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Development of a Model to Evaluate a Multi-Agency Attendance Improvement and Truancy Reduction Initiative: Phase I (A MERC Technical Report)

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**Development Of A Model To Evaluate A Multi-Agency
Attendance Improvement And Truancy Reduction Initiative:
Phase I**

A MERC Technical Report

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Executive Summary

Students must be in attendance daily to benefit fully from public school academics and socialization through both regular and extra-curricular activities. The reality is that many public school students are at-risk of school failure and eventually dropping out partially because of poor attendance behaviors. These poor attendance behaviors can usually be traced to challenged communities and families whose children face multiple at-risk factors. Urban inner-city schools with high percentages of minority students are among those with the highest risk factors and they experience the greatest problems with attendance and, eventually, truancy. The Richmond Public Schools (RPS) has worked diligently for many years to promote resiliency factors in the schools and school system as a whole to moderate the effects of these multiple risk factors. Strengths associated with the RPS attendance plan and procedures include a well-developed and periodically revised plan and procedures manual, adequate tracking and reporting practices defined for daily student attendance, dedicated staff supportive of appropriate attendance behaviors, and numerous support systems for student intervention in cases of inappropriate attendance behaviors.

Although progress has been made in the past three to five years, far too many RPS students are exhibiting attendance problems. Some areas of concern include; “revolving school doors” for repeatedly truant students (i.e., those who return late in the day, without parents, proper records, or attitudes, only to slip away into truancy again), certain intervention strategies that include “red tape” (i.e., cumbersome and lengthy re-entry procedures that impede the students’ timely re-engagement with school), difficulties associated with tracking “W8” students (i.e., students who were in

attendance the previous year, but left without withdrawing to another school and did not return to school the next year), and the lack of active public relations campaigns to encourage parents and community members to support attendance programs, materials and incentives.

The purpose of this study was to develop an attendance evaluation model for urban school systems, which would be useful to determine the strengths and weaknesses of these multi-agency attendance plans/procedures. Phase I of the study was to develop a tentative model and use this model to evaluate and make recommendations for Richmond Public School's inter-agencies addressing attendance issues. The design of the study used a mixed methodology of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. Quantitative methods are used in a supplementary fashion to add credibility and verification for the otherwise qualitative study. Data collection strategies include interviews, both formal and informal, document/data file collection and review, and observations and field notes.

Recommendations for improvement of RPS attendance policies and procedures focus on gaining community support for resources to help challenged schools become better environments to both attract and sustain student interest and, in the event of attendance/truancy problems, to help provide intervention strategies and training to implement these strategies. Other recommendations include opening up alternative opportunities for students alienated from their home school environments to participate in technical programs, career development centers, and other learning experiences, as well as early targeting of students in the lower grades with intervention strategies and special programs.

Table of Contents

Literature Review.....	1
Focus of the Study.....	4
Methodology.....	6
Results.....	8
Discussion and Recommendations.....	25
References.....	30
Appendixes	
A. Project Proposal.....	31
B. Table of Correlation.....	36
C. Interview Protocols.....	37
Figures and Tables	
Figure 1. Likelihood of Academic Success and Student Persistence.....	3
Figure 2. Necessary Components of an Effective Attendance Plan.....	9
Figure 3. Grade-by-Grade Membership Persistence Rates.....	17
Figure 4. Model of Support Systems/Interventions.....	21
Figure 5. Map of Progress from Kindergarten through Third Grade.....	22
Figure 6. Map of Progress from Fourth through Fifth Grade.....	23
Figure 7. Map of Progress from Sixth through Twelfth Grade.....	24
Table 1. Parent Role in Appropriate Student Attendance.....	10
Table 2. School Role in Appropriate Student Attendance.....	11
Table 3. Community Role in Appropriate Student Attendance.....	12

Literature Review

Truancy and dropping out of school constitute some of the most serious problems for schools in this country. An interview by The Philadelphia Inquirer (1994) in The Journal for Truancy and Dropout Prevention (1994), expounds on this problem with the following excerpt:

About 27,000 of more than 190,000 students are absent on an average day in Philadelphia's school system; in secondary schools, about 40 percent of those absences are unexcused. In some high schools, fewer than half the students routinely show up. ...Indeed, truancy is not about bored youngsters hanging out at the mall. Children also stay out of school because they lack clothes, lack transportation and fear violence – either in school or on the way there. Some have drug-addicted mothers. Some have younger children to care for. And those are just a few of the reasons (p.99).

Schools most at risk for high truancy and dropout rates are those in neighborhoods with lower socioeconomic status and higher percentages of minorities. Richmond Public Schools (RPS), with an average school rate of students eligible for free and reduced lunches (the best available indicator of socioeconomic status) of 69 percent and an overall average rate of minority students equal to 93 percent, certainly meets both criteria. Although these statistics place RPS within this high-risk category, research shows that preventative tactics can be adopted and implemented by school divisions to moderate these trends.

One body of research addressing the needs of at-risk students is resiliency research (Milstein, 2000; Zimmerman, 1994; Cowen, 1995; Doll, 1998; Pianta, 1998). One purpose for resiliency research is to understand how schools can promote resiliency in at-risk students. For example, the Zimmerman (1999) results concluded that school environments can increase the child's risk or protect them from debilitating consequences of risk factors; school size, absenteeism, drop out, grades and school bonding." Milstein and Henry in their book, titled Spreading Resiliency: Making It Happen for Schools and

Communities, define resiliency as “the process of coping with disruptive, stressful or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event”(p.11). They give another more basic definition for resiliency as the “capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship and to repair yourself” (p.11). The following list of 12 environmental protective factors, characteristics that can be modeled by families, schools, communities and peer groups, were identified in this book as well:

- 1) Promote close bonds
- 2) Promote values and encourage education
- 3) Adopt a high worth – low criticism style of interaction
- 4) Set and enforce clear boundaries
- 5) Encourage supportive relationships with many caring others
- 6) Promote service to others
- 7) Provide access to meeting basic needs
- 8) Set high and realistic expectations for success
- 9) Encourage goal-setting and mastery
- 10) Develop pro-social values
- 11) Provide leadership, decision-making skills
- 12) Appreciate unique talents of individuals

Although schools and school divisions plan and implement extensive attendance policies and procedures for students, the literature suggests that, “success for students under risk conditions is a developmental process, which occurs in context” (Pianta & Walsh, 1998 p.408). Murhane & Levy (1996) in their book Teaching the New Basic Skills concur:

The role of community is understated in terms of necessary investment in the transformation of learning systems for children. Children attend school nine percent of their time from birth to age 18. We cannot expect even a transformed educational system to overcome the influence of the 91% factor (p.xviii).

Similar findings are reflected in the following model developed by the American Institute for Research (AIR) and the John Hopkins Center for Research for Disadvantaged Students after a 1994 study funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement within the U. S. Department of Education (Rossi, R. (Ed.) (1994).

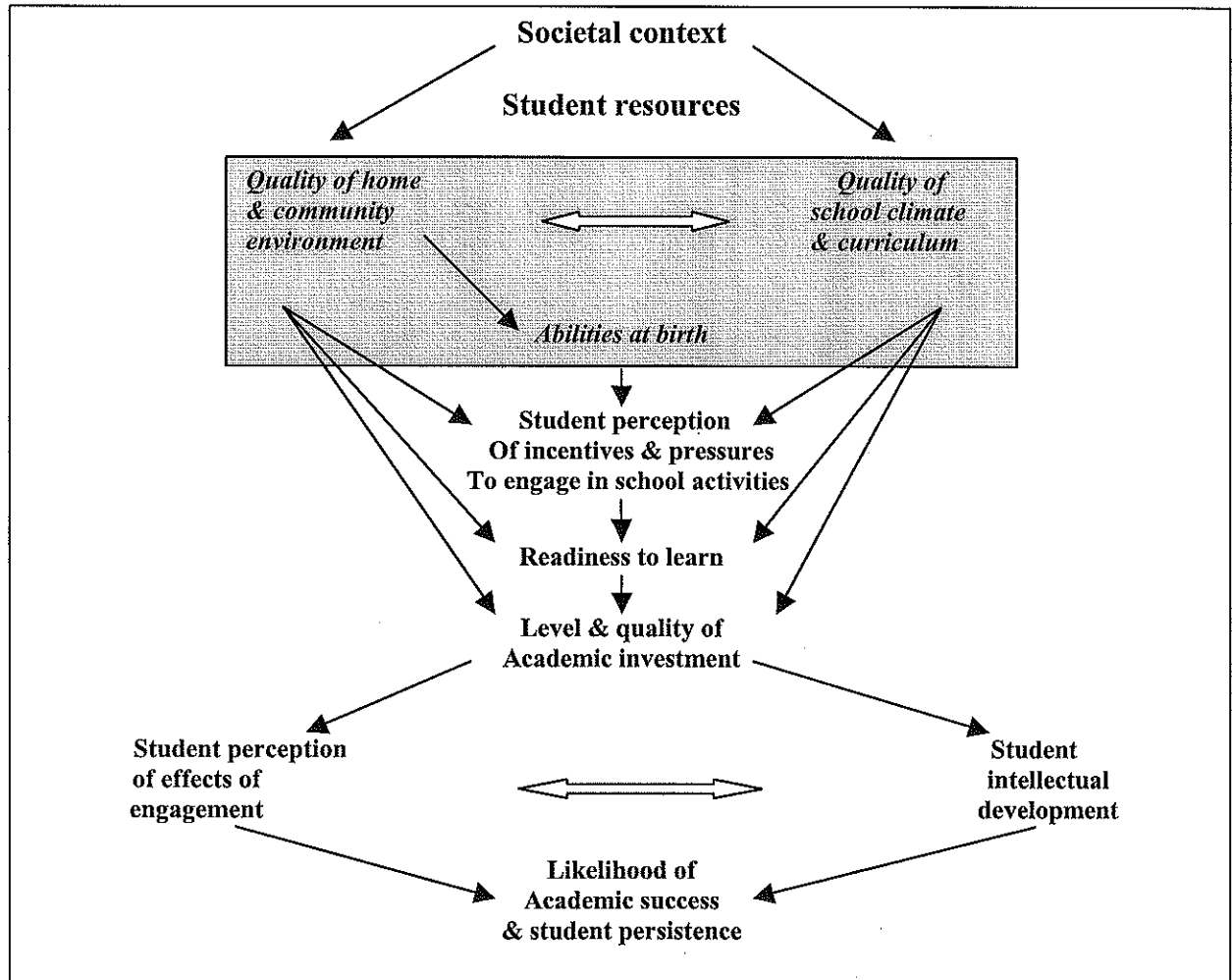


Figure 1. Likelihood of academic success and student persistence (Rossi, 1994).

