

The Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP) Year One Impact and Process Study

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Summary of Key Findings

Impact Study

- During 1997-98, sanctions were imposed on 143 children (6% of all MerCAP year one students), resulting in the reduction of 210 benefit months. Approximately half of the sanctions (73 cases) were for 10 or more absences without good cause, with the remainder imposed due either to failure to return the release of information form (13 cases) or non-cooperation with the required school conference (57 cases).
- There are relatively more sanctions in the high schools than in the K-8 grades.
- The attendance patterns of TANF and non-TANF students are very similar, across all schools and grades. The assumption that excessive attendance problems are concentrated among TANF students is not supported by the data.
- In participating MerCAP schools, 1997-98 overall percentage actual attendance was higher than in 1996-97. After baseline data from Year 2 and 3 schools are collected we will be better able to determine the degree to which MerCAP is responsible.
- Among the subset of a sample of individual MerCAP students who had attended the same school for the past two years, there was no significant difference in attendance between the two years (i.e. from prior to MerCAP to post-MerCAP).
- Schools designated as “case management only” during year one (meaning that no fiscal sanctions were applied) had higher attendance than comparable schools that did issue sanctions. The same schools had higher attendance in the preceding year.
- The major cost of the program is the time spent by schools to monitor attendance, take actions, and produce reports. During the first year these activities averaged about .20 to .25 FTE in staffing at each school.

Process Study

- MerCAP is based on a relatively simple policy idea, but its implementation requires difficult collaboration and complex new procedures. Securing effective inter- and intra-organizational coordination between stakeholders has proven to be one of the most challenging aspects of the new program.
- Operational policies and procedures related to MerCAP's sanction program accurately reflect the required elements listed in the state's project description. These procedures appear to have insured fair correct treatment of TANF recipients.
- Elements of the program that have exhibited the greatest variation among schools are when "good cause" determinations are made, how parent conferences and corrective action plans are handled, and whether schools keep up-to-date in monitoring attendance and filing reports.
- Much of the burden of MerCAP implementation-falls on front-line school staff (particularly attendance clerks), on whom the program has placed significant and largely unanticipated time demands. A good many have had to work on MerCAP after normal hours or on weekends.
- During year one, MerCAP appears to have had a relatively small impact on how much or what kind of family case management schools do. MerCAP has not increased significantly the referral of parents to community resources, beyond preexisting practices.

- As demonstrated in focus groups and individuals interviews, there is broad-based support for the program among key stakeholders, including schools, parents, and the Human Services Agency. MerCAP is perceived by most community stakeholders as a sanction program.
- Some MerCAP procedures cause parents to feel mistrusted/mistreated by schools. Parents wanted more information about the program; most had a very limited and sometimes inaccurate understanding of MerCAP.
- In most schools, excessive absence problems are limited to a relatively small number of families that are well known to school personnel. School personnel believe that the MerCAP sanction is an effective tool in motivating these families.

Mid-Course Corrections Suggested by Year One Implementation

- The MerCAP Oversight Committee established recently should become a permanent part of the program. In addition to exercising responsibility for setting and revising policies, and solving problems, the committee should ask itself: How will the deliberations of the oversight committee be shared with the affected staff in all participating schools? How will ideas for improving attendance and helping families deal with absence-causing problems be shared among all schools? How can families affected by MerCAP have a voice in making the program more effective?
- It would be beneficial for schools to schedule information sharing meetings with all MerCAP parents early in the implementation of the program.
- Given that attendance problems are not concentrated disproportionately in MerCAP families (as originally anticipated), and that school funding is now based on actual attendance, a number of schools and school districts are adopting MerCAP-like attendance policies that are uniform for all students and that contain a variety of incentives and sanction tools.
- Among the initial goals for MerCAP was creating a "county-wide network of agencies committed to providing a full array of services to reduce absenteeism." To pursue this goal, project leaders could constitute a broad-based and inclusive planning body with representatives from schools, families, the Human Services Agency, non-profits, and other civic leaders. Among other tasks, this group should develop a clearer definition of the intended family case management services.
- It seems reasonable to reconsider whether a program such as MerCAP can achieve its intended goals without some provision of new resources, and/or a clearer strategy for how the program will allow families and schools to access existing community resources.
- In exercising oversight over collaborative projects such as MerCAP, state and local agencies need to broaden their perspective to include but transcend the traditional focus on "mandate compliance." Effective collaboration also requires creating opportunities for continuous learning with community partners, and ongoing adaptation of program procedures based on experience.

Introduction

MerCAP Objectives and Assumptions

The Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP) is a joint effort of social service agencies and schools to support better school attendance among students receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The program's primary objective is to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of financial dependence in a TANF household. The means is early intervention to curb absenteeism and support long-term educational accomplishment. The program design includes both a financial sanction to discourage excessive unexcused absences, and family case management to support better attendance.

MerCAP targets children ages 6-15. This is unlike the Cal-Learn program, the San Diego School Attendance Demonstration, and similar programs in other states that focus on older teens. The aim is to establish good attendance habits early, because poor attendance patterns in later years are considered more difficult to change.

All social programs are based on a theory of change that makes certain assumptions about how and why the program will work. MerCAP's underlying theory assumes the following chain of logic:

1. MerCAP will correct early, excessive absenteeism and result in better school attendance.
2. Improved attendance will result in improved school achievement.
3. Improved achievement will result in increased chance of graduating from high school.
4. Graduating from high school will result in a better chance of finding a job and
5. increasing self-sufficiency.

Only the first of these assumptions can be directly influenced by MerCAP, and thus is the primary focus of our evaluation. Within certain limits the evaluation also may shed some light on the validity of the second assumption. A number of previous studies (see Appendix) question the causal relationship between attendance and achievement, with many arguing that achievement is a better predictor of attendance than vice versa. The third and fourth assumptions fall outside the scope of this evaluation.

MerCAP is being implemented at a time when the old social services paradigm of entitlement is being challenged by a new emphasis on using government policy to encourage desired behavior, what some call "the new paternalism." At the same time, there is a shift from categorical programs designed at the federal level toward a new emphasis on devolution, flexibility, and community collaboration. As designed and implemented, MerCAP reflects both the pull of the new emphases and the continuing relevance of the old. Monitoring its implementation provides an occasion for learning about the directions social policy is taking in the current setting.

County Context

Merced County lies in the heart of California's Great Central Valley, and agriculture is the traditional economic base. Median household income is \$25,548, well below the state average of \$35,798. Like many valley counties, its unemployment level is routinely at or near double-digit levels.

At the time MerCAP was initiated, Merced County served approximately 10,000 AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, now TANF) households, with 17% (34,000) of its 200,000 residents receiving AFDC.

On average these households have three children, ranking it at the top of California counties in numbers of children per case. The county; has a large Hispanic population, and a fairly large Southeast Asian community. It consistently ranks in the top ten among the 58 California counties in teen pregnancy rate.

In Merced County schools, 47% of students are Hispanic and 12% Asian. The percentage of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students is well above the state average of 24.2%. Results from the recent statewide achievement tests show that Merced reading test scores fall well below the state average for all grades. Per pupil spending based on average daily attendance is about average for the state, while the high school dropout rate of 2.4% (in 1996-97) is below the state average of 3.3%. Like the state average, the reported Merced dropout rate has been steadily falling since 1992-93.

Program Scope

MerCAP operates for a three-year period under a waiver from the state Department of Social Services granted on June 5, 1997. During each year approximately one-third of the county schools will join the program, until all schools are participating. In year one, 21 schools with a total MerCAP enrollment of approximately 2,500 students took part in the program. By year three, MerCAP will impact approximately 16,333 children in all 20 school districts in the county. The program excludes kindergarten students for whom school attendance is not statutorily mandated, older teens (age 16-18), children who are home schooled, and those attending private schools.

The MerCAP waiver suspends Welfare and Institutions Code 114~0 (the Maximum Aid Payment schedule) in order to allow MerCAP sanctions, and for the first time permits Merced County's Human Services Agency to share with schools lists of TANF students (only after parents are notified and arrangements are made for maintaining strict confidentiality standards. The waiver was approved after federal welfare reform legislation (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of August 1996) and immediately before the state passed its CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) legislation in August 1997.

MerCAP Procedures and Operations

A detailed description of MerCAP procedures and operations, taken from the program handbook, can be found in Appendix B. Basic features of the program include:

- Schools playing an active role with families to resolve problems underlying frequent absenteeism: through conferences, referrals, Corrective Action Plans, etc.
- Attendance action "triggers": at 5 absences the school sends a letter to the parent; at 7 absences the school sends a second letter scheduling a parent conference at which the school will seek to resolve problems; and at 10 absences at which point the school notifies HSA to sanction the family.
- The financial sanction can be imposed if the family fails to respond to the request for a parent conference or if the child continues to miss school until 10 absences are reached.
- The financial sanction is for one month and represents the child's portion of the TANF grant.
- The financial sanction ends when parents cooperate (by attending a conference) or the one-month period is up.
- Subsequent absences during the year can result in another request by schools to HSA for an additional sanction.

- Schools make "good cause" determinations to determine which absences will not apply toward the 10-absence limit.

First-Year Evaluation

Under CalWORKs, one condition for the receipt of TANF support is for parents to insure that their children attend school regularly. Because many counties have yet to determine how they will implement this provision, there is significant interest in learning from the MerCAP experience. This evaluation, under contract with the state Department of Social Services, seeks to understand MerCAP's impact on attendance, achievement, and parent-school relations, and learn from the process by which it has been implemented.

This report covers the first year of the three-year project. As in most complex undertakings, the first year has presented significant challenges in establishing collaborative relationships, setting operational policies and procedures, and solving a variety of implementation problems. We appreciate the good faith effort to meet these challenges, and hope the reflections in this report contribute to ongoing program modifications, and greater clarity about what programs such as MerCAP can and cannot achieve.

Impact Study

Evaluation Activities

The impact of MerCAP was expected to show up in improved attendance of students receiving TANF cash aid, which would in turn be reflected in improved levels of achievement. To test these assumptions, we collected aggregate attendance information from all schools, and individual attendance and achievement data for a sample of MerCAP students. The following sections describe the major findings from our analysis.

It is important to keep in mind that these findings reflect only the first year of MerCAP implementation. They reflect the experience of approximately one-third of the eventual number of schools implementing the program. In many cases, the analytic comparisons available to us in this first year study were severely limited by lack of data, including both missing data from year one schools and the fact that we have not yet collected data from year two and three schools. We have limited our report to those findings that can be supported within the data limitations. The reader should keep in mind these limits and the specific caveats discussed below. We expect subsequent reports after year two and three of MerCAP to address a fuller range of questions, and to do so with a higher degree of confidence.

Attendance: Aggregate Level Comparisons

The basic measure of attendance used—percentage actual attendance—is the ratio of days that students actually attended school per days enrolled in each school attendance month, aggregated by grade for each school. These data are regularly recorded for each class and grade in each school, and reported to the district and to the state. Schools participating in the first year of MerCAP were asked to record and report this information for the TANF students in their school, as well as for all students.

Unfortunately, the TANF data are incomplete. In two districts, the schools used computer software for recording and reporting attendance that did not permit them to run separate reports for a selected group of students within each grade. In another large school, the correct identification of TANF students was not completed within the first month (School Attendance Month 2) after the Merced County Human Service Agency sent the initial list of TANF students believed to attend that school. A few other months here and there were not reported for various reasons, despite the evaluation team's reminders.

In order to minimize the effect of missing data (which would have eliminated whole schools when only one month's record of one grade may have been missing), data were aggregated whenever appropriate, averaging the data that were available. The monthly percentage actual attendance for TANF and non-TANF students in lower elementary grades (1 through 3), upper elementary grades (4 through 6), junior high (grades 7 and 8), and senior high (grades 9 and 10) are arrayed in Figures I through 4 respectively.

