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# Richmond Violence-Free Zone Initiative

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**THE CENTER FOR  
NEIGHBORHOOD ENTERPRISE  
VIOLENCE-FREE ZONE INITIATIVE:  
A RICHMOND CASE STUDY**

April 14, 2010

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## **Background**

### **The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise**

The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (CNE)<sup>1</sup> was founded in 1981 by former civil rights activist and life-long community organizer Robert Woodson, Sr. The three founding principles established by Woodson to govern and direct CNE, which still serve as the guideposts for the organization 29 years later, are:

1. Those suffering from the problem must be involved in the creation and implementation of the solution;
2. The principles of the market economy should be applied to the solution of societal problems; and
3. Value-generating and faith-based programs are uniquely qualified to address the problems of poverty.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of the Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) initiative followed very much along these lines as well.

### **The Violence-Free Zone Initiative – Its Origins**

The thinking and approach of the VFZ initiative, which is a youth-violence prevention and reduction program located within middle or high schools, was actually developed and formulated outside of the public school environment. Woodson already had a great deal of knowledge about gang behavior and youth violence from his days studying and working with a

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly known as the *National* Center for Neighborhood Enterprise.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on CNE and its origins, go to: <http://www.cneonline.org>.

wide variety of community-based organizations, and specifically, the House of Umoja, a faith-based community organization in Philadelphia, PA.

Woodson and CNE helped to craft a peace agreement between the warring youth factions in Benning Terrace, Washington DC in 1997. This pact helped bring life skills, job training and job placement services for youth seeking an alternative to a drug- and crime-filled lifestyle. Observers of CNE's intervention were impressed at how these efforts positively influenced youth and adolescents. This later became the role of Youth Advisor within the VFZ Initiative (as will be described later). A key contributor to the development of the VFZ initiative was Omar Jahwar, who previously worked with the youth population as a prison gang specialist in a Dallas prison and was subsequently 'lured' away by Woodson to start a community-based organization that would serve as a partner with CNE on violence prevention activities out in the community.

Jahwar began by working in the neighborhood surrounding Madison High School in Dallas, where the school's principal had just expelled 50 youths from the school for disruptive behavior. Jahwar, with private funding obtained through CNE, provided summer jobs for these youths, both in an effort to make a connection with these youth and also as a way to get rival gang members to begin talking to one another. Before the beginning of school that next fall, Jahwar met with the principal to discuss the future of the expelled youths, and to offer a proposal to help the principal deal with the overall issue of violence in the high school. The principal took Jahwar up on his offer, providing Vision Regeneration with space within the school and \$100,000 for one semester to hire six youth advisors (see Exhibit 1 for more information on the youth advisor role).<sup>3</sup>

### **How the Violence-Free Zone Initiative Works: The 10% Rule**

One of the central challenges to public schools today is the disruption of the educational environment and the overall educational process resulting from instability within the school, which in turn is often a product of neighborhood rivalries or gang-related conflicts occurring during school time. What Jahwar and Woodson had both learned from their previous

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the VFZ Initiative's history, please see *The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise/Violence-Free Zone Initiative: A Milwaukee Case Study – Baylor University*.

experiences working with gangs and violent youth was the importance of identifying, and reaching out to, the leaders.

Kwame Johnson, coordinator of the VFZ programs for CNE nationwide, described how this dynamic translated into working within the high school environment:

*If you have a high school of 1,000 or more kids, there are usually about 10% of those kids responsible for most of the incidents and disruptions occurring within the school. About 10% of these kids, in turn, are the leaders that orchestrate much of the disruptions, usually in the form of one gang acting out on another gang. Much of the VFZ strategy boils down to first identifying, and second, trying to develop relationships with these 10 or so leaders. So, the 10% rule is really about the 10% of kids causing the disruption at school, and then drilling down to the 10% of those that are really the driving force behind those conflicts. By engaging and re-directing these leaders, we have seen significant reductions in incidents, particularly gang-related incidents, in the schools where the VFZ initiative is operating.*

The VFZ model entails recruiting and training Youth Advisors, which are generally mature young adults who come from the same neighborhoods as the students in the schools they serve. These Youth Advisors gain almost immediate trust and respect because they have faced and overcome the same challenges these youth are facing. They serve several roles, including: mentors, hall monitors, counselors, role models, and ‘peace-makers’ when conflicts flare up in the school.

## **Methodological Approach**

In order to gain a more complete understanding and assessment of the effectiveness of the Richmond VFZ, we completed a case study based upon in-depth interviews with: 1) key staff from CNE and the VFZ; 2) members of the Richmond Outreach Center; 3) staff from the George Wythe High School; 4) staff from the Richmond Police department; 5) individuals with knowledge of the VFZ Initiative in Richmond; and 6) representatives of the foundations funding the VFZ Initiative in Richmond. These face-to-face interviews were transcribed and excerpts appear throughout this case study.

