



Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Richmond Public Schools

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Finally, I would like to thank my mom, for instilling in me both a love of learning and of people. Her impact on my life and education cannot be understated. May this report serve as a testimony to her legacy and memory.

DISCLAIMER

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

HONOR CODE

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Torie Foss". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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About the Author

Torie Foss is a second-year Accelerated MPP student from Springfield, Virginia. Upon graduation, she would like to return to Northern Virginia to pursue a career in education policy.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

RPS: Richmond Public Schools

ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)

NCLB: No Child Left Behind (2001)

VDOE: Virginia Department of Education

CA: Chronic Absenteeism

MTSS: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

PBIS: Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems

CICO: Check-in Check-Out

EWS: Early Warning Systems

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, one in four Richmond Public Schools students were absent more than 10% of the school year, resulting in social and educational consequences for affected students and threatening the accreditation of schools in the district. RPS has tried multiple interventions to mitigate this problem, including utilizing Early Warning Systems (EWS) and targeted home visits to reach chronically absent students, but their absenteeism rates are still consistently higher than the state average. This report will explore three additional interventions that might decrease chronic absenteeism in RPS:

- 1) Check & Connect Mentorship Programs
- 2) Check-in, Check-out Youth Engagement Programs
- 3) Modified Current Practices, that increase home communication and provide translation services for ESL students.

These alternatives will be analyzed based on cost, effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, administrative feasibility, and equity. Using these criteria, **this analysis recommends that RPS implement a Check-in Check-out program to reduce chronic absenteeism**, as it is highly equitable, low in cost, and highly administratively feasible.

To implement this intervention, this report recommends the following steps. Firstly, preparing and presenting a proposal about CICO to the school board, emphasizing its administrative feasibility. Secondly, distributing information about the program to teachers and school administrators, and getting their insights into potential implementation issues. Finally, creating districtwide guidelines and rules for schools to follow as they create and implement their programs.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 2022, **one in four** Richmond Public Schools students were absent more than 10% of the school year, resulting in social and educational consequences for affected students. Despite numerous interventions from RPS, students continue to be chronically absent, threatening both the success of the students and the accreditation of schools in the area.

Client Overview

Richmond Public Schools (RPS), situated in Richmond, Virginia, serves approximately 22,000 students, with a mission guided by three core values: equity, engagement, and excellence. These principles shape the district's strategic plans. Their overall priorities as a district are outlined in their Dreams4RPS plan that was adopted in 2018, and recently concluded in 2023. Broadly speaking, these priorities are: exciting and rigorous teaching and learning; skilled and supported staff; safe and loving school cultures; deep partnerships with families and community; and, finally, modern systems and infrastructure. Within this plan, RPS outlines several goals, including increasing attendance, accreditation, equity and restorative justice.

More specifically, RPS has division-wide engagement goals for each year. For School Year 2023-2024, the engagement goals are 1) Decreasing chronic absenteeism, 2) Increasing two-way communication, and 3) Increasing student and parent advocacy. Each school in the district had to complete an engagement plan, explaining what strategies they will implement to meet these goals. From these goals, it is clear that RPS values equity and community engagement.

Predominantly catering to low-income communities and communities of color, RPS faces a critical challenge in the form of chronic absenteeism, impacting their capacity to effectively educate and engage with students (RPS, 2023). The pervasive issue of chronic absenteeism across all RPS schools has direct consequences on student success, causing setbacks in meeting educational benchmarks. Despite ongoing efforts, Richmond has struggled to revert to pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism rates and, alarmingly, currently exceeds the state average. Adding to the urgency, Virginia's school rating system considers chronic absenteeism alongside academic achievement, placing many RPS schools at risk of missing out on their accreditation. These factors highlight the need for targeted interventions and strategic measures to address and mitigate the chronic absenteeism crisis within RPS.

BACKGROUND

General Background

Consistent attendance at school is closely linked to higher levels of academic success, increased graduation rates, and improved life prospects for students. Students who are chronically absent, missing more than 10% of the school year, are at a distinct disadvantage and face numerous academic hurdles as a result of their absences (NCES, 2024). Chronic absenteeism has long been a concern, but its prevalence surged dramatically in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, 72% of schools in the United States reported a rise in chronic absenteeism when compared to pre-pandemic figures (NCES, 2022). Although there has been some improvement, current rates are still far from pre-pandemic levels, with states reporting chronic absenteeism rates on average 75% higher than before (Malkus, 2024). This surge in absenteeism adds further strain to an education system that is already grappling with the task of addressing the significant learning losses many students have faced due to the pandemic (Morton et al., 2022).

Chronic absenteeism rates are deeply connected to socioeconomic status; economically disadvantaged students are much more likely to be chronically absent than their advantaged peers (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). In addition, some minority groups are also much more likely to be chronically absent than others. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Black, American Indian and Pacific Islander students are much more likely to be chronically absent than students of other races (DOE, 2015).

There are many personal and social factors that can both cause and exacerbate the problem of chronic absenteeism. Researchers sort these factors into four categories: student-

specific, family-specific, school-specific and community-specific. Students may be discouraged from attending due to low academic performance, negative peer relationships (bullying or peer pressure), or a lack of caring relationships with adults. Concerning family-specific factors, low parental involvement, at-home responsibilities, language differences or stressful life events may negatively affect a student's attendance. School-specific challenges might include geographical inaccessibility

Reasons for Chronic Absence can be:

- Student-specific
 - Peer pressure
 - Poor academic performance
- Family-specific
 - Low parental involvement
 - Language differences
- School-specific
 - Geographic inaccessibility
 - Underfunded programs
- Community-specific
 - Unsafe neighborhoods
 - Lack of social support services

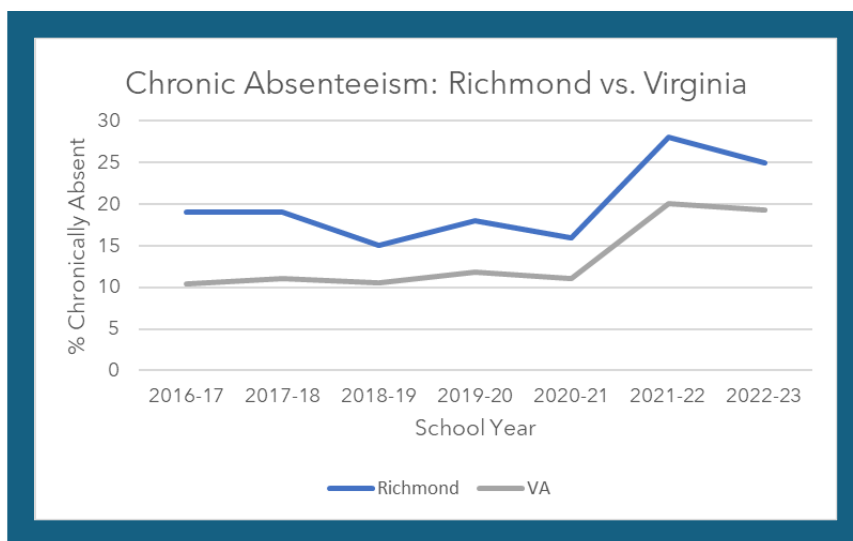
and underfunded or understaffed programs. Finally, at the community level, unsafe neighborhoods and a lack of social and educational support services also contribute to chronic absenteeism (Jacob and Lovett, 2017).

Consequences of Chronic Absenteeism

There are a number of consequences that stem from frequent absences. Research indicates that students who are chronically absent in early education are more prone to miss important developmental milestones and face a heightened risk of struggling with reading proficiency by the 3rd grade (Pareja et. al, 2013). The impact of these early learning gaps tends to compound, contributing to more profound educational disparities in subsequent years. As students progress to later grades, chronic absenteeism becomes the primary predictor of dropping out of school (American University, 2021). The repercussions extend beyond the academic realm, manifesting in increased likelihoods of engaging in criminal behavior, diminished job market prospects, and elevated health risks for individuals who persistently miss school (Lochner et. al, 2004; Binder et. al, 2019; Jacob and Lovett, 2017).

Chronic absenteeism in Virginia and Richmond

The effects of COVID-19 on chronic absenteeism in Virginia mirror those experienced nationwide. Prior to the pandemic, Virginia's chronic absenteeism rates were around 11%. However, the aftermath of the pandemic saw a significant surge in these rates to 20%, with a slight decrease to 19% by the 2022-23 school year. Richmond's situation



is particularly dire, as chronic absenteeism leaped from a pre-pandemic rate of 18% to 28% post-pandemic. Despite efforts to address this, rates remained alarmingly high at 25% in the 2022-23 school year, surpassing both the state average and Richmond's own historical rates.

These high rates of absenteeism can be better understood by looking at the demographic makeup of Richmond Public Schools. Richmond's student population is

predominantly disadvantaged, with 67% facing economic challenges, considerably higher than the statewide 43%. Additionally, there is a stark contrast in racial composition, as African-American students constitute 59% of RPS' student body, while only making up 21.5% of Virginia's student population. Hispanic students make up another 26% of Richmond's population, meaning that 82% of Richmond's students belong to minority groups, a significantly higher proportion than the rest of the state.

