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PLUS: San Jose's Successful Alternative Education Option

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Background

This issue brief is part of a larger study of California Continuation High Schools begun 2007². During Phase 2 of this study, researchers did in-depth site visits and data analysis at 22 continuation programs in three California counties, from November 2009 to October 2010. During site visits to each school we interviewed student groups, teachers, counselors, and school administrators. To learn about the community and policy context, we also interviewed district and county administrators and organizations serving this population of students.

Plus stands out among California's continuation high schools in its design and operation as part of a district 'menu' of alternatives. It is unusual in its school-within-a-school design; CA continuation high schools typically are stand-alone sites. Most notable about Plus, however, are its students' consistently successful outcomes. Though Plus students are similar demographically and economically to other continuation high schools students around the state, their outcomes are markedly different. Whereas too many CA students find continuation programs an exit to nowhere³, most Plus students stick with the program, come to school every day, graduate on time, pass the CASHEE, and move on to productive next steps.

This Brief takes a close look at the Plus program to feature the elements of program design, school and district supports that enable these positive outcomes.

Plus Overview

Plus is a school-within-a-school program that serves students in the San Jose Unified School District who have grade-level abilities but have been unsuccessful in their comprehensive high school and are off track to graduate. ⁴ PLUS is part of the district's Learning Options Department's menu of alternative programs for credit deficient students. Each of the six Plus schools is staffed with two teachers and a counselor, and enrollment is capped at 40, by state law⁵. Teachers team-teach two sessions of twenty

¹ This report is based upon research conducted by Susan Bush, Martha Cortes, and Susan Tu in addition to the authors.

² For a report on Phase One of this study, see Ruis de Velasco et al. 2008. The report is available at: <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/docs/AEO%20Issue%20Brief%204-16-08-lm-r2.pdf>

³ See Kelly 1993; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008

⁴ This description draws from "Learning Options, Plus Overview."

http://www.sjusd.org/school/learning_options/info/C4689/

students each; all students must attend a minimum of 180 instructional minutes for 180 days. The program's goal is for students to graduate with their home high school class.

Courses such as English, US History, Math, Science, American Government, and Economics are offered. The program counselor meets with each student to create an individual academic plan that will meet SJUSD graduation requirements. In addition to Plus classes, students may also attend classes at their home high school, vocational training centers (CCOC), adult education, or community college, and earn credit through work experience and independent studies. Because the Plus program is located on the larger high school campus, students may continue friendships with peers and participation in extracurricular activities.

Plus students must earn the same number of credits [240] to graduate as do their peers in the comprehensive high schools.⁶ However, they receive an L diploma since they are not required to meet the state university system's A-G requirements to graduate.

Plus Students

Plus students are similar in most ways to others who enroll in California's continuation high schools. All Plus students enter off track to graduate with their class. Students describe their previous academic records as dismal and most said that they had just given up trying.⁷ One student put his experience in the comprehensive high school this way: "Grades? They were horrible, like a 1.8. Well, others say they didn't care about their grades but I did care... It hurt me to get bad grades, but I wasn't going to change it... it gets to the point when you do so bad, you can't like, do better, so you give up". Another student explained his poor performance [GPA .08] this way: "I messed up [in 9th and 10th grades]. Some of it was because I was kind of lazy, but that was only because I didn't get it... like it was hard for me."

The majority of Plus students are Hispanic⁸, and many are socio-economically disadvantaged.⁹ Few of students' parents have reached college. And, according to Plus counselors, many students are undocumented. Plus students typically struggle with difficult, stressful personal lives. Many come from households experiencing family disruption, substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental health issues. A significant number of Plus students have parents unable for several reasons to provide consistent or active support—because they are incarcerated, absent, or working two or three jobs just to stay financially afloat. Students commonly have had issues with substance abuse, juvenile crime and gang involvement. A number of Plus students have bounced around different San Jose high schools, or been in juvenile facilities; several are parenting teens.

⁵ Plus is funded out of the district's General Fund. It follows the rules associated with the state's Small Necessary Continuation School program (CA's Pupil Retention Block Grant [AB 825]), which caps enrollment at 40.

CA's Pupil Retention Block Grant [AB 825], which caps enrollment at 40.

⁶ <http://www.sjUSD.org/school/district-new/info/C160/>

⁷ Here and throughout this brief, student comments are taken from focus groups conducted at all six Plus schools in 2009-2010.

⁸ Statewide, continuation students are 11% black, 55% Hispanic, 26% white and 3% Asian.

⁹ See SARC <http://www.sjUSD.org/school/district-new/info/C3290>

In social and academic terms, Plus students differ little from the ‘typical’ continuation high school student in California.¹⁰ Differences between Plus students and many attending other alternative programs lie in what students accomplish.