We also analyzed data provided to us by the Richmond Public Schools and the Richmond Police Department. This data includes information provided by the Richmond Public Schools on

suspensions, unexcused absences, truancy rates and school incidents data. It also includes crime and service call<sup>4</sup> data from the Richmond Police Department. In combination, these in-depth interviews and data capture critical qualitative and quantitative insights (including cost-benefits associated with the program) into the preliminary results of this intervention designed to reduce youth violence.

It is equally important to note that this case study on the VFZ in Richmond does not employ an experimental research design with random assignment of students into experimental and control groups. We are fully aware that randomized research designs provide a much more rigorous and preferred approach when it comes to evaluating the merits of various program interventions. Unfortunately, major impact studies employing such stringent rigor are quite rare due to significant costs, time, and resources necessary to complete them. The current research, however, is quite useful in providing preliminary insights into the functioning, early results and future potential of the VFZ in Richmond public schools. Indeed, this case study represents a potential first step in determining the feasibility of pursuing a longitudinal and randomized impact study.

## **Findings**

The origins to the VFZ in Richmond dates back to 2005, when Rodney Monroe was hired as Chief of the Richmond Police Department. Prior to this, Chief Monroe was the Area 6 Commander in the DC Metropolitan Police Department. While there he worked closely with CNE to better conditions in the Benning Terrace community and facilitated communications and building trust between law enforcement and youth. At the time, Richmond was still recovering from the dubious distinction of having the highest per capita murder rate in the nation back in 1999, and Chief Monroe was determined to transform the image to work more closely with the community, similar to what he had done in Washington DC. Chief Monroe was particularly concerned with the rising tide of youth violence, mostly gang-related, that was plaguing the city. In 2001, the violent crime rate for youth under 18 in Richmond was almost four times the state average.

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<sup>4</sup> Service calls refer to when the police were called in response to an incident (e.g., altercation, presence of a weapon, etc.).

One organization that Chief Monroe and the police came across on numerous occasions was an organization known as the Richmond Outreach Center (ROC), which was developing after-school programs and a Saturday program in which they reached out to youth across the city via a bus ministry, engaging youth in social enterprises aimed at re-directing their time and efforts away from gangs and related criminal activity. In 2004, Chief Monroe asked the ROC to provide outreach for a community carnival, so the community could see ROC staff, which had already forged strong ties with youth and their families, working alongside of the police at this event.

### **The ROC**

The ROC was started in April of 2001, when Geronimo Aguilar and Ronnie Ortiz, also known as Pastor G and Pastor Rsen, respectively, left Southern California, where they were involved in a variety of outreach ministries, and settled in Richmond. Both Aguilar and Ortiz were ‘raised in the streets’ themselves as youths, becoming involved in gangs and criminal activity as the only means of survival that they knew, before experiencing their own personal transformations, and with it a passion for reaching out and helping those faced with similar life challenges. The vision for the ROC was to facilitate community-serving programs and ministries among faith-based and community organizations through the city.

The ROC began with the acquisition of a warehouse, which they renovated into basketball courts and program space to house a variety of programs, with a primary emphasis on serving youth from 5-12 years in age. However, the 144 ministries currently operated by the ROC also include programs on and for: parenting, Hispanics, seniors, substance abuse, marriage, job-readiness, and prisoners. Roughly 80-85% of the ROC’s current staff and volunteers come from among those who were originally served through one or more of ROC’s ministries.

Although the ROC originated as an outreach center, in 2004 it also became a church, and has since been one of the fastest growing churches nationally in the past few years. The mainstay program for the ROC has been what it terms its “bus ministry”, whereby a fleet of 20 buses picks up between 900 and 1,200 youth (ages 5-12) for activities every Saturday afternoon.



Through this and other after-school programs, the ROC: provides 1,400 backpacks filled with school supplies, provides over 2,400 children with Christmas gifts, and involves over 100 kids per month in one of its youth sports programs.

Although the ROC is decidedly evangelical in its various program offerings, they are also skilled in collaborating and coordinating with various public agencies; a skill that Pastors G and Rsen learned from life experiences:

*One of the things we learned personally from living in the streets is the need to be adaptable, which we carry over into our collaboration with public agencies. For example, our prison ministry works closely with the prison chaplain, and also sponsors breakfasts and dinners with the sheriffs and chaplains. Our goals as a ministry is to 'be all things to all people,' whether ministering to a kid or working with the police in the community.*

### **Matchmaking: Putting CNE and the ROC together**

CNE is very particular when selecting a local community partner with which to entrust the operational responsibilities for the VFZ initiative. Another of CNE's founding principles -- *Those suffering from the problem must be involved in the creation and implementation of the solution* – is also represented in the process by which CNE identifies, or sometime creates, the local community partners that assume the responsibility for implementing the VFZ Initiative. As Woodson explained:

