CALIFORNIA CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS:
A Descriptive Study

Perez, Lynne G. & Johnson, Joseph F.
The National Center for Urban School Transformation
San Diego State University
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CONTRIBUTING RESEARCHERS AND COLLABORATORS

Margaret R. Basom, Ph.D., Professor
San Diego State University

Susan Penny Gray, Ed.D, Adjunct Professor
San Diego State University

Misty M. Kirby, Doctoral Student
College of William and Mary

Gregory Austin, Ph.D., Director
Health and Human Development Program, WestEd

Don Dixon, Senior Research Associate
Health and Human Development Program, WestEd

Milbrey McLaughlin, Ph.D.
David Jacks Professor of Education and Public Policy and Founding Director of the John Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities
Stanford University

Grace Chinyere Atukpawu, Doctoral Candidate
Stanford University

Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, J.D., Ph.D.
Institute for Research on Education Policy & Practice,
Stanford University

Devon Williamson, Research Assistant
John Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities,
Stanford University

Leslie Swain, Graduate Student
Stanford University

ABSTRACT

Every year a significant number of California's public school students, disproportionately low-income and minority, leave the educational system before completing high school (Losen & Wald, 2005). On average, only 71% of all California students who enter ninth grade graduate in four years with a diploma (Losen & Wald, 2005; Swanson, 2005). To re-engage out-of-school youth, the state of California provides a number of alternative education options, some described as "schools of choice" and others as "programs or schools to which students are referred involuntarily" (CDE, 2006, p.1). Chief among these options is the continuation high school. Serving nearly 70,000 students, California's 521 continuation high schools offer diploma programs for students sixteen through eighteen years of age "who have not completed high school, are not exempt from compulsory school attendance, and are deemed at risk of not completing their schooling" (CDE, 2006). Despite the growing sense of urgency regarding California's dropout rate and the salience of continuation high schools as the state's premier dropout intervention program, surprisingly little attention, scholarly or otherwise, has focused on "what actually goes on inside them" (Kelly, 1993, p. xv). Thus, drawing upon a broader study of California's Alternative Education Options program, this article aims to present a descriptive analysis of continuation high schools – the students who attend them, how those students come to continuation education, and what they experience once they arrive.

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Every year a significant number of California's public school students, disproportionately low-income and minority, leave the educational system before completing high school (Losen & Wald, 2005). On average, only 71% of all California students who enter ninth grade graduate in four years with a diploma (Losen & Wald, 2005; Swanson, 2005). Moreover, a statewide "graduation gap" of up to 30 percentage points separates black (57%), Hispanic (60%), and Native American (52%) students from white (78%) and Asian (84%) students (Swanson, 2005). These extremely high dropout rates, particularly for minority students, have serious consequences. Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, poor, incarcerated, unhealthy, and single parents with children who will drop out of high school themselves (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morision, 2006). Yet, high dropout rates not only "imperil individual futures but also profoundly impact our communities and nations due to the loss of productive workers, the earnings and revenues they would have generated, and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care, and social services" (p. 2).

While the decision to drop out "is personal, reflects their unique life circumstances, and is part of the slow disengagement from school" (Bridgeland, et al, 2006, p. 3), nearly half of the respondents to a recent survey of former students said that a central factor in leaving school was that classes were not interesting. Nearly 70% cited not feeling motivated or inspired to work hard with participants in focus groups "expressing sadness that they were not challenged more and that teachers were not inspiring" (p. 5). And a majority of respondents indicated that it was too difficult to pass from one grade to the next. When asked why, these former students said that, "in addition to the test being too difficult, teachers were not available to give them extra help, classes were uninteresting, and many of them simply missed too many days to catch up" (p. 7).

To re-engage out-of-school youth, the state of California provides a number of alternative education options, some described as "schools of choice" and others as "programs or schools to which students are referred involuntarily" (CDE, 2006, p.1). During the 2005-2006 school year approximately 414,030[1] California students were enrolled in district and/or county continuation high schools, alternative schools or programs of choice, community schools, juvenile court schools, independent study programs, or opportunity education programs (CDE, 2006). Chief among these options is the continuation high school. Serving nearly 70,000 students, California's 521 continuation high schools offer diploma programs for students sixteen through eighteen years of age "who have not completed high school, are not exempt from compulsory school attendance, and are deemed at risk of not completing their schooling" (CDE, 2006). While most of these students are "credit deficient," others need a more "flexible

[1] This is a single-day report. "Because of the significant turnover of students in some educational options, this number significantly understates the actual number of students served in a given year" (CDE, 2006, p. 1).

educational environment" to accommodate employment or familial obligations (CDE, 2006).

Despite the growing sense of urgency regarding California's dropout rate and the salience of continuation high schools as the state's premier dropout intervention program, surprisingly little attention, scholarly or otherwise, has focused on "what actually goes on inside them" (Kelly, 1993, p. xv). Thus, drawing upon a broader study of California's Alternative Education Options program, this article aims to present a descriptive analysis of continuation high schools – the students who attend them, how those students come to continuation education, and what they experience once they arrive. On the way to describing continuation high schools and the people and practices that inhabit them, we begin with what we know about purpose of continuation education.

What is the Mission of Continuation High School?

Originally conceived as "compulsory part-time schools" for the young worker (Kelly, 1993, p. 37), continuation high schools have served multiple purposes across their 88-year history. From meeting the educational needs of working students, to providing a treatment program for maladjusted youth, to serving as an alternative to the traditional secondary experience, the ever-evolving nature of California's "chameleon-like continuation program" (p. 66) has made the development of a clear, common understanding of its mission a challenge at best. The California Department of Education (CDE) currently defines continuation high schools as diploma programs for students sixteen to eighteen years of age "who have not completed high school, are not exempt from compulsory school attendance, and are deemed at risk on not completing their schooling" (CDE, 2006, p. 104). Yet, educators in the field express a range of beliefs about the mission and goals of continuation high school. These multiple and sometimes competing notions of the purpose of continuation education may be a key factor in the variations we see across and within schools.

During our interviews, we asked district and school administrators to describe the mission of continuation education in their schools. Not surprisingly, the majority named credit recovery and graduation as the primary goal, a mission consistent with both CDE and conventional notions of continuation high school. "The purpose of alternative programs, number one," states a district administer, "is to catch up kids - credit recovery - and the bigger issue is the high school diploma and post-high-school opportunities for kids." As credit-recovery programs, continuation schools were originally designed to provide multiple and varied opportunities for students to quickly accrue enough credits to graduate with their former high school peers, a notion still prevalent among many stakeholders. Yet, as we learned in the field, once students arrive at the continuation high school, most do not return to their sending schools. In fact, many students opt to stay. "It's the first time for some of these kids [that] they've been successful," a principal explains. "They form friends here. It's smaller. They like the relationship they have with the small classes and the teachers so they don't want to leave." Others, however, are unable to return, prevented from doing so by resistant sending schools or referral policies and practices. In the words of another principal with whom we spoke,

> The reality is by the time the students are identified as falling through the cracks, they're generally so far behind in their credits that there's no way they're going to return to their comprehensive high school. So, in some respects, that's not a reasonable goal.

Despite the apparent agreement around the central purpose of continuation education, the educators with whom we spoke seem to part ways when it comes to student outcomes, what students will experience and gain as result of participating in their diploma programs. Some administrators and faculty members expressed a desire to develop in students a strong sense of personal and civic responsibility. A continuation high school counselor explains his message to students. "Graduation is not my ultimate goal. Our goal for you is to turn you into a productive member of society where you can

get a job, and you can function in the community well, you can take care of a family." Others spoke about the importance of students gaining self-esteem. Says a principal, "My personal goal is to have those kids experience success while they're here … so if they don't make it, or whatever might happen, they can draw back on that experience where at least maybe they made the honor roll."

The need to build students' interpersonal skills also seems important to some continuation educators. In the words of one such principal, "I want the kids to be able to learn what they have to do fit in and always put their best foot forward, no matter what it is." Still others view the mission, in part, as motivating students to reconnect with the learning process and to begin to see themselves a capable of success. "When children arrive here they're discouraged and they're disengaged," a teacher explains. "The goal is to get them to buy into something that's meaningful to them. And that's what we do." The principal of another continuation high school agrees.

> A lot of our kids get here kind of beaten down. So, part of our goal is to provide some spark [of] motivation for those students, so as they achieve in these programs like the joint diploma, immediately there's a little hope. …I can actually earn my diploma still.

Similarly, in light of the difficult life experiences of many continuation students, a significant number of educators we interviewed, like this school administrator, believe that a central part of their mission is "to get assistance for students in social/emotional areas that will prevent them from making progress academically." A teacher expounds. "[It's] not only just that you're dealing with the academic component, you're dealing with [profound] issues, which almost becomes as much of a part of the program as anything else."

In addition to providing diploma programs that reconnect students with learning and attend to their social/emotional needs, evidence suggests that some continuation high schools aim also at outcomes related to life after the diploma. Here, the mission recognizes the need to graduate young adults who have a plan for their immediate future and the skills necessary to advance it. A school principal outlines four competencies her school strives to develop in graduates.

> We want them to know where they're going after they graduate - what is their aspiration, what do they need to do in order to get to that career? Another is communication skills. We try to focus on writing because we know that it works across everything you do. Another is [technology] skills to allow them, at least, an entry-level job. And problem solving - to be able to look at a situation and know what to do and why.

Continuation high schools with such a purpose see themselves first as schools. While recovering credits and earning a diploma remain central to their work, these schools are equally invested in providing their students a rich academic experience. The principal of another continuation school principal expounds.

> Number one, we provide them education. Our kids have huge holes in their education, and we need to try to plug some of those skill holes. …[We] try to push them as far as possible academically and skill-wise so that when they exit, they can navigate their life and make good decisions.