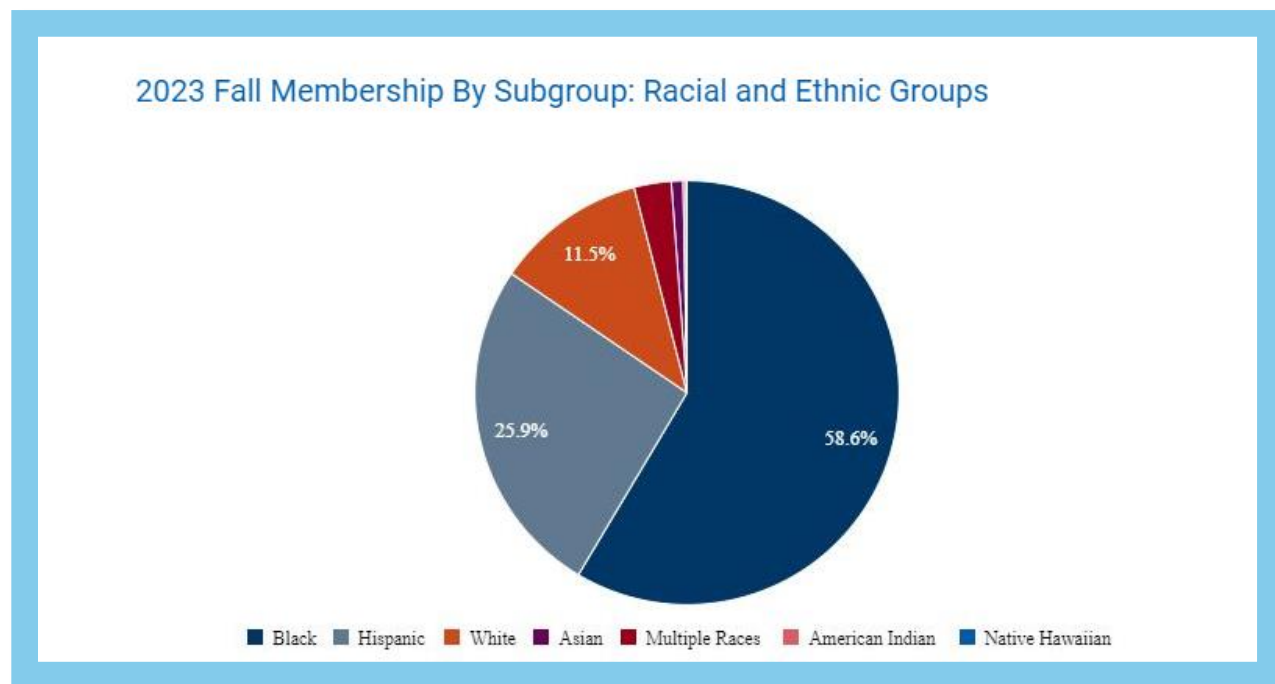


Figure 1: RPS Fall Membership Demographics (VDOE 2024)

Chronic absenteeism rates among these groups are especially high in Richmond. Even among disadvantaged populations, Richmond still has higher chronic absenteeism rates than the rest of Virginia; 30.4% of Richmond's economically disadvantaged students were chronically absent in 2022-23, in comparison to the Virginia average of 27.5% (VDOE, 2023). Looking at racial disparities, 30.1% of Black students were chronically absent during the 2022-2023 school year, compared to 9.3% of White students. Hispanic students also had high rates of chronic absenteeism; 21.5% of Hispanic students were chronically absent in 2022, a nearly 10 percentage point increase from their 2021 rates (VDOE, 2023).

It is difficult to estimate how chronic absenteeism rates in RPS will fluctuate in the future; however, there is no evidence that rates will sharply increase or decrease in the next 5 years. It is unknown how much of the problem stems from lingering effects from the pandemic, but RPS is nowhere near their pre-pandemic rates, which ranged from 15-19% in any given year (Attendance Dashboard, 2024). Nationwide trends

Important State and Federal Policies

Most states will use chronic absenteeism as an indicator for school quality and student success.

The map shows the following states in blue (using chronic absenteeism as an indicator): Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Alaska, and Hawaii. The following states are in gray (not using it as an indicator): Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland.

childtrends.org
Child Trends' Analysis of State ESSA Plans, 2017

Child Trends

Figure 2: States that use Chronic Absenteeism as an ESSA Indicator (Child Trends, 2017)

However, the definition of chronic absenteeism can vary based on location; while most states define chronic absenteeism as missing at least 10% of the school year, some states use 5%, 10 days, or 15 days as their measures. In addition to these various definitions, tracking and predicting chronic absence data can be difficult (Kostyo & Cardichon, 2018). Most states only began tracking chronic absenteeism in 2016, and the inclusion of the pandemic in 2020 means that the data is not only less than 10 years old but is further muddled by the COVID crisis.

Virginia, like many states, defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of the school year, or about 18 of 180 days. The Code of Virginia outlines attendance requirements and consequences for non-attendance in Title 22.1 (VDOE, 2023). This Title states that students aren't allowed to be suspended or expelled for being chronically absent; instead, attendance officers are supposed to meet with parents, then with both parents and school counselors, and finally, if attendance doesn't improve, file a complaint with juvenile and domestic court citing truancy and lack of supervision (Code of Virginia 22.1-258). The students who get court referrals are labeled as "truant" by the Virginia Department of Education. Despite Richmond Public Schools' high chronic absenteeism rates, they have few students considered "truant"; out of 5088 chronically-absent students, only 86 received court referrals for unexcused absences in 2022-23 (VDOE, 2023).

POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

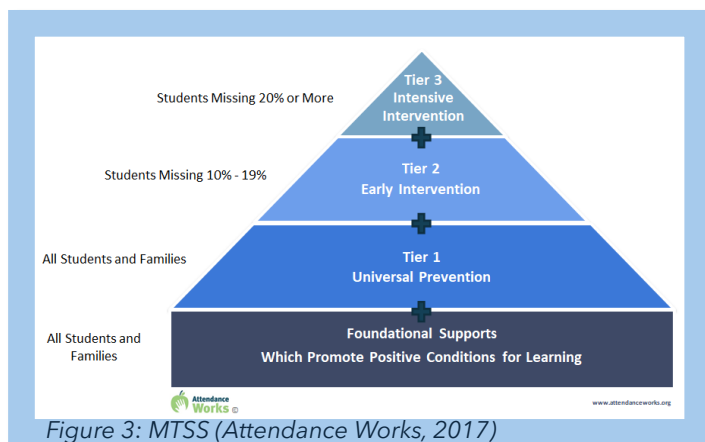
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Chronic Absenteeism

The primary frameworks to address school-related problems are multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). In this model, students are categorized as Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3, with Tier 1 being general supports for the whole study body, and Tier 3 involving targeted interventions for a select group of at-risk students (Branching Minds, 2023). MTSS involves several sub-frameworks to address different problem areas. The Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention Strategies (PBIS) frameworks are tiered in the same way as MTSS, but specifically address academic and behavioral struggles respectively (Branching Minds, 2023; Mellard, 2017; Center on PBIS, 2023).

Despite being the most widely-used support framework by far, MTSS has been criticized for its disjointed approach to different problem areas. Experts argue that focusing intervention in specific areas, like academic or behavioral problems, ignores the interconnectedness of those issues, and results in less effective interventions than a holistic approach may provide. Recent research has demonstrated the efficacy of this “whole child” approach, so many experts have recommended that the MTSS framework be changed to a multidimensional model that integrates RtI and PBIS

interventions with existing supports. This would not only create a better understanding of a student’s needs, but would also allow for flexibility based on student situation, grade level, personality, and surrounding environment (Kearney and Graczyk, 2020).

In order to integrate chronic absenteeism interventions into the MTSS framework, the following



analysis will categorize prevention strategies as Tier 1, and intervention strategies as Tier 2 and Tier 3. This aligns with the concept that Tier 1 strategies are meant to be universally applied to the student body, while Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies are targeted interventions for moderately/severely chronically absent students (Epperson, 2019; Kearney and Graczyk, 2020)

Criteria and Process for Analyzing Potential Solutions

The effectiveness of solutions will be evaluated using the Evidence Standards as outlined by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). These standards evaluate the strength of interventions based on the designs of associated research studies. Under ESSA, there are four tiers of evidence: Strong evidence stems from randomly-controlled trials,

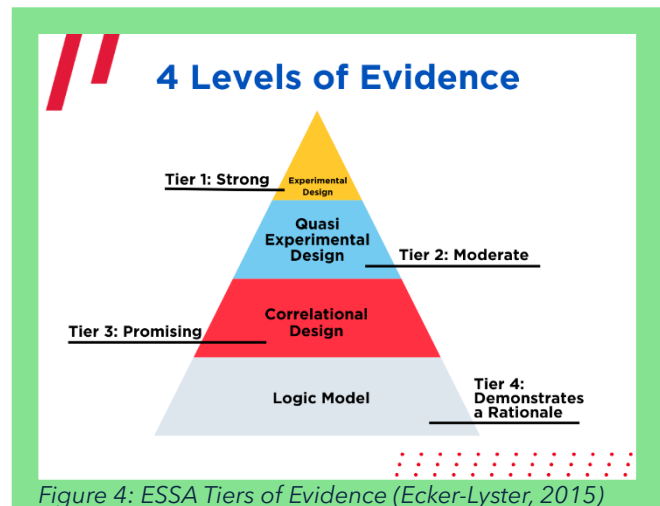


Figure 4: ESSA Tiers of Evidence (Ecker-Lyster, 2015)

Moderate evidence comes from quasi-experimental designs, Promising evidence comes from correlational studies, and evidence that Demonstrates a Rationale originates from logic models (Ecker-Lyster, 2015). Because of the excessive amount of literature available on this topic, only interventions that have Strong or Moderate evidence will be included, as determined by ESSA standards. The only exception to this will be for Tier 3 interventions, which, for reasons explained below, cannot be measured in the same way as the other tiers.

