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## Final Evaluation Report: “Quantum Leap” Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs Mount Anthony Union High School, Bennington Vermont

Item Type	article;article
Authors	Baege, Monika;Hasazi, Susan;Meyers, H. Bud
Publisher	James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research, University of Vermont
Download date	2026-06-05 22:30:59
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Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14849/5806">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14849/5806</a>

**Final Evaluation Report**

**“Quantum Leap” Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs  
Mount Anthony Union High School, Bennington Vermont**

**Monika Baege, EdD  
Susan Hasazi, EdD  
H. Bud Meyers, PhD**

**March 2006**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Quantum Leap is an umbrella for three truancy and drop out prevention programs that are the subject of this study. Located at Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington, Vermont, these programs include the Quantum Leap Classroom, the Project Leap After School Program, and the Academic Mentoring Program. Each offers different levels of support for students of promise who are experiencing challenges making it difficult to learn within the average school structure. Quantum Leap grew out of collaboration between Bennington College, Mount Anthony Union High School, and the Bennington Court System. Specifically, the program’s initial inspiration could be traced to a meeting between a college dance professor with an interest in mediation, an assistant superintendent and a court judge who were concerned about truancy. This inspiration has permeated the staff who implement the programs, as well as the families and students who have benefited from them.

The commitment of those who lead the program is key to the success of Quantum Leap. Their philosophy of “do whatever it takes” to reach a child is tempered by clear definitions of which program best meets the needs of each child. The program’s philosophy stems from Bennington College’s experiential and relationship-based pedagogy: to develop a one to one relationship with each student, find out student interests, and tap into those interests to help young people find their own motivation to explore and contribute to their world.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This evaluation focused on three truancy and dropout prevention programs at Bennington: the Quantum Leap Classroom, the Academic Mentoring Program, and the Project Leap After School Program. Specific attention was given to the Plan Process and Mediation, as well as Systems Change. The evaluation examined what interventions worked in these programs, what were their effects, and which are replicable. The overarching evaluation questions that guided the data collection were:

- 1) How do selected stakeholders (school and program personnel, community partners, students and families) view the process, outcomes, and sustainability of the truancy and dropout prevention programs?
- 2) What are the essential components of the programs that stakeholders consider most effective?
- 3) What outcomes have the programs tracked and recorded. How have students performed on these outcomes?

- 4) How are student outcomes related to measures of their participation and background characteristics?
- 5) How do students describe their experiences with the programs?
- 6) What program improvements do stakeholders recommend?
- 7) What are the recommendations of stakeholders for a community that wants to replicate the positive outcomes of the programs?

Expanding on questions #3 and #4 above, the quantitative aspect of the study asked the following evaluation questions:

- Who participated in each of three program initiatives? (Student Characteristics)
  - Quantum Leap Classroom?
  - Academic Mentoring?
  - Project Leap After School?
- How did participants and non-participants compare with respect to academic performance at the beginning of each of the programs?
- What were the outcomes with respect to attendance and academic performance for each of the program initiatives when:
  - Grouped by program initiative?
  - Grouped by grade level?

The quantitative part of the evaluation focused on the characteristics and outcomes of the three programs named above: Quantum Leap Classroom, Academic Mentoring and Project Leap After School (AS). These three programs were initiatives within the larger scope of the Southwest Supervisory Union's regular school programs at Mount Anthony Union High School. Therefore, comparisons between groups of students formed by the programs and the general school population were made in order to estimate the effects of providing somewhat more specialized services to groups of students who were identified by school staff as 'at risk of poor academic performance and dropping out.'

Specifically, the following research questions were posed to the data provided by the Southwest Supervisory Union:

1. How did the selected students (participants) compare with other students with respect to:
  - Gender
  - Free or Reduced Priced Lunch Eligibility
  - Enrollment over time

2. How did participants in groups formed by programs and the general population of students compare with respect to:
  - Mean number of days absent by grade in 2006
  - Mean number of days absent by grade between 2004 and 2006 by quarter
  - Mean number of days absent by program
  - Rate of withdrawal from school
  - Performance on standardized tests
  - Growth on academic measures of performance

## **METHODOLOGY**

***Qualitative data collection:*** The qualitative portion of the study reached 55 people, primarily through individual interviews, with several pairs and one focus group. Our intent was to conduct more interviews in focus groups, but due to student and parent preferences for confidentiality, individual interviews were most often conducted (See Appendixes A - E for interview questionnaires). The interviewees included 24 students (8 boys and 16 girls) and 13 family members (1 father, 11 mothers and 2 grandmothers), 7 program personnel, 6 school staff, and 4 community partners. Of the interview participants, 14 were male and 40 female.

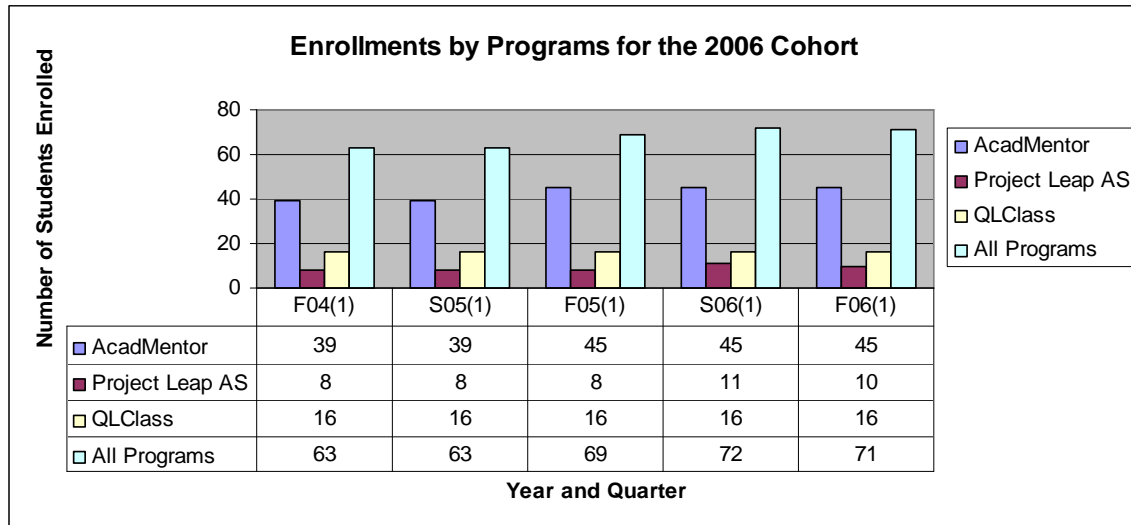
These interviews, conducted in September and October 2006, gathered the perspectives of youth who had succeeded in staying in school with the help of these programs as well as a few who struggled. Parents and grandparents shared their observations and experiences. The interviews also elicited the views of high school teachers, administrators, a school board member, and a school clinician; Quantum Leap program leaders and academic mentors; Bennington College's President and the professors who initiated the program; a juvenile case worker in the local community youth and family service agency, and a regional coordinator of county-wide outreach to youth and families that is part of a statewide human services network. Interviews were conducted on site, so some observation of programs added to the data collection. All the data were coded and analyzed according to emerging themes (Patton 2002). In addition, this report includes an observation of the exhibit of student work at the end of the school term, held on January 5, 2007. The description of this observation is included as Appendix F.

***Quantitative data sources:*** The quantitative portion of the study relied upon data supplied by the school district and data maintained by the program. The numbers of students served by the programs varied by program and by quarter as records are maintained for students enrolled in each of the programs. The largest number of program records of students served by the program during the fall of 2004 through the fall of 2006 was 110 students. Average numbers of students in any one quarter ranged from 63 through 72. Students came in and out of programs over the time period but were not cited as a withdrawal unless they withdrew from the Mt. Anthony High School and did not enroll in a program elsewhere. It is possible that some students re-enrolled at another school and Mt. Anthony was not notified of subsequent enrollment. This would have the effect of inflating the withdrawal rate slightly.

Chart 1, below, indicates the enrollment by program for students who would be considered part of a cohort of students who were followed as ninth graders from the fall of 2004, then as tenth

graders in the fall of 2005 and as eleventh graders through the fall of 2006. Since students were enrolled in the various program components from all grades, the graduation rate is the number of graduates as a proportion of the number of students who were in the tenth grade in 2004. The total number of students in each grade varies by year but is approximately 260 students per grade.

**Chart 1**



Two additional sources of data for program outcomes included the State of Vermont student records at the SWSU for two cohorts of students and the website at the Center for Rural Studies (<http://crs.uvm/schlrpt>). A cohort of students completed state testing as eighth graders in 2004 and then tested again in 2006. These records provided both outcome test measurement for the New Standards Reference Examination including subtests in reading, writing and mathematics.

Most comparisons were made as frequency tabulations by grade, program or group formed by gender or free lunch eligibility. In analyses where numbers of students in groups were small, estimates of chance variation were made with inferential statistics.

**Limitations:** As a program in a moderate sized, relatively rural high school the numbers of students enrolled in any given sub-program during any given quarter were relatively small. Program records show a maximum enrollment of 110 students over the time period for the study. Given the total numbers of students enrolled in 2006 at Mt. Anthony as 1167, across all class years, the estimated contact rate with students who were enrolled in at least one program component was about 10 percent of the total school population. Given that the estimated withdrawal in a given year, across all four classes is 6.4%, the estimate of 10% enrollment seems appropriate. The estimated cohort withdrawal rate is somewhat higher at approximately 13 percent (the reciprocal of the 4-year graduation rate.) Even at this somewhat higher ratio the 10 percent enrollment in truancy prevention seems reasonable. Nevertheless, when estimating outcomes such as graduation and withdrawal rates of program participants in certain programs the numbers of students eligible for graduation or experiencing withdrawal from school sometimes fell below cell sizes where statistical probability estimation was possible.

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The qualitative findings are divided into two sections, following an initial description of each program. The first set of findings discusses the views and experiences of stakeholders (school and program personnel, community partners, students and families) regarding the process and outcomes of the truancy and dropout prevention programs, highlighting the essential components that they consider most effective in truancy and dropout prevention. The second set of findings reveals stakeholders' recommendations for program improvements, thoughts about sustainability, and advice for replication by other communities.

### Program Descriptions

***Quantum Leap Classroom:*** The Quantum Leap Classroom offer students the opportunity to learn in a setting with a small teacher to student ratio. They work independently but have regular access to the teacher for individual assistance. The teacher makes it a point to be aware and sensitive to challenges in the student's personal lives that may interfere with learning. At the same time, expectations are high and clearly outlined. The curriculum is experiential and the semester culminates with an exhibit of student work that is attended by staff, families and the larger community. The classroom provides several computer work stations, books and resources, a kitchen, and space for creative arts projects. Walking into the classroom is more like walking into an interactive museum exhibit than an institutional setting.

Students who join the Quantum Leap Classroom can do so for one or more periods a day. Students become familiar with the Vermont standards for their subject, such as Social Studies, English, Art, or an elective. Assignments are layered to build student knowledge over the course of the semester and students research and portray their topics using multiple media. Experiential assignments weave together various disciplines. For example, a tea party might connect with trade, commodities, and history as well as etiquette.

***Academic Mentoring:*** Academic mentoring combines mentoring with tutoring during school hours. Located in the library, students can pass through to ask for assistance or can spend part or all of a class period working with a tutor. Mentors help students with academic subjects, but also attend to other student needs that interfere with learning. For example, a mentor noticed from a student's body language that it was difficult for him to get any studying done. For 20 minutes, she listened to him. After he had a chance to talk and be heard, he said, "Okay, I'll do my math now." According to the Academic Mentoring Coordinator, the mentor is a listening ear and an advocate who "helps kids get what they need from their education." Sometimes this involves helping students learn to negotiate with teachers and look at what they want their futures to be. For some students, meeting with a mentor in the library is a safe alternative to making a "wrong choice" in a heated moment.

Within the Academic Mentoring Program, students will find various levels of help from their mentors. The philosophy is "whatever it takes." Some students leave class regularly to work with a mentor. Others check in periodically for help with a paper. Issues can include assisting students with negotiating a challenging peer relationship, helping them work within the system regarding

discipline procedures, and getting students to learn to ask for help when they need it. For some students, mentoring offers a short term boost during a difficult time.

***Project Leap After School Program:*** The Project Leap After School Program meets once a week for a minimum of three hours and involves approximately 12 youth. The group participates in various activities such as hiking and field trips to art museums. One goal of the program is to expose youth to possibilities and to help them develop curiosities and define their interests. In addition to the weekly meetings, the group meets once or twice during the semester on a Friday night. The Project Leap After School Program is voluntary, however, the Coordinator invites students to join and teachers refer students to the program. The written material on the program states: *The types of students who might benefit from this program are ones who possess high potential and who seem – for various reasons – socially isolated and/or academically disenfranchised; specifically, we would like to attract any student who feels disconnected from his/her academics and/or school and/or community. Participation in this program is voluntary and students must be willing to make a sincere commitment to the program ideals and to their fellow participants.*

The Coordinator invited students who she describes as “socially disconnected,” who were often in the nurse’s office complaining of being sick, students who ate alone in the lunch room or sat alone in the corners of the library. One boy never left his house before he joined. It took six months to involve him. The target students are usually not involved in anything else after school. She emphasizes that adhering to the particular kind of student who benefits from Project Leap makes it work. It is not a program for all kids. Students “have to want to be there” and to commit to the time the program asks of them. At the same time, she adds that it helps when the group is mixed in age, gender, social strata, and life experiences. She has found it “tough for kids who are severely disabled.” However, one youth who was severely dyslexic found the social aspect of the program beneficial. After a while, students recruit their peers.

