JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER *for Youth and Their Communities*

Building Effective Learning Environments in California's Continuation High Schools

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Background

This issue brief is part of a larger study of California continuation high schools begun in 2007[1]. While the first phase of the study examined various alternative education options throughout the state, this second phase focused on 23 higher performing continuation high schools in California selected based on multiple student outcome measures. The higher performing continuation high schools in our sample were meeting or exceeding their federal adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets, and further demonstrated strong attendance and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) pass rates, and graduation rates. From November 2009 to May 2010, we[2] visited school sites, interviewing teachers, counselors, and school administrators, and conducting student focus groups. To learn about the broader policy context, we also interviewed district and county administrators and organizations serving this population of students.

This issue brief is specifically intended to reach the community of school-based practitioners and district level policymakers, seeking to better understand alternative schooling for over-aged and under-credited youth. During the first phase of our study, teachers discussed their struggle in balancing student engagement with academic rigor of instruction for this unique population of students. These teachers called out for increased research on the unique context and better practices of continuation high school instruction. To that end, this paper highlights creative work-arounds that successful continuation schools, principals, and teachers implement to serve this unique population of students, despite highly restricted state funding. In particular, this paper emphasizes the importance of operationally aligning these practices to balance competing objectives (*e.g.*, vocational vs. college preparatory programs).

The structures and practices highlighted in this brief were identified based on the frequency and prevalence of their use in the higher-performing continuation school sample, as well as the degree to which principals, counselors, teachers, and students described these practices as effective. Once identified, the research team further analyzed interview transcripts across schools and districts to identify patterns in implementation, alignment, school- and district-level contextual features affecting implementation, and other factors that enabled or constrained effective

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[1] For a report on Phase One of this study, see Ruiz de Velasco et al. 2008.

[2] In addition to the author, the research team included Hoorig Santikian, Martha Cortes and Susan Tu, under the direction of Principal Investigators Milbrey McLaughlin and Jorge Ruiz de Velasco.

implementation. We have grouped these practices into three categories: modified school and classroom structures; learner-centered curriculum and instruction; and socio-emotional supports for students. Within each category, we discuss practices evident in the successful continuation high school programs visited, as well as potential implementation issues. Along the way, we will highlight the tensions in alignment and balance that arise, as well as the ways in which continuation high schools seek to mitigate the impact of such tensions.

Structural Modifications

Originally designed to accommodate working students, California's continuation high schools differ from traditional high schools in certain key structures; these schools are only reimbursed for an abbreviated 15-hour instructional week and are monitored using a modified accountability system under the Alternative School Assessment Model (ASAM). Many of the higher performing schools that we visited provided some additional instruction beyond the mandated 15-hour week; nevertheless, the diminished instructional time constrained their ability to provide rigorous instruction to their students. In response, schools leveraged the additional flexibility afforded under the weakened accountability mechanism of ASAM to reorganize the school's structure and curriculum. Several of the higher performing schools that we visited capitalized on their increased flexibility from district policy to alter course and crediting structures to meet the unique needs of their students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Structural Modifications

Altered Course Structure	Schools offered specialized coursework under general course titles (e.g., 'math' instead of separate algebra and geometry courses) or created interdisciplinary courses (e.g., combined English Language Arts and United States History block period).
Short-Term Modules	Teachers designed curriculum within the structure of short-term modules (or mini-units), in which the students receive grades and credits every three to six weeks. Teachers chunked content into these shorter units based on a teacher-defined set of learning objectives, often backward-mapped to the standards.
Performance-based credit recovery	An extension of competency-based education, course grade and/or coursework corresponds to the number of credits awarded. For a three-week period, a student might earn a third of a credit for a C, two-thirds of a credit for a B, or a full credit for an A. In some cases, grading was further tied to the quantity of work product submitted by the students based on a menu of assessment options (final essay, research presentation, multiple choice test, etc.).

In light of rolling admissions and high student turnover, generalized and combined courses allowed students to begin credit recovery immediately upon enrolling and allowed teachers to tailor the curriculum to meet identified student needs. In some higher performing schools, interdisciplinary course offerings provided teachers with the flexibility to design engaging and rigorous instructional activities that captured student interest more readily than traditional content-bound instruction. However, course compression can potentially restrict post-graduation pathways. In order to attend four-year state universities in California (University of California or California State University), high school students must fulfill a set of approved

courses, known as the A-G requirements, in different content areas. Generalized courses may provide a more tailored approach to student learning, but may restrict access to higher education.

