

Alternative Education Options in California: A view from counties and districts

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California's Alternative Education Options—programs which annually enroll between more than 320,000 of the state's high school students¹—include a range of services: district-run continuation schools, independent study programs, and community day schools, and county-operated community schools and community day schools. Alternative education schools are defined as those serving a majority of students that are either at high risk of educational failure, expelled or under disciplinary sanction, wards of the court, pregnant or parenting, or recovered dropouts. Alternative education options are intended to serve somewhat different student groups, with continuation schools offering credit recovery programs, community day schools serving students with serious disciplinary or behavioral issues and community schools enrolling adjudicated or expelled youth.

There are about 850 alternative high schools in California, not including charter schools. Of these schools, about 500 are *continuation high schools* (designed for over-age/under-credited students in grades 10-12); 294 are district or county-administered *community day schools* (designed for students who have been expelled from traditional schools for disciplinary reasons, or who are on probation and referred from the juvenile justice system); and another 56 are *community schools* operated by county education offices that may, like continuation high schools, offer independent study as an educational option (see Warren, 2006).

The different authorizing legislation for the 3 school programs describes their purposes and parameters in only the most general, ambiguous terms. For example, California's Education Code (Education Code 58500, 2007) calls for alternative education options to “maximize the opportunity for students to develop the positive values of self-reliance, initiative, kindness, spontaneity, resourcefulness, courage, creativity, responsibility and joy.” Different rules and regulations apply to each school program, however, meaning that they operate under different policies, supports, jurisdictions and understandings even though they share similar broad purposes.

Because of this statutory ambiguity, decisions made at county and district levels largely determine not only the local “menu” of alternative education, but also program goals—will it serve as a safety net for students, or a safety valve for the comprehensive high

¹ In 2005-06, 85% of Alternative Education Schools participated in the Alternative Schools Accountability System (ASAM) and reported a total yearly enrollment of 322,277 students (WestEd, 2008).

schools, or a cool out (Warren 2006: 14-15). In practice, California's alternative education programs operate as a non-system; they offer students significantly different resources and opportunities depending on local priorities and decisions (op.cit.). The consequence is that the same form of alternative education, continuation high schools, for example, can and does look very different in different counties, in different districts within the same county, and even within the same district. Further, the array of alternative education options available to students varies substantially in form, quantity and quality, and so in their consequences for alternative education students. 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. Others function as exits to nowhere. Most, however, operate in a mid-range of quality, attention and opportunity (see Warren 2006).

This report considers the operation of California's Alternative Education Options programs as interpreted and implemented by county and district systems across the state.² To describe the system context of alternative education options, we draw upon research undertaken in the winter and spring of 2007. We carried out field research in 9 counties located in southern, central and northern California. Within those counties, we visited 26 districts that varied in size, metropolitan status and local alternative education menu and 37 schools that differed in focus, student outcomes, and size. On these visits we interviewed principals, teachers, district and county administrators and students associated with alternative education options, as well as administrators from the traditional high schools that sent youth to the alternative programs. We also spoke with individuals associated with various county and community youth-serving agencies— such as juvenile justice, mental health, child protective services, and foster care.

Here we first consider alternative education's broad regulatory and student context. Then we examine factors affecting the implementation and outcomes of alternative education as well as how the decisions, processes, and choices at county or district levels affect program operations and resources.

Regulatory context for alternative education

The alternative education regulatory context is complex and fragmented. This fragmentation is largely due to the fact that in California – as in other states – there is no single point of authority for articulating state policy on youth education and development. While pre-adolescent school age children are encompassed by a single unitary public education system designed specifically for them, youth ages 13 to 22 often find themselves in multiple “education systems” or in no system at all. Indeed, the Public Policy Institute of California has recently estimated that well over half a million California youth ages 13-22 are out of school with no high school diploma (Hill, 2005). California funds counties directly so districts have little control over the county programs (community schools) which serve their youth. Every district serving high school students is required to provide access to a continuation program, either through the district or in

² Jorge Ruiz de Velasco's report, “Alternative education in continuation schools: Meeting the needs of over-aged under-credited youth,” considers school-level programs and policies; Lynne Perez's report, xxxx, looks inside the school to examine student and instructional policies.

partnership with nearby districts; other alternative education programs are optional. Continuation schools usually rely on district or principal initiative to tap into categorical funding sources for them. Thus the district “menu” of available options differs substantially depending on local choices and resourcefulness. Alternative education programs at district and county levels have different referral and placement strategies and different fiscal frameworks; coordination and coherence depends on local initiative.

So too do instructional practices and educational rigor vary among schools and districts since state law is silent on instructional delivery quality standards. While students and schools operate within common state-defined curriculum content and student performance standards, we find (consistent with prior reports of the LAO) that most alternative education schools escape effective inclusion in accountability systems that are intended to promote adherence to standards-based instruction. Thus local decisions are all-the-more important as a factor determining the overall quality of instruction in alternative schools.

However, examination of alternative education without reference to the other youth-serving institutions operating along-side risks misleading conclusions or advice for policy makers. Alternative education programs in California operate at the intersection of multiple professional and regulatory frameworks. Students are involved in other state “systems” of regulation and oversight - probation, child protective services, as well as federal programs, most particularly No Child Left Behind. Nowhere in the broad youth policy domain do the interrelationships among these institutions come together with more consequence than they do for alternative education’s vulnerable population. The complexity of this institutional context makes it extremely difficult to draw a “map” of the system, let alone understand the diverse institutional and regulatory relationships that shape the opportunities available to California youth enrolled in alternative education programs.

Alternative Education Options: Different Programs and Purposes

The Alternative Accountability System defines alternative education programs ‘in terms of populations served’ where students are characterized as 1) at risk for academic or behavioral failure, 2) foster care youth, 3) pregnant or parenting, 4) expelled from school, or 5) former dropouts. As the primary options for these vulnerable youth, continuation schools, community day schools, community schools, and independent study programs target particular segments of this student population.

However, establishing how many students actually participate in continuation programs statewide is a difficult task. Each October, the California Department of Education conducts a one-day seat count of all students attending public schools in the state. This attendance information is part of the California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS); hence the date the annual attendance count occurs on is referred to as the CBEDS date.