Student Outcomes

Graduation Rates

Plus students generally graduate at rates higher than do students in their comprehensive high school, and at rates higher than the district average of 86%.¹¹ Four of the six Plus schools boast a 100% graduation rate; rates of 81% and 92% are reported for the remaining two.¹²

Students agreed that without the program, they would not have graduated. As one put it: “But for Plus I wouldn’t graduate; they would have sent us away by now; they would have kicked us out already.” Another said: “Before Plus I was either just going to get my GED or drop out. I just wanted to be done with high school.” Most of their friends who had similar academic records and remained at the comprehensive high school were looking at dropping out or, at best, getting a GED through adult education. As one reflected: “None of my friends are on track to graduate; one has 15 credits and he’s a junior. Some have already dropped out.”

Attendance Rates

Plus students attend school not only at a higher rate than they did in the past but at a rate comparable to or better than that of their comprehensive high schools.

Table 1: Student attendance 2009-2010

Plus School	Average Daily Attendance ASAM Indicator ¹³ %	Comprehensive High School	Average Daily Attendance District Data %
Gunderson Plus	95.6	Gunderson	94.9
Leland Plus	93.4	Leland	97.3
Lincoln Plus	91.4	Lincoln	95.7
Pioneer Plus	95.3	Pioneer	96.0
San Jose Plus	95.1	San Jose Academy	94.0
Willow Glen Plus	96.9	Willow Glen	95.4

Students described their attendance at the comprehensive high school as poor. One said: “I would just cut. I would ditch ... like, three times in a week. I’d be absent a lot.” Another told us “I would show up to school

¹⁰ See Ruiz de Velasco, et al. 2008;

¹¹ Data are from 2007-2008 data, the latest available. Accessed on 10-20-2010.

<http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/CompletionRate/comprate3.asp?cYear=2007-08&cSelect=4369666--SAN^JOSE^UNIFIED&cChoice=DGrdRate2&level=District>

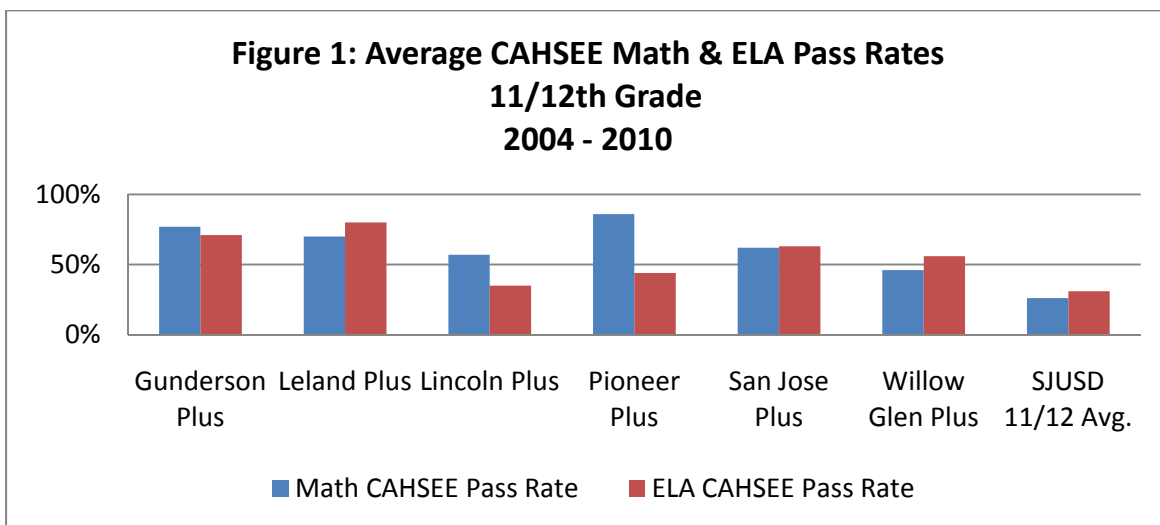
¹² These programs lost 3 and 2 students respectively.

¹³ The California *Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999* established ASAM, the Alternative Schools Accountability Model, which provides school-level accountability for alternative schools serving highly mobile and at-risk students.

and then leave...My mom would drop me off, so, I'd just wave [and take off.]" When asked why they skipped school, across all sites students replied in similar terms: boredom, problems with teachers, feeling disconnected, not doing well, just not liking school.

And when students did go to school they often were tardy. Behaviors changed at Plus. Across all PLUS sites, students seldom are late and many students in fact try to get there early: "[Before] I'd just be late every day five minutes to a half-an-hour. But ever since I got to Plus, since it's my senior year, I've been devoted to coming early and it's actually helped. I've actually been here on time [or] like, within two minutes after the bells ring I get to school." Teachers comment on the changed behavior they see in Plus students. One said: "We have kids who have had the truancy letters and have had to be on probation because last year they didn't come to school at the mainstream setting. And now, they're here every day and they're on time, and some of them are even 20 minutes early... I think our attendance is 98 or 99 percent for the year."