Finally, the evidence suggests that some continuation high schools aim also at creating student pathways to post-secondary education. These schools act upon the growing recognition that a high school diploma, while essential, is not enough to secure a job in today's highly technical market. As a school leader explains,

> I want to get students a diploma, but we are really focused on next steps because that's where students fall down - in that transition. They'll get a diploma, but they don't have the support network or the experience to make that jump to the next step. So, unfortunately, they get a diploma and then work in a dead-end job, and kind of eek out an existence.

For this educator, and others like him, the mission of continuation education should include connecting students to post-secondary coursework and training. Students gain not only knowledge and credit as the take college classes, but also a stronger sense of efficacy in their ability to navigate and succeed in the higher education environment. "[These] programs," remarks a teacher, "[are] allowing a lot of kids to go to college and almost everyone of them are planning on going back next year. If it wasn't for this program, they probably wouldn't have even thought they could have attended college." A colleague agrees. "Exactly. The fear factor is so great, once you get them on the campus; they suddenly realize it's not that big of an obstacle."

In sum, our data suggest that the teachers and administrators with whom we spoke see the current mission of continuation education quite differently from how it was originally conceived. These educators see as their purpose the obligation to provide diploma programs that reconnect students to learning, attend to their academic and interpersonal needs, develop students' civic responsibility, and create pathways to post-secondary education or training.

Who Are The Students?

According to the CDE (2006), continuation high school students are 16-18 years of age, credit deficient, and/or in need of a more flexible educational environment to accommodate employment or familial obligations. To gain a more nuanced understanding of the students who attend continuation high schools, we asked the adults who work with them to describe the students they serve. Many with whom we spoke began simply by characterizing their students as behind in credits, chronically absent, disengaged from school, and/or lacking the motivation necessary to keep up or get caught up. As one principal explained, "A typical continuation high schooler is someone who has fallen through the cracks. Generally they're just kids who are sitting back, who don't do well academically, they're not interested, have poor attendance, or just have low skills in general." While such a characterization of continuation students is not surprising given the factors considered for continuation placement, upon elaboration, the individuals we interviewed described a student population not captured within the CDE definition.

The data suggest more than a few of the students who attend continuation school are younger or older than the advertised 16-18 years of age. Several school officials suggested that current age limits on admission may not be serving the best interest of students. A district administrator expresses the concerns of many with whom we spoke. "Our biggest dropout comes in 9th grade. These students are not 16. Therefore, they're not eligible to go to continuation school even if we have room for them. So, there's a year and a half where we lose kids." Consequently, says another district leader, "We're striving to get kids sooner rather than later, so that they have a chance to actually catch up on their credits." In one large urban district, a principal took action based on her concern.

> I was told you can't take 15 year olds. And I thought, "Oh, ok. You can't." I actually looked in the ed. code, and it doesn't say that. So, now I will take 15 year olds. And I would even like to take 14 year olds, but that's a whole different thing

In addition to admitting students who are younger than 16, some schools are extending their invitations to credit-deficient students older than 18. Another principal explains.

> A lot of our kids end up coming back. They'll come to us at 18, and if I think that they can succeed, we put them on a really strict verbal kind of contract, and if they honor it, I'll keep them here until they're 22. My oldest student is 20, and she deserves every bit of help we're giving her. In fact, she graduates at Christmas time next year.

Our data also suggest that multiple and overlapping variables underlie the credit deficiency, chronic absences, and disengagement of continuation high school students. To begin, teachers and administrators across the study indicate that many of their students are lacking fundamental reading, writing, and mathematic skills. In the words of one teacher, "The common characteristic is reading skills. With just a few exceptions, their

skills of reading instructions and understanding what they have to do are low. So we have to teach kids to read, reread, and then ask for help, too."

The continuation educators with whom we spoke suggest that students' literacy problems are rooted in a variety of issues. A district administrator explains.

> A lot of these kids are free and reduced lunch kids. A lot of them haven't had the opportunities for that preschool, parent-family nurturing. A majority of them have work issues, language issues, and little opportunity to get their skills to where they need to be. Maybe it's attendance, maybe it's family obligations, maybe it's that they sat in those chairs and just weren't interested because of the type of instruction.

Embedded within the social and economic challenges to literacy are those presented by gaps in students' learning. As mentioned earlier, some gaps occurred as students disengaged mentally and physically from school. Says a district administrator, "I don't think they're lacking in gray matter. I think they're capable kids, but either life has gotten in the way, or they have gotten into this cycle of, 'I'm so far behind, why try?'" Others gaps developed as students struggled unsuccessfully to learn English as a second language. As a teacher explains, "A lot of my students are Latinos. Most of them don't seem to be ELDs, at least they're no longer designated, but I would say a lot of them still have second language issues." And while some continuation students have IEPs, more than a few special education students land in the continuation high school after falling through a crack in the educational floorboard. A teacher explains.

> We have some kids who were identified in elementary school, and then were exited out of the program. Nobody ever picked up on the fact that they were special ed. and needed that help, so they've failed all their junior high years, failed everything, and now they're ending up here, and they're very, very low.

Not surprisingly, teachers also report that many continuation students have poor organizational skills and study habits. Consequently, a teacher explains, "we try to teach them some material while we're teaching them organizational skills, reliability, and all those things that they can take back to the high school rather than, 'When was the War of 1812?'" Causes of literacy problems aside, a county administrator cautions us about the impact of failing to address these issues.

> If you don't have systems that build strong literacy, the kids will recidivate time and time again. We need to build an intervention structure that moves kids to the highest literacy level possible - in the time we have them - because we know the kids that can't read are going to prison. There is plenty of data to support that.

Among the students who populate continuation high schools are a significant number of gifted and talented students. An urban district administrator explains.

> They are gifted kids, many of them, [who] get turned off, so they go to a [continuation school] where they earn credits at their own pace [and] they can get

> out of there in a year if they want to. It's small, they feel a part of it, and they blossom. So it's not just kids that are not doing well, the far below basic, we have to meet the needs of a lot of kids.

Together, continuation high school students bring a range of academic skills and needs. So, too, they demonstrate a range of social aptitudes, with some students lacking the capacity to interact productively with their peers and teachers. As a teacher explains, because these students have a difficult time negotiating the complex social structures of the traditional high schools, they tend to act out, skip school, or "just kind of vegetate" in classes. As a result, he continues, "The teachers become frustrated, and it doesn't take long for them to fall enough behind where their only alternative is to come here."

A number of educators with whom we spoke pointed to the link between students' ability to connect socially and emotionally and the presence or absence of a caring adult in their lives. An assistant principal puts it like this. "Most [students] come from an environment where they're disconnected from an adult in their lives." As a result, says a teacher, "These kids really have not developed an attachment capability. Their ability to bond and make relationships has not been very good."

While inadequate academic and interpersonal skills present formidable challenges to the students' educational success, it is their turbulent personal lives that create the greatest barrier to learning. Poverty, family instability, homelessness, constant mobility, substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, incarceration, mental health issues, and/or gang activity punctuate the daily lives of most continuation high school students. Many assume adult roles, either working to support their families, or caring for a young child or ailing family member. "There is so much more that these kids bring with them," remarks a teacher, "that sometimes you have to get through all the other stuff before you can even get to the academics." Another teacher agrees. "If you ever start talking with them, they all come from really traumatic home lives. It's almost like they come to school and this is probably the safest place that they have." Yet, sadly, the constant turmoil in which many continuation students live has a devastating effect on their ability to come to school and learn. A counselor expounds.

> It's like they never know what's going to happen from day to day - where they're going to live, whether somebody's going to get drunk, or whether there's going to be domestic violence. I think that kind of chaos creates some impediments to normal childhood development. So I think that in many ways some of our kids' thinking brains just don't get enough predictable, structured "I know what's going to happen, feel safe and secure, go to school and be able to focus on education."

Given the academic and personal challenges faced by continuation high school students, it is no wonder that trust, self-esteem, and motivation are in short supply when it comes to learning and earning credits. A teacher summarizes.

> We have a lot of kids who come here believing that they can't do anything or they're losers, so we are continually trying to erase their past tapes and get them

> to try a little bit of success. We literally will have some kids who will come in and sit here like they're zoned. It's like they're in shock because the school just dumped on them saying, "You're a failure." So when I say, "You guys can succeed. You can do it," it's like the first time they've [heard] it.

Overall, our data suggest that the majority of continuation high school students are credit deficient, a finding consistent with the CDE definition. However, our analysis also seems to indicate that the students who attend continuation high schools have significant gaps in their basic literacy and organizational skills, problems with English language proficiency, and a plethora of social and emotional issues. That said, these students are significantly more complex than those described by the state (for whom diploma programs have been designed) and, thus, require much more than a "flexible educational environment to accommodate employment or familial obligations" (CDE, 2006).

How Do Students Come to Continuation Education?

According to the data, the majority of students arrive at the continuation high school upon the referral of a dean (vice principal) or counselor at the sending school. Dean referrals are usually triggered by a behavioral or attendance event that lands the student in the dean's office. Often, these referrals are purely disciplinary, a means of involuntarily removing disruptive students from the comprehensive high school. As a continuation teacher explains, "They break up gangs and problems on the high school campuses and assign kids here." A district administrator concurs. "A principal or assistant principal will say to the dean, 'Hey you've got to get this kid out of here. You have to find a place for him.'" In other situations, a trip to the dean's office for a minor infraction uncovers a major problem with credit accrual. Says another administrator,

> Some academic deficits are there because, let's say, a student is frustrated [and] can't cope with a class, or they're not going to that particular class. There's an altercation with the teacher, and the next thing you know, they're sent to the dean's office.

And, as a principal continues, "when a student gets sent to the dean's office, the first thing the dean does is [look] up their grades. If they see all [failing grades]…," a continuation referral usually is recommended.

Some of the individuals with whom we spoke believe that counselors, as academic advisors, might be better positioned than deans to make referrals. When deans make the placement, argues one such educator, "It's not until the student gets into trouble that they are referred to us. [By then, the student] is so far behind credit wise, class wise, there's no way that this program can help." Moreover, some suggest, counselors are more likely to consider a student's academic and social/emotional suitability before making a referral. As another educator remarks, "The counselors try to give us the ones that are going to have the best shot." Careful consideration of match between student and program seems especially significant in districts that employ an independent-study approach to instruction. An administrator in a large, urban school district explains.

