

TIPS/TOOLS FOR FAMILIES -- School Attendance, Absences and Truancy

A state law in Washington, called the “Becca Bill,” requires all children, from **age 8 to 17** to attend school regularly, and it requires their parents or legal guardians to make sure they are in school regularly.

Students can be in public school, private school or homeschool.

The law requires that students are **in school, full-time, every day**, unless there is a **valid excuse**.

If a student **misses school without a valid excuse**, the student might be considered “**truant**.” When a student is truant, schools are required to:

- ✓ Notify the family;
- ✓ Meet and work with the family and student to figure out why, and
- ✓ Try different strategies to help improve the student’s attendance.

If that doesn’t work, a student and family can be referred to a Community Truancy Board or to court.

What does the law require of Schools?

- ✓ notify parents of the attendance rules and get a signature to show they received the notice
- ✓ notify parents every time a student is absent,
- ✓ meet with parents and students to find out why,
- ✓ try different strategies to improve attendance, and in some cases,
- ✓ refer a student and parent to a Community Truancy Board or to court.

What does the law require of Students?

- ✓ in school,
 - ✓ on time,
 - ✓ every day,
- unless there is a valid excuse.

If a student **misses school a lot**, even with a valid excuse, the law now requires schools to meet and work with the family to figure out why, and make a plan to help the student get to school regularly. That is because missing school a lot, or “**chronic absenteeism**” can make it really hard for a student to keep up. It can also be a sign that a student might not be getting the supports he/she needs. When we are talking about missing school, “a lot” can seem like “a little” – missing **even just 2 days a month** can add up to a big impact!

If getting your child to school every day has been a challenge, your school can help break down barriers and help your child **build a new habit of every day, all day, on time**. Check out OEO’s FAQs to find out what may happen if a student continues to be truant, and ideas for getting back on track with regular attendance. If you need more help solving problems with attendance, please call!

Visit our [website](http://www.oeo.wa.gov) at www.oeo.wa.gov, or call 1-866-297-2597 for a copy of the **School Attendance and Truancy FAQs** listed on the back of this sheet

FAQs on School Attendance and Truancy

What about children younger than 8? Do they have to be in school?

What about teenagers? Can they leave school before they turn 18?

What is an excused absence?

Who decides whether a child's absence is excused?

What if my child is late to school? Or skips a class?

What if my child is sick a lot, and can't make it to school?

What does missing "a lot" of school mean?

What will happen if my child does miss a lot of school?

Can I get in trouble if my child misses a lot of school?

Can my child be disciplined for missing school?

The school asked me to meet to talk about my child's absences – how can I prepare for the meeting?

Should my child attend too?

What kind of things could the school do to help?

What if my child keeps missing school?

What is a Community Truancy Board?

What if my child keeps missing school after going to the Community Truancy Board?

What can happen if my child and I have to go to court for truancy?

Can a child with an IEP be sent to court for truancy? What if I think the absences are related to my child's disabilities?

What if I have a disability and it makes it difficult for me to get to all the meetings with the school?

What if I don't speak English well, and I haven't been able to explain to the school what is going on with my child?

What if my child just doesn't want to go to school, but is keeping up with work at home?

What if my child is anxious about school and gets angry, breaks down, or just won't get out of bed?

What if my foster child has already missed school from moving around a lot, and will have to miss more for court and other appointments?

What if we are homeless and my child misses school while we are trying to find housing? Can I get help from the school?

What if I feel school has not been a positive place for my child? Do I have to keep sending my child even if s/he is being bullied, facing discrimination, or constantly being disciplined?

How can OEO help?

Where else can I find help or more information?

Available at www.oeo.wa.gov

FAQs on Attendance, Truancy and Getting to the Root of the Problem

Available at www.oeo.wa.gov

What about children younger than 8? Do they have to be in school?

Washington's "compulsory attendance law" starts at age 8. Parents can choose whether or not to send their younger children to school.

