

Legislative History of Alternative Education: The Policy Context of Continuation High Schools

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Without sacrificing in any way its service to industry, the scope of the continuation school should be broadened to include those elements of general and liberal education that are so fundamental to sound democratic citizenship...It should not be a thing apart, a cheap makeshift for the unfortunate, but rather a recognized and well-supported unit in democracy's public school system (Waterfall, 1923).

National Education Association, Proceedings, 1918

California's Alternative Education (AE) programs operate under ambiguous legislation that leaves implementation up to local administrators and teachers. In addition to an over-generalized mission (McLaughlin, Atukpawu, & Williamson, 2008), AE suffers from a lack of data on student outcomes and a weak accountability system. Students, in turn, face a wide range in the quality of education options available to them through AE. AE programs are commonly defined as schools serving a majority of students that are in danger of "behavioral" or "educational" failure, expelled, wards of the court, or pregnant and parenting (Don Dixon, 2006).

The historical development of continuation schools, in particular, sheds light on the evolution of AE's broad mandate. With over 116,000 students annually attending more than 500 schools (Educational Demographics Office, 2006), continuation schools serve credit deficient 16 to 18 year olds at risk of not graduating. California requires every school district to offer access to continuation classes, making continuation schools the state's most common form of AE. Many continuation students enter the alternative setting with more than just academic needs - AE students face a variety of additional challenges such as high residential mobility, increased dropout rates, living in foster care, and low socio-economic -status (Austin, 2008). Continuation schools as a system operate in the gap between social services provision and mainstream public high schools, serving at risk students linked-to or in-need-of resources normally outside the purview of the classroom.

Since its inception, continuation education¹ has repeatedly transformed itself in response to California's changing social, political, and economic demands. Continuation schools'

¹ 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

lack of public oversight, generalized goals, limited accountability, and reliance on local decision-making rather than a formal structure points to a practice researchers in organizational behavior refer to as decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). The “core technology” of continuation schooling resides in the hands of local officials and educators because continuation education developed as an adaptive response to compulsory education. From its inception, public education failed to account for students not suited to the standardized setting of the comprehensive high school. Continuation education has filled many roles in the last century, from citizenship training to vocational guidance, adjustment education to dropout recover.

The decoupling of continuation education from mainstream schools explains much of the current variability in continuation high schools. AE research to date describes three types of continuation programs that reflect the continuation system’s ability to take on different local roles: 1) safety net, 2) safety valve, and 3) cooling out programs (Hwang, 2003; Kelly, 1993; Warren, 2007), or 1) student-centered, 2) student-reform, and 3) dumping ground programs (Ruiz-De-Velasco, 2008). In both typologies, the first set of programs provides holistic resources and approaches in response to student needs, the second set of programs allows districts to separate unengaged students from the mainstream, and the third set of programs serves as a hiding place for students who are indirectly encouraged to dropout. The decoupled nature of the continuation system makes continuation programs more flexible in response to uncertainty in the environment, such as economic and societal events like the Great Depression and World War II. Continuation’s ambiguous legislative framework also allows continuation programs to adapt more readily to local context. The following analysis examines the evolving educational and social purposes of continuation education in California, with particular attention to the implications for current continuation students. How has continuation education’s mission changed in response to history, and what does continuation education’s decoupled status mean for today’s students?

Conceptual Framework: Decoupling

Meyer and Rowan’s (1991) neo-institutional take on organizational behavior highlights the concept of decoupling as a coping strategy used by organizations to resolve the tension between formal structures and informal practices. In order to appear legitimate, organizations are expected to conform to certain “rationalized concepts,” including how different types of organizations are expected to look and act (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). As an institution, a public high school is expected to a particular structure: students sit in desks in a classroom with a teacher to instruct them, and the teacher is in turn managed by a principal. The pressure to “look like a school” is also referred to as isomorphism: in order to appear legitimate, organizations are expected to conform to structural prescriptions of an institution (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In practice, this rigid conception of schooling does not always engage students in academics or keep them from

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.

dropping out. High school as an organization loses many students each year to a mismatch between prescribed practice and the very real needs of diverse youth. Despite the rational myth of standardized public education, one size does not fit all.