CAHSEE pass rates



Plus programs outperform SJUSD's comprehensive high schools in terms of CAHSEE 11/12th grade pass rate [2004-2010]. These outcomes provide another indicator of the program's success with an academically vulnerable population. Plus students taking the CAHSEE in 11th or 12th grades do significantly better than do peers remaining in the comprehensive high school, who also failed CAHSEE in the 10th grade.

A Second Chance

Plus students describe themselves as "the kids that nobody has hopes for..." and the program as "a second chance—to show people I am not a failure and everything..." Plus reconnects kids to school and the importance of education and a high school diploma. Students commented about how Plus changed their attitudes about school and their future. For instance, one said: "I didn't care about school or grades or anything. When I came to Plus I seen that it is especially important to come to school." Teachers agree that "These kids wouldn't succeed without Plus...this is a place where they actually feel like they can get back on track and start believing in themselves again." Many students stressed the importance of an alternative setting. For instance, one said: "Plus took me out of bad influences... it s like being in a family here. My

friends would just go to the streets [and gang influences] and not come back until late. Now I go home and do my homework.”

Students value the fact that they still are part of their comprehensive high school and so can see friends at lunch or in classes, and graduate with their class. They take electives there, participate in extracurricular and social events. One Plus counselor was proud that her students had been Prom King, on the football team [one was captain], and recently won a Day of the Dead competition

Students had nothing but positive assessments of the program. As one put it: “Everybody loves this program. There is nothing bad about it at all. Love the teachers... they’re awesome!” The only downside mentioned was the fact that even though a Plus diploma requires the same number of credits as a ‘regular’ SJUSD diploma, not all classes satisfy the entrance requirements for the University of California or California State University systems. “Junior college, then real college. That’s the only down part that we have to go to junior college.” The district’s Plus overview acknowledges this limitation and cautions students that once a student has an alternative graduation plan it will be difficult to switch back to the traditional graduation plan.¹⁴ However, a successful community college student may transfer to any UC/CSU or other four year institution. Most all students we spoke with said “college” was their next step—meaning community college: “Everyone is thinking college” said one. College or not, all students we spoke with had a plan—a concrete idea of what they would do when they graduated.

An Alternative Educational Setting: What Makes Plus Effective?

Students emphasized the extent to which Plus was indeed an *alternative* high school setting. What makes Plus an effective alternative for these students who, by their own report, were on a path to drop out or not graduate with a SJUSD diploma? Although there were differences across Plus programs as counselors and teachers developed strategies for their particular student body, across school campuses Plus programs were remarkably consistent and represented a coherent district effort. A number of factors underlie the program’s successes with students, ranging from student selection to staffing to instructional strategies.

Selection Strategies

Students elect to join Plus. For many, this decision reflects the positive experience of a friend or a sibling. However, they must first be invited, and admission to Plus relies on program counselors’ assessment of students’ fit and potential for success. Plus counselors spend considerable time and thought selecting students for the program. A number of criteria come into play. Most important is credit distance to graduation; students cannot be so credit deficient that even the most creative combination of classes, electives, adult education, CCOC won’t bring them to the level of credits needed to graduate on time. As one counselor put it, on-time graduation “has to be mathematically possible.” At all Plus schools, counselors and students map out a detailed strategy for them to graduate—an individual plan that will involve credits earned in the program, but also courses in the comprehensive high school, regional occupational programs, adult education, community colleges and other options.

¹⁴ http://www.sjUSD.org/school/learning_options/info/C4689/ downloaded 10/9/2010

Plus requires adequate English skills; “the pace demands that,” said a teacher. The cutoff on the California English Language Development Test [CELDT] for admission to Plus, according to one counselor, “is a 4 or 5; teachers are not equipped to work with kids who are a 2 or 3.”

Other factors weigh significantly in selection decisions, most importantly students’ attitudes and behaviors. Although counselors will take a chance on students with spotty attendance records, students with a history of fighting or disruptiveness will not be admitted. One counselor, for instance, makes a visit not only to candidate students’ teachers to discuss their demeanor in class, but also to the school secretary to talk with her about how many times particular students have been sent to the office. Dane Caldwell-Holden, Principal/Manager of the district’s Learning Options office, said:

The counselors have learned over the years that the program lives and dies based on the kids who are there. Hence, if we pull a kid that’s got behavior problems on campus and I put him out on my campus, I’m just asking for more behavior problems, which I don’t need. It disrupts the program, it distracts them...