A large majority of students who participate in alternative education are transitory or often enroll after the CBEDs date and so are not counted. Therefore, the enrollment data for these students must be interpreted with caution. In fact, CBEDS figures only account for 43% of the yearly alternative education enrollment (WestEd, 2008). The total enrollment for all alternative education programs in 2005-06 was 322,277 students, while the CBEDs reported a figure of 137,889 students (Wested, 2008).

Continuation high schools

Continuation high schools were originally created to allow working youth to receive an education while tending to occupational responsibilities outside of school. Continuation education takes several forms: as “part-time” continuation classes offered in a traditional high school; as a “school-within-a-school” model where a separate continuation program exists adjacent to a traditional high school; or as an independent continuation high school with its own campus. For the purposes of this paper, the term “continuation education” will be used to designate any of these three options, while “continuation school” will be applied to the latter two examples. As a state law requirement, these schools are operated by districts and provide high school students (ages 16 and older) with personalized attention in a small classroom setting. In 2005-06 the Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) enrollment count was 116,551 while the CBEDS count was set at 68,371—reflecting only 659% of the actual yearly enrollment (Wested, 2008). Of all alternative education programs, continuation schools tend to have the highest rate of enrollment and serve students longer than the other alternative education programs. However some schools have a highly mobile student population - students may stay as short as one month. Students in these settings typically have attendance related problems and use these schools to gain credits needed towards graduation.

Community schools and community day schools

The county office of education offers community schools as an option for youth who are expelled from school or referred to the program through their involvement with the juvenile justice system. In 2005-06, there were 46,889 students enrolled while the CBED count places enrollment at 18,055 (39% disparity) (Wested, 2008). Many of the students have committed serious offenses and are on probation. Community day schools serve a very similar population and can be operated by either districts or counties. In 2005-06, 11,857 students attended county administered community day schools while 18,455 attended those operated by local districts. Interestingly the CBED count for the county run program is 3,232 and 6,959 for the district community day school, reflecting an 27 and 38 percent disparity, respectively. Unlike continuation schools, these two programs are optional (counties or districts may or may not elect to offer them) and provide instruction to youth throughout the K-12 years.

Independent study

Independent study programs are operated within the district and give students the option of fulfilling educational requirements according to a flexible schedule. This form of alternative education is considered an ‘instructional approach’ therefore students who participate often attend one of the other types of schools. In some districts, students from traditional high schools enroll in independent study offerings as a way to accelerate their path through high school. The students in this program can be either low or high achieving students.

Who Attends Alternative Education Programs?

The ethnic and racial distribution of youth in the California alternative education system and those in traditional public high schools are very similar. However, African-American and Latino students are more likely to attend alternative education schools while Asian students are less likely to be part of the system. Approximately 71% of students in the alternative education system are minority youth (Wested, 2008). Also, poverty and mobility are more often linked for students attending alternative schools. Even though the proportion of youth who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program is roughly similar to the traditional school population, many of the students come from low income disadvantaged neighborhoods. Moreover, the parents of alternative education youth have lower educational levels than parents of students in comprehensive schools. According to the (STAR) testing in 2006-07, 41% of alternative education students tested in 2005-06 were presumed as dropouts in 2007 (Wested, 2008). Not only did students disappear from schools, but the 2006-07 California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) reveals that more than 1/6th of alternative students moved more than twice in the previous twelve months (2008, p.30). Research also indicates that there is a higher percentage of youth needing special education services in the alternative education system (Dixon, 2006)

Alternative education youth often enter the system from fragmented, broken, or unstable families where many of them have experienced caretaker abuse (physical, emotional, and/or sexual) and neglect. Interview data reveal that drug and alcohol use tends to be a common theme for many of the youths' parents, leading students to take on 'adult' responsibilities at home. For example, many youth work, and subsequently miss school, to help pay the rent or bills in their homes. Reportedly, many youth are also single teen parents who lack adequate resources and support necessary to care for themselves along with their child (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Parental mental health issues also play a role in shaping the behavior of these youth who are often diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, or bipolar disorder. Subsequently the students are put on medication needed to stabilize and control 'noncompliant' or 'aggressive' behavior.

Respondents often discussed gang involvement as a challenge facing many of these youth within their families and communities. Coming from dysfunctional homes where they lack appropriate adult role models, youth may seek needed social support through gang membership. Lastly, alternative education youth may also encounter homelessness as they battle with economic and social problems within their families.

The turbulence and tragedy experienced in the homes of these youth may channel them into other systems that take on a caretaker role, such as the foster care system or juvenile justice system. Roughly 84% of community day and continuation students report living with their parents as 11th graders, as opposed to 94% of traditional school students, while 4% of community day and 2% of continuation students are wards of the state and reside in foster homes, kinship-relative homes, or group homes (Wested, 2008). These youth face special challenges as they attempt to restructure their lives within an institutionalized

setting. Foster youth experience multiple home and school placements, placing them at risk for significant educational disruptions and academic challenges. Alternative education youth may also encounter the juvenile justice system for a variety of infractions ranging from theft to assault.

A large majority of students enter alternative education programs (particularly continuation high schools) due to difficulties experienced in traditional schools. A teacher commented that the students “don’t have real warm fuzzy feelings about education or school.” As expected, many educators suspect that students’ academic challenges began as early as elementary school and are closely linked to their family background. These youth typically don’t fit into the traditional, comprehensive academic program or setting and subsequently ‘fall off the tracks.’ Many of these students have very low reading and writing levels and failing grades. As a ‘round peg trying to fit in a square hole’ alternative education students are often invisible in the classroom. Teachers repeatedly commented that the students are unsure of how to navigate the system and ask for academic help. They also develop poor work habits which are exacerbated by a lack of academic support at home. Many of these students are then labeled as ‘not wanting to learn.’ We also found that students often described themselves as lazy and truant. These struggling students become credit deficient and require special services in order to catch up. On the other end of the spectrum, there are some alternative education youth who are academically gifted but socially uncomfortable in a large high school. Students in this situation may have been home schooled for an extended period of time or simply found the transition from junior high to high school socially overwhelming. Our research suggests that there is a great deal of educational diversity among alternative education students.

Alternative education students are perceived as ‘bad, throw away kids’ and are often marginalized in their schools and communities. Educators often commented that these youth have low self-esteem, lack confidence, and exhibit high levels of anger which often stems from their home experiences and then becomes exacerbated through a lack of connection to school. A teacher referred to alternative education youth as ‘casualties of society,’ as such, they are at risk for becoming forgotten, unproductive members of society.

