

# THE MERCED COUNTY ATTENDANCE PROJECT (MerCAP)

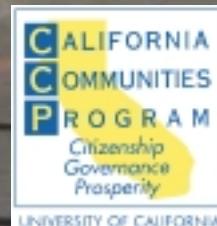
## FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

by

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California Communities Program  
University of California, Davis  
2002



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This evaluation was conducted under a contract between the California Communities Program at UC Davis and the California Department of Social Services. Co-principal investigators from the evaluation were Dr. Ted Bradshaw, Dr. David Campbell, and Dr. Joan Wright.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

During the welfare reform debates of the 1990s there were strong arguments and anecdotal evidence to suggest that parents on welfare frequently fail to ensure that their children attend school regularly. Linking welfare eligibility with school attendance was seen as a way of reinforcing norms of personal responsibility for both parents and students (the life skills argument), and of supporting school attendance and completion as a goal likely to decrease future welfare dependency (the life outcomes argument).

Consonant with the national debate, the idea for the Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP) originated in community concern over the perceived high absenteeism rates among students whose families received welfare cash assistance. MerCAP was a joint effort of the county's Human Services Agency (HSA), county schools, and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). Undertaken to improve the school attendance of students receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the program used attendance monitoring, communication with parents, Corrective Action Plans, and a financial sanction to discourage excessive absences.

MerCAP operated as a demonstration program for three years from June 1997 to June 2000 under a waiver from the California Department of Social Services. CDSS also required an evaluation to test the assumptions and efficacy of the program. Beginning in the 1997-98 school year, schools entered the program in one of three successive yearly MerCAP cohorts, until 71 schools were implementing MerCAP in 1999-2000. At the close of the demonstration period approximately 7,100 TANF students in grades 1-10 were covered by MerCAP.

The specific features of MerCAP differed significantly from other welfare reform school attendance programs in California and elsewhere. While most programs focused on high school students, including pregnant and parenting teens, MerCAP included all TANF school children ages 6 through 15, and excluded teens 16 and older. MerCAP's attendance requirement—no more than 10 unexcused absences in any school year—was more rigorous than many other programs. In addition, the program relied primarily on the threat of sanctions and did not provide special case management services to families whose children did not attend regularly. Finally, by the end of the three-year demonstration period MerCAP involved all schools in this largely rural county rather than a specially selected subset of schools as in other programs.

The MerCAP waiver was approved just prior to passage of state welfare reform legislation creating the CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) program. CalWORKs mandates regular school attendance as a condition for receiving welfare cash assistance. The MerCAP demonstration has provided an excellent opportunity for learning about how the various aspects of school attendance programs can be implemented by California counties and the nature of their impact on intended outcomes.

This MerCAP evaluation—under a contract between CDSS and UC Davis—examines what happened during the demonstration period. It was undertaken to aid participants and policy leaders to reflect retrospectively on the assumptions underlying the program, the congruence between intentions and reality, and program consequences—both anticipated and unanticipated. As is the case with many social policy initiatives in the dynamic post-welfare reform period, MerCAP could not be evaluated according to the strict concepts of “experimental control” that often have been considered the ideal for conducting program evaluations. The use of the language of scientific experimentation is probably

inappropriate to a situation in which assigning individuals to “experimental” and “control” groups may be neither feasible nor fair, and in which desired measurement rigor is difficult to attain and maintain. Nevertheless, stakeholders viewed MerCAP as an important social experiment, and its successes and struggles are instructive.

Four important caveats should be kept in mind in interpreting the findings of this report. First, MerCAP could neither be planned nor conducted as a true experimental design, making it more difficult to isolate the influence of particular program features on the outcomes. Second, three major changes in state education policy occurred during the MerCAP years, making it harder to know whether MerCAP or other policy changes are responsible for observable trends in attendance and achievement data. These include SB727, which allocates state school funds based on actual attendance; adoption of a new statewide testing program (STAR); and SB1X that provides funds to reward schools for test score improvements—all of which altered school business as usual. Third, there are limitations in the availability and quality of the data that were beyond the control of the evaluators. Finally, findings from Merced County should not be generalized to other parts of California. Merced County is a largely rural county, with a school-aged population that is 2/3 non-white, 3/4 eligible for free or reduced cost lunch, and 1/3 English learners. However, only 1/5 of the student population received TANF at that time. The high incidence of low-income families (associated with high unemployment rates in rural areas of the Central Valley) may make behaviors like regular school attendance difficult to attain, regardless of whether a family receives TANF. While many California counties have a substantial non-white school population including immigrants from other cultures, not all have the combination of rural, low-income and ethnically/racially diverse attributes in their student populations. One implication is that the relatively small differences we found in the attendance patterns of TANF and non-TANF students in Merced might not hold in other counties where the demographic differences between TANF and non-TANF students are greater.

This third and final MerCAP evaluation report integrates findings from all three years of the MerCAP demonstration program. It provides analysis of the nature and cost of MerCAP implementation, the impact on TANF student attendance and achievement, and the effect on parent-school interaction. Our analysis draws on formal contacts with more than 700 individuals including group and individual interviews, site observations, and self-administered questionnaires. Research work was conducted in English, Hmong, and Spanish, as appropriate. In addition, we have compiled a database on school attendance and achievement for all Merced County schools and for a sample of 1,092 TANF students. These data cover the school years 1996-1997 (the pre-MerCAP baseline) through 1999-2000 (MerCAP Year 3).

## **Process Study Findings**

### Nature of Program Activities

MerCAP was perceived and operated primarily as a sanction program and did not include special case management provisions. The evidence suggests MerCAP did little to improve on the pre-existing efforts of schools to connect families to supportive community services, primarily because the demonstration program did not include any new resources. Key elements of the program as implemented were 5-day and 7-day absence letters, parent conferences, Corrective Action Plans, and sanction requests. Both schools and the Human Services Agency made a good faith effort to implement these MerCAP procedures. Only two schools failed to implement the basic program elements, with most schools adopting and adapting MerCAP to their existing attendance practices with varying levels of commitment and success. Despite a 6% sanction rate (averaged over the course of the project), there

were very few parent requests for “fair hearings” to challenge sanction determinations. (Only 14 hearing requests were filed for the 469 sanctions requested by schools during Year 3.)

### Consistency of Implementation across Schools

The Human Services Agency developed protocols to insure that schools adhered to basic legal requirements concerning notification of parents and sanction procedures. At the same time, individual schools and school districts were encouraged by the Human Services Agency to use their best judgment in interpreting and implementing particular MerCAP program elements. Elements of the program that exhibited the most variation across schools were:

- at what point “good cause” determinations were made to excuse absences;
- how many second chances were allowed;
- whether Corrective Action Plans were developed;
- how diligent schools were in keeping up-to-date with attendance monitoring; and
- whether parent conferences were devoted primarily to problem-solving or to conveying the threat of sanctions.

Yearly sanction rates among the three cohorts of MerCAP schools varied widely, ranging from a high of 9.1% to a low of 3.2%. Schools varied considerably in their pre-MerCAP approaches to promoting attendance, and the degree to which school staff made it their business to connect families with supportive community resources. Such resources are relatively scarce, particularly in rural areas of Merced County.

### Coordination among Stakeholders

MerCAP increased the interaction between the Human Services Agency and Merced County schools. The Human Services Agency played the lead role, in conjunction with an Oversight Committee that included school administrators and attendance clerks. Parents and other community agencies that work with families were not involved in developing the program. Elements of coordination that were especially difficult included:

- creating and maintaining accurate lists of the TANF students in each school;
- insuring that relevant personnel in all schools were clear about evolving program procedures;
- securing the time required for school personnel to monitor attendance and keep records; and
- educating parents about the nature and intent of the program.

Intra-school dynamics played an important role in implementation, which was enhanced when there was early buy-in from school administrators and attendance clerks.

### Costs of Implementation

The major cost of MerCAP implementation was the staff time required by schools to adapt computer software, update TANF student rolls, monitor absences regularly, send letters, and meet with parents. Schools absorbed these costs, since the program provided them with no new resources. Most schools reported that the time required to implement the program was overly burdensome, even after the start-up period had passed. MerCAP highlighted the limitations of certain school attendance software to support an adequate attendance management information system. On average, .20 FTE (primarily the time of the staff person with attendance responsibilities, but also the time for administrators to confer with parents) was required in each school to implement MerCAP. Efficiency was higher where atten-

dance software could be readily adapted to MerCAP requirements, where attendance clerks were well informed and committed to the program, and where uniform attendance policies for all students were put in place. The program was also relatively staff-intensive for the Human Services Agency, which required 1-2 FTE to implement the program.

### Attitudes toward MerCAP

The basic community norm underlying MerCAP—that parents are responsible for their children’s school attendance—elicited support from schools, parents, and the welfare department. School personnel appreciated having a program that provided real consequences for families. MerCAP parents liked the additional leverage in encouraging their children to attend school regularly. The Human Services Agency saw the program as an additional tool to enhance family independence and welcomed new relationships with schools. Staff of schools and HSA were less positive when they were asked to compare the burdens of implementation to the outcomes achieved. All questioned the excessive time required by MerCAP, and a few persons interviewed expressed opposition to MerCAP, citing its low ratio of benefits to costs, possible mistreatment of parents, and the superiority of other approaches to improving school attendance and achievement. Despite these concerns, HSA and school superintendents supported continuing MerCAP after the demonstration period.

### Parent-School Relations under MerCAP

As intended, MerCAP increased the amount of contact between schools and parents. Schools reiterated the importance of good attendance via letters, phone calls or conferences, and reminded parents of the threat of sanction. Many parents were unaware of MerCAP or were confused about the procedures when they met with school personnel or responded to our interview questions. Most supported the program when it was explained to them. A few families expressed anger at how they were treated by schools, particularly when they received “warning” letters even though they had already provided excuses for absences. School administrators viewed MerCAP sanctions as “another tool” in dealing with problem families, and believe the tool was effective in some (but by no means all) cases.

### Causes of Absenteeism

Consistent with previous research (Fein, Lee, and Schofield, 1999), the MerCAP evidence strongly suggests that the primary cause of most absences is not truancy but illness. In a few cases, parents seemed not to care about or were incapable of managing their children’s attendance, but these were confined to a relatively small number of families who were well-known to local school personnel. Among these families, the threat of MerCAP sanctions was enough to change attendance behavior in a few cases, while others did not respond. If improved attendance is the primary goal, it is likely that health-related interventions would have at least as great an impact as truancy-related interventions.

## **Impact Study Findings**

### TANF vs. Non-TANF Attendance Rates

On average, TANF students had slightly lower attendance than their non-TANF peers during all three years of MerCAP. However, the largest average difference for any year is only eight-tenths of one percent (.008), less than 2 days absence per child. In some schools TANF student attendance is higher than non-TANF attendance. The data are consistent with school reports that relatively few TANF students reached the attendance triggers that prompt letters or conferences. School administrators were

initially surprised at which students were or were not on their TANF lists. Overall, our data contradict the assumption that TANF students as a group have excessive absences.

### Impact of MerCAP on TANF Student Attendance

Statistical tests on both aggregate and individual attendance data offer no conclusive evidence that MerCAP improves TANF student attendance. Even the few tests that find a statistically significant increase in attendance show very marginal substantive gains at best. This finding contradicts the expressed view of school administrators, many of whom believe that MerCAP improved TANF student attendance. The discrepancy may be explained by administrators focusing on the small subset of TANF students with excessive absences, some of whom improved their attendance as a result of MerCAP procedures. The ceiling effect caused by the good overall attendance of most TANF students means that the MerCAP “successes” that loom large in the eyes of administrators are marginal when looked at in the context of the entire TANF population.

### Impact of MerCAP on Overall School Attendance

In their first year in MerCAP, overall attendance in each of the three cohorts of schools entering the program increased significantly. From interviews with school administrators and attendance staff, this somewhat unexpected result seems to result from increased focus on attendance of *all students* as a result of their devoting time and attention to MerCAP procedures. To consider the alternative explanation that SB 727 (school funding based on actual rather than apportioned attendance) was responsible for the increase, we examined the attendance patterns in Merced City Schools. Those schools, which did not enter MerCAP until Year 3, showed no change in attendance from 1997-98 to 1998-99, despite the implementation of SB 727 in the 1998-99 school year. The following year, their first in MerCAP, overall school attendance rates increased significantly.

### Relationship of School Attendance to School Achievement

Previous research has raised doubts about the causal link between school attendance and school achievement, with a small number of studies finding such a link (Lamdin, 1996) and many studies disputing it (Kochan, 1996; National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994; Wise, 1994). While exposure to subject matter is obviously a necessary condition for learning, the studies make it clear that school attendance is not a sufficient condition for achievement. Based on the advice of school officials and education experts, we used SAT 9 reading comprehension scores as the least objectionable of the available measures of school achievement. We found no significant correlation between this measure of achievement and attendance at either individual or school district levels. Keep in mind that the very small differences in school attendance among most students are not likely to impact student achievement no matter how it might be measured.

## **Policy and Programmatic Considerations**

The evidence we have collected paints a relatively clear overall picture of MerCAP. Like previous welfare reform school attendance programs, MerCAP’s sanction program reflected a popular idea, but has had a very marginal impact on TANF student attendance and achievement. Family support services, an element that previous studies found to be effective in reaching program goals, were included in the original program design but not in the actual implementation of MerCAP. As a result, the program had no effective vehicle for addressing the underlying causes of absenteeism, especially health issues. MerCAP did provide a tool that was useful in convincing a subset of the minority of TANF

students with high absenteeism to start attending school more regularly. Whether these marginal gains are worth the relatively high cost of implementing the program is a question that policy makers and program developers should carefully consider.

### The Need for Future Research

In the course of this project we became aware of a number of topics where further study is needed to clarify policy and program choices. They include:

- The inter-relationship of illness, income level and school absenteeism;
- The alternative strategies California counties are using to implement the school attendance provision of CalWORKs, and their comparative outcomes;
- Comparative evaluation of the outcomes of various school attendance programs, irrespective of whether they target TANF students;
- Comparison of policies and practices various school districts use to deal with high absence students;
- The impacts of sanctions on the stability and well-being of families and on the ability of social service agencies to work with families; and
- A comparison of alternative measures of school achievement, aimed at improving on the limitations of existing measures.

Each of these acknowledges the limitations of this study and the opportunity for building on its results to inform future options and choices.

### The Need for Better Assumptions

Our analysis provides one of the most thorough empirical tests to date of the assumptions underlying the new welfare reform school attendance policies that have been adopted in California and 39 other states. The MerCAP data suggest that these policies embody a popular idea but are likely to be, at best, only marginally effective in improving attendance. Our evaluation calls into question five basic assumptions guiding welfare policies for school attendance, and suggests alternative assumptions that may prove more fruitful for policy and program development. The five faulty assumptions, and possible alternative assumptions, are displayed in Table 1.

Parents are often part of the reason children have school problems, but at the same time their cooperation and engagement can play a critical role in improving school attendance and achievement. The role of parents in MerCAP was limited to receiving information that many did not understand and/or take to heart. An alternative approach would bring parents into a partnership, drawing on their experience to identify underlying problems and potential solutions. The benefits of meaningfully involving parents have been cited in the experience of many successful school-community partnerships (Adler and Gardner, 1993; Maeroff, 1998; Murname and Levy, 1996).

Taken as a whole, our analysis suggests that if the goal of the policy intervention is to improve attendance it makes sense to emphasize factors other than TANF status; and if the goal is to improve student achievement, it makes sense to emphasize factors other than attendance.

Table 1. Assumptions Underlying Welfare Reform School Attendance Policies, with Alternatives for Program Design Consideration

ORIGINAL ASSUMPTIONS	ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTIONS
1. TANF students have excessive absenteeism.	1. A small proportion of TANF students has excessive absenteeism. This is also true for non-TANF students.
2. Truancy is a major cause of TANF absenteeism.	2. Health issues are a major cause of absenteeism for all students.
3. Better attendance leads to increased achievement.	3. Better attendance is not sufficient to improve educational achievement.
4. Sanctions are efficacious in changing behavior patterns.	4. Sanctions are only marginally effective and may have adverse consequences.
5. Achieving the intended outcomes requires coordination of school and welfare department stakeholders within existing role definitions and routines.	5. Achieving the intended outcomes may require collaborative partnerships with parents and other community organizations in meaningful roles, working through problems and conflicts until progress is made in achieving desired outcomes.

#### Enforcing the Community Norm vs. Helping Families Meet the Norm

School attendance policies like MerCAP reinforce a popular community norm: “Parents should get their children to attend school regularly.” What seems needed is a network of supportive and accessible support services that help families meet the norm. The use of school attendance problems seems a good trigger for family support interventions, whether or not a sanction program is adopted. Health-related intervention is an obvious starting point, and linking social workers (case managers) with the families of low-attendance students is another. In a few Merced schools these types of programs are already present, and they show considerable promise.

## Improving the Ratio of Program Costs to Benefits

Though based on a seemingly simple policy idea, implementing school attendance programs creates complex problems related to defining good attendance, providing consistency of procedures across schools, and coordinating activities across and within welfare and school bureaucracies. This creates significant implementation costs for schools and welfare departments. Given the high attendance rates of most TANF students, it is unlikely that welfare policies for school attendance that are separate from regular school attendance policies will justify the average costs of implementation. By contrast, at least one Merced school district believes that their work on MerCAP, which included making policies and practices uniform for all students, paid for itself in increased funding due to higher overall attendance. Uniform attendance protocols have a number of advantages. They maintain a sense of fairness and are easier for schools to administer. They also make sense in the wake of SB 727 that funds schools on the basis of high actual attendance. If welfare policies for school attendance are pursued, schools should consider the design of such policies and practices in relation to school attendance protocols for all students.

## Continuous Learning

As local officials experiment with school attendance programs, they learn a great deal from regular opportunities to reflect on experience as they consider changes. Such occasions during MerCAP led to advantageous adjustments over the course of the project. State and local policy makers and program directors can promote this by creating an environment that honors ongoing reflection and responsible mid-course adjustments as much or more so than strict adherence to pre-set agendas. The California Department of Social Services might help these efforts by providing a way to share what is being learned as various counties try different methods of implementing CalWORKs school attendance programs, particularly from models that incorporate successful services to support families (Sacramento County, 2000).

## I. INTRODUCTION

### The Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP)

#### Scope and Objectives

The Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP) was designed to improve the school attendance of students receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). A joint effort of the county's Human Services Agency (HSA) and schools, MerCAP used attendance monitoring, communication with parents, Corrective Action Plans, and a financial sanction to discourage excessive unexcused absences and support long-term educational accomplishment.

MerCAP operated as a three-year demonstration program from June 1997 to June 2000 under a waiver from the California Department of Social Services. The MerCAP waiver suspends Welfare and Institutions Code 11450 (the Maximum Aid Payment schedule) in order to allow MerCAP sanctions, and for the first time permitted Merced County's Human Services Agency to share with schools lists of their TANF students. The lists were shared only after parents signed a release of information waiver and arrangements were made for maintaining strict confidentiality standards. The MerCAP 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.

Beginning in the 1997-98 school year, approximately one-third of the schools in the county joined MerCAP in each of the three demonstration years, until 71 schools and all school districts were implementing MerCAP in 1999-2000 (Appendix A). At the close of the demonstration period approximately 7,100 TANF students ages 6-15 were covered by MerCAP procedures. The program excluded 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.

#### Basic Procedures and Operations

Basic features of MerCAP<sup>1</sup> included:

- Parents were notified about MerCAP policies and signed a waiver as a condition of receiving cash aid.
- HSA provided to each participating school a monthly list of TANF students believed to attend that school.
- Schools were responsible for monitoring attendance and making "good cause" determinations regarding which absences would not apply toward the 10-absence limit.
- Schools played an active role with families to resolve problems underlying frequent absenteeism through conferences, referrals, and Corrective Action Plans.
- Attendance action "triggers." Whenever five absences were accrued over the course of the school year, the school sent a letter to the parent. At seven absences the school sent a second letter scheduling a parent conference to resolve problems, and at 10 absences (without good cause) the school notified HSA to sanction the family.
- The financial sanction could be imposed if the family failed to respond to the request for a parent conference or if the child continued to miss school and 10 absences were reached.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of MerCAP procedures and operations can be found in the program Handbook, available from the Merced County Human Services Agency.

- The financial sanction was for one month and represented the *child's* portion of the TANF grant.<sup>2</sup>
- The financial sanction ended when parents cooperated (by attending a conference) or the one-month period ended.
- Subsequent absence(s) during the year could result in another request by schools to HSA for an additional sanction.

### Program History and Design

During the welfare reform debates of the 1990s there were strong arguments and anecdotal evidence to suggest that parents on welfare frequently fail to ensure that their children attend school regularly. Linking welfare eligibility with school attendance was seen as a way of reinforcing norms of personal responsibility for both parents and students (the life skills argument), and of supporting school attendance and completion as a goal likely to decrease future welfare dependency (the life outcomes argument).

Consonant with the national debate, the idea for MerCAP originated in community concern over the perceived high absenteeism rates among students whose families received welfare cash assistance. This concern was linked to a broader set of related problems in Merced County, including a high rate of teen pregnancy, large numbers of families on cash assistance, and intergenerational welfare dependency.

Inspired by the Learnfare program in Wisconsin (Coles, 1997; Corbett, et. al., 1989; Ethridge and Stephen, 1993; Quinn and Magill, 1994) and similar efforts to link welfare assistance to regular school attendance, County Supervisor Gloria Keene championed the idea of a school attendance program. A group of Merced County school superintendents met with officials of the Merced County Human Services Agency to begin designing a school attendance program. Because a program including possible sanctions for TANF families would require a waiver from provisions of the Welfare and Institutions code, officials from the California Department of Social Services joined in the deliberations over program design.

State DSS officials, recognizing that MerCAP differed significantly from previous programs linking welfare and school attendance, required a formal evaluation of the project, specifying program components to be studied (see “The MerCAP Evaluation” section of this Introduction). They also insisted that the program include a family support component rather than being operated solely as a sanction program.

The originally 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 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.

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<sup>2</sup>The child's portion of the grant was typically \$100 per month. CalWORKs sanctions affect only the adult portion of the TANF grant. At the conclusion of the 3-year demonstration period the state required Merced officials to return to the standard practice under CalWORKs of sanctioning only adults.

Similarly, the project description is clear that notice to the Human Services Agency to impose a financial sanction would occur only after “all other avenues” are exhausted. Both statements suggest that the emphasis in MerCAP would be on family support first, and then on sanctions as a last resort.

### Policy Context

MerCAP is similar to new policies in 40 states, including California, that have added school attendance provisions as a requirement for welfare cash assistance (Fein, Lee, and Schofield, 1999).<sup>3</sup> Under CalWORKs, responsibility for determining how this provision of welfare reform will be implemented rests with county governments. Because MerCAP predated CalWORKs, and because many counties have yet to determine how they will implement the school attendance provision, there is significant interest in learning from the MerCAP experience.

Support for welfare reform school attendance policies stems from the belief that children who attend school will have a better chance of obtaining the skills they need to escape the intergenerational cycle of poverty and welfare dependency. The policies also reflect the new emphasis—made explicit under welfare reform—on using government policy to encourage desired behavior. From this perspective, welfare parents who do not meet the accepted parental responsibility of getting their children to attend school regularly have forfeited the right to cash assistance.

### Comparison with Other School Attendance Programs

The specific features of MerCAP differ significantly from other welfare reform school attendance programs in California and elsewhere. While most programs focus on high school students, including pregnant and parenting teens, MerCAP included all TANF school children ages 6 through 15, and excluded teens 16 and older. The aim was to establish good attendance habits early, because poor attendance patterns in later years are considered more difficult to change. MerCAP’s attendance requirement—no more than 10 unexcused absences in any school year—was more rigorous than many other programs. In addition, the program relied primarily on the threat of sanctions and did not provide special case management services to families whose children did not attend regularly. Finally, by the end of the three-year demonstration period MerCAP involved all schools in this largely rural county rather than a specially selected subset of schools or students as in other programs.

Previous evaluations of sanction-based school attendance programs in Wisconsin and Ohio have found the impacts to be small (State of Wisconsin, Legislative Audit Bureau, 1997a, 1997b; Bos and Fellerath, 1997). The only existing study that has compared the attendance rates of welfare and non-welfare children found that absenteeism is greater for welfare children, but that income differences account for most of the difference (Fein, Lee, and Schofield, 1999). The MerCAP evaluation provides another chance to test the efficacy of sanction-based programs focused on TANF student attendance, and the assumptions on which these programs rest. In addition, it provides an occasion for learning about the directions social policy is taking in the current setting, given the new emphasis on devolution, flexibility, and community collaboration.

The following section provides brief snapshots of the seven previous school attendance programs, arranged chronologically from earliest to most recent. Conclusions from each, limited to data avail-

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<sup>3</sup> A 1999 survey by the Center for Law and Social Policy and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities found that 30 states have added school attendance provisions for elementary and middle school children, and 38 states have added such provisions for high school students.

able, are noted. A second paragraph on each previous program describes similarities and differences between it and MerCAP.

- A three-city Teenage Parent Demonstration, federally-funded in 1986, provided case management to randomly selected teenage mothers receiving welfare assistance (Maynard, 1993). Two years after intervention the experimental groups were not significantly better off than the control groups.

In MerCAP no particular attention was given to teen mothers and no special case management was provided to any participants.

- Wisconsin began Learnfare in 1988 with AFDC 13 and 14-year olds (State of Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau, 1997), and all teen parents on AFDC. Under Learnfare, children in families that received AFDC payments were monitored for school attendance after an initial application for AFDC or after a six-month review. If a student had poor attendance, defined as 10 or more unexcused absences during the previous *semester*, that student's attendance was monitored monthly. If the student had two or more unexcused absences in a given month, the student's portion of the AFDC payment was eliminated for a month. Families had the opportunity to challenge the sanction. As of 1993 (teens only at that point), AFDC students had not shown improved attendance, decreased dropout rates or increased graduation rates.

By contrast, MerCAP included all school-aged children from 6 to 15. It involved communications to TANF parents when children reached 5 and 7 unexcused absences, warning families of possible sanctions if the child reached 10 unexcused absences. Neither program provided case management. Under MerCAP, the schools monitored attendance closely and requested sanctions only when parents did not attend a requested conference with school officials or when students had accumulated 10 absences not for good cause.

- Ohio's Learning, Earning and Parenting Program (LEAP) started in 1989 to encourage pregnant and parenting teens on welfare to attend and complete high school, using a complex set of financial incentives plus child care and transportation support (Bos and Fellerath, 1997). Schools reported attendance to the welfare department. Grants were reduced if the teen failed to meet program requirements and financial bonuses were given for program compliance. Teens who were enrolled in HS or GED at the time of enrollment in LEAP completed short-term goals better than those who had dropped out before enrolling in LEAP. Longer term impacts (greater progress in school, more HS and GED completion, increased employment, less welfare dependence) were smaller and less consistent.

In contrast, MerCAP had no special provision for pregnant or parenting teens and did not deal with drop-outs. Ohio counties had one year of preparation for implementing the program whereas MerCAP involved only one county in a much hastier time frame. Ohio required case management by its welfare departments; MerCAP did not.

- In 1990 the Kern County (CA) County Superintendent of Schools Office and the County Probation Department started a program that involved referral of students with four or more unexcused absences to truancy officers. These officers reviewed each case, interviewed the student, and made a home visit (Van Ry and King, 1997). This program was considered successful in reducing truancy among Kindergarten through eighth-graders, but no data were published.

MerCAP included only TANF students, and did not involve truancy officers.

- The statewide (CA) Cal-Learn Demonstration Project, started 1993, was designed to help pregnant and parenting teenagers on welfare to overcome barriers to receiving a high school diploma. It involved local coordination of effort among schools, welfare departments, GAIN offices, and the Adolescent Family Life Program case managers (Cunniff et al., 1997). Survey data from teens in each of four randomly assigned conditions (Full Cal-Learn, Financial Incentives Only, Case Management Only, and No Treatment) was used to project graduation rates for students by their 20<sup>th</sup> year of age (Mauldon et al., 2000). Of the Full Cal-Learn treatment group nearly half (47%) graduated, as compared with one-third of the No Treatment group. The other groups' graduation rates were higher than the No Treatment group, mainly due to significant increase in GED completion.

MerCAP did not include students 16 or older, and did not focus on pregnant and parenting teens. MerCAP did not provide special case management and was directed toward improving school attendance, not graduation, job skills or employment.

- The California Department of Social Services funded a School Attendance Demonstration Project (SADP) in 1996 (Jones et al., 1999). This program was undertaken in two San Diego County school districts with 16-18 year olds receiving AFDC who had less than an 80% attendance record. Participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group (in which they received special services, with sanctions if they did not improve attendance) or a control group (in which only services were provided). Social Services case data matched with school attendance data for each participant were provided to the evaluators. SADP improved attendance of students who had few risk factors. There were no significant differences between experimental and control groups in graduation or drop out rates.

MerCAP included no students 16 or older, and the action point for imposing cash assistance sanctions was 10 unexcused absences, which was considerably fewer than under the 80% rule (36 days out of the 180-day school year). Furthermore, no services that were not ordinarily provided by the schools were brought to bear on cases of excessive absence in MerCAP. Individual case data matched with school attendance data were not provided for the MerCAP evaluation.

- The County of Sacramento (Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance, 2000) started Opportunity Knocks in 1999 as a test effort to increase attendance and graduation among TANF teens. A few selected teens worked part-time after-school in a welfare office with mentoring from Department of Human Assistance (DHA) staff. Other components included summer employment and college scholarships as incentives for high school completion, homework assistance and tutoring, group and individual counseling, rewards for improved attendance, and others as opportunities and needs coincided. Thirty teens were involved in the first year, some of which were replacements when others dropped out. Of a total of 30 high school students who participated, 14 finished the year. Compared to the previous year, these 14 had an average of 50% improvement in attendance, 16% reduction in tardies, and 43% reduction in suspensions. No data were presented on the 16 who did not complete the school year.
- MerCAP involved only the schools (all districts in the county) and Merced County Human Services Agency, and began full-fledged without a year of planning or trial runs. MerCAP included all TANF kids in participating schools, not a select few, and did not offer any incentives or special program components. Most important, it did not focus on teens, and did not include teens over the age of 16. The Sacramento County DHA partnered with many public and private entities (including just one high school from the Sacramento City Unified School District) to develop and test this model.

## Social Context

Merced County lies in the heart of California's Great Central Valley, where agriculture is the traditional economic base. The county is medium-sized for California, with a population of about 200,000—50% of which is non-white and 40% of which lives in unincorporated areas. The county has a large Hispanic population, and a fairly large Southeast Asian community. Median household income is \$25,548, well below the state average of \$35,798. Like many Central Valley counties, its unemployment level is routinely at or near double-digit levels. In July, 2000, unemployment stood at 13.7%. The poverty rate is estimated at nearly 26%.

At the time MerCAP was initiated in 1997, 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. Between their peak in April 1995 and April 2000, county caseloads declined by 37%, from 10,617 to 6,733 cases. On average, Merced County's TANF households have three children, the highest number of children per case among California counties. Merced consistently ranks in the top ten among the 58 California counties in teen pregnancy rate.

In Merced County schools, 50% of students are Hispanic, 33% are White, and 11% Asian. One in five children (20%) are on TANF, and three of every four are eligible for free and reduced cost lunch. One in three students is classified as an English learner (formerly designated as Limited English Proficient, or LEP), well above the state average of 24.2%. Results from the recent statewide achievement tests show that Merced reading 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.

Aggregate characteristics of Merced County school districts, grouped by year starting MerCAP, are displayed in Appendix A. Among the schools participating in MerCAP, we found that about one-sixth (16%) of 1999-2000 enrollment among students aged 6-15 was of TANF students. The TANF enrollment percentage varied across the three MerCAP cohorts, from a low of 12% in Year 2 schools, to 14% in Year 1 schools, to a high of 29% in Year 3 schools. Year 1 schools had a much higher percentage (48%) of English-learning students than Year 2 or Year 3 schools (32% and 39% respectively), with a higher percentage of Hispanic and lower percentage of white students. Less than 5% of students in either Year 1 or 2 schools were Asian, compared to about one-quarter of students in Year 3 schools in the City of Merced.

## **The MerCAP Evaluation**

### Overview of this Report

The terms of the MerCAP waiver provided for an evaluation to be conducted under the auspices of the California Department of Social Services. CDSS contracted with an evaluation team in the Human and Community Development Department at the University of California, Davis, to conduct the evaluation. The evaluation team was not selected until after the CDSS waiver was in place, at about the time Year 1 implementation was beginning. The evaluation team was not involved in any of the program design discussions prior to Year 1 implementation.

As prescribed by CDSS, the evaluation had four primary objectives:

1. To determine whether MerCAP improves the school attendance and performance of children on public assistance.
2. To determine whether MerCAP has an impact on parent interaction and involvement with their children's school.
3. To develop a qualitative understanding of the kinds of family problems underlying absenteeism, and which problems are best addressed through this kind of intervention.
4. To obtain information on the costs of operating a school attendance program.

This is the final evaluation report on the MerCAP program. In addition to presenting new findings from the third year of MerCAP, this final report summarizes the analysis of all three years of MerCAP data. Two previous MerCAP evaluation reports were produced, one following each of the first two years of the program.

The main sections of this report (after this Introduction) are:

- Summary of Research Activities,
- Process Study Findings,
- Impact Study Findings,
- Reflections and Discussion, and
- Appendices.

The Process Study addresses the nature of program activities, including the congruence between MerCAP objectives and actual activities; the consistency of implementation across schools and over time; co-ordination among stakeholders; cost of implementation; support for MerCAP among stakeholders; parent-school relations under MerCAP; and the causes of absenteeism.