### **Views and Experiences of Stakeholders Regarding Process, Outcomes, and Effective Components of Truancy and Dropout Prevention**

The views and experiences of stakeholders center around five major themes of what appears to make these programs effective: 1) They foster self-determination, 2) They offer a variety of supportive programs for students of promise, 3) They use experiential learning, 4) The leadership is collaborative and inspired, with a focus on individual relationships to enhance learning, and 5) There is a vital connection with Bennington College and the larger community.

#### ***Fostering Self-Determination***

*Many of these kids look dead when they come in – there’s no response. They’re hiding, angry, nothing motivates or interests them.*

*--Quantum Leap Classroom Teacher*

*Quantum Leap changed my whole aspect on school and education. I used to hate school. Now I still come back to high school one or two times a week to visit.*

*--Quantum Leap Classroom Graduate*

The goal of each program within Quantum Leap is to tap into a student's inner motivation to learn. The *Plan Process*, out of Bennington College, is integral to the programs, though students rarely use the term. The plan process involves identifying interests and goals. This may seem like a simple idea, but implementing it with high school students experiencing significant challenges, is almost an art. The Quantum Leap teacher describes the students when they first arrive at her class in the following way: "Many of these kids look dead when they come in – there's no response. They're hiding, angry, nothing motivates or interests them."

The first assignment in the Quantum Leap Classroom seeks to tap into students' inner motivation through what is called a "Plan essay." The essay assignment asks each student to write the teacher a letter, discussing their interests, challenges, goals, and skills. In other words, they write about what brought them to where they are today, where they want to go academically, and what they need to get there. The assignment directly asks students to address "what empowers you." The teacher models this assignment by giving each student a letter to them about her life and relevant experiences, as well as her goals for working with the students. In it, she appeals to their self determination:

*What I want to do at MAUHS is inspire each of you to seek what is out there in the world. I wish to prepare you for what awaits outside of the classroom door. I want you to know what skills you will need to handle any situation that you may encounter and I want you to have the confidence that it takes to do so. Above all, I want to provide you with experiences that you will remember for the rest of your lives. I want to provide you with an exceptional educational experience.*

*I understand that I have a limited amount of time to work with each of you. I know that you may not yet be receptive to what I have to offer, but I urge you to grasp the world around you and make it your own. Do not feel sorry for yourself, or confused, or lost any longer...because no matter what injustices have been dealt to you in the past and what hurdles you think are out there waiting for you in the future...you are free to take control right now. I ask you to commit to making a difference in the world around you – in both small and large ways. Start with yourself. Everyday I am going to give it all I've got. I offer you experience and experiences in an unconventional way. We can do amazing things, but it will not always be easy. It will, however, be worth it in the long run.*

A school teacher echoed the importance of the Plan Process. She pointed out that the preliminary goal is not necessarily to get a particular kid in school all the time. Instead it is to help each student identify their current circumstances, their goals, and 'what they need to get there.' Other school teachers discussed how students eventually progress from gaining increased confidence to spending increased time in school.

The Quantum Leap (QL) Classroom teacher said students get to know themselves and their tendencies through the plan process. They learn to recognize self-defeating habits and refocus on their work. The final semester exhibit in the Quantum Leap Classroom also fosters student self determination. Since the project is too big for any one person to accomplish alone, the students rise to the occasion. As the QL teacher put it, "If I struggle, they come in and start helping."

Although the Quantum Leap teacher said empowerment is difficult to quantify, she has observed that her students who graduate leave more comfortable with themselves and on a more “solid footing” for learning. Many look to attend college whereas in the past they did not want to graduate from high school. She anticipates they may struggle as they get into college, but hopes they will continue. We spoke with a graduate of the Quantum Leap Classroom who currently holds a management position at a local company. She plans to start college through an on-line course program for business and is seeking financial aid. This graduate said Quantum Leap changed “my whole aspect on school and education. I used to hate school. Now I still come back to high school one or two times a week to visit.” She volunteers in the classroom as well. Her mother and grandmother commented that she changed from being unhappy and depressed to being more sociable and confident. They said, the program “brought her out of that shell.”

*We read a lot of books on stuff I'm interested in. If I'm interested in it, I'll do it.*

*-- Academic Mentoring Student*

*I'm definitely a lot more mature. I used to not think before I did things – be very impulsive. Now if I get mad, I think before I do anything.*

*-- Academic Mentoring Student*

Fostering self-determination is also a focus of the Academic Mentoring program, which connects adult and young adult tutors and mentors with students who are experiencing academic difficulties. Teachers refer students to the mentors, or students initiate the request for assistance. Some academic mentoring students value the voluntary nature of it. The Academic Mentoring Coordinator considers it essential that students come up with the solutions to their difficulties. The mentor asks them, “What is the end result that they want? What is the actual problem?” and helps them sort it out. This process helps youth discern the root of their disdain for a teacher, a class, or a subject. In one case, the problem arose from sensitivity to anticipated negative comments from a teacher for not having a necessary school supply.

An academic mentoring student explained his increased motivation due to participating in academic mentoring, “We read a lot of books on stuff I’m interested in. If I’m interested in it, I’ll do it.” This student indicated that he and his tutor would be looking into training programs in a potential career interest. Another academic mentoring student sounded empowered by his improvement. Reflecting back on last year, when he failed and “got kicked out,” he said “I’ve made a lot of progress. . . .I’m impressed with myself. I’m happy.” He added, “I’m getting older. I have to put things in place so I can have a future.” This student contrasted missing only two days of school this year to missing half of school last year. He went on to say, “I wouldn’t be doing well without tutoring.” Receiving a 98 on a social studies essay, he said, “I was really proud.”

One participant said academic mentoring has helped her think about college. Originally planning to get married and have children right out of high school, she said, “They got me to think about it. I’m going to take a year off and then go to college.” She described that she looks forward to learning a particular trade that she loves. She was able to get into the college because her tutors helped her improve her grades in one subject.

Discussing helpful strategies they learned through participation in Academic Mentoring, students said they learned to handle procrastination and became more organized. Others explored how they learn best and strengthened social skills. Some developed skills to manage stress and anger, often due to significant problems at home that were out of their control. A few quotes highlight some of their perceptions:

- *I've grown up a lot. I know my responsibilities, what needs to be done, what comes first now. I'm more mature about making those decisions.*
- *If I know I have a paper to write... I just do it.*
- *I am more organized – my binder – stuff goes where it's supposed to.*
- *They helped me figure out how I learn best and the conditions in which I learn best.*
- *Helped me deal with mental events that go on – helps me sort things out – makes it easier to deal with things....Got me so I was able to focus more....Made me more successful in school.*
- *I calmed down a lot – used to be pretty angry....Now I talk about feelings more....I'm a lot more happy with my life than I was.*

The Project Leap After School Program also shows evidence of increased self-determination among participants. The Coordinator has been tracking grades of her students for five years and finds that 80% of the participants increase their grade point average. Some of the participants have been inspired enough to start programs for younger peers in elementary and middle school. The Coordinator explained that the “activities I plan are subtle – coming from within small moments. I choose activities with goals in mind. Might not go visit a college, but might see music there. It is important that the curiosity comes from them and is not placed upon them.” Here again is an example of the subtle nuances of fostering self-determination in students.

*I became more outgoing, more accepting. I grew a stronger personality. It helped me find myself. I improved my grades and was able to better myself. I matured too.*

*Project Leap Program Graduate*

The first group of Project Leap students have recently graduated, all choosing to attend college, most being first generation college students. The Coordinator described one girl, the first in her family to go to college, as “more self possessed” and that she “gained confidence.” The Coordinator helped her with her college application, explaining that “college applications are really hard for kids who do not come from certain cultural backgrounds. They don't know who to go to with a problem.” Another indicator of the program's effectiveness includes the fact that some participants get involved in other school activities such as student government or theatre.

### ***Variety of Supportive Programs for Students of Promise***

Quantum Leap provides a variety of programs for students with varied needs and styles of learning. Elements of a supportive program that emerged from the interviews include the physical environment, compassionate clarification of expectations, and sensitivity to student home situations as well as their need for privacy. Furthermore, supportive programs offer ways to participate that avoid stigmatization by peers, allow students to keep up with their studies while attending to other problems in their lives, and match students to the appropriate program. Most importantly, supportive programs are flexible. They encourage communication and mutual

support between teachers and program staff. In addition, they maintain viable connections with parents and guardians.

***Physical environment:*** In the Quantum Leap Classroom, staff members consider the physical environment integral to a supportive program. The teacher described her effort to transform an initially punitive and intimidating environment, where “students ran the show,” to one where students have established trust, are happy to be in the classroom, and become self-directed. This was a tumultuous process that lost her some students who “figured I would buckle.” Standing up for her own integrity, she said, she “could not give credit for no work, or justify behavior” that was unacceptable. One of the first class assignments involved the students in designing the interior of their classroom. They researched the effects of color on learning. The results included not only an inviting and relaxing physical space conducive to concentration, but also a 26 page paper documenting the process that later became part of the students’ end of semester exhibit.

***Clarity, compassion, and respect:*** Supportive programs clarify expectations in a compassionate way. In the Quantum Leap Classroom, students are given a notebook at the beginning of the semester which introduces them to assignments and expectations. The teacher outlines three main categories of expectations: respect, trust, and learning. She writes, “I will always treat you with respect. I expect the same from you.” Under respect, she mentions tolerance, attitude, self-discipline, and managing conflict. She also says she will always attempt to speak with the student first if there is a problem and that she will also keep in contact with the student’s parents or guardians. Next she writes, “I will do all that I can for you. I ask that you trust me.” Under trust, she discusses second chances, consequences, accountability, and support. Lastly, she writes, “I am here to teach you. What do you want to learn?” Under learning, she encourages students to ‘give their all’ and challenges students to realize their potential. She discusses being a lifelong learner herself.

***Sensitivity to student challenges:*** Supportive programs are sensitive to students’ lives outside of school as well as their need for privacy. On Fridays, students in the QL Classroom write in their journal as a release, often in preparation for going home for the weekend. They staple pages shut that they don’t want the teacher to read. Journaling on Fridays reflects variety in their school routine. Each day is different. Students appreciate that the program staff acknowledge the realities of their personal histories. One student said the Plan Essay, where students write about their lives and goals, “brought up everything for me.” However, she finds it helpful in interactions with the QL teachers. “They know your weaknesses, how to talk to you, how to be stern. It helps they know what I’ve been through.”

A graduate of the QL Classroom said “this was my second family.” She added, “Everyone’s so close – you’re welcome no matter what past you had.” Her first two years of high school were “rough” and she “wanted to dropout,” though her parents did not let her. At first she thought QL was for “people slower” but after staying, observing, and talking with the program leaders, she realized it was “for everybody.” The QL classroom “gives high schoolers a chance to become somebody and not just be a face. You’re known by everybody.” She added, “If I came here as a starting freshman, I would have gotten better grades. I think the dropout rate would be lower. It’s welcoming out here, the classroom is comfortable, you can relax and do your work.” With an attached kitchen, the students can make breakfast or lunch.

***Prevents stigmatization:*** Supportive programs offer a way to participate that does not stigmatize students by their peers. For example, tutoring happens in the library, a very public location in the school. Students can ask questions as they pass through the library. Teachers can stop in between classes to refer students. As a matter of fact, “some students think it’s cool,” wanting to know how they can sign up for academic mentoring. According to one teacher, some students “feel funny” at first but “that goes away.” Another teacher cited the accessibility of the program, the ease of putting things in the tutor’s box, and walking through the library. The library is acceptable to a mixture of kids including athletes, musicians, and kids in trouble.

One teacher also commented on the advantages of young tutors, recently out of college, who dress like the high school students, watch the same movies, and share a common generational bond. They let the students know academics are important and give them strategies to find success academically. She also found a mix of male and female tutors important. She cited an example of a girl being impressed that “this cute guy thinks school is important. Guys think it is cool for girls to work hard and do good in school.” For some teachers who have tried multiple strategies that have not worked for a particular student, the mentoring program offers another place for this student to find a way to be successful. This teacher added, “It’s wonderful to see them when they feel better about who they are. They have already established strategies to get work done.”

*“Last year I didn’t care about school. I just wanted to leave.” --Academic Mentoring Student*

***Accommodates competing demands in students’ lives:*** Supportive programs allow students to keep up with their studies while attending to other problems in their lives. For example, one school teacher described three students who benefited from the Academic Mentoring Program. “All had different problems. If they get behind, it breaks their spirit. This program allows them to keep up speed, build confidence, prioritize and use their time effectively. It avoids the behavioral issues where they ‘tune you out.’ Students can keep sharp academically and are more effective in the classroom.” Referring to a couple of students who struggled despite having wonderful supportive educated parents, he added, “Sometimes learning from people other than their parents is helpful.” The Academic Mentoring Coordinator acknowledged that without appropriate intervention, a lot of bright students land in classes below their level because of challenges in their home lives.