> Recommendations from the counseling office versus the dean's office are like night and day. Through the dean's office, you have a kid 16 or 17 years old with [only] 20 credits versus another student that was actually on the mark with the kind of courses they were taking, but just was falling behind because they're working nights [and] missing periods one and two. Kids like that excel - they're able to finish the contract. Whereas the kids that come in with a deficit are just stagnant.

In addition to referrals initiated by deans or counselors at the sending schools, some students refer themselves. We talked with a number of students who, having heard good things from friends or relatives who attended continuation school or perceiving the thee-hour day and credit-earning process as quicker and easier, contacted the counselor at their comprehensive school to begin the referral process. In some cases, students come to

continuation schools after opting out of their comprehensive schools to escape the intense social pressures that accompany life in most traditional high schools.

Once the referral is made, many sending schools communicate directly with the continuation school to negotiate a student's placement. These negotiations can take place informally through "a let's make a deal kind of philosophy," as described by one district administrator, or more formally through a placement process that carefully considers student needs. A continuation high school principal explains.

> Whoever is referring students will contact my district counselor. There is a school-initiated placement form that they fill out. Is all the legal stuff up-to-date? Have they done all the latest IEP's? We have to see that the school has done everything possible to assist the student, within reason. We look at what's going to be best for the student. If everything is in order, then my district counselor will contact the family.

When there are multiple referrals, says a sending school counselor, "We'll generate a priority list and get them to complete the application. That goes to the dean for a screening process." Students, then, are selected based on "urgency, the pecking order - upperclassmen first," explains a high school dean. "Our main concern, as with any high school, is you want to see your seniors graduate."

In a few districts, final placement decisions are made by a third party. An example emerges from one district we visited where a committee of teachers, school psychologists, and administrators from the sending and continuation high schools gathers weekly to review the applications. A teacher at the continuation school explains.

> We have alternative placement meetings with each of our feeder high schools, and they come with a stack of files. Hopefully, they've counseled and chosen the students that are the most behind. We look them over, make sure everything is correct, and then we make phone calls.

While continuation high school placement is intended to be voluntary, some students arrive by district or county order. In most districts, as this administrator explains, "There is a process to involuntarily transfer students - if they're on suspended expulsion, or other rare occasions - but that is seldom used. It's usually a voluntary transfer, both the parents and the students agree that this is what they need, and the comprehensive schools referred them to us." According an administrator in one large, urban district, this was not always the case.

> We've been more discerning in terms which kids should go to the continuation high school. We still do take the involuntary transfer with attendance and disciplinary problems. It used to be probably 75% involuntary, 25% voluntary. Now we reversed that process, making sure that the comprehensive high schools do their due diligence in working with the kids.

In other districts, however, the lack of alternative options within the district or county can result in a significant number of involuntary continuation-school placements. A continuation principal explains.

> It's frustrating because there aren't a lot of interventions. If you don't make it here, you're in big trouble because the only options that we have besides some county residential programs is community day school. If you're special ed., you're really in trouble because they won't take that student.

Another school leader continues. "They're referred for discipline issues, or they're coming out of community schools or incarceration. Sometimes they can be court appointed, or their probation officer says, 'I want you at this school.'" Teachers and administrators in these schools spoke to the challenges presented by placing extremely troubled students in programs unprepared to meet their needs.

> We were treating them like all other kids. We didn't know they had the mental issues, the drug issues, the behavior disorder issues. We're talking about kids coming out of incarcerations or mental institutions. Teachers were having a really hard time in their classrooms trying to manage these kids; they were being very disruptive.

Yet, even in continuation high schools that have programs to accommodate students who require special interventions, similar behaviors spill over into the more traditional population.

> If they're behind in credits, that's what [this school] is for. If they're having serious behavioral difficulties, then that's what my community day classroom is for. But kids get behind credits because there are behavior and attendance issues that don't quite rise to the level of expulsion. So, we say over here, "We have all the kids that nobody else can take care of," so to speak.

The timing of intake also varies across schools. Some operate an open enrollment, receiving students on an as-needed basis year round. Other schools accept students at regular intervals that range from once a week to a twice an academic year. However, as one principal reminds us, more than a few students are sent to continuation schools on a moment's notice.

> There are extenuating circumstances. If somebody is a victim of a violent crime, if they are homeless, if they have an illness of some sort, their parent [is ill], I take them. We're also a Safe Harbor, so if somebody happens to have a situation where they're being bullied or abused in their school, we will take those people.

In the end, these data suggest that students come both voluntarily and involuntarily to continuation high schools for disciplinary, attendance, credit accrual, and personal reasons, and sometimes outside of regular intake intervals. Yet, how they get there depends on who makes the decision, based on what criteria. Some students, lacking

of an appropriate alternative, land in continuation school by default. The educators we interviewed seem to agree on the need to develop a clear and consistent process for student referrals and placements. Says a district administrator, "It's all over the place now. At one school, the VP does it. At another school, almost a clerk does it. At another school, a brand new counselor does it. It's just not well organized." She continues. "So we feel very strongly that there needs to be a core of passionate counselors – social worker types - that meet monthly, that know the policies and procedures, and are kept up to date on community resources."

In districts where the process works well, a principal explains, "They have somebody at [the comprehensive] campus, maybe a counselor or a vice principal, who deals with students who need a different program or option, so each school has somebody who will work with the continuation schools." A district administrator talks about how his alternative education programs interact with sending schools on behalf of clarifying the purpose of their programs, thereby increasing the likelihood that the students they refer will be successful.

> We host the counselors from all the high schools here every other year to give them a tour and explain our programs so that everyone in the district - middle school, high school, even the elementary - are aware of the educational options for kids. So if they see an issue that indicates to them [a student] needs another setting, they work with the parents and the students and transition them here.

An administrator in a large, urban district talks about the importance of creating, communicating, and enforcing a clear set of student eligibility criteria.

> I'd want to have a really accurate profile. Right now, it's just so willy-nilly. We have not come up with that rubric that says if [a certain student] falls into this profile, she is an excellent candidate for this because there is a high probability she will be successful because it meets her needs.

A principal in another district agrees.

> In our communications with the comprehensive high schools, we're very clear on the criteria that it's not a dumping ground. A student has to have 40% or better attendance. The student's behavior has to be at a certain level. We have this list of things because those are [the students] we can serve rather than, "Oh, send us anybody because they're just going to sit there and do packets."

In addition to designating a point person at each sending school and developing a shared understanding of the continuation high school program and the students it is designed to serve, many of the continuation educators with whom we spoke feel that placement decisions should be made only after a careful review of each referral. A principal describes how the process at her school aims to match the student with the program.

It’s been a continuous dialogue throughout the year in our placement meetings, “Why is that an appropriate place? Explain to us why that student is going to be successful” because it needs to be about success for that kid, and not about just a dumping ground where “they’ve got to get out of here, so they’re going there.” It has to be the right educational placement for the student too.

What is the Student Experience?

Upon arrival at the continuation high school, students typically experience some form of official orientation to the school. Most orientation programs either request or require parent/guardian participation. At some schools, parental participation aims to encourage compliance with school rules and regulations. Says a principal, "[At orientation], we have the parents and the students sign a contract that they will be responsible for getting to school on time and these types of things." At other schools, inviting parents into the orientation process provides an opportunity to communicate school expectations and increase the parent's comfort with their child's new placement. As another principal contends, "It's mandatory that parents come because we want them to see our school. We go over the requirements and expectations for our school, and if the parents ask questions, we answer them." And, in at least one school we visited, having parents at orientation lays the groundwork for a healthy relationship between school and home. The principal explained that after years of leaving orientation to others on her staff, she now shares the task, seeing it as a pivotal step toward encouraging parents to stay connected. "We changed the way we do intake so that parents could get to know me. They could pick up the phone, know who was on the other end, and feel free to come in."

Across our sample, the orientation experience varies from a brief meeting between the student and the principal to review the rules, to an intensive admission process designed to help students readjust to the academic demands of school. To illustrate the range of practices, we begin with a description of orientation as an informal, one-on-one meeting with the principal or counselor. A continuation school leader explains.

> The intake is real basic. They come in the afternoon [with a parent or a guardian], and they do the registration and meet with us for about 10 minutes. We go over the major concerns that we've had with others students, discipline, the dress code, how they can earn credits, and how they catch the bus. And then I go over three expectations. Number one is that the student has to come to school every day, make an attempt to come, [or] contact the school and let us know when they're absent. The second thing is that they come to school to get an education and not hang out. And, to me, the most important thing is that you give everyone respect on this campus.

In some of these schools, the principal or counselor also presents the student with a personalized plan for credit completion.

From the perspective of these schools, the central purpose of orientation is to convey information, to tell the student what he or she must know and/or do to be successful. Other schools see orientation not only as a means to inform the student, but also as an opportunity to learn about the student. In the words of a continuation school counselor,

> The purpose of the program is to orient students to our way of doing things here at school, get to know a little bit about them, and have them set some goals for why they're here. [Also], the students [must be here] Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. That shows us that they have a commitment to come to school [and] gives us an opportunity to get the paperwork [done], to call their previous school to see if they have any issues that might concern us, and those types of things.

While many schools review transcripts and/or talk with the sending school to identify students' credits deficiencies and schedule their classes accordingly, some continuation high schools administer assessment tests, either during or after orientation, to gain a deeper understanding of their students' academic strengths and needs. Says one continuation principal, "Then we know what kind of skills [they] have, and that determines what kind of schedule we'll give them." In another school, testing moves beyond academics to career testing and, as the principal states, "learning modalities to try to figure out how they are going to be best taught." Because these schools view students as more than the credits they need to graduate, they strive to learn all they can about each student to provide the most appropriate educational plan possible.