The Impact Study considers four primary issues: whether absenteeism among TANF students is excessive compared to their non-TANF peers; whether MerCAP improved the attendance of TANF students; what impact MerCAP had on overall school attendance; and whether the attendance rates of TANF students are related to their school achievement.

The Reflection and Discussion section offers retrospective views on the program from parents, schools and the Human Services Agency. It also identifies issues of interest to future researchers in this field. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it considers the implications of the MerCAP evaluation findings for future policies and programs.

The various appendices provide supportive documentation for the findings in the report, and include complete reports on a number of component studies conducted during the course of the overall evaluation. In a number of cases, tables and figures presented in the main body of the report are repeated in the Appendix so that each Appendix can function as a stand-alone report. The appendices are:

- Selected Descriptors of Merced County Schools;
- Attendance Actions Taken (including letters, parent conferences, etc. with TANF and non-TANF students);
- Parent Survey Report;
- School Administrator Survey Report; and
- Impact Study Analyses.

The MerCAP evaluation presented significant challenges, in particular in coordinating data collection with Merced County schools. We appreciate the good faith effort to meet these challenges, and the cooperation of Merced stakeholders in contributing time and effort to the evaluation.<sup>4</sup> During the course of the evaluation we have shared quarterly and yearly progress reports with CDSS, HSA and school leaders on a regular basis. We hope the reflections in this final report contribute to greater clarity about what programs such as MerCAP can and cannot achieve and the reasons why.

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<sup>4</sup> The cooperation of the schools, particularly those from which the individual student samples were drawn, has been remarkable. They have provided room for members of the evaluation team to spend hours to find and record applicable test scores; they have accessed and printed out current and former year attendance and enrollment records of sample students; they have even searched district records to ‘find’ students not formerly enrolled in their school.

## II. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

### **Process Study**

The Process Study is based primarily on two types of data. The first is evidence from formal contacts with over 700 individuals, including individual and group interviews, site observations, and self-administered questionnaires. Research work was conducted in English, Hmong and Spanish, as appropriate. The work included 372 contacts with parents, of which 220 were individual phone interviews in year 3 (see Appendix C for full report), and 152 were parents participating in focus group interviews during Years 1 and 2.

There were over 325 contacts with school personnel. These included:

- Phone interviews with 58 school administrators conducted near the close of Year 3 (see Appendix D for full report);
- Dialogue with 120 school administrators and attendance clerks participating in 10 area meetings in Year 2;
- Questionnaires completed by 47 administrators and attendance clerks during Year 2;
- Interviews with more than 50 school personnel during 30 site visits conducted during Year 1;
- Numerous comments from school personnel collected in a phone log during the course of regular calls to check on data collection issues; and
- Numerous informal conversations with school personnel during site visits to retrieve missing attendance and achievement data.

Contacts with Human Services Agency representatives included

- Individual and group interviews with all 6 of the agency staff involved with the project in April 2000;
- Notes from Steering Committee and Oversight Committee meetings convened by HSA throughout the project; and
- Regular phone contact with the HSA program manager and other personnel.

The second type of data collected for the process study came from school reports of their MerCAP “attendance actions taken” (the number of MerCAP actions taken with TANF students, and the number and nature of attendance-related actions taken with non-TANF students), and from Human Services Agency reports of the number of MerCAP sanctions imposed (see Appendix B). These reports were intended to document the extent to which MerCAP was implemented as intended, the patterns of actions taken across schools and over time, and the degree of correspondence between school sanction requests and Human Services Agency imposition of sanctions.

### **Impact Study**

MerCAP is based on the assumption of excessive school absenteeism among families receiving welfare cash aid. The program was expected to achieve two primary outcomes—improvement in attendance of children whose families receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and—as a result of more regular attendance—improvement in their school achievement.

To test the underlying assumptions and the extent to which MerCAP has achieved its intended outcomes, we have made comparisons based on two primary data sets, partly based on data routinely reported by individual Merced schools. The first set is made up of aggregate-level school attendance data, coded by school and grade, and differentiating TANF and non-TANF attendance. Despite a few glitches along the way, we were able to construct a complete database on student attendance of all the

71 participating schools for the four years from 1996-97 (the baseline year prior to MerCAP implementation) to 1999-2000.

The second data set is made up of individual student attendance records, collected from a sample of 1,092 TANF students enrolled in selected MerCAP schools. An attempt was made to sample from schools with relatively high and relatively low attendance histories, and schools from districts in different parts of the county. A sample of 50-55 students was randomly selected from the roster of TANF students at each of eight schools selected in each of the first two years of MerCAP, and 75 from each of four Year 3 schools. The actual number of students varied slightly from one school to another, since some students had never been enrolled in the school and others had been there for only a few months before moving. The sampling frame for each of the first two years included elementary (both K-5 or 6 and K-8), junior high/middle, and high schools. There were no high schools in the Year 3 MerCAP cohort. Two elementary, one of which had year-round education (YRE), and two middle schools made up the sampling frame.

We have attempted to collect for each individual in the sample the following data:

- Attendance for the 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99 and 1999-2000 school years;
- Grade and school attended (if any and if known) in each of those years;
- The student's score on the Reading Comprehension section of the Stanford Achievement Test - Version 9 (SAT 9)—the state-mandated test—in 1997-98, 1998-99, and 1999-2000 for all that were eligible and attempted to take the test.

To broaden our understanding of MerCAP dynamics, and provide further tests of findings from the primary data sets, we have also drawn on district level data available from the State Department of Education (described in the Impact Study).

## **Evaluation Challenges and Limitations**

Four important caveats should be kept in mind in interpreting the findings of this report. The first is that MerCAP is neither designed nor conducted according to an experimental design. For reasons discussed later in this report, project leaders abandoned the original idea of having a “case management only” comparison during the first year of MerCAP. The analytical comparisons available for the evaluation are rich, but not of the type associated with random assignment of subjects to experimental and control groups in a way that clearly isolates the causal impact of the program intervention. Our dilemma is similar to what is happening in other evaluations under welfare reform, where the sweeping nature of the changes in both programs and the expectations of clients makes it difficult to isolate the effects of particular programmatic initiatives (Gais, 2000). It also stems from the fact that the evaluation team was not hired until after the design phase of the MerCAP program, and began work just as the program was being implemented.

The second caveat concerns three major changes in state education policy that occurred during the three years MerCAP was in progress. One was the new state policy on the relationship of school attendance to funding allocations (SB 727). Beginning in the 1998-99 school year (MerCAP Year 2), schools were funded based on actual attendance regardless of reasons for absences rather than on attendance adjusted for excused absences. Thus schools had a new and strong incentive to improve attendance for *all* students, making it more difficult to isolate the effect of MerCAP in improving attendance for TANF students. The second change was the adoption of the Standard Testing and Achievement Reporting (STAR) program in the spring of 1998, during the first year of MerCAP. The new testing program meant that we had no reliable way to compare scores on tests given by schools in prior years with scores during MerCAP. The third change was the state's incentive program which rewards schools

for improving their average SAT9 scores (SB 1X). Since we have used the SAT9 reading comprehension scores to measure student achievement in this study, the special school efforts beginning in 1999-2000 to improve scores make it more difficult to interpret the meaning of any positive changes in TANF student scores from prior years.

The third caveat concerns limitations in the data available for this analysis. Under the terms of the evaluation agreement, the evaluation team relied on schools to provide the attendance, attendance actions taken, and achievement data used in our impact analysis. During all three years of MerCAP, the Attendance Actions Taken reports (i.e., the number of letters mailed, conferences held, sanctions requested, etc.) proved to be the most difficult to collect and interpret.<sup>1</sup> Less than two-thirds of the schools sent these reports on a regular monthly basis, and some not at all.<sup>2</sup> Interpreting the available data was difficult because schools did not always define actions in the same way<sup>3</sup> and lacked comparable protocols so that we could reasonably compare attendance actions taken for TANF and non-TANF students.<sup>4</sup>

We also experienced difficulty with our individual student data set due to attrition and missing data. We have four years of data for 310 of the 1,092 students in our sample. The attrition is due to families moving to other schools, often outside Merced County; student placement in a program (e.g., Special Day Classes, continuation schools, independent study) not included in this evaluation; and inability to locate the student in the school s/he was believed to attend. We have been able to maintain data collection for many of the students who have been promoted or moved from one school to another within the county. We have not eliminated any students who may have been dropped from the TANF rolls after they were selected into the sample. A detailed description of the individual student sample, including the numbers for whom key data elements are available, is included in Appendix E.

The fourth caveat has to do with the generalizability of the Merced County experience to other parts of California or to other states. As previously noted, Merced County is a largely rural county, with a school-aged population that is 2/3 non-white, 3/4 eligible for free or reduced cost lunch, and 1/3 English learners. However, only 1/5 of the student population received TANF at that time. The high incidence of low-income families (associated with high unemployment rates in rural areas of the Central Valley) may make behaviors like regular school attendance difficult to attain, regardless of whether

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<sup>1</sup> Difficulties were compounded by the use of MacSchool software in five school districts—Hilmar, Livingston, Los Banos, McSwain and Planada. This software proved to be very difficult to adapt for MerCAP purposes, despite our efforts to contract with a MacSchool service representative to provide a specially designed template and hands-on workshops on how to use it.

<sup>2</sup> For example, of the 71 school districts participating in MerCAP Year 3, only 39 sent in reports on MerCAP attendance actions taken for at least 6 months of the school year. Only one school in the Merced City School District (which joined MerCAP in its third year) regularly reported these actions. We know that at least two schools did not implement the program, one due to the resignation of the attendance clerk and one due to a deliberate choice by the school officials. In most cases, it appears that schools were making a good faith effort to implement MerCAP procedures, but found it difficult to set up a system for recording and aggregating at the school level actions taken with individual students.

<sup>3</sup> During our site visits we learned that some schools counted as a parent conference a telephone conversation with one parent, even if it did not include discussion of a Corrective Action Plan. In other cases school administrators took advantage of an unscheduled opportunity to confer with parents whose children were not attending school regularly, but the attendance clerks may not have been aware of the contact. In other cases conversations between attendance staff and parents were recorded as conferences even though a school administrator was not involved.

<sup>4</sup> The forms that we developed for the schools' use did not reflect the wide variation in school attendance practices. This was particularly the case in actions regarding non-TANF students. Not all schools used parent conferences or attendance supervision, and Student Attendance Review Boards or their equivalent were not available in smaller outlying districts. Thus, the data for non-TANF actions probably under-represent actions actually taken, or the occurrence of attendance problems among non-TANF students.

a family receives TANF. While many California counties have a substantial non-white school population including immigrants from other cultures, not all have the combination of rural, low-income and ethnically/racially diverse attributes in their student populations. One implication is that the relatively small differences we found in the attendance patterns of TANF and non-TANF students in Merced might not hold in other counties where the demographic differences between TANF and non-TANF students are greater.

Despite these limitations, the data sets we have assembled are among the most complete and long-term of any ever assembled to examine issues related to welfare school attendance policies. We discuss specific data limitations where they are pertinent in the remainder of this report.

### **III. PROCESS STUDY FINDINGS**

#### **Nature of Program Activities**

##### Congruence between MerCAP Objectives and Actual Activities

The first task of our evaluation was to ascertain whether the sanction and support for families provisions of MerCAP have been implemented as originally intended. We found that the sanction and attendance supervision elements of MerCAP had been implemented, but they have not been accompanied by an expansion of family support activities beyond previous levels.

Contrary to the original intent to establish supportive case management including referrals to community resources, MerCAP was operated and widely perceived as a sanction program. By default, the threat of sanction became a central component of the interaction between school personnel and TANF families. Family support activities were not defined in either the original project description or subsequent program protocols, and MerCAP provided no new program resources to support such activities.

This left those implementing the program with no clear guidance as to what family support activities were expected. Since MerCAP is only one of many pressing demands on schools and welfare officials, the program ended up reflecting what those stakeholders could accommodate within their existing routines and established priorities. It is not surprising that the sanction element of the program, which builds on existing attendance functions of schools and existing eligibility protocols within the welfare department, took priority. By contrast, the task of expanding family support services would have required more open-ended and time-consuming collaborative planning, involving new resources and/or redeployment of existing resources.

For school personnel, it is extremely difficult to engage in more supportive services for families with no new resources. By contrast, the availability of the sanction as a tool in dealing with problem families is viewed as saving time that might otherwise be spent in fruitless exhortation. From this perspective, many school personnel appear to believe that communicating the threat of sanction is in itself an effective part of their efforts to work with families.

For state and local officials, the MerCAP experience suggests that the goal of promoting a more integrated approach to family supportive services will require more than a simple mandate or directive. Care must be exercised not only in defining family support expectations, but also in insuring that all relevant community stakeholders be identified and involved in developing a common understanding of these expectations. 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 it is becoming increasingly important in the era of devolution and welfare reform.

##### Notification of Parents

All parents or caretakers of children receiving TANF were required to sign a release of information form as a condition of receiving their CalWORKs cash grant. The form explained the nature of the MerCAP program and the requirement of regular school attendance. In this way all families were informed at the outset of the MerCAP program. The rules and requirements of MerCAP are reiterated in both the 5-day and 7-day letters sent to parents.

Despite these procedures, at the end of three years of MerCAP only one-third of the 220 MerCAP parents we interviewed (see Table C-5, Appendix C) knew about the program. More of the parents whose children attend schools that started MerCAP in its first year were familiar with the program than parents who first became involved in Years 2 or 3. While about one in five parents remembered that they had received a letter about MerCAP from Human Services, in fact they all were sent a notice. Obviously written notices alone are not very effective. This may reflect difficulty in reading the language of the notice, or parents treating the notice as simply another form to sign, without concentrating on its meaning. It may also simply reflect the fact that most TANF students have regular attendance and their families have no reason to pay particular attention to MerCAP.

### Patterns in Attendance Actions Taken

As indicated earlier, the available data on attendance actions taken provide an incomplete picture of school activities. A report on these data is provided in Appendix B. The most significant trends observable in the data we received are the following:

- On average, middle schools reported more attendance actions with TANF students per school month (~70) than any of the other school types. High schools that reported on average took ~60 attendance actions per month; K-6 elementary schools reported ~44, and K-8 elementary schools took ~30.
- The number of corrective action plans (CAPs) reported was substantially less than the total number of parent conferences. The number of corrective action plans reported was 68% and 71%, respectively, of the number of parent conferences reported in K-6 and K-8 elementary schools, but only 20% and 33%, respectively, in middle and high schools. It may be that absences were determined to be for good cause and that a CAP was inappropriate. We have also heard school personnel say that in some cases they do not use a CAP because they believe it will not help.
- The ratio of 10-absence sanction requests to 7-absence letters ranged from 13% (K-6 schools) to 38% (K-8 and high schools).
- Conferences with parents were used less frequently for non-TANF than for TANF students. Conferences with parents of non-TANF students appear to be reserved for cases in which absences exceed the 7 absences that trigger the MerCAP parent conference invitation.

### Patterns of Sanctions

*Overall Frequency.* Table 2 summarizes the total number of MerCAP sanctions issued over the course of the three-year demonstration period, by type, as reported by the Human Services Agency. The total number of sanctions does not include those issued to Merced County students who are enrolled in schools such as Valley High School that were not included in the Merced County Attendance Program evaluation.

Table 2. Total Sanctions Issued by the Human Services Agency Since the Beginning of MerCAP in Fall, 1997, by MerCAP Year

Source: Merced Human Services Agency

	Type of Sanction			Total of All Sanctions
	Failure to Respond <sup>a</sup>	Non-Cooperation Sanction <sup>b</sup>	10-Absence Sanction <sup>c</sup>	
MerCAP Year				
1 - 1997-98	13	57	77	147
2 - 1998-99	1	83	108	192
3 - 1999-00	—	248	220	468
TOTAL	14	388	405	807

<sup>a</sup> This sanction is applied by the Human Services Agency when a client does not complete and submit a waiver of privacy in order to participate in the MerCAP program and evaluation.

<sup>b</sup> Non-cooperation sanctions refer to those issued when a parent does not keep an appointment for a school conference and does not arrange an alternate date or time for such a conference. This sanction is ‘curable;’ that is, it ends when the parent appears for a duly scheduled conference.

<sup>c</sup> 10-absence sanctions are requested when students have accumulated 10 or more unacceptable absences. An additional 30-day sanction can be imposed subsequently if the student has additional unacceptable absence(s).

These data indicate:

- Of the nearly 13,000 TANF students enrolled under MerCAP over the three years, 807 sanctions were issued. That means that approximately 6% of TANF students were sanctioned.<sup>1</sup>
- Sanctions were divided almost evenly between those issued for 10-absences and those issued for failure of parents to keep an appointment for the required school conference after seven absences.
- The number of sanctions was higher during the third year of the project (1999-2000) due to the large number of TANF students enrolled in the Merced City School District, which entered MerCAP that year.

*Comparison of Sanction Rates by MerCAP Cohorts.* The number of TANF students in each MerCAP cohort varied, with the largest number in Year 3 schools. The table below compares the sanction rates in the three MerCAP cohorts during MerCAP Year 3, the only year in which all three MerCAP cohorts participated.

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<sup>1</sup>Determining an exact sanction rate is not possible due to the constant fluctuation in the total number of TANF students. In estimating sanction rates for each year of MerCAP, we have used the best estimates we could arrive at from examining the school attendance reports.

Table 3. Sanction Rates in 1999-2000, by MerCAP Cohort

MerCAP Cohort	No. of sanctions issued	TANF enrollment	Sanction rate
Year 1 schools	110	1797	6.1%
Year 2 schools	60	1874	3.2%
Year 3 schools	298	3265	9.1%
TOTAL	468	6936	6.7%

Note: The TANF enrollment figures represent the estimated end-of-year enrollment in 24 Year 1 schools, 29 Year 2 schools, and 16 Year 3 schools. Sanction numbers are derived from the master list of students sanctioned reported by the Human Services Agency.

The larger TANF student population explains why there are a larger number of sanctions imposed in Year 3 schools. It does not explain the smaller number of sanctions imposed on TANF students in Year 2 schools than on students in Year 1 schools, or the wide disparity in the sanction rates between Year 2 schools (3.2%) and Year 3 schools (9.1%). We can think of three possible explanations for the divergence in sanction rates. One is that Year 2 schools simply had better TANF student attendance. The second is that many Year 2 schools were resistant to the record keeping MerCAP required, and perhaps did not keep track of absences as diligently as Year 1 and Year 3 schools. The third is that Year 3 schools began the program by treating each tardy as an absence (a policy since changed), and in general took an aggressive approach to monitoring and sanctions.

*Comparison of sanction rates in the same MerCAP cohorts over time.* One possible indicator of whether sanctions were having a deterrent effect on excessive absenteeism would be a decline in sanctions over time. To test for this, we compared the incidence of sanctions in Year 1 schools over the 3 years of the project and also the incidence of sanctions in Year 2 schools over the last two years of the project. (Since Year 3 schools were only part of MerCAP for one year, no similar comparison was possible for those schools.) Table 4 provides the comparisons.

Table 4. Number of Sanctions in Year 1 & Year 2 Schools for Each MerCAP Year

MerCAP Cohort	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000
Year 1 schools	143	104	110
Year 2 schools	—	81	60

In their second year in MerCAP, both Year 1 and Year 2 schools had a fairly significant decline in the number of sanctions, suggesting that MerCAP might be having a deterrent effect on absences. However, this might also be the result of a decline in TANF student enrollment, since welfare rolls decreased significantly during the time MerCAP was being implemented. The number of sanctions rose slightly for Year 1 schools during their third year in the program.

*Comparison of Sanctions Requested by Schools and Sanctions Imposed by HSA.* Sanctions reported by schools and Human Services Agency are summarized in Table 5 below. In order to provide a valid comparison, we separated out those sanctions reported by the Human Services Agency that came from the schools from which we received reports of attendance actions taken (i.e., those we label “partial HSA”).

Table 5. Comparison of Sanctions Issued in School Year 1999-2000 by Human Services Agency and Reported Requests for Sanctions by Schools, by Type of Sanction and School Type

School Type	Type of Sanction							
	Non-Cooperation Sanction <sup>a</sup>			10-Absence Sanction <sup>b</sup>			Total of All Sanctions <sup>c</sup>	
	All HSA	Partial HSA <sup>d</sup>	School	All HSA	Partial HSA <sup>d</sup>	School	HSA	School
K-6 Elementary	149	36	36	137	42	31	286	67
K-8 Elementary	12	12	18	11	8	13	23	31
Middle/ Junior High	58	24	19	44	9	11	102	30
High School	27	10	21	27	11	31	54	52
TOTAL	246	82	94	219	70	86	465	180

<sup>a</sup> Non-cooperation sanctions refer to those issued when a parent does not keep an appointment for a school conference and does not arrange an alternate date or time for such a conference. This sanction is ‘curable;’ that is, it ends when the parent appears for a duly scheduled conference.

<sup>b</sup> 10-absence sanctions are requested when students have accumulated 10 or more unacceptable absences. An additional 30-day sanction can be imposed subsequently if the student has additional unacceptable absence(s).

<sup>c</sup> The total number of sanctions does not include those issued to Merced County students who are enrolled in schools such as Valley High School that were not included in the Merced County Attendance Program evaluation.

<sup>d</sup> Sanctions reported by the Human Services Agency that were requested from only those schools that sent in reports of attendance actions taken.

Schools generally report more sanction requests than were levied by the Human Services Agency. Inaccurate record keeping by the schools may account for these discrepancies, but there are a number of other possible explanations. One is the time lag between the dates sanctions were requested and the next month in which they could be imposed. Another possibility is that sanctions were ‘cured’ before they could be imposed. In a few cases, sanctions may not have been imposed because the schools did not follow required procedures.

#### Consistency of Implementation across Schools and over Time

To address the consistency of implementation, we drew on reports of attendance actions taken, site observations, and interviews. Despite being a relatively simple concept, MerCAP implementation required reaching agreement on a complex set of operational definitions and procedures. A good deal of time during the first year of MerCAP was spent debating and achieving consensus on these. Examples of the kinds of questions that arose included:

- Whether absences occurring while students are not on cash aid count toward sanctions,
- Whether absences of students who come on TANF during an attendance month count from the beginning of that attendance month *or* from the day the student shows up on the HSA list,
- How tardiness should be handled within MerCAP,
- Whether school suspensions should count as absences, and
- Whether it is legal to send a 7-day letter without sending a 5-day letter first. (The latter comes up if a student has two more absences before the school sends the five-day letter.)

Having resolved most of these questions during Year 1, project leaders took steps in Year 2 to regularize program operations. These included developing a handbook as a guide to MerCAP's operational policies and procedures, providing a yearly training for all participating schools, and creating an Oversight Committee made up of HSA and school personnel with ongoing policymaking responsibility. As a result, considerable unity of formal definition was achieved.

Despite this, we found considerable evidence of variation in program implementation across school sites, and within the same school at different times during the school year. Such variation is not unexpected given the relative independence of schools and school districts and their desire to preserve an appropriate element of discretion in dealing with parents and children. Throughout the project, the Human Services Agency encouraged schools to adapt the program appropriately, while insisting that certain basic program requirements be met. In area meetings school personnel acknowledged that judgment and discretion play a large and important role in how they implemented MerCAP (or any attendance program).

Elements of the program that have exhibited the greatest variation among sites include the following:

*When good cause determinations are made.* Good cause criteria are 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. In other words, some schools send the first letter for any 5 absences, others for 5 *unexcused* absences.

*How parent conferences are handled.* 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 by 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 appear 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. In some schools, parent conferences are devoted to problem solving while in others they are primarily used to convey the threat of sanctions. One school took a broad view of what the parent conference might accomplish. As a school official stated, "I schedule the conference before I send the letter, so that the letter is a reminder. It softens the blow of the letter so that the focus remains on fixing the problem rather than pulling the money."

*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 higher 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. Not all schools use a written CAP. In some cases this is the result of sensitivity to cultures in which the parents' word is sufficient, and an oral contract seems to be effective. In other cases, school personnel have questioned the value of any CAP. Among the comments we heard were, "How can you make a plan with a parent who won't carry it out? The only plan is 'Get your kid to school!'" "I don't waste time with them. I just lay down the law." In other cases school personnel view the problems as too ill-defined to plan a remedy, whereas the CAP is useful when there is a clearly defined problem.

*Use of School Attendance Review Board (SARB) and the District Attorney.* Some schools have a good SARB with many concerned agencies that try to make examples of egregious truancy through the District Attorney's office. Other schools said the District Attorney does not have time to bother with school attendance cases.

*Diversion of poor-attendance students to other programs.* Some schools are more aggressive than others in deliberately moving children with attendance problems into alternative programs or independent study.

*Policies on Mexican vacations.* Many Latino families schedule extended vacations in Mexico during the holiday season. A few school districts have adjusted their academic calendars to accommodate this practice. Others provide independent study options. Still others cancel enrollment of students until they return.

*Difficulties experienced by high schools.* High schools experienced greater difficulties in implementing the program. Possible reasons suggested by school personnel are that high school is too late to change attendance patterns; that high schools are unable to give the needed personal attention due to the large numbers of students; and that the dollar amount of the sanction means less to high school children and their families. As many parents will attest, schools and parents have much less control over teen-agers than over younger students.

*Development of uniform attendance policies and practices for all students.* A few school districts adopted MerCAP-like attendance policies for all their students. These included the Merced City schools, which entered the program in Year 3, and the Hilmar Unified School District. Of the school personnel surveyed in Year 2, 1 in 4 said that their attendance practices for MerCAP and non-MerCAP students are "substantially the same." A more comprehensive survey in Year 3 found that almost 3 of 4 schools had made changes in their attendance practices due to MerCAP, although not all districts had adopted uniform policies.

*Attendance monitoring and reporting.* As part of MerCAP, schools agreed to monitor attendance and attendance-related actions for MerCAP students, and to provide the data needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the project. As noted elsewhere in this report, attendance monitoring was difficult and time consuming. There was considerable variation in how frequently schools monitor attendance, how completely and promptly reports were sent to the evaluators, as well as in how reporting instructions were interpreted. In a few cases where reports were not sent regularly, it is difficult to ascertain if the school monitored attendance sufficiently to implement the program.

### Coordination among Stakeholders

*Leadership.* MerCAP required increased interaction and coordination between the Human Services Agency and Merced County schools. Within these entities, it required communication between administrators and front-line staff. Securing effective coordination between these 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 procedures and responsibilities. Of note is that neither MerCAP parents, nor representatives of other family support agencies in the community, were defined as stakeholders in developing MerCAP plans and procedures.

While key program agencies—state DSS, the Merced County Human Services Agency, and local schools—support the program, MerCAP is just one of a great many projects and programs they are

currently managing. Aside from the one Human Services Agency staff person assigned to manage the project (among her many other duties), MerCAP is far down on the list of priorities for most stakeholders, all of whom are extremely busy with a variety of immediate and pressing demands. Thus, project activities tend to reflect what stakeholders can accommodate within their existing routines, rather than new departures and relationships.

At the same time, project leaders realize that collaboration requires taking steps that move beyond existing routines. As one Human Services Agency representative stated, “I had a lot better interactions with schools when my staff person or I were extending ourselves. Just simple things like visits to the schools can do a whole lot to facilitate coordination.”

MerCAP required clear departures from past practices for the Human Services Agency. These included sanctioning children rather than adults; designating a front-line eligibility worker to specialize on MerCAP (such specialization is rare); building new relationships with schools; and increasing communication and cooperation between eligibility and social services units in order to facilitate integration of family services. The latter function was particularly important, given the role that TANF and Child Protective Services play in the lives of MerCAP families. All the new tasks stretched agency staff and challenged organizational culture.

MerCAP program documents were 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 Services Agency and the schools. In practice, project leadership rested primarily in the hands of the Human Services Agency, even though much of the work required for implementation fell 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, and the schools by accepting the increased time demands on personnel and working with HSA to correct glitches in the program.

*TANF Lists.* A good example of the coordination needed under MerCAP was 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) and difficulty in updating information from previous lists. When these were not immediately corrected, frustration grew. On meeting with HSA representatives, schools learned that staff shortages had prevented a quick resolution, but that a person had been reassigned and changes could be expected shortly. Soon after this, 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 time spent combing through old and new lists.

Despite these improvements, schools continued to express concern during Years 2 and 3 with the number of inaccuracies in HSA lists, and the fact that corrections are not made promptly. In part this indicates how difficult it is to create an accurate TANF list given the mobility of the population and the movement of families on and off the CalWORKs rolls. In part it reflects the different time frames under which schools and the Human Services Agency operate. Schools must track attendance on a daily or weekly basis, whereas the agency procedures are geared to monthly reporting requirements.

*Coordination mechanisms.* During the three years of MerCAP, a variety of coordination mechanisms were employed. Initially, monthly or bi-monthly meetings, to which all Year 1 schools were invited,

were convened by the Human Services Agency. Later in Year 1, an ad hoc committee provided some problem solving, but did not serve in a formal oversight role. During Year 2 a formal Oversight Committee was developed to facilitate coordination between schools and the Human Services Agency. The committee included approximately a dozen regular members representing schools and the Human Services Agency, including some front-line staff. Parents or representatives of other community organizations were not included. Three meetings were held during the school year.

The Oversight Committee continued to meet during Year 3, though attendance was less regular. A major order of business during the January 14 and March 17, 2000, meetings was to discuss whether, and in what form, MerCAP would continue after the demonstration expired in June, 2000. A March 27 memo from Katie Roeser, Merced County Human Services Agency, to the Merced County school superintendents summarized the agreements reached.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after that memo the superintendents met and, with the exception of one District Superintendent (Los Banos), agreed to the stipulations reached by the Oversight Committee. The Los Banos Superintendent talked it over after returning to his district, and later gave his support as well.

*Other issues confronted.* During these Year 3 discussions a number of other issues surfaced which reflect the types of coordination and collaboration concerns that are raised by MerCAP. These include:

- The need for better attendance software,
- The need for schools to develop a better system for sharing information when a child moves within the county,
- The need for greater efforts to match MerCAP requirements with attendance procedures for all students,
- Continued concern by schools over the accuracy of HSA lists,
- Continued concern by HSA over the lack of understanding of basic MerCAP procedures by many school staff,
- Difficulty in implementing HSA's desire to use the sanctions as a trigger for additional referrals or support services for MerCAP families, and
- Concern by all parties that the MerCAP workload is putting an undue strain on staff.

Overall, the level of coordination and cooperation between schools and the Human Services Agency tended to improve as the project developed over time. Of those school personnel surveyed at the spring area meetings in 1999, 60% agreed that the collaboration and coordination between the schools and the Human Services Agency is healthy and productive. A representative of the Human Services Agency noted,

“MerCAP got a dialogue going in this county between schools and welfare. I came to realize that children are what both of our programs are about, so why on earth don't we have more connections? Even though sometimes our relationship is antagonistic, we have developed some very good relationships.”

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<sup>2</sup>The agreement states that MerCAP will continue in its current form in Year 4, with two exceptions: 1) that the evaluation and its attendant reporting will not continue, and 2) that MerCAP will no longer sanction the child's portion of the welfare grant. Instead sanctions will be applied only to the parent's portion of the grant, as stipulated under CalWORKs. The March 27 memo further noted that other modifications to the MerCAP program might be considered after receipt of the final evaluation report. It also noted that the Oversight Committee recommends that school districts hold discussions on further ways to improve attendance for all children, including sharing the best practices for working with the District Attorney on attendance problems.

## Cost of Implementation

A key distinction in the implementation of welfare school attendance programs is whether the primary burden of monitoring attendance falls on schools or the welfare department. In MerCAP, schools played the primary monitoring role. The largest cost of starting and maintaining this program was the time of administrative personnel (principals, vice-principals) and clerical staff (secretaries, attendance clerks) to flag TANF students, monitor attendance, keep careful records and take prescribed actions promptly. These are not tasks easily accomplished during normal school hours, given the near constant state of interruption that characterizes school offices, and chronic understaffing.

Throughout all three years of the demonstration, most schools reported that the time required to implement the program—adapting computer software, updating TANF student rolls, keeping on top of absences, sending letters, and meeting with parents—was overly burdensome. For example, only 1 in 3 of those surveyed at the school area meetings in Year 2 felt that the time that is required for school personnel to implement MerCAP was reasonable. Most schools felt “always behind” with MerCAP record keeping, since clerks have little or no time to attend to it.

Based on the time estimates provided in both our Year 1 site visits and Year 3 survey of school administrators, MerCAP cost an average school about .20 FTE to implement, with the bulk of the work falling on attendance clerks and/or clerical staff (see School Administrator Survey, Appendix D). Time estimates varied significantly across school sites. Efficiency was higher where attendance software could be readily adapted to MerCAP requirements, where attendance clerks<sup>3</sup> were well informed and committed to the program, or where uniform attendance policies for all students were put in place. The workload is higher at the middle school and high school levels, where the numbers of students and student absences are higher. No discernible differences are apparent in the time estimates for schools based on the number of years they have been in the MerCAP program.

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 staff with attendance responsibilities. Schools coped as best they could. In some cases this meant that school personnel stayed late or came 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 sending absence letters and holding conferences. Often such schools failed to provide all the reports necessary for the evaluation. From their perspective, this was understandably a lower priority.

Eventually, many schools began moving or considering a move to integrate MerCAP-like policies and procedures with their attendance policy for all students, which could save the time required by dual record keeping systems. In addition, many schools realized that extra time taken to improve attendance for all students could pay dividends given the new school funding formulas. From a school perspective, it is this broader cost-benefit calculation that is becoming more important.

The program was also relatively staff-intensive for the Human Services Agency, which required 1-2 FTE to manage the program. The lead person for the agency devoted almost 100% of her time to MerCAP during the start up period and through Year 1. After that, MerCAP took about 25% of her time,

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<sup>3</sup> In some schools the school secretary doubles as the attendance clerk. In others the attendance duties are handled by a separate staff person, who may also have other responsibilities. In some small schools, the school administrator takes on the task of monitoring attendance.

plus the time of a full-time eligibility staff worker. The load on the staff worker increased as the program moved to full implementation during Year 3. Staff reported handling 50-75 sanctions per month during the peak periods. As one noted, “If I have 50 sanctions I get 50 phone calls. During the period of time I am sending out notices, I get 18-20 phone calls per day.”