One student explained that tutoring “helps me get work done at school so I can work after school to help pay bills. All my grades are in the 80’s instead of the 50’s.” He said he has not had grades like that since elementary school. What made the difference? “Knowing I had somebody to help me. I always felt embarrassed to ask teachers.” He also added, “I’m a hands-on learner.” This student had difficulties with reading and spent much time on it with his tutor. Discussing the ways he has changed since participating in Academic Mentoring, he said, “I actually enjoy being in school. I had a lot of absence last year. This year I haven’t except for one week when I was sick.” He also mentioned an improved attitude and maturity.

He gave a little history of his relationship with school. “Last year I didn’t care about school. I just wanted to leave.” He added, “I had no one to help me. I would get in trouble and leave. It was so much easier that way. Not really - then I would have to deal with the office calling my

parents.” This student indicated he is working hard this year to catch up. He uses tutoring every day. He mentioned that his “Dad thinks it’s helping out a lot.”

One student accessed tutoring services while recovering from a serious car accident and after she returned to school. She believes people in similar situations “should have the opportunity to catch up and get the help they need.” She also finds it easier to learn in a one to one setting than in the classroom. Referring to the academic mentoring program she said, “Here all my questions get answered” adding that “they took time to make sure I understood.” She compared her grades before her accident (C+/B level) to during the accident (D level) and now (B+/A).

**Flexibility:** Supportive Programs are flexible. A student commented on the “laid back” atmosphere in the QL Classroom – that it’s “not really strict.” According to one school teacher, “Quantum Leap affords a flexibility in rigid public schools. It allows for grey areas to exist where people really exist in. It gives people wiggle room.” She shared an example of a student who was not successful in her class for behavioral reasons. The 90 minute class period was too long for him. Arrangements were made so that the Quantum Leap Tutor would pick him up from class and complete the last 45 minutes of class with him individually. Over the course of the year, this student stayed in class longer. Always given the option to go to the library if the classroom felt uncomfortable, he needed it less and less. Eventually the Tutor only occasionally needed to ask the student “How did it go today?”

This school teacher also described other ways that Quantum Leap tutors filled in the gaps in “all those places where I don’t have time to do individual plans for each student.” In one case, the tutor discovered that a student had been misplaced into a lower level class due to a misdiagnosed learning disability. Now the student was finding success in an appropriate level class. The tutor also gave individual support to a student who had difficulty being in school due to an anxiety disorder. The teacher commended this kind of support: “there is a lot of emotional and mental flexibility in the people in this building.

For the Academic Mentoring Coordinator, flexibility might involve helping a student take a 30 hour tutorial in order to retake a final exam. For some students, whose parents cannot afford the costs of summer school, this opportunity helps them move forward with their academic goals. Flexibility also means working outside of the bounds of school time to reach those who have dropped out. One student, who was “kicked out of school” during the last semester of his Senior year, met with a mentor after school before working second shift at his job. He finished and graduated. Flexibility allows the academic mentors to handle core issues that get in the way of learning, such as food. The ability to get something to eat, take a walk, or modify an assignment can make all the difference in a young person’s ability to continue learning when life challenges become overwhelming. In addition, students have access to their mentors beyond school hours. In extenuating circumstances, they can call the mentor’s cell phone and arrange to meet when and where it is feasible to meet.

A school staff member described flexibility in the following way: “What I mean is...really doing an assessment and figuring out important communication with important adults in that kid’s life and with the kid. What will work here?” In one case, this meant allowing the student to take the final when the tutor administered it to another youth. The student passed with better grades than

expected. The staff member gave an example of another girl, whose experiences at home made school “priority number 27.” She left school to take care of other priorities at home. However, with her mentor’s support through the crisis, “she hung on by a thread.” Over the Summer, she “sorted things out” and is back in school with more support and stability. The mentor was able to clarify with the student’s teacher what was needed for the student to pass. The goal was to keep the youth “connected enough to pass class and move forward this year.” Tutoring is about “being adaptive, communication, and hanging in with the kid.”

***Communication and support between program and school staff:*** Another important component involves support between staff. According to a school staff member, the tutoring program works because it involves communication with the teachers. They “need to feel this is supporting kids in their classes.” One program leader considered working with the staff as the most vital piece, valuing the gradual process of developing common goals and direction. To facilitate building on this support throughout the wider school system, one school staff recommended a “kind of demonstration, communicating success and what’s happening in the program to teachers who may not be aware of it.”

***Connections with parents:*** Supportive Programs maintain viable connections with parents. The Project Leap staff emphasized an essential component to the program as “interfacing with parents in a way that is helpful.” The Principal of MAUHS places high value on teacher contact with parents to establish rapport. As a matter of fact, she monitors that teachers keep a phone log of their contact with parents outside of school. Maintaining contact is not always easy. In some cases, training on handling conflict is helpful. Sometimes it is difficult to reach parents, when students “don’t live with parents.”

Many parents appreciated the connection. One parent described Project Leap as “a good resource for me – listening and working with me – not against me or discouraging me.” A mother at first was against putting her daughter in a ‘special’ classroom. Her daughter told the program leader her mother’s feelings and the Quantum Leap teacher invited the mother to come in anytime to learn more about the program. This helped convince her, in addition to seeing her daughter’s study skills improve.

One parent wishes she had known about the QL Classroom earlier. She said it took several meetings before she learned about it. Her daughter’s mentor told her about Quantum Leap. She now sees her daughter as “a happier child.” She explained that her daughter “felt like she wanted to hurt herself because she couldn’t take the school,” and then referring to the QL Classroom, added, “I just love it here.” She also talked about the way “everyone gets along here. If people don’t like people here they would never show it. They don’t like that here.” Another mother spoke highly of the QL Classroom teacher, appreciating that she is “always in touch with me.”

***Thoughtful matching of students to programs:*** Several people we interviewed mentioned the importance of matching students to the appropriate program. A variety of offerings allows school staff to find one that matches their student’s needs, interests, and receptivity. The school’s principal is central in this matching process. The teachers respect her ability to figure out which students could benefit from each program.

Nevertheless, there are still some students who are not ready for the programs offered. The QL teacher explained, sadly, that some students have “so many personal issues” that “looking inside is a threat.” In her words, “this program isn’t for every student.” Some students drop out of Academic Mentoring before establishing a relationship, especially if they miss a significant amount (30 – 50 days) of school. According to a school staff person, the program is not designed for students who spend time running away, refusing to come to school, or are intoxicated everyday. For some students, school is not a priority because there is “too much other stuff.” The mentors acknowledged that students share responsibility for their own engagement in school. “They have to make the choice, too.” Some may be more receptive another time.

### ***Utilizing Experiential Learning***

Quantum Leap incorporates various experiential activities to engage students in learning. For example, in the Project Leap After School Program, students participate in activities and games that foster social interaction within the group, helping them develop trust and friendships. The activities also offer students opportunities to challenge themselves and develop self confidence and self esteem. All three programs offer a safe environment in which students can explore their interests and their thoughts about the future. Each program tailors curriculum around student interests and uses these interests as a doorway to learning about other disciplines and the larger world. Stakeholders described the process and outcomes of this approach.

Project Leap students engage in experiential activities such as rock climbing, kayaking, and visiting art museums in other locations. They spend time learning about each other through games designed to foster interaction. For example, one student recounted an activity sitting at a circular table, where each group member had a chance to write down questions and place them in a bag. The students then took turns reading and answering the questions as they passed the bag around the group. On another occasion, they celebrated a group member’s birthday with an “ice cream social.” Before finals, the group finds ways to make a game out of studying.

Project Leap’s design broadens student experience in a range of areas. According to one student, the program leader asks the students early on to identify places they would be interested in visiting, saying “you could learn more about something that interests you.” Outings sparked new interests and introduced students to other disciplines. Detailing the inspiration he gained from a museum trip, one student described “a lot of awesome stuff at the museum...a city made out of kitchenware.” He exclaimed, “it’s so cool...with lights on it.” Adding that he enjoyed pictures of sunrises and sunsets, this student said, “I didn’t know I’d have a good time there.” Parents commented that, “These programs keep kids interested....It shows them aspects a lot of these kids would not get a chance to do.”

Discussing how they benefit from their involvement in Project Leap, students mentioned that they make new friends, try new things, learn and have fun. For more than one student, rock climbing presented a challenge to try something in spite of fear. One participant said he ‘learned to have a good time’ and another learned to “not worry about people judging.” One youth commented on the opportunity to “meet people I wouldn’t normally talk to,” adding, “I’m shy.” Her peer who had been involved for several years, said “I learned a lot of stuff from a lot of different people and also became their friend. I’ve learned to realize other people’s

feelings....I've grown up, too." Another student commented, "You learn about different types of people. You realize all people are the same."

A graduate of Project Leap, who now attends college, reflected on her changes in the program. "I started out really rough my freshman year in high school. I was very stereotypical – constantly erasing people out of my life – isolated." As a participant in Project Leap, "I was able to have friendships, get over my fears and gain a lot of trust." It was the activities that kept her interested and helped her talk to people in the group and eventually to people outside of the group. She then led a similar program with junior high students. This experience "helped me see I wanted to teach and guide students through tough years."

The Project Leap graduate discussed the opportunities to not only try new things in the program, but also to bring new interests to the group. "If we had something we enjoyed, we could bring it to the group, help them learn it." She placed high value on "being introduced to very different things" since "high school is really tough to find something you enjoy." She found the close atmosphere of the group helpful. "Even though we're all different, we all clicked on different levels."

Discussing the best thing about Project Leap, one student mentioned "getting out there and interacting with lots of different people instead of sitting at home...It immerses you in lots of different things. This student felt like a "better person" as a result. Students bonded with their peers in the program. One said, "Just knowing you have friends that care about you in Project Leap. By the end of the year, you don't want to leave and say goodbye to your friends." One student appreciated "having somewhere to go a day each week and have fun." A peer added that Project Leap is "good to keep people off streets and in a controlled environment...keep away from trouble."

Discussing the impact of their Project Leap experience on their view of their futures, one student said that it "gives me ideas of things for me to do." After a field trip, this student identified, "I would like to go to a lot of other museums – look at art and other historical stuff." Students also cited the program. "The program itself shows you what's out there. I like that." A Project Leap activity included answering questions such as "what would you do for a career" or "would you go to college?" Another student discussed how Project Leap "helps me with what I want to do when I graduate high school.... It helps me think about what college I want to go to. Where we go, if something catches my attention, I write it down - make a list of occupations I might want to do." Sometimes a Project Leap outing involves tours of college campuses.

*My confidence changed a lot, my mind frame. Before, I had to try to fit in with everybody. Now I get to be myself.*

*--Project Leap Participant*

*It's the only place around that you can absolutely be yourself, be who you are....It makes you have something to look forward to.*

*--Project Leap Participant*

Several Project Leap participants commented on feeling accepted and part of a unique group. The students also discussed ways in which they had changed as a result of their participation in Project Leap. One youth explained, "My confidence changed a lot, my mind frame. Before, I had to try to fit in with everybody. Now I get to be myself. Before, I thought I couldn't do anything. I wouldn't try or do much of anything. Now I do anything." Social skills were often mentioned. "Last year, I was shy...I only said hi to people I knew. Once in Project Leap, I realized I could make friends a lot easier." Another student who described himself as a "loner" in his freshman year, said he has learned to open up more and finds it easier to be himself. "People will like me. If they don't, they probably won't be my friend anyways." He also gained confidence by "experiencing a lot of different things and being able to get through them all." Other students added that they had either developed an open mind, or they had matured, or become more flexible.

The parents of a Project Leap participant said it gives their daughter an opportunity "to be with other kids," which is lacking in their neighborhood. Before coming to the program, she had been primarily surrounded by adults and lost a younger sibling when she was very young. The program gives her a regular opportunity to socialize and form bonds with peers. The program "keeps her interested" and referring to the daughter's positive relationship with the program leader, "gives her someone to talk to." According to her parents, the experience has "brought her out of her shell" and "opened her up to talking." The parents say their daughter is interested in going to college and the program offers a vehicle for exploring that goal. They appreciated the program's emphasis on recognizing youth potential and were aware of the selection criteria. According to the parents, the staff "notice things...they get the right help for them...they know who to talk to because they work here at the school." For example, the Project Leap Coordinator arranged a tutor for the daughter and accommodations were made for their daughter to take morning classes for major subjects because her attention wanes in the afternoon. Tests are also scheduled at other times. Consequently, her grades have risen from 70's/80's to a 96.

The parents commented on the social skills their teen has gained through participation, saying she moved from being "shy" to being a "social butterfly." She has ventured forth into other school activities and one teacher commented on "how much more mature" the girl had become. Their daughter wants to attend Project Leap for all four years of high school. "We pick her up at 5 and see how excited she is - can't wait 'til next week." The "program has helped her maintain her interest in school." The parents observed that the Project Leap participants "like to be together - that's what draws a lot of them....I never saw a kid leave or say, I don't want to be here." Referring to their own daughter, they added, "She won't leave. She'd be heartbroken."

