

**Assessing School Attendance Problems and
Truancy Intervention in Maryland:
A Synthesis of Evidence from Baltimore City
and the Lower Eastern Shore**



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Executive Summary

The Maryland Judiciary shares responsibility with Maryland's Executive Branch and local school systems in enforcing the state's mandatory school attendance and truancy laws. An innovation to address the truancy issue was introduced in 2004 when the General Assembly authorized the establishment of the Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP) in the First Judicial Circuit comprised of four counties located on Maryland's Lower Eastern Shore. The authorizing legislation also required the Judiciary to perform an evaluation of the program. This initiative stimulated an intensive process of policy and program analysis by the Judiciary concerning the most appropriate, efficient and effective roles of courts and judges in responding to truancy. This effort was given additional impetus as the result of the State Justice Institute's (SJI) award of a grant to the Judiciary in 2008. Under the SJI grant, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) evaluated three alternative approaches to truancy intervention in Baltimore City and the First Judicial Circuit (including TRPP), assessed the context of truancy in Baltimore City and the First Judicial Circuit and synthesized the findings from this research to support an assessment of the school attendance and truancy intervention policy and program framework from the perspective of the Judiciary. The current report represents this synthesis.

The Maryland programs discussed in this report represent a continuum of court involvement, with no judicial presence in BSMART, participation of judges in an unofficial capacity in TCP, and judges exercising their full authority in TRPP. Process and outcome evaluations provide some level of support for continuing the BSMART, TCP, and TRPP interventions.

Research has shown that truancy is related to a number of negative social and behavioral outcomes, including poor school performance, high dropout rates, and increased involvement in juvenile and adult criminal behavior. Truancy is typically caused by factors from four levels: the individual, the family, the school, and the neighborhood and community. Recommended approaches to reducing truancy emphasize family involvement, interagency collaboration, provision of services that address the needs of students and their families, and incentives and sanctions.

The contextual analysis provided documentation of the levels of truancy in school districts across Maryland and the relationship of truancy levels to other variables. Qualitative information provided by respondents involved in school attendance issues in the study jurisdictions mirrored the national perspective that truancy is related to a complex, multi-level set of factors and requires holistic solutions.

Statewide in Maryland, 2.25% of students (or roughly 20,000 students) were identified as habitually truant during the 2009-2010 school year because they were absent without a valid excuse for more than 20% of school days. The rate of habitual truancy varies by jurisdiction. Among the jurisdictions that are the focus of this report, the counties on the Lower Eastern Shore (Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester) have habitual truancy rates ranging from 0.29% to 1.49%, whereas Baltimore City has a habitual truancy rate of 8.00%. Although the overall rates for the counties on the Lower Eastern Shore are relatively low, in three of the four counties, truancy rates in individual schools exceeded the state average.

Analysis of data across Maryland school systems revealed the following relationships between truancy and other variables:

- strong positive correlations between rates of habitual truancy and dropout rates, African American students as a percentage of school enrollment, special education students as a percentage of school enrollment, and teen birth rates
- strong negative correlations between rates of habitual truancy and white students as a percentage of school enrollment and percentages of adults in the community who are high school graduates
- moderate positive correlation between rates of habitual truancy and poverty rates
- weak positive correlation between rates of habitual truancy and percent of children living in poverty
- weak negative correlation between rates of habitual truancy and median household incomes
- no significant correlation between rates of habitual truancy and unemployment rates or rates of referrals for juvenile delinquency

With a few exceptions, Baltimore City and the counties on the Lower Eastern Shore rank among the highest in the state in those variables for which positive correlations with truancy were found (e.g., dropout rates, poverty levels, and teen birth rates) and among the lowest in the state in those variables that have negative correlations with truancy (e.g., median household income and high school completion rates).

Knowledgeable informants, including parents, school officials, legal officials, and service providers, identified the following factors as contributing to truancy problems in the five study jurisdictions: impact of poverty, value placed on education, individual needs of children, inadequate monitoring, transportation challenges, safety, and family difficulties. While acknowledging the need to hold parents accountable, respondents generally favored non-punitive solutions to truancy that address the needs of families.

The *Dropout Prevention Resource Guide* published by the Maryland State Department of Education identifies 265 initiatives in Maryland schools that address many of the issues that can impact school attendance. These initiatives include alternative programs, alternative school schedules, alternative schools, attendance accountability, clinical interventions, community service, enhanced counseling, graduation preparation, holistic intervention, justice system coordination, life skill development, mentoring, student parenting, specialized staff, tutoring. The *Dropout Prevention Resource Guide* does not present school attendance as a central issue to be addressed in reducing dropouts, however, and MSDE does not appear to have a policy or operating focus on truancy and school attendance problems.

The three Maryland programs that were evaluated are Baltimore Students: Mediating About Reducing Truancy (BSMART), Truancy Court Program (TCP) and Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP). BSMART is operated by the University of Maryland School of Law's Center for Dispute Resolution in conjunction with Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). TCP is operated by the University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) in conjunction with BCPSS. TRPP evaluated in these reports are operated in the Circuit Courts for Dorchester County, Somerset County, Wicomico County and Worcester County. These programs reflect the national literature concerning the intent and design of truancy interventions. They have a problem-solving orientation, involve both parents and students, and are progressive responses involving interagency collaboration. These programs also represent a continuum of court involvement, with no judicial presence in BSMART,

participation of judges in an unofficial capacity in TCP, and judges exercising their full authority in TRPP.

The BSMART intervention is a one-time voluntary, confidential mediation offered by C-DRUM that involves teachers and parents of students who are beginning to show attendance problems. The program is directed mainly at elementary school students.

TCP is a voluntary, 10-week, in-school intervention program for elementary and middle school students who have between 5 and 20 unexcused absences during the prior two grading periods. A team comprising CFCC staff, school staff, and volunteer judges meets with the students on a weekly basis, assesses student and family need, and provides mentoring, counseling, and service referrals.

TRPP is a court-based program that provides a streamlined procedure for school systems to initiate court action and substitutes criminal offenses with civil violations. The process administered by the juvenile court includes a family assessment, court orders for community services to address problems contributing to truancy, and monitoring of the child's progress for several months.

Individuals involved in planning and delivering the three subject interventions had generally positive appraisals of the programs. Parent/guardian and student participants in BSMART and TCP also were generally positive about their experiences. (The evaluation of TRPP did not include interviews or surveys of parents/guardians or students.) One common problem for BSMART and TCP was maintaining accurate contact information for many of the families.

The evaluations found limited evidence that the three programs are effective in reducing absenteeism. For BSMART, attendance improved for 61% of the referrals who attended mediation and 63% of the cases that were referred to BSMART but did not attend mediation. There was no significant statistical difference in the change in absentee rate between referrals who attended mediation and those who did not. These findings suggest that the mediation component of BSMART is not the intervention's critical ingredient. For TCP, there was no significant statistical difference in attendance between participants and a comparison group of non-participants. Participants that graduated from TCP had improved attendance when compared to non-participants and participants that did not graduate. Improvements in attendance were seen

in TRPP program completers as compared to non-completers, but motivational differences rather than program effects could be the causal factor.

The results summarized above provide some support for continuing the BSMART, TCP, and TRPP interventions. Ideally, expansion of these programs or their use as models would be predicated on more definitive evidence. Additional data and rigorous evaluation designs are needed to produce such evidence.

Dimensions of analysis associated with the problem of truancy can be identified at the state system level, the community level, the family level and the individual student level. Policies and programs intended to ameliorate school attendance problems and truancy should take into account critical factors within each of these levels of analysis. Interventions should be designed with the following considerations in mind:

- Holistic approach to student needs.
- Family involvement
- Early, progressive and continuous intervention
- Inter-organizational collaboration and cooperation
- Accountability

The Judiciary should consider continuing its support for the two external programs of BSMART and TCP with the idea of improving the operation of these programs and conducting more rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness. In addition to investing in BSMART and TCP, the Judiciary could explore other interventions and test these approaches in select jurisdictions that incorporate the characteristics described above.

The State of Maryland could exercise additional control over truancy policy by mandating collaboration among public agencies in truancy reduction efforts and penalizing jurisdictions that fail to address high levels of truancy. The State also could make funding available for jurisdictions to implement proven truancy reduction programs.

Introduction and Overview

An Examination of Truancy and Truancy Intervention in Maryland

A growing body of literature has demonstrated the relationship between truancy and a number of negative social and behavioral outcomes, including increased involvement in juvenile and adult criminal behavior. In response to the demonstrated link between truancy and undesirable social outcomes, in recent decades a wide variety of truancy/school attendance interventions have been introduced throughout the United States. Among these interventions are programs designed to directly or indirectly involve courts and judges in responding to truancy. To date there has been very little empirical assessment of such truancy reduction intervention programs (Daining, 2007).

This report is part of a series of reports intended to bridge that gap through evaluations of truancy interventions, a review of the context of truancy in Maryland and a synthesis of research findings. The first report in the series considered an evaluation of the Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP), a court-based truancy reduction intervention in the juvenile courts of the First Judicial Circuit of Maryland. A second report documented an evaluation of the school-based Baltimore City Truancy Court Program (TCP). The third report addressed Baltimore Students: Mediation about Truancy Reduction (B-SMART), a mediation program that works with students, parents, and schools to improve communication and address factors that may be contributing to student truancy. Each program's impact on students' academic performance and attendance, and court-involvement where appropriate, was also considered. The fourth report, "A Contextual Analysis: Truancy in Baltimore City and the First judicial Circuit", analyzed the social, economic and other correlates and indicators of truancy in Maryland. The current report represents a synthesis of findings included in the other four reports and additional relevant information.

Whereas TRPP is operated by the Maryland Judiciary, TCP is operated by the Center for Families, Children, and the Courts at the University of Baltimore School of Law, and B-SMART is operated by the Center for Dispute Resolution at the University of Maryland School of Law. The results from the evaluations of these three programs combined with the contextual analysis and the synthesis report will inform the future role of the Maryland Judiciary in truancy intervention. Due to the relationship among the evaluations and their shared objective, they draw

heavily from the same literature. Since the Judiciary’s 2008 TRPP evaluation report to the Maryland General Assembly included a review of relevant literature, this report will frequently cite that report and its sources.¹

The evaluation of three truancy intervention programs was conducted by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) in collaboration with state universities. The University of Maryland School of Social Work led the evaluation of TRPP and BSMART, and preparation of the contextual analysis, while the University of Maryland-College Park, Institute for Governmental Service and Research (IGSR) evaluated TCP and provided data analysis for BSMART. The researchers consulted on a regular basis to ensure consistent evaluation methodology across the studies. AOC staff edited the reports and performed additional data analysis.

The Challenge of Defining Truancy

The study of truancy in the United States has proven to be difficult for researchers. Problems associated with the study of truancy begin with the definition of truancy. Definitions of school attendance, including what constitutes truancy, vary widely across the United States and even within jurisdictions. Variation in terminology and the meaning of terms impacts the ability of researchers to describe and make comparisons among patterns of school attendance problems across the country. Data may refer to “attendance,” “absence,” “absenteeism,” “chronic absenteeism,” “truancy,” “truant,” “habitual truancy,” “habitual truant,” “school refusal,” “compulsory school attendance,” and other terms meant to elucidate the field, often adding confusion. Although attempts have been made to establish uniformity in definition through federal and state government action, ambiguity regarding these definitions remains, frustrating the efforts of policy-makers, administrators and researchers. Inferences drawn from existing research indicate that variations in definitions associated with school attendance problems and truancy may be at least partially associated with the purposes of the organizations that promulgate the definitions. While school administrators in a jurisdiction may focus on reducing “absenteeism,” juvenile authorities in the same jurisdiction may focus on acting on their statutory mandate to enforce “truancy” laws (Daining, 2007).

¹ Daining, C., Bryant, V., & Crumpton, C.D. (2008). *An evaluation of the Truancy Reduction Pilot Program of the First Judicial Circuit of Maryland*. Annapolis, MD: Maryland Judiciary, Administrative Office of the Courts.

In Maryland, truancy is defined as “a student who is absent without lawful cause...from the attendance for a school day or portion of it” (Code of Md. Regs. 13A.08.01.04B). Truancy rises to “habitual truancy” “if the student is unlawfully absent from school a number of days or portion of days in excess of 20 percent of the school days within a marking period, semester, or year” (Code of Md. Regs. 13A.08.01.04C). As will be discussed elsewhere in this report, definitions of absence and habitual truancy vary, as the State grants local school boards discretion in defining school attendance policies and in defining habitual truancy in a more stringent manner (see Code of Md. Regs. 13A.08.01.04A and C).

Truancy as a Societal Problem

The causes of truancy are multilayered and highly correlated; a child’s decision to not attend school is influenced by a number of personal and environmental factors. A study by Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007) of sixth graders in high poverty, predominantly minority schools in Philadelphia found that low attendance is often accompanied by misbehavior and low grades in math and English, which can ultimately lead to low rates of graduation. Although the specific factors vary for individual children, truancy is typically caused by factors from four levels: the individual, the family, the school, and the neighborhood and community (Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001; Daining, 2007; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; McCluskey, Bynum & Patchin, 2004).

At the individual level, student behavior and misbehavior and academic achievement are key factors contributing to chronic truancy. Academic failure negatively affects a child’s engagement and contributes to misbehavior, which sets a child apart from the school community. These factors correlate in a cycle that leads to further disengagement, truancy and academic failure (Balfanz et al., 2007; Daining, 2007; McCluskey et al., 2004; Strickland, 1998). Family life can also play a significant role in truancy. Disorganized or dysfunctional home life leads to high levels of family stress, which can cause children to not attend school (Daining, 2007; Teasley, 2004). Balfanz and Byrnes (as cited in Balfanz et al., 2007) found that parental involvement also has a significant effect on students’ attendance in school. At the school level, children are affected by fear of school violence and the disengagement of themselves, other students, teachers, and administrators (Baker et al., 2001; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC), 2002; Daining, 2007; Garry, 1996). At the community and neighborhood level, although race has not been found to be a high predictor of truancy (Balfanz et al., 2007),

poverty (indicated by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch) is associated with higher rates of absenteeism (Baker et al., 2001; Daining, 2007; Epstein & Sheldon, 2001; McCray, 2006; National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), 2006). The relationships between truancy, poverty and race at the school district level of analysis in Maryland are considered later in the current report.

Consequences of Truancy

Researchers have demonstrated a substantial link between truancy and school completion. In 2002, the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC, now named The Partnership for Families and Children) examined the relationship between chronic truancy and persistence in school. The CFFC study found that 70 percent of suspended youth were chronically truant in the six months before suspension and 80 percent of dropouts were chronically truant. Similarly, students in Philadelphia who attended school less than 70 percent of the time in ninth grade had a greater than 75 percent chance of dropping out (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

Existing research shows that truancy during middle school in particular predicts high dropout levels. One study found that a majority of students who later dropped out showed significant indicators for dropping out as early as the sixth grade (Balfanz & Boccanfuso, 2007). Students with a sixth grade attendance rate below 90 percent had an on-time graduation rate of only 18 to 26 percent. In high-poverty urban schools, sixth graders who miss 20% or more of the school year do not progress in school; rather they drop out before high school graduation. In Baltimore's high poverty neighborhoods, the percent of students who miss more than 30 days of school in a school year jumped from 15% in the elementary grades to 55% in the middle grades (Balfanz et al., 2007). Disengagement from school coupled with a high rate of suspension or expulsion and academic failure due to extended absences result in a high probability that a child will drop out of school prior to graduation. The relationship between habitual truancy and dropout rates on the school district level of analysis is considered later in the current report.

The consequences of chronic truancy last long after children complete or leave school, and can negatively impact their lives. In a study of low-income African American youth from Baltimore City, students who did not graduate from high school were less likely to be employed and had lower incomes than those who completed high school. These differences were noted

among adults at ages 19-20 and ages 28-29, indicating long-term implications of high school non-completion (Leventhal, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2001).

In addition to poor academic experiences, D'Angelo, Weinberger, and Feldman (as cited in Sheverbush, Smith & DeGruson, 2000) found that chronically truant children participate in risky behavior such as drug and alcohol consumption, early pregnancy, criminal behavior, and increased incidence of depression and suicidal ideation. Indeed, once students who go on to receive their general equivalency degree are excluded from analysis, research shows that "failure to graduate from high school is associated with a tripling of likelihood of being imprisoned" (p. 45).

Schools, communities and taxpayers also suffer negative consequences as a result of high rates of truancy. School funding is based on attendance, and low attendance rates result in reduced funding to individual schools. When truants attend school, they require additional funds for extra attention for counseling, handling disciplinary referrals, and monitoring (NCSE, 2005). Truants also require additional taxpayer funding for law enforcement personnel to locate and process truants, and public assistance for dropouts who are underemployed or unemployed (Byer & Kuhn 2003; Daining, 2007; McCray, 2006). It has been estimated that each person who drops out of school costs society over \$200,000 during his/her lifetime (NCSE, 2005).

Promising Programmatic Elements

Truants need services that address scholastic difficulties, psychological problems, and mediate dysfunctional family factors (CFFC, 2002). Multi-pronged approaches and reforms that address both attendance issues and course failures are shown to be more effective in keeping children on the path to graduation than those which address these separately (Balfanz et al., 2007).

In 2007, the University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Families, Children, and the Courts (CFCC) hosted two roundtable discussions on truancy, bringing together a variety of stakeholders who demonstrated an interest in school attendance in Baltimore City. The roundtable included representatives from eleven Baltimore City and State of Maryland agencies (including the Maryland Judiciary), numerous community groups and foundations, and representatives from Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). A recurring theme of the roundtable discussions was that truancy is a community problem, and as such, all sectors of the

community should be involved in developing, implementing and supporting truancy interventions.

According to CFCC, since truancy is “not the exclusive problem of school systems or of juvenile justice, the development of a successful program requires collaboration within the community” (CFCC, 2002, p. 9). The U.S. Department of Education (1996) has identified five key components of school-community-family collaborations to address the problem of truancy:

- Family involvement;
- Incentives for parents such as parenting skills education and formal sanctions;
- Student sanctions (zero tolerance policy);
- Development of truancy prevention strategies in school such as mentoring, tutoring, and drug prevention; and
- Local law enforcement involvement.

In a similar vein, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (Reimer & Dimock, 2005) also has published guidelines for successful truancy reduction programs:

- Interagency collaboration;
- Comprehensive response addressing individual needs of young people and families;
- Incentives intended to encourage attendance and sanctions to hold students accountable for their behavior;
- Provision of services in a supportive environment; and
- Thorough program outcome evaluation.

Researchers at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) performed a meta-analysis of 34 distinct truancy intervention and prevention and drop-out prevention programs (Klima et al., 2009). The outcomes considered in WSIPP’s study were dropping out, high school graduation, grades, test scores, attendance and enrollment. WSIPP found that alternative programs (as compared to alternative schools), mentoring and behavioral programs show improvement in school-related outcomes. (Klima et al., 2009)

Focusing on the role of schools in dealing with factors related to school attendance/truancy and alternative school-based programs to deal with the problem, Balfanz and colleagues (2007) designed a model, (Talent Development Middle Grades), which is intended to help re-engage students in school. This model design required comprehensive school reform through extensive teacher training and support, instructional programs in core academic subjects,

and extra academic help, all aimed at re-engaging children in school. The evidence of this model's success in reducing poor attendance rates demonstrates the importance of addressing truancy through a variety of means within the school system. Evaluation of this model has shown that 9% of middle grade students attending target schools had poor attendance compared to 15% of middle grade students at control schools (Balfanz et al., 2007). Even though the model has been shown to improve attendance, Balfanz and colleagues acknowledge that additional interventions focusing on attendance must be integrated in order to achieve full re-engagement. Indeed, while this model addresses a variety of school-based supports and services, it was not designed to address other contextual factors such as family involvement.

In their school-oriented model, Balfanz and colleagues (2007) argued for a three-stage approach centering on student attendance, behavior, and course failures. Stage one entails comprehensive school-wide reform designed to address 75 percent of poor attendance. In applying this package of reforms, schools must constantly recognize, model, and promote good attendance; respond consistently to the first absence; develop simple data collection and analysis tools for teachers to track deviation from the graduation path more quickly; and create attendance teams made of school personnel (and occasionally parents) that meet regularly to look at the collected data and find solutions.

Stage two of Balfanz and colleagues' approach individually targets students with poor attendance by measuring their emotional and cognitive engagement in school and gaining a better understanding as to why individual students are disengaging. This stage is expected to address the 15 to 20 percent of students with low attendance that needs additional support. Typically, a designated adult (frequently one of the student's teachers) is assigned to act as a mentor to build a closer relationship and check in with students when they miss a day of school to ask the reason for nonattendance (Balfanz et al., 2007).

Stage three addresses the needs of the 5 to 10 percent of students with low attendance that need more clinical support. In stage three, intensive effort is taken to re-engage students through the use of clinical specialists such as counselors or social workers (Balfanz et al., 2007).

In a policy brief written for the National Middle School Association, Balfanz (nd) outlined several factors that could be taken into consideration when developing early warning and intervention systems to address attendance, behavior, and course performance:

- Focus on effective intervention, not just identification;
- Recognize and build on student strengths;

- Provide time, training, and support to teachers for implementing early warning and intervention systems;
- Match resources to student needs but practice intervention discipline;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions; and
- Use existing school data.

As incidences of truancy escalate and become chronic, additional resources beyond school interventions must be identified. Land (2003) identifies community responses that involve social services to address needs of families, and law enforcement and court systems to enforce state compulsory attendance laws when other interventions are unsuccessful. Nationally, several programs have been developed that reflect this intensive approach to focusing on needs of students and families (see for example, McCluskey et al., 2004; Mueller et al., 2006; Richtman, 2007; Van Ry & Garcia, 2006).