## **Support for MerCAP among Selected Stakeholders**

The basic idea behind MerCAP—parents have a responsibility to get their children to school—is widely supported. Because of this, MerCAP is popular among the majority of stakeholders, including parents, school personnel, and representatives of the Human Services Agency. Stakeholder support weakens when the focus is placed on the significant implementation burdens resulting from MerCAP, and questions about its efficacy. Despite this, a majority of persons interviewed supported continuing MerCAP after the demonstration period.

Throughout the project, a few persons expressed varying degrees of opposition to MerCAP, citing its low ratio of benefits to costs, potential (or actual) mistreatment of parents during the implementation of some procedures, and the superiority of other approaches to meeting MerCAP’s goals. There was no active effort during MerCAP to involve parents or other community organizations in considering how the program might better achieve its intended outcomes.

The following is a more detailed description of various stakeholder opinions:

*School personnel.* School personnel support MerCAP, but often with ambivalence. This is not too surprising given that schools have born the heaviest implementation costs. Despite this, two-thirds of school representatives surveyed in spring 2000 (see Appendix D) favored continuing the program in something like its current form. Only a few school representatives openly questioned the value of the program.

School personnel appreciate having a program that provides real consequences for families. In effect, the sanction threat can replace the past pattern of relying solely on repeated exhortation to parents by school officials. They appreciate having the Human Services Agency provide reliable backup (via the sanction) to their communication with parents, which is unlike their typical experiences with the School Attendance Review Board or District Attorney.

Only 14% of the school administrators surveyed in spring 2000 believed that MerCAP undercut their relationship with parents. Most indicated that increased communications and conferences were good opportunities for working with the parents on problem solving. A few noted that the tone of the original 5-day and 7-day letters caused some defensiveness among parents, but that was fixed by re-writing the letters. One administrator noted, “Some parents resent any efforts to make their children attend school. MerCAP is a convenient excuse for parents who would complain anyway.” Only one administrator expressed a strong opinion that MerCAP really undermined the school’s efforts to work with parents.

When asked in spring 2000 to comment on whether MerCAP should continue past the demonstration period, or be altered in some fashion, school administrators offered the following comments. One said, “If I had to choose I would continue MerCAP as is. There’s too much invested in it at this point to just quit.” Another noted, “I like the program, but it takes so much time I’m not sure it can be continued as is.” “There’s got to be a better way that doesn’t require so much paper work,” according to one principal. Another pointed out, “I wouldn’t want it to continue as is, but would be willing to work with Human Services if a better method were developed.”

Three or four administrators commented that they wanted to involve a successful SARB program (or work with the DA) in conjunction with MerCAP, or to continue work with case workers and meld the TANF list into the school's overall attendance program. The most critical comments were offered by one administrator who summed up that school's experience with MerCAP and hopes for the future, "I like the program in theory, but in practice it hasn't been effective. Notifying Human Services has not been effective. Too much time for too little return in our experience."

*MerCAP parents.* Most MerCAP parents support the basic idea of the program, expressing appreciation for the fact that it provides them with additional leverage in encouraging their children to attend school regularly. For example, of the 204 parents who responded to this question in our April 2000 interviews (see Appendix C), only 3 had "mostly negative" feelings about MerCAP, and only 11 had "mixed feelings." Otherwise, parents were mostly positive, commenting that "anything that can help get children to school is a good idea." This included two of four parents whose welfare checks were cut due to MerCAP. The other two had mixed feelings about the program.

These interview findings are consistent with the findings of the focus groups held with MerCAP parents in Years 1 and 2. Those parents generally supported the idea of the program, viewing MerCAP as a tool to use with parents, not children. Many parents said that they welcomed having a program to help motivate them to get their children to school. They indicated that MerCAP gave them more backbone when dealing with the excuses their children sometimes offer.

One parent noted, "I see the children 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 children cleaner and happier." Another commented, "I tell my child 'You get five sick days during the year. Is today going to be one of them?'"

A few parents questioned the basic fairness of the program, noting that many non-cash aid children had worse attendance than their own. As one stated, "It's like punishing everyone because a few have a problem. They should just focus the program on those people." Another noted, "There are parents who don't care whether their children go to school or not. For us who do care, I don't think we should have to go through the hassle."

*Human Services Agency.* The Human Services Agency welcomed the chance to be responsive to an initiative coming from the County Board of Supervisors, and saw benefits from the new relationship with schools. On the other hand, agency representatives, like schools, had ambivalent feelings about MerCAP due to the time required and questions about the program's efficacy.

In interviews with six HSA personnel in April 2000, we asked each, "On balance, was MerCAP worth the effort?" Three of the six said "definitely yes," two were mostly positive but indicated that it was "hard to say," and one said "definitely not." Positive comments included:

"I think it got a dialogue going in this county between schools and welfare that is appropriate. Like anything else, it's difficult because it's breaking down the territorial barriers that are there... There shouldn't be this hush-hush about who is on welfare. It was worth it. It definitely didn't save money, but that was never the goal."

"I think the general population's perception is that welfare recipients do not force their children to attend school; that welfare recipients stay home. Therefore, it's easier just to let the children sleep in, or do whatever they want to. And not go to school. I think overall MerCAP is going to

change the perceptions of the Board of Supervisors and say, ‘Hey, our welfare people do attend [school].’”

“Oh, definitely worth it. It’s timely, it went hand in hand with welfare reform, and it’s exactly in line with the vision of where we wanted to go in the county.”

More ambivalent comments to the question “Has MerCAP been worth it?” included:

“Ah, that’s a tough call...I think it’s been a success in a way; particularly for the folks down in the more technical areas. We’ve passed all the barriers that keep this from happening...paper work, getting the data, getting people to independently work together, getting the tools to make this 3-year rollout. The second year was better than the first and the third year was even slicker...anecdotally we’ve gotten a lot of feedback from schools that this is healthy to interdict some of the known problem families—to get the children to school. So my feeling is we spend a lot of time and paper work, but if it helps a few children to do better, it’s worth the hassle.”

“You know, I think that’s more of a question that you would have to give to the schools, because I don’t see the change in attendance... I notice that it’s usually the same clients over and over again, and it doesn’t change those clients, so it has no effect on them.”

One staff person was more critical when asked if MerCAP was worth it:

“No, because we haven’t solved anything. I don’t think it was a problem resolution issue. I think it caused a lot of work and yielded few results. I don’t know how significant the attendance increases are, but I think we had the opportunity to help a lot more people than we did. I would have liked to see a social worker assigned in addition to the MerCAP eligibility worker.”

### Parent-School Relations under MerCAP

Along with the primary goal of increasing the attendance of TANF students, one of the other major outcomes sought by MerCAP was to increase the involvement of TANF parents with their children’s schools. Increased involvement was expected to lead to better student achievement outcomes, and also to enable schools to provide families with referrals to community resources that address the underlying causes of absenteeism. In general, MerCAP has increased the amount of contact between TANF parents and schools, 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. A few schools also used the occasion of parent conferences to make referrals to community services. Overall, however, MerCAP has not increased the provision of referrals or other supportive services to TANF families. Nor did we hear any mention from schools or parents we interviewed of any effort made under MerCAP to involve parents in helping their children improve their school achievement.

It is important to keep in mind that most TANF parents already feel quite involved with their children’s schools, and are mostly positive about their experiences. Of the TANF parents we interviewed in spring 2000, 87% reported attending teacher conferences, 29% go to other school events, and 12% help out with school events. Just under 90% of the parents could accurately estimate the number of absences their child had accrued (see Appendix C). In addition, 94% of these parents reported overall positive feelings about their interaction with the school (in general, not with reference to MerCAP). If anything, these data raise the potential that a sanction-oriented program like MerCAP might sour existing good relationships between schools and parents, but that does not seem to have been the case in most instances.

Very few TANF students reach the attendance triggers that would prompt letters or conferences. While nearly half of the parents interviewed reported that the school called them whenever their children were absent, only 13 families—6% of the parents interviewed—had received an absence letter, and all of the 13 received more than one. Of the 13, only 10 had met with school authorities. Of the 10, three families said they were offered help or referred to a source of assistance. Most (8 of 10) of these families said they felt good about the meeting, and all said their children attended more regularly after that. Four of these families had had their welfare checks cut, and the three who commented about it indicated that this was a real hardship for the family. It appears that the required action protocol applies to a very small percentage of MerCAP families, and that in two out of three of these applicable cases there is no need to request sanctions.

We received somewhat conflicting data regarding the degree to which the MerCAP procedures were being effectively communicated to parents. On the one hand, 83% of school administrators said they believed that parents were “getting the message” and that attendance was improving. On the other hand, 33% of parents surveyed reported they did not know what MerCAP was, and the HSA eligibility worker noted that most parents who called after being notified of a sanction were confused. This apparent discrepancy may actually reflect the reality that the attendance problems that most concern school personnel tend to be isolated in a few “problem families.” Of the administrators we surveyed, 97% agreed that attendance problems are concentrated in a small number of families for whom “nothing works.” Administrators who experienced a positive result with even one or two of these families under MerCAP procedures were no doubt impressed, regardless of the program’s broader efficacy.

A key dynamic under MerCAP is the nature of what happens during parent conferences, and the feelings these engender. We received mixed responses when probing this topic. Of the school representatives surveyed at the spring 1999 area meetings, 40% believed MerCAP was improving parent school relations and 27% believed it was not. School personnel confirm what we have heard from parents, many of whom appreciate MerCAP because it “backs them up” in the task of motivating their children to attend school. A number of school personnel insist that MerCAP “just gives them another tool—hitting them in the pocketbook” in dealing with parents, and that relationships are essentially the same as they have always been.

Schools reported that parents are not happy to be called in to school, but most respond positively to the schools’ efforts to increase student 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 children 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 children, 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 something for which the parent is solely accountable.

Some parents felt mistrusted or mistreated by schools. For example, we heard complaints, some quite angry, from parents who had received 5- or 7-absence letters despite having previously provided doctors’ 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?” 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.”

Doctors' notes play a key role in the relationship between parents and schools. The notes provide a way to give the policy "teeth." However, many families have difficulties obtaining notes for routine illnesses. On the other hand, schools believe some doctors are too ready to sign notes excusing absences. A few schools have school nurses and ask parents who are in doubt about whether their children should be at school to bring the child and let the nurse make the determination. This is especially helpful when families have limited access to doctors.

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 notes from a doctor. She was eventually reimbursed, but says the schools never called her 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. 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 do not understand the meaning of terms like "sanctions," "unexcused absences," or "good cause."

Overall, however, parents had mostly positive feelings about MerCAP, and the program has certainly not created any noticeable backlash or controversy in the community. Parents say that anything that can help get children to school regularly is a good idea. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that MerCAP has had a minimal impact on the level of involvement of TANF parents with their children's schools.

### Causes of Absenteeism

One goal of the MerCAP evaluation was to learn more about the reasons for attendance problems, and to identify effective school or community strategies for encouraging attendance. Based on our interviews with parents and school personnel, it is clear that the usual reason for absences is illness, with the other major reason being medical and dental appointments. This finding is consistent with previous research (Fein, Wang, and Schofield, 1999), which has found health issues to be the major cause of student absences, not truancy.

One regular cause of absence in Merced County is head lice.<sup>4</sup> In cases of persistent absence due to head lice, parental negligence is sometimes the issue. Cases where parents simply "do not care" enough to insure that their child is attending school regularly appear to occur infrequently, but these cases often have a high visibility for the schools who must deal with them.

Frequent absences from school may also be explained by the student's experience with school. We asked TANF parents if their children enjoyed school and how they were doing in school. Their responses, arrayed by whether their children had been absent more or less than 10 days, are shown in Table C-7, Appendix C. The percentages of children whose parents believed they did not enjoy school, did not get along well with others, and did not do well in school were higher in the "Absent more than 10 days" than in the "less than 10 days" columns. The direction is reversed for those who enjoyed school, got along with others, and did well in school.

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<sup>4</sup> The problem is of sufficient magnitude that the County developed a "lice patrol" program featuring a mobile van and volunteer "nit pickers."

Other reasons parents suggested for why children are absent include:

- Problems with homework or children doing poorly in school;
- Children feeling picked on by other children;
- Problems with their teacher, particularly feeling embarrassed by the teacher;
- Problems “fitting in” due to dress or other social pressures;
- Independence/rebellion in older children;
- Logistical issues associated with single parent families;
- Family conflict issues (especially lack of support from divorced spouse, or alcohol, drugs, etc.); and
- Either the parent or the child being too lazy to get up in the morning.

In our survey of school personnel at the 1999 spring area meetings, the top three reasons given for why families have problems with attendance were 1) routine health problems, 2) lice, and 3) parents who either allow absences or are incapable of managing their children’s attendance. Issues related to children liking school, getting along with peers, or being irresponsible were rated considerably lower as factors. During the meetings, extended trips to Mexico were frequently mentioned as a cause of absences. Children being bored with the curriculum, especially at the high school level, was also mentioned.

Cases of excessive absences without good cause are particularly rare at the elementary and middle school levels, and occur not only in families that receive cash assistance. 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. On the other hand, the threat of MerCAP sanctions is enough to change attendance behavior in only a subset of cases.

Most schools now have regular routines to support good school attendance. Common elements include rewarding good attendance, calling the homes of absent students, monitoring absences regularly, and involving students in engaging and fun activities.

It is worth emphasizing that the MerCAP sanction alone does not provide leverage on the most frequently reported 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 it doesn’t guarantee that families can access the health-related services they need. Inadequate health-related resources or limited understanding of options limit access. By contrast, programs such as Healthy Start or the Heritage/Lodi Memorial Health Center, which locate health services and resources on school sites, have proven effective in promoting both better health and improved school attendance. These collaborative programs provide morning sick call screening, insure immunizations are complete, reduce the length of time required for head lice absences, and make referrals for chronic illness.

## IV. IMPACT STUDY FINDINGS

### Introduction

The following section of this report describes the major findings from our impact study. The analysis takes into account data collected for school years 1996-97 (the pre-MerCAP baseline year) through 1999-2000 (the third and final year of the MerCAP pilot). Statistical details for the analyses in this section are reported in Appendix E.

In analyzing the data we sought to answer four primary questions:

1. Did the attendance patterns of TANF students differ significantly from those of their non-TANF peers?
2. Did participating in MerCAP improve the attendance of TANF students?
3. What changes in overall school attendance patterns were observed over the three years of MerCAP?
4. Were the attendance rates of TANF students related to their school achievement?

Our major finding, supported by a variety of statistical tests, is that MerCAP's overall impact on TANF student attendance has been marginal. Even where statistically significant gains in attendance were discovered, the actual gains in attendance are quite small. In addition, the data reveal that TANF students on the whole do not have excessive absences compared to their non-TANF peers. Finally, there is no evidence that increases in attendance are linked to better school achievement. Taken as a whole, these empirical findings call into question the main assumptions undergirding school welfare attendance policies, and the efficacy of a sanction program in meeting the goals of increased attendance and achievement.

In considering the statistical information presented below, it is helpful to keep in mind that both overall attendance and TANF student attendance are quite high, creating a ceiling effect on improvements. For example, in all three MerCAP cohorts, the mean percentage actual attendance for TANF students in the year prior to MerCAP was around .945, equivalent to an attendance record of 10 absences in a 180 day school year (irrespective of whether those absences were excused). By far the largest increase in attendance found in any statistical test that we ran was 1.4%, which is equivalent to 2.5 school days in a 180-day school year. In most cases, increases or decreases in attendance amount to about 1 school day per year, per child. Changes at this level of magnitude are not likely to be very significant in altering a student's school experience.

#### **Question 1. Do the attendance patterns of TANF students differ significantly from those of their non-TANF peers?**

The purpose of this analysis was to test the assumption that TANF student absences are excessive compared to their non-TANF peers. To accomplish this we collected from each grade (and track, where applicable) in participating MerCAP schools the number of days of actual attendance and of possible attendance for **all** and **TANF** students. An average percentage actual attendance was calculated for all students (**PAA**), TANF students (**MPAA**), and non-TANF students (**NPAA**) for each grade and track. To rule out the effect of grade and school as causal factors in attendance, we compared TANF students with non-TANF students in the same schools and grades.

*Overall finding:* On average, TANF students had slightly lower attendance than their non-TANF peers during all three years of MerCAP. However, the largest difference for any year is only eight-tenths of one percent (.008), less than 2 days absence per child. In some schools TANF student attendance is higher than non-TANF attendance. The data are consistent with school reports that relatively few TANF

students reached the attendance triggers that prompt letters or conferences. School administrators were initially surprised at which students were or were not on their TANF lists. Overall, our data contradict the assumption that TANF students as a group have excessive absences.

*Test 1:* We compared the mean attendance of TANF and non-TANF students, using paired t-tests for each year of MerCAP. Each “case” represented a single grade in a school or track. For 1997-98 there were 76 cases, in 1998-99 there were 207 cases, and in 1999-2000 there were 292 cases.

*Result:* During all three years, TANF students had slightly lower attendance than non-TANF students in the same school and grade. While the differences are statistically significant, the largest difference in mean attendance is .008 (eight-tenths of one percent). It is possible that a few TANF students with very low attendance skew the figures, since the TANF population is smaller than the non-TANF and thus more easily influenced by a few outlying cases. Table 6 shows the comparisons.

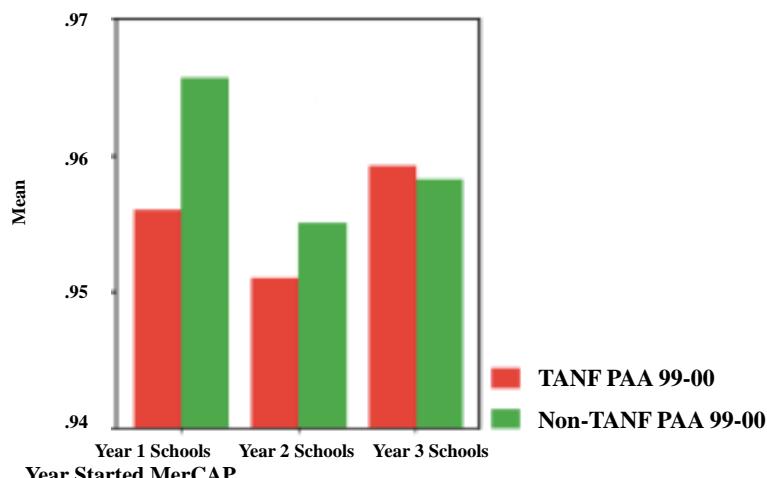
Table 6. Comparison of TANF and Non-TANF Percentage Actual Attendance in School Years 1997-98 through 1999-2000

School Year	TANF PAA	Non-TANF PAA
1997-98 (N=76)	.950	.954
1998-99 (N=207)	.951	.959
1999-2000 (N=292)	.955	.959

*Test 2:* We compared the mean TANF and non-TANF percentage actual attendance for 1999-2000 for each MerCAP cohort to see if longer exposure to MerCAP protocols improves attendance.

*Result:* Non-TANF attendance was higher than TANF attendance in 1999-2000 for schools that began MerCAP in Year 1 (Non-TANF PAA=.965 and TANF PAA=.956– $t=$ , 4.187, sig. .000) and Year 2 (Non-TANF PAA=.955 and TANF PAA=.951– $t=$ , 1.819, n.s.). But in Year 3 schools TANF attendance was slightly higher than non-TANF attendance (.959 vs. .958– $t=$ .628, n.s.). Once again, the magnitude of the difference in mean attendance is quite small in each case, never higher than .009 (nine-tenths of one percent). These data (Figure 1) contradict what one would expect if continuing exposure to MerCAP was associated with TANF students doing better in comparison to their non-TANF peers.

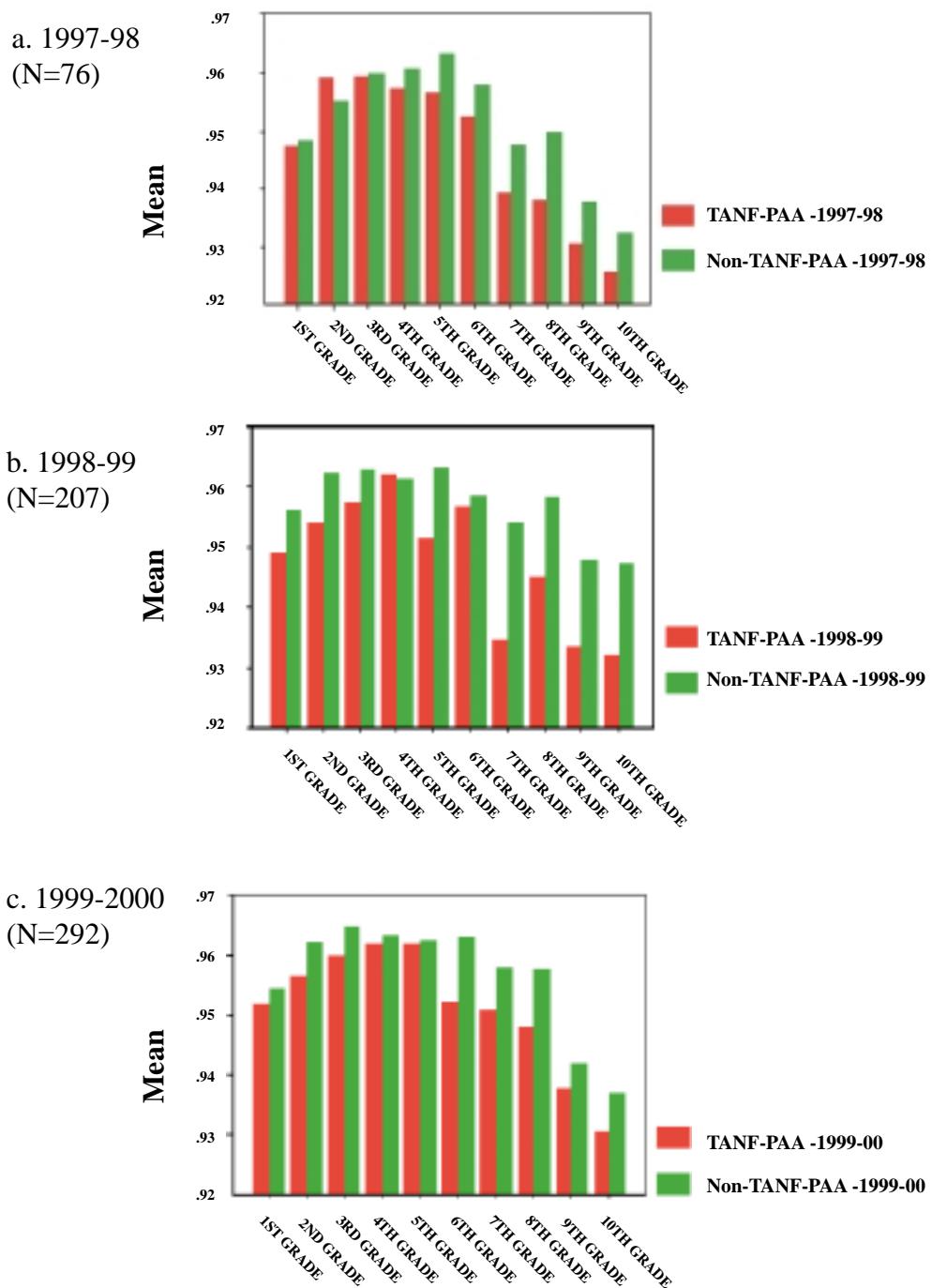
Figure 1. Comparison of TANF and Non-TANF Attendance for 1999-2000 by MerCAP Cohort



*Test 3:* To see if the difference in TANF and non-TANF attendance patterns are magnified as students get older we compared TANF and non-TANF attendance by grade for each year of MerCAP.

*Result:* The comparisons are shown in the three graphs of Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c below. In all three years, TANF student attendance tends to lag farther behind non-TANF attendance in higher grades.

Figure 2. Mean TANF and Non-TANF PAA by Grade and Year

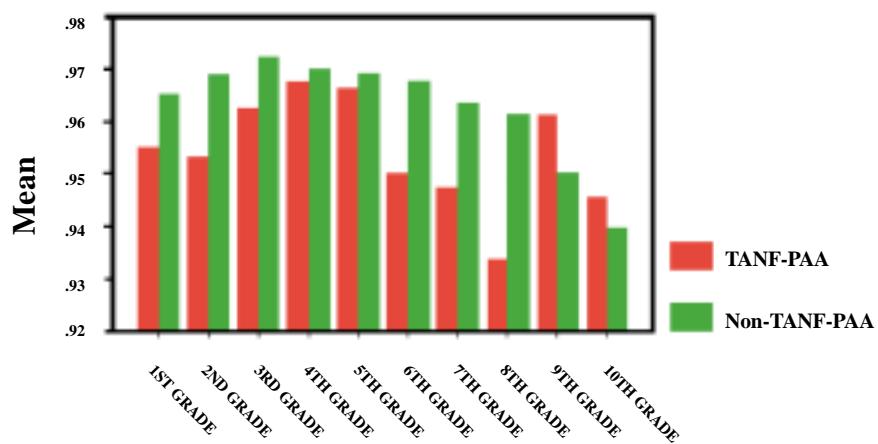


*Test 4:* To see if the pattern identified in test 3 was similar in all MerCAP cohorts, we compared 1999-2000 TANF and non-TANF attendance by MerCAP cohort and grade.

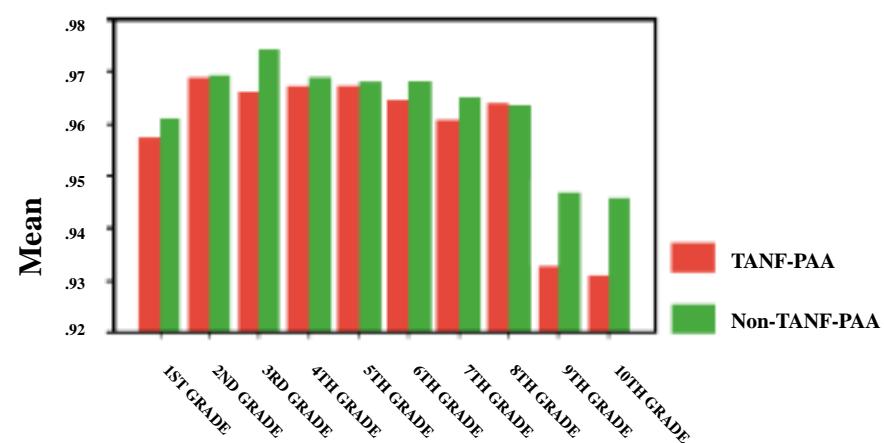
*Result:* These data are less conclusive about the effect of maturation on the comparative attendance patterns of TANF and non-TANF students. (See Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c.) Year 2 schools demonstrate most clearly the pattern found above, with the gap between TANF and non-TANF attendance widening in upper grades. Year 1 schools seem to follow the pattern of lower TANF attendance as students advance through the grades, but only until students reach 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, when TANF students have better attendance than their non-TANF peers. Year 3 schools include no 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grades, making it harder to discern the effect of age on attendance.

Figure 3. Mean TANF and Non-TANF 1999-2000 PAA by Grade and Year for Schools Starting MerCAP

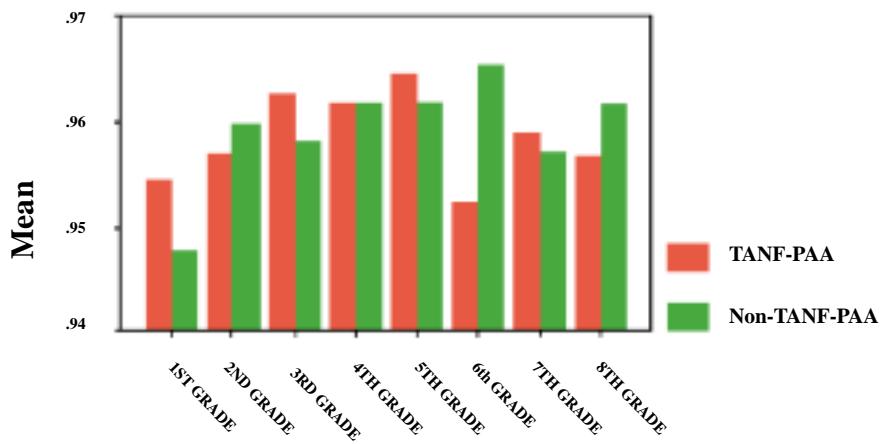
a. Schools Starting MerCAP in 1997-98



b. Schools Starting MerCAP in 1998-1999



### c. Schools Starting MerCAP in 1999-2000



#### **Question 2. Does participating in MerCAP improve the attendance of TANF students?**

A basic objective of the evaluation was to ascertain whether MerCAP had the desired effect of improving TANF student attendance.

*Overall finding.* Statistical tests on both aggregate and individual attendance data offer no conclusive evidence that MerCAP improves TANF student attendance. Even the few tests that find a statistically significant increase in attendance show very marginal substantive gains at best. This finding contradicts the expressed view of school administrators, many of whom believe that MerCAP improved TANF student attendance. The discrepancy may be explained by administrators focusing on the small subset of TANF students with excessive absences, some of whom improved their attendance as a result of MerCAP procedures. The ceiling effect caused by the good overall attendance of most TANF students means that the MerCAP “successes” that loom large in the eyes of administrators are marginal when looked at in the context of the entire TANF population.

*Test 1 (Individual):* We compared the mean attendance for TANF students in the individual sample by comparing each MerCAP cohort of students in their pre-MerCAP year and their first year in MerCAP.

*Result:* The mean attendance of individual TANF students in the Year 1 MerCAP cohort (N=219) increased from .944 in 1996-97 to .952 in 1997-98 and is statistically significant. The mean attendance of individual TANF students in the Year 2 MerCAP cohort (N=244) decreased from .945 in 1997-98 to .938 in 1998-99, and is not statistically significant. The mean attendance of individual TANF students in the Year 3 MerCAP cohort (N=241) increased from .946 in 1998-99 to .960 in 1999-2000, and is statistically significant. Keep in mind that even the somewhat larger gain in Merced City schools during Year 3 (1.4%), represents only 2 - 3 days of student attendance during a 180 day school year.

*Test 2 (Individual):* The mean baseline PAA of the sample students in each MerCAP cohort was ~.945, the equivalent of 10 absences per year. This is a conservative estimate of the number of absences which might trigger serious school attendance action, since presumably many absences would be excused for good cause. We then looked at changes in PAA for students whose PAA in the year before or the year after their school started MerCAP was less than .945. We were looking for the net increase or decrease in the number of these relatively low-attending students who move above or below the .945 threshold during their first year in MerCAP. A cross-tabulation of changes in PAA appears in Table 7.

Table 7. Cross-tabulation of Baseline PAA status with Year 1 PAA status

Baseline PAA status	Year 1 PAA status		Total
	below .945 PAA	.945 PAA or higher	
below .945 PAA	162	114	276
.945 PAA or higher	78	405	483
Total	240	519	759

Of the 276 students who had a PAA less than .945 in the year before starting MerCAP, about 41% (114) increased their attendance to at least .945 in the first year of MerCAP. The other 59% (162) did not reach that level of attendance. Of the 240 students whose PAA was less than .945 in the first year of MerCAP, 32.5% (78) had higher attendance in the prior year. While the differences between observed and expected frequencies are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 147.044$ , 1 d.f., sig. .000), the net increase in number of students who reached the .945 level is only 36 (about 5% of the 759 students in this analysis). Data to indicate whether positive (or negative) changes are maintained are not available. A PAA of .945 is, of course, only an arbitrary level of acceptable attendance. These data suggest that even among students with relatively more absences per year, the MerCAP “success” rate is not high.

*Test 3 (Individual):* We compared the average percentage actual attendance of sample students in 1996-97 (the year before MerCAP started) with the mean of students’ PAAs for all of the three subsequent years for which data exist.

*Result:* There was a marginal but statistically significant average gain (.0068) for the 429 students in this t-test. The generalizability (external validity) of results from this small select sub-sample is questionable. When comparing means by “grade in 1996-97,” there was only one grade (4<sup>th</sup>) for which the change (a slight drop) in attendance was statistically significant. Otherwise changes (mostly increases) were not statistically significant, due to the smaller number of students in each comparison.

*Test 4 (School-level):* A univariate analysis of variance was conducted on the school-level TANF PAA for all schools in 1999-2000 to determine the effect, if any, of the number of years schools were in MerCAP. This was to test the hypothesis that TANF student attendance would increase as MerCAP became more routine and established.

*Result:* As previously demonstrated when comparing differences between mean PAAs of TANF and non-TANF students (Question 1, Test 2), the effect of MerCAP cohort is not statistically significant.