*When we come into a city looking for the right community partner, I generally start networking through any contacts – family, friends, and colleagues – about community-serving organizations already working with youth. We will also walk into barber shops and local restaurants to find out where people go to get help in times of trouble. This searching mostly takes place through informal community networks, among people who 'know each other,' and generally not through public social service agencies or local elected officials.*

For Richmond, however, CNE and Woodson relied on Chief Monroe and his recommendation of the ROC as the VFZ community partner. Based on his relationship with Chief Monroe, as well as the opportunity to meet and visit with the ROC, CNE agreed to the partnership. As Chief Monroe explained:

*I saw the ROC and CNE as the ideal partnership. The ROC had a well-established reputation of working with the youth in the city, and had staff with experience running various youth programs already. CNE had the experience in working with school superintendents and other staff to insure that the right conditions were in place for the VFZ to succeed.*

### **Support from the Corporate Foundation Community**

Chief Monroe first introduced the VFZ program to the Richmond School Department back in 2005, which began a long ‘courtship’ process for winning over their support for the program. CNE invited a number of both police and school officials to Washington DC for a presentation of the work CNE had done in Benning Terrace, and also met with principals in Washington DC and Baltimore about their experience working the CNE on youth violence prevention efforts. A couple of years later one of those school officials, Larry Evert, Specialist for Truancy for Richmond school department, and had become the informal designee for evaluating the potential of a VFZ program in Richmond. Evert spoke to students, principals, teachers and VFZ staff about the VFZ program, was impressed with the impact that the program was having, and made a favorable report back to the school superintendent in Richmond.

The next step for Chief Monroe was to raise the start-up funding through private sources to pilot VFZ at one of the more troubled, violence-plagued high schools. Consistent with one of CNE’s founding principles; namely, that *the principles of the market economy should be applied to the solution of societal problems*, CNE did not approach school systems for funding to support VFZ until and unless they demonstrated results, in the form of reduced the levels of truancy, non-violent/violent incidents, and unexcused absences.

Chief Monroe targeted the corporate foundation community, using the Richmond Police Foundation, a dormant 501(c) 3 organization, through which he was able to raise \$450,000 to fund VFZ at one school for two years. Among those funders was MWV, a global packaging solutions company headquartered in Richmond. The interest in supporting VFZ arose from shared objectives, as Kathryn Strawn, MeadWestvaco Foundation Vice-President and Executive Director, explained:

*We want to help make a real difference in student success for young people attending Richmond Public Schools. Clearly academic achievement requires a safe and secure learning environment. VFZ has an established track record of positive impact. We are pleased to help to seed a program we believe can be effective and worthy of sustaining through longer term funding from the school system.*

For Chief Monroe, there was a clear connection between supporting VFZ and public safety, as he explained:

*There is a clear short-term and long-term rationale for funding VFZ's start-up through the police foundation. In the short-term, the VFZ program would free up police resources in terms of the frequent service calls we've had to respond to at certain schools from violent incidents, and the associated labor hours for responding officers.<sup>5</sup> In the long-term, the VFZ, involving the ROC, is an opportunity to reach and re-direct kids away from a lifestyle of crime and violence that we are otherwise going to have to deal with.*

### **VFZ Richmond Implementation**

With the funding and community partner (i.e., the ROC) in place, CNE, Chief Monroe and the school system settled on George Wythe High School, with an enrollment of about 1,100 students, as the VFZ pilot site. This choice was based, among other things, on the school's 2006-07 truancy rate (as measured by the percentage of students with six or more unexcused absences) of 66%, more than triple the 20% average for the other seven high schools. In addition, George Wythe was tied for the most youth aged 14-19 years that were arrested between January and June of 2008, comprising 36% of all youth arrests among Richmond high schools during that time period.

Another factor for selecting George Wythe as the pilot site was the fact that there was to be a new principal, Willie Bell, coming into the school for the 2008-09 academic school year. Principal Bell had developed a niche for turning around troubled schools, and this appointment represented his fourth school in his eight year career as a principal. The unique opportunity for the VFZ program to 'start fresh' with a new principal would allow VFZ to be a part of an overall

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<sup>5</sup> As shown in the Outcome section on page 18, there was also a 61% decrease in auto thefts within 1,000 feet of the high school where VFZ was implemented.

culture change that was to take place within the school, as opposed to trying to “fit in” to a pre-existing modus operandi from a principal that had already been there.

The Richmond Police Foundation funding for the VFZ supported six Youth Advisors for two years. However, the ROC leadership was so enthused by the opportunity to work within the school; they redirected five of their youth ministry staff to augment the number of Youth Advisors to eleven. As Pastor Rsen explained:

*We jumped at the opportunity to increase the staffing for the VFZ, because it would give us more time to interact with the kids. Without VFZ, we had to work time in around the school. VFZ helps blur the distinction between school and the community in a positive way. Our general philosophy is that, given enough time with them, we can effectively counter-act the negative influences of peer pressure and impact these kids' lives, and so improve the school environment in the process.*

The added staff also allowed VFZ Richmond to have a penetration rate (as measured by the percentage of VFZ ‘caseload’ students to overall high school enrollment, about twice as high as for a typical VFZ site. With an average caseload of 20 students per youth advisor, this came to about 18% caseload to total enrollment, as compared to the typical VFZ penetration rate of about 10%.

