

CHANGING PLACES



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HOW COMMUNITIES WILL IMPROVE
THE HEALTH OF BOYS OF COLOR

**Edited by Christopher Edley Jr.
and Jorge Ruiz de Velasco**

With a foreword by Robert Phillips



The Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Race, Ethnicity and Diversity at the University of California at Berkeley School of Law is a multidisciplinary, collaborative venture to produce research, research-based policy analysis, and curricular innovation on issues of racial and ethnic justice in California and the nation.

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Cover: The cover image was designed by Oakland, California-based printmaker and digital artist Favianna Rodriguez. Using high-contrast colors and vivid figures, her composites reflect literal and imaginative migration, global community, and interdependence. She has lectured widely on the use of art in civic engagement and the work of bridging community and museum, local and international. Rodriguez is coeditor of *Reproduce and Revolt!* with stencil artist and art critic Josh MacPhee (Soft Skull Press, 2008). An unprecedented contribution to the Creative Commons, this two-hundred-page book contains more than six hundred bold, high-quality black and white illustrations for royalty-free creative use. Rodriguez's artwork also appears in *The Design of Dissent* (Rockport Publishers, 2006), *Peace Signs: The Anti-War Movement Illustrated* (Edition Olms, 2004), and *The Triumph of Our Communities: Four Decades of Mexican Art* (Bilingual Review Press, 2005).

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN CALIFORNIA

Academic On-ramps or Exit Ramps for Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian Boys?

Jorge Ruiz de Velasco and Milbrey McLaughlin

ABSTRACT

Continuation high schools and the students they serve are largely invisible to most Californians. Yet more than 115,000 California high school students pass through one of the state's 519 continuation high schools each year—a number that approaches almost 10 percent of all high school students. The law creating continuation schools—intended to meet the educational needs of overage and undercredited youth at risk of dropping out of school—contemplates more intensive services and accelerated credit accrual strategies so that students might have a renewed opportunity to graduate from high school. Based on a statewide study of these schools, however, we conclude that these schools, as a whole, are failing to provide the academic and support services students need to succeed.

Continuation schools are more racially or ethnically concentrated than the state's comprehensive high schools. Latino students comprise 55 percent of all students in continuation schools, and although African American enrollments in continuation schools approximate those of comprehensive schools statewide, they tend to be overrepresented in many districts. Also, boys outnumber girls in these alternative schools. This chapter explores the role that the state, counties, and districts play in affecting school quality and student outcomes in continuation schools. Also examined are the roles of community nonprofit and county or municipal social services, law enforcement, or juvenile justice agencies that come to play important actors in the lives of adolescents in these alternative schools. Finally, the authors reflect on the implications of their study for young boys of color and assess the school-level factors, as reported by principals and teachers, that appear

to be associated with better student achievement for this academically vulnerable group.



INTRODUCTION

In 2007 a group of researchers at Stanford University, California State University at San Diego, and WestEd, a nonprofit research and development agency, launched a multiyear, in-depth study of alternative schools in California. The intent was to showcase the state's approximately 980 basically invisible alternative schools as an option for stemming the tide of high school dropouts.¹ Ultimately, we focused on California's 525 continuation high schools, institutions serving overage and undercredited students. Continuation schools comprise the largest part of California's alternative-school system, both in terms of number of schools and annual enrollment. At this writing, researchers at Berkeley and Stanford continue data collection for a second wave of studies. Our focus has been on systemic issues (including relationships within schools and among districts and county authorities) and institutional determinants of effective instruction (that is, how work and time are conceived and organized in schools). Along the way we have interviewed hundreds of teachers and principals, and an equal number of students, the single largest group of whom are Latino males.

In this chapter we reflect on what these schools can tell us about interventions, with particular relevance for young black, Latino, and Asian boys at risk of dropping out of school.² We tread cautiously here because for most students who are not on track to graduate because of poor grades and insufficient credits, alternative schools remain simply early exit ramps from school.³ But we have seen enough successful schools and students to report with confidence that despite disappointing overall results, these schools *can* provide important opportunities and resources for a vulnerable population of youth. Many continuation high schools in California are in fact successful on-ramps for reengaging youth back into school and onto a path to a high school diploma. All schools, including most traditional high schools, can learn much from the experience of educators and students in these alternative schools.