Schools concerned with getting to know the learners also demonstrate interest in helping them feel comfortable with their new surroundings and develop a sense of connection with the school. Some of these orientation programs provide tours of the campus, introducing new students to teachers, staff members, and other students as a way of helping them connect. One school principal spoke about how she meets with the new students as a group to grow their sense of comfort with and connection to school.

> The last day all the kids are with me. We talk about things. We do goals. We get to know each other. They get to see me as a real person, and they get to know each other. It gives them a group that they feel comfortable with when they come in. They get a sense of the school, and so it's works really well.

The most intensive student orientation we found takes place over a month's time. The principal explains. "After the parent orientation with the student," the principal explains, "our students have to go through a two-week orientation process, two weeks of re-acclimating students to school." During this time, students explore study skills, problem-solving, goal-setting, conflict-resolution, gang prevention, career exploration, communication skill building, and respect for adults and each other. Students are also tested in reading and math and then placed into the appropriate classes. She continues.

> We're very strict during those two weeks. You cannot miss. You cannot be late. For a student who maybe hasn't been going to school that's huge, but we tell them, "You've got to prove to us that you want to be here." There's a lot of intensive work … getting them habituated back into putting pen to paper, producing, meeting deadlines, those types of things.

Once students complete the two weeks, the principal contends,

> They've kind of accomplished something. They've attended 10 days in a row, …so they start off with a clear understanding of what we know they're capable of doing, that there's all kinds of hope, [and that] they're going to make decisions about their life here." The next two weeks [they're in] classes [and the orientation] teacher has 10 more days to track those students on their attendance. So, there's like 30 days to develop a habit.

For the students who are not successful, she explains,

> If they're not ready, it's not going to happen. We'll refer them back to the school and say, "Give them a little more time." We'll put them in our next orientation, and they can come back and try it again.

Two other schools we visited have two-week orientations that reflect similar practices: clearly conveying high expectations for students, monitoring their attendance and output as they re-engage in school, and, in doing so, fostering a sense of self-efficacy in students regarding their ability to succeed as a student. These and other orientations that provide students a warm welcome; the information they need to be successful; activities designed to connect students with teachers, counselors, administrators, and others students; and a supportive and closely monitored re-immersion into school, seem to have the best chance of effectively initiating students into their continuation high school. "Then, hopefully," muses a counselor, "when they go into classes on that [first day], they should be fairly comfortable about what to expect. And, they should be off and going towards getting those credits."

The School Environment

By design, continuation high schools serve fewer students than do their comprehensive counterparts, creating smaller, less complex educational and social settings. In these learning environments, teachers are better able to provide at-risk students the individual attention and support they so desperately need. As a continuation high school teacher explains, "At comprehensive schools it's really easy to fall through the cracks. We're a small school. Our cracks are almost miniscule. If you're having trouble, or if you're sitting in the back and you don't talk to anybody, someone is going to notice." A student agrees. "Because their classrooms are smaller, and there are less people, the teachers will actually sit down one on one and try to help you." And, as another student maintains, "It's easier to ask questions since you know them." The smaller school environment helps teachers get to know their students on a more personal level which, in turn, makes it "easier to differentiate instruction." The teacher continues. "You know who's got social issues, or who has academic issues. So the small ratio kind of leaves the teacher able to, on a moment's notice, modify, modify, modify."

Many continuation students and teachers also describe their schools as having fewer distractions. "There's no drama here," a student remarks. "Like, everybody pretty much knows everybody, and they just get along, so there's no rival, there's no tension. There's like none of that going on." A sending school counselor agrees, positing that it

may be related to the size of the school. He explains. "When social problems [happen] such as bullying, or those kinds of things, it's easier to catch in a smaller school. Sometimes at a bigger school it gets hidden, or we don't realize it until it's a big problem." According to many we interviewed, like this principal, the less socially complex environment of the continuation high school eliminates, "a lot of activities that disrupt them from doing their school work. When they come here, they [learn] what they need to do to be successful and how to focus." She elaborates.

> [Students] frequently tell me, "If I [had] understood that all I needed to do was do work and be here, I would have gotten it. But there were so many other things going on, I didn't make that connection that I just need to be there, do my work, do well on the tests, and I'd get credits."

The lack of drama on many continuation campuses may be related also to the schools' capacity to cultivate a climate of acceptance. A student conveys the sentiments of many with whom we spoke. "I just like how at this school the teachers and the other kids don't just judge you on how you look or act or talk." Another student expounds. "At most high schools you feel like you're not welcome by everybody. And here, it's kind of like a big family, in a way. It's like you're friends with everybody. That's how they make you feel."

To develop a school setting in which all individuals are appreciated and respected, some schools create opportunities for students to succeed and be acknowledged in front of their peers. A principal explains how she sets up students for academic success early on so they can see themselves as capable within an academic environment.

> When they first come in, I look at the courses they need, and I try to put them one that will be easier to pass. Once they pass a contract, they feel good, and they say, "Oh, I know what it feels like. I know what I can do." And then they keep working harder and harder, because they need to have success.

Extra-curricular activities (ASB, clubs, intramural sports, etc.) and reward programs, say others with whom we spoke, help students connect with their peers and feel appreciated.

> We have all kinds of award systems in place for the kids, for good attendance, for academic scholarship. Sometimes we have dances on campus for the kids. We try to make it a warm and welcoming place for them to come and, probably for the first time in their lives, be recognized for what they're doing.

Schools also foster acceptance as teachers engage students in ways that say they are valued and capable. Says a student, "They focus more on you, you know? It's like they make you feel like you're important." Another student weighs in. "I mean you come here not thinking that you can make it or pass through high school or solve any problems, and they really help you out. They inspire you to succeed." Another continuation student describes the difference made in her life by an accepting school environment.

> When I went to a real high school, they're like, "Oh, well, look at her. She doesn't come to school. She's on drugs. She drinks," you know, all that, and they just didn't want anything to do with me. When I came to a continuation school, the teachers were interactive with the students, and they were always pushing me to do my best.

Across the data also emerges strong evidence that student/adult relationships are of central importance in continuation high school settings. A student articulates what many expressed. "The teachers actually try to build somewhat of a relationship with you. And that's what I think for me has made it more comfortable and more fun being down here other than at the other high school." "With the teachers over here," explains another student, "it's like you have a friendship where you can ask for help with work, and you can talk your problems out." Many teachers also spoke about the salience of making and sustaining strong, trusting connections with students. "You could be Einstein," a teacher argues, "but you'll never do anything for these students if you don't build the relationships with them first."

Students, teachers, and administrators all suggest that these one-on-one relationships may significantly influence student engagement, motivation, and achievement. In the words of a principal,

> You build that relationship, that trust, and you tell them, "This is something we're kind of doing together. This is something we have to do," and present the importance of it. I think they're willing to get on board and buy in instead of being resistant. It takes awhile to develop, but I think it's just huge.

Similarly, *school as family* emerged as a significant characteristic of continuation school settings. Consistently, students report that they feel comfortable and cared for at school, in some cases for the first time. Says a student,

> I had an opportunity to go back to [my sending school] this year and graduate, but I didn't want to because I like this school a lot. The teachers here are like more than teachers. They really care about you, and they show you. It's just really different. It's more like a family, you know? I feel more comfortable here than I ever did in any other school.

Given the turbulent life circumstances of many at-risk students, providing stability across the school environment also seems important. A teacher explains.

> I think a lot of our kids don't have any kind of consistency at home or wherever they came from. Even if we all have different personalities, the expectations and the consistency makes [students] a little more comfortable 'cause they know what's going to happen.

And students are more at ease because expectations are clear, consequences are predictable, and adults are present with unconditional and ongoing support – the kind that encourages self-reliance. A student explains.

> There are days when you don't want to work, and the teachers kind of are lenient on it because they understand that's the reason you're here. They're not going make you, but they're going to tell you, "We need to try and do *some*thing to get your points." So, if you don't want to work that much, you won't go far. But if you want to do your work, it's a good school because you're in control of everything you do.

Several students spoke about the importance of making their own decisions and having control over their own success. Another student puts it like this.

> I think they push you to do better than what you have been doing. They don't push you like a hurtful push. Like, it's a push where you don't know you're being pushed, but you are. It's like bungee-jumping. Instead of being pushed, you kind of jump and make the leap yourself.

A teacher sums it up. "These are young people on the verge of becoming adults, and they understand about respect. Rather than getting into 'don't talk back,' and 'don't do this,' I just put it on that level and it works pretty good."

In schools that promote a supportive atmosphere, teachers, administrators, and staff behave accordingly. A student describes the differences she observes when a principal genuinely trusts and cares for his students. "[At the comprehensive school], the adults walk around with their walkie-talkies, and it's like they're looking for [us doing something bad]. Over here, it seems like when [the principal is] walking around he's just looking out for us, you know?" In several of the continuation high schools we visited, on campus security promotes student safety more as a family member than as an authority figure, modeling again the school's commitment to caring. A principal elaborates.

> Our security knows almost every single student. They talk to the kids. It's a little bit more of an older brother or sister or parent role. It's not as much of a "gotcha." It's really more of talking to you like an adult. There's that mutual respect.

In all, continuation high school students seem to benefit from small school environments that promote a family-like network of acceptance and caring. Yet, wise words from the continuation students themselves remind us of the importance of tempering a compassionate school environment with rigorous academic expectations.

> It can be good because you feel more comfortable, like you can come here, and you're going to be okay. And that's a good feeling. But it can be bad because the world is not like, "Hey man, you didn't finish your work today, so, yeah, just turn it in next week, it'll be fine." No. When you get some jobs you have to have it

done in like five minutes, or maybe the very next day, on your boss's desk, printed, edited, everything. So, like over here …

Another student finishes her sentence. "We're spoiled."

Several of the educators we interviewed, like this district administrator, contend that while compassion and caring are important characteristics of effective continuation high school environments, when they are operationalized as low expectations, "it's wasting what those kids can become." As a principal explains, "[Many people] think when you come to a continuation school you've got to throw out the academic standards in order for kids to be successful. [But] I think the better the structure they have, the more they're likely to be successful." A teacher agrees.