In addition to altered course offerings, schools utilize their autonomy from district scope and sequence to facilitate speedy credit recovery by structuring instruction in short-term grading modules (mini-units). Teachers and students reported that mini-units helped to motivate students by packaging the curriculum in manageable portions that encouraged sustained student engagement. Teachers and students explained that, in the traditional school setting, students had often started the semester well, but subsequently fell behind, due to poor attendance or low rates of homework completion. Instead of receiving no credit due to an overall grade of a D or F, the mini-unit structure allowed teachers to award grades and credits on a three-week basis. While motivating students and facilitating speedy credit recovery, mini-unit structures also required teachers to carefully plan lessons and tailor the curriculum. Teachers remarked that mini-units made it difficult to address certain content in depth, especially in subjects that require students to continually build on previous knowledge. While teachers could design curriculum to build unit-upon-unit, continuity is constrained by the high student turnover and rolling student intake procedures.

In conjunction with the structures above, continuation high schools utilized additional autonomy to award credits based on student performance and work product, rather than seat time. Derived from the competency-based education system (Spady & Mitchell, 1977; Tyo, 1979; Burke, 1989), performance-based crediting ties the quality and quantity of student work to the number of credits earned and, in this way, results in a better match to the student's intuitive sense of accomplishment. Students responded well to this system; as one teacher noted, *"I heard one kid … bragging that he got 21 credits [in one mini-unit], but he's my A+ student and so it totally didn't surprise me. And he's the kid always asking me, 'Do you have any more extra credit?'"* Given that teachers award credits on a rolling basis accompanying the completion of mini-units, they also had more leeway to allow students to complete missed or extra credit work to raise their grades or earn additional credits.

Further, some teachers allowed students to select from a menu of performance-based assessments to earn different grades within the same unit. For example, a student might: (1) complete and pass a multiple-choice examination for a C, (2) complete the same exam and an additional analytical essay for a B, or (3) complete both of these assignments with an additional multimedia research presentation on a topic of the student's choice to earn an A. In this way, expectations were effectively communicated and rewards were clearly tied to effort and work product. However, one potential drawback of performance-based grading and crediting is an intensified focus on the quantity and completeness of work product, rather than work quality and overall student learning.

Curriculum and Instructional Design

Autonomy from district scope and sequence and district-wide periodic assessments enables continuation high schools to design their own curriculum and set their own learning objectives. This flexibility was essential for the continuation schools that we visited, as they sought to provide rigorous and personalized instruction to students with a wide range of academic backgrounds. Figure 2 lists some strategies employed.

Figure 2: Curriculum Design

Data-Driven Approach	Teachers and principals in our study administered pre-test assessments to identify gaps in student learning. At some sites, teachers described periodic data analysis meetings with the principal, during which they discussed student progress and created an intervention or re-teaching plans.
Backward-Mapping to State Standards	Some successful schools engaged in careful backward-mapping of the standards in creating intensive content-infused units tailored to student background, ability, and needs. Often, teachers choose standards based on student benchmark assessments.
Computer-based Programs	Schools utilized computer-based programs for four main purposes: (1) to assess and address gaps in student learning with highly differentiated, targeted instruction, (2) to allow students to take courses that could not otherwise be offered within the confines of a small school (including A-G requirement courses and sometimes Advanced Placement level courses) (3) to facilitate accelerated credit recovery by allowing students to complete additional hours and credits outside of the school day, and (4) to manage intake.

Despite weakened accountability measures under ASAM, the higher performing continuation high schools that we visited carefully analyzed student achievement data on an individual level to identify student needs and tailor instruction. Most of the teachers and principals in our study implemented some kind of pre-test assessment to identify gaps in learning. *"We can look at every student, including the new ones, because […] the first thing we look at is their data. In the English department we teach by clusters, so I know where every student is based on their data, and then [the] students [also] know. We pull them and say, 'Look, this is where you are, and this is what we're going to work on. And you can do it.'"* Combined with the demands of planning short-term grading modules, teachers examined data and designed or modified curriculum at least every three to six weeks. At higher performing continuation high schools, the principal assumed a leadership role in modeling careful and consistent data analysis and encouraged teachers to frequently examine student data to guide their instruction. One teacher shared that *"people are asking questions now because [the continuation school] is now starting to pass comprehensive high schools. Like in algebra, the last [benchmark assessment], we outperformed three high schools … so the superintendent is asking, 'Well, what are you doing that's working and how can we replicate it?' Everything is data-driven."* The teacher described how the principal works with each teacher, following the administration benchmark assessments, to examine data and formulate a plan to 'loop back' and re-teach certain state standards.

