

Students With Amazing Goals (SWAG) Year 2 Interim Report

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INTRODUCTION

Students With Amazing Goals (SWAG) was established as a multi-sector program to redress low graduation rates among youth in East Palo Alto and the Belle Haven section of East Menlo Park. Administered through the San Mateo County (SMC) Manager's Office and based at Live in Peace, a community-based organization in East Palo Alto, SWAG provides holistic supports for young people at risk for not graduating high school. While the majority of SWAG programming takes place in East Palo Alto, SWAG also includes partnerships with Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD) and the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA), as well as with families and other community based organizations, all of which have a stake in the well-being and success of East Palo Alto and Belle Haven youth.

In 2015, the San Mateo County Manager's Office engaged The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education as the research partner for a three-year partnership focused on understanding SWAG program implementation and early outcomes. The first year of research focused on developing the SWAG Theory of Change (TOC) and research activities to better understand early program implementation. This current year's research focused on providing a deeper understanding of program implementation by incorporating youth participant perspectives, as well as providing an initial look at student outcomes. The findings presented here draw on interviews with SWAG staff and caseworkers, as well as focus groups with SWAG youth participants. In addition, we analyzed educational data from SUHSD for SWAG participants in an effort to better understand their risk factors for not graduating from high school, as well as their educational outcomes after participating in SWAG for one year. These analyses illuminate preliminary trends in student outcomes, and provide important information for program improvement; however, given the small sample size and the preliminary nature of program implementation, they should not be interpreted as an assessment of program effectiveness.¹

Key Findings

- SWAG serves a population of youth with many risk factors for not graduating from high school.
- Relationship-building is an essential strategy of SWAG that keeps youth engaged and contributes to youth outcomes.
- Supporting youth with authentic goal development maintains youth motivation and bolsters future orientation.
- Youth participants are engaged in the program, building important developmental assets, and motivation to graduate from high school.

¹Final SUHSD data for school year 2016-17 were not available yet at time of this research, and will be included in the Year 3 Final Report which will delve more deeply into student outcomes utilizing additional years of data and a range of data sources. See Appendix for further description research questions guiding this project, as well as research and analysis methods.

- SWAG students demonstrated modest increases in the average number of credits earned, as well as small improvements in average GPA in the program's first year.

SWAG PROGRAM DESIGN & THEORY OF CHANGE

Our research is guided by the SWAG program's Theory of Change (TOC) (see figure 1), which serves as a map for the program, outlining the problem that SWAG aims to address, the desired outcomes for youth who participate, and the program's key strategies for achieving these goals. The TOC was co-developed by the Gardner Center and a range of SWAG partners, and was revised at the end of Year One based on early lessons from SWAG program implementation and research. We briefly describe each of these elements below.

The Challenge of Low High School Graduation Rates

Students who graduate from high school are more likely to have greater life earnings, better health, and a longer life expectancy relative to their peers without a high school diploma (America's Promise Alliance [APA], 2016). Nationally and over time, graduation rates have been increasing, yet notable gaps remain among different student populations (APA 2016, NCES 2014).² These gaps are most acute for youth who are low-income, ethnic minorities, have limited English proficiency, and/or have been involved in the juvenile justice system.³

SWAG is designed to address the problem that a significant number of youth in East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park are at risk for not graduating from high school, as indicated by low grades, attendance, and credit completion as well as high rates of disciplinary issues. SWAG targets high school-age youth with these risk indicators. In San Mateo County, the overall graduation rate is above the state's average, yet ethnic minority students complete high school at persistently lower rates than their peers. For instance, in the 2014-15 school year, the SUHSD overall graduation rate was 86%, yet the completion rates for Latinos and African Americans were lower, at 77% and 83% respectively. The high school completion among East Palo Alto youth in the SUHSD has historically been the lowest graduation rate of all of Sequoia's eight feeder districts (Castrechini, 2013). Further, racial/ethnic disparities also exist in the area of school discipline. While Latino students comprise less than 50% of the SUHSD student body, they account for more than 70% of suspensions. Similarly, Pacific Islander students account for about 3% of total enrollment, but comprise 29% of all expulsions. The overrepresentation of ethnic minority students in school suspensions and expulsions can significantly diminish their sense of connection to school and opportunities to learn (Skiba et al., 2011).

² Recent reports show especially encouraging trends in narrowing the gap for Latino and African American students in college eligibility, an important indicator of academic success.

www.opr.ca.gov/docs/RTI_Eligibility_Report_071417_FINALtoOPR.pdf

³ In California, approximately 65% of students with limited English proficiency, 76% of economically-disadvantaged students, 68% of African Americans, and 77% of Latinos graduate from high school (NCES, 2014). About 40% of students who have been involved with the juvenile justice system drop out of high school (Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio & Thompson, 2004).

Youth Context

While SWAG focuses on youth at risk of not graduating from high school based on a number of educational indicators, individual young people are situated within broader settings and systems that contribute to their life outcomes (Dukakis, London, McLaughlin, & Williamson, 2009). The factors influencing student success are complex as well as inter-connected. Therefore, our research considers the individual, as well as the broader setting- and system-level contexts as they relate to supporting East Palo Alto youth's educational and life success. For example, although San Mateo is one of the country's wealthiest counties, it is also home to some of the highest levels of income inequality (Silicon Valley Institute for Regional Studies, 2015). In East Palo Alto, a city of 30,000 residents, the median household income in 2014 dollars was \$52,716, significantly lower than neighboring cities (e.g., \$115,650 for Menlo Park; \$81,955 for Redwood City). Nearly 20% of the population earns below the federal poverty line of \$20,420 for a family of three. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in housing costs in Silicon Valley has made this once relatively inexpensive area unaffordable for many long-time residents. Many have been priced out of the area, diluting the community's political voice and fragmenting social ties.⁴ Those who do stay often face overcrowded or unstable housing conditions.

Key Strategy Areas

SWAG provides holistic supports for youth in East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park at risk for not graduating from high school. Potential SWAG participants are identified by staff based on risk indicators (low grades, attendance, and credit completion as well as high rates of disciplinary issues), as well as referral by school counselors, family members, and/or friends. Each SWAG youth participant is assigned a caseworker (also called a "life coach"), and also has access to a range of holistic supports offered at the SWAG site, including after-school tutoring (e.g., homework help), credit recovery assistance, enrichment activities (e.g., fieldtrips, college visits), college and career planning, and pro-social activities to support positive youth development. SWAG staff also hold a weekly "family night" to engage with parents around their children's progress and success, and partner with the school district, HSA, and other community-based organizations and service providers to provide holistic supports to youth. Fundamental to the SWAG program is relationship building for youth both with adult staff and with other youth participants. SWAG serves a population of students who are often disengaged from school and other institutions in their lives. Without this relationship building and other related strategies many youth many not fully engage in the program or access its services and support.

⁴ While "East Palo Altans have great pride in their rich history of community activism and their struggle to achieve self-determination" (Harris & Cespedes 2015, pg. 3), due to unaffordable housing and the high cost of living, many residents have had to move to the outer fringes of the Bay Area, thus diluting the political voice that used to exist in the community (Cutler, 2015)

Key Assumptions

The success of the SWAG program requires: 1) sufficient resources; 2) a clear system to identify, refer, and enroll youth; 3) active student participation and adult record-keeping; and 4) clear roles, structures, and processes. Note that the Year One SWAG Report focused largely on the extent to which these four assumptions were being met, in order to inform ongoing program improvement.

Outcomes

In the short term (1-3 years) SWAG aims to improve a range of outcomes for youth participants including:

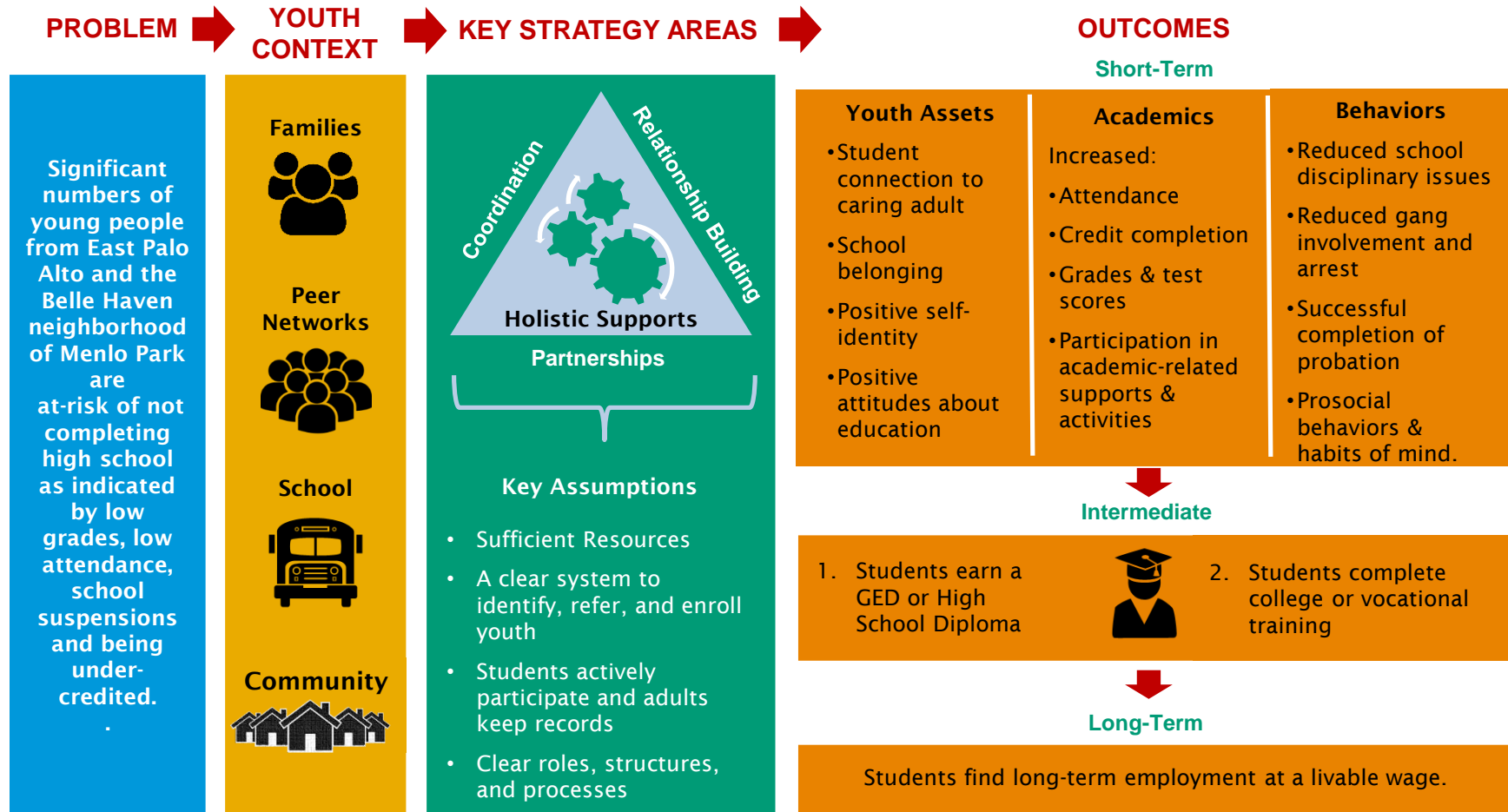
- *Youth Assets.* SWAG aims to strengthen a range of youth assets such as connection to caring adults, school belonging, and positive self-identity and attitudes about education.
- *Academic Outcomes.* SWAG intends to increase school attendance, credit completion, grades and test scores, as well as participation in academic-related supports and activities.
- *Behavioral Outcomes.* SWAG intends to improve behavioral outcomes through reduced school disciplinary issues, gang involvement and arrest, as well as successful completion of probation (if applicable) and development of pro-social behaviors