> I've been concerned about low expectations. It's almost acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy to say, "Well, you know these kids. They're not going to do this, or they're not going to do [that]. Yeah, we've got lots of students whose problems are so serious that I'm not so sure that even the best teaching is going to be able to get them to focus first on education, but for the most part, if their feet are held to the fire, and they're given the support they need, we'll do a better job and they'll do better.

The Instructional Setting

The California Education Code requires continuation high schools to provide a minimum of 180 instructional days per year, each with at least 180 minutes of instructional time. Across the schools we visited the academic day ranges in length from three to over six hours. A few continuation high schools offer multiple sessions each day in an effort to better accommodate students' working and life circumstances. Several schools have extended day programs as well. And, like their comprehensive counterparts, some continuation schools operate year round. While some educators we interviewed seem comfortable with the shorter continuation school day, others, like this principal, express concern.

> I think the model doesn't really reflect the needs of the kids. If anything, our kids need to be on a longer day because they, of all students, shouldn't be taking a short cut. And they need a lot of instruction, and they're not getting that.

Another principal emphatically agrees. "Most alt. ed. schools go five periods, 8-12, and go home. That's bogus. You have the kids who are the most needy spending the least amount of time at school. It's crazy to me."

Class size also seems to be an issue in some continuation high schools. While the statewide class-size average is 17.4 students,[2] at least three of the schools we visited report having over 30 students registered in classes. One principal explains,

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[2] See Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, *Alternative Education in Continuation High Schools: Meeting the Needs of Over-age Under-credited Youth*

> We put 36 on the roster. Class size reduction calls for 20 or less at the comprehensive high schools, and we pack in 29, 30 kids, so that's a little difficult. I just think that anytime it gets up to 20, it gets a little shaky there. I like to see class size anywhere from 15-18 kids.

While some educators explain that larger class sizes are moderated by low attendance, nearly all of the students, teachers, and administrators with whom we spoke maintain that smaller numbers are essential to student success. A principal sums it up.

> In the traditional schools, there are too damn many kids, and the teachers don't have the time to work with kids individually the way we do here. Small class size and small number of students on our campuses is what gives us the opportunity to do that. And there's no legislation that says continuation schools are going to be limited to a certain student-to-teacher ratio, but there should be.

What is the Curriculum?

All of the schools we visited report delivering a core curriculum (English, mathematics, history/social science, and science), the content of which is aligned with California state standards. In the main, course offerings are limited to those required for high school graduation. Only a few schools provide students access beyond the basics to such as coursework as algebra II, trigonometry, or advanced placement physics.

Several schools offer coursework designed especially to meet the needs of continuation high school students. A number of schools provide students preparation courses for the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). As a principal explains,

> We have a whole series of classes [aimed a preparation]. We have about 40 credits of language arts and 30 credits of math. There's a general course that you begin with that's an elective, and then specific courses for the strands of high school exit exam. We have an online class, and we have CAHSEE prep class that's like 16 hours of direct instruction.

In some cases, schools use reading intervention curricula such as Read 180 and PLATO to help prepare for the CAHSEE and improve their literacy skills. Says a principal,

> We take the period that we do the CAHSEE and intertwine it with the Action Learning System intervention and Read 180. Read 180 is three-tiered. You have computers where you're working on comprehension, reading is another station, and then working with a teacher on what you read. It's 90 minutes a day.

Many schools also offer parenting and/or life skills coursework. In at least one school, a principal explains, pregnant and parenting students "participate in a full instructional model that has nutritional instructions for natal education, health

monitoring, and a daily parenting class that's embedded in the curriculum so that they're learning and practicing the parenting skills in the child development center."

In addition to core content and various skill classes, a number of continuation high schools offer coursework aimed at creating career and post-secondary pathways. Our data suggest that Regional Occupation Programs (ROP) provide the primary source of these course offerings for continuation students. As one continuation teacher explained during her presentation at the annual CCEA conference,

> It's quality training. We have one student who took the ROP auto-body class three semesters, and he got a specialist's certificate. He said to me, "I want to get a job." So we started calling auto body places, and at one [a person] said, "You know what? I was a kid like you once. Why don't you just come down and talk to me?" Offered him a job - $17.50 an hour to start.

While some students have access to ROP courses on their continuation high school campuses, others do not. A county administrator explains.

> ROP courses in this county tend to be located at the [comprehensive] high school, and if a kid is referred outside that high school structure to an alternative site and there's limited ROP resources, then the only way a student like that can get to ROP classes is to attend them in the evening, or be released from the continuation school to go to the comprehensive high school to access the classes. If the kid is an expelled student, then access is pretty much limited.

Moreover, when courses are off campus, student access is complicated further by transportation and other issues. And, in the case of ROP classes scheduled after the school day ends, laments a principal, "the kids will all have the intention [to take the course], and I'll get 20-25 to start, but at the very end I'm lucky if I have two or three kids [remaining in the class]."

Some continuation schools extend the curriculum through opportunities to take courses offered by community colleges. A continuation principal explains.

> If they need credit for English 9A or 10B, they can take English 21 at the community college, and it will substitute the five credits. So you get five high school credits, and you get three college units, and you're building your community college transcript.

A few continuation schools send their students to local community colleges to complete courses that the continuation school may not be able to offer. Says a principal, "We don't have a shop class, or a PE teacher, so [students] can go to a community college and take swimming, or dance, or art, or whatever." Yet, for many with whom we spoke, post-secondary experiences offer students more than a means of earning credit. They offer students the way to a better future. In the words of a teacher,

> You have to successfully complete a college course, so the idea is that the students are completing their high school work, but at the same time, you're segueing them into the world of adult education and getting them to see, "Yes, you can do this. There are options for you beyond high school."

In the aggregate, continuation high schools also offer courses in such areas as family and consumer science, foreign language, the fine or practical arts, physical education, and driver's education. While many schools offer at least one elective course, most are unable to provide students the variety of elective course offerings they need and want. A principal explains.

> We have a terrific art program, [but] we're a little shy in electives. I'd love to have five or six periods of art. I wish we had a few more electives like maybe a guitar class, maybe an astronomy class. But we just don't have the faculty or facilities.

One student, like many others, agrees. "I wish we had more electives." According to several students and teachers, electives enrich the curriculum, creating hooks to engage and motivate students whose aptitudes and interests lie outside the core curricula. They provide further opportunities for student to explore future pathways. And, as a teacher explains, "In electives, you can interweave the curricular stuff that they need. You can teach them even when they're not looking."

How is the Curriculum Delivered?

According to the data, a range of instructional beliefs and practices exists both across and within California's continuation high schools. The variation we observed seems best described along a continuum of strategies ranging from an independent study model to whole-class, direct instruction. While the majority of the schools we visited use some form of independent study (some exclusively and others combined with small-group, project-based, or whole-class instruction), a few schools claim to have stopped using it altogether in favor of a direct-instruction approach to teaching and learning.

In the school and classrooms where independent study is employed, students move individually through the curriculum by following a clearly articulated sequence of tasks, also known as contracts, packets, or bookwork. These self-paced lessons generally consist of reading the course material; answering questions, working problems, or completing tasks at the end of each section and/or chapter; and passing required quizzes and tests. Within the model, teachers serve primarily as one-on-one instructional supports for students, providing course outlines and materials, answering questions, re-teaching difficult concepts, reviewing graded papers, and monitoring credit accrual. A teacher describes a typical day in his classroom.

> Students come in, get their books and materials out, sit down and start working. [We] take attendance. We have folders that have work they've turned in, and we call them up and say, "You need to work on this" …Then they're testing; they're

> getting help. You're passing out tests, pencils. You're constantly moving, recording things, and working with them. I find them at my desk all day. Before you know it, time's up.

Individual teacher attention, while important to all instructional settings, seems especially critical within the independent study model. As students make their way through new material without benefit of upfront instruction, they need access to immediate and ongoing assistance from a caring and knowledgeable teacher who can answer questions and explain the material in meaningful ways. In the words of a student, "Here, they teach step by step, and over [at the comprehensive high school], they hand you the paper and they expect you to do it. They don't really explain assignment very well. Like right here, they really do." Another student agrees.

> The teaching is a lot more like, "Try it on your own first. And if you just don't get it, raise your hand, and I'll come back to you, and I'll help you some more, and I'll help you until you get it."

For many students and teachers, individualized attention provides instructional support and the opportunity to build strong, trusting student/teacher relationships. That said, the level of teacher involvement we observed varies from classrooms that evidence ongoing student/teacher interaction, like the one just described, to those where contact between the teacher and student is infrequent at best. A teacher explains. "They have a prescribed contract, and they work on that, and, every now and again, there is interaction when they need help and assessments and so on."

Students and teachers also seem to value the self-paced nature of independent study. For students, the benefit of working independently boils down to the quick completion of credits and the freedom to work, as one teacher explains, "as fast as they want, or as slow as they need to without the pressure of 'the test is Friday,' [because] the test is ready when they're there to take it." A student agrees. "At the high schools, you have to follow the curriculum and what everyone else is doing, so you're limited. But here, you can finish your class in two weeks. …You can get as many credits as you possibly can." For teachers, self-paced work serves as a powerful means of motivating students who are far behind in credits. A continuation school principal argues the point.

> So, a kid comes in a year, year and a half behind. It has to be an accelerated program, otherwise there's no light at the end of the tunnel. If keep the same rigor in curriculum as they have next door, there's no way these kids would catch up, so there would be no reason for them to come back to school.

While many with whom we spoke see packet work as central to credit recovery, not all members of the continuation community agree. Several educators we interviewed view the independent-study model as evidence of persistent old thinking regarding continuation education and as inadequate for meeting learning needs of students who typically land in continuation high schools. As a teacher explains, "Individual packets, basically seat-work, busy-work strategies are not working because, when we get into it,

the majority of the kids don't read very well, [and] they don't understand what they're reading." A principal agrees. "If they couldn't get it in the traditional high school with instruction and someone explaining, how are they going to get it when they open up a book and have to self-teach?" Moreover, says another principal, "Learning is a social process, and students weren't engaging with one another, with the teacher, and with the curriculum, they're basically [just] filling out these packets."