If a parent decides to enroll a child who is 6 or 7, then the student must attend school regularly, on time, unless there is a valid excuse (or the parent decides to remove them from school).

*And remember, children have a **right to access free public school starting at age 5!***

What about teenagers? Can they leave school before they turn 18?

If a child is 16 or older AND is regularly employed, or the parent agrees the child should not be required to attend school, or the child is emancipated, has already met graduation requirements or has received a GED, then the child is not required to continue to attend school.

*Remember, youth have a **right to access free public school until they are 21 years old, or until they graduate.** There are an increasing number of options for youth who are looking for alternatives to a traditional high school but still want a high school diploma. You can find information about options for older youth at [OSPI's Graduation a Team Effort](http://www.k12.wa.us/GATE/Re-engagement/default.aspx) page: <http://www.k12.wa.us/GATE/Re-engagement/default.aspx>.*

What is an excused absence?

Excused absences include:

- Participation in a school approved activity (e.g. sports, drama, community service)
- Illness, health condition, medical appointment
- Family emergency (including death or illness)
- Religious or cultural observance, including a holiday or instruction
- Court proceeding, or serving on a jury
- Post-high school apprenticeship program visit or scholarship interview
- Search and rescue activities
- Absences related to a student's homelessness;
- Absences related to a deployment of an active duty parent or guardian
- Suspension or expulsion
- Activity agreed and approved by principal and parent

Who decides whether a child's absence is excused?

Generally, the **school principal** will decide if an absence meets the criteria for being excused or not. For example, sometimes a parent may call to say a child is sick and should be excused. A principal might ask the parent to provide a doctor's note or ask for more detail before agreeing that the absence is excused.

If you disagree with the Principal's decision you can ask to meet to discuss the issue, or ask to speak to someone at the District-level about your concerns.

What if my child is late to school? Or skips a class?

Check your district's policy! An unexcused absence can mean that a student has missed more than half a day OR has violated a stricter district policy for unexcused absences. Some districts may count being late to class a certain number of times, or missing one or more full classes during the day as an unexcused absence. **A student might also be disciplined for being tardy or skipping class.**

What if my child is sick a lot, and can't make it to school?

Being sick is a valid excuse for being absent. A child should have the chance to make up what was missed, and not get in any trouble for being absent.

At the same time, if a child misses a lot of school for any reason, it makes it really hard to keep up with school work and take advantage of opportunities available at school. If your child is sick a lot, you can ask the school to work with you to find ways that your child can keep learning, and making progress with school work, even if it has to happen somewhere other than the classroom.

If a student is temporarily unable to attend school for four weeks or more because of a physical and/or mental disability or illness s/he may qualify for [Home/Hospital Instruction](#). More information is available here: <http://www.k12.wa.us/HealthServices/HomeHospital.aspx>. If a student is likely to be out for an extended period of time, or their absences may be intermittent, the student may need an evaluation and specialized supports through an Individualized Education Program ([IEP](#)) or Section 504 Plan. Find more information on Evaluations, IEPs and 504s in [OEO's Parent Guides](#): Protecting the Educational Rights of Students with Disabilities in Public Schools.

What does missing “a lot” of school mean?

“Chronic absenteeism” is when a student misses **18 or more full days** (excused or unexcused). That could be as few as **2 days a month**. But it adds up. Educators and parents have looked at data and see that missing more than 9 days of school each year can make it hard to catch up and keep up. Missing 18 days a year can make it even harder, and students risk falling behind in reading and math, and face a hard climb to graduation.

What will happen if my child misses a lot of school?

A child who misses a lot of school misses out on a lot of opportunities.

Sometimes there are completely valid reasons why a child can't get to school (for example, if they are sick, or dealing with a health condition, or trying to sort things out if their family loses their housing). If a child has to miss school a lot, you can ask the school to work with you to put together a plan so that your child can still keep learning.