Figure 1.

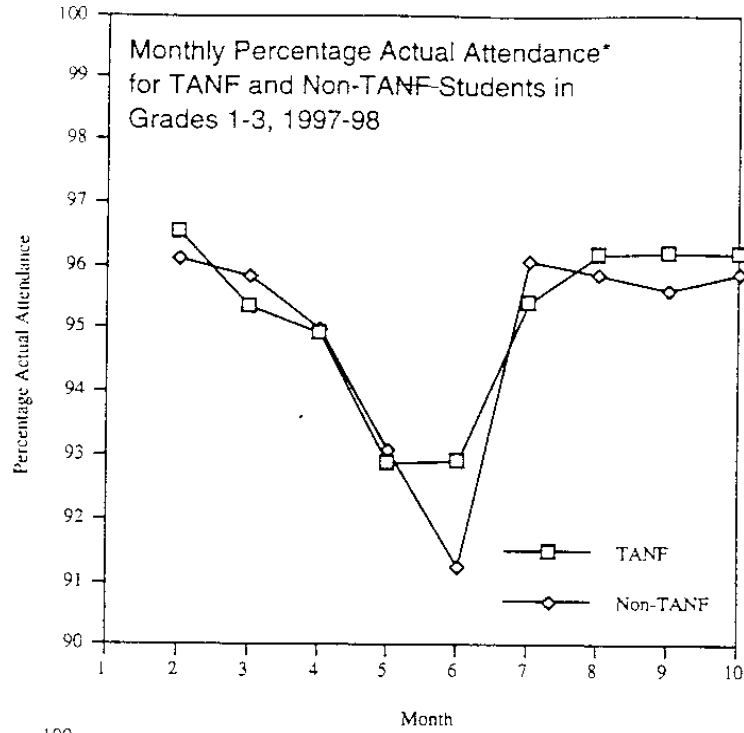
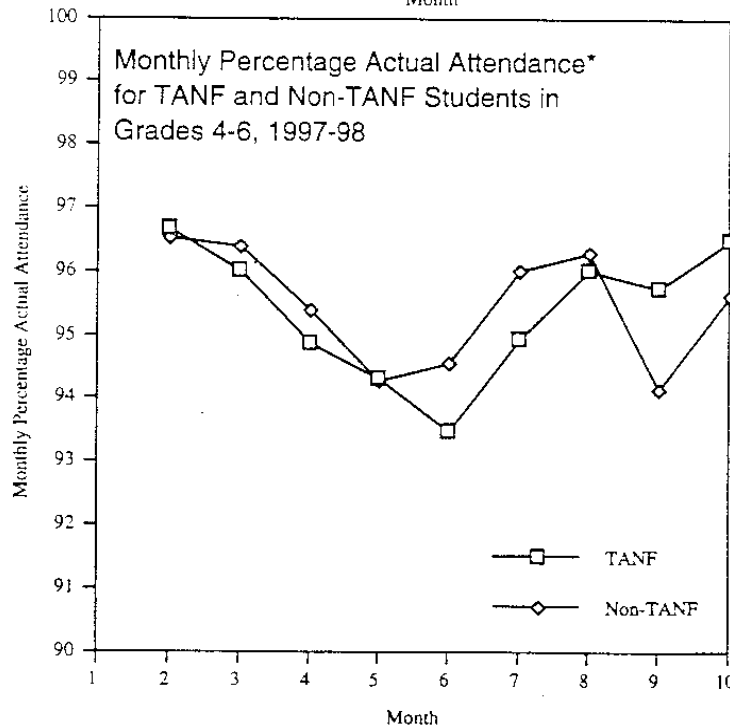


Figure 2.



*The percentage actual attendance is the ratio of days of attendance to days of enrollment for all TANF and Non-TANF students in each grade, aggregated for the grades indicated.

Figure 3.

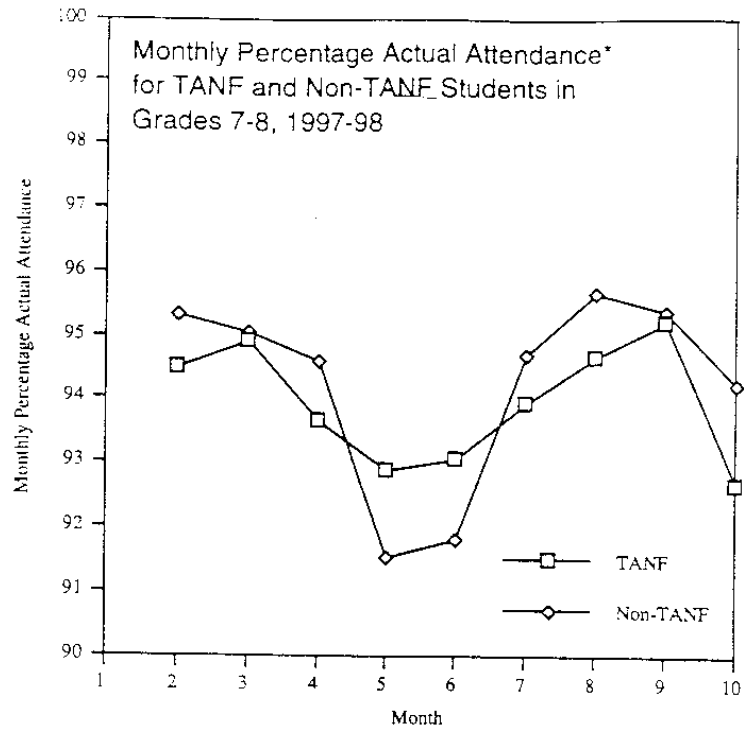
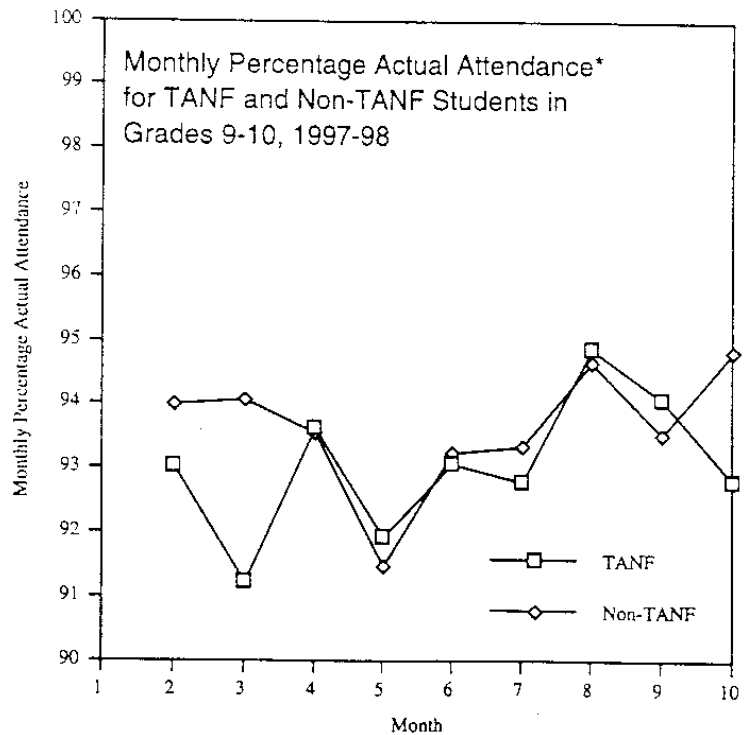


Figure 4.



*The percentage actual attendance is the ratio of days of attendance to days of enrollment for all TANF and Non-TANF students in each grade, aggregated for the grades indicated.

These figures make clear one of the things that participating schools learned—the attendance patterns of TANF and non-TANF students across all schools participating in the first year of MerCAP are very similar for each of the grade groupings.

To examine the impact of MerCAP on attendance more rigorously several comparisons were made. The rationale and procedures for each are described below.

Comparison 1: A statistical test of the differences in percentage actual attendance for TANF and non-TANF students was conducted, using a repeated measures analysis of variance. This did not include the four schools for which no TANF data were available. In order to minimize the effect of other missing data, the months were collapsed into three clusters: months 2-4, 5-7, and 8-10. This permitted the calculation of a percentage actual attendance for TANF and non-TANF students if data for even one of the three months in the cluster were available. To decrease the skewness and kurtosis of the resulting data, a log of each percentage actual attendance was calculated and used in the analyses.

A separate analysis of variance was run for each grade grouping, with month clusters (3) and TANF status (2) as factors. Ten schools are included in the early elementary and upper elementary groupings; four schools in the junior high grouping; and four in the senior high grouping. In each of the analyses the effect of month cluster was statistically significant, and TANF status was not (Table 1). There were no significant interaction effects. In other words, attendance rates vary significantly by month of the year (with lowest attendance during winter months), but whether a child receives TANF is not a significant predictor of their actual attendance.

Table 1. Results of Analyses of Variance Comparing TANF and Non-TANF Students' Percentage Actual Attendance by Month Clusters

Grade Grouping	Factor	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig. Of F
Grades 1-3	Mo. Cluster	1.04	2	.52	33.42	.000*
	TANF	.06	1	.06	.40	.055
	Mo. by TANF	.01	2	.00	.15	.864
Grades 4-6	Mo. Cluster	.48	2	.24	14.70	.000*
	TANF	.00	1	.00	.03	.870
	Mo. by TANF	.03	2	.02	.91	.410
Grades 7-8	Mo. Cluster	.35	2	.17	13.32	.001*
	TANF	.04	1	.04	2.98	.128
	Mo. by TANF	.01	2	.00	.80	.469
Grades 9-10	Mo. Cluster	.06	2	.03	4.49	.041*
	TANF	.01	1	.01	.72	.435
	Mo. by TANF	.03	2	.01	2.87	.104

* Significant at <.05

Comparison 2. Presumably the impact of MerCAP would be reflected in an overall improvement of attendance of all students in the participating schools when compared with their monthly attendance records in the previous year. The monthly percentage actual attendance of all students in each grade was calculated for each participating school for both 1996-97 (pre-MerCAP) and 1997-98 (MerCAP Year 1). These data were available for all grades and schools. Again, a repeated measures analysis of variance was performed, with month and year as factors. The results are shown in Table 2.

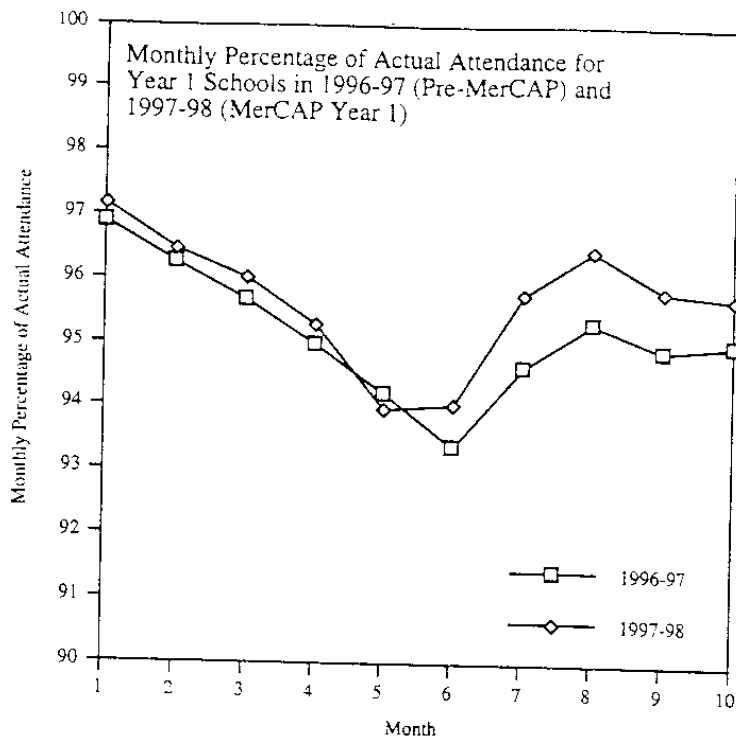
Table 2. Results of Analysis of Variance Comparing the 1996-97 and 1997-98 Monthly Percentage Actual Attendance of Participating Schools

Factor	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Month	1732.38	9	192.49	101.71	.000*
Year	147.62	1	147.62	43.13	.000*
Month x Year	91.35	9	10.15	6.84	.000*

* Significant at <.05

Clearly the improvement in attendance from the preceding year for all schools was statistically significant. Figure 5 displays the magnitude of the difference for each month. While the percentage points are small, the number of student days represented is substantial overall, representing a positive outcome for school finances and a potential for students to benefit more from increased exposure to schooling. Since many other factors can potentially impact attendance, the degree to which MerCAP is responsible for the increase cannot be determined at this time. In subsequent years, when we have in hand baseline attendance data from Year Two and Year Three schools, we will be able to compare attendance patterns in MerCAP Year One schools with attendance in Year Two and Three schools in order better to assess MerCAP's impact.

