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Giving parents equal parenting time by law By [Bill Harrington](#)

Washington state is now an official shared parenting state for families impacted by parental separation, writes guest columnist Bill Harrington. Time for the Washington Legislature to enact a law that mandates standard parenting plans that envision significant time for each parent.

For the third time in 22 years, Washington state is leading the nation in family law reform. This time, the report is called the Residential Time Summary Report prepared by the state Office of the Administrator for the Courts. This is a first-in-the-nation compilation of post-divorce breakdown of parenting time for children, mothers and fathers. The numbers are collected case-by-case and county-by-county.

Amazingly, 46 percent of children of divorce, statewide, are ordered to spend a minimum of 35 percent parenting time with their biological fathers. Parenting time is broken down by large percentages, and meaningful shared parenting starts in the range of 30-35 percent. This is about 300 percent better results than anyone could have expected from the time the Parenting Act was first approved. If there ever was any doubt, Washington state is now an official shared-parenting state for families impacted by parental separation.

In 1987, Washington required divorcing parents to detail parenting schedules in Parenting Plan documents that are filed with the court. Over 30 states have adopted this family law reform. Again, in 1991, Washington Department of Social and Health Services first developed and used the Paternity Affidavit for unwed, never-married, fathers. Staffers were pleasantly shocked and surprised with how forthcoming fathers were to provide financial information used to help create child-support orders.

However, the question has always been placed — how much post-divorce parenting time are children of divorce actually spending with their male parents? Now we see some actual results statewide and county-by-county.

The King County and Pierce County numbers are higher than the statewide average at 50 percent with Snohomish close by at 49 percent. The two highest counties are Whatcom at 66 percent and Skagit at 59 percent. Yakima County comes in the lowest at 28 percent.

The summary report and study was advocated for by fathers' organizations and shared-parenting advocates as a way of documenting why an official shared-parenting law is needed in Washington. Sen. Jim Kastama introduced Senate Bill 5342 addressing this issue but it has not moved out of committee.

The 46 percent is a great number. However, there are probably another 30 percent where the fathers and some mothers arbitrarily are restricted to the typical every-other-weekend. In these cases, the fathers and mothers with limited schedules actually feel more like aunts and uncles than meaningfully involved parents. The children are the biggest losers. The new law is needed for these other parents to avoid decisions that are strictly perceived winners and losers.

The report statistic that rings the loudest and truest is that 93 percent of the final decisions are by agreement of the parents. This means that good mothers and fathers are operating with one reality most in mind: These children had two involved parents before separation and this should be the end result as well. These good parents are sending society and our courthouse officials a loud message.

Unfortunately, our elected superior-court judges, appointed court commissioners and family law lawyers seem stuck in 1987. This is the time before the positive and encouraging language of the Parenting Act was approved and the Tender Years Doctrine was still operational.

Children of divorce are our most fragile social statistics: over 70 percent of high-school dropouts and pregnant teen girls come from fatherless homes as well as the 80-85 percent of male teens in juvenile justice centers and more than 90 percent of men in prison, all from fatherless homes. Society has paid a huge price to keep fathers away from their children. Now we see good dads fighting to stay involved and our children are better off for this effort.

The time has come for children of divorce to be guaranteed continuing parental involvement such as the children in the above numbers coming from homes where both parents are legally fit. It is time to stop

divorcing children from one of their parents, most often the father. We can do better.

Bill Harrington from Pierce County was a commissioner with the US Commission on Child and Family Welfare.