Because the technology of learning may not always match the formal structure of high school, continuation schools serve as a less formal, decoupled setting for educational activities. In order to efficiently achieve its end product while also conforming to rational institutional expectations, an organization may need to separate its structures from its activities. This strategy, known as decoupling, allows an organization to avoid an outside evaluation of its activities that might undermine its legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). Organizations decouple practice from prescriptions in four ways: by delegating activities to be completed without direct managerial oversight; by establishing ambiguous, un-measurable goals; by making evaluation ceremonial and avoiding integration; and by relying on individual relationships to coordinate activities, rather than formal processes (p.57-58). An analysis of the legislation and policy that shaped continuation education reveals the use of each of these four strategies. Continuation education was based on British and German models that emphasized local implementation without central oversight; ambiguous and un-measurable goals are repeatedly put forth by state legislature and education administrators; limited accountability and a lack of data make only the most ceremonial evaluation possible; and, responsibility for defining, designing and coordinating continuation education practice falls largely to the continuation educator or principal.

Historical Context

State publications and legislation provide a general picture of how the purposes of continuation education developed over time. Prior research divides continuation education's evolution into four distinct periods: "1) 1917-1930 Part-time school for young workers; 2) 1931-1944 Vocational education to vocational guidance; 3) 1945-1964 Adjustment education; and 4) 1965-Present Program for the push-out problem" (Hwang, 2003; Kelly, 1993). The delineation of these absolute time frames, however, is misleading. Analysis of the stated goals of continuation education shows more rapid transitions and the bleeding of "trouble" students across each of these time frames. Rather than focusing on part-time school for young workers for its first thirteen years, for example, educators and policy makers quickly realized that a diverse range of students attended continuation classes and required social and vocational guidance in addition to preparation for skilled occupations (California State Board of Education, 1926).

Compulsory education and dropouts

The history of continuation education is closely aligned with that of compulsory schooling in the United States. Massachusetts first implemented compulsory education in 1642 with local review of children's education by selectmen, and in 1852 the state again was one of the first to pass a law requiring children to attend public school, in this case for a minimum of 12 weeks a year (Katz, 1974). States like Connecticut and Massachusetts formalized the institution of public education by developing prescriptions for what schools should look like and how they should operate, including the creation of

“a complex network of legal rules that established effective machinery for dealing with school attendance . . . as one aspect of a more inclusive control of the behavior of youth” (p.256). These rules set a precedent for future institutional isomorphism of state public education systems by formalizing educational practice via legislation.

In the early 1900’s, as compulsory education laws began to include young people as old as 16 or 18, students dropped out at high rates. In defining requirements for student attendance in public schools, compulsory education also defines the dropout. The social construction of dropouts, or push-outs, as the case may be, appears as a continuing theme throughout continuation education ideology. Some progressives argued that the first two years of high school, the ones most high school students completed, held little use for students from poor, working class families (Snedden, 1913). In a system where access to higher education was often limited to families with means, working-class students had limited opportunities to attend college and often left the public education system before attending high school. The organization of education itself took the blame for dropouts rather than individual students; at the turn of the century, dropouts were viewed as mature youth with employment, families to support, and legitimate interests outside school walls.

In 1907, the U.S. Board of Education published a Bulletin describing German and English continuation schools as possible models for replication in American high schools (Jones, 1907). Jones references the work of Thorndike at Columbia’s Teachers College, who estimates that in cities with a population greater than 25,000, only 27% of students enter high school, and only 8% of students graduate. According to additional researchers, students who leave school between the ages of fourteen and sixteen find industrial jobs that offer little or no opportunity for further training or advancement, while those who leave school two or more years later find employment in higher level industries (Jones, 1907). In contrast to later definitions, he frames high school dropouts as the school system’s brightest students: “the stronger the pupil the stronger will outside interests appeal to him and attract him away from the pursuit of studies in which he has comparatively little interest” (p.10).