Embedded implementation contexts

In practice if not in policy, California’s alternative education programs reflect priorities, choices and contexts at both county and district levels.

County Offices of Education

County Offices of Education (COE) oversee Regional Occupational Centers (ROP), community day schools, community schools, and court schools – the latter two educational settings work with students expelled from school districts or incarcerated youth, respectively. Across the spectrum of alternative education options, many school districts view county-run community schools as the option of last resort. Communication between school districts and COEs is often limited to district personnel dealing directly with the referral process after a student is expelled from a school district for behavioral or attendance reasons. This lack of communication and relationships across county/district

lines manifests in a range of beliefs about community schools within districts - in particular, views on the part of district staff of community schools as “holding pens” or lacking in educational value.

Student pathways into and out of community schools follow standardized procedures designed to limit “cherry picking” of students, as one COE employee puts it. County programs do not typically receive voluntary transfers. The School Attendance Review Board (SARB), for example, manages a process through which students with low attendance records are eventually expelled from the district. Recently incarcerated students on probation, “602s,” usually attend community schools, as well as students expelled from a district under a “48915”³ mandatory expulsion for, as one administrator described it, “specific offenses that are considered serious enough that the student would pose a danger and a threat to himself and everyone else on the campus.”

District administrators and continuation high school principals report mixed impressions of community schools as academically weak, unsafe, and overly funded programs that are not accountable to local communities. Some perceive community schools as lacking a clear academic focus and hotbeds of behavioral problems. Community schools typically offer a limited range of courses – one student at a community school we visited described taking the same four classes for each of three years in order to earn enough credits to graduate. Community schools are also described as safety valves for school districts to move students with significant behavioral problems out of their schools. Community school students either graduate from the community school program, age out, or drop out – rarely do they return to district secondary school programs. Additionally, community schools are often less visible at the local level than even continuation high schools and do not typically receive voluntary transfers. This lack of visibility is particularly true of geographically large counties where county programs may be located at considerable distance from local districts and communities. Several district administrators cited academically deficient county-run community school options as the reason for starting a district community day school program to serve this population. District administrators pointed to a lack of academic focus and accountability for community schools – as one shared, “I believe your education is always going to be better if districts are running it versus county – because they’re in the community and they’re more responsive to parent needs and so on.”

Resentment about differentials in funding formula and financial resources accompany these negative descriptions. Another administrator described community schools as receiving increased funding for less class time, “...the county program, a lot of those students were only going to class one hour a day, and they were really Independent Study. And they were getting double funding for them because they were 602s and all that...And it was a cash cow for the counties.” Even where funding differences are

³ Under California’s Welfare and Institutions Code Section 602, children who commit a criminal act in California fall under the jurisdiction of juvenile court and may be declared wards of the court – in the case of alternative education, adjudicated youth, particularly those on probation, are sometimes referred to as “602s.” According to California’s Education Code 48915(c) the following acts require mandatory expulsion: possessing a firearm or brandishing a knife, selling drugs, committing sexual assault or battery, or possessing an explosive.

marginal, they serve to exacerbate inter-agency conflict when several providers have incentive to compete for scarce resources.

County social services

Counties are critical to the opportunities and outcomes seen in alternative education for another reason, as well: they oversee the range of social services that serve district alternative education students. The regulatory structures for child protection services (CPS), public health, and homeless services, to name a few, are all administered at the county level. The level of coordination, communication and cohesion of county services affecting youth matters significantly to educators and students involved with district alternative education programs. In many if not most counties, youth services function as Balkanized agencies, carrying on their work and providing services in isolation from one another and from the County Offices of Education as well as school districts. In these settings, educators and youth service providers at the local level encounter a maze of often contradictory regulations, and youth experience little coordination in the services provided them or their families. Across the spectrum of alternative education options, services coordination at the county level is highly variable and often based on the experience and personal relationships cultivated among agency leaders. Different reporting and confidentiality requirements, uncoordinated regulatory structures, and lack of personnel or resources dedicated to collaborative efforts all combine to limit coordination between agencies.

Some counties make intentional efforts to communicate across youth-serving institutions, to coordinate services and policies so that they are mutually reinforcing and leveraged, and to adopt a “youth development” stance—a perspective invested in providing positive supports for young people and a coherent system of comprehensive services. In San Joaquin County, for example, alternative education administrators from multiple districts praised the county run community schools known as ONE schools. In nearby Fresno County, the head of the county-run community schools works closely with court schools and the local correctional facility. These different contexts for youth assigned to community schools carry different opportunities and expectations for this especially troubled youth population.

One example of a coordinated approach to county-level services is the San Joaquin County Office of Education (SJCOE). The SJCOE seeks to foster collaboration and creativity among its workforce in an effort to develop programs that improve opportunities and outcomes for alternative education youth, “...it’s a great place to work because we are all willing to work together.” Administrators we spoke with stressed that the office tries to encourage staff to explore partnerships with other agencies. They are also encouraged to attend professional development and networking opportunities, as well as to develop their own programming ideas. As one county administrator put it, “I just know that everyone here really supports young people and really works hard to find programs that will meet their needs.”

The SJCOE partners with a range of institutions to provide further supports for students, including career training, supports for foster care youth, and a voluntary probation program. The WorkStart YES program is a partnership with the local workforce investment board that pairs students with career development mentors. After

participating in the WorkStart program, youth go on to part time employment through WorkNet during the school year and the summer. The SJCOE also manages a YouthBuild program, organized through the local housing authority, which combines construction training with a half day of academics. Additionally, a counselor from the Division of Preventive Services is on-site five days a week to provide mental health and drug counseling. The COE has a full-time position dedicated to coordination with Child Protective Services, and the county's ONE community schools participate in a voluntary probation program that links students to probation officers as an additional support.

Not only do San Joaquin's administrators report that the office works to foster an environment of collaboration and leadership within its staff, but the county also purportedly seeks to institutionalize a youth development philosophy within its schools. As the Director of county operated programs points out, ONE "...basically means that as individuals everyone has worth and is important. And we value everyone as individuals. But when we all come together as one, then truly we can perform miracles. And so our kids know that." The ONE program also attempts to address student pathways after leaving the community school – seniors are required to develop a post graduation plan that outlines the steps they have already taken towards post-secondary enrollment or the workplace.