A parent of a former Project Leap and Academic Mentoring student who now attends a boarding school for students with learning disabilities described Project Leap as a "non-academic way for [her] son to be himself and to be in an environment where he felt safe and comfortable." Though he was truant, he always came to school on the days Project Leap met. It was something he "looked forward to" and where he "saw a future for himself." There were "older students he looked up to" and he "saw what he could accomplish." He "felt safe" and "made connections." These connections "translated to other parts of the day."

Although she said that her son had many allies at the school and that the “school developed a whole program for him,” it was not meeting her son’s needs. This parent feared that had her son stayed in a regular high school, his disabilities would have become more debilitating. “I was thinking if he stayed here he’s going to be on SSI – he became so disabled....It was a hard year in this setting with this amount of kids.” Outside testing showed a deterioration in his mental health status during that time. According to this parent, he is doing well at his new school and is seen as “a confident boy that fits in.”

*He would have quit without it. His anxiety is down. He has goals.*

*--Parent of Academic Mentoring Student*

Stakeholders acknowledged the experiential aspects of the Academic Mentoring Program. One teacher delineated a core component of Quantum Leap as tailoring the curriculum to the interest of the child. He saw the academic mentors as having the time to do this and as supporting him in doing it as well. Academic Mentoring students also gained exposure to potential new interests through their involvement. A teacher explained, “One girl was failing. She passed because she came here.” When asked what made the difference, this teacher said, “To me, it’s the communication back and forth” and the program provides a place where students can communicate about both academics and social/emotional issues.

Students in the Quantum Leap Classroom also commented on the experiential process of learning and its benefits. For example, students prepared exhibits and wrote to pen pals in other states. According to its coordinator, the QL Classroom’s end of semester exhibit is a “huge” effort that demands group participation and excellence. This is where the program is not just focused on the intra-personal, but also encourages the youth to work as a group, while simultaneously demanding a high level of quality in student work.

A graduate of the QL Classroom described herself as “more hands-on” and enjoyed the engaging nature of preparing exhibits. Her mother and grandmother said the business-related display she prepared for the exhibit motivated her. “She really worked on it,” researching the educational content and creating the visuals. She invited a company representative who came. On the evening of the exhibit, she was “so sociable, serving shrimp with caviar” to the people who attended. In addition, this student found meeting pen pals in Baltimore an “awesome” experience.

The graduate’s mother and grandmother described the atmosphere in the QL classroom that worked for her daughter. “I think they learn more with a smaller group than 20 kids in the classroom....That’s half the battle.” Further commenting on the program, they said, “It eliminates dropouts – the children are so involved in here and they learn to get along. We were watching some kids working on a project and they were working so well together. I can’t wait to see their next project....It keeps them off the street – there’s enough to keep them interested.” Both mother and grandmother did not like high school when they themselves attended. One said, “I wish I had this when I was in school.” Commenting on the daughter’s good outlook and self esteem, they added that she “even got on the Principle’s list for her marks.”

*It eliminates dropouts – the children are so involved in here and they learn to get along.*

*--Family of a Quantum Leap Classroom Student*

Another student enjoyed the exhibit and fewer students in a class, which allowed her to get the help she needed. As a result, she reports “better grades” and feeling “more confident in school.” The experience has helped her define a love of writing and she hopes to use this skill in her future. One of the assignments, a journal about an imaginary trip around the world, is among what she identified as “more stuff that’s fun to write about.” Her mother agrees. “I think [she] is doing so much better since she started here...In middle school I had a hard time to get her to school. This has been a blessing to her. She’s an honor student. It’s amazing.” Continuing to describe her daughter’s progress, this mother said, “she has learned how to follow through with tasks that before she was unable to. She would get very distracted and never finish, not even half way. She has learned to be consistent. She’s much happier. I am too.” It has been helpful for her daughter to receive praise for what she does well, encouragement to give more to a project, and to be held accountable for things she does not do well. For example, “If I’m late, please don’t just ignore it. Bring it to my attention and let me know I’ve done wrong.”

For this mother the best thing was her daughter “wanting to be here, to get things done, achieve her goals and be proud of them. I’m proud of her. The exhibits are wonderful.” This has been a significant outcome for a student who, in her mother’s words, “never wanted to be accountable for her actions” and was put in state custody “for being an unmanageable child.” She explained, “I didn’t want her to hurt. I didn’t hold her accountable.” She added that during the past few years, “We’ve all gone through hard times” and that it is “amazing she’s been able to stay functioning.” This mother had high praise for the QL Classroom program. “I’ve had a wonderful experience and if it wasn’t for this program for my daughter, she would never have made it. It was a fight to get her to school. It helped her develop a routine.”

*She got into this program and totally turned around. She looks forward to coming to school every day. No more counselors. Total different child.*

*--Parent of Quantum Leap Classroom Student*

*In the worst way I wanted to quit. I don’t even think about that anymore.*

*--Quantum Leap Classroom Student*

Another student described her experiences with the QL Classroom. “Before I started, I was never coming to school.” At the high school, she said, the “classes were big” and “I failed. Here the classes are smaller. I looked forward to coming to school every day. One on one and independent work is easiest for me.” Her mother agreed. “I think the program is wonderful.” She described her daughter formerly as a “very depressed child” with “low self esteem” who “had a rough life” and “attended counseling every day.” The daughter said her attitude changed “a lot.” She described her former routine. She would come home from school, not talk with anyone, and go straight to her bedroom to sleep. “In the worst way I wanted to quit. I don’t even think about that anymore.” Now she comes home “talking, telling how her day went.” Her mother said “even her doctor has seen a big change.” The daughter said, “Everyone has.” The mother continued, “She got into this program and totally turned around. She looks forward to coming to school every day. No more counselors. Total different child.”

The student added, “I love this program – I look forward to coming here every day.” She described how her QL teacher helped her connect her interests in makeup products to a class project on world traveling that she initially found boring. “We made it interesting. I had to go around to these countries and get beauty products and make them from scratch.” Another example was a cooking class. “It wasn’t just a cooking class – more a class about how to live without a man - independent living. We had to pretend we had an apartment, a job, a car, budget our month. Monday we went grocery shopping. Thursday and Friday we cooked lunch. I loved cooking.” Now she says, “I’m looking forward to going to college” and is looking into culinary schools. As a result, her mother says her grades have gone up, from C’s and D’s to an average of 81.

Another student’s grandmother also lauded the program as “one of the best” and “absolutely marvelous.” She believed the ‘hands-on’ aspect of these experiences kept her grandson interested. Describing her grandson, she said, “he was a mess” and is now “like a different kid, interested in school.” She added, “He got kicked out of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It’s a complete turnaround.” She attributes the difference to the size of the class, the involvement of the teacher, the general atmosphere of freedom and allowing students to learn in their own way. She does not think all youth can tolerate an all day structured classroom.

Her grandson appreciated the less structured and non-traditional setting, saying “I’ve learned a lot.” He has defined a career interest and wants to attend a specific college for it. He now combines a class in QL with other courses and off site programs where he is able to gain experience in his chosen interest. This student said he learned from being given “a lot of responsibility” and by “watching everyone” around him.” He said the QL classroom “helped me straighten out my life....I don’t want no dead end job. I don’t want to be...living on the street somewhere. I used to be into a lot of dumb stuff.” He also said, “I learned to control my temper a little more – not scream at teachers the way I used to.” Last year, he made honor roll. Three years ago, he was not sure he would make it through school.

*I know I am one of the biggest troubled children you’d ever see. Last year, I only came one time a week if lucky....I had so much going on at home, I couldn’t make myself go to school....Now, I don’t look at it as it’s a bad thing to come here....I’m doing stuff for my self when I come. I come everyday now.”*

*--Quantum Leap Classroom Student*

A couple of students made small steps forward, due to counteracting challenges in their lives. However, they were making progress. One student takes two blocks in the QL Classroom. At times she has found the lack of structure challenging. She “got behind last semester” and found it “overwhelming to catch up.” Her goals are to graduate from high school and “to keep my mind full of good thoughts of what I want to do with my life.” Art is her favorite subject this year and she is working on a project for the exhibit. She adds, “I know I am one of the biggest troubled children you’d ever see. Last year, I only came one time a week if lucky.” Now, she says, “I don’t look at it as it’s a bad thing to come here. I’m not gonna get bored. I’m doing stuff for my self when I come. I come everyday now.”

This student sees herself as 100% changed by her participation. She said, “I had so much going on at home, I couldn’t make myself go to school. Dropping in the main building wasn’t working for me.” When someone suggested Quantum Leap she was at first skeptical. She said she “instantly liked it” and felt “so accepted.” She added, “You don’t have to be perfect. They won’t look at you like you’ve done wrong.” However, she still was truant last year. Now, she says, “everyday my mind keeps getting more on my goals and what I want in life.”

Her mother thinks the QL classroom has boosted her daughter’s self esteem and improved her study skills. “One project she is doing now she talks a lot about, finds very interesting.” She likes the teamwork she sees encouraged in the QL Classroom, “knowing kids aren’t picking on each other....I don’t hear her say other students make rude comments. They work together as a team, not separate.” In addition, she values the hands-on approach and the fact that students can work at their own pace. “This is the only class I can honestly say she talks a lot about... especially the hands-on part where she can show what she’s learned.”

Another student enjoys the “hands-on” approach and says she doesn’t learn well with textbooks. She likes working on research papers independently and being able to get help from the QL teacher as she needs it. She finds another helpful aspect of the QL Classroom to be the small class size and the fact that “we all get along.” This student spoke highly of current and former experiential projects and exhibits, describing what she had learned. She believes her improved writing and research skills will be helpful with college. “I never used to write papers like I did last year. [My teacher] said a lot of papers I wrote last year were senior level.” This was a major turnaround for this student. “I always hated – never wrote – papers. I started writing and getting more into it – worked on it every day.” She explained that her teacher encouraged her to work on her paper some before working on the art project at break. The trick is to “do it on stuff I like to write about. However, she said some “stuff going on outside of school” has recently been causing her to fall behind.

This student’s mother said her daughter is having an excellent experience in the QL Classroom. When she was taking “normal classes, she didn’t want to come to school and was doing poorly.” Citing “issues at home that we’re straightening out,” this mother appreciated the one on one approach, the smaller class size, and the different structure to learning. She sees her daughter “feeling better about her self in general” and “wanting to stay in school instead of wanting to give up completely.” She was failing in her previous school before moving to the area. She believes her daughter responds well to working independently.

Another year long graduate of the QL Classroom now works full time. She “never had an easy time in high school” saying that as a kid, she was at her “wit’s end” and that “things frustrate you.” She got to the point where she decided she couldn’t be in high school anymore and did not have the help she needed, however, she did not want to drop out. She found Quantum Leap’s one on one approach helpful. “People here care and want to help you get through school. Everything was going to be okay and I would get the help I needed to graduate high school.” Describing the experiential component of the learning, she said the teacher “made their interests fit into class. She helped kids open up and share what they like to do....showed us there’s a bigger place like this – sushi – other cultures – there’s a bigger and better place. By going through school there’s a bigger world. By going through school you can see whatever you want.”

### ***Vital Connection with Bennington College and the Larger Community***

Many stakeholders saw the vital connection between Bennington College, the school, and the community as key to Quantum Leap's success with truancy and dropout prevention. For example, a few parents recommended that a key to replication is to have the college involved. They explained that this connects youth to peers who are slightly older and shows them "other possibilities." Kids say, "I want to be like that." One parent reflected that with a similar program, he might have gone to college. Teachers as well as community partners commented on the benefits of connecting college students with kids: "Having a relationship with Bennington College is a real plus. This is the biggest piece. It helps students realize there's more beyond Bennington."

***History of the collaboration that resulted in Quantum Leap:*** It may be useful at this point to give an overview of the history of Quantum Leap. The founders of the program, two professors at Bennington College, both specialize in the arts but expand the application of their fields to central issues in the community, such as truancy. The one professor saw her background in mediation as the underpinning of the program's success. In her view, creative problem solving emerges from an effective mediation process. This ideal applied not only to theatre and dance, but also to preventing students from dropping out of high school. The President of Bennington College encouraged the professor to start a program in mediation, based on the teacher practitioner model where you "teach what you do." The professor developed a course and created a mediation program.

In the meantime, the Judge at the local court was seen as a mediator. "We knew every time he would decide a case – it was like a mediation. There was fairness and justice. This judge had a handle on justice." The professor began bringing her classes into court and the judge helped teach. Students observed and co-mediated with the professor in small claims court, working on real cases. When the judge was appointed to a legislative committee in Montpelier looking to decriminalize the truancy law in the State, he approached the professor for ideas. With the high drop out rate in Bennington, the professor was asked to submit a proposal for a pilot program to prevent truancy and drop out. She invited a colleague to join her. The two professors reflected on the Dewey philosophy of Bennington College, "learn by doing," where students develop a four year plan with their teachers and advisors. There are no majors or requirements. "We knew it worked for students who got engaged in that." We also knew that "just mediation was not enough. A process like "Plan" might work." The professors offered to volunteer and try the pilot for two months to see if it could work.

