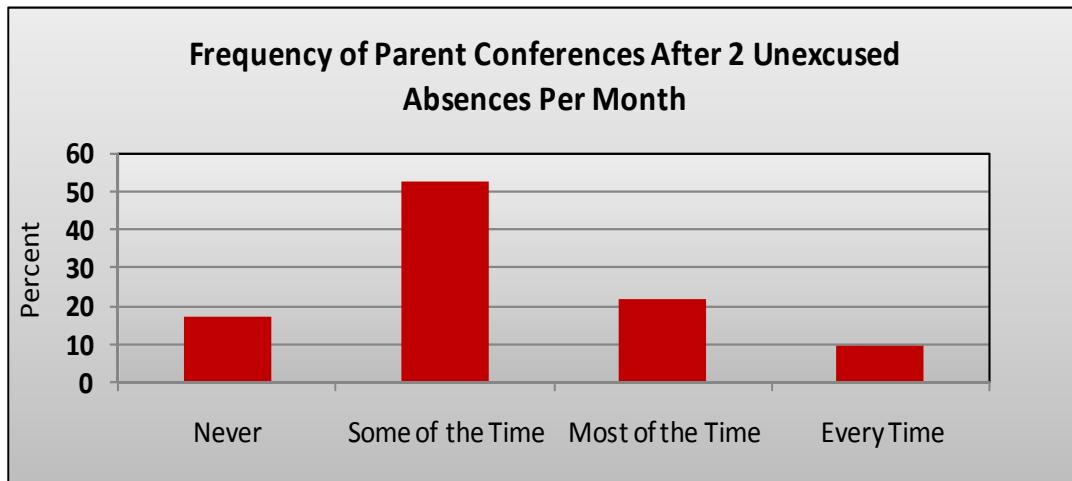
Overall, respondents identified a variety of causes of truant behavior. Notably, lack of attachment and drug and alcohol use by youth were among the most frequently identified causes. Both overall parenting and parental drug and alcohol use were also rated frequently. Interestingly, lack of social services was the least common response given among the Spokane County schools survey respondents. A number of the survey respondents offered causes not provided in the question prompts. In particular, it was noted by multiple respondents that students often are expected to stay at home and help with family responsibilities such as raising younger siblings. It was also apparent that the school spokespersons believed that students learned truant behaviors and attitudes from other truant youth and family members. Respondents disagreed somewhat on when chronic truant behaviors began, yet tended to agree that the causes of truancy were different at different ages. Both of these results suggest a need to tailor different interventions at different levels of schooling.

III. CURRENT RESPONSES TO TRUANCY

Pre-Petition Process

Respondents identified several ways that they attend to periodic unexcused absences before engaging in the petition process. The most common response, identified by 25 of 44 respondents, was that *parents were contacted*. This mainly occurred in the form of a phone call to the home. Eleven respondents stated that they engaged in some type of prosocial intervention process — such as attempted inclusion of student into a club/activity at school or schedule change to remedy problematic issues. One school mentioned that they had a child study team (CST) in place to discuss options and interventions. Discipline was also a common theme — with at least 13 respondents identifying some sort of consequence such as detention or in-school suspension. Saturday school was a common form of discipline, and some schools had less punitive consequences such as community service or school cleanup chores. One school in particular had the following staged process for dealing with truancy: 1st offense per Year, Warning/In House Suspension; 2nd Offense per Year, In-house Suspension; 3rd Offense per Year, Parent Conference and Level 1 Contract; 4th Offense Per Year, Short-term suspension and performance board hearing; 5th offense per Year, Long-term suspension up to 18 weeks.

Although parental contact was a common response to unexcused absences before the petition process, the frequency of parent conferences after 2 unexcused absences per month was not as often as expected. The most common response (52%) was that these conferences took place “some of the time.” Seven respondents remarked that this type of conference never took place. These conferences typically took place by phone (57%) or in person at the school (39%).



Petition Process

When asked for their opinions on the Becca Bill provisions for when truancy petitions must be filed (after 5 unexcused absences in a month or 10 in a year), 86% viewed the Becca limits as appropriate, 7% reported that the limits for truancy are too low, and another 7% reported that they are too high. As such, the majority of the respondents agreed with the limits set.

Respondents were asked if it was valuable for schools to set their own policies regarding truancy. More than half of respondents (61%) believed this flexibility in administration to be at least moderately valuable. There were three broad themes that emerged when respondents were asked to elaborate on their responses in this regard.

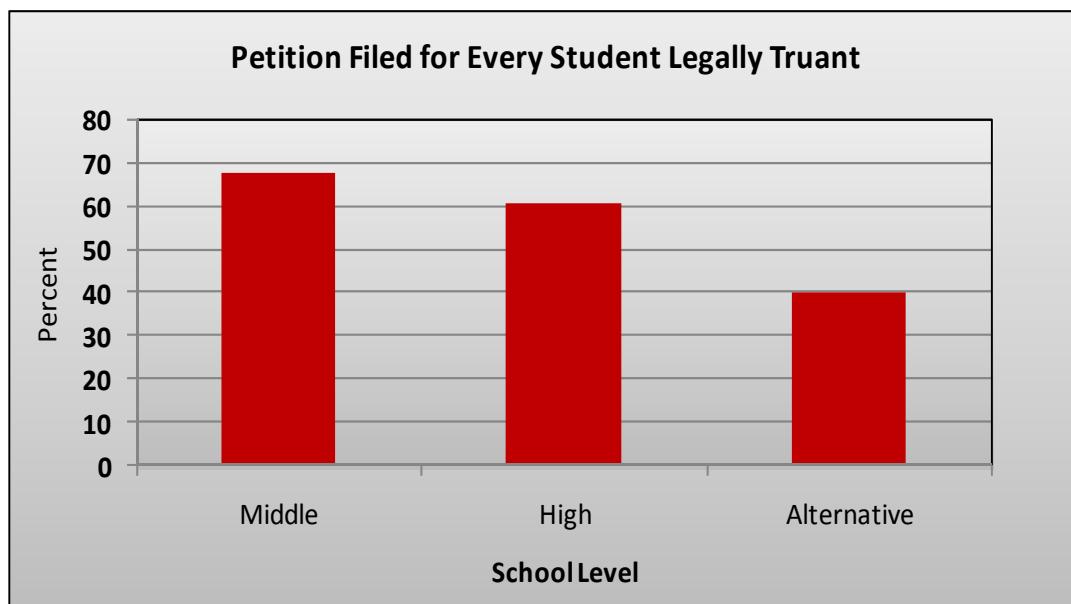
- 1) The majority of respondents suggested that uniformity across the state would be beneficial. One of the most frequent comments was that some schools follow the law closely while others do not. This creates uncertainty for both students and administrators in terms of how to interpret policy. Responses in support of this viewpoint include the following:
 - *"All schools should be consistent in order for us to handle transfers/students that move between schools."*
 - *"If the procedures are based on State Statute, then the state should set the procedures to be followed so as to avoid potential legal ramifications for misinterpretation of the statute and its provisions, or improperly implementing the procedures."*
 - *"This is a state law and should be treated as such. If schools have a problem with the law and the interpretation of the law, then they would need to take it up with a board which oversees Becca, much like the Supreme Court oversees the constitution. We need to keep things consistent for everyone."*
 - *"I believe consistency across schools would best benefit students and families; too many times I have seen firsthand the challenges with an inconsistent method of intervention."*
- 2) A contrasting theme was that discretion was needed as every case is different and may not necessarily respond to the same uniform procedure. Two major reasons for this were that different areas have different types of students with different needs, and that some schools do not have the resources to follow Becca procedures. Responses in support of this include:
 - *"Nothing is ever concrete or black and white. Circumstances must always be considered."*
 - *"Each school has a different population of students which come from different backgrounds... it is the school's responsibility to learn those differences so they can make the learning process a positive one for every student."*
 - *"Due to resources allocated at each school we need flexibility."*
 - *"Every school has a need to know its families and holding to uniform procedures is efficient but not effective for all environments."*
 - *"Within the context of the law, there must be local discretion. The problem is larger than our resources."*
- 3) A final theme was that current Becca procedures were not efficient in that they were either not punitive enough or they were not quick enough, or both. Responses in support of this include:
 - *"There is little teeth (but quite a bit of documentation that ends in wasted time). Clear criteria and procedures for everyone, with teeth would be my first choice."*
 - *"The Becca bill is another unfunded mandate that has little to no effect on students in that the courts have stopped sending kids to lock up as a result of their truancies."*
 - *"The problem with the Becca procedures is that they do not account for the single period truancies and that the Becca procedure is slow."*

Respondents were asked whether truancy petitions were filed for every student who met the legal criteria for being truant. Slightly over half of respondents (59%) responded that every eligible student was indeed petitioned. Of those who responded that students were not petitioned every time, several responses were given for why or why not use was made of the petition process:

Three major themes emerged for why petitions were indeed filed. First, where nonresponsive parents were present there was likely to be a filing of a petition. This included both parents who did not respond to contact at all as well as those who were not committed toward improving their child's attendance behaviors. Second, a petition was filed when all other informal attempts at intervention had failed. Finally, a few respondents mentioned that they would file a petition only if they believed it would be successful in reducing truancy (i.e., not be representative of a futile effort).

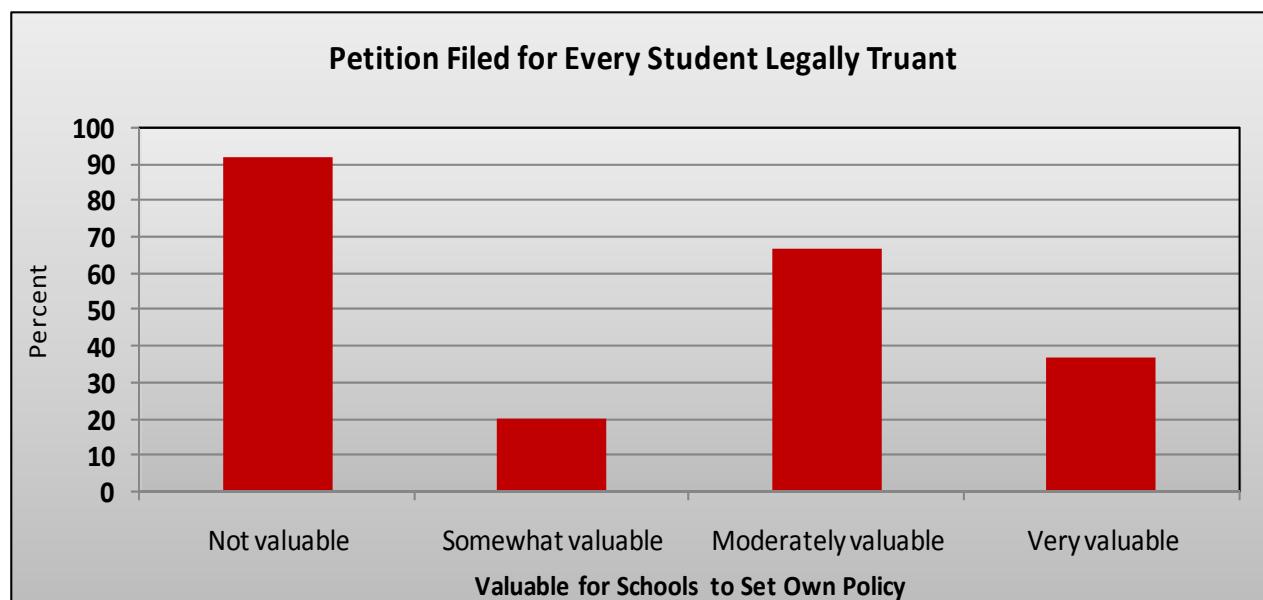
Parental involvement and cooperation was the most common reason given for why a petition was not filed. A second major theme was if extenuating circumstances were related to the school absences. This included physical health or mental health issues, or family disruptions. A particular comment reinforced the need for discretion as mentioned above: "If the student has major issues (run away, living with others, abuse/neglect, safety transportation) and the parent will not excuse the student, we will first try to work with the student to make resources available to facilitate school attendance, and also work with the parent to reduce any roadblocks." Respondents also said they would not file a petition if the student had shown signs of improvement. Finally, a couple of respondents noted that they often did not have the time or the resources to go forward with a court petition.

Whether a petition was filed every time or not varied somewhat across school levels. Alternative schools (40%) were less likely to submit a petition for every student as compared to middle schools (68%) and high schools (61%). This relationship was not, however, statistically significant.

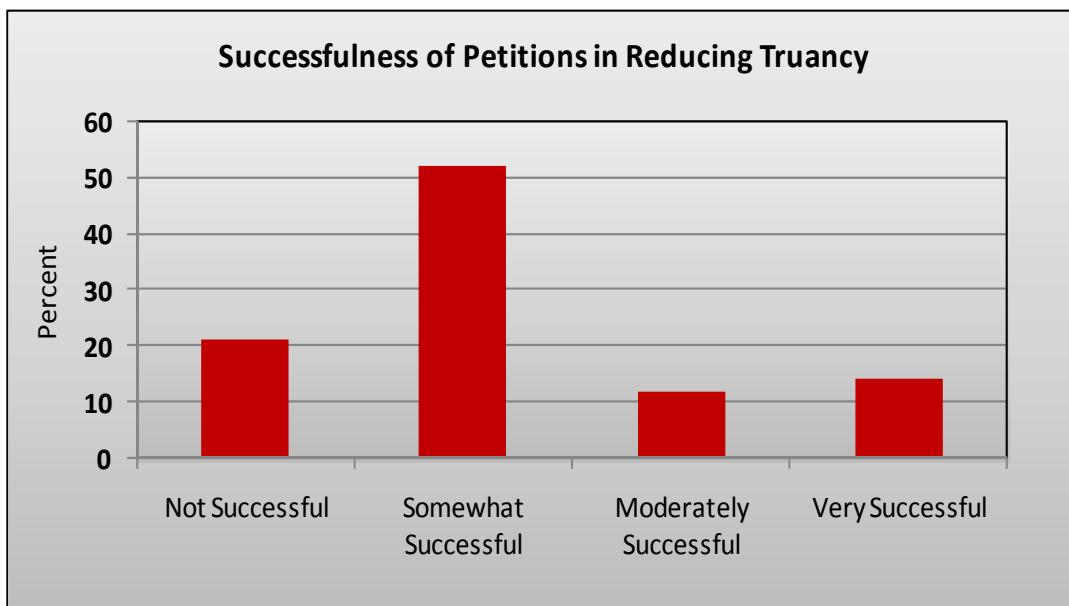


A statistically significant relationship was observed, however, between whether a petition was always filed and whether schools believed it was valuable to set their own policies. Perhaps not surprisingly, those survey respondents who believed it was *not* valuable to set their own policy were almost uniformly likely to petition all eligible students. No significant relationship was observed between

whether a petition was always filed and perceived problem of truancy, whether Becca limits are appropriate, whether the reduction of truancy is important to the operation of the school, and whether filing petitions is perceived as successful in reducing truancy.

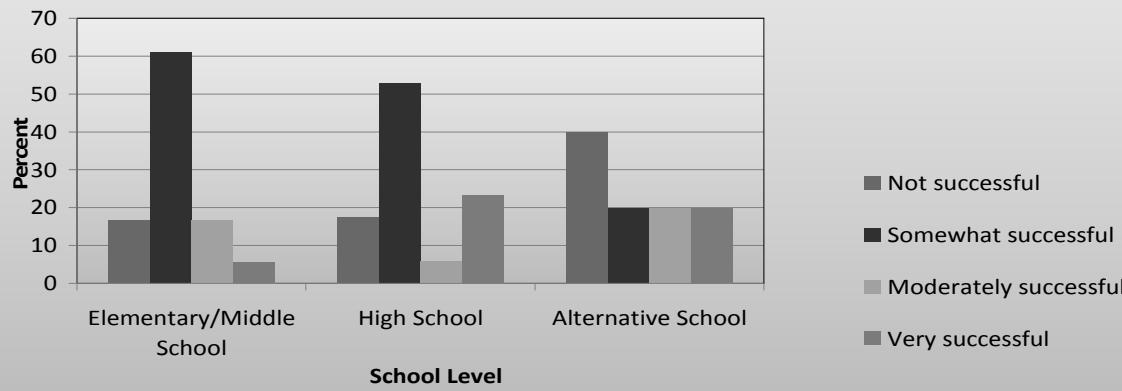


Only 6 respondents (14.3%) believed that filing petitions was “very successful” in reducing truancy. The majority of respondents perceived them to be somewhat successful. Over 1-in-5 school administrators believed that filing petitions was not successful in reducing truancy.



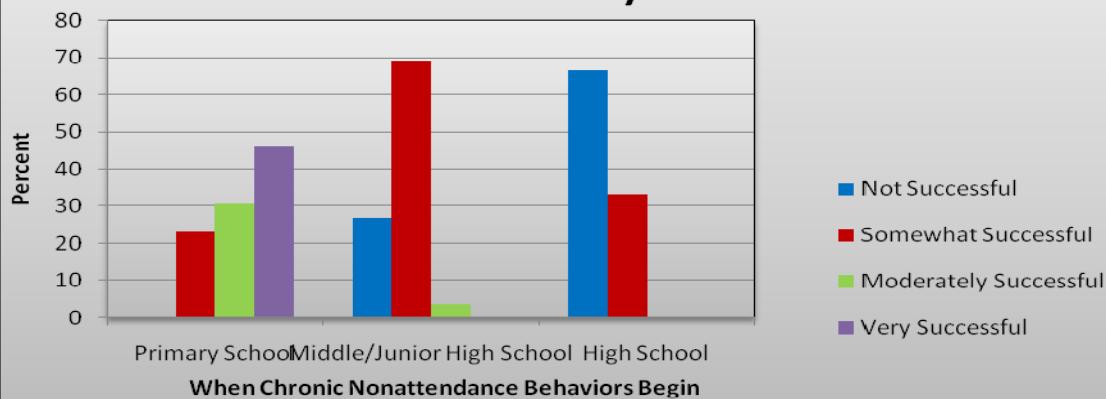
The perception of the success in reversing truancy through the filing of petitions was mixed across school levels. Alternative schools were most likely to perceive the truancy process as not being successful. High schools were only slightly more likely to assume successful outcomes.

