

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS: MEETING THE NEEDS OF OVER-AGED UNDER-CREDITED YOUTH

Jorge Ruiz de Velasco
The Earl Warren Institute
University of California, Berkeley, Boalt Hall School of Law

for

The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities
Stanford University

April, 2008

California school districts operate 519 continuation high schools that enrolled over 115,000 students over the course of the 2006-07 school year.¹ Originally designed to provide a flexible schedule for working students to continuing their schooling, the modern continuation high school now serves a diverse population of students. The single common denominator is that most continuation students have reached the 9th or 10th grades lacking sufficient academic credits to remain on track to graduate with their age cohort. Since 1965, state law has mandated that all school districts enrolling over 100 12th grade students make available a continuation program or school to provide an alternative route to the high school diploma for youth vulnerable to academic or behavioral failure. The law, unique to California, contemplates accelerated credit accrual strategies and more intensive services “including, but not limited to, independent study, regional occupation programs, work study, career counseling, and job placement services” so that students might have a renewed opportunity to “complete the required academic courses of instruction to graduate from high school.”² This legislative design thus makes clear that continuation schools constitute the state’s primary drop-out prevention strategy.

In examining these schools, we find significant variation in size, demography, curriculum, discipline policies, social organization, intake procedures, resources, facilities, staff capacities, and in the institutional pathways available to students as they move through and beyond the school. Moreover, this variation in specific practices and school quality is evident both within and across counties and districts. Better understanding the determinants of this variation is a major theme of this study.

¹ This report considers only independent continuation “schools within schools,” or stand-alone continuation high schools. We do not examine continuation “programs” or “options” embedded in comprehensive high schools.

² See California Education Code, § 48430, and § 51225.3.

Study Overview

Continuation high schools remain among the most understudied sub-sector of secondary education in California (and nationally). Thus it seemed important to first get a clearer descriptive picture of where continuation schools fit in California within the field of youth policy at the county level (i.e., among health, law enforcement, and education agencies that serve or encounter youth) as well as among comprehensive secondary schools and “alternative” secondary school “options” within school districts. These system issues are covered in greater detail by colleagues Milbrey McLaughlin, Grace Atukpawu and Devon Williamson in a companion report “Alternative Education Options in California: A view from counties and districts” (McLaughlin, et.al. 2007).

We also need a clearer picture of how alternative programs are conceived and organized for their stated mission (e.g., how they are viewed by school administrators, funded, staffed, operated and otherwise supported – or not – by districts and their communities). A better understanding of these contextual factors and “necessary priors” to classroom instruction will guide subsequent inquiry into what is happening in classrooms.

Section I of this paper begins with a demographic look at the students, teachers, and administrators in the 37 continuation high schools we visited across the state. As well, it provides a brief review of key administrative data, including the availability of technology at the schools, staffing ratios, the certification status of teachers, average class size for schools, and whether the schools are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.³

In **Section II**, we present a school typology that provides an organizing frame and attempts to capture the key school-level attributes, issues, and variations we observed. We also summarize in **Section III** our preliminary assessment of the internal and external determinants of school quality. Finally, in **Section IV**, we draw on our site visit data to explore curriculum and instruction issues as we found them in our sites.

SECTION I

A Snapshot: Continuation High Schools in Five California Regions

Our initial analysis is based on field research conducted during the winter and spring of 2007 in 37 continuation high schools across the state by researchers at the Stanford School of Education’s John W. Gardner Center and the National Center for Urban School Transformation at San Diego State University. On these visits we interviewed principals, teachers, counselors, district administrators, and students about their work and experiences. To gain different perspectives on the schools we also interviewed administrators from county education offices, community members, school board

³Students attending continuation schools do not have their state accountability assessment tests results counted toward the continuation school’s Academic Performance Index (API) scores unless those students have been in the school for at least 90 days.

representatives, and individuals responsible for youth issues in city governments, juvenile justice agencies, Child Protective Services, and local nonprofit youth service providers in the relevant counties. What follows is a statistical snapshot of the schools in our study.⁴

Site Selection

Nine Counties in Five Distinct Geographic Regions: In selecting counties, an important priority was to ensure that we captured California’s geographic diversity. To this end we chose nine counties from five very distinct geographic regions: the North Region (Humboldt county), the Bay Area (Alameda and Santa Clara counties), the Central Valley (Fresno and San Joaquin counties), the Southern Region (Los Angeles and San Diego counties), and the Inland Empire (Riverside and San Bernardino counties).

Twenty-six Districts and 37 Schools -- Size and Urbanicity. A second important criterion was to capture the experiences of students and faculty in small and large continuation schools. About 40 percent (15) of the schools in our sample enrolled fewer than 100 students. Another 36 percent (13) enrolled more than 250 students each. The smallest school enrolled 17 students and the largest school enrolled 598 students. The schools selected were “nested” within a range of large and small districts that included sites in rural settings, as well as in sub-urban and inner city locations.

A Range of School and Student Performance. We also thought it was important to visit schools that had prior evidence of both strong and “average” performance relative to other continuation high schools on a number of school and student-level indicators. Eight of our 37 schools (about 22 percent) were designated as “Model Continuation High Schools” by the California Department of Education (CDE) in 2007.⁵ A little over a quarter of our schools (10) report making their AYP targets during the 2006-07 school year. We also examined data on California continuation high schools supplied by WestEd that reported the gain scores on California’s Academic Performance Index (API) to assure a range of performance. On the assumption that we stood to learn more about promising practices from the more successful schools, we excluded those schools in the bottom quartile of the API rank list. The resulting sample thus over-includes schools with evidence of better performance.

School Climate. We were also guided in site selection by survey data supplied by WestEd showing the percentage of students in schools who reported feeling safe in their schools and looked to select schools along a range of this dimension.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the statistical information in this section is drawn from administrative data reported by the schools to the California Department of Education (CDE) and made available to the public via the Education Data Partnership website at www.ed-date.k12.ca.us.

⁵ The CDE operates a program to identify “model” continuation high schools and invites schools to apply for this designation each year. Schools are ranked and selected based on a range of criteria, including management practices, curriculum, instructional strategies, school climate, guidance and counseling practices, and a site visit by CDE staff.

Ultimately, the 37 schools we were able to visit represent about 7 percent of the 519 continuation high schools in California.

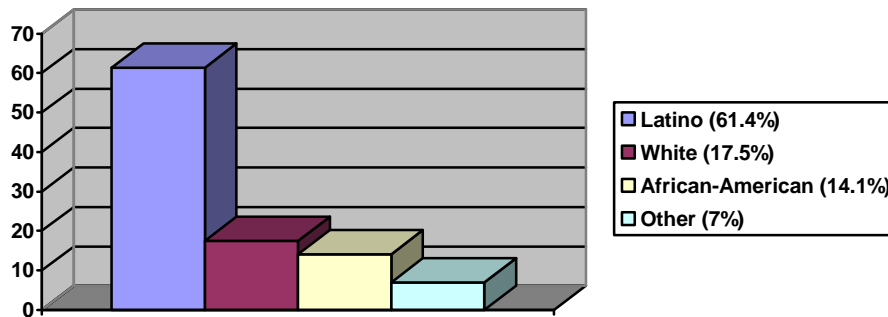
The Students (2006-07 data)⁶

The 37 schools in our sample enrolled approximately 6,900 students, who together account for almost one-tenth (9.7 percent) of continuation high school enrollment in California at the October 2006 count.