Sometimes students get in a habit of missing a few days now and then, and before you know it, it has added up to a lot of days. It might seem like they are doing fine, catching up when they get back, but the missed time can really make an impact in learning to read, write and do math. If a student misses several days, they might miss learning things that they'll need to know as they move on to more complex topics. Missing days in high school can mean a student risks losing credit for a class. Missing days in elementary school can mean a student misses out on learning key things that they'll need to be successful as the work gets harder.

Updates to the law this year now **require districts to meet with parents** if a child in **elementary school** has **5 or more excused absences in a month** or **10 or more excused absences in a year**. These meetings will be an important time to consider whether a child needs extra supports.

If you have already given the district a doctor's note and have worked out a plan to help the student keep on track with work, the meeting won't be required. If the child already has an IEP or Section 504 Plan, then the team will participate in the meeting.

Read more about the rules for school attendance, and resources for helping break down barriers and support students to build a habit of regular attendance at the Washington state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) [Attendance page](#) at <http://www.k12.wa.us/Attendance/default.aspx>.

Can I get in trouble if my child misses a lot of school?

A parent can face a **court hearing**, and **possible fines or community service** if a child is truant, and continues to be truant after being referred to court.

After **2** unexcused absences in a month the school should schedule a conference with you and your child, and might do an assessment with your child to try to find what is causing the absences.

If a student has **5** unexcused absences in a month, the district must either:

- make an agreement with the parent and student to set attendance requirements,
- refer the student to a community truancy board that will make an agreement with the student and parent; or
- file a petition with the juvenile court.

If a student has **7** unexcused absences in a month, or **10** in a year, even after the district has taken steps to try to reduce absences, then the law says the district must file a petition with the juvenile court against the parent, the student, or both.

When the court gets the petition, it generally won't move forward immediately. First, it will "stay" or hold the petition while the student and parent are referred to a community truancy board (if one is available).

If the community truancy board doesn't reach an agreement with the parent and student, or if the parent or student doesn't comply within the time set, then the case goes back to the juvenile court. The court will schedule a hearing.

If a court finds that a parent failed to ensure their child attends school as required, the court can order the parent to:

- Pay a fine of not more than \$25 for each day of unexcused absence; or
- Do community service.

A parent can avoid the fines by showing that the school didn't follow its duties to notify, meet or work with the parent and student to reduce absences, or by attending a conference to address the reasons for the absences and participating with the school and student in a supervised plan for attendance.

Can my child be disciplined for missing school?

Yes, the law allows schools to discipline students for missing school.

If a student is disciplined for missing school, the school must also notify the parents of the absence, schedule a conference with the parent and student to talk about the possible causes for the absence, and work together to try to reduce the absences.

A student's **grades or credits** can also be impacted by absences if attendance or participation is related to the goals of the class, the teacher has said that attendance will count, and the reasons for the student's absences have been taken into account (including whether the absence or tardiness is directly related to a disability).

The school asked me to meet to talk about my child's absences – how can I prepare for the meeting? Should my child attend too?

It is a good idea to have your child participate in the meeting if possible. Your child can share what is going on from his/her point of view. Your child can also hear you and the adults at the school working together to try to figure out how to support them in school. That can be powerful for a young person – to know you and the adults at school care about them and care about them being in school.

If you think there might be some difficult conversations in the meeting, think about having your child attend for part of the time.

Before you go to the meeting:

- Let the school know if you will need an interpreter;
- Let the school know if other people will join you (for example: your child's counselor, a grandparent);
- Ask your child to share with you what has been going on at school, and outside school: with friends, with other students, with teachers. Ask how your child feels about school work and school activities, and what your child would like to have happen at school.
- Talk with your child about your goals and hopes for your child with school.

At the meeting, you and your child can share your thoughts on why your child has been absent and ideas for how to reduce the absences. You will have the chance to hear from the staff at school what ideas they have to help, and also what might come next if your child continues to miss school.

What kind of things could the school do to help?

Educators can be very creative when they are working to support a student – especially when they are able to partner with the family and understand what is really going on for the student.