The Interest of the Maryland Judiciary in Truancy and Truancy Intervention

Maryland law requires school attendance by children ages 5 through 15 and provides that a parent or guardian who fails to see that his/her child attends school is guilty of a misdemeanor “...unless the child is otherwise receiving regular, thorough instruction during the school year in the studies usually taught in the public schools to children of the same age” (Maryland Code Edu. Article §7-301). The same statute also permits specified school officials to excuse a child for a lawful absence. Under Maryland’s Education Article the Judiciary effectively shares responsibility for enforcing compulsory school attendance with the State’s Department of Juvenile Services and local boards of education.

The historic and statutory interest of Maryland’s Judicial Branch in truancy was heightened in 2004 when the General Assembly of Maryland authorized the establishment of the Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP) in the First Judicial Circuit. With its authorization of TRPP, the General Assembly also directed the Maryland Judiciary to perform an evaluation of the program. This initiative stimulated an intensive process of policy and program analysis by the Judiciary. This effort was given additional emphasis through the Judiciary’s acquisition of a grant from the State Justice Institute (SJI) in 2008. Under the SJI grant, was to evaluate three alternative approaches to truancy intervention in Baltimore City and the First Judicial Circuit (including TRPP), assess the context of truancy in Baltimore City and the First Judicial Circuit and synthesize the findings from this research to support an assessment of the school attendance

and truancy intervention policy framework from the perspective of the Judiciary. This report represents the research synthesis.

The Context of Truancy in Maryland

Overview

One of the four components of the Maryland Judiciary's truancy intervention research project funded by SJI involved assessing the context of truancy in Maryland, with a focus on Baltimore City and the four counties of the Lower Eastern Shore. A research team from the Ruth Young Center for Families and Children at University of Maryland School of Social Work (RYC (Shdaimah et al., 2011) performed this research. This research focused on the five jurisdictions that serve as sites for the operation of the three truancy intervention models evaluated as part of the SJI-funded research project: Baltimore City, Dorchester County, Somerset County, Wicomico County and Worcester County.

In conducting the assessment of the context of truancy in Maryland, a multi-methods approach was used that included collection and analysis of a variety of forms of archival information, interviews with key informants, focus groups, and observations. The report narrative concerning this research will be incorporated below with limited attribution. The current report includes additional information gathered from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and other sources to more clearly frame the context of school attendance and truancy problems in the five jurisdictions of interest for this report. Data collection occurred throughout 2009.

Snapshot of the Maryland Public School System

On an average school day during the 2009-2010 school year 795,577 of 846,970 enrolled students attended Maryland's over 1,400 public schools.² As of September 30, 2010, approximately 24,000 students were enrolled in over 1,400 non-public schools in the state. Another 24,000 children were home-schooled during this period of time. Thus, approximately 95% of Maryland's students are enrolled in the state's public schools. Of the students enrolled in Maryland's public schools, 464,323 were enrolled in elementary schools (pre-kindergarten through grade 6) and 387,888 were enrolled in secondary schools (grade 7 through grade 12) (MSDE, 2011c, MSDE 2011d).

² According to MSDE average daily attendance and enrollment statistics.

The resources of public education in Maryland are organized into 24 school districts that correspond with the state's county-level local jurisdictions and the City of Baltimore. Maryland's 24 school districts range in size from Somerset County with 2,920 enrolled students and 9 schools to Montgomery County with 144,023 enrolled students and 205 schools (MSDE, 2011d). MSDE, operating under the guidance of the State Board of Education and Superintendent of Education, was created under the provisions of Chapter 506 of the Acts of 1916. In general terms, MSDE is responsible for developing professional standards for school teachers and administrators and developing policies and programs that guide the delivery of public education by the local school districts (Maryland State Archives, 2011).

The demographics of Maryland's public schools reflect the State's racial/ethnic composition. The state's public school system is primarily white and African American: 42.9% of all students are white and 35.8% are African American. A growing number of public school students are Hispanic – as of September 30, 2010, 11.5% of all students were Hispanic. Among other racial/ethnic groups, at 5.7% on September 30, 2010, Asian Americans make up the largest percentage of all public school students. These averages vary widely by jurisdiction, with the percentage of white students ranging from a high of 98.1% in Garrett County to a low of 4.5% in Prince George's County. Among the jurisdictions included in the current analysis, the percentage of whites ranges from 68.6% in Worcester County to 7.8% in Baltimore City. In terms of jurisdictions across the state, the percentage of African American students ranges from 86.6% to 0.4% in Baltimore City and Garrett County, respectively. Among the jurisdictions included in the current analysis, the percentage of African Americans ranges from 86.6% in Baltimore City to 20.7% in Worcester County. With regard to Hispanic students as a percentage of all students, a high of 25.3% is found in Montgomery County, while a low of 1.3% is found in Allegany County. Among the jurisdictions included in the current analysis, a high of 6.3% Hispanic is found in Somerset County, while a low of 3.9% is found in Baltimore City (MSDE, 2011b). Table 1 represents the racial/ethnic breakdown for the five jurisdictions included in the current analysis.

Table 1. Student racial/ethnic breakdown, by jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Local Jurisdiction	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Asian	African American	White	Hispanic	Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	Two or Racial/Ethnic/Cultural Groups
Baltimore City	0.4%	1.0%	86.6%	7.8%	3.9%	0.1%	0.2%
Dorchester Co.	0.3%	1.0%	36.5%	52.1%	5.1%	0.0%	4.9%
Somerset Co.	0.3%	0.9%	41.3%	45.9%	6.3%	0.2%	5.2%
Wicomico Co.	0.4%	3.2%	34.7%	50.5%	6.1%	0.1%	5.1%
Worcester Co.	0.3%	1.7%	20.7%	68.6%	5.2%	0.0%	3.4%

Source: Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Accountability and Assessment (2011). *Maryland Public School Enrollment, September 30, 2010*. Baltimore, MD: Maryland State Department of Education.

The current analysis focuses on school attendance and habitual truancy. The study of this area is complicated by challenges related to collecting data concerning and measuring school absences. Many reasons for missing school result in a substantial number of days of lost instruction and withdrawal from school. For 2009-2010 MSDE reported that 8,380 – approximately 1% of enrolled students – withdrew from school. The most frequent reasons for withdrawal were “lack of interest” (n = 4,021) and “whereabouts unknown” (n = 2,374) (MSDE, 2011d). Table 2 represents the reasons for these withdrawals and the number for each category.

Among the jurisdictions included in the current analysis MSDE reported the following concerning withdrawals from school during the 2009-2010 school year:

- Baltimore City
 - There were a total of 1,240 withdrawals. This represents approximately 1.5% of total enrollment.
 - The number of withdrawals per reason of withdrawal were as follows: illness, 2; academic, 282; discipline, 4; lack of interest, 545; employment, 10; marriage, 1; military service, 2; court action, 50; economic reasons, 2; expulsion, under 16, 0; special cases, 6; death, 21; parenting, 14; expulsion, 16 and over, 1; whereabouts unknown, 292; pregnancy, 8.

Table 2. Withdrawals from Maryland public schools, by reason of withdrawal, 2009-2010.

Reason for Withdrawal	Number
Illness	86
Academic	727
Discipline	31
Lack of interest	4,021
Employment	503
Marriage	3
Military service	7
Court action	130
Economic reasons	23
Expulsion, under 16	72
Special cases	41
Death	97
Parenting	54
Expulsion, 16 and over	170
Whereabouts unknown	2,374
Pregnancy	41

Source: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Summary of School Attendance, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

- Dorchester County
 - There were a total of 35 withdrawals. This represents approximately 0.8% of total enrollment.
 - The number of withdrawals per reason of withdrawal were as follows: illness, 0; academic, 1; discipline, 1; lack of interest, 23; employment, 2; marriage, 0; military service, 0; court action, 0; economic reasons, 1; expulsion, under 16, 0; special cases, 2; death, 0; parenting, 0; expulsion, 16 and over, 1; whereabouts unknown, 4; pregnancy, 0.
- Somerset County
 - There were a total of 47 withdrawals. This represents approximately 1.6% of total enrollment.
 - The number of withdrawals per reason of withdrawal were as follows: illness, 1; academic, 2; discipline, 0; lack of interest, 38; employment, 0; marriage, 0; military service, 1; court action, 0; economic reasons, 0; expulsion, under 16, 0;

special cases, 0; death, 0; parenting, 0; expulsion, 16 and over, 0; whereabouts unknown, 4; pregnancy, 1.

- Wicomico County
 - There were a total of 224 withdrawals. This represents approximately 1.6% of total enrollment.
 - The number of withdrawals per reason of withdrawal were as follows: illness, 0; academic, 0; discipline, 0; lack of interest, 197; employment, 0; marriage, 0; military service, 0; court action, 11; economic reasons, 0; expulsion, under 16, 2; special cases, 0; death, 1; parenting, 2; expulsion, 16 and over, 5; whereabouts unknown, 4; pregnancy, 2.
- Worcester County
 - There were a total of 34 withdrawals. This represents approximately 0.5% of total enrollment.
 - The number of withdrawals per reason of withdrawal were as follows: illness, 0; academic, 2; discipline, 0; lack of interest, 24; employment, 1; marriage, 0; military service, 0; court action, 2; economic reasons, 0; expulsion, under 16, 0; special cases, 0; death, 0; parenting, 0; expulsion, 16 and over, 1; whereabouts unknown, 3; pregnancy, 1.

Given the progressive nature of school problems, with truancy often leading to school withdrawal, the reasons reported to the State for school withdrawal may provide clues about habitual truancy.

School Absenteeism and the Extent of Truancy in Maryland

In its annual report, *Habitual Truants: Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010* (MSDE-DAA, 2011) MSDE reported that statewide 2.25% of students are habitually truant. Based on the 2009-2010 enrollment in Maryland Public Schools of 852,211, on any given school day nearly 20,000 of Maryland's school age children were habitually truant. Local habitual truancy rates in 2009-2010 ranged from a low of 0.02% in Garrett County to a high of 8.00% in Baltimore City.

Among the jurisdictions upon which this report focuses, the 2009-2010 truancy rates were as follows: Baltimore City, 8.00%; Dorchester County, 1.32%; Somerset County, 1.49%; Wicomico County, 1.06%; and, Worcester County, 0.29%. Based on local school enrollment figures, on any given day in 2009-2010 the average number of truant students was as follows for

each of these jurisdictions: Baltimore City, 6,596; Dorchester County, 61; Somerset County, 43; Wicomico County, 155; and, Worcester County, 19.

School attendance data vary among elementary, middle school and high school level students. Table 3 represents the percentage of students absent 20 percent of school days or more by instructional level in 2009-2010 for the jurisdictions considered in this report. Since this is a less restrictive perspective from which to consider chronic truancy as compared to the Code of Maryland Regulations’ definition of habitual truancy, the percentages reported are higher than those cited in the preceding paragraph. This data is consistent with national research that indicates that school attendance problems intensify as students age in public education systems.

Table 3. Percentage of students absent for more than 20% of school days by jurisdiction and level of instruction, 2009-2010.

Local Jurisdiction	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Baltimore City	11.3	18.6	42.0
Dorchester County	9.4	15.5	34.9
Somerset County	8.0	14.5	13.8
Wicomico County	5.9	11.5	15.0
Worcester County	5.7	7.4	17.2

Note. The percentage is computed by dividing the number of students absent more than 20 days by the number of students in membership more than 90 days at a given school during the September to June school year. Summer school attendance is excluded (Maryland State Department of Education, 2009).

The Legal Framework of Truancy in Maryland

Defining Truancy

Similar to what is seen in the national discourse concerning truancy, operationalizing the word “truancy” in Maryland is a complex matter. Again, similar to the national truancy discourse, complexity and confusion associated with this problem area begins with the definition of the words “truancy” and “habitual truancy.” As noted earlier, in Maryland truancy is defined under State statutes as a violation of compulsory attendance law for any portion of the school day without lawful excuse. Truancy rises to “habitual truancy” if a student is absent for any portion of a school day without lawful excuse in excess of a fifth of school days within a marking period, with local school systems granted the authority to define more but not less stringent parameters. (Code of Md. Regs. 13A08.01.03) Under those regulations, public school students are considered lawfully absent from school only under the following conditions:

- Death in the immediate family. The local school system shall determine what relationships constitute the immediate family;
- Illness of the student. The principal or a pupil personnel worker shall require a physician's certificate from the parent or guardians of a student reported continuously absent for illness;
- Court summons;
- Hazardous weather conditions. Hazardous weather conditions shall be interpreted to mean weather conditions which would endanger the health or safety of the student when in transit to and from school;
- Work approved or sponsored by the school, the local school system, or the State Department of Education, accepted by the local superintendent of schools or the school principal, or their designees as reason for excusing the students;
- Observance of a religious holiday;
- State emergency;
- Suspension;
- Lack of authorized transportation. This does not include students denied authorized transportation for disciplinary reasons;
- Other emergency or set of circumstances which, in the judgment of the superintendent or designee, constitutes a good and sufficient cause for absence from school.

Local school systems may add criteria for unlawful absences to local board-approved attendance policies (Code of Md. Regs. 13A.08.01.04 and .05) This law further requires each local school system to develop a policy that specifies rules, procedures, penalties, and an appeals process regarding student attendance and requires early intervention and progressive penalties to address attendance problems. This framework leaves room for variation to emerge among local school district is operationalizing and applying the meaning of truancy and habitual truancy.

In its annual *Habitual Truant* report, MSDE reports statewide and county rates of habitual truancy. To be considered “habitually truant” by MSDE a student must be:

- between the ages of 5 and 16 during the school year
- in membership in a school for 91 or more days; and
- unlawfully absent for 20% or more of the days in membership.

Local school districts collect data on chronic school absences and transmit them to MSDE. As required by the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland §7-302, Report of Absences and Maladjustment and §7-304, Special Programs for Disruptive Students, each school system must annually provide the number of students identified as being habitually truant to MSDE (MSDE, 2011a). MSDE uses school attendance data from local school districts to prepare a variety of reports for the state's education community. It also uses this data to prepare reports to inform Executive Branch and Legislative Branch policy processes. An example of this is its recently published report to the General Assembly, *State of Maryland Dropout Prevention Resource Guide: Providing School Completion Options for Maryland Students* (MSDE, 2011).

Across five school districts and among the schools from which data was acquired for this report, researchers found subtle differences in the ways that district and school level administrators interpreted the definitions of “truancy” and “habitual truancy.” (Cornelius & Bankins, 2011) Although comparative analysis among school districts and schools regarding variations in the application of these terms is beyond the scope of this project, anecdotal evidence suggests that the variation in these definitions impacts the number of students labeled as truant and habitually truant. This variation in practice likely impacts the number of students referred to intra- and extra-scholastic truancy interventions and the points in their school attendance problem experience at which they are referred to truancy interventions.

Legal Consequences of Truancy

Students in Maryland experience practical social and economic consequences associated with chronic absenteeism and truancy. Under State law both parents and their children may be held criminally responsible for truant behavior. As provided in the State's truancy statute, parents can be prosecuted criminally and, if found guilty can be fined or incarcerated (Shdaimah et al., 2011). An adult who unlawfully fails to send a child to school is subject to criminal prosecution under “Failure to Send Law” provisions codified in Section 7-301 of the Education Article. An individual convicted under these provisions is subject to incarceration for up to 30 days and/or a fine. Criminal cases under this provision can be filed in either the District Court or the Juvenile Court (in local Circuit Courts). The Juvenile Causes Act provides that a child of compulsory school age who is “habitually truant may be the subject of a Child In Need of Supervision (“CINS”) petition filed under Section 3-8A-01 of the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland. Only the Department of Juvenile

Services (DJS) can authorize a CINS petition. In that DJS does not authorize CINS petitions for truant behavior, criminal prosecutions related to truancy are limited to those involving parents and are filed in the District Court.

In 2009 a total of 2,887 cases were filed against the parents of truant children in the District Court. Table 4 represents truancy filings for each of Maryland’s 12 districts in 2009. As indicated in this table, the jurisdictions upon which the SJI-funded research and the current analysis focus, Baltimore City, Dorchester County, Somerset County, Wicomico County and Worcester County saw a total of 292 truancy cases filed in District Court in 2009. Data concerning the ultimate disposition of these cases are not available.

Table 4. District Court truancy filings by district and jurisdiction, 2009.

District Number - Jurisdiction	Filings
1 – Baltimore City	283
2 – Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico, Worcester Counties	9
3 – Caroline, Cecil, Kent, Queen Anne’s, Talbot Counties	1,042
4 – Calvert, Charles, St. Mary’s Counties	10
5 – Prince George’s County	1
6 – Montgomery County	9
7 – Anne Arundel County	1,271
8 – Baltimore County	88
9 – Harford County	31
10 – Carroll, Howard Counties	17
11 – Frederick, Washington Counties	104
12 – Allegany and Garrett Counties	22

In lieu of a comprehensive policy among the education, juvenile justice or court systems, truancy filings in District Court across Maryland may be most accurately assessed as a response used by some boards of education in collaboration with state’s attorneys’ offices. It appears to be a response that is deployed when school or school district based responses to truancy have not succeeded and other forms of intervention are limited or unavailable to school administrators.

Educational, Economic and Other Impacts and Correlates of Truancy in Maryland

The national dialogue concerning school attendance problems has identified notable individual, school, community and societal level impacts as well as correlates associated with truancy. Secondary analysis of MSDE aggregated data reveals interesting associations at each of these levels of analysis, including instruction and school governance impacts, poverty, race, and educational attainment, learning disabilities, hunger, health, and juvenile safety.

Instruction and School Governance

An immediate individual level impact of truancy that results in lasting consequences for students involves lost days of school instruction. Missed days of instruction impact the extent of the student's learning experience and may impact his or her performance and ability to advance through and beyond public school. Statewide in Maryland it is estimated that 19,370 habitually truant students missed almost 700,000 days of instruction in 2009-2010. Table 5 presents the estimated average number of habitual truants by jurisdiction in 2009-2010 for the five jurisdictions upon which this report focuses. It also includes the estimated number of missed days of instruction for this group of students. Beyond the substantial amount of educational experience lost by truant students, educators face substantial challenges to maintain individual and school performance. It can be reasonably assumed that the larger the number of habitually truant students and the greater the number of days of instruction missed, the more substantial will be the challenges faced by educators.

Table 5. Estimated number of habitual truants and lost days of instruction, by jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	Number of Habitual Truants	Number of Missed Days of Instruction
Baltimore City	6,596	237,447
Dorchester County	61	2,192
Somerset County	43	1,544
Wicomico County	155	5,563
Worcester County	19	694

Source: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Summary of Attendance, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

Table 6. High School dropout rate and ranking by jurisdiction compared to habitual truancy rate, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	HS Dropout Rate (Ranking)	Habitual Truancy Rate (Ranking)
Allegany	2.89% (9)	0.99% (9)
Anne Arundel	2.83% (10)	0.82% (11)
Baltimore City	6.20% (1)	8.00% (1)
Baltimore County	3.74% (5)	1.62% (3)
Calvert	1.60% (19)	0.43% (16)
Caroline	3.90% (4)	0.84% (10)
Carroll	1.07% (23)	0.10% (23)
Cecil	3.49% (7)	1.29% (6)
Charles	2.60% (12)	0.38% (19)
Dorchester	3.52% (6)	1.32% (5)
Frederick	1.65% (18)	0.57% (15)
Garrett	2.15% (15)	0.02% (24)
Harford	2.32% (14)	0.80% (12)
Howard	1.39% (21)	0.24% (22)
Kent	2.99% (8)	0.73% (13)
Montgomery	2.72% (11)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Prince George's	1.34% (22)	6.33% (2)
Queen Anne's	2.07% (17)	0.35% (20)
Somerset	4.44% (3)	1.49% (4)
St. Mary's	2.13% (16)	1.24% (7)
Talbot	2.56% (13)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Washington	1.56% (20)	0.61% (14)
Wicomico	5.15% (2)	1.06% (8)
Worcester	0.97% (24)	0.29% (21)
State	2.80%	2.25%

Sources: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Summary of Attendance, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.
 Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Habitual Truants, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

Another indication of the impact of habitual truancy on educational outcomes can be seen in its relationship with dropout rates. Table 6 presents jurisdiction level data concerning habitual truancy and high school dropout rates for Maryland's 24 local public school jurisdictions. Analysis of this data indicates that on the jurisdiction level there is a strong positive correlation between habitual truancy and dropouts (Pearson's $r(22) = 0.44, p < .05$). Among the six jurisdictions with the highest dropout rates, four of the jurisdictions upon which this report

focuses are represented (ranked #1, Baltimore City, 6.20%; #2 Wicomico, 5.15%; #3 Somerset, 4.44%; #6 Dorchester; 3.52%). Worcester County, at 0.97%, has the lowest dropout rate in the state.

As indicated in the national literature, school attendance and truancy problems translate into governance and instructional problems for educational administrators and teachers. It is reasonable to assume that the intensity of a school's truancy problems will influence the ability of teachers and administrators to achieve successful school outcomes as measured by local, state and national standards. Table 7 provides evidence concerning the extent of habitual truancy on the school level by jurisdiction for the 2009-2010 school year. In 2009-2010 the habitual truancy rate among all students in Maryland was 2.25%. Table 7 identifies the number of schools for each jurisdiction that experienced habitual truancy rates at or above the statewide average. The table also identifies the number of schools in each jurisdiction that experienced habitual truancy at the rates of 5% and higher and 10% and higher. Statewide, 20.4% of all public schools experienced habitual truancy rates of 2.25% or more, with 67.7% of schools in Baltimore City experiencing the highest rate according to this dimension of analysis. Across the state, 11.3% of public schools in Maryland experienced habitual truancy at 5% or higher and 5.1% experienced a rate of 10% or higher. With 17.9% of its schools experiencing habitual truancy at the rate of 10% or higher, Baltimore City had the highest rate among the state's local education jurisdictions. Among the five jurisdictions included in the current study, four were among the eight in the state with the highest percentages of schools with habitual truancy rates of above 2.25% (Baltimore City #1, 67.7%; Somerset, #3, 22.2%; Dorchester, #4, 15.4%, Wicomico, #8, 8.0%). The fifth jurisdiction, Worcester County, had the lowest percentage of schools with habitual truancy rates of 2.25% or higher (0.0%).