Evidence-based Solutions

Tier 1: Prevention Strategies

Prevention strategies attempt to establish a culture of attendance among the student body and surrounding community. These strategies are often rooted directly in the guidelines for attendance policies set by state legislatures, and include measures like absence tracking, attendance goals, and communication with family members, either in case of an unexcused absence or to provide materials promoting the importance of attendance. These strategies are implemented at the school or district level, and apply to students universally (Jordan, 2023; Chang et. al, 2018; Patnode et. al, 2018).

Community Schools

This model coordinates the work of local organizations to properly address student needs. The school essentially becomes a community hub, where students are able to access social services, health care, and additional learning support (Coalition for Community Schools, 2020). Community schools are able to address all three tiers of interventions; due to their interconnectedness with crucial infrastructure, they are

able to provide more services and address more barriers to attendance than traditional schools (Jordan, 2023; Oakes et. al, 2017).

Evaluation: Strong. A 2022 study of New York City's community schools found that the model had led to a 5.6 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism (Covelli et. al, 2022). Similarly, a 2020 RAND corporation study found that chronic absenteeism had decreased across all NYC schools using the model (Johnston et. al, 2020). However, the concept is still fairly new, so it is unknown if this model will have similar success in other cities.

Family Engagement

Family engagement falls into two categories: generalized informational campaigns and personalized outreach. The informational campaigns convey the benefits of regular attendance to a larger audience. Personalized outreach, on the other hand, addressing parents directly, either to inform them of their child's past absences or to personally inform them of the benefits of attendance. This outreach could involve phone calls, text messaging, or home visits.

Evaluation: Strong. Multiple experimental studies have shown that family engagement greatly reduces chronic absenteeism rates. Personal engagement has much higher rates of success than generalized campaigns. Families who receive home visits are less likely to have chronically absent children (Sheldon et. al, 2015; Cook et. al 2017; Sheldon et. al 2018). Personalized texts are showing particular promise; multiple studies have demonstrated their ability to lower chronic absenteeism rates, and one study found that texting was especially helpful in decreasing the chronic absenteeism

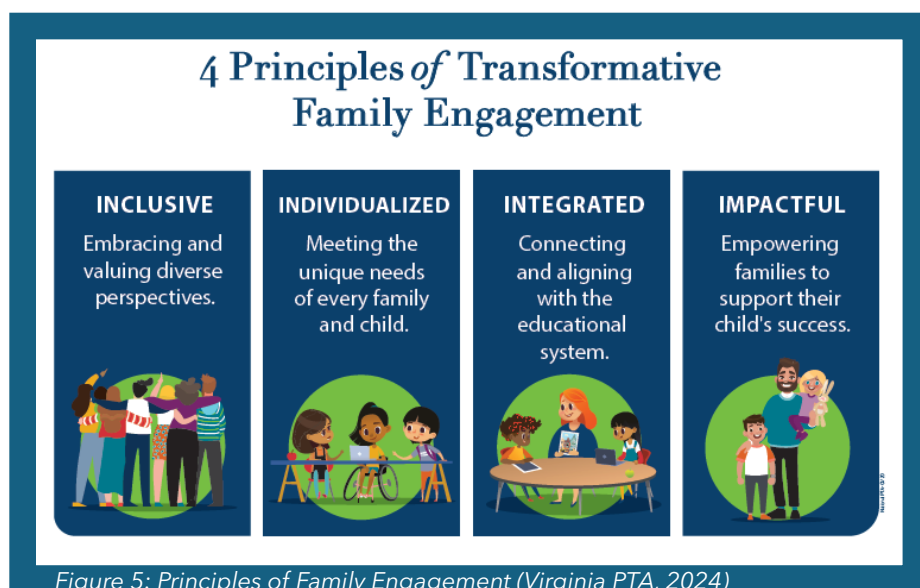


Figure 5: Principles of Family Engagement (Virginia PTA, 2024)

rates of students with disabilities (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020; Bergman and Chan, 2019; Branco, 2019). The replicability of these studies in different locales with different populations

suggests that this evidence is highly generalizable and applicable to Richmond Public Schools.

Summer Learning and After School Strategies

Summer and after-school programs are meant to encourage positive youth development, and provide increased academic support for struggling students (Hutton et. al, 2019; NCSL, 2023). Researchers have turned their attention to these programs to see if the academic and social benefits transfer to school attendance.

Evaluation: Moderate. Both summer learning and after-school programs have demonstrated an ability to reduce chronic absenteeism rates. A 2023 MIT quasi-experimental study of the Aim High summer program concluded that the program led to substantial reductions in chronic absenteeism (Pyne et. al, 2023). This is consistent with earlier findings (Horizons National, 2018; Lynch et. al, 2021). Studies on various after-school programs have also produced similar findings (Chang et. al, 2012; OUSD, 2011; Goerge et. al, 2007). However, these programs rely on student attendance, and require lots of additional funding, planning and staff to be effective (McCombs et. al, 2020). There is no guarantee that Richmond Public Schools will have the funding, or the student interest, to fully utilize these programs.

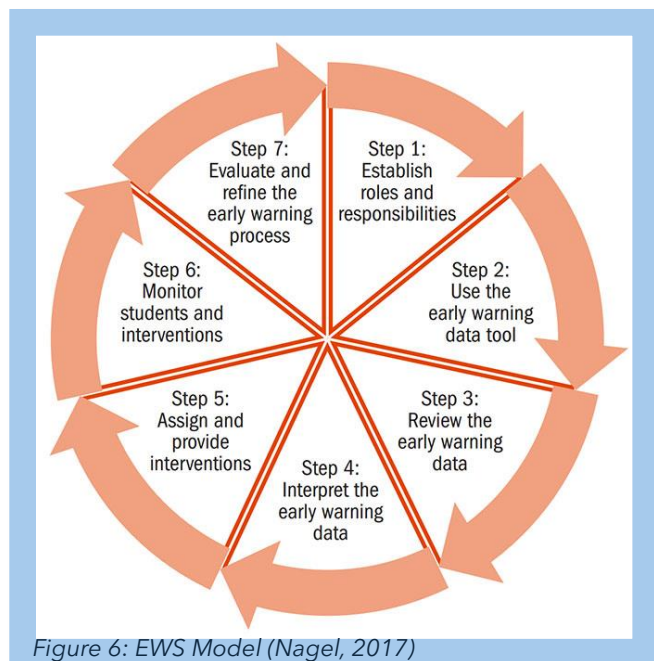
Tier 2: Early Intervention/Targeted Support

Early intervention systems address the problems of students close to or already missing 10% of the school year (Attendance Works, 2017). These interventions take into account a student's personal situation, and involve targeted support in problem areas to increase attendance (Jordan, 2023).

Early Warning Systems

Early warning systems (EWS) track attendance data to determine patterns and at-risk students. That data is then given to the attendance teams at those schools, who are charged with creating and implementing interventions for those affected students. These systems allow schools to head off attendance problems before the effects become irreversible.

Evaluation: Moderate. EWS has been shown to slightly reduce chronic absenteeism rates in schools that use the system. One Regional Education Laboratory study found that schools randomly-assigned to EWS had 10% chronic absenteeism rates, as



compared to the 14% chronic absenteeism rates of their non-EWS counterparts (REL, 2017). Another 2018 study from Johns Hopkins' Diplomas Now program revealed that EWS was particularly effective for urban middle schools; the chronic absenteeism rate dropped 33% at schools that utilized the model (Everyone Graduates Center, 2018). However, these studies have been done at a select few cities, so EWS' effect in other locations is unknown. (Everyone Graduates Center, 2018). In addition, these programs are dependent on extreme vigilance from the associated attendance

teams, putting increased stress on school district infrastructure. The somewhat invasive nature of the tracking also may cause objections from students' families (Jordan, 2023).

Targeted Home Visits

In April 2021, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont launched his Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP). This program included targeted home visits, in which school or community representatives would visit the families of at-risk/chronically absent students (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021). These visits were a step above the Tier 1 family engagement strategies and focused on building and deepening relationships with affected families. Since this program's implementation, researchers have been looking at the effectiveness of such visits (CSDE, 2023).

Evaluation: Moderate. A 2023 study of the LEAP framework found that these home visits had increased attendance by 15 percentage points in a six-month period (CCERC, 2023). The study itself would be classified as a Strong form of evidence, but the lack of other literature calls into question the replicability of this intervention. Richmond Public Schools has implemented a targeted home visit program like LEAP, but the effects are unknown.

Mentorship Programs

Mentorship programs are designed to give students a caring relationship with someone at school. These programs provide academic and social supports to struggling students, and work to better connect them to their school through these positive relationships (Jordan, 2023).