In actuality, CNE did not get the ‘official’ green light from the Richmond school system to begin at George Wythe until a week before the start of the 2008-09 academic school year. In fact, the VFZ program had been operating for a month in the school before they were even introduced to teachers and other school staff. However, the Youth Advisors worked diligently to reach out to teachers and let them know they were there to support them.

At the same time, Evert worked internally during the initial months with social workers, teachers, and security staff to hear their concerns and clarify roles and responsibilities as it related to the work of the VFZ program and staff. As Evert explained:

*It took a bit of massaging with various personnel at Wythe regarding the introduction of the program. Because of the challenges we have had historically at Wythe, there are a lot of people that wanted to provide help, so we just needed to make sure there was coordination and communication of those efforts as it related to the VFZ program. I think the VFZ staff have done a good job of*

*navigating these relationships and, most importantly, did not try to take all the credit for the turnaround in the school when we started to see results.*

In 2008, Chief Monroe left the Richmond Police Department (RPD) to assume a similar role for the city of Charlotte, NC. However, the RPD continued to support the VFZ program, which included sending representatives to VFZ sites in other cities, and has publicly credited the VFZ program with reductions in crimes such as motor vehicle thefts in the area around the Wythe High School (described further in the findings below).

### **Richmond Public Schools - Differences You Can Measure**

The impact of the VFZ in George Wythe, both qualitatively (from interviews of school staff and students) and quantitatively (through the comparison of a wide range of data) between academic years 2007-08 and 2008-09 has been immediate and significant. Many teachers that were initially skeptical and sometimes intimidated by the presence of the Youth Advisors have, over time, come to see their value and have referred disruptive youth to them, or requested their presence in the classroom.

Qualitatively, the principal, teachers, and other school staff observed positive changes in the school culture with the presence of the Youth Advisors in the school. For principal Bell, VFZ helped him bring about the turnaround faster than he had experienced in his previous placements:

*We've had surprising success in just the first year here at the school, and the VFZ was a big part of that. In particular, the VFZ youth Advisors has accelerated our efforts to strengthen what I call the school-home connection. Now, when a parent comes in with their child following a suspension, as is required, we have a Youth Advisor there, and an opportunity to give the parent information about the VFZ and possibly 'recruit' the student into the program, and thus providing them with the additional support and mentoring to prevent future suspensions and get them back on track as a student.*

The philosophical/strategic alignment between principal Bell and the VFZ is further reflected in their shared views on the students' need, and therefore the school's need, for more discipline and organization. As pastor Rsen explained:

*Our experience in working with these kids helped us see that their home and family life is often unsettled and chaotic. Therefore, we understand and supply their need for more structure in their lives through our after-school and Saturday programs, and hope to bring that into the school environment as well through the VFZ.*

Assistant principal Riva Green, who was at George Wythe the prior year, also saw the benefits of VFZ coming aboard at the same time as the new principal. As she described:

*I think it was perfect timing to have VFZ starting at the same time we had a new principal, because they were able to work together to re-shape the school and make positive changes. I also think that the ROC's high visibility among many of the students, based on the work they do in the community, helped them hit the ground faster and begin to impact the kids' lives and behaviors.*

Teachers have also responded positively to the presence of the VFZ. As Ahad Allah, Art teacher at George Wythe, explained:

*You could see kids that were on the verge of being disruptive getting re-directed, and making better choices. I have seen attendance in the class improve, with fewer kids cutting classes, and becoming more teachable in the classroom. I think that the reward system they use for their caseload kids, where they get an opportunity to go on a field trip for meeting certain academic or behavioral benchmarks, has helped a lot. As a result of all this, I have fewer disruptions, my classes are more productive, and I have more self-directed students to work with.*

## **Youth Advisors**

The Youth Advisors are the cornerstone of the VFZ program. They generally share similar life experiences as the youth they serve, in terms of having a past history of crime and substance abuse. In contrast with VFZ programs in other cities, the majority of the Youth Advisors in Richmond are white, whereas the majority of the students they serve are African-American. However, as explained by Kwame Johnson, this distinction proved to be a non-factor:

*At first we were challenged with the fact that the VFZ staff shared and understood the life experiences faced by these youth, in terms of some of the things they have gone through, but generally did not share a similar cultural or ethnic background. However, once you see the kids interacting with the VFZ staff, you realize that these kids don't see color; they see people that truly care for them. What the students are really looking for is someone to be real with them. That's all we needed to see to know that this program would succeed.*

The VFZ model is simple, but the work is not easy. The day for a Youth Advisor for VFZ Richmond begins at 6:30am when they meet as a team, discuss issues with particular students from the previous day, and get updates on school policies and/or activities. At 7:00am, they get to their morning post to prepare to greet the students into school, and make themselves visible and available to students as the day begins. Kelly Williams, one of the Youth Advisors, explains the important role of morning posts:

*Monday mornings are especially important, because that's when we learn about what happened in the neighborhood over the weekend that may spill into the school.*

During the course of the day, all Youth Advisors assist security with monitoring the halls between periods, and also are present in the cafeteria during lunchtime.