Table 7. School level habitual truancy rates, by jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	Number of Schools	Greater than or equal to 2.25%	%	Greater than or equal to 5.00%	%	Greater than or equal to 10.00%	%
Allegany	27	2	7.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Anne Arundel	125	9	7.2%	5	4.0%	1	0.8%
Baltimore City	195	132	67.7%	70	35.9%	35	17.9%
Baltimore County	172	25	14.5%	12	7.0%	3	1.7%
Calvert	26	2	7.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Caroline	10	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Carroll	48	1	2.1%	1	2.1%	0	0.0%
Cecil	29	4	13.8%	1	3.4%	0	0.0%
Charles	37	1	2.7%	1	2.7%	1	2.7%
Dorchester	13	2	15.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Frederick	64	2	3.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Garrett	16	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Harford	53	5	9.4%	2	3.8%	1	1.9%
Howard	73	1	1.4%	1	1.4%	1	1.4%
Kent	8	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Montgomery	205	7	3.4%	3	1.5%	2	1.0%
Prince George's	206	95	46.1%	65	31.6%	30	14.6%
Queen Anne's	14	1	7.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
SEED School	1	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
St. Mary's	28	2	7.1%	1	3.6%	0	0.0%
Somerset	9	2	22.2%	2	22.2%	0	0.0%
Talbot	8	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Washington	46	1	2.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Wicomico	25	2	8.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Worcester	14	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Totals	1452	296	20.4%	164	11.3%	74	5.1%

Source: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Summary of Attendance, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

Again, as discussed in the national literature, high rates of truancy have severe resource impacts on schools and school districts. Resources must be diverted to enforcement, record keeping, monitoring and other administrative requirements associated with dealing with truant children and their parents. It might be reasonably hypothesized that responding to the demands of habitual truancy rates of 10% or higher will require much more in resource allocation dedicated to school attendance issues than would be the case at the 2.25% or lower rate.

It should be noted that, for many school districts, the schools across the state that exhibit the highest habitual truancy rates (as high as 73%), are alternative schools. This may indicate de facto or intentional school district level strategies in response to habitual truancy. If some students are moved from non-alternative schools to alternative schools to help educators better deal with attendance and related problems, truancy problems at non-alternative schools may be more serious than indicated in the statistics reported to MSDE.

Other Correlates of Truancy

In the contextual analysis report on truancy in Baltimore City and Maryland's Lower Eastern Shore, extensive evidence was offered to indicate that truancy is influenced by a complex and interactive set of problems rooted in family and societal structural problems. Truant children disproportionately come from poor minority families that experience problems including unemployment, inadequate housing, and family dissolution.

Poverty, race and educational attainment

Although little empirical data exist in the national discourse concerning truancy, an inference can be drawn from the literature that there is a distinct relationship between household characteristics and school attendance and truancy problems. Children from poor African American families with lower levels of educational attainment likely experience higher rates of truancy than does the population as a whole or do middle-class white families. Table 8 includes information concerning unemployment, poverty rate, percent of children living in poverty, average household income and habitual truancy rate among Maryland's 24 local jurisdictions. These data indicate that there is a moderate positive correlation between jurisdiction level poverty and habitual truancy (Pearson's $r(22) = 0.37, p < .10$) and a weak positive correlation between percent of children living in poverty and habitual truancy (Pearson's $r(22) = 0.28, p > .10$). There is a weak negative correlation between jurisdiction level median household income and habitual truancy (Pearson's $r(22) = -0.27, p > .10$). There is no significant correlation between unemployment rate and habitual truancy (Pearson's $r(22) = 0.14, p > .10$).

Among the jurisdictions included in the current study, in terms of *unemployment*, all five of the jurisdictions were among the ten in the state with the highest rates of unemployment as of June 2010 (#2 Somerset, 10.5%; #4 Dorchester, 10.1%; #8 Worcester, 8.3%; #9 Wicomico, 8.1%; #10 Baltimore City, 7.9%). In terms of the percent of children living in poverty, three of

the jurisdictions included in this study ranked among the four jurisdictions statewide with the highest percentages of children *living in poverty* (#2 Baltimore City, 28.2%; #3 Worcester, 28.2%; #4 Dorchester, 25.2%). With 18.4% of area children living in poverty, Wicomico County ranked ninth among Maryland counties, while at 11.3%, Somerset County ranked thirteenth. Regarding county level *poverty rates*, all of the jurisdictions included in the current study ranked among the ten jurisdictions with the highest poverty rates (# 1 Somerset 24.0%; #2 Baltimore City, 20.9%; #4 Dorchester, 15.4%; #7 Wicomico, 13.2%; #10 Worcester, 12.0%). In terms of *median household income*, all of the jurisdictions included in the current study are among the seven with the lowest median household income (#1 Somerset, \$35,621; #3 Baltimore City, \$38,458; #5 Dorchester, \$43,751; #6 Wicomico, \$46,404; #7 Worcester, \$47,829).

Table 8. Habitual truancy, poverty, and median household income rates and ranking, by Maryland jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	Unemployment Rate (Ranking)	% of Children Living in Poverty (Ranking)	Poverty Rate (Ranking)	Median Household Income (Ranking) ³	Habitual Truancy Rate (Ranking) ⁴
Allegany	9.2% (6)	22.4% (5)	16.6% (3)	\$37,151 (2)	1.0% (9)
Anne Arundel	6.8% (16)	7.0% (21)	6.8% (17)	\$79,843 (19)	0.8% (11)
Baltimore City	7.9% (10)	28.2% (3)	20.9% (2)	\$38,458 (3)	8.0% (1)
Baltimore	10.9% (1)	10.2% (15)	8.3% (14)	\$64,629 (13)	1.6% (3)
Calvert	6.2% (21)	7.5% (20)	5.4% (23)	\$86,281 (22)	0.4% (16)
Caroline	8.8% (7)	18.8% (7)	13.2% (6)	\$49,050 (9)	0.8% (10)
Carroll	6.5% (19)	6.5% (23)	5.9% (21)	\$78,418 (18)	0.2% (23)
Cecil	10.2% (3)	12.6% (12)	10.0% (11)	\$60,543 (12)	1.3% (6)
Charles	6.2% (22)	8.6% (17)	6.4% (19)	\$85,899 (21)	0.4% (19)
Dorchester	10.1% (4)	25.2% (4)	15.4% (4)	\$43,751 (5)	1.3% (5)
Frederick	6.6% (17)	7.0% (22)	5.7% (22)	\$82,598 (20)	0.6% (15)
Garrett	7.3% (14)	18.5% (8)	12.6% (8)	\$42,320 (4)	< 0.1% (24)
Harford	7.4% (12)	7.8% (19)	6.2% (20)	\$75,364 (17)	0.8% (12)
Howard	5.5% (24)	5.6% (24)	4.5% (24)	\$101,417 (24)	0.2% (22)
Kent	7.7% (11)	19.4% (6)	14.4% (5)	\$50,585 (10)	0.7% (13)
Montgomery	5.7% (23)	8.3% (18)	6.7% (18)	\$93,774 (23)	0.4% (17.5) ³
Prince George's	7.4% (13)	10.5% (14)	7.8% (15)	\$69,545 (14)	6.3% (2)
Queen Anne's	6.6% (18)	9.3% (16)	7.3% (16)	\$75,146 (16)	0.4% (20)
Somerset	10.5% (2)	11.3% (13)	24.0% (1)	\$35,621 (1)	1.5% (4)
St. Mary's	6.3% (20)	29.8% (1)	8.5% (13)	\$71,316 (15)	1.2% (7)
Talbot	7.3% (15)	14.1% (11)	8.8% (12)	\$59,633 (11)	0.4% (17.5) ³
Washington	10.1% (5)	16.0% (10)	12.4% (9)	\$48,883 (8)	0.6% (14)
Wicomico	8.1% (9)	18.4% (9)	13.2% (7)	\$46,404 (6)	1.1% (8)
Worcester	8.3% (8)	28.2% (2)	12.0% (10)	\$47,829 (7)	0.3% (21)
State	7.4%	11.8%		\$69,193	2.25%

³ Ranked lowest to highest median household income

⁴ Ranking based on numbers to the hundredth decimal place, as reported in Table 6. Sources: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Habitual Truants, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment. U.S. Census Bureau (2011). Accessed at www.census.gov. Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011). *Kids Count Data Center*. Accessed online at www.datacenter.kidscount.org.

Table 9. Percent African American and white students and habitual truancy rates, by jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	Percent African American Students (Ranking)	Percent White Students (Ranking)	Habitual Truancy Rate (Ranking)
Allegany	4.1% (22)	90.6% (2)	0.99% (9)
Anne Arundel	20.7% (10.5)	61.9% (15)	0.82% (11)
Baltimore City	86.6% (1)	7.8% (23)	8.00% (1)
Baltimore County	38.7% (5)	45.9% (19.5)	1.62% (3)
Calvert	14.6% (17)	75.2% (6)	0.43% (16)
Caroline	16.4% (16)	69.9% (9)	0.84% (10)
Carroll	3.5% (23)	89.0% (3)	0.10% (23)
Cecil	8.5% (20)	81.2% (5)	1.29% (6)
Charles	51.5% (3)	34.8% (21)	0.38% (19)
Dorchester	36.5% (6)	52.1% (16)	1.32% (5)
Frederick	10.6% (19)	68.0% (12)	0.57% (15)
Garrett	0.4% (24)	98.1% (1)	0.02% (24)
Harford	18.1% (14)	68.6% (10.5)	0.80% (12)
Howard	20.4% (12)	48.8% (18)	0.24% (22)
Kent	22.3% (8)	65.1% (14)	0.73% (13)
Montgomery	21.3% (9)	34.6% (22)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Prince George's	68.9% (2)	4.5% (24)	6.33% (2)
Queen Anne's	7.0% (21)	85.1% (4)	0.35% (20)
Somerset	41.3% (4)	45.9% (19.5)	1.49% (4)
St. Mary's	19.5% (13)	70.2% (8)	1.24% (7)
Talbot	17.9% (15)	67.8% (13)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Washington	11.6% (18)	74.9% (7)	0.61% (14)
Wicomico	34.7% (7)	50.5% (17)	1.06% (8)
Worcester	20.7% (10.5)	68.6% (10.5)	0.29% (21)
State			2.25%

Sources: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Habitual Truants, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Summary of Attendance, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

The relationship between race and habitual truancy can be seen in Table 9, which compares the percentage of African American and white students with habitual truancy for Maryland's 24 public school districts. There is a strong positive correlation between percent African American students and habitual truancy (Pearson's $r(22) = 0.83, p < .01$) and a strong negative correlation between percent white students and habitual truancy (Pearson's $r(22) = -0.73, p < .01$). Among the jurisdictions upon which the current study focuses, four were among the school districts with the highest percentages of African American students (#1 Baltimore

City, 86.6%; #4 Somerset, 41.3%; #6 Dorchester, 36.5%; #7 Wicomico, 34.7%). At 20.7%, Worcester County had the eleventh highest percentage of African American students. The statewide average was 35.8%, with a median of 20.0%.

The national discourse concerning truancy as well as evidence from respondents gathered in the contextual analysis of the current study counties indicates a relationship between educational attainment and truancy. A specific concern raised from these sources is that households that include adults with lower educational attainment and who have jobs that do not require high school diplomas will include students who value education less and subsequently experience higher rates of truancy. Table 10 uses percentage of high school graduates on the jurisdiction level as a measure of adult educational attainment to compare with the rate of jurisdiction level habitual truancy. This analysis reveals that there is a strong negative correlation between percent of high school graduates and habitual truancy rate (Pearson's $r(22) = -0.51$, $p < .01$) This indicates that the lower the percentage of high school graduates, the higher the rate of habitual truancy will be on the jurisdiction level of analysis. Among the study jurisdictions, all five were among the twelve Maryland jurisdictions with the lowest rates of high school completion (#24 Baltimore City, 76.9%; #22 Dorchester, 81.0; #21 Somerset, 82.0%; #17 Wicomico, 85.1%; #13 Worcester, 87.9%).

This analysis indicates that social and economic structural characteristics can be seen to be related to habitual truancy in Maryland. Race, poverty, income and educational attainment are correlated with habitual truancy at levels ranging from weak to very strong.

Learning disability, hunger, health, and juvenile safety

Through interviews with knowledgeable informants in Baltimore City and the counties of the Lower Eastern Shore, the contextual analysis found that behavioral issues, including disruptive in-school behaviors and school attendance problems, were often related to underlying issues. Learning disabilities, the threat of hunger, and health and safety issues were viewed by the interview respondents as being integrally related to school attendance/habitual truancy problems.

Table 10. Percent high school graduation and habitual truancy rates, by jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	High School Completion Rate (Ranking)	Habitual Truancy Rate (Ranking)
Allegany	85.2 (16)	0.99% (9)
Anne Arundel	89.9 (7)	0.82% (11)
Baltimore City	76.9 (24)	8.00% (1)
Baltimore County	88.3 (11.5)	1.62% (3)
Calvert	91.4 (2)	0.43% (16)
Caroline	80.2 (23)	0.84% (10)
Carroll	89.1 (9)	0.10% (23)
Cecil	86.0 (15)	1.29% (6)
Charles	90.2 (6)	0.38% (19)
Dorchester	81.0 (22)	1.32% (5)
Frederick	91.1 (3.5)	0.57% (15)
Garrett	84.2 (19)	0.02% (24)
Harford	90.8 (5)	0.80% (12)
Howard	94.3 (1)	0.24% (22)
Kent	84.8 (18)	0.73% (13)
Montgomery	91.1 (3.5)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Prince George's	86.1 (14)	6.33% (2)
Queen Anne's	89.2 (8)	0.35% (20)
Somerset	82.0 (21)	1.49% (4)
St. Mary's	88.3 (11.5)	1.24% (7)
Talbot	88.8 (10)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Washington	82.8 (20)	0.61% (14)
Wicomico	85.1 (17)	1.06% (8)
Worcester	87.9 (13)	0.29% (21)
State	87.5	2.25%

Sources: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Habitual Truants, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

U.S. Census Bureau (2011). Accessed at www.census.gov.

Table 11 represents an analysis of the correlation between habitual truancy and indicators of learning disability, hunger, health and safety. Although some of these indicators are relatively narrow in terms of the populations considered, they are offered as proxies for other, broader indicators. They were chosen in part because data concerning them are available for each of Maryland's county level jurisdictions.

A critical underlying issue related to truancy identified by educators is learning disabilities. Viewed in this light, habitual truancy can be hypothesized as positively correlated

with the incidence of children in special education programs. In Table 11 the incidence of students in special education programs is compared with the habitual truancy rate among Maryland's 24 public school districts. This analysis indicates that, on the school district level of analysis there is a strong positive correlation between special education students as a percentage of school district total enrollment and habitual truancy rate (Pearson's $r(22) = .42, p < .05$). In terms of the jurisdictions included in this study, at 16.8%, Baltimore City had the highest percentage of special education students in the state. The rankings and percentages of special education students for the other four study jurisdictions were as follows: #12 Worcester County, 11.7%; #13 Somerset County, 11.6%; #16 Wicomico County, 11.2%; #20 Dorchester, 9.8%.

Table 11. Habitual truancy compared to special education students, students receiving FARM, teen births, women without prenatal care and juvenile arrests, by jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	% Special Education Students (Ranking)	% Receiving FARM (Ranking)	Teen Births ¹ (Ranking)	Juvenile Delinquency Referrals (Ranking)	Habitual Truancy Rate (Ranking)
Allegany	14.6 (3)	50.0 (6)	35.0 (8)	109.6 (7)	0.99% (9)
Anne Arundel	10.5 (18)	22.6 (19)	27.8 (14)	84.9 (11)	0.82% (11)
Baltimore City	16.8 (1)	83.5 (1)	64.4 (2)	133.7 (5)	8.00% (1)
Baltimore County	12.9 (7)	39.3 (12)	25.2 (16)	93.0 (10)	1.62% (3)
Calvert	10.6 (17)	19.2 (22)	21.8 (19)	58.6 (19)	0.43% (16)
Caroline	10.0 (19)	52. (5)	64.2 (3)	105.9 (8)	0.84% (10)
Carroll	11.9 (10)	14.4 (24)	14.2 (23)	49.6 (21)	0.10% (23)
Cecil	13.1 (6)	35.3 (13)	32.3 (12)	65.7 (15)	1.29% (6)
Charles	8.8 (21)	26.0 (17)	26.8 (15)	81.4 (12)	0.38% (19)
Dorchester	9.8 (20)	57.1 (3)	68.0 (1)	159.9 (4)	1.32% (5)
Frederick	11.4 (14)	21.1 (20)	22.9 (18)	60.8 (18)	0.57% (15)
Garrett	12.3 (8)	48.5 (8)	39.4 (6)	72.9 (13)	0.02% (24)
Harford	13.7 (5)	25.7 (18)	19.7 (21)	47.8 (22)	0.80% (12)
Howard	8.7 (22.5)	14.5 (23)	12.9 (24)	39.2 (23)	0.24% (22)
Kent	8.7 (22.5)	45.3 (9)	30.0 (13)	167.3 (1)	0.73% (13)
Montgomery	15.8 (1)	29.3 (15)	20.3 (20)	37.7 (24)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Prince George's	11.9 (10)	52.9 (4)	35.4 (7)	62.9 (16)	6.33% (2)
Queen Anne's	11.4 (15)	20.7 (21)	23.3 (17)	57.3 (20)	0.35% (20)
Somerset	11.6 (13)	64.1 (2)	34.8 (9)	128.2 (6)	1.49% (4)
St. Mary's	11.9 (10)	26.5 (16)	33.6 (11)	62.4 (17)	1.24% (7)
Talbot	13.9 (4)	33.8 (14)	17.3 (22)	100.2 (9)	0.40% (17.5) ¹
Washington	8.2 (24)	42.7 (10)	40.8 (5)	66.8 (14)	0.61% (14)
Wicomico	11.2 (16)	49.0 (7)	44.7 (4)	162.4 (3)	1.06% (8)
Worcester	11.7 (12)	39.5 (11)	34.0 (10)	164.3 (2)	0.29% (21)
State	12.0	n.a	31.2	73.4	2.25%

¹ Teen Births per 1,000

² Delinquency referrals per 1,000 youth population

Sources: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Maryland Special Education/Early Intervention Services Census Data & Related Tables, October 30, 2009*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Habitual Truants, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011). *Kids County Data Center*. Accessed at www.datacenter.kidscount.org.

Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (2010). *FY 2010 Annual Statistical Report*. Baltimore, MD: Maryland Department of Juvenile Services.

As suggested in the contextual analysis and the national research on truancy, students at risk of experiencing school attendance problems are also at risk of experiencing hunger, health and safety problems. Using free and reduced meals (“FARM”) as a proxy for risk of hunger among school-aged children, FARM was compared to habitual truancy across school districts. This analysis reveals a strong positive correlation between these variables (Pearson’s $r(22) = 0.65, p < .05$). The five study jurisdictions had some of the highest percentages of FARM

students in the state (#1 Baltimore City, 83.5%; #2 Somerset, 64.1%; #3 Dorchester, 57.1%; #7 Wicomico, 49.0%; #11 Worcester County, 39.5%).

The dimension of teen births per 1,000 total births was used as a proxy for health risks. A strong positive correlation with habitual truancy was found for this variable (Pearson's $r(22) = 0.45, p < .05$). The five counties included in this study were among Maryland's ten counties with the highest rates of teen births (#1 Dorchester, 68.0; #3 Baltimore City, 64.4; #4 Wicomico, 44.7; #9 Somerset, 34.8; #10 Worcester, 34.0).

As an indicator of public safety, juvenile delinquency referrals per 1,000 juveniles as reported by DJS were used to assess the jurisdiction level correlation with habitual truancy. No significant relationship was found (Pearson's $r(22) = 0.17, p > .10$). The study jurisdictions, however, had some of the highest rates of juvenile delinquency referrals (#2 Worcester, 164.3; #3 Wicomico, 162.4; #4 Dorchester, 159.9; #5 Baltimore City, 133.7; #6 Somerset, 128.2). In that juvenile delinquency referrals represent a small percentage of juvenile contacts with law enforcement agencies, this finding is open to serious questioning. National literature may be an important relationship between truancy experience and exposure to the juvenile and adult justice systems. It is possible that neighborhood rates of juvenile delinquency referrals are more highly correlated with habitual truancy rates on the school level than the relationship seen on the jurisdiction/school district level of analysis. This hypothesis can only be confirmed through individual level analysis, which was not possible in the current study.

Cost Consequences of Truancy

As indicated earlier in this discussion, school attendance and truancy problems have immediate cost consequences for schools, law enforcement agencies, juvenile authorities, courts and other public organizations that are involved in some way with truancy. The research concerning school attendance problems indicates that there also are long term cost impacts of truancy, particularly in terms of its relationship with dropouts. The national literature considers truancy to be one of the strongest predictors of dropouts. This evidence is reinforced by the analysis concerning Table 6 that demonstrates a strong positive correlation between the rate of habitual truancy and dropout rate on the jurisdiction level of analysis. As a result, it is reasonable to consider the cost consequences for society of dropouts in assessing the impact of habitual

truancy. The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE)⁵ estimates that each dropout costs society \$200,000 over his or her lifetime in criminal justice system, social services and other public costs. MSDE reported that there were 7,201 high school dropouts during the 2009-2010 school year. Based on the NCSE estimates, this translates into a total societal public cost of \$1,440,200,000 associated with dropouts from one school year. Among the jurisdictions upon which this report focuses, the estimated public costs of dropouts during the 2009-2010 school year are as follows: Baltimore City, \$219,600,000; Dorchester County, \$6,400,000; Somerset County, \$8,600,000; Wicomico County, \$41,400,000; and, Worcester County, \$6,200,000. It should be noted that these cost figures do not include costs to the national economy, individual businesses or the families of dropouts. The estimated societal public cost consequences of dropouts by Maryland jurisdiction are represented in Table 13.

⁵ Accessed at www.truancyprevention.org.

