

California's Continuation Schools

EACH YEAR, MORE THAN 10% OF California's public high school students attend some kind of "alternative" program, most notably continuation, community, and community day schools. Although some parents and students actively choose these schools, many of the schools' students have been placed involuntarily. Often they are identified as "struggling" within a regular high school, in danger of either not graduating on time or dropping out of school entirely.

The alternative programs run by school districts and county offices throughout California constitute the state's official safety net for these students. The California Alternative Education Research Project is an ongoing effort to examine California's alternative education system in order to shed light on these programs and raise important issues regarding how the state's public schools are meeting the needs of California's most vulnerable teenagers. Their work to date does not include court schools or various other small programs often placed under the "alternative" umbrella.

This EdSource brief summarizes the project's initial research study, *Alternative Education Options: A Descriptive Study of California Continuation High Schools*. It looks at the study's findings about the students who attend these programs and their academic achievement, and it also describes their basic structure and the policy context for these schools, the largest of California's alternative programs. In addition, this brief summarizes the group's research regarding dramatic variations in the quality of California's continuation high schools and

provides some insights into what distinguishes those that are most successful.

California has four main types of alternative education programs

State law requires school districts and county offices in California to provide alternatives to the comprehensive high school for "students vulnerable to academic or behavioral failure." The Alternative Education Project researchers put the programs that meet this objective into four general categories:

- Continuation schools, which generally offer programs that help students who are behind in earning credits catch up;
- Community day schools, which serve students with serious disciplinary or behavioral issues;
- County-run community schools, which enroll adjudicated or expelled youth; and
- Independent study programs, which school districts operate as an educational option.

The researchers found that the state does not collect discrete information

about independent study programs, which are offered in various school settings as an alternative for a broad range of students.

Each of the other types of alternative programs—continuation schools, community day schools, and county-run community schools—operate under somewhat different parameters. Together they represent about 850 alternative high schools within the state. (See Figure 1 on page 2.) The largest segment—and the focus of the research project's 2008 report—is the state's 519 continuation schools.

Data about continuation school students are often estimates, but their differences from other students are clear

This research project makes it clear that even the most basic data about continuation schools—their enrollment figures—are uncertain. This is due in great measure to the mobility of the students they serve. As Figure 1

The California Alternative Education Research Project

This project is conducted jointly by the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University, the National Center for Urban School Transformation at San Diego State University, and WestEd. The principal investigators are (in alphabetical order) Greg Austin, Don Dixon, Joseph Johnson, Milbrey McLaughlin, Lynne Perez, and Jorge Ruiz de Velasco.

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A comprehensive set of study documents and a summary brief by the study's authors are available at: jgc.stanford.edu

illustrates, the state’s annual “census” of students—known as CBEDS and reflecting student counts on a single day in October—put the total enrollment in continuation schools in 2005–06 at 68,371 students. However, based on data from the Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) system, the study’s authors estimated that 116,551 students were in a continuation school when they took state tests.

While acknowledging these data limitations, the authors use the data that are available to describe how continuation school students differ from other high school students in California.

Continuation school students appear to be more likely to drop out

The researchers note that the one common denominator among most continuation students is that they have reached age 16 lacking sufficient academic credits to remain on track to graduate with their age cohort. In other words, they are at risk of dropping out. However, documenting how many continuation school students drop out of high school entirely is problematic because reliable data are unavailable.

In an examination of state testing data, WestEd researchers concluded that “once referred into an alternative school, students tend to remain within the alternative education system, transferring between alternative schools, or leave school altogether.” They also cite official state dropout statistics that indicate that alternative school students are many times more likely to drop out than their peers in comprehensive high schools. (An anticipated May 2008 state release of dropout information based on individual student data may help shed more light on this question.)

figure 1 | Alternative Education Programs in California in 2005–06

Type of School	Students Served	Operating Agencies	Number of Schools	Official Enrollment (based on October data)	Enrollment Based on Accountability Data
Continuation High Schools	For students who are at least 16 years old and generally “undercredited” relative to their age group	School district	519	68,371	116,551
Community Day Schools	For students in grades K–12 who have been expelled from comprehensive schools for disciplinary reasons or are on probation and referred from the juvenile justice system	School district or county office of education	294	6,959 in district-run schools; 3,232 in county-run schools	18,455 in district-run schools; 11,857 in county-run schools
Community Schools	Serve same students as community day schools but can also provide independent study	County office of education	56	18,055	46,889