Counselors listen carefully to students’ reasons for applying to Plus and for what one termed the “light bulb” moment that motivated them to change, evidence that they are “serious about a second chance...to stay on campus and graduate with their friends.” One said “I try to avoid kids who think it is easy; I want motivated kids.” Students selected for Plus may be under credited and off track to graduate, may have skipped school and classes on a regular basis, but in Plus counselor’s assessment, they can graduate with support from the program. This stance on admission to the program comes from the district and is enacted at all sites. Caldwell-Holden outlined the policy this way:

So, the counselors are very cognizant of the fact that we’re looking for a very specific type of kid. A kid who realizes he made a mistake, wants to work to make it up, is between 25 and 65 credits behind, who’s going to show up. What the kids get in return for that is a set of adults who will support him 100 percent.

A counselor concurs:

The number one thing that I will not touch is a kid that has an attitude or behavior. We’ll take the kids with attendance issues and grade issues or GPA’s and be credit-deficient, because what we’ve experienced is that when they walk through that door, they come in and their self-esteem is kind of beat up and downtrodden. And every three weeks, we issue progress reports, how their grades and credits are, and you can see them quickly, just chest goes out, it’s like... a typical comment is, ‘I’ve never made the honor roll before!’ ... And by the middle of the year, I mean, you couldn’t even get them out of here, if you wanted to, they love it so much.

The policies and strategies Plus counselors use to admit students to the program go a long way to explain why Plus, unlike many other continuation programs, is not a revolving door and why almost all students graduate on time with a high school diploma. But, admission to the program is only one factor underlying Plus’s success. Multiple supports within the program keep students engaged, connected to school, motivated to do well and positive about their futures.

Staff

Plus teachers and counselors are dedicated to this student population and their success. Unlike some continuation high schools where our previous research has surfaced evidence that the alternative program is seen as a 'dumping ground' for teachers as well as students, Plus staff has chosen to be there and typically describe their work in terms of a mission or a calling. One teacher's comment reflected the views of many: "Here is where I can make a life-altering change." Caldwell-Holden keeps an eye from the district office on teacher assignment to his schools to ensure this commitment and fit, as well as academic background.

Plus counselors have a fair amount of autonomy in selecting teachers and look for this "fire in the belly," as one put it. "My focus is on teachers who not only have strong instructional credentials but who have a passion for these kids." Some Plus sites also employ a student hiring committee to interview prospective teachers to promote buy-in on both counts. One teacher told us that she was not totally sure she wanted to teach in an alternative program but that she was "blown away by the interview panel and students on it—by their focus on fit with the school and kids." Plus teachers describe their rewards and satisfaction in similar terms--working with a group for 2 years, seeing them graduate, being able to develop a relationship with them, unlike teachers in traditional high schools who see around 125 kids a day.

Plus counselors play a multi-faceted role. One described the job this way:

I am the principal, the vice principal, the chief cook and bottle washer. I do the suspensions, expulsions, all the disciplinary work. I handle the budget, just like a principal would in a major high school with 2,000 students, do everything exactly as a principal would do, exactly, but have a lot less personnel and a lot less problems. So, then we do counseling as well. It's kind of a funny hat. You may have to [discipline] someone, but you have to be attractive enough to them so that they'll come and talk to you as a counselor, and not that threatening in that role.

Counselors play a key bridging role on two fronts. They are the primary connection between the Plus program and the comprehensive high school. Relationships established and nurtured with the high school's principal, counselors and teachers influence the type of student referred to the program, the perception the program on the main campus, and the range of academic and co-curricular opportunities available to Plus students. Counselors also are the primary parent contact. From initial meetings with parents where expectations are established, to phone calls home asking about student whereabouts, counselors stress parents' responsibility to uphold expectations about attendance and on-time participation. One teacher said, for instance "Parents sign and agree to a detailed contract...they know that if they don't meet those expectations, [their child] is moved out to a different program." Plus counselors' parent outreach efforts and connections provide a crucial support for teachers.

Attendance Policies

"Before no one cared if I came to school..."

Plus has clear attendance policies and staff enforce them vigorously. Students and parents know the consequences of a missed day or a tardy. The credit recovery protocol for Plus programs requires consistent

attendance; in order to receive credits a student must be present. For every three absences (excused and unexcused), a student must attend Saturday school for four hours; otherwise, the academic credit is not awarded. The program particularly emphasizes attendance because it affects not only student progress but also funding. Teachers tell students that “if your butt isn’t in the chair we don’t get paid.” Or as a counselor put it: “Attendance pays these lights.”

Plus staff uses an array of strategies to get students to school and class on time. The first is a call to a student’s cell phone if they are not there at the start of first period. If they can’t reach the student, the next call is to the parent to inquire about the student’s whereabouts and remind parents of their responsibility to call if they know their student will be absent. Several teachers have the parent come to school to sit with the student, to underscore to them both the importance of being there.