These efforts to bring coherence to services provide the young people involved in alternative education options that reflect committed leadership, political will and hard work on the part of core individuals within county agencies. Constant monitoring and development of partnerships work hand in hand with a youth development focus that strives to help students identify and access services and long term goals. The ONE ideology is also seen by administrators as reinforcing the potential of each and every student by fostering continuous growth and experimentation with programming at the county level.

Districts

Districts vary as well in their approach to and priority for alternative education programs and students.

Dumping ground schools. The general view among district and county administrators interviewed was that district personnel see alternative education programs, in particular continuation schools, as dumping grounds—repositories for disruptive students and ineffective teachers. Continuation schools have a significantly higher suspension (8.7:1), expulsion (9.5:1), and dropout rates (Wested, 2008). Speaking about youth attending his district's continuation school, an administrator states that "Nobody wants to deal with them." Moreover, some argue that "the premise behind the transfer is that the sending school is not the problem; the student is the problem" (Gregory, 2001). A county social worker connected to the foster care system wondered if some districts use the IEP (individualized educational plan) as a reason to push a 'disruptive' student out of a district, claiming that the district could not provide the needed services. Many alternative education advocates at both district and county levels believe that comprehensive schools would rather send students off rather than provide services to work with them. Students are being shipped off and they often do not have the opportunity to transfer back (depending on the reason for being transferred out). Although many alternative education

administrators in this study comment that these practices are changing, the beliefs that underlie them persist in many settings (Warren, 2006).

This dumping ground perception is strengthened by the variation in alternative education options even available to at risk students within a district. For example, a district in the Central Valley offers only an adult education program as an alternative to the continuation school. Consequently, that continuation school receives students needing services that a community day school would typically provide. This predicament creates a situation where the schools have little to no control over the students who enroll and reinforces the idea of alternative education as a dumping ground. Often students end up leaving the district to attend a school elsewhere. Although the district and school board may be aware of the need for more alternatives, the school principal in such a district context comments that the idea has “fallen through the cracks” and there is no real board support yet.

Benign Neglect. Other districts, probably most typical of districts around the state, provide alternative education programs as required by law, but with little expressed attention to their quality, resources or the students’ pathways (Warren, 2006). We characterize alternative education in these districts in terms of “benign neglect.” Alternative education is not necessarily a dumping ground, but neither is it a priority. In such settings alternative education is described as a “necessary evil... oh yeah, we’ve got that school too.” Alternative education teachers and administrators in these districts see themselves as “the bottom of the food chain” as district officials focus resources and priorities on their comprehensive high schools. One continuation school principal commented that “the ‘acceptable loss’⁴ schools get the last go around; [while] the district is looking out for large comprehensives. You have to go out and fend for yourself. I have my *own* network.” In benign neglect districts, the character and quality of the continuation school turns on the principal’s commitment to the alternative mission and skill in securing resources and political support for the school. One administrator further supports this sentiment in stating that ‘the district treats [us] as outcasts’ and as such one has to ‘rely on other sources for success.’

In Southern California, a school district administrator highlighted this dilemma in the context of student transfers into and out of alternative education programs. Typically, when a student is voluntarily transferred from the comprehensive high school to an alternative education placement the underlying assumption is that the student simply needs a chance to recover credits and to successfully graduate. Students seen in this way are usually given the opportunity to transfer back to the comprehensive school. However, when a student is involuntarily removed from the traditional high school and placed in alternative education the mindset is that the student has serious ‘attendance and behavioral problems’ and needs to be housed somewhere else. Unlike voluntary transfers, there is a greater likelihood that these students would be prevented from reentering the traditional school. No real incentive exists for the comprehensive high school to take back a student who has “disrupted” the program and can potentially “drag down test scores.” These contrasting perceptions of the students can create a situation where the

⁴ By “acceptable loss” this principal refers to the acceptable drop out rate of 10% and by extension, the schools that enroll these youth.

school and the students are seen as ‘less than,’ and provided what one continuation high school teacher called “old, left over stuff.”

A Central Valley continuation high school principal commented on having to continuously plead with the district administrators and superintendent about needing more services in his school. After hearing the response of “I’ll check into it” and receiving no help a year later the principal actively made the necessary changes on his own. He opened up a ‘transitional class’ to provide needed special support services that his school previously was ill equipped to provide. However, sustaining such efforts requires district level support that may or may not happen.

A few districts are taking steps to change perceptions about alternative education programs and the students who attend them. However, for this shift to occur several district representatives stated that they must have superintendent support. Although financial support is critical, the support that is desired extends beyond funding to presence--superintendents and school board members visiting the schools, making alternative education a district priority of the same sort as the traditional high school. In a few instances, time spent on a continuation high school campus changed central office views of alternative education and the resources teachers and students required. One Northern Bay Area principal commented, for example, that a former superintendent acted as a substitute principal in her school and afterwards wondered “why have we not been taking care of this program a little better?” The superintendent further stated that the alternative school was “like a deep secret” and admittedly, they haven’t been paying attention. This acknowledgement after experiencing the school first hand subsequently ‘opened all the doors’ for them to receive equal services and resources (i.e. books, materials). A district superintendent in the Central Valley discusses how true change started when there was a change in the belief of the role of alternative education in the district:

Well I think that it starts with a belief system that says that our alt ed schools should be treated like our comprehensive schools: the same amount of time on my part, the same amount of resources, the lead teacher kind of resources, the CAHSEE classes. It had been my experience in this district as a comprehensive site principal in the past that our continuation programs weren’t treated the same. There certainly wasn’t a focus there. Because for a while they weren’t even part of our principals groups; they met separately because they were “different”. And that’s just not right, that’s not healthy. Kids are kids.

This school leader acknowledges the importance of a ‘professional understanding’ that alternative education schools deserve similar attention, respect, and resources that traditional schools receive. Professional development is one of those resources. One district we visited designated an ‘instructional leadership team’ in each school where teachers work together to establish a professional learning community. The district funds this attempt to ‘deprivatize instructional practice’ by paying for an extra prep period. Importantly, this strategy aims to reduce the idea that these schools are a dumping ground for problematic students and ineffective teachers—instead they send a message that teachers can benefit from specialized professional development and these vulnerable students deserve quality teachers.