They began with five youth, one in high school, two in middle school, and two in elementary school. Two of these youth had been out of school for more than a year. Guided by the mediation model, the professors decided to go to the families. They introduced themselves and the new Quantum Leap program, explained that they were there to understand why the youth were not in school, to see what they could do to make it better, and emphasized that they believe kids will do better and have more choices if they finish school. The first family they visited included a fourth grader who had not been in school for a year. The mother seemed unaware of him. He showed no affect. The professors asked the older brother if there was anything he thought would put a smile on his little brother's face. He said "Cheese." Cheese? They discovered that the youth was

interested in all kinds of cheese such as Roquefort and Blue Cheese. Suddenly he had a lot to say. They arranged to take him on a tour of the Grafton Cheese Factory. He had rarely been out of his trailer park before. Describing the experience as transformative, the professors emphasized “the model: to find the interest, the strength, and connect it with something out in the real world.” Within three months all of the identified youth were back in school.

Every case was different. “Mediation helped us deal with families and kids in a process where everyone felt empowered. Everyone had a place at the table.” Citing that connection to an adult is key, the professors commented on how the Plan Process worked with all ages. The fourth grader wanted to own a cheese factory. He was willing to take the challenge and frustration of going back to school if he could see a future. In the words of the professor, “If there is a future, then people can think about how to get there.”

In another case involving middle school age, a washer and dryer was needed. “We just did it. We had the money and the flexibility.” The Assistant Superintendent took notice and offered to secure funds to support the development of the Quantum Leap program. The original program focused on after school mentoring and those who staffed the program received mediation training. With the assistance of a three-year drop out prevention grant from the Agency of Human Services, they were able to continue the development.

The Quantum Leap Classroom grew out of the need for a transitional space, for those students “who were somehow traumatized, fragile, and in need of skills.” The Classroom began with two Bennington College graduates and multiple part time staff. When the current QL Classroom Teacher came along, the program took the shape it is in now. The Academic Mentoring Program started within the past two years to create a way for youth to connect with an adult during school, a way to “catch kids before they drop out.” The program has blossomed from a part time staff member to four full time salaried professionals with benefits. Project Leap, the after school program, added an option for kids requiring some preventive options, but not at crisis level.

Several teachers mentioned the philosophy of the program’s founding professors in their interviews. One school teacher’s connection with Quantum Leap pre-dated her working at MAUHS. As a student at Bennington College, she remembers the founder of Quantum Leap going door to door asking families why kids were not coming to school, finding reasons such as “no clothes” and “no washing machine.” This teacher was intrigued by the “self-organizing” structure of the program, a term she equates with the professor. This non-hierarchical structure allows students to “find a person to connect with” and “facilitates the forming of ‘high quality’ relationships that gear students toward learning.” According to this teacher, the result is enhanced self esteem. The students feel “I have value. I matter.”

***Applying Bennington College pedagogy:*** The President of Bennington College shared the symbolism behind the name, Quantum Leap. Rather than incremental steps, “you move from being out of play into the thick of it.” That’s the “quantum leap.” The President reflected on the elements of Quantum Leap’s success as a collaboration between the college, the high school, and the broader community. She cited “the genius of Bennington pedagogy,” defining it as “the act of a student taking charge of education” within a “framework of support.” She discussed two ways in which people make sense out of things, one being an external template with an imposed

order, and the other being an internal connection made between life experiences, which she finds infinitely more powerful. She added that the “power of the curriculum is the extent to which it allows you to make internal connections.” The “Plan Process” is the framework for making sense of experience. It develops the idea of working with the student by responding to need rather than external criteria. This allows you to work from where the person is. A core element is the respect with which the person is treated. They are treated as “capable” and as having the power to move themselves to where they want to be.”

The President spoke highly of the professors and their willingness to defy usual ideas. “It takes huge energy to fight the system.” She spoke admiringly, “Artists have daring and courage.” The lead professor is a former Bennington College student. The President expressed her profound “confidence in this most remarkable person to extend her imagination into the world. She is an artist, a choreographer. She has never separated out her work as a dancer from her work in the world. Then she became a mediator. She just did it. There is a richness...a performing artist – what that makes her able to do.” The President acknowledged the challenge of what QL will be without its founding professors. She has been “stunned by how well it’s been turned over” through systems change. She sees that the high school has become co-owners of the program. The professors’ roles are diminishing, though she does not foresee them ever abandoning the program.

The President described the core components of the curriculum. “On the one hand, mediation gives it discipline and shape” and the “Plan Process is very calibrated.” However, she said the methodology never becomes bureaucratic and the imagination and passion remain central. Always, the question remains, “what’s the best thing to do to get at this issue?” Sometimes this involves helping a student take a cab to school instead of a bus or “Bennington students going into homes to do two days of laundry.” She adds, “Where does that fit into the curriculum?” In addition to the imagination and passion of the professor, the President attributes the success of Quantum Leap to Bennington College’s approach: “to always try to be able to respond to a good idea – to never have a culture or structure that makes that impossible.” She added that this “can be dangerous and irresponsible so you have to be very careful.”

The President cited Bennington as one of the poorest communities in the state, with a divided demography including a professional class and lower middle class. Discussing institutional collaboration, she believes Quantum Leap has played a role in the College becoming “one of the leading ‘higher ed’ institutions in the life of this community.” She emphasized, “For us to be major players in the community - the community notices what we’re doing.” She added, “I think this program should be a high profile national model.” However, she points out that while the College’s small size allows it to be a laboratory for ideas, it also limits grant funding.

***Recent developments:*** A more recent outgrowth of Quantum Leap is “Projects,” such as gardening, quilting, or cooking, initiated by a mentor who organizes mentor relationships between community members and youth. For example, one project involves a restaurant chef who works with youth in foster care, teaching them how to cook. As a culmination of the project, the youth prepare and serve a meal for their family and other guests. This program is not part of this evaluation, but worth mention as another component of Quantum Leap’s offerings to

connect youth with caring adults around common interests. One youth involved in this project has gone on to get his GED and attend Culinary School.

The Coordinator of the Project Leap After School Program unofficially serves as a liaison between the school and the QL program. In this capacity, she has been facilitating “systems change” and helping people within the school and the program feel involved and understand each other as they transition to school “ownership” of the program. She helps QL staff find ways to approach the school, sometimes acting as an intermediary between a program staff member and a school teacher, for instance, acknowledging that “teachers have a long list of things to deal with.” Due to her own connections, the PL Coordinator has been developing a dual enrollment program through a 21<sup>st</sup> century grant where students can receive vouchers to take courses at the local extension of Community College of Vermont.

Another opportunity that the collaboration with Bennington College makes possible is Quantum Leap assistantships through the College’s Master in Teaching Program. Project Leap usually acquires one assistant each year which they do not have to pay for. This keeps costs down and enhances sustainability of the program for the school. The student assistants receive half of their tuition free in return for working in the program. The program has a reciprocal positive impact on Bennington College students who get involved in Quantum Leap. Quantum Leap staff also receive training through the College. For example, the Academic Mentoring Coordinator took a course from the founders of the Quantum Leap programs.

***Community outreach:*** The Director of the Regional Community Partnership in Bennington County reflected on study groups that involved one of the Bennington College faculty as well as all the youth in Bennington. Adults and youth facilitated, including youth from Quantum Leap who were struggling to be in school themselves. “These kids are still connected, even if not successful in completing school in a normal manner.” Some have continued with adult education and another manages a local store. A juvenile caseworker mentioned that “various Quantum Leap folks” collaborated in the county Catamount Partnership’s youth summit, held recently. The summit identified areas of need for youth in Bennington. He added that one of the professors from Bennington College is active in these meetings. The two professors were also part of a district-wide training on poverty, which was open to the community. The caseworker said, “The fact [the professors] are so visible in the community helps to legitimize Quantum Leap as a program.” He also appreciated Quantum Leap’s collaboration with juvenile justice.

According to the juvenile caseworker, “Quantum Leap mentors play a huge role in the lives of our kids. Too often kids in foster care get stuck in systematic ruts. We click into our roles with pat answers for certain problems. I appreciate Quantum Leap because they can offer fresh perspectives around enrichment activities that we’re not budgeted or staffed for. They are not entrenched in the system.” For example, “they were able to take a youth who was interested in drama to New York City to meet working actors. He had never left Bennington before. They have also taken kids to Guatemala... building schools....you can’t duplicate an experience like that.” He added, “Quantum Leap can also offer exposure to arts, cultures, subgroups – even within our own town that DCF folks might not have access to.”

*I've never seen kids respond this way....I've seen kids who really struggle in school excel in Quantum Leap.*

*--Community Juvenile Caseworker*

### ***Inspired and Collaborative Leadership Focused on Individual Relationships to Enhance Learning***

The leadership observed at Mount Anthony Union High School was exemplary, creative and centered on individual needs and goals of students, including those students who are in need of individual support to remain and thrive in school. The principal described her role related to students, especially those who struggled as a result of poverty, family issues, and low self-esteem as “doing whatever it takes to keep students in school where we can help them succeed.” When visiting the school, there was a stream of students and teachers seeking advice from the principal who respectfully and creatively attempted to respond to the needs of the staff and students.

At Mount Anthony, their philosophy is characterized by a caring environment where administrators and Quantum Leap teachers, tutors, coordinators and volunteers collaborate to develop relationships and programs to assist students in acquiring needed skills in general education classrooms, the Academic Mentoring Program, and the Quantum Leap classroom. In addition, the Project Leap After School Program provides various activities in the community where students build relationships with other students. The administrative leadership strongly supports the varied ways in which students can learn through creative projects that provide rich opportunities in the community as well as in the school environment.

When talking with the students who participated in Academic Mentoring all of the students were enthusiastic about what they had learned, the caring attitudes of all of the tutors, and the knowledge that if they needed support it was always available. One student reported that because of the tutoring “I’ve changed my attitude, enjoy being in school, and don’t stay at home anymore.” Another student said “I can go to any of the tutors for help with school work and also with my problems.” Finally, another student reported that his tutor sometimes gave him advice, but he didn’t necessarily take it and the tutor still respected his choices. Many of the students we talked with suggested that the tutoring program needed to be expanded to support even more students.

The Academic Mentoring Coordinator clearly understands the needs, fears and aspirations of the students and is available to the tutors to help develop alternative teaching strategies, talk through personal challenges and collaborate with the general education teachers to develop adaptations that help students learn more effectively. She frequently stays after school to talk with students, especially when they are experiencing difficulties both academic and personal. She also makes herself available in the evening to talk with students about their assignments and personal challenges.

Students who participated in Academic Mentoring said they discovered learning needs they had, such as reading out loud, and one on one tutoring. One student, who described her grades as “so better” attributes it to the one on one attention. Another academic mentoring student with learning challenges was close to failing when he asked if he could be tutored for part of class.

The result was passing with a high grade (95-100). His academic mentor said although he is not required to be in school for fourth quarter, he stays to read. This is a significant development since when the mentor first met him, he did not read and had been expelled from school.

One student utilized mentoring for one block a day to earn an English credit in order to re-enter high school. The next semester she re-entered all her high school classes and used one block for mentoring in social studies. The following semester this same student participated in all regular classes. According to the Coordinator, what made the difference for this student was “knowing that somebody cares and listens, and the academic help. She would tell you she has one person she’s connected to.”

All of the Project Leap participants we talked with were enthusiastic about their involvement in the program. The PL Coordinator’s commitment to the program and the students was ever present and she found creative ways to engage every student, help them build friendships and contribute to the community. One of the students reported that she had “found new skills” and “grown more mature.” Another student said that he felt “more grown up and had made more friends.” Another student said that he had learned that “not everything needs to be done exactly the way you planned and sometimes you learn from that.” Further, another student reported that being with other students that he had not known gave him an opportunity to make new friends and participate in “activities he would never have known about before.” Several PL participants mentioned the program leader as important to their process of thinking about the future as well as other issues. One student described her as “really open-eared, she’ll listen to anybody about anything, she always wants to help.”

A community juvenile caseworker commented on the power of individual relationships in the lives of these youth: “Being in the foster care system is disempowering...multiple parties setting new guidelines leave kids feeling they have no say. With the Quantum Leap mentor, they do feel empowered. They are given choices, opportunities.” They end up “feeling valued.” He added, “That they’re able to develop a trusting relationship with an adult is impressive itself.” This thought was echoed by a student who, referring to the PL Coordinator, appreciated “knowing you can trust someone....She’s always looking out for us.”

The Quantum Leap Classroom was designed for students who were not successful in a typical classroom and needed to find an alternative way to obtain their education and become independent and responsible for their own lives. The Quantum Leap teacher helps students to find their interests and develop creative and multiple paths for learning. She is an inspired teacher and knows how to interact with all of her students in ways that allow them to become engaged and motivated. Her leadership is based on the belief that all students can succeed and discover their talents and skills through a caring and relational environment where the students define their interests and goals. Her goal for every student is to help them define their interests, and to build the skills and knowledge required to help them become independent and competent once they complete the program. She achieves this through developing trusting relationships with her students who value her for her caring and creative approach to teaching and learning, and her commitment to every student as though they were her own child.