Evaluation: Strong. One student engagement program, Check & Connect, has been shown to decrease absences by up to 135%. These effects are especially strong in high-poverty schools; economically-disadvantaged students have been shown to gain up to 2 weeks of school time back by being involved with a mentor (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2018; May et. al, 2021). Like many of the other interventions, this approach would require extra funding and administrative burden, but some have suggested a tiered approach to mentorship, where older students act as mentors to younger students, to relieve that burden (Kraft and Falken, 2021).

Targeted Youth Engagement

Youth engagement programs, also known as social-emotional or character development programs, seek to equip children with problem-solving, emotional regulation and self-control capabilities. Often a form of PBIS, these programs combine mentorship and positive school environment strategies to decrease psychological stress and increase the use of positive coping mechanisms (Jordan, 2023). Good school and attendance behaviors are encouraged and rewarded,

Evaluation: Strong. These programs have been particularly effective in low-income urban areas (Snyder et. al, 2010). Randomized-controlled trials of different youth engagement programs in Hawaii, Chicago and Long Beach demonstrated significant reductions in chronic absenteeism rates (Bavarian et. al, 2017; Snyder et. al, 2010; Positive Action, 2013; Cook et. al). The downside of these interventions is the cost; one of these programs spent an estimated \$4400 per student (Cook et. al).

Tier 3: Intensive Intervention/Specialized Support

Intensive Intervention is for students that are already missing 20% or more of the school year (Attendance Works, 2018). Due to the incredibly personalized nature of Tier 3 supports, it is nearly impossible to measure the effectiveness of any one intervention. At this tier, students are being affected by a variety of serious and complex problems, such as homelessness, teen pregnancy, and severe mental illness. Because these interventions are student-specific, they cannot be tested by experimental or quasi-experimental designs, and can only rely on correlational designs or logic models to prove the strength of their data.

Interagency case management

These programs provide many of the same supports of community schools, but are specifically tailored to individual students. These interventions involve increased engagement with social services, like the local housing authority or foster care, in order to have a more holistic understanding of a student's needs and barriers (Jordan, 2023; Save the Children, 2014; Kimbrel, 2023).

Evaluation: Promising. While experimental and quasi-experimental tests are difficult to perform on Tier 3 interventions, there is an extensive body of literature supporting interagency cooperation. Evaluations of interagency programs have shown statistically significant increases in attendance, especially for elementary-aged students (Parise et. al, 2017; Laird et. al, 2020). However, interagency case management involves sharing data, which often brings up privacy concerns. The amount of data needed to provide such intensive supports may not be available nor accessible (Jordan, 2023).

SCOPE OF INTERVENTION

The interventions chosen for this report are **Tier 2 supports**, focused on students close to or already missing 10% of the school year. These alternatives will build upon the foundations of RPS' current programs.

The following alternatives will focus on **8th and 9th graders** as the target demographic for intervention. RPS frequently engages with the families of students to ensure attendance, but there is evidence to suggest that late middle school/early high school is when students begin to make decisions about their attendance on their own. Students are twice as likely to shift to poorer attendance trajectories than improved attendance trajectories during this time (Benner et al., 2017); unexcused absences also quadruple between the 8th and 9th grade, necessitating intervention before the consequences become irreversible (Allensworth, 2013). Furthermore, school performance during this time is essential for future opportunities; academic standing in 9th grade is the single biggest predictor of graduation, and student absences at this stage not only negatively affect academic achievement in that year, but also predict long-term educational attainment (Williamston, 2010; University of Utah, 2012; Liu et al., 2021). Thus, intervention during this transitional period is essential, both to instill good attendance habits and to promote academic achievement among students.

Unexcused absences

QUADRUPLE

Between 8th and 9th grade

CRITERIA

Cost (25%)

As with most policies, the cost of each alternative will limit what RPS is able to accomplish. This criterion will be measured in dollars, using the cost of similar programs as a baseline. This information will be presented as both a district cost, under the assumption that the proposed alternative will be implemented division-wide, and as a cost per-student, so that the amount of money needed can be determined at the school-level as well. Because these are targeted interventions that only apply to a specific number of students, division-wide cost estimates will be based on the number of students expected to be involved with these programs, those considered to be at-risk of chronic absenteeism. These costs will be determined per-school-year, since all three alternatives will deal with a new batch of students each year. Low costs will be those under \$1000 per student, medium costs will be those between \$1000-\$1999 per student, and high costs will be \$2000 and above. Programs with higher costs are less desirable, as resource constraints will make it difficult to acquire those funds.

Effectiveness (20%)

This criterion will measure just how much a given alternative can be expected to lower chronic absenteeism rates in RPS. The expected effects can be determined by compiling the results of previous studies, and applying those results to the current RPS population. These estimates will be presented as a percent change in chronic absenteeism. If results vary across studies, or are inconsistent, then I'll present three different scenarios-highly effective, moderately effective, and mildly effective-to create a full picture of the best and worst case scenarios for each of these alternatives.

Cost-effectiveness (15%)

This criterion will be the cost of a one percent reduction in chronic absenteeism, across the entire two-year span of the programs.

Equity (15%)

As one of Richmond Public Schools' core values, the equity of each alternative is key to its possible success and implementation. As it stands, I'm expecting quite a bit of overlap between disadvantaged groups and the students targeted by these alternatives; historically, Black and economically disadvantaged students are much more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. This holds true for RPS; while the chronic absenteeism rate in 2022-23 was 25.3% for all students, the rates for Black,

Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students were 30%, 21.6% and 30.4% respectively. Therefore, the measurement for equity in this case will focus on the equivalent distribution of resources across these affected groups. Some schools in the district are at risk of missing out on their accreditation because of their dropout/chronic absenteeism rates, so while they will probably benefit the most from these programs, they also may not have the available staff to implement them in a feasible manner. My approach will be focused on capacity, or the given alternative's ability to feasibly reach as many disadvantaged students as possible. High equity alternatives will be able to capture all students that could benefit from that program, while low-equity alternatives will have multiple barriers to entry that may restrict equitable access.

Administrative Feasibility (20%)

As RPS is already constrained with their other programs and initiatives, it is important to give them alternatives that will not cause overwhelming administrative burden. Measuring this criterion will focus on perceived workloads, distribution of work across departments, and disruption of current routines. This will also account for the reallocation of resources; if the needed professionals are scattered across different departments, then the amount of time spent on getting acquainted with each other as a team and communicating across departments will be estimated and included. All of this is measured with the assumption that, given the massive amount of time and money put into engagement programs in the last few years, RPS will be hesitant to undergo major changes to their organization. Based on the culmination of this data, I will determine the administrative feasibility of each alternative, using the terms "high, medium, and low" as a measurement system. A program that is highly-administratively feasible would fit into the current routines of staff members, require little additional training, and would not require the hiring of new staff or heavily burden current staff with program creation.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1: Check & Connect Mentorship Program

Mentorship programs are designed to give students a caring relationship with someone at school. These programs provide academic and social supports to struggling students, and work to better connect them to their school through these positive relationships (Jordan, 2023). Student mentorship programs have proven to be effective in improving student behavior and academic achievement; now, those programs are being evaluated by their ability to promote school attendance as well. These programs can either be created specifically for the school, or taught through purchased educational materials. Looking at a variety of evidence regarding different mentorship programs, there seem to be semi-consistent positive outcomes across the literature; several studies have found that schools with mentoring programs fare significantly better in school attendance than those without such programs (Elston, 2020; May et. al, 2021; Roberts, 2023).

While there are many possible mentorship programs, Check & Connect has frequently marketed itself as the best option. Check & Connect is one of the oldest student engagement programs, and the only program to demonstrate positive effects on staying in school, as reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education (University of Minnesota, 2020). It is quite possibly the most studied mentorship intervention for chronic absenteeism; the literature on seems to be more extensive than other interventions. In this program, students meet with mentors for a minimum of two years and form deep and meaningful connections with the mentors. For RPS, this would likely involve hiring extra mentors, or connecting with community partners. Students would remain in the program for their 8th and 9th grade years, maintaining their same mentor during their transition from middle school to high school. This requires mentors to be flexible enough to switch locations every year, and

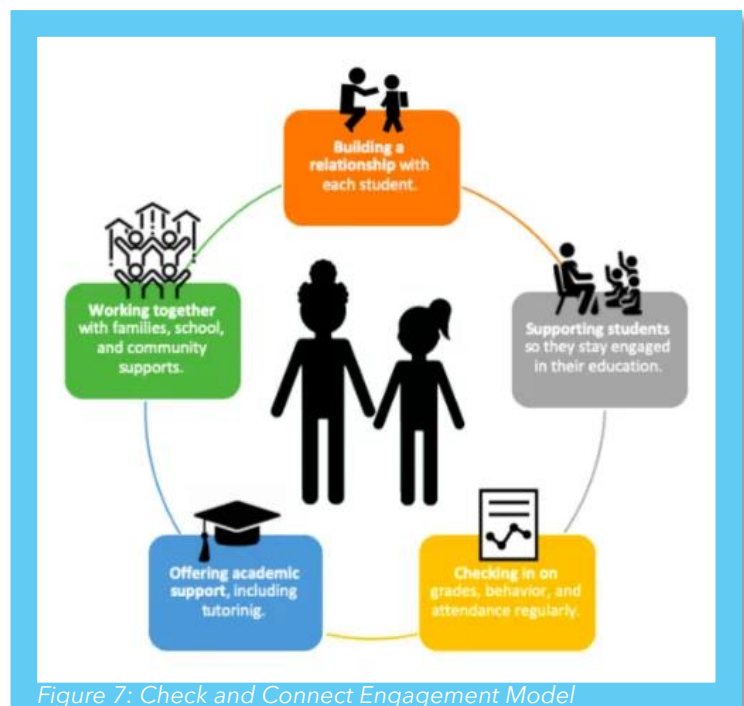


Figure 7: Check and Connect Engagement Model

for middle schools to consistently send students to the same high schools. Since the district lines change between middle and high school, in terms of what school students would go to, it would be beneficial to group mentees by neighborhood/high school district, so RPS can guarantee that students will be able to retain the same mentor throughout the course of the program.

