

Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path

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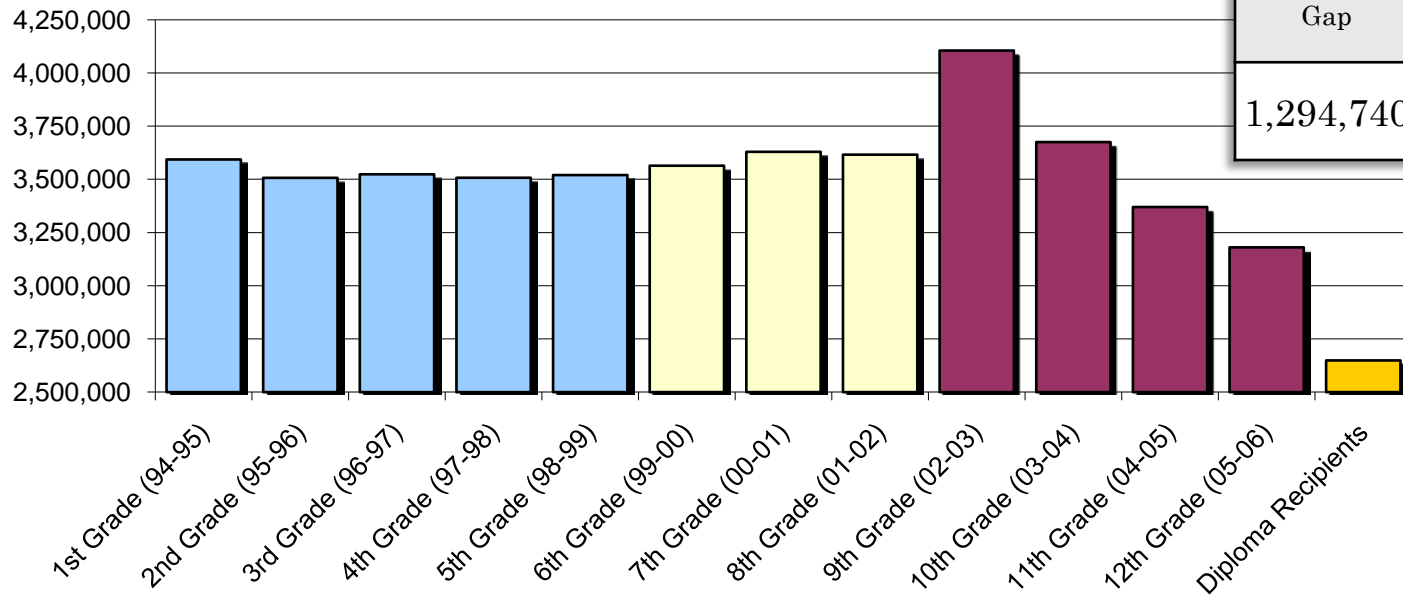
President Obama has challenged the nation to eliminate dropping out as an option.

The middle grades, particularly in high-poverty neighborhoods, have a vital role in meeting this challenge



The Nation Faces a Significant Graduation Challenge—Class of 2006

Total Number of Students and Graduates



Current Graduation Gap	
9th Graders to Diploma Gap	12th Graders to Diploma Gap
1,294,740	370,269



Why the Middle Grades Matter

Finding 1: At least half of eventual dropouts can fall off the path to graduation in the middle grades.



HOW EARLY IN THE MIDDLE GRADES COULD WE IDENTIFY STUDENTS WHO, *WITHOUT INTERVENTION*, LIKELY WOULD NOT GRADUATE ?

- Wanted reliable and valid indicators
- Collectively wanted the indicators to produce a high yield of future non-graduates
- Wanted indicators to be based on data readily accessible to schools



CONTINUED

- Conducted cohort analysis of entire 6th-grade cohort of 1995/96 in Philadelphia – roughly 14,000 students
- Examined large number of potential indicators based on literature and our experience, included school performance/interaction and status variables
- Wanted variables that had independent and additive effects



FOUR SIXTH-GRADE INDICATORS EMERGED

1. Attending less than 80% of the time
 2. Receiving a poor final behavior grade in a core course
 3. Failing math
 4. Failing English
- Sixth-graders with any *one* of these indicators had 25% or lower graduation rates
 - Collectively, the four indicators identified 40% of the future non-graduates from the cohort



Failed English



Sixth-graders who fail English have a 1 in 8 chance of making it to the 12th grade on time

- Only 16% graduate on time or with one extra year

1996-97 6th g. students who failed English (n=905)

	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
6th	100%	28%	0	0	0	0	0	0
7th	0	59%	28%	0	0	0	0	0
8th	0	7%	55%	25%	0	0	0	0
9th	0	0	0	59%	61%	47%	16%	6%
10th	0	0	0	3%	21%	27%	20%	10%
11th	0	0	0	0	2%	12%	10%	5%
12th	0	0	0	0	0	1%	13%	13%
On-Time Grad	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	9%	NA
Grad +1 Yr	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	7%
Left SDP	0	7%	16%	13%	16%	13%	41%	NA

"Left SDP" includes all 'leavers': student transferred, moved, withdrew or otherwise left the District and is no longer in SDP data file

	on-track to graduation
	4-year grad

Failed Math

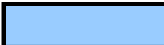

Sixth-graders who fail math have less than a 1 in 5 chance of making it to the 12th-grade on time

- Only 21% graduate either on time or with one extra year

1996-97 6th g. students who failed math (n=1424)

	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
6th	100%	22%	0	0	0	0	0	0
7th	0	67%	24%	0	0	0	0	0
8th	0	6%	62%	21%	0%	0	0	0
9th	0	0	0	64%	59%	44%	16%	7%
10th	0	0	0	2%	24%	27%	18%	7%
11th	0	0	0	0	1%	14%	11%	4%
12th	0	0	0	0	0	0%	17%	14%
On-Time Grad	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	10%	NA
Grad +1 Yr	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	11%
Left SDP	0	5%	14%	13%	15%	13%	39%	NA

"Left SDP" includes all 'leavers': student transferred, moved, withdrew or otherwise left the District and is no longer in SDP data file

	on-track to graduation
	4-year grad



Attendance and behavior are powerful components of course failure in 6th grade

- 85% of 6th-graders who failed English and 75% of those who failed math also received a poor final behavior mark and/or attended less than 80% of the time



By comparison, students who enter middle school with basic skills, attend regularly, behave and pass their courses are likely to graduate.