In addition to these short-term outcomes, the anticipated intermediate term outcomes for SWAG participants include earning a GED or high school diploma, as well as completing college or vocational training. The ultimate goal is for SWAG participants to find long-term employment at a livable wage.

THIS REPORT

The remainder of this report is structured into three topic sections. First, we present implementation findings, beginning with an analysis of administrative data to better understand the population that SWAG is recruiting, enrolling, and serving in practice. In this section we also describe the SWAG program's key strategies, drawing on the perspectives of youth participants and program staff. In the following section, we begin to explore youth development and educational outcomes for SWAG youth based on school records as well as youth interviews. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the key findings and their implications for practice and policy and next steps for our SWAG research partnership.

Figure 1. SWAG Theory of Change



IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

In this section, we present findings that offer a deeper understanding of SWAG program implementation. We focus specifically on understanding how youth most in need are identified and referred into the program, and examine the characteristics of students served in practice; as well as how the program strategies operate in practice and how SWAG fits into youths' daily lives.

Identifying, Recruiting and Enrolling SWAG Youth

The SWAG program is premised upon a clear system to identify, refer, and enroll youth; this system ensures that the program is reaching the intended beneficiaries. While SWAG youth are referred to the program through a number of sources—school counselors, probation, their families, and peers—the majority of youth we spoke with indicated that they learned about the program through a peer or family member. Additionally, for many youth, their initial experience with SWAG was a casual “drop in” during a social occasion (pro-social activities) or tutoring session, at which point they were approached by staff for an introduction and to determine program eligibility. In this section, we examine the extent to which SWAG is reaching the youth intended to benefit from this program. We find that that, largely, SWAG is reaching the intended target population of students at risk for not graduating from high school.

First, we describe the youth who participated in SWAG during the 2015-16 school year including the number of participants and the schools and grades that they attend, student demographics, as well as the extent to which they may be at risk for not graduating from high school based on SWAG risk indicators/eligibility criteria. Where appropriate we compare SWAG youth to the population of all youth from East Palo Alto in SUHSD, as well as to the SUHSD student body overall. Note that in describing SWAG youth below, we focus on youth who joined the program in its first year (2015-16), the majority of whom also continued participating in 2016-17. Our analysis indicates that SWAG does, in fact, enroll and serve a population of youth at educational risk well beyond that of the SUHSD population overall. As described above, there are myriad system- and setting-level factors at play, and that the “Problem” in the TOC and the data presented below should not be interpreted as representing deficits of SWAG youth themselves.

Number of SWAG Youth Participants

During the program's first two years, 139 individual youth participated in SWAG. A total of 96 youth participated in SWAG at some time during the 2015-16 school year (see Figure 2).⁵ The majority (63) of these youth continued to participate in SWAG in 2016-17 as well. In 2016-17, 43 additional youth enrolled in SWAG, for a total of 106 youth participating in SWAG at some time during that year. Among the 33 youth who started SWAG in 2015-16 and did not return in Year Two, 15 graduated, 11 were still enrolled in high school or adult education, and two were listed

⁵See appendix for more information about research methodology, matching of SWAG students to SUHSD data and sample size for analyses.

as having exited the district (“grade level exit”). Of the remaining five students (“Other” in Figure 2), two had graduated prior to SWAG, and the in-school status was unknown at the end of the first year for three students. At any given time, SWAG serves around 70-80 youth (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. SWAG Student Pathways, 2015-16 and 2016-17

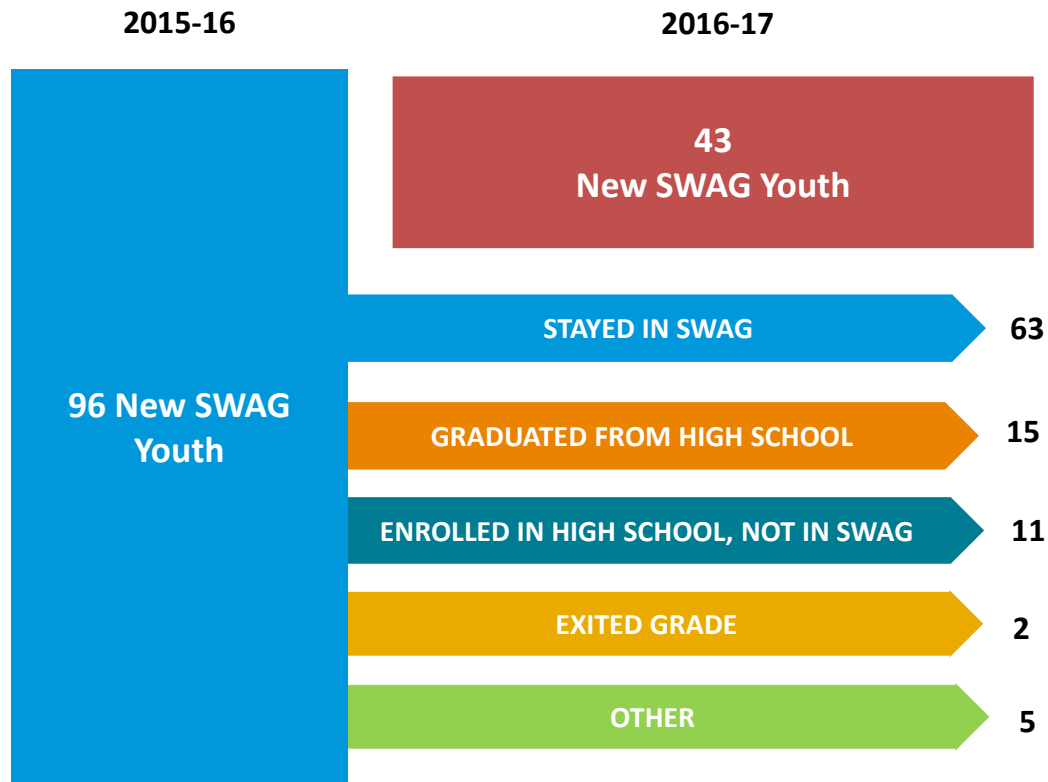
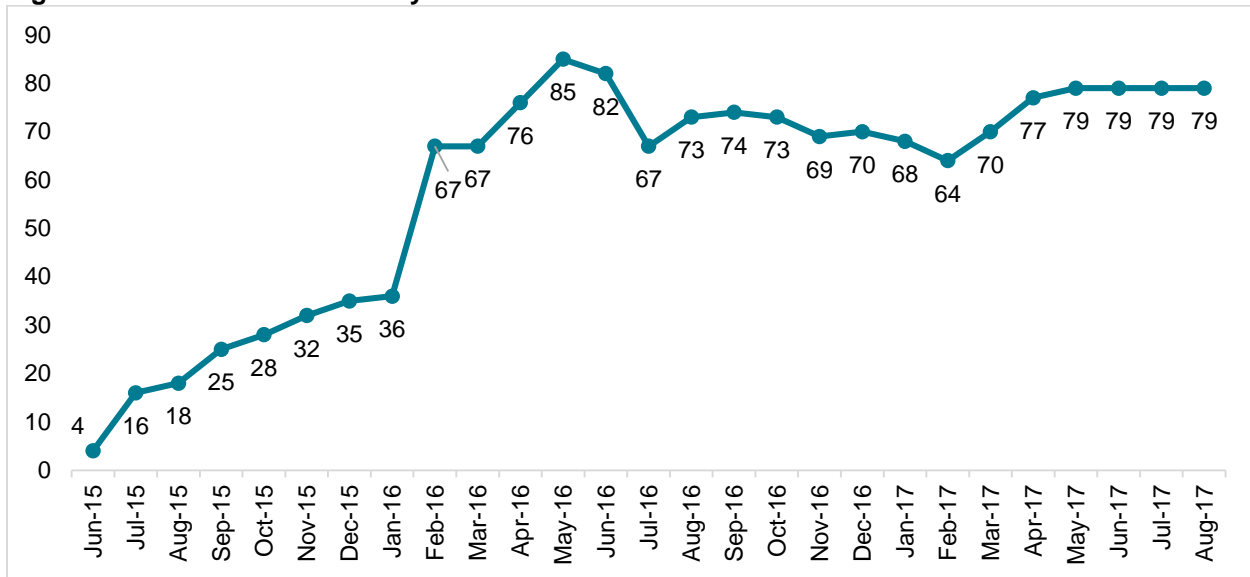