In terms of effects on chronic absenteeism, the results seem to be mixed. One study of the program found that it reduced chronic absenteeism in Chicago Public Schools by 22% in grades 5-7, while another found that it increased the percentage of students who were absent 5% of the school year or less (Guryan et al., 2020; Lehr et al., 2009). Other studies found the program to have no effect on absenteeism whatsoever, or inconclusive results (Maynard et. al, 2013; Abrams, 2015).

Some of these mixed results can be explained by the implementation of the programs themselves. Take, for example, two studies: one, conducted by Guryan et. al, that supports claims of C&C's effectiveness as an absenteeism intervention, and the other, conducted by Heppen et. al (2017), that finds no significant effects. Both studies were conducted in the same year, but that is where the similarities end. In Guryan, mentors were from a community-based nonprofit, with caseloads of around 30 students each, which they met with 5 times a month on average. Meanwhile, Heppen's study involved school staff as mentors, with caseloads of 50-60 kids that they met with for around 40 minutes per month (National Mentoring Resource Center, 2021). This indicates that, while Check & Connect is flexible and adaptable, the effectiveness of the program likely depends heavily on implementation. This assumption is further supported by a 2018 implementation evaluation of Check & Connect across 24 elementary and middle schools. In this evaluation, researchers found that implementation fidelity was highly associated with positive outcomes for students (Goulet et al., 2018).

Analysis

The following analysis relies on the assumption that all eligible students opt into the program. There is little data available that might suggest how many students would opt-in to a Check & Connect program, as such a decision relies on a number of factors that can vary on an individual basis. Assuming that all eligible students will opt-in provides a good estimation of cost at full-operation, as well as the maximum benefits that could be reaped from this program.

Cost: **High**

The estimated cost of the program per student per year in 2024 is approximately \$2361 (Guryan et. al, 2017; University of Minnesota, 2001; Social Programs that Work, 2017). The full two-year course of the program would cost approximately \$4.3 million¹, assuming that all 857 chronically-absent students are enrolled in the program.

Effectiveness: **Medium**

Due to the variations surrounding Check and Connect programs and their effects on chronic absenteeism, I estimate that this program will be medium in terms of effectiveness. There are scenarios where the program is highly effective, and scenarios when the program has no effect at all. The many different forms of implementation and the varied focuses of each study make it difficult to weigh them against each other, so I will split the difference between the two, and halve the estimation of effectiveness. In scenarios where the program reduces chronic absenteeism, it does so drastically, with studies demonstrating a 20-30% increase in student attendance/decrease in absenteeism. Halving this estimation gives us an estimated 10-15% decrease in chronic absenteeism.

Scenario 1: Highly Effective

In studies where Check & Connect decreases chronic absenteeism, it does so drastically; such studies demonstrate a 20-30% increase in student attendance/decrease in chronic absenteeism on average. RPS' chronic absenteeism rate would decrease from 25% to 18.75%.

Scenario 2: Moderately Effective

Due to the inconsistency of results, I will halve the estimation of effectiveness, to account for the possibility of little effect. Therefore, there will be an estimated 10-15% decrease in chronic absenteeism using this program.

Scenario 3: Ineffective

There's a possibility that Check & Connect will have no effect on chronic absenteeism, given the inconsistency of findings across the literature.

¹ See Appendix 2 for more details

*Cost-effectiveness: **Medium***

Assuming a 10-15% decrease in chronic absenteeism and a cost-per-student-per-year of \$2361, I estimate that a 1 percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism over the two-year period will cost \$335,000.

*Equity: **Low***

As mentioned previously, Check & Connect is ultimately an opt-in program, which relies on parental knowledge of the program and commitment on the part of the students. Those already involved in the school, and with knowledge of these programs, would likely benefit the most, while those more disconnected with the school-and those we would most likely want to target-would remain unaware of the program. RPS will also likely have difficulties operating this kind of program on a large scale; even if all students were able to opt-in to the program, the constraint on resources would likely necessitate a lottery system to place students with mentors. ESL students would likely need mentors that speak their home language, which may be difficult to provide, especially to the extent required; 174 of the 857 potential students affected by this program are English Learners (VDOE, 2023).

*Administrative Feasibility: **Low***

Because a Check & Connect program guide can be bought directly from the University of Minnesota, administration will need to allocate very little time to the actual creation of the program. However, as demonstrated earlier, implementation is vital to the success of this intervention, so a great deal of time will be needed to ensure proper implementation (Guryan et. al, 2018). The intensity of this program will also likely necessitate the hiring and training of additional staff to serve as mentors, increasing the administrative burden. There is also the matter of feasibility in terms of staff willingness; this change would be extensive, and with all of the time and resources that the current staff have put in to create and manage the current CA interventions, it is unlikely that there would be adequate buy-in for this program.

Alternative 2: Check-in, Check-Out Youth Engagement program

Check-in Check-out (CICO) programs are meant to increase student engagement in the classroom and provide them with actionable feedback. At the beginning of the school day, students will check in with an intervention officer. Throughout the day, teachers will evaluate a student's engagement and behavior using a rubric, while students evaluate themselves. The culmination of rubrics are sent to the intervention officer at the end of the day, who checks in with the student once more, gives them an action item to work on the following day/week, and sends the rubric home with the student. This cycle continues until the student's cumulative measurements of engagement improve consistently, and then the student is slowly phased out of the program. Incentives for improvement-merchandise from the school store, fun activities/experiences that celebrate success-can be implemented in order to give

students a goal to work towards (Lewis, 2022).

The rationale behind this program is that it will increase engagement among students through positive reinforcement, thus increasing their desire to attend school and participate. Although the program was originally created to address behavioral problems among elementary-aged students, researchers have begun adapting the program to fit the needs

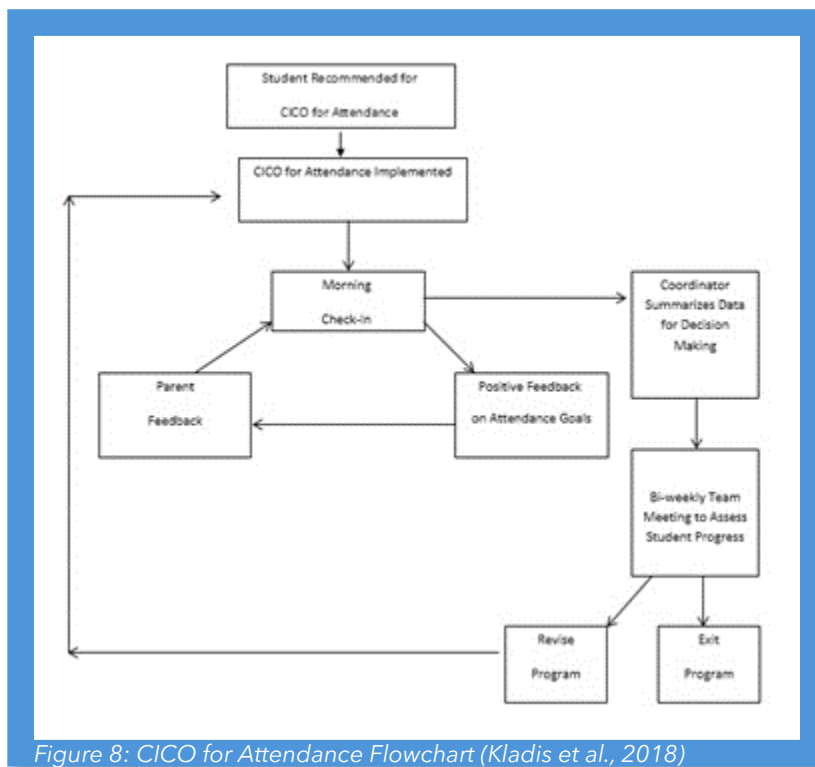


Figure 8: CICO for Attendance Flowchart (Kladis et al., 2018)

of high school students (Kato et. al, 2023; Kladis et al., 2018). In RPS, this program would specifically be adopted at the 8th and 9th grade levels, with at-risk students remaining in the program for both school years, or until their attendance significantly improves and they can begin the process of phasing-out.

Analysis

Cost: **Low**

Taking into consideration the training needed for both participants and teachers, as well as the materials needed to enact this program, I estimate that the total cost over one year is around \$657,000 or around \$766 per student. Over the full two-year span, the program would cost an estimated \$1.4 million².