Families also commented on the importance of individual attention from program leaders. One parent attributes her daughter's interest in school to the Quantum Leap Classroom teacher's one to one work with all the students. "She holds them accountable for everything they do, whether positive or negative. She helps them through their difficulties." Another student said, "I've learned that you don't have to have a wall." For her the wall was related to abuse problems. Her mother said "She was a toughy....a fighter" adding that this program "taught her how to talk it out....She interacts now."

Critical to the overall success of the programs was the involvement of community partners from Bennington College, the Catamount Regional Partnership, the local Department of Children and Families, the School Board and the High School. The support, insights and collaborative leadership both within the school and the community have sustained the programs for students who otherwise might not have succeeded. The combined knowledge, commitment and leadership demonstrated from varied stakeholders in the community encouraged the expansion of more creative and productive learning opportunities. The Bennington community has demonstrated their ability to work together to improve the outcomes for students who struggle in school. The creative projects, caring skills, and willingness to cross professional borders has led to positive outcomes for students and families and will hopefully continue and expand the projects made possible through inspired and joint leadership.

### **Stakeholders' Additional Advice for Replication by Other Communities, Thoughts About Sustainability, and Recommendations for Program Improvements**

*Additional advice from stakeholders for program replication by other communities:* Comments directly about replication included and expanded on the themes already discussed. "People" were most often mentioned. This included enough people, flexible people, the right people, and the benefits to keep them. Stakeholders recommended finding people with commitment to young people and a philosophy of "whatever's gonna work for the kid," along with the skills to make this a reality, such as mentoring and mediation. They described people who could listen, respect others, truly value kids, and be willing to stand alone with unpopular views when a child's best interest was at stake. These people had community ties and a vision for their school and community. For example, the Bennington College professors had a vision for a town of mentors, including a community consortium for mentoring. At the same time, one stakeholder acknowledged that the program was interested in being "replicable" and "not so person reliant." She added, "Certainly others can hold that vision in their own area or school." Those who are interested could receive training in the skills needed. Some quotes emphasize these points:

- *You have to get the right people – can't advertise for a job. The human element is so important, caring, interest in a student's success, interest in making the student's life better, some value in education....It's 24/7.*
- *The people. If it weren't for the particular approach, consistent among QL folks: willingness to listen, respect, truly valuing kids, flexibility to devote the amount of time, willingness to step forward and take an unpopular view...flexibility and opportunity to construct those community ties.*

- *Have young tutors. Involve teachers who want the program and will promote it and help with the transition. You will need people who are willing to do it - it takes more work. It takes time to talk with the tutors, for instance. Start with a small group willing to do that.*
- *Mediation skills allow you to understand how to talk to people, to put your own values aside and figure out how to pull student and family back into school.*

Stakeholders also considered program structure important, namely a flexible and seamless one in an accessible location. The truancy and dropout prevention programs should be woven into the school program and be flexible enough to meet students' needs without getting stymied by policies and procedures that block students from getting help. One parent of a former Project Leap student encouraged replication by other districts. "The more it can happen, the better. It would be wonderful if it could happen for more kids." Her advice included keeping group size small and manageable, and incorporating experiences and activities away from school so that youth gain familiarity with the community. She recommended a program philosophy of "do what needs to be done." For example, finding a way to get needed resources for students with special needs, such as a handheld recorder for notetaking. Quality was emphasized over quantity whenever considering expansion. Stakeholders felt it was important to gradually build connections and rapport through one on one and small group structures so that the reputation would build from within. The following quotes highlight these thoughts:

- *Start gradually. Build a rapport within the program. Get a few kids connected....Build a reputation among students and among faculty.*
- *Keep in a place with easy access like the library. The program should weave into the overall school program.*
- *There needs to be enough people, not just one tutor and one classroom. That's okay for five kids. A tipping point here is there were enough people involved in a structure flexible enough to have something grow from it.*

Others advised custom-building the program to fit the needs and resources of a new school or community. Several interviewees invited other schools and communities to visit and talk with them for advice on replication. One interviewee recommended interviewing the founders of the program and using them as a role model for a new program. This person saw the connection to the college or to a technical center as important so that students can "see aspiration." In addition, mentors from all walks of life, proper funding, and 'word of mouth' were seen as important to successful replication. A couple of comments are quoted below.

- *Don't cut and paste. Find people who are flexible emotionally and intellectually. Make a list of what you need and what you have, and then start. It's a mistake to say this structure that worked at MAUHS will work at Brattleboro. It came of this. It makes sense for us.*
- *Ask them what they want to accomplish? What is it you're trying to do? Find the right person to start a mentoring program – interest-based mentoring. The mentor tries to make a connection based on student's interest....The goal is to connect them back to the world that they're in."*

**Stakeholders' thoughts about program sustainability:** Everyone interviewed expressed enthusiasm for continuing the programs, often suggesting expansion. For example, when asked if

they thought Project Leap should continue, each student said, “Definitely!” Several lauded the continued process of “systems change,” in which the high school has taken over more of the funding and management of the programs. Stakeholders discussed funding as the most important aspect of program sustainability. They saw community advocacy as important to convincing potential funders. This could be a barrier in a community with a lot of poverty and substance abuse, where education is not valued. According to one interviewee, a parent was upset that the school counselor was suggesting college to his daughter. The community bears a history of generational poverty with parents who have had negative school experiences themselves. In this environment, Quantum Leap fills a need. It connects them with caring educators and gives them ways to get involved.

A parent of a QL Classroom student thinks the program should be state funded so that the needed resources are available. A school staff person believes “the school gets a lot for their investment in the QL programs. They touch a lot of kids.” Several stakeholders talked about the importance of paying QL staff adequately for their work. A school teacher would like to see QL be part of the line budget rather than grants. She thinks it is important to “get the school board to realize this is so important to the kids” She quoted a youth who said, “It would be hard for me to be here without Quantum Leap.”

***Stakeholders’ recommendations for program improvements:*** Most suggestions for improvements focused on careful expansion while preserving quality. Often, additional resources were recommended. Some stakeholders suggested location changes and a few parents wanted improved outreach so that other parents would be aware of QL programs.

Several students and parents would like to see Project Leap extended to two days per week, accommodating more youth, but without losing the personal connections that come with the small group. A peer indicated that although he wanted the program to be bigger so it could include more people, he thought it might not work if it became “like a classroom.” Another participant preferred to keep the small size so the individual attention would not be compromised.

The Project Leap Coordinator suggested a summer residential component, combining on-campus and community service. She also suggested better financial access to tutoring and needed equipment. A few students suggested a different meeting location, with one student identifying problems with the room in which Project Leap meets. They often find the attached kitchen full of dirty dishes and counters left by other groups. One youth suggested field trips to farther destinations that might involve flying somewhere.

Stakeholders in the Academic Mentoring Program discussed the need for expanding the mentoring opportunities for students, by not only adding more tutors, but also implementing in-class tutors, before school mentoring, and outreach mentoring for kids that need to engage in the community. One school staff member spoke about some kids who are not in school and instead need to develop a life plan or connect with a tutoring center outside of school. The discussion of expansion also included a new and larger location, and more funding to make these possible. A few parents wanted information on the program more readily available to parents.

The emphasis on program expansion seems to be growing out of a felt need by both students and mentoring staff. For example, one student said his mentor “will see me and another person at the same time. I don’t get the full 45 minutes.” Some would like to see more tutors added to the program “so students get the help they need.” One youth commented that there were too many demands on his tutor. This student would like to see “less kids per tutor.”

One student found it challenging to avoid missing in-class work while still getting the tutoring help she needs. She suggested a tutor in class as well as out of class: “Probably somebody in the class and out of class too, not in front of friends” or if somehow the tutor was “more together with the class you’re getting help with.”

Some students suggested moving academic mentoring out of the library and into its own classroom. Problems with the library include difficulty concentrating as classes come in to use the library or as “people come up and talk to you.” Other issues were restrictions on food. “Students want to work during lunch and can’t bring lunch with them.” Right after lunch, the tutors are busy and it may be hard to get help. Another student mentioned that food helps him focus. Since it is not allowed in the library, he has less working time because he has to go elsewhere to eat. Some students felt that a different location would give tutors more control over the space. The younger mentors also felt that the QL mentoring program needed to move into a separate space than the library. Although the library was accessible to teachers passing through, it had limitations such as no eating, no listening to music, and rules about attire, such as not wearing hats. They think the youth will “feel more together in a separate space.”

The Academic Mentoring Coordinator identified the need for an after school connection for some students, a bridge between school and outside-of-school time. Some kids need both but this taxes the staff (“how to do both and not go insane”). Block scheduling requires taking students from class during first and fourth periods, which has some drawbacks. The mentoring staff would also like to see mentoring expanded to outside of school, including vacations, school breaks, and when youth leave school. One school teacher would like to see tutoring before school, from 7:15-7:45, explaining that some youth cannot stay after school because of the bus schedule. However the program needs more resources to make these improvements happen. Although the Academic Mentoring Program has expanded to four full time staff, further expansion is necessary and will require resources. They need more than four mentors. The library space, which is beneficial due to its open access, also precludes many more staff.

Two parents of Academic Mentoring students would like to see more funding so the program can grow and would also like improved outreach to parents. “I think parents should be informed about the tutoring program, what it is and how it helps.” The other parent said she found out about it because she worked at the middle school: “He would have ended up on the back burner if I hadn’t asked for help. There are a lot of parents... [of students] in the special ed program that can’t read or write - So how do they get help?”

Most of the youth and their parents in the Quantum Leap Classroom had no changes to suggest. A couple of youth in the QL Classroom suggested “more field trips if anything” and one student and her parent would like the program to include more people. The QL Classroom teacher

identified needed improvements including a teacher's aide, a secretary, more computers, and improved compensation.

## QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

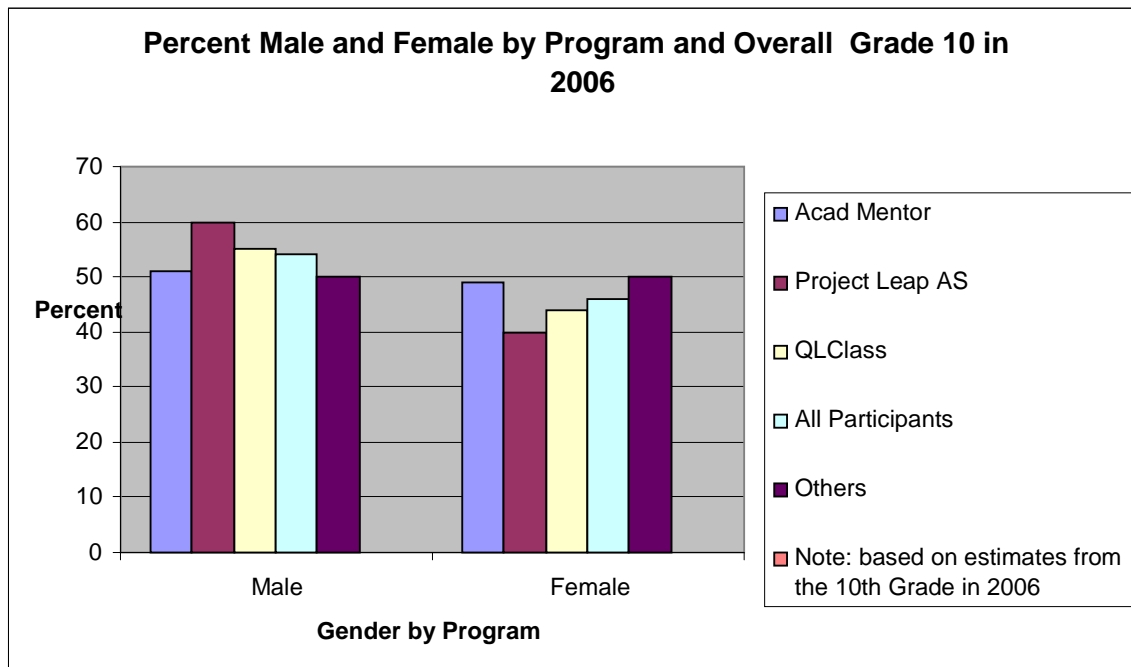
The quantitative findings are also divided into two sections. The first section presents data of a descriptive nature concerning the first set of evaluation questions. These analyses answer the questions concerning who the students were and how they compared with the general student population. The second section focuses on the outcomes students experienced during the period from the fall of 2004 through the fall of 2006. Comparisons were made with the general student population in order to estimate program effects.

**Question 1:** How did the selected students (participants) compare with other students with respect to:

- Gender
- Free or Reduced Priced Lunch Eligibility
- Enrollment over time

**Enrollment:** As Chart 2 indicates, the proportions of males to females varied somewhat by program. Project Leap, enrolled more males than females by a wider margin than other programs. In general, there were more male than female participants, while the gender distribution is 50:50 males to females, in the general population.