Importing an international model

Seeking an organizational precedent for an alternative to mainstream schools, Jones looked to Germany and England for a model that melded academics and work in an effort to better serve the needs of teenagers. The Germans had established an extensive system of continuation schools, or *Fortbildungsschulen*, by the end of the 1870’s (p.34-39). In Germany, sorting by class began at a young age, with students of wealth leaving the public school, or Volksschule, early on for private schooling, while working class students remained behind until they entered the labor force at the age of fourteen. The continuation schools were evening schools that teenage students attended for the first few years of their employment. By the time of Jones’s piece, these continuation schools were focusing on industrial and commercial education, rather than general academic or cultural instruction. The continuation school responded to local conditions; “...the Continuation School movement in Germany originated solely out of the needs of the community” (Waterfall, 1923), and “...the whole organization and plan of schools is flexible, so that it may adapt itself readily to the needs of different localities” (Jones, 1907). The German

schools provided a model of an adaptable system, but one based on class distinctions that fostered social reproduction.

In England, similarly flexible continuation schools reached significant numbers near the end of the 19th Century. The changing labor demands of the industrial revolution called for a different type of worker preparation, one that provided guidance during the crucial period of adolescence, or else "...neglect results in great waste of early promise, in injury to character, in the lessening of industrial efficiency, and in the lowering of ideals of personal and civic duty" (Waterfall, 1923). Continuation evening classes as defined by government code were designed to offer a range of choices in subject and school site management rather than centralized oversight (Jones, 1907). Phillips of Oxford University, on the other hand, described the purposes of continuation schools included individual student attention, exposure to a liberal education, and control over sexual energies" (Phillips, 1922). The local control base, flexible programming, and ambiguous legislation governing these evening classes echoed the broad goals of the German continuation school, while the purposes cited by outside researchers addressed socialization and control of the working class.

While German continuation schools openly maintained class hierarchy, English continuation schools revealed a deep fear of the working class – could these young workers be controlled? A "crowd" of students with rampant "sexual energies" and no understanding of civic or personal "duty" posed a sinister threat to industrial progress (Phillips, 1922). During the Progressive Era, proponents of social efficiency found vocational education programs like continuation classes particularly appealing. The British combination of industrial and civic training via locally determined instruction and management formed the basis of the American continuation school.

Early legislation: the industrial worker

In 1911, the first continuation school was founded in Wisconsin. In 1917, the federal government passed the Smith-Hughes Act, which established a Federal Board of Vocational Education and authorized significant funding of vocational programs. The legislation stipulated that "at least one third of the sum appropriated to any State ... be applied to part-time schools or classes for workers over fourteen years of age who have entered upon employment" (Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1917). In California, the legislature quickly passed an act accepting the provisions of the Smith-Hughes Act. Although the State Superintendent of Public Instruction studied existing continuation programs, including Wisconsin and England, in preparation for expected new programs, the state failed to set up its own continuation schools due to lack of enforcement (California State Board of Education, 1918). The Superintendent decried the lack of compulsory implementation of part-time education and called for the expansion of compulsory attendance to all citizens 18 years old or younger.

The wait for an expansion of compulsory education law in California, however, proved quite short. In 1919, the state extended compulsory attendance from age eight to sixteen. The legislature also passed the Part-Time Education Act, which required any district with fifty or more fourteen to eighteen year old students in a three mile radius to establish part-

time classes for at least four hours a week, unless the district could prove that less than 12 students would qualify for part-time education (Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1919). High schools were also required to provide part-time students “individual counsel in guidance in social and vocational matters” (California State Board of Education, 1922). The Act was implemented in three phases – by 1921, the law mandated that all children eighteen or younger attend continuation classes. Meanwhile, a new high school apportionment act provided Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funds, first established in 1915, for the creation and maintenance of continuation education classes. Between 1920 and 1926, enrollment in continuation classes and schools more than tripled, from 6,965 students to 22,631, as evidenced in Table 1 (California State Board of Education, 1926). California was not alone in its rapid implementation of continuation education programs, either; nationally, twenty-three states passed laws requiring part-time education by 1923 (Keller, 1924).