Of the schools we visited that shared their instructional approach,[3] a majority employ either direct instruction, or a mixed-method approach, using both independent study and direct instruction. Evidence suggests that some mixed-method schools are packet schools that apply direct instruction only when conducting small-group or whole-class mini-lessons. Other schools use direct instruction only in certain subject areas. A teacher explains.

> When I first started here, I had math, science, health, all [in one] class. There was no whole-class instruction, and it was very difficult to do individualized work with students because every minute or so you'd have a different hand [that was on] a different section. We decided to go with semester math and science classes because we were not seeing the results we wanted to see in terms of students finishing contracts on time.

Still other schools divide the week into independent-study and direct-instruction *days*, seeing the both methods as useful for accommodating the learning and credit accrual needs of their students. Says a teacher from one such school,

> We know that most of our kids who come here are really low on credits. So Mondays and Fridays are independent-study based. It gives them a chance to get caught up and work one-on-one with the teachers. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays you'll see our teachers giving direct instruction just like they would at a traditional school.

From across the data emerge examples of direct instruction methods used in continuation high schools. Many with whom we spoke, like this teacher, stated that student skill levels and frequent absences greatly influence the method and pace of curriculum delivery.

> We have to offer the same curriculum in a different manner and in little pieces. The other schools are on a set curriculum where they have to have certain areas covered by a certain amount of time; we may go back and do that same piece over and over again until they get it.

Likewise, some teachers feel students' academic deficiencies call for lessons that are clear, concise, and delivered using consistent vocabulary, format, and directions. Others suggest that lessons might best have a "punch" to engage reluctant students with

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[3] This includes approximately two-thirds of the total number of schools we visited.

short attention spans. Still others use methods that attend to a variety of aptitudes and learning styles. Says a teacher, "Many students weren't successful because they were being taught in a ways that they don't learn, so … I try to incorporate the multiple intelligences aspect - primary sources, visuals, simulations, manipulatives, things like that. This morning," he continues, "I had them under their desks writing letters home from the trenches of war."

To deliver the curriculum, many continuation high school teachers employ the traditional teacher-directed approach. Says a teacher, "I think my classroom is run almost identical to how I ran it at the comprehensive high school. The minute the bell rings, I tell them what we're doing for today, and it's structured the same." Some teachers, however, as a principal explains, "mix projects or various modality lessons with traditional book and paper." In these classrooms, students learn through hands-on, project-based, technologically infused activities. A teacher explains.

> We created a collection of investigations for our math students, so we try to do a math lab almost every week. Most [students] come to us with negative attitudes towards math. They enjoy doing hands-on activities, and it's in the context of what they're learning. I know in geometry they use Geo Sketchpad a lot to get them on the computers, finding angles and testing conjecture. That's probably a little different from a typical math classroom.

Student choice, a critical feature of successful instruction, plays a role in some these instructional situations. Remarks a student, "Instead of the teacher just giving you an assignment, you get to choose more of what you want to do. It makes you more interested in your work, and you want to work more."

Teachers in other classrooms are finding alternative ways for continuation students to learn while they demonstrate what they know. A principal explains.

> We're doing the formative and summative assessments with all our kids, where before it was just paper and pencil tests. Now, the teachers have a lot more leeway for students to demonstrate mastery… through portfolios, oral presentations, or written tests.

A teacher at another school uses visual art to engage students and assess proficiency.

> One of the [history] standards is understanding political and editorial cartoons. Rather than give them a test, I had them do a [cartoon] ceiling panel. They research it, and make up something of their own.

Changing the way teachers teach, however, is not easy, especially in the context of continuation education, where innovative practices face ideological, structural, and fiscal constraints. Nevertheless, says one principal, "we have to teach the teachers how to be able to work with students, to provide multiple instructional strategies." While

most teachers say they have access to professional development, they also maintain that most of what the district provides is not relevant to alternative education. In the words of a continuation teacher, "Because we are so different from the other campuses, when we go to staff development, out of an eight-hour day, there might be half an hour that pertains to us. They don't really design things for our schools." Yet, in at least one continuation high school we visited, teachers have received professional development in Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) techniques through district mandate. "It was quite extensive," explains a teacher. "We learned how to package learning for specific populations and that was very valuable."

One of the major challenges for schools that employ direct instruction is how to ensure that these highly mobile students have access to the full curriculum. In short, asks a principal, "If you've got three new kids lined up at your door mid-unit, how do you handle that?" In some schools, the answer is to give students work to make up for what they have missed. This instructional response seems designed more to ensure credit recovery than mastery of the curriculum. However, in another school we visited, teachers and administrators meet the challenge of mobility by providing instructional units of study. Says the principal,

> We don't do a semester-based system. Our students need to take as long as they need in that class in order to successfully complete the standards for that class. So, we've developed units of study. Let's say, in English, over the course of the year there's eight units of study. If I enter in November, [I'll have missed a] couple of units. I'll lap over to the next year, or go during summer school, to pick up those units, and I'll keep looping around.

To protect the overall instructional environment from undue disruption, this principal also has made structural changes regarding when students enter and exit classes.

> We've coincided the ending of the units with the intake of the students, so all the changes happen at the same time. At first, it was come here any day. Unless the district is telling us, you will take kids on any given day, which they weren't, we can control those things. So let's control them.

A final theme emerging from the data concerns the level of instructional rigor at continuation high schools. One principal articulates what many expressed.

> I hope that other continuations take this similarly, but we're very serious about our program having rigor - that the kid who gets a diploma from us, or even completes a class, has done the same level of work that he would do anywhere at any comprehensive high school.

She continues.

> I just spoke to a principal who said he graduated 29 kids at his school. It's near by and in a very similar community. That concerns me because I think

> continuations have a reputation of just letting the kids slide by and just say, "Oh, poor thing. You've been struggling with this contract for so long." And they give them credits like candy.

Credit accrual practices across schools and within districts are inconsistent. Evidence suggests that many continuation educators go to great lengths to ensure that students earn credits they need to graduate, using such strategies as variable credits, requiring fewer credits for graduation, and allowing students to earn credits in atypical ways. A student explains. "Anything we do, there's one way or the other that we're getting credit for it. Being here, working, staying after for something, just everything that we do, the teachers are getting credits for us." From one school leader's perspective, the nature of continuation education lends itself to leniency.

> I was talking to somebody the other day about the difference between alternative education and the big school, and this had to do with…what's that whole thing about when you make your decisions is it from a point of justice, point of critical, or the point of caring? At the big school people are usually way into justice, and it's real black and white. But in alternative ed., it's rarely black and white. You're always trying to find a way to make it work - you want to find solutions for these kids.

Likewise, the debate about homework reflects the conflicting beliefs about student capabilities and rigorous expectations. A continuation high school counselor argues, as do others with whom we spoke, that at-risk students need "a different sort of after-school expectation." Another educator expounds.

> Most are classroom activities because a lot of the kids have so much other stuff going on in their lives that once they're away from school, it's not real conducive for doing work, and it's setting them up for failure.

On the other side of the debate, educators contend that homework is an essential component of rigorous academic expectations. Says a continuation high school teacher, "We're not doing anybody a favor if we don't require homework, if we don't require [students] to be actively involved in the class." And some students, like this one[4], agree.

> No one says, "If you don't finish your work take it home for homework," when really you should. If you're really serious about your education, you're going to try to complete each assignment despite what might be going on with your friends, or what's going on at home.

What Support Systems Are Available for Students?

Given the characteristics of continuation high school students, many educators with whom we spoke stressed the importance of appropriate and ample student support

[4] This student attends the school where the earlier quoted "educator" spoke against homework.

services. Yet, access to counseling, health care, and other necessary service programs at continuation high schools is limited.[5] A principal laments.

> For the last five years, we were fortunate to have the federally funded wellness program on our campus. We had a therapist, a probation officer, someone from mental health, and a nurse, but the money ran out, and we couldn't sustain the program. My heart goes with that program. I miss it very much.

Some of the schools we visited, however, are able to offer students access to the help they need. In one school, a fulltime nurse serves as a liaison between local resources and her students and their families. Says one of the teachers at the school, "She gets [them] free eye exams, free glasses, free dental. I mean free shoes sometimes." This school nurse initiates the process by approaching the students and their families when their first arrive on campus. She explains. "During the registration/orientation process, I meet most of the families and prepare packets with lots of resources. Or, I talk to them a little bit, and I can identify health problems." If warranted, she makes a referral and follows up.

> I'm always communicating with the child about their health problem. Did you go, what happened, and what medicine are you on? The parent doesn't usually call me back, or send the form back, and sometimes I'll track them down, call them. I piece a lot of it together.

Rather than depend solely on the students or their parents for information regarding the outcome of health care referrals, the nurse developed her own line of communication. "When I first started school nursing, I realized pretty quickly, you send these referrals and you never know if they went, who they saw, and what happened, and so I forged this relationship with [the local clinic]." For this school nurse, and others with whom we spoke, networks of assistance are invaluable when aiming to meet the needs of at-risk youth. "You really have to work the relationships, and you've got to collect your little list of phone numbers - who can you call for this or that." Despite her success in building a strong network of support for student health concerns, she, like many we interviewed, sees the value of on-site health services. "We actually had a [clinic] satellite on campus, which was really useful because then the kids don't have to miss school. I would advocate, in an alternative setting, for a lot of resources on campus, a lot more social workers, other agencies that we could work closely - that with would be very helpful." As another educator simply states, "We need health services. You're trying to teach kids who have toothaches and various other health issues that make it hard to learn."

At another school, a campus manager helps students and their families with community services. According to the principal, the person who holds this classified position "helps kids that are homeless, have had a tragedy in their family that they need support with, or are looking for a job." Due to their daily presence on the campus and

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[5] See Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, *Alternative Education in Continuation High Schools: Meeting the Needs of Over-age Under-credited Youth*

supportive interactions with students, he and the other supervisors know the students on a personal level and serve, in a way, as confidants intervening before serious issues erupt.

