



OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE-BALTIMORE



ON THE PATH TO SUCCESS:
POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR GETTING
EVERY CHILD TO SCHOOL EVERY DAY

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POLICY PAPER #3

IN OSI-BALTIMORE'S STUDENT ATTENDANCE SERIES



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IN THE UNITED STATES, THERE IS JUST ONE PUBLICLY-FUNDED YOUTH OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM THAT IS UNIVERSALLY AVAILABLE: THE K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

And for children who are poor, have special needs, or struggle academically, schools provide additional essential supports and services, such as access to educational materials, nutritious meals, and basic health services. They also provide youth opportunities to make friends and to get to know a group of college-educated adults - their teachers. Regular school attendance is critical; in fact, without it, youth are very unlikely to graduate from high school, escape poverty, and stay on course for a productive future. For these reasons, school attendance is a bellwether for a city's future.

Nearly every student misses some school each year due to illness, families' needs, and other occasional events. But too often, especially in areas of concentrated poverty, students' reasons for missing school are frequently-occurring features of their lives. The first two papers in this series discussed the many and complex reasons for low levels of student attendance. Poverty and its correlates - such as poor health and lack of healthcare, dependence on unreliable public transportation, everyday violence on the routes to and from school, parental substance use, unstable housing, and multiple foster care placements - make it difficult for many students to get to school on time or at all. Further, school discipline policies that rely on suspension and expulsion for all types of misbehavior have vastly increased absences from school, especially at the middle and high school levels.

Compounding the problem of frequent excused absence is truancy, or unexcused absences. Truancy is a serious problem with multiple causes. Student academic failure, chaotic schools, unprepared or unwelcoming faculty and staff, fear of violence, childcare or employment demands, and misguided student beliefs about the importance of school all play a role. To ensure that students attend regularly, it is essential to understand the root causes of absence, because, in the end, all types of absences must be addressed if children are to stay on track.

The first two papers in this series describe the problem of school absence and excessive use of suspension, as well as the academic and life consequences for children who miss many school days. This third paper is intended to provide communities, particularly cities, with strategies and policies that will increase the number of students in school each day. As in the first two papers, we use Baltimore, Maryland as an example to highlight both the problem and possible solutions to frequent school absence.



01. BALTIMORE: AN URBAN CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL ABSENCE EPIDEMICS

In Baltimore, like other communities that struggle with poverty and academic failure, the levels of both excused and unexcused student absence are alarming:

- ▶ 14 percent of elementary school students, 34 percent of middle school students, and 44 percent of high school students in Baltimore were chronically absent during the 2006-2007 school year. Chronically absent students miss 20 or more school days - nearly a month of school.¹
- ▶ Although 93 percent of students responding to the 2006-2007 Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) School Climate Survey said that attending school every day was important, on average, nearly 12 percent of middle school students and 18 percent of high school students were absent on any given day.²
- ▶ 9.17 percent of BCPSS students - about 7,550 youth - were habitually truant in the 2006-2007 school year, more than quadruple the state-wide truancy rate. Habitually truant students have been enrolled for more than 90 days and miss more than 20 percent of those days - which, over the course of a full school year, is more than 36 missed school days.*
- ▶ Students who are frequently absent are more likely than their regularly-attending peers to struggle academically, drop out of school, use alcohol and drugs, and become involved in the juvenile justice system.³
- ▶ Suspensions are categorized as excused absences. During the 2006-2007 school year, 12.5 percent of BCPSS students were absent due to suspension (9,854 students with a total of 16,752 suspensions).⁴ Far from being administered to a “few students who are disruptive and don’t want to learn,” tens of thousands of Baltimore City students have been suspended over the last decade.
- ▶ Student misbehavior that interferes with learning, other’s rights, and/or safety must be addressed immediately. But Baltimore has used suspension indiscriminately for all types of misbehavior. In relying only on school exclusion, students are not given consequences that fit their misdeeds; they are not required to learn and demonstrate that they know how to behave in school and control their anger; and, they are not required to redress the wrongs that led to their suspension.⁵ And when suspended students return, teachers and classrooms are burdened by the need to help yet another child catch up.