Table 13. Estimated societal public cost impact of dropouts, by Maryland jurisdiction, 2009-2010.

Jurisdiction	No. of Students ¹	Dropouts	Cost of Dropouts @ \$200,000 Each
Allegany	9,135	66	\$13,200,000
Anne Arundel	74,597	690	\$ 138,000,000
Baltimore City	82,447	1,098	\$219,600,000
Baltimore County	103,251	1,065	\$213,000,000
Calvert	16,920	95	\$19,000,000
Caroline	5,533	63	\$12,600,000
Carroll	27,673	92	\$18,400,000
Cecil	16,071	184	\$36,800,000
Charles	26,753	183	\$36,600,000
Dorchester	4,613	32	\$6,400,000
Frederick	40,116	162	\$32,400,000
Garrett	4,299	24	\$4,800,000
Harford	38,564	280	\$56,000,000
Howard	50,755	242	\$48,400,000
Kent	2,182	11	\$2,200,000
Montgomery	142,129	963	\$192,600,000
Prince George's	126,497	1,297	\$259,400,000
Queen Anne's	7,747	44	\$8,800,000
St. Mary's	17,033	168	\$ 33,600,000
Somerset	2,878	43	\$8,600,000
Talbot	4,489	34	\$6,800,000
Washington	21,911	127	\$25,400,000
Wicomico	14,577	207	\$41,400,000
Worcester	6,643	31	\$6,200,000
Totals	846,813	7,201	\$1,440,200,000

¹ Based on "average daily membership" as reported by MSDE

Sources: Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *Summary of Attendance, Maryland Public Schools, 2009-2010*. Baltimore, MD: MSDE, Division of Accountability and Assessment.
National Center for School Engagement (2011). Accessed at *truancy prevention.org*.

Qualitative Evidence Regarding Truancy and Truancy Intervention

Overview

In 2009 and 2010 the University of Maryland School of Social Work's Ruth Young Center for Families and Children (RYC), as part of its investigation of the context of truancy in Baltimore City, Dorchester County, Somerset County, Wicomico County and Worcester County interviewed and conducted focus groups with knowledgeable informants familiar with school attendance and truancy problems in these jurisdictions. The data that emerged from the interviews and focus groups reinforce and add depth to the evidence garnered from the national research concerning truancy and the preceding assessment of the jurisdiction level correlates of habitual truancy. The informants from the study counties contributed to this report's assessment that truancy is a product of a complex, inter-related and interactive set of factors that defy easy understanding or simplistic solutions. (Shdaimah et al., 2011).

Sources of Information

A total of 64 respondents from the five study jurisdictions participated in interviews and focus groups involved in the contextual analysis.⁶ The informants represented the following organizations and interests:

- Maryland Office of Public Defender
- Education-related non-profit organizations
- Non-profit legal services providers
- Local departments of social services
- Local school districts
- Offices of State's Attorneys
- Parents
- School pupil personnel workers
- Local health departments
- School police officers
- Interpreter services
- Youth and family service agencies

⁶ The interview instrument and focus group guide can be found in the contextual analysis report.

- Parent-teacher associations
- Community treatment services
- Maryland Department of Juvenile Services
- Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- Maryland State Department of Education

Information was also obtained through participant observation during a one-year plus series of meetings of the School Attendance Work Group (SAWG) in Baltimore City. Facilitated by Open Society Institute-Baltimore, SAWG brought together BCPSS administrators, principals, teachers and specialized service providers and other groups and individuals involved in a variety of issues related to school attendance in Baltimore City. Representatives from the Judiciary, including the current authors also participated in meetings of SAWG.

Qualitative Findings

Concerns about the legal context of truancy in Maryland

The contextual analysis found a solid consensus that, consistent with the national discourse, truancy is a product of interplay among many factors. In light of this and what they see as increasingly legalistic responses to the problem that tend to be simplistic, they collectively argued that policy makers should seek solutions that are less punitive, more holistic and more attuned to the broad set of needs found in the families of habitually truant children.

Baltimore City respondents observed that the leadership of BCPSS is apparently emphasizing legal action against parents as a central response to chronic truancy. Their assessment is that Baltimore City schools are actively pursuing the statutory option of filing cases against parents in District Court. The number of truancy filings in Baltimore City District Court locations does not appear to bear this out, however. Among the interview and focus group respondents, a fear was expressed that taking parents to court may actually exacerbate the problem. The District Court is not in a position to make service referrals, provide monitoring or pursue other responses to the truancy problem. Rather, the only statutory remedies available to District Court judges in Baltimore City are fines and/or imprisonment. Additionally, court appearances concerning truancy cases may be disruptive for poor families lacking in transportation, child care and other resources upon which they must rely if they are to appear in

court. An unforeseen consequence of this set of challenges is that chronically truant children may miss additional days of school so that their parents can attend court hearings.

Respondents in the contextual analysis were generally ambivalent toward legal action against the parents of truant children. Many informants expressed support for the idea of holding parents accountable for their children's school attendance. They also expressed a belief, however, that prosecuting parents in District Court does not address the complex issues associated with truancy. They reported a concern that prosecution of parents can be counterproductive and further alienate parents and children from the educational system.

As will be discussed later in this report, the District Court in the four counties of Maryland's Lower Eastern Shore possesses options in dealing with the parents of truant children that are not available in Baltimore City. The District Court in Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester Counties may refer truancy cases to the Circuit Court and the Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP).

Understanding the complexity of the truancy problem

In discussions concerning the complexity of the truancy problem, respondents in the contextual analysis identified a variety of interrelated themes:

- **Impact of poverty.** Respondents saw poverty as a central problem that amplifies all of the other factors that interact to produce school attendance and truancy problems. Regardless of other issues that may emerge among students who have trouble attending school, poor families and students from poor families typically will be the least equipped to respond to them. Poor families are often not able to support the mundane needs of students. Provision of appropriate clothes, personal hygiene, adequate food, school supplies and other personal needs often are lacking in poor families. As a result, the potential of students avoiding school and real or perceived marginalization among their peers is highest among those from impoverished families.

A major problem among impoverished families identified by respondents is unstable housing. Difficulties in paying rent, overcrowded housing in multiple generation families, unsafe physical conditions and other factors associated with housing difficulties among poor families often result in frequent student moves. This in turn results in reduced attachment to schools, instructional days lost during moves and

- lack of familiarity with new neighborhoods that impact the ability and motivation of students to attend school.
- Value placed on education. Interview and focus group respondents indicated that the value parents/guardians place on education impacts student attendance. In families where adults hold jobs that do not require high school diplomas and where adults do not actively emphasize the importance of academic accomplishment, poor academic performance and school attendance problems frequently result.
 - Individual needs of children. Respondents consistently reported that responses to truancy must take into account individual needs of children. Responses to school attendance/truancy and related problems must be individualized to improve the potential for success. For instance, systems of truancy response must be attentive to identifying the presence of learning disabilities. Respondents reported that,
“ . . . the caring and persistent parent, teacher, or service provider may be able to identify and understand the dynamics that contribute to a student’s truancy. Even when this does not immediately resolve the problem, it may help to engage the student, which our respondents indicated can be helpful in preventing further movement toward chronic absenteeism or dropout”
 - Inadequate monitoring. Respondents stated that attempts to improve school attendance and reduce truancy are handicapped by lack of consistent early identification of children at risk of this problem and the factors in their lives that contribute to their at-risk status. Often children who have learning disabilities or health issues that impact their ability to attend school are not identified or their problems are not adequately diagnosed in time to develop responses that will prevent school attendance problems.
 - Transportation challenges. Respondents reported that children at risk of truancy, particularly poor children, are often those who face serious transportation hurdles. Many poor families do not have automobiles. Students in rural settings may not have easy access to public transportation. Students in urban settings may face complicated transportation arrangements that include public transportation transfers or reliance on unreliable carpooling sources. If they walk to school, urban students may have to face

safety issues and exposure to neighborhood level problems such as drug dealing, gangs or prostitution.

- Safety. Students at risk of school attendance and truancy problems are often those most concerned with their personal safety in their neighborhoods and in their schools. Interview and focus group respondents stated that students living in poor neighborhoods are exposed to risks associated with gang battles over turf – battles that may carry over to school. To avoid harassment or bullying, students may opt to join gangs. Students who traverse multiple neighborhoods to get to their schools may fear crossing hostile gang boundaries. Many students who ultimately exhibit records of chronic truancy have chosen to stay home rather than risk their safety by attending school.
- Family difficulties. Respondents identified a variety of family problems that may impact the ability and willingness of students to attend school. These family problems include unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, incarceration of a parent, divorce, and parental abandonment. A frequent consequence of these family difficulties is that grandparents assume responsibility for the welfare of children. To complement the information provided by their informants, the contextual analysis report cites Sharpe and Strieder (2009) regarding the challenges that grandparents face, and in particular, those faced by grandparents in Baltimore City. Sharpe and Strieder state that the percentage of children living with grandparents in Baltimore City (22%) is more than double the rate for Maryland. They report that grandparents responsible for children in Baltimore City face a variety of challenges. Older or physically limited grandparents may not have the strength or energy to “keep up with” their grandchildren. Grandparents may have trouble enforcing family rules such as school attendance. They may have difficulty navigating the agencies involved in attending to the welfare of their children, particularly children who have disabilities or are involved in juvenile justice or dependency systems.

School Responses to Truancy

Review of School Responses

In a recent report to the Maryland General Assembly,⁷ MSDE (2011) catalogued school district level programming designed to prevent dropouts. Improving school attendance may be a supportive objective, but it is not a central issue for these dropout prevention interventions. In this *Dropout Prevention Resource Guide*, MSDE identified programs designed to impact the dropout rate by addressing indicators and predicates of dropping out. A brief description of each program is provided in the *Guide*, including program target population. Two hundred sixty-five programs were identified in the *Guide* – an average of 11 per school district. There appears to be no correlation between the number of programs per school district and the size of the school population, or between the number of programs and the incidence of habitual truancy. For instance, Worcester County, with less than 6,700 students, is identified as operating 34 programs, while Anne Arundel County, with nearly 75,000 students, operates 32 programs.

The programs listed in the *Guide* address many of the issues that can impact school attendance and, ultimately, successful school completion. The programs identified by MSDE can be categorized as follows:

- Alternative programs. This category includes a broad range of interventions. Examples include behavior-oriented programs, programs that deal with developmental challenges, distance learning, ESOL programs, programs focused on students at high risk of dropping out and bullying/harassment prevention programs.
- Alternative schedule schools. These schools include evening middle and high schools, twilight/after schools, summer schools and Community Learning Centers.
- Alternative schools. Alternative schools are a ubiquitous approach applied by school districts to deal with students who experience behavioral and school performance problems. Many students with school attendance problems wind up in alternative schools.

⁷ Maryland State Department of Education (2011). *State of Maryland Dropout Prevention Resource Guide: Providing School Completion Options for Maryland Students*. Baltimore, MD: Maryland State Department of Education.

- Attendance accountability. Among other elements, these programs include attendance contracts, attendance letters, attendance review committees and assigned case workers. The mediation-based BSMART program operated by the University of Maryland School of Law's Center for Dispute Resolution and offered in a limited number of Baltimore City schools can be classified as an attendance accountability program.
- Clinical interventions. School social workers and mental health professionals collaborate with community service providers to deal with individual emotional/behavioral issues in the context of student educational objectives.
- Community service. These community improvement programs are generally intended for suspended students.
- Enhanced counseling. Some school districts use the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model of enhanced counselor intervention.
- Graduation preparation. Some districts operate programs intended for juniors and seniors who are at risk of not meeting requirements for graduation. They address academic and other issues – including school attendance – that may impact the probability of the target population graduating from high school.
- Holistic intervention. Holistic sets of individual and family needs are addressed by programs that may include in-home service components and substantial interaction with parents/guardians and other family members.
- Justice system coordination. School districts collaborate with juvenile authorities, police departments, courts and others in initiatives such as teen courts, juvenile drug courts, the University of Baltimore's Truancy Court Program, and the Judiciary's Truancy Reduction Pilot Program. They also work with law enforcement and child welfare authorities to address issues of child abuse and neglect.
- Life skill development. A variety of approaches are available to help students prepare for employment, personal financial management and parenting, among other topics.
- Mentoring. Community and school-based mentoring approaches are utilized by many districts.

- Student parenting. Several models of intervening with student parents or prospective parents to help them continue and complete school are pursued by some school districts.
- Specialized staff. Pupil personnel workers and other school and school district level specialized staff members utilize a variety of strategies to engage students and parents to improve school attendance, behavior and performance.
- Tutoring. Several community and school-based tutoring approaches are applied by many districts.

A review of MSDE's *Dropout Prevention Resource Guide* reinforces other evidence found through a review of the context of truancy in Maryland and the study jurisdictions: there is not a coherent response to truancy in evidence in the state's educational infrastructure. In the *Guide*, school attendance does not appear to be a central issue to be addressed in reducing dropouts. A review of online resources available from MSDE indicates that, aside from its annual habitual truancy statistical reports, there is little coherent policy and operating focus on truancy and school attendance problems.

Other Observers of School Attendance Problems in Baltimore City

During the three-year period that the Maryland AOC has studied truancy intervention in Baltimore City, other groups have demonstrated intensive interest in this area of concern. Two expressions of this interest, the Baltimore City SAWG and the University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Families, Children and the Courts' 2009 Urban Child Symposium, are particularly noteworthy. The issues identified during the Symposium and by SAWG are consistent with what is found in the national discourse concerning school attendance and truancy problems, as well as with the quantitative and qualitative data that emerged from the AOC's assessment of the context of truancy in Maryland and the five study jurisdictions.

Participants in SAWG and the Urban Child Symposium represented many interests concerned with school attendance issues in Baltimore City. They included elected officials, school system administrators, principals, teachers, scholars, court officials, members of the bar, community health service providers, police officials, prosecutors, public defenders, education advocates, child welfare advocates, advocates for the poor and representatives of other interests and groups. Although neither SAWG nor the Symposium produced a final product that could be viewed as a set of policy or programmatic recommendations, the collective analysis of both

groups was consistent with the discussion represented elsewhere in this report.⁸ Symposium and SAWG participants generally concurred in an assessment that school attendance problems are the result of the interplay of a complex set of factors. There seemed to be broad agreement that school attendance was not an issue that could be addressed by focusing solely on the student involved. Rather, school attendance and truancy problems must be viewed as family and neighborhood problems. In so doing, all the factors that impact family and neighborhood functioning must be taken into account: poverty, health, employment, transportation, domestic violence, involvement with the criminal justice system, family dissolution, the role of extended family members, neighborhood safety and developmental challenges. Participants also were in general agreement that responses to truancy should be problem-solving rather than punitive in nature. As a result, skepticism was expressed regarding the role of courts and the use of prosecution as an approach to deal with either students or their parents.

Of particular interest to the analytic perspective of the current study, Symposium and SAWG participants directed attention to the importance of effective inter-agency and inter-jurisdiction relationships to deal with school attendance problems. School attendance and truancy is not just of concern to public educators. The predicates of truancy and truancy as an indicator of other problems is also of interest to family welfare organizations, public health officials, prosecutors, public defenders, courts and judges, juvenile authorities and many other organizational interests that have missions and/or statutory responsibility in this area of concern. Symposium and SAWG participants concurred in an understanding that entities that share an interest in the children and families involved in improving school attendance must collaborate and effectively link resources if the problem is to be successfully addressed.

⁸ This assessment is based on observations made by the current author during the Symposium and SAWG.

Three Models of Truancy Intervention in Maryland

Introduction

The core research performed through the SJI-funded project concerning truancy intervention in Maryland involved evaluation of three models of truancy intervention in Baltimore City and the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit on Maryland's Lower Eastern Shore. The programs evaluated are Baltimore Students: Mediating About Reducing Truancy (BSMART), Truancy Court Program (TCP) and Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP). BSMART is operated by the University of Maryland School of Law's Center for Dispute Resolution in conjunction with Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). TCP is operated by the University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Families, Children and the Courts in conjunction with BCPSS. TRPP is operated in the Circuit Courts for Dorchester County, Somerset County, Wicomico County and Worcester County.

In selecting these three models of truancy intervention to evaluate, the AOC was guided by the national literature concerning the intent and design of truancy interventions. Scholars and practitioners across the United States argue that truancy interventions should represent, to the extent feasible, non-punitive responses to school attendance. They should be problem-solving in orientation and geared toward engaging students and parents in the education process through the utilization of a variety of program elements designed to break down barriers to school engagement. Truancy intervention programs should be progressive in nature; as truancy problems intensify, more intensive methods of intervention and forms of accountability should be available and applied. They should be age and needs appropriate. Parents/guardians should be involved. Truancy interventions should be holistic in addressing the complex set of individual and family issues that influence the ability and willingness of children to attend school. To the extent feasible, they should not interfere with the student's educational process or the work and home life of family members who participate in the intervention.

A pre-study assessment of the characteristics of BSMART, TCP and TRPP indicated to the AOC that these programs might represent approaches to truancy that lie along a continuum of responses. Respectively, BSMART, TCP and TRPP, appeared to be progressive responses to the incidence of truancy in terms of:

- age;
- intensity of the school attendance problem;
- the number and intensity of intervention elements; and,
- the intensity of monitoring and supervision of intervention participants.

Collectively, these interventions include many evidence-based practices (EBP) found in the literature concerning truancy. They involve inter-organizational cooperation and collaboration. Parents are involved. For the most part, they are problem-solving rather than punitive in nature. Strategies that focus on improving engagement and interest among parents and students are emphasized. Approaches designed to reduce the exposure to and effects of risk factors faced by children with school attendance problems are also found in these programs.

The research teams assigned to evaluate these programs were able to acquire and analyze data adequate to assess the processes of all three programs. Determinations were made regarding the extent to which each program operates to address the needs it was designed to meet and if its program components perform as intended.

As will be considered in the following discussion, for a variety of reasons the quantitative data concerning outcomes of the programs was not adequate to make highly reliable assessments of the extent to which they impact outcomes of interest to policy makers and program operators. The primary reasons these data proved to be inadequate are: 1) uncoordinated data collection systems; 2) incomplete intra- and extra-program data; 3) short periods of program operation; and, 4) small sample sizes. Despite these limitations associated with the acquisition and analysis of quantitative data, the extensiveness of qualitative data that were acquired allowed the research teams to offer noteworthy findings regarding the impacts of the three interventions under consideration.

Baltimore Students: Mediating About Reducing Truancy (BSMART)

Background and Overview

As part of the research program funded by the Maryland Judiciary and SJI, the AOC and MJRC evaluated BSMART with the University of Maryland School of Social Work, Ruth H. Young Center for Children and Families (RYC) (Sander, 2011). The study period covered the 2008-2009 school year.

BSMART is operated by the University of Maryland School of Law's Center for Dispute Resolution in Baltimore City. Initiated in 2006 and funded by a private foundation, it is based on a program operated on a statewide basis by the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management. BSMART is a free and voluntary program offered to BCPSS students. It is intended to involve elementary and middle school students who have experienced five to ten days of unexcused absences. As the evaluation report states:

It provides "a one-time, voluntary, confidential mediation involving teachers/caregivers of students . . . The intervention is based on two assumptions: 1) school attendance issues may stem from family issues that often can be resolved or improved; and 2) families of students with school attendance issues often experience communication barriers with the school. (Sander, 2011).

Process and outcome evaluations of BSMART were performed. Data to support the process evaluation were acquired through interviews with knowledgeable informants, review of archival materials concerning BSMART and review of descriptive data kept by BSMART. Ten interviews were conducted with teachers, representatives of schools participating in the program and the BSMART coordinator. Data to support the outcome evaluation included data from BSMART and BCPSS's Division of Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability (DREAA).

The process evaluation was designed to identify the program's target population, determine if it operated as intended, assess what works and does not and describe lessons learned during the implementation and operation of BSMART. To accomplish these objectives, the evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

- What schools participated in the program and how were they selected?
- Who was referred to the program? Did they meet the program criteria?
- What percentage of referrals resulted in mediation?
- How many mediations were conducted? How many resulted in an agreement?
- What issues contributing to school attendance problems were identified in mediation?
- What form did agreements take? Did they include [service] referrals?
- What characteristics of BSMART worked well?
- What were program challenges? and
- What lessons have been learned during program implementation and operation?

(Sander, 2011).

The outcome evaluation was designed “to examine if there was a change in student, parent and/or teacher knowledge or behavior that could be linked to the BSMART mediation” (Sander, 2011). To this end, qualitative and quantitative data analyses were performed to answer the following questions:

- Did parents report they had increased understanding of school attendance policies after mediation?
- Did mediation participants report satisfaction with the process and the mediator?
- Was there a change in the rate of days absent for students whose parents participated in mediation? Was there a difference in days absent between students whose parents participated in mediation and those whose parents were referred but did not attend mediation?

Program Description

BSMART is based on the idea that mediation can be an effective means of engaging parents, teachers and students in solving school attendance problems before they escalate to the point that juvenile authorities or courts may become involved:

The intent of mediation in this setting is to develop a unified approach to resolve problems contributing to student absenteeism . . . Mediation is a therapeutic, nonjudgmental approach emphasizing parent and student education concerning school attendance policies, as well as parent-teacher collaboration on how best to address issues contributing to truancy. In contrast, traditional responses to truancy by law enforcement and courts officials have been [retributive] . . . with limited success at reducing patterns of truancy. Mediation programs represent early intervention models aimed at avoiding formal petitions to courts, while addressing family issues that contribute to truant behavior and thus acts to decriminalize status offenses . . . Mediation has been used in conjunction with other inventions in comprehensive approaches to prevent and reduce truancy. (Simmons, 2006 and Lindstadt, 2005, cited in Sander, 2011).

BSMART follows three guiding principles: 1) the value of early truancy intervention; 2) the importance of cooperation among teacher, school and family; and 3) truancy mediation should be voluntary, free and confidential (Sander, 2011). These principles are reinforced by the assumptions that family problems are frequently connected to school problems and communication barriers between families and schools contribute to school attendance problems.