Racial/Ethnic Composition

Over 82 percent of the students in our sample are members of ethnic or racial minority groups.⁷ Almost two-thirds (61.4 percent) of the students in our sample schools are Latino. Non-Hispanic white students comprise 17.5 percent and African-Americans comprise 14.10 percent of students.⁸ Together Asian, Pacific Islander, Filipino, American Indian, and students reporting multiple racial/ethnic affiliations comprise only 7 percent of the remaining students in the schools we visited.

Students: Race & Ethnicity



Some important regional differences are notable. American Indian students were the single largest minority group (averaging 14.29 percent of enrollment) across the four Humboldt county schools we visited. Humboldt was also the only county where non-Hispanic whites comprised the single largest group enrolled (62.42 percent).

Asian students (including those designated as “Asian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino by the CDE) together exceeded 10% of enrollment in the Central Valley schools, on average. However, this was largely due to high combined enrollments of Asian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino students in two of 10 Central Valley Schools visited (17.8 percent

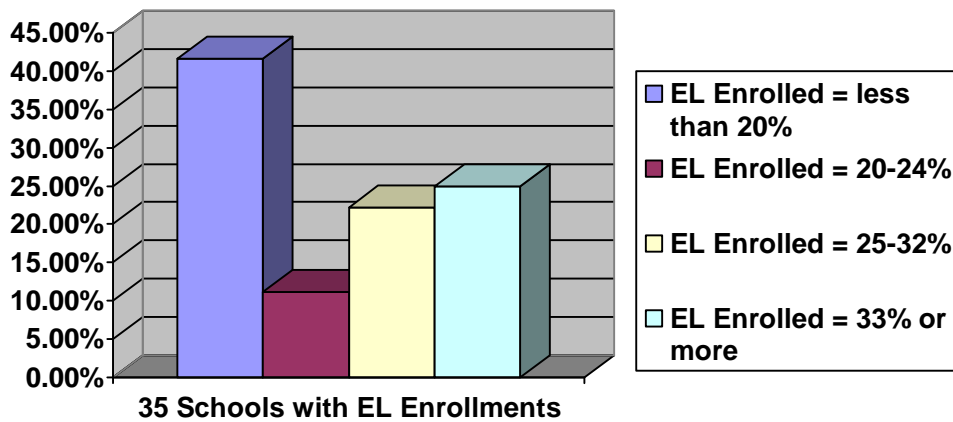
⁶ Although we collected site-based data from 37 Continuation high schools, two of those schools are reported as a single school to the CDE in 2006-07. Hence, when referring to statistical data drawn from CDE administrative sources, we refer to “36” schools.

⁷ Minority groups include Hispanic, African-American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Filipino, American Indian, and student who report multiple race/ethnicity.

and 19.3 percent). The enrollments in these two schools reflect comparable demographics in the districts where they reside.

English Learners

Students identified as English Learners (EL) comprised about 26 percent of students in the continuation schools we visited. In fact, all but one school we visited enroll students identified as EL. In all but 6 of the 35 schools that enroll EL students, Spanish is the home language of 75 percent, or more of the EL students. Of the six schools that enroll significant numbers (greater than 25 percent) of students who speak a home language other than Spanish, five are in the Central Valley and enroll sizeable percentages of Hmong and Cambodian students.⁹



The last two bars of the chart above, taken together, indicate that EL students constitute over 25 percent of total enrollment in almost half (48.6 percent) or 17 of the 35 schools with EL enrollments. The high concentration of EL students in our schools was almost double the EL enrollment of 11th graders statewide (14 percent).¹⁰ The large EL enrollment was also surprising given that EL specific instruction or support services were rarely evident in the schools we visited. An explanation was offered by two principals who reported that because of staff capacity, their schools accepted only EL students who had reached advanced levels of oral English proficiency.

⁹ Refugee resettlement agencies in the Fresno and Stockton areas are supported by the US State Department to resettle Hmong refugees, some of whom resided in Thai refugee camps before being admitted to the US. Hmong students (whose refugee parents are often non-literate) are reported by school personnel to arrive severely under-schooled and with significant health problems due to hygiene situations in refugee camps and thus present especially tough challenges for schools.

¹⁰ The 11th grade statewide EL enrollment data is reported by EdSource, “*English Learners in California: What the Numbers Say*,” (EdSource: Palo Alto, 2008). We chose 11th grade (2006-'07) for comparison as representing the most comparable age cohort to students in continuation schools.

Grade Spans

Although continuation programs were originally conceived for students in grades 10-12 who desired to combine work with school, we found that two-thirds of our schools enrolled students in grades other than 10-12.¹¹ Well over a quarter of our schools (28%) have enrollments where 7th 8th and 9th graders together comprise 20 percent or more of the student body. About one in five of our schools (19.4%) enroll middle school students (grades 6-8) in continuation schools.

Class Size

The statewide class size average for continuation schools is 17.4 students per class. This compares favorably to the 26.8 students per class ratio in comprehensive schools statewide. This favorable pattern prevails in the continuation schools we visited. Although class size varied widely from school-to-school, the class size ratio for continuation schools was smaller than the district wide average for comprehensive schools in their respective districts in all but one case.

Nevertheless, the goal for continuation schools is to offer appropriately small classes, not just smaller relative to comprehensive schools. We found that over 60% of the schools in our sample (22 schools) had class sizes that exceeded the statewide average for *continuation schools* (see paragraph above). About 36 percent of the schools we visited (13 schools) had average class sizes that were 20 or greater.

Staffing

Student-Teacher Ratios

Unlike class size, the goal of providing more favorable student/teacher ratios was not always met by continuation schools in our sample. This ratio is a measure of students relative to the full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers in the school. One-third of our sample schools (33.3%) had student/teacher ratios that exceeded the district-wide student/teacher ratios for comprehensive schools in their respective districts.¹² The reason for this is unclear from the data. One possible explanation is that because continuation schools have shorter days and fewer students, they employ more part-time teachers, thus lowering the FTE ratio. Another potential explanation draws on the structure of the schools themselves – because continuation schools are only required to offer a minimum of three hours of instruction each day, some schools teach half of their students during three hours in the morning and the other half during three hours in the afternoon. This doubling up

¹¹ Enrollment of students younger than the 10th grade in continuation schools is at the discretion of local school boards.

¹² Moreover, the Handbook for Continuation High Schools indicates that both the CDE and the California Continuation Education Association (CCEA) recommend student/teacher ratios be no more than 1/15 in Continuation schools. Just over one-quarter of the schools in our sample met this recommended target in 2006-07.

on the instruction day also results in a lower student-teacher ratio while maintaining low class size for individual students.

Teacher Certification

Statewide, about 4.3 percent of California teachers were working on emergency credentials in 2006-07. Three-quarters of the schools we visited (75 percent) reported that they employed no teachers on emergency credentials. We did find that 5 of our schools (14 percent) employed more than double the statewide average (>8.5%) of teachers on emergency credentials. All of those 5 schools were in urban school districts.

Other Staffing Patterns

We examined the race and ethnicity of teachers in our site-visit schools and found that they generally reflect the district-wide demography of teachers.¹³ Very little administrative data on principals is available but we did find that the ratio of principals to students in continuation schools is generally more favorable than those in comprehensive schools, even though only the very largest schools have even one assistant principal.

Other staffs in continuation schools however, generally reflect per-pupil formula funding to the disadvantage of students in smaller schools. The administrative data confirm comments from continuation school principals that the per-pupil funding formula, combined with smaller enrollments relative to comprehensive schools, combine to force difficult staffing choices. For example, 15 of 36 schools (41.7 percent) report having no pupil services staff (e.g., no counselors, nurses, or EL specialists). Smaller schools struggle most: all but one of the schools without pupil services staff have enrollments of 153 or less.