BACKGROUND

This chapter draws on survey results and state administrative data reviewed by staff at WestEd and described in a supporting technical report (see

Austin et al. 2008). We also draw on technical reports that describe results from field research undertaken during the winter and spring of 2007 in nine southern, central, and northern California counties (see McLaughlin, Atukpawu, and Williamson 2008; Ruiz de Velasco 2008; and Perez and Johnson 2008).⁴ Within these counties researchers visited twenty-six school districts and forty schools (including thirty-seven continuation schools and three traditional high schools that refer students to continuation programs) that differed in focus, student outcomes, size, and metropolitan status. Researchers interviewed individuals associated with county and community youth-serving agencies, including juvenile justice, mental health, child protective services, and foster care. The size, scope, and legislative design of the continuation high school program make clear that these schools are a cornerstone of the state's dropout prevention strategy.

Attendance at California's Continuation High Schools

Originally designed in the early twentieth century to provide a flexible schedule for working students, the modern continuation school now serves a diverse student population. The single common denominator is that most continuation students have reached age sixteen without sufficient academic credits to graduate with their age cohort; the data also reveal continuation students to be a highly vulnerable population characterized by multiple risk behaviors and other nonacademic school engagement barriers, such as unstable home settings or involvement with youth gangs or the juvenile justice system. It is important to note that enrollment in California's continuation high schools is voluntary, so it is safe to assume that most of these students, despite the academic and social challenges they face, are still seeking a regular high school diploma and are looking for ways to stay connected to school.

Race and ethnicity. If you are looking for young boys of color, you will find them in California's continuation schools. Latino students are especially overrepresented, comprising 55 percent of all students in continuation schools and 61.4 percent of enrollments in schools we visited, compared with 42.3 percent of the eleventh-grade enrollment in traditional comprehensive schools statewide.⁵ In contrast, non-Hispanic white and Asian students are underrepresented relative to eleventh-grade enrollments in comprehensive high schools.

As shown in table 5.1, African American enrollments in continuation schools approximate those of comprehensive high schools statewide; however, African Americans were overrepresented in the urban and rural

Table 5.1 Continuation student enrollment, by race and ethnicity, 2006–07

	Site visit schools (37)	Statewide continuation-school enrollment	Statewide eleventh-grade enrollment
Hispanic	61.4%	55%	42.3%
White	17.5	26	34.3
Asian	7.0	3	12.2
African American	14.1	11	8.0

SOURCE: California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS), California Department of Education, 2006–07.

schools we visited. For example, we visited thirteen continuation schools situated in districts where African American students comprised 10 percent or more of total districtwide enrollment. We found that almost half of these continuation schools (six of thirteen) had African American student enrollments that exceeded districtwide averages by 50 percent or more. Black and Latino students make up about half of the eleventh-grade population in the state, but they make up a full two-thirds of enrollment in continuation high schools.

Some important regional differences are noteworthy: American Indian students were the single largest minority group (averaging 14.29 percent of enrollment) across the four Humboldt County schools we visited.⁶ And, on average, although Asian students are notably underrepresented in these schools, they exceeded 10 percent of enrollment in the Central Valley schools. The Asian students we met at these schools were overwhelmingly drawn from Southeast Asian groups (principally youth of Hmong or Cambodian origin). Their teachers report that these students come from low-income families with low levels of parental formal education.

Gender. Boys, especially black and Latino, are overrepresented in continuation schools. Statewide, boys and girls are evenly enrolled (50 percent to 50 percent) in the eleventh grade. In continuation schools, however, boys outnumber girls 58 percent to 42 percent. Behavioral differences among boys (for example, greater rates of referral for chronic insubordination, aggressive behavior, suspected gang affiliation, and truancy) are the reasons most often cited by continuation-school staff for the gender imbalance. In interviews at some rural schools teachers and counselors mentioned what they perceive to be a considerable (but never counted) number of “sensitive” or “sexually confused” boys who are counseled into continuation schools or whose “perceived homosexuality” made them the target

of intimidation or bullying by peers in the sending schools. Remarkably, the schools' response in these cases was most often to separate the victimized boy from the traditional school and to make a "protective" referral to the continuation high school—a questionable practice given the starkly more limited academic options available in continuation schools. These unconfirmed reports indicate a need for more careful study of school referral practices generally, as well as of the specific experiences of gay, lesbian, and questioning youth—particularly in rural communities with few community resources to support them.