Year	Continuation Enrollment
1921	6965
1922	13275
1923	16351
1924	18598
1925	19542
1926	22631

Citizenship and assimilation (1917-1930)

The 1919 Part-Time Education Act was minimal in the extreme, focusing on basic attendance requirements with no reference to course content, instructional delivery, or organizational form. This silence on the major components of continuation classes persisted until the 1923 publication of a bulletin directly addressing continuation policy by the California State Board of Education. According to this bulletin, the legislation targeted student dropouts who left school due to the appeals of an adult lifestyle and income, or due to feelings of academic failure for a variety of reasons (California State Board of Education, 1923). The Board described the main purpose of part-time education as primarily to prepare young people for citizenship in a thinly veiled message encouraging the speedy assimilation of recent immigrants. The duties of a California citizen that part-time continuation were expected to foster in students included a range of broad tenets:

1. *To be obedient to social law and custom.*
2. *To develop and preserve a clean, strong body.*
3. *To contribute to the welfare of society by performing some useful work.*
4. *To stand ready at all times to defend his country from its foes, visible and invisible.*
5. *To be a real democrat in ideal, in thought, and in action.*
6. *To intelligently exercise the franchise.*

7. *To be willing to accept public office if offered the same, and if competent, to perform the service as well as, or better than some other person* (p.25).

A loose list follows these duties with a description of required educational content – a list that offers no explicit, formal guidance regarding curriculum or instruction. In sharp contrast to current education regulation, a “minimum uniform standard” for student performance is legally banned because it unfairly fails students who cannot reach a level of “artificially equal achievement” (p.40). Not only is the purpose of continuation education open to interpretation, but student evaluation is strictly prohibited.²

In the 1924 publication, *Day Schools for Young Workers*, Keller claims American continuation schools are the result of demands from two camps, the employer seeking more skilled workers and less “labor turnover” and the “social workers, labor leaders, progressive school movement, the vague ‘public’” who sought more useful and relevant education for high school students (p.49). Keller was an admirer of Snedden, a social efficiency progressive. The role of the state as parent, the urgency of meeting the needs of industry, and the importance of modern progress necessitated education for the masses. Not only were part-time schools to provide “social guardianship” for impressionable students, for “from this group...most criminals are recruited” (California State Board of Education, 1922), but “The big problem is to adjust public education for the ever-changing conditions of industry and society as well... The needs of the next generation must be considered in the education plans of today” (California State Board of Education, 1924).

Establishing a separate continuation system decoupled from mainstream public education clearly motivated California implementation of the Part-Time Education Act. Strict guidelines prohibiting student evaluation complimented un-measurable the social, patriotic and economic goals of continuation classes. Where schools failed to meet the needs of “industry” and “society,” continuation education became an alternative tool for the socialization of young workers, particularly recent immigrants deemed in need of assimilation. The informality of state guidelines for establishing continuation classes left the design of continuation education in the hands of local administrators with no state oversight or accountability. The message of such a deliberate omission of formal standards for continuation education is not just an attempt to create a flexible educational alternative – it is a deliberate decision based on the perceived value of continuation students. Despite Jones’s repeated depictions of continuation students as “bright” and motivated, they were in fact mostly working class men, many who were immigrants. In its origination, the decoupling of the continuation system from mainstream public education benefited industry and let high schools off the hook for failing to meet the needs of all students, but at the expense of continuation students.

² The list of content areas also includes the following notable objective under tolerance education, “The disabusing of the mind of the notion that individuals have inalienable rights, and the securing of a knowledge of those privileges accorded the individual by society” (California State Board of Education, 1923).

After the first few years of implementation the purposes of continuation education became complicated by an unexpected development in the student population; rather than retaining teenage leaders for further important training, as Jones had hoped, continuation education began to take on students struggling to complete full time school. The actual student population of continuation schools did not match the projected industrial worker or recent immigrant described in literature and legislation. In 1926, the California Board of Education described an unwanted addition to continuation schools:

To these schools come the pupils who were the most serious educational, disciplinary, or social problems in the full-time school...merely because they belong to the age group for whom part-time schools were designed...