Figure 5.



Comparison 3: In the first year of the MerCAP experiment some schools were designated "case management only" (CMO), which meant that 5- and 7-absence letters were sent to parents and parent conferences were scheduled, with corrective action plans written as needed. Sanctions for 10 absences, however, were not imposed. Three of these schools were not able to record attendance data for TANF students. Therefore, the percentage actual attendance for all students in these CMO schools was compared with all students' percentage actual attendance in Year 1 schools that did apply sanctions in order to see whether sanctions made a difference. Selected comparison schools were similar in size and grade structure. An analysis of variance was performed in which the monthly percentage actual attendance for each grade were the observations, and use of sanctions was the factor. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of Analysis of Variance in Monthly Percentage Actual Attendance of Year I MerCAP Schools With and Without Sanctions, with Covariate of Preceding Years' Attendance

Factor	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Regression, 1996-97 Monthly Percentage Actual Attendance	Between Subjects, 271.97	1	271.97	73.22	.000*
Use of Sanctions	9.61	1	9.61	2.59	.120
Regression, 1996-97 Monthly Percentage Actual Attendance	Within Subjects, 24.26	1	24.26	35.29	.000*
Month	93.32	9	10.37	15.08	.000*
Sanctions by Month	28.41	9	3.16	4.59	.000*

* Significant at $<.05$

All of the mean monthly percentage actual attendance rates of the CMO schools were greater than that of the schools that used sanctions (see Figure 6). The CMO elementary school district and its local high school (part of a Unified High School District) are reputed to have had better attendance records than most school districts in Merced County. Figure 7 shows the percentage actual attendance of the same schools in the previous year. The CMO schools had significantly higher attendance than the comparison sanction schools in 1996-97 ($F=4.92$, significance $.035$). The difference between the monthly percentages for the two clusters, however, was less than in the first year of MerCAP.

Figure 6

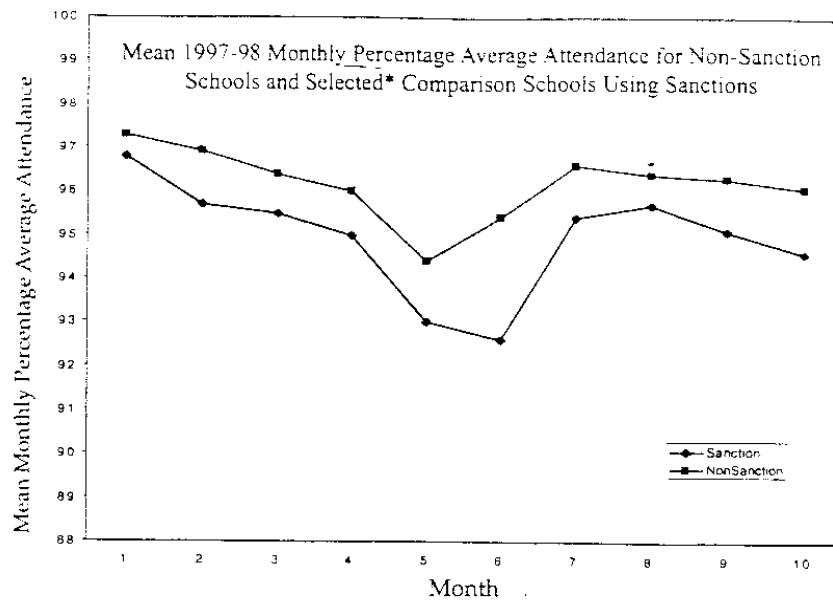
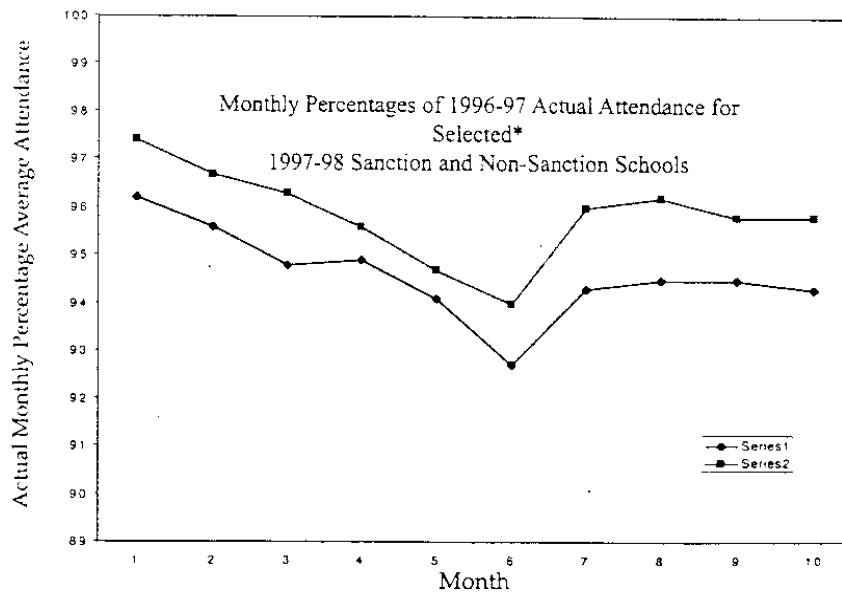


Figure 7



*Attendance at the four non-sanction schools was compared with that of four sanction schools similar in grade level and student population.

While administrators in the CMO schools found it difficult to be unable to request sanctions, particularly when this was in conflict with the general information distributed by the Human Service Agency to all TANF families prior to the beginning of the school year, attendance in the CMO schools did not appear to suffer. This supports the views of parents and administrators alike that what matters most in establishing and maintaining good school attendance is the overall experience of the student in the school.

Attendance: Individual Student Comparisons

The impact of MerCAP is most likely to be reflected in school attendance of individual TANF students, comparing their record in 1997-98 with the previous (pre-MerCAP) year. A sample of 55 students in each of eight schools was randomly selected from the list of TANF students identified by the Merced County Human Service Agency.

An important finding from collecting data on the sample of students is the number who stay in the same school for less than two years. Table 4 shows the distribution of the original sample of 438 students (55 from each of 8 schools, less two who were unknown) by enrollment in the same school in 1996-97, 1997-98, and 1998-99. Students who had been promoted to the next level of school in the same district are indicated in the furthest right hand column.

Table 4. Number and Percentage of Sample Students' Enrollment in Three Study Years

School Level	Total Sample	1997-98 All	1997-98 Part	1996-97 Same School	1998-99 Same School	1998-99 Within District
Middle (5-8)	55	46 (83.6%)	9 (16.4%)	30 (54.5%)	32 (58.2%)	6 (10.9%)
Middle (6-8)	54	41 (75.9%)	13 (24.1%)	25 (46.3%)	26 (48.1%)	13 (24.1%)
High School (9-12)	55	41 (74.5%)	14 (25.5%)	11 (20%)	38 (69.1%)	2 (3.6%)
Elementary (K-4)	55	41 (74.5%)	14 (25.5%)	34 (61.8%)	27 (49.1%)	7 (12.7%)
Elementary (K-6)	55	41 (74.5%)	14 (25.5%)	30 (54.5%)	32 (58.2%)	6 (10.9%)
High School (9-12)	54	39 (72.2%)	15 (27.8%)	13 (24.1%)	40 (74.1%)	0 (---)
Unified (K-8)	55	36 (65.4%)	19 (34.5%)	32 (58.2%)	32 (58.2%)	7 (12.7%)
Middle (7-8)	55	35 (63.6%)	20 (36.4%)	22 (40%)	13 (23.6%)	23 (41.8%)
Total Sample	438	320 (73.1%)	118 (26.9%)	205 (46.8%)	243 (55.5%)	69 (15.8%)

Less than three quarters of the students drawn from the HSA list attended for the whole year the school in which HSA believed they were enrolled. Only 205 students (less than half the sample) had been in the same school the previous year. Some of those were not enrolled in the listing school for the whole 1997-98 school year. Attendance data for some of the remaining students have not yet been made available by the schools for both years.

Attendance data for 1996-97 and 1997-98 were available for 141 students overall (32.2% of the sample). A t-test of the difference between mean percentage actual attendance for both years was conducted. Results by grade groupings and overall are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of t-Tests of Differences in Means of Percentage Actual Attendance for Randomly Selected TANF Students in 1996-97 and 1997-98

Group	Mean, PAA 1997-98	Mean, P.\A 1996-97	t value	Signif.*
Total Sample (N= 141)	86.5%	87.2%	-.25	.805
Grades 1-5 (N= 60)	85.0%	89.2%	-.90	.370
Grades 6-8 (N= 57)	88.0%	84.7%	.79	.430
Grades 9-10 (N= 24)	86.5%	87.9%	-.23	.822

* Significant at <.05

For this subset of MerCAP students, the data show no statistically significant difference in attendance between the pre- and post-MerCAP years. Because of the small sample size, these data cannot be generalized to the entire population of MerCAP students.

Attendance Actions Taken

While the absence of data prevents full grasp of the frequency of attendance-related interaction between school and parents, it is clear that MerCAP gives a school choosing to implement the program more opportunities to interact with parents of absent kids than they would otherwise have. The process study offers more detailed discussion on how schools and parents perceive MerCAP-related interactions.

It appears that the 5-absence intervention is somewhat effective. Among all year one schools there are approximately half as many 7-absence letters reported (427 as opposed to 891 five-absence letters). A total of 204 parent conferences were reported. Presumably the smaller number of parent conferences than 7-absence letters is due to the schools' waiving absences for good cause prior to holding a conference. In 57 cases the parents did not show up for the required conference and were sanctioned.

Attendance Actions Taken With Students in Sample: Table 6 arrays the number of students in each of the eight sample schools that had 10 or more absences (for all causes other than suspension from school), the total and mean number of absences for this group, and the most severe attendance actions taken in these cases. Three of the schools from which sample students were drawn were designated Case Management Only, unable to request sanctions for 10 unexcused absences. Of the 281 TANF students for whom 1997-98 attendance records were made available, 105 (37.4%) had 10 absences or more (including excused absences). From the relatively small number of 10-absence sanctions requested (16), parent conferences held (37) and other actions (17), it is clear that many of these absences were for bona fide illness and other excusable causes. We found few instances in which these schools had been involved in significant case management with families over children's health problems, or indeed for any other problems interfering with regular school attendance.

Table 6. Absences and Attendance Actions Taken for Sample Students with Ten or More Absences. 1997-98, by School

	No. of Students, ≥10 absences	Total Number of Absences	Mean Number of Absences	Most Severe Attendance Actions
Middle (5-8)*	1	11	11	----
Middle (6-8)	24	476	19.8	9 Sanctions, 6 Parent Conferences, 7 Letters
High School (9-12)	22	433	19.7	4 Sanctions, 5 Parent Conferences, 1 Letter
Elementary (K-4)*	9	129	14.3	7 Parent Conferences
Elementary (K-6)	7	89	12.7	6 Parent Conferences 1 Letter
High School (9-12)*	10	187	18.7	2 Parent Conferences, 4 In-School Suspends
Unified (K-8)	15	260	17.3	3 Sanctions, 4 Letters
Middle (7-8)	17	346	20.4	11 Parent Conferences
Total Sample	105	1931	18.4	16 Sanctions, 37 Parent Conferences, 4 In-School Suspensions, 13 Letters

*Schools designated Case Management Only, no 10-absence sanctions.

Sanctions

Table 7 is HSA's record of the total number of attendance-related sanctions imposed on MerCAP families. A total of 143 children were sanctioned, resulting in a reduction of 210 benefit months. This represents approximately 6% of all MerCAP Year 1 students (n=2,533 as of 12/28/97 HSA list). Of the 143 sanctions, 73 were for 10 absences or more without good cause, 57 for failure to attend the required parent-school conference, and 13 for failure to provide a completed school Release of Information form. Of the 73 ten absence sanctions, 63 were for one month only. This may suggest the effectiveness of the sanction in motivating better attendance subsequently, but also reflects the large number of sanctions occurring in June for which no subsequent sanction month was possible.

Table 7. MerCAP Year One Sanctions

Return of Release of Information (n=13) 6 cured in 1-15 days 3 cured in 16 days to one month 3 cured in 2 months 1 cured in 3 months
Non-Cooperation with Required School Conference (n=57) 15 cured prior to effective sanction date 7 cured in 1-15 days 15 cured in 16 days to 1 month 7 cured in 2 months 5 cured in 3 months 3 cured in 4 months 3 cured in 5 months 1 cured in 6 months 1 cured in 7 months
10 or more Absences without Good Cause (n=73) 63 sanctioned for 1 month 7 sanctioned for 2 months 2 sanctioned for 3 months 1 sanctioned for 4 months

Source: Merced Human Services Agency

As student absences accumulate over the school year, the frequency of sanctions also increases. Sanction began in the month of November, when seven were imposed, and peaked in June, when 43 were imposed (Table 8). There are relatively more sanctions in the high schools than in the K-8 schools, both for parent non-cooperation (failure to attend scheduled conferences) and for 10 absences.

Table 8. Student Sanction Activity by Month

NOV 1997	DEC 1997	JAN 1998	FEB 1998	MAR 1998	APR 1998	MAY 1998	JUNE 1998	JULY 1998	AUG 1998
7	13	17	22	26	31	29	43	19	3

Source: Merced Human Services Agency

Achievement

Two measures of achievement were considered in the evaluation plan—whether students are enrolled at the appropriate grade level for their ages, and their standardized scores on the Reading Comprehension section of whichever recognized achievement test is administered at their schools. Neither is a satisfactory measure. In most schools in Merced County, at least until the last school year, social promotion of students been the norm. No students in our sample had in the past been detained or accelerated, according to the cumulative files available in their current schools. Only three were being detained at the end of the 1997-98 school year. Thus

we found no variability in age-in-grade. defined as the student being within the standard grade for persons entering first grade no later than one year past the cutoff for being eligible to enroll.

In 1996-97 Merced County schools had used a variety of achievement tests, including CAT-V, CTBS, and SABE (for native Spanish speakers). We had envisioned using the same measure of achievement (standardized scores on the Reading Comprehension section of the same test) for 1997-98. However, California schools were required in 1997-98 to administer the Stanford Achievement Test, version 9 (SAT9), to all students beginning with the second grade. Although we have collected all the reading comprehension scores that are available for our sample of students, the same tests were given in both years by only 2 of the 8 schools. Students for whom a score on the same test was available do not include first graders, who were not tested as kindergartners, and who are not required to take the SAT9; any student who attended another school in the preceding year (and whose test scores in that year did not follow to the new school); students who were absent on the day(s) the test(s) were given; and students who did not attempt the SAT9 because of inadequate English comprehension.

Only 57 students in our sample took a standardized achievement test other than the SAT9 in 1996-97 and 1997-98 for which their scores are available. Because these students' scores are distributed over three tests (CAT-V, CTBS, and SABE), there is too small an N in any one in which to make meaningful comparisons, let alone to extrapolate to the total population. Further, attendance data are not available for all of these students, making it impossible to examine the relationship of attendance to standardized Reading Comprehension scores. Fortunately, it will be possible to follow some of these students for the next two years, and presuming that the STAR program continues, to compare scores on the SAT9 for at least 2 years.

Cost and Saving Implications of Implementing MerCAP

HSA estimates TANF benefits not paid due to sanctions at \$19,200, with the county share of this amount at less than \$500. The county share is to be reinvested back into the MerCAP program, as indicated in the state waiver.

To obtain information on the cost of implementing MerCAP we asked schools to estimate the amount of staff time required, and any other costs. No significant costs other than staff time were identified by the Year 1 schools in implementing MerCAP. Table 9 summarizes the data on staff time spent implementing MerCAP.

Table 9. MerCAP Staff Time 1997-98

School	Total Enrol.	MerCAP Enrol.	Start-up Cler. Hrs.	Start-up Cler. FTE	Start-up Prof. Hrs.	Start-up Prof. FTE	Total Start-up Hrs.	Total Start-up FTE	Ongoing Monthly Cler. Hrs.	Ongoing Monthly Cler. FTE	Ongoing Monthly Prof. Hrs.	Ongoing Monthly Prof. FTE	Total Monthly Hrs.	Total Monthly FTE
K-8														
Aileen Colburn	475	94	162	0.23	0	0.00	162	0.23	50	0.29	0	0.00	50	0.29
Belleve	611	244	42	0.06	10	0.01	52	0.07	50	0.29	12	0.07	62	0.36
Mitchell Elem.	521	162	120	0.17	48	0.07	168	0.24	16	0.09	15	0.09	31	0.18
Peggy Heller	492	82	95	0.14	12	0.02	107	0.15	25	0.14	4	0.02	29	0.17
Shaffer	503	115	108	0.15	43	0.06	151	0.22						
Thos. Ohaeta	422	74	143	0.20	4	0.00	147	0.21	6	0.03	2	0.01	8	0.05
Finer Wood	521	78	50	0.07	20	0.03	70	0.10	12	0.07	6	0.03	18	0.10
Le Grand Elem.	455	75	33	0.05	10	0.01	43	0.06	5	0.03	0	0.00	5	0.03
Plainsburg	106	12	8	0.01	16	0.02	24	0.03						
Planada	1000	153	70	0.10	50	0.07	120	0.17						
Yarmato Colony	622	88	8	0.01	50	0.07	58	0.08						
Campus Park	733	117	15	0.02	8	0.01	23	0.03	10	0.06	5	0.03	15	0.09
Des Palos Elem.	529	125	47	0.07	?	?	>47	>0.07						
Marks Elem.	537	94	47	0.07	?	?	>47	>0.07						
Mitchell Sr.	840	193	14	0.02	74	0.11	88	0.13	12	0.07	18	0.10	30	0.17
Bryant MS	536	111	129	0.19	13	0.02	142	0.20						
Livingston MS	939	181	20	0.03	22	0.03	42	0.06						
High Schools														
Atwater HS	2480	227	55	0.08	12	0.02	67	0.10	34	0.20	10	0.06	44	0.25
Livingston HS	1200	89	19	0.03	4	0.00	23	0.03						
Le Grand HS	550	35	0	0.00	7	0.01	7	0.01	0	0.00	4	0.02	4	0.02
Des Palos HS	658	54	13	0.02	0	0.00	13	0.02						

Keep in mind that these figures are based on *estimates* submitted by the schools, and that we have lumped together professional and clerical time in order to provide a readily understandable unit of comparison. The FTE figures are standardized based on 2080 work hours per year. The data suggest six primary findings:

- To get MerCAP started in a school that uses an attendance software program takes about a .20 FTE staff person for the first four months. This assumes that there is guidance or understanding as to how to use the software to flag the MerCAP students, monitor their attendance, and print out the reports needed for the evaluation.
- If a school does not use attendance software, or if it does not handle the MerCAP requirements differently from its regular attendance routine, or if it has very few MerCAP students, or if its attendance problems are limited, .10 FTE or less of staff time is required specifically for beginning MerCAP.
- During the startup period more clerical than professional time is required to set up the system, although this may mean some troubleshooting and support by the administrator(s).
- The average monthly time required after the startup period is generally greater than the first four months. This is due to having more MerCAP students to monitor, and to the accumulation of absences that require action (e.g., letters, conferences, sanctions). MerCAP monitoring, action and reporting requirements probably average .2 FTE, depending in part on the number of MerCAP students in the school.
- The school's standard operating procedures regarding attendance influence the amount of extra time required for MerCAP. It appears that in those schools in which attendance problems for all students are handled similarly and those which have other mechanisms for encouraging attendance the extra time required for MerCAP may not exceed .10 FTE.
- The delegation of tasks involved with implementing MerCAP varied widely from school to school (e.g., in some schools parent conferences were handled by the attendance clerk and in some the flagging of MerCAP students was handled by the principal). Further, salary costs vary from one system to another. Therefore, we are no longer asking schools for the cost equivalents of the staff hours allocated to MerCAP. By reporting in FTEs, schools can estimate their own probable costs.

In general, MerCAP was quite costly for schools to implement during year one. The implications of these costs are considered further in the process study.

Process Study

Evaluation Activities

The process study examines the ways and extent to which the project was implemented during each year, and the perspectives of major stakeholders. During year one, the evaluation team engaged in the following major activities related to the process study:

- conducted site visits with principals and attendance clerks in all year one schools during the fall 1997;
- conducted follow-up site visits with 12 of the 18 schools during spring 1998;
- observed regularly scheduled MerCAP coordination meetings between representatives of the Human Services Agency and school personnel (initially held monthly and then roughly quarterly);
- conducted focus groups with parents of a sample of MerCAP students;
- participated in meetings held quarterly with the state Department of Social Services and county representatives to review evaluation progress reports and solve problems; communicated frequently by phone with school, Human Services Agency, and DSS personnel; . collected documents related to MerCAP.

The remainder of this report is divided into sections representing key issues covered by the process evaluation.

Congruence of intended project goals with actual activities

The intended goals and procedures for MerCAP are articulated in two places: 1) the waiver signed by the Department of Social Services Director on June 5, 1997, and 2) the project description prepared by the AFDC Policy Development Bureau of DSS in June 1997. According to the waiver:

The demonstration project will test the efficacy of reducing school absenteeism among 6 through 15 year-old school children by using a combination of family case management and sanctions Schools will work closely with families of non attending children, making referrals to a variety of community

¹ The interview protocol for both the school site visits is included in Appendix C. ² The parents of 40 students (randomly selected) from each of the eight sample schools (i.e. 320 total families) were invited to focus group meetings to discuss the program. The focus groups were held on five nights between May 11-21, 1998. In all, 13 separate focus groups were conducted, six in Spanish, four in English, and three in Hmong. A total of 95 families were represented (-30% of those invited) at the meetings, with 121 total participants. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 6 to 20. Parents were informed about our roles as evaluators, and assured that we would not divulge their names as sources of particular comments. Questions concerning school attendance in general, their knowledge of MerCAP, and their opinions of MerCAP were asked. As a token of our thanks for their participation, each family received scrip worth \$20 at a local supermarket. The interview protocol for the focus groups is included in Appendix C. For more information, see our third quarterly progress report.

services as necessary. After exhausting all other avenues to insure the child attends school, the school will recommend to the County Welfare Department that the family be sanctioned.

The project description lists important definitions, provisions and activities to be employed in implementing the project. These include:

- defining "full-time attendance" as fewer than 10 absences in one school year, independent of whether the absences are excused or unexcused;
- provision that schools will adopt uniform "good cause" reasons for removing any number of absences from consideration toward sanction;
- public notification by the Human Services Agency to AFDC (now TANF) applicants and recipients;
- a release of information form signed by students' parents or caretakers; a series of triggers at five, seven and 10 absences, resulting in a five-day letter, seven day letter and parent conference, and sanction after 10 absences or parent failure to attend the conference or contact the school;
- notice to the Human Services Agency to impose a financial sanction after "all other avenues" are exhausted;
- recipient right to a formal hearing to dispute a sanction determination.

While based on a relatively simple policy idea, MerCAP's implementation requires developing a complex set of new procedures, and new patterns of communication between organizational entities and individuals (the welfare department, schools, TANF parents) that have little history of working together (see section on coordination below). Adding to the complexity is the relative independence of each school and school district in interpreting and implementing day-to-day attendance policies and procedures. Establishing operational procedures and insuring that they are clearly understood and consistently implemented by a wide range of school personnel has challenged project leaders during the first year.

Within existing resource limitations, both school personnel and the Human Services Agency have made a good faith effort to implement the program as designed. While not always applied in a completely consistent manner (see section below), the major program elements listed in the state's program description are accurately reflected in MerCAP's operational policies and procedures. Where inconsistencies have occurred, they generally fall within a range that would be considered normal for the start-up period of a new policy initiative, particularly one that involves substantial collaboration and coordination between agencies.

Sanction Program Project leaders have been careful to insure that MerCAP insures fair and legally correct treatment of recipients. Procedures related to parent notification, documentation of sanction-related actions, and following the sequence of actions prescribed before initiating a sanction have been consistently implemented. Despite a higher number of sanctions than anticipated (143), only three persons indicated to the Human Services Agency that they disagreed with a sanction. One appeal was resolved when the school reviewed the circumstances and decided that one or more of the days missed were for good cause. The other two decided to let the decision stand and withdrew their request for a hearing. The small number of appeals" appears to reflect careful program implementation. In some cases it may also reflect parental confusion or fear (see section on parent focus groups below).

According to HSA, quality assurance was achieved by periodic reviews of the sanction table (in December 1997, February 1998, May 1998). In September 1998 all sanction table entries were compared against the case and benefit record. In a few cases corrective action was indicated and modifications made. MerCAP implementation led to at least 10 fraud referrals during the first year.

Family Case Management: During year one, MerCAP appears to have had a relatively small impact on how much or what kind of family case management schools do. There are three primary reasons why this is the case:

1. Despite being a subject of considerable concern and discussion during the development of the project, neither the waiver nor the project description provides a clear definition of a set of essential case management practices to be used in the project.
2. MerCAP provided schools and the Human Services Agency with no new funds or staff support.
3. The time required for school personnel to monitor attendance and implement basic program requirements (letters, conferences, etc.) constrains their ability to undertake new family case management activities.

For these and related reasons, the original evaluation idea of distinguishing the effect of sanctions from that of case management by designating "case management only" schools proved difficult during year one. A revised strategy, consistent with the original intent, has since been agreed to by all parties.

Based on our conversations with school personnel, MerCAP does not appear to have increased significantly the referral of parents to community resources, beyond preexisting practices. Prior to MerCAP, all schools already engaged in some form of case management, though to widely varying degrees. Of the 12 schools visited in May 1998, seven reported referring MerCAP parents to at least one outside resource. One school, a Healthy Start site, said that the Healthy Start coordinator at the school does referrals for them all the time. Healthy Start also offers a clothes closet and a shoe fund, and will copy pages from "Redirect" (an organization that offers parent education) for families that need parenting help. The others' use of outside resources were:

- Two schools sent one or more families to Child Protective Services (homelessness, domestic violence, child neglect);
- One school had referred parents to a mental health counselor; the school also called a parent's boss to get time for her to attend the conference;
- One high school sent problem cases to SARB, several to Redirect;
- Two schools sent families to the Health Department for help in ridding them of head lice.

Most schools said they generally handled attendance problems themselves. With the exception of the Healthy Start school, their use of external resources was not the rule.

Future Considerations: During the first year, we have found that MerCAP is perceived by most community stakeholders as a sanction program, where the sanction is considered one of many tools schools can use to encourage good attendance. Ibis falls short of the ambitious goal articulated in the project description, which envisioned MerCAP as "a county-wide network of agencies committed to providing a full array of services in order to reduce absenteeism among Merced County AFDC students." No direct, sustained attempt to create such a network has been pursued during year one.

It may be that better progress toward this goal can be made during years two and three, now that the details of the basic sanction program have been worked out. For example, at the recently held MerCAP training session for year two schools a presentation was made about the county's Supportive Ongoing Services (SOS) team, which meets weekly to help families solve problems and seek agency resources. It remains quite possible that the MerCAP oversight committee will begin heightening awareness within other county agencies and non-profit organizations of current (and potential future) efforts to integrate services for families in need, and will spawn ways of involving schools more integrally in these efforts. Significant progress would seem to require: a clearer definition of the intended family case management services; additional staff resources or redirection of existing resources to provide services; and/or constitution of a coordinating committee or other form of planning body to initiate a more deliberate strategy for achieving collaboration between schools, the Human Services Agency, and other local agencies.

Consistency of Implementation Across Schools and Over Time

As with any new program, it has taken a while for local collaborators to develop a set of consistent operational policies and procedures. Both schools and the Human Services Agency have made a good faith effort to address questions promptly, and work toward common understandings and standards. By the end of year one, consensus on basic program elements was evident, and a policies and procedures handbook was created to aid implementation during year two.

Examples of the kinds of issues and questions that arose during year one include:

- Do student absences occurring while they are not on cash aid count toward sanctions?
- Do absences of kids who come on Cash Aid during an attendance month count from the beginning of that attendance month or from the day the student shows up on the HSA list?
- Can tardiness be handled within MerCAP?
- Should school suspensions count as absences?
- Is it legal to send a 7-day letter without sending a 5-day letter first? (This comes up if a student accrues two more absences before the school sends the five-day letter.)

- Can a school opt not to send a 5 or 7-absence letter if the absences were already excused by a doctor's letter? If there is prolonged medical absence, should schools make some contact to see if there is some way in which the student can be helped not to lose too much work?
- Would it make sense to adopt the MerCAP protocols as the policy for all students in order to simplify record keeping and assure fair treatment?

Even as answers to some of these questions have become more clearly defined over time, and greater unity of interpretation has been achieved, some variation in program implementation is evident across school sites. As noted earlier, such variation is not unexpected given the relative independence of schools and school districts, and their desire and need to preserve an appropriate element of discretion in dealing with parents and children. While insisting that certain basic program requirements are met, the Human Services Agency has encouraged schools to adapt the program appropriately. Elements of the program that have exhibited the greatest variation among sites are:

When good cause determinations are made: Good cause criteria are set by each school district based on the education code, and are quite consistent across sites. What varies is when in the process schools make good cause determinations. Some schools wait until the parent conference, using the occasion of the conference as a means of impressing on parents that the school is cracking down on absenteeism. Other schools determine good cause as they go (often involving a phone call to the parent), so that the child may never reach the 5 or 7-day triggers.

How parent conferences are handled.- Handling parent conferences is done differently in each school. Common to all parent conferences is reviewing the child's attendance record with the parent(s), checking to see if any absences can be waived, and explaining what might happen if the student is absent again without a doctor's note or other good cause.

Differences include the fact that some schools do most of their conferences b~ phone; others primarily do them face-to-face. Also, some schools hold the parent conference immediately after the 7-day letter, and request a sanction quickly if the parent doesn't show after the first or second scheduled meeting. Other schools use their discretion in how quickly they will hold the conference, and how many times they will reschedule before requesting a sanction for non-cooperation.

Corrective action plans (CAPs): CAPs are usually pre-printed forms the parent and school administrator sign, with room to add comments particular to the case. In some older grades and high schools the student also signs the plan/contract. The form itself is often adapted from that used in the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) process, with parents (and students) agreeing that the students will be at school on time unless they bring a doctor's excuse. If in doubt, students in some schools are instructed to come to school to have the nurse determine whether they should be in school. The school typically agrees to monitor attendance and contact the parents if students have further absences. The CAP generally states that the school will request a sanction from HSA if the student reaches 10 unexcused absences. Not all schools use a written CAP; in some cultures the parents' word is sufficient, and in some schools an oral contract seems to be effective.

Data collection and reporting: As part of MerCAP, schools agreed to carefully monitor attendance and attendance-related actions for MerCAP students, and to provide data required to evaluate the effectiveness of

the project. As noted elsewhere in this report, this monitoring and data collection has created a difficult and time consuming burden for school staff. There has been considerable variation across school sites in how completely and promptly data have been provided to the evaluators, as well as in how accurately data reporting instructions have been interpreted. In a few cases where reports have not been sent regularly, it is difficult to ascertain if the school is monitoring attendance sufficiently to implement the program. The evaluation team has worked with schools to streamline and simplify the data reporting requirements, and to reinforce the importance of the evaluation.

Coordination between stakeholders

MerCAP has required coordination between the county and the state, the Human Services Agency and schools, and within each sector between different levels of the bureaucracy (from Superintendents and agency directors, to mid-level and front-line staff). Securing effective coordination between these various stakeholders has proven to be one of the most challenging aspects of the new program. Problems range from the seemingly simple matter of who should be copied on which memos, to the complex business of determining operational responsibilities. It can take a great deal of time and creativity to deal with issues of trust, power, and communication in any collaborative endeavor. It is important to learn from experience, drawing lessons from the past year's experiences that can inform ongoing implementation.

Many successful collaborative initiatives have at least one "champion" with the clout to motivate meaningful participation and provide necessary resources. MerCAP was originally championed by County Supervisor Gloria Keene, and her support was critical to initiating the program. Despite her intentions and the early efforts of the Human Services Agency to elicit community support, the program has come to be viewed by some school personnel less as a grass roots program reflecting wide community discussion, than as another top-down, state mandated program.

While key program agencies—state DSS, the Merced Human Services Agency, and local schools—support the program and are fulfilling their commitments, it remains true that MerCAP is just one of a great many projects and programs they are currently managing. Aside from the one Human Service Agency staff person assigned to manage the project (among her many other duties), MerCAP is well-down on the list of priorities for most collaborators, all of whom are extremely busy with a variety of immediate and pressing demands. This makes it more likely that project activities will reflect what stakeholders can accommodate within their existing routines, rather than sparking major new departures and relationships.

Power and trust are key issues in any collaborative program. MerCAP program documents are somewhat ambiguous about where responsibility for the program rests. The state waiver suggests that MerCAP is a Human Services Agency project, with school and community support, while the project description refers to MerCAP as being jointly conducted by the Human Service Agency and the schools. In practice, project leadership has rested primarily in the hands of the Human Services Agency, even though much of the work required for implementation has fallen on the schools. Both parties have made good faith efforts to make this arrangement work—HSA by consulting closely with school representatives and providing schools significant discretion in implementing the program; the schools by accepting the increased time demands on personnel and working with HSA to correct early glitches in the program.

A good example of how trust has been built during the first year of the program has been the evolution of the list of MerCAP students provided to schools by HSA. Early on, schools identified a number of problems with the lists, including inaccuracies (e.g. students on the list that were not in their school; students listed under different names; etc.) and difficulty in updating information from previous lists. When these weren't immediately corrected, frustration grew. On meeting with HSA representatives, they learned that staff shortages had prevented a quick resolution, but that a person had been reassigned and changes could be expected shortly. Very soon most of the original problems were resolved, and over the course of the year a number of modifications were made to the lists making them much easier for school personnel to use. Particularly helpful was providing schools with separate lists of students added or dropped since the previous month, saving attendance clerks the time spent combing through old and new lists. A sense of reciprocity and trust grew during this process.

Still, the ambiguity and/or lack of equality in formal program leadership and responsibility creates a context which sometimes can impede creative problem-solving. During the course of the year, school personnel sometimes felt "dictated to" by HSA personnel, and HSA leaders in turn sometimes balked when school personnel advanced competing understandings of the program. No collaborative can be entirely free of these tensions, but effective collaborations develop structures and processes to manage conflict creatively. MerCAP will benefit from having in place a permanent oversight committee with responsibility for setting and revising policies, solving problems that emerge during implementation, and providing meaningful occasions for participants to reflect on what has worked well, as well as what needs to be changed. An ad hoc committee provide some problem-solving for a while during year one, but did not serve in a formal oversight role. At a minimum the oversight committee should include representatives of both HSA and the schools, but it might also be expanded to include other social service providers, parents, community stakeholders, etc. The more that a broad array of stakeholders feel responsibility and ownership of the program, the more likely they will commit resources to achieving the program's goals.

For state and local officials, the early MerCAP experience suggests that the goal of promoting a more integrated approach to family case management requires more than a simple mandate or directive. Care must be exercised not only in defining case management expectations, but in insuring that a common understanding of these expectations is developed by all relevant community stakeholders. Because the work of service delivery integration is a long-term process, it requires an ongoing investment with community partners in iterative learning, and a willingness to adapt program procedures based on ongoing experience. Working in this way is a departure from the culture and routines that have previously characterized welfare bureaucracies, but is becoming increasingly important in the era of devolution and welfare reform.

Impact on Schools

As detailed in the impact study, the major impact of the program on schools has been the significant time required to implement the program. Because MerCAP procedures differed from existing attendance policies and procedures, attendance clerks have had to set up a parallel record keeping system, in effect running two sets of attendance reports where previously they did just one. This has been more difficult for some schools depending on the computer software being used (MacSchool has proven the most difficult to adapt to MerCAP). Keeping on top of absences, sending letters, and meeting with parents requires significant focus and energy. These are not tasks easily accomplished during normal school hours. given the near constant state of interruption that characterizes school offices.

Since details of the program and the evaluation were not known at the time schools agreed to participate in the program, and since personnel at the attendance clerk level were not included in the original discussions and decision making, accurate estimates of the time impacts were not made in advance. The time requirements took many school personnel by surprise, particularly the front-line staff. It seems likely that schools would have been more reluctant to participate in MerCAP had the full extent of the time commitment been known in advance. At a minimum they would have wanted the program to provide adequate staff support for attendance monitoring and case management functions. There is always a trade off between getting a program going in a timely manner and working out the necessary details to insure effective implementation. In retrospect, it appears that more preliminary discussion with a wider range of school personnel might have made the initial impact of MerCAP less traumatic for schools.

Since no new resources accompany the program, schools have had to cope as best they can with the program requirements. This included the need to adapt existing computer software to MerCAP requirements (a significant challenge), and monitor MerCAP student attendance on an ongoing basis. In some cases this has meant that attendance clerks have stayed late or come in on weekends to handle MerCAP-related monitoring, letters, and reports. In other cases schools were simply unable to monitor attendance as frequently as they would have liked, leading to delays in when absence letters were sent, conferences held, etc. Often such schools failed to provide all the reports necessary for the evaluation, this being a lower priority (understandably) from their perspective. At least one school district provided some of its own discretionary funds to schools to help supplement the additional time required. In addition, county staff have encouraged schools to use county welfare-to-work clients, at no expense to the schools, to handle routine office business, potentially freeing time for existing staff. During year one we heard of no schools who had taken up this offer. Some schools are now moving toward integrating MerCAP-like policies and procedures as part of their attendance policy for all students, which could save the time currently required by dual record keeping.

Both the Human Services Agency and the evaluation team have worked closely with the schools to streamline procedures, resulting in significant time savings. Beginning with year two, a MerCAP handbook and initial orientation are being provided to all schools entering the program. Even so, we expect that basic monitoring activities, letters, conferences, etc. will continue to require a significant time commitment. This would be true even if there were no evaluation component to the program. Were the program to become more focused on family case management, and community networking, the time requirements would be even greater.

In light of these concerns, it seems reasonable to reconsider whether a program such as MerCAP can achieve its intended goals without some provision of new resources, and/or a clearer strategy for how the program will allow families and schools to access existing community resources (see the resource list in the Appendix for examples of community school partnership programs). As it stands, the program appears to place additional stress on school staff who are already overburdened, and whose ability to interact with students and parents is a key to making schools safe, positive and rewarding places—the kind of places which inspire good attendance.

Impact on Parent-School Relations

One of the goals of MerCAP was to increase the amount of contact between schools and the parents of children with high absenteeism, and to provide families with referrals to community resources which address the underlying causes of absenteeism. In general, MerCAP has increased the amount of contact, but in most cases

the primary focus of the communication has been for schools to reiterate the importance of regular attendance, and to remind parents of the threat of sanction. As noted in an earlier section, some schools also used the occasion of parent conferences to make referrals to community services. Schools and parents had somewhat different perceptions of whether the increased contact was positive.

Schools reported that parents are not happy to be called in to school, but most respond positively to the schools' efforts to increase the students' attendance and chance for school success. They "...start out angry, but get used to the idea once explained." As one high school attendance counselor said, "Once the parent realizes you're reaming out the kid and not them, they appreciate working with the school. They don't like losing money because of kids they can't control." Another high school staff member stated that meeting with parents is helpful because it scares the mom; she takes the kid home and "works on him." An elementary school staff person noted that most parents care a lot about their kids, and appreciate finding out what's happening with them. Some schools make a great effort to make parents feel welcome when they come for a conference, and to deal with the child's attendance as a mutual concern--not just something for which the parent is accountable.

By contrast, quite a few parents indicated that some MerCAP procedures cause them to feel mistrusted/mistreated by schools. We heard many complaints, some quite angry, from parents who had received 5 or 7-absence letters despite having previously provided doctor's notes to the school explaining their children's absences. One said: "If your kid is sick and you take him to the doctor and you turn in your note, I don't see the point in getting the notice. Your child is sick, what can you do about it—tell them not to get sick any more?" Another said, "It's cooperation we need." Parent conferences are hard on parents with no transportation, and parents believe conferences should be for a good reason, not for absences which are already excused.

Many parents seemed to view MerCAP not as an attendance program but as a "thou shalt bring a doctor's note program." Some complained about having to produce a doctor's note even for minor illnesses (e.g. flu, bad cold), and wondered why they were treated with suspicion rather than being more trusted by the schools. "I'm his mother. I know if he is well enough to go to school." "They shouldn't question what the parent says, but give them the benefit of the doubt." "My nine year old was suspended from school, and you know what, they wanted an excuse."

Some of the ill feelings by parents toward schools stem from inadequate understanding or failed communication. One parent lost aid for two months because she did not know she could get absences removed with doctor's notes. She was eventually reimbursed, but says she was never called by the schools for a conference. Another parent received a 5-absence Letter even though she had turned in doctor's notes and was no longer on cash aid. Still another parent who had just got on welfare received the notification letter from HSA when his child had been absent for only one day, and felt mistreated (i.e. he was not able to distinguish the notification letter as distinct from a five-absence letter).

In general, parents wanted more information about the program. Most had a very limited and often inaccurate understanding of what MerCAP is, and knew even less about the specific operational procedures. Some parents thought that the program covered all children. Others believed it involved the police rounding up kids to get them to school. It is clear that even the communication parents get is not always understood. Many do not understand the meaning of terms like "sanctions," "unexcused absences," or "good cause."

We report these parental perspectives not to imply that most parent-school contacts have been negative in their impact, but to suggest obstacles to MerCAP being perceived as a program supportive of families, and of better school-parent relationships. We believe it would be wise for schools to schedule meetings with all MerCAP parents early in the implementation of the program. These meetings could go into more detail than the notification letters to explain the program to parents. They would also be a good occasion for Human Services Agency personnel and/or other community organizations to describe resources available to parents. Building on the foundation of parental support for the basic idea of MerCAP, these meetings might go a long way toward building better parent school relations. They might also uncover information and ideas that will help improve school or social service programs, and engage parents in collaborative problem-solving. Involving parents with the project oversight committee would help send the message that parental involvement is valued.

Unanticipated Effects

As with any new programmatic initiative, MerCAP has had some effects not clearly or completely foreseen by all parties at the outset. These include:

- altered perceptions of school personnel, for whom the MerCAP lists often contained surprises as to which children were or were not on cash aid;
- recognition within many families that MerCAP gives kids the power to affect family income (at its best, this leads to a sense of pride for kids as contributors to family well-being; at its worst, it becomes a weapon that can be used by kids to blackmail their parents, particularly among the older kids);
- concern by some that the program will lead to sick children attending school out of fear of the sanction;
- appreciation by many parents, especially parents of older children, of being notified promptly of their child's absences by the school (e.g. the five-absence letter can serve as a wake-up call if they did not previously know their child was not attending school, perhaps due to kids sneaking back in the house or leaving school when the parents are at work).

Lessons Learned About Excessive Absences and Effective School Strategies

One goal of MerCAP is to learn more about the reasons for attendance problems, and effective school or community strategies for encouraging attendance. Parents offered a broad range of reasons for why attendance problems occur:

- illness
- problems with homework or kids doing poorly in school
- kids feeling picked on by other kids
- problems with their teacher, particularly feeling embarrassed by the teacher
- problems "fitting in" due to dress or other social pressures
- independence/rebellion in older kids

- logistical issues associated with single parent families family conflict issues (especially lack of support from divorced spouse, or alcohol, drugs, etc.)
- either parent or child too lazy to get up

When we asked school personnel about the reasons for excessive absences they tended to focus on a narrower range of issues. The most frequently mentioned reasons for excessive absences were head lice (a widespread problem), and parents who simply did not care or could not function to support their children. In most schools, excessive absence problems are limited to a relatively small number of families that are well known to school personnel. Schools vary in how much effort they make to reach out to these families with referrals, resources, or personal attention, but it is typical for almost all schools to reach a point where they feel that further such effort is unlikely to change the behavior of certain problem families. It is for this very reason that school personnel welcome the sanction program since it provides a new tool for motivating parental cooperation in cash-aid families.

Cases of excessive absences without good cause are particularly rare at the elementary and middle school levels, and do not always correlate with families that are on cash-aid. Whatever the effectiveness of the sanction tool in motivating attendance, the question of whether the limited range of target families is worth the substantial investment in time devoted to the program warrants further reflection. This is particularly so given the impact welfare reform is having on decreasing welfare caseloads, meaning that even fewer children will be covered by the program.

It is worth noting that the MerCAP sanction alone does not provide leverage on the most frequent reason why children are excessively absent—illness. Regular attendance monitoring under MerCAP may help schools discover if there are persistent health problems that are causing a child to be excessively absent, but doesn't guarantee that families can access the health-related services they need due to inadequate resources or limited understanding of options. By contrast, programs such as Healthy Start or the Heritage/Lodi Memorial Health Center, which locate collaborative health services and resources on school sites, have proven effective in promoting both better health and improved school attendance. These programs provide morning sick-call screening, insure immunizations are complete, reduce the length of time required for head lice absences, etc.

Programs such as these, and other strategies for increasing actual attendance, will become increasingly important to schools beginning in 1998-99. This year marks the shift from apportionment to actual attendance as the basis for schools' state fund allocations. This is one reason some schools are moving to adopt a uniform set of MerCAP-type attendance policies for all students, using a variety of incentives and sanctions.

We asked school staff what they believed schools could do to enhance attendance, based on their experience generally and with MerCAP. The main thrusts of their responses are reported below.