BSMART is based on an Ohio program. The Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management (2011) describes its statewide Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program in the following terms:

- It uses a facilitated problem-solving session involving a mediator to identify family problems that may be related to school attendance problems. Voluntary, non-punitive solutions are sought; these often involve referrals to public or non-profit private service providers.
- Mediations are conducted in schools during school hours or immediately before or after school. For elementary school students, the teacher is the only person other than the mediator and parent(s) or guardian(s) in attendance. For mediations involving middle school students, school social workers and/or principals also may be in attendance. Frequently the mediation session is the first time teachers and parents/guardians have met.
- For mediations involving K-6 students, the student may be brought in at the end of the session to be part of the prospective solution. Middle school students usually participate in the mediation sessions.
- All parties in the mediation session formally agree to confidentiality.
- Parents or guardians are invited by letter from the schools to participate early in emerging patterns of truancy – usually the third to fifth unexcused absence.
- Although it is a statewide model, individual programs are operated locally. There is variation among local programs regarding whether mediators are volunteers, under contract, court staff or a combination of the three.

Description of BSMART Students

Descriptive statistics were produced regarding characteristics of students who were subjects of BSMART mediations. This statistical analysis was based on data provided by BSMART and BCPSS/DREAA. Table 14 represents statistical breakdowns for the following descriptive categories: gender, race/ethnicity, special education status, Title 1 school status, FARM status and limited English status.

Table 14. Descriptive statistics concerning BSMART subject students, 2008-2009.

Category	Percentage of BSMART Subject Student	
	Male	Female
Gender	52.9%	47.1%
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	63.3%	
White	34.3%	
Hispanic	2.4%	
	Yes	No
Special Education	21.9%	78.1%
Title 1 School	89.5%	10.5%
FARM	86.2%	13.8%
Limited English		100.0%

The characteristics of students who were subjects of BSMART mediations are similar to and different from BCPSS students as a whole. The white/African American breakdown of BSMART differs from all BCPSS students. The district as a whole is made up of 86.6% African American students as compared to 63.3% among BSMART students; 7.8% of all BCPSS students are white as compared to 34.3% among BSMART students; and 2.4% of BSMART students are Hispanic as compared to 3.9% for BCPSS. The rate of special education status among BSMART students is higher than among all BCPSS students – 21.9% versus 16.8%. The percent of FARM students among BSMART students is similar to that among all BCPSS students – 86.2% versus 83.5%.

Program Operations

BSMART operations fall into three sets of activities: collaboration with schools; mediator training and mediation process. Each of these is discussed in the following subsections.

Collaboration with Schools

BSMART works with BCPSS administration to identify schools to participate in the program. Schools are selected for participation based on recommendations from administration and the interest of principals. The selection process is informal, without an application or screening procedures.

Principals who choose to have their schools participate must agree to: assign a staff member to be the school contact; designate a private space for mediations at the school; make arrangements for teachers to attend mediations during school hours; and agree to follow program procedures. Each principal identifies a day of the week and two-hour block when mediations will be conducted. The designated school contacts identify students who have at least three unexcused absences and send their parents/guardians an initial letter informing them of the emerging school attendance problem. If the problem continues, the school contact sends a letter to the parents/guardians to schedule a mediation date. The school contact also informs BSMART of the prospective mediation.

Mediator training

Students enrolled in the University of Maryland School of Law's Mediation Clinic serve as BSMART mediators. In addition to 40 hours of Clinic training, they receive 3 hours of training from the BSMART coordinator.

Mediation process

The mediation process is made up of the following four sets of activities:

- Confirmation of mediations. The BSMART coordinator attempts to follow up by telephone after mediation scheduling letters are sent to parents/guardians by school contacts. Prior to the scheduled mediation, in coordination with the school contact, the coordinator also begins to explore family problems and services that could address them. If parents/guardians agree to participate in mediations, the coordinator schedules mediators and confirms sessions with schools.
- Assigning mediators. The original BSMART plan called for the use of community mediators. Given the uncertainty involved in scheduling mediations, this proved to be unworkable. As a result, a determination was made to use staff from the Center for Dispute Resolution at the University of Maryland (C-DRUM), School of Law faculty members and law students as mediators. The BSMART coordinator works with prospective mediators to assign blocks of mediation time to them.
- Mediation sessions. As noted earlier, mediation sessions include teachers, parents/guardians and the mediator. Mediations concerning middle-school students may also include the subject student. If the school and BSMART coordinator

determine that it may be of value, principals, guidance counselors and/or school social workers may also attend mediations. Confidentiality is stressed during mediations. Agreement is sought regarding the nature of issues that contribute to the truancy problem. A goal of the mediation is to reduce this agreement to writing. Written agreements include the responsibilities of each party. The mediation participants also agree as to when follow-up should take place. Parent/guardian, student and school participants are given surveys to complete and mail or fax back to BSMART. The mediator completes a Mediation Summary Form.

- Mediation follow-up. At the end of the mediation session the participants may agree to schedule a follow-up session. If no follow-up session is scheduled the coordinator will attempt to follow up with the mediation participants regarding progress in meeting the terms of the agreement. Follow-up outcomes are recorded on the Mediation Summary Form.

Process Analysis

The process analysis was based on data from interviews with knowledgeable informants, BSMART archival material and descriptive data collected by the program. The 10 interviews conducted included representatives from each of the eight schools that participated in the program during the 2008-2009 school year and BSMART staff members. Archival materials reviewed included: original grant report; status reports to the program funder; program budget; reports to principals; and C-DRUM newsletters that include BSMART information. Descriptive data acquired from BSMART were extracted from referral forms, contact sheets, mediation summary forms and post-mediation surveys. In reviewing these data, steps were taken to protect the identity of individuals involved.

Summary of process analysis findings

The process analysis focused on three categories of program activities: school collaboration; mediator training; and the mediation process. It also considered program strengths and weaknesses.

School Collaboration. The BSMART coordinator reported that she made presentations at parent and faculty meetings to introduce the program and encourage participation. Interviews with school representatives confirmed the efforts of BSMART staff members to inform teachers

and school administrative staff regarding the program primarily through presentations. School representatives identified several barriers to active engagement with the program: lack of coverage for teachers to attend mediation sessions; inadequate engagement with parents/guardians; lack of “buy-in” from school administrators; geographic isolation of schools; and inadequate school resources.

Mediator training. The BSMART coordinator provided three-hour classes on truancy to law students enrolled in the School of Law’s Mediation Clinic. Law students were offered the opportunity to observe mediations and co-mediate sessions. Twelve of 15 students enrolled in the Clinic observed mediations and 5 students co-mediated sessions. The coordinator reported that the aspects of truancy mediation that had the most impact on law students were the variety of family factors involved in school attendance problems and the technical nuances of mediation in this setting.

Mediation referrals. During the 2008-2009 school year, 200 students were referred to BSMART. Families of 44, or 22.0% of referred students participated in at least one mediation session. School level rates of mediation participation ranged from 7.0% to 21.5%. By grade the highest rate of mediation participation was among kindergarteners (17.5%), while the lowest rate was among ninth graders (0.5%). Students in 52.5% of mediation participant families were pre-k to fourth grade, with 31.0% from kindergarten and first grade. The mean percent of days absent⁹ at the time of first referral was 13.0%, while the mean percent of days tardy also was 13.0%. Of participating schools, only three had rates of days absent at referral within the target range of 5 to 10 days.

Results of initial mediation referral. A notable finding from the process analysis was the limited success in contacting parents/guardians to schedule mediations. Schools were unsuccessful in making contacts in 42.5% (n=85) of referrals. Of the 57.5% (n=115) of cases wherein successful contact was made, 38.3% (n=44) went to mediation and 31.3% (n=36) declined mediation by choosing not to participate or not showing up for a scheduled mediation session. In order of frequency of occurrence, the other reasons for scheduled mediation not taking place were as follows: school cancelled the session; family asked to reschedule; child no longer at the school; parent work conflict; no reason indicated; and no teacher available to cover for teacher involved in the mediation.

⁹ BCPSS does not maintain records of days absent without excuse. As a result, only days absent could be reported.

The mediation session. During the 2008-2009 school year 56 mediations were conducted concerning 52 students. Over three-fourths (44 or 78.6%) of the sessions were mediated by the BSMART coordinator, with the balance mediated by C-DRUM faculty members. Student observers were present during 12 (21.4%) of the mediation sessions. The following discussion is a consideration of factors related to the mediation sessions.

Structural factors. The logic model for BSMART includes three structural quality indicators for mediation sessions: room readiness; sessions starting on time and teacher attendance. Among the 56 mediation sessions, for 80.4% the room was ready, for 46.4% the session started within 10 minutes of the scheduled time, for 73.2% the session started within 20 minutes of the scheduled time, and teachers attended 85.7% of the sessions.

Issues identified in mediation sessions as contributing to truancy.

The BSMART coordinator continuously compiles a list of issues that emerge in mediations as contributors to truancy. In the process analysis the issues were grouped into three categories: parent/caregiver-focused, student-focused, and resource-focused. Table 15 represents a compilation of the number and percentage of mediation sessions wherein issues within these categories arose. Table 15 indicates that student-focused issues were far and away the most frequently noted factors related to school attendance problems identified in the mediation session. It is worth noting the variety of issues that arose. The issues affecting the attendance of students from families participating in the BSMART intervention are consistent with those identified in the national discourse concerning school attendance problems and the information discussed in the current project's examination of the context of truancy in the study jurisdictions.

The issues listed in Table 15 also were identified in knowledgeable informant interviews. Interview respondents offered more detail regarding the intensity of problems such as transportation and housing. They also identified sibling tardiness as a notable issue that impacted the school attendance problems of students involved in the BSMART intervention.

Table 15. Issues contributing to truancy that arose during mediation session, by number and percentage of total mediations.

Parent/Caregiver-Focused Issues	Mediations	
	#	%
Parent's job interfered	9	16.1%
Parent was ill	4	7.1%
Other family member was ill	4	7.1%
Parent unaware of absences	4	7.1%
Parent involved in divorce/separation	4	7.1%
Parent separation anxiety	3	5.4%
Parent fears for child's safety	0	0
Parent has a substance abuse issue	0	0
Student-Focused Issues		
Student was ill	21	37.5%
Homework not completed	15	26.8%
Student has mental health issue (incl. anxiety)	14	25.0%
Student felt no need to attend	12	21.4%
Student not up in time	12	21.4%
Student feels unsafe at school/travelling to/from school	6	10.7%
ADD/ADHD mismanaged	5	8.9%
Student had lice	4	7.1%
Conflict with other students	3	5.4%
Medication side effects	3	5.4%
Student has alcohol/drug issue	0	0
Resource-Focused Issues		
Transportation problems	5	8.9%
Homeless	2	3.6%
Child care problems	0	0
Unsafe condition at home	0	0

Mediation agreement. Feedback regarding the mediation sessions is acquired from the mediation summary forms and surveys of teachers, parents/guardians and students. The following discussion summarizes the feedback for the 2008-2009 school year.

Feedback from mediators. A section of the mediation summary form asks of mediators: was the time sufficient; was the process appropriate; and were issues that made the mediation difficult. Of the 56 mediations this section was completed for 53 mediations. For 88.7% (47) of the mediations respondents indicated that the amount of time was adequate and in 100% the process was considered appropriate. In 4 (7.6%) mediation difficulties were reported. The difficulties reported were: a father's behavior toward his daughter; no teacher available; no

privacy in the room; interruption of the mediation; and the teacher had to leave prior to completion of the mediation.

Feedback from teachers. 42 teachers completed the post-mediation survey. In the survey they were asked whether this was the first time they had met the parent/guardian and if they had received 24-hour notice of the mediation. 35.7% (15) reported that the mediation session was the first time they had met the parent/guardian. 78.6% (33) indicated that they had received 24-hour notice. They also were asked if they were satisfied with the process, if they were given adequate time to talk, if they were satisfied with the mediator and if they would recommend BSMART mediation to others. All respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the process, were given adequate time to talk, were satisfied with the mediator and would recommend the program to others.

Feedback from parents/guardians. 41 parents/guardians completed the post-mediation survey. Not all survey items were completed by all respondents. 40.0% (16) of respondents indicated that the mediation session was the first time that they had met the teacher. 97.5% (39) strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the process; 94.3% (33) reported that they were allowed enough time to talk; 97.2% (35) strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the mediator; and 97.2% (35) strongly agreed or agreed that they would recommend BSMART mediation to others.

Feedback from students. Six of ten students who participated in mediation sessions completed surveys. Not all students who responded to the survey completed all survey items. All respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they learned new information about school attendance policies and strongly agreed that they were given an opportunity to explain why they did not attend school.

Assessment of process outcomes

View of mediation. All participants in mediation sessions – teachers, parents/guardians and students expressed satisfaction with the mediation session in which they participated. Almost all participants indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that they were given enough time to express themselves during the mediation session, that their questions were answered, that they were satisfied with the mediator, that the mediator listened to them, and that the mediator was effective. As a result, teachers and parents/guardians indicated that they would recommend mediation to others.

Understanding of attendance policies In the BSMART post-mediation survey respondents were asked if mediation helped them understand school attendance policy. Nearly all parents/guardians, two-thirds of school representatives and nearly all students agreed that mediation helped them in this way.

Program Outcome Analysis

The impact of BSMART on school attendance was analyzed based on data acquired from the BSMART database. To assess the impact of BSMART mediation on attendance, the experience of students whose parents/guardians that attended mediation sessions was compared to that of students whose families were offered mediation, but did not participate in it. A challenge in assessing attendance impact in Baltimore City's schools results from BCPSS's lack of data concerning unexcused absences. Since data concerning unexcused absences are not maintained by BCPSS, the number of absences was used as a proxy for unexcused absences. Data on absences collected by the BSMART coordinator provide limited evidence that the program has an impact on student attendance. Table 16 shows average absentee rates for BSMART referrals who actually attended mediation and for whom pre-referral and post-referral data were available. The average absentee rate across all schools did not change from pre-referral to post-referral, and at several schools absenteeism among this group actually increased.¹⁰ Nonetheless, attendance improved for 61% of the referrals who attended mediation. Table 17 shows average absentee rates for cases that were referred to BSMART but did not attend mediation. Interestingly, average absentee rates for this group either improved or stayed the same at all the schools that provided these data. Attendance improved for 63% of the cases that were referred to BSMART but did not attend mediation.

To further understand the effects of BSMART on absenteeism, a regression analysis was performed with the pre-referral absence rate and whether a referral attended mediation as the independent variables and the change in absence rate after referral as the dependent variable. The results showed a significant inverse relationship between the pre-referral absence rate and the change in absence rate following referral ($p = .001$). That is, higher pre-referral absence rates

¹⁰ Average rates are sometimes deceiving, however. The increase in absentee rate at Bay-Brook is due to a 0.954 post-referral absentee rate for the one mediated case at Bay-Brook for which attendance did not improve.

Table 16: Changes in absenteeism for BSMART referrals who attended mediation

School	Number of Referrals		Absentee Rate		Referrals with Improved Attendance	
	Attended mediation	With pre- and post-referral absenteeism data	Pre-referral	Post-referral	Number	Percentage
Bay-Brook	6	6	0.233	0.240	5	83%
Curtis Bay	12	12	0.185	0.162	8	67%
Maree G. Farring	7	7	0.147	0.134	4	57%
Masonville Cove	4	3	0.106	0.233	1	33%
Morrell Park	8	8	0.225	0.198	5	63%
Pimlico	10	8	0.144	0.164	4	50%
Total	47	44	0.179	0.179	27	61%

Note: No data were available for the two Beechfield referrals or three Lakewood referrals who were seen in mediation. For referrals involving siblings, the average of the siblings' absentee rates was used.

Table 17: Changes in Absenteeism for BSMART Referrals Who Did Not Attend Mediation

School	Number of Referrals		Absentee Rate		Referrals with Improved Attendance	
	Did not attend mediation	With pre- and post-referral absenteeism data	Pre-referral	Post-referral	Number	Percentage
Bay-Brook	14	12	0.140	0.097	9	75%
Curtis Bay	31	21	0.167	0.128	13	62%
Maree G. Farring	28	21	0.162	0.155	14	67%
Masonville Cove	22	20	0.151	0.151	10	50%
Morrell Park	14	8	0.134	0.105	5	63%
Pimlico	18	14	0.182	0.162	9	64%
Total	127	96	0.159	0.138	60	63%

Note: No data were available for the twelve Beechfield referrals or nine Lakewood referrals that were not seen in mediation. For referrals involving siblings, the average of the siblings' absentee rates was used.

were associated with bigger decreases in absence rates. Basically, students with the worst attendance prior to referral tended to have greater improvement than did students whose attendance was not as bad prior to referral to mediation. Attendance at mediation did not significantly impact changes in absenteeism ($p = .139$).

Referral to BSMART appears to result in improved attendance in most cases, with greater improvements associated with students whose absence rates coming into the program are relatively high. It does not appear that the mediation experience itself contributes to improved attendance. Furthermore, the improvements of both the mediation and non-mediation groups may be unrelated to BSMART. Additional analysis of changes in attendance of BSMART participants compared to a group that did not participate in BSMART is needed to confirm the program's impact. The comparison group selected by BCPSS was to be used for this purpose, but BCPSS attendance data covers an entire academic year. Consequently, it was not possible to separate absences in the period prior to referral to BSMART from absences after referral using the BCPSS data.

Conclusions

BSMART is intended to be an early response to school attendance problems. The intervention is framed by two underlying assumptions: 1) family issues frequently are the source of school attendance problems; and 2) communication barriers that exist between families and schools also contribute to school attendance problems. The BSMART model further assumes that mediation can be useful in engaging families and schools and have a positive impact on school-family engagement and school attendance. The BSMART program operationalizes these assumptions through collaboration with schools, training mediators and in its mediation process. Evidence gathered in the process analysis indicates successes in applying the BSMART model, as well as some challenges.

Application of the BSMART model

In terms of engaging schools and reaching the target population, the intervention demonstrates mixed results. The BSMART program has been generally successful in getting schools to meet the intervention's structural requirements and providing opportunities to inform teachers and other school staff members about the program. In regard to engaging the target population – students in the early stages of experiencing school attendance problems – success is

indicated by evidence that kindergarten through fourth grades students make up the majority of BSMART subjects. The program's objective of identifying students with 5 to 10 days of unexcused absences, however, is not being met by the majority of schools. A more troubling problem related to engaging the program's needs group involves recruitment of families. Over three-fourths of families eligible for BSMART do not participate in mediations. The largest factor contributing to this low rate of participations involves lack of success among schools in making contact with parents/guardians. Schools were successful in making contact with only 57.5% of eligible families. Unavailable and inaccurate contact information is most frequently cited reason for unsuccessful contact.

Information gathered from participants in BSMART mediations indicates that mediation sessions operate as intended and result in constructive experiences for teachers, parents/guardians and students. Data from interviews with knowledgeable informants and post-mediation surveys reveal a variety of encouraging results of mediation sessions:

- They provide opportunities for teachers and parents/guardians to connect regarding important matters concerning students and their families. In many cases mediation sessions are the first time that teachers and parents/guardians have met.
- They result in better understanding of school policies concerning school attendance. Family members experience substantial improvement in understanding these policies. Perhaps surprisingly, many teachers also report that mediations improve their understanding of the policies.
- They are useful in identifying family issues that negatively impact school attendance.
- In almost all cases they result in written agreements between schools and families that include steps to deal with problems that contribute to school attendance problems.
- They represent a process that is embraced and respected by teachers and parents/guardians. Mediation participants report that they like the process, find mediators to be effective and believe that they are given adequate opportunities to participate and represent their interests. That approximately half of initial mediation sessions are followed by second mediation sessions also indicates support for the process by participants.

School outcomes

Evidence from data collected by BSMART and BCPSS/DREAA is inconclusive concerning the impact of the program. A comparison of outcomes experienced by BSMART subject students and students whose families are referred to the program but do not participate is inconclusive in terms of attendance, MSA scores, suspensions and course completion measures. These findings, however, should be interpreted and generalized cautiously for several reasons:

- The representativeness of the experimental and comparison groups is open to serious question. Earlier in this report jurisdiction level correlations between race/ethnicity and special education students and habitual truancy were reported. BSMART subject students are not representative of all BCPSS students in terms of race/ethnicity (BSMART students are more frequently White and less frequently African American) and special education (fewer BSMART students are special education students). Identification of the cause or causes of these representation issues was beyond the scope of the current study.
- The low participation rate of families eligible for BSMART also challenges the usefulness of the current evidence.

Truancy Court Program (TCP)

Background and Overview

Description of TCP

During the 2008-2009 school year researchers from the University of Maryland-College Park, Institute for Governmental Service and Research (IGSR) conducted process and outcome evaluations of the Truancy Court Program (TCP) in Baltimore City. TCP is operated by the University of Baltimore School of Law (UB), Center for Families, Children, and the Courts (CFCC). The program began operations in 2005. TCP was designed to be a voluntary, 10-week, in-school intervention program for elementary and middle school students who are beginning to demonstrate a pattern of truancy. CFCC (Babb et al., 2008) describes TCP in the following terms:

[TCP is] an early intervention, therapeutic, and non-adversarial approach to truancy. It targets students who are “soft” truants – students who have from five to twenty

unexcused absences/tardies – in the belief that this group still has academic, social and emotional connections to the school.

TCP operates in a limited number of schools in Baltimore City. During the study period the program operated in a total of six schools. Three of the schools are elementary and middle schools, two are middle schools and one is a high school. The high school was not included in the outcome evaluation. Schools volunteer for participation in the program. Students are selected for TCP by teachers, counselors, and other staff at the individual schools. Each student's parent/guardian decides whether the student will participate. The program emphasizes mentoring and service referral for student participants and their parents/guardians. Volunteer "judges" conduct mock court sessions in participating schools to monitor student progress in the program and to provide encouragement to participants and their families. The TCP team includes principals and vice principals, other school staff, and CFCC staff members and UB law students. Since the inauguration of TCP in 2005, over 500 students from 14 Baltimore City schools have participated in the program. In summary terms, the program offers participating students and their parents the following:

- Character-building classes and mentoring;
- Mentors and tutors;
- Referral to a mediation clinic operated by supervised UB clinical law students;
- Incentives and/or rewards;
- Identification of family needs for which referral to social work and other wraparound/support services can be made by BCPSS;
- "Family fun nights;" and
- Program graduations that reward students who demonstrate at least a 75% increase in attendance, better classroom behavior and improved grades, with gifts, graduation certificates, and a reception hosted by the First Lady of Maryland.

UB students working at CFCC conduct workshops for parents/guardians in BCPSS schools during the school year. Topics considered in the workshops are built around the idea that parents/guardians need to better understand school attendance policy,

The extent of truancy and Baltimore City Public School truancy policy

To understand the potential role of TCP in responding to the truancy problem in Baltimore City it is useful to review the extent and implications of habitual truancy and BCPSS pre-existing policy concerning and responses to chronic school absenteeism.

During the 2008-2009 school year, the habitual truancy rate for BCPSS as reported to MSDE was 8.22% as compared to the statewide rate of 2.32%. The high school dropout rate in Baltimore City was 6.20% during the study period as compared to 2.80% for the state as a whole. Table 18 represents the habitual truancy rates at the schools included in the study. Aside from Patterson High School and William Lemmel Middle School, the schools included in the study had habitual truancy rates lower than that for BCPSS as a whole.

Table 18: Habitual truancy rate for schools participating in TCP, 2008-2009.

School	Habitual Truancy Rate
Barclay Elementary and Middle School	1.04
Highlandtown Elementary and Middle School	4.88
Patterson High School	24.46
Steuart Hill Academic Academy	0.91
Walter P. Carter Elementary and Middle School	2.83
William Lemmel Middle School	9.62

BCPSS policy states that school officials are required to contact truant students and their parents or guardians to reengage the students in school. The level of contact made with students and parents increases with the number of unexcused absences. The reengagement process begins with a meeting between the teacher and the student, followed by a phone call to the parent or guardian by either the teacher or the attendance monitor. Next, the principal mails a letter to the child's home to request a conference to discuss reasons for the absences. Once a student has been absent 6 to 10 days, the student's school sends home a letter requesting an informal hearing between the parent/guardian and the teacher, attendance officer or other staff member. During the informal hearing, an attendance agreement is prepared between all concerned parties. Depending upon the underlying problems thought to be causing the student's truancy, the student and his/her family may be referred to school and/or community-based programs such as the Chronic Health Impaired Program (CHIP), the University of Baltimore School of Law's Truancy

Court Program, the University of Maryland School of Law's Baltimore Students: Mediation About Reducing Truancy (B-SMART), mentoring programs, alternative school programs, General Educational Development programs, or other human services programs such as mental health services available in the community.

At this point, if the school's efforts do not yield re-engagement, BCPSS policy states that the student and his or her parents or guardians are to be referred to the Office of Attendance and Truancy (OAT) located at the BCPSS Administrative Headquarters. Once a student is referred to OAT, the re-engagement process is a collaborative effort between the school and OAT. Upon continued absence, phone calls and home visits are initiated by both the school and the OAT to remind parents and guardians about the conditions agreed upon in the attendance agreement.

Once a student is absent 16 or more days, the parent or guardian and the student are required to attend a formal hearing at the BCPSS Administrative Headquarters. The formal hearing serves as both a warning to the parents/guardians of their child's poor attendance and its consequences, and as an opportunity to provide information on available community services. The student's attendance is followed up after two weeks by OAT at which point, if additional days are missed without a valid excuse, a "Statement of Charges" is filed by the school system with the State's Attorney (BCPSS, 2008). During the 2008-2009 Academic Year, 375 cases were filed with the State's Attorney's Office; of these cases, 213 came from attendance hearing cases. The remaining 162 cases were filed prior to a scheduled attendance hearing because the needs of the student or family had to be addressed sooner than the earliest hearing date. Once charges are filed with the State Attorney's Office, cases may be dismissed if the student reaches the age of 16 or if the judge determines that there is insufficient evidence against the family. The State's Attorney's Office files charges against the parent in the Baltimore City District Court; a judge may place the parent/guardian on a STET and monitor the student's subsequent attendance, or the parent can be found guilty of a misdemeanor and fined up to \$50 per day of unlawful absence or imprisonment not to exceed 10 days, or both (Md. Code Edu. Article, §7-301).

Viewed in light of BCPSS overall official response to truancy, TCP maybe viewed as an intermediate response to truancy at the school level before truancy cases are referred to the administration level for action. TCP serves as an evidence-based resource for school level administrators to call upon to assist parents/guardians and students deal with truancy before the problem further escalates.

Evaluation Methodology

Process evaluation

The TCP process evaluation focused on the operation of TCP in six Baltimore City Schools in the 2008-2009 academic year (Highlandtown Elementary and Middle, Barclay Elementary and Middle, William Lemmel Middle, Patterson High, Walter P. Carter Elementary, and Steuart Hill Academic Academy). In doing so, it identifies productive and less productive strategies and provides preliminary outcomes for students served by the program.

The sources of data used to gather data for the evaluation included the following:

- 1) Semi-structured interviews with senior staff at the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) and senior staff at CFCC.
- 2) Semi-structured interviews with 16 members of the TCP team.
- 3) Semi-structured interviews with 12 participating students and 17 parents or guardians of participating students.
- 4) Observations of 6 TCP sessions.
- 5) Administrative data from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).
- 6) Review of archival data, including program planning and implementation reports, the Baltimore City Public School Student Attendance Policy/Procedures Handbook, the TCP program manual and Tool Kit, and newspaper articles.

Outcome evaluation

The outcome evaluation examined the impact of TCP participation on student attendance, academic performance, school behavior and juvenile justice experience for students who participated in TCP during the 2008-2009 academic year. To accomplish this, data were obtained from CFCC, BCPSS and the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS). Student scores on Maryland School Assessment (MSA) tests were used to measure academic performance, suspensions were used to measure school behavior and referrals to DJS were used to measure juvenile justice experience. To the extent possible, results for TCP participants were compared to results of a similar group of students selected by BCPSS who did not participate in TCP. This approach enabled the researchers to separate the effects of TCP from other potential factors. The following analyses were performed:

- Total absences, MSA scores, and suspensions during the 2008-2009 academic year, as reported by BCPSS, were examined for fall 2008 TCP participants and graduates and a comparison group to determine whether TCP had an effect on attendance, academic performance, and in-school behavior.
- Absences and tardies during the 10 weeks prior to and during participation in TCP, as recorded by CFCC, were examined for spring 2009 TCP participants and graduates to assess attendance for this group during and after participation in TCP.
- Referrals to DJS during and after the 2008-2009 academic year were examined for fall 2008 TCP participants and graduates and a comparison group to assess juvenile justice experience before and after participation in the program.

Process Evaluation

Needs assessment

The needs assessment that frames TCP is the same as that reported concerning BSMART. During the study period, 2008-2009 the rate of habitual truancy in Baltimore City was 8.22% - the highest rate among Maryland's 24 local education authorities and over 4 times the statewide rate.¹¹ This equates to over 7,000 students habitually truant on any given school day in Baltimore City. Based on the literature that identifies a positive correlation between habitual truancy and dropout rates, the state's highest high school dropout rate of over 6% in Baltimore City is not surprising. Therefore, the need for truancy intervention programs in Baltimore City is great.

TCP is intended as an intervention for students early in their truancy experience, before they are counted among BCPSS's habitual truants. Since TCP operates in only a limited number of voluntary schools, it is not part of a systemic response by BCPSS to the City's truancy problem. As a result, it cannot be assessed in terms of its overall role in responding to the truancy problem in Baltimore City's public schools.

¹¹ During the most recent reporting period, 2009-2010, the habitual truancy rate reported by BCPSS to MSDE was 8.0% - a reduction of more than 13% as compared to 2007-2008.

Operation assessment

Profile of Participants. As an intervention for students early in their truancy experience, the TCP model incorporates many of the recommended elements of truancy reduction and prevention programs. These include interagency collaboration, family involvement, incentives and sanctions, prevention strategies such as mentoring, and identification of service needs in a supportive environment. CFCC accepts only schools with well-organized and complete TCP program applications and indications of commitment to TCP among school staff.

Based on data for the six TCP schools in Baltimore City during 2008-2009, TCP participants are representative of BCPSS students in terms of race and gender, except that TCP participants included a higher percentage of Hispanics than are present in BCPSS as a whole. This finding was not surprising given that two of the TCP schools serve neighborhoods with relatively large Hispanic populations.

The average age of TCP participants was 11. This finding is in line with the expectations of the CFCC operators of TCP who indicate that the program is designed to respond to the needs of middle-school students.

Nearly 20% of TCP participants were special education students. This corresponds with the statewide contextual finding of a positive correlation between the presence of special education students and habitual truancy. It is therefore unsurprising that special education students are slightly over-represented in TCP as compared to the 17% rate among all BCPSS students.

More than 17% of TCP participants changed schools one or more times between 2007 and 2009. This represents a slightly higher rate than the 15% of all students that BCPSS reported to MSDE that transferred within the district, but is lower than the overall BCPSS transfer rate of 19%.

TCP serves a low income population. All but one of the TCP schools during 2008-2009 was a Title 1 school, and 90% of TCP participants were eligible for low or reduced cost meals (FARM). This is somewhat higher than the BCPSS-wide figure of 83.5% of students who receive FARM assistance.

Attendance data provided by BCPSS was aggregated by academic year and did not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. Consequently, the evaluation team was not able to confirm whether attendance by TCP participants fit the program's guideline of 5 to 20

unexcused absences during the previous two marking periods. Assuming, however, that absences can serve as a proxy for unexcused absences, a limited comparison of the attendance history of TCP participants with the program's guidelines can be made. The median number of total absences among TCP students during the academic year prior to their participation was 21. This level of total absenteeism is consistent with expectations for a group chosen for having 5 to 20 unexcused absences during the prior two grading periods (equivalent to half an academic year).

Students that participated in TCP tended to have low grades in English, math, and science, with mean scores in the mid-60s prior to their participation. Only about 15% of TCP participants had been suspended during the academic year prior to their TCP participation. Among the participants who had been suspended, the average number of suspensions was 2.1 and the average number of days per suspension was 4.4.

Nine TCP participants were referred to the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) prior to their participation in the program. These nine students experienced a total of 16 referrals to DJS, with one referral resulting in a finding of delinquency.

About 45% of the 2008-2009 TCP participants graduated from the program after one semester of participation. Some of the students who did not graduate after one semester chose to participate again. Roughly half of the 2008-2009 TCP participants graduated from the program after one or two semesters of participation. The graduation rate varied greatly from school to school, however. At the one high school offering TCP, only 27.3% of participants graduated from TCP after one or two semesters. TCP graduation rates at elementary and middle schools ranged from 36.4% to 80.0%.

The researchers developed a logistic regression model to test whether race, gender, age, mobility, free lunch status, special education status, prior academic performance, prior numbers of absences, or prior numbers of suspensions predicted whether a participant graduated from TCP. For students who participated in TCP during the fall of 2008, none of the variables tested had a significant effect on graduation from TCP. For the spring 2009 group, the only variable found to have a statistically significant effect on graduation from TCP was the number of suspensions during the 2007-2008 academic year, with a higher number of suspensions associated with a reduced likelihood of TCP graduation. CFCC representatives noted that TCP was designed for elementary and middle school students, and that inclusion of the one high school in analyses may skew the results. To alleviate this concern, researchers repeated the

analysis with high school students excluded. Once high school students were removed from the analysis, suspension ceased to have a significant impact on graduation.

Process assessment

Schools implement TCP guided by the TCP Toolkit, a handbook that outlines the program, the role of some team members, session activities, and graduation requirements. Beyond the guidelines presented in the Toolkit, CFCC designed TCP to be a flexible program that can be adapted to the context and needs of individual schools, including choosing the students to whom the school offers participation.

Based on survey results and observations, it appears that a number of TCP functions are being performed well. A principals' workshop, held prior to the beginning of the academic school year, informs interested principals about the level of commitment expected of school staff participating in TCP and reviews TCP operational requirements. Training is provided to TCP team members and is generally considered to be valuable. Most respondents agreed that the training was detailed, organized and prepared them for their respective roles in TCP. The majority of team member respondents indicated that team members worked together and that conflicts did not arise among team members. CFCC staff meets weekly with the Law Student Fellows and weekly amongst themselves to review cases, gather feedback on the program, and discuss future development of the program.

TCP is a multiagency program requiring coordination among organizational partners. The relationships among TCP team members from these multiple organizations, as observed by the research team, appear to be effective. It is not clear, however, whether TCP coordinates effectively with agencies that have the resources to provide support services to TCP participants and their families. TCP did not maintain lists of available resources and does not track referrals for services, but CFCC says that a new manual of available resources is currently being created.

The parent/guardian and student participants surveyed generally reported that they were satisfied with their interactions with program personnel and procedures. When asked what they liked best about the program, the common themes within the parent/guardian responses were motivation, support, and hope. The incentives and sanctions utilized by the program were generally viewed as appropriate and/or effective by parents/guardians.

Satisfaction with TCP among schools is demonstrated by multi-year participation by 6 of the 14 schools that have been involved with the program, as well as the high rate of reapplication

for the program among participating schools. Four of the schools participating during 2008-2009 had been involved for multiple years, including one school that had been involved for three years.

The use of the word “Court” in the TCP title creates possible confusion regarding the program’s relationship to the Judiciary. Although judges were involved in planning and implementing TCP, it is a school-based rather than court-based intervention. CFCC suggests that the stature of a judge in the community supports his/her role as a problem-solver and supporter of community safety; however the public, and even TCP participants, may be misled into believing that the program can leverage judicial authority over truancy.

TCP was found to be an evolving program that adheres to a collaborative approach suggested in the literature. The program has been well-received by team members and participating parents/guardians, and students. Program policies and procedures and associated documentation have been gradually clarified as the program has matured. Updated outcomes provided by program managers seem to indicate improved attendance rates.

Outcome Evaluation

Measures

Measurements applied in the outcome evaluation were designed to consider the effect of TCP on attendance; academic performance, as measured by Maryland School Assessment (MSA) test scores; and student behavior, as measured by suspensions and referrals to DJS. The outcome analyses considered only elementary school and middle school students, the age groups targeted by TCP.

Analysis

Analysis of the outcomes of fall 2008 TCP participants and a comparison group of BCPSS students who had not participated in TCP found that participation in TCP did not significantly impact attendance. Graduation from TCP within one or two semesters of participation was associated with an improvement in attendance, however. When compared to non-participants and non-graduates, TCP graduates were absent on average five fewer days in 2008-2009. Data from CFCC for spring 2009 participants showed that attendance improved for TCP graduates, but did not improve for participants who did not graduate. Data on non-participants were not available for comparison with the spring 2009 TCP group.

The analysis did not reveal an impact of TCP on academic performance. Neither participation in TCP nor graduation from TCP had a significant effect on MSA reading or math scores.

TCP participants and graduates, and the comparison group of non-participants all experienced slight increases in the numbers of suspensions in 2008-2009. Neither these increases nor the differences among the three groups were statistically significant. Smaller percentages of TCP participants and TCP graduates were referred to DJS between the fall of 2008 and August 2010 than had been referred prior to the fall of 2008. In contrast, the percentage of comparison group students referred to DJS increased between the two periods. The number of students referred was too small, however, to test for statistical significance. The numbers of TCP participants at each school were too small to allow detailed analysis of attendance, academic, and behavioral results across schools.

In summary, graduation from TCP was associated with improved attendance. Approximately half of 2008-2009 TCP participants graduated from the program after one or two semesters of participation. Thus, the program can be described as effective for about half the participants. Graduation from TCP also appeared to be associated with reductions in DJS referrals. It should be noted, however, that outcome data provided subsequent to this evaluation by program managers indicates that program participants do show improvements in their attendance and grades.

Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP)

Background and Overview

As part of the research funded by the Maryland Judiciary and SJI, the AOC evaluated the TRPP with the University of Maryland School of Social Work's Ruth Young Center for Families and Children, and the University of Maryland- College Park's Institute for Government Service and Research.

Authorized under the provisions of Chapter 551 of the Acts of 2004, Chapter 648 of the Acts of 2007 and Chapter 718 of the Acts of 2009, the Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (TRPP) is codified in Sections 3-8C-01 to 3-8C-12 of the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article of the

Annotated Code of Maryland. TRPP is a court based truancy¹ reduction intervention model in juvenile courts of Maryland. The legislation establishing TRPP as a pilot program in a limited number of local jurisdictions created a new cause of action in juvenile court. Prior to 2004 Maryland law provided two remedies to address truancy, both of which still exist. An adult who unlawfully failed to send a child to school is subject to criminal prosecution under “Failure to Send Law” provisions codified in Section 7-301 of the Education Article. An individual convicted under this section is subject to incarceration for up to 30 days and/or a fine. Criminal cases under this provision can be filed in either the District Court or the Juvenile Court. The Juvenile Causes Act provides that a child of compulsory school age who is “habitually truant may be the subject of a Child In Need of Supervision (“CINS”) petition filed under Section 3-8A-01 of the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland. Only the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) can authorize a CINS petition.

Efforts by local boards of education to deal with truancy were frustrated by the apparent defiance by students and their parents to the mandatory school attendance law.² State’s attorney offices had difficulty proving cases of Failure to Send under the adult criminal statute when parents offered the defense that they could not control their children. DJS, determining truancy to be an educational issue, refused to authorize CINS petitions in the juvenile courts. Thus, referrals by local boards of education to DJS or the state’s attorney offices did not result in interventions or services to reduce truancy.

The TRPP model is intended to address these problems. Under this approach local boards of education may initiate the action directly in juvenile court, rather than through DJS referral. Once in court, TRPP is intended to provide a holistic, non-criminal framework to deal with

¹A Truant child is defined in the Code of Maryland Regulations, Section 13A.08.01.04 as “a student who is absent without lawful cause . . . from the attendance for a school day or portion of it.” A student is “habitually truant” as defined by the same regulation “if the student is unlawfully absent from school for a number of days or portion of days in excess of 20 percent of the school days within any marking period, semester, or year.” Students are considered lawfully absent from school under COMAR 13A.08.01.03 only if they are absent for the following reasons: death in the immediate family, illness of the student, court summons, hazardous weather conditions, work approved or sponsored by the educational authorities, religious holiday, state emergency, suspension, lack of authorized transportation, other circumstances, which constitute good cause in the judgment of the superintendent. In addition, most if not all counties allow students a certain number of absences when excused by a parent note.

²School attendance is governed by §7-301 of the Education Article. This provides in pertinent part that “each child who resides in this State and is 5 years old or older and under 16 shall attend a public school regularly during the entire school year unless the child is otherwise receiving regular thorough instruction during the school year in the studies usually taught in the public schools to children of the same age.”

truancy issues. The statute presently authorizes the establishment of TRPPs in the Circuit Courts for Dorchester, Harford, Prince George's, Somerset, Talbot, Wicomico, and Worcester Counties.

With the creation of TRPP, unlawful failure to attend school in the participating counties became a code violation and a civil offense. Adjudication under the provisions of this subtitle are not criminal offenses.³ If a child is less than 12 years old, a criminal charge against the child's parent or guardian under § 7-301 of the Education Article must be filed and either dismissed or placed on the stet docket before a truancy petition can be filed against the child.⁴

An adjudicatory hearing under TRPP is conducted using the Rules of Evidence and the respondent child has a right to be represented by an attorney at any stage of the proceedings.⁵ If adjudicated truant, the child is ordered to attend school, and, with his or her family, have a comprehensive family assessment. Based upon the input of the school board, the child, his or her family and the recommendations from the assessment, the court orders a variety of community services to address the problems identified in the assessment. The services ordered often include community service, family counseling, substance abuse counseling, mental health services, and curfews.⁶ The child's progress is monitored for several months. During this period, the child will be seen by TRPP judicial masters on a regular basis – some children as often as two times per month – in order to encourage compliance with the court's orders. The court uses incentives and some minor sanctions to encourage cooperation with the program. Those who demonstrate improved school attendance, re-attachment to their schools, and who are cooperative with the services offered, successfully complete the program. Successful completion generally involves a formal "graduation" ceremony in which the child is provided with a certificate of completion.

The four counties of the First Judiciary Circuit were the first in the state to implement the TRPP model. The first TRPP case was adjudicated in Wicomico County in January of 2005. Subsequently, TRPP cases were adjudicated in Somerset County beginning in November of 2005, Dorchester County in March of 2006, and Worcester County in January of 2007. TRPP includes a special docket of truancy cases that are heard by the same master/judge each month. At these monthly hearings, factors contributing to truant behavior are identified through comprehensive family assessments and, as a result, students and their families are referred to

³Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article, §3-8C-03.

⁴Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article, §3-8C-04.

⁵Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article, §3-8C-05.

⁶Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article, §3-8C-06.

community service resources to address these factors. Students are monitored by the court for a minimum of 90 days. Students who demonstrate improved school attendance behavior are “graduated” from the program.

The AOC and RYC produced a report dated December 1, 2008 (Daining, Bryant and Crumpton, 2008) which considered the processes and very early outcomes of TRPP in the four counties of the First Judicial circuit. The current evaluation incorporates the process findings of the earlier report.

Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation enhanced the findings from the 2008 report with quantitative and qualitative data drawn from TRPP records, information resulting from observations of TRPP operation, as well as from focus groups and individual interviews involving knowledgeable informants. It also considered key outcomes experienced by TRPP participants. Specifically, it included analyses concerning program participation, school attendance and performance, and juvenile justice data gathered for TRPP participants. Data collection efforts occurred from about August 2009 to June 2010.