Nonetheless, our study also reveals some challenges these schools face as they try to shift the perception of being a dumping ground or recipient of benign neglect. A principal from an ever-changing district commented that there is a lack of ‘institutional knowledge’ on how things operate —especially considering the frequent superintendent or principal turnovers. When new superintendents come into the district they may have an outlook or philosophy on alternative education that does not match the progressiveness of the previous leadership. Another district leader stated that ‘people are programs’ so in order to improve the alternative education programs he had to alter the leadership and teaching staff.

Youth development stance. Still other districts adopt a youth development stance, making concerted efforts not only to provide alternative education programs with needed resources, but also to connect programs and students with other important resources such as counseling, work experience, and life skills classes. Districts of this stripe afford alternative education full citizenship and view the student population as one needing different, but high quality educational settings and focused resources. Administrators in a district that has shifted from benign neglect to active support of alternative programs comment how the superintendent and the school board saw “the school as just another high school. They really don’t make the distinction...”

A school district in the central valley exemplified a youth development agenda as they provided students with high quality, alternative pathways in the form of coordinated services. The alternative school within this district focuses on effectively and intentionally shaping the learning environment as opposed to ‘fixing’ the student. This orientation is given momentum from the start since there is continuous open dialogue between the traditional school and alternative school regarding student transfers. This communication across systems eliminates the alternative school from being perceived as a dumping ground since the sending school counselors ‘try to give [them] the ones that are going to have the best shot.’ A traditional school counselor also stated that they try interventions before sending the student on. The alternative school strives to be student centered and believes in the importance of finding the best fit for a particular student.

This developmental stance is also reflected in the central valley district which supports the school “100 percent.” According to district officials, the district has high expectations for all principals and teachers across educational settings—alternative and traditional—and promotes active, collective staff development and collaboration. A principal commented that “all principals have a common school plan, [are] aligned with the board, and moving in the same direction.” This common school goal is evident since the district has just one graduation including both the continuation and comprehensive high schools. Moreover, principals are held accountable and required to submit reports every three weeks to the superintendent regarding student achievement outcomes. In this ‘constant state of analysis’ they examine student data (i.e. CAHSEE, CST) to see what is effective and what is not; then they work to develop and implement new approaches. The district and school board support in this community is strong as principals and teachers express that they work in true partnership. Board members, as well as the superintendent regularly visit the school. Also, financial support from the district allows them to enhance

the physical aspects of the school by expanding the building and adding technology, such as a computer lab.

This continuation school manages a coordinated system of support services available to the students. Counseling services are provided on the school campus with the idea that students and families may not be able to access those services if they were not there. A school counselor commented that the ‘counseling process’ is integrated within the school in order to create a “good environment that students can buy into.” This setting promotes confluent education, which places emphasis on both cognitive development and affective features of a student which shape their learning style and academic trajectory. The alternative education school also pays serious attention to student pathways beyond high school by providing a program referred to as DECISIONS.⁵ This weekly program exposes students to different career options after graduation. College representatives and individuals from different occupations come to this program to discuss potential career pathways for the students. Students are also given the opportunity to take classes at a local community college. The staff also assists them in discovering which jobs or careers match their skills. This program fosters students’ networking skills as they learn how to recognize their needs and connect with other people and resources to meet those needs. Also, the school counselor brings in community speakers to discuss relevant personal and health issues in the students’ lives. If she notices something going on in the community, such as drugs, alcohol, and sex she says “uh-oh, these kids are having a problem with this. I’ll go look for my resource and bring them in...” The staff is committed to addressing the students’ various personal and social developmental needs.

Our research suggests that districts taking this view of alternative education as a vital element of the district’s educational services are not the norm (see also Warren, 2006). Board support is an unusual occurrence even when the superintendent is supportive, for instance. The principal of the school described above recognizes that although her school “is not unique, there are not a whole lot of continuation schools who enjoy the kind of support [we] have.”

Challenges to more effective alternative education

Successful student experiences in alternative education programs depend not only on opportunities for students to complete academic requirements necessary to receive a high school diploma but also implicate support services to meet the special needs of this population. Indeed, the expressed intent of the legislation authorizing alternative education programs in California suggests that its broad goal is to create a continuum of care for an especially vulnerable student population whose needs extend beyond school to family supports, daily survival, physical and mental health, and transitional support. Youth in this alternative setting can greatly benefit from housing assistance, mental health counseling (conflict resolution, stress management, anger management), child care, career counseling, and job training. Yet the reality is a shortfall in services largely due to inconsistent or incompatible regulatory structures and poor articulation across elements in their educational pathways. Even where alternative education programs are well-

⁵ The name of the program was changed to protect confidentiality.

resourced, overwhelm in the surrounding youth service agencies means that few students receive anything approaching a continuum of care, or even an adequate level of comprehensive services. As alternative educators and advocates everywhere struggle to provide needed service for this vulnerable population they are faced with many obstacles as they work to implement and provide effective services. In the following section we present key challenges that were salient in this study: an institutional train wreck and demand that exceeds supply in a variety of contexts.

Institutional train wreck

Many youth in alternative education experience little support or consistency in their lives and consequently interact with a multitude of social systems that shape their social and developmental pathways. Effectively addressing the students' needs requires coordination and collaboration among several youth-serving systems including schools, child protective services, law enforcement agencies, juvenile justice system, health services agencies, mental health system, youth shelters, and occupational programs (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Findings from this study suggest that key institutions in the lives of these youth have created a "train wreck" of ineffective and inadequate support services impeding their chances of overcoming the many barriers they face to education.