Teachers also sought to improve classroom rigor by carefully backward-mapping curriculum to state standards to create intensive content-infused units, tailored to student background, ability, and needs. One teacher shared, *"I tell my kids, we jump around in the book, but [they would say], "Oh, you didn't go to the next chapter," and I say, 'No, we go by state standards.'"* Despite weakened accountability mechanisms, schools—and even individual teachers—judged their own progress based on Academic Performance Index (API) scores and increased proficiency levels on the California Standards Tests (CST). This locally-generated motivation to reach standards-based accountability targets trickled down to students, who talked about their improving scores on standards-based assessments and mentioned their precise scores during our focus groups.

While many schools modified course offerings as discussed above, a small subset of higher performing schools did offer the full complement of rigorous A-G coursework including some laboratory science, foreign language courses, and even a supplemental Advanced Placement (AP) course. Most of these schools offered A-G courses through partnerships with traditional high schools, adult education and community colleges, or by using computer-based coursework. In fact, all schools visited utilized some kind of computer-based system to provide instruction to students for the purposes of intervention, advancement, or personalization. While teachers and administrators felt that programs were extremely helpful to students, students' reaction to these programs was mixed, with some students referring to the programs as *"monumentally boring"* and *"confusing"* and noted that *"there are tricks to online classes to get a good grade."* We cannot determine whether this student perception correlated with specific programs used, school structures supporting these programs, or individual learning styles. Despite unenthusiastic student reception, teachers commonly used computer-based programs as a classroom tool to address wide variation in student ability and proficiency levels.

Computer coursework was also used to manage and facilitate student intake; some schools provided online instruction to students while awaiting placement in a continuation program, allowing students to enter a pre-placement credit recovery program via computer while awaiting the start of a new module or orientation session. This strategy allows the school to serve new placement students while minimizing disruption to instruction and preserving crediting continuity.

Instructional Methods

In addition to structural changes and modification to curriculum, these higher performing continuation high schools employed several unique, school-wide instructional methods (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Instructional Practices

Direct Instruction	Teachers and principals used this term to describe teacher-guided group discussion of a reading, lesson, or case-study. *(Note: Teachers were not referring to the highly-scripted style utilized in some direct instruction curricula, particularly as most curricula were teacher-modified or teacher-created.)*
Project-based Learning	Teachers engage students in inquiry-based projects focusing on solving a complex problem or question collaboratively. In continuation high schools, students often complete projects in coordination with Regional Occupational Programs (ROP)[3] or Career Technical Education (CTE). Some schools also drew on community partnerships to collaboratively design projects with real-world impact.
'No Homework' Policy	Notably, the schools that we visited did not issue homework assignments to students. At most, students were only expected to complete any extra-credit (independent study) or 'make-up' assignments outside of school.

The first phase of this study noted that independent study style instruction, such as 'packet work' in which teachers assigned packets of worksheets and provided assistance as needed, was generally prevalent in

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[3] Regional Occupational Programs, or 'ROP,' are career and technical education programs offered in California. These programs are usually administered by counties (California Department of Education, 2010).

alternative schools (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). In our second phase interviews, teacher and principals in all schools said that they no longer utilized packet work in the classroom. Instead, they favored 'direct instruction,' which they valued as a shift to more rigorous course work. Principals and teachers were not referring to the highly-scripted style utilized in some direct instruction curricula, particularly as most curricula were teacher-modified or teacher-created. Rather, teachers and principals used this term to describe teacher-guided group discussion of a reading, lesson, or case study. Respondents reported that the use of direct instruction dramatically improved student engagement.

To further improve student engagement, many teachers utilized interdisciplinary projects, often integrating Career Technical Education as well as community partnerships. For example, one project effectively struck the balance between student engagement and academic rigor as the students planned and created a community council-commissioned park for neighborhood children. The Landscape Architecture ROP teacher, in collaboration with the continuation school math, science, and history teachers, aided the students in structuring the project to address learning goals. In this way, students engaged meaningfully with content in environment science (in choosing appropriate landscaping and addressing geological issues), urban planning and local government (in obtaining permits and learning about the prospective plot), and mathematics (through surveying work and budgeting), as well as practicing landscape design. The project engaged students in developing critical thinking skills, project management skills, and a deeper understanding of their community. This project was collaboratively designed and continued over a longer period than a single mini-unit.