Figure 3. Enrollment in SWAG by Month



SWAG Youth across Grades and Schools

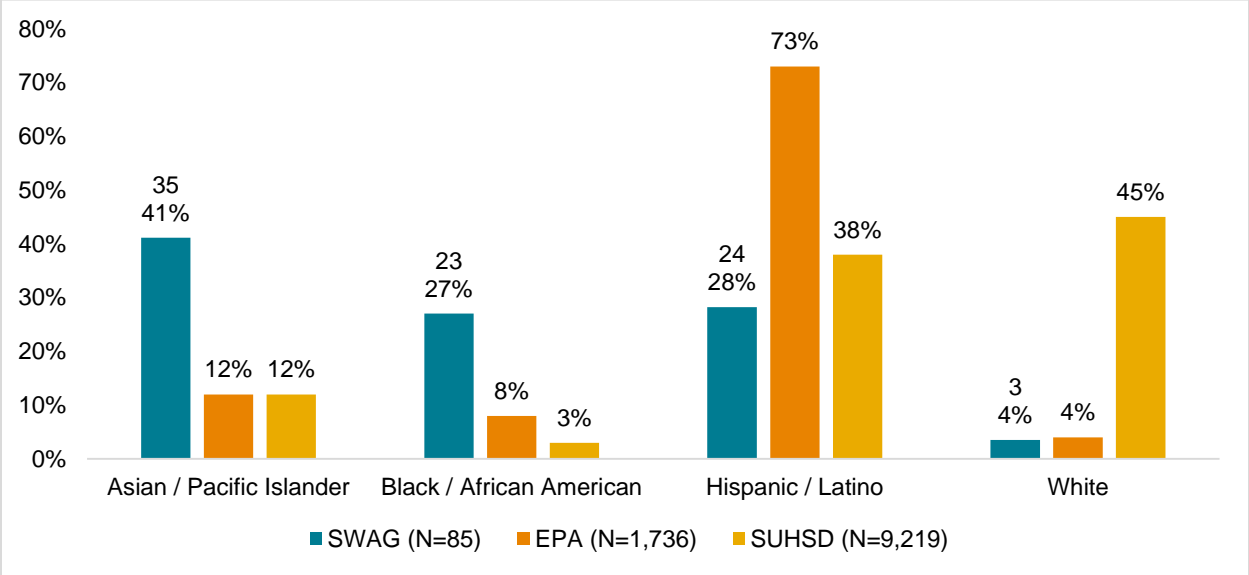
SWAG serves students in grades 9-12. Among the students that participated in SWAG in the 2015-16 school year, 18% were in 9th grade, 29% 10th grade, 28% 11th grade, and 25% 12th grade. An additional five students were no longer enrolled in SUHSD when they joined SWAG.

SWAG students are spread over five SUHSD Schools, with the majority attending either Redwood High School (alternative) (34%) or Menlo-Atherton High School (33%), followed by East Palo Alto Academy (19%), Woodside High School (12%), and Carlmont High School (2%).

SWAG Student Demographics

Nearly all SWAG students are students of color. The largest proportion of SWAG students (2015-16 cohort) are Asian/Pacific Islander (40%), followed by Latino (28%) and Black (27%). Compared to all SUHSD students that are from East Palo Alto, SWAG has a higher percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander and Black students, and a lower proportion of Latino students. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. Demographics of SWAG Youth



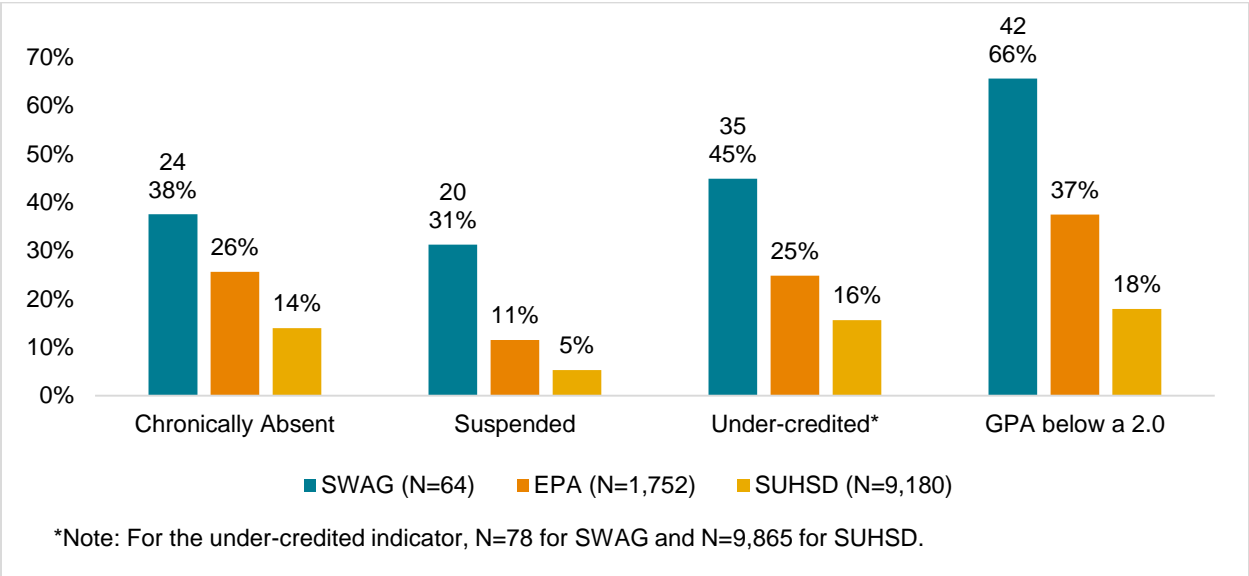
SWAG participants are split roughly evenly between males (52%) and females (48%). Among SWAG youth, 79% are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRPL), similar to the rate for all East Palo Alto students (80%), and twice the proportion in the SUHSD student population overall (39%). About one quarter (24%) of SWAG youth are English Language Learners (ELL), also similar to the rate among East Palo Alto students overall (26%), and considerably higher than the district average (14%).

In summary, SWAG serves approximately 80 students at any given time. Participants are in many ways demographically similar to students in the community more broadly, although SWAG serves a higher proportion of Asian Pacific Islander and Black students, and lower proportion of Latino students than is reflected in the East Palo Alto area overall. SWAG students attend the alternative Redwood High School at much higher rates than their East Palo Alto and SUHSD peers overall.

SWAG Eligibility and Risk Indicators

SWAG aims to serve youth from East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park who are at risk for not graduating from high school based on a number of factors (See TOC). Specifically, SWAG leaders decided to target youth with low school attendance, low credit accumulation, and a history of being suspended and/or involved with juvenile probation. SWAG participants did indeed experience risk indicators for not graduating from high school, prior to joining SWAG (see Figure 5).⁶

Figure 5. 2015-16 SWAG Cohort Risk Indicators (Based on the year before SWAG, 2014-15 School Year)⁷



- Attendance.** For youth who joined SWAG in 2015-16, 38% had been chronically absent from school (defined as an attendance rate of 90% or less) in the school year prior to joining SWAG, with an average attendance rate of 88%. By comparison, 14% of all SUHSD students, and 26% of SUHSD students from East Palo Alto were chronically absent that year.
- Suspensions.** Among SWAG participants, 31% of these youth had experienced school suspension in the prior school year. By comparison, 5% of all SUHSD students, and 11% of SUHSD students from East Palo Alto were suspended that year.
- Credits.** Among youth who had been in high school in the year prior to joining SWAG, 45% were considered under-credited. By comparison, 16% of all SUHSD students, and 25% of SUHSD students from East Palo Alto were under-credited that year.

⁶ Note: Risk indicator data are based on the school year before entering SWAG (i.e. for the cohort of students that began SWAG in 2015-16, we examine their risk indicators using 2014-15 SUHSD data). These figures do not include incoming 9th graders because their data are not available in the SUHSD data for the prior year when they were in 8th grade.

⁷ Note: For the under-credited indicator, N=78 for SWAG and N=9,865 for SUHSD.

- **GPA.** Before entering SWAG, participants had an average GPA of 1.76, compared to 2.18 for all East Palo Alto students in SUHSD, and 2.81 for SUHSD overall. Two-thirds (66%) of these youth had a GPA below a 2.0 in the prior school year. By comparison, 18% of all SUHSD students, and 37% of SUHSD students from East Palo Alto had a GPA below a 2.0 that year.
- **Involvement with Probation.** Among youth who participated in SWAG in 2015-16, 13% (12 out of 96) had been involved with juvenile probation.⁸

SWAG Program Strategies

In our interviews with SWAG participants, youth described concern about the increasing gentrification and inequality in East Palo Alto. Youth highlighted the entry of new businesses (e.g., Facebook, Amazon), the arrival of people not originally from East Palo Alto, and the departure of many families who could no longer afford the cost of living. The increasing economic pressures seem to exacerbate already challenging conditions. Many youth described a wide range of challenges in their personal lives and home environment including mental health issues, overcrowded or unstable housing, food insecurity, parents or guardians working multiple jobs, the responsibility to care for younger siblings, family sickness, and exposure to violence and death. Further, youth also described being exposed to illegal activity (e.g., drugs, prostitution, theft) as a means of addressing their own and their families' pressing economic needs. Staff described the difficult trade-offs youth make between the potential to earn immediate income in illegal activity and/or low-wage jobs, versus the promise of higher earning potential through persistent academic success (i.e., high school graduation and college). Many youth described feeling the pressure (from themselves, and/or family members) of being among the first or few in their families to graduate from high school.