The institutional overwhelm is evident most especially in county child protective services (CPS), and creates significant service shortfalls for foster youth in alternative education programs. Federal and state regulations have shaped the nature of the relationship between school and CPS. The McKinney Vento Act was created in 1987 to assist the homeless but was reauthorized in 2002 to include foster youth who were waiting to be placed in foster or group homes. The law states that foster youth must be allowed to enroll in school whether or not they have their immunization records, school records, birth certificate, or parent or legal guardian. To further support educational rights for foster youth, AB 490 was enacted in 2003 to promote educational stability and allows them to have the same access to opportunities and resources as their peers. Importantly, this law mandates that foster youth have the right to remain at their school of origin. This aspect of AB490 is critical since research has suggested that mobility is a significant problem in the lives of youth involved with alternative education options. AB490 also mandates that 'placing agencies may access educational records in order to ensure that they can meet the educational needs of youth in foster care.' In other words, CPS has the right to refer to a student's school records in order to make important decisions regarding other needed services. California legislation requires that this information be collected in a foster youth 'educational passport' that includes records needed to monitor educational progress such as grades, test scores, attendance, and individualized education programs. Lastly, these laws mandate that each school district should appoint a Homeless Liaison and an Educational Liaison to ensure that foster youth receive needed support services. These positions are usually housed under the umbrella of Foster Care Youth services, a program that typically oversees how these regulations are carried out within the school system, while providing direct services such as tutoring and mentoring.

Due to district constraints there is typically no Educational (or Homeless) Liaison present at the school who understands foster youth regulations and maintains educational passports for case management purposes. Consequently, schools lack knowledge about current foster youth policy that impacts their enrollment process and access to needed

services. A foster youth coordinator said that foster parents often go to schools and become ‘intimidated’ when they try to enroll students but are faced with administrators who are not familiar with these laws and often block their attempts to enroll the youth. Moreover, some school districts question the validity of state law that conflicts with federal law, specifically FERPA—Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. This federal regulation protects the privacy of student educational records by requiring the consent of parents or adult students for disclosure. However, our interviews suggest that CPS is often blocked from obtaining necessary information when schools believe that the dissemination of records about a foster youth is not permitted under FERPA guidelines. As a community service provider commented, “collaborating is a difficult thing to do because of the laws and regulations” requiring them to go through a web of channels to access and provide basic services.

To carry out the intent of these federal and state regulations CPS and schools must be part of a capacity building system where they are given the resources (i.e. space, staff, leadership) to effectively coordinate and collaborate with one another. However, more often than not this is not the case. We found that there is in fact an acknowledgement among child protective service workers and educators that special services are needed for foster youth in alternative programs, however the common sentiment was that there is a ‘general lack of support overall that makes it very difficult’ to provide those services. County workers commented on being ‘tired and sad’ about the infrastructure inadequacy where a lack of resources prevent regulations such as AB490 from being executed. High caseloads are seen as an impediment to developing healthy, functional relationships with schools. County workers, often conflicted by the institutional push for safety, do not have the time to build a rapport with the schools, be present for IEP meetings, or keep track of a student’s educational progress in the state mandated ‘educational passport.’ The distance between CPS and school officials potentially causes schools to believe that social services do not have the same level of concern for education as they do for child safety. Frustrated, educators believe that the school and services provided can potentially be a ‘stable, safe haven’ for youth whose home lives are disrupted by tragedy and chaos. Thus the lack of communication creates the impression of misaligned or conflicting student goals and agendas.

The lack of communication and information dissemination across these youth serving systems creates problems providing mental health services for this at risk population. Principals commented, for example, that group home youth are often assigned to alternative programs without staff being informed of students’ mental health needs. As a result they often are unable to determine if disruptive student conduct is a behavioral or a medical problem. Many youth in the alternative education system, especially those in foster care, are diagnosed with clinical depression, ADHD, bipolar disorder and are medicated when they come to school. Students may often ‘act out’ due to serious mental health issues and without this key piece of information, teachers and principals may mislabel problem behavior as requiring discipline rather than support services. Educators expressed that identified or not, ‘various health issues make it hard for [students] to learn.’ Further, school officials reported that even having space to provide counseling services to students is problematic and tedious. A principal described the space requirements for a county mental health worker as needing ‘this-many square feet and that-many doors and this-many windows and sinks.’ Alarming, a teacher reported that

some districts have been experiencing decreases in school based health services as high as 80 percent. Services that are not school based often are provided in reactive ways that make it difficult for alternative education students and their families to profit from them. For instance counties or districts may say that there are mental health services available to youth however they are typically inaccessible; an educator states that "...99% of them [service] the dysfunctional kid and their families are supposed to gather themselves up, get into their little Ford Escort and drive over there? It doesn't happen! The services need to come to the kids!" The systematic and practical delivery of mental health services to alternative education youth (and often their families) is a critical component in a coordinated collaborative effort towards a continuum of care.

At the most fundamental level, conflicts and inconsistencies reflect the fact that systems involving alternative education students often have different goals—schools focus on providing academic support, CPS is concerned with child safety and/or 'preserving the family at all costs,' juvenile justice system prioritizes social control and violence abatement, and mental health strives to promote 'normal' psychological development. However, students would benefit from an acknowledgement (beyond the regulations) of shared responsibility between these systems and occasion for outreach that addresses family and youth health needs across agencies (for elaboration, see Aron and Zeiweg, 2003; p. 16)

Demand exceeds supply

In most alternative education settings we studied, demand for student spaces exceeds availability (see also Aron, 2006). Our research shows demand-supply issues in various contexts such as general enrollment for continuation high schools, placement needs for younger youth, and the capacity to serve special education students. The lack of alternative education options often creates lengthy waiting lists for youth needing an alternative to the comprehensive high school (see also Warren, 2006). Waiting lists at alternative programs prevent some of the neediest youth from accessing the programs they require to graduate from high school. In this study, some districts stated that they could serve at least 30% to 50% more students but 'can't take all kids appropriate for alternative education.' Some schools try to be creative in order to accommodate youth by creating more space through combining classrooms, removing non-instructional course offerings, within an already limited, low-resourced school building. Some educators expressed a desire to do what is necessary to serve their students and address their needs. Yet the youth who must linger while waiting for a spot in an alternative program is at serious risk for dropping out altogether.

This research also showed a critical gap in alternative education services, particularly continuation schools, for younger youth. There is a large demand for alternative education programs among 9th graders but there options are limited to community day or community schools. Some districts expressed the need of an Opportunity School (one teacher for all subjects throughout the year) to house middle school students on their campus who would otherwise get expelled or drop out. Similarly, data show a large percentage of youth attending alternative education programs require special education services - 13% as opposed to 11% of non-alternative students (Wested, 2008). However, an overwhelmingly large number of schools and districts told us that they do not have the

staff or resources to provide special education students with appropriate services. Consequently, many of these students ‘slip through the cracks’ and drop out.