As the first two papers in this series discuss high levels of school absence, in Baltimore and nationally, reflect weak family and community supports as well as policies and practices that aren’t doing the job of ensuring regular school attendance. Ineffective attendance and discipline policies, indifferent or negative attitudes towards education in some families and communities, barriers created by inattentive city agencies, violent communities and concentrated poverty, and myopic, test-based accountability systems have each unintentionally contributed to the epidemic of irregular school attendance and consequent school failure.

The good news is that school attendance can be increased - and along with better attendance will come better outcomes for young people and the community. To boost attendance, schools must fight to keep every child in a learning environment every day. They must be joined in this effort by parents, community members, employers, city agencies, and other youth-serving organizations.

As a start:

- City leaders, citizens, public officials, and school personnel must move beyond pat characterizations of the schools as failing and take action to increase daily attendance by all city youth as the critical path to a more prosperous and thriving Baltimore.

* A student is defined as being habitually truant if s/he was aged 5-20 during the school year, enrolled for 91 or more days, and unlawfully absent for more than 20% of enrolled days (equivalent to more than 36 school days - or seven weeks - during the year).



- Parents and guardians must also recognize the importance of regular school attendance for their child's success and take responsibility for ensuring their child's daily presence in school.
- The “carrots” and “sticks” that are now tightly focused on school achievement must be broadened so that school staff can work as hard on increasing attendance and boosting student engagement as they now do to raise standardized test scores.
- Because absence is widespread and because time and funds are in short supply, the city must start with a careful analysis of data, rather than the introduction of many “good idea” programs. In Baltimore, the city must use its attendance analysis to direct and place priority on its interventions in the communities, schools, and students with the highest absence rates.
- Although much of the work will fall to the school system, city agencies must identify and remove transportation, childcare, health, and safety barriers to regular attendance.
- Schools must become places where all students feel welcome and safe. To reduce student misbehavior and violence and to transform school climate requires universal teaching of social skills and violence prevention, alternative programs and settings for students who cannot behave in regular school settings, and training for all school personnel in violence prevention, conflict de-escalation, and classroom management.

All children should be in safe, supervised learning environments every day. By focusing intently on school attendance at the school, community, and city levels, Baltimore and other cities around the country can ensure that every young person stays in school and on the path to success.

02. NEW POLICIES, NEW RESULTS

► **If students do not attend school daily, beginning in pre-kindergarten, they are unlikely to gain the skills they need to become productive workers, capable family members, and informed citizens.**

OSI-Baltimore believes that school attendance can be improved and that, with it, student engagement in education and graduation rates will also rise. The key to dramatic improvement will be new policies and practices that meet the needs of students, parents, and school staff and that hold them all accountable for regular school attendance. In this paper, we group solutions to the school absence epidemic into three categories, namely those that: (A) make schools safe, engaging, and attractive to students; (B) remove barriers to attendance; and (C) eliminate push-out practices by schools and school staff.

A. MAKING SCHOOLS SAFE, ENGAGING, AND ATTRACTIVE TO STUDENTS

► **Ensure that every student is known well and cared for by at least one adult at school.**

Researchers have shown in countless studies that the most important factor in predicting school success is whether students feel that there is at least one adult at the school who cares about them and their success. To facilitate these relationships, schools must be organized so that all teachers, staff, and administrators can know and check-in regularly with a manageable number of students. Teachers and other school staff must understand that developing these relationships is a key component of their jobs. School systems must keep track of every student, so that when students switch schools, move, are absent, suspended, expelled, or court-involved, they are not lost from the enrollment database and placed out of reach of an adult to



whom they were formerly connected. In Baltimore and other cities where poverty and struggling students are the norm, these relationships, and the school organization and data systems necessary to make them possible, are the most essential elements of a strategy to ensure that children are in school every day.

► **Restore and reinvigorate programs in arts, music, and physical education as well as other high-interest classes.**

Many children, especially those who struggle academically, do not go to school for academic reasons. Regardless of how crucial reading and math are, what gets many kids to school regularly are recess, sports, arts, and other such programs. In addition, there is evidence that these types of programs increase regular academic learning. For example, researchers have shown that physical activity during the school day improves concentration and brain activity and leads to academic success. Organized sports and recreation programs can also provide critically-needed opportunities for teaching teamwork and conflict resolution, and can help kids make friends.