Incentives and rewards play a major role in keeping attendance high. As one counselor put it: “I am into bribery!” Teachers reward students’ attendance with field trips, BBQs, pizza parties, certificates for McDonalds or Starbucks. Students with perfect attendance for six weeks and no tardies get an award certificate they can take home to their parents. The lively competition between AM and PM student cohorts for attendance rewards generates strong student attendance norms. A student told us: “We try to get better than them--- that’s motivation! Last time, they had a BBQ and we didn’t.” Students monitor each others’ attendance and strong group norms discourage cutting. “Don’t make us look bad!” One teacher commented that, by the end of first period, every student can tell you who is not in school.

Students see Plus’s tough attendance policy as a boost to the program’s image on campus. One teacher told us “I hear them talking to their friends, and they’ll say things like, ‘Oh, man, you can’t get away with anything in Plus. There’s only 20 kids in there, and ...if you try to cut, [my teacher will] nail you.’ And its like, ‘Man, if you’re absent at all, like five minutes, and he’s on the phone with my parents.’” Discipline policies at Plus operate much the same way: firm but supportive. Counselors avoid suspensions so kids can stay in school. Rather than suspend, counselors have them do community service, scrub classroom floors, and the like. Rigorous, proactive focus on attendance has paid off both in student success and in economic viability, The program’s high attendance rates means that Plus does not cost any more per student, on average, than ‘regular’ high school program and so is economically feasible.¹⁵

But all of these incentives and consequences would mean little if students did not want to be there. Plus students are of a voice in expressing their connection to the program, the comfort and support they feel there.

A Supportive School Environment

“What’s good about Plus? Smaller classes, available help, individual focus. Teachers take care that we are not overwhelmed. It is easier to get homework done, which was major reason why I was doing badly in high school; regular teachers don’t have patience. Plus teachers are open to new ideas. My Plus teacher has taught me more than I’ve ever learned in my *whole* life... like I [now] love reading...” And teachers care: “Like if anything happens to us, they already know and they’ll talk to us.” [comments from a student focus group]

¹⁵ Source: 2008-2009 School Accountability Report Card. Published in 2009-2010. Available at: [Http://www.sjusd.org](http://www.sjusd.org)

Comparisons between survey responses of Plus students to the district’s annual school climate survey and those of students attending the comprehensive high schools with which they were associated show that students experience these settings quite differently. Table 2 compares students’ responses—per cent agree/strongly agree—on items that reflect reasons why Plus students felt they were not successful in their comprehensive high school. The school for which data are reported is the Plus program Dane Caldwell-Holden thought most “typical” in terms of student demographics.

Table 2: School Climate Student Questionnaire, May 2010¹⁶

Survey Item	“Typical School” Responses	
	Plus % ¹⁷	Comprehensive %
Students at this school are friendly	79	51
Students treat each other with respect	66	32
My teachers tell me when I have done a good job	94	55
My teachers care about me	91	53
My teachers listen when I have something to say	91	59
My teachers give me individual help when I need it	92	60
My teachers notice if I am having trouble learning something	90	38
My teachers treat me with respect	97	67
I feel safe from threats/harassment at my school	85	60
My teachers show how class lessons are helpful in real life	85	39
My teachers talk with me about future career or job	94	42
I feel like I am a part of this school	81	54
Topics are taught in an interesting way	90	33
What we learn in class is necessary for the future	97	57
I feel I am a successful student	91	64
<i>N respondents</i>	32	1194

Results on similar items from the state’s annual California Healthy Kids Survey [CHKS] reinforces this comparison between Plus environments and students’ perceptions of those in their comprehensive high schools. On a measure of “school environment”¹⁸ differences between Plus students’ ratings and those of

¹⁶ SJUSD administers a School Climate survey annually at all schools. In addition to students, the district also surveys school staff and parents with the same questionnaire.

¹⁷ % of respondents answering agree/strongly agree to the question.

¹⁸ CHKS School Connectedness scale: [strongly agree/disagree 1-5]

- At my school there is a teacher or adult who really cares about me
- At my school there is a teacher or adult who notices when I am not there
- At my school there is a teacher or adult who listens to me when I have something to say
- At my school there is a teacher or adult who tells me when I do a good job
- At my school there is a teacher or adult who wants me to do my best
- At my school there is a teacher or adult who believes I will be a success
- I do interesting activities at school
- At school I help decide things like class activities or rules

comprehensive high school students receiving Ds and Fs are significant at the .05 level in all but one instance, with Plus students describing their school climate in more positive terms.¹⁹ And on a measure of “school connectedness”²⁰ Plus students again provided, with one exception, a significantly (.05) more positive assessment of their school than did students receiving Ds and Fs in comprehensive high schools.