Some of the typical things that schools and families might consider include:

- **Change classes?** Review how the student is doing in each class, and make changes to a class schedule, drop a class, add a class, or make time for extra support in some classes;
- **New school?** Consider whether a different school with a different kind of program or setting would work better;
- **Extra help? Test retakes?** Provide tutoring, extra credit opportunities or test make-ups so the student can catch up;
- **More English language support?** Review an English language learner's progress and consider whether additional support is needed;
- **A person to connect with?** Think about whether there is someone (or several people) at the school that have, or could build, a close connection with the student to help them feel like they are an important part of the school community;
- **Positive behavior interventions?** Build a plan to identify possible triggers, reduce inappropriate behavior, and teach appropriate behaviors;
- **Sports? Music? Robotics?** Explore extra-curricular activities or elective classes that would motivate the student to show up to the classes that are harder or less exciting;
- **Reward system?** Brainstorm possible "rewards" that the student could work toward with improved attendance;
- **Evaluation for Special Education?** Request an evaluation to see if the student has a disability that is getting in the way of learning and may need an IEP or 504 Plan;
- **Work Experience?** Find opportunities for the student to try vocational courses or get work experience;
- **Address peer conflicts/bullying/harassment?** Agree on a plan to try to resolve a conflict with a friend, or address bullying or harassment;
- **School Climate?** Talk about the overall school climate and think of ways to make sure it is welcoming to yours, and all students;
- **Support for the Family?** Connect the family with community-based services to help with needs outside the school setting; and, if absences continue:
- **Community Truancy Board?** Refer the student to a community truancy board or to court.

What if my child keeps missing school?

After **2** unexcused absences in a month the school should schedule a conference with you and your child, and might do an assessment with your child to try to find what is causing the absences.

If a student has **5 unexcused absences in a month**, the district must either:

- Make an agreement with the parent and student to set attendance requirements,
- Refer the student to a community truancy board that will make an agreement with the student and parent; or
- File a petition with a juvenile court.

If a student has **7 unexcused absences in a month, or 10 in a year**, even after the district has taken steps to try to reduce absences, then the law says the district must file a petition with the juvenile court against the parent, the student, or both.

When the court gets the petition, it generally won't move forward immediately. First, it will "stay" or hold the petition while the student and parent are referred to a community truancy board (if one is available). Starting with the 2017-18 school year, all school districts with more than 200 students will be required to have Community Truancy Boards set up with their local courts.

If the community truancy board doesn't reach an agreement with the parent and student, or if the parent or student doesn't comply within the time set, then the case goes back to the juvenile court. The court will schedule a hearing.

If the case ends up in court, and the student keeps missing school without a valid excuse, the student could face incarceration in juvenile detention.

What is a Community Truancy Board?

A community truancy board is a group of people from the community that is brought together by a joint agreement between a school district and the county juvenile court.

Each of the board members receives training on:

- how to identify barriers to school attendance,
- the use of a new Washington state tool for assessing risks and needs of students, called the "WARNS", or other similar assessment tools;
- trauma-informed approaches to discipline;

- evidence-based treatments for supporting youth and families and
- specific services and treatment available in the local school, court and community.

Community truancy boards meet with youth and families that are referred by their district. They listen and talk with them to try to figure out what is getting in the way of the student attending school; they make recommendations to the family and the school for steps to take to improve attendance.

Community Truancy Boards can:

- Connect students and families with services including functional family therapy, or “wraparound” mental health, behavioral health or other family services);
- Recommend that the district transfer the student to another school, an alternative program, skill center, dropout prevention program, or other school option; or
- Recommend to the juvenile court that the youth be referred to a [HOPE center](#) or [crisis residential center](#). (more information on those is available here: <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/adolescents/riskrunaway-youth>).