DATA: ADAPTED FROM *Alternative Education Options in California: A View from Counties and Districts*, McLAUGHLIN, ET AL., MARCH 2008

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Continuation school students are more likely to be Hispanic, African American, and English learners

The study’s authors found that continuation school students are most likely to be Hispanic. This group of students comprises about 55% of all students in continuation schools compared with 42% of the total 11th grade enrollment statewide (the most comparable age cohort to continuation school students). African American enrollments in continuation schools are 11% of the continuation school population compared with 8% of 11th grade enrollment. In contrast, non-Hispanic white and Asian students are underrepresented in continuation

schools compared with statewide 11th grade enrollments.

English learners are also enrolled in continuation high schools at a higher rate (21%) than in the 11th grade statewide (14%).

Survey data highlight these students’ difficult circumstances and challenges

To look at students’ living situations and behavioral issues, the research team accessed information from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) for the period from 2004 to 2006. The survey results that follow compare the responses of continuation school students with those of 11th graders in comprehensive high schools who answered the same surveys.

The researchers looked at student mobility across two dimensions and found:

- 17% of continuation students reported changing where they lived two or more times in the past year, compared to 7% of 11th graders in comprehensive high schools (almost 2.5 times higher).
- Almost half (47%) of continuation students reported that they had been enrolled in their current school for fewer than 90 days.

Continuation students are almost three times more likely than comprehensive high school students to be in foster care or living with a relative other than a parent (11% versus 4% for the 11th graders).

Rates of regular and heavy alcohol and drug use (including use at school) are at least two times higher among continuation students than among the 11th grade comparison group, with the group differences increasing with the severity of involvement. For example, almost one-fifth of continuation students had been drunk or high at school on seven or more occasions, more than three times the reported rate among the group of 11th graders. Continuation students also reported almost twice the rates for a range of use-related problems; for example, their alcohol and other drug use interferes with normal activities, such as studying at school.

Between 11% and 14% of continuation students report that they have either engaged in or been a victim of violence, such as fighting at school, carrying a gun, being a gang member, or being threatened or physically hurt. This is generally two to three times the rate of the 11th graders in comprehensive high schools.

Interviews show the extent to which state policies affect continuation schools

The study included interviews with school principals and teachers in 37 continuation schools statewide. The researchers heard from these educators that the state's policies related to student performance are influencing how they see their work and what they expect for their students. At the same time, responses from educators at this sample of schools indicate their perception that the accountability system for continuation schools sends a less definitive message about expectations. The study also questions the state's commitment to the academic success of these students given a funding structure that bears little rational relationship to school or student needs.

Student performance standards shape local action

The authors found, based on their interviews, that continuation school leaders are clear that both the California Public School Accountability Act and the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) signal that the state intends to hold all students to at least a minimum set of academic standards for receipt of a standard high school diploma.

Further, the authors report that most of the educators in the study “embraced this single basic standard for the diploma as an important factor in improving the quality of instruction in continuation high schools in the last decade.” In particular, principals commented that the CAHSEE gives students and teachers “a concrete goal post to structure and animate their efforts.” Some principals also credit the federal No Child Left Behind Act's focus on teacher preparation with

getting more fully credentialed teachers into their schools.

In addition, state policy leaves districts free to establish higher local standards if they wish. In some places, that discretion results in more rigorous requirements for students in comprehensive schools than for continuation school students, creating additional ambiguity related to academic expectations, the authors found.

The accountability system for continuation schools creates ambiguity

This study also makes the case that the state's approach to accountability for continuation schools is in contrast to its stated objective of common academic achievement goals for *all students*. They report that school leaders described “a dichotomous accountability system in which alternative schools are held to a set of standards that are substantially different from those of comprehensive schools.”

The reference above relates to California's Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM). While comprehensive high schools are held accountable based on students' mastery of standards tested on the California Standards Tests and the CAHSEE, ASAM schools can choose other indicators for state accountability purposes. (See the box on page 4 for additional background on ASAM and accountability results for continuation schools.)

The researchers characterize site administrators as ambivalent about the ASAM system. For example, documenting benchmarks, such as attendance and credit completion, is particularly important with academically vulnerable populations, the school leaders said. And they often complained that these types of

Accountability Measures for Continuation and Other Alternative Schools

The Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) was created following the passage of the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999. According to the California Department of Education, ASAM provides school-level accountability for schools serving highly mobile and at-risk students. Under ASAM, schools can select indicators of progress other than the standardized test scores that drive the Academic Performance Index (API) system for most schools in California.