Whether integrated into the curriculum or provided during after-school hours, physical activity, art, music, and exciting hands-on learning opportunities in subjects such as science and technology increase school attendance. When these programs are scheduled to start before school or during first period, they encourage students to get to school on time. When they begin in the afternoon, these same types of activities keep more students in school until the closing bell.

► **Invest in out-of-school time programs, after school and in the summer, that provide exciting learning opportunities for all children and youth.**

While many after-school and summer programs are evaluated in terms of their effect on academic achievement, it is their capacity to attract students to, and engage them in, school that has proven to be most robust. Program evaluations in Baltimore and elsewhere have shown that youth who participate in after-school, weekend, and summer programs are more likely than similar but non-participating peers to be regular school-goers who have good work habits, high motivation, and positive self-esteem, and who come to school prepared to learn. Most successful are programs that do not mimic the school day's activities or culture, and that engage students with other relevant, accessible, and exciting activities. These programs use hands-on learning techniques, emphasize positive peer and adult interactions, and offer skill-building internships where youth can earn money. In communities that are plagued by violence, they also provide safe, supervised places for city children.

► **Provide universal free lunch, in-classroom breakfast, and summer feeding programs in high-poverty and high-absence schools to encourage attendance and boost performance.**

Despite the fact that the benefits of eating breakfast are profound, 27 percent of Maryland's urban 4th graders skip breakfast three or more times each week.⁶ Students who eat a school-provided breakfast are absent and late less often, have fewer behavioral problems, score higher on achievement tests, earn higher reading and math grades, work more quickly, have longer attention spans, and visit the nurse's office less often than their peers.⁷ The Maryland Meals for Achievement Program (MMFA) increases breakfast-eating by providing all students in participating schools with a daily, in-classroom breakfast. The all-student and in-classroom features of the MMFA are crucial, as they reduce any stigma associated with free-meal programs and increase participation rates. The Maryland State Department of Education should increase MMFA funding, and all eligible schools should participate. Extensive summer



feeding programs nourish children when school is not in session and encourage participation in structured summer activities and connection to school in general.

B. POLICIES THAT MAKE ATTENDANCE EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY:

Regular attendance is not only critical to each student's future, it is also essential to the future of the Baltimore community. In this section, we focus on policies, attitudes and practices that will make regular attendance a key public priority.

- ▶ **Remind students, parents/guardians, business and community leaders, and citizens about the importance of daily school attendance and their responsibility to ensure that children get to school each day.**

All too often, public schools are characterized as failing and useless. While Baltimore public schools remain far from perfect, they are nevertheless the key to the success of the city's youth, and the safest place for children to be. The city, its communities, businesses, and parent and youth organizations must launch a major communications campaign to emphasize the importance of daily attendance and to remind parents/guardians about their legal responsibility to enroll their children in school and ensure that they attend daily.

- ▶ **Recognize that school absence is an early predictor of dropout and respond to every absence with urgency.**

When families, communities, schools, and city agencies emphasize the importance of regular attendance and work to make improved school climate and student engagement a priority, the number of absences will decrease. System-wide efforts to engage students in school will generally increase attendance and reduce behavior problems. Nevertheless, a small number of students will continue to struggle with regular school attendance or with appropriate behavior when in school. For these students, schools must intervene quickly and effectively to address the underlying causes of school absence or behavior problems. Suspension, expulsion, and frequent absence are highly-accurate early predictors of school dropout and high risk behaviors. As early as 6th grade, students who are suspended are at a much greater risk of eventually dropping out of school, and students with a 6th grade attendance rate below 80 percent have on-time graduation rates of just 5-13 percent.⁹

- ▶ **Improve safety and reliability of transportation to and from school.**

Regardless of whether students walk to school or take a bus, the route to and from school can be fraught with complications that make daily on-time attendance challenging. In Baltimore, many students fear for their safety on the way to and from school, and other students face unreliable and/or complicated public transportation routes. The Baltimore Police Department should ensure that police officers are deployed during crucial hours before and after school to ensure that students who walk to and from school have safe routes. And because most Baltimore public students rely on public transportation rather than school system buses to get to and from school, the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) should assess whether the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) buses and their routes are frequent, reliable, and accessible enough to get students to school on time. Unlike their peers in nearby counties, many city children have to wait for, and take, multiple buses to get to school each morning. The City must consider whether the MTA service is an appropriate means of transportation for city youth - especially those in the middle grades.