Some districts have been working with community truancy boards for many years. In 2016, the law changed and now requires every district (except ones with fewer than 200 students) to develop a community truancy board by the 2017-2018 school year. Members of Community Truancy Boards will be trained in how to identify barriers to attendance, to use assessment tools to help identify causes of truancy, trauma-informed practices and how to connect youth and families to services.

What if my child keeps missing school after going to the Community Truancy Board?

The student, or parent or both may be referred back to the juvenile court.

What can happen if my child and I have to go to court for truancy?

If a court finds a student has been truant, the court can order the **student** to:

- Attend school regularly
- Switch schools (if there is space, and an appropriate program available);
- Get testing to determine if the student has used alcohol or drugs, and if so, then follow recommendations of the assessment;
- Get a mental health evaluation
- Be placed temporarily in a [crisis residential center](#) or [HOPE center](#) (if there is an immediate health and safety concern, or a family conflict with need for mediation).

If a court finds that a parent failed to ensure their child attend school as required, the court can order the **parent** to:

- Pay a fine of not more than \$25 for each day of unexcused absence; or
- Do community service.

A parent can avoid the fines by showing that the school didn't follow its duties to notify, meet or work with the parent and student to reduce absences, or by attending a conference to address the reasons for the absences and participating with the school and student in a supervised plan for attendance.

After the court issues an order, if a student violates it, the court can order **incarceration in juvenile detention** for up to 7 days, or alternatives to detention.

Can a child with an IEP be sent to court for truancy? What if I think the absences are related to my child's disabilities?

Students with disabilities, including students with an IEP, are sometimes referred to court for truancy. The court generally won't take any action until the student and parent have a chance to try to work with a community truancy board to address the issues behind the absences. But, if that does not work, the case can be referred back to the court.

If the case is considered by the court, the court must ask the district what efforts it has made to help the student get to school. Parents can use this opportunity to share concerns about why the student has missed school, including concerns that the absences are related to the student's disability, and what might help to improve attendance. For more information and ideas on working with IEP teams to address problems, including absences, call OEO at 1-866-297-2597, or check out our [Parent's Guide on Protecting the Educational Rights of Students with Disabilities](#).

What if I have a disability and it makes it difficult for me to get to all the meetings with the school?

Parents with disabilities can request reasonable accommodations from their child's school and district. School districts must follow the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504, both of which prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities. Schools are places of public accommodation and they may need to make reasonable accommodations so that parents with disabilities can equally access their buildings, services and programs. Ask your child's school or contact the district office and ask for their ADA or Section 504 coordinator.

What if I don't speak English well, and I haven't been able to explain to the school what is going on with my child?

If you have limited English proficiency (LEP), the notices and communication from the school about your child's attendance should be in your primary language. You can ask for interpretation. The school should make sure an interpreter is available for meetings to talk about your child's attendance. If you are having a hard time getting an interpreter, you can try calling the district office. You can also call OEO for help at 1-866-297-2597.

What if my child just doesn't want to go to school, but is keeping up with work at home?

Regular attendance is required by law, even if a student is otherwise keeping up with homework and passing tests. Often, even when students think they are doing ok without going to class, they are missing more than they realize.

Students saying that they don't want to go, don't like school, or are bored, might also be a sign that something is bothering them at school. They might really be bored and need more challenging work. Or, they might be facing bullying or harassment, or feeling like they just can't keep up with school.

If you are having a hard time getting your child motivated to go to school regularly, try connecting with someone at the school or district for ideas, call OEO at 1-866-297-2597, and/or check out some of the links at the end of this sheet for other places to find help.

What if my child is anxious about school and gets angry, breaks down, or just won't get out of bed?

You can ask for help from the school.

A child who is struggling with anxiety, depression or other mental health condition may need an evaluation and specialized supports and accommodations to be able to participate regularly in school. If a child is showing signs of anxiety that is getting in the way of going to school, it is important to try to get help as early as you can.

One of the types of disabilities that is covered under special education law is "emotional or behavioral disability", and that can include anxiety, depression or other mental health conditions.