- 6th-graders who came to school most days, got good behavior marks, passed math and English and had basic (not proficient) academic skills had a 69% graduation rate
- In short, middle grades (even high poverty) schools work much better for the students for whom they were traditionally designed
- In many large cities or high-poverty areas these students are in short supply. Less than a quarter of the 6th-graders might match this description



Comparison Group

Sixth-graders with 90%+ attendance, excellent behavior, passed math and English, and scored at or above basic on the 5th-grade PSSA math and reading have more than a 3 in 4 chance of making it to the 12th grade on time

- 69% graduate on time or with one extra year

1996-97 6th g. comparison group (n=1225)

	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
6th	100%	0%	0%	0	0	0	0	0
7th	0	92%	1%	0	0	0	0	0
8th	0	1%	92%	1%	0%	0%	0	0
9th	0	0	0	87%	8%	5%	1%	1%
10th	0	0	0	0	76%	7%	2%	2%
11th	0	0	0	0	1%	74%	4%	3%
12th	0	0	0	0	0	1%	76%	14%
On-Time Grad	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	61%	NA
Grad +1 Yr	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	8%
Left SDP	0	6%	7%	12%	14%	13%	16%	80%

"Left SDP" includes all 'leavers': student transferred, moved, withdrew or otherwise left the District and is no longer in SDP data file

	on-track to graduation
	4-year grad

*right-hand columns may >100%, as 12th graders and grads overlap (grad status being 1 of 6 status codes that students carry)



EXTENSION AND REPLICATION STUDIES

- Have looked at additional cohorts in Philadelphia
- Analysis has been replicated in six additional school districts – five were high-poverty urban school districts, and one was a southern city-county district with urban, suburban and rural areas and varied incomes
- Basic findings have held. **Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance** variables reliably predicted significant numbers of future non-grads and dropouts, as early as the 6th grade.



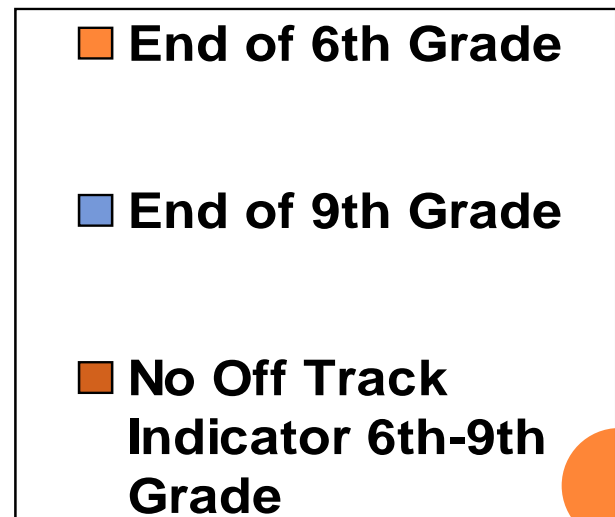
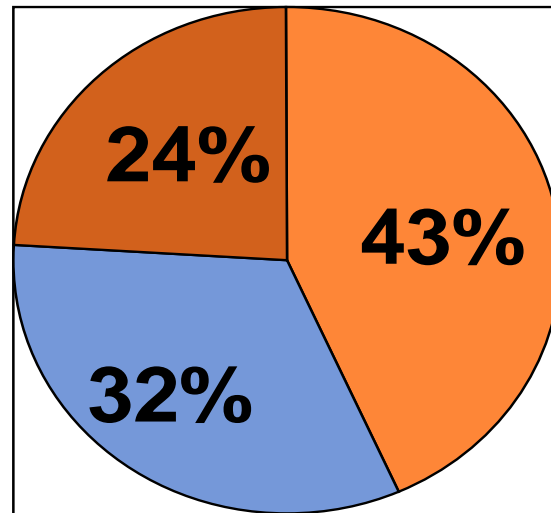
Major Finding

- Students in high-poverty school districts who successfully navigate grades 6 to 9 generally graduate from high school (75% or higher grad rates).
- Students in high-poverty school districts who struggle and become disengaged in the early secondary grades and in particular have an unsuccessful 6th and/or 9th grade transition do not graduate (20% or less grad rates).



**In high-poverty school districts,
75% of eventual dropouts can be
identified between the 6th and 9th Grade**

**Percent of Dropouts That Can Be
Identified between the 6th and 9th
grade-Boston Class of 2003**



Students are knocked off course in the early secondary grades by the A,B,Cs

Attendance

Behavior

Course Failure



ATTENDANCE

- No common thresholds across the districts
 - Philadelphia needed to be below 80% attendance to get 75% yield, Boston needed to be below 90%.
- Where you are in the attendance distribution may be a factor, as well as total days missed.
- States and districts will need to do their own analyses to identify key attendance thresholds.