Lastly, demand may actually be even higher than alternative education advocates believe. In some contexts, families may be unaware that an alternative option exists for their struggling student. Consequently those youth are left to linger in traditional high schools without any hope of graduation or drop out of the educational system all together. During our site visits we found that there were very few schools had brochures or compiled materials about their school and services. Also, high school counselors in most settings have little to no contact with alternative education programs. For example, a traditional school counselor in a large district commented that she had minimal contact with the administrators at the alternative school and (although she routinely placed students into the alternative school) had never even been to that campus. During student focus groups, several youth commented that they heard about the school through friends or siblings who had previously attended. Thus poor communication between these two systems can exacerbate efforts to provide alternative options for the students who seriously need them.

Factors affecting the opportunities and resources of alternative education programs

Context features

The context within and through which alternative education options operate matters. Context factors establish conditions that enable or constrain alternative education programs, resources and relationships that ultimately impact student experiences and outcomes.

District size, for instance, plays a significant role in the character of relationships and student experience. For example, many of the small districts we visited had limited alternative education offerings for students, only the mandated continuation high school. This restricted menu often meant that students presenting significant behavioral issues were placed in the same setting as students enrolled to make up academic credit, thereby combining the purposes of the community school and continuation high school options in ways that created instructional and disciplinary challenges for teachers and administrators. A principal described his struggles to work with these two different student populations—“a kid who has been [involved with] some kind of major violence...jeopardizes the whole entire school.” Alternatively, small districts often co-locate continuation, community day, and independent study programs in one single campus creating complex administrative challenges as a single administrator struggles to manage three different “schools” with different missions and students with different needs all in one place.

Big districts present communication and coordination issues for alternative education. Absent expressed priority for and district office commitment to alternative education, coordination and consistency of resources provided alternative education were hard to achieve in large districts, as was accountability for alternative education outcomes. We found that school board members, central office administrators, or teachers, principals and counselors from the comprehensive high schools had little knowledge of or direct

experience with the alternative programs. In a number of instances, this lack of awareness meant that inequities in resources [books and other instructional materials] went unaddressed, intentional ‘pathways’ for students across educational settings were difficult to create, and negative perceptions of alternative education programs, staff and students were difficult to dispel. Several alternative school educators working in large, urban districts expressed feelings of “invisibility” and low professional status.

Small districts, in contrast, had the ability to communicate within and across programs, and to bring the entire administrative team together. “We can all sit in one room and talk about issues...” reported the counselor from a sending school. Twice monthly he and the principal of the district continuation high school meet to talk about students, their progress, students who might benefit from the continuation program and coordination needs. A mid-sized district with strong superintendent support for alternative education involves the continuation high school principal in all district leadership meetings, evaluates student progress with the same accountability strategy, and supports a strong connection between continuation and comprehensive high school counselors. The superintendent’s regular visits to the continuation high school reinforced these connections between alternative and comprehensive programs and kept him personally informed about programs and students’ progress. This hands-on relationship with alternative programs would be difficult for superintendents at the helm of large, urban systems to carry out.

The **capacity of area youth-serving services** also affects alternative education programs. In some instances shortfalls in social service supports for the alternative education population reflect local economic not bureaucratic contexts. In Humboldt County, for example a severe lack of foster homes constrains CPS and a COE administrator said further that “it would take an act of God to get someone a Big Brother or a Big Sister.” Economic tough times in the county mean that law enforcement is stretched thin so cannot provide effective support to alternative education programs or child welfare agencies. Decline in local forestry and fishing industries restricts employment options for adults or youth. The strained capacity of both public and private sectors limits partnerships to support alternative programs and their students are in short supply. Alternative education programs in this economic context struggle on all fronts—resources, staffing, facilities, and relations with relevant agencies.

However, we see substantive variation in alternative education programs across settings despite these context considerations. Some smaller districts had poor communication around their alternative education students; some fiscally pressed settings still afforded alternative education attention and priority. We found that key factors influencing alternative education practices within counties and districts are largely beyond the reach of policy as it currently stands. The ambiguity of alternative education’s authorizing legislation and its weak presence or oversight at the state level means that critical elements of alternative education reflect personal choices and connections rather than policy directives. At county and district levels, three factors shape the goals, resources and operation of alternative education programs: personal networks and relationships that leverage resources, alternative education partnerships within and across youth-serving public and private institutions, and individual leadership for and commitment to alternative education.

Personal relationships and networks

Invariably, explanations of an innovative practice, productive partnerships, unusual resources or other elements particular to county or district alternative education practices and resources featured personal relationships. These personal relationships arose through deliberate action as well as circumstance. Alternative educators describe seeking out networking opportunities, building connections over the course of a career within a region or district, and taking advantage of chance encounters to wheedle resources from administrators and community members. Despite the high needs of students within alternative education, a number of resourceful teachers, principals, and district personnel have become adept at building, maintaining, and leveraging local networks for funding, services, and materials. Although the California Continuation Educators Association (CCEA) tries to provide professional development and networking opportunities, locally based support for alternative education depends on the public relations skills of individuals committed to this student population

The networks and relationships that support alternative education often are *sui generis*. A continuation high school principal in a rural district who also serves as the district's technical support builds upon relationships he built over the years with district administrators: "I'm in everybody's office fixing their computer... I know a lot of people and I've been here a long time." This same principal also attends the sending school's weekly leadership meetings by choice, not mandate, and informally "drops by" the traditional campus several times a week. The result of his continuous, deliberate involvement with the sending school is that the school's two counselors and assistant principals describe alternative education as "an extension of this school site."

Another continuation high school principal spent his entire career within one school district, starting out as a teacher and football coach. After decades spent moving up the administrative ladder, he founded his own continuation high school in a church trailer and proceeded to muscle district personnel, many of whom he had worked with previously, into building a new continuation high school facility. These personal relationships continue to be essential for his program: "You have to get up in the morning and make your own contacts."

Several individuals drew upon contacts made in their previous positions. A county YouthBuild and Workstart YES coordinator began building relationships across the county while conducting research with WestEd. Doing qualitative interviewing in the field provided a key opportunity to build relationships with school districts and businesses. As she notes, "I just tried to place myself in areas where I have some exposure. So it's just kind of evolved." Not only are professional relationships leveraged for materials, favors, and programs, but networks are also a source of staff. The former director of the San Joaquin COE left a position in the Manteca School District behind, but kept in touch with his former colleagues. One of the first staff members he recruited, over a Big Mac and French-fries, was a Manteca principal who is now the Director of the COE. She, in turn, recruited a former teacher who served under her when she was a principal to direct the Alternative Education programs several years later.