The evaluation of TRPP in Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester Counties sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the extent of need for a court-based truancy intervention in the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit?
2. What is the target population for TRPP?
3. What are the design characteristics of TRPP?
4. To what extent do the design characteristics incorporate best and promising practices identified in the literature concerning school attendance/truancy intervention?
5. Do the design characteristics of TRPP meet the truancy intervention needs of the First Judicial Circuit and reach the target population with services, case management and oversight as intended in the program design?
6. What impact does TRPP have on program participants’ school attendance and performance?
7. What impact does TRPP have on program participants’ juvenile justice system experience?

The process evaluation steps followed by the evaluators included: semi-structured interviews with program stakeholders who planned the program and/or operate the program in each county; observation of court sessions; analyses of court and school administrative data; and review of program archival information. To assess the operational characteristics and effectiveness of TRPP, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 41 individuals. Their perspectives represented the variety of interests found among the organizations that contribute to the operation of the truancy intervention. In the telephone and in-person interviews these TRPP stakeholders were asked about their roles in the intervention, planning of the program, program purpose, operation of TRPP, and their assessment of the program's effectiveness.

A total of 72 court observations were conducted for the evaluation. All four types of hearings involved in the TRPP program – adjudicatory, disposition, review and final – were observed. Adjudicatory hearing observations involved acquiring the following information: parties to the case present; court staff members and representatives of other organizations in attendance; details concerning the case, including the number of days the subject student had been absent from school; the extent to which the master engaged the student and parents/guardians; and orders recommended by the master, including evaluations. In review hearings the nature and content of exchanges between the master, student, parents/guardians and representatives of the school and other agencies were recorded. Progress in relation to orders resulting from the adjudicatory hearing was also noted.

The outcome evaluation included analyses of school and court administrative data related to school attendance and performance. As well, it included analysis of DJS records concerning misdemeanor and felony adjudications.

Summary of Findings

Needs assessment

TRPP is designed to be an intervention that assists courts and schools in meeting their responsibilities under state law to respond to the problem of truancy. In so doing the program responds to a set of needs that impact school attendance, school performance and juvenile justice experiences among children in the counties of the First Judicial Circuit. Earlier in this report indicators of the extent of school attendance, school performance and juvenile justice problems

in Maryland were discussed. Reviewing measures associated with these problems will help to frame the need for TRPP in the jurisdictions of the Lower Eastern Shore.

Habitual truancy rate as reported to MSDE in 2009-2010 provides an indication of the extent of school attendance problems in Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester Counties as compared to other jurisdictions in Maryland. Three of the subject counties rank among the eight in the state with the highest rate of habitual truancy. Somerset County ranked fourth, Dorchester County fifth and Wicomico County eighth. Worcester County ranks twenty-first. Baltimore City and Prince George's County have habitual truancy rates that are much higher than any other jurisdiction in the state. If these jurisdictions are excluded from this comparison among Maryland's jurisdictions, Somerset County has the second highest habitual truancy rate, while Dorchester County ranks third and Wicomico County ranks sixth among 22 jurisdictions.

The percent of students who complete high school and the rate of high school dropouts in 2009-2010 can be viewed as ultimate measures of school performance. All four subject jurisdictions are among the twelve in the state with the lowest rates of high school graduation. Dorchester County had the third lowest rate of graduation, Somerset County the fourth lowest, Wicomico County the eighth lowest and Worcester County the twelfth lowest. In terms of rate of high school dropouts, three of the subject counties were among the six jurisdictions with the highest dropout rates. Wicomico County's dropout rate ranked second, Somerset County's third and Dorchester County's sixth. Worcester County had the lowest dropout rate in the state.

The rate of juvenile delinquency referrals per 1,000 juvenile population as reported by DJS is a measure of juvenile justice experience that can be used for purposes of comparison. In 2009-2010 all four jurisdictions of the Lower Eastern Shore were among the six jurisdictions in the state with the highest rates of juvenile delinquency referrals per 1,000 juvenile population. Worcester County ranked second, Wicomico County third, Dorchester County fourth and Somerset County sixth. The rate of juvenile delinquency referrals per 1,000 juvenile population for all four of the subject counties was substantially higher than the state rate of 73.4. The rates in Worcester, Wicomico and Somerset Counties were more than twice the statewide rate. According to these school and juvenile measures, the counties of the First Judicial Circuit can be viewed as experiencing more intense problems in these areas of concern than other counties in Maryland. Table 20 represents the aggregate experience on these school attendance and

performance, juvenile justice experience dimensions for the four counties of the Lower Eastern Shore.

Table 20. School attendance, performance and juvenile justice measures, counties of the Lower Eastern Shore, 2009-2010

Jurisdiction	Habitual Truancy Rate	Percent Completed High School	High School Dropout Rate	Juvenile Delinquency Referrals Per 1,000 Youth Population
Dorchester	1.32%	81.0%	3.52%	159.9
Somerset	1.49%	82.0%	4.44%	128.2
Wicomico	1.06%	85.1%	5.15%	162.4
Worcester	0.29%	87.9%	0.97%	164.3
State of Maryland	2.25%	87.5%	2.90%	73.4

TRPP is designed to impact school attendance problems by assessing the needs of children and their families and then connecting them to services that address the identified needs. As discussed earlier in this report, poverty/low income is an indicator of the types of family problems associated with truancy. As a result, to assess the need for TRPP in terms of overarching family problems it is useful to examine the counties of the Lower Eastern in terms of comparative measures of household income and poverty.

As of August 2011, all four the counties of the First Judicial Circuit rank among the ten jurisdictions in the state with the highest poverty rates. Somerset County has the highest poverty rate in the state, while Dorchester County, Wicomico County and Worcester County rank fourth, seventh and tenth, respectively. All four counties have poverty rates considerably higher than the statewide rate of 9.2%. In terms of the percentage of children living in poverty, all four subject counties are ranked among the thirteen counties in the state with the highest percentages. Worcester County ranks third, Dorchester County fourth, Wicomico County ninth and Somerset County thirteenth. Worcester, Dorchester and Wicomico Counties have rates of children living in poverty considerably higher than the statewide rate of 11.8%.

The counties of the Lower Eastern Shore currently rank among the seven counties in Maryland with the lowest median household income. Somerset County has the lowest median family income, while Dorchester has the fifth lowest, Wicomico the sixth lowest and Worcester the seventh lowest. The median family income of the four subject counties is at least \$21,000 less than the statewide average of \$69,193.

This assessment of the school attendance, school performance, juvenile justice experience and poverty/low income measures provides substantial inferential evidence of the need for TRPP in the Lower Eastern Shore. This evidence is reinforced by other factors considered elsewhere in this report. Central among these is a need for greater cooperation and collaboration among the state and local public organizations that are involved in responding to truancy and the family problems that have been demonstrated to be related to truancy. TRPP is designed to respond to this need for greater cooperation and collaboration.

Process analysis

Description of TRPP Participants. Between December 2004 and June 2010 a total of 373 young people were admitted to TRPP in the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit. Of students entering TRPP, 44.3% met program requirements and successfully “graduated,” 26.8% of program entrants failed to meet program requirements and left TRPP, and 11.7% of program entrants left the program due to relocating out of the jurisdiction. The remaining 17.2% of students admitted to TRPP who did not complete the program left for a variety of reasons. The most frequently reported reasons were: aged out, taken into DJS custody and home schooled.

According to responding key informants in the evaluation, TRPP is designed to provide schools with a viable option for responding to the needs of children who continue to have school attendance problems after the schools have exhausted all other options among their internal responses to school attendance and related problems. As a result, assumptions at the outset of the evaluation included that the target population of TRPP would not involve the youngest students in the four school systems and may exhibit other behavioral problems, including juvenile justice system involvement. Evidence gathered during the evaluation confirmed these assumptions.

The average age of TRPP participants during the study period was 13.3, ranging from an average of 12.7 years of age in Worcester County to 14.0 in Dorchester County. Program participants were most frequently 9th graders. They typically had missed a quarter of school days prior to admission to the program. At program entry, TRPP participants had records of low school performance. GPA data for samples taken from the four participating counties (n=178) indicate an average GPA of 0.82. Involvement in the juvenile justice system also can be found among TRPP participants. DJS data acquired for samples taken from the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit (n=181) indicate that at entry program participants on average had a record of 0.67 misdemeanor adjudications. Thus, the masters, administrative staff and service providers

associated with TRPP are challenged with a service population that is characterized by records of multiple behavioral problems in the education and juvenile justice systems. Table 21 includes descriptive statistics concerning these dimensions for all four of the study jurisdictions.

Table 21. Descriptive statistics concerning First Judicial Circuit TRPP participants at program entry.

County	Age of Participants	Truancy Rate	GPA	Misdemeanor Adjudications*
Dorchester	14.0	25.2%	.85	.27
Somerset	13.5	23.5%	.86	.66
Wicomico	13.3	19.5%	.99	.72
Worcester	12.7	38.9%	.50	.46

Note: * One year prior to TRPP entry.

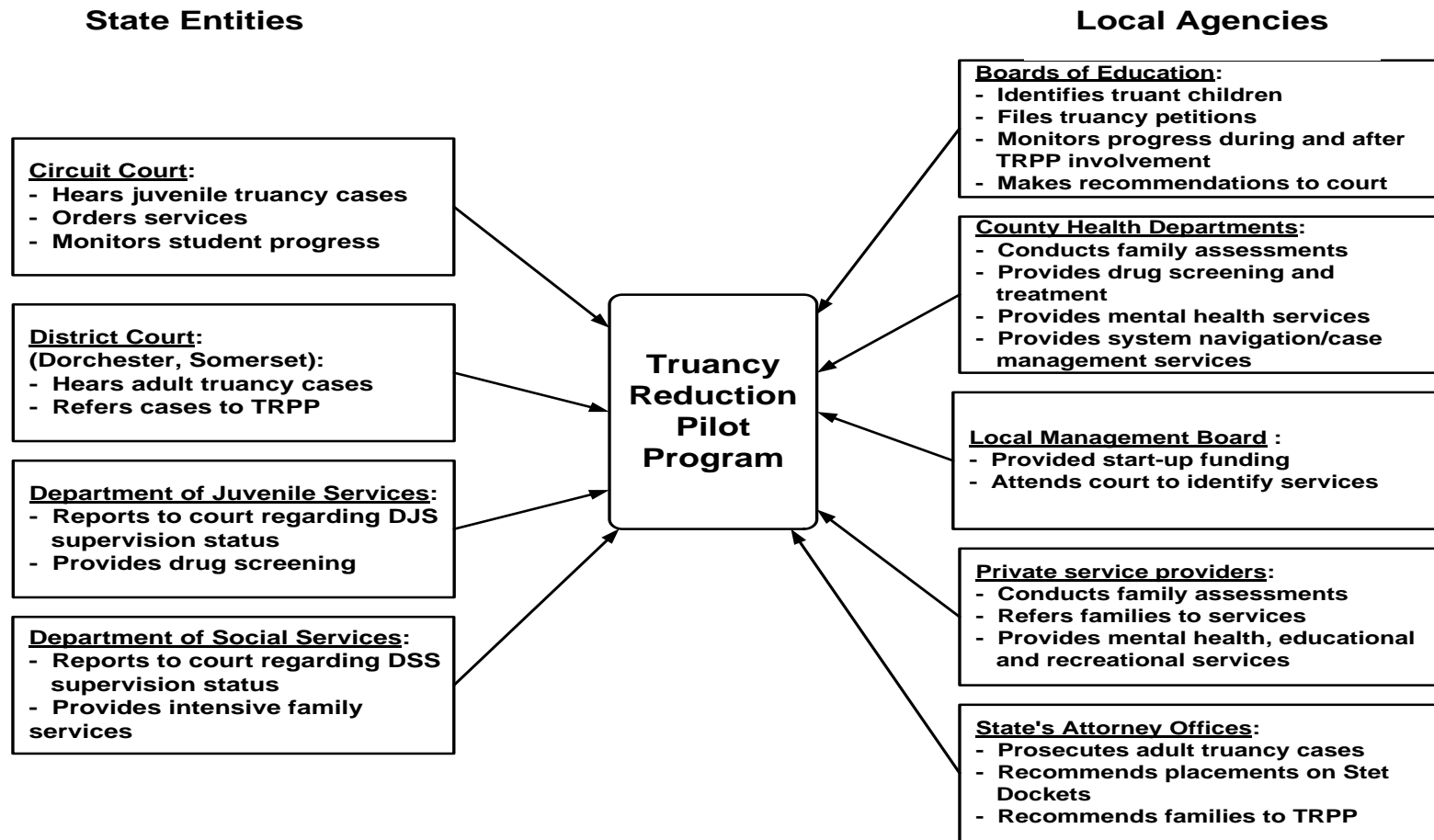
Process description. The TRPP process involves multiple agencies touching the lives of young people before during, and after they leave TRPP. Although TRPP operation in the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit is similar in many ways across these jurisdictions, there also are variations within and across counties. For instance, differences can be seen regarding how unexcused and excused absences are defined, how tardiness is defined, how sanctions are administered, and how the courts, schools, DJS and DSS interact with the target population of young people.

TRPP can be assessed as operating as a single program across four counties. This can be seen in that one coordinator supports all four jurisdictions and one centralized database is used to ensure consistency in the collection of program data across the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit. The operation of TRPP in the counties of the Lower Eastern Shore also can be assessed as four separate programs serving the distinct and particularized needs of each county. Viewed according to these terms each program can be seen as possessing stylistic and substantive differences. An assessment of TRPP operating as four separate programs is reinforced by evidence gathered from court observations, data regarding the profiles of students referred to the program and variations in resources to support the TRPP intervention.

Despite the complex nature of the inter-organizational collaboration required to support the TRPP model in the First Judicial Circuit and variations found among the counties, the evaluation revealed extensive and successful collaboration among the cooperating organizational entities. For instance, although TRPP is clearly a court-based truancy intervention, the Boards of

Education of Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester Counties have embraced the TRPP model as valuable in retaining and engaging students with school attendance problems in the educational process. It is reasonable to infer that encouraging outcomes identified in the current evaluation are at least partly attributable to the substantive inter-organizational cooperation evidenced in TRPP. Figure 1 demonstrates the extensive collaboration and cooperation among state and local public organizations required for TRPP to function. The figure includes each of the state and local organizations that contribute to TRPP operate and the contribution that each organization makes.

Figure. The organizational environment of TRPP: state and local agencies that serve as source organizations for the program.



Service provision through TRPP

Among the key objectives of TRPP in Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester Counties is to link students with school attendance problems and their families with support and services. Process outcomes identified in the evaluation confirm that operation of the program in the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit is accomplishing this program intent. For instance, 86.1% of the families of program participants were successfully referred to family assessments, 36.5% of young people admitted to TRPP were referred to individual counseling, and 29.8% of TRPP participants were referred to substance abuse evaluation. TRPP participants and their families also were engaged in a wide range of other important interventions: after school programs, transportation facilitation, anger management counseling, mental health evaluations, medical evaluations, parenting training and mentoring. Through consistent application of incentives and sanctions, judicial masters in the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit were found to encourage fidelity to their service recommendations for TRPP participants and their families.

Table 22 represents a compilation by jurisdiction of evaluations and services provided as the result of TRPP orders. The evaluations and services listed are intended to provide support to families and students in fulfilling the central requirement of TRPP participation – school attendance. In review hearings for each TRPP case, masters inquire of participating students, parents/guardians and school and service provider representative as to whether their orders for evaluations and services have been followed and the results of such. This table offers evidence that TRPP masters recognize that, in addition to services made available for truant children, family problems that result in school attendance problems also require services and monitoring.

Table 22. TRPP evaluations and services provided, by jurisdiction.

Type of Disposition	County				Total
	Dorchester	Somerset	Wicomico	Worcester	
Community-based Evaluations and Interventions					
Substance abuse evaluation	0	41	28	0	69
Family Assessment	12	51	116	26	205
Dental Evaluation	0	2	0	2	4
Medical Evaluation	0	6	9	7	22
Medication Evaluation	0	1	1	0	2
Mental health evaluation	2	6	7	3	18
Anger Management	1	9	3	1	14
Individual counseling	5	28	39	11	83
Family Counseling	2	19	18	0	39
Mentor	1	0	5	0	6
Other Mental Health Treatment	1	6	18	13	38
Substance abuse treatment	0	8	7	2	17
Equestrian Therapy	0	3	1	0	4
Parenting classes	0	7	2	0	9
School-based Evaluations and Interventions					
Educational Testing	0	1	0	2	3
IEP Evaluation	0	0	3	0	3
After School Program	2	0	3	6	11
Summer School	0	4	0	0	4
Tutoring	4	17	19	7	47
Career Projects	0	5	0	0	0
IEP Review	0	0	1	0	1
Saturday School	0	0	0	1	0
Suspension Alternative	1	4	1	2	8

During the typical 90-day post-adjudication hearing monitoring period for TRPP participants, continuing oversight by masters provides leverage to assure that parents/guardians and students follow through on the requirements of court orders. During this period masters monitor indicators of progress including compliance with services, school attendance, school performance and conduct at home and at school. To encourage compliance masters use a

combination of incentives and non-punitive sanctions to encourage compliance with court orders. Incentives for compliance include gift certificates and verbal praise during review hearings. Sanctions include withholding of incentives, community service and curfews. Table 23 on the next page summarizes sanctions and incentives applied by jurisdiction during the study period.

Table 23. TRPP incentives and sanctions, by jurisdiction, 2008-2009.

Incentive/Sanction	County				Total
	Dorchester	Somerset	Wicomico	Worcester	
Incentives	7	17	40	8	72
Projects	1	6	15	0	22
Community service	1	3	10	0	14
Curfew	3	31	50	5	89

Assessment of TRPP operation

The national literature concerning truancy intervention emphasizes the importance of inter-organizational collaboration and cooperation among jurisdictions and agencies that share responsibility for dealing with school attendance problems and their consequences. The evidence gathered for the evaluation of TRPP, particularly the evidence that emerged from interviews with individuals actively involved in the TRPP process and from observations of TRPP hearings, indicates that TRPP has resulted in improved collaboration and cooperation among courts, schools and service providers. The leadership of the First Judicial Circuit has effectively used the prestige and authority of the courts to establish a collaborative response to truancy and the family-based problems associated with it. Information is continuously shared among the courts, schools and service providers to identify problems, connect children and their families to evaluations and services designed to ameliorate the problems, and monitor compliance with evaluation and service requirements. Beyond collaboration on individual cases, representatives of stakeholder organizations regularly share ideas regarding how TRPP can be made more efficient and effective.

The discourse concerning responses to school attendance problems clearly indicates that truancy intervention programs should not just focus on students. Rather, scholars in this area of concern argue that, since truancy is frequently rooted in a variety of family problems, responses to truancy should identify and respond to family needs. The TRPP program design takes into

account the importance of responding to family needs. Family assessments are regular components of masters' recommendations in TRPP cases. Other services intended to improve family functioning, such as family counseling and parenting classes, are typically included in TRPP court orders as well.

Scholars studying school attendance problems in the United States also suggest that interventions should be holistic in addressing the needs of children. Rather than just focusing on enforcement of compliance with mandatory school attendance laws, experts argue that truancy intervention programs should deal with factors that contribute to truancy in a holistic manner. Emotional, medical and other factors that impact a student's ability and willingness to attend school should be addressed through evaluations and services. TRPP clearly embraces this approach to responding to the needs of truant students. Beyond acquiring and acting upon information concerning school attendance and performance, TRPP masters take steps to assure that truant students are evaluated and a broad set of services are made available to deal with conditions that impair school attendance.

An area wherein TRPP may be viewed as problematic involves the consistent suggestion in the national discourse that school attendance interventions should be non-punitive. In that TRPP represents an application of judicial process in response to violations of state law, a surface assessment of the program could lead to a determination that it holds the potential for being punitive – particularly for parents who face District Court charges that have been placed on the stet docket. As was stated earlier, however, TRPP has been crafted to reduce or eliminate the potential for punitive action by the courts. Under the terms of the legislation that created TRPP, unlawful failure to attend school in the participating counties became a code violation and civil offense. Adjudication under the provisions of the authorizing subtitle is not a criminal offense. If a child is less than 12 years old, a criminal charge against the child's parent or guardian under § 7-301 of the Education Article must be filed and either dismissed or placed on the stet docket before a truancy petition can be filed against the child. In that TRPP students are typically ninth-graders who have experienced school-based interventions designed to address their extensive records of unexcused school absences, TRPP may be viewed as their "last chance" to remedy their school attendance problems. This, however, should not cast TRPP in a punitive light. Evidence gathered for this evaluation indicates that masters and others associated with the intervention seek to provide support and encouragement for participant students and

their families. It appears that the interest of an authoritative figure such as TRPP judicial masters serves as a source of encouragement for participating students and parents/guardians.

That judicial officers lack punitive power is viewed by some as a program area in need of strengthening. Judicial masters noted that they felt contempt authority could encourage compliance with program requirements. Judicial masters in the First Circuit point out that since the Department of Juvenile Services handles delinquent contempt referrals informally, in effect the contempt authority cannot be used for the purpose of program compliance. As a result, they suggest that the truancy and delinquency statutes be modified to preclude DJS from informally resolving delinquent contempt referrals from a court. Evaluators found support for the use of punitive measures for the most indomitable cases if the balance of program efforts remains supportive.

The intent of TRPP envisioned by its planners is to intervene with habitually truant students and their parents/guardians to connect them to services and provide oversight by judicial masters who monitor their progress during participation in the program. The target population is comprised of habitually truant students in the four local education agencies of the Lower Eastern Shore. When TRPP began operation no target had been established as to what percentage of habitually truant students that enter TRPP would be a desirable target. Table 24 compares the number of TRPP participants to the number of habitually truant students reported to MSDE by school year and jurisdiction. Over the five-year period of analysis between one-fourth and one-third of all habitually truant students participated in TRPP.

Table 24. The number of habitual truants compared to the number of TRPP participants, by jurisdiction.