English language learners. Students classified as English language learners (ELL) are also overrepresented in continuation high schools. Enrollment of English learners in the eleventh grade is 14 percent statewide but is about 21.3 percent in continuation schools statewide. In the continuation schools we visited (which included a large number of high-growth Hispanic communities in Fresno, San Joaquin, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties), more than a quarter of the students (25.6 percent) were classified as ELL. Spanish was the home language of about 75 percent or more of the ELL students in our sample; some Central Valley schools also enrolled sizable numbers of Hmong- and Cambodian-origin ELL students.

Social Context and Behavioral Issues

There are often other factors at play for students attending continuation schools, including living and family arrangements, student mobility, alcohol and other substance use, and violence and victimization issues.

Living and family arrangements. Continuation students surveyed on the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) are three times more likely than students surveyed in comprehensive high schools to be in foster care or living with a relative other than a parent (11 percent versus 4 percent for eleventh-graders in the statewide survey).⁷ WestEd researchers found that all students in the CHKS sample who reported living in transitory arrangements (for example, in a shelter, on the street, in a car or van) were in a continuation school or in a community day school (for expelled students) (see Austin et al. 2008).

Student mobility. Compared with students in comprehensive schools, continuation students are more likely to move from school to school. As a result, they spend less time in any one school. Increased mobility is often the result of frequent family or guardian moves, or changes in a student's foster home placements. Between 2004 and 2006, 17 percent of continuation students surveyed on the CHKS reported changing where they lived

two or more times in the past year, compared with 7 percent of eleventh-graders (almost 2.5 times higher). Fewer than half (47 percent) of continuation students reported being enrolled in their continuation school more than ninety days. This lack of stability increases the academic disengagement of an already challenged student population and often hampers a school's ability to help these students (Austin et al. 2008). Our site visits further confirmed the link between family dislocation and student mobility. Students in economically fragile or otherwise socially unstable home environments tend to move frequently as their parents or guardians seek jobs and affordable housing. Teachers report that the undocumented status of many students' parents keeps their families moving as they seek seasonal work, often in informal job markets such as short-term domestic or itinerant labor.

Alcohol and other substance use. Our WestEd colleagues found that rates of regular and heavy alcohol and drug use (including use at school) are at least two times higher among continuation students than eleventh-grade students in comprehensive schools. For example, methamphetamine use and daily marijuana use are about five times higher among continuation students than eleventh-grade students in traditional schools. Continuation students also reported almost twice the rate of illegal drug use-related problems and dependency indicators (such as frequent and high levels of alcohol consumption) than eleventh graders overall. Especially disconcerting is the high rate of substance use at school. Almost one-fifth of continuation students had been drunk or high at school on seven or more occasions during the school year, more than three times the reported rate among eleventh graders surveyed on the CHKS statewide (24 percent versus 7 percent). They are at least three times more likely than eleventh graders in comprehensive schools to report that alcohol or other drug use causes them to get into trouble and that it interferes with such activities as studying. When the California School Climate Survey (CSCS) asked continuation-school staff to rate how severe a problem each of fourteen student behaviors was in their school, three of the four most-selected problems were drug use, tobacco use, and alcohol use, in that order (truancy was the fourth). These percentages were markedly higher than among students at traditional comprehensive high schools (Austin et al. 2008).

Violence and victimization. Continuation students are about three times more likely than eleventh graders statewide to have been in four or more physical fights at school in the course of a year, as well as to have carried a gun to school (13 percent for both versus 3 to 4 percent for eleventh graders in comprehensive schools), according to the CHKS. Similarly, 14

percent of continuation students report membership in youth gangs, twice the percentage of eleventh graders statewide (7 percent). Continuation students are also more likely to be physically victimized in and out of school. Nine percent report being threatened or injured with a weapon more than once, more than double the rate of eleventh graders statewide (4 percent). Rates of reported violent conflict with peers were also higher among continuation students. They are twice as likely as eleventh graders statewide to report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past twelve months (14 percent versus 7 percent) (*ibid.*).