We did find a discernable district effect as small schools in *some* districts were supported with counselors and part-time nurses despite small enrollments. Where schools *did* provide for counselors, nurses, or other pupil services staff, the student/staff ratios in these schools were almost always more favorable than the ratios for comparable staff in comprehensive schools.

A similar pattern prevailed with respect to the employment of essential paraprofessional staff. We found that 15 of 36 schools (41.7%) reported employing no paraprofessionals (i.e., no teacher aides or librarians) on staff. Again, smaller schools struggled most: all but 2 of the schools with no paraprofessionals on staff enrolled less than 187 students.

Access to Technology

The statewide ratio of students to computers in continuation schools is 2.8-to-1, which compares favorably to the 4.2-to-1 ratio for comprehensive schools statewide. This

¹³ The publically available Ed-Data Partnership, which reports administrative data from state sources, does not contain information on teacher age, education, or experience: www.ed-data.k12.ca.us.

favorable comparison to comprehensive schools holds true in CDE reports for all but 3 of the 36 continuation schools visited.

Vocational Education

One statutory mission for continuation high schools is that they should meet student needs for achieving occupational goals through the provision of intensive vocational guidance and education (Warren, 2007). We found that 14 of 37 schools we visited (37.8 percent) reported having no teachers offering “vocational classes.” Again, the per-pupil funding formula affected staffing patterns in the smallest schools most. All but two of the schools assigning no teachers to vocational instruction had enrollments of 187 students or less. The staffing patterns tell only part of the story since some continuation schools we visited do provide vocational education through connections to county-run ROP or through partnerships with local businesses. Even with these connections, student vocational education opportunities appeared limited.

SECTION II

A Typology of Continuation Schools

The following school typology serves as a framework for discussing some of the major patterns we encountered in the California continuation high schools we visited. We introduce this typology with some important caveats. First, it attempts to provide only a broad framework for discussing the 37 schools in our sample. However, schools with prior evidence of good student outcomes (e.g., either from a prior referral from the CDE or independent reports of strong attendance, CAHSEE pass rates, API growth rates or graduation rates) are over-represented in the sample.¹⁴ This strategy allowed us to learn as much as possible about practices employed at those more successful schools. Second, we caution that the wide variation (along a number of dimensions) found among schools limits us to a typology that can provide only the broadest description. No individual school fits neatly into a given type. We supply this typology, nonetheless, because schools that appeared to be doing well by students exhibited discernable patterns of organization and practice. We seek to draw attention to these important patterns because they will form the basis for further exploration as we seek to learn more about (or to discover) “best practices.”

In constructing this typology, we acknowledge a debt to prior efforts by Deirdre Kelly over a decade ago. In *Last Chance High School: How Girls and Boys Drop in and Out of Alternative Schools* (1993), Kelly developed a typology that focused on the often tacit institutional goals of schools and districts that served continuation students.¹⁵

¹⁴ Our sample excluded schools in the bottom quartile of API growth for continuation schools in their respective counties.

¹⁵ Kelly, Deirdre, *Last Chance High School: How Girls and Boys Drop in and Out of Alternative Schools* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993). Kelly’s typology includes “*safety net*,” schools that operate as true alternatives to the comprehensive high school, “*safety valve*,” schools that focus on the needs of sending schools, and “*cooling out programs*” that largely neglect students’ educational needs.

We build on Kelly’s insights and draw more attention to the institutional and student-level consequences of how students and their academic prospects are regarded by the staff and leaders in our sample continuation schools and districts. It reflects our overarching observation that important consequences follow depending on whether the dominant philosophy of the staff is that students need to be “reformed” or “fixed;” or whether the dominant belief is that the schools themselves need to adapt to the unique needs and challenges faced by their students.

“Fix the School to a Adapt to Students”	
Mission & Goals for Students	<p>About one in five of the schools we visited could broadly be described as exhibiting most of the student-centered qualities we ascribe here to “Fix-the-school” type schools. Principals and staff in this type of school describe their work as animated by a desire to meet the needs of students who are not well served by traditional schools and need greater individualized instruction. These schools strive to be full-service organizations where student success is embraced, not in the abstract, but as an organizing principle.</p> <p>Teachers in these schools frequently described their work as characterized by a constant effort to understand where each student is in the academic trajectory and to figure out how the school must respond to keep him or her academically engaged. We observed that staff in these schools generally engaged with each other in purposeful (if often informal) inquiry: (1) what would “success” look like for each student, at any given time in their academic development, (2) what does the staff need to do to help students achieve success and how should it be done, and (3) what do real-time student outcomes tell the school about the efficacy of its efforts. Embedded in this approach is the notion that staff must accept an appropriate level of responsibility for student success.</p> <p>Nevertheless, we did not find that schools of this type shared a common definition of student success. While staff sometimes articulated a uniform standard for all students (e.g., “My goal is for everyone of my students to graduate with a diploma.”), others express success on more relative terms. One such principal stated that if a student, once on the verge of dropping out, left his school without a diploma but inspired to keep studying and learning, he would count that as a success.</p>
Leadership	<p>Although effective leadership takes many forms, a common feature among leaders in these student-centered schools is a focus on instructional approaches and organizational features that <i>adapt to student needs</i> (rather than on how students must change to access educational opportunities). Principals communicate high expectations</p>

	<p>for behavioral and academic growth and provide or acquire supports for the faculty and students aligned with that expectation.</p> <p>Principals also reported having a free hand to select staff for their schools and report monitoring teachers very carefully to reward what they believe to be good teaching, support struggling teachers, and encourage less successful teachers to move on from the school.</p> <p>Principals in these schools tended also to report longer tenure in their districts, often as much as 15 or 20 years in the same district. Principals with long tenure were most likely to report that they were able to leverage their knowledge and experience to develop personal networks within the district and community to garner resources for the schools and students.</p>
<p>Organizational Features</p>	<p><i>Discipline and Social Environment.</i> Discipline and social environment in these schools tends to be non-authoritarian. Often principals described themselves as coaches (and many had actually held coaching jobs previously). Consequently, they seek to have the faculty and students conceive of themselves as playing on a “team.” In some schools, a similar philosophy was reflected in efforts by leaders to have students and faculty conceive of themselves as part of a “family” with mutual responsibilities for maintaining academic focus and order in the school. Students are encouraged to self-monitor by understanding the implications of individual behavior to both team and individual success. In fact, many students and teachers in these schools commented that the school “felt like a family” where care and personal concern are modeled by the staff and where students are encouraged to care for and celebrate each other’s social and academic development.</p> <p><i>Staffing & Student Supports.</i> These schools tends to move beyond core academic supports (e.g., individual tutoring – which is, at least formally, a common feature of alternative schools) to social and emotional supports through formal social counseling and to adult-student interactions that communicate caring. Principals sought to secure the availability of at least a part-time academic counselor, staff with vocational education experience or credentials, and tasked their office clerks to focus on attendance issues and parent contact. These schools are also the most likely to obtain school volunteers with professional backgrounds in social services, or to partner with social services agencies to provide on-site support to students. Providing these additional supports is very difficult for smaller schools because of their lean staffing structure and so depend on developing relationships with agencies and individual volunteers outside the system.</p>