Effectiveness: **Low**

On its own, Check-in, Check-out programs have been shown to have small but significant effects on chronic absenteeism. Most notably, an RCT of a small sample of ninth grade students found that the CICO program had a small-to-moderate effect in decreasing unexcused student absences (Flannery et. al, 2024). The study showed a 26% reduction in unexcused student absences over the period of study, but given the small sample size and the fact that these results are so new that they have yet to be replicated, I will assume a moderate 6.5% reduction in chronic absenteeism. Although this may underestimate the effects of CICO, the assessment is fair; the other alternatives have a great deal of literature on them, and the lack of study in the application of CICO to chronic absenteeism makes the effectiveness weaker in general, so estimates were adjusted accordingly.

CICO program offers a lot of potential benefits when it comes to collecting and measuring chronic absenteeism data. One of the teachers interviewed for this project indicated that the attendance data was flawed; if a teacher did not take attendance, then all students were automatically marked present. If correct, this creates many potential issues for measuring the extent of chronic absenteeism in RPS. CICO presents a way to keep better track of student attendance and engagement without overly burdening teachers and administrators.

Cost-effectiveness: **Medium**

CICO ranks medium in terms of cost-effectiveness. With an estimated cost of \$766 per student, and an estimated 6.5% reduction in chronic absenteeism, with full implementation, a 1 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism would cost around \$209,000.

² See Appendix 3 for more details

*Equity: **High***

In terms of capacity-focused equity, CICO programs are highly rated. Because the check-ins and check-outs are so short, and the burden of responsibility is dispersed across teachers, administrators, and families, all at-risk students have the opportunity to participate in this program. Training for this program for disadvantaged students and their families should only take about 15-30 minutes, meaning that families will not be bombarded with information or will need to know a great deal about the program before engaging in it (Filter, 2019). This program is also opt-out, rather than opt-in, so a greater number of at-risk students can be reached.

*Administrative Feasibility: **High***

The administrative feasibility of this option is high. This option does not require a massive overhaul of current systems, but instead fits within those systems to provide extra support. The primary changes that administration would have to make would be the creation of a rubric of assessment for given behaviors, and the training of current/new “coaches” on how to administer said rubric. The program could be implemented within the existing morning routines of attendance teams and family liaisons, without extra administrative burden. However, it may be difficult to train teachers to administer the rubric, and there may be little buy-in from teachers in general. Because there are so many chronically absent students in these years, teachers would likely have to monitor 2 or more students in any given class period; providing extensive feedback through rubrics, as well as teaching their other students, may prove a significant challenge. Making these forms completely online will slightly ease that burden, but the amount of forms will likely prove unwieldy in the high school setting.

Alternative 3: Select Modifications to Current Practices

Description of Current Practices

One current targeted intervention is RPS' use of an Early Warning System (EWS). These systems track attendance data to determine patterns and identify at-risk students. The data is handed off to the attendance teams at each school, who in turn create and implement further interventions for selected students. My client indicated that there are a lot of trackers on their Data team that watch for early warning signs of chronic absenteeism, and inform the attendance teams accordingly.

As of 2015, 52% of American schools had some type of EWS program in place (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In one 2017 study of 73 high schools across the Midwest, researchers found that schools with EWS had a 4-percentage-point decrease in chronically absent students than schools that did not (Faria et. al, 2017). Similarly, a separate 2021 study found that implementing an EWS program caused a 3.9-percentage-point decrease in chronic absenteeism (Stepanik et. al, 2021). Another 2018 study from Johns Hopkins' Diplomas Now program revealed that EWS was particularly effective for urban middle schools; the chronic absenteeism rate dropped 33% at schools that utilized the model (Attendance Works, 2018). However, some researchers have found that the system itself is not an effective intervention; rather, EWS itself has no effect on chronic absenteeism rates, but the application of the data provided by the system creates the positive effects (Hansen, 2018; Canbolat, 2024).

Another currently-utilized intervention is Targeted Home Visits. Once a student has missed a certain number of days, a school representative will come to the home to talk with the student's family. At RPS, there are specific family liaisons, whose main job is to connect with these families and engage with the community. These liaisons use multiple methods to communicate with families, including texting, emails, and phone calls, as well as home visits. If a student has been absent for 5 or 10 days, a family liaison will visit the family of the student and discuss action plans for attendance going forward.

In the existing literature, home visits have mostly been examined in the context of their effects on academic achievement, student behavior, and family engagement. However, there is a growing set of literature examining the effects of home visits on chronic absenteeism specifically. A 2018 study of the Parent-Teacher Home Visit program by Johns Hopkins University found that students whose families participated in the program were 21% less likely to be chronically absent (Sheldon & Bee Jung, 2018). Similarly, a 2015 study of the Family Engagement Partnership in Washington,

D.C. found that students whose families received home visits were 24% less likely to be chronically absent (Sheldon & Bee Jung, 2015).

The primary evidence for Targeted Home Visits using family liaisons comes from Connecticut’s LEAP. In comparison to other home visit programs, which often rely on teachers to visit the families of affected students, LEAP relied on a mix of other school professionals. A 2022 study of the LEAP framework found that these home visits had increased attendance by 15 percentage points in a six-month period (CCERC, 2022).

Evaluation of Current Practices

Quantitative Evaluation

Evaluating these current practices quantitatively proves difficult, due to the pandemic’s effects on chronic absenteeism and the somewhat unreliable data collection that preceded that. Although I cannot make concrete assertions about how these interventions have affected chronic absenteeism rates, I am going to do my best to estimate the effects as seen between the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. This analysis is based on three assumptions:

1. Focus on chronic absenteeism interventions increased between these two school years, as demonstrated by the expansion of the Office of Engagement.
2. There is no significant difference in student demographics between the two years.
3. The return to in-person learning provided more accurate attendance data.

The chronic absenteeism rate in the 2021-22 school year was 28%, with 5596 students being labeled as chronically absent (RPS, 2024). The chart to the right highlights the

Intervention	Avg. Expected Effect	Estimated CA Rate (current-expected effect)	Actual 2022-23 CA Rate
Early Warning Systems	-3.5 percentage points	24.5%	25%
Targeted Home Visits	-20%	22.4%	25%

expected effects on CA rates, for each intervention. The expected effects are the averages of those effects found in various scientific studies, with outlier studies excluded³. The second column estimates what RPS’ CA rate would be in the 2022-23 school year, if the given

³ (Attendance Works, 2018) study on EWS will not be included. This report is referenced in multiple sources, but the actual link to the report itself is nonfunctional; as there is no way of directly assessing its methods and credibility, it will be excluded from analysis.

intervention were fully effective. Although the studies were often implemented across different levels of education with different demographics, results were consistent. For RPS, there was not a significant difference in school population, nor in the demographics of that population, as far as I can tell, so there are no observable characteristics that may have accounted for the differences between 2021-22 and 2022-23 (VDOE, 2024).

This is a crude evaluation, as it would be difficult to estimate either the true effects or the combined effects of both Early Warning Systems and Targeted Home Visits without sufficient data. However, given that Targeted Home Visits work off the data that Early Warning systems provide, one might expect a combined effect larger than the sum of its parts, rather than smaller.

Qualitative Evaluation: Survey Data

To gather qualitative data regarding attendance practices, I sent a District Self-Assessment Survey to my contact, the Director of Family Engagement. This survey was created by the non-governmental organization Attendance Works, which focuses on reducing chronic absenteeism. Their data and practices are used as primary resources for school districts and state governments; this survey was recommended by the Virginia Department of Education itself. The Director of Family Engagement filled this survey out, providing insight to areas improvement as he viewed them.

The survey had six subject areas: Capacity Building, Actionable Data, Positive Engagement, Strategic Partnerships, Adequate and Equitable Resources, and Shared Accountability. Each subject area had 5-6 questions, with answer choices of "Solidly in Place", "Measurable progress", "Needs Improvement, and "Urgent Gap". I assigned a number to each answer choice with 4 being the highest (Solidly in Place), and 1 being the lowest (Urgent Gap). To the right is a chart detailing the score of each subject area.

Subject Area	Score
Capacity Building	19/24= 79%
Actionable Data	19/24= 79%
Positive Engagement	13/20= 65%
Strategic Partnerships	11/20= 55%
Adequate and Equitable Resources	14/24= 58%
Shared Accountability	16/24= 66%

As the chart demonstrates, Richmond Public Schools is confident in their capacity building and actionable data aspects, but positive engagement, strategic partnerships, adequate resources, and shared accountability are all incredibly low. Almost all the “Needs Improvement” questions focused on the accessibility of data to families and the community. My client has indicated that there is a need to streamline the distribution of information to and communication with non-English speaking households, as these populations are often overlooked by current methods.

Suggested Modifications

Given the quantitative and qualitative data gathered, this report suggests the following modifications to current practices:

1. Increase communications between families and schools regarding attendance needs, keeping language barriers in mind. The gap between expected effectiveness of Targeted Home Visits and the actual effectiveness of the program, as well as the self-evaluation of practices, suggests that there are communication gaps between families and school administrators. Increasing the quantity of communication, and structuring attendance materials so that they are accessible to non-English speakers, might be helpful in closing that gap. Sending home weekly attendance reports can further include families in the decision-making process and clarifying attendance policies through informational pamphlets/reminders may help increase effectiveness of the current program.