(California State Board of Education, 1926).

Anti-loafing and vocational guidance (1931-1944)

In 1929, California legislation expanded compulsory part-time continuation class attendance to three hours per day for any 16 to 18 year old who was unemployed (California Department of Education, 1973; Campbell, 1937). This move came in response to rising levels of unemployment and an anti-loafing sentiment aimed at preventing unemployed young men from loitering about (Kelly, 1993). Legislation authorized attendance and parole officers to arrest truant high school students, even in the workplace. Legitimizing the statutory ambiguity surrounding continuation education, the Superintendent of Public Instruction added to the list of roles the system filled by mandating that programs provide students with individual attention, employment services, and counsel “in matters dealing with educational, occupational, social, and civic problems” (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1929).

Continuation school’s enrollment first peaked in 1930, amidst disagreement over the purposes and funding of the programs. In response to the economic decline at the beginning of the Depression, continuation education began to focus less on helping students find vocational placements and more on guidance (Kelly, 1993). According to Kelly, many states stopped offering continuation education all together during the Great Depression, but California managed to continue funding its programs, maintaining a basic, though contentious, continuation infrastructure. In his 1936 analysis of the McKinley High School, a continuation school in Berkeley, Smith describes the need for continuation schools as arising from high schools ill-equipped to meet the needs of working youth with varying academic and vocational experience (Smith, 1936).

Two publications illustrate some of the differing opinions of the effectiveness of continuation classes and teachers, despite the seemingly lax and supportive policy context. A survey by the University of California’s Research and Service Center of continuation teachers in the first years of economic decline (Paine, 1931) brought attention to the role of these professionals in meeting the varied needs of the part-time student. One of the study’s conclusions was that students greatly benefited from personal relationships with teachers, and a teacher’s personality influenced student attendance and growth (p.403). In a 1937 volume of the *California Journal of Secondary Education*, Trout, a continuation education administrator, offered a less positive perspective on the

ability of teachers to meet the wide range of continuation students' needs. He describes not only the challenge of meeting the differentiated needs of ten to twenty students, but paints a picture of the continuation population as comprised of both the "moron and the genius, the social misfit and the socially unfit" (Kelly, 1993; Trout, 1937).³ Both Paine and Trout emphasize the key role of continuation teachers in the implementation of continuation education. A tremendous burden and power fell to the continuation educator. Within a decoupled system of loose oversight, ambiguous goals, and no evaluation, these commentaries highlight the fourth decoupling strategy – a reliance on individual relationships to coordinate activities rather than formal processes (Meyer & Rowan, 1991).

Adjustment education (1945-1964)

The pendulum of public opinion regarding the purpose and target student of continuation education shifted once again in the 1940's. This decade began with a California survey on youth that described as much as 40% of students as high school dropouts; these "maladjusted youth" faced more economic hurdles and lower job prospects (Williams, Bryant, & Jones, 1940). Within a few years, wartime rhetoric defined part-time students as the industrious young workers continuation education was originally purported to serve (Kelly, 1993). California's continuation education enrollment hit an all-time high during World War II, with a student population of approximately 41,000 during the 1946-47 school year (Morena, 1953). This growth was in large part due to increased youth employment; opportunities for continuing education while joining the war time workforce were particularly attractive to high school districts with declining enrollments and attendance-based funding; during the war, "two out of every five youth 16 to 17 years of age were employed and out of school" (Joyal, 1944). In 1945, state legislation made it possible to establish continuation programs as continuation high schools, and two years later, changes in ADA funding for continuation education established a three hour school day for part-time students, rather than the four hours of daily attendance required to receive ADA funding in mainstream high schools (California Department of Education, 1973).