Each Youth Advisor carries what they call a formal and an informal caseload of students. The formal caseload, of about 20 students, are one for the VFZ program tracks interventions and outcomes, both in terms of academic performance (i.e., GPA) and behavior-related data (e.g., fights, truancy, etc.). The VFZ caseload students are roughly comprised of: 1) students specifically targeted by VFZ staff, principal, and/or teachers; 2) students enrolled during reinstatement after a school suspension; and 3) 'word-of-mouth' referrals. The informal case load constitutes students reaching out for relationship and connection with one or more Youth Advisors, since the VFZ staff always wants to be available to whoever needs their time and attention.

The VFZ Richmond strategy, which also embraces the broader goals of the ROC after-school and Saturday programming, is not to eliminate gangs per se, but to re-engineer them. As Williams explains:

*With more time together with the kids through the VFZ, we can take what's good about gangs, as a social support network, and make it something positive. For example, through the after-school program at the school, which we just started this year [the 2009-10 academic school year], we can re-mix the kids, so we have kids from different neighborhoods sitting together and doing activities together and re-form their groups to reduce the conflicts that might otherwise occur between different kids.*

When conflicts do occur, the VFZ employs a formal mediation process, whereby the Youth Advisor brings the two students together, lays out the ground rules for communicating with one another, give each student a chance to 'speak their piece,' including an apology, and have them sign a mediation contract, where they pledge to not fight with one another in the future. During the 2008-09 academic school year, VFZ Richmond enacted 133 mediation contracts.

### Impact on Students

The impact of the VFZ program on the students, as described by students, echoes the comments made by the ROC on how the program offers them additional time with, and exposure to, the students, as the key difference. As one student explained:

*My youth advisor has helped me to stop being a follower, and to take responsibility for my actions, instead of just going with the crowd. I've been involved with the ROC since I was in elementary school, but having them here in the school really makes a big difference, and helps to remind me of what I need to be doing to stay out of trouble and focus more on my schoolwork.*

Another student talked about how the VFZ program gave him a reason to show up at school, and to focus more on learning:

*Once I got involved with the VFZ, I stopped skipping school and changed my attitude about school and got my grades up.*

### **Looking Forward**

Plans are currently underway to expand the VFZ to another high school, which has also struggled with disruptive behavior and violence. The VFZ program is also expected to be operated by ROC as the community partner.



For year two at George Wythe, the VFZ is looking forward to another year of successes and positive changes. As Williams explained:

*There were a lot of adjustments we had to make the first year, but now we have a clearer understanding of our scope of work, and can build on the relationships we've developed with both staff and students. We believe there is room for more improvements and positive changes at George Wythe this coming year.*

### **Assessing Data from the Richmond Public Schools and the Richmond Police Department**

The impact the VFZ initiative has had within George Wythe High School is not only descriptive, but is captured through changes in data and outcomes tracked through the Richmond Public Schools. In particular, the Richmond VFZ demonstrated an impact after just one year of operation in the three following areas:

1. ***Improved safety within the schools***, as measured both by changes in the number of incidents, the number of students involved in those incidents;
2. ***Increased presence of students in school***, as measured by the number of unexcused absences, total absences, suspensions, suspension days, and truancy rates; and
3. ***Reduced Need for police services/intervention***, as measured by changes in the number of calls for service, arrests, and motor vehicle thefts within 1,000 feet of the George Wythe High School. These findings will also be conveyed in economic cost-benefit terms, both in terms of reduced 'transaction' costs (i.e., fewer police hours needed to address incidents/crimes at or near the high school) and general 'value' associated with the reduced number of auto thefts attributable to the VFZ program.

The long-term outcomes that VFZ hopes to achieve, whose impact is not shown after one year, are improvements in the school's overall GPA, as compared to the other Richmond high schools that do not have a VFZ program. It is important to keep in mind, however, that VFZ staff is not directly involved in the education of youth, although the expectation is that a safer school environment will lead to improvements in academic performance.