Families can ask the school to consider doing an evaluation to see if the child needs extra supports through an IEP or 504 plan (see [OEO's Parent Guide on Protecting the Rights of Students with Disabilities](#)).

Families may also be able to find help from a private mental health counselor who can partner with the school and family to support the child in getting to school. Each county has community mental health services, and for youth who need intensive mental health services, there may be “wraparound” services and supports that can help. (learn more about [WISe – Wraparound with Intensive Services for Medicaid-eligible youth](#) at <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SESA/publications/documents/22-1594.pdf>).

What if my foster child has already missed school from moving around a lot, and will have to miss more for court and other appointments?

Children and youth who are in foster care (youth who are dependent under the child welfare laws), often end up missing school for reasons beyond their control. They also often face unique challenges and need support from their schools and other adults who care for them.

For those reasons, [state law](#) requires schools to work together with foster parents, parents, caseworkers, educational liaisons, an attorney if the youth has one, and other adults involved in the student's life, to take a close look if a youth in foster care is absent unexpectedly or often. They must work together to figure out why the student has been absent and school staff are required to work proactively with the student to support them with their school work so the student won't fall behind or get in trouble for missing school. You can find more information and resources on [OSPI's Foster Care Education Program](#) page (at <http://www.k12.wa.us/FosterCare/default.aspx>) and from your local [Foster Care liaison](#).

What if we are homeless and my child misses school while we are trying to find housing? Can I get help from the school?

Yes. Every school district has someone on staff whose job is to help homeless youth and families. That person is often called the McKinney-Vento Liaison. You can find their contact information by calling your district, or looking on OSPI's page for [Education of Homeless Children and Youth](#) at <http://www.k12.wa.us/HomelessEd/ContactList.aspx>.

Absences related to a student's homeless status should be excused.

Students who are experiencing homelessness can also receive supports from the school to help them keep up, to avoid having to change schools, and to help with transitions if they do have to move. These protections come from the federal [McKinney-Vento Act](#).

What if I feel school has not been a positive place for my child? Do I have to keep sending my child even if s/he is being bullied, facing discrimination, or constantly being disciplined?

Though it is sometimes not quick or easy, there are options for trying to resolve problems at school, and people that can help you with it.

There are also options for different kinds of school programs. Not all are available in every district, but some options are available statewide (for example, part-time or full-time online public school programs). Or parents can choose to homeschool their children.

At the end of the day, though, the law requires that students are in school.

If you are feeling like there are no good options, please call. We can't promise we'll be able to solve the problem, but we would like to help you try. You can call us at 1-866-297-2597 or find us online at www.oeo.wa.gov.

How can OEO help?

OEO is here to listen to your questions and concerns, share information, and work with you to figure out what steps you can try to make things better for your child. In some cases, with a parent or guardian's permission, we can work directly with the school or district to try to clarify what's going on, and find out what's possible to address the situation. Read more about [how we work](#), or call us at 1-866-297-2597.

Where else can I find help or more information?

The best help often comes from the people closest to the situation. Your child's teacher, principal, school counselor or a family liaison may be able to help. You can also ask to connect with the district's attendance person. You can find information online from the Washington state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI): <http://www.k12.wa.us/attendance/>.

If your child receives special education services or accommodations – or you think they should – try connecting with your principal, special education teacher, or your district's special education office. Read more about accessing services for students with disabilities in [OEO's Parent Guide](#) for Protecting the Educational Rights of Students with Disabilities. There are also organizations that connect



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[Twitter/EdOmbuds](#)

[Parents to Parents](#) to support families with kids with disabilities. You can find contact information for parent to parent programs here: http://arcwa.org/getsupport/parent_to_parent_p2p_programs.

There is help for students who are [homeless](#), and students in [foster care](#). You can start looking for information by calling your school or checking out OSPI's website, here:

<http://www.k12.wa.us/HomelessEd/default.aspx> and here: <http://www.k12.wa.us/FosterCare/>.