Despite these mounting challenges, youth also expressed tremendous pride in living in East Palo Alto. Youth highlighted the many assets of their community including its diversity, citizens who care about improving the community and the many talented people in East Palo Alto. Youth also expressed feeling out of place, or feeling “looked down on” by adults and authority figures in their schools and elsewhere, or by other communities. In the words of one youth:

One thing that I am proud of about my community is how willing and strong the people are from here.... I was born here. I was born and raised here. But the thing that I would like to change in this community is the statistics that are placed over our heads, both from other communities, like Atherton and Palo Alto saying that we're not enough or good enough for their standards.

⁸ The percentage of all SUHSD students and of SUHSD students from EPA who were involved with probation is not currently available.

In the section that follows, we highlight key strategies that emerged from SWAG youth and staff interviews that, taken together, paint a picture of what makes SWAG uniquely able to serve its intended student population.

Strategy #1: Relationship-Building

Building meaningful relationships with youth is a core SWAG strategy. Soon after joining SWAG, each participant is matched with a case manager or “life coach” to support their success. Case managers have weekly check-in meetings with each youth to review progress and goals, but also to provide ongoing support and advocacy as needed; for example, following up with a student’s teachers or other school staff, or accompanying youth to court dates. Staff and case managers also connect with participants during ongoing daily program activities such as homework help (i.e., tutoring), daily free dinners, and enrichment activities. Further, staff hold weekly “family nights” to build relationships with and provide information to students’ families; for example, on the college admissions process and financial aid applications. These program elements are infused with a commitment to building meaningful relationships with youth. Relationship-building is not only an intentional strategy at SWAG, but staff and youth perceive it as the primary activity. In the words of one staff:

So, it starts off—I wouldn’t call them friendships, but there’s relationships with the students that most programs don’t have with their kids. So, we start with building bonds with these students because without a bond, you can’t force somebody who doesn’t want to go to school into a class or to learn or to read to do packets of homework or anything, no matter the consequences of it.

The constant day-to-day engagement in the program helps staff develop deeper knowledge of and familiarity with participants, building trust between students and staff, and increasing staff’s ability to see when something is “off” and intervene with needed supports. For youth, relationships define their experience at SWAG and makes the program stand apart from other peer programs. To these ends, we synthesize below how youth described their experience of SWAG relationships:

Caring relationship with an adult. Youth feel that SWAG staff genuinely care about them as people. Unlike other programs that feel more impersonal, or are exclusively focused on students’ academics, youth feel that with SWAG, “it’s way different... it’s deeper than just an education program, way deeper. When you’re in SWAG, you’re family.” Youth feel like they can count on SWAG staff to be there when they need them, to always be looking out for them. One young person described how SWAG supported him during a court case, including going above and beyond to advocate for his release and dismissal.

He reflected:

When [SWAG staff] did that big favor for me, I was just like wow, nobody's ever done something so big for me ever, in my whole, entire life, besides my mom and my parents. That's when I started first claiming [my caseworker] as the big brother I've never had before.

High expectations and holding youth accountable. Youth reported feeling that, in contrast to other adults in their life, SWAG staff genuinely believed in them and held them to high expectations. High educational and life expectations have a distinct importance for SWAG youth, as they often experience themselves to be the subject of negative stereotypes and discrimination. Youth described that, whereas, in other programs and settings they could “drop off the radar” or simply stop trying, in SWAG, they experienced staff as genuinely caring about their success and not giving up on them. As one young woman stated:

Personally, I've had lots and lots of people give up on me... I sometimes put myself in that mindset to where it's like you're too far behind. Don't even try anymore. I've expressed that to other people. Those other people will be like 'okay, fine, whatever you want to do. It's your future, whatever.' I've expressed that to people like the staff here at Green Street, and they're just like no, it's not over.... it's nowhere close to being over. You're still young. You still need to be striving for your best because half of the people that you see out there in the streets, that's what their mindsets were, and look where it got them. So you need to change that mindset. You need to keep on striving for the best that you can be because you know that you can do it.

Using terms like “tough love,” youth also expressed that SWAG staff helped hold them accountable by calling them out when they were getting off track. They described “long lectures” during which staff “keep it real” and point out the mistakes that youth make, or point out the consequences of negative behavior or bad decision-making.

In contrast to other programs and contexts where youth feel that adults often “sugar-coat,” youth felt that SWAG staff are real with them about the consequences of actions and choices. In the words of one youth, describing her interaction with staff:

He would be straight up with you. He would tell you if you keep this up, you're not gonna go to a four-year college, you're gonna go to junior college... or [you're not gonna graduate.] But he never told us 'that's fine, just keep trying' and stuff like that. No, he would tell us straight up, so we'll put things in perspective for you and you'll just be like, oh my God, okay, I actually have to do this. But he did it all because he cared for us.

When youth are on-site, they experience staff as constantly monitoring them and keeping them on-task. As one young person stated: “They're always on me, 24/7. Whenever I get here, [staff]

is like pull out some work. What are you doing? Even the slightest slack that I feel like doing, they're like no. They're just staying on me." Additionally, youth felt that SWAG staff go above and beyond to keep track of youth when they are not on-site; for example, calling to wake them up in the morning, taking them to and from school, attending court appointments, and following up with their families.

Positive peer support. In addition to providing ongoing follow-up and support, SWAG also provides youth with a positive peer environment that supports academic achievement. Youth describe feeling comfortable and safe with their peers, because they come from the same background, and aren't being judged. The positive peer relationship is something that youth credit staff with cultivating. As one student stated:

We all came here with just not caring about school, but now we all care and now we all care for each other's education. You will see somebody like, oh did you finish your homework? Or there's students helping each other. But, [staff], they set that up for us. [They] built that for us.

Not only do the positive peer relationships keep youth engaged and motivated to spend time at SWAG but, also, their sense of "achieving together" creates collective responsibility among youth to keep each other on track. As one youth said *"we all have the same goal to graduate. So, because of that, we all help each other."* When youth find their peers distracted or getting off track, they intervene and encourage them to do work. In the same way youth describe that staff are "hands on" and "stay on" youth to be productive, youth keep track of and "stay on" each other to be productive.

In sum, case managers and adult mentors' ability to develop meaningful relationships with youth is at the core of the SWAG program. Youth respond by describing a program setting in which they feel genuinely cared about and motivated to keep trying. Together, this leads to a level of engagement that SWAG youth report not having experienced in other academic support programs. These positive mentoring relationships are reinforced by peer relationships that also supports students' academic engagement and motivation.

Strategy #2: Goal-Setting & Plan Development

SWAG programming includes academic supports, college and career development, and skill-building for youth. Specifically, SWAG provides academic tutoring, credit recovery, and college/career planning for youth participants. Local college students offer tutoring daily to help students complete homework assignments; this is augmented by periodic "homework blitzes" to help students catch up on missing assignments. A SUHSD instructor located on site also offers independent studies courses to help students recover needed credits. Finally, with the support of their case managers, students receive college counselling, including support identifying and visiting prospective colleges, navigating the application process, and completing financial aid

requirements. Undergirding these activities is an emphasis on helping youth develop meaningful goals for themselves and their future. In the words of one youth: “SWAG ... helps you set goals for yourself and helps you get where you wanna get to in life.”

Goal development. Education research has indicated that supporting the development of meaningful goals can be an important protective factor for youth (Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 2006; APA 2004). In SWAG, staff create opportunities to discuss youths’ goals, help identify concrete action steps and milestones needed to reach those goals, and conduct regular check-ins to assess ongoing progress. Goal-development occurs in structured interactions, such as youth intake interviews, weekly check-ins with case managers, and in tandem with programmatic activities (e.g., exposure fieldtrips and college visits). Goal-setting is responsive to youth’s interests, and integrated into the ongoing supports SWAG provides students. As one staff member described:

The first thing that happens is a one-on-one with the case manager. And in that, some youth are just open and just say everything that’s going on in their lives and so we’re able to just do that. But usually what happens is that I work to identify a goal and then the case manager will set up steps to reach that goal. [Not every person can define a goal for themselves.] Some can’t even say what they like to do, what makes them happy. So then the goal is to help them to find that.

When Gardner Center staff asked SWAG focus group participants to share a goal they were working on, each youth was able to identify at least one area they were actively working on. Youth stated they wanted to graduate and go to college. Some youth had specific school-centered goals, such as increasing their GPA or not missing as much class. Many of these goals were specific and measurable, such as “I want to increase my GPA from 2.8 to 3.3.” Youth also had goals of working toward specific careers, such as becoming a physical therapist, a sociologist, a high school history teacher, or going into business. Identifying specific goals is important in that it provides youth with a positive future to work toward, and can motivate academic achievement (Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 2006).