1. Increase the amount of bilingual Family Liaisons for non-English speaking populations. Like the first modification, increasing connection to families through bilingual Family Liaisons may be helpful in increasing the effectiveness of current programs. Research has shown that meeting ELL families where they are, both culturally and linguistically, instead of forcing them to assimilate, increases engagement in school and the community (Parsons & Shim, 2019). Direct communication through home visits, as well as the attendance materials mentioned above, could increase engagement with the community and increase student engagement in school.

Analysis

Cost: **Low**

Given the cost of hiring extra translators/family liaisons, creating new materials to be distributed to families of English-Learners, and the cost of distribution of weekly attendance reports, I estimate that these modifications will cost \$985 per student, or

around \$845,000 per year. The per-student cost is for all chronically absent 8th and 9th grade students. The total two-year cost of the program is around \$1.75 million⁴.

Effectiveness: **Low**

If these modifications were to be implemented in such a way that closed the gaps between expected and actual results, then we would expect a 10.4% decrease in chronic absenteeism. However, given the multitude of factors that could account for the gap between expected and actual results, and the lack of data available that would be able to mitigate confounding variables, I will assume that these areas do not account for the entire gap in results, and therefore halve my estimate to account for other variables and factors. Therefore, we can expect that these changes will decrease chronic absenteeism by 5.2%.

Cost-effectiveness: **Medium**

If these modifications reduce chronic absenteeism by 5.2%, and they cost around \$845,000 a year, then a 1 percentage point in chronic absenteeism across the two-year period would cost around \$336,000.

Equity: **High**

These modifications address current gaps in information given to non-native English speakers, and are not exclusionary of any one group, so they rate high in equity.

Administrative Feasibility: **Medium**

These modifications are moderately feasible in terms of the administrative effort required to enact them. The low cost would make this option more desirable to the administration, but the lack of clear data in regards to gaps in current practices gives the option a great deal of uncertainty. Hiring new family liaisons and creating more comprehensive materials aren't administratively overwhelming on their own, but the lack of certainty in the evaluation of current practices suggests that administrative buy-in might be difficult to achieve. No administration will want to put time, effort and money into an intervention that might be the exact opposite of what they need, especially when it involves bringing on more staff members. Therefore, I rate these modifications as medium in terms of administrative feasibility.

⁴ See Appendix 4 for more details

RECOMMENDATION

This report recommends that Richmond Public Schools adopt a Check-In, Check-Out program at the 8th and 9th grade levels. Although it is less effective than its Mentorship counterpart, its low cost and high administrative feasibility make it easy to adopt in the coming academic year, without overwhelming current resources. This program also has the benefit of addressing gaps in at-home communication and transparency regarding attendance practices, therefore incorporating aspects of the suggested practice modifications without the increased cost. As a short-term intervention, CICO programs can fill some of the gaps left by current practices and give a better understanding of chronic absenteeism data.

Intervention	Cost (25%)	Effectiveness (20%)	Cost-effectiveness (15%)	Equity (15%)	Feasibility (25%)
Check & Connect	High (\$2361)	Medium (-12.5)	Medium (335k)	Low	Low
CICO	Low (\$766)	Low (-6.5)	Medium (209k)	High	High
Modifications	Low (\$985)	Low (-5.2)	Medium (336k)	High	Medium

Modifying current practices may give similar results to a CICO program; however, the data currently available is not strong enough to confidently predict why there are gaps between the expected and actual effects of Targeted Home Visits. There is a strong possibility that the assumptions I've made as I evaluated the current practices are incorrect, and the effects of COVID further confound the data, making it so that true effects are nearly impossible to disentangle. District-wide modifications of practices, including the hiring of new staff, for inconsistent data is not likely to be popular with district administration.

However, in the long-term, this report urges Richmond Public Schools to consider implementing a Check & Connect mentorship program. Although it is high cost and requires a great deal of administrative buy-in, it is quite possibly the most effective

chronic absenteeism intervention that RPS has not pursued so far. Even moderate effects would greatly reduce CA rates and may also have the added benefit of increased graduation rates, as Check & Connect has been proven to prevent dropouts as well. Implementing the program with fidelity and ensuring that all at-risk students have access to the program would greatly affect the CA rates in Richmond.

IMPLEMENTATION

Best practices for implementation of Check-in-Check-Out programs are outlined in the Handbook for Behavioral Interventions (Filter, 2017). In general, the daily cycle of implementation of CICO programs is as follows:

1. Morning check-in with students. These should only be one to two minute long meetings, usually with the CICO program manager. However, since the at-risk student population at any one school is too much for one program manager to handle, members of the existing attendance teams at each school will handle check-ins for about 5-10 students each. These additional check-in officers will be supervised by the program manager. At check-in, students will pick up the daily point cards that they will be using for the remainder of the day, as well as return the point card of the previous day with a parent's signature. The check-in officers will briefly go over areas of improvement, possibly set an individualized goal that the student will aim for, and then send the student to class.

2. Daily assessment sheets. These paper cards will be carried by students from class to class, and will feature spaces where teachers can mark when the students arrived to class, and how much they participated in the class section.

3. Regular Teacher Feedback. Teachers provide feedback about the engagement of students in class, and the on-time arrival of students. They rate their engagement on a scale from 0-2, and mark the arrival time of students. They then provide written and verbal feedback, sign the form, and give it to the students for them to take to their next class.

A blank CICO Report Card form. At the top, it says "Daily Progress Report" in green. To the right, there are fields for "Student Name:" and "Date:". Below this, there are sections for "Goals" (Goal 1, Goal 2, Goal 3) and "Today's Target Percentage:". There is also a "Reward:" section. The main part of the form is a "Schedule / Points Tracker" table. The table has columns for "Period / Teacher", "Goal 1", "Goal 2", "Goal 3", and "Notes/Observations". Each goal column has a sub-column for "Score" with values 2, 1, 0. The table is filled with empty boxes for marking scores. To the right of the table is a "Scores Legend" box with three levels: 2 - Great Job! (80-100% of the time), 1 - Almost! (20-80% of the time), and 0 - Try Again! (0-20% of the time). Below the legend is a "Points available per duration of periods" box with a list of points for different numbers of periods (1 period = 6 points, 2 periods = 12 points, 3 periods = 18 points, 4 periods = 24 points, 5 periods = 30 points, 6 periods = 36 points, 7 periods = 42 points, 8 periods = 48 points, 9 periods = 54 points, 10 periods = 60 points). At the bottom of the form, there are sections for "Scores" (Points earned, Points available, Score percentage) and a "Parent/Guardian Signature" line. The Panaroma Education logo is in the bottom right corner.

Figure 9: Blank CICO Report Card (Panaroma, 2024)

4. Check-Out (with rewards delivery). At the end of the school day, students return to their check-in officer with their daily report. The officer looks over the report, notes late/missed classes, and sends the report home with the student to be reviewed and

signed by a parent. At certain benchmarks, attendance teams should reward the student for improved or good attendance.

5. Home communication. The final step of the process is communication with students' families. The daily point cards will be taken home for parent signatures, with the expectation that the students will return them to their check-in officer the following school day (Crone et. al, 2010). As stated previously, these assessment sheets will include the time students arrived to class, and their level of engagement with the material. This provides more information about a student's attendance patterns, and keeps the parents informed about their child's habits and areas of improvement.

Key Stakeholders

Attendance Teams

The existing attendance teams will be carrying out the majority of analysis and direct student contact for a CICO program. Attendance teams, otherwise known as School Attendance Support Teams (SAST) consist of school administrators, family liaisons, counselors, select teachers, and workers that specialize in attendance. They will be responsible for the daily implementation of CICO, as well as the creation of daily report cards. The duties of school program manager can be delegated to the current SAST team leads, which are the assistant principals. The program managers will dedicate approximately 10 hours a week to the implementation and monitoring of CICO, and will convene weekly meetings to discuss trends (Filter, 2017). These meetings can be incorporated into existing SAST meetings. To ensure uniformity across schools, but also allow for flexibility between schools, guidelines should be provided that reflect the practices outlined in the implementation guide and can inform school administrators as they structure their program.

Family Engagement Administrators

District administrators within the office of engagement will be responsible for the creation of standards and guidelines for implementation across the district. Just as the district administrators use rubrics to assess the practices of SAST teams at the school level, they should have similar rubrics regarding the creation and management of CICO programs.

Teachers

Educators will be responsible for daily student feedback, and are thus a key part of this program. Failure to take attendance on a regular basis, as well as provide

comments for specific students, will weaken the effectiveness of the program. Increasing teacher buy-in will therefore be incredibly important, so an understanding of hesitations expressed by teaching staff prior to full implementation will be necessary to anticipate potential problems.

Families

Communication with families keeps them involved and informed about their children's progress. However, many schools struggle with implementing the at-home components of CICO as consistently as school-based components; students either don't give the card to their parents, or the parents don't sign it (Hawken et. al, 2006; Filter et. al, 2007).