These data illustrate the complexity of the challenges faced by continuation schools and their students. They are highly vulnerable youth with multiple risk factors and a great deal of turbulence in their lives. Educators in continuation schools struggle to provide alternative ways of helping them to remain in school, accelerate credit accumulation, and meet district and state performance standards for high school graduation. But schools' efforts to support academic advancement cannot be separated from the need to address the high level of nonacademic learning barriers that continuation students experience. The data underscore the need for highly skilled educators who can combine instructional content knowledge with a deep understanding of youth development and training to support their work with behaviorally and emotionally challenged adolescents—a profile we would want for all teachers but that is essential for teachers in alternative settings.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN CONTINUATION SCHOOLS

Statewide data on continuation students' academic performance is scant and limited to performance on state accountability examinations, administered by grade level, and to numbers of students passing the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), which is first administered to students in the ninth grade. It is unsurprising that continuation students score substantially lower on nearly all measures of academic performance compared with their grade-equivalent cohorts in comprehensive high schools. First-time CAHSEE-takers in continuation schools also score significantly lower on the exit exam than their peers in traditional comprehensive high schools.

Among repeat CAHSEE test-takers in eleventh and twelfth grades, however, comprehensive high school pass rates are close to or identical to those of students at continuation schools.⁸ This performance pattern

reflects the fact that a smaller, more academically deficient subgroup of comprehensive school students—a subgroup academically more like continuation students—is retaking the exam at grades 11 and 12. This observation suggests that when roughly comparable students are examined, continuation schools may be doing at least as well at helping students succeed on the high school exit exam as are comprehensive high schools. In fact, several continuation schools we visited boasted better CAHSEE pass rates and high school graduation rates than did their respective sending schools. Although closer examination and better data are needed, these findings suggest a measure of success given the greater documented behavioral and emotional challenges of students in these continuation settings.

So what makes the difference in a continuation school? State-level policy considerations as well as school-level practices are associated with higher-performing alternative schools. We examine these next.

State-level Policy Considerations

In our previous reports we have emphasized state- and school-district level factors that affect schoolwide performance.⁹ Interviews with school leaders and teachers provide two consistent and overarching concerns about state policy as it influences their work with overage, undercredited youth. First, school principals frequently reported that the 1999 application of universal state student performance and curriculum standards for all schools posed new challenges for continuation schools. This spurred them to think more creatively about how they staff their schools and how they approach instruction. However, school principals noted that the current accountability system focuses on increasing the percentage of students who meet or exceed specific performance levels on state assessments. This policy encourages educators to focus their attention on students who fall just below the cut-off score and so are most likely to make gains that would lift overall school academic performance indicators. This focus on students near the cut-off-score “bubble” provides little incentive for teachers to focus on students scoring in the lowest range—that is, most continuation-school students. Continuation high school educators would prefer an accountability system that focused more on student progress over time and that attends to the progress of all students across the performance continuum as well as to students in specific racial and language subgroups.¹⁰

Second, school staff report little recognition in state finance policy of the special challenges to effective instruction and academic engagement in continuation high schools. This constraint is particularly important in

California, where state- and federally controlled dollars account for more than 90 percent of local school finances (EdSource 2006). State rules also limit continuation schools to reimbursement for a maximum of fifteen instruction hours a week (about four periods per school day), regardless of actual additional programming or attendance rates (California Education Code section 46170). Principals and teachers in the continuation high schools we visited report that they are charged with doing more in less time with roughly the same resources per student as all other schools. They say that this aspect of state policy leaves them ill-equipped to meet student needs and is ultimately one of the most frustrating and unfair constraints with which they must contend.

Although educators and policymakers universally acknowledge the particular value of small classes and low student-teacher ratios in alternative settings, many continuation schools receive no additional funding to support the required staffing. More than a third of the continuation high schools we visited have class sizes that are only marginally better than the districtwide averages (class sizes equal to, or greater than, twenty to one) and no special counseling or vocational education support. Moreover, a third of the schools we visited had student-teacher ratios (based on full-time equivalent [FTE] staffing) that actually *exceeded* the average student-teacher ratio for comprehensive high schools in their districts.¹¹

Continuation schools usually have enrollment sufficient to hire at least one part-time academic counselor, but most schools we visited did not have enough funding to support a librarian, nurse, or dedicated attendance officer. None reported hiring staff specializing in English language development instruction, despite the fact that almost half the schools we visited had enrollments of 25 percent or more ELL. Schools enrolling fewer than two hundred students generally are staffed with only a principal, one or two clerical aides, and a part-time counselor (who is often shared with another school or program). The only departure from traditional school staffing structure is the somewhat lower student-teacher ratio and even that depends on district support and commitment to alternative instruction.