BEHAVIOR

- Philadelphia data indicate that sustained, mild misbehavior is as problematic as behavior that generates suspension.s
- Challenge – most districts do not systematically collect data on mild misbehavior, only on suspensions
- Suspensions were predictive though number and type varied by school district; many more students in Philadelphia had poor behavior grades than were suspended. Thus, suspensions as only behavior indicator may miss a significant number of off-track students.



COURSE PERFORMANCE

- Failing courses in the middle grades was consistently predictive of non-graduation and dropping out across districts.
- In most districts, 6th-graders failed only 1 or 2 courses. Failing a single core course typically signaled off-track status.
- Only extremely low test scores – below the 15th percentile – on nationally normed tests had predictive power that produced high yields.



The earlier students develop off-track indicators the lower their odds of graduating

- In Philadelphia, Boston, Gary, and Mobile – the earlier students exhibited off-track indicators, the worse their odds of graduating.
- Students with no off-track indicators in the middle grades, who developed them in the 9th grade, did better than students with middle grade and 9th grade indicators.



A CLOSER LOOK:

WHY ARE ATTENDANCE, BEHAVIOR
AND COURSE PERFORMANCE SO
CRITICAL AND WHY DO THEY
DECLINE IN THE MIDDLE GRADES?



THE ONSET OF ADOLESCENCE COMBINED WITH CONCENTRATED, INTER-GENERATIONAL POVERTY CREATES ITS OWN SET OF RISK FACTORS

- The developmental and cognitive challenges all middle grades students face – magnified by the freedom of urban environments and large numbers of students with academic skills below grade level
- Neighborhood challenges – gangs and criminal enterprises need young adolescent males
- Family responsibilities brought on by poverty increase in adolescence



IN HIGH-POVERTY NEIGHBORHOODS
ATTENDANCE CAN DECLINE
SIGNIFICANTLY IN THE MIDDLE
GRADES



IMPACT OF ADOLESCENCE AND POVERTY ON ATTENDANCE IN BALTIMORE

High-Poverty Neighborhood	Percent of Elementary Students Missing 20+ Days	Percent of Middle Grades Students Missing 20+ Days
Clifton-Berea	15%	46%
Greenmount	15%	50%
Madison	21%	65%
Midway	6%	55%
Park Heights	17%	57%

Source: BNIA



THESE CHALLENGES ARE MET WITH AN INADEQUATE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE, MAKING MATTERS WORSE

- Large numbers of students with demanding emotional, social, and academic needs in a sub-set of middle schools
- Insufficient numbers of skilled, stable adults in these schools and neighborhoods committed to middle grades students' development
- Poor physical facilities



AS A RESULT, MIDDLE GRADES STUDENTS IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS BEGIN TO DISENGAGE FROM SCHOOL IN LARGE NUMBERS AND AT AN ACCELERATING RATE

- Some stop attending school regularly
 - flight
- Some start acting out and being disruptive in class
 - fight
- Some just stop trying and start failing courses
 - withdrawal