> He and the other counselor/supervisors know every kid, they know what their backgrounds are. They have talked to almost all of their parents, so the kids feel very comfortable to be able to come to them and to say, "Here's what's happening with me," or "I know that so and so is having a bad day." So a lot of things are stopped before they occur because the kids feel free to tell them what's happening.

While many of teachers we interviewed spoke about serving also as counselors to their students, a few of the schools we visited have strong professional counseling support. As one principal explains,

> We have substantial counseling that I have not seen at other sites. We have four full-time counselors for our kids. In addition to that, we have a psychologist that is hired through our district that comes two days a week to our site. He specifically is here to serve the needs of kids that are on suspended expulsions, and he is a clinical person, so he has spent substantial time with the kids. He deals a lot with anger management and problem solving, making good decisions.

In another school, counselors provide individual, small-group, and classroom-based sessions. Says the principal, "I wanted them to impact students in a variety of settings." Consequently, he purposefully built a counseling team that included elementary and middle-school people. "They're a little more person-centered," he contends, "[and] we really wanted people with more individual and small-group [experience]." He continues.

> We've got a lot of balance within the counseling program. There's a wide range. Our head counselor was at a high school, so she leads the way in terms of graduation requirements and helps establish timelines for getting things done. Our district counselor is also our life-skills counselor, and she runs a lot of our drug, alcohol, and tobacco groups. She also planned a lot of the classroom-based lessons. We have about six or seven strands like social and emotional needs, career and college awareness, and test prep.

Evidence suggests that at least a few continuation high schools provide students an advisory or homeroom period as a means of support during the instructional day. In some of these schools, advisory sessions provide students with a periodic review of their progress toward graduation. A teacher explains.

> We talk to every kid about "How come you didn't do this in class? You're behind here, this how many credits you need." Right now we have a group of seniors that are really pushing hard to finish. And it's constantly, "Ok, did you get this? Do you know what's coming next?" Every student here has talked to a teacher

> for a good period of time about where they are and what's going on, so there're no questions in their mind about what they need to do.

In other schools, advisory serves as an ongoing support not only for credit completion, but also for future planning. Here, the principal of a continuation school we did not visit presents her advisory program at the annual California Continuation Education Association (CCEA) Convention.

> Each teacher has approximately 15 to 18 students assigned to them and students meet with that teacher a full period each day. And there's two, formal quarterly advisory periods where the whole group comes in to plan class schedules. We also meet for graduation plans and to create secondary transition plans, which is a very strong part of our program for our graduating seniors, even our non-graduating seniors. Hopefully, [their plans] will provide them some basis for economic success as adults.

In one school we visited, students, grouped by grade level, meet 30 minutes a day with a homeroom teacher to address pertinent concerns. A teacher explains.

> I'm a senior advisor, so the whole year was spent on applications for college and financial aid and getting them prepared for their senior portfolios. So, it's kind of serving the needs of a senior before we let them graduate. For sophomores, juniors, and freshman, it's a little different I think.

Periodically, counselors visit advisory sessions to talk with students and deliver age appropriate lessons on such topics as drug use and sex education. One teacher talks about the benefit of what she terms their school's "more global approach" to advisory.

> I think we do a really good job of advocating for the students in advisory everyday, and they all have a counselor so I think we do a really good job of connecting kids with social service agencies. So [it's] not just, "What's your grade point average, and what classes are you in?" [It's], "What are the social and emotional issues that we want [to address] to help kids become better students and advocate for themselves?"

Not all of the teachers, however, are convinced. With the program only two years old, this teacher shares her concern about the lack of a formal advisory curriculum.

> I have [a mixture of grade-level students], and it's a struggle because there's not a real curriculum. There's not a real focus I think. At the beginning of the year, we started talking about things and trying to focus on choices, goals, and Cornell notes, but I think it was too disjointed. I don't know how effective it is, at least with me. I'm not effective at it.

In addition to the foregoing support services, we found several schools that offer programs to support their pregnant and parenting students. A principal expounds.

> We have the pregnancy minor program for teen moms and dads and there are two periods that they're required to have and one is where they take family management and we teach them the responsibilities of being parents, their parental rights, how to take care of children, nutrition, you know, just things about being parents and legal rights and so forth and so on and then the other half of the program is where they actually attend a class, it's called Parent Lab where they actually go down to where the infants and the toddlers are and they not only take care of their children, but they assist in taking care of all of the other babies as well, such as feeding, changing, working with them in the educational activities and the outdoor activities, the physical activities as well.

In sum, we found examples of continuation high schools with regular access to substantial support personnel including career and other counselors, school psychologists, social workers, school nurses, security, special educators, and speech pathologists. We also found schools with strong on-site counseling and/or advisory programs. However, it's important to note that some of the schools we visited have few support services or none at all. In the words of a principal, "[At] every continuation school, because of the students we have, a campus security aide position should be built in, as well as a counselor and a nurse. We don't have any of that. We have the principal, the office manager, and four teachers."

How do Continuation Schools Help Prepare Students for the Next Step?

As articulated earlier, a number of educators with whom we spoke believe that continuation high schools should have structures in place that connect students to post-secondary coursework and training. "These kids need postsecondary," one such principal argues. "A high school diploma holds no value anymore. Either you have it, or you don't have it. You need to have some place to train kids, to give them a hope to live north of some street, or to have a life that's better." This growing sense of urgency about the future of at-risk youth has many schools struggling to identify and implement procedures that can effectively link students to post-diploma opportunities. A continuation school administrator expresses the frustration.

> Our 'fifth-year plan' is to get them into college, into trade school, into the military, into the job force at more than an entry-level place. I just think they have to get beyond high school. And we're not there yet. We're not even close, I'm embarrassed to say.

Yet, despite the expressed concern of many with whom we spoke, some schools we visited offer students little more than verbal encouragement to pursue post-secondary pathways. "Even though we try to encourage them to pursue a further education, to go to community college to take vocational classes or work on a 4-year degree," a principal complains, "unfortunately, a lot of them do not and most of them just go to work." Other schools take slightly more aggressive steps, helping students with applications and financial aid materials, administering community-college entrance exams, taking students on field trips to the community-college campus, and bringing in continuation alumni who

have since completed post-secondary programs. A student shares. “Some people are just totally against college. But our teachers still talk about it. We have field trips to colleges, and we get to see what college is like.” These experiences, as another student explains, make college seem possible.

> We have guest speakers sometimes come in. I know a couple students who came, and one’s about to graduate from [a CSU] college. And, seeing that, it’s like, “Whoa. You were at [this school] and you were just like me. You were behind in credits, and now you’re about to graduate.” I mean, here, they definitely put that in your head. Like, going to college is definitely the way to go.

A few schools also offer college scholarships to senior students. As a student maintains,

> When I heard about the scholarship I said, “Oh, that sounds like a good idea.” They help people out and get students to start thinking about going to college. Like, some of them maybe never saw that in the future for themselves.

Notwithstanding efforts to acquaint students with community college and help with the application processes, some schools provide post-secondary pathways through off-campus work experiences and internships. Through both activities, students can earn credit and income while being exposed to the world of work, providing, in the words of s district administrator an invaluable opportunity for at-risk youth to learn “when, where, and how they’re going to need to use the skills that we so desperately want to teach them.” A counselor explains the work experience program at his school.

> If they’re working outside of school, they can take the work experience class through the career center and get elective credit for those hours. They have to do some reports and job education things like budgeting, how to get along with your work partners, how to interview, how to write a résumé, and how to search for jobs.

A teacher at another schools adds, “We have guest speakers and we do lessons on how to get a job, how to keep the job, to quit a job.” Some continuation students also have access to a career counselor at their schools. Says one such staff member, “We have job settings as they become available, and I have two employers I work with that have benefits and tuition assistance - FedEx Ground is one of them. We have 56 kids on the list today.”

As detailed in earlier in our section on curriculum, many of the educators with whom we spoke also place great value on vocational technical and career coursework as a bridge to post-diploma success. Unfortunately, funding issues and negative notions of vocational education have limited the number of courses currently available in high schools. Says a district administrator,

> We've lost the electives, the job prep, the workable skills that could transition, most particularly this group of students, directly into the world of work. These kids need to find jobs, to support families. So I really think we're missing the boat there. We just don't know how to get there.

Yet, in one district where ROP is particularly successful, the district alternative education administrator offers this suggestion to improve the program.

> It should be a sequence of courses, not just a little of this and a little of that - meaning they take computer applications, and *then* they take the ROP computer course. We don't want to just put an ROP course in a school that doesn't have any foundation. [One of our schools] has a superb culinary arts ROP program, and we are very proud of that, but we also want to grow it to include more foundational and intermediate courses.

Finally, some schools are connecting students to post-secondary education through joint diploma and/or middle college programs. Both programs allow students to earn high school and college credit simultaneously – advancing their path toward the diploma while, as a principal contends, "segueing them into the world of adult education and getting them to see, "Yes, you can do this. There are options for you beyond high school." While we visited a number of continuation high schools with joint diploma programs, one program, in particular, emerges as exemplary. Ten years ago, after the school district negotiated with the board of the community college, the continuation high school was relocated to its new facility built on community-college property. This new location was purposeful, designed to help facilitate the development of a middle college program to serve the district's severely credit-deficient students. In the words of the principal, "Rather than saying, 'Let's take the continuation school and put them in the bungalows over there,' [the board said] 'Let's give them the new facilities. Let's give them more opportunities.'" As a result of the board's decision, she continues, "[our students] literally walk across the street to take their courses, so you don't lose them. With students who have challenges just getting to school, if you have to drive, or go a block away, it's not going to happen."

This program, however, has more than location on its side. Teachers at the continuation high school serve a significant support role in their students' community college experience. Says the principal, "We earmark courses [for students] depending upon where they are as far as their skill development, their current abilities, reading abilities, and that sort of thing." She expounds.