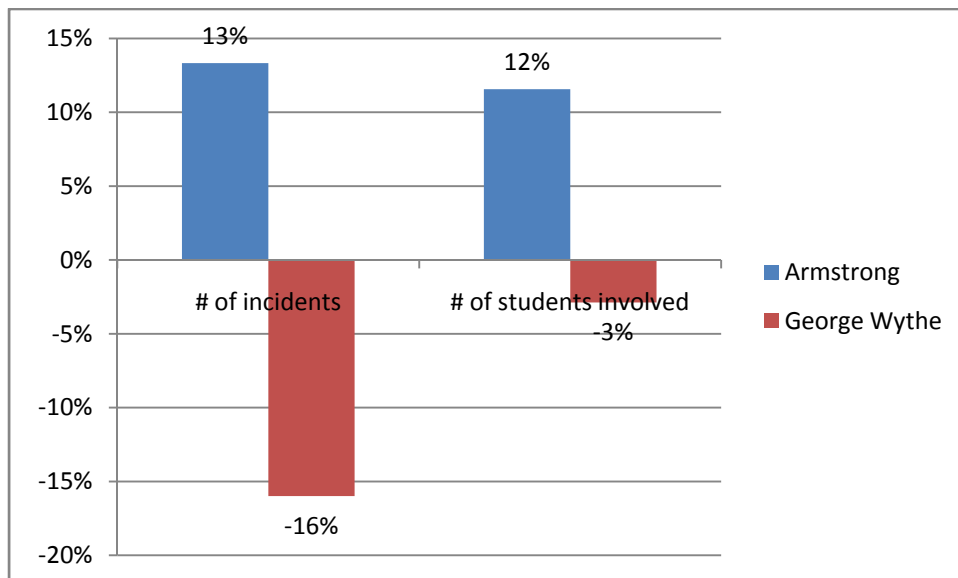
### Compared to What?

When researchers evaluate programs, it is not enough to simply compare outcomes before and after an intervention. Stated differently, it is necessary to ask if the pre- and post outcome results are significantly different from a comparable group not receiving the intervention under study. Therefore, we made several comparisons between George Wythe High School and a comparable high school without the VFZ program. The Armstrong High School is similar to George Wythe in terms of the income and demographics from which it draws its students.

### Improved Safety within the School

As can be seen in Figure 1 below, the number of school incidents and the number of students involved in those incidents at Armstrong both increased from Academic Year (AY) 2008 and AY 2009. For George Wythe, both decreased during the same time period. Though we do not have a research design in place that would allow us to address cause and effect relationships, it is compelling nonetheless to observe the impressive differences presented between the two comparable Richmond schools.

**Figure 1. Comparative Trends in School Incidents and Students Involved (Academic Year '08 to Academic Year '09)**



### Increased Presence in the School

Making the school safer (i.e., fewer incidents) is the precursor for increasing the presence of students in the school. Table 1 below shows the changes in trends in unexcused absences, total absences, suspensions, suspension days, and truancy rates for the two schools between AY 2008 and AY 2009.

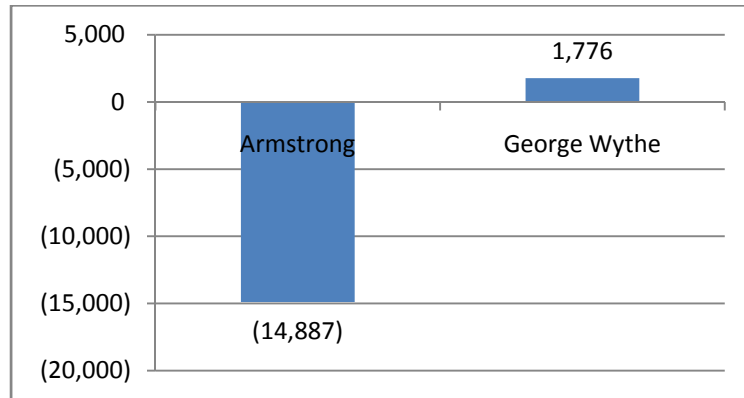
**Table 1: Comparative Trends on Student Absence from School (AY2008 to AY 2009)**

School	AY 2008	AY2009	% Increase (decrease)
<i>Unexcused Absences</i>			
Armstrong	13,428	15,916	19%
George Wythe	14,177	9,161	(35%)
<i>Total Absences (days)</i>			
Armstrong	22,641	37,988	68%
George Wythe	22,972	20,949	(9%)
<i>Suspensions</i>			
Armstrong	1,430	1,375	(4%)
George Wythe	1,001	994	(1%)
<i>Total Suspension Days</i>			
Armstrong	5,209	5,456	5%
George Wythe	4,438	3,978	(10%)
<i>Truancy Rate</i> <sup>6</sup>			
Armstrong	29.84	40.91	37%
George Wythe	33.87	19.85	(41%)

Most notable in these comparative trends is in total absences, which increased by 68% at Armstrong between AY2008 and AY2009, while decreasing by 9% at George Wythe. Truancy rates increased 37% at Armstrong, while decreasing by 41% at George Wythe. These findings are consistent with comments by VFZ staff and students at George Wythe, in which the close relationships forged between students and staff make attending school more desirable. Figure 2 conveys the collective impact of changes in student presence in terms of the change in the number of teaching days for both schools.