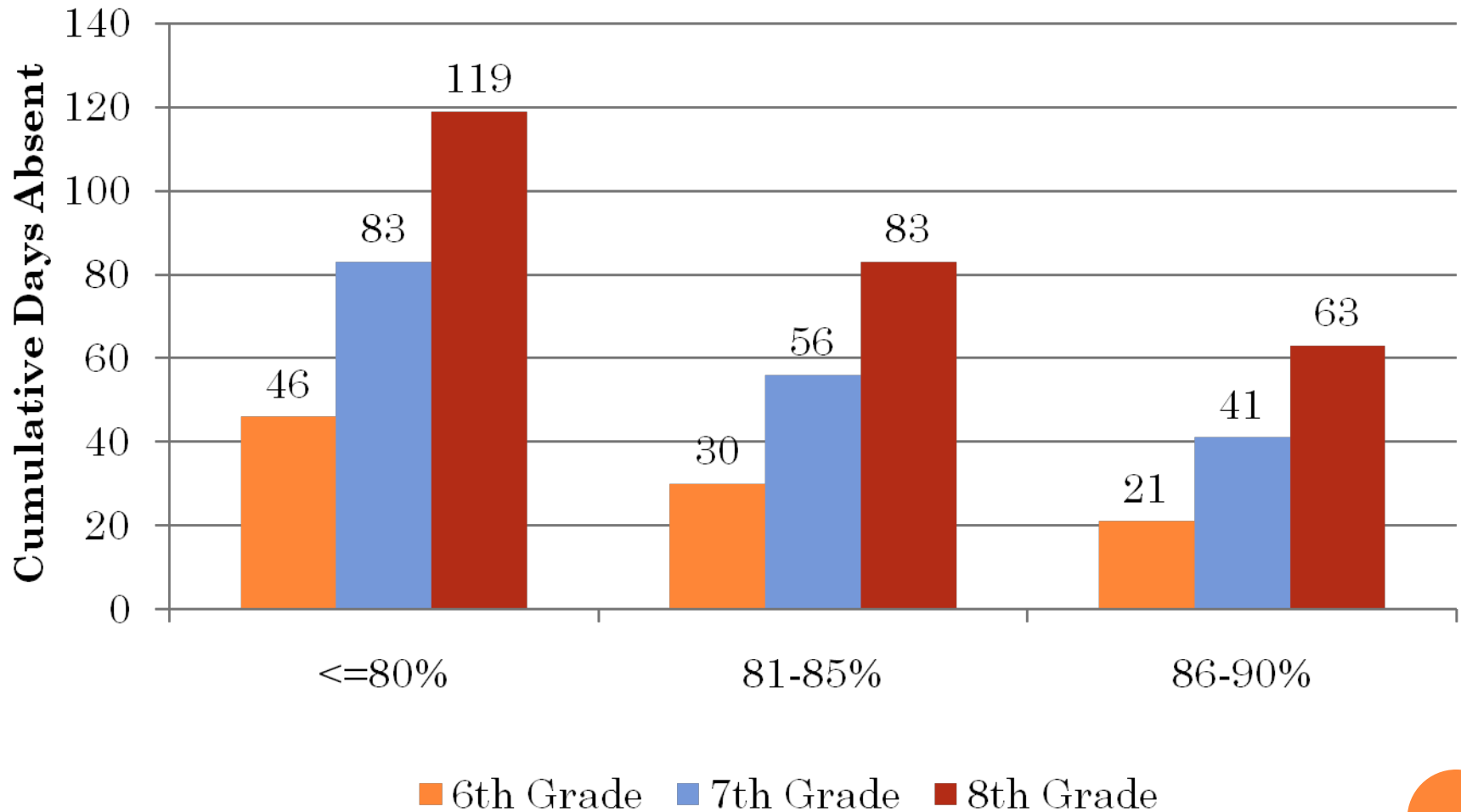


WITHOUT SUSTAINED INTERVENTIONS,
THESE BEHAVIORS DO NOT CORRECT
THEMSELVES. THEY GET WORSE



Average Cumulative Days Absent Through the Middle Grades by 6th Grade Low Attendance Categories

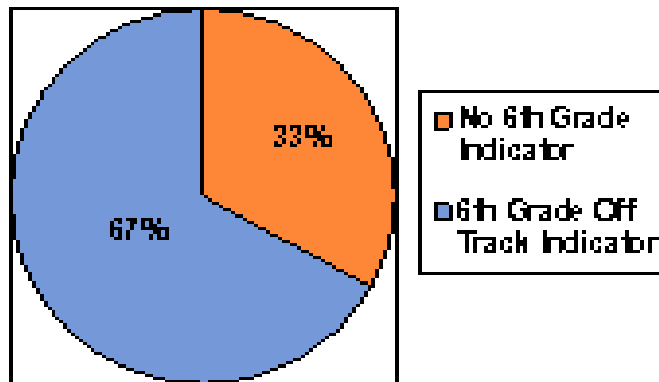
N = 9,125



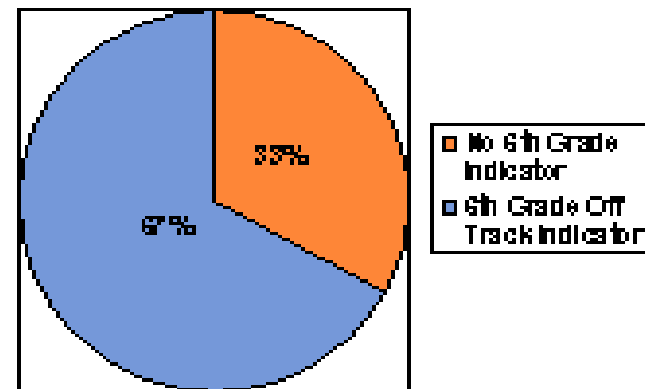
AND BRING SOCIAL COSTS

School Disengagement Proceeds Involvement with the Juvenile Justice System and Teenage Pregnancy

Males Incarcerated in High School-Philadelphia



Females Who Give Birth in High School-Philadelphia



Why the Middle Grades Matter

Finding 2: Students who enter high school two or more years below grade level struggle to pass standards-based courses and exit exams



Research Question 2:

What factors lead to students making large achievement gains in the middle grades?



Found that the same factors that keep middle grades students on the graduation path also drive achievement gains

- Attendance
- Behavior and Effort
- Course Performance



When students disengage from school in the middle grades, they do not achieve significantly.

- Excellent instructional programs and good teachers have limited impact when students do not attend school regularly, behave, engage, and try.



This is very important:

It lets us create a unified field theory
of middle grades improvement



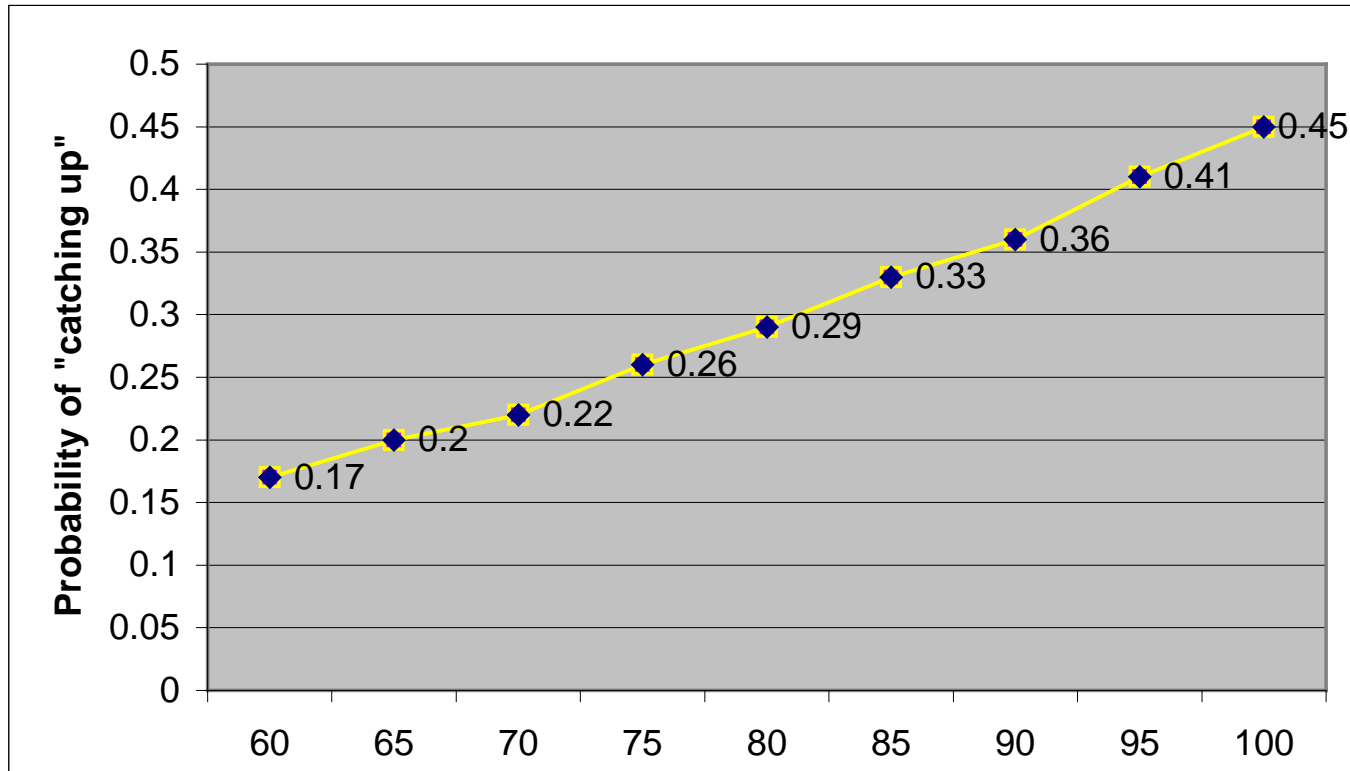
Effective instruction PLUS student engagement = achievement gains