Mapping out a plan. Most youth were also able to identify concrete action steps and milestones needed to reach their goals. For example, one young woman who aspires to become a high school history teacher describes how SWAG staff helped her develop concrete action steps toward her goal:

What we do every year, [our caseworker] gets our transcript, and she asks, how do you want your grades to change? What do you wanna do [with your life], ‘cause we’re gonna start working on personal statements [for college], which is scary to think about... So she’s like, okay, [this is what] we’re gonna talk about first semester, second semester, [this is] what you’re gonna do, and [this is when] you’re gonna come to Green Street to get homework done. So we set this goal and she always reminds us every day. ‘Good

morning. I'll expect all you guys to show up today.' All the tutors are here and then everybody's like okay ... So, yeah ever since sophomore year they started working on me with that. I started getting a clear picture every year to know what I'm gonna do. Before that it was just like yeah I wanna become a history teacher, but I didn't know how I was gonna actually get it done and they made sure that I knew how.

Identifying concrete action steps to support youth in reaching their goals is important to help keep youth on track with their progress. SWAG staff actively work to keep youth on track by providing ongoing follow-up and support. As described in the passage above, not only did the case worker help the student develop concrete action steps toward her long-term academic and career goals, but she also provided daily encouragement and reminders (e.g., to stay on top of homework), and a supportive study environment. Providing this ongoing follow-up and support is important to youth, as many described getting distracted or getting off track as primary challenges they faced in reaching their goals. These holistic academic supports and case management help keep youth focused on and making progress toward their academic goals.

In sum, SWAG supports students' academic achievement through helping youth identify meaningful academic and career goals, providing academic supports and case management to help keep them on track, and cultivating a positive peer group to reinforce students' efforts.

Strategy #3: Culturally Responsive Programming

SWAG's programming also includes pro-social activities that help youth develop positive behaviors and habits of mind. In practice, this occurs through much of the day-to-day program offerings, such as tutoring, enrichment activities, and exposure trips. Additionally, SWAG has built in social time, such as daily free meals to engage students and encourage them to stay on the Green Street campus. Permeating all of these activities is a cultural responsiveness that youth and staff describe as essential to addressing barriers to student success. Specifically, SWAG activities "use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of... youth to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them" (Gay, 2013).

Positive racial identity. One of the principal ways in which SWAG staff support students in culturally responsive pro-social programming is by cultivating a positive racial identity. Education research shows that building students' positive racial identity and providing a sense of ethnic belonging can lead to more positive academic and behavioral outcomes, including improved attendance, GPA, and credits (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2016). Fostering positive racial identity is especially important for minority students, as schools can often be sites of alienation for young people of color (Hall, 2006).

Similarly, the youth who participate in SWAG are acutely aware of the economic and racial inequalities surrounding their community, and often feel themselves the subject of negative

stereotypes at school and other environments outside their home community (as described above). As one young woman stated:

I don't like statistics that's held over my community's head.... This is my community. This is not murder capital. ... We're not delinquents. We're not just colored people with ignorance... We're very aware of where we live and what's happening around us.

For SWAG staff, an important part of the program is supporting youth to be successful in the face of racial and class bias—including institutional racism and dysfunctional systems that do not favor poor young people of color. As one staff described his aims:

... finding a way to get the students to understand the impact that they have on their own lives. How much their own reality can be changed through having an education. And building confidence in an area they're uncomfortable in... in a predominantly white world. Feeling comfortable and confident and bringing honor to themselves and their family.

Community belonging. Staff actively work with youth to shift the narrative of their racial and ethnic identity from stereotype to positive racial identity and community belonging. This happens through formal programming (e.g., a weekly “Roots” social studies class that covers culture, identity, and environment) as well as unstructured opportunities such as talking with youth about current events and their future plans during tutoring and homework help. Staff also work with youth to build a sense of community belonging, focus on success, and give back to the community to help the community thrive. As one youth stated:

I'd say SWAG, as a whole, is pretty much a community that serves its community, that helps boost the community that's been so overlooked and overthought and pushed out. We're grasping at the last little bit that's here. And so SWAG is just trying to save our city. And we're trying to prepare our youth that's from here, that was born and raised, that doesn't come from anywhere else but here, or at least has family roots tie here, to be able to stay here. ...that's what SWAG is all about is getting our kids to graduate—to be able to thrive in an environment in this community. So, it's a platform. It's a platform to be able to keep ours here.

Culturally competent staff. The majority of SWAG staff themselves are from the community, connected with youth participants' social network, and of similar economic and cultural backgrounds as SWAG program participants. Staff are sensitive to the racial- and class-inflected experiences of youth, and can catch subtleties that others might miss. They are also embedded in young peoples' lives in a way that for many youth builds a sense of trust and care that they do not experience in other programs. As one young woman stated:

[Other programs], they make you feel so distant and it just makes you want to fall off and be like, 'okay well then I don't trust you or I don't have this certain relationship or bond with you on a level where I can talk to you about my personal being or my struggles that are

happening.’ Then they’ll be like, ‘oh what are you going through at home?’ But then they’ll go and then you probably just won’t see them throughout the day. They will just like smile at you. Wave hi but they won’t actually be engaged with your life as how people here [at SWAG] do.

In sum, building positive racial identities and a sense of belonging for young people of color can be an important lever to support student success. Education research has shown that culturally responsive instruction can boost student engagement, as well as promote other positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Olneck, 1995, Wakefield & Hudley, 2007, Dee & Penner, 2016). SWAG staff actively work to build youth’s capacity to challenge reinforced stereotypes, provide role models youth can relate to, and create a sense of belonging to the program and the East Palo Alto community. By employing culturally competent staff and embedding cultural responsiveness into holistic programming, SWAG shows a promising practice of engaging youth who have previously felt marginalized and disengaged by traditional institutions and systems. Sustained engagement in SWAG activities increases the likelihood that youth will indeed experience growth in important academic areas.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

SWAG aims to influence a range of desired outcomes for youth, as outlined in the Theory of Change. In the short term, SWAG intends to improve youth assets, academics, and behaviors. Further, intermediate outcomes for SWAG youth include earning a high school diploma or GED and completing college or vocational training, with a long-term goal of finding employment at a livable wage. Below, we explore early evidence regarding the extent to which these short-term outcomes as well as the intermediate goal of high school graduation are improving for SWAG students.

Youth Assets

In the short term, SWAG aims to support and build youth assets, specifically including connections with adults, sense of school belonging, positive self-identity, and positive attitudes about education. Interviews with SWAG staff and youth themselves shed light on these youth assets for SWAG participants. We describe several below.

Connection to a Caring Adult

Youth in SWAG experience a connection to a caring adult. Connection between youth and others (e.g., peers, adults, community members) is considered a key element of positive youth development. Connection, along with the other elements (e.g., competence, caring) is associated with greater civic engagement and healthy behaviors (Lerner & Lerner, 2012). SWAG staff actively build trust and develop relationships with youth. Youth believe that SWAG staff genuinely care about them as people beyond their academics. One youth shares:

When I came [to SWAG], I never wanted to go back to [my previous program] because it was different. [Staff at my previous program] were just on kids about school, but this program worried about you personally and education wise. Just knowing that they care about those two things, they're prioritizing people's lives, make kids want to do it, make kids want to push for it, make kids want to accomplish more.

As detailed above, meaningful relationships with a caring adult are a core SWAG program strategy and an important protective factor (DuBois et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2013).

Self-Concept

Youth in SWAG develop confidence in their ability to accomplish any goal they set for themselves—what youth themselves often refer to as a “positive” or “productive” mindset. Youth believe they have control over their lives and feel empowered to accomplish what they set their mind to. One youth shares:

I had a very non-productive mindset. So, I would just go home knowing that I had homework and would just stay home and be on my phone and do nothing or go out or just stay out, not at programs like this. But when I came [to SWAG] they were just like ‘oh pull up your school, let's see your grades, let's see what you're gonna work on tomorrow’...they were just so ready to help you. So, I started coming – but I feel like if I wasn't here, I would probably have really horrible grades and my mindset wouldn't have changed. Also, because they made it clear that if we put our mind to something, it would actually get done.

A young person's sense of their own competence is another protective factor that has been linked to improved academic, behavioral, and life outcomes, especially for youth who have been involved in the juvenile justice system. (Schwartz, 2000; Durlak et al., 2010)

Sense of Belonging

Youth who experience a positive sense of group belonging are less likely to be socially withdrawn, anxious, depressed, delinquent, and aggressive toward others (Newman, Lohman & Newman, 2007). In SWAG, youth describe feeling welcomed, accepted for who they are, and included. Youth, however, did not report feeling a sense of belonging to their school. The relationships that SWAG staff actively build with youth and the friendships that youth build with one another foster a sense of belonging to the SWAG and East Palo Alto/Belle Haven community. One youth shares how the bonds she developed with SWAG staff and her peers give her a sense of belonging and keep her engaged in the program:

We all have bonds with each other and with our case managers and with [staff] and all of those little bonds makes us. If we don't have that, then it breaks us 'cause then we'll feel

left out, and we wouldn't want to show up. We don't want to come. Just having those little bonds, I feel like that's the most important thing, and that's what makes SWAG.

For low income and minority youth participants, this sense of belonging to the program and to a positive peer group, as described above, is especially important as a protective factor that can support positive life and academic outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2013; Schwartz, 2000; Durlak et al., 2010).