Implications for State Policy

To expand the number of “beating-the-odds” schools, the state needs to fund these schools according to a formula that realistically reflects the instructional and academic engagement challenges such schools face. Interviews with school and district officials who are finding the resources to supplement the state formulas at continuation schools suggest that the

cost differential might not be great (and might be less) relative to the return on investment in terms of reduced dropout rates and successful transitions to postsecondary education and employment. Additional cost savings would be realized through reductions in youth incarceration rates or other contact with the juvenile justice system.

The key unfunded items are generally a full day of instruction (continuation high schools are funded only for a half-day of instruction) and supplemental funds for support staff and services related to the vulnerable status of enrolled students.¹² Most pressing is the need for staff trained in social work or psychological services, full-time academic/vocational counselors, and dedicated attendance officers who can work with youth and their families to address absenteeism or tardiness issues. The current staffing system reflects the “horizontal equity” of a per-pupil funding system that assumes all students ought to be funded equally. However, students placed in continuation schools usually present great academic and behavioral challenges to school staff. Students in these settings are also more likely than peers in comprehensive schools to be pregnant, parenting small children, or working part time. Keeping these students engaged in school and supporting their academic needs while enabling them to shoulder family responsibilities also requires special support. We observed that unless a school principal makes a concerted effort to acquire these additional resources from sources outside his or her district, student needs often go unmet by alternative programs with limited staff.

School-level Practices Associated with Higher-performing Alternative Schools

The importance of key leaders’ and teachers’ beliefs and values is vital at higher-performing alternative schools. Principals in schools with evidence of exemplary student outcomes (particularly CAHSEE pass rates and credit-accumulation rates) were often emphatically positive about what they believed their students could accomplish and about the school’s role in facilitating those outcomes. When experienced principals were clear and proactive about their beliefs, the faculty and students echoed their sentiments. Teachers whose principals articulated clear expectations about standards and student outcomes felt empowered and played a significant role in encouraging less-motivated colleagues to try new strategies to engage and support their students.

Our WestEd colleagues reviewed data from the California School Climate Survey (CSCS) indicating that continuation-school staff are more

likely than comprehensive-school staff to describe their schools as positive, caring, and safe learning environments that promote—and have high expectations for—students’ academic success. CSCS data associated higher scores on standardized tests with staff reports of student behaviors that facilitate learning (such as being healthy, alert, ready to learn, and well-behaved) and low levels of substance use as a problem at the school. This observation highlights how closely connected academic and nonacademic factors are in these schools. Prevention and health practitioners surveyed by the CSCS also tended to report that continuation schools have higher levels of support and services than do staff at comprehensive schools to address the nonacademic needs of students. These survey data suggest a strong commitment among high school continuation staff to meeting both the academic and nonacademic needs of their students.

Attention to student academic and social engagement is also a necessary factor in effective instruction. Students are affected by the attitudes and beliefs of their teachers and school leaders. In focus groups students were unequivocal about the effect that teachers’ positive attitudes and high expectations had on their motivation to engage and learn. Some of the black and Latino youth expressed genuine surprise at their own apparent transformation into “good students,” since they had previously experienced only failure. Most students underscored the importance of the extra help and time they received to accomplish work in these settings. Most also emphasized that their teachers and the principal regarded them as “teachable” and having a positive future—and this belief in their potential and value made all the difference to students. These communicated beliefs about student “teachability” and promise take on heightened importance where accountability systems are not in place to ensure a basic minimum level of quality in critical aspects of school operations and instruction.

Likewise, WestEd’s review of data from the CHKS and CSCS identified additional key factors that might account for better performance in some continuation schools. These include student perceptions about how connected they felt to the school, school safety, the presence of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation in their schools (Austin et al. 2008).