### **Question 3. What changes, if any, in overall school attendance (PAA) have been noted over the years of the MerCAP experiment?**

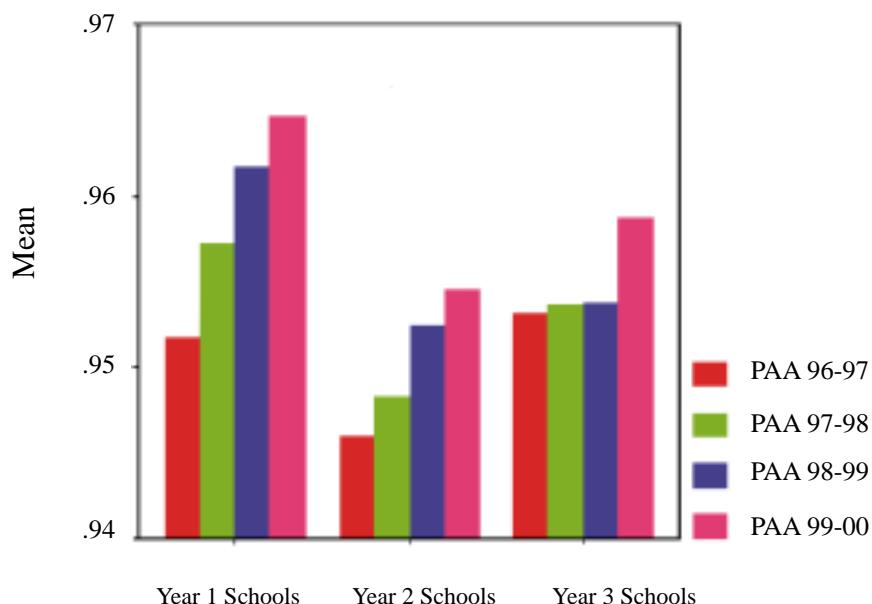
Our Year 2 report found evidence that the overall school attendance in both Year 1 and Year 2 schools rose by a small but statistically significant amount during the first year they were in MerCAP. We re-

tested that finding in Year 3 to see if the same pattern was discernible when the experience of Year 3 schools was taken into account.

*Overall finding.* In their first year in MerCAP, overall attendance in each of the three MerCAP cohorts of schools entering the program increased significantly. From interviews with school administrators and attendance staff, this somewhat unexpected result seems to result from increased focus on attendance of *all students* as a result of schools' devoting time and attention to MerCAP procedures. To consider the alternative explanation that SB 727 (school funding based on actual rather than apportioned attendance) was responsible for the increase, we examined the attendance patterns in Merced City Schools. Those schools, which did not enter MerCAP until Year 3, showed no change in attendance from 1997-98 to 1998-99, despite the implementation of SB 727 in the 1998-99 school year. The following year, their first in MerCAP, overall school attendance rates increased significantly.

*Test.* The general linear model using a repeated measures analysis for the schools' Percentage Actual Attendance (PAA) for school years 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99, and 1999-2000 was run, with schools grouped by the years that they started MerCAP. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Schools' Percentage Actual Attendance for School Years 1996-97 through 1999-2000, by MerCAP Cohort



*Results:* The picture after the final year of MerCAP is very similar to that at the end of the second year. Overall, there is an increase in PAA between baseline year 1996-97 and the final year of MerCAP, 1999-2000. This increase, however, varies by the three MerCAP cohorts (the years in which different groups of schools started).

- For schools starting in the first year of the program (1997-98), there has been an increase in attendance each year. The differences between 1998-99 and 1999-2000 are not statistically significant, but other contrasts are.
- For schools starting in 1998-99, there was a statistically significant increase in attendance the first year of the program, and an increase (non-significant) in their second year.
- For schools starting in the final year of MerCAP (the Merced City Schools), there had been little change in attendance between 1996-97 and 1998-99, the year before they started. Attendance increased significantly in their first MerCAP year, 1999-2000.

#### **Question 4. Are the attendance rates of TANF students related to their school achievement?**

Part of the theory underlying MerCAP is that school attendance is related to school achievement, such that improved attendance will lead to increased learning, more likelihood of graduating from high school, and better long-term economic prospects. The MerCAP data allow us to test this assumption. On the advice of school officials and education experts, we used percent actual attendance as our measure of attendance and the normal curve equivalent (NCE) of the reading comprehension component of SAT9 scores as our measure of achievement.

*Overall finding.* Previous research has raised doubts about the causal link between school attendance and school achievement, with a small number of studies finding such a link (Lamdin, 1996) and many studies disputing it (Kochan, 1996; National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994; Wise, 1994). While exposure to the content of what is to be learned is viewed as a necessary condition for learning, school attendance is not seen as a sufficient condition for achievement. Other hypothesized factors include teacher expectations of student performance (Phillips, 1997); obstacles to learning (e.g., poor health, poor nutrition, poor self-image) embedded in the absenteeism of high-risk students (New Orleans Public Schools, 1994; Lamdin, 1996); special attention to development of student talent (McPartland et al., 1996); the quality of instruction (student motivation); and students' test-taking proficiency (including English language familiarity and assimilation of the culture to which school tests are relevant).

Our analysis used SAT 9 reading comprehension scores as the least objectionable of available measures of school achievement (see Section V, Suggestions for Future Research). We found no significant correlation between this measure of achievement and attendance at either individual or school district levels. It should be noted that small differences in school attendance are not likely to impact student achievement no matter how it might be measured.

*Test 1.* Using the individual TANF student data, we calculated correlation coefficients to test whether a relationship exists between attendance and achievement. We compared 1997-98 attendance and the 1998 SAT9 NCE reading comprehension score (N=606), 1998-99 attendance and the 1999 SAT9 score (N=710), and 1999-2000 attendance and the 2000 NCE reading comprehension score (N= 621).

Table 8. Coefficients of Correlation between Attendance & Achievement Measures

		SAT9 NCE, 1998	SAT9 NCE, 1999	SAT9 NCE, 2000
PAA 97-98	Pearson Correlation	.025	-.066	.029
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.537	.114	.522
	N	606	583	499
PAA 98-99	Pearson Correlation	.055	.012	-.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.185	.743	.251
	N	583	710	595
PAA 99-00	Pearson Correlation	-.004	-.012	-.051
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.924	.768	.206
	N	531	641	621

None of the correlation coefficients is statistically significant.

*Result.* No significant correlation was detected between individual attendance and reading comprehension scores in any of the three years of MerCAP (Table 8).

*Test 2.* Using the individual TANF student data, we calculated correlation coefficients to test whether a relationship exists between the number of years in MerCAP and the NCE SAT9 reading scores. If MerCAP was working to improve achievement, we would expect years in MerCAP to be positively correlated with those scores. We tested for significant correlation in 1998 scores (N=655), 1999 scores (N=734), and 2000 scores (N=634).

Table 9. Correlation of Years in MerCAP with SAT9 Reading Comprehension NCE Scores for 1998 through 2000

Years in MerCAP		SAT9 NCE, 1998	SAT9 NCE, 1999	SAT9 NCE, 2000
	Pearson Correlation	-.038	-.020	-.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.337	.597	.234
	N	655	734	634

None of the correlation coefficients is statistically significant.

*Result.* No significant correlation was detected between years in MerCAP and NCE reading comprehension scores for any of the three years (Table 9).

*Test 3.* In this comparison we ran correlations using the average national percentile ranking (NPR) of the total reading test component of the SAT9 for each Merced County school district, and the average PAA for each district. The reading scores used are those reported on the California Department of Education web site in September 2000. Note that this test looks for a correlation across all students, TANF and non-TANF combined.

Table 10. Correlation Coefficients of Relationship Between District-level Attendance and National Percentile Ranking on Reading Component of SAT9 2000, Aggregated by Grade

		GR2 NPR	GR3 NPR	GR4 NPR	GR5 NPR	GR6 NPR	GR7 NPR	GR8 NPR
PAA9900	Pearson Corr.	.230	.184	.111	.183	.069	.077	-.053
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.374	.496	.662	.481	.799	.769	.845
	N	17	16	18	17	16	17	16

None of the correlation coefficients is statistically significant

*Result.* The district level measures also failed to find a statistically significant correlation between attendance and test scores at any grade level (Table 10).

*Test 4.* For our Year Two report we examined the relationship of student attendance and achievement with a variety of district level variables, including proportions of students in TANF, in different ethnic groups, with Limited English Proficiency (English learner), and receiving free or reduced lunch. These data showed a very complex set of relationships. There was a significant negative correlation between the income variable we used (% of students receiving free or reduced lunch) with SAT9 reading scores for grades 2 through 7. However, this measure was also highly correlated with “limited English proficiency” and “% Hispanic students,” and significantly negatively correlated with “% White students.”

Table 11. Updated Attributes (2000) of Merced County Schools Aggregated by MerCAP Cohort (Year Started MerCAP)

Attribute (updated for 2000)	MerCAP Cohort (Year Started MerCAP)		
Percentages of students	Year 1 (1997-98)	Year 2 (1998-99)	Year 3 (1999-2000)
On TANF	22%	17%	41%
Receiving free or reduced lunch	77%	63%	77%
Who are English learners (LEP)	48%	32%	39%
Classified as:			
Hispanic	60%	45%	42%
Asian	4%	4%	24%
White	27%	45%	26%
SAT9 NPR Reading Scores:			
Grade 2	30	42	33
Grade 3	26	36	28
Grade 4	26	39	29
Grade 5	25	35	30
Grade 6	25	37	37
Grade 7	29	35	34
Grade 8	30	43	41
Overall PAA 99-00	.962	.953	.957

*Source: State Department of Education*

The 2000 update of school attributes in the Impact Study (Table 11) shows that the Year 2 MerCAP cohort, in which SAT9 Reading NPR scores were highest, had the smallest proportions of students eligible for free and reduced cost lunches, and of English learners. That MerCAP cohort also had the lowest overall 1999-2000 average attendance. These data suggest that school achievement is not related to attendance but perhaps to income level (the proportions of TANF students and students receiv-

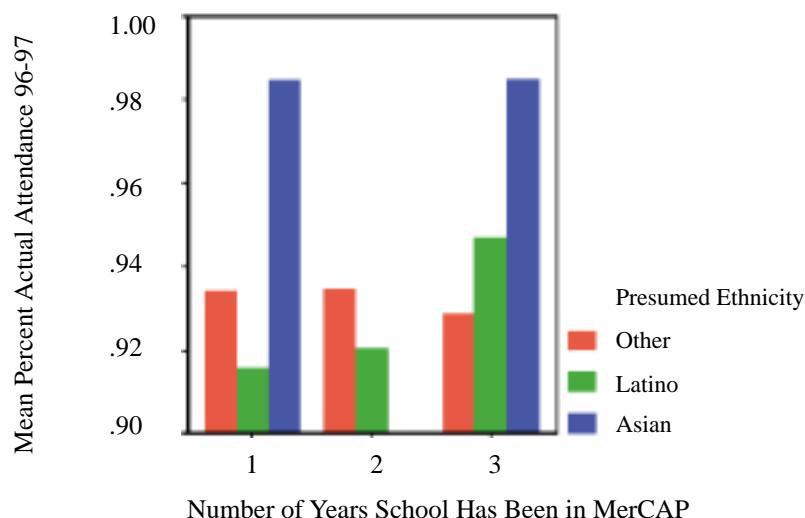
ing free or reduced cost lunch), and to English language ability. If the goal of policy intervention is to improve student achievement, it may be more effective to emphasize these factors and not attendance.

### Other Impact Study Results

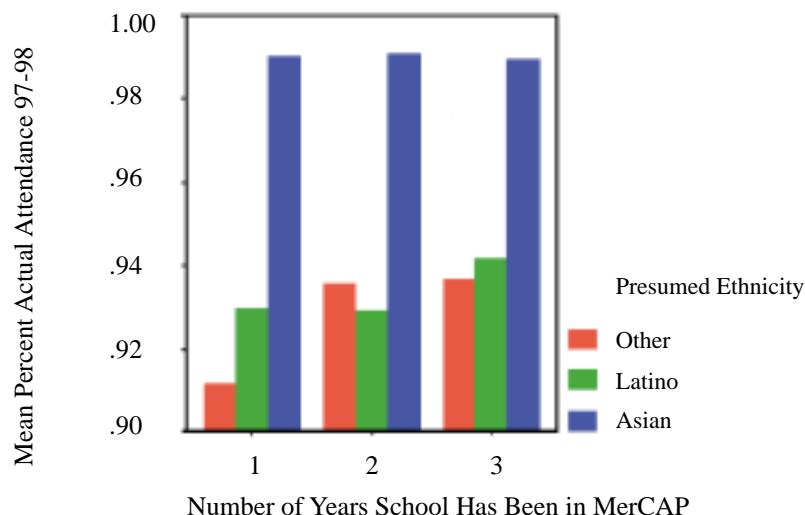
*Ethnicity and attendance.* Some studies (e.g., Rumberger, 1998) have found that attendance patterns varied by ethnicity. To test this, we compared the attendance rates of Asian, Latino, and “all other” students in our sample. We used a rough measure, presumed ethnicity, based on last names of students in our individual sample. There were 310 students (73 Asians, 130 Latinos, 107 others) for whom attendance data were available for this analysis. Figures 5a, 5b, 5c, and 5d below show the attendance patterns for each ethnic grouping, by year. The Asian students attended more regularly than any other group in all four years. The relative attendance of Latino and “other” varied by year and MerCAP cohort.

Figure 5. Presumed Ethnicity and Attendance, by School Year

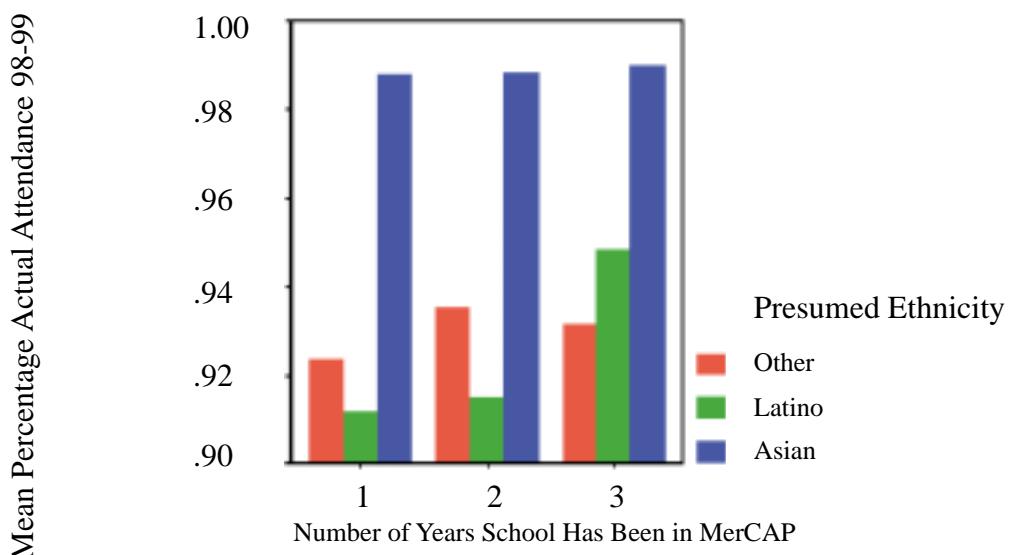
- a. 1996-97 (preMerCAP) - Note: We have no 1996-97 data for Asian students in the Year 2 MerCAP Cohort.



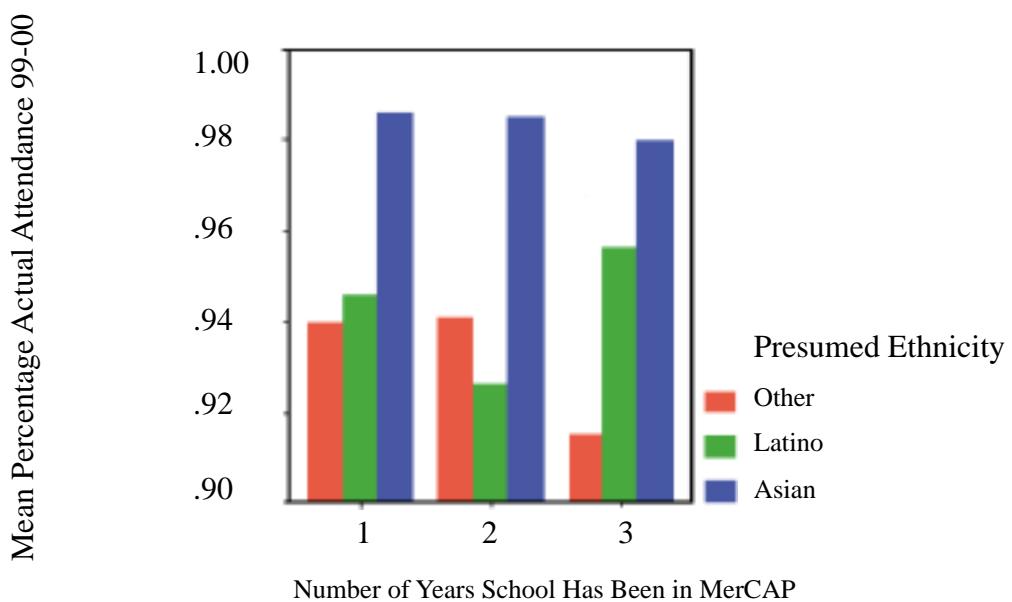
- b. 1997-98 (Year 1 of MerCAP)



c. 1998-99 (Year 2 of MerCAP)



d. 1999-00 (Year 3 of MerCAP)



*Ethnicity and achievement.* We also tested to see if there was a correlation between ethnicity and achievement. To do this we used as the dependent variable the Normal Curve Equivalent for the reading comprehension component of the SAT9 exam given in the spring of 1998, 1999, and 2000. This measure is adjusted for student grade level, which eliminates the increase in the standardized score expected to occur with age. The interaction of NCE score and presumed ethnicity is statistically significant in all three years. Figures 6a through 6c show the relationship between presumed ethnicity and reading comprehension NCE scores for each year.

NCE scores of Asian TANF students were superior to those of their Latino peers on the 1998 and 1999 SAT9 exams, but not for the 2000 SAT9 exams. “Other” students fared better than either ethnic group, possibly because they had greater familiarity with English. Except for 2000, Latinos did less well than either of the other groups, but their scores improved somewhat over the three years the tests were given.

Table 12. Mean SAT9 Reading Comprehension NCE Score by Presumed Ethnicity and Test Year

	1998	1999	2000
Other	36.7	37.5	39.3
Latino	30.3	31.5	33.6
Asian	33.9	33.5	32.7

*Achievement by student age.* The means of normal curve equivalent scores were compared across age differences in the individual TANF student sample by arraying the mean NCE score for each of the 3 years that the SAT9 tests were given in California by student grade in 1999-2000. There is no clear pattern of change in NCE for any age MerCAP cohort. In an analysis of variance, the only significant interaction effect of grade by NCE score is for the 1999-2000 scores ( $F=4.130$ , sig. .000).

One very interesting finding is that among all students in the sample, fewer took the test in 2000 than in the previous year. No one with whom we spoke when we collected the test score data mentioned this as a noteworthy phenomenon, even in the few cases when we asked why scores were missing for so many students.



## V. REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

The evidence we have collected paints a relatively clear overall picture of MerCAP. Like previous welfare reform school attendance programs, MerCAP's sanction program reflected a popular idea, but has had a very marginal impact on TANF student attendance and achievement. Family support services, an element that previous studies found to be effective in reaching program goals, were included in the original program design but not in the actual implementation of MerCAP. As a result, the program had no effective vehicle for addressing the underlying causes of absenteeism, especially health issues. MerCAP sanctions did provide a tool that was useful in convincing a subset of the minority of TANF students with high absenteeism to start attending school more regularly. Whether these marginal gains are worth the relatively high cost of implementing the program is a question that policy makers and program developers should carefully consider.

In this final section of our report we consider how various stakeholders viewed the program in retrospect, suggestions for future research in this field, and the policy implications of what was learned in this demonstration welfare school attendance program.

### **Stakeholder Reflections and Suggestions**

We asked parents, school personnel and Human Services Agency staff to reflect on what they had learned from the MerCAP experience, what changes they would suggest to better meet the goals of a program like MerCAP, and/or what they might do differently if they were starting over again. We share some of their responses here in hopes that they might inform future policies and programs, particularly efforts to implement the school attendance provisions under CalWORKs. In this section we merely report these reflections, without necessarily endorsing their suggested directions or validating the assumptions on which they rest.

Many of the suggestions we heard took the presence of welfare reform school attendance policies as a given, and then went on to offer ideas on how best to implement these policies. Among the most commonly mentioned suggestions and recommendations are the following:

- Get everyone at the table in early planning,
- Clarify the vision and communicate it up and down the chain of command in both schools and welfare departments,
- Get buy-in from school attendance staff early, and make sure they are well versed in procedures,
- Unify policies for TANF and non-TANF students to simplify record keeping and monitoring,
- Provide schools with the resources they need to take on increased attendance monitoring functions,
- Develop standard protocols to insure that attendance data follow students who move to a new school, either within or beyond a given county,
- Use absences as a trigger for social service intervention with families before sanction (i.e., use attendance monitoring as an early warning system),
- Increase resources for health-related interventions (school nurses, Healthy Start, etc.),
- Involve parents more meaningfully and communicate with them more creatively, rather than treating their role as just being to "get their kids to school."

#### Reflections from Human Services Agency Staff

The retrospective views of Human Services Agency staff focused on their partnership with schools, and their efforts to establish new ways of working with TANF families.

Regarding the schools, one agency representative noted, “I think if I started over again I would probably go back and look at the issue a little closer in regards to the schools and the impact on staffing for both the schools and us.” Another said, “We’ve learned to work with the schools... When you start working with a new group of folks you realize how little you know about their point of view, and what they do. We both touch the same families, but we don’t know anything about what each other do.”

Regarding the agency’s work with TANF families, one agency representative noted,

“I don’t think we’ve ever gotten a real good handle on providing services to the families that needed them. That’s one thing you guys have noted in all your reports. This still looks more like a sanction program than it does like a services program. I hope we can find a solution. That’s something we’re finding in a lot of the CalWORKs programs. We’ve done a lot of sanctioning for non-cooperation in employment training area, but we’re just now studying how you intervene with families, saying, ‘Look, we don’t want to sanction you; we want to work with you to get you resources to get you going.’”

Another staff member noted, “I would like to see a social worker assigned along with the MerCAP eligibility worker, to find out what is really going on in the family.” Still another suggested it would be a good idea to get social workers involved at each 7-day conference, if not actually stationing a permanent social worker at each school site.

At the time MerCAP was concluding, the Human Services Agency was engaging in a couple of demonstration projects designed to provide a “new way of doing business” and improve family support practices. Six MerCAP-sanctioned families were selected in the still embryonic and small-scale demonstration effort. Agency personnel were hopeful that these efforts may grow and develop, but admitted, “it doesn’t happen easily.” One factor influencing continued effort is the continuing interest of the original MerCAP champion, County Supervisor Gloria Keene. At the January, 2000, Oversight Committee meeting she reiterated her view that expanded family support services would be a central component of MerCAP, citing the experience with Wisconsin’s Learnfare program as an example of why family support is crucial.

### Reflections from School Personnel

As reported elsewhere in this report, the school administrators we interviewed at the close of the MerCAP demonstration were mostly positive about the program. At the end of each interview with school administrators we asked if they wished to say anything more. Forty-eight of the administrators did, about half (23) reiterating positive feelings toward the experience. Eleven more were also positive, but wished that the program applied to all students or that they had more resources (including an efficient monitoring system) to implement it. Two were skeptical, wanting to see the evaluation results before deciding if MerCAP had made much difference one way or another. The other 12 were negative, most with suggestions for improvement. Some focused on improving communications with the Human Services Agency, some on building working relationships with community agencies, some on creating a program for all students.

On a different tack, one administrator suggested, “There could be some sort of incentive for the school to encourage the investment of time in the program. For example, if the district gains money because attendance is up, that could somehow go to the schools that are showing the improvement in their attendance.”

Another administrator who started in the last year of the program made a number of suggestions which illustrate the complexity of school attendance issues:

“The program has increased parental awareness of attendance issues and mandates. It should have a 3-year trial in this district. It needs to be institutionalized so that their work has not been done for nothing. Put student ID numbers on the list so they are easier to find. When a student transfers within the district or county an attendance printout and record of actions should be sent to the new school. Drop the curable sanction because it makes the school look like the bad guy. Develop consistency with the letters for all students (drop the 5-day, use a 3-day and 7-day). Doctors who give out excuses too freely (some really seem to give a lot of them) should be investigated.”

### Reflections from TANF Parents

The final question on the TANF parent interview was an open-ended request for ideas on what would make school better for parents and their children, and for anything else they would like to say about parents and schools. The responses illuminate an issue that was not previously considered in MerCAP discussions, namely the degree to which parents of different ethnic groups bring different expectations about attendance and about the relationship of families to schools. The major themes of these improvement suggestions are shown in Table C-10, Appendix C.

The Hmong parents differ markedly from the other parent groups in that they appear to hold the school responsible for setting standards—more homework, tougher rules, and stricter discipline—and expect the students to be responsible for meeting those standards. Their attitude is captured in responses such as,

- “Teachers should teach better by giving students more homework to do and more rewards for doing it.”
- “School should be stricter so all students would do their work and not cause trouble or skip out.”
- “Schools should be tougher on kids who break the rules, and should make sure that all teachers give homework to the students.”
- “Schools should give more homework and punish those who don’t do it.”

By contrast, the Spanish-speaking parents want more help from the schools—more programs (e.g., after-school tutoring), improved communication to parents, more counselors to help kids with serious problems, more Spanish language communication with parents. Their responses include,

- “Schools would be better if they offer more help with work for students at school. My son says that the teacher doesn’t help him at the after-school program, just talks to another teacher.”
- “My daughter needs a counselor once a week to help her see that school is very important for her future.”
- “School and parents should get together to see what type of punishment to give kids instead of suspending them.”
- “Schools should have more meetings with the teachers and parents in English and Spanish.”

Finally, the English-speaking parents were most likely to focus on the need for more involvement from the parents and more interaction between principal, teachers and parents. Some of their comments include,

- “Teachers need more help with yard duty and kids need to be watched more,”
- “Honor kids more for their achievements,”
- “The school uniform is a problem because my child is overweight and can’t deal with the uniform,”
- “Have the bus come closer to our house,”
- “I’m tired of English being a minority—minorities need to learn English.”

## Reflections from The Program Evaluation Team

Evaluation of a program is ideally designed in concert with the design of the program, thus assuring that keeping accurate records is viewed as a standard operating procedure. Coming in after the basic program design was constructed, and with no opportunity to test protocols for record-keeping and data collection, the evaluation was seen by schools as an add-on imposition. While school staff were generally very helpful in searching for less time-consuming means of recording and reporting process and impact data, it was always a necessary evil, not a process that they supported because they created it and wanted to learn from the experience.

Our experience suggests that the independent nature of local schools presents a number of difficulties for researchers trying to make sense of new welfare reform school attendance policies. One of the most difficult challenges we found was securing reliable data from schools. While schools are required to submit monthly attendance records for all regular programs to the State Education Department, expecting schools to send evaluators a copy each month created problems (e.g., some reports were sent to the wrong address, revised reports were not mailed). Schools were not required to submit reports of TANF attendance to the state. In some schools attendance software did not permit flagging students for this type of special report and once flagged, there was no easy way of revising the designation of TANF students.

The expectation that schools could (or would) report attendance actions taken that would allow comparison of TANF and non-TANF actions over time was based on faulty assumptions. Not only is there no standard for how non-TANF absenteeism is handled, few schools routinely keep records of attendance actions taken for either TANF or non-TANF students unless a student's absences are considered problematic.

School independence involves more than just record keeping systems and practices, however. It is also the case that leadership for getting things done does not necessarily, or even routinely, come from hierarchical systems of authority. The best examples we saw of schools committed to improving attendance and nurturing relationships with families were typically the product of a single individual in a particular school who made it her/his business to "go the extra mile." More rarely, this ethic would infuse an entire school site under the leadership of the principal, or because of a collaborative program like Healthy Start or Success for All. Evaluations that are focused on whether a particular program is working may miss the important point that it is often *people* and not *programs* that make the most difference in the experience of students. A student who is befriended by someone on the school staff will likely have good attendance outcomes regardless of attendance policies and practices. An attendance clerk who goes out of her way to get students to school will make more of a difference in their lives than new rules.

## Suggestions for Future Research

In the course of this project we became aware of a number of topics for future study. They include the following:

- Illness, income level, and school absenteeism - Abt Associates (Fein et al., 1999) was asked to study absenteeism and other school outcomes of welfare children in Delaware's "A Better Chance" welfare reform program. They found that most absences arise from illness rather than truancy, which is consonant with school and parent observations in the MerCAP experience. Fein et al. also concluded that while absenteeism is greater for welfare children than for other children, income differences account for a large share of this absenteeism gap, especially among teenagers. The relationship of illness to income status among school children is not clear. It would be valuable to design a study in which different family income groups (welfare, below the poverty line but not on welfare, up to twice the poverty line, and above twice the poverty line) categorized by family size

and composition and student age/grade are compared not only in school attendance patterns but incidence of illness and other reasons for school absence. Admittedly, under current privacy considerations it would be very difficult if not impossible to obtain family income level, family characteristics, and reasons for school absence.

- Comparison of alternative implementations of the school attendance provision of CalWORKs - It may be that not all school districts in all California counties have fully implemented these provisions. However, for those that have, it would be instructive to compare the following:
  - School-community context (e.g. school population size and composition, local employment and poverty rates);
  - Roles of schools, welfare departments, welfare parents, and other organizations, if any, in planning and implementation ;
  - Nature and extent of services provided, if any, to high absence families;
  - Interventions (e.g. preventive health care), if any, other than the threat of sanctions and the funding sources for these;
  - Definitions of acceptable absences and good attendance for welfare and non-welfare children;
  - Information systems used to monitor and record attendance of students;
  - Evaluation of alternative programs - If the comparison of CalWORKs school attendance implementation identifies strategies that differ from MerCAP in, for example, the nature and extent of services provided, it would be very useful to examine their effect on attendance for different age groups. Comparison of other programs with MerCAP might highlight program aspects and assumptions that affected attendance results.
- Outcomes for high absence students - Policy and practice for dealing with high absence students is not consistent across school districts. While school attendance in California is compulsory through age 18, few schools wish to devote their scarce resources to establishing an airtight case against a family. District Attorneys' offices seldom allocate their resources to track down and crack down on offending families. Are high absence students diverted to alternative schools, independent study, home study? Do they officially 'move,' but in reality drop out of school altogether? Does anyone know? What difference does it make other than in easing one burden on school teachers?
- Impacts of sanctions - In evaluations of Learnfare (Ethridge & Percy, 1993) and LEAP (Bos & Fellerath, 1997), long term effects of attendance-related sanctions on welfare recipients were negligible at best. No studies of which we are aware have examined impacts of attendance-related sanctions, and of their interaction with other welfare reform sanctions, on the stability and well-being of families, or on the ability of social service agencies to work with sanctioned families.
- Comparison of alternative measures of school achievement - We were advised by Merced County school officials and researchers in the Division of Education at UC Davis that no one measure of school achievement that we proposed was reliable or valid across the schools and districts. For example, "Age in grade" was discarded because in many schools social promotion had been the norm. "Teacher assessment of student ability" was unacceptable because it violated student privacy and was not reliable from one grade to the next. "Grade point average" was not applicable in the younger grades and is highly dependent on English-speaking ability. "Standardized test scores," using the state-mandated Standardized Testing and Achievement Reporting (STAR) system applicable only for grades 2 through 11, are dependent on student language, cultural background, and test-taking experience. The reading comprehension component of the SAT9 test was believed to be less influenced by student linguistic and cultural background than any more comprehensive test scores. There may be other measures that could feasibly be applied to studies of school achievement in a diverse school population. Perhaps an index constructed from multiple measures could be developed, or some understanding of the relationship between a single measure and a more general estimate of student achievement could be gained.

## Policy Considerations

### The Need for Better Assumptions

Our evaluation calls into question five basic assumptions guiding welfare policies for school attendance, and suggests alternative assumptions that may prove more fruitful for policy and program development. The five faulty assumptions, and possible alternative assumptions, are displayed in Table 13.

Table 13. Assumptions Underlying Welfare Reform School Attendance Policies, with Alternatives for Program Design Consideration

ORIGINAL ASSUMPTIONS	ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTIONS
1. TANF students have excessive absenteeism.	1. A small proportion of TANF students has excessive absenteeism. This is also true for non-TANF students.
2. Truancy is a major cause of TANF absenteeism.	2. Health issues are a major cause of absenteeism for all students.
3. Better attendance leads to increased achievement.	3. Better attendance is not sufficient to improve educational achievement.
4. Sanctions are efficacious in changing behavior patterns.	4. Sanctions are only marginally effective and may have adverse consequences.
5. Achieving the intended outcomes requires coordination of school and welfare department stakeholders within existing role definitions and routines.	5. Achieving the intended outcomes may require collaborative partnerships with parents and other community organizations in meaningful roles, working through problems and conflicts until progress is made in achieving desired outcomes.

Parents are often part of the reason children have school problems, but at the same time their cooperation and engagement can play a critical role in improving school attendance and achievement. In MerCAP the role of parents was limited to receiving information that many did not understand and/or take to heart. An alternative approach would bring parents into a partnership, drawing on their experience to identify underlying problems and potential solutions. The benefits of meaningfully involving parents have been cited in the experience of many successful school-community partnerships (Adler and Gardner, 1993; Maeroff, 1998; Murname and Levy, 1996).

Taken as a whole, our analysis suggests that if the goal of the policy intervention is to improve attendance it makes sense to emphasize factors other than TANF status; and if the goal is to improve student achievement, it makes sense to emphasize factors other than attendance.

#### Enforcing the Community Norm vs. Helping Families Meet the Norm

While its impact on attendance and achievement of most TANF students appears minimal, MerCAP reinforces a popular community norm, “Parents should get their children to attend school regularly.” What seems needed is a way of developing accessible supportive services that help families meet the norm. The use of school attendance problems seems a good trigger for family support interventions, whether or not a sanction program is adopted and whether the program targets TANF populations or, alternatively, some broader segment of the low-income/working poor population. Health-related interventions is an obvious starting point, and linking social workers (case managers) with the families of low-attendance students is another. In a few Merced schools these types of programs are already present, and show considerable promise.