- Reward good attendance: Half of the 12 schools we visited mentioned individual recognition for perfect attendance and/or group recognition for the best attendance record as an important incentive, especially to younger grades. The nature of the recognition (e.g. McDonalds' certificates, letter of commendation to parents, pizza with the principal, award in assembly) varied, as did the frequency (monthly, semiannual, yearly). In one school the principal remarked that they will probably do something more frequently next year so that more kids have a chance to "win."
- Monitoring attendance regularly: Most schools feel that monitoring attendance closely is essential to nip potential bad habits in the bud, and to establish good relations with families. Some call absent children every day, showing parents that the school cares about the student's well-being, and finding out if help is needed. For older children these calls may alert parents to unsuspected

truancy. In some schools the school nurse makes home visits; if kids are red-flagged (8-10 absences) the home school liaison in some schools may visit the home to determine the cause of absences. Schools stressed the importance of keeping up contact with families, and treating them with respect.

- Involve the students: School staff believe that children involved in school activities are less likely to be absent than those who are not involved. Involvement takes many forms, from tutoring to a library with computer, from sports to spirit days. Providing an after-school activities bus is important in more rural areas; special programs for older elementary grades help keep kids interested. Home teaching for children with medical problems is another way of keeping students connected to the schools. One principal pointed out that 'teachers are the most important people on campus' in making the school a safe and positive place where kids want to be.
- Other techniques: One school's home-school liaison operates a 'fun bus' (that is neither fun nor a bus) to pick up children who should be in school. One high school's policy of giving no course credit to any student who misses 8 sessions has improved attendance considerably. The teachers in that school have reduced tardiness by doing an opener for the first 15 minutes of each class for which participating students get special credit. Another school provides free breakfasts and lunches for all students; this has not only been an incentive to attend school regularly, but costs less than staff time to check eligibility. One school includes a pencil in its letters to parents as an incentive for parents to open the letter and examine the student's attendance record.

Overall Stakeholder Support for MerCAP

We have found widespread support for the program among all key stakeholders, including schools, parents, and the Human Services Agency. Most stakeholders believe the sanction is an effective tool in improving attendance. More fundamentally, they find the program's moral logic compelling: "Parents should get their kids to school." Even during periods where operational difficulties have been the most troubling and perplexing, a substantial majority of stakeholders have reaffirmed their commitment to the project's goals and purposes. Staff in 10 of the 12 schools we visited gave the program a positive rating. In one non-positive school the staff said they did not have time to implement MerCAP's monitoring requirements; they feel confused and consider the program 'terrible.' In the other, a small school, staff were neutral, feeling the program might be helpful for a larger school, but in that school the attendance problems of kids receiving cash assistance were no greater than for other kids.

Notable comments from the school staff interviewed include the following:

- The concept of parent accountability is wonderful, but the paper work and parent conferences are horrendous.

- Teachers who really care, and show it, make a difference to kids' attendance. But if parents don't show support, teachers won't matter.
- Some of our chronic offenders are no longer a problem.
- The whole program in the end saves time because it eliminates SARB. When parents think they are going to lose something [e.g. via MerCAP or SARB sanction] it gets their attention.
- The school needs to have both MerCAP and non-MerCAP systems the same.
- Maybe there should be an income tax penalty for all families whose kids have poor attendance. \$ are the real incentive.

Most MerCAP parents who participated in focus groups generally support the idea of the program. Parents view MerCAP as a tool to use with parents, not children. A good many said that they welcomed having a program to help motivate them to get their kids to school. They indicated that MerCAP gave them more backbone when dealing with the excuses their kids sometimes offer. At the same time, most of those we spoke with indicated that the program had little direct effect on them, because their children already attend school regularly, but was valuable in motivating "other parents." A few questioned the basic fairness of the program, noting that many non-cash aid children had worse attendance than their own.

Notable parent comments include:

- I see the kids going to school now. I don't see them running around. I see the parents not partying like they used to—cause that's \$100 they don't want to lose. I see the kids cleaner, and happier.
- I tell my child "You get five sick days during the year. Is today going to be one of them?"
- There are parents who don't care whether their kids go to school or not. For us who do care. I don't think we should have to go through the hassle.
- It's like punishing everyone because a few have a problem. They should just focus the program on those people.

Conclusion

It is too early to draw definitive conclusions on the still-evolving MerCAP program. At the same time, this report documents a significant amount of learning that is already taking place. Some learning involves rethinking basic assumptions in light of new data, such as the evidence that TANE status alone is not a good predictor of attendance problems. Some learning concerns the challenges faced in forging new collaboration, and the means by which these challenges can be overcome. Still other learning focuses on how schools can act independently to encourage better attendance.

The available evidence from year one suggests a mixed picture of the program's effectiveness. On the one hand, all county stakeholders, including MerCAP parents, support the idea of the program. School personnel insist that the threat of sanction has been effective in motivating better attendance by many of the relatively few students in their schools with excessive attendance problems. On the other hand, MerCAP seems to have had little impact on overall attendance or on that of the limited sample of individual students for which we have

sufficient data to make comparisons between pre- and post merci years. Nor has it significantly increased beyond preexisting practices the amount of family case management done by schools.

While we know that MerCAP has helped some parents in getting their children to school more regularly, we do not know the effects of the program on sanctioned families. We do know with relatively high certainty that the program has been costly for schools to implement. Whether these and other costs are warranted when compared against the program's benefits and its community support will remain an important question as MerCAP implementation continues.

APPENDIX A. Selected References

I. Attendance General

- Duckworth, Kenneth, and deJung, John. 1989. "Inhibiting Class Cutting Among High School Students." The High School Journal. Vol. 72, No. 4.

Based on data collected in 1984 from 5,799 students enrolled in six urban high schools in the Northwest, Duckworth found that parental punishment and parental knowledge of student cutting and poor grades had more effect on student attendance than did school penalties.

- Enomoto, Ernestine K. 1994. "The Meaning of Truancy: Organizational Culture as Multicultures." The Urban Review, Vol. 26, No. 3.

This article explores how the organizational culture and administrative structure of schools can cause students to fall through the cracks, cut class, and drop-out.

- Lazerson, David B; Foster, Herbert L.; Brown, Steven I.; and Hummel, Jeffrey W. 1988. "The Effectiveness of Cross-Age Tutoring With Truant, Junior High School Students with Learning Disabilities." Journal of Learning Disabilities Volume 21, Number 4 April 1988.

This article finds that peer tutoring improves the performance of students with poor attendance rates and achievement levels.

- McPartland, James M. et al. "The Talent Development High School: Early Evidence of Impact on School Climate, Attendance, and Student promotion," Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (Baltimore, MD) report to Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Washington, DC.

This report describes outcomes of the first Talent Development High School, which features career focused academies for the upper grades, a ninth grade academy and other key talent development components. Data indicate that, compared to previous years, there is a dramatic improvement in overall school climate, in student attendance, and in expected student-promotion rates.

II. Correlation Between Attendance and Achievement

- Epstein, Kitty Kelly. 1990. "Case Studies in Dropping Out and Dropping Back In." Journal of Education, Volume 174 Number 3.

From interviews with drop-outs in the Oakland school district, Epstein finds humiliation, feeling invisible, and boredom as main causes of absences that lead to dropping out. Successful classrooms provide students with individual attention and positive reinforcement.

- Kochan, Susan et al. 1996. "You Can't Judge a High School by Achievement Alone: Preliminary Findings from the Construction of a Behavioral Indicator of High School Effectiveness." ERIC microfiche #ED402348

This study compares high school effectiveness in achievement (CAT scores) and behavior (attendance) based on a sample of 310 public schools. Findings indicate that attendance is not an indicator of achievement.

- Lamdin, Douglas. 1996. "Evidence of Student Attendance as an Independent Variable in Education Production Functions" The Journal of Educational Research Vol. 89, No.3, January/February 1996.

This study of public elementary schools in Baltimore, Maryland finds that attendance is positively and significantly related to standardized achievement test performance.

- Wise William H. 1994. "Who Benefits: Mandatory Attendance and Its Relationship to Learning." Tiffin City School District, Ohio. "ERICs microfiche collection #ED381905

This study of 9th, 10th, and 11th graders at Tiffin Columbian High School in Tiffin, Ohio finds an insignificant correlation between students' GPAs and the number of days in attendance.

- Prisoners of Time.: Schools and Programs Making Time Work for Students and Teachers. Report of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning. Washington, DC. September 1994.

The National Education Commission on Time and Learning explores international educational standards and argues that the relative low achievement levels of US public schools is due to our focus on time spent in the classroom rather than the quality of education and academic rigor.

III. Correlation Between Low-Income and Attendance

- Coles, Adrienne D. 1997. "Little Impact Found Tying Welfare' Attendance." Education Week v16. p. 12, May ~I 1997.

Summarizes the findings from studies of Wisconsin's Learnfare program (see * below). Learnfare is a welfare reform initiative initially designed to encourage teenage recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefits to attend school on a regular basis. Evaluators found the program unsuccessful in achieving its goals.

*Corbett, Thomas; Jeannette, Deloya; Manning, Wendy; and Uhr, Liz. 1989. "Learnfare: The Wisconsin Experience," Focus (a journal of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty) Fall and Winter 1989, Vol. 12, No. 2: 1-14.

*Ethrige, Marcus E. and Percy L. Stephen. 1993. "A New Kind of Public Policy Encounters Disappointing Results: Implementing Learnfare in Wisconsin." Public Administration Review July/August 1993, Vol. 53, No. 4: 340-347.

- Kurdek, Lawrence A. and Sinclair, Ronald J. 1988. "Relation of Eight Graders' Family Structure, Gender, and Family Environment With Academic Performance and School Behavior." Journal of Educational Psychology, 1988, Vol. 80, No. 1: 90-94

A study of 219 middle-class eighth graders finds family structure more of an indicator of low attendance than economic status. Children living with two parent nuclear families have better attendance rates.

- W. McMahon, et al. 1989, "Do School Attendance Rates Vary Between AFDC and Non-AFDC Supported Children?" Urban Research Center, University of Wisconsin.

This study of the attendance rates of AFDC and non-AFDC supported children finds little difference between the two groups.

IV. Educational Programs that Positively Impact Attendance Rates

Lodi Memorial Heritage School Health Center (209) 39-7590 Lodi Memorial Hospital's Heritage School Health Center 975 S. Fairmont Lodi, CA 95240

The Lodi Memorial Hospital Heritage School Health Center is a collaborative health services, education and resource center located on an elementary school campus in East Lodi. The center provides bi-lingual health services and education to families and children in need throughout the Lodi Unified School District. Among other improvements, school attendance has increased 8.6 percent during the 1996-1997 school year.

New Schools Initiative (410) 396-8723
Baltimore City Public Schools
Baltimore, MD 21202

The New School Initiative is a school reform effort mandated by a consent decree and managed by the Baltimore City Public Schools. The Initiative has made a request for proposals for community groups that believe they can bring creative solutions to the district's educational challenges. The New Schools reformed to date claim a 97.9% attendance rate, 5.1 % higher than other Baltimore City Public Schools. The New Schools Initiative has also seen positive results in New York, Boston, and Chicago.

New York ACORN Network of Community Schools (718) 246-7900 88 Third Avenue, 3rd Floor Brooklyn, NY 11217

ACORN schools are characterized by a commitment to high educational standards, innovative pedagogical practice oriented around themes of social change, a genuinely democratic school governance system, and strong community and parental involvement. ACORN school is smaller than most New York City public schools and claims a higher attendance rate.

Powerful Schools Community Schools Program (206! 722-5543 3301 S. Horton Seattle, WA 98144

Powerful Schools is an independent, grassroots coalition of parents, teachers, principals and local community members dedicated to creating world-class public schools by mobilizing and drawing on the strengths and resources within the surrounding community. In five years, Powerful Schools helped member schools to increase achievement test scores and daily attendance rates.