	<i>Curriculum and Instruction.</i> Principals in these schools focus on the quality of instruction and student learning in the core academic subjects (math, English reading comprehension and composition, and social studies) but believed it was important, and set out to provide, additional options -- either through formal courses like botany or parenting, or through informal options like team sports – that build social cohesion and academic engagement.) Some principals also noted that service learning opportunities were also important for building connections to community and building students’ self-esteem.
Student Pathways	Attention is paid in these schools to forming partnerships with external institutions, like community colleges, ROP programs, or local employers, which provide students with post-secondary pathways to academic growth and self-sufficiency.
Outcomes	Invariably, the schools we characterize here as focused on adapting the school to student needs sought and usually received model school status from the CDE. They also reported CAHSEE pass rates or graduation rates that match or exceed district-wide averages in comprehensive schools. As well, principals in these schools reported strong attendance rates. Notably, Principals emphasized success on the outcomes they voluntarily selected as important, as opposed to those imposed by state of federal accountability systems. In some cases we observed efforts by staff to develop school-level metrics of student progress – innovative responses like entry and exit assessments -- to cope with the often uncertain timeline of student enrollment in continuation settings

“ Fix the Student to Adapt to School”	
Mission & Goals for Students	The largest majority of schools we visited – perhaps more than 3 of 5 - fall roughly into this category. Principals and faculty in these schools tend to describe their schools as places that provide a second – perhaps last best chance – for students to “catch up” and to bring themselves in line with the academic expectations of traditional secondary schools. In other words they are focused on <i>helping students to change</i> so that they can “get with the program” and have effective access to the opportunities the system can provide. The traditional comprehensive school is held out as the preferred learning environment and alternative education students are urged to return there when they are “ready.” In some cases, district leaders see the principal role of these schools as helping to extend and rationalize the work of the traditional schools. As Kelly noted in her own typology, schools like these provide a “safety-valve” for the sending schools by removing disruptive or non-

	conforming students from the comprehensive schools while offering a time-limited place for non-conforming students to “catch-up.” ¹⁶
Leadership	Leadership styles varied within this broad category, but many of the principals bring with them the guiding belief that students have failed in comprehensive schools because they do not behave in ways that are rewarded in traditional environments. In this view, a central leadership goal of their leadership is to provide an environment where students are guided to modify their behavior and level of participation so that they can meet at least the minimum graduation requirements. Many principals in these schools also emphasize the importance of standards-based instruction...either as a means of easing the transition of students back to comprehensive schools or as a motivating tool and objective target for faculty and students.
Organizational Features	<p><i>Discipline and Social Environment.</i> No clear pattern of approach to discipline emerged in this type of school...beyond the imperative of order. All school leaders emphasized the need for a quiet, relatively peaceful environment that strips away distractions and allows vulnerable students to focus on academics.</p> <p><i>Staffing & Student Supports:</i> Attention here is often on providing support for student success in the core subjects. Usually this takes the form of individualized tutoring in math or language arts. Additionally, most schools also devoted additional resources to staff whose principal role is to help improve attendance. Some have full-time attendance officers, who arrange for transportation and work with parents on student attendance issues. Many of these schools, however, struggle to hire instructional aids, librarians, and full-time counselors unless they receive add-on funds for staff resources from their districts.</p> <p><i>Curriculum & Instruction:</i> Instruction in these schools focuses on the basics and reflects the more traditional imperatives of success as defined in the comprehensive school. Reading and math are emphasized and tested. While individual teachers in these schools often used science and/or social studies content in English/reading classes, we observed little emphasis on direct instruction or curricular offerings in arts or the physical, biological, or social sciences. These schools tend to use study or lesson “packets” and self-paced materials that allowed students to earn credits at their own pace.</p>
Student Pathways	Alternative pathways are often limited to the GED, independent study, referrals to adult education, the military, or preparation for entry level work that does not require post-secondary academic instruction.

¹⁶ See, Kelly, Dierdra, *supra*, (1993).

Outcomes	Student outcomes in this middle group of schools vary widely as reported by school staff. While some staff report strong student outcomes on the CAHSEE and on attendance rates and program completion, these outcomes seem to depend on district-defined factors that affect school performance (like student-teacher ratios that facilitate direct instruction and other staffing policies that include specially trained paraprofessionals and teacher aides).
-----------------	---

Dumping Ground Schools	
Mission & Goals for Students	A small but troubling number of schools we visited (about 3-4) can be described – and often were described by staff and students in these schools – as serving largely as holding places for students who will eventually drop out. As with the “student-reform” schools, these schools also focus on “changing students” to meet expectations of the sending schools, but ultimately neglected or otherwise failed to meet the social, psychological, and academic needs of students placed in alternative settings.
Leadership	We visited few schools in this category since our site selection strategy tended to exclude schools that appeared from administrative data to be the poorest performers. Consequently, it is hard to develop a clear characterization of leaders here. In some cases, the principals and teachers were themselves reluctant leaders in an environment that was not their first choice. In other cases, the leaders were simply working unsuccessfully to turn around what was often the accumulation of many years of low-expectations in a school. In sum, however, leaders here were either unwilling or un-able to develop a school dynamic that promoted effective teaching and learning. Some district leaders indicated that principals and teachers were sometimes (usually in the past) assigned to these continuation schools as “training” for comprehensive schools, or as a “pasture” for district “lemons.”
Organizational Features	<i>Discipline and Social Environment.</i> Discipline policies and social norms of these schools are often developmentally inappropriate for adolescent youth. An administrator in one school, for example, described continuation students as needing “to be treated like 3 rd graders” and designed disciplinary rules accordingly. Order and obedience are also paramount values in some schools, leading to very restrictive, zero-tolerance rules for behavior and student movement that contributed to a “lockdown” feeling in the school and to mutual mistrust among students and staff.

	<p><i>Staffing & Student Supports.</i> Often limited to supports for which there is formal categorical aid, e.g., CAHSEE tutoring. There seemed to be little support in these schools, beyond help to meet core academic requirements. Often these schools were the most bereft of counselors or other paraprofessionals and specially trained instructional aides.</p> <p><i>Curriculum & Instruction.</i> All schools we visited emphasized that they delivered a “standards-based” curriculum. What distinguishes the least successful schools is the apparent passive nature of that delivery on the part of the staff. Here we saw the least evidence of direct instruction and greatest reliance on lesson packets or interactive computer programs. One student described the teaching in such a school this way: “<i>You grab your [academic] contract, do what you’re gonna do...nobody’s teaching you anything. You pretty much do it on your own. You pick up you book and do the work, or just say ‘screw it.’</i>”</p>
Student Pathways	Attention to post-secondary pathways is notably absent in these schools, so they often serve as exit ramps to nowhere.
Outcomes	In the worst cases drop-out rates appeared higher than in other comparable continuation schools...and staff often expected many students to drop out.

SECTION III

SOURCES OF SCHOOL-LEVEL VARIATION

In this section we explore the enabling and constraining factors imposed on alterative schools by state, district, and county environments to assess how they may explain the variation we find among schools. As noted earlier, we find wide variation in practice and over-all quality among schools situated in the same county and district. We therefore direct special attention to how, and under what circumstances, the *internal* environments of schools —staffing, principal leadership and experience, and the fundamental beliefs of teachers and school leaders --- may play powerful rolls in determining school quality.

A. Enabling and Constraining Factors: The school contending with state policy

Continuation schools are created under the state’s enabling, authority and so it is to state policy that we look first for clues to the school-level outcomes we find. We focus on state policies that relate to schools and to the students and personnel within them. We make no effort to be exhaustive, but rather draw on our school site visits and interview data to identify those state-determined factors that school leaders and teachers find most salient. From our school informants we draw two very consistent and over-arching descriptions of state policy.