In focus groups, students stressed how differently the Plus environment compared to their experience in their comprehensive high school where they felt “invisible” and marginalized. Plus students felt respected, listened to, connected to their peers, classroom activities and teachers. This student’s assessment is typical: “Teachers are a lot more understanding and respectful of your personal beliefs or whatever; they really do want to hear what you have to say; they bring up discussions where all of us have something to say.” The classroom environment is structured to support focus and engagement—there are no bells, no intercoms.

A sense of emotional and physical safety was bottom line for Plus students. Hispanic students especially felt marginalized in their comprehensive schools and looked down upon by cliques of mainstream white or Asian students. “Mexicans are looked down on. Here it is nice, it’s safe.” Students at all Plus sites described the environment as family-like. A Plus counselor underscores the fundamental importance of providing a safe setting:

They don’t wear colors here. There’s no gang crap going on here at all. Plus accepts everyone for who they are and what they’re doing right here, and they leave all that outside. We have a number of gay students here; there’s nothing said, nothing derogatory. We have a couple of students who are really goofy, and nobody gives them any trouble... It’s just a good, accepting place. The kids are really good. In fact, they’re protective of each other and their teachers.

Students emphasize the trust they feel from their teachers. As one put it: “We have a lot more freedom here, we are trusted more.” The student-run store figures prominently. Four of six sites have a store that sells food to students, under cost. Originally started to provide coffee and breakfast to Independent Study youth coming at 7 AM, the stores have become an integral part of the setting. “Students own this space,” one teacher said. “They take care of it. And the store creates community. There are no cliques here.”

Plus teachers say they “Don’t sweat the small stuff...” and endeavor to treat students as adults. Students’ use of such things as ear plugs, hats, food in the classroom—all infractions in the comprehensive high school setting—receive no comment at Plus. As one teacher put it, “you’ve got to attend to the person first.”

-
- I do things at school that make a difference

¹⁹ We compare Plus students to those receiving [by self report] primarily Ds and Fs since these grades are most like those Plus students received in the comprehensive high school.

²⁰ CHKS School Connectedness scale: [strongly agree/disagree 1-5]

- I feel close to the people in this school
- I am happy to be at this school
- I feel like I am part of this school
- The teachers here treat students fairly
- I feel safe at my school

Teachers' attention to students' personal circumstances—such as working with public transit to get free passes—reinforces students' perception that they are seen, heard, and respected. And students feel that staff responds quickly if behavior is out of line and focus on what the problem might be rather than penalty. As one put it: "Over there, if you act out they will just send you out, just make you sit outside. Here they'll deal with it right away... and [counselor] actually is interested in what's wrong with you."

Student-Centered Curricula and Pedagogy

With their counselor and teachers, students create their own learning plan—how they will accumulate credits sufficient to graduate with their class. But essential to students' success was the learning environment teachers created and the instructional strategies they used. Students pointed to class size and teacher loads as one reason why they felt they received little assistance in the mainstream setting if they were having problems with their school work. They felt teachers at their comprehensive high school had little time or interest in dealing with struggling students. "Over at [the other school] you can tell that the teacher just hates to be there—they see so many students, have to deal with so many students." Many students felt that "...No one really cared if we came to class or not" and that "... in regular school, they have no time for the individual." The consequence, said students, was to 'stop caring and stop doing your work.' Plus staff agrees that it is very difficult in mainstream high school settings to provide individual attention, especially to students who are failing. One teacher, with several years' experience in a comprehensive high school, said, "it's completely different here. You can ask about why, provide personal assistance, work with a kid to bring up an F." Several aspects of the classroom environment put students at the center of their learning.

Close relationships with teachers. Plus students experienced the program as fundamentally different from the regular high school in terms of relationships with teachers, support, and personal encouragement for their academic success. One student summed up the views of students this way: "Our teachers add more interest in each student in this class, like they really have interest in each person, and they take the time to make our activities fun. They try to put like personal attention to the assignment." Teachers' personal attention made all the difference in their motivation to work hard and focus on school. "In the [other school], teachers didn't have enough time to work with us—that made us not care about homework and so we didn't do it. Like here they will do everything in their power to help you pass, and if you don't it is your own fault." Another said: "It's different here...they're really on you, but they don't let you fail; they help out a lot; they don't let you down; they don't give up on you." Teachers take great care not to embarrass struggling students. One teacher shows missing assignments by code name—for instance, "Bugs Bunny is missing Wednesday's work".