Students

Paper attendance rubrics may affect student buy-in. Students may find it embarrassing to carry around the paper report to each of their classes, or they may risk losing the paper as they move from class to class. If this kind of aversion is observed, then the school should be able to shift from paper rubrics to online rubrics, where teachers use Google Forms or something similar to fill out the attendance rubric. This allows for a more discreet, efficient way to give feedback, but also may negatively impact the fidelity of the implementation. However, this adaptation may not be necessary, as similar interventions at this level have found that the CICO sheets are socially acceptable, and students don't tend to view them negatively (Flannery et. al, 2024).

Next Steps

The first step towards implementation would be to present a proposal to the school board, detailing the effectiveness of CICO and the multifaceted uses it can have given certain adaptations. Emphasis will be placed on the little funding needed for CICO, and the flexibility it gives each school while still closely monitoring attendance. If the school board is hesitant to adopt the proposal, the implementation can be scaled back to reduce costs further, and test the effectiveness of the intervention at one or two schools rather than the entire district.

Secondly, the RPS Office of Engagement should begin circulating information about the program, and get feedback from school administrators, teachers, and members of the attendance teams. Evidence suggests that the best-structured CICO programs include staff input, both to improve the flexibility of the program and to account for any potential issues in the program's creation and implementation (Rodriguez et. al, 2015).

Thirdly, the RPS Office of Engagement will need to develop and present specific guidelines to school administrators regarding the main goals of CICO and how it can be implemented at each school. These guidelines will fit well within the existing Attendance Engagement Plans created by each school, as the expectations for CICO are incredibly similar to these plans. Schools will benefit from the personalization of the program to cater to their specific students, and the needs of those students, but core aspects—such as the daily cycle and the guidelines for evaluation—should remain relatively constant across all schools. As they currently do with school-level Attendance plans, schools should be able to present their CICO programs to the Office of Engagement for evaluation and approval.

CONCLUSION

Consistent school attendance is essential for student academic achievement and positive life outcomes. Regular attendance has become even more crucial, as school districts attempt to close the learning gaps created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Too many RPS students are missing too much school, negatively impacting their academic performance at especially important transitional periods, and limiting the number of opportunities they will have in the future. To lower chronic absenteeism rates in RPS, this report explored three interventions targeting chronically absent students: Check & Connect Mentorship Program, Check-in Check-out student engagement program, and Modifications to Current Practices, including more accommodations for English learners and increased family engagement practices. Having analyzed these options, this report identified the Check-in Check-Out program as the best option for RPS, as it is low cost, administratively feasible, and highly equitable. Steps toward implementation should include a proposal to the school board, circulation of the material to relevant teachers and administrators, and the development of program rules and guidelines to be distributed to school leaders.

Although there is a great deal of work to be done in decreasing chronic absence, implementing a Check-in Check-out program is an easy way to both continue that journey and increase engagement with at-risk students. This problem will likely require more intensive intervention in the future, like a fully-fledged mentorship program, but I believe that a CICO program is the best option available at this current point in time. While the effects of this intervention may be smaller than hoped, it has the potential to lay the foundation for deeper connections with students and a greater understanding of chronic absenteeism.

APPENDIX 1: Rates of Calculation and General Assumptions

Assumptions

1. There are currently 857 8th and 9th grade students who are chronically absent. Per-student cost calculations assume that all 857 students will be participating in the program. When an alternative includes family participation, it is assumed that each child comes from a different family, and thus all materials made would be distributed to 857 households.
2. As I understand it, attendance teams are made up of around 7 people, with 6 being staff support and 1 person being the assistant principal/program lead. While the staff support members (family liaisons, school nurse, attendance workers and data specialists, usually) all have different salaries, the difference in the days/hours they work means that they all make around \$30/hr on average, so in my cross-district calculations, I'll be using that hourly wage to calculate labor cost for such teams. The hourly wage for assistant principals is much higher, so the cost of program managers will be a separate calculation.
3. Implementation of these programs will only take place during the 180 days of the school year, or 36 school weeks. Since it is the program managers' responsibility to oversee and implement these programs, I will assume that they will work 38 weeks, or 190 school days, to account for extra administrative burden.

Important Populations

Demographic	Amount of Chronically-Absent Students
8th Graders	383
9th Graders	474
ESL Students (8th and 9th grade)	174

Rates of Calculation

Below are the average salaries for important figures in the RPS system. Although none of these roles are paid hourly, to my knowledge, the hourly salary is included for the purposes of costing time calculations. All of these salaries were derived directly from the RPS 2023 payscale, with the exception of the Teacher Salary, which was derived from 166 self-reported salaries on a job website. This exception was due to the fact that the teacher pay schedule is based on both years of experience and

educational attainment, and does not necessarily reflect the current teaching population; averaging the high and low ends of the pay scale gives us \$92,000, which is a significantly higher salary than expected for a teacher, especially since those higher-end salaries require decades of experience and a masters degree. The job site gives us a much more reasonable range of salaries; according to Glassdoor, teachers salaries in RPS range from \$51k-\$76k (Glassdoor, 2024).

For each pay grade in the RPS pay schedule, there are 37 "steps", likely representing experience in some form. The numbers below were derived from the 18th "step", reflecting the exact middle of the pay scale for that specific job.

Teacher Salary	\$62,000/yr, 260 8-hr days	\$30/hr
Family Liaison Salary	\$51,976/yr, 216 8-hr days	\$30/hr
Translator Salary	\$65,700/yr, 260 8-hr days	\$31.5/hr
Assistant Principal (Middle School)	\$107,557/yr, 260 8-hr days	\$52/hr
Assistant Principal (High School)	\$112,936/yr, 260 8-hr days	\$54/hr

APPENDIX 2: Check & Connect

Cost

In their 2017 study of Check & Connect programs in 23 elementary and middle schools in Chicago, Guryan et al. found that the average cost per student was \$1700. Another study, also in 2017, found that the cost to implement Check & Connect for 9th grade students was around \$1955 per student (Social Programs That Work, 2018). In 2024 dollars, this would account for \$2152 and \$2475, respectively. Both of these studies took place in urban districts, with high populations of African-American students and high levels of disadvantaged populations, so there are no demographic or socioeconomic differences that would cause program costs to be significantly different in Richmond. Program creators estimated that the program would cost \$1400 per student in 2001, which is equivalent to \$2455 in 2024, so while both estimates are within a reasonable range, it's likely that the cost is closer to \$2475.

Study	Year	Cost	2024 Cost
Guryan et al.	2017	1700	2152
Social Programs that Work	2017	1955	2475
University of Minnesota	2001-02	1400	2455
Average		1685	2361

Cost per student	Total Students	Total Cost (1 yr)	Total Cost (2 yrs)
2361	857	2023377	4330026.78

APPENDIX 3: Check-in, Check-out

Cost

Implementation hours are drawn from the Handbook of Behavioral Interventions in Schools (2019).

Materials/Resources	Cost	Cost-per-student (Cost/students)
Initial Manual ➤ (Guilford Press, 2024)	35	0.04084014
Staff Training ➤ Average 25-1 student to teacher ratio in middle school, 21-1 in high school ➤ 1430 8th graders/25= 57.2 teachers (rounded to 58) ➤ 1507 9th graders/21=72 ➤ 58+72= 130 teachers ➤ 130*1 hour* \$30/hr=3900	3900	4.55075846
Software ➤ Google Suite should be the only software required, and it's already used in RPS	0	0
Rubric Development	6479.16	7.560280047
Labor Cost ➤ Assuming a maximum of 4 hours per rubric-creation, at \$30/hr, across 12 schools	1440	1.680280047
Distribution Cost ➤ 857 rubrics printed at \$0.02 a page, for 180 school days, plus a one-time distribution of information through mail, at \$0.68 a stamp	3667.96	4.28
Program Costs	629720	734.795

Materials/Resources	Cost	Cost-per-student (Cost/students)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 6 attendance team members x 1 hour of work per day x 180 school days x \$30/hr x 12 middle and high schools ➤ Middle School: 7 Program Managers x 10 hours per week x \$52/hr x 38 school weeks ➤ High school: 5 program managers x 10 hours per week x \$54/hr x 38 weeks 		
Family Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 857 30-minute conversations between Family Liaisons and families, at the rate of \$30/hr 	12855	15
Total	656725.92	766.31

Cost Totals

	Per-Student	First Year Cost	Second Year Cost	Total Cost (2 yr)
Check-in Check Out	766.307958	656725.92	702696.7344	1359422.654

APPENDIX 4: Modifications to current practices

Cost

While Family Liaisons are usually hired at around \$52000/yr, I calculated that the liaisons would be hired at the average rate of Translators for RPS (\$65700/yr). This both accounts for the increased cost of second language proficiency, and is within the upper boundaries of the Family Liaison pay scale.

Materials/Resources	Cost	Cost per student
Family Liaisons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 12 family liaisons, one for each school, hired at \$65,700/yr 	788400	919.9533256
Creation of Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ \$31.5/hr x 4 hours a week x 36 weeks x 12 schools 	54432	63.51458576
Weekly Attendance Reports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 857 reports per week x 36 weeks x \$.02 a page 	617.04	0.72
Gas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ \$3.37 per gallon x average of 2 miles per visit x 174 visits 	1172.76	1.368448075
Total	844621.8	985.5563594

Cost Totals

	Per-student	First year cost	Second year cost	Total cost (2yr)
Modified Practices	985.5563594	844621.8	903745.326	1748367.126

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