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Alternative Education Options: A Descriptive Study of California Continuation High Schools

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This issue brief summarizes initial findings from a year-long descriptive study of continuation high schools in California. It is the first in a series of reports from the ongoing *California Alternative Education Research Project* conducted jointly by the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University, the National Center for Urban School Transformation at San Diego State University, and WestEd.

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Continuation high schools and the students they serve are largely invisible to most Californians. Yet, state school authorities estimate that over 115,000 California high school students will pass through one of the state's 519 continuation high schools each year, either on their way to a diploma, or to dropping out of school altogether (Austin & Dixon, 2008).¹ Since 1965, state law has mandated that most school districts enrolling over 100 12th grade students make available a continuation program or school that provides an alternative route to the high school diploma for youth vulnerable to academic or behavioral failure. The law provides for the creation of continuation schools "designed to meet the educational needs of each pupil, including, but not limited to, independent study, regional occupation programs, work study, career counseling, and job placement services." It contemplates more intensive services and accelerated credit accrual strategies so that students whose achievement in comprehensive schools has lagged might have a renewed opportunity to "complete the required academic courses of instruction to graduate from high school."²

Taken together, the size, scope and legislative design of the continuation high school program make clear that these schools are a cornerstone of the state's drop-out prevention strategy. This study concludes, however, that these schools of last resort may be the last

¹ Based on data reported to the Educational Options Office of the California Department of Education.

² See California Education Code, § 48430, *et seq.*, and § 51225.3.

schools ever attended by large numbers of California students because they are not getting the academic and support services they need to succeed.⁵

Study Background

This study draws on survey results and state administrative data reviewed by staff at WestEd and detailed in a supporting technical report (Austin & Dixon, *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, we draw on technical reports (McLaughlin, Atukpawu & Williamson, 2008; Ruiz de Velasco, 2008; and Perez & Johnson, 2008) that detail results from field research undertaken during the winter and spring of 2007 in 9 southern, central, and northern California counties.⁶ Within these counties, researchers visited 26 school districts and 40 schools (including 3 sending schools and 37 continuation high schools) that differed in focus, student outcomes, size, and metropolitan status. Researchers also interviewed individuals associated with county and community youth-serving agencies, such as juvenile justice, mental health, child protective services, and foster care.

Organization of Report. The study takes the continuation high school as the central point of analysis, but situates this analysis within state, county and district systems. In Section I, we summarize available data describing the demographics, behavioral characteristics, and academic performance of students in California's continuation schools. The main sources of information are the California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS) with student demographic and enrollment data, the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) for behavioral data and the California School Climate Survey (CSCS). During the 2004-06 periods the CHKS was administered at 364 continuation high schools (70 percent of the total) and was completed by about 23,000 continuation

students. Although adequate student performance information is still lacking, the report also draws on relevant data from the Standardized Testing and Reporting System (STAR); the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE); and the Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) system.

In Section II, we focus on state policy from the point of view of local educators involved with continuation schools. We explore how accountability and finance systems affect the day-to-day work of principals and teachers. We make no effort to be exhaustive about state policy, but rather draw on responses from schools we visited to identify those state-determined factors that school leaders and teachers find most salient.

In section III, we turn to the role that counties and districts play in affecting school quality and outcomes. Adolescents in secondary schools often have significant contact (voluntarily and involuntarily) with a myriad of community non-profit, and county or municipal social services, law enforcement, or juvenile justice agencies that come to play important roles in their lives. County and district strategies for providing these services and resources have consequences for continuation high schools and their students.

Finally, in Section IV, we consider school-level factors, as reported by principals and teachers, that appear to be associated with better student achievement outcomes.

Summary of Findings

I

Characteristics of Students in California Continuation High Schools

Who attends California's continuation high schools? Originally designed to provide a flexible schedule for working students, the modern continuation school now serves a diverse student population. The single common denominator is that most continuation students have reached age 16 lacking sufficient academic credits to remain on track to graduate with their age cohort, but the data also reveal them to be a highly vulnerable population characterized by multiple risk behaviors and other nonacademic learning barriers.

⁵ This observation is consistent with a recent study estimating that about one-third of all California high school drop-outs in the 2005-06 school year were last enrolled in an alternative school. Continuation schools enroll the greatest number of students among alternative school options included in the study (Rotermund, 2007).

⁶ Counties in the study include Humboldt, Alameda, Santa Clara, San Joaquin, Fresno, San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

Student Race & Ethnicity. Student populations in continuation schools are more likely to be racially or ethnically concentrated than those in the state’s comprehensive high schools. Hispanic students especially tend to be over-represented, comprising 55 percent of all students in continuation schools and 61.4 percent of enrollments in schools we visited, compared to 42.3 percent of the 11th grade enrollment in comprehensive schools statewide.⁷ In contrast, non-Hispanic white and Asian⁸ students are *under*-represented relative to 11th grade enrollments in comprehensive schools. As shown in **Table 1** below, African-American enrollments in continuation schools approximate those of comprehensive schools statewide, but were found to be over-represented in our site-visit schools, which include an oversampling of urban schools. For example, we visited 13 schools situated in districts where African-American students comprised 10 percent or more of total district-wide enrollment. We found that almost half of those schools (6 of 13) had African-American student enrollments that exceeded district-wide averages by 50 percent or more.

Table 1

	Site Visit Schools (37) 2006-07	Statewide Continuation School Enrollment 2006-2007	Statewide 11 th Grade Enrollment 2006-07
Hispanic	61.4%	55%	42.3%
White	17.5%	26%	34.3%
Asian	7%	3%	12.2%
African-American	14.1%	11%	8%

Sources: CBEDS, 2006-2007

English Language Learner (ELL) Students. English learners are also over-represented in continuation high schools. As noted in **Table 2**, enrollment of English learners in the 11th grade is 14 percent statewide, while it

⁷ We chose the 11th grade (2006-07 from the CBEDS data) for comparison as representing the most comparable age cohort to students in continuation schools. Also, that is the comparison grade when using survey data from the CHKS.

⁸ Asian students here include students who self report as Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander.

is about 21.3 percent in continuation schools statewide. In the continuation schools we visited (which oversampled in high-growth areas, including Fresno, San Joaquin, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties), over one-quarter of the students (25.6 percent) were classified as ELL. Spanish was the home language of about 75 percent or more of the ELL students in our sample; some Central Valley schools enrolled sizeable Hmong and Cambodian-origin students.

Table 2

	Site Visit Schools (37) 2006-07	Statewide Continuation School Enrollment 2006-2007	Statewide 11 th Grade Enrollment 2006-07
English Learners (EL)	25.6%	21.3%	14%

Sources: CBEDS,, 2006-2007; EdSource, 2008,

Living and Family Arrangements. Continuation students surveyed on the CHKS are three times more likely than students surveyed in comprehensive high schools to be in foster care or living with a relative other than a parent (11 percent vs. 4 percent for 11th graders in the statewide survey).

Student Mobility. Compared to students in comprehensive schools, continuation students are more likely to move from school to school and, as a result, spend less time in any one school. Mobility results from family moves as well as changes in students’ foster home placements. Between 2004 and 2006, 17 percent of continuation students surveyed on the CHKS reported changing where they lived two or more times in the past year, compared to 7 percent of 11th graders (almost 2.5 times higher). Almost half (47 percent) of continuation students reported being enrolled in any one continuation school for fewer than 90 days, giving these schools very little time to help them.

Alcohol and Other Substance Use. Rates of regular and heavy alcohol and drug use (including use at school) are at least two times higher among continuation students than 11th-grade students in comprehensive schools; group differences increase with the severity of involvement. For example, methamphetamine use and

daily marijuana use are about five times higher among continuation students. Continuation students also reported almost twice the rates of 11th graders for a range of use-related problems and dependency indicators.

Especially disconcerting is the high rate of substance use at school. Almost one-fifth of continuation students had been drunk or high at school on seven or more occasions, more than three times the reported rate among 11th graders surveyed on the CHKS statewide (24 percent vs. 7 percent). They are, at least three times more likely than 11th graders in comprehensive schools to report that alcohol or other drug use causes them to get into trouble and that it interferes with normal activities, such as studying. Consistent with these results, when the California School Climate Survey (CSCS) asked continuation school staff to rate how great a problem each of 14 student behaviors were to their school, three of the four most-selected problems were drug use, tobacco use, and alcohol use, in order (with truancy being the fourth), at percentages markedly higher than among students at comprehensive high schools.

Violence & Victimization. Continuation students are about three times more likely than 11th graders statewide to have been in four or more physical fights at school in the past 12 months, as well as to have carried a gun to school (13 percent for both versus 3-4 percent for 11th graders in comprehensive schools) according to the CHKS. Similarly, 14 percent of continuation students have ever been a gang member, twice the percentage of 11th graders statewide (7 percent). They are also more likely to be physically victimized in and out of school. Nine percent report being threatened or injured with a weapon more than once, over double the rate of 11th graders statewide (4 percent).⁹

In sum, these data illustrate the dimension of the challenges faced by continuation schools and their students. They are highly vulnerable youth with

⁹ Rates of reported violent conflict with peers were also higher among continuation students. They are twice as likely as 11th graders statewide to report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt by their boy or girlfriend in the past 12 months (14 percent vs. 7 percent).

multiple risk factors and a great deal of turbulence in their lives. Continuation schools are charged with providing alternative ways of helping at risk students to remain in school and meet state performance standards common to all students. But these academic efforts cannot be separated from the need to address the high level of nonacademic learning barriers that continuation students experience. These data illustrate as well the need for highly skilled educators who can combine instructional content knowledge with strong behavior management skills and a deep understanding of youth development.

Indicators of School Success at Promoting Student Achievement

It is exceedingly difficult to ascertain how well continuation high schools do in the aggregate at helping students succeed in the absence of a longitudinal data system that would enable researchers to track student progress across educational settings over time. Likewise, state data systems do not make it currently possible to construct a comparable comparison group to students in continuation schools given that students are, by design, selected for continuation placement on the basis of prior credit deficiencies, inappropriate behavior, and/or a poor attendance record. We would need a data system that allowed us to assess continuation students by comparing them to students in comprehensive schools *who have similar prior performance and behavioral characteristics*. In the absence of such a data system, academic comparisons between continuation and comprehensive schools can be highly misleading.

Performance on the Academic Performance Index (API) and Standard Assessments. With the forgoing caveat in mind, it should come as no surprise that continuation students score substantially lower on virtually all measures of academic performance, including the STAR and CAHSEE exams, than their grade-equivalent cohorts in comprehensive schools. Since school performance measures are derived from school level, aggregate test scores, it is also not surprising that continuation schools score lower on the state's Academic Performance Index (API). In 2006-07, the average API for a continuation school serving this age group was 471, compared to an average score of 686 for comprehensive high schools. Of equal significance, out of 519 continuation schools, only

376 reported sufficient numbers of valid test scores to receive an API (72 percent).

At the local level, school records make it possible to assess how well individual schools do at helping students on specific achievement goals (e.g., pass rates on the CAHSEE or improvement on the STAR test), but as we report in Sections II - IV, local interventions, standards, and even outcome goals vary to such an extent that it is not possible to compare student performance across schools or districts. In fact, data reveal a wide variation in test score results and evidence of success. For example, about 10 percent of 229 continuation schools, for which API scores were available for three consecutive years, were found to be “beating the odds” and performing better than one might expect based on their CBEDS demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, ELL, free/reduce meals, parental education, average class size).

Comparisons of continuation and comprehensive school performance based upon year-to-year change scale scores for individual students also provide a somewhat mixed picture. *While students in continuation schools still do less well, changes in student scores across years are more comparable.* For example, matching individual scale scores for 2005-06 and 2006-07 shows that high school students who took the language arts portion of the STAR in a continuation school lost 13 scale score points between years, while those tested in a comprehensive school showed a loss of 2 scale score points. By contrast, continuation schools modestly out-performed comprehensive schools in math. While high school aged students in both types of school lost points, those tested in continuation school showed less of a loss (-5) than those tested in a comprehensive school (-16).

Performance on the CAHSEE. As with STAR results, students in continuation schools score significantly lower on the CAHSEE than those in comprehensive schools. In 2006-07, the pass rate among continuation students on the language arts portion of the CAHSEE was about half that of students in comprehensive schools (31 percent versus 61 percent). In math, the differences were greater. The math pass rates for continuation students were 26 percent versus 61 percent for students in comprehensive schools.

Notably, while CAHSEE pass rates for continuation students are significantly lower, much of the difference is accounted for by grade level of students tested. Among 10th graders in 2006-07, CAHSEE passage rates for continuation school students were significantly lower than those of students in comprehensive schools. In the 11th and 12th grades, however, comprehensive high school pass rates are very close or identical to those of continuation schools.¹⁰ This performance pattern is related to the fact that a smaller, more academically deficient subgroup of comprehensive school students — a subgroup academically more like continuation students — are retaking the exam at grades 11 and 12.

This observation suggests that when roughly comparable students are examined, continuation schools may be doing at least as well at helping students succeed on the CAHSEE as comprehensive schools. In fact, several of the continuation schools we visited boasted better CAHSEE pass rates than their respective sending schools.

When we further looked at data from the CHKS and CSCS for factors that might account for why some continuation schools perform better than others, among the indicators significantly linked to higher API performance were student perceptions about how connected they felt to the school, school safety, and about the presence of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation in their schools. As well, higher school APIs were associated with staff reports of student behaviors that facilitate learning (including being healthy, alert, ready to learn, and well-behaved) and of low levels of substance use as a problem at the school. This underscores again how closely connected are academic and nonacademic factors in these schools.

While meriting more examination with better data, these findings suggests a measure of success given the greater documented behavioral and emotional challenges of

¹⁰ English language arts pass rates are identical for continuation and comprehensive schools in the 11th (31 percent) and 12th (24 percent) grades. For math, continuation school pass rates are only slightly lower; 25 percent versus 31 percent in grade 11 and 22 percent versus 26 percent in grade 12.

students in these continuation settings. Still, the over-all picture is one of substantial variation across schools in success and performance. Coming to a better understanding of determinants of this variation is a major theme of our study.

II

State Accountability and Resource Policy – Major Enabling and Constraining Factors

One of the initial questions posed to school and district leaders concerned the chief enabling and constraining factors that bear on their work with continuation students. Our interviews provide two consistent and over-arching descriptions of state policy as it relates to their work. First, school principals frequently reported that the universal application in 1999 of state *student* performance and curriculum standards posed new challenges for continuation schools and spurred them to think more creatively about how they staff their schools and how they approach instruction. By contrast, local school leaders report that they operate within a weaker *school* accountability system that contains fewer incentives for promoting student success than the accountability system applied to comprehensive schools.

Second, school staff report that there is scant recognition in state finance policy of the special challenges to effective programming in continuation high schools. This constraint is particularly important in a state where state and federally controlled dollars together account for more ninety percent of school finances, on average (EdSource, 2006). Each of these two observations is discussed in greater detail below.

State Accountability Issues a Top Concern for Continuation School Principals and Teachers.

Student Performance, Curriculum, and Teacher Quality Standards Shape Local Action. School leaders, especially those with considerable experience in continuation schools, were often quick to note that while the statutes that authorize continuation schools are somewhat ambiguous about academic standards, the subsequent universal application of both the California

Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) and the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) have left no doubt that California intends to hold all students to the same academic standards for receipt of a standard high school diploma.¹¹

Most educators we spoke with embraced this single basic standard for the diploma as an important factor in improving the quality of instruction in continuation high schools in the last decade. Principals reported that prior to the enactment of the PSAA, curriculum standards in continuation schools were often lower than those in sending schools. While noting that curriculum quality continues to vary in continuation schools, school leaders have gotten the message that the state goal is to deliver on a curriculum that meets state standards for all students. In particular, principals often commented that the CAHSEE standard (though minimal) gives students and teachers a concrete goal-post to structure and animate their efforts. Some principals also noted the benefits of No Child Left Behind's increased focus on teacher preparation – they pointed out that more of their teachers are now fully credentialed than in past years because of NCLB's requirements.

Nevertheless, local educators also often observed that this standard-driven approach assumes that it is possible for students in continuation programs to accomplish state-mandated benchmarks in the *same* amount of time, and further that the materials, curricula, and supports necessary for academic success are the same and readily available to continuation students. In this respect, teachers often report that they are largely left to their own devices to figure out how to align their instructional efforts to the state standards. An important consequence is that, more than ever, student success turns on access to teachers who can help them successfully navigate the standards.

¹¹ We note, however, that while the state requires all students to complete a basic course of study (CA Education Code § 51225.3) and to demonstrate the same subject mastery (e.g., as measured by achievement on the California Standards Tests); some districts establish higher local standards for students in comprehensive schools, while maintaining lower credit accrual requirements for students in continuation or other alternative programs to qualify for a diploma.

A Different and Demonstrably Weaker Accountability System for Continuation Schools. In stark contrast to the common academic achievement goals for all students, school leaders describe a dichotomous accountability system in which alternative schools are held to a set of standards that are substantially different from those of comprehensive schools. Our interviews with continuation school leaders largely confirm findings of the Legislative Analyst's Office (Warren, 2007) that conflicting rules either allow most schools to escape accountability under the Federal NCLB Law and the State Public School Accountability Act of 1999, or application of those systems bear few discernable consequences for alternative schools.

Site administrators were particularly ambivalent about the voluntary Alternative School Accountability Measures (ASAM). On the one hand, the ASAM measures enabled school leaders to document important academic "engagement" benchmarks, such as attendance or credit completion rates that are particularly important to work with academically vulnerable populations. School principals often complained, however, that the ASAM measures are not incorporated into their assessments of adequate yearly progress (AYP). Several principals in schools that have been awarded "model" status by the CDE stated a clear preference for focusing their faculties on the WASC accreditation process and on school-articulated goals for student achievement.¹² In general, principals observed that the ambiguous state accountability system reflects a lack of consensus among educators and policymakers about how to measure the effectiveness of schools that serve students with special needs, as well as about what ought to be the legitimate expectations of teachers and principals in this sub-sector of secondary schools.

State Finance and Governance Policy Conceives of the Continuation School as a Small Version of a Comprehensive School

Principals and teachers in the continuation high schools we visited report that they are charged with doing more,

¹² The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) is one of six regional associations that accredit public and private schools, colleges, and universities in the United States

in less time, but with roughly the same resources per student, as all other schools.¹³ They indicate that this feature of state policy leaves them ill-equipped to meet student needs and is ultimately one of the most frustrating and unfair constraints with which they must contend.

We reviewed data from the CSCS indicating that continuation school staff are more likely than comprehensive school staff to describe their schools as having a positive, caring, and safe learning environment that promotes, and has high expectations for, student academic success. Prevention and health practitioners on the CSCS also tended to report that continuation schools have higher levels of supports and services than comprehensive schools to address the nonacademic needs of students. These survey data suggest a strong staff commitment to meeting both the academic and nonacademic needs of their students.

Nevertheless, our site visits and review of administrative data on staffing and services actually available at continuation school sites indicate that the reality does not always measure up to the staff survey perceptions in the CSCS. We observed that the current finance structure, in particular, has powerful implications for alternative schools. While small classes and low student-teacher ratios are universally acknowledged by educators and policymakers as essential features of instruction in alternative settings, many continuation schools receive no additional

¹³ There are significant disparities in funding for continuation schools among districts. For historical reasons, continuation schools established after 1979 receive a financial supplement in addition to the district high school revenue limit. However, this add-on is calculated only once, in the first year of the school's operation. No annual adjustment of the add-on is made to reflect subsequent increases or decreases in the number of students or staffing in the school. The result is that some districts receive no supplemental funding to operate continuation schools, while others receive add-ons based solely on historical artifact rather than on any calculation of actual student needs. Continuation school programming and staffing is further complicated by state rules that limit continuation schools to reimbursement for a maximum of 15 instruction hours per student each school week, regardless of actual additional programming or attendance (Education Code § 46170).

funding to account for the additional required staffing. For example, we found that over one-third of the schools we visited have class sizes that are only marginally better than the district-wide averages (i.e., class sizes equal to, or greater than, 20 to 1) and with no special counseling or vocational education supports. Moreover, one-third of the schools we visited had student/teacher ratios (based on FTE) that actually exceeded the average student/teacher ratio for comprehensive high schools in their districts.¹⁴

This structure poses particularly steep financial challenges for schools enrolling fewer than 200 students, in the absence of state or district add-ons. While continuation schools usually have enough enrollment to hire at least one part-time academic counselor, most schools we visited did not have enough to qualify for a librarian, nurse, or dedicated attendance officer. None reported hiring staff specializing in English language development instruction, despite the fact that almost half of the schools we visited had enrollments of 25% or more ELL.¹⁵ Schools enrolling fewer than 200 students are generally staffed with only a principal, one or two clerical aids, and a part-time counselor (who is often shared with another school or program). The only departure from typical school staffing structure in a comprehensive school is the lower student-teacher ratio; and even that depends on district support and commitment to alternative instruction.

This staffing system reflects the horizontal equity of the per-pupil funding system that assumes all students ought to be funded equally. However, as noted earlier, students placed in continuation schools usually present great academic and behavioral challenges to school staff.

¹⁴ The California Department of Education and the California Continuing Education Association recommend student/teacher ratios be no more than 1/15 in continuation schools. Only about one-quarter of the 36 schools in our sample meet this target.

¹⁵ Austin and Dixon find comparable rates of English Language Development and Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English services to students across comprehensive and continuation schools. These findings merit a closer examination given site visit data that suggests much lower staff capacity to deal with language development issues in continuation schools (Austin & Dixon, 2008), (Ruiz de Velasco, 2008).

Students in these settings are also more likely than peers in comprehensive schools to be pregnant, parenting small children, or working part time. Keeping such students engaged in school and supporting their academic needs while enabling them to shoulder family responsibilities also requires special supports. We observed that unless a principal makes a concerted effort to acquire these additional resources from sources outside his or her district, student needs will often go unmet by alternative programs as typically staffed.

III

County and School District Contexts

Continuation high schools remain among the most understudied sub-sector of secondary education in California (and nationally). Thus, it seemed important to get a clearer picture of where continuation schools fit in California within the field of youth policy at the county level (i.e., health, law enforcement, and education agencies that serve youth) as well as among comprehensive secondary schools and “alternative” secondary school “options” within school districts.

No Youth Policy: An “institutional train wreck” at the county and local level

In California – as in other states – there is no single point of authority for articulating state policy on youth education and development. Consequently, alternative education programs operate at the intersection of multiple professional and regulatory frameworks. Students typically are involved in other state “systems” of regulation and oversight - probation, child protective services, homeless services, to name a few. Successful student experiences in alternative education programs depend not only on effective opportunities for academic engagement but also on critical support services often accessible only from out-of-school agencies. Yet, at both county and district levels, we found that the various youth-serving institutions which touch alternative education students generally operate in isolation from one another, or worse, at cross purposes.

No explicit “youth policy” exists in most counties or districts; instead regulatory structures balkanize youth services and create what could be called an “institutional

train wreck.” Nowhere in the broad youth policy domain do the problematic interrelationships among these institutions come together with more consequence than they do for alternative education’s vulnerable population. Continuation students fortunate to live in counties or communities with structures established to promote the coordination of youth services benefit from a level of resource integration and support generally unavailable in other settings.

Variability in Focus and Quality

California’s ambiguous and fragmented alternative education regulatory framework means that in practice, if not in policy, California’s alternative education programs reflect county and district priorities and contexts. These local decisions and resources largely determine not only the alternative options available to students, but also the goals of the alternative programs—to serve as a safety net, a safety valve or a cool out of public education (Warren 2007). The county administers one or two alternative programs—community schools and community day schools. Though these programs often intersect with district-run continuation high schools, communication across program boundaries is uncommon. In many locations, these county programs are seen as “holding pens,” or the option of last resort.

At the district level, alternative education options vary substantially in form, focus and quality. Some district and county programs endeavor to put together the supports, academic and otherwise, that would enable students to graduate and take a confident next step. Alternative education options in these settings focus on pathways to higher education, work or back to the comprehensive high school, and on partnerships that bring additional resources to the school and its students. Other programs function as exits to nowhere and dumping grounds for disruptive students and ineffective educators. We observed, however, that most continuation schools operate in a mid-range of quality, attention and opportunity—a condition of “benign neglect” and low priority. Because of this significant variability, continuation schools can and do look very different in different counties, in different districts within the same county, and even within the same district.

Critical Role of Districts and School Board Support

From the school leaders’ perspectives, districts play a critical role in setting clear academic goals for students in alternative settings—providing needed resources (e.g., supplemental appropriations to maintain small class size), providing the principal with discretion to hire a qualified and motivated staff, and implementing supportive policies that take the special needs of continuation and community day schools into account. Most often mentioned are supportive policies that allow the continuation schools to place parameters on how students are referred and placed in the school and that facilitate effective collaboration with county agencies, regional occupation programs, community colleges, and other external entities that provide needed supports or post-secondary pathways for students.

Teacher and principal professional development is recognized as a shared responsibility across state and district agencies in most states. In California this role most often falls on district shoulders as researchers have found that California lags other states in implementing state-led educator professional development (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; Loeb & Miller, 2007). School leaders in our study reported that they perceive scant recognition within the state school governance system, and often as well among district administrators, of how work with abused, or otherwise vulnerable youth may require special staff training or skills. Principals and teachers also commented that appropriate staff development programs targeted to the needs of educators who work with vulnerable youth is difficult to find. As a result, they often feel professionally isolated and often focus on school-level experimentation and a trial-and-error approach to instructional change.

The quality of school facilities and the location of the continuation schools also support or hinder school performance in important ways. Although excellence is as likely to be located in a somewhat run-down facility as in a sparkling new venue, school staff and students often observed that the quality and location of the facilities relative to other schools sent powerful signals to the community and to the students themselves about the priority the district placed on their education.

Ultimately, while consistent district support did not always *determine* school quality, it was clear that the principal's job was much easier, and improvement efforts were more fruitful where district support was evident.

Lost Opportunities and Wasted Resources

The policy goal of a "continuum of care" remains particularly elusive for the at risk students in alternative programs. Instead, for too many youth, opportunities to connect with school, to imagine hopeful futures, and to set on a positive pathway are lost when schools do not or cannot respond to their needs—do not offer them a genuine alternative. Educators working in alternative programs pay a cost as well when county, municipal, or community-based youth services fail to support their efforts, when the resources provided them are limited or of poor quality, when they themselves are afforded little professional respect. Many vulnerable youth are caught in the middle, wanting a different course for themselves, but not finding the supports or "hand holds" that would enable them to change direction.

Though we observed alternative programs across the state providing effective opportunities for this population, unfortunately they were the exception. The significant variability in California's alternative education options leads not only to inequitable and lost opportunities but also to wasted resources—both in terms of ineffective programs and the youth themselves.

IV

Qualities and Practices of Schools with Good Student Achievement Outcomes

The 37 continuation schools we visited demonstrated enormous variation in size, demography, curriculum, discipline policies, social organization, intake procedures, resources, facilities, staff capacities, and in the institutional pathways available to students as they move through and beyond the schools. Moreover, this variation in specific practices and over-all school quality is evident both within and across counties and districts.

Role of School Leadership: Importance of key leaders' beliefs and values

Principals in schools with evidence of exemplary student outcomes (particularly CAHSEE pass rates and program completion rates) were often emphatic and positive about what they believed their students could accomplish and about the school's role in facilitating those outcomes. Where experienced principals were clear and proactive about their beliefs, the faculty and the students echoed their sentiments. Teachers often told us, for example, that principals who were very clear about the standards and student outcomes to be met, empowered teachers who endorsed those beliefs and made worklife uncomfortable for teachers who held themselves or their students to lower standards.

Students, in turn, pick up on the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers and leadership and were unequivocal in focus groups about the positive effect it had on their motivation to engage and learn. Some students seemed genuinely surprised by their own transformation into a 'good student' since previously they had experienced only failure. Most students underscored the importance of the extra help and time they received to accomplish work. But most also acknowledged that their teachers and the principal regarded them as teachable and this seemed to make all the difference to students. These beliefs (both positive and negative) about student "teachability" and promise take on heightened importance where accountability systems are not in place to ensure a basic minimum level of quality in critical aspects of school operations and instruction.

Creating Partnerships and Pathways Beyond the School

Leaders of particularly effective alternative schools attend to forming partnerships with external institutions, like community colleges, Regional Occupational Programs, or local employers, which provide students with post-secondary pathways to academic growth and self-sufficiency. Partnerships provide essential and particular resources for continuation schools, but they do not exist to the same extent at every school. Often they are the product of personal networks; other times they reflect the vision

and commitment of administrators to alternative education's vulnerable student population.

Where we found strong continuation programs, we usually also found deliberate, well-designed partnerships with local community colleges. Teachers and counselors in continuation schools worked with area community colleges to develop programs of study, opportunities for their students to visit the campus and sit in on classes; advisors from community colleges visited the continuation high school to tell students about the program, explain opportunities for financial aid and admissions procedures.

Several continuation school administrators actively cultivated relationships with local businesses to provide jobs for students as well as opportunities for credit-carrying internships. Others developed relationships with a number of community agencies that provide youth services and multiple opportunities for community service. Several continuation schools rely on relationships with county mental health agencies or community-based mental health programs to provide drug and alcohol treatment, and partnerships with Probation to offer informational talks to students and collaborate on student placements.

These partnerships were of a distinctly local flavor, differed in form and intensity, and always added critical resources to support teachers and their students. Schools lacking these partnerships and connections were, by comparison, at a significant disadvantage in their efforts to meet students' needs.

Other Practices Associated with Student Achievement in More Effective Continuation Schools

Positive beliefs about students are important enabling factors, but they are not self-executing. Where we found exemplary outcomes in CAHSEE pass rates, attendance, accelerated credit accumulation or other measures, we also found school leaders¹⁶ who were successful in

¹⁶ Critical leaders were often, but not exclusively, the school principal. In some cases, teachers cite the importance of leadership from a counselor or a teacher-colleague as

imposing order on the school placement and intake process so that teachers would have a stable environment in which to manage their work with students, effective in applying more rigorous standards to themselves and their faculties than those imposed by the state or district, and intentional in using student performance data to guide change.

The foundational importance of an orderly student identification and placement process. Principals and staff in many continuation schools reported that student placement is not overseen by their school but rather is governed by the needs or imperatives of sending schools or district administrators. Yet, teachers almost always cited the importance of being able to *plan* for good instruction. This implied that continuation schools need the ability to collaborate with sending schools to implement a rational system for identifying, placing, and carefully managing student intake.

Establishing higher expectations for continuation students and their teachers; taking concrete steps to improve and tailor instruction to student needs. Staff at schools with strong student attendance, CAHSEE pass or graduation rates, reported that their principals communicated a clear vision of what success looked like in classrooms, as well as clear expectations that everyone would move purposefully to achieve that vision. Principals often cited the advent of the CAHSEE high school graduation requirement as a standard-setting event that focused not just students, but staff as well on a concrete goal for all students. Teachers in the more impressive schools sought to balance individualized coaching and tutoring with whole-class instruction that promoted group problem-solving and developed better interpersonal communication among students.

Using Student Performance Data to Guide Change. The most successful principals relied on a frequently identified "best practice" in the literature on standards-based school reform—use of evidence concerning student outcomes. For example, some principals kept progress charts on the walls of their offices and knew where each student in the school was in terms of reaching important benchmarks on state assessments or

supplying the vision and inspiration need to coalesce positive action on the part of the staff.

on internally selected assessments of academic progress. Still most principals who used these strategies seemed to be using systems and materials that they “invented” themselves with little assistance from the district.

In future Issue Briefs we intend to devote greater attention to these school-level factors and to further explore the relationship between student achievement and the promising practices we identify here. Moreover, our initial findings suggest that any follow-up study should also attend to the relationship between practice and the state/district role in supporting the learning and effectiveness of principals, teachers and counselors. Many middle and low-functioning schools in our study claim to be implementing the same practices (e.g., data-driven reform, standards-based instruction) that the more successful schools are implementing. But results vary widely. What seems to make the difference is prior capacity in the form of experience and strong leadership from both principals and teachers. Yet, strong educators in our field study say that they got where they are despite a lack of professional development and leadership training specific to work with vulnerable youth. Many found success only after years of “on-the-job trial and error.” One over-arching conclusion thus seems clear: in the absence of clear signals about expectations, systematic support and incentives for performance, the quality of instruction in continuation schools will continue to depend largely on the beliefs, effort and motivation of individual teachers and local administrators.

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