Enrollment in continuation education declined sharply after the war – the student population decreased by half, reaching approximately 20,000 in 1947 (Morena, 1953). In the 1950's, the flaws of continuation students, described historically as maladjusted

³ Trout further bemoans the role of the continuation educator:

Whoever had the idea that one person could take twenty or thirty or even ten continuation students and instruct them in the things they should know and make them like it must have been the champion day-dreamer of the ages...They [continuation students] represent the moron and the genius, the social misfit and the socially unfit, the rich man's misunderstood daughter and the poor man's understood son, together with the bewildered and groping foreign born. I don't know of anyone in America who isn't represented, nor anyone in America capable of handling them as a single group (p.182-3).

youth, found repurposing as part of a national “adjustment education” movement that focused on socializing students who were unsuccessful in mainstream schools in preparation to return to mainstream high schools (Kelly, 1993). In a 1955 California Education Bulletin published by the California Board of Education, juvenile delinquency was decried as “a problem which increasingly concerns not only school authorities but workers in other agencies serving youth” (Shaffer, 1955). Kelly’s (1993) “safety-valve” typology of continuation schools directly reflects one of the purposes of continuation education during this time – the reformation of non-conforming students. One-third of high school students continued to dropout before graduation, usually finding full time work that was an unequal, but “socially acceptable substitute for an unsatisfying school experience” (p.1).

Dropout recovery (1965-present)

A state study of long-term suspensions revealed high push-out rates for minority students in the early 1960’s (Hwang, 2003). The National Education Association’s *Project: School Dropouts*, pointed out the drawbacks of a “credential society” that stigmatized dropouts (Miller, 1964). Dropout became a more inclusive, sensitive term, expanded to low-income individuals who left school due to: “low intellectual or mental functioning;” who were pushed out by negative schooling; whose many needs related to poverty could not be met in school; or who sought careers that did not require a high school diploma (p.16-19). In response to public outcry, in 1965 California’s legislature expanded the definition of a continuation student to include students suspended for more than ten days (California Department of Education, 1973). Under the same legislation, continuation classes were extended to include evening hours, and elementary-credentialed teachers were approved to teach remedial reading instruction in continuation schools (California Department of Education, 1973). Shortly afterwards, the legislature extended the long-term suspension maximum from ten to twenty days before a student transferred to a continuation setting.

As continuation schools became the solution to preventing dropouts (Kelly, 1993), the goals and quality of continuation education shifted once again. The use of elementary school teachers for continuation instruction, for example, indicates the mixed state oversight applied to maintaining academic expectations for continuation students. One researcher describes continuation schools at this time as an opportunity “to develop in the academic non-achiever a sense of competence in vocational, interpersonal, and technical skills such as the ability to read and write” (Elder, 1966). These basic skills were deemed important to achieve success in a “technically advanced society” (p.326). Continuation schools were viewed as warehousing “for ‘mentally retarded and disciplinary cases,’ ” (Kelly, 1993). These schools were now responsible for students who were “habitual truants, behavior problems in the regular school, juvenile court wards, retarded students...students with health problems, and those with little motivation to succeed in school” (Elder, 1966).

The 1973 publication of a *Handbook on Continuation Education in California* outlined a new approach for continuation education that extended from the 1965 and 1967 legislation. Dropout recovery became the administratively sanctioned

focus of continuation education with an expansive mission and vague objectives. According to the Department of Education, continuation schools should provide: 1) the “opportunity” to complete coursework for graduation; 2) an individual instruction program with vocational goals; 3) individual instruction and “intensive” guidance services for severe behavioral or attendance issues; or, 4) a “flexible program combining all of these features” (California Department of Education, 1973).

In 1980, a new funding formula for continuation schools was implemented and provided an additional, annual stipend specifically for new continuation schools. Part of the application process required these schools to set enrollment, school day, and other parameters as the basis for the stipend. The additional funding based on these figures was a fixed annual sum that would not respond to future changes in the school.