Implications for Local Practice

Social supports for vulnerable students are critical to student success. Schools we visited that had strong school-completion outcomes tended to move beyond core academic supports (for example, individual tutoring, which

is at least formally a common feature of alternative schools) to social and emotional supports through psychological counseling and to adult-student interactions that communicated caring. Principals in these schools hired at least a part-time social worker as well as staff with vocational-education experience or credentials; principals also focused their office clerks on attendance issues and parent contact. Providing these additional supports is difficult for smaller schools because of their lean staffing structure, so they depend on developing relationships with agencies and individual volunteers outside the system. These schools were also the most likely to obtain school volunteers with professional backgrounds in social services or to partner with social services agencies to offer on-site support to students.

School-discipline policies in the high-performing alternative schools we visited were generally nonauthoritarian. Principals often described themselves as coaches (and many actually held coaching jobs previously). Consequently, these school leaders encourage faculty and students to conceive of themselves as members of a “team.” In some schools leaders’ efforts to have students and faculty conceive of themselves as part of a “family” with shared responsibility for maintaining academic focus and order in the school reflected a similar philosophy. In such settings students are encouraged to monitor their own behavior by understanding the implications of individual behavior to both group and individual success. In fact, many students and teachers in these schools commented that the school “felt like a family,” where care and personal concern are modeled by the staff and where students are encouraged to care for and celebrate each other’s social and academic development. More than one teacher commented that “these students don’t get much support at home” and the school furnished the family-like encouragement and “tough love” fundamental to their success.

The continuation high schools we visited generally took a “restorative” rather than punitive stance toward disciplinary issues—they sought to understand and respond to the reasons underlying students’ behaviors. These schools focus on direct instruction in positive behaviors, including self-discipline, problem-solving skills, and the development of nurturing relationships. Because many students tell teachers that they have experienced discipline in other schools (or in the hands of the police) as arbitrary and unjust, teachers and principals in these schools are explicit about establishing positive norms and clear expectations for behavior. Teachers enforce consistent disciplinary actions tied to the nature of any infraction. Some teachers offer students skills and strategies for appealing the school’s disciplinary rules and decisions in constructive and socially appropriate ways.

Many schools we visited are in communities where youth gang activi-

ties compete with families and schools to provide students with a sense of belonging. Teachers in high-performing schools did not describe formal “antigang” initiatives, but instead insisted that their own personal effort to gain the trust of students was their most effective strategy for reorienting gang-involved students. They made a point of asking students about what was going on in their home and personal lives, and tried to help them reflect on their context and challenges in ways that engender trust in their teachers and school professionals. High-performing continuation schools report that young black and Latino boys who formed positive relationships with their peers or with the adults in the school are less likely to engage in aggressive behavior in school or to maintain affiliations with gangs. Teachers and principals in high-performing schools note that developing student trust requires that students be given concrete opportunities to contribute in some positive way to the life of the school, their communities, or their peers. Many schools are therefore intentional about engaging students as peer counselors, creating peer discipline “courts,” or by arranging for volunteer opportunities in the school and community, and recognizing them for their prosocial behaviors and contributions.

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

Building college and career knowledge among boys of color from low-income families is also key. It’s important to create intentional partnerships and pathways beyond the school. Black and Latino boys have the lowest college-going rates among all racial and gender subgroups. We found that leaders of particularly effective continuation high schools are purposeful about forming partnerships with external institutions including community colleges, regional occupational programs, and local employers. These partnerships provide students with postsecondary pathways to academic growth and self-sufficiency, along with the resources to help them get there. Interviews with teachers and counselors indicate that even boys who are motivated to stay in school are woefully misinformed about the academic

and social preparation needed to navigate the transition to college and to succeed there.

Where we found strong continuation programs, we usually also found well-designed partnerships with local community colleges. Teachers and counselors in continuation schools worked with area community colleges to develop programs of study as well as opportunities for their students to visit the campus and sit in on classes. Advisers from community colleges visit the continuation high school to tell students about the local program and to explain opportunities for financial aid, admissions procedures, and academic prerequisites.

Several continuation-school administrators actively cultivate relationships with local businesses to provide jobs for students as well as opportunities for credit-bearing internships. Others develop relationships with a number of community agencies that provide youth services and multiple opportunities for community service. Several continuation schools rely on relationships with county mental-health agencies or community-based mental-health programs to provide drug and alcohol treatment, and on partnerships with probation agencies to offer informational talks and collaborate on internships or job placements for students on probation.