Positive Attitudes about Education and Future Orientation

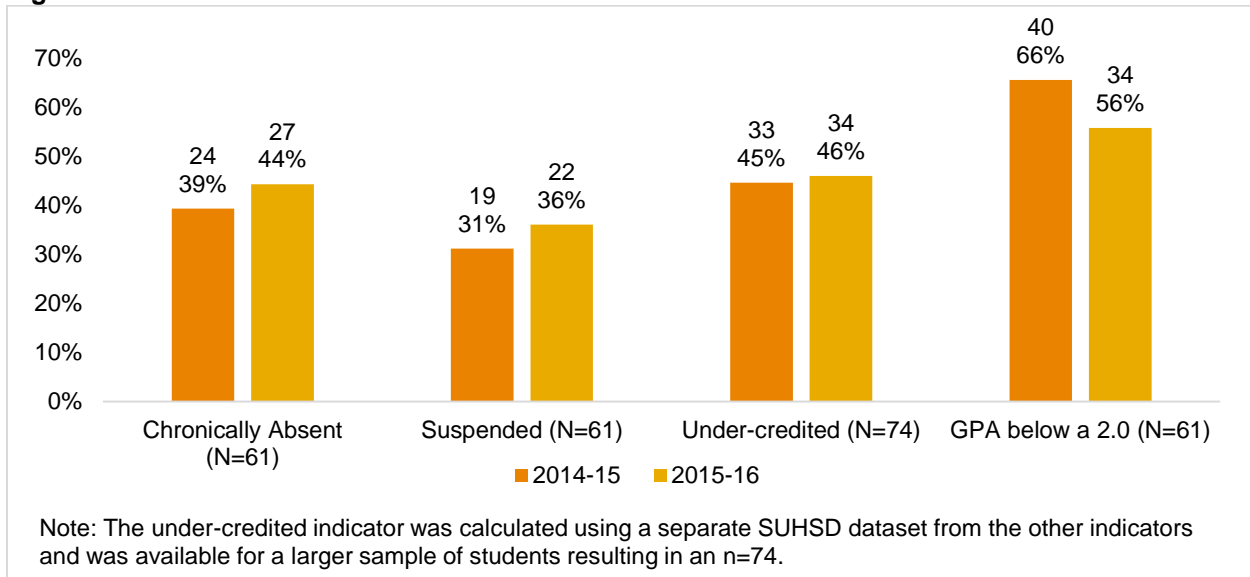
Youth who are future-oriented tend to see education as critical in achieving success in life. Future orientation is also associated with higher academic motivation and performance (Brown & Jones, 2004). For the youth in SWAG, the initial goal-setting process and ongoing conversations clarify what goals they are working toward and keep these goals at the forefront of their minds. Succeeding academically with the support of SWAG can expand what youth consider possible for themselves in the future. Despite the challenges he faced, one youth managed to graduate from high school and now has a sense of his future career path. Before his involvement in SWAG, he reported, he thought *"I'm not gonna graduate. I'm not gonna pass high school. I don't even think I'm gonna go to college."* Now, as a SWAG graduate, he aspires to attend college and eventually become a computer programmer.

Academic Outcomes

In this section, we describe early outcomes for SWAG students in key academic areas that have been found by prior research to be associated with high school graduation, including low credit accumulation, GPA, and attendance (i.e., chronic absence) as well as having been suspended (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). We draw on educational data from SUHSD for the 2015-16 school year (i.e., the first year of the SWAG program), as well as for the 2014-15 school year in order to provide a baseline for student outcomes prior to SWAG.

These preliminary findings point to some positive signs, with small increases in the average number of credits earned and in GPA. We also note the importance of measuring educational success in multiple ways in order to gain a fuller picture of student achievement. For example, while credit accumulation increased on average for SWAG students, there is considerable variation between students, with many earning a substantial number of credits and a small number earning very few credits. Overall, similar numbers of SWAG youth exhibited risk indicators (e.g., being under-credited, chronically absent) after the first year of the program as in the year prior (see Figure 6). This suggests, for instance, that some students may have been considerably under-credited prior to SWAG and remained so despite the average increases in credit accumulation. Below we discuss these preliminary findings in more detail, as well as next steps for this research examining student outcomes.

Figure 6. Risk Indicators Before and After the First Year of SWAG



Credits

After the first year of SWAG, participants demonstrated modest increases in the average number of credits earned, in contrast to students in East Palo Alto and SUHSD more broadly who earned similar numbers of credits from year-to-year. Nonetheless, the number of SWAG students who were under-credited remained roughly the same. Specifically, the average number of credits earned by SWAG students before (2014-15) and after (2015-16) the first year of SWAG, increased from 49 to 61. (Of these credits, an average of 37 were academic and 23 were elective.) By comparison, the average number of credits earned for East Palo Alto and SUHSD students more broadly remained flat from year to year (see Figure 7).

Many SWAG students earned a considerable number of credits during the program's first year. Specifically, 40 SWAG students earned more than 60 credits during the 2015-16 school year, while a small number (10) earned very few credits (see Figure 8). At the same time, as Figure 6 above indicates, there was little overall change in the number of students considered under-credited. This indicates that while many students earned credits at a high rate, this often did not move them from under-credited to on-track overall.⁹

⁹ Under-credited defined based on Sequoia Union High School guidelines.
<http://www.sequoiahs.org/documents/Resources/Program%20Planning%20Handbook/Sequoia%20Program%20Planning%20Handbook%202017-2018%20English.pdf>

Figure 7. Average Credits Earned, SWAG 2015-16 Cohort

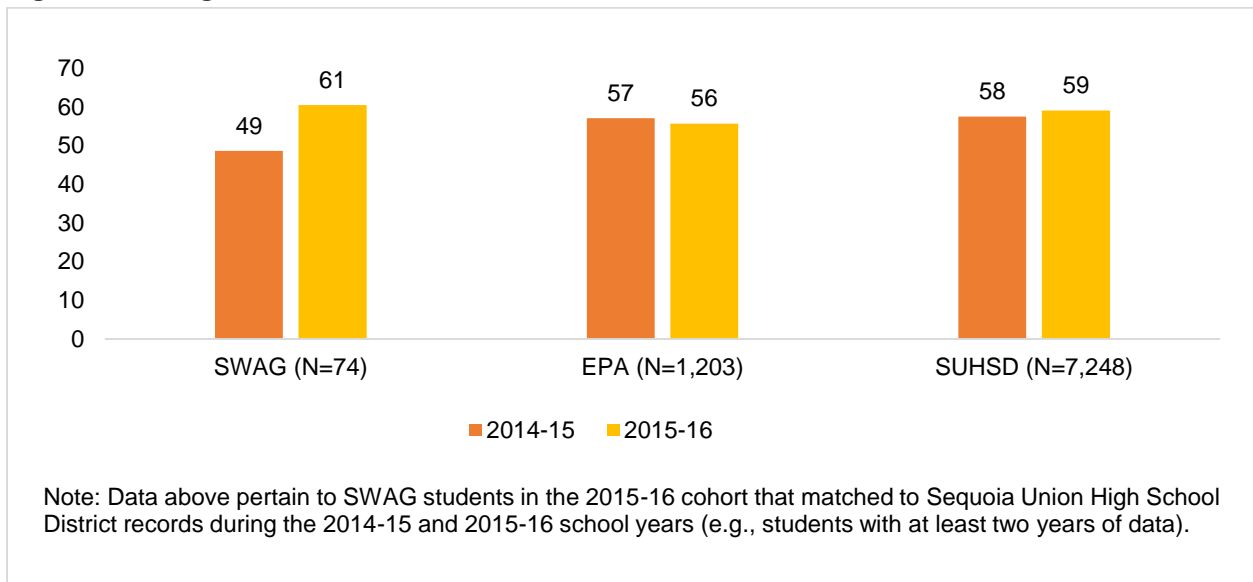
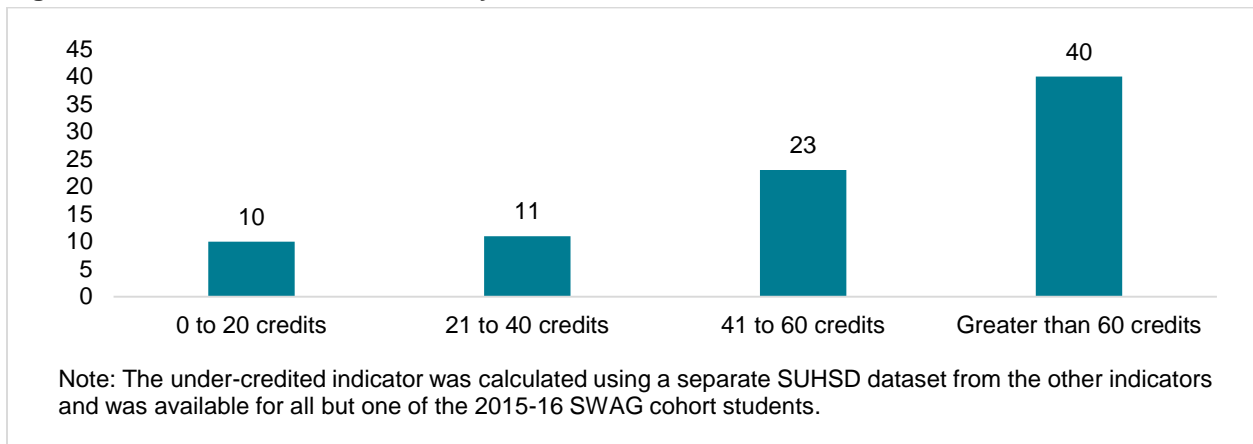


Figure 8. Number of Credits Earned by SWAG Students in 2015-16¹⁰



GPA

There was small increase in the average GPA for SWAG students (from 1.8 to 1.9) from 2014-15 to 2015-16, although their average GPA remained below that of their peers (see Figure 9). By comparison, the average GPA held steady from year-to-year for SUHSD and East Palo Alto students overall. Further Figure 6 above indicates a small decrease in the number of SWAG students with the risk indicator of a GPA below 2.0. Again, among SWAG students, there are differences in GPA that are not apparent when looking at the overall average for SWAG students. Specifically, a handful of SWAG students (5) have high achievement, with a GPA over 3.0, while

¹⁰ Note: The under-credited indicator was calculated using a separate SUHSD dataset from the other indicators and was available for all but one of the 2015-16 SWAG cohort students.

another handful have a GPA close to zero (see figure 10). The greatest number of SWAG students have a GPA between 1.5 and 2.0, just below the 2.0 threshold which we use as an indicator of academic risk.