Successfulness of Petitions in Reducing Truancy



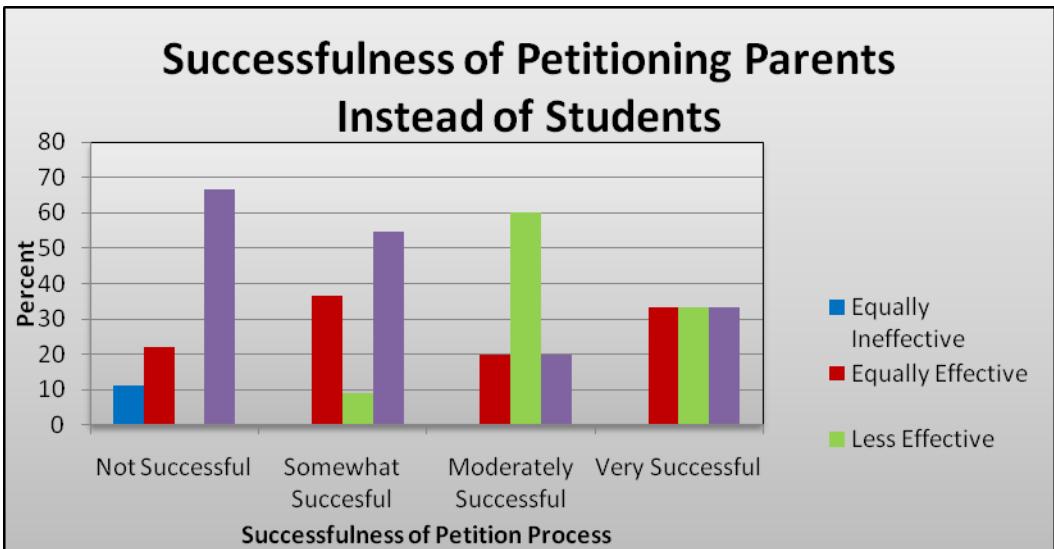
The perception of the successfulness of the petition process in reducing truancy did significantly differ based on when the respondent considered chronic nonattendance behavior to start. The later behavior was deemed to begin, the less likely the petition process was perceived to be successful. Nearly half of those who believed chronic truancy behaviors began in primary school were likely to believe the process was very successful, while no respondents selected very successful for either of the other categories of when behavior began.

Successfulness of Petitions in Reducing Truancy

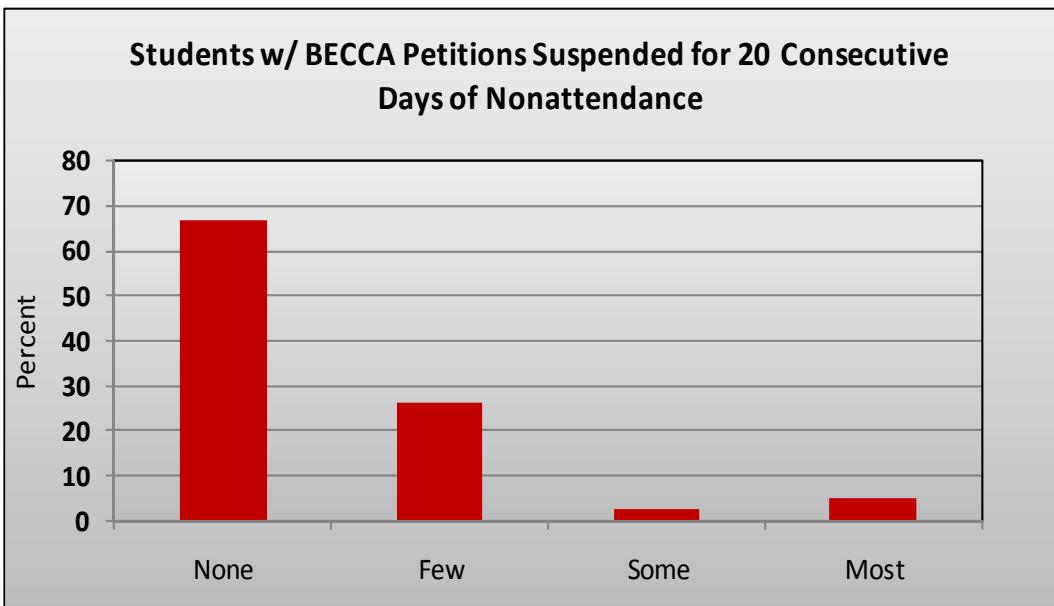


The perception of the value of the petition process for reducing truancy did not differ based on perceptions of the extent of the truancy problem, whether Becca statutory limits were appropriate, or whether it was important for schools to set their own policies.

Respondents were also asked whether they believed petitioning parents would be more effective in reducing delinquency than petitioning truant youth. Responses were mainly positive — with 51% believing it would be more effective, 16% believing it would be less effective, and 32% believing it to be equally effective or ineffective. Broken down by whether they viewed the petition process as likely to be successful overall, a statistically significant relationship emerged in which those who viewed the petition process as likely being unsuccessful were more likely to see the merits in petitioning parents.

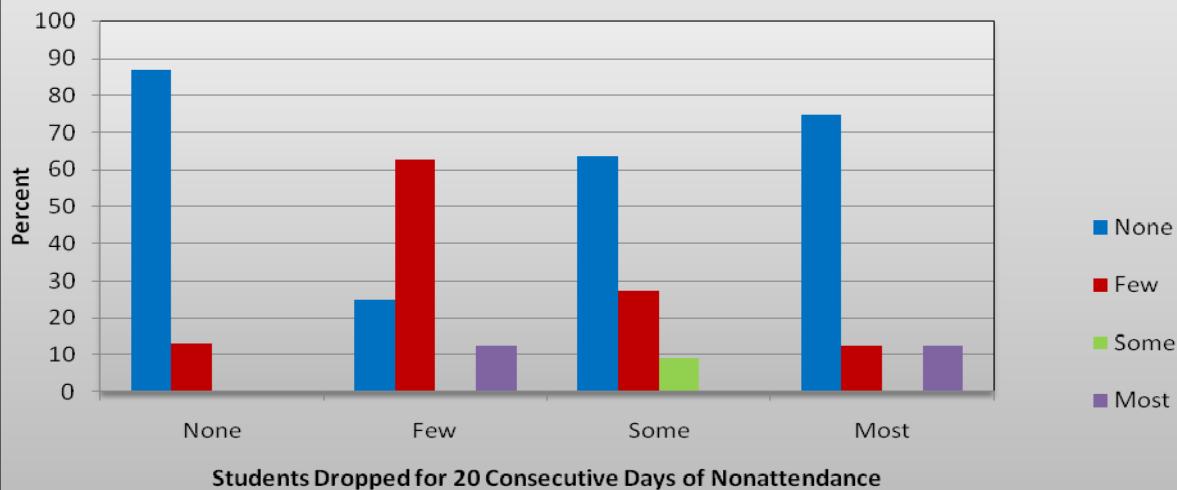


Respondents were asked how many students with Becca petitions filed were suspended for 20 consecutive days of non-attendance. Less than 10% of respondents said that “most” or “some” students were suspended. Two-thirds of respondents said that no students were suspended.



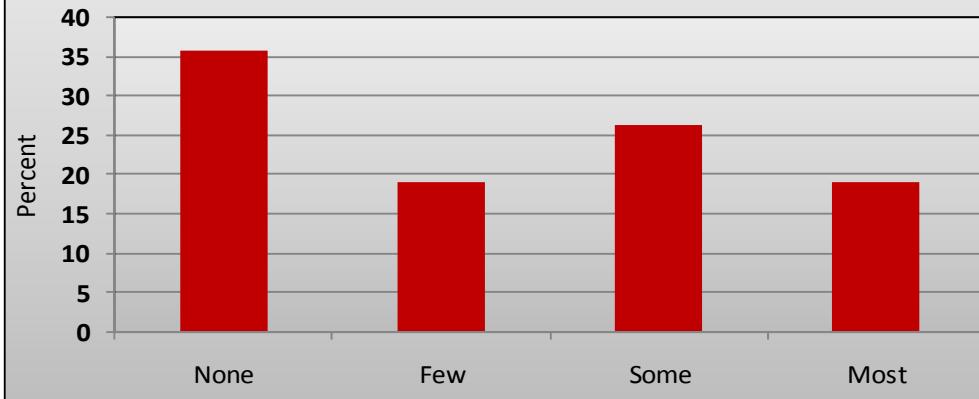
A significant relationship emerged between number of students suspended for 20 consecutive days of nonattendance and number of students dropped for 20 consecutive days of nonattendance. If few or no students were suspended for 20 consecutive days of nonattendance, the school was also unlikely to drop students for the same behavior. No other statistically significant relationships emerged between number of students suspended and any of the other relevant variables.

Students w/ BECCA Petitions Suspended for 20 Consecutive Days of Nonattendance

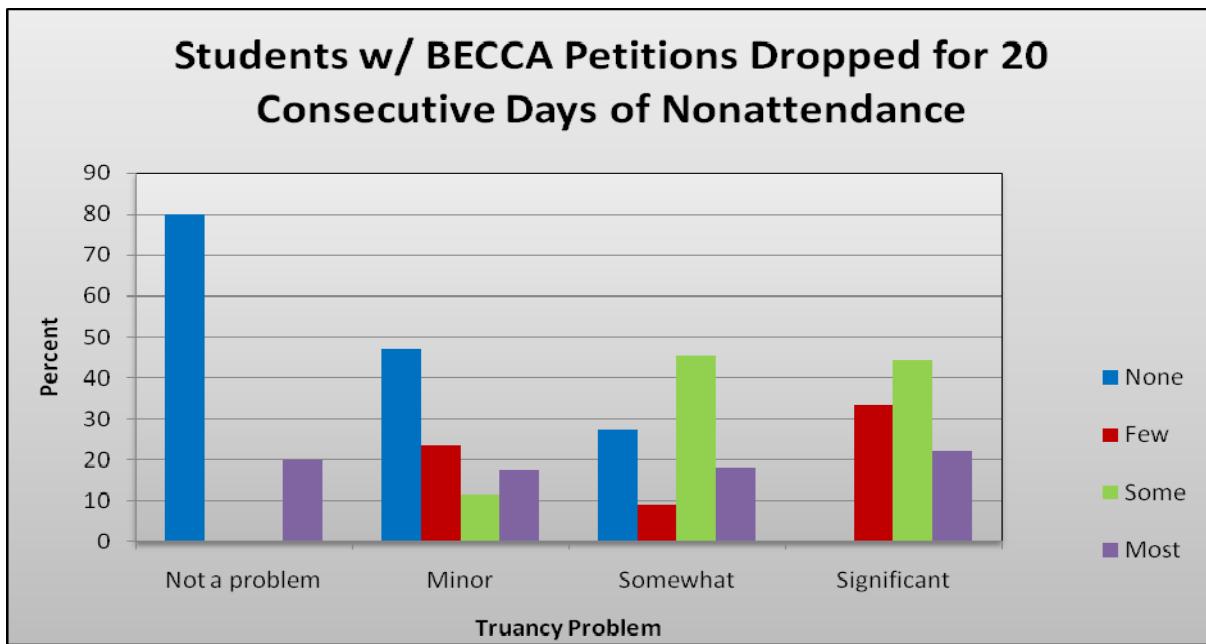
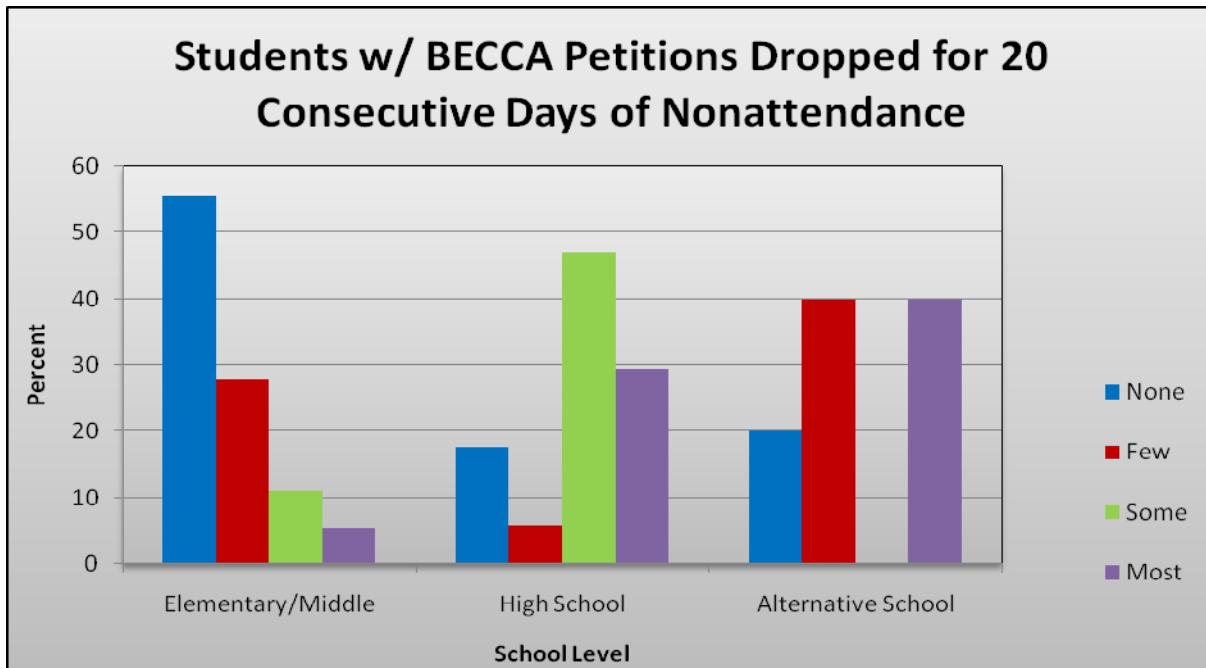


Respondents were also asked how many students with Becca petitions filed were dropped for 20 consecutive days of non-attendance. More respondents said “most” or “some” as compared to the question about how many were suspended. The most common response was that no students were dropped (36%).

Students w/ BECCA Petitions Dropped for 20 Consecutive Days of Nonattendance



Two statistically significant relationships emerged between likelihood of dropping students with Becca petitions and other relevant variables. First, school level was related to likelihood of dropping. Elementary schools (56%) were less likely to drop students as compared to high schools (18%) and alternative schools (20%). Second, perception of truancy as a problem was related to likelihood of a student being dropped. Those school spokespersons who reported that truancy was a minor problem or not a problem in their school were less likely to drop students.



Noncompliance

Respondents were asked what they believed to be the three most important contributors to noncompliance with the requirements of a truancy petition. Six main themes emerged—the most common response involved **parenting**. This included overall poor parenting, parents who enable their children by making up excuses for them, and the inability to exert control over children. An equally common response involved drug and alcohol use — most often by the student, but also by parents. A third theme that appeared as a contributor to noncompliance was lack of attachment to school. A related concern was that both students and parents did not care, and that there was a lack of motivation

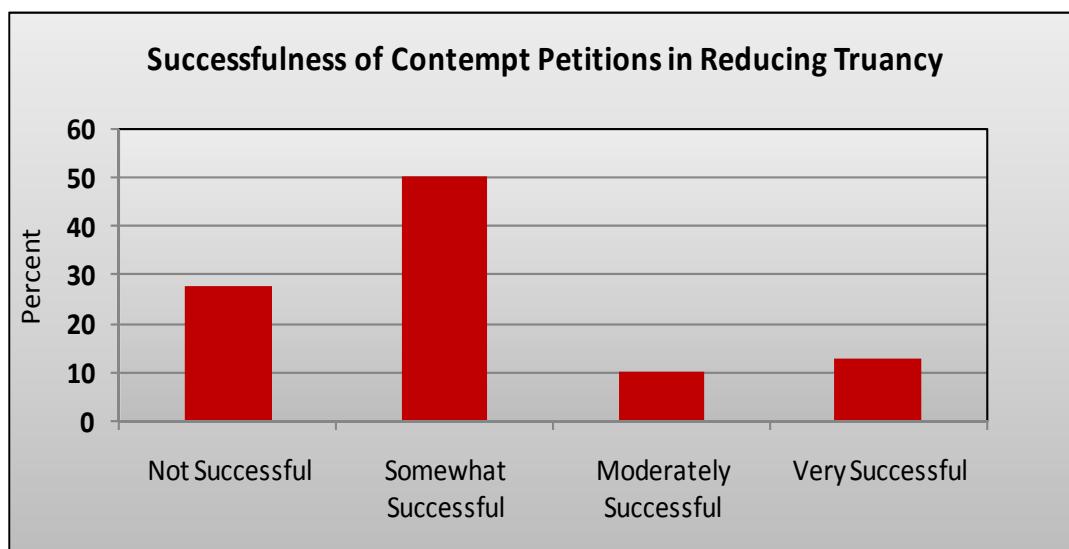
to follow through with petition requirements. Fifth, and stated less frequently, a lack of consequences was identified as leading to noncompliance. This included the idea that the process took too long and that the consequences were not sufficiently harsh. Finally, school survey respondents identified situational factors such as dysfunction at home, lack of social services, and living in conditions of poverty as being responsible for noncompliance.

Contempt

Similar to the question asking whether all eligible truant students were petitioned, respondents were also asked whether truancy contempt petitions were filed for every student who met the criteria for being in contempt of their truancy petition. About 66% of the administrators surveyed stated that contempt was filed for all eligible students. Of those who did not file contempt every time, a lack of parent contact and involvement was the reason most often given for when contempt was filed. Contempt was NOT filed when student and family involvement was evident towards improving the situation. There were, however, other responses given that did not involve improvement in attendance; most prominent among these was the perception that a contempt filing would not make a difference.

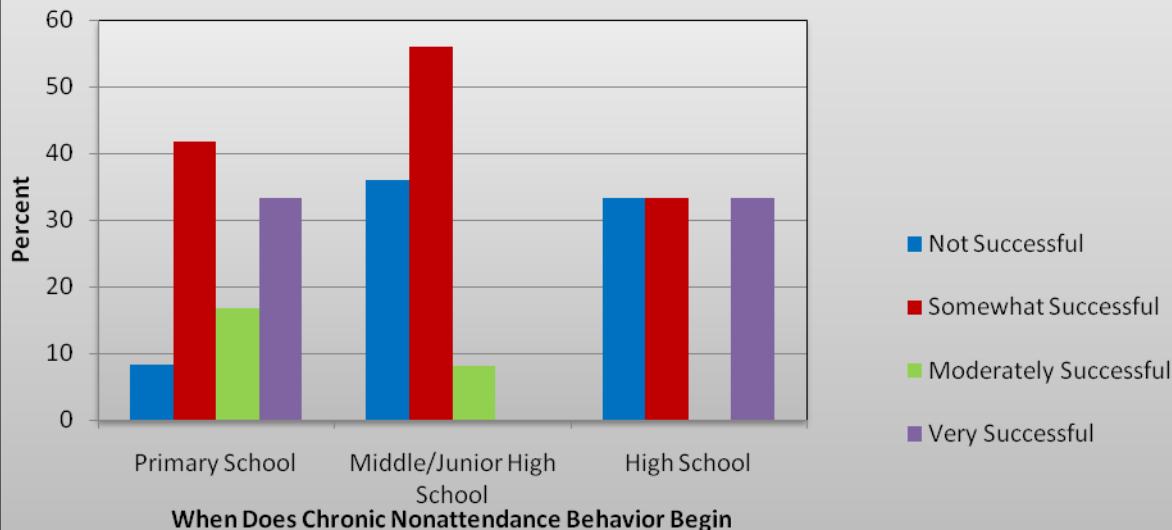
Not surprisingly, a significant relationship emerged between whether a school files a truancy petition for all eligible and whether a school files a contempt petition for all eligible. Those schools that followed the law closely in filing a petition for all truant youth also were likely to file a contempt petition when petition process requirements and conditions were not met.