#### Improving the Ratio of Program Benefits to Costs

Though based on a seemingly simple policy idea, implementing school attendance programs creates complex problems related to defining good attendance, providing consistency of procedures across schools, and coordinating activities across and within welfare and school bureaucracies. This creates significant implementation costs for schools and welfare departments. Given the high attendance rates of most TANF students, it is unlikely that welfare policies for school attendance that are separate from regular school attendance policies will justify the average costs of implementation. By contrast, at least one Merced school district believes that their work on MerCAP, which included making policies and practices uniform for all students, paid for itself in increased funding due to higher overall attendance. Uniform attendance protocols have a number of advantages. They maintain a sense of fairness. They are easier for schools to administer. They also make sense in the wake of SB 727 that funds schools on the basis of high actual attendance. If welfare policies for school attendance are pursued, schools should consider the design of such policies and practices in relation to school attendance protocols for all students.

#### Continuous Learning

As local officials experiment with school attendance programs, they learn a great deal from regular opportunities to reflect on experience as they consider changes. Such occasions during MerCAP led to advantageous adjustments over the course of the project. State and local policy makers and program directors can promote this by creating an environment that honors ongoing reflection and responsible mid-course adjustments as much or more so than strict adherence to pre-set agendas. The California Department of Social Services might help these efforts by providing a way to share what is being learned as various counties try different methods of implementing CalWORKs school attendance programs, particularly from models that incorporate successful services to support families (Sacramento County, 2000).



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## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

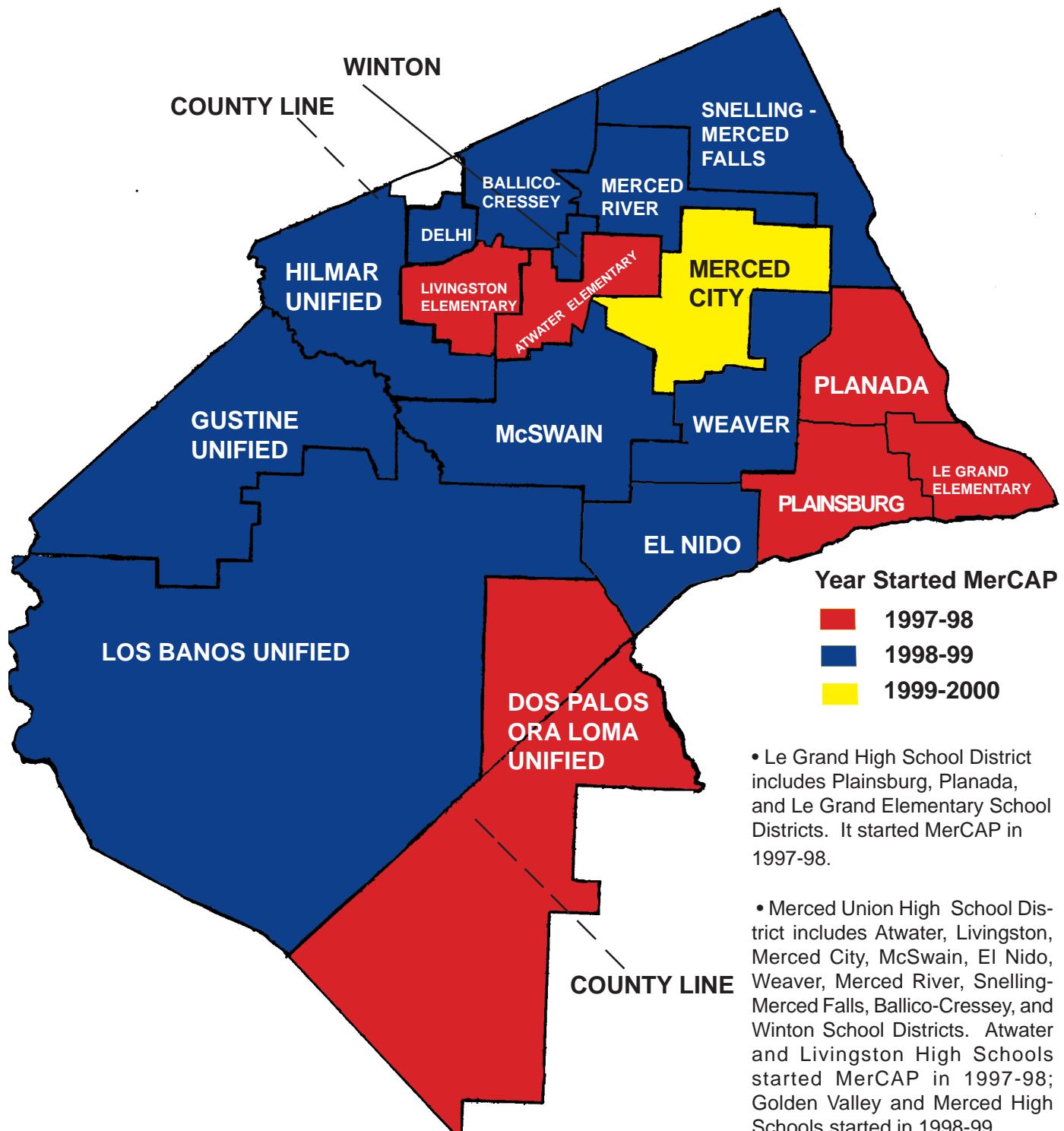
A number of abbreviations have been used frequently in this report. Most if not all are explained in the context of the report in which they appear. For the reader's convenience, this is a quick explanation of those most frequently used.

AFDC	Aid to Families of Dependent Children - The term used prior to 1996 federal welfare reform to designate cash assistance to welfare families
CalWORKs	California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids - The title of California's welfare reform legislation passed in August, 1997
CDSS	California Department of Social Services - The state welfare agency
GLM	General Linear Model - A statistical approach to analysis of the variance from the means of variables believed to be interrelated
MerCAP	Merced County Attendance Program - The three-year (School years 1997-98 through 1999-2000) demonstration program on which this evaluation report is focused
MPAA	Percentage Actual Attendance of TANF students - Calculated as the ratio of actual days of school attendance to the possible days of attendance of TANF students in a given grade in a given school participating in MerCAP
NPAA	Percentage Actual Attendance of non-TANF students - Calculated as the ratio of actual days of school attendance to the possible days of attendance of non-TANF students in a given grade in a given school participating in MerCAP
PAA	Percentage Actual Attendance - Calculated as the ratio of actual days of school attendance to the possible days of attendance of individuals in our sample of 1029 TANF students, or of all students in a given grade in a given school, whether or not the school was participating in MerCAP
TANF	Temporary Assistance to Needy Families - The federal designation of the cash assistance made available to eligible families under federal welfare reform; in California, eligible families would be enrolled in CalWORKs, the state welfare reform program
Non-TANF	Students whose families were not receiving TANF payments
NCE	Normal Curve Equivalent - One way of expressing students' achievement on a standard test (e.g., the Stanford Achievement Test); NCE locates each student's score on the whole test or any of its components, standardized by age and grade, in relation to the distribution of scores nation-wide
SAT9	Stanford Achievement Test, Version 9 - The statewide school achievement test administered annually to students in second through 11 <sup>th</sup> grades under California's Statewide Testing and Reporting (STAR) program, initiated in 1997-98
YRE	Year-round education - The organization of school to use facilities for teaching throughout the full calendar year. The enrolled school population is divided into tracks, each of which distributes its 180 days of attendance differently, with vacation periods scheduled at different times.



## Appendix A. SELECTED DESCRIPTORS OF MERCED COUNTY SCHOOLS

Figure A-1. Merced County School Districts, by MerCAP Cohort

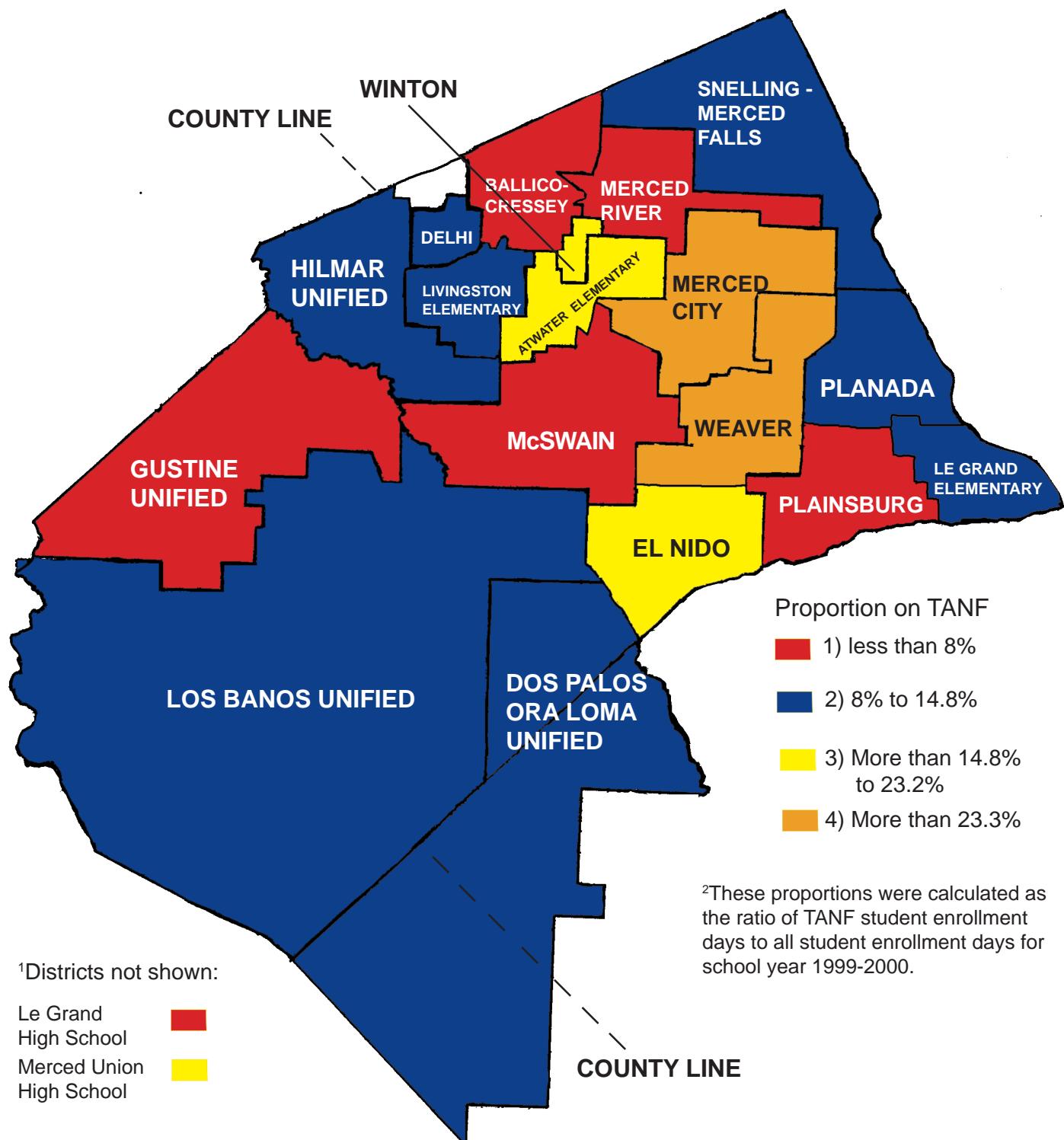


- Le Grand High School District includes Plainsburg, Planada, and Le Grand Elementary School Districts. It started MerCAP in 1997-98.

- Merced Union High School District includes Atwater, Livingston, Merced City, McSwain, El Nido, Weaver, Merced River, Snelling-Merced Falls, Ballico-Cressey, and Winton School Districts. Atwater and Livingston High Schools started MerCAP in 1997-98; Golden Valley and Merced High Schools started in 1998-99.

- Dos Palos Ora Loma USD extends into Fresno County. Schools serving mostly Fresno County residents were not included in MerCAP.

Figure A-2. Merced County School Districts<sup>1</sup>,  
Showing Proportion<sup>2</sup> of School Population on TANF in 1999-2000.



## **Merced County Schools in the MerCAP Evaluation**

Table A-1 shows the schools that began MerCAP each year of the demonstration. Program status (as of school year 1999-2000) indicates the grades included in each school and whether it is organized as year-round education with tracks (YRE) or a traditional (10-11 month) program.

### 1997-98

- 21 schools began MerCAP. None were year-round schools; none had more than one track.
- Livingston and Planada Schools used MacSchool software for attendance monitoring and reporting.

### 1998-99

- 34 schools (64 if counting each track as a school) started MerCAP. Two of these schools were brand new (Delhi Middle School and Delhi High School). Several are year-round schools, with multiple tracks.
- The Hilmar, Los Banos, and McSwain Schools used MacSchool software.

### 1999-2000

- Westside Union Integrated School, which accommodates all 6<sup>th</sup> grades in the Los Banos Unified School District, began.
- 16 schools (37 if counting each track as a school) in the Merced City School District started MerCAP. They all use the same software and accumulate attendance data at the district office.

Table A-1. Merced County Schools, by MerCAP Cohort, with Program Status in 1999-2000

District/School	Cohort	Status	District/School	Cohort	Status
Atwater ESD	1		Los Banos, cont.		
Aileen Colburn		Trad K-6	Los Banos ES		YRE K-5
Bellevue		Trad K-6	R. Miano ES		YRE K-5
Elmer Wood		Trad K-6	Volta ES		Trad K-5
Mitchell ES		Trad K-6	Los Banos JH		YRE 7-8
Mitchell SE		Trad 7-8	Los Banos HS		Trad 9-12
Shaffer		Trad K-6	Westside UIS		Trad 6
Thomas Olaeta		Trad K-6	McSwain ES	2	Trad K-8
Peggy Heller		Trad K-6	Merced City USD	3	
Ballico-Cressey SD	2		Burbank		YRE K-5
Ballico		Trad 4-8	Chenoweth		YRE K-5
Cressey		Trad K-3	Franklin		YRE K-5
Delhi USD	2		Fremont		Trad K-5
El Capitan		Trad K-6	Givens		Trad K-5
Schendel		YRE K-6	Gracey		YRE K-5
Delhi MS		YRE 7-8	Hoover MS		Trad 6-8
Delhi HS		Trad 9-12	Muir		YRE K-5
Dos Palos USD	1		Peterson		YRE K-5
Bryant MS		Trad 6-8	Reyes		YRE K-5
Dos Palos ES		Trad K-2	Rivera MS		Trad. 6-8
Marks ES		Trad 3-5	Sheehy		Trad K-5
Dos Palos HS		Trad 9-12	Tenaya MS		Trad 6-8
El Nido ES	2	Trad K-8	Wright		Trad K-5
Gustine USD	2		Cruickshank MS		Trad 6-8
Gustine ES		Trad K-5	Stowell		Trad K-5
Gustine MS		Trad 6-8	Merced River SD	2	
Gustine HS		Trad 9-12	Hopeton		Trad K-3
Romero ES		Trad K-5	Washington		Trad 4-8
Hilmar USD	2		Merced UHSD		
Elim ES		YRE K-6	Atwater HS	1	Trad 9-12
Hilmar MS		Trad 7-8	Livingston HS	1	Trad 9-12
Hilmar HS		Trad 9-12	Golden Valley HS	2	Trad 9-12
Merquin ES		Trad K-6	Merced HS	2	Trad 9-12
Le Grand ES	1	Trad K-8	Plainsburg ES	1	Trad K-8
LeGrand HS	1	Trad 9-12	Planada ES	1	Trad K-8
Livingston ESD	1		Snell-Merc. Falls	2	Trad K-8
Campus Park		Trad K-4	Weaver SD	2	
Yamato Colony		Trad K-5	Pioneer		YRE K-3
Livingston MS		Trad 6-8	Weaver		YRE 4-8
Los Banos USD	2		Winton SD	2	
Charleston ES		Trad K-5	Winton MS		Trad 6-8
Henry Miller		YRE K-5	Frank Sparks ES		Trad K-5
			Crookham ES		Trad K-5

Table A-2. Selected Descriptive Data on Schools, by MerCAP Cohort

School Characteristic	Cohort 1 (started MerCAP in 1997-98)	Cohort 2 (started MerCAP in 1998-99)	Cohort 3 (started in 1999-2000)
1. Percentage of students on TANF	22%	17%	41%
2. Percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch	77%	63%	77%
3. Percentage of students who are English learners (LEP)	48%	32%	39%
4. Percentage of students classified as Hispanic Asian White	60% 4% 27%	45% 4% 45%	42% 24% 26%
5. SAT9 Reading Scores - National Percentile Ranking (2000) Grade 2 Grade 3 Grade 4 Grade 5 Grade 6 Grade 7 Grade 8	30 26 26 25 25 29 30	42 36 39 35 37 35 43	33 28 29 30 37 34 41
6. Overall Percentage Actual Attendance	.962	.953	.957

Source: State Department of Education (for items 1-5); item 6 was based on evaluation data



## APPENDIX B. Attendance Actions Taken (AAT)

Schools were asked to report to the evaluation team every month the number of each type of MerCAP attendance actions taken (see report form at the end of this Appendix). The forms also requested information regarding the number of typical attendance actions taken with non-TANF students, using categories that schools had identified in the first and second years of this study. The reports were intended to:

- Indicate the extent to which schools have implemented the program as it was intended, and
- Permit an examination of patterns of MerCAP attendance actions taken that can be compared with overall TANF attendance, with reports from the Human Services Agency of requests for sanctions, and with actions taken with non-TANF students.

Table B-1. Frequency of Attendance Actions Taken, as Reported by Merced County Schools for 1999-2000 School Year (by School Attendance Month)

Action Taken	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total
<u>TANF</u>														
5-Absence letter	16	92	87	43	104	107	115	74	62	59	4	8	0	771
7-Absence letter	4	31	47	38	57	52	68	47	43	28	18	3	0	436
Parent Conference	4	14	23	39	42	36	46	55	37	23	4	2	0	325
Non-Coop'n Sanction	0	3	4	13	15	14	17	10	15	3	0	0	0	94
Corrective Action Plan	0	12	18	24	11	24	20	16	14	17	5	2	0	163
10-Absence Sanction	1	3	5	4	13	10	12	13	13	12	1	0	0	87
Sub-total	25	155	184	161	242	243	278	215	184	142	32	15	0	1876
<u>Non-TANF</u>														
Parent Conference	25	116	119	96	80	90	62	44	51	23	6	0	1	713
Attendance Supervision	25	52	165+	210+	210+	200+	215+	220+	105	47	40	0	0	1489+
SARB Referral	5	6	12	21	8	43	24	12	16	20	12	0	0	179
Sub-total	55	174	296+	327+	298+	333+	301+	276+	172	90	58	0	1	2381+
Comments	6	9	7	10	7	7	3	3	1	3	2	0	0	
# Schools Reporting	37	38	38	39	37	36	36	34	33	30	17	3	2	

**Number of schools reporting:** Of the 71 school districts, only 39 sent in reports on the MerCAP attendance actions taken for at least 6 months of the school year. Only one school in the Merced City School District (which joined MerCAP in its third year) regularly reported these actions. We know that at least two schools did not implement the program, one due to the resignation of the attendance clerk and one due to a deliberate choice by the school officials. In other cases, it appears that schools were making a good faith effort to implement MerCAP procedures, but large schools found it especially difficult to set up a system for aggregating individual student records at the school level. Records of attendance actions are probably kept in the individual students' files.

**Drop-off after Month 10:** The decline in total number of schools reporting after the 10<sup>th</sup> month is due to the short 11<sup>th</sup> month for traditional schools (many took no attendance actions in the final week) and the relatively small number of year-round schools (the only schools for which the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> school attendance months are applicable).

**Definition of actions taken:** Not all schools that sent records every month defined each action in the same way. For example, some schools may have counted a telephone conversation with one parent as a parent conference, which may or may not have included discussion of a corrective action plan. It is likely that many schools took advantage of any opportunity to confer with parents whose children were not attending school regularly, and the attendance clerks may not have been aware of some of these opportune contacts. It is also likely that some conversations between attendance staff and parents were recorded as conferences even though a school administrator was not involved.

**Comparison of TANF and non-TANF actions:** The forms that we developed for the schools' use did not reflect the wide variation in school attendance practices. This was particularly the case in actions regarding non-TANF students. Not all schools used parent conferences or attendance supervision, and Student Attendance Review Boards or their equivalent were not available in smaller outlying districts. The figures for non-TANF actions under-represent actions actually taken, and do not indicate the occurrence of attendance problems among non-TANF students.

**Significance of comments:** "Comments" in most cases referred to attendance-related practices of the particular schools. For example, in one school system school attendance officials noted that TANF students were referred to SARB and letters were sent to parents of non-TANF students.

**Patterns in TANF actions taken:** The 30+ schools reporting for the first 10 school attendance months reveal a pattern of absences of TANF students and of school responses to those absences. The number of total actions taken increases in each of the first three months, then drops slightly in the fourth month. It increases substantially in months 5 through 7, then declines significantly over the final three months.

The same general pattern appears in the number of 5-absence and 7-absence letters written. The highest number of parent conferences occurs, understandably, a month after the highest numbers of letters sent. It also lags behind the number of non-cooperation sanctions requested, suggesting that some parents come to a conference only after the threat of sanction gets their attention. The number of Corrective Action Plans reported is more evenly distributed across the 10 months. Schools did not report requests for a significant number of 10-absence sanctions until the 5<sup>th</sup> month of school.

The number of corrective action plans reported is substantially less than the total number of parent conferences. It may be that absences were determined to be for good cause and that a CAP was inappropriate. We have also heard school personnel say that in some cases they do not use a CAP because they believe it will not help.

Looking at the year long total for each type of TANF action taken, it is clear that the number of actions declines as the severity of the attendance problems and relevant actions increases. This appears to be evidence that the actions impact attendance in the desired direction.

**Non-TANF parent conferences:** Conferences with parents were used less frequently for non-TANF than for TANF students. Conferences appear to be reserved for cases in which absences exceed the 7 absences that trigger the MerCAP parent conference invitation.

**Non-TANF attendance supervision:** One high school in the Merced Union High School District used attendance supervision a great deal for its non-TANF students—far more than any other reporting school. In all of the cells in which a “+” appears, at least one hundred of these actions are attributable to that one school.

**SARB referral:** The reported number of non-TANF students referred to SARB peaked in the 6<sup>th</sup> month of school. From then on it declined; this was quite different from the smaller but steadier number of 10-absence sanctions requested for TANF students.

**Patterns in non-TANF actions taken:** The actions about which we requested information on our forms were obviously not considered to be in ascending order of severity in dealing with absenteeism problem, and did not appear to have a deterrent effect. While one might be tempted to suggest that schools could adopt more preventive and corrective measures for dealing with attendance problems for all of their students, the data reported may hide the actual practices that schools use, and any effects of those practices. It may also be the case that the time required for monitoring individual attendance and processing multiple action options is considered more than it's worth. More than one school administrator told us that the school's job is to teach the kids, and the parents' job is to get the kids to school. If schools do intervene, we were told, they take on others' responsibilities and weaken the role of student and family.

Judging from the variety of ways in which schools deal with non-TANF attendance problems, however, most schools seem to see working with families to encourage regular attendance as a legitimate and important role for the school to perform. Although the AAT report forms did not allow an adequate job of identifying new practices that apply similarly to all students, it is clear that MerCAP has had an impact on the overall attendance function of many schools.

Table B-2 compares attendance actions taken by type of school (elementary, middle, or high school). On average, middle schools reported more attendance actions per school (~70) than any of the other school types. High schools that reported on average took ~60 attendance actions; K-6 elementary schools reported ~44, and K-8 elementary schools took ~30. The ratio of 7-absence to 5-absence letters ranged from 35% at K-8 schools to 59% at K-6 schools. The ratio of parent conferences to 7-absence letters ranged from 64% (K-6 schools) to 125% (middle schools). These schools either did not issue 7-absence letters as an invitation to a school-parent conference, or they did not report them. The

Table B-2. Total Number of Reported MerCAP Attendance Actions Taken for the First Ten Months of School Year 1999-2000, by School Type (N=39 Schools Reporting)

School Type	5-absence letters	7-absence letters	Parent conferences	Non-cooperation sanctions	Corrective Action Plans	10-absence sanctions	Total
K-6 Elementary (n=21)	410	242	155	36	102	31	976
K-8 Elementary (n=8)	96	34	28	18	20	13	209
Middle/Junior High School (n=4)	109	57	71	19	14	11	281
High School (n=6)	148	82	61	21	20	31	363
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>763</b>	<b>415</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>1829</b>

ratio of non-cooperation sanctions requested to 7-absence letters ranged from 15% for K-6 schools to 53% for K-8 schools. The number of corrective action plans reported was more than 2/3 of the parent conferences reported in K-6 and K-8 elementary schools (68% and 71%, respectively). There is a significantly lower ratio of corrective action plans to parent conferences in middle and high schools (20% and 33%, respectively). The ratio of 10-absence sanction requests to 7-absence letters ranged from 13% (K-6 schools) to 38% (K-8 and high schools). Of all actions taken reported by each school type, the proportion of 5-absence letters does not vary greatly, ranging from 39% to 46%.

### **Sanctions Reported by Schools and Human Services Agency (Table B-3)**

It is not expected that the number of non-cooperation and 10-absence sanction requests reported by schools would jibe with Human Services Agency records, since only 55% of the schools sent monthly AAT reports. The relatively small number of reported sanction requests include data from only one Merced City School; the Merced City district has almost half of all TANF students in the county. At the end of the second year of MerCAP, discrepancies between school-reported sanction requests and HSA-reported sanctions imposed were explained as:

- Lags between the dates sanctions were requested and the next month in which they could be imposed,
- Sanctions that were ‘cured’ before they were imposed, and
- Sanctions, in a few cases, which could not be imposed because schools had not followed required procedures.

**Table B-3. Comparison of Sanctions Issued by Human Services Agency and Reported Requests for Sanctions by Schools in School Year 1999-2000, by Type of Sanction and School Type**

School Type	Type of Sanction							
	Non-Cooperation Sanction <sup>1</sup>			10-Absence Sanction <sup>2</sup>			Total of All Sanctions <sup>3</sup>	
	All HSA	Partial HSA <sup>4</sup>	School	All HSA	Partial HSA <sup>4</sup>	School	HSA	School
K-6 Elementary	149	36	36	137	42	31	286	67
K-8 Elementary	12	12	18	11	8	13	23	31
Middle/Junior High	58	24	19	44	9	11	102	30
High School	27	10	21	27	11	31	54	52
TOTAL	246	82	94	219	70	86	465	180

<sup>1</sup> Non-cooperation sanction refer to those issued when a parent does not keep an appointment for a school conference and does not arrange an alternate date or time for such a conference. This sanction is ‘curable;’ that is, it ends when the parent appears for a duly scheduled conference.

<sup>2</sup> 10-absence sanctions are requested when students have accumulated 10 or more unacceptable absences. An additional 30-day sanction can be imposed subsequently if the student has additional unacceptable absence(s).

<sup>3</sup> The total number of sanctions does not include those issued to Merced County students who are enrolled in schools such as Valley High School that were not included in the Merced County Attendance Program evaluation.

<sup>4</sup> Sanctions reported by the Human Services Agency that were requested from only those schools that sent in reports of attendance actions taken.

When examining HSA data on sanction requests only from schools that reported attendance actions taken to the evaluation team, schools generally reported more sanction requests than were levied by the Human Services Agency. Inaccurate record-keeping by the schools and the reasons cited by the Agency last year (above) may account for these discrepancies.

#### **Examination of number of sanctions over time (Table B-4)**

Table B-4 summarizes the total number of MerCAP sanctions issued over the course of the three-year demonstration period, by type, as reported by the Human Services Agency. The total number of sanctions does not include those issued to Merced County students who are enrolled in schools such as Valley High School that were not included in the evaluation of the Merced County Attendance Program.

Table B-4. Total Sanctions by the Human Services Agency since the Beginning of MerCAP in Fall, 1997, by MerCAP Year

*Source: Merced Human Services Agency*

MerCAP Year	Type of Sanction			Total of All Sanctions
	Failure to Respond <sup>1</sup>	Non-Cooperation Sanction <sup>2</sup>	10-Absence Sanction <sup>3</sup>	
1 - 1997-98	13	57	77	147
2 - 1998-99	1	83	108	192
3 - 1999-00	--	248	220	468
TOTAL	14	388	405	807

<sup>1</sup> This sanction is applied by the Human Services Agency when a client does not complete and submit a waiver of privacy in order to participate in the MerCAP program and evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> Non-cooperation sanctions refer to those issued when a parent does not keep an appointment for a school conference and does not arrange an alternate date or time for such a conference. This sanction is ‘curable;’ that is, it ends when the parent appears for a duly scheduled conference.

<sup>3</sup> 10-absence sanctions are requested when students have accumulated 10 or more unacceptable absences. An additional 30-day sanction can be imposed subsequently if the student has additional unacceptable absence(s).

With the exception of the “Failure to Respond” sanctions, all of which occurred during the first two years of MerCAP, the number of sanctions issued by the Human Services Agency increased each year, as more schools entered the program. The distribution of sanctions issued (excluding schools not in the evaluation study) during MerCAP years 2 and 3 among Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 schools is shown in Table B-5:

Table B-5. Number and Type of Sanctions Issued in Years 2 and 3 by MerCAP Cohort.

School Cohort	Type of Sanction					
	Non-Cooperation		10-Absence		Total	
	98-99	99-00	98-99	99-00	98-99	99-00
Year 1 schools	58	61	46	49	104	110
Year 2 schools	25	34	56	26	81	60
Year 3 schools	--	153	--	145	--	298
TOTAL	83	248	102	220	185	468

For Year 2 schools these figures suggest that in their first year of MerCAP they did not have problems in getting parents to attend 7-absence conferences, or that parent conferences were not helpful in reducing the number of 10-absence sanctions imposed. In their second year of MerCAP, there were more non-cooperation sanctions than 10-absence sanctions, suggesting that parents recognized at this point that sanctions were a real threat. The figures do not give information as to the effect of parent conferences in Year 3 schools.

The number of TANF students in each MerCAP cohort varied, with the largest number in Year 3 schools. Table B-6 compares the sanction rates in the three MerCAP cohorts during MerCAP Year 3, the only year in which all three MerCAP cohorts participated.

Table B-6. Sanction Rates in 1999-2000, by MerCAP Cohort

School Cohort	No. of sanctions issued	TANF enrollment	Sanction rate
Year 1 schools (N=24)	110	1797	6.1%
Year 2 schools (N=29)	60	1874	3.2%
Year 3 schools (N=16)	298	3265	9.1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>6936</b>	<b>6.7%</b>

Note: The TANF enrollment figures represent the estimated end-of-year enrollment. Sanction numbers are derived from the master list of students sanctioned reported by the Human Services Agency.

The larger TANF student population explains why there are a larger number of sanctions imposed in Year 3 schools. It does not explain the smaller number of sanctions imposed on TANF students in Year 2 schools than on students in Year 1 schools, or the wide disparity in the sanction rates between Year 2 schools (3.2%) and Year 3 schools (9.1%). We can think of three possible explanations for the divergence in sanction rates. One is that Year 2 schools simply had better TANF student attendance, although that explanation is not supported by the average district attendance rate for Year 2 schools (see Table A-2). The second is that many Year 2 schools were resistant to the record keeping MerCAP required, and perhaps did not keep track of absences as diligently as Year 1 and Year 3 schools. The other is that Year 3 schools began the program by treating each tardy as an absence (a policy since changed), and in general took an aggressive approach to monitoring and sanctions.

#### **Number and severity of sanctions issued in the 1999-2000 school year (Table B-7)**

The total number of 1999-2000 sanctions is displayed in Table B-7. A relatively small number of families (7 of 224) were sanctioned for more than one month for non-attendance. More families (137 of 287) were sanctioned for more than one month for not attending parent conferences (non-cooperation). This implies that many parents either did not understand or did not take seriously their responsibility for communicating with the school when they received the 7-absence letter. It is also possible some families found it impossible to do so. The number of Year 3 families that received sanctions for more than one month may be greater than for other MerCAP cohorts (although we do not have that information) because of their relative unfamiliarity with the program.

Table B-7. Number of Sanctions Issued in 1999-2000, with Total Number of Months of Reduced TANF Cash Aid

<b>10 Day non-attendance sanctions</b> (Total=255 sanction months; up from 108 in Year 2)
217 sanctioned for 1 month
1 sanctioned for 2 consecutive months
6 sanctioned for 6 consecutive months
<b>Parent non-cooperation</b> (Total=592 sanction months; up from 98 sanction months in Year 2)
30 cured prior to effective date
64 cured in 1-15 days
34 cured in 16 days to 1 month
32 cured in 2 months
5 cured in 3 months
5 cured in 4 months
23 cured in 5 months
21 cured in 6 months
73 still in sanction at the end of school year of which:
22 @ 1 month
10 @ 2 months
9 @ 3 months
9 @ 4 months
1 @ 5 months
15 @ 6 months
5 @ 7 months
1 @ 8 months
1 @ 9 months

Source: Merced Human Services Agency

Sanction counts by month are reported in Figures B-1 (Non-Cooperation Sanctions) and B-2 (10-Absence Sanctions) for each MerCAP cohort. The distributions of these two types of sanctions vary over the course of the year, and differ somewhat by MerCAP cohort.

Figure B-1. Distribution of 1999-2000 Non-Cooperation Sanctions Issued by Human Services Agency, by MerCAP Cohort

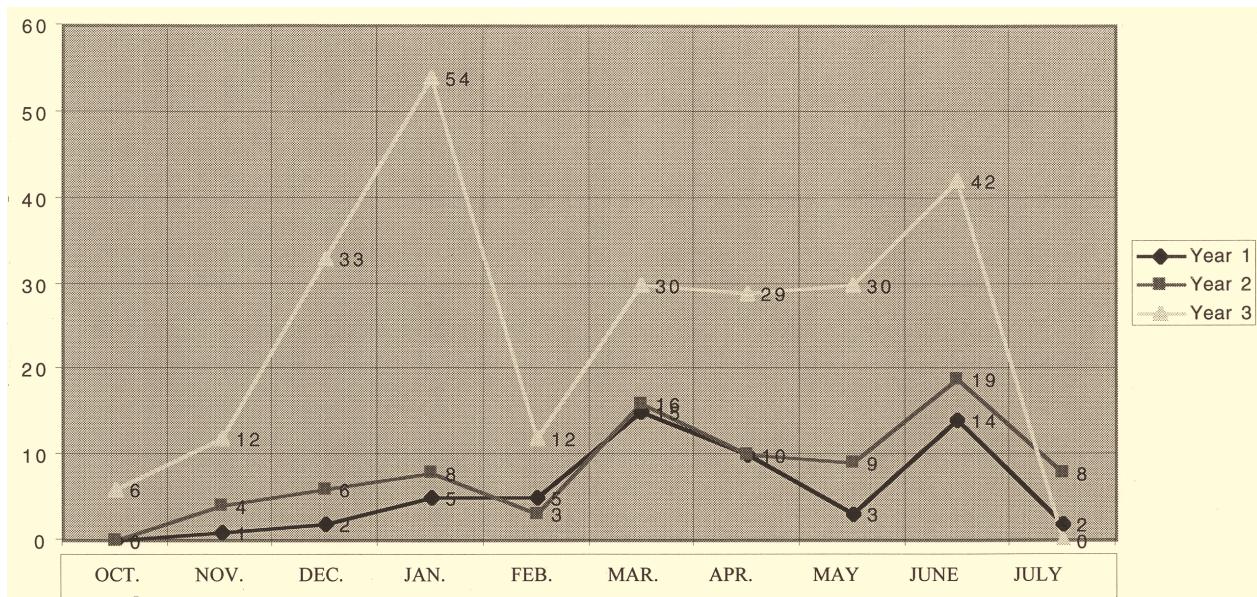
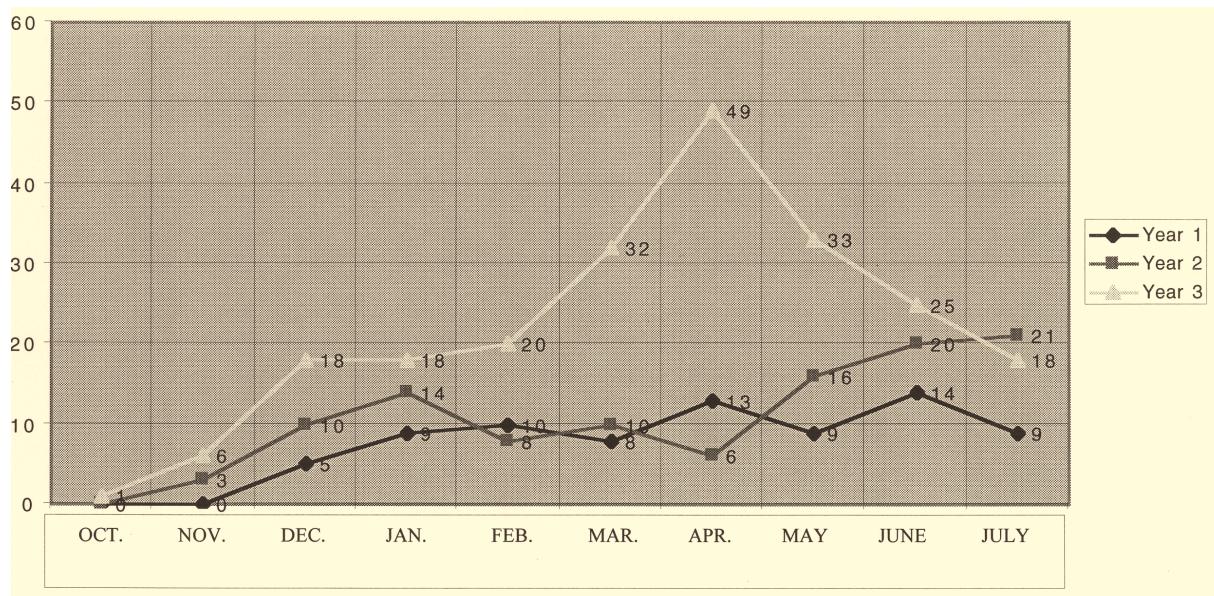


Figure B-2. Distribution of 1999-2000 10-Absence Sanctions Issued by Human Services Agency, by MerCAP Cohort



The profiles are similar for all three years, but are exaggerated in Year 3 by the increased number of sanctions. This is particularly true of the January and June spikes of Non-Cooperation Sanctions (Fig. B-1) and the April spike of 10-Absence Sanctions (Fig. B-2).

It is not surprising to have the fall-off of Non-Cooperation Sanctions at the end of the year, given that schools were not sure what the requirement for parent conferences would be in the post-MerCAP 2000-2001 school year.

We don't know if spikes are a function of a pile-up of unprocessed sanctions at Human Services Agency, or the natural accumulation of non-cooperative parents and unacceptable absences as months progress. Especially puzzling is the large number of January Non-Cooperation Sanctions. This may be primarily a function of the Merced City Schools joining the program. Since 54 of the 67 sanctions were from Year 3 schools, the answer is probably yes. In June, 42 of the 75 sanctions were from Merced City Schools—that's a more reasonable distribution between the MerCAP cohorts.

The April spike of 10-absence sanctions is composed of 49 sanctions for TANF students in Merced City schools and the other 19 from Year 1 & 2 schools. It is not clear why it is so much more pronounced than in previous years. Again, the drop-off at the end of the year may be due to school reluctance to request sanctions so near the end of the 3-year MerCAP experiment, or so near the end of the school year in general.

The time distributions shown in Figures B-1 and B-2 display an expected lag from the school reports of attendance actions taken (Table B-1). Two caveats:

- The school attendance months are not the same as calendar months, particularly noticeable with year-round education schools that start in July, and
- Less than half of the participating schools reported these data.

This is especially significant in that only one Merced City School reported, yet that district has the bulk of the overall Merced County school TANF population and was responsible for a larger share of the sanctions issued in 1999-2000 than both other MerCAP cohorts.

## **MERCAP ATTENDANCE ACTIONS TAKEN**

School:

Attendance Month:      Contact Person:

### **MerCAP Students**

- Number of 5-absence letters sent this month
- Number of 7-absence letters sent this month
- Number of parent conferences held this month
- Number of non-cooperation sanctions requested
- Number of Corrective Action Plans written
- Number of 10-absence sanctions requested

Comments:

### **Non-MerCAP Students**

- Number of attendance-related parent conferences held this month
- Number of students placed on attendance supervision this month
- Number of students referred to SARB (if applicable) this month

Comments:

Please complete this form monthly and send with the monthly non-MerCAP and MerCAP attendance reports to:

Joan Wright, MerCAP Evaluation  
Human & Community Development  
University of California  
1 Shields Avenue  
Davis, CA 95616-8523

Telephone: 530-752-3955  
FAX: 530-752-5855  
E-mail: jxwright@ucdavis.edu



## **Appendix C. PARENT SURVEY REPORT**

### **April - June, 2000**

#### **Background**

One of the assumptions on which the MerCAP experiment is based was that communication from schools to parents of absent students would result in more and more cooperative interaction between schools and families working together to improve student attendance and help students do well in school. The protocol of phone calls, letters, parent conferences and corrective action plans offers multiple opportunities for parents to offer suggestions on how schools might help their children, as well for schools to offer suggestions for ways parents can help.

Near the ends of the first and second years of MerCAP, focus group interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, and Hmong with parents of a sample of students whose schools had joined the program that year. Especially in the second year, this turned out to be a labor-intensive effort with disappointingly few parents. While the group structure may have been helpful in getting parents to talk more freely about their experience with MerCAP, it did not attract many parents and there was little way of knowing whether those who participated represented the population of MerCAP parents.

In order to capture the responses of a broader group of parents representing MerCAP families who were first involved in each of the three years of the program, it was decided to conduct individual interviews with parents. The purpose of this survey was to tap parents' experiences with the program and their perspectives on its contribution to their children's education over the last 1, 2, or 3 years. More specifically, the objectives were to find out

- How parents were involved with their children's schools,
- What had been their experience with MerCAP, and
- What was the family's general experience with schools.

#### **Research Methods**

*Sample Selection:* Persons interviewed were parents of our student sample. In each of the three years of MerCAP, a sample of individual students had been selected from a sampling frame of schools entering the program that year. The schools were selected to represent major sources of potential variance (size, grades included, and attendance in the year prior to starting MerCAP). The individual students were randomly selected from a list generated midyear by the Merced County Human Services Agency of students at the selected schools who were receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). It was recognized that there would be greater attrition from the sample of students selected in Year 1 of MerCAP than in those selected in Years 2 and 3. To the extent possible we followed each year's sample as they moved to different schools and/or residences, seeking help from the schools each year in tracking the sample. The schools in which the sample TANF students were currently enrolled were very helpful in updating our information on parent names, addresses, and phone numbers, and identifying the major language spoken at each student's home.

*Instrument:* A telephone interview questionnaire was developed by the evaluation team and tested with a number of English-speaking parents of TANF students not enrolled in the sample schools. Considerations included length of time required for parents to respond to interview questions, parent understanding of the interview items, and interpretability of parent responses. After several revisions, an acceptable version was produced that took about 10 minutes to conduct on the phone. This was translated into Spanish by a Spanish-speaking UC Cooperative Extension program representative in Merced County, and into Hmong by a staff member of the Lao Family Council in Merced.

These interview drafts were then tested as part of their training by persons recruited to conduct the parent interviews. A few adaptations were made in the Spanish and Hmong versions for cultural appropriateness. (A copy of the English language interview form is appended.)

*Interviewer Selection and Training:* Two interviewers were selected for each language group, with Hmong and Spanish interviewers who were also fluent in English. These persons were known to staff of the Merced County Office of UC Cooperative Extension and had previously worked with UCCE-sponsored programs, in one case helping to conduct the MerCAP Year 2 Spanish language parent focus groups. They participated in a four-hour training session, then conducted 5 practice interviews with parents whose children are not enrolled in the sample schools, and not necessarily receiving TANF. When the practice interviews were reviewed and found to be in satisfactory shape, interviewers were given a list of parents. Interviewers were instructed to bring in their completed interview forms weekly and get new parent lists when needed. Most interviews were completed in 10 minutes; a few persons wanted to talk longer and had to be steered back to the questions posed.

*Response Rate:* Our goal was to interview 320 parents, stratified by school (years in MerCAP) and language spoken in the home. Two problems prevented our reaching this goal:

- The number of families in Years 1 and 2 with current contact information was smaller than expected; and
- Our English language interviewers were discouraged by the low number of parents they could reach and did not request more lists when they had completed the first two lists assigned.

At the same time, one Hmong interviewer was so enthusiastic about this project that she exceeded the proportion of Hmong families we had originally envisioned.

The distribution of outcomes for potential interviewees is shown in Table C-1. While the overall response rate was a satisfying 60%, it is clear that English-speaking parents had the lowest response rate, mostly because the phone numbers given to the schools were inaccurate or outdated. They also had the highest refusal rate (13%). Hmong-speaking parents, on the other hand, were more likely than English or Spanish language families to have reachable telephones.

Table C-1. Distribution of Potential Interviews, by Outcome and Language Spoken at Home

Potential Interviewees	English-Speaking N %		Spanish-Speaking N %		Hmong-Speaking N %		Total N %	
Completed interviews	24	30%	78	57%	118	78%	220	60%
Could not be reached in 3 tries	17	21%	18	13%	20	13%	55	15%
Wrong or no number	29	36%	39	28%	12	8%	80	22%
Refused	10	13%	3	2%	1	1%	14	4%
Column Totals	80	100%	138	100%	151	100%	369	100%

Note: Column totals may add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

The distribution of completed interviews by year started MerCAP and family language is shown in Table C-2. The distribution of Hmong and Spanish surnames in the sample of 868 students still included in our study of individual TANF students is 49% Spanish, and 17% Hmong. While the proportions of interviews for each year of MerCAP are not badly skewed, there are more Hmong families and fewer English- and Spanish-speaking families in the completed interviews than the proportions of surnames in our TANF individual student sample suggest.

Table C-2. Distribution of Completed Interviews by Year Started MerCAP and Family Language

Completed Interviews	English-Speaking		Hmong-Speaking		Spanish-Speaking		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Started Year 1	10	42%	7	6%	42	54%	59	27%
Started Year 2	7	29%	57	48%	20	26%	84	38%
Started Year 3	7	29%	54	46%	16	21%	77	35%
Row Totals	24	11%	118	54%	78	35%	220	100%

It is probably not appropriate to draw inferences for the English-speaking TANF parent population from the survey data. The findings are useful, however, in understanding the perspectives of Hmong and Spanish-speaking families, and may suggest comparisons that can be pursued in further investigation.

## Findings

*Parents' Involvement with Their Children's Schools:* Of the 220 parents interviewed, 192 (87%) said they attended parent-teacher conferences, 63 (29%) go to school events, 26 (12%) help with school events, and 14 (6%) help the teacher and the same number are involved in other ways (Table C-3). The pattern of involvement varies with primary language, with English- and Spanish-speaking parents involved in language-dependent situations in which Hmong parents do not attempt to participate.

Table C-3. Number of Parents Involved in School Activities, by Language Spoken at Home

Nature of parent involvement	Total		English		Spanish		Hmong	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Go to teacher conferences	192	87%	19	79%	59	76%	114	97%
Go to school events	63	29%	5	21%	16	21%	42	36%
Help with school events	26	12%	7	29%	19	24%	---	---
Help the teacher	14	6%	5	21%	9	12%	---	---
Other	14	6%	3	13%	11	14%	---	---

Parents were asked if they thought their involvement with the school made a difference in how their children did at school, and whether they had been asked to get involved. They were also asked if overall they felt mostly positive or mostly negative about their involvement in their child(ren)'s school, and why they said that. Their responses are arrayed in Table C-4. Most parents (92%) said that involvement makes some or a lot of difference, with variability between language groups in extent of that difference. Most parents (78%) said they had been asked to get involved, again with differences between language groups.

In all language groups, most parents were mostly positive about their interaction with their children's schools, with fewer Spanish-speaking and all Hmong parents responding positively. Parents' comments help to explain these differences. Hmong parents reported that teachers (or most of the teachers, or those they had met) were helpful, kind and friendly when the parents had attended a teacher conference or had questions about their children's progress. One parent said [translated by the interviewer], "I cannot speak English much so I did not talk with the teacher but the teacher seems very helpful." Several said they had no complaints about the way they were treated. It appears that the basis for Hmong judgment of interaction with the school is the extent to which the parent is treated with courtesy and respect, and the assumption that teachers share parental concerns about the students.

Spanish-speaking parents who felt mostly negative about school-parent interaction based their judgment on the fact that they were not involved with the schools due to working long hours or having to care for other children at home. Those who felt positive liked the way teachers teach their children, and the extra efforts (e.g., homework club) to help their children learn. One parent reported that she liked to go to school to help and at the same time learn. In general, Spanish-speaking parents seem to feel negative if they are not included, and positive if they see the schools doing good things for their children.

English-speaking parents generally had no comments on the reason for their feelings about interaction with their children's schools.

Table C-4. Parental Involvement in Schools, by Language Spoken at Home

Parent Response to Item	Total		English		Spanish		Hmong	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Involvement makes a difference</b>								
Not at all	11	5%	1	4%	10	13%	---	---
Some	156	72%	6	25%	37	48%	113	97%
A lot	44	20%	17	71%	25	33%	2	2%
Not sure	7	3%	---	---	5	7%	2	2%
<b>Have you been asked to get involved?</b>								
Not at all	47	21%	7	29%	39	50%	1	1%
Some	159	72%	10	42%	33	42%	116	98%
A lot	12	6%	6	25%	5	6%	1	1%
<b>Overall feeling about interaction</b>								
Mostly positive	205	94%	22	92%	65	84%	118	100%
Mostly negative	8	4%	1	4%	7	9%		
Not sure	6	3%	1	4%	5	7%		

### Parents' Experiences with MerCAP

*Familiarity with MerCAP:* Parents were asked if they know about the program of the Merced County schools and the Human Services Agency (HSA) to improve school attendance (MerCAP). If they said yes, we asked how they found out about it (Table C-5). Perhaps the most startling finding is that at the end of three years of MerCAP only one-third of the parents in our sample knew about it. More of the parents whose children's schools started MerCAP in its first year were familiar with the program than parents first involved in Years 2 or 3. While about 1 in 4 or 5 parents remembered that they had received a letter about MerCAP from Human Services, in fact they all were sent a notice. Obviously, written notices are not very effective, perhaps due to difficulty in reading the language of the notice.

Table C-5. Parents' Source(s) of Information about MerCAP, by Year Started MerCAP

SOURCE	YEAR STARTED MERCAP						Total	
	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3			
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Letter from HSA	14	24%	12	14%	16	21%	42 19%	
Letter or call from school	6	10%	5	6%	6	8%	17 8%	
Other	8	14%	4	5%	1	1%	13 6%	
Total number who knew about MerCAP	28	47%	21	25%	23	30%	72 33%	

*Attendance Actions Taken:* The protocol for schools' interaction with parents of students who are frequently absent includes a letter to parents after five absences for unacceptable reasons, and another letter after seven absences with an appointment for a parent conference. At the conference with parents a Corrective Action Plan is expected if the absences were for unacceptable reasons, with possibility of suggesting resources or making referrals to address problems identified in the conversation. If unexcusable absences continue, the school requests the Human Services Agency to sanction the family at 10 absences, eliminating the child's portion of the family's cash assistance for one month.

Parents were asked a series of questions to determine what attendance actions, if any, the school had taken with the family. They were first asked if they had ever received a letter from the school saying that the family's cash assistance would be cut if their child did not attend school regularly. They were also asked if the school had ever called about their children's absences, given that in many schools it has become a standard practice to call every absentee's family as soon as possible on the day of an absence. This line of questioning was continued to cover each next applicable action; otherwise the interview went on to the next topic.

The chain of actions reported by the parents is shown in Table C-6. While nearly half of the parents interviewed reported that the school called them whenever their children were absent, only 13 families—6% of the parents interviewed—had received an absence letter, and all of them received more than one. Of the 13, only 10 (7% of those responding) had met with school authorities. Of the 10, 3 families (30% of those who had conferences but only 2% overall) said they were offered help or referred to a source of assistance. Most (8) of these families said they felt good about the meeting, and all said their children attended more regularly after that. Four of these families had their welfare checks reduced, and the three who commented about it indicated that this was a real hardship for the family. It appears that the required action protocol applies to a very small percentage of MerCAP families, and that in two out of three of these applicable cases there is no need to request sanctions. None of the Hmong parents reported any attendance actions taken; most indicated that their children (of whom there were 3 to 10 in the respondent families) were rarely, if ever, absent from school.

Table C-6. Parents' Reports of Attendance Actions Taken

Action	Total	
	N	%
Absence call from school	99	45%
Absence letter from school	13	6%
More than 1 letter	13	6%
Meeting with school	10	5%
Welfare check cut	4	2%

*Overall feelings about MerCAP:* Of the 204 parents who responded to this item, only 3 had mostly negative feelings about MerCAP, and only 11 had mixed feelings. Otherwise, parents were mostly positive, commenting that anything that can help get children to school is a good idea. This includes two of the parents whose welfare checks were reduced. (The other two had mixed feelings about the program.)

### Families' Experiences with Schools

*Number of schools attended in the last three years:* Parents were asked how many schools their children had attended in the last three years. Most (53%) of the parents who responded said that the child we asked about had been in the same school all that time; 38% indicated that the child had attended two schools. In most cases this was due to promotion to middle school or high school. Twenty families (9%) said their children had attended 3 to 6 schools in that time period; several commented they had a hard time finding housing.

Table C-7. Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's School Experiences and Absences

School Experience	Absent more than 10 days		Absent less than 10 days		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Enjoy school?						
No	3	27%	9	5%	12	6%
Yes	8	73%	158	83%	166	82%
Mixed	---	---	24	13%	24	12%
Get along with others?						
No	2	20%	19	10%	21	11%
Yes	6	60%	155	82%	161	81%
Mixed	---	---	6	3%	6	3%
Not mentioned	2	20%	9	5%	11	6%
Does well in school?						
No	4	40%	41	22%	45	23%
Yes	2	20%	51	26%	51	26%
Not mentioned	4	40%	103	52%	103	52%

Note: Errors due to rounding.

*Absences from school:* We requested parents to estimate whether the child we asked about had been absent more than or less than 10 days in this school year. A few (3%) did not know, but most (92%) believed it was less than 10 days. When we compared these estimates with the records of actual attendance for their children, most parents (nearly 90%) were accurate in estimating their children's attendance at school. The usual reason for absence was illness, with the other major reason being doctors' and dental appointments. Some Hmong parents said their children were never absent, and therefore gave no reasons.

Frequent absences from school may also be explained by the student's experience with school. We asked parents if their children enjoyed school and how they were doing in school. Their responses, arrayed by whether their children had been absent more or less than 10 days, are shown in Table C-7. The percentages of children whose parents believed they did not enjoy school, did not get along well with others, and did not do well in school were higher in the "Absent more than 10 days" than in the "less than 10 days" columns. The direction is reversed for those who enjoyed school, got along with others, and did well in school. The small number of students absent more than 10 days makes statistical inferences inappropriate.

Table C-8. Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's School Experience, by Language Spoken at Home

School Experience	Total		English		Spanish		Hmong	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Enjoy school?</b>								
No	12	6%	---	---	10	15%	2	2%
Yes	171	82%	20	91%	57	83%	94	80%
Mixed	26	12%	2	9%	2	3%	22	19%
<b>Get along with others?</b>								
No	21	10%	1	5%	14	21%	6	5%
Yes	167	81%	17	77%	44	67%	106	90%
Mixed	7	3%	---	---	1	2%	6	5%
Not mentioned	11	5%	4	18%	7	11%	---	---
<b>Does well in school?</b>								
No	46	22%	6	27%	21	32%	19	16%
Yes	53	26%	12	55%	27	41%	14	12%
Not mentioned	107	52%	4	18%	18	27%	85	72%

Note: Errors due to rounding.

Recognizing that there may be cultural differences in parents' perceptions of their children's school experiences, we also arrayed these responses by language spoken by the parent (Table C-8). While large proportions of children in each language group enjoyed school, Hmong parents were more likely to report that their children liked some of the subjects but not others, hence the higher percentage of mixed feelings. When asked how their children were doing in school, Hmong parents always answered in terms of how well their children got along with teachers and other children; this was not always included in the English and Spanish answers. On the other hand, English and Spanish-speaking parents were much more likely to interpret the question as to whether their children were doing well academically. Hmong parents frequently reported whether their children did all their homework every night (not coded). Few (12%) mentioned their children getting good grades.

*Influences of changing schools on parents' perceptions of their children's school experiences:* Previous studies have suggested that children who move from one school to another are more likely to have a poor school experience than those who remain in one school for all of the grades located there (Rumberger et al., 1998). We examined the relationship of the number of schools attended in the last three years to the parents' reports of their children's absences from school, enjoyment of school, relationship with others, and school achievement. The findings are arrayed in Table C-9.

Table C-9. Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's School Experience by Number of Schools Attended in Last Three Years

School Experience	1 school		2 schools		3 or more schools		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Absent								
More than 10 days	5	5%	2	3%	4	20%	11	5%
Less than 10 days	107	95%	77	97%	16	80%	200	95%
Enjoy school?								
No	4	4%	6	8%	2	10%	12	6%
Yes	89	85%	60	78%	16	84%	165	82%
Mixed	12	11%	11	14%	1	5%	24	12%
Get along with others?								
No	10	10%	8	11%	3	17%	21	11%
Yes	86	83%	61	80%	13	81%	160	80%
Mixed	3	3%	3	4%	---	---	6	3%
Not mentioned	5	5%	4	5%	2	11%	11	6%
Does well in school?								
No	25	24%	16	21%	4	22%	45	23%
Yes	27	26%	18	24%	7	39%	52	26%
Not mentioned	52	50%	42	55%	7	39%	101	51%

The results suggest that increasing mobility is related to increased absences, decreased enjoyment of school, and not getting along with others, but that it does not affect school performance negatively. Given the small number of students who had attended 3 or more schools, the data are only suggestive.

*Suggestions to make school better:* The final questions on the interview were open-ended requests for ideas on what would make school better for the parents and their children, and for anything else they would like to say about parents and schools. Of the Spanish-speaking parents, 54% had suggestions for improvement; 63% of the English-speaking parents offered suggestions, and 70% of the Hmong parents identified ways to improve. The major themes of these improvement suggestions are shown in Table C-10. Thirty-one parents, all Hmong, said the schools were doing fine (or the best they could), and that they had no ideas on how to improve the schools.

Table C-10. Suggestions for Making Schools Better, by Language Spoken by Parent

Suggestion	Total number of times mentioned	English	Spanish	Hmong
Schools should be stricter	37	---	1	36
More homework	35	---	---	35
More/better home-school interaction	34	11	12	11
More programs to help kids learn	21	1	13	7
More counselors for kids and parents	10	---	10	---
More interpreters/bilingual communication with parents	9	---	6	3
Better teaching	9	---	2	7
Improved student safety	5	2	3	---
Better school lunches	3	1	2	---
No school uniforms	2	2	---	---
Closer buses	1	1	---	---

The Hmong parents differ markedly from the other parent groups in that they appear to hold the school responsible for setting standards—more homework, tougher rules, stricter discipline—and expect the students to be responsible for meeting those standards. Their attitude is captured in the following translated quotes:

- Teachers should teach better by giving students more homework to do and more rewards for doing it.
- School should be stricter so all students would do their work and not cause trouble or skip out.
- Schools should be tougher on kids who break the rules, and should make sure that all teachers give homework to the students.
- Schools should give more homework and punish those who don't do it.
- Teachers are teaching very well; it's my son's fault that he can't learn.

The Spanish-speaking parents want more help from the schools—more programs (e.g., after school tutoring), improved communication to parents, more counselors to help kids with serious problems, more Spanish language communication with parents. Their responses include:

- Schools would be better if they offer more help with work for students at school; my son says that the teacher doesn't help him at the after school program, just talks to another teacher.
- My daughter needs a counselor once a week to help her see that school is very important for her future.
- School and parents should get together to see what type of punishment to give kids instead of suspending them. [Note: Daughter had problem with another girl who 'terrorized' her.]
- The principal should listen instead of talking all the time.
- Schools should have more meetings with the teachers and parents in English and Spanish.

The English-speaking parents were most likely to focus on the need for more involvement from the parents, and more interaction among principal, teachers and parents. Some of their other quoted concerns include:

- Teachers need more help with yard duty and kids need to be watched more.
- Honor kids more for their achievements.
- The school uniform is a problem because my child is overweight and can't deal with the uniform.
- Have buses closer.
- I'm tired of English being a minority—minorities need to learn English.

## **Summary**

In comparing the results of this study with the responses of parents in focus groups conducted near the ends of Years 1 and 2 of MerCAP, there are several consistencies, notably:

- Most parents are not familiar with MerCAP, even though the Merced County Human Services Agency sent all parents/guardians of TANF school children a letter notifying them that the child's cash assistance could be forfeited if the child did not attend school regularly.
- Only a small percentage of parents said they had received absence letters about their children; even fewer had had their cash assistance sanctioned. This is also consistent with school records of attendance actions taken with TANF students.
- Most parents had mostly positive feelings about MerCAP, including two out of four whose welfare checks had been cut. As in past years, parents say that anything that can help get children to school regularly is a good idea.
- The main reasons children were absent from school were for illness and doctors' or dental appointments.

Individual interviews provided an opportunity to record individual points of view and experiences, and to examine differences among the various cross-sections (by year started MerCAP, language spoken, number of schools attended) of the parent respondents. Main findings include:

- Those parents whose children were in schools starting MerCAP in 1997-98 were more likely to be aware of MerCAP than those in schools starting in 1998-99 or 1999-2000.
- Most parents attend teacher conferences and many are involved with schools in other ways. Spanish- and English-speaking parents were less likely to go to teacher conferences and school events than Hmong parents; the most frequent reason offered for not going was because of parent employment. Hmong parents generally do not participate except when they are asked to attend a conference or event.
- Most parents had mostly positive feelings about their interaction with their children's schools; Spanish-speaking parents were less likely to be positive than Hmong parents, all of whom were pleased that school personnel treated them well (even when the parent spoke no English).
- Frequent moving from one school to another contributes to more absences and fewer ties to school, but (in our limited data set) moving does not seem to be related to academic performance.
- The types of suggestions to make schools better for parents and their children varied greatly by parent ethnicity. Hmong parents expect schools to set demanding standards and homework assignments, which their children are then expected to meet/accomplish. Spanish-speaking parents want more help for their children, both with learning and counseling.



PARENT INTERVIEW FORM  
MERCAP, Spring 2000

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Name \_\_\_\_\_

School 1999-2000 \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Year started MerCAP \_\_\_\_\_

School started MerCAP \_\_\_\_\_

Date 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Time 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Date 2 \_\_\_\_\_ Time 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Date 3 \_\_\_\_\_ Time 3 \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Language \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship to Student \_\_\_\_\_

This is \_\_\_\_\_ from the University of California Cooperative Extension. Is this the home of [student's name]? May I speak with [his/her] parent or guardian, please? [If not home, ask when would be a good time to call back. If asked what this is about, say we're doing a study of parent involvement with schools, and it's to get the parent's perspective on a school program.]

[Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_], we're doing a study of parent involvement with schools that have been enrolled in the Merced County Attendance Program, called MerCAP. We'd like to ask you about your experience with \_\_\_\_\_ 's school. It should take about 10 minutes. Is this a good time? [If no, When can we call you back? If yes, Thank you. We'll try to make this quick.]

A. Parent involvement with School

1. In what ways are you involved with \_\_\_\_\_ 's school? [Pause for their answers]

[probe if no answers] Do you [check all that apply]:

- go to teacher conferences?
- help the teacher?
- participate in school events?
- help with school events?
- anything else?

[If any involvement] Do you think your involvement with the school makes a difference in how your [student's name] does at school?

- None at all
- Some
- A lot
- [not sure/no response]

3. Does the school ask you and other parents to get involved?  
 Not at all  
 Some  
 A lot  
 [Not sure, no response]
4. Overall, do you feel positive or negative about your interaction with \_\_\_\_\_'s school?  
 Mostly positive  
 Mostly negative

Why do you say that?:

## B. Experience with MerCAP

1. Your [son/daughter] was a part of the Merced County Attendance Program when it started [School Year] at the school. Do you have other children who were in school at that time?
2. Do you know about MerCAP—the Merced County Attendance Program? [describe it if they say no]  
[If they say yes, ask] How did you find out about it? [check all that apply]  
 letter from HSA  
 letter or call from school  
 other:
3. Have you ever received a letter from the school saying that \_\_\_\_\_ had been absent many days and that your family's cash assistance from the Human Services Agency would be cut if [he/she] did not attend school regularly?

NO » Has the school ever called you about your child's absences? [allow time for more info]

YES » Have you received more than one letter? [allow time for parent to elaborate]

Did you meet with the school about this?

- Yes  
 No

What happened? [probes = who talked, suggestions, tone of meeting, etc.]

Were you offered any help or referred to any assistance?

- No
- Yes - what help?

Did you feel good about the meeting?

- Yes
- No Why not?

Did your child attend school more regularly after that?

- Yes
- No

Was your welfare check ever cut because your child missed a lot of school?

- Yes
- No

[if yes] Did that make a difference? [probes = positive effects? Negative effects?]

4. Overall, do you feel positive or negative about MerCAP? [allow time for probes on why they say that]
  - Mostly positive
  - mostly negative
  - mixed
  - [not sure/did not respond]

#### C. Family Experience with Schools

1. How many schools has \_\_\_\_\_ attended in the last 3 years?
  - [if reason for high mobility offered, note it]
2. During this school year would you say \_\_\_\_\_ has been absent more than 10 days or less?
  - More
  - Less

3. What are the usual reasons \_\_\_\_\_ is absent from school? [Probe: are there other reasons?]
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Do your children (Does your child) enjoy school?
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How are your children doing in school? [probes = relationships w teachers & kids, academic performance, etc.]
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What would make school better for your children and you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Anything else you'd like to say about parents and schools?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP. WE REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR TIME. GOOD-BYE.

Interviewer comments:

## **Appendix D. MerCAP SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR SURVEY**

### **March & April, 2000**

#### **Purpose**

We have talked with most of the administrators of the 71 Merced County schools in the Merced County Attendance Program at one time or another, and have met with some districts to reflect on the findings to date. However, these contacts were not systematic across all participating schools. Before the end of the final school year we wanted to gain a clear understanding of school administrators' experience with the program and their views for the future.

#### **Method**

We chose a "Phone and Fax" survey method in which we called each school and requested a phone interview with the appropriate administrator. On the day before the appointed phone call, our team member faxed a copy of the survey instrument to the administrator in preparation for the interview. The interview questions were keyed to the items on the faxed instrument. (Copies of the survey instrument and interview protocol are attached.) On completion of the interview, which generally took less than 20 minutes, the Merced interviewer filled in all responses on the survey data sheet and sent it to the UC Davis campus via electronic mail. Coded quantitative data were then entered into an SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) file for analysis; comments were separately recorded for each item and subjected to content analysis.

Fifty-eight administrators were interviewed, two of whom served in two schools. Eleven administrators did not return phone calls or did not have time for an interview. The response rate was 84.5%, with no discernible pattern in the non-responding schools. The option to fax comments was elected by one administrator. Comments from the other administrators were recorded by the interviewer.

#### **Results**

*Part A.* School administrators were asked first whether observations and opinions that we have heard about MerCAP apply to their schools. If the observations did not apply, they were asked how their experiences differ. The following tables indicate administrators' responses to each of the shared observations. Comments regarding how their experiences differed are shown after each table. The stimulus observations are presented in bold type.

- Since we started MerCAP, parents have learned that the school is really serious about cracking down on absenteeism. Many of the students who started out the school year with many absences have been coming to school regularly since we sent letters to their parents.**

Response	Percentage of Administrators				
	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	87%	62%	90%	78%	83%
Not applicable	13%	38%	10%	22%	17%

Comments: Six administrators said they had few TANF students, so it was hard to tell whether MerCAP letters made a difference. Four indicated that it wasn't the first [5-absence] letter, but the conference or action plan or second [7-absence] letter or SARB action that made a difference. Two said they had more problems with non-TANF than with TANF students. Only five administrators said MerCAP made little or no difference to attendance of TANF students.

- There is a small number of “problem families” in which kids do not attend school regularly no matter what you do.**

Response	Percentage of Administrators				
	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	100%	87%	100%	89%	97%
Not applicable	---	13%	---	11%	3%

Comments: Seven administrators indicated that the problem families were not TANF. Three indicated that MerCAP had reduced the incidence of chronic absenteeism.

- 3. Parents of students who don't want to go to school feel helpless at making their kids attend. The parents get the kids up in the morning, but can't jeopardize their jobs by staying home to supervise their children actually getting to school.**

		Percentage of Administrators			
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	29%	50%	90%	89%	52%
Not applicable	71%	50%	10%	11%	48%

Comments: Several elementary school administrators indicated this is not a problem with younger children. Very few had heard that excuse; most believed that parents whose children don't get to school might feel helpless, but not because of a job. As one said, "I think they just don't care."

- 4. The loss of cash assistance means little in some families, especially those that have older kids who consider themselves independent and don't want to cooperate with the family.**

		Percentage of Administrators			
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	19%	25%	30%	56%	28%
Not applicable	81%	75%	70%	44%	72%

Comments: Administrators in 12 schools believed that the cash assistance means a lot to their families. More felt the observation was not applicable because they deal with younger students who do feel dependent on their families, and do cooperate. A few indicated that the parents may not care about the cash assistance, but the children do.

**5. The threat of losing income represents a useful tool for parents to get their children to attend school whether the kids want to go or not.**

	Percentage of Administrators				
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	94%	87%	100%	89%	93%
Not applicable	6%	13%	---	11%	7%

Comments: One administrator noted that families move before they can be sanctioned; another was very concerned about the refusal of the Human Services Agency to sanction some of the older students who would soon be 16 years old. One administrator remarked, “Your [sic] caseworkers create additional problems by condoning the behavior and refusing to assist us in our efforts. Telling us not to refer students, that nothing will happen anyway.”

**6. Southeast Asian immigrant families receiving cash assistance are generally very conscientious in assuring that their children attend school every day and work hard at getting good grades.**

	Percentage of Administrators				
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	58%	25%	50%	22%	47%
Not applicable	42%	75%	50%	73%	53%

Comments: Administrators in 23 schools indicated they had no Southeast Asian students; five others had very few. Two administrators objected to labeling or tracking students by ethnicity. One pointed out that many Southeast Asian families [coincidentally] left the area at the time MerCAP started.

**7. A better deterrent to truancy than losing \$100 for a month is having the District Attorney bring charges against parents of kids who cut school regularly.**

		Percentage of Administrators				
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)	
Applies	23%	50%	40%	56%	35%	
Not applicable	77%	50%	60%	44%	65%	

Comments: Nine administrators felt both should be used. Twelve felt that the loss of money was at least as effective as calling in the District Attorney. Ten indicated that the DA does not follow up, at least in a timely fashion. A few noted that the DA is the only “stick” available for non-TANF truants.

**8. MerCAP undercuts schools' attempts to build positive relationships with parents.**

		Percentage of Administrators				
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)	
Applies	13%	25%	20%	---	14%	
Not applicable	87%	75%	80%	100%	86%	

Comments: Most believed that increased communications and conferences were good opportunities for working with the parents on problem solving. A few noted that the tone of the letters caused some defensiveness, but that was fixed by re-writing the letters. Among the minority who agreed with the statement, several administrators noted that the relationship might not be positive, but MerCAP was not the reason. Some parents resent any efforts to make their children attend school. As one said, “It’s a convenient excuse for parents who would complain anyway.” Only one administrator believed that MerCAP really undermined the school’s efforts to work with parents.

**9. When we implement MerCAP we have to crack down on poor attendance of all students, not just those on cash assistance.**

	Percentage of Administrators				
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	94%	100%	100%	100%	97%
Not applicable	6%	---	---	---	3%

Comments: One administrator pointed out that they had done this long before MerCAP; another noted that the non-TANF students have more attendance problems than TANF students, so they have to crack down on all.

**10. Schools do not have the staff or the mandate to work with other agencies to help families resolve attendance problems.**

	Percentage of Administrators				
Response	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Applies	61%	75%	70%	56%	64%
Not applicable	39%	25%	30%	44%	36%

Comments: Fourteen administrators responded that they didn't have the staff, but they did it anyway. Others noted several agencies that they did work with, including Family Resource Center, SOS (Supportive On-going Services), Healthy Start, SARB (School Attendance Review Board), probation and police, but not always effectively. One pointed out that staff training is needed. Most would do more if they had more staff and greater collaboration with community resources.

*Part B.* One of our observations in previous conversations with Merced County school staff was that some schools had adapted their attendance policies and practices to make them “fit” better with MerCAP procedures. In order to find out how widespread such adaptations might be, we asked administrators what changes related to attendance they had made or intend to make based on their experience with MerCAP. The results are shown below.

Percentage of Administrators Reporting Changes Based on Experience with MerCAP				
K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
71%	100%	60%	56%	71%

Seventeen administrators commented that they are giving or intend to give more attention to the attendance function, doing it more efficiently, and giving it more up-front emphasis with students and parents. Thirteen stressed efforts to make their attendance procedures consistent for all students. One just complained that MerCAP means extra work for staff because the systems don't jibe. From the ten administrators who commented about making no changes, several said they had run a tight ship before MerCAP, and that MerCAP was a help. One said that the school had requested help with their computer system, but had not received it; the inference being that they didn't have resources to implement MerCAP. Four said they were making more and earlier phone calls about absences than they had before; three said they were intervening with problem cases earlier, and two noted that conferences with families were very effective. Two said they had added incentives for good attendance. One hoped that a program could be designed for handling tardiness.

Six administrators indicated they had added or had applied for grants to add more resources to work with families having attendance problems. One administrator wished for greater resources in the community; “[MerCAP] could be a great program, but personnel and cooperation between agencies restrict this.”

*Part C.* The oversight committee for MerCAP recommended early in 2000 that county schools continue with MerCAP. We understand that this recommendation was approved by the Superintendents at a monthly meeting in the spring of 2000. It was not clear to us (or to school staff with whom we have talked while collecting year-end data) exactly how the program will be continued. We included a question in our survey of school administrators ascertaining their preferences for School Year 2000-2001, when MerCAP is over but the CalWORKs attendance provisions apply. We asked which options they hoped their districts would adopt:

- To continue MerCAP as is,
- To fulfill only the minimum CalWORKs requirements by notifying the Merced County Human Services Agency when a TANF student has not attended school regularly, or
- To follow another alternative (which they were asked to describe).

Their preferences are shown below.

Percentages of Administrators Expressing Preferences for Next School Year					
Preference	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
A. Continue MerCAP as is	71%	75%	50%	67%	67%
B. Minimum CalWORKs	16%	12.5%	10%	11%	14%
C. Other	10%	12.5%	30%	11%	14%
Don't Know	3%	---	10%	11%	5%

A few administrators felt they didn't know enough about the CalWORKs requirements to make an informed decision. As one said, "If I had to choose I would select A [continue MerCAP as is]. There's too much invested in it at this point to just quit." Another noted, "I like the program, but it takes so much time I'm not sure it can be continued as is and I don't know enough about the CalWORKs provisions to make that choice."

At least five administrators commented that they would continue MerCAP as is if there were more resources to make it possible. "There's got to be a better way that doesn't require so much paper work," according to one principal. Another pointed out, "I wouldn't want it to continue as is, but would be willing to work with Human Services if a better method were developed."

Three or four said they wanted to involve a successful SARB program (or work with the DA) in conjunction with MerCAP, or to continue work with case workers and meld the TANF list into the school's overall attendance program.

One administrator summed up that school's experience with MerCAP and hopes for the future.

"I like the program in theory, but in practice it hasn't been effective. Notifying Human Services has not been effective. Too much time for too little return in our experience. Also, no positive response from Human Services. Sanction all grades would be effective. Implement 13202.7 CVC. Assist us by sharing information and working with us, not against us. Seems like some Human Services employees are concerned about the time they are spending on this. May I ask, what is their job all about? Better communication between agencies. Feedback on clients referred. Development of a program to assure compliance rather than a skeleton like we presently have."

*Parts D and E.* One of the policy questions of interest to public officials is the cost of implementing a new program. We were told in the first two years of MerCAP that the largest cost of starting and

maintaining this program was the time of administrative personnel (principals and vice-principals) and clerical staff (secretaries and attendance clerks) to flag TANF students, monitor attendance, keep careful records, and take prescribed actions promptly.

In this final survey we asked them to estimate the full-time equivalent (FTE) of administrators and clerical staff allocated to attendance. They were then asked to estimate what proportion of those FTE were specific to MerCAP. The estimated FTE's for attendance functions, the percentages of those FTE's particular to MerCAP, and the resulting FTE particular to MerCAP are shown below for administrators and clerical staff, averaged by school type.

Estimates of Time required	K-6 Schools (N=31)	K-8 Schools (N=8)	Middle Schools (N=10)	High Schools (N=9)	All Schools (N=58)
Administrative FTE - Attendance	.14 FTE (0 - .6)	.01 FTE (.01 - .2)	.26 FTE (.05 - .55)	.54 FTE (.20 - 1.50)	.21 FTE (0 - 1.5)
% of Attendance FTE for MerCAP	36% (0 - 100%)	38% (3 - 90%)	27% (5 - 67%)	.8% (0 - 33%)	30% (0 - 100%)
Admin. FTE for MerCAP only	.005 FTE (0 - .22)	.001 FTE (0 - .04)	.007 FTE (0 - .3)	.007 FTE (0 - .5)	.005 FTE (0 - .5)
Clerical FTE - Attendance	.54 FTE (.1 - 1)	.40 FTE (.06 - 1)	.87 FTE (.08 - 1.75)	1.61 FTE (.45 - 4.00)	.74 FTE (.06 - 4.0)
% of Attendance FTE for MerCAP	31% (0 - 90%)	13% (5 - 30%)	33% (5 - 75%)	16% (0 - 50%)	26% (0 - 90%)
Clerical FTE for MerCAP only	.18 FTE (0 - .77)	.006 FTE (.01 - .3)	.31 FTE (.03 - .88)	.24 FTE (0 - .6)	.19 FTE (0 - .88)

Based on these estimates, implementing MerCAP appears to require about .20 FTE, with the bulk of the work falling on attendance clerks and/or clerical staff. The workload is higher at the middle school and high school levels, where the number of students and student absences are higher. These estimates are consistent with those reported in our Year 1 report, which found that most schools required about .20 to .25 FTE to implement the program. No discernible differences are apparent in the time estimates for schools based on the number of years they have been in the MerCAP program.

*Part F.* At the end of each interview administrators were asked if they wished to say anything more. Forty-eight of the administrators did, about half (23) reiterating positive feelings toward the experience. Eleven more were positive, but wished that the program applied to all students or that they had more resources, including an efficient monitoring system, to implement it. Two were skeptical, wanting to see the evaluation results before deciding if MerCAP were a good thing or believing it hadn't made much difference one way or another. The other 12 were negative, most with suggestions for improvement. Some focused on improving communications with the Human Services Agency, some on building working relationships with community agencies, and some on creating a program for all students.

On a different tack, one administrator suggested, “There could be some sort of incentive for the school to encourage the investment of time in the program. For example, if the district gains money because attendance is up, that could somehow go to the schools that are showing the improvement in their attendance.”

Another administrator who started in the last year of the program made a number of suggestions.

“The program has increased parental awareness of attendance issues and mandates. It should have a 3-year trial in this district. It needs to be institutionalized so that their work has not been done for nothing. Put student ID numbers on the list so they are easier to find. When a student transfers within the district or county an attendance printout and record of actions should be sent to the new school. Drop the curable sanction because it makes the school look like the bad guy. Develop consistency with the letters for all students (drop the 5 day, use a 3 day and 7 day). Doctors who give out excuses too freely (some really seem to give a lot of them) should be investigated.”

MerCAP School Administrator Survey  
March & April, 2000

Plan of Work

- I. An updated list of Merced County school administrators will be compiled. There are 21 schools in Year 1, 34 in Year 2, and 16 in year 3.
- II. Starting as soon as we have an instrument we like, call each school and tell the selected administrator we would like to do a final interview. Explain that we will fax some questions and call the next day to get answers. Should not take more than 20 minutes. When would be a good day and time of day?
- III. FAX the attached sheet on the morning of the day before the appointment.
- IV. Call at the appointed time. It's OK to use a tape recorder IF they have no objection AND the data sheets are completely filled out before being sent here.
- V. Finish the interview. Thank the person, ask if they would like to fax back fuller answers (in addition to, not instead of interview). Write up the interview completely. Send completed interviews to UCD for analysis.

**FIRST PHONE CONTACT:**

This is \_\_\_\_\_ from the MerCAP Evaluation Team. We are setting up appointments now for our final round of interviews with school administrators. May I speak with \_\_\_\_\_ or the person who keeps his/her calendar?

This time we are planning 20-minute telephone interviews based on questions we will FAX a day in advance. What day in the next month looks possible for you? OK, I'll FAX the questions on the morning of the \_\_\_\_\_ and call on the \_\_\_\_\_. What time of day is best? \_\_\_\_\_ Great, I'll FAX the questions with a reminder the day before.

**SECOND PHONE CONTACT:**

This is \_\_\_\_\_ from the MerCAP Evaluation Team. I have an appointment for a phone interview with \_\_\_\_\_ now. Did he/she get my FAX yesterday? Is he/she ready? [If not ask whether you should call back a little later. If hesitant, ask if you should reschedule for the next day/week.]

Have you had a chance to look over the questions I sent you yesterday? Any comments before we get started? Would you have any objections to my using a tape recorder so it doesn't take so long to take notes? We will not attribute anything you say to you; the notes are just for our analysis.

## School Administrator Survey Data Sheet

- A. Item A on the fax includes 10 comments we have heard from school administrators in the last 2+ years. [Read each one and ask the questions.]

1. Does this apply to your school?

Comments

       YES

       NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

2. Does this apply to your school?

       YES

       NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

3. Does this apply to your school?

       YES

       NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

4. Does this apply to your school?

       YES

       NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

5. Does this apply to your school?

       YES

       NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

6. Does this apply to your school?

       YES

       NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

7. Does this apply to your school?

YES

NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

8. Does this apply to your school?

YES

NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

9. Does this apply to your school?

YES

NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

10. Does this apply to your school?

YES

NO

‡ How does your experience differ?

B. Based on your MerCAP experience, what changes at your school have you made or will you make related to attendance?

C. Which of the following options do you hope your district will adopt next year when MerCAP is over and the CalWORKs attendance provisions apply to Merced County schools?

a. Continue MerCAP as is.

b. Fulfill only the minimum CalWORKs requirements by notifying the Merced County Human Services Agency when a TANF student has not attended school regularly.

c. Other: what?

- D. What would you estimate is the full-time equivalent **you and other administrators** in your school devote to attendance-related responsibilities? \_\_\_\_\_FTE  
- Of that time, how much is specific to MerCAP? \_\_\_\_\_%

Comment:

- E. What would you estimate is the full-time equivalent your **secretaries/attendance clerks** devote to attendance-related responsibilities at your school \_\_\_\_\_FTE  
- Of that time, how much is specific to MerCAP? \_\_\_\_\_%

Comment:

- F. Any thing else you would like to say about your experience with MerCAP?

Thank you very much. This is invaluable to the study of MerCAP. If you wish to say more about MerCAP, you may write it on the FAX you received and send it to Joan Wright at 530-752-5855.

**Department of Human & Community Development (HCD) Cooperative Extension,**

**University of California, Davis**

Fax #530-752-5855      Office phone 530-752-3007

**Merced County Office of University of California Cooperative Extension**

Fax #209-722-8856      Office phone 209-385-7418

***Telefacsimile (Fax) Message***

Date    3/ /00 Number of pages (including this page)      3

<b>TO:</b> (name; city; state/county)	<b>Fax #</b>	<b>Voice Phone #</b>
<b>FROM:</b> (name)	<b>Sender's FAX #</b>	<b>Sender's phone #</b>

Enclosed are the questions which I shall be asking you in our 20-minute interview scheduled for:

\_\_\_\_\_.

If for any reason you are unable to keep this appointment as scheduled, please call the phone number above and suggest some alternative times.

THANK YOU IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR WILLINGNESS TO BE INTERVIEWED. YOU ARE PROVIDING INFORMATION THAT IS ESSENTIAL TO THE FINAL EVALUATION OF MERCAP.



## MerCAP School Administrator Survey

- A. Over the last two and a half years of the Merced County Attendance Program, school personnel have shared many observations and opinions from their experience with the program. Below are a few of them.

When we call you at the appointed time, we will ask you:

1. Does this apply to your school?
2. In what ways does your experience differ?
  1. Since we started MerCAP, parents have learned that the school is really serious about cracking down on absenteeism. Many of the students who started out the school year with many absences have been coming to school regularly since we sent letters to their parents.
  2. There is a small number of “problem families” in which kids do not attend school regularly no matter what you do.
  3. Parents of students who don’t want to go to school feel helpless at making their kids attend. The parents get the kids up in the morning, but can’t jeopardize their jobs by staying home to supervise their children actually getting to school.
  4. The loss of cash assistance means little in some families, especially those that have older kids who consider themselves independent and don’t want to cooperate with the family.
  5. The threat of losing income represents a useful tool for parents to get their children to attend school whether the kids want to go or not.
  6. Southeast Asian immigrant families receiving cash assistance are generally very conscientious in assuring that their children attend school every day and work hard at getting good grades.
  7. A better deterrent to truancy than losing \$100 for a month is having the District Attorney bring charges against parents of kids who cut school regularly.
  8. MerCAP undercuts schools’ attempts to build positive relationships with parents.
  9. When we implement MerCAP we have to crack down on poor attendance of all students, not just those on cash assistance.
  10. Schools do not have the staff or the mandate to work with other agencies to help families resolve attendance problems.
- B. Based on your MerCAP experience, what changes at your school have you made or will you make related to attendance?

C. Which of the following options do you hope your district will adopt next year when MerCAP is over and the CalWORKs attendance provisions apply to Merced County schools?

- a. Continue MerCAP as is.
- b. Fulfill only the minimum CalWORKs requirements by notifying the Merced County Human Services Agency when a TANF student has not attended school regularly.
- c. Other: what?

D. What would you estimate is the full-time equivalent **you and other administrators** in your school devote to attendance-related responsibilities? \_\_\_\_\_ FTE

- Of that time, how much is specific to MerCAP? \_\_\_\_\_ %

Comment:

E. What would you estimate is the full-time equivalent **your secretaries/attendance clerks** devote to attendance-related responsibilities at your school \_\_\_\_\_ FTE

- Of that time, how much is specific to MerCAP? \_\_\_\_\_ %

Comment:

F. Any thing else you would like to say about your experience with MerCAP?

IF YOU WISH TO SEND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION YOU MAY FAX THESE PAGES TO  
JOAN WRIGHT, MERCAP EVALUATION, UC-DAVIS, 530-752-5855.

## Appendix E - MerCAP IMPACT ANALYSES

*School-level Data:* The school-level data set included the following variables, collected for each school grade for the school years 1996-97 (pre-MerCAP) through 1999-2000 (the final year of the MerCAP experiment).

- Percentage Actual Attendance (PAA) - The ratio of days of actual attendance to days enrolled for all students
- TANF Percentage Actual Attendance (MPAA) - The ratio of days of actual attendance to days enrolled for TANF students, grades 1 through 10 only
- Non-TANF Percentage Actual Attendance (NPAA) - The ratio of days of actual attendance to days enrolled for non-TANF students, grades 1 through 10 only
- MerCAP cohort - Schools starting MerCAP in the same year; Year 1 = 1997-98, Year 2 = 1998-99, and Year 3 = 1999-2000
- Years in MerCAP - The number of years a school has been a part of MerCAP (1 to 3 years)

In year-round schools (Years 2 and 3) grades were aggregated across tracks to provide one set of attendance figures for each grade.

Schools are required to submit monthly attendance reports on their regular programs. MerCAP was not a regular program, and was not accommodated in the computer software of some schools. TANF attendance figures were not reported monthly in those schools. An estimate of MPAA for those schools was constructed by analyzing the yearly attendance records by grade of all students who had been identified as being on TANF by the Merced County Human Services Agency at the end of the year. NPAA was calculated by subtracting days of actual attendance and enrollment for TANF students from the figures for all students, and computing the ratio of the remainders.

For new schools started during the MerCAP years (e.g., Delhi Middle School, Westside Union Intermediate School), grade attendance figures from schools (e.g., Schendel Elementary School, all the Los Banos 6<sup>th</sup> grades) that became part of that school were used for previous year comparisons. This was not possible for all new schools (e.g., Delhi High School, Stowell Elementary School).

*Individual Data:* In the first two years of MerCAP a sample of TANF students was randomly selected from a sampling frame of all TANF students in eight schools selected as having relatively high and low attendance for the categories of K-6 elementary schools, K-8 elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. The lists provided by the Human Services Agency contained some names unknown in the school (not an unusual situation, according to the schools) so we oversampled such that at least 50 students from each school, a total of at least 400 students, were selected in each of the first two years. In the third year MerCAP cohort (all Merced City Schools) there were no high schools, so we selected 75 students from each of two elementary and two middle schools. The total sample for the three years before eliminating some unknowns and some students in Special Day Classes was 1162. The final sample size was 1092.

Variables collected to the extent possible for each student include:

- Percentage actual attendance for school years 1996-97 (baseline) through 1999-2000. Some students (e.g., first-graders) entering MerCAP in the second and third years would not have been in school in 1996-97; others attended another school from which their attendance records were not available.
- Scores (Standardized Scores, National Percentiles, and Normal Curve Equivalents) on the reading comprehension component of the SAT9 tests for 1998, 1999, and 2000. This test is given only to students in second through 11<sup>th</sup> grades. Not all students attempt the tests; some are absent when the tests are given.

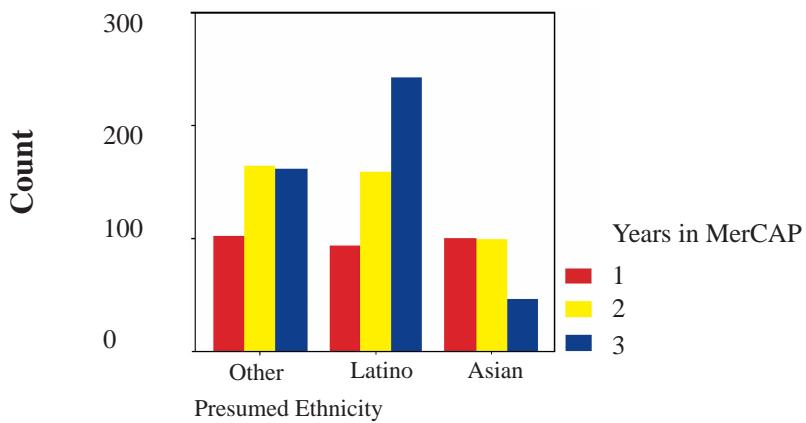
The number of students in each sample MerCAP cohort for whom the specified data are available is shown below:

Table E-1. Distribution of Individual Students in Sample

School Year(s)	Year 1 Sample	Year 2 Sample	Year 3 Sample	Total Sample
9798 only				
PAA only	12	6	--	18
PAA & some SAT9	13	3	--	16
9798 & 9697				
PAA only	15	--	--	15
PAA & some SAT9	25	--	--	25
9899 only				
PAA only	8	9	2	19
PAA & some SAT9	6	18	5	29
9899 & 9798				
PAA only	4	10	--	14
PAA & some SAT9	25	21	2	48
9899 & 9798 & 9697				
PAA only	5	--	--	5
PAA & some SAT9	24	1	19	44
9900 only				
PAA only	1	1	7	9
PAA & some SAT9	--	8	5	13
9900 & 9899				
PAA only	9	99	225	38
PAA & some SAT9	3	4	3	133
9900 & 9899 & 9798				
PAA only	3	4	3	10
PAA & some SAT9	83	178	36	297
9900 & 9899 & 9798 & 9697				
PAA only	3	--	--	3
PAA & some SAT9	131	34	149	314
Other combinations				
PAA only	--	2	1	3
PAA & some SAT9	24	7	8	39
Unknown	53	8	9	70
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>1162</b>

The presumed ethnicity (based on judgment of a panel of three researchers who reviewed students' last names) of the sample is shown in Figure 1 on the following page. There are more Latinos in the first MerCAP cohort (3 years in MerCAP) than in the other two sample MerCAP cohorts, and fewer Asians, but each MerCAP cohort contains a mix of ethnicity that fairly represents the population in that MerCAP cohort.

Figure E-1. Distribution of Presumed Ethnicity by Years in MerCAP



### Detailed Analyses of Impact Study Questions

The remainder of this appendix is organized by the test identified for each major research question in the impact section of the final report.

#### **Question 1. Do the attendance patterns of TANF students differ significantly from those of their non-TANF peers?**

Table E-2. Test 1: Paired t-tests, MPAA v NPAA, for 1997-98, 1998-99, and 1999-2000

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	MPAA 97-98	.950324	76	1.64606E-02	1.88816E-03
	NPAA, 97-98	.953900	76	1.25757E-02	1.44254E-03
Pair 2	MPAA 98-99	.950911	207	2.86017E-02	1.98795E-03
	NPAA 98-99	.958775	207	1.13003E-02	7.85427E-04
Pair 3	MPAA 99-00	.954710	292	2.34991E-02	1.37518E-03
	NPAA 99-00	.959309	292	1.32067E-02	7.72863E-04

Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	TANF PAA - 1997-98 & Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98	76	.584	.000
Pair 2	TANF PAA 1998-99 & Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99	207	.415	.000
Pair 3	TANF PAA 1999-00 & Non-TANF PAA 99-00	292	.413	.000

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper						
Pair 1	M PAA 97-98 - NPAA, 97-98	-3.575837E-03	1.36818E-02	1.56941E-03	-6.702255E-03	-4.494194E-04	-2.278	75	.026			
Pair 2	M PAA 98-99 - NPAA 98-99	-7.863845E-03	2.60308E-02	1.80926E-03	-1.143089E-02	-4.296796E-03	-4.346	206	.000			
Pair 3	M PAA 99-00 - N PAA 99-00	-4.598539E-03	2.16870E-02	1.26914E-03	-7.096389E-03	-2.100689E-03	-3.623	291	.000			

Table E-3. Test 2: Paired t-tests, MPAA99-00 v NPAA99-00, by MerCAP Cohort

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Year 1 Schools	TANF PAA 99-00	.956000	97	2.40623E-02	2.44316E-03
	Non-TANF PAA 99-00	.965642	97	1.18660E-02	1.20481E-03
Year 2 Schools	TANF PAA 99-00	.951059	123	2.76410E-02	2.49230E-03
	Non-TANF PAA 99-00	.954966	123	1.39882E-02	1.26128E-03
Year 3 Schools	TANF PAA 99-00	.959211	72	1.10304E-02	1.29994E-03
	Non-TANF PAA 99-00	.958194	72	9.97630E-03	1.17572E-03
All Schools	TANF PAA 99-00	.954710	292	2.34991E-02	1.37518E-03
	Non-TANF PAA 99-00	.959309	292	1.32067E-02	7.72863E-04

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
					Lower	Upper						
Year 1	MPAA 9900 - NPAA 9900	-9.642552 E-03	2.26839E-02	2.30320E-03	-1.421436 E-02	-5.070739 E-03	-4.187	96	.000			
Year 2	MPAA 9900 - NPAA 9900	-3.907828 E-03	2.38264E-02	2.14835E-03	-8.160702 E-03	3.45047 E-04	-1.819	122	.071			
Year 3	MPAA 9900 - NPAA 9900	1.01690 E-03	1.37439E-02	1.61974E-03	-2.212768 E-03	4.24657 E-03	.628	71	.532			
All Schools	MPAA 9900 - NPAA 9900	-4.598539 E-03	2.16870E-02	1.26914E-03	-7.096389 E-03	-2.100689 E-03	-3.623	291	.000			

Table E-4. Tests 3 & 4: Means of MPAA and NPAA for 97-98, 98-99, and 99-00 by Grade and Years in MerCAP

Case Processing Summary

		Cases				Total			
		Included		Excluded					
		N	Percent	N	Percent				
TANF PAA - 1997-98 * GRADE		76	24.3%	237	75.7%	313	100.0%		
Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98 * GRADE		76	24.3%	237	75.7%	313	100.0%		
TANF PAA 1998-99 * GRADE		207	66.1%	106	33.9%	313	100.0%		
Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99 * GRADE		207	66.1%	106	33.9%	313	100.0%		
TANF PAA 99-00 * GRADE		292	93.3%	21	6.7%	313	100.0%		
Non-TANF PAA 99-00 * GRADE		292	93.3%	21	6.7%	313	100.0%		
TANF PAA - 1997-98 * Years in MERCAP		76	24.3%	237	75.7%	313	100.0%		
Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98 * Years in MERCAP		76	24.3%	237	75.7%	313	100.0%		
TANF PAA 1998-99 * Years in MERCAP		207	66.1%	106	33.9%	313	100.0%		
Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99 * Years in MERCAP		207	66.1%	106	33.9%	313	100.0%		
TANF PAA 99-00 * Years in MERCAP		292	93.3%	21	6.7%	313	100.0%		
Non-TANF PAA 99-00 * Years in MERCAP		292	93.3%	21	6.7%	313	100.0%		

**MEANS OF MPAA & NPAA BY GRADE, 97-98 THROUGH 99-00**

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GRADE		TANF PAA - 1997-98	Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98	TANF PAA 1998-99	Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99	TANF PAA 99-00	Non-TANF PAA 99-00
1ST GRADE	Mean	.947260	.948313	.948963	.955790	.951653	.954171
	N	10	10	28	28	41	41
	Std. Dev.	1.44147E-02	1.08343E-02	2.11351E-02	1.05892E-02	1.85628E-02	1.31334E-02
	Minimum	.9209	.9243	.8940	.9358	.8994	.9182
	Maximum	.9636	.9619	.9944	.9772	.9876	.9826
2ND GRADE	Range	.0427	.0376	.1004	.0414	.0882	.0644
	Mean	.958963	.954988	.953672	.961916	.956294	.962056
	N	10	10	26	26	42	42
	Std. Dev.	9.87484E-03	9.53012E-03	2.21667E-02	1.00116E-02	2.79088E-02	1.11615E-02
	Minimum	.9387	.9326	.8841	.9430	.8285	.9330
3RD GRADE	Maximum	.9738	.9631	.9854	.9778	.9951	.9820
	Range	.0351	.0305	.1013	.0348	.1666	.0489
	Mean	.959094	.959694	.957117	.962410	.959772	.964507
	N	10	10	28	28	39	39
	Std. Dev.	1.04929E-02	1.16118E-02	2.27603E-02	7.85090E-03	1.18044E-02	1.33483E-02
4TH GRADE	Minimum	.9461	.9327	.8925	.9429	.9369	.9371
	Maximum	.9758	.9757	1.0000	.9741	.9806	.9899
	Range	.0296	.0430	.1075	.0312	.0437	.0529
	Mean	.957052	.960589	.961718	.961092	.961701	.962932
	N	10	10	27	27	40	40
5TH GRADE	Std. Dev.	1.06733E-02	7.61845E-03	1.84297E-02	1.00567E-02	1.38320E-02	1.00501E-02
	Minimum	.9399	.9510	.9148	.9380	.9356	.9404
	Maximum	.9717	.9725	.9948	.9782	.9941	.9804
	Range	.0318	.0214	.0800	.0401	.0585	.0400
	Mean	.956227	.962951	.951151	.962720	.961849	.962365
6TH GRADE	N	10	10	28	28	41	41
	Std. Dev.	1.27694E-02	7.71758E-03	2.91230E-02	1.01484E-02	1.73133E-02	1.00290E-02
	Minimum	.9369	.9533	.8627	.9426	.9046	.9415
	Maximum	.9733	.9754	.9905	.9775	1.0000	.9781
	Range	.0364	.0221	.1278	.0349	.0954	.0366
7TH GRADE	Mean	.952121	.957717	.956286	.958185	.952002	.962786
	N	9	9	24	24	28	28
	Std. Dev.	1.42168E-02	9.72688E-03	1.84639E-02	1.26816E-02	2.39143E-02	1.07398E-02
	Minimum	.9322	.9465	.9093	.9259	.8889	.9358
	Maximum	.9682	.9748	.9833	.9747	.9926	.9821
8TH GRADE	Range	.0360	.0283	.0740	.0488	.1037	.0463
	Mean	.939135	.947252	.934450	.953695	.950708	.957688
	N	5	5	16	16	22	22
	Std. Dev.	1.87205E-02	1.50169E-02	5.72216E-02	1.07329E-02	2.15268E-02	1.14785E-02
	Minimum	.9111	.9303	.7500	.9362	.9053	.9323
9TH GRADE	Maximum	.9587	.9629	1.0000	.9710	.9909	.9838
	Range	.0475	.0326	.2500	.0348	.0857	.0514
	Mean	.937775	.949273	.944718	.957780	.947755	.957276
	N	4	4	16	16	19	19
	Std. Dev.	1.72685E-02	1.23685E-02	3.09758E-02	1.36885E-02	2.82148E-02	9.75061E-03
10TH GRADE	Minimum	.9124	.9377	.8779	.9310	.8934	.9314
	Maximum	.9487	.9630	.9944	.9744	1.0000	.9763
	Range	.0363	.0254	.1165	.0434	.1066	.0449
	Mean	.930195	.937541	.933482	.947490	.937578	.941742
	N	4	4	7	7	10	10
Total	Std. Dev.	1.33959E-02	6.29691E-03	3.39441E-02	1.06533E-02	4.41682E-02	1.32372E-02
	Minimum	.9199	.9293	.8889	.9373	.8231	.9210
	Maximum	.9482	.9446	.9878	.9651	.9730	.9698
	Range	.0283	.0153	.0989	.0278	.1500	.0488
	Mean	.925510	.932025	.931768	.946992	.930348	.936796
Total	N	4	4	7	7	10	10
	Std. Dev.	2.48956E-02	6.58490E-03	2.97856E-02	1.30528E-02	4.38290E-02	1.78112E-02
	Minimum	.8967	.9268	.8677	.9363	.8174	.9084
	Maximum	.9487	.9416	.9526	.9674	.9639	.9705
	Range	.0521	.0147	.0849	.0311	.1465	.0621
Total	Mean	.950324	.953900	.950911	.958775	.954710	.959309
	N	76	.76	207	207	292	292
	Std. Dev.	1.64606E-02	1.25757E-02	2.86017E-02	1.13003E-02	2.34991E-02	1.32067E-02
	Minimum	.8967	.9243	.7500	.9259	.8174	.9084
	Maximum	.9758	.9757	1.0000	.9782	1.0000	.9899
	Range	.0791	.0514	.2500	.0522	.1826	.0815

ANOVA Table

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
TANF PAA – 1997-98 * GRADE	Between Groups	(Combined)	.008	9	.001	4.548	.000
	Within Groups		.013	66	.000		
	Total		.020	75			
Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98 * GRADE	Between Groups	(Combined)	.005	9	.001	6.022	.000
	Within Groups		.007	66	.000		
	Total		.012	75			
TANF PAA 1998-99 * GRADE	Between Groups	(Combined)	* .015	9	.002	2.119	.030
	Within Groups		.154	197	.001		
	Total		.169	206			
Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99 * GRADE	Between Groups	(Combined)	.004	9	.000	3.647	.000
	Within Groups		.023	197	.000		
	Total		.026	206			
TANF PAA 99-00 * GRADE	Between Groups	(Combined)	.016	9	.002	3.436	.000
	Within Groups		.145	282	.001		
	Total		.161	291			
Non-TANF PAA 99-00 * GRADE	Between Groups	(Combined)	.012	9	.001	9.692	.000
	Within Groups		.039	282	.000		
	Total		.051	291			

Measures of Association

	Eta	Eta Squared
TANF PAA – 1997-98 * GRADE	.619	.383
Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98 * GRADE	.672	.451
TANF PAA 1998-99 * GRADE	.297	.088
Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99 * GRADE	.378	.143
TANF PAA 99-00 * GRADE	.314	.099
Non-TANF PAA 99-00 * GRADE	.486	.236

MEANS OF MPAA & NPAA BY YEARS IN MERCAP, 97-98 THROUGH 99-00

Report

Years in MERCAP		TANF PAA - 97-98	Non-TANF PAA, 97-98	TANF PAA 98-99	Non-TANF PAA - 98-99	TANF PAA 99-00	Non-TANF PAA 99-00
Started in 1999-2000	Mean					.959211	.958194
	N					72	72
	Std. Deviation					1.10304E-02	9.97630E-03
	Minimum					.9345	.9182
	Maximum					.9820	.9767
	Range					.0476	.0585
Started in 1998-99	Mean		,	.943841	.956377	.951059	.954966
	N			111	111	123	123
	Std. Deviation			3.39138E-02	1.05001E-02	2.76410E-02	1.39882E-02
	Minimum			.7500	.9310	.8174	.9141
	Maximum			1.0000	.9774	1.0000	.9893
	Range			.2500	.0464	.1826	.0752
Started in 1997-98	Mean	.950324	.953900	.959086	.961548	.956000	.965642
	N	76	76	96	96	97	97
	Std. Deviation	1.64606E-02	1.25757E-02	1.77822E-02	1.16081E-02	2.40623E-02	1.18660E-02
	Minimum	.8967	.9243	.8949	.9259	.8285	.9084
	Maximum	.9758	.9757	.9948	.9782	1.0000	.9899
	Range	.0791	.0514	.0999	.0522	.1715	.0815
Total	Mean	.950324	.953900	.950911	.958775	.954710	.959309
	N	76	76	207	207	292	292
	Std. Deviation	1.64606E-02	1.25757E-02	2.86017E-02	1.13003E-02	2.34991E-02	1.32067E-02
	Minimum	.8967	.9243	.7500	.9259	.8174	.9084
	Maximum	.9758	.9757	1.0000	.9782	1.0000	.9899
	Range	.0791	.0514	.2500	.0522	.1826	.0815

ANOVA Table

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
TANF PAA – 1997-98 * Years in MERCAP	Between Groups	(Combined)	.000	2	.000	.000	1.000
	Within Groups		.020	73	.000		
	Total		.020	75			
Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98 * Years in MERCAP	Between Groups	(Combined)	.000	2	.000	.000	1.000
	Within Groups		.012	73	.000		
	Total		.012	75			
TANF PAA 1998-99 * Years in MERCAP	Between Groups	(Combined)	.012	2	.006	7.794	.001
	Within Groups		.157	204	.001		
	Total		.169	206			
Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99 * Years in MERCAP	Between Groups	(Combined)	.001	2	.001	5.633	.004
	Within Groups		.025	204	.000		
	Total		.026	206			
TANF PAA 99-00 * Years in MERCAP	Between Groups	(Combined)	.003	2	.002	2.992	.052
	Within Groups		.157	289	.001		
	Total		.161	291			
Non-TANF PAA 99-00 * Years in MERCAP	Between Groups	(Combined)	.006	2	.003	20.478	.000
	Within Groups		.044	289	.000		
	Total		.051	291			

Measures of Association

	Eta	Eta Squared
TANF PAA - 1997-98 * Years in MerCAP	.000	.000
Non-TANF PAA, 1997-98 * Years in MerCAP	.000	.000
TANF PAA 1998-99 * Years in MerCAP	.266	.071
Non-TANF PAA - 1998-99 * Years in MerCAP	.229	.052
TANF PAA 99-00 * Years in MerCAP	.142	.020
Non-TANF PAA 99-00 * Years in MerCAP	.352	.124

\*

**Question 2. Does participating in MerCAP improve the attendance of TANF students?**

Table E-5. Test 1, t-tests - Sample Student PAAs for Baseline and First Year in MerCAP, by MerCAP Cohort

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Percent actual attendance, 96-97	.944258	219	5.66244E-02	3.82632E-03
	Percent actual attendance, 97-98	.951844	219	5.28715E-02	3.57273E-03
Pair 2	Percent actual attendance, 97-98	.945016	244	6.42266E-02	4.11169E-03
	Percent actual attendance, 98-99	.938047	244	9.47871E-02	6.06812E-03
Pair 3	Percent actual attendance, 98-99	.946549	241	7.92813E-02	5.10696E-03
	Percent actual attendance, 99-00	.960724	241	4.88015E-02	3.14358E-03

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
					Lower	Upper						
Pair 1	PAA 96-97 - PAA 97-98	-7.585563 E-03	4.50173 E-02	3.04199E-03	-1.358103 E-02	-1.590091 E-03	-2.494	218	.013			
Pair 2	PAA97-98 - PAA 98-99	6.96962 E-03	9.66728 E-02	6.18884E-03	-5.221002 E-03	1.91602 E-02	1.126	243	.261			
Pair 3	PAA 98-99 - PAA 99-00	-1.417447 E-02	6.40987 E-02	4.12896E-03	-2.230811 E-02	-6.040839 E-03	-3.433	240	.001			

Table E-6. Test 2: (Individual), Cross-tabulation, Baseline PAA Status vs. Year 1 PAA Status

Count

		Year 1 PAA status		Total
		below .945 PAA	.945 or higher	
Baseline PAA status	below .945 PAA	162	114	276
	.945 PAA or higher	78	405	483
Total		240	519	759

Cross-tabulation: Baseline PAA status by Year 1 PAA status

			Year 1 PAA status		Total
			below .945 PAA	.945 PAA or more	
Baseline PAA status	below .945 PAA	Count	162	114	276
		Expected Count	87.3	188.7	276.0
		% within Baseline PAA status	58.7%	41.3%	100.0%
		% within Year 1 PAA status	67.5%	22.0%	36.4%
		% of Total	21.3%	15.0%	36.4%
	.945 PAA or more	Count	78	405	483
		Expected Count	152.7	330.3	483.0
		% within Baseline PAA status	16.1%	83.9%	100.0%
		% within Year 1 PAA status	32.5%	78.0%	63.6%
		% of Total	10.3%	53.4%	63.6%
Total		Count	240	519	759
		Expected Count	240.0	519.0	759.0
		% within Baseline PAA status	31.6%	68.4%	100.0%
		% within Year 1 PAA status	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	31.6%	68.4%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	147.044	1	.000		
Continuity Correction	145.083	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	145.868	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	146.851	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	759				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 87.27.

Table E-7. Test 3, t-test of Sample Students' PAA in 1996-97 (pre-MerCAP) v. Mean PAA for 1997-98, 1998-99, and 1999-2000

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PAA 96-97	.945600	429	5.63303E-02	2.71965E-03
	Mean PAA for 97-98, 98-99 & 99-00	.952403	429	5.47974E-02	2.64565E-03

Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	PAA 96-97 & Mean PAA for 97-98, 98-99 & 99-00	429	.601	.000

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
				Lower	Upper						
PAA 96-97 - Mean PAA for 97-98, 98- 99 & 99-00	-6.802430 E-03	4.96353 E-02	2.39642 E-03	-1.151264 E-02	-2.092222 E-03	-2.839	428	.005			

Table E-8. Test 4, Univariate ANOVA (MPAA99) by Years in MerCAP (grades 1 through 10)

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Years in MERCAP	1	Started in 1999-2000	72
	2	Started in 1998-99	123
	3	Started in 1997-98	97

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: TANF PAA 99-00

Years in MERCAP	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Started in 1999-2000	.959211	1.10304E-02	72
Started in 1998-99	.951059	2.76410E-02	123
Started in 1997-98	.956000	2.40623E-02	97
Total	.954710	2.34991E-02	292

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: TANF PAA 99-00

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3.260E-03	2	1.630E-03	2.992	.052
Intercept	254.128	1	254.128	466502.402	.000
YRSTANF	3.260E-03	2	1.630E-03	2.992	.052
Error	.157	289	5.448E-04		
Total	266.310	292			
Corrected Total	.161	291			

a R Squared = .020 (Adjusted R Squared = .014)

## ESTIMATED MARGINAL MEANS

Years in MERCAP

Dependent Variable: TANF PAA 99-00

Years in MERCAP	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Started in 1999-2000	.959	.003	.954	.965
Started in 1998-99	.951	.002	.947	.955
Started in 1997-98	.956	.002	.951	.961

**Question 3. What changes, if any, in overall school attendance (PAA) have been noted over the years of the MerCAP experiment?**

Table E-9. Test, General Linear Model : Repeated Measures PAA4 by Years in MerCAP  
(Grades 1 through 10 Only)

Within-Subjects Factors

Measure: MEASURE\_1

PAA	Dependent Variable
1	PAA9697
2	PAA97
3	PAA98
4	PAA99

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Years in MERCAP	1	Started in 1999-2000	67
	2	Started in 1998-99	134
	3	Started in 1997-98	99

Descriptive Statistics

	Years in MERCAP	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
PAA 9697	Started in 1999-2000	.953126	7.91875E-03	67
	Started in 1998-99	.945969	2.17931E-02	134
	Started in 1997-98	.951740	1.21880E-02	99
<b>Total</b>		.949472	1.68519E-02	300
PAA9798	Started in 1999-2000	.953607	7.93664E-03	67
	Started in 1998-99	.948282	1.71170E-02	134
	Started in 1997-98	.957170	1.20124E-02	99
<b>Total</b>		.952404	1.43871E-02	300
PAA9899	Started in 1999-2000	.953663	7.79282E-03	67
	Started in 1998-99	.952456	1.26702E-02	134
	Started in 1997-98	.961646	1.14960E-02	99
<b>Total</b>		.955759	1.20615E-02	300
PAA9900	Started in 1999-2000	.958701	8.03090E-03	67
	Started in 1998-99	.954466	1.35017E-02	134
	Started in 1997-98	.964587	1.20528E-02	99
<b>Total</b>		.958752	1.27453E-02	300

#### Multivariate Tests

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
PAA	Pillai's Trace	.253	33.247	3.000	295.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.747	33.247	3.000	295.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.338	33.247	3.000	295.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.338	33.247	3.000	295.000	.000
PAA * YRSTANF	Pillai's Trace	.062	3.163	6.000	592.000	.005
	Wilks' Lambda	.938	3.177	6.000	590.000	.004
	Hotelling's Trace	.065	3.191	6.000	588.000	.004
	Roy's Largest Root	.055	5.466	3.000	296.000	.001

a Exact statistic

b The statistic is an upper bound on F that yields a lower bound on the significance level.

c Design: Intercept+YRSTANF Within Subjects Design: PAA

#### Mauchly's Test of Sphericity

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Epsilon		
					Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
PAA	.720	97.255	5	.000	.812	.825	.333

Tests the null hypothesis that the error covariance matrix of the orthonormalized transformed dependent variables is proportional to an identity matrix.

a May be used to adjust the degrees of freedom for the averaged tests of significance. Corrected tests are displayed in the Tests of Within-Subjects Effects table.

b Design: Intercept+YRSTANF Within Subjects Design: PAA

#### Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
PAA	Sphericity Assumed	1.234E-02	3	4.114E-03	47.873	.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1.234E-02	2.436	5.067E-03	47.873	.000
	Huynh-Feldt	1.234E-02	2.474	4.989E-03	47.873	.000
	Lower-bound	1.234E-02	1.000	1.234E-02	47.873	.000
PAA * YRSTANF	Sphericity Assumed	2.106E-03	6	3.511E-04	4.085	.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	2.106E-03	4.871	4.324E-04	4.085	.001
	Huynh-Feldt	2.106E-03	4.948	4.258E-04	4.085	.001
	Lower-bound	2.106E-03	2.000	1.053E-03	4.085	.018
Error(PAA)	Sphericity Assumed	7.657E-02	891	8.594E-05		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	7.657E-02	723.398	1.058E-04		
	Huynh-Feldt	7.657E-02	734.730	1.042E-04		
	Lower-bound	7.657E-02	297.000	2.578E-04		

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Source	PAA	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
PAA	Linear	1.232E-02	1	1.232E-02	89.648	.000
	Quadratic	2.398E-05	1	2.398E-05	.418	.519
	Cubic	9.812E-07	1	9.812E-07	.016	.901
PAA * YRSTANF	Linear	1.403E-03	2	7.017E-04	5.107	.007
	Quadratic	5.040E-04	2	2.520E-04	4.388	.013
	Cubic	1.991E-04	2	9.956E-05	1.581	.208
Error(PAA)	Linear	4.081E-02	297	1.374E-04		
	Quadratic	1.706E-02	297	5.743E-05		
	Cubic	1.871E-02	297	6.298E-05		

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Transformed Variable: Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	1009.774	1	1009.774	2088359.543	.000
YRSTANF	1.658E-02	2	8.292E-03	17.150	.000
Error	.144	297	4.835E-04		

ESTIMATED MARGINAL MEANS

Years in MERCAP \* PAA

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Years in MERCAP	PAA	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Started in 1999-2000	1	.953	.002	.949	.957
	2	.954	.002	.950	.957
	3	.954	.001	.951	.956
	4	.959	.001	.956	.962
Started in 1998-99	1	.946	.001	.943	.949
	2	.948	.001	.946	.951
	3	.952	.001	.951	.954
	4	.954	.001	.952	.957
Started in 1997-98	1	.952	.002	.948	.955
	2	.957	.001	.954	.960
	3	.962	.001	.959	.964
	4	.965	.001	.962	.967

**Question 4. Are the attendance rates of TANF students related to their school achievement?**

Table E-10. Test 1, Correlation Matrix, Attendance & Achievement

Correlation							
		PAA 97-98	SAT9 nce, 1998	PAA 98-99	SAT9 nce, 1999	PAA 99-00	SAT9 nce, 2000
PAA 97-98	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1.000  834	.025  .537 606	.449  .000 726	-.066  .114 583	.349  .000 646	.029  .522 499
SAT9 nce, 1998	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.025  .537 606	1.000  655	.055  .185 583	.712  .000 519	-.004  .924 531	.599  .000 402
PAA 98-99	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.449  .000 726	.055  .185 583	1.000  960	.012  .743 710	.505  .000 799	-.047  .251 595
SAT9 nce, 1999	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	-.066  .114 583	.712  .000 519	.012  .743 710	1.000  734	-.012  .768 641	.623  .000 502
PAA 99-00	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.349  .000 646	-.004  .924 531	.505  .000 799	-.012  .768 641	1.000  856	-.051  .206 621
SAT9 nce, 2000	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.029  .522 499	.599  .000 402	-.047  .251 595	.623  .000 502	-.051  .206 621	1.000  634

Table E-11. Test 2, Correlations - Years in MerCAP by SAT9 Reading Comprehension NCE Scores for 1998 through 2000.

Correlation		SAT9 NCE, 1998	SAT9 NCE, 1999	SAT9 NCE, 2000
years in MerCAP	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	-.038  .337 655	-.020  .597 734	-.047  .234 634

None of the correlations are statistically significant

## Other Impact Study Results

Table E-12. Ethnicity and Attendance: GLM - PAA4 by Presumed Ethnicity and Years in MerCAP

Within-Subjects Factors

Measure: MEASURE 1

PAA	Dependent Variable
1	PAA9697
2	PAA9798
3	PAA9899
4	PAA9900

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Presumed ethnicity	1	Other	107
	2	Latino	130
	3	Asian	73
Years in MerCAP	1		149
	2		30
	3		131

Descriptive Statistics

	Presumed ethnicity	years in MerCAP	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Percent actual attendance, 96-97	Other	1	.934894	5.97165E-02	46
		2	.934524	3.39808E-02	14
		3	.936425	4.83826E-02	47
		Total	.935518	5.16916E-02	107
	Latino	1	.916090	6.59760E-02	42
		2	.917068	5.01068E-02	16
		3	.953167	4.22699E-02	72
		Total	.936745	5.47380E-02	130
	Asian	1	.987517	1.77472E-02	61
		3	.984722	2.05323E-02	12
		Total	.987057	1.81098E-02	73
	Total	1	.951137	5.82570E-02	149
		2	.925214	4.35282E-02	30
		3	.950051	4.49810E-02	131
		Total	.948169	5.20720E-02	310
Percent actual attendance, 97-98	Other	1	.938250	5.53973E-02	46
		2	.944841	3.35792E-02	14
		3	.942343	4.75706E-02	47
		Total	.940911	4.92866E-02	107
	Latino	1	.941416	4.39687E-02	42
		2	.932639	4.42065E-02	16
		3	.959353	4.09087E-02	72
		Total	.950270	4.32769E-02	130
	Asian	1	.992676	1.17168E-02	61
		3	.985185	1.48568E-02	12
		Total	.991445	1.24876E-02	73
	Total	1	.961424	4.69829E-02	149
		2	.938333	3.94284E-02	30
		3	.955617	4.34229E-02	131
		Total	.956736	4.51713E-02	310
Percent actual attendance, 98-99	Other	1	.938627	5.22779E-02	46
		2	.960714	2.91103E-02	14
		3	.947508	5.33311E-02	47
		Total	.945418	5.05102E-02	107
	Latino	1	.943547	3.93877E-02	42
		2	.929773	5.47028E-02	16
		3	.955248	5.05129E-02	72
		Total	.948332	4.81897E-02	130
	Asian	1	.990189	1.76009E-02	61
		3	.984707	2.27340E-02	12
		Total	.989287	1.84745E-02	73
	Total	1	.961123	4.44916E-02	149
		2	.944212	4.66279E-02	30
		3	.955170	5.04524E-02	131
		Total	.956971	4.74188E-02	310
Percent actual attend., 99-00	Other	1	.955628	3.83435E-02	46
		2	.957124	4.54019E-02	14
		3	.933597	6.69204E-02	47
		Total	.946147	5.42692E-02	107
	Latino	1	.955809	3.32996E-02	42
		2	.951528	3.04070E-02	16
		3	.953270	8.38427E-02	72
		Total	.953876	6.58107E-02	130
	Asian	1	.984277	4.00439E-02	61
		3	.971206	6.18487E-02	12
		Total	.982128	4.40961E-02	73
	Total	1	.967408	4.00359E-02	149
		2	.954140	3.75546E-02	30
		3	.947855	7.67309E-02	131
		Total	.957861	5.88627E-02	310

### Multivariate Tests

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
PAA	Pillai's Trace	.026	2.711	3.000	300.000	.045
	Wilks' Lambda	.974	2.711	3.000	300.000	.045
	Hotelling's Trace	.027	2.711	3.000	300.000	.045
	Roy's Largest Root	.027	2.711	3.000	300.000	.045
PAA * ETHNIC	Pillai's Trace	.033	1.686	6.000	602.000	.122
	Wilks' Lambda	.967	1.686	6.000	600.000	.122
	Hotelling's Trace	.034	1.685	6.000	598.000	.122
	Roy's Largest Root	.027	2.685	3.000	301.000	.047
PAA * YRSTANF	Pillai's Trace	.036	1.862	6.000	602.000	.085
	Wilks' Lambda	.964	1.870	6.000	600.000	.084
	Hotelling's Trace	.038	1.877	6.000	598.000	.083
	Roy's Largest Root	.035	3.561	3.000	301.000	.015
PAA * ETHNIC * YRSTANF	Pillai's Trace	.032	1.084	9.000	906.000	.372
	Wilks' Lambda	.968	1.085	9.000	730.272	.372
	Hotelling's Trace	.033	1.085	9.000	896.000	.371
	Roy's Largest Root	.027	2.708	3.000	302.000	.045

a Exact statistic

b The statistic is an upper bound on F that yields a lower bound on the significance level.

c Design: Intercept+ETHNIC+YRSTANF+ETHNIC \* YRSTANF Within Subjects Design: PAA

### Mauchly's Test of Sphericity

Measure: MEASURE\_1

	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Epsilon		
Within Subjects Effect					Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
PAA	.653	128.051	5	.000	.792	.817	.333

Tests the null hypothesis that the error covariance matrix of the orthonormalized transformed dependent variables is proportional to an identity matrix.

a May be used to adjust the degrees of freedom for the averaged tests of significance. Corrected tests are displayed in the Tests of Within-Subjects Effects table.

b Design: Intercept+ETHNIC+YRSTANF+ETHNIC \* YRSTANF Within Subjects Design: PAA

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
PAA	Sphericity Assumed	1.422E-02	3	4.739E-03	3.920	.009
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1.422E-02	2.375	5.987E-03	3.920	.015
	Huynh-Feldt	1.422E-02	2.450	5.803E-03	3.920	.014
	Lower-bound	1.422E-02	1.000	1.422E-02	3.920	.049
PAA * ETHNIC	Sphericity Assumed	1.349E-02	6	2.248E-03	1.859	.085
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1.349E-02	4.749	2.839E-03	1.859	.103
	Huynh-Feldt	1.349E-02	4.901	2.752E-03	1.859	.101
	Lower-bound	1.349E-02	2.000	6.743E-03	1.859	.158
PAA * YRSTANF	Sphericity Assumed	1.979E-02	6	3.299E-03	2.728	.012
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1.979E-02	4.749	4.167E-03	2.728	.021
	Huynh-Feldt	1.979E-02	4.901	4.039E-03	2.728	.020
	Lower-bound	1.979E-02	2.000	9.896E-03	2.728	.067
PAA * ETHNIC * YRSTANF	Sphericity Assumed	1.088E-02	9	1.209E-03	1.000	.439
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1.088E-02	7.124	1.527E-03	1.000	.431
	Huynh-Feldt	1.088E-02	7.351	1.480E-03	1.000	.432
	Lower-bound	1.088E-02	3.000	3.626E-03	1.000	.393
Error(PAA)	Sphericity Assumed	1.095	906	1.209E-03		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1.095	717.165	1.527E-03		
	Huynh-Feldt	1.095	739.982	1.480E-03		
	Lower-bound	1.095	302.000	3.627E-03		

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Source	PAA	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
PAA	Linear	1.148E-02	1	1.148E-02	5.716	.017
PAA * ETHNIC	Linear	9.787E-03	2	4.894E-03	2.436	.089
PAA * YRSTANF	Linear	1.677E-02	2	8.387E-03	4.175	.016
PAA * ETHNIC * YRSTANF	Linear	4.151E-03	3	1.384E-03	.689	.559
Error(PAA)	Linear	.607	302	2.009E-03		

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Transformed Variable: Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	602.135	1	602.135	111993.902	.000
ETHNIC	.225	2	.112	20.903	.000
YRSTANF	2.101E-03	2	1.050E-03	.195	.823
ETHNIC * YRSTANF	3.874E-02	3	1.291E-02	2.402	.068
Error	1.624	302	5.376E-03		

### Estimated Marginal Means

Presumed ethnicity \* years in MerCAP \* PAA

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Presumed ethnicity	years in MerCAP	PAA	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Other	1	1	.935	.007	.921	.948
		2	.938	.006	.927	.950
		3	.939	.006	.926	.951
		4	.956	.008	.939	.972
	2	1	.935	.012	.910	.959
		2	.945	.011	.924	.966
		3	.961	.012	.938	.984
		4	.957	.015	.927	.987
	3	1	.936	.007	.923	.950
		2	.942	.006	.931	.954
		3	.948	.006	.935	.960
		4	.934	.008	.917	.950
Latino	1	1	.916	.007	.902	.930
		2	.941	.006	.929	.954
		3	.944	.007	.930	.957
		4	.956	.009	.938	.973
	2	1	.917	.012	.894	.940
		2	.933	.010	.913	.953
		3	.930	.011	.908	.951
		4	.952	.014	.923	.980
	3	1	.953	.005	.942	.964
		2	.959	.005	.950	.969
		3	.955	.005	.945	.965
		4	.953	.007	.940	.967
Asian	1	1	.988	.006	.976	.999
		2	.993	.005	.982	1.003
		3	.990	.006	.979	1.001
		4	.984	.007	.970	.999
	2	1	.	.	.	.
		2	.	.	.	.
		3	.	.	.	.
		4	.	.	.	.
	3	1	.985	.013	.958	1.011
		2	.985	.012	.962	1.008
		3	.985	.013	.960	1.010
		4	.971	.017	.939	1.004

a This level combination of factors is not observed, thus the corresponding population marginal mean is not estimable.

b Based on modified population marginal mean.

Table E-13. Ethnicity and Achievement: Means of Individual Student NCE Scores by Presumed Ethnicity and Years in MerCAP

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Included		Excluded		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
SAT9 nce score, 2000 * Presumed ethnicity	634	58.1%	458	41.9%	1092	100.0%
SAT9 nce score, 1999 * Presumed ethnicity	734	67.2%	358	32.8%	1092	100.0%
SAT9 nce score, 1998 * Presumed ethnicity	655	60.0%	437	40.0%	1092	100.0%
SAT9 nce score, 2000 * years in MerCAP	634	58.1%	458	41.9%	1092	100.0%
SAT9 nce score, 1999 * years in MerCAP	734	67.2%	358	32.8%	1092	100.0%
SAT9 nce score, 1998 * years in MerCAP	655	60.0%	437	40.0%	1092	100.0%

Report

Presumed ethnicity		SAT9 nce score, 2000	SAT9 nce score, 1999	SAT9 nce score, 1998
Other	Mean	39.3004	37.5384	36.7008
	N	228	263	240
	Std. Deviation	18.0137	17.9243	17.7226
Latino	Mean	33.5549	31.5402	30.3154
	N	246	296	260
	Std. Deviation	19.4493	15.8642	15.9669
Asian	Mean	32.7127	33.5200	33.8606
	N	160	175	155
	Std. Deviation	15.0527	14.7061	15.7471
Total	Mean	35.4086	34.1614	33.4940
	N	634	734	655
	Std. Deviation	18.1195	16.5658	16.7916

ANOVA Table

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
SAT9 nce score, 2000 *	Between Groups	(Combined)	5461.578	2	2730.789	8.515	.000
Presumed ethnicity	Within Groups		202363.732	631	320.703		
	Total		207825.310	633			
SAT9 nce score, 1999 *	Between Groups	(Combined)	5105.005	2	2552.503	9.517	.000
Presumed ethnicity	Within Groups		196049.994	731	268.194		
	Total		201154.999	733			
SAT9 nce score, 1998 *	Between Groups	(Combined)	5115.879	2	2557.939	9.302	.000
Presumed ethnicity	Within Groups		179285.248	652	274.977		
	Total		184401.127	654			

Measures of Association

	Eta	Eta Squared
SAT9 nce score, 2000 *	.162	.026
Presumed ethnicity		
SAT9 nce score, 1999 *	.159	.025
Presumed ethnicity		
SAT9 nce score, 1998 *	.167	.028
Presumed ethnicity		

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years in MerCAP		SAT9 nce score, 2000	SAT9 nce score, 1999	SAT9 nce score, 1998
1	Mean	36.5426	34.4966	34.4822
	N	179	206	157
	Std. Deviation	17.1627	16.1004	16.6156
2	Mean	35.4155	34.3000	33.5715
	N	277	308	221
	Std. Deviation	16.5071	17.3310	17.5062
3	Mean	34.2573	33.6536	32.8722
	N	178	220	277
	Std. Deviation	21.2228	15.9504	16.3353
Total	Mean	35.4086	34.1614	33.4940
	N	634	734	655
	Std. Deviation	18.1195	16.5658	16.7916

ANOVA Table

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
SAT9 nce score, 2000 *	Between Groups	(Combined)	466.146	2	233.073	.709	.492
years in MerCAP	Within Groups		207359.164	631	328.620		
	Total		207825.310	633			
SAT9 nce score, 1999 *	Between Groups	(Combined)	85.784	2	42.892	.156	.856
years in MerCAP	Within Groups		201069.215	731	275.060		
	Total		201154.999	733			
SAT9 nce score, 1998 *	Between Groups	(Combined)	261.730	2	130.865	.463	.629
years in MerCAP	Within Groups		184139.396	652	282.422		
	Total		184401.127	654			

**Measures of Association**

	Eta	Eta Squared
SAT9 nce score, 2000 * years in MerCAP	.047	.002
SAT9 nce score, 1999 * years in MerCAP	.021	.000
SAT9 nce score, 1998 * years in MerCAP	.038	.001

Table E-14. Achievement by Student Age: Means of NCE Scores for Reading Comprehension Component of SAT9 Tests in 2000, 1999, and 1998 by Grade of Student in 1999-2000

**Case Processing Summary**

	Cases					
	Included		Excluded		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
SAT9 nce score, 2000 * Grade of student, 99-00	633	54.5%	529	45.5%	1162	100.0%
SAT9 nce score, 1999 * Grade of student, 99-00	713	61.4%	449	38.6%	1162	100.0%
SAT9 nce score, 1998 * Grade of student, 99-00	635	54.6%	527	45.4%	1162	100.0%

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Grade of student, 99-00		SAT9 nce score, 2000	SAT9 nce score, 1999	SAT9 nce score, 1998
Second grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	36.3885 61 17.9883		
Third grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	32.9484 62 13.7356	35.4791 67 12.7419	48.1500 2 1.9092
Fourth Grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	36.5138 58 16.3130	34.8441 68 17.6999	33.5086 58 15.2541
Fifth grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	32.6200 55 18.1568	35.3891 55 15.6866	33.5471 51 16.5023
Sixth grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	41.3607 61 26.4833	35.9975 79 17.4746	36.8707 75 18.8088
Seventh grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	41.5193 69 16.0989	35.0729 85 16.3196	30.5808 78 15.9601
Eighth grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	39.5193 88 17.4245	34.6809 115 20.1628	33.9500 92 17.4652
Ninth grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	32.5016 63 14.8400	33.6306 98 16.0141	30.8069 87 17.7753
Tenth grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	27.7792 72 17.4195	32.0000 75 15.5822	35.4126 95 17.5189
Eleventh grade	Mean N Std. Deviation	30.5477 44 14.7581	29.0382 55 13.8228	33.2720 75 13.8085
Twelfth grade	Mean N Std. Deviation		32.1813 16 15.4811	31.4455 22 16.3747
Total	Mean N Std. Deviation	35.4372 633 18.1195	34.1010 713 16.6240	33.4745 635 16.8139

ANOVA Table

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
SAT9 nce score, 1998 * Grade of student, 99-00	Between Groups	(Combined)	3039.676	10	303.968	1.076	.378
	Within Groups Total		176197.071	624	282.367		
			179236.747	634			
SAT9 nce score, 1999 * Grade of student, 99-00	Between Groups	(Combined)	2480.630	10	248.063	.896	.536
	Within Groups Total		194284.839	702	276.759		
			196765.469	712			
SAT9 nce score, 2000 * Grade of student, 99-00	Between Groups	(Combined)	12919.442	10	1291.944	4.130	.000
	Within Groups Total		194577.430	622	312.825		
			207496.872	632			