► **Fully fund and implement the city's plan to reduce gang violence.**

Evidence suggests that organized gangs are growing in Baltimore and contribute to violence in and around the schools. Students who are suspended, expelled, or truant, as well as other out-of-school youth, are targeted for gang membership, and gang violence and intimidation that occurs off school grounds can spill over into the schools, with serious adverse effects on school safety and climate. Baltimore has developed a Gang Violence Reduction Plan, which lays out a comprehensive interagency approach to reducing gang-related violence and crime. The plan focuses on five areas: community mobilization, opportunities provision, social intervention, suppression, and organizational change and development. To date, however, the only component of the plan that has been extensively addressed has been suppression. In order to prevent the spillover effects of gang violence in the schools, all aspects of the plan, particularly prevention, community mobilization, and intervention strategies that provide services to youth placed at risk and their families, must be adequately funded and fully implemented.

► **Ensure that needs of students in foster care are met so that they are quickly enrolled and regularly attending school.**

Baltimore has one of the highest rates of foster care placement of all U.S. cities, with more than 6,000 Baltimore City youth in foster or kinship care. These students are at an increased risk for academic failure, particularly because students in foster care are likely to change schools on average 1-2 times per year while in foster care. In 2006-2007, 31 percent of these students were not placed in school within one week after placement, and 27 percent of children in kinship care did not have their education monitored by Baltimore City Department of Social Services (DSS).⁹ DSS and the Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) should work with BCPSS to help students in foster care stay in the same school whenever possible and, when transferring schools is necessary, facilitate rapid enrollment and information sharing between schools, foster care workers, and foster parents.

► **Review all city and state agencies to determine whether their youth services create or reduce barriers to school attendance.**

In addition to the areas detailed above, there are barriers to attendance that other city and state agencies must address. For instance, the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) must evaluate their policies and procedures to move youth leaving juvenile detention back into regular schooling. Transitional programs, educational assessments, and other supports should be used to help ensure a successful reentry. Student mobility, whether due to foster care, juvenile justice involvement, unstable housing, or homelessness, contributes to high levels of absence. The creation of unique student identifiers is part of the solution; however, agencies must also collaborate to establish procedures that ensure that students who are highly mobile remain in a stable educational setting or, if they must switch schools, are enrolled as quickly as possible.

The Baltimore City Health Department also has an ongoing role to play in addressing the health and mental health barriers that prevent regular school attendance. For instance, 80 percent of children enrolled in Baltimore City Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) have asthma, and children with asthma are three times more likely to miss school than those without asthma. These examples serve as illustrations; each city agency should consider its policies and procedures in light of the goal of regular school attendance for every youth.

► **Use data to find cost-effective strategies to Baltimore's attendance problem.**

- Schools should track attendance and follow up rapidly and consistently with parents and guardians when



students are absent. At a system-wide level, a careful analysis of readily-available data on chronic absence in Baltimore reveals that certain neighborhoods and schools are struggling with attendance problems while others are not. Coupling system-wide efforts to engage students and families with targeted interventions in these high-absence neighborhoods and schools is a cost-effective and efficient way to improve school attendance. Again, at the state level, it is critical to move forward rapidly with the implementation of a unique student identifier, so that children who move across district lines and those who “disappear” from all districts’ roles can be tracked. By relying on data and focusing resources where they are needed most, we can provide more cost-effective solutions and tackle the largest problem areas first.

C. POLICIES THAT ELIMINATE PUSH-OUT PRACTICES:

Here we focus on replacing those policies that push kids out of school with policies and incentives to keep kids in school.

► Create incentives for schools to retain students and increase attendance all year long.