Respondents were asked if the filing of contempt would be successful in reducing truancy — only 23% believed that filing contempt would likely be either moderately successful or very successful, while 77% responded that it was either only somewhat successful or not successful in reducing truancy.



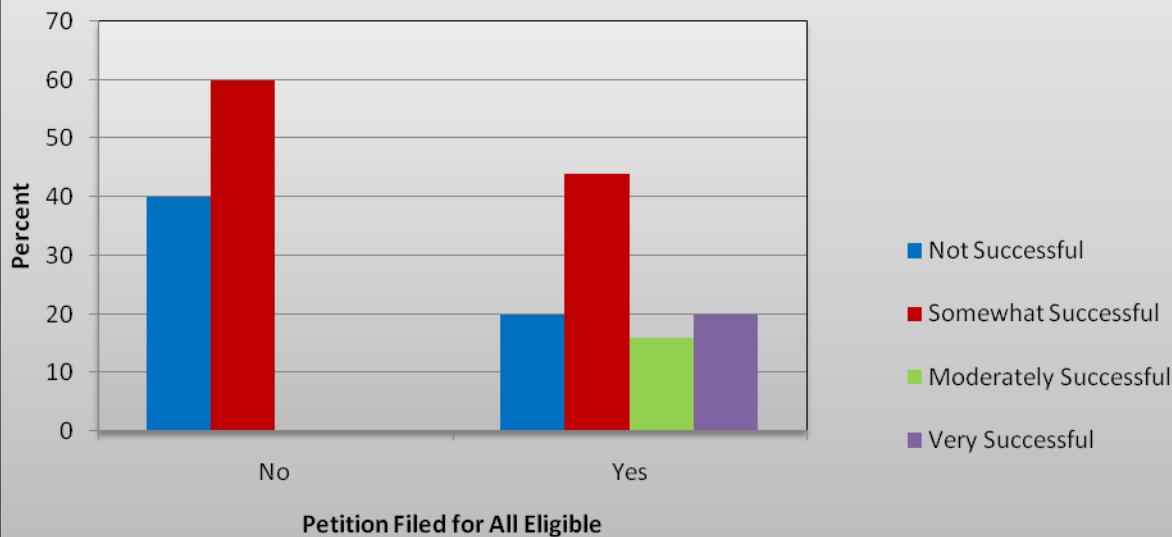
A significant relationship emerged between perception of the successfulness of filing contempt in reducing truancy and age at which chronic nonattendance behaviors were thought to begin. Those who believed chronic truant behavior began in primary school were more likely to find filing contempt as successful or moderately successful.

Successfulness of Contempt Petitions in Reducing Truancy



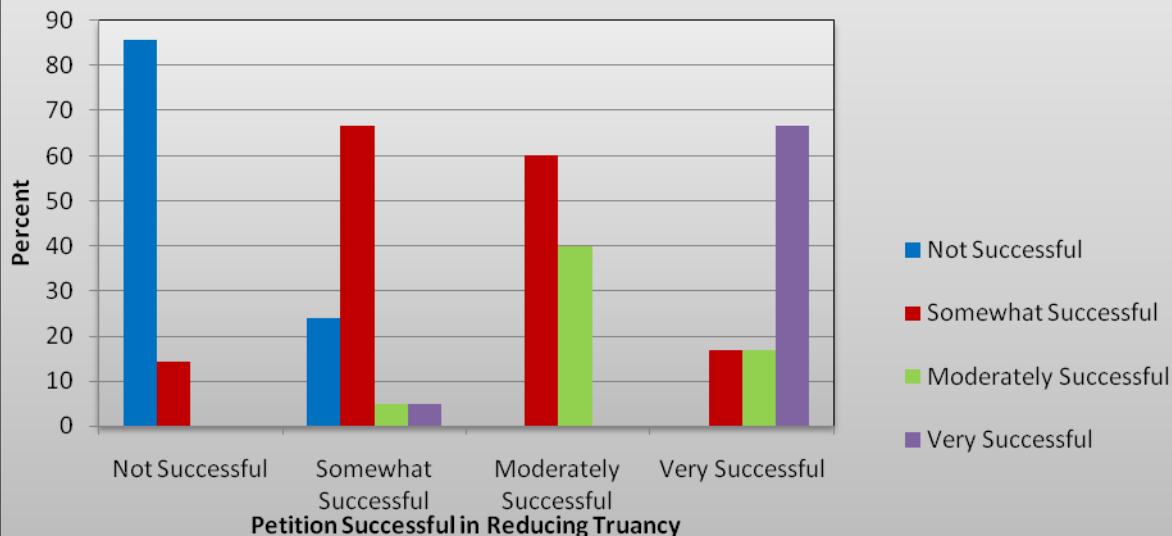
Also, those who filed a petition for all eligible were more likely to see the contempt process as being successful. This represents a statistically significant relationship.

Successfulness of Contempt Petitions in Reducing Truancy



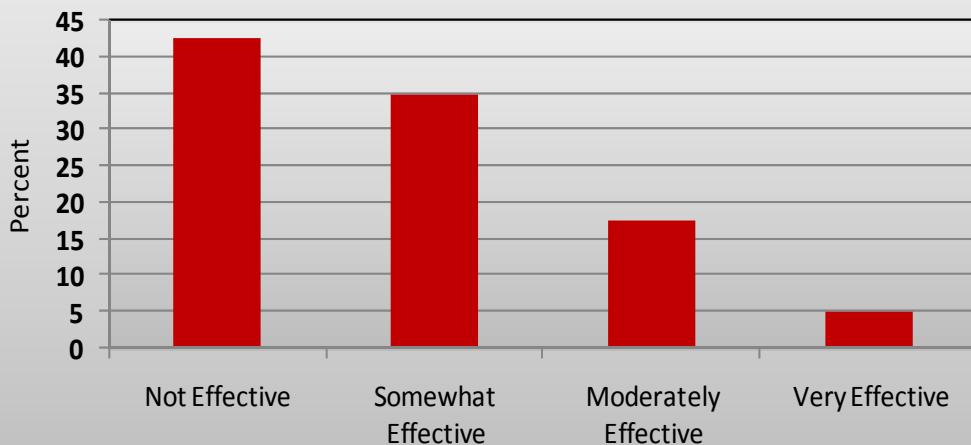
Finally, a significant relationship emerged between whether the petition process was deemed to be effective and whether the contempt process was perceived to be effective. In general, those who found one to be successful in reducing truancy were generally positive about the ability of the other to do the same.

Successfulness of Contempt Petitions in Reducing Truancy



Respondents were also asked about the likely success in reducing truancy of the process that allows a petition to be purged upon completion of set requirements. Only two respondents identified this process as being very effective in reducing truancy. Nearly half of respondents found this process to be ineffective in reducing truancy.

Successfulness of Purge Process in Reducing Truancy



Community Truancy Boards: Familiarity with and Desire for Training for Service

Two questions assessed familiarity with and desire for training on community truancy boards. One respondent referred to an effective community truancy board already implemented throughout the survey. Several other respondents alluded to attendance review and performance review boards in

their responses. Over three quarters of the school survey respondents (77%) were familiar with community truancy boards, and about half (52%) desired having training on community truancy boards.

Overall, respondents seemed to be somewhat frustrated by the current response toward truancy. Prior to the petition process, several different ways of addressing truancy were identified. The most common was for parents to be contacted — usually via a phone call home. Other responses included the use of prosocial interventions (e.g., attempted inclusion in club/activity), and the use of discipline (e.g., in school suspension, Saturday school). Despite the emphasis on parental contact, less than 10% of respondents reported that parent conferences always occur after 2 unexcused absences per month.

Most respondents (86%) believed that Becca Bill limits were appropriate, with the remaining administrators split between the limits being either too high or too low. Respondents were more likely, however, to report that it would be valuable for schools to set their own policy. Those in support of this argued that each truancy case is different and that the use of discretion was valuable in appropriately attending to each. Comments also indicated that the current process is too slow and does not feature properly harsh penalties. Those who argued against the value of schools setting their own rules emphasized that uniformity would allow for consistency across schools and cases.

Slightly over half of respondents reported that truancy petitions were filed for every student who met the legal criteria for being truant. Those who filed every time were also the administrators who believed that there would be no benefit to allowing schools to set their own policies. Of those who did not file every time, lack of parental involvement, lack of student improvement through other interventions, and the perception that the process would be successful were most likely to lead to a petition being filed. Parental involvement and extenuating circumstances (e.g., health issues, problems at home) were cited for why petitions were not filed. A few respondents noted that they did not file petitions because they did not have the time or the resources to do so.

Few respondents believed that petitions were very successful in reducing truancy, and more respondents were likely to state that petitions were not successful at all. The majority of respondents were somewhere in-between — with alternative schools and those who believed truant behavior began later (i.e., high school) less likely to believe the petition process was successful. Respondents were somewhat more supportive of the idea of petitioning parents instead of students, with 51% believing it would be more effective and 16% believing it would be less effective.

Around two-thirds of respondents stated that no students with Becca petitions were suspended for 20 consecutive days of nonattendance. Only three respondents stated that “most” or “some” students were suspended. Around half of respondents said “most” or “some” students with Becca petitions were dropped for 20 consecutive days of nonattendance. Slightly over 1-in-3 respondents said that no students were dropped. Students were less likely to be dropped if the respondent was from the elementary school level and if the school reported that truancy was a minor problem or not a problem.

Several reasons were given for why students do not comply with the requirements of a truancy petition. The most common reason given involved the **noninvolvement of parents**. A slightly less common reason for noncompliance was drug and alcohol use by student, parent, or both. Lack of concern by both students and parents was also identified as a frequently problem. As such, parents were viewed as an important reason for noncompliance through a variety of avenues. This reinforces the causes associated with parenting that were so predominate above. Lack of attachment to school by

student and situational factors (e.g., dysfunction at home, living in conditions of poverty) were also identified as contributing to noncompliance. Finally, lack of consequences including empty threats and inability to quickly mete out punishments were also identified as reasons for noncompliance.

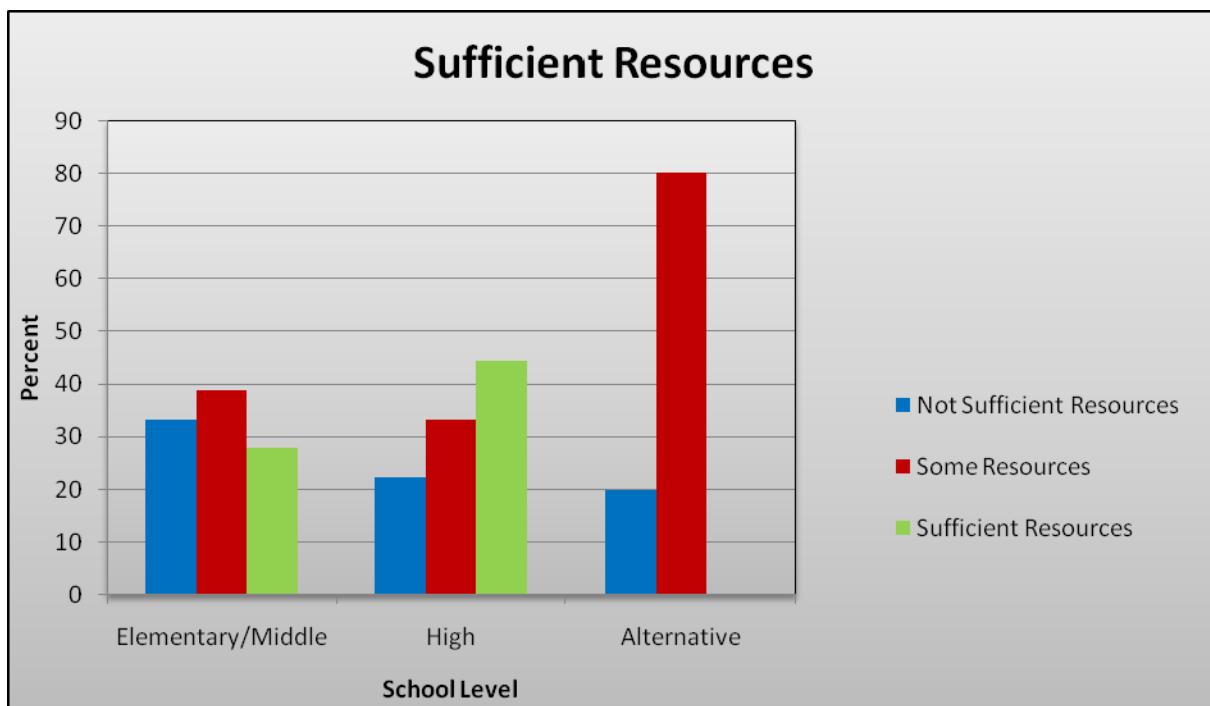
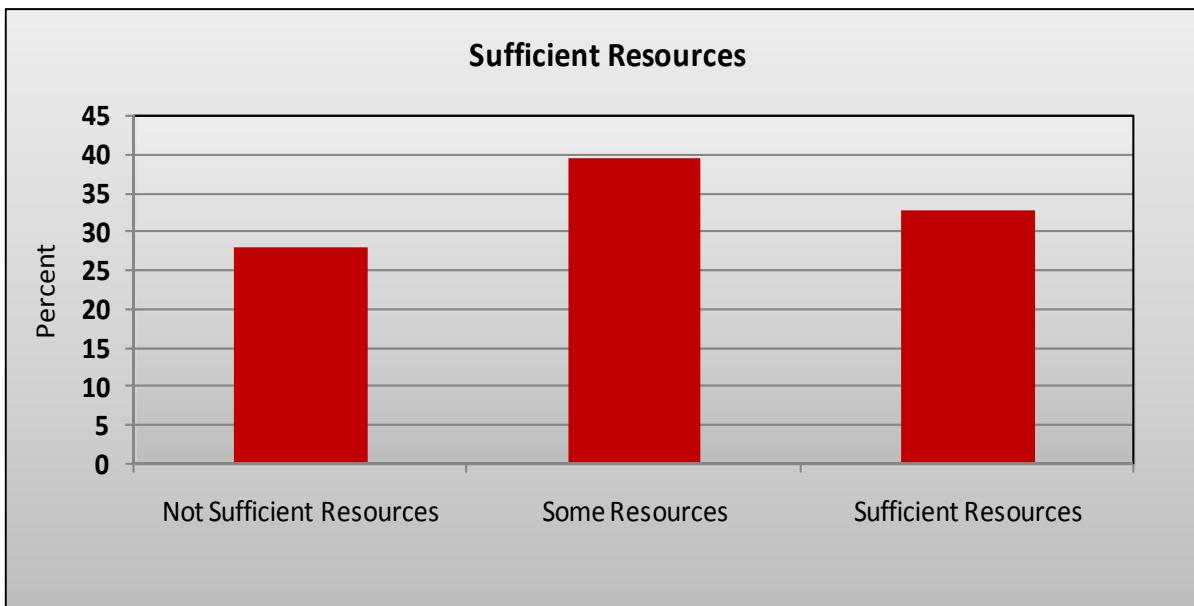
About two-thirds of respondents stated that contempt petitions were filed for all eligible students. Of those who did not file in every case, lack of parental contact and involvement in the process was the most common reason cited for why they did file a contempt petition. Contempt petitions were not filed when student and family involvement was evident towards improving the situation, but also due to a perception that the petition would be unsuccessful in improving the situation. Overall, more than three-fourths of school survey respondents believed that filing contempt petitions was either only somewhat successful or not successful in reducing truancy. Respondents were more likely to see the contempt process as successful if they believed chronic nonattendance behavior began earlier (e.g., primary school), if they had filed a petition for all eligible, and if they believed the initial petition process was successful in reducing truancy. Finally, respondents were primarily negative in their opinions toward whether the petition purge process was effective in improving school attendance behavior, with nearly 80% of respondents stating it was either only somewhat effective or not effective.

Most of the school survey respondents were rather familiar with the idea of community truancy boards (a robust 77%) — and some of the survey respondents indicated that they had performance and attendance review boards in place that were somewhat similar in concept and intent. One respondent noted that they already had a community truancy board in place, and also noted that it was very successful in reducing truancy. Around half of the Spokane County school survey respondents were interested in receiving training on community truancy boards.