Schools select three indicators from the list below and annually report on those.* The choices are somewhat constrained by the type and size of the school.

- **Behavior:** A school can choose either student behavior or suspensions.
- **Attendance:** A school can choose measures of student punctuality, sustained daily attendance, or attendance.
- **Student persistence**
- **Writing achievement**
- **Reading achievement**
- **Math achievement**
- **Completion data:** Based on the age of their students, schools choose promotion to next grade, course completion/average course completion, or credit completion/average credit completion.
- **High school graduation**
- **General Educational Development (GED) completion,** California High School Proficiency Examination certification, or GED section completion

In 2002 California responded to new federal accountability requirements by including continuation schools in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability system. In addition to their participation in ASAM, most continuation schools now also receive an API score and are evaluated based on their performance relative to adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals under NCLB. As is true for all California schools, only those that receive Title I Basic Grants are placed into the federal intervention called Program Improvement, and they face no systematic consequences under the state accountability system alone. To be held accountable under NCLB, a school also has to have a statistically meaningful number of test scores from students who have been in the school from early October through the spring testing date, a threshold many continuation schools do not meet.

EdSource examined state accountability data for continuation schools available on the Education Data Partnership (Ed-Data) website and found that in 2006–07 about half of California’s continuation schools received Title I Basic Grants and thus were subject to Program Improvement under NCLB. Of the 256 Title I continuation schools, 141 did not make AYP that year.

*For more information about the ASAM indicators—including other restrictions and conditions—see: www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/am/documents/indicatorfrm.doc

benchmarks were not considered in the federal accountability system. Yet principals also observed that “the ambiguous state accountability system reflects a lack of consensus among educators and policymakers about how to measure the effectiveness of schools that serve students with special needs, as well as about what ought to be the legitimate expectations...”

State finance and governance policies conceive of the continuation school as a small version of a comprehensive school

In the study, principals and teachers in continuation high schools report that educators in alternative settings are charged with doing more in less time with roughly the same resources per student as all other schools. They indicate that this feature of state policy is one of the most frustrating and unfair constraints with which they must contend.

The authors frame their examination of these issues within the view that “small classes and low student-teacher ratios are universally acknowledged by educators and policymakers as essential features of instruction in alternative settings.” They used both the interviews and data from their sample of schools to conclude:

- Many continuation schools receive no additional funding to account for the additional required staffing.
- More than one-third of schools had class sizes only marginally better than the districtwide averages (i.e., class sizes equal to, or greater than, 20 to 1) and had no special counseling or vocational education supports.
- One third of the schools had student-teacher ratios (based on

full-time equivalents) that exceeded the average for comprehensive high schools in their districts, and only one quarter met the California Department of Education recommended ratio of 15 to 1.

Continuation schools are relatively small. Like other small schools, if the resources they receive from their district are based solely on the number of students they serve, they often do not have extra support staff positions. Although most of the continuation schools the researchers visited had at least one part-time academic counselor, they often did not have enough enrollment to qualify for a librarian, nurse, or dedicated attendance officer. None reported hiring staff specializing in English learner (EL) instruction, despite the fact that 25% of the students in the sample were classified as English learners and almost half of the schools had enrollments of 25% or more ELs. Schools with fewer than 200 students faced particular challenges in the absence of extra funding from the state or their district and were generally staffed with only a principal, one or two clerical aides, and a part-time counselor (often shared with another school or program).

Data indicate a measure of success for continuation schools

Regarding student achievement, the authors note that they are constrained by the lack of “a data system that allowed us to assess continuation students by comparing them to students in comprehensive schools *who have similar prior performance and behavioral characteristics*. In the absence of such a data system, academic comparisons between continuation and comprehensive school students can be highly misleading.”

The continuation school funding system yields disparities

State funding targeted specifically at continuation schools reflects various policies and adjustments that, over time, have accumulated to create a system that treats schools differently for reasons not related to their needs, the students they serve, or the programs they run.

For example, districts receive a supplemental revenue limit add-on if they run continuation schools established after 1979. However, this add-on is only calculated in the first year of the school’s operation. No adjustments are made to reflect subsequent increases or decreases in the number of students or staffing in the school. As a result, some districts receive add-ons based solely on historical artifact and others receive no supplemental funding to operate continuation schools.