Jurisdiction	Habitual Truants by School Year					Total
	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	
Dorchester County	13***	43	52	33	61	157
Somerset County	34**	41	26	19	43	115
Wicomico County	145*	251	200	172	155	923
Worcester County		25****	23	15	19	46
Total	192	360	290	239	278	1,241
TRPP Participants	56	91	86	81	80	394
As a Percentage of Habitual Truants	29.2%	25.3%	29.7%	33.9%	28.8%	31.8%

Notes: * Since the first TRPP cases were heard in January 2005, the estimated number of habitual truants for one-half of the school year is included.

** Since the first TRPP cases were heard in November 2005, the estimated number of habitual truants for two-thirds of the school year is included.

*** Since the first TRPP cases were heard in March 2006, the estimated number of habitual truants for one-fourth of the school year is included.

**** Since the first TRPP cases were heard in January 2007, the estimated number of habitual truants for one-half of the school year is included.

Evidence gathered from TRPP records, interviews with knowledgeable informants and observations of TRPP hearings indicates that the intervention is successfully connecting habitually truant students and their parents/guardians with evaluations and services designed to assist them in dealing with problems that contribute to school attendance problems. As reported above, a broad set of services are available through TRPP referrals to address a broad set of student and family needs.

Case management for TRPP participants is provided through collaboration among the TRPP coordinator and service provider staff members. Ultimate oversight is provided by TRPP masters who receive progress reports on program participants during update hearings.

Outcomes Analysis

Outcomes in two domains were analyzed in the evaluation: schools and the juvenile justice system. School outcomes considered were school attendance as indicated by measurement of unexcused absences and grade point average (GPA). Juvenile justice system outcomes analyzed were misdemeanor and felony adjudications measured at program entry, during program participation and one-year post-program. Challenges and limitations associated with the research design should be considered when interpreting these program outcomes. Due to

confidentiality concerns, program referral practices and data access challenges, the most desirable quasi-experimental research design involving a comparison of the experiences of a group of program participants with those of a like-kind group of children who did not participate in TRPP could not be constructed. Rather, the experiences of TRPP “graduates” were compared to those of young people who did not successfully complete the program. The power of the analysis is also limited by the small samples available.

Another limitation to the usefulness of the analysis involves the source school data. The data acquired for the analysis of school outcomes was primarily collected manually from individual paper files maintained by the four school districts. The consistency and completeness of files varied substantially across and within jurisdictions. As a result, the number of cases that could be analyzed varied across dimensions of analysis.

School attendance outcomes

Across all four counties of the First Judicial Circuit students who successfully completed TRPP experienced improvements in school attendance, both in terms of a comparison between their rate of unexcused absences at program entry and the rate at one-semester post-program and as compared to students who did not successfully complete the program. Pre- and post-program experiences in all four study counties showed notable improvement in absence rates of participants. The average absence rates for TRPP participants were : Dorchester County, from 25.6% at program entry to 20.5% one semester post-program; Somerset County, from 23.9% at program entry to 15.1% one semester post-program, Wicomico County, 18.0% at program entry to 9.2% one semester post-program; and Worcester County, 42.8% at program entry to 11.2% one semester post-program.

TRPP students in Dorchester County who unsuccessfully completed the program experienced a rate of unexcused absences of 68.3% at TRPP exit, whereas the unexcused absence rate for students who successfully completed TRPP was 18.8% at program completion. In Somerset County students who did not successfully complete TRPP had an unexcused absence rate of 24.8% at program exit, whereas the unexcused absence rate for students who successfully completed TRPP was 8.1% at program completion. Students in Wicomico County who did not successfully complete TRPP experienced an unexcused absence rate of 19.3% at program exit, whereas the unexcused absence rate for students who successfully completed

TRPP was 12.2% at program completion. In Worcester County students who did not successfully complete TRPP had an unexcused absence rate of 55.4% at program exit, whereas the unexcused absence rate for students who successfully completed TRPP was 15.6% at program completion.

School performance

In three of the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit, students who successfully completed TRPP also were found to experience improvements in grade point average (GPA) from program entry to one semester post-program and as compared to students who did not complete the program. In Dorchester County TRPP completers experienced an improvement from 0.94 at program entry to 1.25 at one semester post-program; Somerset County, from 1.05 to 1.74; and Wicomico County, from 0.99 to 1.31.

For Dorchester County TRPP participants who completed the program, the average GPA at one semester after program exit was 1.25, compared to an average GPA one semester after program exit of 0.62 for program non-completers. In Somerset County, TRPP participants who completed the program had an average GPA one semester post-program of 1.74 as compared to 0.50 for non-completers. For Wicomico County TRPP participants who completed the program had an average GPA one semester after program exit of 1.31 as compared to 0.85 at the same measurement point for non-completers.

Juvenile justice outcomes

Analysis of DJS data revealed that in three of the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit young people who successfully completed TRPP experienced positive juvenile justice outcomes as compared to children who did not complete the program.

In Somerset County, during the program and one-year post-program there were notable differences in juvenile justice experiences between TRPP “graduates” and program non-completers for new adjudications. During their TRPP experience program completers had an average of 0.19 new misdemeanor and 0.09 new felony adjudications as compared to an average of 0.60 new misdemeanor and 0.22 new felony adjudications for program non-completers. One-year post-program, TRPP completers experienced an average of 0.14 additional misdemeanor adjudications and an average of 0.02 new felony adjudications as compared to 0.44 and 0.00 for program non-completers. From program entry to one-year post-program, individuals who

completed TRPP on average experienced 0.43 new misdemeanor adjudications and 0.13 new felony adjudications as compared to 1.04 and 0.22 for program non-completers.

There also were notable differences in Wicomico County in juvenile justice experiences between TRPP “graduates” and program non-completers in terms of new adjudications during the program and one-year post-program. At program entry TRPP completers had experienced an average of 0.65 misdemeanor and 0.14 felony adjudications as compared to 0.91 and 0.27 for program participants who did not complete TRPP. During their TRPP experience program “graduates” on average had 0.35 new misdemeanor and 0.41 new felony adjudications as compared to 1.27 misdemeanor and 0.18 felony adjudications for program non-completers. One-year post-program TRPP completers, on average, experienced no additional misdemeanor adjudications and 0.38 new felony adjudications as compared to 0.36 and 0.19 for non-completers. As a result, from program entry to one-year post-program TRPP completers on average experienced 0.35 new misdemeanor adjudications and 0.69 new felony adjudications as compared to 1.69 and 0.37 for program non-completers.

Analysis of DJS data revealed that in Worcester County there also were substantial differences in juvenile justice system involvement for TRPP completers as compared to program participants who did not complete TRPP. At program entry TRPP “graduates” had experienced an average of 0.14 misdemeanor and no felony adjudications as compared to 1.00 and 0.23 for program non-completers. During their program experience program completers had 0.18 new misdemeanor and no new felony adjudications, on average, as compared to 0.38 new misdemeanor and 0.16 new felony adjudications for non-completers. One-year post-program completers experienced an average of 0.41 additional misdemeanor adjudications and no new felony adjudications as compared to 0.62 new misdemeanor and no new felony adjudications for program participants who did not complete TRPP. Therefore, from program entry to one-year post-program, on average, TRPP completers on average experienced 0.59 new misdemeanor adjudications and no new felony adjudications as compared to 1.00 and 0.16 for program non-completers.

Recap of School and Juvenile Justice Outcomes

Table 25 below summarizes key school and juvenile justice outcomes for TRPP “graduates” for each county in terms of measurements at program entry, program exit or post-program.

Table 25. School and juvenile justice outcomes for TRPP completers in the four counties of the First Judicial Circuit.

	Dorchester County	Somerset County	Wicomico County	Worcester County
Change in Rate of Unexcused absences, Program Entry Versus Program Exit	- 26.6%	- 66.1%	- 32.2%	- 63.6%
Change in GPA, Program Entry Versus One Semester Post-Program	+ 33.0%	+ 65.7%	+ 32.3%	n/a
New Misdemeanor Adjudications, One-Year Post-Program Versus Comparison Group	+.23	-.71	-1.23	-.41

Conclusions

Evidence concerning the operation of the court-based TRPP model in Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester Counties indicates that its operational objectives are being realized and students with records of problems in the educational and juvenile justice systems are receiving critical assistance and experiencing improvements in school attendance, school performance and juvenile justice outcomes. These programmatic successes are likely products of three critical ingredients manifested in TRPP operation:

1. TRPP provides an organizational framework for multiple organizational entities with responsibility for the welfare of children to deal effectively with their behavioral and family problems.
2. Through the guidance of judges and active involvement of judicial masters, a system of accountability is in place to assure that schools, social service agencies and the courts collaborate and that students and their parents/guardians meet TRPP participation obligations.
3. TRPP provides a focus to identify young people with school attendance and related problems and then to connect them and their families to needed services.

TRPP is an innovative approach to organizational collaboration, accountability and service provision which aligns with recommended practices found in the national literature concerning truancy intervention. Although subject to limitations related to study design, data quality and small sample sizes, the evaluation of TRPP produced evidence that the program is having desirable impacts on critical school and justice system outcomes. Children who successfully complete TRPP experienced improvements in school attendance, GPA and juvenile justice experience.

An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Role of the Judiciary in Responding to Truancy

Evidence of the Problem and Responses to the Problem Nationally

National truancy rates are difficult to determine due to variability in ways truancy is defined across states (Daining, 2007). Major cities, however, report high rates of absenteeism on a daily basis. For example, of 723,000 students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, 30,000 middle and high school students miss school on an average day (Gehring, 2004). In Philadelphia, about 32,000 students have unexcused absences daily, representing approximately 18% of the 180,000 students enrolled in the public school system (The School District of Philadelphia, 2006).

Some indication of the extent of the truancy problem is found in nationally representative studies conducted in recent years (Daining, 2007). For example, results from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), a cross-sectional survey conducted by U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCSE), indicated in 2003, 8.5% of students ages 12-18 had unexcused absences from school in the 4 weeks prior to being surveyed. Of students with unexcused absences, 10.5% missed 5-9 days of school, and 5.1% missed more than 10 days of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). It has been estimated that each person who drops out of school costs society over \$200,000 during his/her lifetime (NCSE, 2005).

It is widely acknowledged that truancy is an important precursor to dropping out of school. The status dropout rate measures percentage of persons who are not attending high school and who do not have a high school credential, regardless of when they dropped out. In 2004, 10% of the 36.5 million 16-to-24 year olds in the U.S. were status dropouts (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006).

The factors causing truancy are generally grouped into four levels: individual, family, school, and neighborhood and community. It follows that responses to truancy must target more than the individual student. The U.S. Department of Education (1996) encourages collaborative programs that involving schools, the community, and families; provide both incentives and sanctions; include mentoring, tutoring, and drug prevention efforts within schools; and involve law enforcement. The National Dropout Prevention Center (Reimer & Dimock, 2005)

emphasizes interagency collaboration on comprehensive responses that address the needs of families. They also favor a supportive environment and inclusion of incentives and sanctions.

Previous evaluations of truancy interventions (Klima et al., 2009) have identified alternative programs, such as behavior-oriented programs, as well as mentoring as effective in improving school attendance. A model of comprehensive school reform designed to re-engage children in school has was found to be effective (Balfanz et al., 2007). Programs that provide services to address family needs, but invoke law enforcement and the courts for persistent problems (e.g., McCluskey et al., 2004) also appear promising.

Review of the Maryland Evidence

As documented in Section II of this report, truancy represents a significant problem in Maryland, particularly in Baltimore City and Prince George's County, where habitual truancy rates are 8% and 6% respectively. Individual schools in these two jurisdictions and in six other Maryland counties have rates of habitual truancy exceeding 10%. As would be expected from the national literature, there is a strong correlation in Maryland between jurisdictions with high rates of habitual truancy and jurisdictions with high dropout rates.

The Maryland programs discussed in this report represent a continuum of court involvement, with no judicial presence in BSMART, participation of judges in an unofficial capacity in TCP, and judges exercising their full authority in TRPP. The three approaches are directed at students in a range of age groups and grades, from pre-k to high school, and students that demonstrate a range of truancy levels, from initial signs of excessive absenteeism to chronic truancy.

Although the interventions differ, there are also common features. All three programs involve collaboration with the respective public school systems. Both BSMART and TCP were designed by and are operated by schools of law and receive funding from the Maryland Judiciary. Both programs operate in collaboration with selected schools in Baltimore City. The impetus for each program was the law school, which sought out partners in Baltimore City Public Schools. Both TCP and TRPP involve judges, unofficially in TCP and officially in TRPP.

There are also similarities across the programs in the evaluation results and the shortcomings of the evaluations. Each of the interventions incorporate components of effective responses to truancy as described in the literature, including interagency collaboration and a

focus on families rather than students alone. Both TCP and TRPP attempt to link families with services that address underlying causes of truancy. Individuals involved in planning and delivering the interventions had generally positive appraisals of the programs. Parent/guardian and student participants in BSMART and TCP also were generally positive about their experiences. (The evaluation of TRPP did not include interviews or surveys of parents/guardians or students.) Another common finding for BSMART and TCP was lack of accurate contact information for many of the families.

The evaluations found limited evidence that the three programs are effective in reducing absenteeism. For both BSMART and TRPP, the lack of a comparison group of students who did not participate in the program makes it impossible to determine whether any improvements in attendance are due to the intervention. Improvements in attendance were seen in program completers as compared to non-completers of TRPP, but motivational differences rather than program effects could be the causal factor. For TCP, a comparison group was available, but attendance data from the school system did not differentiate between excused and unexcused absence and was available only for full academic years so the post-intervention data encompassed the intervention period as well.

For BSMART, attendance improved for 61% of the referrals who attended mediation and 63% of the cases that were referred to BSMART but did not attend mediation. There was no significant difference in the change in absentee rate between referrals who attended mediation and those who did not. These findings suggest that the mediation component of BSMART is not the intervention's critical ingredient.

For TCP, there was no significant difference in attendance between the participant and comparison groups. Participants that graduated from TCP had improved attendance when compared to non-participants and participants that did not graduate, as would be expected given that a criterion for graduation is improved attendance.

For TRPP, program completers had better attendance records following the intervention than prior to it and better attendance records following the intervention than did program non-completers. Again, this finding is not surprising, given that improved attendance is a requirement for program completion.

The evaluations of TCP and TRPP also examined the impact of the interventions on academic performance and behavior. TCP had no significant effect on MSA reading or math

scores or on numbers of suspensions. Although TCP participants had fewer referrals to DJS following the intervention than did members of the comparison group, the numbers were too small to test for statistical significance. In three of the four TRPP counties, grade point averages for program completers increased from pre-intervention to post-intervention. Completers in these counties also had higher post-program grade point averages than non-completers. In all four counties, TRPP completers experienced fewer new misdemeanor and felony adjudications than did non-completers.

The results summarized above provide some support for continuing the BSMART, TCP, and TRPP interventions. Ideally, expansion of these programs or their use as models would be predicated on more definitive evidence. Obtaining such evidence requires more complete and targeted data than was available for the evaluations reported here as well as the use of non-participant comparison groups to make it possible to attribute changes to the intervention. Acquiring the data needed for rigorous evaluations will require working in advance with the interventions' administrators and collaborating agencies to define measures and establish processes and mechanisms for compiling the data. Similarly advance preparation is required to identify comparison groups and arrange for the same data to be compiled for these non-participants.

A Conceptual Framework for Responding to the Problem

The ability and willingness of children to attend school is related to social, economic and political tensions that impact multiple policy domains. Macro factors including race, poverty, employment, and other structural features of the American system are related to school attendance. Micro factors such as neighborhood characteristics, family functioning, school functioning and the extent of collaboration among state and local organizational stakeholders impact school attendance and truancy. The societal forces that impact school attendance are beyond the policy reach of the current study. Many of the micro or state and local factors that impact school attendance and truancy, however, are within the policy and program scope of the audience of this report – state and local elected, judicial and administrative officials.

This and national research lead to an analytic framework that considers the issues at multiple levels. Dimensions of analysis associated with this problem area can be identified at the state system level, the community level, the family level and the individual student level.

Policies and programs intended to ameliorate school attendance problems and truancy should take into account critical factors within each of these levels of analysis.

Community, Neighborhood and School

Evidence from this study indicates that state and local systematic policy and program responses to school attendance problems and truancy must take into account community factors. The quantitative data represented earlier in this report demonstrate sometimes dramatic differences among Maryland jurisdictions in terms of the incidence of school attendance problems and its correlates. As a result, policy and program frameworks should be developed that allow for differentiated responses that account for these differences from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

In developing and operating effective responses to school attendance problems and truancy, local and neighborhood leaders must take into account neighborhood strengths and challenges that impact the willingness and ability of students to attend school. Neighborhood safety, transportation, after school activities and neighborhood support systems – including mentoring and tutoring for struggling students – are important in improving school attendance. Perhaps of greatest importance to the health of neighborhoods is economic viability. Neighborhoods that have jobs and opportunities for economic success provide environments for healthy schools and students interested in attending them.

Families

National and Maryland evidence clearly indicates that school attendance and truancy problems are interwoven with family problems. Poor, urban, minority single-parent families are at highest risk of having children who experience school attendance problems. Unemployment, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, domestic violence, family dissolution, missing parents, incarcerated parents, substance abuse and many other problems at home prevent or seriously challenge the ability and willingness of children to attend schools. As a result, truancy interventions – whether they are operated by schools or other entities – must take into account students' home environments. Not only must students be engaged in school attendance initiatives; their parents/guardians must be active partners in these programs as well.

Individual Children

National scholars and practitioners in Maryland agree that interventions intended to ameliorate school attendance problems and truancy must address the needs of students in a holistic manner. As was clearly expressed by SAWG and Urban Child Symposium participants and respondents in the contextual analysis, children who have trouble attending school are burdened with complex sets of inter-related and interactive problems that they are ill-equipped to face alone. Poor, urban and rural, African American, white and Hispanic students are frequently products of chaotic homes that do not adequately feed, dress or supervise them. Facing the prospect of violence in their neighborhoods and schools, and transportation difficulties, many children opt to avoid attending school. These children too often bring developmental challenges and learning disabilities with them to school – disabilities that too frequently are identified only after school attendance problems have emerged.

The national discourse and evidence accumulated in Maryland point to key concepts and practices that should be brought to bear in school attendance interventions. In response to the problems exhibited by truant children, interventions should be designed with the following considerations in mind:

- Holistic approach to student needs. Students who experience school attendance problems encounter a broad range of cultural, social, physical, behavioral and cognitive barriers. School attendance interventions should be designed to identify and address the complex multi-symptom picture that students present to them.
- Family involvement. Parents/guardians should be involved in school attendance interventions. A comprehensive approach to dealing with a broad set of family needs should be applied in these programs.
- Early, progressive and continuous intervention. School attendance interventions should be designed to identify school attendance problems at the earliest possible point in their emergence. They also should be designed to identify and respond to particularly acute conditions that contribute to school attendance problems as early as possible. Programs intended to respond to school attendance problems should be designed to respond to the intensity of the problem. As the problem intensifies, available responses should be more intense. They should be age and developmentally

appropriate. Interventions also should be continuous, without gaps between or among age and needs groups.

- Inter-organizational collaboration and cooperation. Under Maryland law, schools, courts and juvenile authorities share responsibility for enforcement of the State's mandatory school attendance laws. Many other organizations – law enforcement agencies, social service agencies, health departments, state's attorneys' offices, public defenders and private service providers – share responsibility for dealing with factors related to school attendance problems. As a result, school attendance interventions must involve extensive collaboration, cooperation, clear divisions of labor, sharing of resources and commitment to joint problem-solving.
- Accountability. To the extent possible, responses to school attendance problems and truancy should be non-punitive. Scholars and respondents cited in the contextual analysis, however, also argue that accountability should be built into these interventions. Students and parents should be held accountable. Yet methods for holding them accountable should not be counterproductive. For instance, suspension of students for unexcused absences is usually counterproductive. While students and parents should be held accountable for truancy, the public jurisdictions and agencies that are responsible for fostering and enforcing school attendance also should be held accountable for their responses to truancy. An example of a problematic area in this regard involves prosecution of parents in District Court for the habitual truancy of their children. It is reasonable to examine the access to justice implications of the wide variation among Maryland's local jurisdictions in prosecution of parents.

The primary consumers of this report, leaders of Maryland's Judicial Branch, are challenged to determine the extent to which the Judiciary should take the lead in assuring that the most promising responses to the truancy problem are pursued. The evidence concerning truancy clearly indicates that, regardless of the role the Judiciary chooses in maintaining or altering Maryland's response to this problem, courts and judges will continue to be impacted. In that research indicates that truancy is closely related to other central family and child welfare concerns of courts and judges, it clearly impacts the work of the Judiciary.

Policy and Program Options for Responding to the Problem

Given the need for early interventions, the shortcomings of the evaluations of BSMART and TCP, and the fact that TCP operations have been evolving, abandoning BSMART and TCP based on the current evaluation results is not warranted. A more productive option may be for the Judiciary to continue its support of BSMART and TCP with the idea of improving the operation of these programs and conducting more rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness. Improved program operations might include increasing referrals to service and follow-up on those referrals. Improved evaluation could be achieved through more systematic record keeping and prospective identification of comparison groups.

In addition to investing in BSMART and TCP, the Judiciary could explore other holistic early interventions and test these approaches in select jurisdictions. The design of alternative programs should involve individuals with knowledge of national research findings and evaluation methods in addition to representatives of the respective school systems, state's attorneys offices and service providers. Because of the perceived benefits of TRPP, several jurisdictions outside the Lower Eastern Shore have pushed successfully for expansion of TRPP to their courts. The Judiciary could select a pilot jurisdiction in which several other holistic programs geared to different ages and levels of absenteeism are offered in addition to TRPP.

The State of Maryland also has options for addressing truancy in terms of the level of control it exercises over the issue and the level of support it provides for truancy reduction efforts. There are valid reasons for the State to allow local discretion in responding to the problem of truancy. The State could, however, mandate collaboration among public agencies in truancy reduction efforts and penalize jurisdictions that fail to address high levels of truancy. The State also could make funding available for jurisdictions to implement proven truancy reduction programs. As national research shows, successful initiatives to reduce truancy are likely to result in a high return to taxpayers in the long run.

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