IV. PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Current Resources

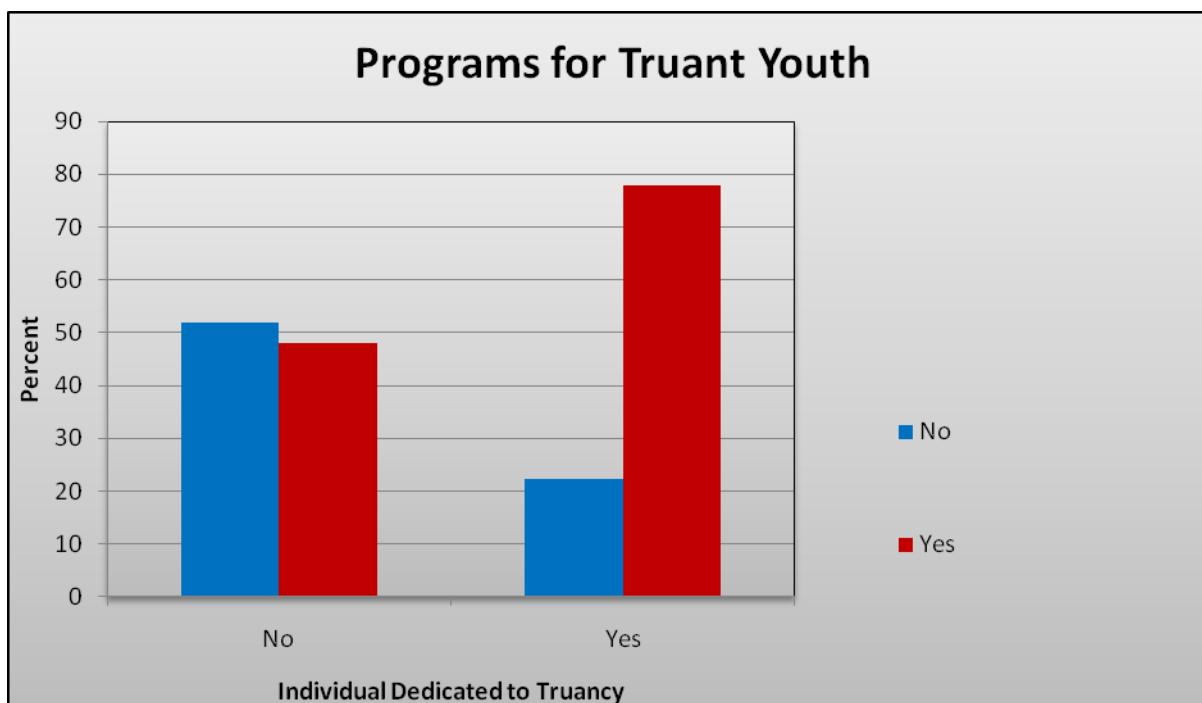
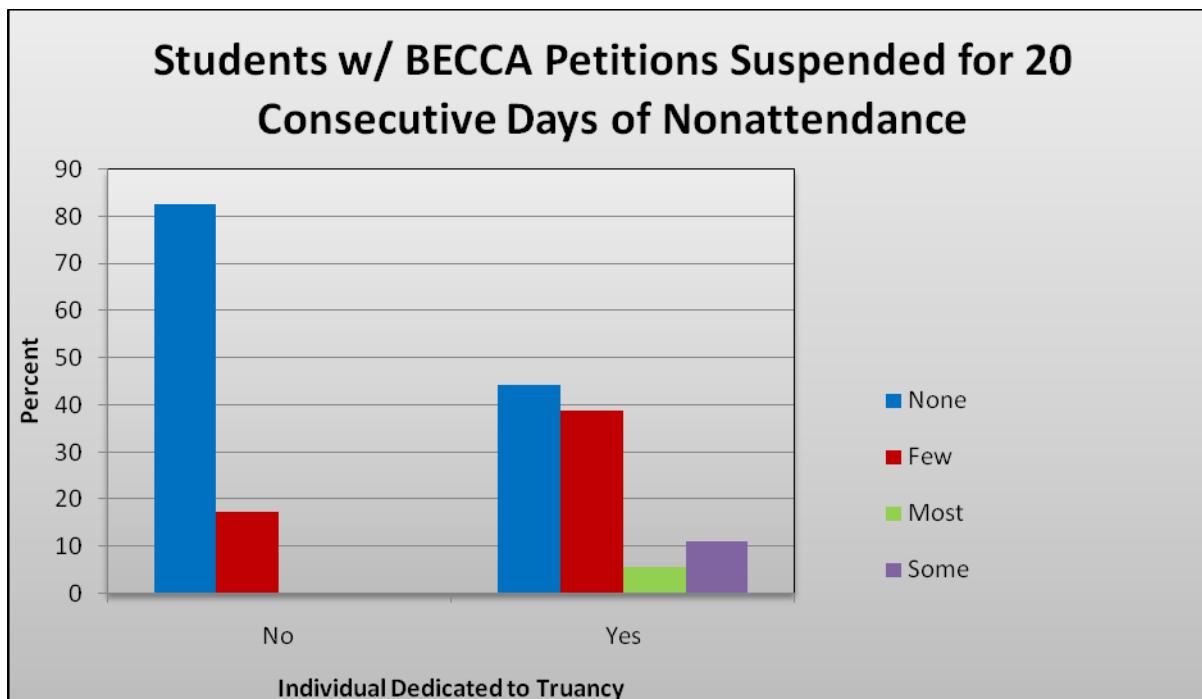
The Spokane County school survey respondents were asked about their perceptions of the resources and programs available at their respective schools to be used prior to engagement in the petition process. Slightly less than 1-in-3 of the school survey respondents believed that they have sufficient resources dedicated to identifying and managing student absences before truancy petitions are filed. Responses differed by school level, as alternative schools were most likely to believe that they did not have sufficient resources as compared to representatives from the middle and high schools. These differences were not statistically significant, however. Perhaps most importantly, perception of availability of resources did not significantly differ by whether schools identified truancy as being a significant problem or not much of a problem.

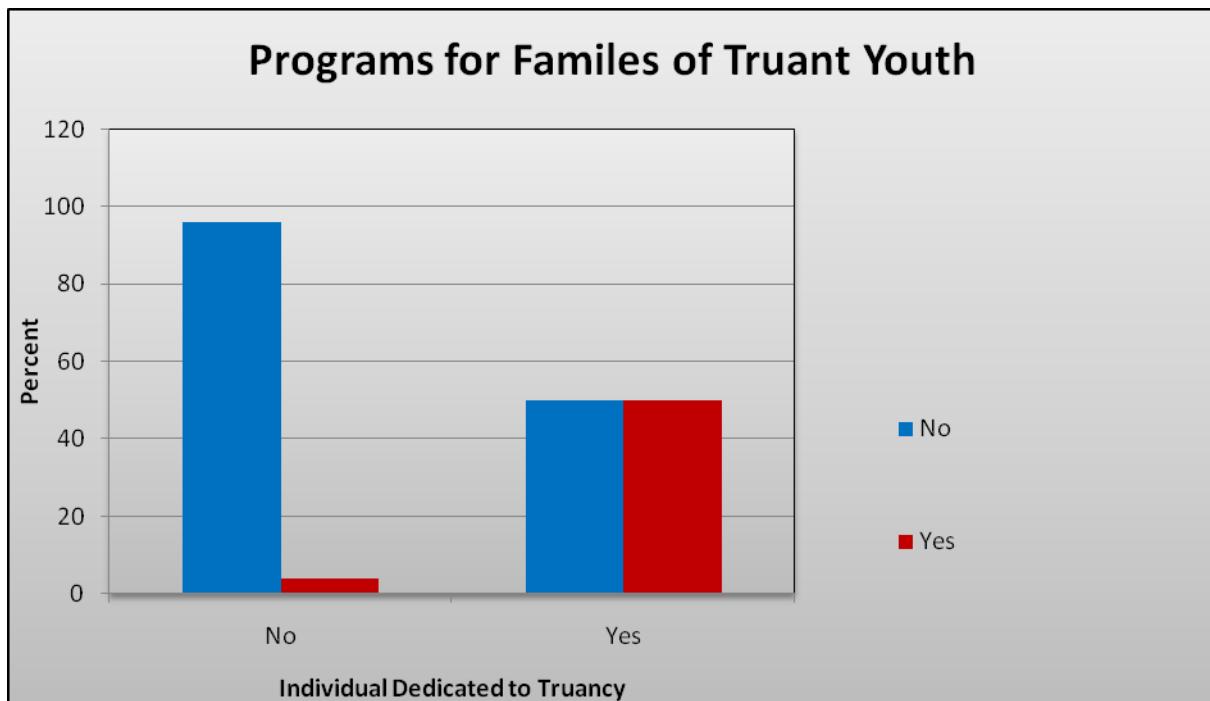


Current Programs

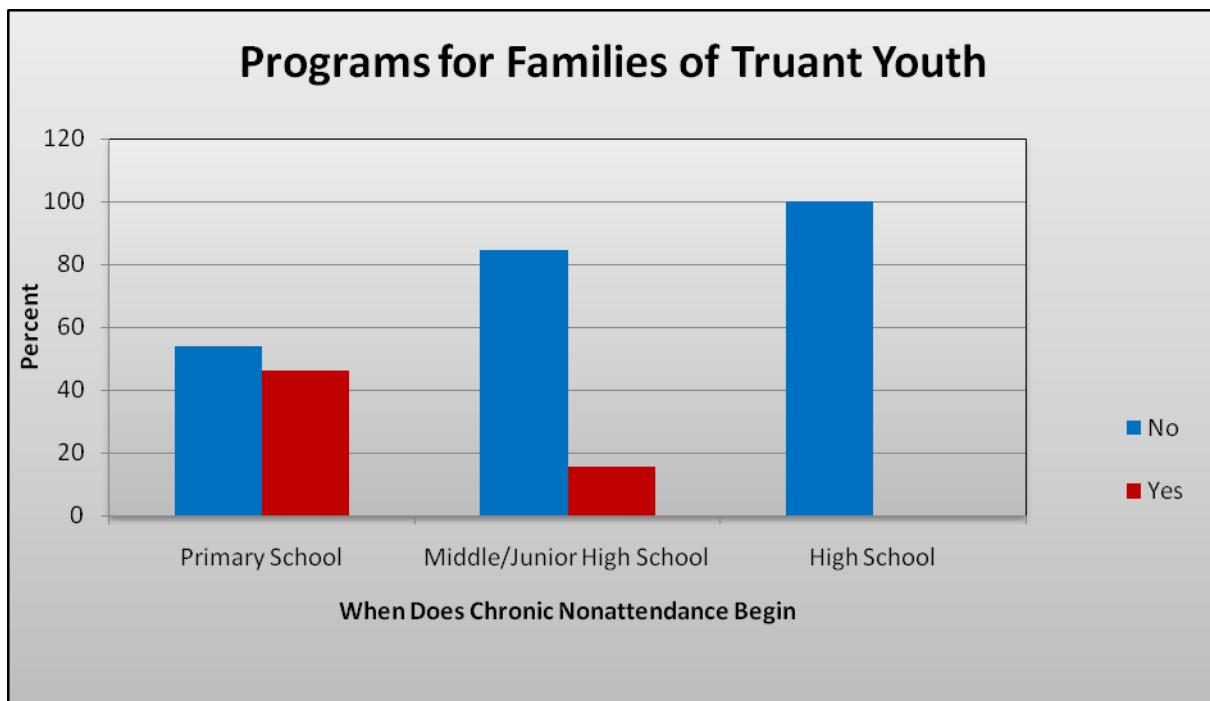
Respondents were asked about current individuals and programs they employ in attending to truant and absent youths in their school. Less than half of respondents (42%) said that they have an individual with a job dedicated toward working with absent or truant students. The most common person to have in this position was an attendance secretary, followed by principals or assistant principals. A few respondents mentioned that they had counselors or intervention specialists in charge of these duties. Whether or not a school had an individual dedicated to truancy was related to number of students suspended after 20 unexcused absences. Those who did NOT have individuals dedicated to truancy were less likely to suspend students — suggesting that a possible lack of resources led to students not

being suspended. There was also a significant relationship between whether the school had an individual dedicated to truancy and whether the respondent was familiar with community truancy review boards. **Virtually all (17 of 18) schools spokespersons who had a person dedicated to truancy issues had heard of community truancy review boards.** Finally, there were significant relationships between whether there was a person dedicated to truancy and whether the school had programs for truant youth and programs for the families of truant youth. Schools that had individuals dedicated to truant youth were more likely to also have programs for that youth and their family.

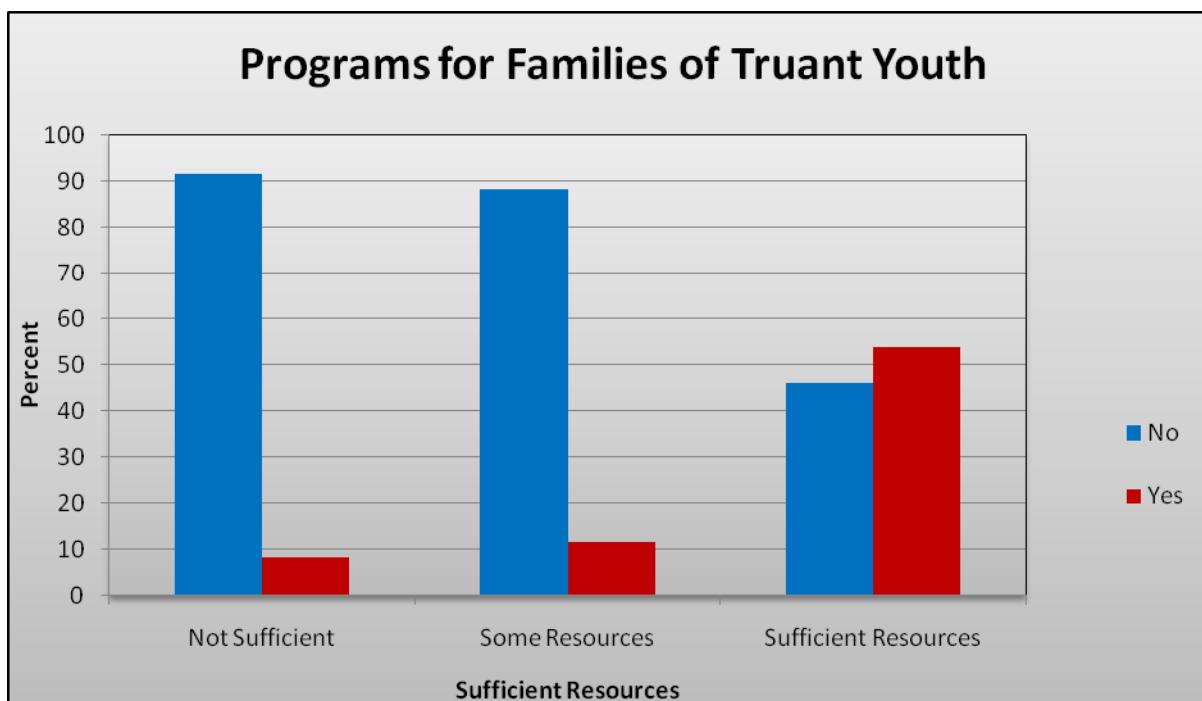




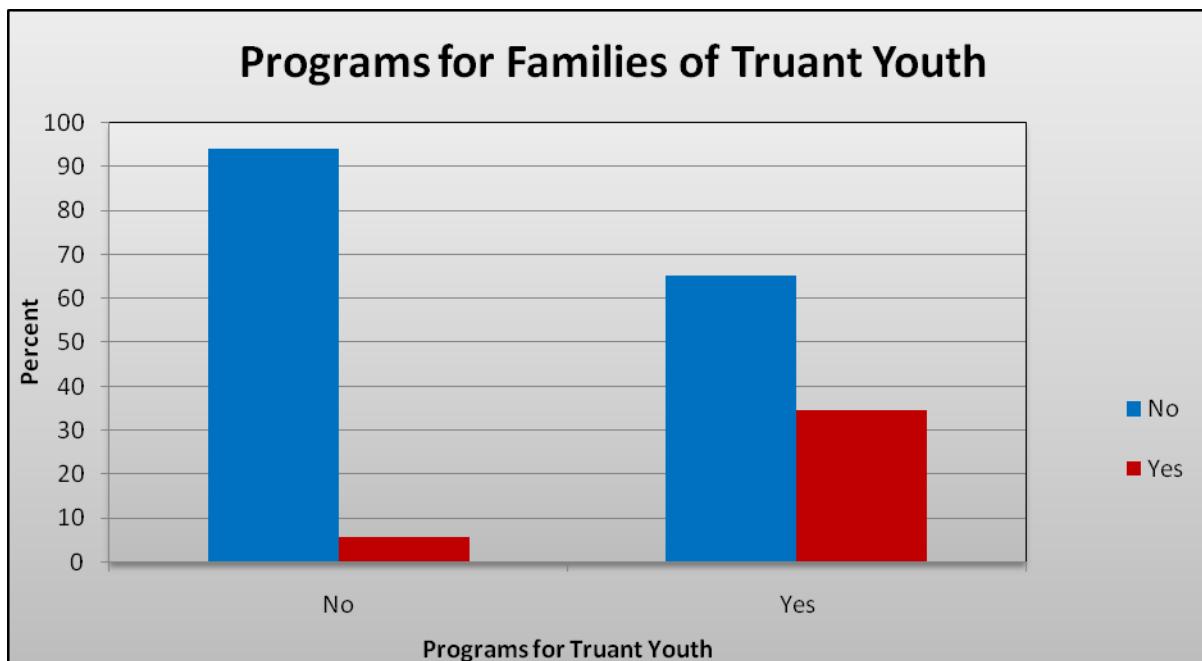
About 61% of respondents said that they have programs dedicated to identifying and addressing the needs of absent or truant students, yet only 23% said that they have programs dedicated to working to identify and address the needs of absent or truant youths' families. Whether schools had programs for families of truant youth varied by when chronic nonattendance was perceived to begin — as those who believed it began earlier were more likely to have programs.



Programs for families also varied by whether a school had sufficient resources. Schools that did not have sufficient resources were less likely to have programs for the families of truant youth.



Finally, programs for families of youth and programs for truant youth themselves were related. Of the 10 respondents who identified that they had programs for the families of truant youth, 9 of them also had programs for truant youth themselves. Stated differently, those who did not have programs for youth were also not likely to have programs for families of youth.



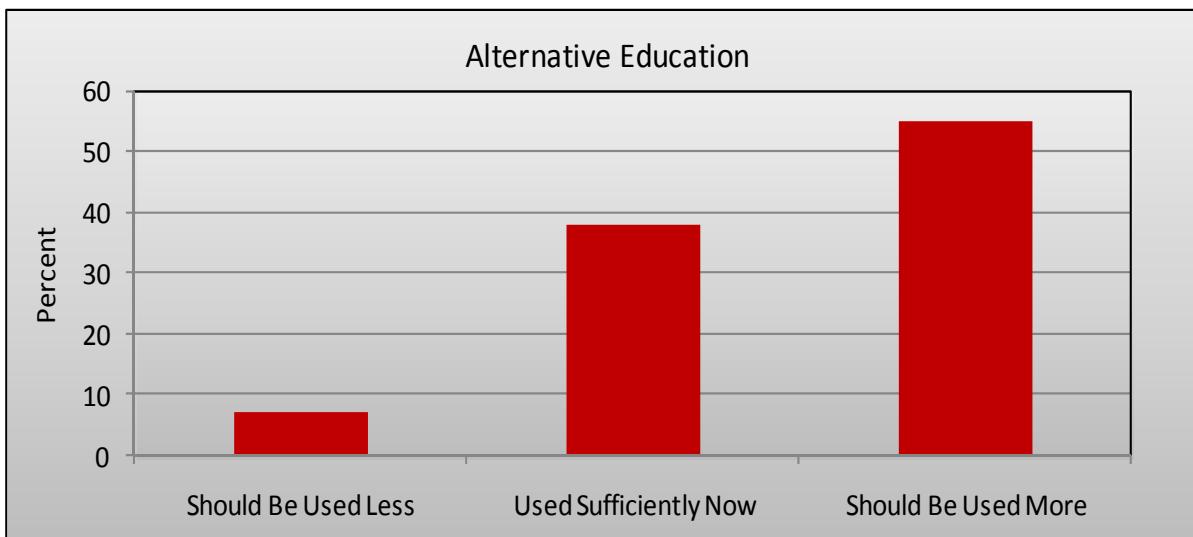
The majority of programs set up for youth and families were informal programs that incorporated communication and implementation of various interventions as appropriate. Specific programs included *Social Responsibility Training*, *Love and Logic* parenting classes, *Daybreak*, *Youth at Risk*, and *FAAST*. Respondents were also asked about programs implemented in their schools to prevent dropout. Examples of available resources/programs identified:

- 21st Century Grant
- Connections
- On-Line Achieve
- Catholic Charities
- Children's Home Society
- Credit Retrieval/School within a School
- Fresh Start and GPS
- Gear Up Grant
- Alternative Schools
- Home School Program
- Navigation 101
- AVID
- SADD Club
- Homework Club

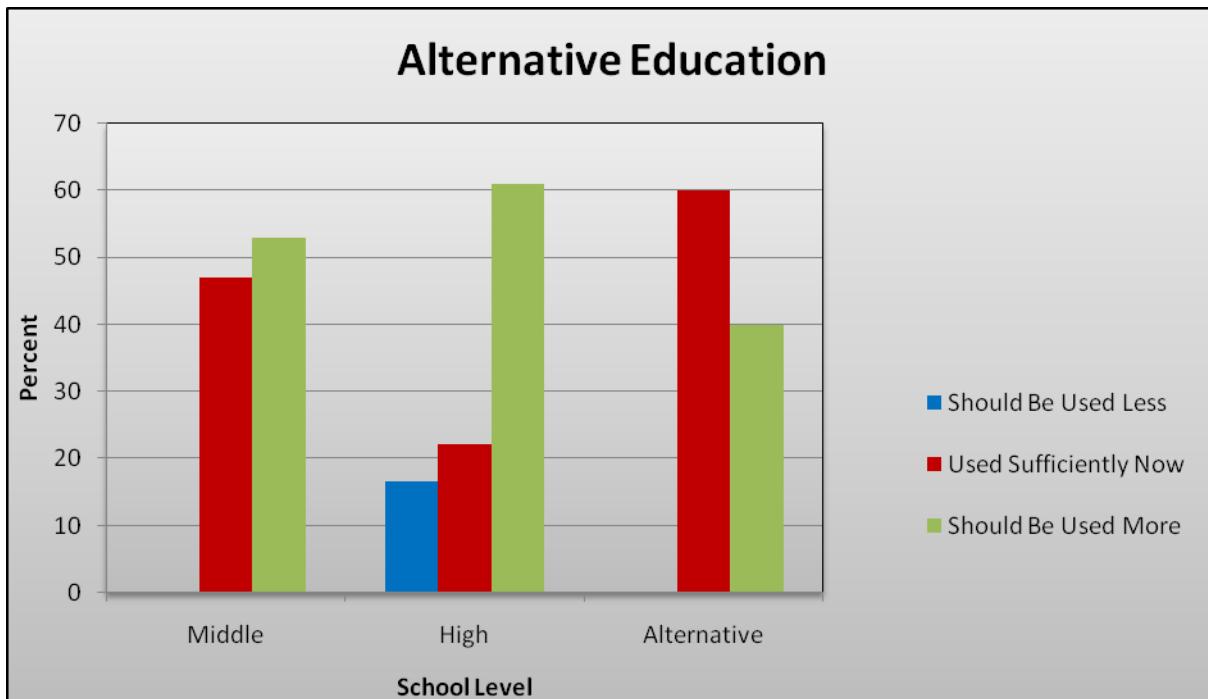
Of those identifying dropout prevention programs, 56% noted that the current capacity was sufficient with the remaining 44% saying that the need was greater than the current capacity. The capacity of these programs ranged anywhere from 10 to 1,100 — with the higher end numbers often being indicative that the programs were offered to the entire student body. Of those indicating that the need was greater than the current capacity, the range of those not served was as small as 20 and as large as 400 — with around 50 students being the most common response.