In the schools we visited, these partnerships were of a distinctly local flavor, differed in form and intensity, and always added critical resources to support teachers and their students. Schools that were intentional about building these connections helped students to see the relationship among their education, opportunities in their local communities, and positive pathways. These connections helped students to reimagine themselves, their potential, and their futures. Teachers and principals also reported that these connections helped to build public support and understanding in their communities about alternative schools and the students they serve. The benefits are especially important for black and Latino boys in communities with high gang-activity rates, as contact with academically motivated students helps local merchants and businessmen see young men and boys of color in a positive light. Schools lacking these partnerships and connections are, by comparison, at a significant disadvantage in their efforts to meet students' needs.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In describing the process of developing a supportive, quality program at their schools, almost all high-performing continuation high school principals emphasized that there was no road map or professional training

to inform their efforts. Nearly all described a process of experimental implementation over a long period of time, guided and driven by their own instincts and positive goals for their students. An important take-away for us has been that many principals saw themselves as pioneers at their schools, with few external models to guide critical aspects of their school design and reform. Despite these principals' often-lonely efforts, the policy goal of a "continuum of care" remains particularly elusive for young men and boys of color and other at-risk students in alternative programs. Instead, for too many youth, opportunities to connect with school, to imagine hopeful futures, and to set out on a positive pathway are lost when schools do not or cannot respond to their needs—and do not offer them a genuine alternative. Educators working in alternative programs suffer as well when county, municipal, or community-based youth services fail to support their efforts, when the resources offered to them are limited or of poor quality, and when they 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 holding that would enable them to change direction. Although we observed alternative programs across the state that do provide effective opportunities for this population, they were unfortunately the exception. The exceptions remind us that we can do better.

NOTES

1. The California Department of Education reported 974 alternative schools in the 2008–09 school year, of which 525 are continuation high schools, and 449 are community schools or district or county community day schools. In addition, 71 are juvenile court schools under the jurisdictions of the Department of Corrections' Division of Juvenile Justice. Currently, California's high school graduation rate hovers at about 80 percent. See information from the California Dropout Research Project for a full discussion of dropout rates and consequences in California, available online at <http://cdrp.ucsb.edu/>.

2. "Asian students" includes students who self-describe as Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander.

3. See Susan Rotermund, "Alternative Education Enrollment and Dropouts in California High Schools," University of California, Santa Barbara, October 2007, revised December 2007; available online at http://cdrp.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs_statbriefs.htm. Rotermund has estimated that about one-third of all California high school dropouts in the 2005–06 school year were last enrolled in an alternative school. Continuation schools enroll the greatest number of students among alternative school options examined in her study.

4. Counties in the study include Humboldt, Alameda, Santa Clara, San Joaquin, Fresno, San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

5. We chose the eleventh grade (2006–07) from the California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) for comparison as representing the most comparable age cohort to students in continuation schools. This is also the comparison grade when using survey data from the California Health Kids Survey (CHKS).

6. Humboldt County is a largely rural region on the northern coast of California, near the border with Oregon. Humboldt County has eight Native Indian reservations lying within its borders.

7. The CHKS 2004–06 was administered to students in more than nine hundred California school districts. It includes data on 364 continuation high schools (70 percent of the total) and was completed by about twenty-three thousand continuation students.

8. English language arts pass rates on the CAHSEE are identical for continuation and comprehensive schools in the eleventh (31 percent) and twelfth (24 percent) grades. Continuation-school pass rates for math are only slightly lower: 25 percent versus 31 percent in grade 11, and 22 percent versus 26 percent in grade 12.

9. See the references for our publications.

10. This change to federal school accountability measures recently supported by the Obama administration bears watching. See “Blueprint for the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965,” available online at <http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2010/03/03152010.html>.

11. The California Department of Education and the California Continuing Education Association recommend student-teacher ratios be no more than one to fifteen in continuation schools. Only about a quarter of the thirty-six schools in our sample meet this target.

12. Continuation schools are funded for only a partial day, on the outdated assumption that most students in continuation schools work part time. The schools in fact collect no data on whether students work, and our informal interviews with students and teachers indicate that only a handful of students in these schools hold jobs.

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