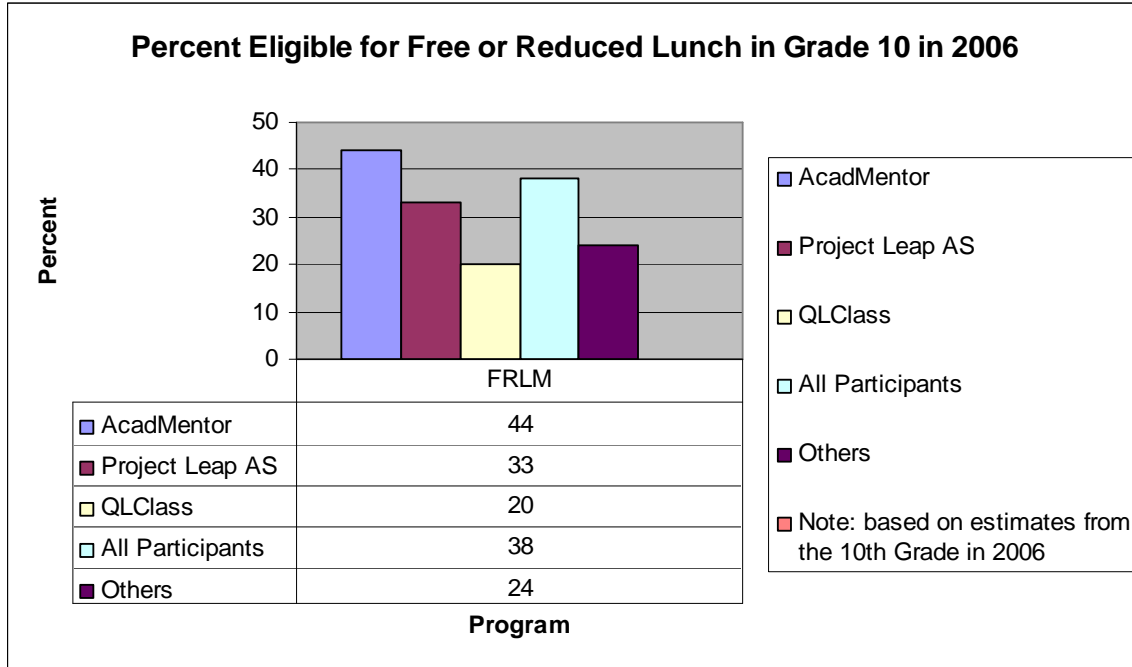
Chart 2



With respect to Free or Reduced Priced Lunch Eligibility, the Academic Mentor Program typically enrolled the larger proportion of eligible students than did other programs. The Quantum Leap Classroom enrolled a proportion which more closely matched the general

population. These distribution may be important for further interpretation since it is generally the case that students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch are generally more likely to have poorer academic outcomes, including dropping out of school. The range between the Academic Mentor program and the general population (Others) is important to the discussion which follows. See Chart 3 below

**Chart 3**



Enrollment over time by programs is indicated in Chart 1, above. Enrollment percentages are fairly stable over time despite the fact that students enter and leave programs. This results in some apparent discrepancies in the numbers reported as enrolled at any given time and the numbers that were enrolled at any given quarter. The numbers of students who withdrew from programs and school are considered below, as part of the findings concerning outcomes.

**Question 2:** How did participants in groups formed by programs and the general population of students compare with respect to:

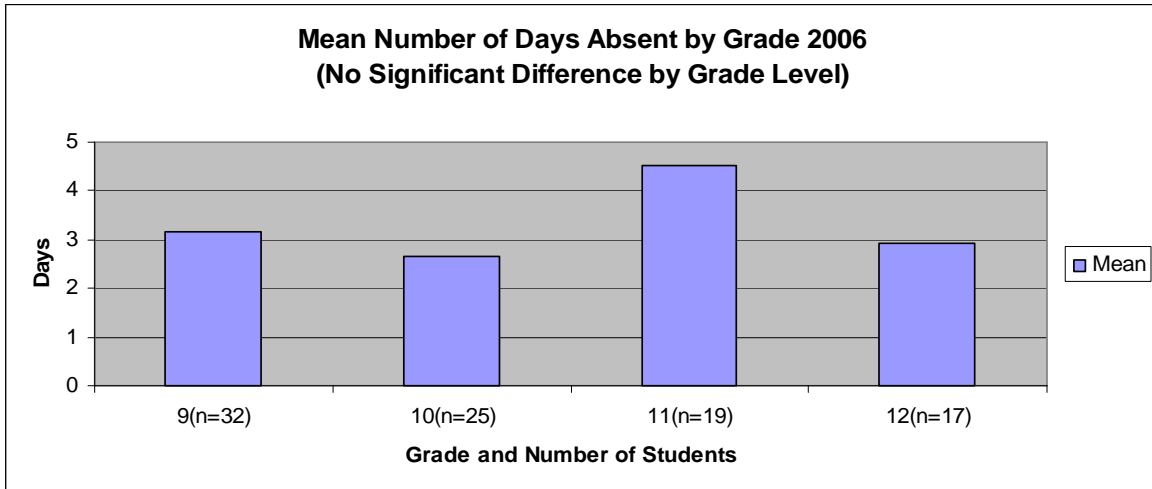
- Mean number of days absent by grade in 2006
- Mean number of days absent by grade between 2004 and 2006 by quarter
- Mean number of days absent by program
- Rate of withdrawal from school
- Performance on standardized tests
- Growth on academic measures of performance

**Absences:** Absences are a key indicator of progress since previous research indicates that as absence increases the likelihood of dropping out increases as well (Lamdin, 1996). Researchers differ on the projection of thresholds that signal a high probability for dropping out, but generally cite 30 or more days of absenteeism as highly predictive of a range of poor school outcomes

including dropping out, delinquency, and poor academic performance. (Dynarski and Gleason, 1998).

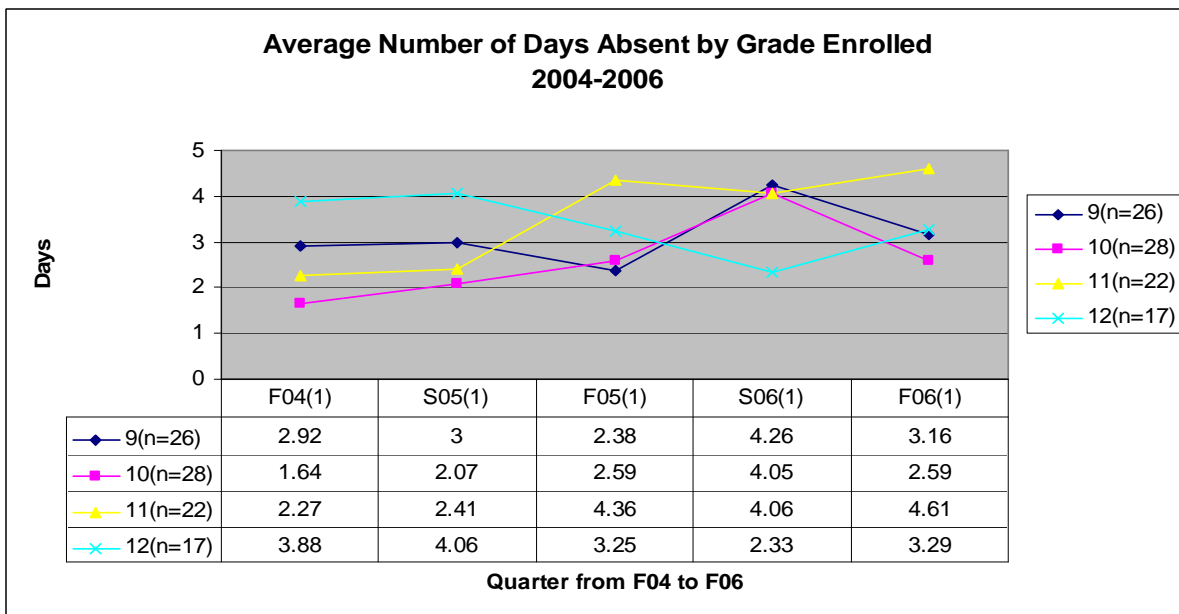
The first measure of student performance is the snapshot average number of student absences by grade in 2006.

**Chart 4**



One observation about the chart is that 11<sup>th</sup> graders seem most at risk for higher absentee rates (although the difference is not statistically significant.) Grade 11 seems to be the prime grade for dropping out and probably accounts for the drop in absentee rate in grade 12.

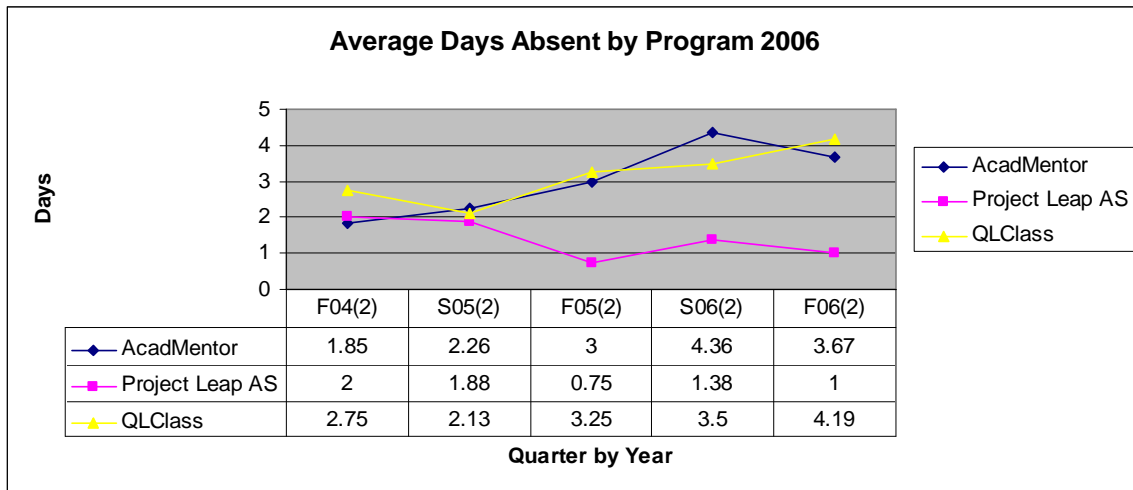
**Chart 5**



As Chart 5 indicates, the average number of absences by grade varies from a low of 1.64 days for the 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the Fall of 2004 to a high of 4.61 days for 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the fall of 2006.

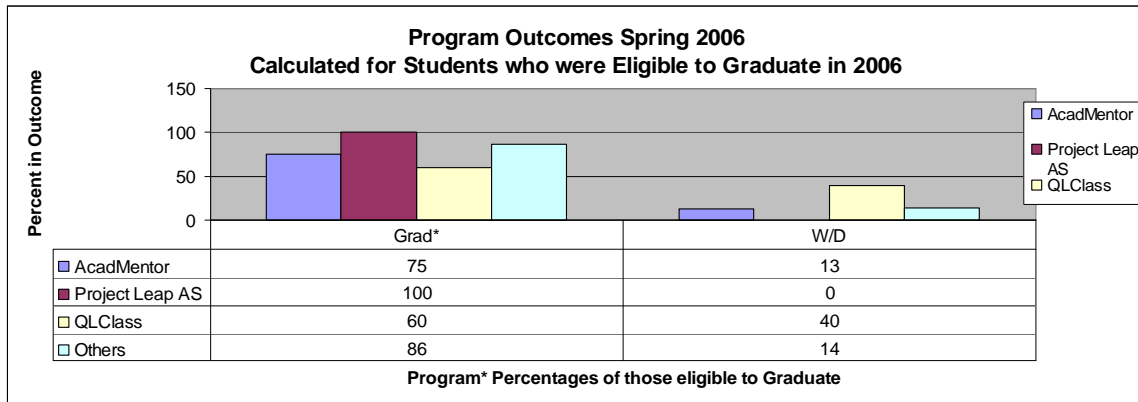
These averages are consistent with an overall attendance rate of about 94% reported by the school for yearly averages from 2002 through 2006. The range of these absences however, is great within the program sub-populations, from 0 through 46 days. Program absence rates also varied across time. Project Leap After School demonstrated the lowest absentee rates across time, while the Academic Mentor Program and Quantum Leap program had a similar profile at around 3.75 average days absent. See Chart 6, below:

**Chart 6**



The rate of withdrawal from school is perhaps the most important of all the outcome measures as it signals the end of students' academic programs. While the cell sizes within programs indicated in Chart 7 below, was minimal for Project Leap After School Program, for example, the high rate of graduation (100%), both students who were eligible to graduate, did graduate. Perhaps more important from a program design point of view, the Academic Mentor program appears to look more like the general population with respect to its outcomes (but recall that 44% of this program is FRLM eligible.) The Quantum Leap Classroom, however, may be a better indicator of what provides the most challenge to students and teachers. That is, the fact that the Mentor program yields a graduation rate only slightly different from the general population is important when considering that all students in all three programs are at risk of dropping out. The fact that any of these students persist, even at a rate less than the general population is important to the students who maintain their enrollment. It is also important to note that the overall dropout rate for the school increased by 1% in 2006, but the cohort dropout rate decreased by 9% between 2004 and 2005.

**Chart 7**



Performance on standardized tests is a measure that is not well designed to measure the effects of alternative programs that often focus student attention on attendance and student learning that emphasizes projects that involve participation in community activities. Nevertheless, the tests are measures that tend to be correlated with post school success and readiness to proceed to the next level of education. Here again, cell sizes of students enrolled in programs and within grades tend to be small, but probably large enough to examine trends.