First, continuation high school principals and district leaders describe state policy (especially finance policy) as largely conceiving of alternative schools as smaller stripped-down versions of comprehensive high schools. There is scant recognition in state policy that the charge given to alternative schools, the demands on staff, and the special supports that students need to succeed, may require a funding and support model that differs substantially from that of comprehensive schools. For example, state policy recognizes that over-aged and under credited adolescents would benefit from smaller class size and from special support for working students. Yet administrators observed that the current funding and staffing model leaves almost one third of the schools we visited with class sizes that are only marginally better than the district wide averages (i.e., student/teacher ratios greater than 20 to 1) and with no special counseling or vocational education supports.

Second, school leaders and staff describe a dichotomous accountability system in which *students* in continuation schools are usually held accountable to the same graduation standards as are all other secondary school students. Meanwhile, alternative *schools* are held to a set of district standards that are substantially different from those of comprehensive schools and that contain fewer incentives for promoting student success.¹⁷ Moreover, these two accountability systems appear to be moving in opposite directions, further complicating things for continuation school students caught in the middle. Alternative school leaders describe a situation where the standards for students are tightening, most recently evidenced in the universal application of the CAHSEE requirement, while most of the principals indicate that the accountability system for continuation schools remains largely ineffectual, either because those standards can be easily evaded or because they carry no discernable consequences for the school.¹⁸ The singular exception is in the implementation of the CAHSEE requirement. Most school leaders said that this new standard for the diploma (though minimal) gives students and teachers a concrete goal-post to structure and animate their efforts. As one principal said in an interview; “[The CAHSEE]...is real...an expectation backed up with something.” Some principals also noted the benefits of NCLB’s increased focus on teacher preparation – they pointed out that more of their teachers are now fully credentialed than in past years.

¹⁷ The state requires all students to complete a basic course of study (CA Education Code § 51225.3) and to demonstrate the same subject mastery (e.g., as measured by achievement on the California Standards Tests). Nevertheless, some districts establish higher local standards for students in comprehensive schools, while maintaining lower credit accrual requirements for students in continuation or other alternative programs to qualify for a diploma. While this practice is discouraged by the state, it is permissible provided that the minimum state standards and course of study requirements are met.

¹⁸ These observations largely confirmed the conclusions of the Legislative Analysts Office, which issued a report earlier in 2007 detailing how most alternative schools escape the consequences of the federal (Adequate Yearly Progress) and state (Academic Performance Index) requirements. Meanwhile the Alternative School Accountably Measures (ASAM) create few effective incentives for school improvement.

1. The Alternative School as a Small Basic Version of the Comprehensive School

The idea that alternative schools are, from an organizational perspective, small versions of “regular” high schools is reflected in a common, if not transparent funding structure, common staffing formulas, and a common approach to staff professional development. Principals and teachers in continuation high schools indicate that this feature of state policy is one of the most frustrating, and unfair, constraints with which they must contend. They report that staffs in alternative settings are charged with doing more, and in less time, often with the same resources, per student, as all other schools.

A common and opaque school finance system. Many continuation schools receive the same funding as all other schools of its size, following the ADA formula dictated by their district’s general revenue limit.¹⁹ In fact, there exist significant disparities in funding for continuation schools among districts. For historical reasons, continuation schools established after 1979 receive a supplemental revenue limit add-on. However, this add-on is calculated only once, in the first year of the school’s operation. No annual adjustment of the add-on is made to reflect subsequent changes in the number of students or staff in the school (California Education Code § 42243.7). The result is that some districts receive no supplemental funding to operate continuation schools, while others receive add-ons based solely on historical artifact rather than on any calculation of actual student need.

Continuation school programming and staffing is further complicated by state rules that limit continuation schools to reimbursement for a maximum of 15 instruction hours per student each school week, regardless of actual additional programming or attendance (Education Code § 46170).

This finance structure has two powerful implications for alternative schools. The first is readily and painfully apparent to all school leaders we interviewed. While small classes and low student-teacher ratios are universally acknowledged by educators and policymakers as essential features of instruction in alternative settings, many districts do not receive additional funding to account for the additional staffing required in continuation high schools. As noted in Section I, this funding formula poses very steep challenges for schools enrolling fewer than 200 students, in the absence of district add-ons. The strategies employed by schools to accomplish smaller classes are as varied as the number of schools we visited. Some obtain supplemental funds from district sources; others apply for categorical funds to supplement general revenue funds. Still others report resorting to “creative accounting” to obtain the funds needed to maintain necessary staffing levels, or some schools teach two different sets of students within one school day by having a three hour school session in the morning for half the school’s students and another three hour school session in the afternoon.

¹⁹ Community Schools and Community Day Schools -- education options that serve expelled or adjudicated youth -- do receive supplemental funding, but that additional funding is largely at the margin, for a limited number of students, and only for programming that exceeds a four-hour school day.

While alternative schools usually have enough enrollment to hire at least one part-time academic counselor, most schools we visited did not have enough to qualify for a librarian, nurse, or dedicated attendance officer. None reported hiring staff specializing in EL instruction, despite the fact that almost half of the schools we visited had enrollments of 25% or more EL. Teachers who work with EL and other over-aged, under-credited students often report needing a broader range of instructional materials than those in traditional schools. These material needs are not adequately reflected in school budgets according to our respondents. (This is a complaint often also heard from California charter school operators in schools of under 300 in enrollment.)

A second, less apparent consequence of the finance structure is that, like all other schools, a potentially large share of a school's finances could come through categorical grants. Some categorical dollars, like state funds designated for English learners flow directly to schools on a per-student formula basis. Other funds, like federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) dollars flow to counties and districts, but then are distributed to schools following priorities set by districts. This is especially so at secondary schools, which receive a substantially smaller share of the NCLB dollars than do K-6 schools. Some funds, however, are competitive and require that school or district leaders take affirmative steps to apply for the funds. Thus, substantial parts of the finance system yield more to school and district leaders who know how the finance system works and take the steps necessary to qualify for those funds.

In this respect, our school-based interviews reveal a broad range in principals' knowledge of how their own schools are financed, as well as in their skill and experience in proactively managing and growing those finances. Some principals indicated that they had almost no direct knowledge of how money came to their schools – in one case a principal directed us to his clerk for more detailed information. Such principals would typically describe a scenario where a report would arrive shortly before the beginning of the school year forecasting how much money would be available and they would then set to work within those limits. Other principals were very proactive in managing school finances, but even the most knowledgeable among them often confessed to being occasionally baffled by some aspects of the finance system.²⁰ District officials are also varied in their knowledge of the finance system.²¹

A principal's school finance knowledge, it turns out, is critical in a state where one third or more of all available dollars may come through categorical grants above the districts ADA general revenue funds. One district official reported that his continuation high school received only a small amount of categorical funds because the site principal did

²⁰ In fact, some principals stated that the NCLB law was helpful on this score because its finance transparency provisions have helped them become more knowledgeable about what funds are due to their schools and under what authority.

²¹ This diversity of knowledge about school finance and complaints about the lack of transparency in the system are common among school principals generally. See, for example Brewer, Dominic and Joanna Smith, *Evaluating the "Crazy Quilt": Educational Governance in California*, (University of Southern California, 2007) available at www.irepp.net. Brewer and Smith find that California's school finance system is among the most complex and opaque among the states.

not care for the paperwork and regulatory requirements that came with these funds. That site principal declined to apply for Gifted and Talented Education funds for which the school was eligible, for this reason. In contrast, other principals were forthright in describing how their funding situation changed, sometimes dramatically, after they learned how to apply for and to insist that they receive all categorical funds to which their school and its enrolled population was eligible. In any event, principals report that successfully navigating the school finance system often depends on knowledgeable support from district leaders and staff.