- In three representative high-poverty middle schools, 77% of the students who attended 95% of the time, got excellent behavior grades, had above average effort levels during 6th, 7th and 8th grades, and strong teachers for two of those three years made large achievement gains in math.
- Less than 20% of students in the sample of three high-poverty middle schools, however, had high attendance, excellent behavior, and high effort levels throughout grades 6-8, and strong teachers in two of the three years.
- Attendance, behavior and effort all had independent and additive effects beyond teacher quality.



Impact of Attendance

Figure 3 (*Impact of Attendance*)



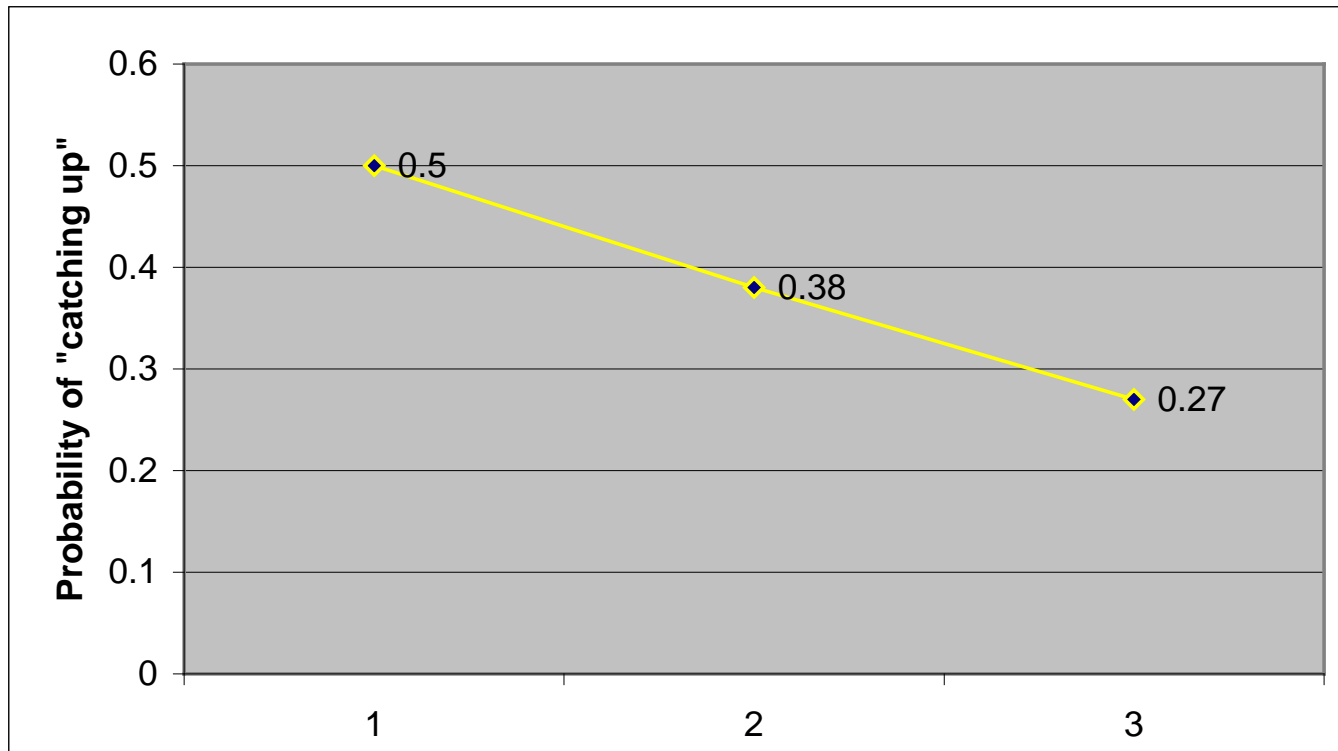
Percentage of total school days attended

(CEMS student; Non-Asian Student; from Cohort 1; with effort of 6; behavior of 2; percentage of effective math teachers of 50)