Rigor and flexibility. Plus instruction is aligned with California's state standards. A Plus counselor stressed the rigor of Plus instruction:

There are no Mickey Mouse classes. I've been in drop-out programs that have been Mickey Mouse... there's a bunch of sofas around and they're just holding kids. That is not what this is about. [Plus] is very academic. Our teachers are as academic as the main school, in fact a little more in math and science. [Plus counselor]

However, teachers do not have to adhere to the district's instructional benchmarks which guide instruction in comprehensive high schools. Plus teachers comment on the flexibility of the curriculum that allows them to select standards to emphasize in their instruction, based on what their students need most, and what the

CAHSEE and college admission exams will be testing. Dane Caldwell-Holden, Plus Principal, summed up the district's stance this way:

I don't demand that everybody teaches science or math or English of whatever the same way. I ask that they cover all the state standards they can cover. We don't follow district pacing calendars or benchmark tests because we can't follow those things. I don't like packet work. I want to see more Socratic discussion, more group work, more hands on stuff. Kids will rise to expectations.

And students responding in focus groups, to the district's annual school climate survey and the California Healthy Kids Survey felt that teachers held high expectations of them. Across Plus sites, 83% students agree/strongly agree with the statement "My teachers expect me to do my best."

Individualized Learning. Plus teachers, like teachers in alternative educational settings elsewhere, are challenged to accommodate the diverse learning issues and skill levels students bring to the program. Across Plus sites, for instance, English teachers said that students' reading ability levels ranged from 3rd to 12th grade. Likewise math teachers worked with students barely numerate to those able to move into Algebra: "I have kids who count on their fingers to those who could do college-level math." Because Plus is located on the comprehensive school campus, students are able to take mainstream courses for which they qualify.

Plus teachers focus on individual students' understanding of materials, something students report was missing in their mainstream high school. For example, one told us:

If we don't understand something, they find a way for us to understand it. Like when they teach us something, they teach it in a way we can remember it. Like some other teachers, they had like a certain method to the way they want to teach, and if you don't understand that was you're just going to fail their class.

Another said: "You don't get left behind in this class. In other classes that have so many students—even if you go at lunch or after school, they're busy with meetings. Here is a smaller class more focused on the individual."

Teachers make use of a variety of methods to reach students and support their learning. Classroom instruction in Plus blends whole-class lectures with work assigned based on individual needs. Teachers keep activities varied and change up often because, as one teacher put it, "almost all of our students have ADD [attention deficit disorder]." Another said, "In all of my years of teaching I have learned that with the Alt Ed student you have to change it up...they need change." Plus teachers say that they deal with the different levels of skills and competencies by grouping students of different levels together or by assigning high-performing students as tutors and encouraging "lots of peer interaction." The teachers we observed were skilled at projecting passion into the room, whether about math or astronomy or the industrial revolution.

On-going feedback and variable credit also personalize instruction. Plus programs provide consistent, on-going feedback to students about how they are doing, what they have accomplished, and what they need to focus on. Stress is on the positive and parents receive on-going reports as well. Rewards and incentives figure prominently in PLUS assessment practices—public, tangible notice of student progress in credits, academic achievement and competencies. In addition to the much-appreciated rewards of food, teachers’ creativity has resulted in field trips to local amusement parks, opera, and other events.

Attention to life skills. Plus counselors and teachers stress that the program’s mission encompasses more than academics. The number one goal is for students to graduate on time. But the program intends as well “to change their perspective on life and to really value education,” as one teacher put it. Instruction incorporates elements of self-management strategies such as how to work in small groups, how to set goals [near, mid and long term], and how to get there. The program also features college knowledge. Representatives from local community colleges visit regularly, students visit college campuses, Plus alums enrolled in or graduated from college stop by to talk with students about their experiences and motivate them to head to college. Teachers and counselors provide concrete help in terms of practice writing college essays and filling out financial aid forms. Counselors and teachers say they are able to spend this time focusing on college and self-management skills because they are not as constrained by state testing requirements as are their colleagues in comprehensive high schools.

District Context Matters

A number of district-level factors underlie the successful operation of the Plus program.

A Menu of Alternatives

The array of alternative education options available to students is fundamental. The San Jose Unified School District provides a menu of alternatives through the Learning Options office; an estimated 10% of the district’s secondary school students participate in these programs. Plus could not operate as it does absent this broader programmatic context. Students who do not qualify for the Plus program because they are too far behind on credits, are not minimally proficient in English, or have had significant behavioral problems have other alternatives available to them, from small, necessary continuation schools, to a middle college program, to independent study, to community day programs.²¹ The availability of this menu of options means that students unsuccessful in the regular high schools can be placed in alternative programs with careful attention to fit between student needs and the educational setting.