Continuation school programming and staffing is further complicated by state rules created in response to the schools’ original purpose of providing a flexible schedule for working students. The law limits continuation schools to reimbursement for a maximum of 15 instruction hours per student each school week, regardless of actual additional programming or attendance (Education Code §46170). Some districts use other resources to provide funding for these schools above that amount.

With that caveat in mind, they report as no surprise that statewide data show continuation schools and students scoring substantially lower on virtually all measures of academic performance. In 2006–07 the average Academic Performance Index (API) score for a continuation school was 471, compared with an average of 686 for comprehensive high schools. Of equal significance, only 72% of continuation schools reported sufficient numbers of valid test scores to receive an API.

Using local school data, the researchers looked at year-to-year changes for similar individual students in continuation versus comprehensive high schools. They found that although “students in continuation schools still do less well, changes in student scores across years are more comparable.”

Similarly, when they compared CAHSEE pass rates for continuation school students with those of 11th and 12th graders who took the

CAHSEE in comprehensive high schools (those who did not pass the test in 10th grade), the passage rates were very close or identical. These data, they say, suggest that “when roughly comparable students are examined, continuation schools may be doing at least as well at helping them succeed as comprehensive schools.”

In summary, the researchers say: “Continuation high schools seem to do as well, but no better, in the aggregate than comprehensive schools with *similar at-risk students*. While meriting more examination with better data, this tentative finding suggests a measure of success given the greater documented behavioral and emotional challenges of students in these continuation settings. Still, the overall picture is one of substantial variation across schools in success and performance. Coming to a better understanding of the determinants of this variation is a major theme of our study.”

Continuation schools vary substantially in focus and quality

The authors characterize California's regulatory framework for alternative education programs, including continuation schools, as ambiguous and fragmented. They say this situation results in programs that reflect county and district priorities and contexts. Local decisions and resources largely determine not only the alternative options available to students, but also the goals of the alternative programs, be they county-run schools or continuation schools run by districts. The authors generalize that these disparate goals result in programs that tend to fit into three categories:

- **Strong youth development programs** that endeavor to put together the supports, academic and otherwise, that would enable students to graduate and take a confident next step. These programs focus on pathways to higher education, work, or back to the comprehensive high school, and on partnerships that bring additional resources to the school and its students.
- **Programs that operate in a mid-range** of quality, attention, and opportunity—a condition of “benign neglect” and low priority. The authors say this accurately characterizes most alternative programs.
- **Dumping grounds** for disruptive students and ineffective educators, which function as “exits to nowhere.”

Because of this significant variability in local context, continuation high schools can and do look very different in different counties, in different districts within the same county, and even within the same district. Further,

the authors conclude that although consistent district support did not always *determine* school quality, it was clear that the principal's job was much easier—and improvement efforts were more fruitful—where district support was evident.

Lack of coordinated youth policies and appropriate professional development are common concerns

The authors point out that continuation school students typically are involved in other state “systems,” such as probation, child protective services, and homeless services. Thus, successful student experiences depend in part on critical support services often accessible only from out-of-school agencies. They note that, in most counties and districts, regulatory structures balkanize youth services and create what could be called an “institutional train wreck.” In contrast, continuation students in communities where youth services are coordinated benefit from a level of resource integration and support generally unavailable elsewhere.

In contrast to states with strong state-led professional development programs, in California the responsibility for teacher and principal development largely falls on district shoulders. School leaders interviewed for the study report that they perceive scant recognition among district administrators of how work with abused or otherwise vulnerable youth may require special staff training or skills. Principals and teachers also report that appropriate staff development “is difficult to find and so they often feel professionally isolated and often focus on school-level experimentation and a trial-and-error approach to instructional change.”

Continuation schools that work seem to share certain characteristics

Based on their school visits, the researchers report enormous variation in continuation schools, from their size and demography to their facilities and staff capacities. The authors looked at practices and attitudes that were common in the schools they visited that showed evidence of exemplary student outcomes, particularly CAHSEE passage rates, program completion rates, student attendance, and accelerated credit accumulation.

District leadership plays a critical role

Interviews with school leaders led the researchers to conclude that school districts can play a critical role in the creation of successful continuation schools by:

- Setting clear academic goals for students;
- Providing needed resources (e.g., supplemental appropriations to maintain small class size);
- Providing the principal with discretion to hire a qualified and motivated staff; and
- Implementing supportive policies that take the special needs of continuation schools into account, particularly in regard to how students are placed in the school and effective collaboration with external entities that provide needed supports for students as well as postsecondary pathways.