A common and largely inadequate system for staffing schools. A typical continuation high school of 225 students in our sample is staffed similarly to any secondary school of its size: one principal (no other administrator), one part-time counselor, 12 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers, 2-3 clerical staff and 1-2 paraprofessional aids. Schools enrolling fewer than 200 students are typically staffed with only a principal, one or two clerical aids, and a part-time counselor (who is often shared with another school or program). The only departure from school staffing typical of a comprehensive school is the lower student-teacher ratio. And much depends on district support and commitment to alternative instruction. The principal of one medium-sized continuation school indicated that with tightening district budgets, his district central office was forcing him to accept more students and to bring his student/teacher ratio closer to the district average.

This staffing system reflects the horizontal equity of the per-pupil funding system that assumes all students ought to be funded equally. However, the students placed in alternative settings usually present greater academic and behavioral challenges to schools than the typical student. Most are the equivalent of one or more years behind in credit accumulation and will almost certainly need more intensive intervention strategies to help them catch up. Other students in continuation schools are the victims (or the perpetrators) of abuse in prior school or home settings and so bring with them behavioral, emotional or psychological challenges that interfere with their academic engagement. Such students need mental health counseling or other interventions that require specialized staff and supports. Students in these settings are also more likely than their peers in comprehensive schools to be pregnant, parenting small children, or working part time. Keeping such students engaged in school and supporting their academic needs, while enabling them to shoulder family responsibilities, also requires special intervention and supports. Unless a principal makes a concerted effort to acquire these additional resources from sources outside his or her district, they will often go unmet by schools as typically staffed.

The lean staffing structure typical of continuation schools also presents access problems for some vulnerable students. One of the schools we visited has developed a reputation for getting better results with over-aged, under-credited students than neighboring comprehensive schools, but that school's principal reported that they have a waiting list of students and further could not accept English Learner students (except for those that were fully orally-proficient in English) because they have no staff capacity to serve them at the school.

A common and inappropriate state system for staff training, certification, and professional development. In addition to a common staffing structure, alternative school principals and teachers are subject to the same training and certification requirements as are staff in comprehensive secondary schools. Other studies have found that California lags other states in asserting state leadership over educator professional development.²² School leaders in our study report that there is scant recognition within the state school governance system of how work with abused, or otherwise vulnerable youth may require special staff training or skills. Likewise, staffs in many of these schools report almost no support for their own on-going professional development.

Local school leaders report that staff may participate in the same professional development opportunities available to other secondary school teachers. But school staff often indicate that these opportunities fail to provide specialized support for the academic programming required of teachers and principals in alternative school settings where the transitory nature of enrollment and multiple academic levels of students in a single class impose special challenges to staff.

One of the few special education teachers we encountered, reflecting on the lack of professional development for the work she does, observed that she could not really explain how she assesses students academic and social needs: “It’s just a very instinctual thing for me. I can have a kid kind of walk in and I can kind of watch him for 5 or 10 minutes and then kind of go ‘Ohhhh, this is maybe where the problem is.’” Principals, in particular were uniform in citing the professional isolation they experience as leaders of institutions for which there is no special leadership training or guidance.

2. Divergent Accountability Systems for Schools and Students: Heightened student-level accountability – weak system for promoting school-level accountability.

Students in continuation schools are, in most cases, held accountable to the same graduation standards applicable to all other secondary school students. The state accountability system evinces a clear preference for holding all students to the academic standards for receipt of a diploma. At a minimum, this means that all students must complete the state-mandated course of instruction,²³ and pass the CAHSEE. At the district level, the desire to assure that the high school diploma “means something” generally is translated to requiring, at least on paper, that all students should complete the same district standards for promotion and graduation.²⁴ This approach assumes, counter

²² Darling-Hammond, Linda, and Stelios Orphanos, *Leadership Development in California*, (Stanford University, 2007); and Loeb, Susanna and Luke Miller, *A Review of State Teacher Policies* (Stanford University, 2007). Both studies available at www.irepp.net.

²³ California Education Code § 51225.3.

²⁴ We note again, however, that some districts have established higher standards for students in comprehensive schools while allowing lower credit accrual requirements for student in continuation or other alternative programs to qualify for a diploma. (For a more detailed discussion see Perez, Lynne, *California Continuation High Schools: A Student Perspective*, (National Center of Urban School Transformation: San Diego State University, 2008).

to what we often observed, that it is possible for students in continuation programs to accomplish these benchmarks in the *same* amount of time, and further that the materials, curricula, and supports necessary for academic success are the same and readily available to students placed in alternative settings.

Continuation schools operate within an accountability system that is demonstrably weaker than the systems in place for comprehensive secondary schools. While students in continuation programs are held to the same state standards as all other students – and while those standards have recently been tightened – the accountability system for schools has moved along a different plain. Our interviews with continuation school leaders largely confirm findings of the Legislative Analyst’s Office (Warren, 2007) that conflicting rules either allow most schools to escape accountability under the Federal NCLB Law and the State Public School Accountability Act of 1999. One principal of a CDE model continuation school was largely dismissive of most state accountability measures preferring to focus on WASC accreditation and school-articulated goals. While he was most critical of the ASAM, he implied that the other state and federal measures were useful only at the margin, for public relations purposes: *“But what’s the purpose of it [referring to the ASAM]? I don’t know. I mean it comes every year.... We get AYP scores, API scores, and [those go] to the [news]paper. And I keep the paper right here with my score on it. When I get down I look at it. I do! So when I have a parent who says, “How’s your school?” I say, “Right here, let me show you what my school is.” But they don’t care about the ASAM.....It holds no weight right now that I know of.”*

The implementation of the Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) in 2000 marked California’s most recent effort to use standards to drive improvement in continuation high schools. But site administrators report that this system is weak and does not promote improvement at the local level. As detailed in the 2007 LAO report, individual schools can choose the indicators on which they will be tracked...and many schools chose to focus predominantly on indicators that do not directly measure academic quality or learning, such as attendance or credit completion rates. As a result, there is no way to compare performance across schools in this system. In many ways this weak accountability system is a reflection of a lack of consensus among educators and policymakers about how to measure the effectiveness of schools that serve students with special needs, as well as about what ought to be the legitimate expectations of teachers, and principals, in this sub-sector of secondary schools. In the absence of clear signals about expectations, systematic support and incentives for performance, the quality of instruction in schools depends largely on individual beliefs, effort and motivation of teachers and administrators.²⁵ We explore these factors further in the next section.

B. Enabling and Constraining Factors: The local level

The broad variation in school quality that we observed is not surprising, given that most local educators report that the state standards are irrelevant in practical terms (most often

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of instruction issues see Perez, 2008.

because applicable standards could either be easily met or evaded). In this context, the factors that appear to be the most important determinants of educator effort, student performance, and instructional quality at the school level are (1) the quality of district support afforded to alternative schools, and (2) the beliefs, experience, and leadership qualities of the site principals and teachers. These factors are further explored below.

1. Districts: The discretion factor

In the early stages of each school site visit, we asked school administrators to tell us what they thought was important about the school's history and evolution. This aspect of our interviews produced important insights into the school improvement process because, with few exceptions, where we had advance information that a school was exemplary in some way, we learned from the principal that things had not always been so at their school. Typically, principals in schools designated by the CDE as "model"²⁶ schools offered a historical narrative in which a change in the quality of district support for the school (or for alternative education generally) served as a pivotal point in the school's reform trajectory.