Figure 9. Average GPA (Unweighted), 2014-15 to 2015-16

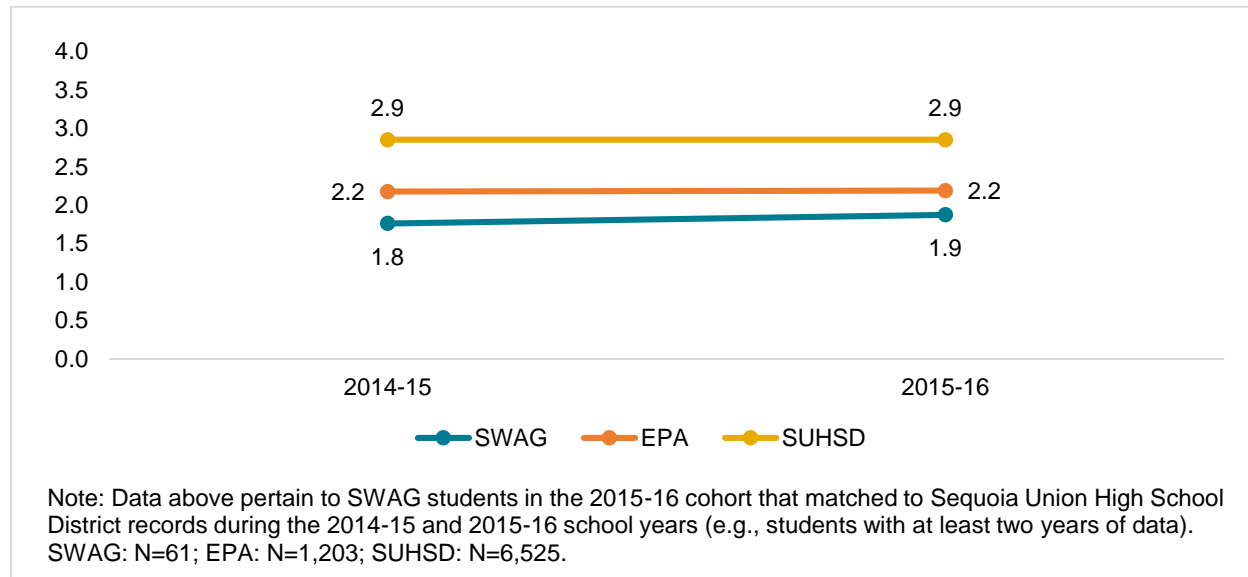
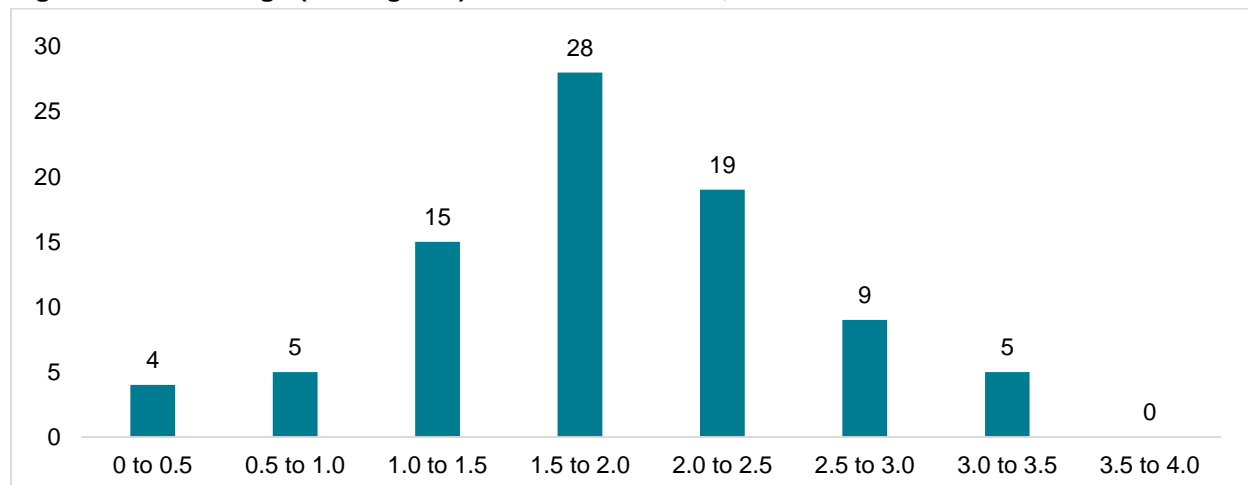


Figure 10. GPA Range (Unweighted) for SWAG Students, 2015-16



Attendance and Suspensions

About 40% of SWAG students were chronically absent in 2015-16, similar to the number in prior year (see Figure 6). Average attendance for SWAG students declined slightly from 92% to 90% in 2015-16. On average, attendance in high school declines as students get older and this is the case for SWAG students as well as across SUHSD, with slight declines when following the same cohort of students from one year to the next (see Appendix). About one-third of SWAG students were suspended in 2015-16, similar to the rate for the prior year (see Figure 6).

Graduation

Of the 21 SWAG students who were 12th graders in 2015-16, the majority (16 of 21 or 76%) graduated by the end of the school year. The remaining five SWAG 12th graders were either still enrolled (three or 14%); enrolled in adult education (one or 5%); or transferred to a school outside Sequoia Union High School District (one or 5%) (see Appendix).¹¹

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The SWAG program appears to be making progress toward many of its goals. SWAG is indeed recruiting, enrolling, and serving a population of youth with many risk factors for not graduating from high school. Both participating youth and staff note that its focus on building strong relationships has been key to engaging youth, fostering connections, and building youth assets. Importantly, SWAG supports participants with youth-centered goal development, which maintains youth motivation and bolsters future orientation toward both school and career. Culturally responsive programming (including culturally competent staff) strengthens protective factors known to be especially critical for low-income minority youth, such as positive racial identity and community belonging. Our research suggests that SWAG youth participants who are actively engaged in the program are building developmental assets like motivation to graduate from high school, an important contributor to academic success. We also note that our analysis revealed some critical program elements not reflected in the program's initial Theory of Change, such as its cultural responsiveness and the centrality of goal-setting.

Our analysis also presents an initial look at academic outcomes for SWAG participants and suggests some encouraging trends in the areas of credit accumulation and GPA. The average annual number of credits earned by SWAG students increased in 2015-16, with a considerable proportion of students earning more than 60 credits during the year. At the same time, the number of students who were under-credited remained about the same over the first year of the program, indicating that that growth in credit accumulation may still not put students over the under-credited threshold. This issue of understanding growth, for students above and below the under-credited threshold warrants further investigation in future research, especially as data from additional years of the program become available. We also see small improvements in student GPA (a slight reduction in students with a GPA under 2.0). On the other hand, we do not see shifts in attendance rates, chronic absence, or suspensions.

While this report highlights early trends, the outcomes should be interpreted with caution as they draw on a relatively small sample size and rely on data from the first year of program implementation. Many program evaluators consider the first year to be too early to assess impact given that programs in their first year often are still working out the kinks of program implementation (Weiss, 1998). Therefore, while these findings provide some insight into potential shifts in student indicators, they should not be interpreted as a determination of program

¹¹ Two additional SWAG students who had been categorized as 11th graders in 2015-16 also graduated.

effectiveness. Subsequent research will incorporate 2016-17 SUHSD data which will allow us to include SWAG youth from two years of the program in the outcomes analysis. A modest increase in sample size and the opportunity to follow the cohort of students who participated in SWAG for both years will enable us to examine changes after two years of participation. As the available data allow, we also will delve more deeply into understanding the nature and intensity of program participation, as well as explore additional analyses comparing differences in outcomes for SWAG students to those of other students.

Finally, in interpreting these findings it is important to note both the considerable obstacles SWAG youth participants face, as well as how complex it can be to develop programmatic interventions to ameliorate these challenges. The reasons that many SWAG students are at risk of not graduating from high school are multi-faceted and, in many cases, systemic (i.e., persistent poverty and inequality). From our ongoing analysis, it appears that SWAG has been able to engage youth who are otherwise disengaged from school and other academic support institutions. While the data are still emerging, this report does point to encouraging signs for the SWAG program and its youth.

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APPENDIX

Research Design and Methodology

The 3-Year SWAG Study is guided by the following set of research questions:

1. How is the SWAG model being implemented?
 - a. How many students is the program reaching? What are the demographics and other characteristics of these students? What is their intensity and duration of program participation?
 - b. What key elements of SWAG have been fully implemented? What, if any, key elements of SWAG have not yet been fully implemented?
 - c. What do program staff consider to be the primary challenges to program implementation? What aspects of the program do staff consider to be going well? What suggestions do staff have for program improvement?
 - d. What barriers (if any) do students and parents see to program participation? What aspects of the program do students and parents consider to be going well? What suggestions do students and parents have for program improvement?
2. What is the relationship between participation in SWAG and student outcomes compared to similar students who do not participate?
 - a. Student outcomes may include school attendance rate, school suspensions, credits earned, high school graduation, employment, college enrollment, contact with the justice system, or others.¹

Qualitative Analysis:

The qualitative findings presented here draw primarily upon analysis of interviews with SWAG staff and youth participants. In spring and summer 2017, Gardner Center staff interviewed 8 SWAG program staff, including all caseworkers, about their day to day responsibilities and experiences administering the program to youth. We also conducted group interviews with over 20 youth participants about their experience in the program (e.g. “how would you describe SWAG to a friend?” or “what do you do or get from being part of SWAG”), their academic and life goals, the challenges they face, and the conditions that help them succeed.