Impact of Behavior

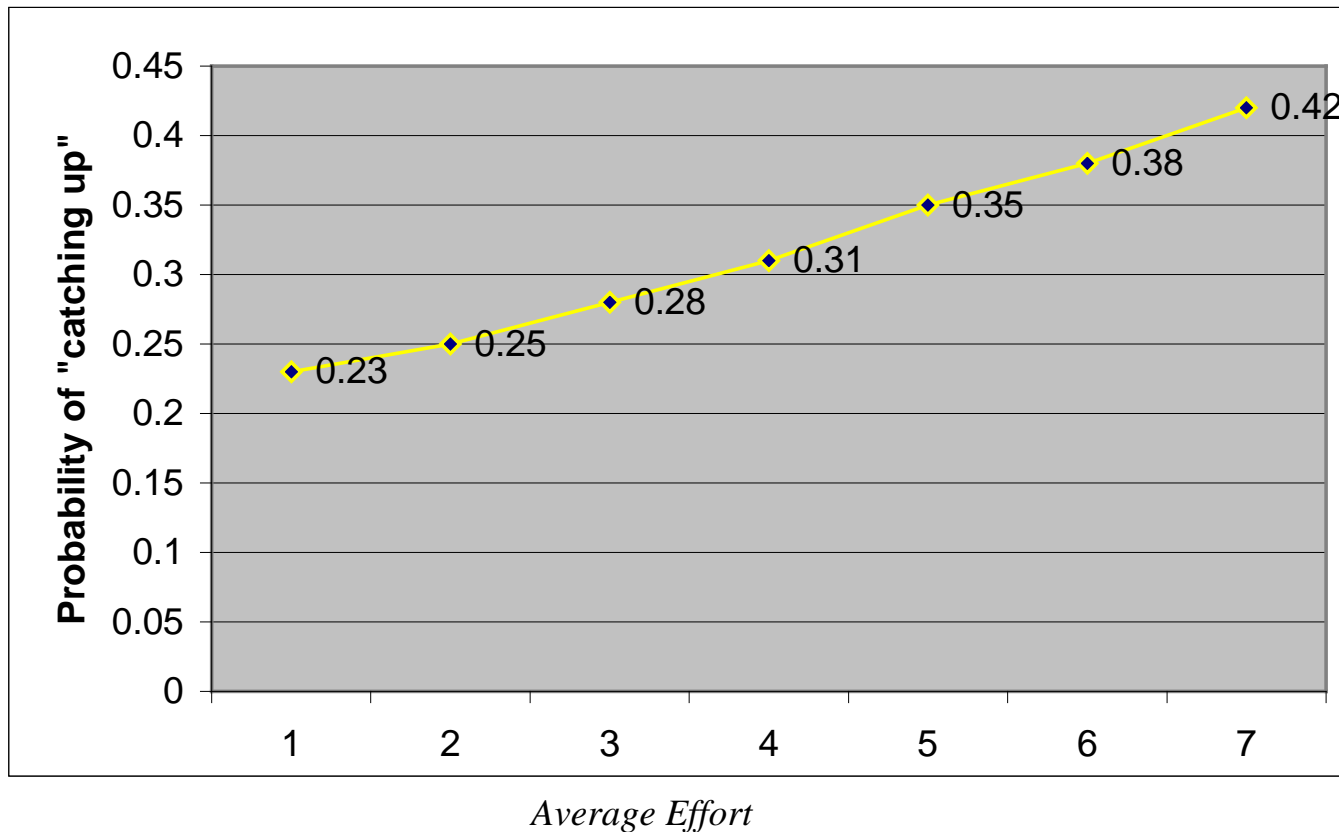
Figure 5 (*Impact of Behavior*)



*Average Behavior Marks(1 = Excellent, 2= Satisfactory, 3 = Unsatisfactory)
(CEMS student; Non-Asian Student; from Cohort 1; with attendance rate of 92%; effort of 6; % of effective math teachers of 50)*

Impact of Effort

Figure 4 (*Impact of Effort*)



(CEMS student; Non-Asian Student; from Cohort 1; with attendance rate of 92%; behavior of 2, percentage of effective math teachers of 50)



Implications for Practice



Most of the things we think matter, do matter but have limited impact.