Reflecting a more humanistic approach to students as individuals, the goals of continuation education were revised by state administrators (California Department of Education, 1987). The rephrasing of goals echoes the original Board of Education description of a good citizen, but with a focus on developing intrinsic skills in less didactic language.⁴ The objectives span the spectrum of personal behaviors and beliefs, from helping students develop self-worth to teaching them money management skills. The notion that one organization can achieve all of these un-measurable outcomes requires the continuation educator to be teacher, parent, social worker, therapist, coach, and accountant. Once again, the policy context of continuation education relied on individual continuation educators to interpret and achieve the improbable. Without a formal process, curriculum, or any standardized guidelines, continuation educators found themselves adrift in a decoupled institution unconcerned with the oversight or the evaluation of the largely informal continuation education system.

⁴ The objectives of continuation education programs were to aid students to:

- *Acquire a high school diploma or California High School Proficiency Certificate;*
- *Become productive persons by convincing them of the importance of vocational preparation and by assisting them in acquiring entry-level job skills;*
- *Develop a feeling of self-worth, self-confidence, and personal satisfaction;*
- *Develop a sense of responsibility;*
- *Develop a tolerance and understanding of a variety of viewpoints;*
- *Engage in meaningful recreational and leisure-time activities;*
- *Understand and obey laws and participate in constructive civic activities’*

Understand and practice sound money management and become intelligent consumers (California Department of Education, 1987).

Data and accountability – ceremonial evaluation (2008)

Continuation school annexation into accountability territory has been a gradual process. California has a well-developed system of alternative education settings for at-risk youth, but little evaluation of these programs was conducted until the Public School Accountability Act of 1999 (Don Dixon, 2006). This state legislation established the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program – each spring STAR testing measures the academic performance of kindergarten through twelfth grade students. With the advent of NCLB in 2002, California chose to continue using STAR testing to measure student outcomes and schools’ Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Alternative schools, including continuation schools, have the option of participating in an Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) as a more holistic form of assessing school performance. The ASAM evaluates alternative schools based on STAR results and three indicators chosen by the individual school from a list that offers approximately nine choices. These indicators are grouped into three areas: readiness indicators include student behavior or suspension rates, and student attendance, tardiness, and “persistence”; attendance is considered a contextual indicator; and academic and completion indicators include academic achievement scores, credit completion, and graduation rates.

Allowing schools to choose how they will be measured reduces comparability across sites, but an additional aspect of ASAM reporting threatens the significance to this reporting system. Most of the indicators only count students who have attended the school for at least 90 days, and the spring STAR testing is only counted for students who have been at the continuation school since the CBEDS date in October. Due to the continually shifting population of these schools, many do not have enough “valid” test scores or other measures to qualify for an API or AYP score.

Even establishing how many students actually participate in continuation programs state wide is currently beyond the scope of the state administrators and local districts alike. 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. Continuation schools have a highly transitory student population – some students enter only briefly, while other “long-term” students may remain for more than 90 days. It is estimated that CBEDS undercounts actual enrollment in continuation schools by 63% (D. Dixon, 2006).

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Today continuation schools are the only alternative education program with a legislative mandate to focus on dropout recovery rather than on addressing behavioral issues (Sturgis, 2006). Continuation schools still serve 16 to 18 year olds who are at risk of not graduating, but the schools vary dramatically based on the needs of their community, the

additional services or partnerships through which they support students, and in size. All school districts with eligible students either have their own continuation education program or are part of a regional network of districts that share a continuation program.

The original conception of the continuation system as a site-sensitive arrangement with little centralized management, ambiguous directives, limited accountability for student outcomes, and reliance on the individual relationships of continuation educators to garner resources for their students persists. At the county and district level, continuation schools face an institutional train wreck of social services, public agencies, AE options and conflicting policies (McLaughlin et al., 2008). Navigating between the systems of mainstream public education and these social welfare institutions, continuation schools are deeply embedded in local contexts and rely on the individual leadership and personal networks of continuation educators and principals to coordinate resources and opportunities for students. As the historical policy context of continuation education illustrates, these schools developed as part of a decoupled education system responsive to the environmental demands of economic and social pressures. This organizational flexibility, however, comes at the expense of continuation students who experience a wide range of quality and availability of resources and opportunities. The repeated reinvention of continuation education buffers mainstream high schools from nonconforming students who are sorted, reformed, or saved based on the decisions of local district and school administrators.

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