<sup>6</sup> Truancy rates are calculated as the percentage of students absent from school for more than 10 days in a given school year.

**Figure 2: Comparative Gains/Losses in Teaching Days<sup>7</sup> (AY 2007 to AY 2008)**



Added Benefits/Value of the VFZ Program

In addition to improvements in safety and presence, the VFZ program also creates value in other ways. As shown in Table 2 below, the reduced number of incidents at the school has also translated into a decrease in ‘transaction’ costs for the police, as measured by the average number of police hours required to respond to each type of incident. In essence, the Richmond VFZ has helped to lessen the burden of the Richmond Police department, allowing them to attend to other public safety priorities. The value of this decreased burden is expressed here in financial terms, using an average rate of \$35/hour of police time.

**Table 2: Transactional Cost Savings from VFZ Richmond Program**

Incident	AY 2008 (# of incidents)	AY 2009 (# of incidents)	Reduction in Incidents	% Reduction	Avg. Police Hours/Incident	Total Savings <sup>8</sup>
Calls for Service	120	98	22	18%	1 hour 5 minutes/call	\$834
Arrests	107	91	16	15%	3 hours 5 minutes/arrest <sup>9</sup>	\$1,726
Motor Vehicle Thefts (w/in 1,000 feet of school)	132	51	81	61%	2 hours/incident <sup>10</sup>	\$5,670
<b>Total transactional savings from VFZ Richmond Program at George Wythe</b>						<b>\$8,230</b>

<sup>7</sup> Teaching days are calculated by the number of students times the number of school days attended.

<sup>8</sup> Based on an average police labor cost of \$35/hour, as furnished by the Richmond Police Department.

<sup>9</sup> This includes the transportation of juvenile and all related paperwork.

<sup>10</sup> This includes initial report and initial investigation follow-up by Detective.

Even more significant in terms of cost savings related to VFZ Richmond is the reduction in the number of motor vehicle thefts from AY 2008 and AY 2009 that occurred within 1,000 feet of the high school. As shown in Table 2 above, there was a 61% decrease in motor vehicle thefts near George Wythe, as compared to a Richmond-wide decrease of 20% during the same time period.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, all things being equal, the projected decrease in auto thefts within 1,000 feet of the high school would have been 26, meaning there was an additional “unexplained” reduction of 55 auto thefts (81 actual less the 26 projected reduction). The average value of a stolen car, according to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Data Report, is \$6,751. This puts the total value of ‘cars not stolen’ at \$371,305 (55 times \$6,751 per motor vehicle). The Richmond Police Department believes that these reductions are attributable to the VFZ program and their effort to change youth behavior.

This finding regarding auto theft reductions might also tell us more about the manner in which the VFZ program impacts the youths with whom they work. The implication is that VFZ staff, through the Youth Advisor’s relationship the youth (particularly the caseload youth), are changing the decision-making processes that previously lead to perpetrating crimes such as motor vehicle thefts.

## **Conclusion**

The Violence Free Zone initiative is a youth-violence prevention and reduction program located within select middle and high schools across the United States. The VFZ model entails recruiting and training Youth Advisors from the same neighborhoods as the students in the schools they serve. These Youth Advisors serve several roles, including: hall monitors, mentors, counselors, role models, and ‘peace-makers’ when conflicts flare up in the school.

The VFZ was implemented in the George Wythe high school in the Richmond Public School system in 2008. Preliminary research reveals several important findings: 1) the number of school incidents decreased at George Wythe from the 2008 to the 2009 academic year; 2) from 2008 to 2009, there were significant decreases at George Wythe in unexcused absences, total school day absences, total suspension days, and truancy; 3) from 2008 to 2009, at

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<sup>11</sup> As reported by the FBI Uniform Crime Data Report.

Armstrong High School, a comparable Richmond public school, there were significant increases in unexcused absences, total school day absences, and truancy; 4) students from George Wythe gained 1,776 teaching days, while 14,887 teaching days were lost at Armstrong; 5) the reduced number of incidents at George Wythe translated into a decrease in calls for service, arrests, and motor vehicle thefts – providing a significant cost savings to Richmond Police Department; and 6) there is a consensus among relevant stakeholders that reductions in incidents, absences, suspensions, and truancy are linked to the implementation of the VFZ initiative.

It is important to acknowledge, however, it would be inappropriate to draw causal inferences considering the limitations of the current study. A more rigorous and controlled study covering a significant time period is absolutely vital before it is possible to have serious discussions of cause and effect relationships between interventions like VFZ and outcomes such as youth violence, suspensions, truancy, and GPA. What we can safely conclude from the current study is that we have found preliminary and encouraging evidence of potential linkages between the VFZ intervention George Wythe High School and a number of important and positive outcomes.

In sum, interviews with Richmond school officials, teachers, staff and other observers indicate widespread agreement regarding the connections between the implementation of the VFZ initiative and improvements in a host of areas. In-depth interviews with teachers and administrators support these findings. Indeed, school officials we interviewed were remarkably enthusiastic at the preliminary results of the VFZ in Richmond.