In one case, for example, the school principal told of an earlier time in which the school staff played no role in how students were placed at the school. As well, the school struggled to get the resources (e.g, office equipment) it needed for effective operation. Both led to a perpetually chaotic environment where teachers struggled to maintain academic order even as new students appeared at their door on an almost daily basis. After one principal quit mid-year, a district administrator was temporarily assigned to run the school until the current principal was recruited. The first-hand knowledge gained while serving as interim principal converted that administrator into an advocate for the continuation school upon returning to the district post. The current principal stated that it was easier for her to change the intake process and to get needed resources than it had been for her predecessors because she now had an advocate in the district leadership. This, in her mind, made a critical difference as she sought to implement improvements on behalf of students. Likewise, two other principals described similar stories of how their school had once been a "dumping ground" for poor teachers and administrators until the district got a superintendent who "got it" about alternative education.

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

²⁶ See discussion of how schools are awarded the model school designation at footnote 3.

The quality of school facilities and the location of the continuation schools also support or hinder school performance in important ways. Although excellence is as likely to be located in a somewhat run-down facility as in a sparkling new venue, school staff and students noted often that the quality and location of the facilities relative to other schools sent powerful signals to the community and to the students themselves about the priority the district placed on their education. Ultimately, while consistent district support did not always *determine* school quality, it was clear that the principal's job was much easier, and improvement efforts were more fruitful where district support was physically evident.²⁷

2. Resources Internal to Schools: The critical role of shared beliefs and leadership

Even where a relatively strong district-level structure existed to support continuation schools, these schools are subject to such a weak accountability system that we found the principal, and his or her beliefs and leadership qualities to be the single most important element determining school quality.

a). Role of Educators' Beliefs and Values

An often revealing moment in our campus interviews came when site leaders responded to an open-ended question about what they saw as the "mission" of their school. Some principals were vague: "our goals are the same as the goals for all children" answered one. Some seemed unprepared for the question and groped for an answer, beginning often with a restatement of the formal charge from the district (e.g., "to meet the needs of students that fall behind in credits") or they articulated only basic goals (like "to get [students] ready to be students, get them ready to be responsible, get them ready to be accountable, [and to] follow through)."

By contrast, principals, in schools with evidence of exemplary student outcomes (particularly CAHSEE pass rates and program completion rates) were often very emphatic and positive about what they believed their students could accomplish and about the school's role in facilitating those outcomes. One principal began by stating that all students who voluntarily come to the school are ready to meet high academic expectations: "we're just giving kids an opportunity to demonstrate they are learning in a lot of different non-traditional ways." Another principal in a CDE model school was typical of high-performing administrators in comments that, at once, asserted success and acknowledged that the success they experienced beat both the odds against them and the expectations of many in their communities. After showing us how his school outperformed some comprehensive schools on a number of student outcomes he asserted "Our whole life has been, 'Let's show you! You want us to show you something? With the test scores, we'll show you. Attendance, we'll show you'."

²⁷ See McLaughlin, Atukpawu and Williamson, *supra*, for a more detailed discussion of the mediating role that districts and counties play in determining school quality.

Where experienced principals were clear about their beliefs, the faculty and the students echoed their sentiments. Teachers often communicated to us, for example, that principals who were very clear about the standards and student outcomes to be met, empowered teachers who endorsed those beliefs and made worklife uncomfortable for teachers who held themselves or their students to lower standards. Over time, teachers in such schools found that low-performing teachers voluntarily left and enabled the principal to build a school staff with like-minded, highly motivated individuals.

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

b) Role of School Leadership

Positive beliefs about students, of course, are important enabling factors, but they are not self-executing. Where we found exemplary outcomes in CAHSEE pass rates, attendance, accelerated credit accumulation and on other measures, we also found school leaders²⁸ who were voluntarily (1) applying more rigorous standards to themselves and their faculties than those imposed by the state or district (2) using student performance data to guide change, and (3) successful in imposing order on the school placement and intake process so that teachers would have a stable environment in which to manage their work with students.

Most often, purposive leadership in these student-centered schools took the form of a school-level commitment to seeking and obtaining a high WASC accreditation mark. More than one principal mentioned the school’s WASC accreditation as an important benchmark before mentioning their CDE model status. One principal observed that the WASC *accreditation* was less consequential than the WASC accreditation *process*, which includes a site visit by a team of outside experts. He liked this process because it helped motivate his staff and helped them to see their individual role in advancing important aspects of school change.

Almost without exception, site leaders, at schools with evidence of high performance on achievement benchmarks, developed a set of student outcome goals and communicated them to students and faculty. Benchmarks generally included CAHSEE pass rates,

²⁸ Critical leaders were often, but not exclusively, the school principal. In some cases, teachers cite the importance of leadership from a counselor or teacher-colleague as supplying the vision and inspiration need to coalesce positive action on the part of the staff.

student attendance rates and credit accumulation. These are important achievement benchmarks, but they are not, in themselves, conclusive indicators of the quality of instruction or student learning at those schools. Among the very best schools, (about 3-4 of those we visited) we saw evidence that principals were working in intentional ways to establish curriculum and instructional checks that attended to grade-appropriate curriculum standards in the core subjects (mathematics, English language arts, and social studies). Principals in these schools were adamant that students could and would meet the challenges of standards-based instruction. And, they worked with faculty on a regular basis to gather and examine student performance data and to reflect on how that data might guide improvements in instruction and student learning.

Finally, in describing the change process at their schools, almost all principals in high performing schools emphasized that there was no clear roadmap for success. Nearly all described a process of experimentation over a long period of time. For example, in describing how they came to their current intake system, one principal described a decision process that was initially determined on a case-by-case basis by the principals of the sending and receiving schools. That then changed to a process where intake was handled by the counselors, and finally by a committee of teachers, counselors and administrators that met and vetted each placement. A similar process of problematic implementation was described with respect to how the school settled on the mix of direct instruction and independent study and on the curriculum that would be used in the school. A significant point about these examples is that principals believed they were inventing the wheel at their schools, with few external models to guide critical aspects of their school design and reform.

SECTION IV

Curriculum & Instruction: Initial Observations

A. Limits of this Study

This descriptive study of Alternative Education Options is designed to help educators and policymakers and the public understand the still-evolving role that alternative education institutions (and especially continuation high schools) have come to play in secondary education broadly. The applicable legislation suggests that Alternative Education Options should provide expanded opportunities for all California youth to obtain an academically rigorous education leading to the diploma and to successful engagement in post-secondary work and education. It follows that the quality of curricula and instruction offered in these “options” programs lies at the heart of any effort to breathe life into the legislative intent.

While our research design, up to this point, has not afforded us an opportunity to delve deeply into classrooms, our interviews with principals, teachers and students often did touch on issues of curricula and instruction and provide us with some clear guideposts for exploration in further research. We discuss these early observations below.

B. School Administrators: setting the stage for a strong instructional program

Schools administrators in schools where lead indicators (like school attendance rates, CAHSEE pass rates and graduation rates) suggest strong underlying instructional practices reported having three things in common worthy of further exploration.

1. Foundational Importance of an Orderly Student Identification and Placement Process

Student placement into continuation high schools is often not controlled by the continuation school but is instead governed by the imperatives of the sending schools. As noted in our typology, the continuation school is often designed to take the pressures created by non-conforming students off of the “system.” Yet, teachers almost always cited the importance of being able to *plan* for good instruction. The ability and time to plan was, in turn, supported by a rational system for identifying, placing, and otherwise carefully managing student intake.²⁹ There was no dominant approach here, typically principals negotiated with the district or sending schools for a common standard of admission to the continuation school (e.g., that only students who are not more than a certain number of credits behind be referred to the school) or that assignments happen on a manageable schedule (e.g., in six-week cycles) so that teachers attempting group direct instruction are not be disrupted by too many students arriving in the middle of an academic cycle.