Leaders are emphatic about what students can accomplish

Principals in schools with evidence of exemplary student outcomes were often emphatic and positive about what they believed their students could accomplish and about the school's role in their success. Where experienced principals were clear and

proactive about their beliefs, the faculty and the students echoed their sentiments. Teachers said that principals who were very clear about their expectations empowered teachers who endorsed those beliefs and made work life uncomfortable for teachers who held themselves or their students to lower standards.

Students, in turn, picked up on these attitudes and beliefs and, in focus groups, were unequivocal about the positive effect on their motivation to engage and learn. Some students seemed genuinely surprised by their own transformation into a “good student” since previously they had experienced only failure. Although they underscored the importance of extra help and time, most students seemed to feel that having their teachers and the principal regard them as teachable made all the difference.

Leaders create strong partnerships with outside institutions

The authors found that leaders of particularly effective continuation schools formed partnerships with external institutions. These partnerships were often the product of personal networks, reflecting the vision and commitment of individual school administrators.

In particular, strong continuation programs usually had deliberate, well-designed partnerships with local community colleges. The schools’ teachers and counselors worked with community colleges to develop programs of study and opportunities for students to visit the campus and sit in on classes. Community college advisers also visited the continuation school and explained programs, financial aid, and admissions procedures.

Similarly, several school administrators cultivated relationships with

local businesses to provide jobs or internships for students, or with community agencies to provide community service opportunities. Others relied on relationships with mental health agencies or community-based mental health services to provide programs on drug and alcohol treatment, and on partnerships with probation departments to offer informational talks to their students and collaborate on student placements.

The authors observed that “these partnerships were of a distinctly local flavor, differed in form and intensity, and always added critical resources for teachers and students. Schools lacking these partnerships and connections were, by comparison, at a significant disadvantage in their efforts to meet students’ needs.”

More effective continuation schools shared other specific practices

Where the authors found continuation schools with exemplary outcomes, they also found school leaders—be they principals, counselors, or teachers—who were successful in:

- Imposing order on the school placement and intake process;
- Applying more rigorous standards to themselves and their faculties than those imposed by the state or district; and
- Using student performance data to guide change.

Principals and staff in many continuation schools reported that the process for placing students in their schools was often not controlled by the continuation school but instead was governed by the needs or imperatives of sending schools. Yet teachers almost always cited the importance of being able to plan for good instruction. The ability and time to plan was,

in turn, supported by a rational system for identifying, placing, and carefully managing student intake.


Staff at schools with strong student outcomes reported that their principals communicated a clear vision of what success looked like in classrooms and clear expectations that everyone would move purposefully to achieve that vision. Principals often cited the advent of the CAHSEE high school graduation requirement as a standard-setting event that focused not only students, but also staff on a concrete goal for all students. Teachers in the more impressive schools sought to balance individualized coaching and tutoring with whole-class instruction that promoted group problem-solving and developed better interpersonal communication among students.

The most successful principals also relied on a frequently identified “best practice” in the literature on standards-based school reform generally—use of evidence concerning student outcomes. A few principals kept progress charts on the walls of their offices and knew where each student in the school was in terms of reaching important benchmarks on state assessments or on internally selected assessments of academic progress.

The authors note that although all of these practices merit further investigation, the effectiveness of their implementation appears to be closely linked to the experience and capacity of a given school’s teachers and principals. “One overarching conclusion seems clear: In the absence of clear signals about expectations, systematic support, and incentives for performance, the quality of instruction in schools depends largely on the beliefs, effort, and motivation of individual teachers and administrators.”

Too many continuation schools fail to provide students with the help that they need

The researchers in the Alternative Education Research Project report observing continuation schools across the state that provide effective opportunities for their students, but they found these to be the exception. They conclude that for too many at-risk students: “Opportunities to connect with school, to imagine hopeful futures, and to set on a positive pathway are lost when schools do not or cannot respond

to their needs—do not offer them a genuine alternative. Educators working in alternative programs pay a cost as well when county, municipal, or community-based services fail to support their efforts, when the resources provided them are limited or of poor quality, when they themselves are afforded little professional respect. Many vulnerable youth are caught in the middle, wanting a different course for themselves, but not finding the support or ‘hand holds’ that would enable them to change direction.” 



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