Many continuation programs across the state function as “dumping grounds” or “safety valves” for comprehensive high schools because they are the only, or one of few, alternative placements available. As a consequence, continuation programs in these district settings experience high levels of churn as students enter and leave on a weekly if not daily basis and teachers struggle to respond to the very different personal and

²¹ In addition to the six Plus programs, Learning Options include Liberty High School and Virtual Academy, O’Connor Career Academy, Middle College, Home studies, Independent Studies. San Jose Community Middle and High Schools, which are independent of the Learning Options office, serve extremely at-risk students who have been expelled, suspended or has been adjudicated. Learning Options also provides counseling support for SJUSD students attending MetroEd’s Central County Occupational Program [CCOC] where students attend regular high school for half of day and CCOC for half day. http://www.sjUSD.org/school/learning_options/

academic needs students bring to the program. Plus, in contrast, is able to select of students most likely to succeed because other options exist for students who require more or different academic and personal supports.

Supportive District Leadership

The district's significant investment in alternative programs reflects the express, strong commitment of district leadership to providing quality options for this vulnerable student population. In districts across the state, continuation or alternative programs have been among the first to feel the impact of fiscal retrenchment. Learning Options in SJUSD, in contrast, have grown even as the district struggles to balance its budget. The superintendent sets the tone for alternative education and, according to the Principal of the Learning Options programs, he is an "absolute proponent." The recently retired superintendent was known to have a "strong connection to the kids who have the most needs," in part because of his background in special education. Support from the superintendent and the school board has meant that Caldwell-Holden is an integral part of the district management team and decisions about curriculum and instruction. His place in the district office also provides Caldwell-Holden with the knowledge and contacts to provide the necessary supports and services to alternative education students. His position contrasts with the status of alternative education in other district settings, where it is often a small and low priority component of an Assistant Superintendent's portfolio.

Because alternative education defines his job, Caldwell-Holden is able to keep a close eye on his programs. He visits each Plus site every couple of weeks, for instance, to foster a high level of programmatic consistency across Plus sites. The programmatic location of Learning Options also sends the message to Plus counselors and teachers that alternative education is a district priority and, as a counselor put it, "the superintendent and [our boss] are on the same page...that kind of support encourages us to achieve as much as possible."

The priority afforded Learning Options in SJUSD also has brought valued professional development supports for teachers and counselors. Teachers stress the importance of the once a month Plus meetings at the district office as an opportunity to share with colleagues in other sites, adopt uniform measures of success, get ideas to support curriculum and instructional practices. This district stance on the professional opportunities available to educators in alternative programs contrasts with the experiences of colleagues in alternative settings elsewhere who say they feel like "lone rangers or independent contractors" because they lack such opportunities.

Data, Advocacy and Accountability

Despite its success with students who otherwise would have failed or dropped out of regular high schools, the Plus programs are sometimes seen as a destination for the "bad" or "dumb" kids. Plus teachers and counselors feel that, as one counselor put it, "the program really isn't that well known in the school or in the community... or that it is where the kids in trouble go." Caldwell-Holden says that advocacy for the Plus program [and alternative settings more generally] is an on-going task and that he never misses an opportunity to inform educators or the community about the success and contribution of the Learning Options programs. The support and buy-in of the comprehensive high school principal is essential to the smooth operation of the Plus program. Counselors at two Plus sites said that the program was seen as a dumping ground by the comprehensive high school a few years ago. The arrival of new principal in both sites has, in the words of one,

“transformed the program...and I need them and they need me. I boost graduation rates; they provide classes we cannot offer.”

Data documenting students’ graduation rates play a key role in program advocacy at all levels, according to Caldwell-Holden. Outcome data demonstrate to district leadership the financial rationale for supporting alternative settings—kids who would no longer be enrolled in the district are bringing in ADA through Learning Options. Data also figure prominently in Caldwell-Holden’s advocacy efforts for the program on the comprehensive campuses:

The one thing I have to continually remind some of the schools is that ‘My kids are your kids in the Plus program. You’d better understand that if my kids are successful, your graduation rate is higher; if my kids are successful, your kids aren’t going to get in trouble, because my kids graduate as your kids. They don’t graduate as my kids, they graduate as yours.’

* * *

The Plus program intervenes in the lives of students who are unsuccessful in the comprehensive high school setting, likely to drop out, but able to take advantage of the program’s opportunity to graduate on time. Though criteria for a Plus diploma may be short of “college ready” as defined by California’s A-G requirements for admission to the University of California or California State University systems, Plus students do graduate with solid grade-level academic skills, and the motivation necessary to remain engaged in post secondary learning or to pursue positive career goals.

Plus’s programming choices are specifically tailored to the needs of students placed in the program and are implemented consistently across Plus sites. This tight relationship between placement and programming holds the key to Plus’s success. But it also points to the limitation of Plus as an alternative education strategy: it is not for all students. Plus is not designed for students with significant behavioral challenges, for beginning or intermediate English learners, or for students with little practical possibility of accruing credits sufficient to graduate on time. The district provides good options for these students through other programs. For students accepted into Plus, the program represents a genuine second chance and, for almost all of them, an opportunity to move from being “on track to dropping out” to “on track to graduate” and positive futures.

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