Chart 8 shows the relative performance of the cohorts across time on the subscales of the NSRE. Differences between participants and non-participants are significant in every instance. There are at least two observations that may be of interest to program designers. First, the differences between the groups are expected by the relative difference in opportunities to learn experienced by both participants in the truancy program and others. That is to say, differences in academic performance by groups who have historically not participated in say mathematics or reading or writing programs to the same extent as other groups are both predictable and cumulative. Many programs that are designed as alternative to the school program that has failed these students (or that the students have failed) do not contain the same rigorous content in mathematics or writing as experienced by college bound students.

Expectations for student achievement published by the truancy prevention programs in the Mt. Anthony website seem to indicate a higher level of performance in academics than might be otherwise expected. However, the detail that lies behind the expectations for each enrolled participant was not examined. In any case, Vermont now is changing its assessment to the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) and the common expectation of grade level expectations would now need to be re-examined by the program for future program design.

**Chart 8**

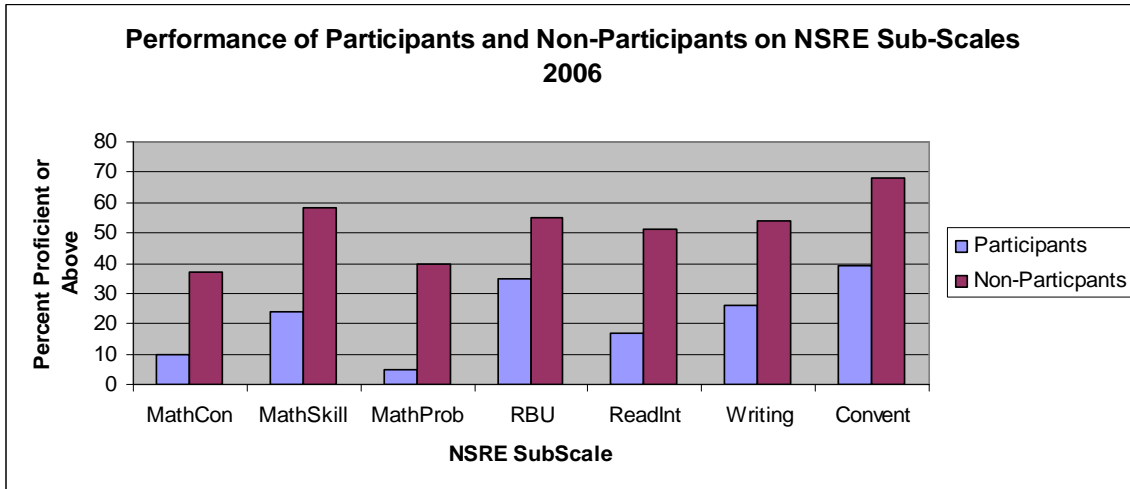
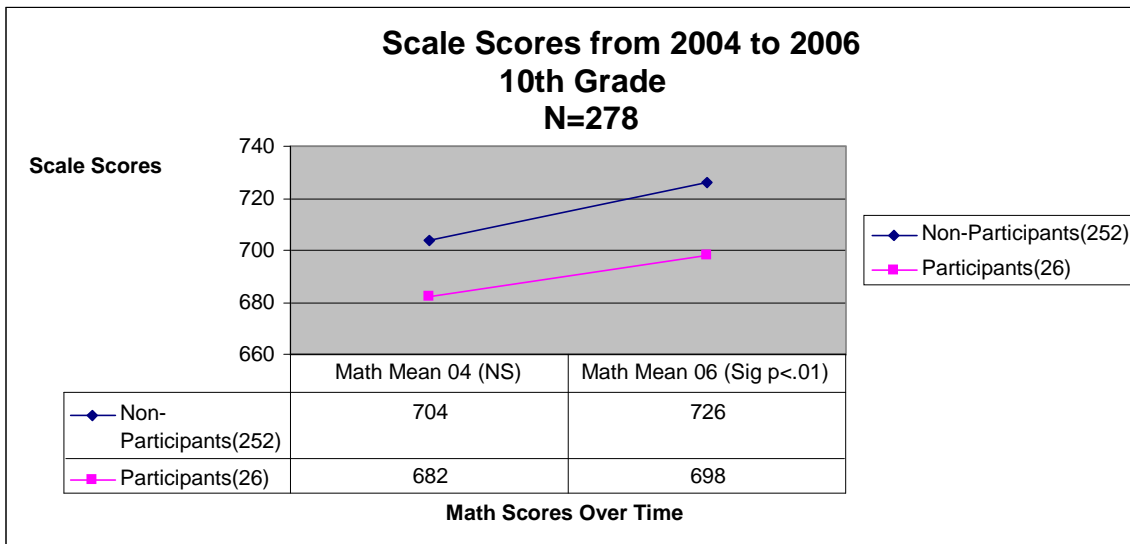


Chart 9 indicates student performance on the New Standards Reference Examination between the years of 2004 and 2006. The chart represents a cohort of students who were enrolled in all three truancy prevention programs in 2006 who took the NSRE tests in 2004 as eighth graders and again as 10<sup>th</sup> graders in 2006 and compared with the remaining cohort of 10<sup>th</sup> graders. What is interesting about this chart is that the cohort of participants has the same upward slope of gain in the scale scores as the general population. An expected outcome for this population might well have been a flat line or even downward trend over the two-year period.

**Chart 9**



## CONCLUSION

The Quantum Leap programs described above have demonstrated the ability to enroll and maintain students who were at risk of dropping out through positive academic outcomes and persistence to graduation with a high school diploma. While the numbers of students enrolled are modest, the outcomes with respect to persistence are impressive.

Future directions for program design and program monitoring include the following recommendations:

- Link academic performance files to program records in such a way as to be able to closely monitor both academic performance on grade level expectations and attendance
- Map program activities against academic measures for both grade reporting and standardized testing
- Enable students to link the importance of measures of academic achievement such as college readiness measured by perhaps a portfolio of work and their day to day and week to week academic performance as measured by grades and tests. Provide students with the documentation of their achievement that will enable them to compete for the next higher level of education.

The Quantum Leap programs were designed to help students achieve and all have been enormously effective in keeping students in school. Not only that, but students have successfully graduated and others reported that they were hoping to continue their education once they had graduated. All of these programs have been successful in engaging students in taking responsibility for their learning and if the resources were available, even more students would participate.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Questionnaire for Students**  
Bennington Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs

1. Tell us a little bit about \_\_\_\_\_ (Academic Mentoring or Tutoring, Project Leap or Quantum Leap Classroom).
  
2. What did you get out of participating in \_\_\_\_\_ (Academic Mentoring or Tutoring, Project Leap or Quantum Leap Classroom)?
  
3. What do you think is the most important part of \_\_\_\_\_ (Academic Mentoring or Tutoring, Project Leap or Quantum Leap Classroom) that made it work for you and why do you think it worked?
  
4. Is there anything you would change about \_\_\_\_\_ (Academic Mentoring or Tutoring, Project Leap or Quantum Leap Classroom) and if so, what is it?
  
5. Has \_\_\_\_\_ (Academic Mentoring or Tutoring, Project Leap or Quantum Leap Classroom) helped you think about your future and if so, how?
  
6. Do you think \_\_\_\_\_ (Academic Mentoring or Tutoring, Project Leap or Quantum Leap Classroom) should be continued and if so, for what reasons?
  
7. From the time that you started \_\_\_\_\_ (Academic Mentoring or Tutoring, Project Leap or Quantum Leap Classroom) to now, how do you think you have changed?

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Questionnaire for Parents**  
Bennington Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs

1. What were your son/daughter's experiences with the \_\_\_\_\_ program?
  
2. What were the benefits of his or her being in the program?
  
3. What was the best thing for your son or daughter that came out of the program?
  
4. Did the \_\_\_\_\_ program help your son/daughter maintain an interest in school? If so, how?
  
5. If parents in another school district wanted to start a program like this, what advice would you give them?
  
6. Would you recommend that this program continue and if so, why?
  
7. Do you have any recommendations for how the program could be improved and if so, what are they?

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Questionnaire for School Staff**  
Bennington Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs

1. How and why was the program developed, from your perspective?
2. Do you think this program has made a difference and if so, how?
3. What do you think are the most essential parts of this program that make it work?
4. What changes, if any, have you observed in the students who have participated in these programs at your school?
5. Are there students who did not benefit from the program and if so, why?
6. Are there any suggestions you would like to make to enhance the program?
7. If another school district wanted to replicate this program, what would you recommend to them?
8. What is your perspective on how these programs can be sustained?
9. To what degree do these students participate in selected programs in the High School?

**Appendix D**  
**Interview Questionnaire for Program Personnel**  
**Bennington Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs**

1. What do you see as your role in the program?
2. How and why was the program developed, from your perspective?
3. Do you think this program has made a difference and if so, how?
4. What do you think are the most essential parts of this program that make it work?
5. What changes, if any, have you observed in the students who have participated in these programs at your school?
6. Are there students who did not benefit from the program and if so, why?
7. Are there any suggestions you would like to make to enhance the program?
8. If another school district wanted to replicate this program, what would you recommend to them?
9. What is your perspective on how these programs can be sustained?
10. To what degree do these students participate in selected programs in the High School?

**Appendix E**  
**Interview Questionnaire for Community Partners**  
Bennington Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs

1. How did you get involved in this program?
2. What are your thoughts about the way the program has operated to achieve its goals?
3. What do you see as the outcomes?
4. What are the most important parts of the program that have contributed to these outcomes?
5. Do you have opinions about ways in which the program could be enhanced, and if so, what are they?
6. How have the various partners in this initiative collaborated to establish and maintain the program and its sustainability into the future? (Probe: systems change)
7. If another community wanted to replicate the positive outcomes of these programs, what would you recommend?

Additional Questions for Mentors:

8. As a mentor, what are things you do with the students you work with?
9. How would you describe the relationship you have built with your mentee?

**Appendix F**  
**Observation of the Quantum Leap Classroom Student Exhibit**  
**January 5, 2007**  
Monika Baege, EdD

The Quantum Leap Classroom held a student exhibit on the evening of January 5, 2007. Formal invitations were mailed ahead of time which included the quote: *“If you want your life to be a magnificent story, then begin by realizing that you are the author and everyday you have the opportunity to write a new page. With opportunity, true learning becomes possible.”* The invitations themselves were a piece of artwork. The exhibit was held in a classroom adjacent to the Quantum Leap Classroom. Having seen this room months earlier during interviews of program participants, it was hardly recognizable. The classroom had been transformed into a museum-like space, with one intriguing exhibit after another, some tucked away in smaller rooms and spaces that had been created by the students within the larger room. Throughout the exhibits, delicious hors d’oeuvres were offered to attendees, accompanied by detailed information about foods and eating patterns of various regions of the world.

A sampling of the Quantum Leap exhibits included a walk through a villa in Ancient Pompeii. Students had made plaster molds, using themselves, to recreate lava covered replicas of the people that had perished when Mount Vesuvius erupted. For example, there was a life size replica of a man and a dog that had died together. Even the floors became integral parts of the displays. In the Pompeii exhibit, the floor was covered in plaster to imitate the rubble. The students also created an exhibit of Etruscan Tomb Painting, and constructed four original mosaic murals, modeled after others they had studied. These were remarkable.

I was invited to view an exhibit on Uganda by an enthusiastic student who showed me a DVD about the “invisible children.” A resourceful and skilled intern from Bennington College, with expertise in African history, has been working with the students on this exhibit. They plan to raise awareness in the Bennington school and community about the plight of children in Uganda, as part of a national “Invisible Children Movement.” I introduced myself to a woman watching the DVD alongside of me and she told me she was the grandmother of the student who was manning the exhibit. She was obviously very proud of her grandson.

Various displays illustrated what the youth were learning from traveling the world, both imaginatively and virtually. They shared what they had learned about tastes and cultures of various world regions and they shared actual foods made from recipes they had designed. For example, there was a spice exhibit. There was also an Italian Room with some fabulous bruschetta. I found it interesting to read about Tuscany and Italy, the timing of their daily meals and the foods they eat. In addition, the students launched 50 newly constructed “geobooks,” which are notebooks, elaborately decorated by the students. Anyone attending the exhibit could take a geobook with the promise of writing in it during future travels and then returning it to the Quantum Leap Classroom. The students will then study the returned geobooks as part of their world traveling projects.

## **Appendix F: Observation of the Quantum Leap Classroom Student Exhibit -- Continued**

The exhibit was a chance to witness not only the learning taking place, but also the dedication and enthusiasm of the various stakeholders connected with the program. When I walked in, the room was brimming with parents, students, school staff, program personnel and community partners. For example, I spoke with a local legislator who praised the program. The High School Principal, the Bennington College professors and the President of Bennington College all had made the effort to come. Their conversation was a testimony to the collaborative spirit behind their work with truancy and drop out prevention, in other words, on helping students find their niche and succeed.

In summary, I saw students engaged in learning and proud of their work. It was obvious that this curriculum allowed the students to bring their unique perspectives, interests, and personalities to their learning. I highly recommend attending a future exhibit of the Quantum Leap Classroom. It is inspiring and educational.