Zovala Elementary, Alliance School (512! 459-6551 Interfaith Education Fund 1106 Clayton Lane, Suite 120W Austin? TX 78723

Through parent involvement and stakeholder engagement strategies, Alliance School organizers assist schools in developing innovative improvement initiatives. Zovala Elementary School tapped the resources of the parent and the greater community to establish a full time community clinic at the school. Before the Alliance initiative Zovala ranked 33rd in attendance among 63 Austin elementary schools. Two years after the community mobilization and improvement initiative Zovala tied for first in attendance.

APPENDIX B. Basic **MerCAP Procedures** (from 'MerCAP: A Resource Guide for Schools, pp. 1-3).

Introduction

The purpose of MerCAP is:

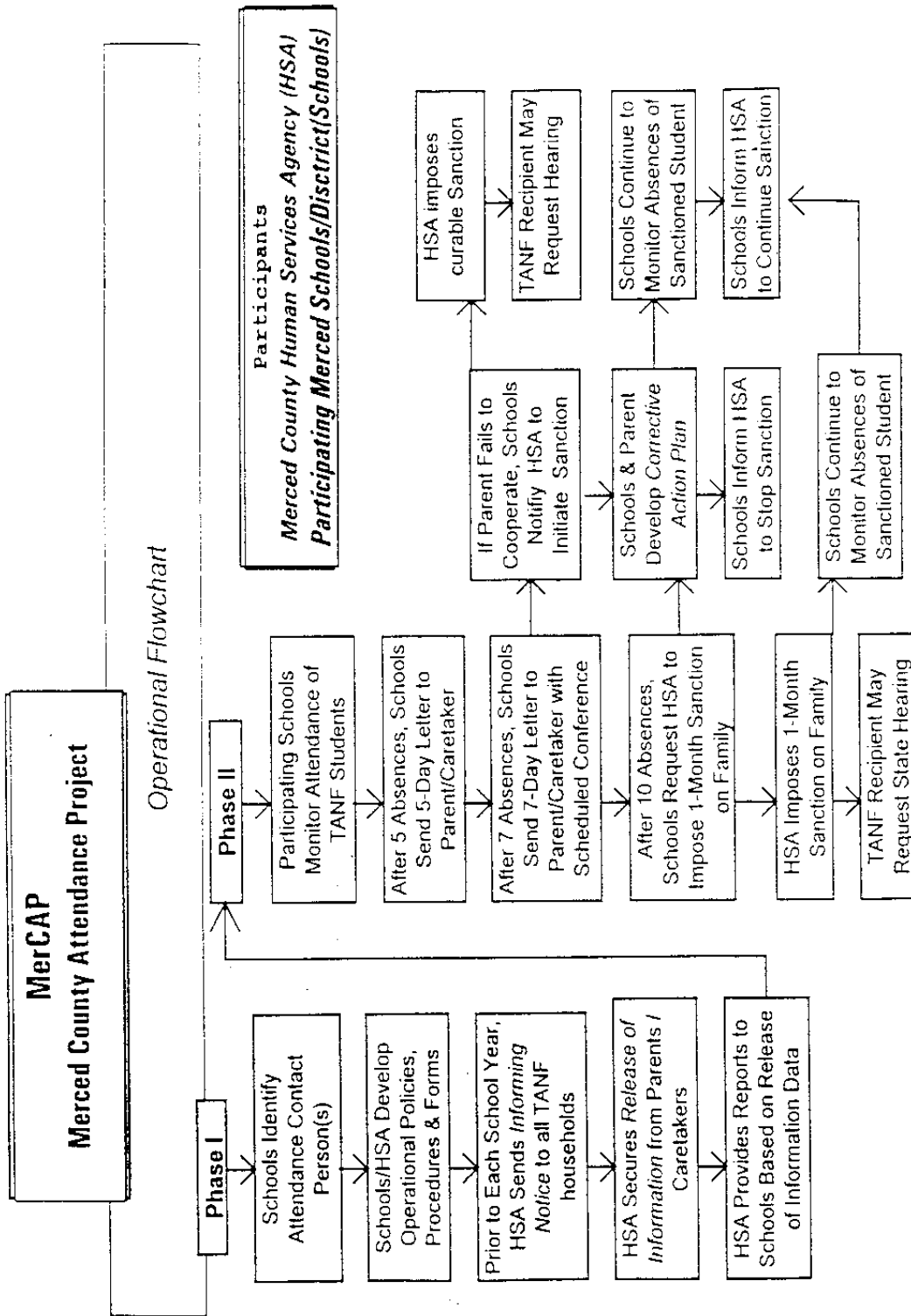
- ⇒ to motivate Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) parents to keep their children attending school regularly
- ⇒ to establish and encourage an early intervention system for schools and HSA to work with families to resolve issues surrounding frequent absenteeism
- ⇒ to interrupt intergenerational dependency on the welfare system by promoting development of good school attendance habits in young children

The intended outcomes of MerCAP are:

- ⇒ to increase TANF parent involvement with their child's schooling
- ⇒ to improve the attendance of TANF schoolchildren
- ⇒ to accumulate qualitative information regarding the kinds of family problems underlying absenteeism' and which problems are best addressed through this kind of intervention and social policy

The Key Features of MerCAP are:

- ⇒ that the project was initiated and developed and implemented through networking and collaborating with community entities: The County Board of Supervisors, the School Board, the Human Services Agency
- ⇒ that the schools will play a uniquely active role in working with families to resolve problems underlying frequent absenteeism: to conference early and often; to develop a Corrective Action Plan with the family; to refer as needed and as available, the families to community services such as transportation, child care, mental or physical health, or substance abuse
- ⇒ that approximately 30% of the county's school population are TANF children between the ages of 6 and 16 years
- ⇒ that all 20 School Districts of Merced County will participate, phasing in over a three year period that there are "triggers": five (5) absences, the school sends a letter to the parent; seven (7) absences, the school sends a second letter to the parent scheduling a conference at which the school will seek to resolve any underlying problems through the referral process to community services; ten (10) absences, the school notifies HSA to sanction the family
- ⇒ that there are financial sanctions if families fail to respond to the problem-solving efforts of the school or the child continues to miss school
- ⇒ that financial sanctions end when families cooperate, or when a mandatory one-month sanction has been completed
- ⇒ that schools will make a good cause" determination for disputed reasons for absence: verifiable illness; death in the family; family emergency; court dates; pre-arranged and agreed upon excused absence; and, that families will be advised and offered multiple opportunities to request and establish good cause
- ⇒ that UC Davis will provide evaluation of the project for and to the California Department of Social Services
- ⇒ that the project will run for three years, 6/6/97 through 6/5/2000



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MERCAP Procedures

Five (5) Absences

- School—Sends the parent/caretaker a first warning letter. There is no need to inform the Human Services Agency (HSA) at this time.
- Parent—May contact the school to discuss removing an absence from consideration toward sanction.
- HSA—No action taken.

Seven (7) Absences

- School—Sends the parent/caretaker a second warning letter notifying the parent/caretaker of their scheduled conference date and time and meets with parent to agree on a corrective action plan. Number of absences counted may be reduced or eliminated at this time.
- Parent—Attends conference or contacts the school to arrange other plans with the school to discuss the child's attendance.
- HSA—No action taken

If the Parent Fails to Attend the Conference without Contacting the School)

- School—Informs the HSA of the parent failing to attend scheduled conference. The date of the conference and the dates that the five- and seven-day notices sent and needed.
- Parent—must contact the school to discuss the child's absence.
- HSA—Imposes a sanction for the first month in which a 10-day notice is available and sends the client a 10 day notice of grant reduction.

Once the Parent Meets with the School (Sanction Will Be 'Cured')

- School—Must inform the HSA of the date that the parent cooperated with the school as soon as possible.
- HSA—Terminates the sanction from the date the parent cooperated with the school. The HSA may issue supplements for benefits that were reduced if the parent meets with the school in the month the sanction was in effect.
- Ten (10) Absences
- School—Informs the HSA of the date of the child's tenth day of non-attendance. The dates that the five- and seven-day notices were sent are needed.
- HSA—Imposes a one-month, non-curable sanction for the first month in which a 10-day notice is available and sends the client a 10-day notice of grant reduction.

Subsequent Absences

- School—Informs the HSA if the parent is not complying with the terms of the corrective action plan.
- HSA—Imposes sanctions as requested by the school and sends the client a 10-day notice.

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APPENDIX C. Interview Protocols for School Site Visits and Parent Focus Groups

MERCAP EVALUATION -1997-98
AGENDA FOR FIRST MEETING WITH EACH SCHOOL

- I. Introductions:
 - School staff and evaluation team members present
 - Review of MerCAP operations - roles of HSA, Schools, UC evaluation team (campus and county)
 - Identification of pressing concerns
- II. Update:
 - school info - Changes in contact persons, enrollment # MerCAP students' ethnic composition of student body, other
 - distribute 'evaluation questions'
- III. Baseline data - all Year 1 schools complete
- IV. 1997-98 Attendance data - current status. problems, questions
 - monthly attendance for all students
 - monthly attendance for MerCAP students
- V. Attendance actions taken
 - MerCAP students - experience to date, successes, problems, etc.
 - Five-absence letters
 - Seven-absence letters
 - Parent conferences - scheduled kept, etc.
 - Corrective Action Plans Sanction notices
 - Ability to retrieve information on individual student, if needed
 - Non-MerCAP students
 - Usual way of handling absences
 - Differences from MerCAP
 - Monthly forms - how interpret
 - NCA data
 - # absences waived (need the number of days waived for each student to which this applies)
- VI. Cost information - Start-up estimates due by end of 1997
 - Review purpose and form
 - Add non-personnel cost items, if any
- VII. Other items
- VIII. Tentative schedule for next meeting

Pilot Parent Focus group Protocol

Introductions

Thank you for coming this evening. We are from the University of California [introduce team members present by first name and location or role (as appropriate)]. Our job is to evaluate the Merced County Attendance Program. We are not part of the Merced County schools. or the county Human Services Agency.

We have asked for your help because you have children in this program. Your views on school attendance and the program are very important to us. We truly appreciate your assistance.

Before we explain what we want to talk with you about, could you please tell us your name and the ages and grade of your children. If you have not already done so, please write your first name on the card in front of you so we don't forget. [go around the table]

Thank you. For the next hour we are going to ask you questions about school attendance and the Merced Counts Attendance Program. There are no right answers just your own ideas and experiences. Hearing what others say may help you to think what you want to say, but we do not expect everyone to say the same thing.

Two rules: 1) Who says what this evening stays in this room. For example, we all agree NOT to say that Mrs. X said blah blah. Is that clear? 2) We ask that one person answer at a time, and that we let one person finish before the next starts to speak. OK?

We are going to take notes and use a tape recorder so that we remember what was said. No names will be attached to what you say. Is that OK with everyone?

Let's start with another question going around the table.

1. What is one thing you like about your children's school?
2. What is one thing your kids do not like about school? [Anyone can start answering.]
3. What are problems families have in getting their children to attend school every day?
4. What suggestions do you have for how schools and families can encourage children to attend school?
5. Are schools and families doing any of these things now,? Do they help?
6. Are the schools doing anything else to improve attendance? Do they help?
7. a. How did you first hear about the Merced County Attendance Program?
b. How does it work?

The purpose of the Merced County Attendance Program is to encourage parents and schools to work together to improve students' school attendance and do well in school.

8. Do you think the program makes a difference in getting kids to attend school?
9. Have you or other families you know had more contact with the school this year because of the attendance program? Is that a good thing?
10. Does the Merced County Attendance Program affect your family, friends, or the community in any other ways?
11. Overall, how do you feel about the program?
12. Anything else anyone would like to say?

Thank you all very much. This is the first parents' meeting we have held. While we're getting out your scrip, do any of you have an' ideas how we can make the next meeting better?