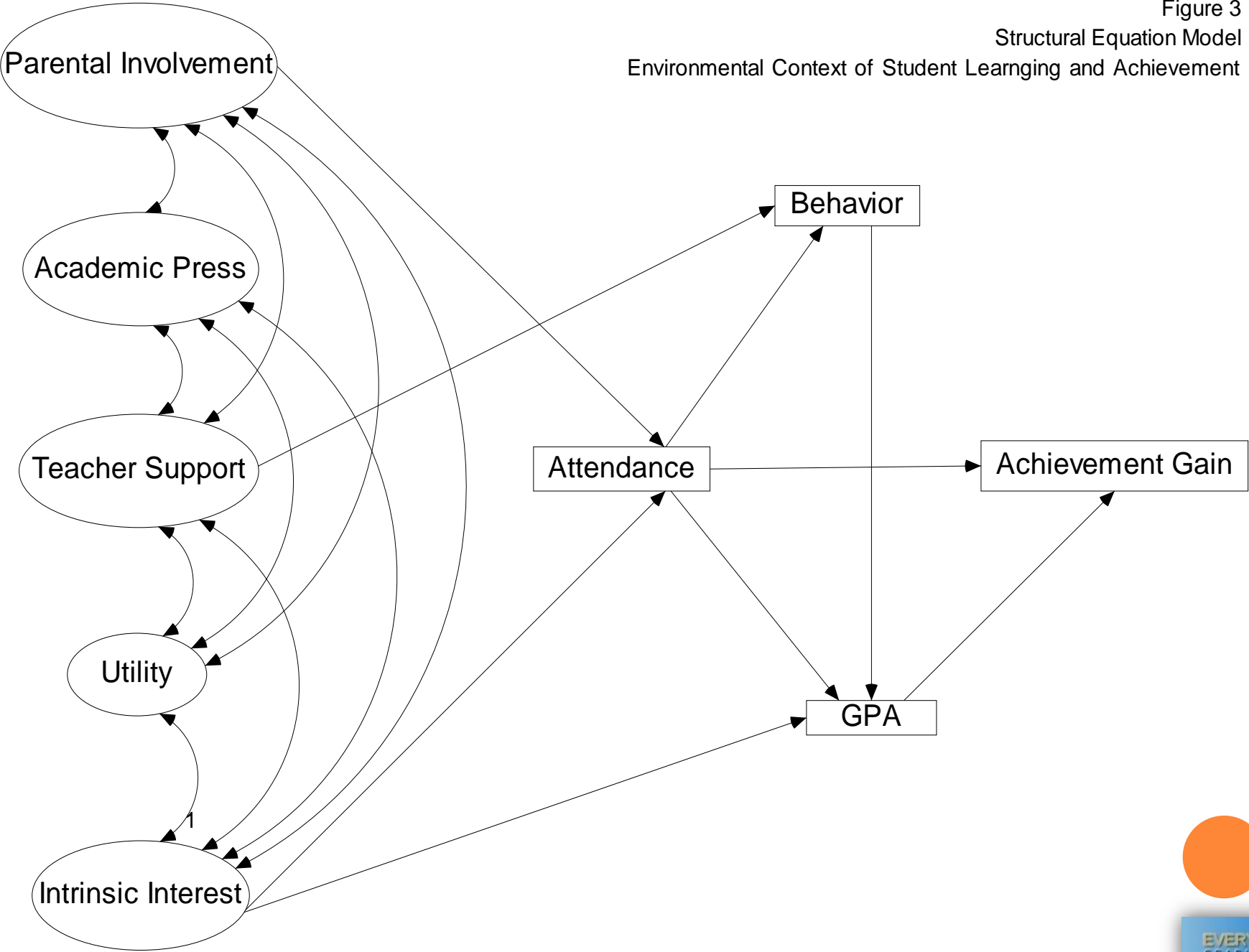
To make progress, schools will need comprehensive strategies



Figure 3

Structural Equation Model

Environmental Context of Student Learning and Achievement



In addition to good teachers, strong instructional programs, and safe and supportive learning environments, we will need to pay attention to the ABCs of putting middle grades students on the graduation path.



Attendance

- We need to measure attendance in informative and actionable manners. Every absence needs to bring a problem-solving response.
- Good attendance needs to be recognized regularly through public acknowledgement and social rewards.
- For better or worse, schools need to acknowledge that middle grades students are making independent decisions about whether they are engaged by school.



Behavior and Effort

- Need high-engagement electives that provide avenues for short-term success and positively recognize asymmetrical skill levels in students.
- Need activities that honor and use middle grades students' desire for adventure and camaraderie.
- Positive behavior needs to be recognized.
- Organizational and self-management skills need to be taught.



Course Performance

- Quality coursework involves the ability to integrate a series of skills and a set of knowledge to produce an intellectual product. Common benchmark assessments may not measure this.
- We need to acknowledge that course grades are more predictive of eventual success than standardized test scores. Need common grading rubrics.
- We need to create high school and college readiness indicators that are meaningful and engaging to middle grades students, and understood by parents. Think academic merit badges.
- We need to get extra help right.



Putting it altogether with early warning and intervention systems

- Focus on effective intervention, not just identification
- Recognize and build on student strengths
- Provide time, training, and support to teachers
- Match resources to student needs but practice intervention discipline
- Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions
- Remember you can get started with the data in your school