Students aren’t the only ones who need incentives. Schools and teachers do as well. An unfortunate part of the the test-based accountability measures of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has been to make schools less likely to encourage daily attendance for students struggle academically. However, by creating incentives for attendance, federal and state lawmakers and local school systems can help promote a school- and district-level focus on school engagement. For example, school funding should reward schools that retain enrollment and have high attendance. Currently, schools’ funding depends on the number of students who are present in the prior year for two weeks at the end of September and beginning of October. Then, schools that work hard to get their students to school every day are not rewarded, while schools that let attendance slip after the yearly count receive funding for students they are not serving. As another example, NCLB test requirements notwithstanding, local districts can and should create accountability rubrics that reward and hold schools accountable for getting students to school each day and for keeping them enrolled. This is especially important in Baltimore, where a redesign of school budgeting processes and accountability rubrics is underway, and school principals are concurrently being granted more autonomy and held to higher standards of accountability.

► Teach, model, and reward positive behavior.

System-wide positive behavior initiatives use data to determine how teachers and administrators should allocate limited resources within the school. They use school-wide efforts to engage all students, to teach appropriate behavior, and to reinforce those lessons with rewards and sanctions, as needed. Furthermore, they call for focused problem-solving when misbehavior arises and call for intensive interventions for students with serious, ongoing challenges. Employing a detailed data collection system that tracks student misbehavior, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) calls for universal prevention initiatives, targeted interventions for the subset of children who need additional supports, and comprehensive, intensive interventions for the very few children who do not respond to universal and targeted interventions. In the spring of 2008, the Maryland State Legislature mandated that high absence schools use PBIS to develop school-wide approaches to attendance as well as behavior. Although it will require modification to add attendance to the PBIS tracking system and it will be a challenge to implement well in all of the mandated schools, a data-driven approach is important and much-needed.



Schools must also adopt classroom management programs that teach, model, and reward appropriate behavior and that therefore can have a lasting impact on students' social, emotional, and academic development. One such program, Paths to Pax, is currently being used in 17 Baltimore elementary and K-8 schools. It includes a social-emotional curriculum and a school behavior teaching initiative called the Good Behavior Game. Both Paths to Pax and the Good Behavior Game have been rigorously tested; in fact, the Good Behavior Game, which familiarizes children with the role and expectations of being a student, has been carefully evaluated since the 1980s. The first group of students who participated in this program showed a significant decrease in alcohol and drug abuse during adolescence as well as a decrease in the use of services for emotional and behavioral problems. These students also graduated from high school at a higher rate than their peers. Schools must adopt a range of teaching tools such as these, and be allowed to teach them, if Baltimore is to create the kind of welcoming, safe schools that are essential to solving its attendance crisis.

- ▶ **Revise student discipline codes to ensure the equitable, appropriate, and limited use of suspension and expulsion, expand the set of meaningful consequences for misbehavior, require students to redress the harm of misbehavior and learn appropriate behaviors, and ensure that misbehaving students continue to attend school.**

By revising student discipline codes, local school systems can reduce the overall suspension rate and address disparities in the application of disciplinary exclusion. Discipline codes can be used to implement fair and equitable approaches to student misbehavior across schools and to encourage explicit, effective teaching of appropriate behavior - for both students and staff. BCPSS recently revised its discipline code for these purposes. In 2007, BCPSS convened a working group that conducted a comprehensive review of all discipline policies and procedures and developed a revised code to ensure an equitable application of discipline policies and to encourage the use of alternatives to suspension and expulsion whenever appropriate. For every disciplinary action, the goal should be to keep students in a learning environment, to create logical consequences for misbehavior that redress the wrong that was done, and to teach the student ways of behaving differently in the future. And when students are suspended or expelled for serious and violent behaviors, they should be referred to appropriate services or treatment so that they return to school with new skills, tools, or supports to help them make better choices in the future. When new discipline codes are adopted, in Baltimore or other jurisdictions, teachers and administrators must be provided with additional training and tools to deal with student behavior in ways that do not rely on out-of-school suspension. In-school suspension, detention, counseling, conflict resolution programs, and alternative schools all must be available to ensure that schools can be safe and orderly.