Personal relationships and networks such as these enabled individuals to ask for favors, bend some rules, cross boundaries and otherwise garner resources for their alternative education efforts that otherwise would have been unavailable or unaffordable.

Partnerships

Partnerships provide essential and particular resources for alternative education programs, but they do not exist to the same extent at every alternative education site. 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.

Community colleges. Where we found strong alternative education programs, we usually also found deliberate, well-designed partnerships with local community colleges. Teachers and counselors in continuation high schools worked with community colleges in their area to develop programs of study, opportunities for their students to visit the campus and sit in on a few classes; advisors from community colleges visited the continuation high school to tell students about the program, explain opportunities for financial aid and admissions procedures. An especially proactive continuation high school principal has established a dedicated person at the local community college to whom her students can report, and who can follow through on registration forms, class schedules, financial aid and other areas that too often derail alternative education students from a successful community college experience. These partnerships required thoughtful attention on the part of both continuation high school and community college staff and commitment to creating successful pathways for alternative students.

Local businesses. Several continuation high school administrators actively cultivated relationships with local businesses to provide jobs for their students as well as opportunities for credit-carrying internships. One joked how he bought beers every Friday at a local restaurant as a way to nurture those relationships. Others made it a point to join the local Rotary, Lions Club, Chamber of Commerce, or other associations where they could interact with business people with the goal of promoting work opportunities and scholarships for their kids. The principal of a strong continuation high school said she saw her attendance at monthly Chamber of Commerce meetings as a way to "give a positive image of our continuation school in the community... and [talk about] some special things we are doing." Positive relationships with the business community also bring representatives to campus to talk about careers, local opportunities, meet the students. Students appreciate these contacts and exposure. One said: "they bring a lot of people in...to meet *us*, so I know a lot more people. I have a stack of business cards this big!"

Community service agencies. A central valley continuation high school has relationships with a number of agencies in the community, connections that provide students multiple opportunities for community service. This school's principal stresses the importance of "giving back" to the community, and the important value it has for his students, many of whose parents have been through the welfare or social service system and have no experience with community service. Other partnerships that stress community involvement and contributions include those with the Conservation Corps, the Forestry

and Fire Departments, “special Olympics” and other activities for special education students.

Several continuation high schools rely on relationships with county mental health agencies or community-based mental health services to provide programs on drug and alcohol treatment, and partnerships with Probation to offer informational talks to their students and collaborate on student placements. In one district, a partnership with the local housing authority furnished needed classroom and recreational space for a continuation school.

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

Proactive leadership

Proactive leadership on the part of district or county alternative education administrators, or agency heads, figured prominently in all “best case” examples of quality instructional programs, extensive links to other services and successful efforts to change community (or district) perceptions of alternative education as program for “losers” or “bad kids”. We saw individuals actively seeking out resources, attempting to change attitudes about alternative education, devoting hours of personal time to building political and social capital for their programs.

One principal walked the neighborhood when he first arrived at the school, handing out business cards in an effort to change perceptions of continuation high school students—“give me a call if you see my kids.” An especially proactive and well-connected central valley continuation high school principal secured the involvement of several partners: A local health group that provides *pro bono* a support group for parenting teen; a University of California campus brings classes on nutrition; a local family planning clinic offers pregnancy and child birth classes on campus. A dental clinic comes out to give dental checks to teen moms and their babies. The District Attorney’s office visits about four times a year to talk with students about paternity and child support issues.

Proactivity requires persistence. One veteran continuation high school principal, an educator who has seen his school transformed from classes offered in an abandoned church with discarded texts to a new, well-resourced facility that provides a rigorous academic program, explains in colorful terms the perseverance he applied to acquire status and resources for alternative education in his district

I’m what we call a “mudder”. I’ll just mud you out and I’ll just keep on working ‘til you get tired. I mean [a mudder is] just one of those guys who won’t come out of the rain. And I’ll just wear your tail down. I mean I’ll work every day. I work every Saturday, I get here at around 6 o’clock. I might not be *better* than you are, but I’ll work you. I’ll wear you down. ... But you have to want to do it for something, to bring your team, to be competitive, to care about the kids, not to feel sorry for them, but to want to make a difference in society.

Administrators such as this “mudder” also were tireless in ferreting out resources obscured in various regulatory frameworks or accounting practices. Two principals, for instance, argued effectively for their students’ eligibility for federal Title I funds. A central office administrator scoured the various pots of restricted funds in his office to locate resources he could send to alternative education. Administrators’ success in locating additional funds for alternative programs turned on their knowledge of various categorical funding streams and budgeting processes, and critically on their determination to allocate every dollar they could to the alternative programs.

We also saw proactive leadership to benefit youth in alternative education programs on the part of community-based service providers, many of whom expressed frustration in their dealings with districts and schools. We found persistence here also. A YouthBuild director described the “trials and tribulations” she experienced in efforts to work with the county’s largest district since the Superintendent was not supportive of the program. She nonetheless maintained contacts as she could and with the arrival of a new superintendent has active district support. YouthBuild now has a career developer at each of the school sites, collaboration between district career counselors and their career developer to provide work experience classes, and a district-supplied office. A community mental health provider commented that receptivity to their services varies not only by district but also by site. Some sites, she explained, are very pro-therapy and counseling; others do not want them on campus “because academics are more important.” They have expanded services and pulled services in the same sites over time—depending on the attitude and support of the administrator.

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From the vantage point of counties and districts, the resources and opportunities available to youth through California’s alternative education programs vary considerably and in ways that matter a lot to students’ outcomes and futures. We saw that wins for alternative education programs and students had little to do with current policy arrangements and everything to do with personal initiative, relationships, networks, and drive to provide the best program possible for alternative education students. And in some instances, these personal initiatives succeeded despite policy strictures or because someone persevered to locate exceptions in the statutory language, or find entitlements in existing law. In California, as a practical matter, “state policy” regarding alternative education options exists in name only. Place of residence significantly determines the resources and opportunities available to young people through the state’s alternative education options.

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