A Manual to Combat Truancy (July, 1996) prepared by the United States Department of Education in cooperation with the United States Department of Justice indicates that research data support findings that students who are truant and eventually drop out of school are at a long-term disadvantage for becoming productive citizens. For example, the manual states in the introduction that high school drop-outs are two and a half times more likely to be on welfare than high school graduates and those who are employed receive lower salaries. The manual further states that high rates of truancy are the most powerful indicators of juvenile delinquency, daytime burglary rates and high vandalism.

Focus of the Study

Virginia school laws and regulations (title 22.1, sections 254, 258, 261, 265 of the Virginia Code Annotated, 2000) require compulsory school attendance of all children five to 18 years of age, specify procedures for attendance monitoring, and outline specific consequences for those parents/guardians of students in non-compliance. In the spirit of this law, the following determination and objectives are a part of the RPS Attendance Plan:

Richmond Public Schools has determined that all of its students will attend school regularly. From this determination, Richmond Public Schools (RPS) has initiated academic reforms and accountability procedures designed to integrate and to reinforce the delivery of student programs and services. ...The Richmond Public Schools Attendance Plan is predicated on the notion that the school, the home and the total community must share in the responsibility of improving the attendance of all students in RPS. In order to accomplish, RPS staff has created strategies whereby the allocation of resources will be coordinated in order to generate the desired results. The following objectives were developed to support the attendance:

Elementary

1. To increase the percentage of students in grades K – 5 who are absent 10 days or less from school by 10%.
2. To increase the number of schools attaining a 95% attendance rate by 5%.

Secondary

1. To increase the percentage of students in grades 6 – 12 who are absent 10 days or less from school by 10%.
2. To increase the number of schools attaining 90% attendance by 5%.
3. To reduce the truancy rate by 10%.
4. To reduce the dropout rate in grades 7 – 12 by 15%.

In order to meet these objectives, RPS has developed a comprehensive Student Attendance Policy and Procedures Manual and has completed the second revision of the manual. Findings and models from this study were incorporated into that revision and will contribute to subsequent revisions of the manual.

Further commitment by RPS included the development of an evaluation of the Attendance Improvement and Truancy Prevention Initiative. The purpose for this project as taken directly from the proposal, which may be found in Appendix A, reads as follows:

The purpose of the proposed project is to obtain assistance in the development and implementation of a model for evaluating the effectiveness of Richmond's multi-agency attendance improvement/truancy prevention initiative. In order to develop an evaluation model that is appropriate for such a complex inter-agency intervention effort and one which will assess the degree of articulation between the components of the intervention (the process by which the intervention is implemented) as well as the outcomes of the intervention, it is proposed that the project include a design-and-data collection phase as well as a process-and-outcomes evaluation phase.

This study addresses questions 1 to 4 of Phase I: Design and Data Collection Phase. Questions 1 and 2 incorporate comparisons with other similar inter-agency models, yet identifying the unique features of the RPS initiative. Questions 3 and 4 focus on each agency with respect to goals, responsibilities, follow-up and criteria used to define success. The remaining question (5) from Phase I and questions 1 and 2 from Phase II will be addressed in the follow-up study.

Significance of the Project

The significance of the project is reported as quoted directly from the proposal:

This project has both immediate and long-term significance not only for Richmond, but also for other school divisions that are engaged in multi-agency initiatives to intervene on behalf of children. Developing an evaluation design that is based on the research traditions of the participating agencies will not only enhance the likelihood of its acceptance for this project, but will also serve as a model for other school divisions to use in similar situations.

Methodology

The methods for study design, data collection, and data analysis for Phase I were somewhat determined in the proposal for the project, which states that the study would use a mixed method design. Initial meetings from April to June 2000, with various RPS central office staff including Ann Allen, Coordinator of Research and Evaluation, Sandra Mitchell, Coordinator of the Truancy Assessment Center, and Larry Everette, Specialist for Safe and Nurturing Schools, resulted in a process of gathering hard copy data documents and data files from school records for quantitative data analysis. These records included elementary data files with attendance and grades for the 1998 and 1999 school years and third and fifth grade Standards of Learning (SOL) scores in the four core content areas for 1998. Other hard copy documents reviewed were attendance records disaggregated by month, school, excused/unexcused absence, and regular or special needs students for both 1998 and 1999 school years. Records of students withdrawn and not re-registered at other schools (potential dropouts) were also reviewed. Materials referring to the computerized attendance monitoring system used to track middle and high school attendance were also collected. Copies of attendance manuals from RPS and two other nearby school divisions within the Metropolitan Educational

Research Consortium (MERC) were collected for comparison purposes. The last set of documents used for both, guidance for the study and data analysis, were notes and minutes from the meetings of the Attendance Interface Committee in May and June of 2000.

Further collaboration with Ann Allen and Sandra Mitchell resulted in the decision to collect qualitative data through a series of interviews. And, of course, review and analysis of documents collected early in the summer were also included in the qualitative piece of this study.

Trustworthiness, Validity and Reliability of the Study

Trustworthiness, validity and reliability were concerns for this study. Reliability was gained through a series of efforts made to verify works in progress. An informal study team including Suzanne Nash (study team leader), Ann Allen (developer of the original proposal) and Sandra Mitchell (major developer of attendance manual revisions) was formed through conversations, working lunches and persistent re-evaluation of the study processes. As models were being developed, input and revisions were constantly addressed as experts in the field (RPS and agency staff) collaborated with the study team and as the study team dialogued together. Because of the complex nature of the inter-agency relationships, interviews were transcribed from notes and returned to the interviewee for clarification and additional notes about those relationships. As the model developed, interviewees were asked to correct or make additions to the model as well. This constant interaction among all of the stakeholders and the study team lends credibility to both the conclusions drawn from the study and the models created to explain or clarify those conclusions.

Trustworthiness was built in by researcher immersion into the culture as participant observer, being careful to “hear the voice” of those interviewed. Visits in the field included trips to the Truancy Assessment Center, the Northside Truancy and Diversion Center, the Department of Juvenile Justice Services Southside Truancy, Diversion, and Curfew Center, the Richmond Police Department’s Youth and Family Crimes Department, RPS Central Office (various occasions for collaborative meetings), RPS Safety and Security Office, site of the Educare and Acceleration Programs for RPS, and John Marshall High School.

Sample

Purposeful sampling was used to select individuals to interview. Criteria for selection included these considerations: 1) RPS staff in positions of authority that would have a top-down view or 2) persons in the field who would have a one-on-one perspective with truant students or students with inappropriate attendance behaviors. Documents were collected both purposefully and randomly as offered by RPS staff or, as were available from the research and evaluation office. Data file information both in SPSS format and hard copy were for all RPS elementary students.

Results

To assist with this process of understanding the necessary components of comprehensive attendance models and how policies are created, the researcher conducted an extensive review of available literature and comparison of other policy and procedure manuals from surrounding school divisions. Then, a model, illustrated in Figure 2, reflecting all the necessary components for an effective attendance plan and a comparison

chart shown in Appendix B was created. Research studies and policy manuals contributed ideas for this diagram and are cited in the reference section of this document. The role of the stakeholders for each of the identified components shown in the model are further explained in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

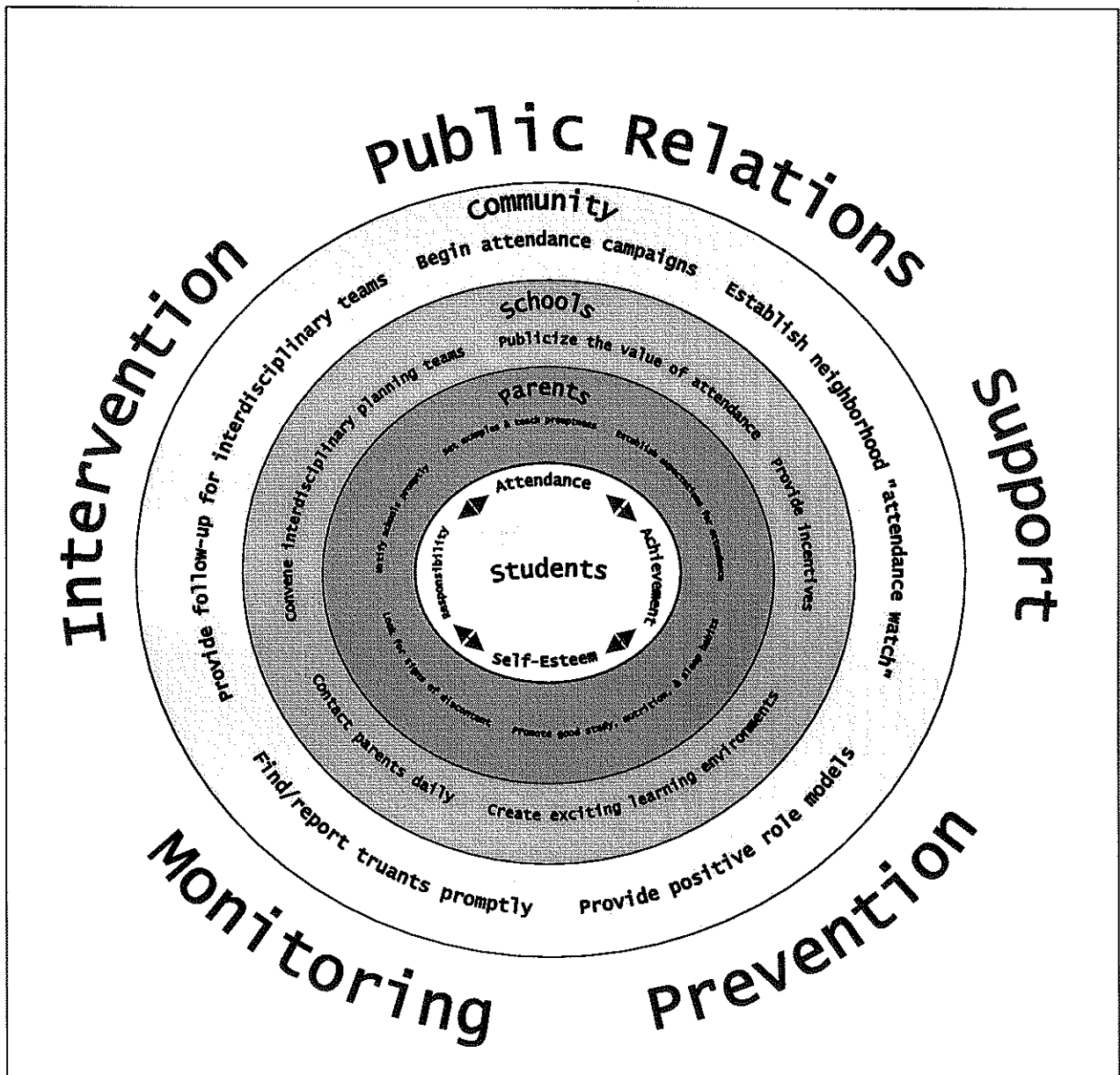


Figure 2. Necessary components of an effective attendance plan.

Table 1. Parent Role in Appropriate Student Attendance by Five Components Identified in the Literature and Richmond Public Schools' Attendance Manual.

Public Relations

- Role model good attendance on the job
- Provide incentives for their children for good attendance
- Promote community involvement in schools
- Promote community programs and participation in partnerships

Prevention

- Promote learning at home
- Support school programs
- Make decisions about student attendance (when child can/cannot miss school)
- Support extra-curricular activities
- Read attendance manual

Monitoring

- Look for signs of discontent
- Monitor child's/children's attendance
- Respond immediately to inappropriate school attendance behaviors
- Collaborate with schools at first signs of student discontent

Intervention

- Properly notify school when child is absent
- Collaborate and cooperate with schools/other agencies to identify and provide intervention strategies to help students re-assess their attendance policy
- Support school decisions and enforce attendance policy

Support

- Establish expectations for appropriate attendance
 - Collaborate with schools to provide adequate extra-curricular activities
 - Collaborate with schools to meet academic needs of all students
-

Table 2. School Role in Appropriate Student Attendance by Five Components Identified in Literature and Richmond Public Schools' Attendance Manual.

Public Relations

- Professionals role model good attendance on the job
- Provide materials to educate parents and students on benefits of good attendance and seriousness/detriments of poor attendance
- Publicize the value of attendance
- Collaborate with the community to promote attendance campaigns

Prevention

- Create exciting learning environments
- Provide a wealth of extra-curricular activities
- Identify and meet needs of all special needs students

Monitoring

- Monitor student attendance closely and report excessive absences to the proper authorities
- Inform parents of attendance status of their children
- Distribute copies of attendance manual to parents/students
- Follow through with appropriate intervention strategies for continued student absences
- Tag student records for future/continued monitoring

Intervention

- Develop intervention strategies
- Provide activities for students on peer mediation, conflict resolution, tutoring, and counseling
- Provide truancy diversion centers
- Make referrals to other agencies when necessary
- Complete vocational/behavior assessments at truancy assessment center for both parents and students
- Collaborate with police, courts and child welfare

Support

- Provide incentives for students with good attendance
 - Collaborate with Richmond Acceleration Program, Richmond Technical Center, Adult Career Development Center, and the juvenile courts to meet the needs of all students
 - Identify students with special needs and develop individual plans to meet their academic needs
-

Table 3. Community Role in Appropriate Student Attendance by Five Components Identified in Literature and Richmond Public Schools' Attendance Manual.

Public Relations

- Support campaigns sponsoring good student attendance
- Provide incentives for students to have appropriate school attendance habits
- Form partnerships with schools to support academic and extra-curricular activities

Prevention

- Provide good community role models
- Provide accessible (free) learning opportunities for students in the community
- Provide free access to appropriate forms of entertainment
- Support school programs and extra-curricular activities

Monitoring

- Develop a community plan to report truant students
- Collaborate with schools/other agencies to provide services for detained students until filtered back into schools

Intervention

- Provide follow-up for interdisciplinary team
- Provide community/public agency support for students with truancy issues
- Collaborate with schools to provide strategies to deal with at-risk student behaviors

Support

- Establish neighborhood attendance watch
 - Provide equal access to learning opportunities in community for all students
 - Develop programs for special-need students
 - Collaborate with schools to promote good attendance for all students
-

As a review of the data in Tables 1, 2, and 3 reveals, improvement of student attendance and reduction in truancy requires effort not only on the part of schools and school staffs, but also on the part of parents and the community as a whole. This effort encompasses public relations, to raise awareness of the importance of attendance; prevention, to keep students interested and engaged in school; monitoring, to ensure that students are attending; intervention, to help students and their families overcome obstacles to good attendance; and support, to encourage attendance.

Results from the Interviews

Interviewees from a purposeful sample of RPS personnel resulted in a series of recurring themes:

- 1) Richmond Public Schools' at-risk student population lives in challenged community circumstances.
- 2) Absenteeism and truancy are usually family issues involving lack of basic needs and/or poor parenting and/or transience.
- 3) Inter-agencies cooperate and vast effort is exerted to re-connect truant students to their schools yearly.
- 4) Early detection in housing development areas and continued intervention through house calls is responsible for diminishing rates of dropouts and diminishing numbers of pickups for the two diversion centers in RPS.
- 5) Too many students remain alienated from their home schools and drop out, usually in the ninth grade.
- 6) Lengthy application and acceptance procedures (60 days or more), required to assist students potentially ready to re-connect through alternative school choices such as receiving Technical Center or Career Development Center services, is a serious hindrance.
- 7) Middle and high schools are challenged to deal with returning truant students who are behind in classes, resistant to offered assistance, and in some cases belligerent and disrespectful to staff.
- 8) Violence and crime are not issues generally associated with RPS truant students.
- 9) Community efforts are successful on a limited basis in assisting RPS with their absentee/truant issues.

Field Experiences: Speaking with the Voice of a Truant Child

Among many interview questions on the interview protocol (see Appendix C for copies of all interview protocols), some asked for those interviewed to speak with the voice of the student or tell a relevant story to help the researcher understand truant student perspective. The following excerpts reflect both the voices of the student and those who work with them every day:

Sometimes these students have been very successful in school and because of circumstances have been forced to drop out. They have been highly successful academically in the past and they really want to go back. Others may be 7 or 8 years old and trying to wash out their own pants and hang them up to dry for the next day. And when they say to you, "I didn't have anything dry to wear to school today cause my pants were still wet," ... what can you say? Some are babies having babies with responsibilities way beyond what they are able to deal with. Some are homeless. I had a mother with five children in here just the other day. The children were clean and respectful. That says something about the parent right there. These are the issues that we need to address. Drugs and violence don't seem to be the real problem at this center.

Most of the time you can see them start out missing school ... bright kids and you work with them and try to help ... but about ninth grade they want to look tough and what their peer group thinks is more important ... [they] start hanging out on the streets with older kids ... there was this one young man ... we tried everything ... but he started doing drugs ... then selling ... how do you tell them school is important when they have this huge roll of money and make more in one day than you do in a month? I told him it was easy money and wouldn't last ... talked to his mom and she tried to help for a while ... finally I warned him to be careful and at least watch his back ... he didn't even listen to that. They killed him ... three bullets in the chest ... he just didn't believe it could happen. But most of our truant students aren't into violence or crime ... just hanging out, but usually with the wrong crowd.

Students are here who are disconnected from their regular schools. Some are suspended more than 30 days from their regular school or need to be filtered back into their home school. Some just won't go to their home school ... don't fit in ... feel alienated. Did you hear anything when you came in this building ... bet you didn't even know there were students here? They like coming here ... most come every day.

The problem is that by the time we get through the court system and get them back to school, they move or get pregnant and we have to start all over again trying to locate them and work with their parents to provide documents or go enroll them. But we just keep talking and checking up on them so they know "somebody cares." Sometimes they call just to check in with us. Maybe, we finally convince them to show back up at school and it may be ten o'clock when they arrive and this was a troublemaker when they

dropped out, so the [greeting might be], “What are you doing here?” So the student is in one door and out the other. Sometimes, if they’re 16 or 17 when we start the process, they’re 18 and we still haven’t gotten through all the red tape.

... Officers don’t go out looking for these students. If we see them on the street, we take them to one of the diversion centers. We have Vanquish officers that work in the schools to help with truancy. Most of these students aren’t involved in crime or violent acts. Maybe some vandalism ... mostly just acting out at school I guess.

Results from quantitative data analysis

According to the W8 information sheets on the seventh through twelfth grade students from 1988/99 to 1998/99 school years:

- Percent dropout rate decreased gradually from 1988 to 1999 from 12.6% to 4.3%.
- There was a sudden increase in dropout rate in the 1994/95 school year to 6.1%, followed by gradual decrease over four year period back to a rate similar to the 1993/94 school year of 4.3%.

Correlations between the 1998/99 and 1999/00 absences of RPS elementary students to their four core content area SOL scaled scores show a statistically significant negative correlation. In other words, as days absent increased for students, SOL test scores decreased for both the 1998/99 and 1999/00 school years. (See Table of Correlations in Appendix B.)

According to an attendance table showing RPS students who had ten or more unexcused absences for the 1998/99 school year:

- A total of 9,127 students had 10+ unexcused absences.
- High schools with lowest percentages for attendance were Wythe, Kennedy and Jefferson in order of severity, with Wythe having the lowest.

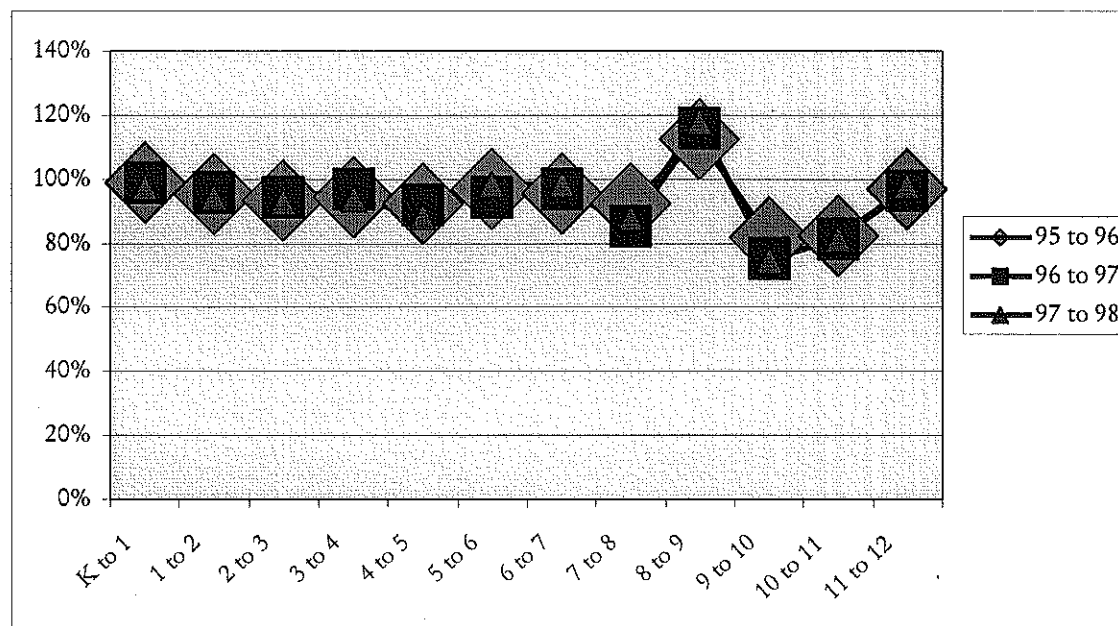
- High school attendance ranged overall around high 70 percents or low 80 percents.
- Mosby and Chandler middle schools had lower percentages of attendance than other middle schools for 98/99 school year.
- All middle school attendance ranged from mid 80 percents to mid 90 percents.
- Elementary school attendance ranged from low 90 percents to high 90 percents.

According to 1999/00 school year data, RPS students with six or more unexcused absences:

- A grand total of 11,696 students with 2,551 special education students missed 6 or more unexcused absences in 1998/99.
- Highest percentages of absences came from sixth through tenth graders, with the highest percent by far existing for ninth-graders [855 (6th. graders), 854 (7th. graders), 909 (8th. graders), 1,376 (9th. graders) & 888 (10th. graders)].



One of the principal investigators for this study accessed the data file for fall membership by grade level for 1995 – 1998 (only years available online) from the Virginia Department of Education’s web site and calculated a persistence rate for each grade-to-year transition (i.e., kindergarten in 1995 to first grade in 1996). The kindergarten-to-first grade persistence rate was computed as the September 30, 1996 first grade membership divided by the previous years – September 30, 1995 –kindergarten membership. Persistence rates for other grade levels were computed in a similar manner across all years and displayed in the graph shown in Figure 3,



below.

Figure 3. Grade-by-grade membership persistence rates, 1995-to-1996, 1996-to-1997, and 1997-to-1998.

This graph clearly shows a drop in membership from ninth to tenth grade across all of the years included. While some of the drop in membership between ninth and tenth grade may be

due to losses to schools outside of the division from the influx of ninth graders during the prior year, the actual number of students lost between ninth and tenth grade far exceeds the number gained between eighth and ninth grade. Similar calculations were made for the other MERC school divisions and all showed the same trend – gains in membership between eighth and ninth grade, followed by losses between ninth and tenth. Consistent with what is noted in the literature, those divisions with the greatest percentages of at-risk students show the most dramatic effects.

Summary from Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysis

Richmond Public Schools has invested time, energy, and valuable resources into providing a comprehensive attendance plan, a computer-based attendance tracking system for middle and high school students, and support programs and collaborative inter-agencies to promote appropriate student attendance. Those personnel and other public support agency representatives interviewed were exemplary in their dedication and flexibility to work with troubled Richmond Public School children.

Despite these efforts, absenteeism, truancy and dropouts are serious academic and social problems for the division. Those students who miss school gradually increase from sixth grade through ninth grade when many students drop out. Those that remain in tenth grade, of course, show an improved attendance rate from then through twelfth grade. Students who are enrolled at the end of a school year and do not return the next year (W8 report) even though there is no record of a request for school records from another school, are dropped from the attendance rolls. One reason the number of these students is so large (600 to 700 students or more yearly) is because many of the students are transient, moving school to school within and across school years, with the receiving school entering them as new registrants rather than re-entered students.

The number of students transported to diversion centers and tracked as dropouts has decreased over the past three school years. Dedicated workers in the field credit this decrease to a shift in emphasis to earlier prevention due to home visits. The Department of Safety and Security reported that over 2,000 doors were knocked on to encourage parents to get their truant children back in school and to make follow-up visits. The director described this as a “humongous” increase over the previous years. Other intervention strategies include “sweeps” to pick up truant students and longer follow-up to check up on students returned to schools from diversion centers.

Housing authority attendance officers are responsible for working in their assigned buildings to locate and work with families to ensure that students are in school. Those families in non-compliance with attendance laws and regulations can have their housing leases terminated and be asked to vacate their homes. Those in the field have mixed feelings about this threat to families, preferring to try and convince family members to come on board as a team to help get their children back in school. Also, those children defined as “out of control” by parents may cause families to lose housing, which only contributes further to schooling issues.

RPS middle and high schools are challenged to deal with these absenteeism and truancy issues. Students returning to school after missing several weeks of school are so far behind in their academic work and so unhappy to be there that in most cases their behavior is not acceptable. Teachers, already stressed with other academic concerns like preparing students for SOL assessments, are forced to spend valuable time dealing with these students, who have special academic, social, and emotional needs. Principals are challenged to welcome these students back into their schools, who often return with inappropriate attitudes, incomplete or non-existent records, no parental presence or support, and poor academic skills. As one administrator described this position, “Our job is really to try and love the unlovely. Sometimes

it's just really hard to love these kids." School attendance support teams are challenged to develop strategies to re-connect these students to their classrooms, to their peers and school social activities. With all of these difficulties, sometimes it is understandable that eyes are closed as these students slip right back out the back door ("revolving school doors" syndrome).

Interpretation from this aggregation of both qualitative and quantitative data resulted in the development of a model, which is a modification of the model constructed by the American Institute for Research (AIR) and the John Hopkins Center for Research for Disadvantaged Students (see Figure 1). As depicted in Figure 4, this model shows that RPS students' success in being productive and graduating from high school depends on a pyramid of support systems all operating efficiently and collaborating together for student success. A further breakdown of this model by grade level is represented in the continuing flow chart, shown in Figures 5 through 7 on the following pages.



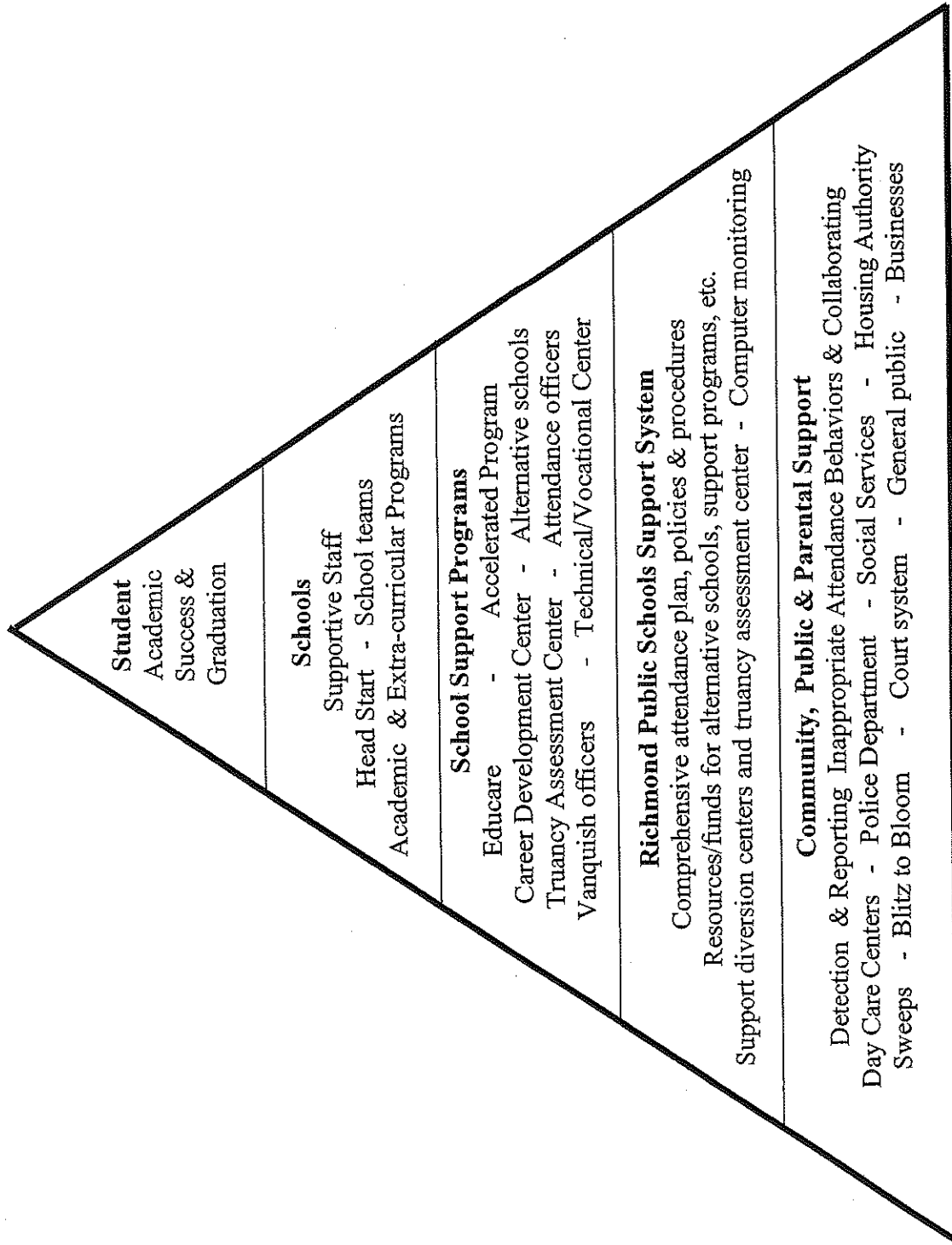


Figure 4. Model of support systems/interventions necessary for student success and graduation.

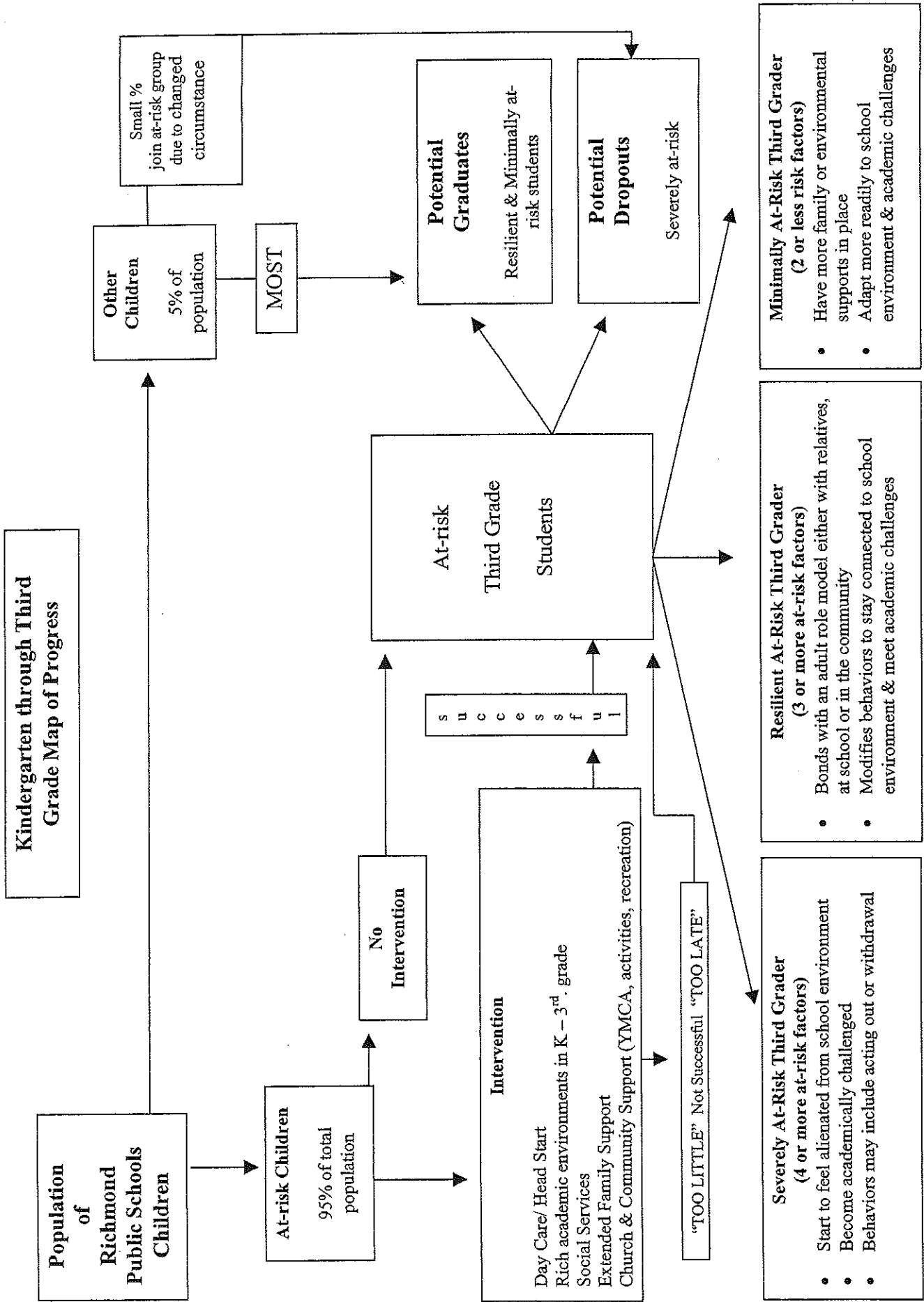


Figure 5. Map of progress from kindergarten through third grade.

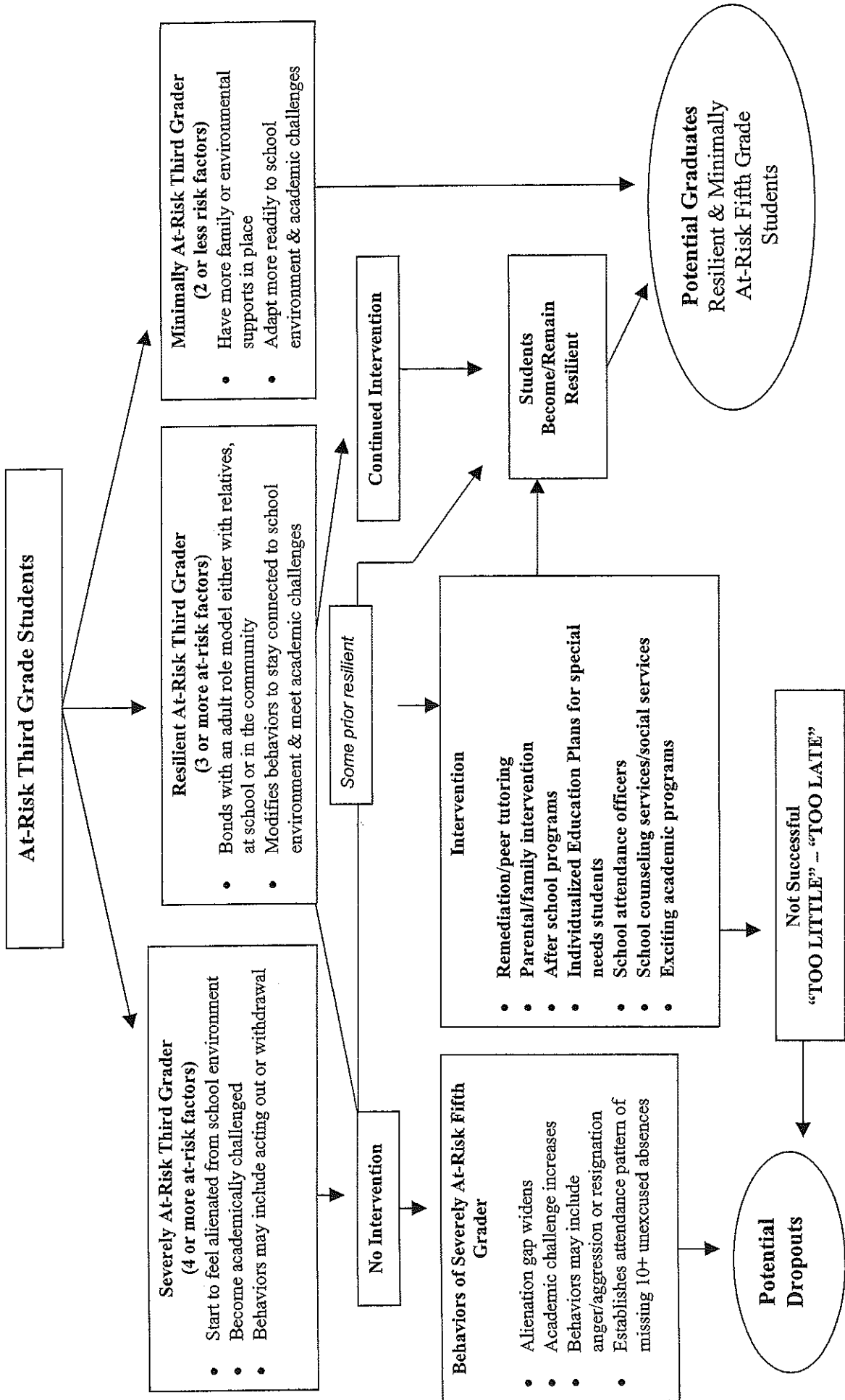


Figure 6. Map of progress from fourth through fifth grade (continued flow chart).

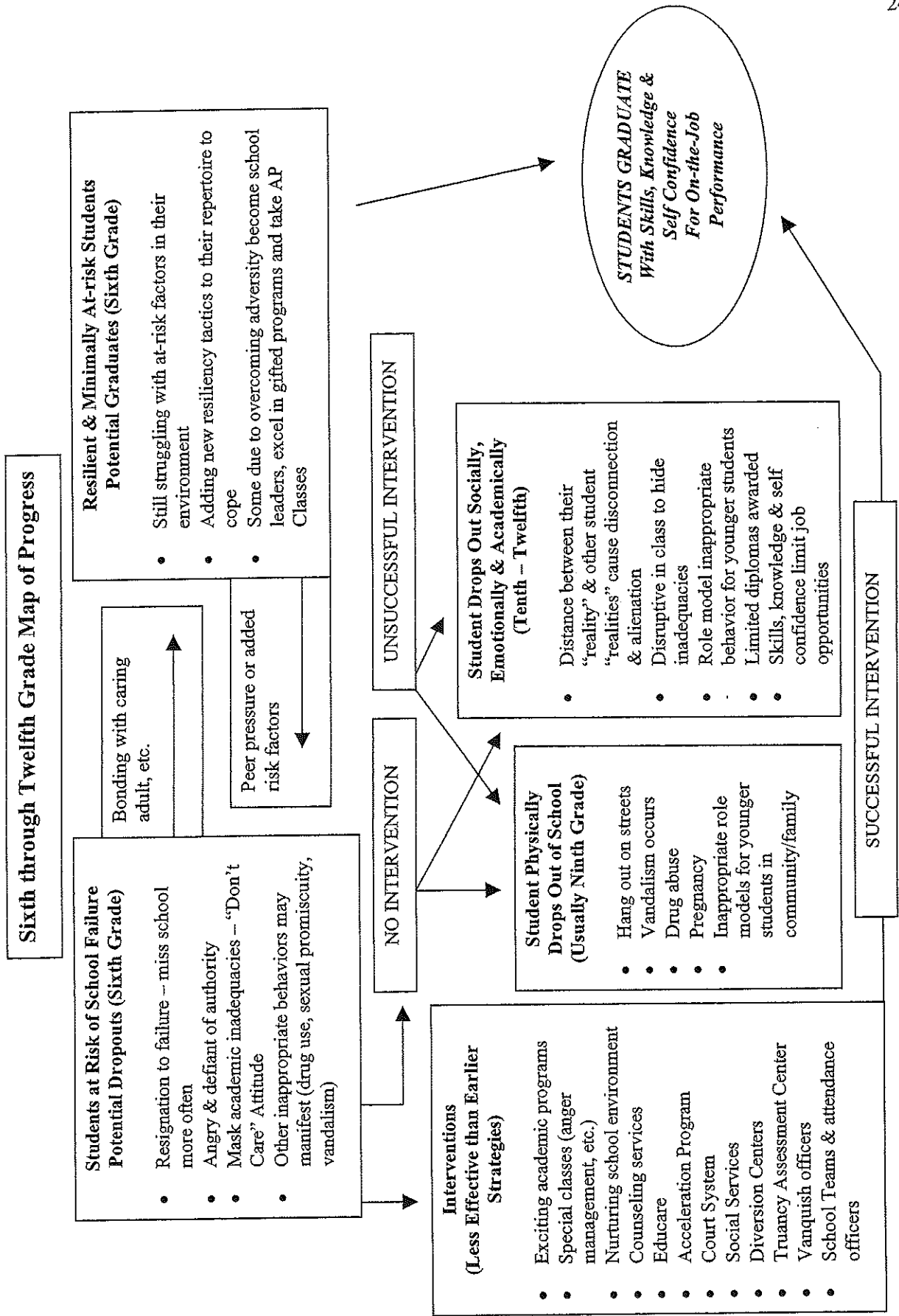


Figure 7. Map of progress from sixth through twelfth grade (continued flow chart).



Discussion and Recommendations

The following discussion and recommendations were composed after data analysis comparisons to the tentative evaluation models (Figures 2 and 4) prepared for Phase I of this study. This comparison of “what is” to the “ideal”, and created in the models, resulted in several recommendations for Richmond Public Schools.

Field work and collaboration with Richmond Public School personnel resulted in clear definitions of what is “working” and what is “not working” with attendance and truancy policies in this system. Strengths, which have culminated in a decrease in dropout rates over the last five years and fewer numbers of truant student pick-ups for diversion centers over the last three years, are both varied and many, and include the following:

- 1) Comprehensive attendance plan and policies have been adopted by RPS.
- 2) Personnel dedicated to the task of increasing attendance and decreasing truancy and work collaboratively to meet the needs of at-risk students.
- 3) Earlier and more personalized intervention through housing development attendance officers and other intervention personnel is impacting families more directly to keep students in school.
- 4) Classes and activities provided by diversion centers for both students and parents for anger management, parenting, socialization skills, and entertainment etc. are impacting appropriate student behaviors, which in turn impact individual student and family attendance policy.

The researchers have identified issues surrounding the implementation of RPS policies and procedures impacting attendance and truancy. The following are recommendations and sources for model use and verification in data analysis procedures. The first three are related to

the school interdisciplinary teams, identified in the attendance model (Figure 2) under “School Intervention”. Recommendations four and five are addressed in an expanded model (Figure 4) under “Richmond Public Schools Support System”. And, the last two recommendations could be a joint responsibility addressed in both Figures 2 and 4 under school and community components.

- 1) Interventions need to be focused earlier before symptoms present themselves in first and second grades. (Validation through interviews is consistent with literature (Cohen et. al., 1995, Doll & Lyon, 1998 & Milstein & Henry, 2000).

Recommendation: Identify the most at-risk students (homeless students, students who missed 10 or more days in kindergarten, etc.) from kindergarten and first grade. These students and their parents would then have the option to participate in a school-mentoring program using parent/community volunteers as mentors for students and support groups for parents with students in the program.

- 2) Middle and high school attendance/truancy issues focus on identification, monitoring and reporting. (Document review validates this finding.)

Recommendation: This presents a different perspective since identifying, monitoring and reporting attendance and truancy are all extremely important and necessary school functions. However, because monitoring and reporting systems are in place, efforts must be made to ensure that each step of the process is implemented as designed. Then, the focus needs to shift to planning strategies to prevent and intervene so that minor attendance problems do not turn in to major truancy issues. Each school needs at least one truancy prevention/intervention staff member to work with the school attendance support team to plan and implement both prevention and intervention

strategies for students in that school. Existing grant monies for dropout prevention and safe and nurturing schools, as well as parent and community resources could be tapped to help support the program.

- 3) Schools have many issues to consider and attendance/truancy is just one of many. (Interviews verify this study finding.)

Recommendation: Attendance and truancy issues are too complex and impacting on student academic progress to be addressed through one school wide committee/school team. Therefore, a separate committee needs to plan, help implement, evaluate and revise school practices to deal with inappropriate student attendance behaviors in their respective schools. This committee could operate as a sub-committee with recommendations to the larger overall school team.

- 4) Truant students, regardless of the severity of their attendance problems, are re-introduced into their zoned schools in the same manner. (Interviews were the main source for verification for this important study result.)

Recommendation: Truant students are not all at the same level when returning to their school environments and should be treated according to their status when re-entering school. For example, a student picked up on the streets and brought to one of the diversion centers, who has missed two days of school that week, is completely different in regard to re-entry status than a comparable student who has missed a month or more school or a student identified in a housing development who hasn't been to school all year. One strategy to deal with this re-entry problem might be for the appropriate staff either at the division level or school level to identify ways to appropriately re-introduce students back into their school environments for each category

of severity. Special assistance programs for worst-case scenarios must be in place at the schools to help transition students back into their classrooms or the “revolving door syndrome” will not be broken.

- 5) Re-connection of truant students to school system is sometimes hindered by regulations and time involved to get students into more diversified programs.

(Interviews confirm this study finding.)

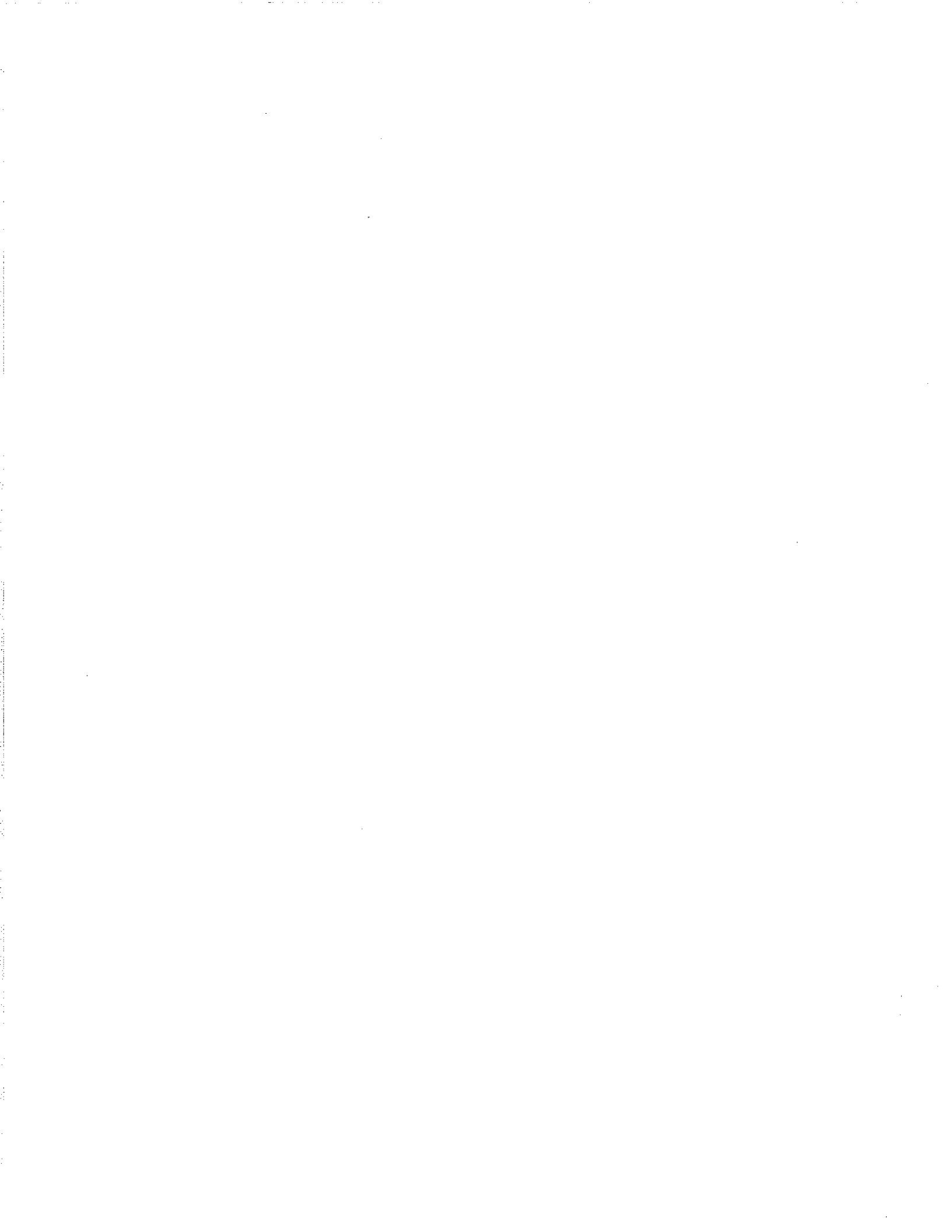
Recommendation: When students are feeling alienated from their regular school programs, sometimes special interests can help re-connect them. For example, students may want to attend the technical center to take classes in eighth or ninth grade and this would be an alternative to dropping out. Therefore, school systems like RPS with a large at-risk population might need to offer technical training services earlier and make it easier for younger students to attend.

- 6) Ninth grade dropout point for many students is not addressed. (Ninth grade dropout rate for RPS confirms this problem and document analysis verifies that no formal procedure is in place to address this important issue.)

Recommendation: Since many RPS students officially drop out of school at ninth grade, it makes sense that an earlier grade should be targeted to educate teachers, administrators, parents and students about possible alternatives. Pamphlets, brochures, and other materials could be distributed in public offices to educate the general public to this very serious problem and to ask for public support for training seminars.

- 7) Community support is not as broad-based as it needs to be. (This study finding was evident through both formal and informal interviews.)

Recommendation: Literature addressing attendance/truancy issues agree that the key to student resiliency, which directly impacts coping in school, is through support systems to moderate risk factors. Since school systems, schools, principals, and teachers are all challenged to provide resources and energy for multiple school programs, it seems logical to look to the community for additional resources. Public relations, good will and trust can all be built through open communication between community leaders, business representatives and school systems/schools. A recommendation to expedite this might include hiring a liaison at the division level to seek out areas for community support and actively collaborate between the school and the public to address attendance incentives, mentoring programs, and other possible attendance public relations issues.



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APPENDIX A

**DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A MODEL TO EVALUATE A
MULTI-AGENCY ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT AND TRUANCY
REDUCTION INITIATIVE**

A MERC 2000-2001 Technical Report Project Proposal

Submitted by:

Richmond City Public Schools

February 16, 2000

Development and Implementation of a Model to Evaluate a Multi-Agency Attendance
Improvement and Truancy Prevention Initiative:
A MERC 2000-2001 Technical Report Project Proposal

Purpose

The purpose of the proposed project is to obtain assistance in the development and implementation of a model for evaluating the effectiveness of Richmond's multi-agency attendance improvement/truancy prevention initiative. In order to develop an evaluation model that is appropriate for a such a complex inter-agency intervention effort and one which will assess the degree of articulation between the components of the intervention (the process by which the intervention is implemented) as well as the outcomes of the intervention, it is proposed that the project include a design-and-data collection phase as well as a process-and-outcomes evaluation phase.

Research Questions

Although additional research questions may emerge as a result of the data collected during the design-and-data collection phase, the following research questions are proposed initially to guide the design and implementation of the project:

Phase I: Design-and-Data Collection Phase

1. What models have been used successfully to evaluate similar inter-agency intervention initiatives and how can these be adapted for Richmond?
2. What are the unique features of the Richmond initiative, what agencies are involved, and what are their roles in the initiative?
3. What goals has each agency developed for the initiative, what are their respective responsibilities in the initiative, and what procedures are in place to ensure that appropriate follow-up occurs at each point in the intervention?
4. What criteria does each agency use to define success and what data are routinely collected at each intervention point relative to the identified success criteria?
5. What are the research traditions of each participating agency and how can these be employed to enhance the validity of the evaluation model?

Phase II: Process-and-Outcomes Evaluation Phase

1. How congruent are each agency's goals for the initiative, how effective is the articulation between them in carrying out their responsibilities, and how well are the follow-up procedures implemented?
2. How effective is the initiative in improving student attendance and reducing truancy?

Significance of the Project

This project has both immediate and long-term significance not only for Richmond, but also for other school divisions that are engaged in multi-agency initiatives to intervene on behalf of children. Developing an evaluative design that is based on the research traditions of the participating agencies will not only enhance the likelihood of its

acceptance for this project, but will also serve as a model for other school divisions to use in similar situations.

Methods of Inquiry

In order to increase the likelihood that the conduct of the evaluation and its findings will be accepted and used by the participating agencies, it is proposed that a mixed-method design be used for this project. This type of methodology will combine the use of document review and analysis, survey research, interviews and observations, plus analysis of quantitative data related to student attendance and truancy.

Data Sources/Evidence

Sources of data for this project will include documents of student attendance plans, policies, and procedures; school division attendance notification records and student attendance reports; records of students served at the truancy centers; principals and school attendance workers; staff at the truancy centers.

Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics, including frequency tables and means, will be produced for the quantitative data collected. Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook (Miles & Huberman, 1994) will be used as a guide for developing appropriate data analysis strategies for document review, interview, observational, and other qualitative data collected in the project.

Time Table

The following is a tentative work plan outline and time schedule for implementing the major activities of the study:

	----- 2000 -----							-- 2001 --	
	May	Jun	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Conduct literature and document reviews			---						
Identify participating agencies & key staff in each			---						
Develop & administer survey of activities at each intervention point			----						
Analyze data & develop proposed evaluation model for review			----						
Gather & analyze attendance & truancy data for 1999-2000			----						
Prepare final design for evaluation model			----						
Implement model: Conduct observations/interviews, collect & analyze data (1 st semester of 2000-01)				-----					
Present final report on the project								-----	

Budget

The proposed budget for this project is shown below. It includes expenditures for researcher time and travel. Additional research support, clerical support, office supplies, and report printing will be provided by the school division as in-kind contributions.

Proposed Budget

Study Investigator	\$2,4
	50.0
	0

1 person for 9.8 days @ \$250 per day

1.0 day initial consultation, planning, background data collection

1.0 day literature & document review

.5 day survey development

.5 day consultation on data collection &

analysis

1.0 day model development

1.5 days observations/interviews

3.0 days data analysis

.3 day final consultation

1.0 day report preparation

Travel		50.0 0
Additional Research Support	In- Kind	
Survey duplication & administration		
Data collection & analysis		
Secretarial Support	In- Kind	
Office Supplies	In- Kind	<hr/>
Total		\$2,5 00.0 0

APPENDIX B

Table of Correlation

Correlations of 1998/99 Absenteeism and 1999 SOL Scores

	ABS9899	ABS990	ENG3SS9	ENG5SS9	HSS3SS9	HSS5SS9	MTH3SS9	MTH5SS9	SCI3SS99	SCI5SS99
ABS9899	1.000	.609**	-.209**	-.207**	-.219**	-.205**	-.228**	-.216**	-.195**	-.199**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	15836	12127	2117	1740	2112	1746	2129	1744	2117	1745
ABS9900	.609**	1.000	-.196**	-.098	-.190**	-.042	-.209**	-.210	-.188**	-.077
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.657	.000	.849	.000	.347	.000	.727
N	12127	13300	1896	23	1894	23	1907	22	1896	23
ENG3SS99	-.209**	-.196**	1.000	.740**	.737**	.737**	.737**	.751**	.751**	.743**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	2117	1896	2145	0	2124	0	2137	0	2127	0
ENG5SS99	-.207**	-.098	.740**	1.000	.737**	.737**	.737**	.721**	.721**	.743**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.657	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	1740	23	0	1745	0	1738	0	1740	0	1737
HSS3SS99	-.219**	-.190**	.740**	.737**	1.000	.754**	.754**	.810**	.810**	.750**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	2112	1894	2124	0	2140	0	2129	0	2127	0
HSS5SS99	-.205**	-.042	.737**	.737**	.754**	1.000	.699**	.699**	.776**	.719**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.849	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
N	1746	23	0	1738	0	1752	0	1741	0	1746
MTH3SS99	-.228**	-.209**	.737**	.754**	.754**	.699**	1.000	.776**	.776**	.719**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
N	2129	1907	2137	0	2129	0	2158	0	2133	0
MTH5SS99	-.216**	-.210	.721**	.721**	.721**	.699**	.776**	1.000	.776**	.719**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.347	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	1744	22	0	1740	0	1741	0	1749	0	1739
SCI3SS99	-.195**	-.188**	.751**	.810**	.810**	.776**	.776**	.776**	1.000	.719**
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	2117	1896	2127	0	2127	0	2133	0	2144	0
SCI5SS99	-.199**	-.077	.743**	.743**	.743**	.750**	.750**	.750**	.750**	1.000
Pearson Correlation										
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.727	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	1745	23	0	1737	0	1746	0	1739	0	1751

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

a. Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.



APPENDIX C

Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol for Diversion Center Personnel (Introduction/overview of the study, background about MERC's involvement)

1. What is your position?
2. How long have you held this position?
 - Here at the Center?
 - Overall?
3. Briefly summarize what you do every day.
4. What is the main purpose for this Center?
5. How many students do you serve? Daily? Weekly?
 - What age group of students are normally brought here?
 - How long do students normally remain here?
 - Where do they go when they leave here?
6. Are all students brought here truant students? How many (what percentage) are return offenders?
7. Are crime issues associated with these students? If so, could you describe a typical incident?
8. Are violent behaviors something that may occur here? From what source (students? Parents?)
Can you tell me what this might look like?
9. Are follow up services provided? If so, what type of services?
10. Does the center provide other services that we have not discussed? If so, what are they?
11. If you could speak with the voice of the students brought here, what would they want to tell me?

**Interview Protocol for Principals/School Administrators
(Introduction/overview of the study)**

1. What is your position?
2. How long have you held this position?
 - In this school?
 - Overall?
3. How many students attend this school?
4. How important is student attendance here? Rate it on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 representing "Not important at all" to 10 representing "Extremely important" in relationship to other things that go on here.
5. What educational opportunities are provided for your students concerning positive aspects of good attendance? For parents?
6. Is absenteeism a serious problem? Could you rate it on a scale from 1 – 10 with 1 representing "Not at all serious" to 10 representing "Extremely serious" in relation to other problems at this school?
7. Are dropouts a serious problem at your school? Could you rate this problem on a scale from 1 – 10 with 1 representing "Not at all serious" to 10 representing "Extremely serious" in relation to other problems at this school?
8. How many students would you consider absentee or truancy problems?
9. Are these students associated with other school problems? If so, can you tell me what these problems are?
10. Does your school have a working School Attendance Support Team (SAST)? If so, how does this team function?
11. How can RPS best improve their attendance plan or procedures?
12. Do you ever see a success story involving a successful return to school with any of these students? If so, could you describe a case for me?
13. How familiar are you with the truancy diversion centers?
 - Have any of your students been sent to the centers?
 - Do you think the diversion centers are effective? If so, how? If not, why?
14. Does the Truancy Assessment Center provide services for any of your students? If so, what services?
15. If you could speak with the voice of one of your truant/chronically absent students, what would you most want to tell me?

**Interview Protocol for School Attendance Officer
(Overview/purpose of the project, background on MERC)**

1. What is your position?
2. How long have you held this position?
 - In this school?
 - Overall?
3. Briefly summarize what you do every day. How much direct contact do you have with students? Parents?
4. How important is attendance here? Rate it on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 representing "Not important at all" to 10 representing "Extremely important" in relationship to other things that go on here.
5. What percent of your time each day is spent on attendance/absenteeism/truancy issues (i.e., working with attendance records, etc.)?
6. About how many students are enrolled at this school?
 - How many are absent each day? Excused? Unexcused?
 - How many students with absenteeism or truancy problems do you count daily?
7. How would you rate absenteeism on a scale from 1 to 10 (with 1 representing "Not a problem" and 10 representing "Very serious problem") in relation to other problems at this school?
8. If a student is absent 5 days, what actions does the school take? After 10 days? 15?
9. Do students ever "drop out" of this school? How does this happen?
10. What do you think are the main issues that cause these students to be absent, truant, or "drop out"?
11. What could RPS do to help these students?
12. If you could speak with the voice of one of these students, what would you tell me?

**Interview Protocol for Chief of Security &/or Security Officer Personnel
(Introduction/overview of the study)**

1. What is your position?
2. How long have you held this position?
3. Briefly summarize the major responsibilities of your position.
4. What percent of your time/your staff's time is spent on attendance/absenteeism/truancy issues?
5. How many students do you/your staff deal with daily? Weekly?
 - In two or three sentences, how would you describe the students you work/your staff works with every day?
 - Are crime issues associated with these students? If so, could you describe a typical incident?
 - Are violent behaviors something that you/your staff have to deal with? From what source (Students? Parents?) Can you tell me what this might look like?
6. What percentage of the students have absenteeism or truancy problems?
 - On the average, how old are these students who have truancy problems?
 - What other problems, if any, do they have?
 - Do you provide follow up services? If so, what type of services?
7. What do you think are the main issues that cause these students to be absent, truant, or "drop out"?
8. If you could speak with the voice of these students, what do you think they would want to tell me?
9. Do you ever have success stories? What can you tell me about one of these?

**Interview Protocol for Social Worker
(Introduction/overview of the study, background on MERC)**

1. What is your position?
2. How long have you held this position?
3. Briefly summarize the major responsibilities of your position.
4. How important is student attendance to RPS? Rate it on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 representing "Not important at all" to 10 representing "Extremely important" in relationship to other things in the school system.
5. How many students do you deal with daily? Weekly?
 - What percentage of these students have attendance problems?
 - What other problems, if any, do they have?
 - What is the average age of truant students you work with?
 - If you could speak with the voice of one of these students, what would you most want to say?
6. Is absenteeism a serious problem at for RPS? Could you rate it on a scale from 1 – 10 with 1 representing "Not at all serious" to 10 representing "Extremely serious" in relation to other problems in the school system?
7. Are dropouts a serious problem for RPS? Could you rate this problem on a scale from 1 – 10 with 1 representing "Not at all serious" to 10 representing "Extremely serious" in relation to other problems for this school division?
8. How many students would you consider absentee or truancy problems in the division?
 - Are these students associated with other school problems?
 - If so, what can you tell me about these problems?
 - What are the main issues contributing to this problem?
9. How many RPS students/families go to court each week? Month
10. Is the process working to get children back in schools? If yes, how? If not, why not?
11. How can the whole system work better to keep students in school?
12. Do you ever have success stories? What can you tell me about one of these?