2. High(er) Expectations than those Signaled by weak State or District Accountability Systems

Staff at schools in this type, with strong attendance rates, CAHSEE pass rates and graduation rates, reported that their principals communicated a clear vision of what success looked like in classrooms, as well as clear expectations that everyone would move purposefully to achieve that vision.

Principals often cited implementation of the CAHSEE graduation requirement as a standard-setting event (albeit a low one) that focused not just students, but staff as well on a concrete goal for all students. The role that these standard-setting efforts internal to schools play in the process of improving instruction deserves further investigation.

3. Using Student Performance Data to Guide Change

This is the one area of practice where the most admired principals were clearly drawing on one of the most frequently identified “best practices” in the literature on standards-based school reform. A few principals kept progress charts on the walls of their offices and demonstrated to us their command of where each student in his/her school was in terms of reaching important benchmarks on key state assessments and/or internally selected assessments of academic progress.

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of how students are placed into continuation schools see Perez, 2008.

Still most principals who used these strategies were using systems and materials that they “invented” for themselves with little assistance from the district. One school used a commercially available professional development system for teachers but most seemed to be “re-inventing the wheel” on their own. We need to learn more about these data-driven practices as enacted in continuation high schools because they keep coming up as high leverage strategies of creative principals.

C. Teachers on Instruction Practices

Where we had the opportunity to visit classrooms, (in about half of our sample) we observed a range of instructional practices both across and with the schools. As Lynne Perez reports in a more detailed examination of instructional issues, the variation we observed falls along a continuum of strategies ranging from independent study to whole-class, direct instruction. Students in self-paced instruction earn needed course credits by following a sequence of tasks assigned in lesson packets or contracts. These lessons generally consist of independently reading assigned material; answering questions or solving math problems, and completing required tests (Perez, 2008). Students may check in with teachers once or twice a week, or as needed as they work through their lesson packets. Teachers report that they try to identify their most motivated and self-starting students for this mode of work. But this may be the only effective option available to students in small schools with very limited staff who must contend with students at radically different skill levels in a single class.

In larger schools, where there were two or more teachers in a discipline, there was greater opportunity for staff to group students by skill level and thus to engage in the type of direct instruction more typically seen in comprehensive high school English and math courses. Still, even in these larger schools, teachers report such varying levels of ability, motivation, and academic engagement among students that much of their time is spent trying to give students space for self-paced instruction. This is so even where whole-class direct instruction was the preferred approach. Teachers we observed, ultimately serve primarily as one-on-one instructional supports for students, answering questions, re-teaching difficult concepts for sub-groups of students, reviewing graded papers, and monitoring individual students’ credit accrual (Perez, 2008). Students we interviewed in focus groups often reported that having the opportunity to work at their own pace motivated them and removed the pressure to keep up (or in some cases keep back) with peers.

The variation across schools in homework policy, even among “fix-the-school” type schools reflects this tension between the need for both self-paced study and direct instruction in continuation schools. While some faculty use homework as a way of extending independent study and credit accrual possibilities, at least two schools we visited had “no homework” policies. These policies reflected a belief among faculty that this “special” population was too vulnerable to work independently in often chaotic homes and so would benefit more from in-class work where teacher support is available.

D. Relevance and Relationships in Instruction

It is a commonplace in high school reform that some students come to school goal-oriented and ready to learn, others will need educators to step in and build the trusting relationships and relevance links that will engage them in academics. But in continuation schools teachers report that this is a central task for *every* teacher with *every* student. Indeed, some report that it may take new students weeks or months of intensive intervention by school staff before they “buy-in” and begin to really engage the work. As one teacher reported: “I think the number one thing that’s really important is developing relationships with these kids and...[developing] trust. Because I think that when that happens, there’s a lot of acceptance...they’re willing to buy in with you about where you’re trying to take them...”

The importance of supportive interpersonal relationships between students and adult educators emerged as a major theme in every school – a “necessary prior” – to academic engagement. Our next level of work must explore the specific practices teachers use to re-engage discouraged students through relevance and relationships (e.g., concerted efforts to make post-secondary pathways transparent to their students). Of particular concern is to learn more about how teachers adhere to a rigorous standards-based curriculum while making sure students build academic resilience and remain goal-oriented.

E. Building Partnerships and Pathways Beyond the School

Leaders of effective continuation schools attend to forming partnerships with external institutions, like community colleges, Regional Occupation Programs, or local employers, which provide students with post-secondary pathways to academic growth and self-sufficiency. These partnerships provide essential resources including:

- Teachers and counselors in community colleges who work with continuation schools to develop programs of study, opportunities for students to visit the college campus; advisors from community colleges who visit the continuation school to tell students about their programs, and explain financial aid opportunities and admissions procedures.
- Relationships with local businesses that provide jobs or credit-carrying internships for students.
- Relationships with community agencies, including county or community-based mental health services to provide drug and alcohol treatment, as well as other connections that provide students with community service opportunities.

These partnerships differed in form and intensity across local contexts and were often the product of personal networks among school administrators and community leaders. Schools lacking these partnerships were, by comparison, at a significant disadvantage in their efforts to meet students’ needs.³⁰

³⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the importance of these school-community partnerships see McLaughlin, Atukpawu, and Williamson, (2008).

Fixing Schools/Fixing Students: Some inherent trade-offs

We observe that some of the more successful schools lead by taking the view that the organization of time, work, and instruction in continuation schools must respond to the particular needs that students bring. They do not try to “fix” students. Nevertheless, we also observe that there are some trade-offs inherent in the two approaches.

Schools that work to help students conform behaviorally and academically to the norms and demands of the comprehensive system have the advantage of working towards fixed standards. And those students who do respond and meet the standards are rewarded by the school system. The dilemma is that those students who never fully conform – and they are sometimes the majority of students in continuation schools -- are demonstrably as ill-served by “fix-the-student” schools as by the comprehensive schools.

In contrast, schools that are trying to be more “student-centered,” must hew a fine line between adapting to students, and offering them instruction that is so different it may fail to meet the same academic standards offered in comprehensive schools. Those that succeed in maintaining standards while adapting to student needs, often achieve success through the application of extra, uncompensated time and effort. Thus, leaders in these “model” schools are often very conscious of the fact that they are building organizations that, while remarkable, are nonetheless institutionally fragile and unlikely to be replicated on a large scale without substantial changes in the incentives and structure of the overarching school finance and governance system. Indeed, there is substantial doubt that their results can be sustained after their charismatic leaders retire.

References

- Brewer, Domenic and Joanna Smith, *Evaluating the “Crazy Quilt”: Educational Governance in California*, (University of Southern California) 2007, available at www.irepp.net.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, and Stelios Orphanos, *Leadership Development in California*, (Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice: Stanford University), 2007, available at www.irepp.net.
- Kelly, Dierdre, *Last Chance High School: How Girls and Boys Drop in and Out of Alternative Schools* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993).
- Loeb, Susanna and Luke Miller, *A Review of State Teacher Policies* (Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice: Stanford University) 2007, available at www.irepp.net.
- McLaughlin, Milbrey, Grace Atukpawu and Devon Williamson, “*Alternative Education Options in California: A view from counties and districts*,” (The John W. Gardner Center: Stanford University) 2007.
- Perez, Lynne, *California Continuation High Schools: A Student Perspective*, (National Center for Urban School Transformation: San Diego State University) 2008.
- Warren, Paul. (2007). *Improving Alternative Education in California*. Sacramento, CA: California Legislative Analyst's Office) February 2007