## **EXHIBIT 1: The VFZ Youth Advisor**

These staff, who are typically between the ages of 19 and 30, all come from, and continue to live in, the same neighborhoods as the students, and most have struggled with the same issues, such as gang-related crime and substance abuse. They are employed by CNE’s community partner organization(s) within the city where VFZ is operating. Table 1 below shows some of the contrasts in the work and mind-set of these youth advisors, as compared with school social worker and counselor staff.

**Table 1: Youth Advisors and Social Workers/Counselors**

	<b>Youth Advisors</b>	<b>Social Workers/Counselors</b>
<i>They generally relate to students as...</i>	Friends	Clients
<i>Make themselves available to students...</i>	24/7	9 to 5
<i>The daily work activities are...</i>	Driven by student needs	Generally pre-determined through position descriptions
<i>Skills and knowledge primarily based on...</i>	Similar background and experiences/struggles as faced by students	Professional licensure/certification

### A Day in the Life of a Youth Advisor

The VFZ model is simple, but the work is not easy. Figure 1 below outlines what a typical day for a Youth Advisor involves.

**Figure 1: A Day in the Life of a Youth Advisor**

1. ***Walking the Streets*** – The youth advisors walk around within about 1,000 feet outside the school before the day begins. The advisors encourage students towards school and pick up information on any brewing gang conflicts, touching base with any police officers in the immediate vicinity;
2. ***Greeting the Students*** as they come in to school, offering any support they can to school security personnel, making themselves visible and available to any students that may have issues from home or for other reasons;
3. ***Tardy Hall*** – For students arriving late to school, youth advisors meet with youth that are chronically late to find out why the student is continually tardy. Sometimes, advisors will also put calls to home for late or absent students to identify issues affecting their attendance;
4. ***Walking the Halls*** – Between classes youth advisors walk around the halls, redirecting students, maintaining a presence/ keeping radar up for any possible individual ‘beefs’, neighborhood rivalries, or gang-related conflicts, and touching base with teachers on any behavior issues in the classroom;
5. ***Lunchtime*** – A critical relationship-building opportunity for the youth advisors with the students, building trust and maintaining visibility;
6. ***Mediation*** – As scheduled throughout the day, participate in teacher-student, parent-student, and student-student mediation to surface and resolve issues causing disruption within the school and classes.



## About the Authors

Byron R. Johnson is Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences and Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) as well as director of the Program on Prosocial Behavior, both at Baylor University. He is a Senior Fellow at the Witherspoon Institute (Princeton), and Senior Research Scholar at the Institute for Jewish and Community Research (San Francisco). He is chief advisor for the Center for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Peking University (Beijing). Before joining the faculty at Baylor University, Johnson directed research centers at Vanderbilt University and the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Johnson is currently conducting a series of empirical studies for the Department of Justice on the role of religion in prosocial youth behavior. He is recognized as a leading authority on the scientific study of religion, the efficacy of faith-based organizations, domestic violence, and criminal justice. Recent publications have examined the impact of faith-based programs on recidivism reduction and prisoner reentry. He is principal investigator on a new study assessing the impact of Scouting on a host of outcomes in later life. Johnson is currently partnering working with the Gallup Organization on a global study addressing religion and spirituality in the world. He has published more than hundred journal articles and book chapters, as well as several books and many research monographs. Johnson's research has been used in consultation with the Department of Justice, Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and the National Institutes of Health.

William Wubbenhorst is Research Fellow at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion and Program on Prosocial Behavior. He serves as a project manager for the Faith Service Forum and is the lead subject matter expert within ICF Macro in the area of faith-based and community initiatives and the establishment partnerships with government at the local, state and federal level. Mr. Wubbenhorst recently served as project director for training and technical assistance for the US Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) for Promoting Responsible Fatherhood. He was also involved in two other contracts relating to review of abstinence education curriculum and promising practices research for federally-funded abstinence education programs. Prior to that, Mr. Wubbenhorst worked on behalf of the US Department of Labor (DOL) and the Corporation for National and Community Service's Americorps\*VISTA program on projects related to those agencies' faith-based and community initiatives. For DOL, this work entails supporting the Department's efforts to develop local partnerships between workforce development boards and faith-based and community organizations to better serve hard-to-reach populations with training and employment services. The work for Americorps\*VISTA involves an evaluation of the number and types of faith-based and community organization partners, along with selected profiles of model programs, particularly in the area of mentoring children of prisoners. Additionally, Mr. Wubbenhorst worked for 8 years in Massachusetts state government. He has published a number of articles pertaining to Charitable Choice and the Faith-Based/Community Initiative and served as an independent research consultant for the Center for Public Justice, conducting research on Charitable Choice and other related faith-based initiatives. He is currently a Technical Director at Macro, International, Inc.



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