We had each of these interviews transcribed, then uploaded into qualitative data analysis software to be coded. To better understand the SWAG model in practice, we followed an eclectic coding approach, “a purposeful and compatible combination of two or more coding methods” (Saldaña 2016). The research team read six complete transcripts together, and over the course of those reviews compiled a coding structure of key ideas and themes. We drew from “in-vivo” coding, in which we let participants’ own words guide our early articulation of themes; process coding, to help identify the process by which youth learn about, join, and engage with SWAG over time; and

evaluation coding, to capture evidence of key program elements identified in the theory of change (for example, specific youth outcomes). These early codes reflected the central, and multi-faceted role that relationships play in youth’s experience of the program. We were especially concerned with ensuring that youth’s own perception and experience guided our interpretation of the findings; as such, most of our in-vivo codes drew from language youth themselves used in the interviews: “love”, “tough love”, “family”, “friends”, “hands on”, and “second home.” After finalizing our coding structure and coding all the interviews, we crafted analytic memos about each of these thirteen themes. The analytic memos allowed us to not only summarize the data, but to reflect and expound on them (Saldaña 2016). Subsequent analysis included reviewing these initial codes and “lumping” similar themes together into broader categories that helped to answer our research questions and loosely corresponded to the SWAG program theory of change.

Statistical Analysis: Data Matching and Sample Sizes

The data presented in this analysis include the roster of SWAG students provided by LIP, matched to SUHSD records for the 2015-16 school year (first year of the program), as well as for prior school years when available. Of the 96 students who were enrolled in SWAG during the 2015-16 school year; 85 matched to records during the SWAG 2015-16 pilot year. This is the sample used in analysis of educational outcomes for all SWAG students in 2015-16. (Of the remaining 11 students, 7 matched to district records in years before the SWAG pilot year only, and 4 students did not match to district records at all (2 attended schools outside SUHSD, 1 was no longer school age, and 1 did not match to district records for unknown reasons)). Of the SWAG students that did match to SUHSD records, 61 matched in both the year prior to SWAG (2014-15) and during the pilot year (2015-16); this is the sample we used when comparing outcomes across two years for the same group of SWAG students.

Figure A. Range of Credits to be considered on-track versus “under-credited”

Sequoia High School	
Grade level	Range of credits required by grade
9th grade	0-44
10th grade	45-104
11th grade	105-149
12th grade	150-220

Link: <http://www.sequoiahs.org/documents/Resources/Program%20Planning%20Handbook/Sequoia%20Program%20Planning%20Handbook%202017-2018%20English.pdf>

Additional Figures

Figure B. Average Cumulative Credits Earned by Grade, 2015-16 Cohort

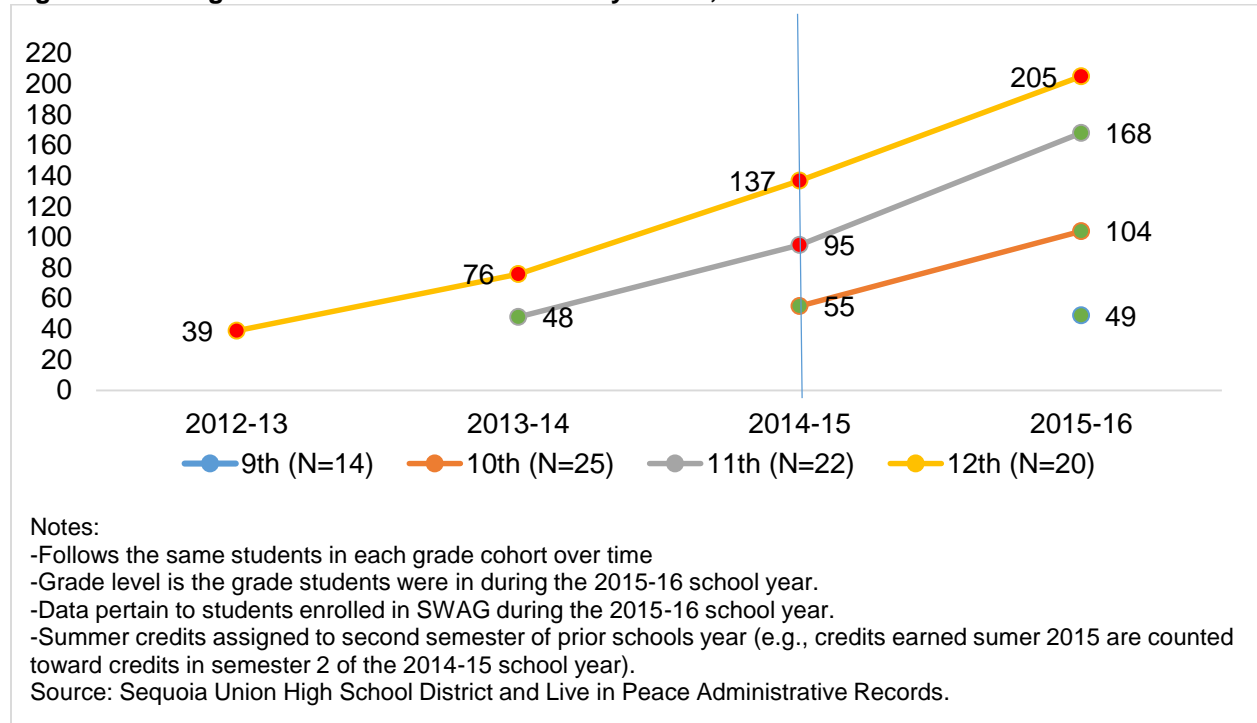


Figure C. Average Attendance Rate

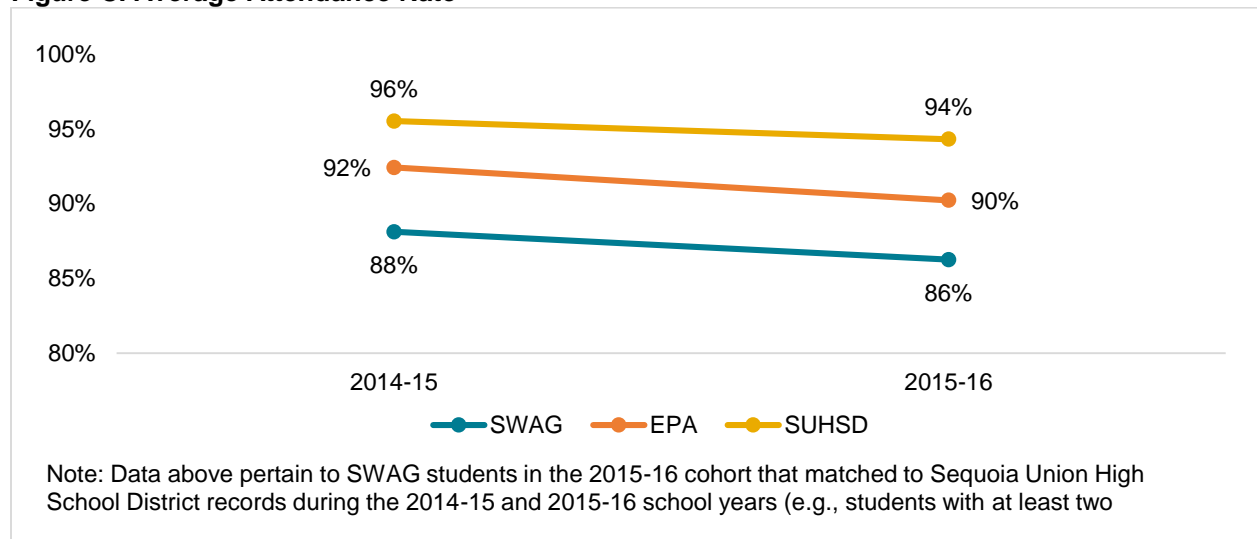


Figure D. Attendance Rate Range for SWAG Students, 2015-16

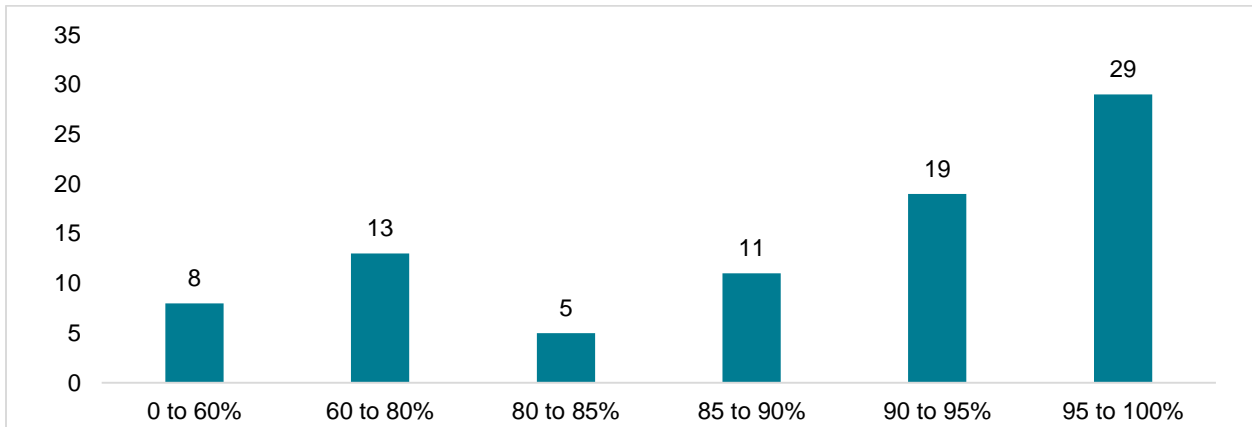


Figure E. End of Year Status for SWAG 2015-16 Seniors