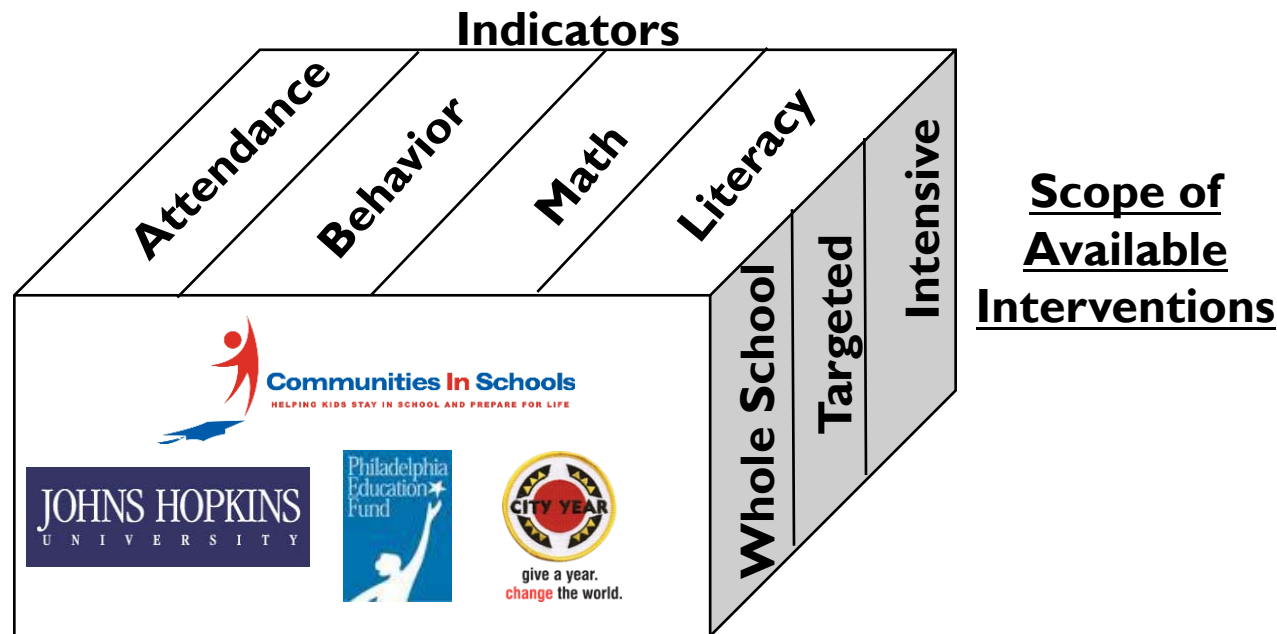


For Example,



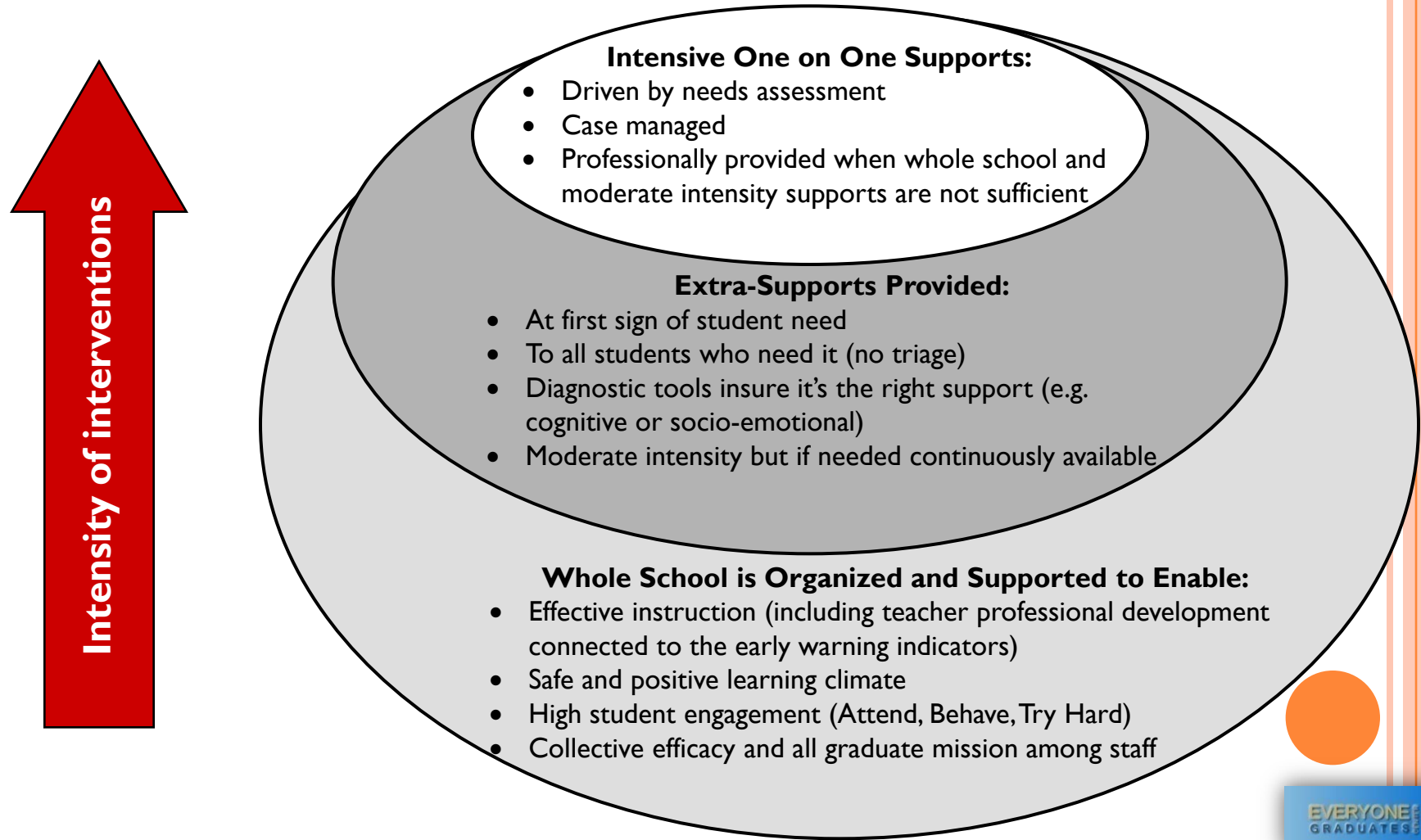
Diplomas Now is designed for the middle and high schools with the greatest number of “off-track” students

1. Combine **whole school reform, national service and integrated student supports** with an **early warning indicator system** and **on-site coordination** to provide a full school tiered system for supporting all students.
2. Continuous monitoring of student performance related to key early warning indicators
3. Identification of students who are veering off track by indicator
4. Provide the appropriate interventions



Diplomas Now School Design

Providing the Right Support to the Right Student at the Right Time



Challenges We Need to Overcome

- Getting the ratio of skilled adults to students in need right
- Getting teacher buy in and support for the Mission of Keeping Middle Grade Students on the Graduation Path
- Strengthening the Parent, Student, Teacher Support Triangle



Final Conjecture

- With the tools and knowledge at hand we can make middle schools much more successful and effective.
- But to reach the promised land of middle grades that engage, educate and keep all students on the path to graduation prepared for success in adult life, we will need more invention.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Email: rbalfanz@csos.jhu.edu

Visit: <http://www.every1graduates.org>

The logo is a blue rectangular box with the text "EVERYONE GRADUATES" in yellow and white. "EVERYONE" is in yellow and "GRADUATES" is in white. To the right of "EVERYONE" and "GRADUATES" is the word "CENTER" written vertically in white.

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