- ▶ **Provide early interventions that remove barriers to attendance and that support students who are struggling academically or behaviorally.**

Every absence should receive attention - a check-in with the student, a phone call or home visit, or other appropriate intervention. Schools must be consistent and relentless about following up on absences. When contacting families, schools must adopt creative and effective ways to communicate with parents or guardians who struggle with unstable housing, who do not have a phone, or who do not speak English. When possible, home visits are an ideal response to frequent absence. Most importantly, communication with students and families should emphasize a problem-solving rather than punitive approach. Students who are frequently absent typically face multiple challenges at home or in school. Schools must be prepared to help students



overcome barriers to attendance, including transportation, bullying or other safety concerns, and health or mental health problems. School nurses, social workers, and psychologists can often provide appropriate support services and resources, and should be prepared to refer students to additional outside services that cannot be provided through the school. Students who are absent due to suspension or expulsion must be provided with alternative educational services, and should be provided with mental health services when appropriate. Any student who is involved in an alcohol or drug-related incident should be referred to a substance abuse treatment program.

03. IMPROVING ATTENDANCE IN BALTIMORE CITY ▶

The implementation of these ambitious and wide-ranging policies and practices will require tremendous leadership and commitment from city agencies, schools, businesses, and community organizations.

Baltimore now has an opportune time to begin implementing these recommendations. New data from the Baltimore Educational Research Consortium and from the Annie E. Casey Foundation-funded study on early chronic absence give us a sharp picture of who is absent, from which schools and neighborhoods, for what reasons, and with what effects. A series of roundtables convened by the University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Families, Children, and the Courts in Fall 2007, along with a forum series on truancy and school engagement organized by the Open Society Institute-Baltimore in Winter/Spring 2008, have also built a coalition of educators, youth-serving organizations, city and school system employees, funders, and others who are well-versed on this issue and ready to work together to confront Baltimore's school attendance problem.

Tackling this complex problem will require leadership from the mayor of Baltimore, and the CEO of BCPSS, with the active support and participation of city agencies, foundations, youth-serving organizations, and community leaders.

CONCLUSION ▶

Many Baltimore youth miss school due to misguided beliefs about its importance and inadequate family support. Others are pulled out of school by family, work, or community factors, and still others are pushed out of school by school exclusion policies and a lack of academic, social, and emotional support in the schools. The result is a student absence epidemic that is disastrous for the city. Addressing this problem in Baltimore - and in other communities with high levels of student absence - will require that leaders and residents emphasize the importance of education and the responsibility of families to get students to school each day. In addition, public agencies must remove barriers to attendance, and schools must establish the programs, policies, and relationships that engage students and make them feel welcome and supported. When students get to school - every day, beginning in pre-kindergarten - they can learn and develop the skills they need to become educated, healthy, and productive citizens.

**ENDNOTES** ▶

¹ 2007 Maryland Report Card: Maryland State Demographics. Accessed at <http://www.mdreportcard.org/Demographics.aspx?WDATA=State&K=99AAAA#attendance>.

² Baltimore City Public School System. (May 2007). SY06-07 School Climate Data: Students, Parents, and Staff. Accessed on 18 April 2008 at http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Student_Performance/PDF/SY06-07_Summary_Report.pdf.

³ See the OSI Issue Brief: Sundius, J. & Farneth, M. (2008). Missing school: The epidemic of school absence in Baltimore City. Baltimore, MD: Open Society Institute-Baltimore.

⁴ Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Division of Accountability and Assessment. Suspensions, expulsions, and health-related exclusions, Maryland public schools, 2006-2007. December 2007.

⁵ See the OSI Issue Brief: Sundius, J. & Farneth, M. (2008). Putting kids out of school: What's causing high suspension rates and why they are detrimental to students, schools, and communities. Baltimore, MD: Open Society Institute-Baltimore.

⁶ Gross, S., Bronner, Y., Welch, C., et al. (2003). Breakfast and lunch meal skipping patterns among fourth-grade children from selected public schools in urban, suburban, and rural Maryland. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Maryland State Department of Human Resources. (February 5, 2008). 39th Semi-Annual Compliance Report, L.J. v Massinga.

⁹ Balfanz, R. & Boccanfuso, C. (2007). Falling off the path to graduation: Early indicators research brief. Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools.