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JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER
for Youth and Their Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RAISING THE BAR, BUILDING CAPACITY:

DRIVING IMPROVEMENT IN CALIFORNIA'S CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS

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California's approximately 500 continuation high schools are estimated to serve more than 115,000 California high school students each year—a number that approaches almost 10 percent of all high school students and as many as one of every seven high school seniors. Continuation schools are, however, more racially and ethnically concentrated than the state's traditional comprehensive high schools. Hispanic students comprise 55 percent of all students in continuation schools, and although African American enrollments in continuation schools approximate those of comprehensive schools statewide, they tend to be overrepresented in many districts.

California law contemplates more intensive services and accelerated credit accrual strategies so that students who are vulnerable to dropping out of school might have a renewed opportunity to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Based on a statewide study of these schools, however, we conclude that, as a whole, they are failing to provide the academic and critical support services that students need to succeed.¹

This report draws on our two-phase study of continuation high schools in California. In Phase I, during the winter and spring of 2007, our research team visited 26

school districts and 40 schools in nine southern, central and northern California counties.² These schools differed in focus, student outcomes, size, and metropolitan status. In Phase II, researchers returned to three of the original nine counties (Santa Clara, Fresno, and San Diego) and visited 23 continuation high schools to explore more deeply the emerging “better practices” that characterize more successful continuation high schools.

Our report comes at a watershed moment for American public education. At both the federal and state levels, policymakers are poised to reshape our school finance, governance, and accountability systems to promote universal college and career readiness through a new common core curricula and a renewed focus on the lowest performing schools. As well, the California legislature is considering almost 10 bills to address school discipline policies and practices that have tended to push low-income and minority youth out of comprehensive schools and away from college and career-ready pathways. This ferment in public education presents both promise and peril for continuation high schools. The peril is that these schools and programs may remain an

1. Ruiz de Velasco, Jorge & McLaughlin, Milbrey. (2012) *Raising The Bar, Building Capacity: Driving Improvement In California's Continuation High Schools*. Stanford University: Stanford, CA. Available at: http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/current_initiatives/alt_ed.html.

2. Ruiz-de-Velasco, Jorge, et al. (2008) *Alternative Education Options: A Descriptive Study of California Continuation High Schools*. Stanford University: Stanford, CA. Available at: http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/current_initiatives/alt_ed.html.

afterthought in the emerging curricular and accountability reforms. If so, our report offers a bleak prologue of what the vast majority of the state’s continuation high schools will offer those youth who find themselves falling behind but struggling to stay engaged in pursuit of a high school diploma.

The promise, however, is that this moment presents a window of opportunity to fully incorporate continuation high schools, intended as second-chance pathways to the diploma, into the thinking, planning, and articulation of new accountability reforms and innovation. To this end, our report explores the role that the state, local districts and school leaders play in affecting school quality and student outcomes in continuation schools. Also examined are the roles of community nonprofit, and county or municipal social services, law enforcement, and juvenile justice agencies that come to play important roles in the lives of adolescents in these alternative schools. Our focus is on systemic issues (including relationships within schools and among districts and county authorities) and policy determinants of effective instruction (that is, how work and time are conceived and organized in schools). In our earlier report, our objective was to describe the schools and the challenges they face. A major theme in our study has been that

continuation high schools are essential invisibly within their communities and school districts. These schools and their students often sit outside of performance accountability systems that might otherwise direct greater attention to their needs and, in some instances, to their extraordinary success under especially challenging circumstances. Many vulnerable youth are caught in the middle, wanting a different course for themselves, but not finding the support that would enable them to change direction.

In this report, we focus on schools that are performing well under state and federal accountability systems and reflect on what these schools can tell us about promising policy and practice interventions.³ Although we observed alternative programs across the state that do provide effective opportunities for this population, it bears emphasizing that they were the exceptions. But we have seen enough successful schools and students to report with confidence that despite disappointing overall results, continuation high schools can provide important opportunities and resources for a vulnerable population of youth. The exceptional schools we examined remind us that we can do better. In that spirit, we offer the following recommendations, drawn from the experience of the “beating the odds” schools we visited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The State Role

Clarify academic goals. California’s statutory and school accountability systems provide contradictory, confusing and inconsistent signals to districts and schools about expectations and academic goals for teachers and students in continuation schools. The consequence is deep variability in the quality and performance of continuation high schools across the state and even within the same district. If the standards of the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) are to be maintained and uniformly applied to

all students, occupational or career training in continuation schools should prepare student to meet the academic standards of the mandated common core curricula.

Limit involuntary transfer to placements in county day or community day schools or to other appropriate in-school programs specifically resourced to support students with behavioral challenges. Involuntary transfers to continuation schools are inconsistent with the primary goal of

3. In selecting Phase II schools, we over-sampled schools that were meeting or exceeding their federal AYP targets (adequate yearly progress), and further demonstrated strong attendance and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) pass rates, and graduation rates. We also examined results from the California Healthy Kids Survey to select sites that received high scores on student and teacher satisfaction and school climate and safety variables.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

The State Role

serving as a programmatic alternative for over-aged and under-credited youth whose principal challenges are academic, not behavioral.

Hold continuation high schools accountable for results by strengthening the Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) and providing clearer guidelines about how it fits or might be better integrated into the regulatory scheme of the No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and the state's Academic Performance Index (API) student performance standards applicable to all schools. Make a strengthened ASAM more relevant by incorporating it into a school level API specifically designed for alternative schools.

Reward continuous student proficiency-based growth at the school level. (Proposed changes in the federal AYP calculation system to this end may help if adopted.) Special guidance may be necessary to help local schools define appropriate growth measures and benchmarks for over-aged and under-credited youth, while allowing schools flexibility in how they meet those goals.

Use a 5 or 6-year graduation rate as a standard accountability measure for students who complete their education in a continuation high school. Require all continuation schools that award regular diplomas to calculate attendance, persistence, credit accumulation and graduation rates consistently across schools and districts.

Provide all continuation students pursuing a regular diploma with the option of a state-supported full day of instruction. Meet the demand for effective alternative education options.

Support schools with best-practice guidance on how to use expanded learning time to build instructional capacity and expand learning opportunities through collaboration across

education options (e.g., Regional Occupation Centers, Community Colleges and Adult Education). Support, evaluate and provide incentives for instructional innovation in continuation high schools.

The State Board of Education should require districts to articulate a coherent set of identification, placement, and school intake procedures that are applicable to all alternative school options in the district, including continuation schools.

Strengthen the ASAM data collection and analysis system by including all alternative option programs for purposes of collecting accurate student enrollment, mobility, student demographic and educational characteristics. Alternatively, any new comprehensive school accountability system should fully incorporate student and school progress measures (e.g., academic achievement and engagement measures) that would help to promote continuous improvement in alternative education.

Invest in a fully functional CALPADS to strengthen district and school-level educators' ability to assess school, program, and student level performance over time. Our study indicates that this measure would greatly strengthen both state and local accountability and create greater opportunity for continuous improvement of instructional interventions and social supports in alternative schools.

Fund targeted supports and rewards for instructional innovation in continuation schools and promote accountability for results by funding rigorous evaluation of innovative practices. In this regard, the federal Invest in Innovation program might serve as a model for the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The District Role

District and school-level student identification and placement policies should be written, transparent, and available to all students and parents and community stakeholders to promote greater parent understanding, school accountability, and community engagement.

Districts should make better, more systematic use of data from the CHKS and CSCS to generate usable information, for school leaders and the public, of school climate variables that have been found to be important drivers of school and student success.

Districts should assess student performance data to track the number and characteristics of students who have become over-aged and under-credited as well as to assess when in the school trajectory most students begin to fall behind and for what reasons. These data

would allow the state and district to better assess the need for alternative options and targeted interventions for these youth.

Address the unique professional development needs of continuation high school leaders and faculty. School districts should support continuation school leaders and instructional staff with on-going professional development opportunities that reflect the unique demands of alternative education. As a more general matter, district leaders should include continuation high schools in system-wide efforts to spur innovation, adoption of best practices, and reform in secondary schools.

Districts (and relevant labor organizations) **should create incentives to attract highly- skilled principals and teachers to alternative schools.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Role of School Leaders

Promote an asset-based, student-focused school climate. Schools that student perceive as safe, supportive, engaging and caring are more likely to have positive student outcomes—graduation rates, higher API scores, consistent attendance—and remove behavioral barriers to student learning such as substance abuse, absenteeism and campus violence.

Develop discipline policies that are clear, known and understood by all, consistently carried out. High performing schools generally adopt a “restorative” rather than a punitive stance to disciplinary issues. They also focus on building

positive behavioral skills by attending to the social/emotional learning of students.

Blend academic supports with social supports and connections to community resources, businesses, and post-secondary institutions. Social supports for vulnerable students are critical to student success and cannot be separated from efforts to promote academic learning. Local businesses can offer valuable internship opportunities; partnerships with local community colleges foster college-going aspirations and build important “college knowledge.”