> If you're reading at a sixth- or seventh-grade level, you're going to need a lot of support [so] it may end up being a college remediation type course. Then, because what we want them to take a course that is a UC transferable as their joint diploma college course, you may end up having to take more.

The joint diploma program also offers pathways to occupations, providing course opportunities in various professional fields or personal growth and goal setting for

students how are still exploring options. "So," as the principal maintains, "it depends upon where you are, and what you need."

Joint diploma students (85% of those attending this continuation high school) also receive teacher support through the school's advisory program. "When they sign up for the college course, then they have a support class built in during the day here with the same group of kids that are in that college course." She continues. "So, every day [during our 30-minute advisory period] they're meeting, and they have additional support." At this school, continuation teachers also provide a number of after-school peer-led support groups and/or tutoring sessions to assist their college-attending students. And, a few continuation teachers pull double duty by teaching courses also at the community college. This, suggests the principal, provides students an additional sense of security in the form of an on-campus advocate who knows, understands, and cares about their academic and personal strengths and needs. "Although they may end up in somebody else's course, for the most part, we are more confident that [our teachers] will have more of a vested interest in our students than someone else who is the usual college teacher."

In all, our data suggest that continuation high school student graduates need some form of post-secondary training or education to lead successful adult lives. While not all continuation high schools provide students adequate pathways to higher education opportunities, those that do, offer one or more of the following exploratory or educational experiences: career education, vocational technical training, ROP courses, work experience, internships, and joint diploma/middle college programs.

Conclusions and Suggestions

During 2007, our team of researchers visited and studied continuation high schools in California. We interviewed principals, teachers, support personnel, district administrators, county service providers, and students. We observed classrooms. We examined data. We tried to understand the purpose, functions, procedures, problems, and promise of California's continuation high schools.

The most prominent finding from this investigation is variation. Continuation high schools vary dramatically in mission, design, program, philosophy, resources, and challenges. For some students, continuation high school is a route from academic futility and frustration to graduation and post-secondary education and/or career success. For others, it is a road with a dead end at graduation, because students have acquired credits, without necessarily acquiring knowledge and usable skills. For others, continuation high school is little more than a pothole in the steep downhill drive toward dropping out of school.

This variation results from vague expectations, differences in district priorities, poor data collection and analysis systems, a patchwork of curricula and instructional strategies, and widely varying access to support services. Lacking these critical systemic elements, teachers, administrators, and support staff in many continuation high schools do an admirable job of piecing together programs and practices that help some students continue their education. Nonetheless, a more coherent system could help ensure that the 70,000 students served in California's continuation high schools have substantially greater access to graduation and post-secondary education and/or career success. As well, a more coherent system for continuation high schools could provide a model for the reform of other alternative education programs that serve an additional 350,000 students each year.

California can create a more coherent system of continuation high schools. Unfortunately, the findings of this study only provide untested suggestions about the essential elements of such a system. These suggestions, however, can be starting points for testing and affirming the potential of system elements to improve results for continuation high school students. This section lists those suggestions and proposes a strategy for testing them in a manner that could lead to powerful recommendations for altering future policy and practice related to continuation high schools.

Critical System Elements Suggested by Findings

Our findings suggest that continuation high schools in California are more likely to lead students to graduation and post-secondary education and/or career success if seven system elements are developed. These elements are described below:

1. More Explicit Purpose
   Continuation high schools should have the explicit purpose of helping students in at-risk situations acquire the knowledge and skills that will allow them to graduate

and successfully continue their education in a four-year college, community college, technical school, or other post-secondary setting and/or prepare them to succeed in a career that is likely to offer a livable wage. Programs and services must be designed in a manner consistent with this purpose.

2. More Extensive Data Collection Systems
   If continuation high schools are to prepare students to succeed in post-secondary education and/or careers that offer a livable wage, data systems need to be structured in ways that allow schools, districts, and the state to determine the extent to which this purpose is being achieved. Schools should employ pre- and post-testing in ways that help determine if literacy, numeracy, and other critical work skills develop and approach proficiency. These data should be collected systematically and reported. Schools should determine and report the extent to which students apply for and receive admission to post-secondary institutions, apply for post-secondary financial assistance, and apply and receive offers of employment for positions offering career opportunities. Data collection requirements should be sufficient to generate a more comprehensive picture of the extent to which students continue at continue high schools until graduation. As well, data collection should provide a more comprehensive picture of what happens when students leave continuation high schools.

3. Intake Aligned to Purpose
   If continuation high schools are likely to prepare students for success in post-secondary education and/or careers that offer a livable wage, they probably cannot meet the needs of every student in an at-risk situation. Continuation high schools cannot be the catchall for every student who is not likely to succeed in a comprehensive high school. There should be a thoughtful, deliberate system for ensuring that the continuation high school has a high likelihood of ensuring the success of each student admitted. As well, there should be intake and orientation systems designed to maximize the likelihood of student success.

4. Curriculum and Program Design Aligned to Student Needs/Program Purpose
   The curriculum and the program design of continuation high schools should have a reasonable likelihood of meeting the needs of the students admitted and achieving the purpose stated above. If, in fact, a substantial number of the students admitted are far behind their peers in credit accrual and academic skills, the program should be structured to offer students more time to learn, rather than less time (as is currently the case in many continuation high schools). If, in fact, a large percentage of the students admitted cannot read well, the curriculum should include multiple venues for the teaching of reading. If the program is intended to prepare students to succeed in high-need/high-wage careers, curriculum offerings should be structured to ensure high quality preparation, with highly motivating opportunities for participate in career and technical training programs, perhaps through partnerships with community colleges or technical skill centers. Simultaneously, if the program is intended to prepare students to succeed in post-secondary education, curriculum offerings should be structured to ensure that

students learn the study skills, note-taking skills, library skills, and other information accessing/processing skills that could increase their sense of efficacy as learners and their readiness to succeed in post-secondary settings. If the students served are more likely to complete challenging programs if they participate in elective courses that align to their interests and needs, such electives should be designed and offered.

5. Instruction Aligned to Student Needs and Program Purpose
   The instruction in continuation high schools is not likely to help meet any useful purpose if it is identical to the instruction that failed to meet the needs of the students when they attended comprehensive high schools. Some students possess the literacy skills, motivation, and self-direction to succeed in the individualized, self-paced style of instruction currently provided in many continuation high schools. Other students clearly do not have the capacity to benefit from such instruction.

   Each continuation high school should offer a variety of instructional models designed to address the various needs of the students served. In general, instruction is most likely to meet student needs if it is highly interactive, connected to the real-world situations in which students live, and linked explicitly to the immediate futures students envision for themselves. Instruction should maximize the use of technology students find engaging and stimulating. As well, instruction for English language learners should be designed in ways to maximize their development of English while also maximizing their development of core curricular knowledge and skills. Of course, any curricular or instructional innovation must include strong systems of classroom-based professional development for both teachers and leaders to ensure that innovations are implemented well. Ultimately, the nature and quality of instruction should increase the likelihood that students want to go to school and continue learning throughout their lives.

6. Services Aligned to Student Needs
   A school should not be considered a continuation high school unless it offers an array of services designed to maximize the success of the students it serves. These services should include case management that connects students to the various health and human services offered in the community. There should be ample counseling services to help students chart a course toward post-secondary education and/or careers, as well as to manage the various personal and inter-personal challenges that could impede their school success. The nature of the needs of the students admitted should drive decisions about the services that need to be provided. Such services may include (but should not be limited to) school nursing services, school psychology, special education, support for pregnant and parenting teens, and speech pathology.

7. Supportive Relationships

Every student in a continuation high school should have regular contact with a caring adult who builds a healthy, supportive relationship. Students are most likely to persist in school when perceive that adults care sincerely about them, their situations, and their future. If continuation high schools are to fulfill their purpose, such relations cannot be left to chance. In contrast, there must be a deliberate, focused effort to develop such relationships for every student served.

Strategy for Testing Critical System Elements

It would be tempting to ask state policy makers to work toward putting these system elements in place immediately. Unfortunately, we do not have the empirical evidence that could help convince policy makers that this course of action was likely to generate substantially better results. As well, we do not know the difficulties school districts and schools are likely to encounter as they work toward these system elements. Therefore, it is appropriate that we devise a strategy for testing these system elements in a pilot environment.

We recommend the development of a strategy to encourage school districts to pilot continuation high school improvements in ways that reflect the above listed system elements. An appropriate pilot program would require districts to articulate their commitment to addressing each of the seven elements listed in this report and their plans for doing so. District plans should also define the partnerships they would establish to maximize adherence to the seven elements. The funder should select proposals that best reflected the system elements and offer those districts a nominal amount of funding (perhaps in the range of $30,000 to $100,000 per year for three years) to support district efforts to implement the system elements. The funding should be relatively small to 1) maximize district commitment of local resources, 2) determine the minimal levels of additional resources needed in order to implement the system elements well, and 3) maximize replicability.

During the course of this pilot, the funder should insist upon the maintenance of intensive data collection systems, consistent with the second system element. Additionally, the funder should provide for the collection of qualitative data that describes the challenges and best practices associated with the implementation of the system elements. This data collection, analysis, and evaluation process should be structured in a manner that provides both formative and summative information. The formative information should help schools and districts refine their efforts in ways that better align with system elements and build upon emerging best practices. The summative information should lead to the development of a powerful case for changes in policy affecting California's continuation high schools.

The funder should contract with an entity to design an appropriate Request for Proposals and provide information to school districts interested in applying. The same entity could review the proposals and make recommendations to the Irvine Foundation regarding funding decisions. Once funding decisions are made, the contracted entity could provide technical assistance and support to school districts and their partners, while

also collecting the qualitative and quantitative data described above. Finally, the contracted entity could prepare annual reports regarding the progress of the pilot with recommendations for both educators and policy makers.

The important work completed to date exposes both the challenges of continuation high schools and the opportunities to improve them. Now, it is appropriate to build upon this work by systematically piloting and evaluating a more coherent system of continuation high schools in California.

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