Alternative Education

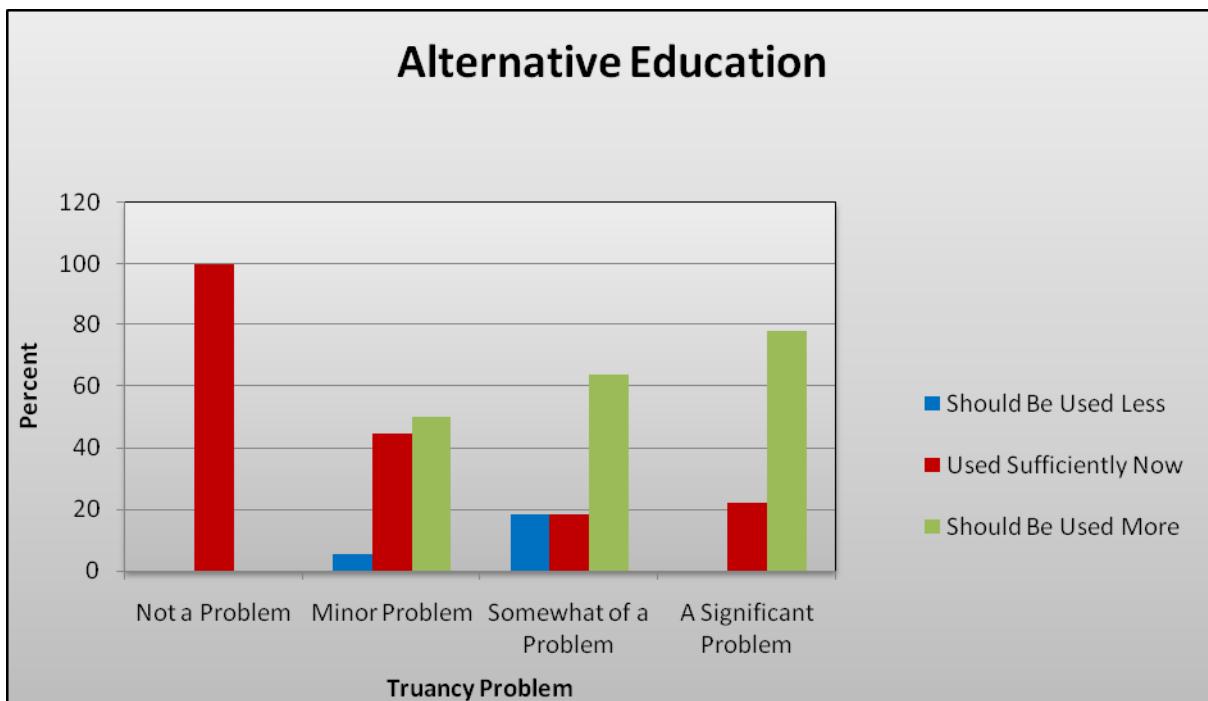
Finally, respondents were asked whether they believed alternative education should be used more as a strategy for dealing with truancy problems. Overall, respondents were mainly positive about the usefulness of alternative education — with only 7% suggesting that it should be used less and over half suggesting that it should be used more.



Some interesting results emerged when this finding was broken down by school level, as those in alternative schools were less likely to say it should be used more than it is now. This relationship between school level and use of alternative education was not, however, statistically significant.



A significant relationship did emerge between whether alternative school should be used more and how big of a problem truancy was. The bigger the problem truancy is seen to be, the more likely the respondent was to believe alternative education should be used more often.



Best Approach

Respondents were also asked what they believed to be the best approach in dealing with truancy, and whether there was a time in a child's life when this approach was likely to succeed. First, nearly all respondents (93%) believed that there was indeed a time in a child's life when intervention was likely to be successful. Most respondents believed this time to be "as early as possible," while an equal number of respondents identified middle school as a more specific time to intervene. A slightly lower number said elementary school, and a few others stated when the problem first became a significant issue. Most noted that if it is not dealt with early on when the school avoidance begins, then a pattern develops that is very difficult to break. One respondent summed up the thoughts of most: "When the problem is beginning, where a pattern is forming but the impact is not yet at such a level that they cannot pull themselves back into the educational system."

Three themes emerged in terms of what the best approach to dealing with truancy would be. The most common response (15 respondents) was that some sort of prosocial intervention and encouragement was needed. Two respondents mentioned that specific individuals dedicated to truants would be helpful. Responses in support of these ideas include:

- *"Getting to know the families and their hardships so that we can address those needs before the truancy goes on too long... Letting the student know that we want that student here...they are not just a number to us."*
- *"Helping the student to see the connection between attending school and having a successful life."*
- *"Getting the students into counseling to help discover what adjustments need to be made to the child's program."*
- *"Having a contact/go-to person in the building for the student who has attendance issues and/or petitions filed so that a positive relationship may be established between the two. Students often feel that they have no one to trust or go to when there is trouble in their lives, thus many times resulting in truancy from school."*
- *"Having at least one person in the school that has a strong personal relationship with the student and family."*
- *"interesting classroom activity; positive student/staff relationships; relevant learning; rigorous curriculum."*

A second common theme (14 respondents) was to emphasize the marked importance of consistent communication and partnering with parents. Responses in support of this include:

- *"Personal contact with the family on a regular basis."*
- *"The best approach is working with student's parents/legal guardians and having a plan of attendance completed."*
- *"Conference w/ parent and student, clear consistent communication about expectations/consequences/ immediate and powerful consequences coupled w/ support and interventions."*

A less common theme (8 respondents) was for stronger enforcement of consequences throughout the process by a variety of different means. Responses in support of this theme include:

- “*Stronger enforcement of the petition and contempts that are turned in. Spokane County's assistance has not been helpful in getting good results.*”
- “*County truancy officers with the authority to pick up students and bring them school.*”
- “*Stricter accountability standards for parents/guardians.*”
- “*Involvement of the court system and law enforcement.*”
- “*Outside agency with teeth knocking on parent's door.*”
- “*Truancy center with patrols looking for truant students.*”

Overall, respondents believe that they did not have enough resources to attend to truancy properly. This was an overall general pattern, and did not differ based on school level or whether truancy was perceived to be a significant problem. Fewer than half of respondents noted that they have specific individuals dedicated to the problems associated with truancy, and many were unable to identify a specific person, and instead identified a group of individuals who are somewhat engaged in anti-truancy efforts at their respective schools. If a school did not have an individual dedicated to truancy, they also were not likely to have programs for truant youths or their families. As such, it does not appear as though there are the human resources necessary to combat truancy effectively in Spokane County schools. Programs for both truant youth and their families were also lacking. Only 61% of schools had programs dedicated to youth, and only 23% had such programs for their families. A variety of programs were mentioned to prevent dropout in addition to those mentioned to deal with truancy. Almost half of these programs were operating beyond capacity, and because of that they were unable to meet the needs of students requiring timely assistance. Some programs had as many as 400 students that they could not serve.

The Spokane School survey respondents were fairly supportive toward the increased use of alternative education, with over half believing it should be used more fully. It is interesting to note, however, that those already involved in alternative schools were slightly less supportive of the use of alternative education than other survey respondents not associated with alternative schools.

When asked about their opinion on the best approach toward reducing truancy, respondents were much more likely to identify a social support orientation than any other type of approach. Common themes included the need to actively involve parents and the broader community, while doing so with dedicated school personnel as the core element of the effort. School attachment and involvement was strongly encouraged, while only a few respondents emphasized the need for greater discipline. The importance of consistent communication and partnering with parents was also a common response. This set of findings suggests that, given the opportunity, most Spokane County school administrators would be receptive to more resources and programs that encourage intervention through prosocial means rather than concentrating on juvenile justice system consequences and stronger disciplinary measures

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Overall Truancy Problem:** Nearly half of respondents reported that truancy was at least somewhat of a problem in their buildings. One-in-five administrators reported that truancy was indeed a significant problem. This was especially the case for those at the high school and alternative school levels. While middle schools were less likely to identify this as a problem, we hesitate to dismiss the importance of truancy at that level as a majority of respondents later indicated that this is where they believe chronic truant behavior tends to begin. A majority of school spokespersons (70%) believe that it is moderately or very important to the operation of their school to reduce truancy — especially persons from those schools wherein truancy is considered to be a significant problem. Also, a slightly higher percentage (74%) thought that reducing truancy was moderately or very important to higher level school administrators.

Recommendation: Truancy is a significant problem that extends beyond individuals to disrupt the normal functioning of the school, as well as to divert the responsibilities and resources of higher level administrators. As such, it is still an urgent issue in need of attention at *all levels* of education. More research and the implementation of effective programming would likely improve school functioning appreciably, and relieve the burden on the courts of carrying out their role under the Becca Bill. Stated differently, more than just the student would benefit from an increased attention to the problem of truancy — the beneficiaries in addition to truant youth are schools, parents/guardians, the courts, and the broader community.

2. **Causes of Truancy:** A multitude of causes of truancy were identified by respondents. The factors identified most frequently as being a major cause of truancy in Spokane County schools were lack of attachment to school, youth drug/alcohol problems, and poor parenting. These causes were followed closely by abandonment and parent drug/alcohol problems. Less than one-third of respondents identified either poverty or lack of social services as major causes of truancy.

Recommendation: A more holistic understanding of truancy is needed. The many causes of truancy identified suggest that no one case is the same, and that a concentrated effort on any one specific perceived cause of truancy will likely produce disappointing results. Lack of attachment to school was often cited as a cause, as was drug and alcohol use by youth. Parenting was also identified as a major cause—either through a general poor parenting variable or through drug/alcohol abuse. In promoting a holistic understanding of truancy, it must be remembered that parents/guardians are a large part of the equation. Additionally, administrators and educators would benefit from an understanding of the societal factors such as poverty so often implicated in causes of truancy. Leaving the student to fend for themselves through the Becca process when the problem transcends the individual is likely to exacerbate the truancy problem.

3. **The Importance of Family and Friends in Truant Behavior:** The importance of child-rearing may take precedence over education in many troubled families. The survey revealed that many students were often expected to stay at home to help with younger siblings when need be. Another common cause of truancy offered by respondents was that students were often learning these school avoidance behaviors from older siblings and other truant youth.

Recommendation: A more family-oriented approach to the causes of truancy, as well as the need for culturally competent programs and resources, should be promoted. Further, the effects of growing up in poverty and areas disadvantaged to certain resources enjoyed by others (e.g., ongoing medical care, reliable child care services) should be emphasized. Finally, the impact of siblings and peers should not be discounted when attempting to correct the problem of one individual.

4. **When Does Chronic Non-attendance Behavior Begin?** Over half (61%) believed that these behaviors began in middle school, while 30% answered primary school, and only 9% reported high school. Several significant relationships emerged in which causes of truancy were perceived differently based on when this form of problem behavior was perceived to begin. For example, respondents who believed that truant behavior began in middle school were more likely to identify parental drug/alcohol abuse as a major cause of truancy. Most did agree, in fact, that the causes of truancy were different at different ages.

Recommendation: Truancy should be attended to while students are still young and, as one respondent put it, “when the problem is beginning, where a pattern is forming but the impact is not yet at such a level that they cannot pull themselves back into the educational system.” It is important to recognize, however, that different causes of truancy are present at different ages. It would be valuable to identify the causes specific to certain ages so that the appropriate resources may be diverted to the levels at which they are needed. As but one example, lack of attachment to school was rated as a major cause more often by those respondents who believed truant behavior began later (e.g., high school).

5. **Current Responses to Truancy:** Respondents identified several ways to deal with truancy before the petition process — the most common of which was to contact parents. The frequency of parent conferences, however, seemed to be less than the pre-petition responses indicated. Only 10% of respondents said that parent conferences occurred after 2 unexcused absences “every time.” The majority reported that they did some of the time, with 7 respondents stating that they never did.

Recommendation: Encourage schools to hold parent conferences *every time* a student has two unexcused absences within a month. Given the importance placed on parenting as a cause of truancy, it would seem clear that parents should be involved before the petition process begins. Nonresponsive parents or parental indifference was often cited for why truancy petitions and contempt petitions are filed (by those not filing every time), and for why students do not comply with the requirements set forth by petitions. As such, parent conferencing before engaging in the petition process seems to be a fruitful route toward reducing truancy, this particularly the case when combined with pro-social interventions and reasonable accommodations such as schedule changes.

6. **Becca Bill Perceptions:** About 86% of respondents believed that Becca limits were appropriate, with the remaining 14% split between the limits being too high and being too low. Only 59% of respondents reported that truancy petitions were filed for every student who met the legal criteria for being truant; 66% said contempt petitions were filed for every student who met the criteria for being in contempt of their truancy petition. Two-thirds of respondents noted that no students with Becca petitions were suspended after 20 consecutive days of non-attendance, with less than 10% reporting that most or some were suspended. Over one-third of the school administrators said that

no students with Becca petitions were dropped after 20 consecutive days of nonattendance. In lieu of the current process, more than half of respondents (61%) believed it would be at least moderately valuable for schools to set their own policy in this regard. Respondents were split evenly on this issue; some believed standardization and uniformity was necessary, while others argued that discretion was needed for each individual case. Few respondents (14%) identified the current petition process as being very successful in reducing truant behavior. This sentiment was particularly prominent among those who considered truancy to be a significant problem.

Recommendation: The current process is implemented in very different ways across schools. From the view of school administrators, what may be needed is some form of bounded discretion, in which schools follow the same general processes but are allowed more leeway to handle cases on an individual basis. In keeping with the idea that there are multiple causes that are uniquely combined in each case, the ability to handle cases individually is a necessary response to the problem of truancy. Based on information provided by respondents, this is already being done since petitions are filed and dropped based on parental involvement, student improvement, and extenuating circumstances such as family problems or health issues.

7. **Perceived Effectiveness of the Petition Process:** Nearly half of respondents identified the petition purge process as not being very effective in bringing about a change truant behavior. Only two of the forty-four respondents believed this process to be “very effective” in changing truant behavior.

Recommendation: The purge process should be modified so that the conditions required are attainable and so that they give the student incentive to want to change behavior. If this process is not effective in changing behavior, then it is likely that a student will become locked into the petition process with little incentive to change.

8. **Community Truancy Boards in Spokane County:** Respondents were fairly familiar with community truancy review boards, with more than three quarters of the Spokane County school survey respondents having heard of them. Of those who had heard of them, slightly over half (52%) desired training on them.

Recommendation: Community truancy review boards deserve more attention as a potential resource to combat truancy. A sizeable portion of respondents are familiar with the concept, and a significant percentage of those respondents would like to receive training on community truancy review boards. As such, they remain a viable option for dealing with truancy — particularly for schools that identify truancy as a significant problem and have grown frustrated with their current resources, including the court process. These review boards have the potential to provide assistance with the multiple factors identified as leading to truant behavior — both internal and external to the individual student. Further research is needed on existing review boards to determine if they could be effectively implemented in other areas.

9. **Programs and Resources:** Only about one-in-three of the survey respondents believed they had sufficient resources to deal with the truancy problem before engaging the petition process. Around 60% had programs dedicated to truant youth, but only 23% had programs for the family of truant youth. Those who did not have programs for truant youth were also not likely to have programs for the families of truant youth. This general lack of resources was an overall pattern, and did not

differ based on school level or whether truancy was perceived as a significant problem. Of those schools reporting other programs designed to reduce dropout, nearly half of the programs were identified as operating beyond capacity.

Recommendation: In keeping with the emphasis on the importance of resources to alleviate truancy problems, we recommend that more programs should be made available to schools to deal with truancy specifically. Those who reported truancy to be a significant problem were particularly handicapped by resources. In order to best attend to the multiple causes of truancy, a range of programs should be developed and implemented that can handle a wide variety of cases of truant youth. In particular, an emphasis needs to be placed on programs that include the families of truant youth. Familial issues were frequently mentioned in a variety of different ways as causes of truant behavior. It is, therefore, particularly disappointing that only one quarter of schools had programs in place for the families of truant youth. It is also difficult to expect current programs to effectively attend to truancy when they are operating beyond capacity with several students missing out.

10. **The Need for Dedicated Staff:** Less than half of respondents said that they had individuals whose jobs were dedicated to working with absent or truant youth. When asked for specific individuals, respondents often identified groups of personnel partially involved in truancy — most often including principals, attendance secretaries, and counselors. If a school did not have an individual dedicated to truancy, they were also not likely to have programs for truant youths or their families.

Recommendation: Each school would benefit from having an individual who is dedicated to the problem of truancy specifically, and is somewhat knowledgeable of the causes and potential remedies of truant behavior. Expecting others to do this demanding work in addition to their normal duties will likely lead to continued disappointing results. A common theme throughout the survey was that a lack of adequate school staff led to an inability to monitor students and effectively implement current procedures, let alone add new ones. Having an individual dedicated to truancy may allow for better implementation of resources and may increase the likelihood of effective programming. An effective teaming of a school-based court truancy counselor AND a school-based educator would likely provide an effective countermeasure to truancy, particularly in schools where the problem is relatively serious.

APPENDIX 1

WEST VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT AND SPOKANE SCHOOL DISTRICT ANALYSES

The above analyses were repeated for a subset of the entire sample in order to get a more complete picture of truancy in Spokane County. The responses of West Valley (7) and Spokane School District (8) administrators were each analyzed separately to determine their respective views on the causes and rectifications of truancy.¹ West Valley was chosen because it is a smaller district and it has a history of prosocial interventions with truant youth. It is the only school district in Spokane County that currently employs a community truancy board, and has done so since the 1996-1997 school year. In contrast, the Spokane School District (hereinafter referred to as Spokane) is a very large district that does a lot of petition filing and has a smaller capacity to intervene in the life of each individual student. In short, the two districts represent different responses to truancy, and it could be expected that a comparison of each would provide useful information toward better understanding truancy in the hope that it can be addressed effectively.

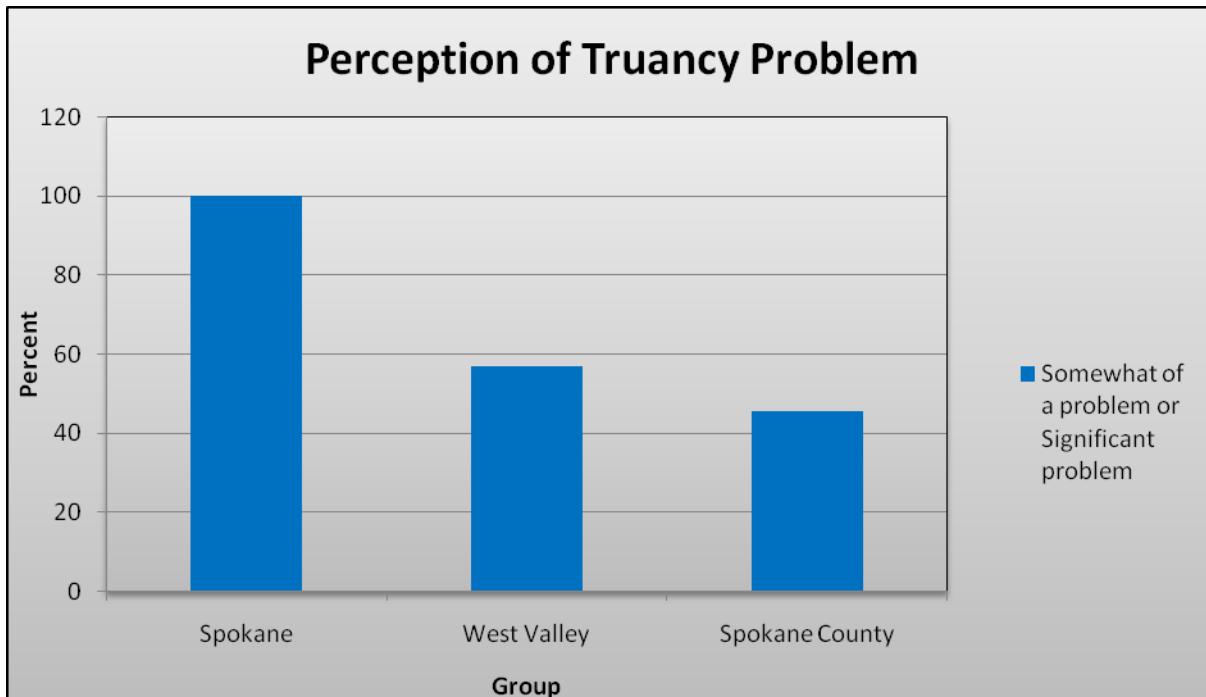
West Valley had an equal number of elementary/middle schools (2), high schools (2), and alternative schools (2) represented in responses (one respondent did not answer this question). Respondents to the Spokane County school survey were more likely to be male (57%) than female, and nearly all respondents were white (86%). On average, respondents from West Valley were 50 years old and had spent an average of 5 years at their current position.

Spokane respondents were primarily from high schools (5), with the remaining two respondents being from the elementary/middle school level. Nearly all of the Spokane respondents were male (88%), and were primarily white (75%). On average, respondents from Spokane were 46 years old and had spent an average of 5 years at their current position.

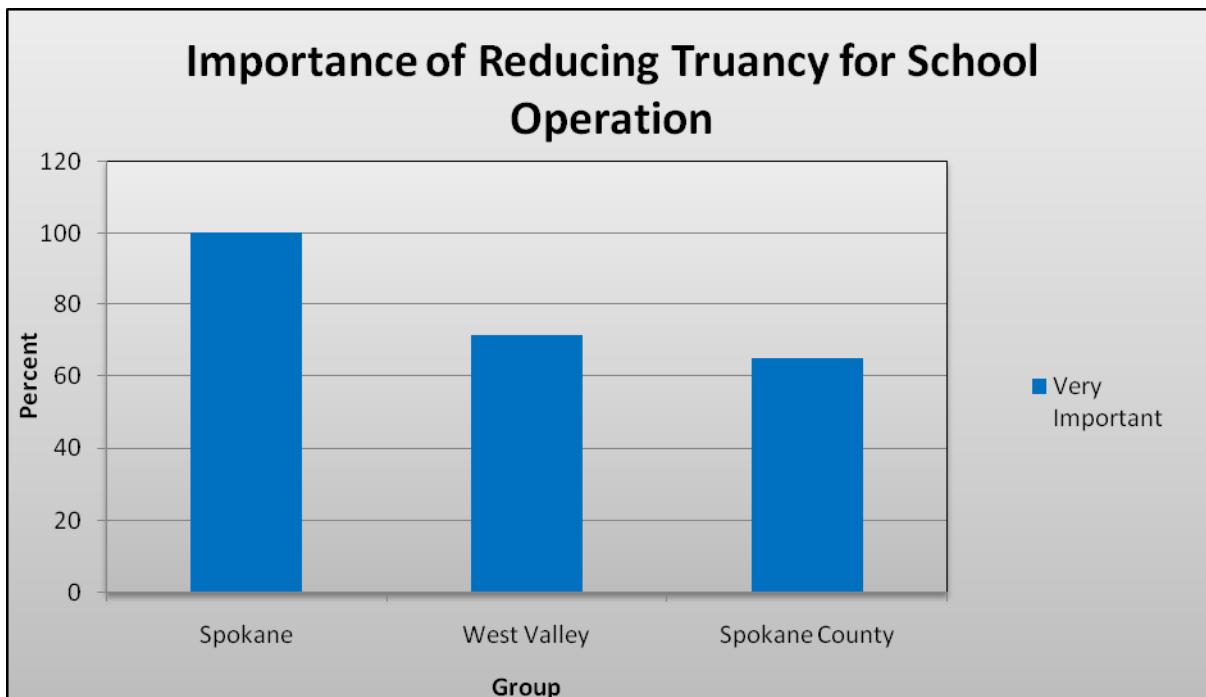
I. OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF TRUANCY

Spokane respondents identified truancy as a serious problem — with all selecting that it was either somewhat of a problem or a significant problem. West Valley reported that it was less of a problem — with 57% saying that it was either somewhat of a problem or a significant problem. The West Valley responses indicated that truancy was slightly more of a problem there as compared to Spokane County overall, while the Spokane responses indicated that truancy was a much greater problem compared to the entire dataset.

¹ Due to small sample sizes, the detailed analyses above were not repeated for the subsets of West Valley and Spokane School Districts. It would make little sense statistically, for example, to break down the 7 respondents of West Valley by school level to see if a relationship emerged between school level and perceived truancy problem. Instead, the overall frequencies for each question were examined for each district and comparisons were made between the two, as well as with the overall sample. It is important, therefore, to interpret any potential differences with due caution.

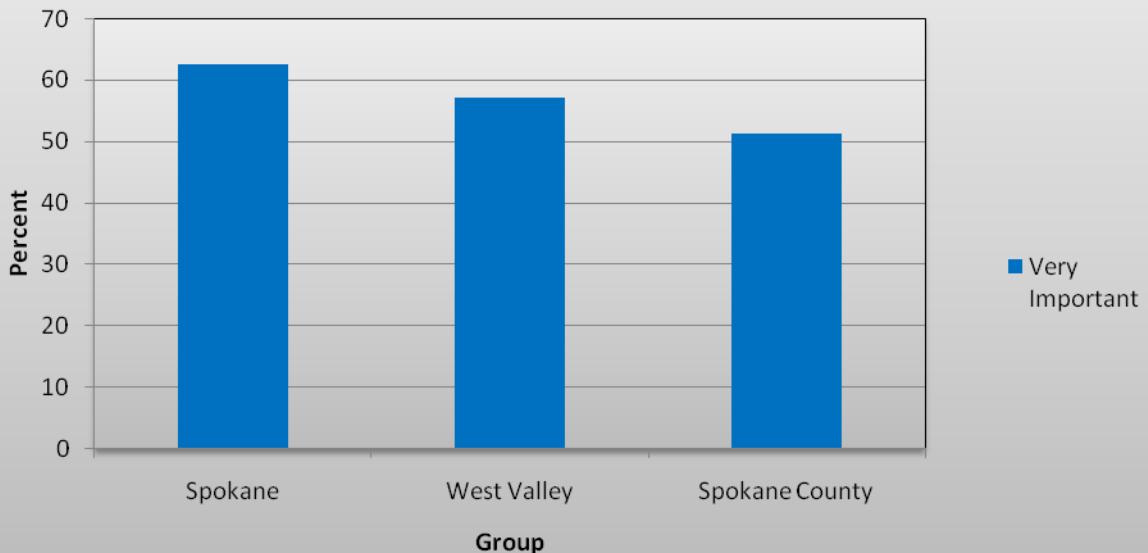


All Spokane respondents indicated that it was very important to the school to reduce truancy. West Valley respondents were less likely to identify the reduction of truancy to be very important, but were slightly more likely to choose this response as compared to Spokane County overall.



Responses for whether it was important to higher administration to reduce truancy were comparable across the 3 groups — with Spokane slightly more likely to consider this important as compared to West Valley and Spokane County overall.

Importance of Reducing Truancy to Higher Level Administrators



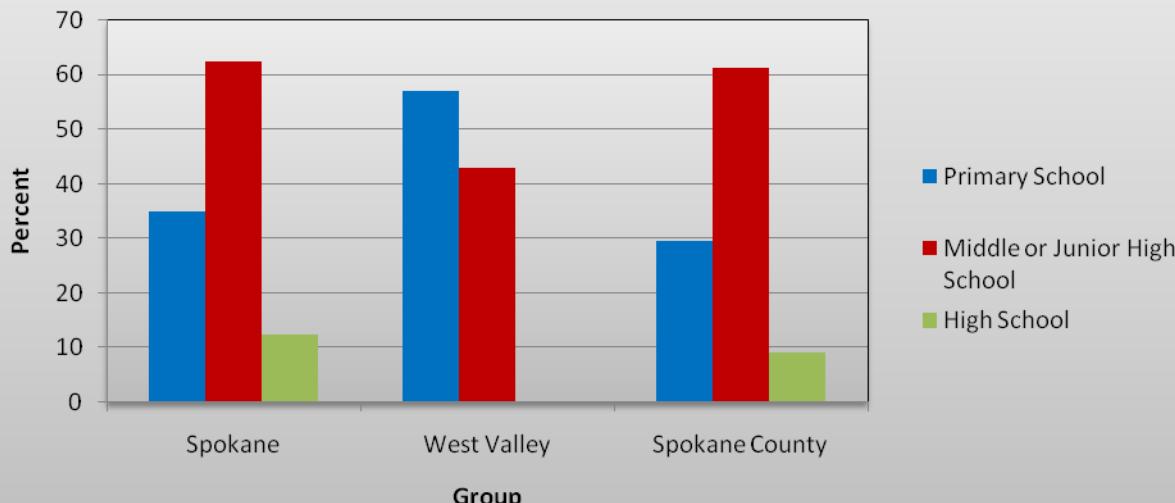
Overall, truancy as a problem seemed to be particularly pronounced in Spokane, specifically as compared to West Valley and all of Spokane County. This translated to Spokane respondents also being more likely to place greater importance on the reduction of truancy for the successful operation of the school for which they were replying to the survey. Spokane respondents were also slightly more likely to believe that it was very important to higher level administrators to reduce truancy.

II. CAUSES OF TRUANCY

The top three causes identified above as a “major cause” by all of Spokane County were youth’s lack of attachment to school (72.7%), youth drug/alcohol problems (72.7%), and parenting (61.4%). The top three causes identified by West Valley respondents specifically as a major cause were youth drug/alcohol problems (100%), low attachment youth (85.7%), abandonment (71.4%) and youth mental illness (71.4%; versus only 25% for Spokane specifically). The top three causes identified by Spokane respondents specifically were low school attachment youth (100%), youth drug/alcohol problems (75%) and parenting (75%). Overall, then, the responses of each subset were comparable to the larger dataset. **The significance placed on youth mental illness and abandonment by West Valley respondents was a notable difference in the analyses.** Also, when compared to Spokane specifically, West Valley was less likely to identify low achievement by youth as a major cause (14.3% to 62.5%; Spokane County 34.1%), and more likely to identify lack of social services as a major cause (57.1% to 12.5%; Spokane County 20.5%).

West Valley respondents (57.1%) were more likely to identify truant behaviors as beginning in primary school when compared to Spokane (25%) and Spokane County (30%). No West Valley respondents believed that truant behavior began in high school.

When Does Chronic Nonattendance Behavior Begin



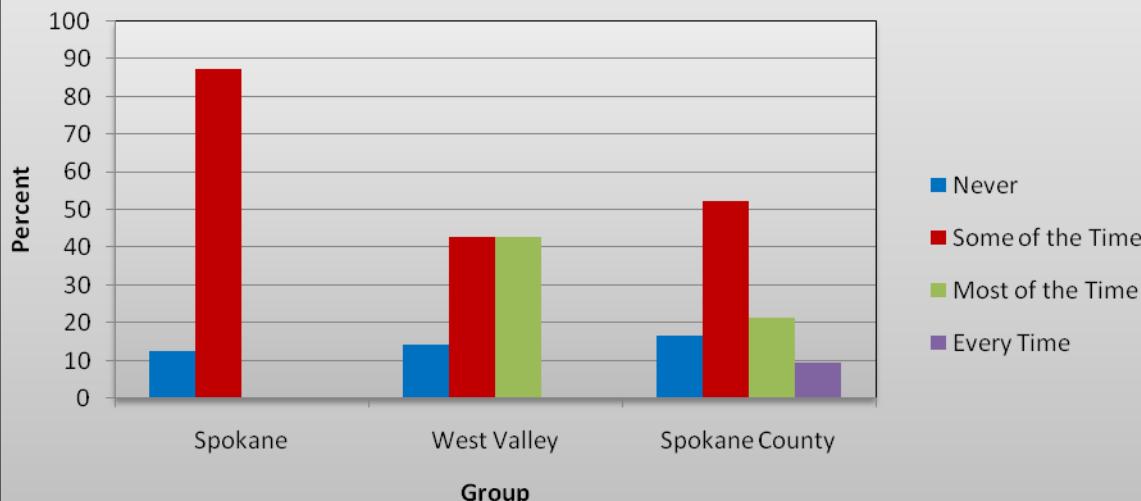
Overall, some interesting differences emerged when exploring the causes of truancy as identified by respondents from West Valley and Spokane. West Valley survey respondents believed that chronic nonattendance behavior began early in a student's life, and that lack of social services, abandonment, and youth mental illness were all likely causes of truancy. These causes were not identified as often by either Spokane or Spokane County. Despite these differences, all three groups frequently identified low attachment to school by youth and youth drug/alcohol use as major causes of truancy.

III. CURRENT RESPONSE TO TRUANCY

Pre-Petition Process

No respondents in Spokane reported that parent conferences took place “most of the time” after two unexcused absences per month. Among West Valley respondents, 42.9% reported that it took place most of the time, and 21.4% of Spokane County overall reported that it took place most of the time. No respondent in either Spokane or West Valley identified conferences as occurring “every time” — this is as compared to 9.5% of Spokane County. One respondent each in Spokane and West Valley noted that these conferences never took place.

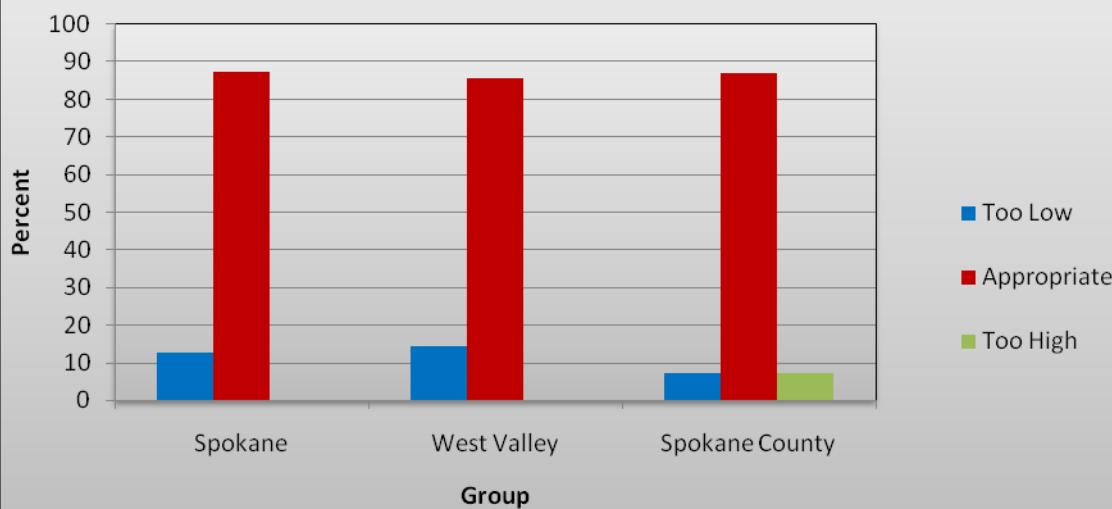
Frequency of Parent Conferences After 2 Unexcused Absences Per Month



Petition Process

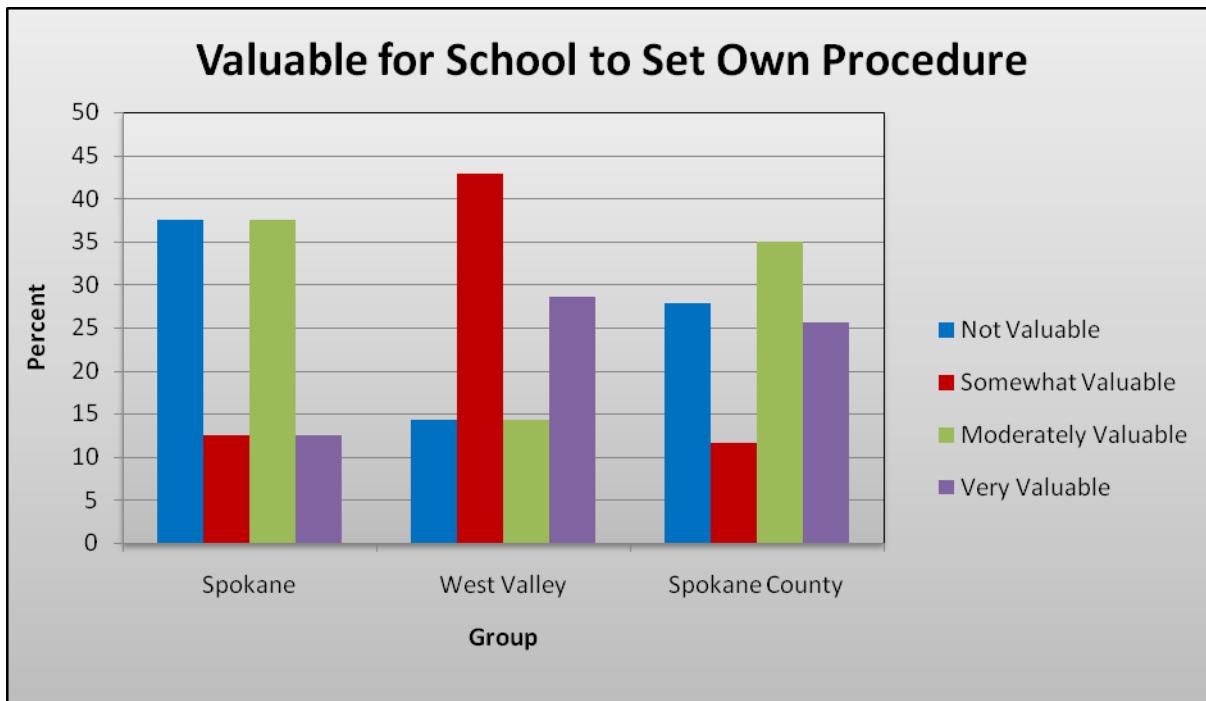
Respondents in Spokane and West Valley were generally in agreement with respondents in Spokane County that Becca limits were appropriate. Neither district believed that the limits were too high.

Appropriateness of BECCA Bill Limits



Respondents from West Valley and Spokane were also in agreement with how valuable it was for schools to set their own procedures, with 43% of West Valley respondents reporting it was moderately or very valuable as compared to 50% of Spokane respondents. Both districts were less likely than Spokane County overall to find this to be valuable, and Spokane in particular had a higher percentage

of respondents report that it was “not valuable” as compared to the other two groups. Only one West Valley respondent noted that it would not be valuable for schools to set own procedures.



As mentioned above, three themes emerged when respondents in Spokane County were asked to elaborate on their responses. First, the majority of respondents suggested that uniformity across the state would be beneficial. Second, respondents also identified the contrasting theme of the need for discretion. Finally, some respondents noted that current Becca procedures were inefficient due to either lack of punitive consequences or quickness with which the punishments were meted out, or both.

The same first two themes were seen in Spokane and West Valley specifically, but no mention was made of Becca being inefficient. For Spokane, of those who provided responses, three supported the need for uniformity and two supported the need for discretion. Spokane responses were as follows:

- *We need consistency throughout the district.*
- *If the procedures are based on State Statute, then the state should set the procedures to be followed so as to avoid potential legal ramifications for misinterpretation of the statute and its provisions, or improperly implementing the procedures.*
- *This is a state law and should be treated as such. If schools have a problem with the law and the interpretation of the law, then they would need to take it up with a board which oversees Becca, much like the Supreme Court oversees the constitution. We need to keep things consistent for everyone.*
- *Due to resources allocated at each school we need flexibility.*
- *We have a small school so we can individualize for each student's situation and family dynamic.*

Of those who provided responses from West Valley, two supported the need for uniformity while four supported the need for discretion. Important to note is that even those who were in support of uniformity were at least somewhat in favor of the use of local school discretion. West Valley responses were as follows:

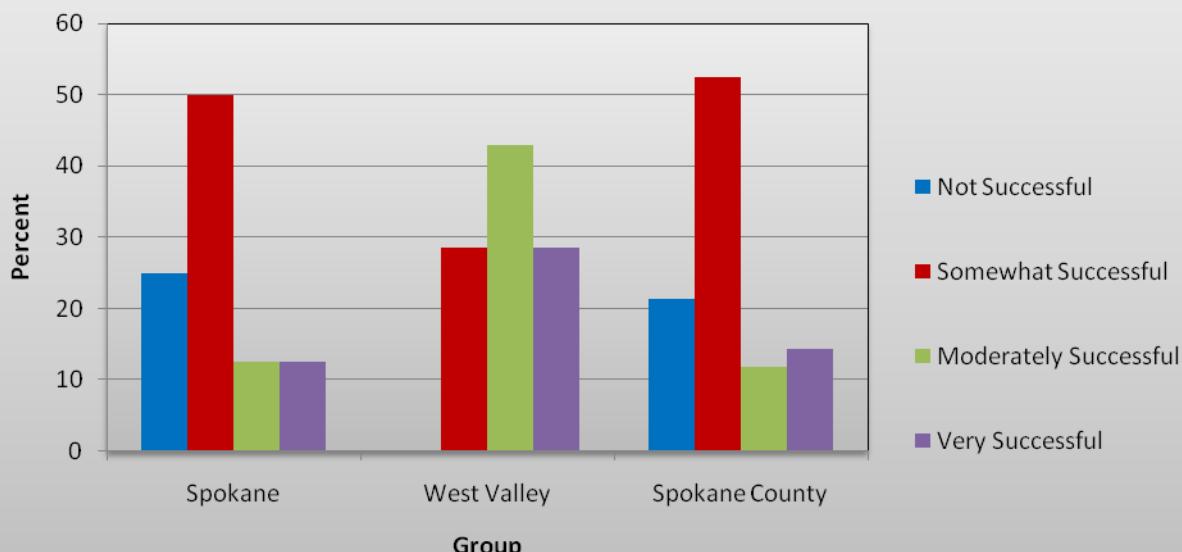
- *I believe consistency across schools would best benefit students and families; too many times I have seen firsthand the challenges with an inconsistent method of intervention. I feel that having the autonomy to intervene with students who have chronic absenteeism is important (before they hit Becca status), but once Becca status occurs, procedures across the state should be consistent.*
- *There needs to be some individual differences but if the procedures vary too much it will create the wide disparity that currently exist.*
- *Every school has a need to know its families and holding to uniform procedures is efficient but not effective for all environments.*
- *West Valley has a very effective Community Truancy Board, and we turn many kids/families around with interventions before the Court gets into the mix. If a district does not choose to intervene, it is not in the best interests of students.*
- *If someone has a better way of lowering truancy they should be allowed some flexibility.*
- *Within the context of the law, there must be local discretion. The problem is larger than our resources.*

Only 43% of respondents from West Valley indicated that they filed a petition for every student who met the legal criteria for being truant under the Becca Bill. This was slightly less than Spokane County overall (59%), and much less than Spokane specifically (75%). For all of Spokane County, three themes emerged as to why a school was more likely to file a petition: nonresponsive parents, when all other intervention attempts had failed, and perceived successfulness of filing. Themes for all of Spokane County for why a petition was NOT filed included: parental involvement and cooperation, extenuating circumstances (e.g., health issues), student showed signs of improvement, and lack of resources to file.

Few responses were given by either Spokane or West Valley respondents as to why they were either likely to file or not likely to file a petition. An important comment from a Spokane respondent was that they “do the best we can with 1,700 students.” West Valley was more likely to provide responses that were indicative of trying to intervene first, and then petition when intervention was unsuccessful. This included the use of the truancy board — as one respondent noted that they filed on 99% of students, but that the petition is filed *with a stay* if the student/parent attended the review board. The stay is lifted only if an absence occurs after the truancy board intervention.

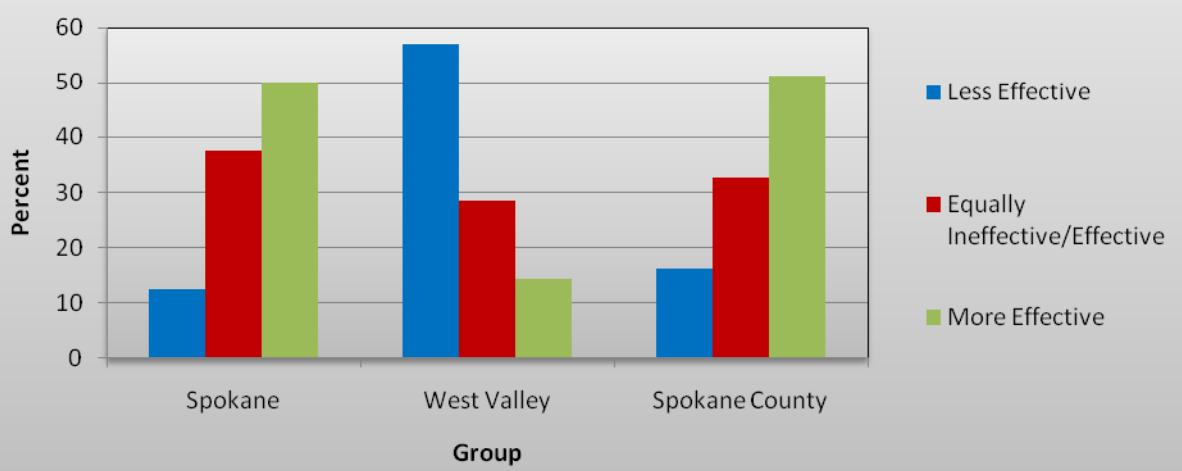
As noted above, only 14.3% of respondents in all of Spokane County believed that filing petitions was “very successful” in reducing truancy. The majority of respondents perceived them to be somewhat successful, and over one-in-five Spokane County administrators believed them to be “not successful.” Respondents were more positive about the process in West Valley, while the responses from Spokane were similar to that of Spokane County.

Successfulness of Petitions in Reducing Truancy

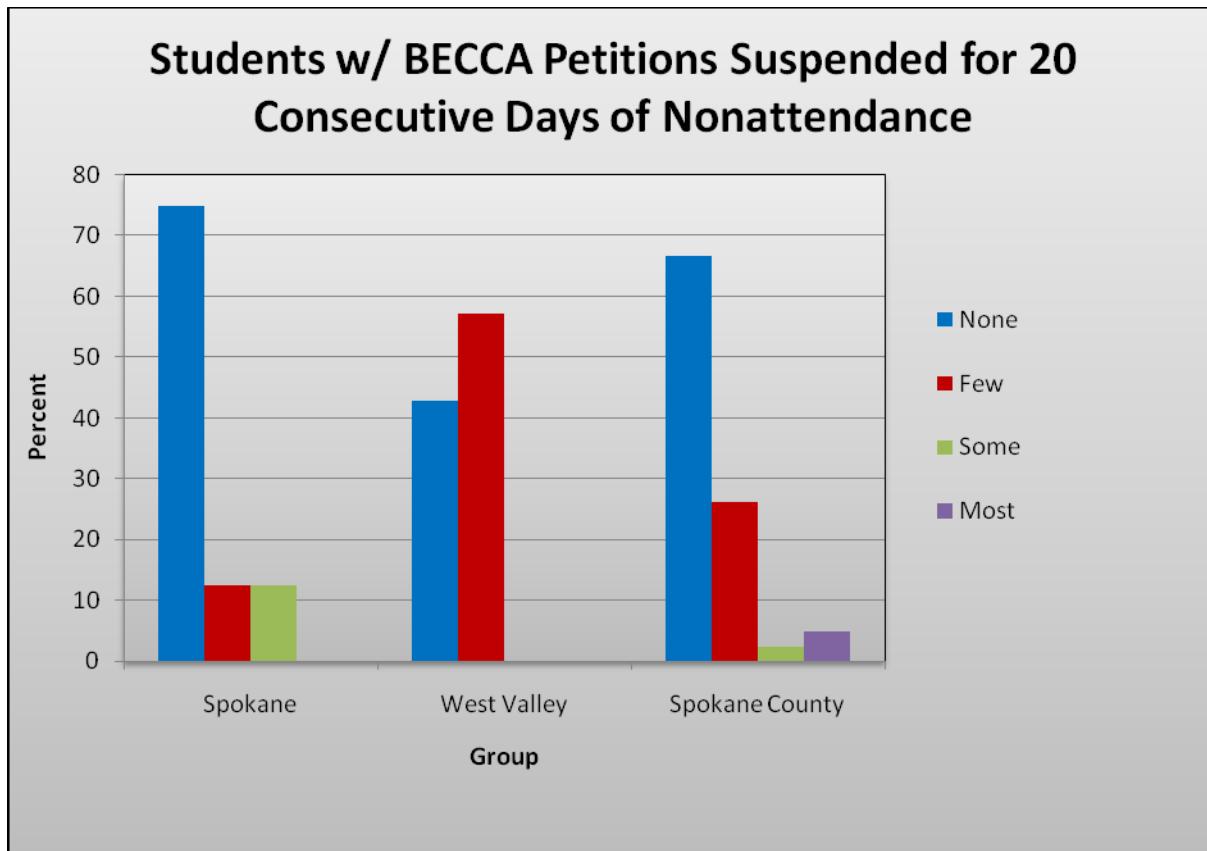


West Valley was less likely to believe that petitioning parents would be more effective than students when compared to Spokane specifically, and also to all of Spokane County. Only 1 respondent from West Valley believed that petitioning parents would be more effective, which is in contrast to the 50% who responded this way in Spokane and Spokane County.

Successfulness of Petitioning Parents Instead of Students

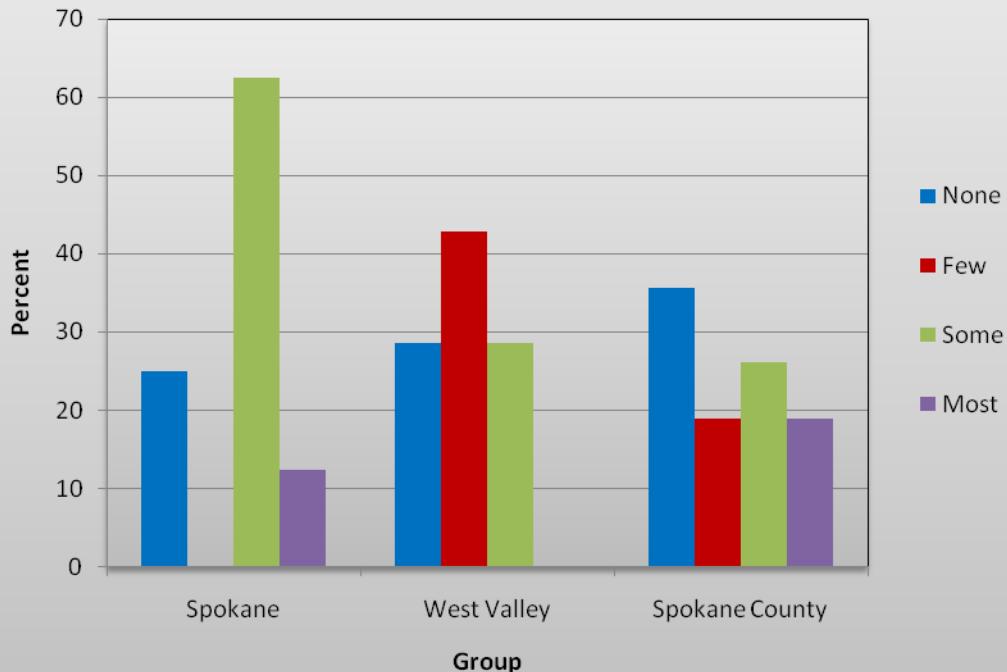


In all of Spokane County, less than 10% of the respondents to the Spokane County school survey noted that “most” or “some” students with Becca petitions were suspended after 20 consecutive days of non-attendance. Two-thirds of respondents said that no students were suspended. In West Valley, all respondents noted that either few or no students were suspended. Nearly all respondents in Spokane (75%) noted that no students were suspended, with one respondent indicating few and another indicating some.



Respondents in all of Spokane County were more likely to indicate that students with Becca petitions were dropped after 20 consecutive days of nonattendance — although the most common response was that no students were dropped. West Valley was less likely to drop students, and Spokane was more likely to drop some or most students.

Students w/ BECCA Petitions Dropped for 20 Consecutive Days of Nonattendance



Noncompliance

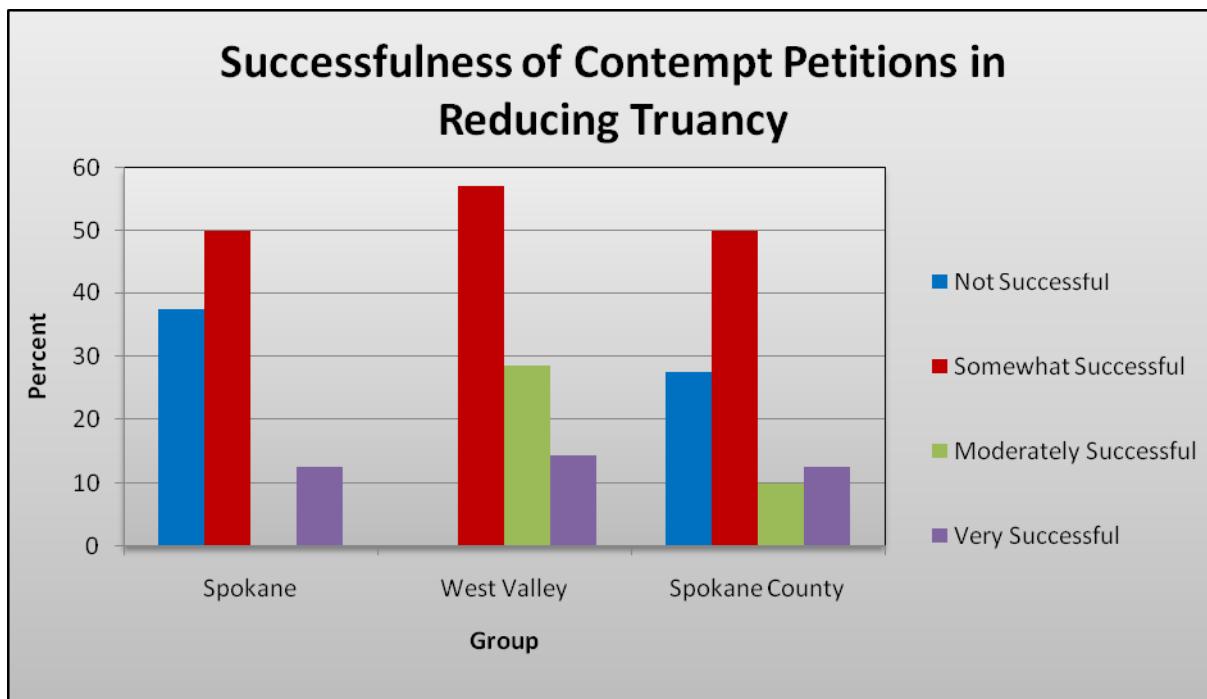
Respondents for all of Spokane County identified six major themes as to why students were not likely to comply with truancy petitions. First, the most common response was inadequate parenting — overall parenting, parents who enable students by making excuses for them, and the inability to control children. Second, drug and alcohol use by youth as well as parent was listed. Third, lack of attachment to school was a frequent response. Fourth, student and parent indifference to the process was identified as a source. Fifth, the lack of consequences was identified as source of noncompliance. Finally, situational factors such as dysfunction at home, lack of social services, and poverty were identified.

For Spokane specifically, the most common reason cited for noncompliance related to consequences in some manner — e.g., the process was too slow, the consequences were too lenient, or students/parents were indifferent to the court process and penalties. In contrast, no respondent in West Valley mentioned anything indicative of this theme. The most common reason cited in West Valley related to drug use by students or parents. The second most prevalent response in each district was related to situational factors such as lack of early intervention or support in the community. West Valley respondents in particular were likely to mention concerns related to mental health and abandonment. Finally, an equal number of respondents in each district were likely to mention lack of attachment to school as a third theme.

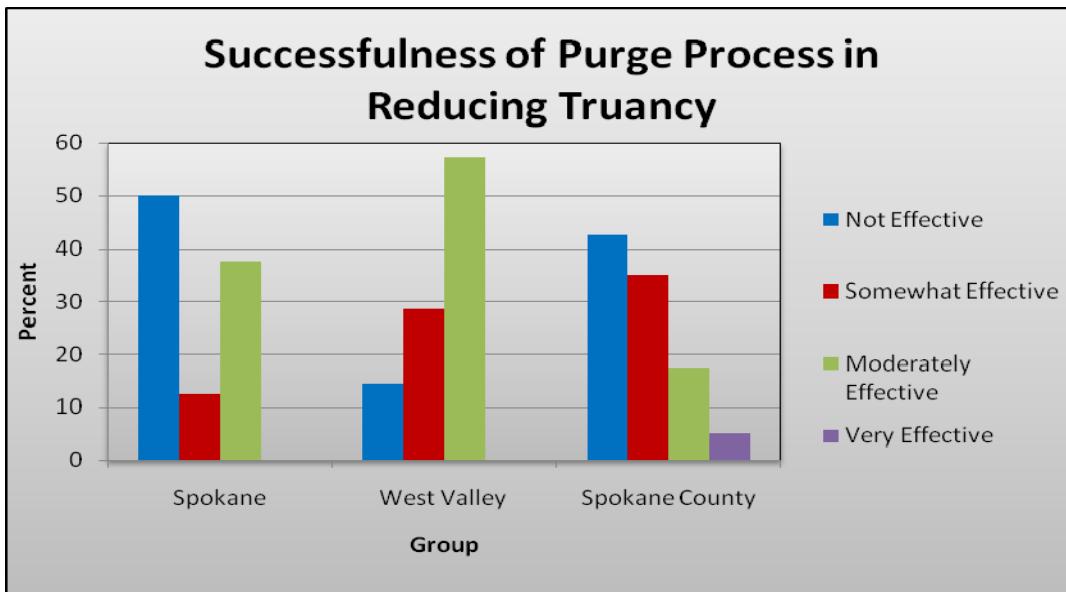
Contempt

For all of Spokane County, about two-in-three administrators stated that contempt was filed for all eligible students. West Valley was slightly less likely to file contempt for all eligible students (57%), and Spokane was slightly more likely to file contempt for all eligible students (75%). For Spokane County, a lack of parent contact and involvement was the reason most often cited for why a contempt motion was filed. Contempt was not filed when student and family involvement was evident towards improving the situation, but also when there was a perception that filing would not make a difference. Few specific responses were given for either Spokane or West Valley, but it is instructive to note that a Spokane respondent reported that they had so many kids eligible that sometimes they missed filing contempt when they should have. Two West Valley respondents noted that they would not file if intervention seemed promising.

Respondents in Spokane County were fairly pessimistic about the likelihood of success of contempt petitions in reducing truancy, with only 23% believing that filing contempt was either moderately successful or very successful. West Valley was more positive about the effectiveness of contempt petitions, while Spokane was decidedly more negative.



Spokane County respondents were inclined to be negative about the effectiveness of the current purge process in reducing truancy. Nearly half of respondents found the process to be ineffective in reducing truancy. This response was also communicated by Spokane respondents, while West Valley respondents were more likely to see the process as effective.



Community Truancy Boards

Over three quarters of the survey respondents (77%) in Spokane County were familiar with truancy boards, and about half (52%) desired training on community truancy boards. All respondents in West Valley were familiar with review boards, and only one Spokane respondent was unfamiliar with them. More than half of West Valley respondents desired training on community boards (57%), while less than half of Spokane respondents wanted training (38%). It must be remembered that West Valley is currently the only district that employs a community truancy review board, and that this likely influenced the responses to each question.

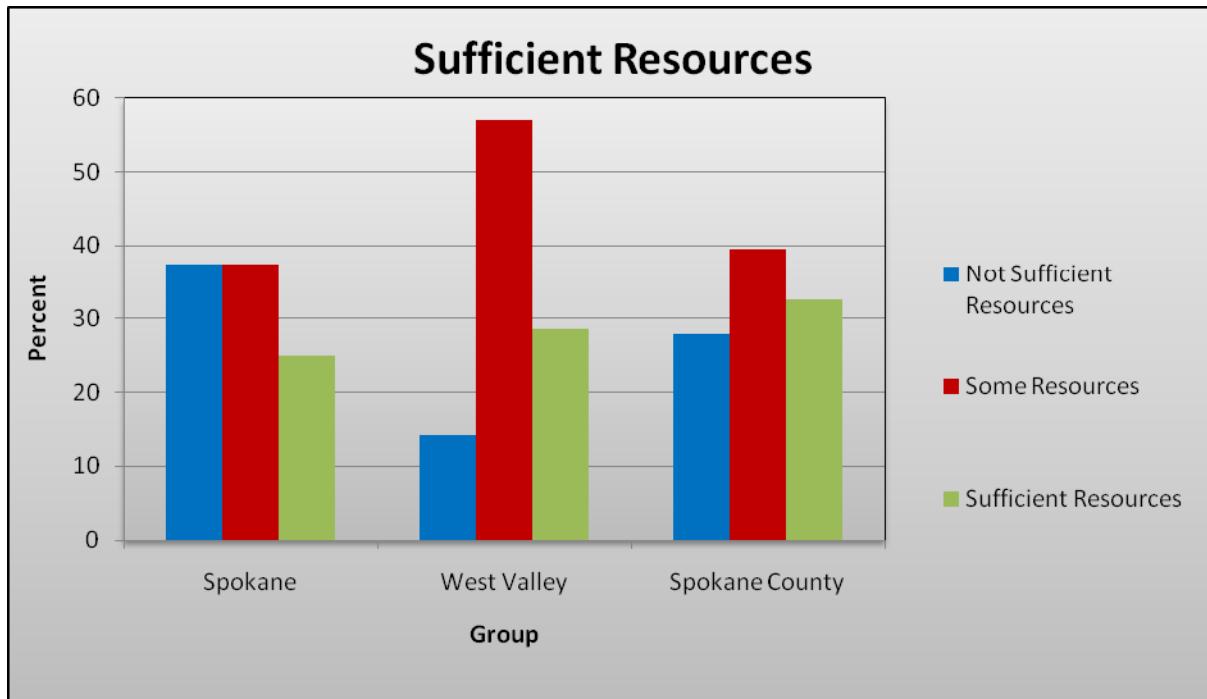
Overall, there was some consistency in responses by Spokane and West Valley when it came to current responses to truancy. As noted above, Spokane is a larger district that relies heavily on the petition process and the court in order to combat truancy. This reality is reflected in the fact that Spokane is less likely to hold parent conferences after two unexcused absences per month, less likely to consider as valuable being able to set their own policies (and more likely to emphasize consistency in procedures), and more likely to file a petition for every student eligible. Students in Spokane with Becca petitions were more likely to be dropped than suspended after 20 days of consecutive nonattendance. Reasons for noncompliance given by Spokane respondents were largely related to the court process and consequences. Finally, narrative volunteered responses received from Spokane respondents also emphasized the difficulty in dealing with such a large population.

In contrast, the responses from West Valley were indicative of a more individualized approach to truancy that stressed the importance of prosocial interventions rather than court involvement. Almost half of respondents noted that parent conferences took place most of the time after two unexcused absences (as compared to 21% of Spokane County and 0% of Spokane). West Valley respondents were more likely to identify discretion as important in following procedures and policies. Less than half of West Valley respondents said that petitions were filed for every student, and West Valley schools were less likely to suspend or drop students with Becca petitions after 20 days of consecutive nonattendance. The most common reason cited for noncompliance was drug and alcohol use by either or both youth and parent.

IV. PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Current Resources

Slightly less than one-third of all Spokane County respondents believed that they had sufficient resources dedicated to identifying and managing student absences before truancy petitions were filed. This percentage of overall respondents indicating sufficient resources was comparable with West Valley and Spokane, but Spokane respondents were more likely to indicate that they did not have sufficient resources while West Valley was less likely to indicate lack of sufficient resources.



Current Programs

Less than half of Spokane County residents indicated that they had an individual with a job dedicated toward working with absent or truant students. West Valley reported a similar percentage, while Spokane identified a higher percentage of individuals dedicated to truant youth (63%). This individual was most likely to be an attendance secretary for Spokane, but West Valley respondents also noted use of a truancy specialist. Overall, 61% of Spokane County respondents said that they had programs dedicated to working to identify and address the needs of absent students. Both West Valley and Spokane noted that they had a slightly lower percentage of programs (43% and 50%, respectively). The programs in West Valley included counseling teams, intervention plans and use of the community truancy board while Spokane respondents were more likely to identify administrative contact with students. Only 23% of Spokane County respondents reported that they had programs for the families of truant youths. This percentage was greater in West Valley (43%), while only one respondent in Spokane reported that their school had such family programs.

In terms of other programs and issues related to dropout prevention, Spoken respondents provided the following responses:

- *We have a Core program with teachers sharing identified high-need/risk students*
- *We had an Intervention Transition Specialist Teacher position that helped, but we no longer have funding for.*
- *Fresh Start and GPS - alternative programs used to re-engage youth*
- *Our total school program is designed to re-engage the disengaged learner. All best practices for quality instruction and student support.*
- *Lunch time academic support and after school homework program, teacher directed study table tim.*

West Valley respondents provided the following other programs and issues associated with dropout prevention:

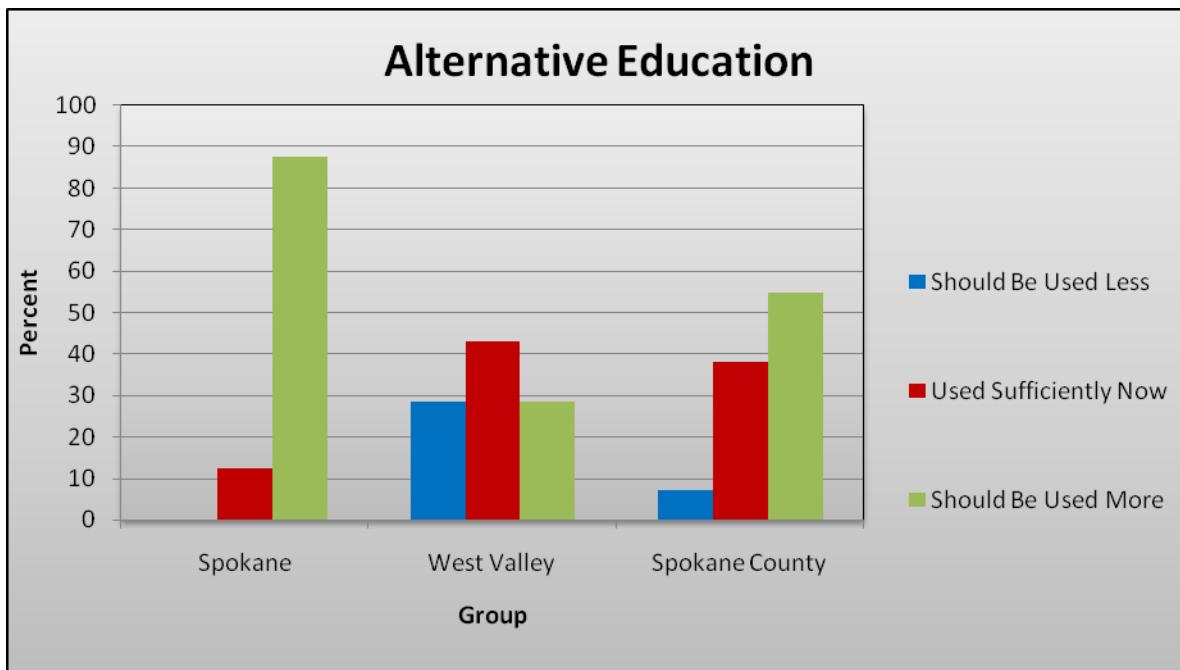
- *Children's Home Society provides in-school one-on-one counseling, multitude of parent/family engagement activities*
- *Developing a building philosophy of relationships (internal and external) as our core goal. We are lacking the social service component for children and families in need of mental health services.*
- *Counselors and counseling assistants; social service workers from agencies that partner with the school district (for example, Children's Home Society)*
- *Gear up Grant; high school counselor 1 day per week; small number of students, so the relationships with teaching staff are stronger*
- *Our entire school is THE INTERVENTION program for Spokane County*

Of all Spokane County respondents who identified dropout prevention programs, 44% said that the need was greater than the current capacity. The capacity of programs ranged from 10 to 1,100, and the number of students NOT served when the program was above capacity ranged from 20 to 400, with an average of 50 students not being served.

In Spokane specifically, 5 of the 6 respondents who identified dropout prevention programs reported that these programs had a greater need than capacity. Multiple respondents noted that several hundred students were not served, and the most common reason for this was that a “one-size-fits-all” program is unlikely to be effective for all students (i.e., they did not have the resources to attend to the specific problems of many students whose truancy stems from different sources).

In West Valley, 3 of the 7 respondents who identified dropout prevention programs reported that these programs had a greater need than capacity. The number not served was usually around 20 – 50 students.

Respondents were also asked whether they believed alternative education should be used more for dealing with truancy problems. Overall, Spokane County respondents were mainly positive — with only 7% suggesting that it should be used less and over half suggesting that it should be used more. Spokane respondents were much more likely to be supportive of the use of alternative education — with 88% indicating that it should be used more. Only one respondent said that it is being used sufficiently now and no respondents said it should be used less. West Valley responses were mixed, with all categories nearly represented equally (2 of the 3 total respondents in Spokane County that said it should be used less were from West Valley).



Best Approach

Similar to Spokane County overall, nearly all respondents from Spokane and West Valley agreed that there was a best time to intervene. Most respondents from Spokane County noted that this was “as early as possible” or in middle school. Both West Valley and Spokane respondents identified “as early as possible” most frequently, and both schools believed elementary school was a better time to intervene than middle school (albeit by a very small margin).

Overall, three themes emerged in terms of the best approach to reducing truancy in Spokane County. First, the most common response was that some sort of prosocial intervention and encouragement was needed. Second, the importance of consistent communication and partnering with parents was emphasized. Finally, some respondents identified stronger enforcement of consequences throughout the process as important.

Virtually ALL of the West Valley respondents identified prosocial intervention as the way to handle truancy. Their responses are as follows:

- *Getting to know the students and their families and providing a program that engages students.*
- *Early intervention by school-- parent contact via phone, conference, home visit.*
- *Having at least one person in the school that has a strong personal relationship with the student and family.*
- *School personnel meet with the student/parent. If this does not correct the problem, refer student/parent to Community Truancy Board.*
- *Our truancy board has been helpful, in addition to the follow up by staff after the truancy meeting.*
- *Interesting classroom activity; Positive student/staff relationships; Relevant learning; Rigorous curriculum.*
- *Strong relationships--a belief that the people here are on the side of the kid's success.*

Spokane respondents were also most likely to identify prosocial interventions, but they also emphasized parent contact, and, to a lesser extent, enforcement and consequences. Their responses are as follows:

- *Communication with parents.*
- *Try to make sure the student attaches to school and that there is an adult mentor.*
- *Truancy center with patrols looking for truant students.*
- *The first step would be a consistent schedule so teachers could clearly monitor attendance.*
- *Quality teachers that build relationships with kids.*
- *Conference w/ parent and student, clear consistent communication about expectations/consequences/ immediate and powerful consequences coupled w/ support and interventions.*
- *Forming strong relationships with the students.*
- *Having a contact/go-to person in the building for the student who has attendance issues and/or petitions filed so that a positive relationship may be established between the two.*
- *Students often feel that they have no one to trust or go to when there is trouble in their lives, thus many times resulting in truancy from school.*

Overall, respondents from Spokane appeared to be fairly frustrated with the amount of current resources they had to deal with truancy. They were less likely overall to have sufficient resources as compared to Spokane County and West Valley. In particular, Spokane had few programs for the families of truant youth, and they were more likely to have dropout programs that were operating above capacity. Two respondents noted that the programs operated in a one-size-fits-all fashion, and that because of this, many students needing help were not attended to in a timely way. **The frustration of Spokane respondents was evident in that 88% of them thought that alternative education should be used more than it is now—perhaps indicating that the problem of truancy cannot be adequately attended to within their current conventional school setting.** Spokane respondents were likely to identify prosocial interventions as the best response to truancy, but also emphasized parental contact and enforcement/consequences.

West Valley respondents were less likely to report that they did not have sufficient resources. Around 43% of respondents indicated that there were programs in place for both truant youth as well as for their families. Additional dropout prevention programs included counseling and the use of the community truancy review board in order to avoid court processing of truancy. Less than half of West Valley respondents reported that these programs were operating above capacity. They were less likely to support the use of alternative education as a way to deal with truancy. In terms of best approach, all of the respondents from West Valley were in support of prosocial interventions — no respondent made mention of punitive consequences and the responses were based on building strong relationships and encouraging student engagement in school.

It must be remembered that West Valley is a small district and that the current respondents from there represented middle schools, high schools, and alternative schools (while Spokane respondents were mainly from high schools). Keeping these differences in mind, it would be valuable to explore further how the West Valley School District attends to truancy. The approach to the causes and remedies of truancy by West Valley appears to be one that emphasizes prosocial interventions to reengage the student without heavily favoring the petition process. In particular, it would be useful to examine the components of the community truancy review board in order to determine the feasibility of implementing this program in other areas such as that of Spokane Public Schools.