At almost all of the sites visited, instructors instituted no-homework policies to meet the unique needs of this student population. One teacher noticed that students had low academic confidence and, as a result, had trouble starting homework for fear of failing. As she put it, *"They don't have the confidence to do the work on their own is probably the biggest reason I can give you [for the school's no-homework policy]. I have so many [who] have such poor self-esteem and just look at this and they go, "I can't do this!" And when you sit down with them and you kind of just point a little bit to it or simply just watching them do it and telling them, 'Yep, that's right. Yep, keep going. Oh, that looks great.' And they'll do it without a problem."* Research is mixed on its effectiveness (Cooper et al., 2003; Cooper, 2007); nonetheless, homework is considered an integral part of high school coursework, both as a necessary extension of the academic day and as a means of developing independent study skills. A counselor at one traditional school remarked that students returning from the continuation high school (in order to graduate at the traditional school) could not keep up in courses because they were not used to homework requirements.

Socio-emotional Supports

Bearing in mind continuation students' complex home environment and past experiences, higher performing continuation high schools prioritized the creation of safe, inclusive learning environments and communities on campus. This community-centered learning environment is intended to enhance student learning by enabling students to make mistakes or explore difficult concepts within a safe environment (Bransford et al., 2000; Brown and Campione, 1994; Cobb, Yackel, and Wood, 1992). Despite the lean staffing of continuation high schools, most schools had designed and implemented context-driven socio-emotional support systems for their students, often in partnership with community-based nonprofit organizations, community colleges, and local businesses (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Socio-emotional Supports

Modified Disciplinary Approach	Teachers and principals set clear, consensus-based behavioral expectations, characterized as 'tough love,' but assumed a more lenient approach to relatively minor, compliance-based infractions.
Family Culture	As we conducted interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers, and students, we often heard the word "family" used to describe the schools. Students often cited strong relationships with teachers, academic counselors, and, where present, psychologists.
Advisory and Orientation	Capitalizing on the benefits of their small size, some continuation schools added orientation classes and daily advisement programs that emphasized study skills and motivation.

Considering the wide background of students placed in continuation high schools, determining an appropriate disciplinary plan is not an easy task. Nevertheless, the schools that we visited exhibited common practices with regard to classroom management and school discipline. Teachers and principals set clear, consensus-based behavioral expectations tied to the school's priorities and objectives, with built-in leniency for minor infractions. For example, teachers stated that it was common to hear inappropriate language in the classroom, and was not something that they felt necessary to address unless directed at another individual. However, continuation schools stringently enforced their consensus-defined expectations around safety and mutual respect, by modeling positive behaviors, guiding students through dispute resolution, and assigning appropriate and relevant consequences. For example, when conflicts arose, teachers and principals functioned as mediators and used these opportunities to teach problem solving and conflict management techniques. As one principal noted, *"If you treat them like adults, they're more inclined to act like adults."*

To bolster this modified approach to behavioral issues, teachers and administrators cultivated a more personal relationship with students. In our focus groups, students at many schools described the school, its students, and staff as a family. As one student elaborated, *"It's seriously like a family in there. Mr. … and Ms. … are the teachers and you can go to them with anything."* Teachers described their role as a coach or a counselor, in addition to their teaching responsibility. As one teacher put it, *"These are the kids that come in and they believe that they 'can't,' they've been told all their lives they 'can't.' So I start with small things to give them that self-confidence and to constantly reward them for the positives."* In larger schools (200-400), the expanded teacher-counselor role was structured through the creation of advisory programs.

Similar to practices in some successful charter schools (Friedlaender & Darling-Hammond, 2007), a positive school culture was developed and sustained through student orientation sessions and weekly or daily advisory period. One model continuation high school, whose methods we saw replicated at neighboring continuation schools, utilized an integrated advisory and orientation session. At this school, student intake occurred only once each month (students took computer-based courses while awaiting orientation). Prior to intake, the school required prospective students to attend a three-week orientation session, which offered instruction in academic and personal goal setting and positive study habits. At the end of the orientation, each student was required to complete an interview with the principal to be 'admitted' to the school. At the end of the orientation session, students joined the general school population, with ongoing support during a daily advisory course. Through these courses, students gained access to an adult and peer support system while also developing and creating a detailed higher education and career portfolio. Observed at many of the schools we

visited, the school admissions application or interview process was an evident strategy to gain buy-in from students and families, while advisory programs encouraged ongoing student engagement and provided students with a direct connection to their teacher and peers.

Factors Facilitating Successful Implementation: Balance and Alignment, Strong Leadership, and District Support

Overall, the learning environments in California's continuation high schools greatly vary in program offerings and quality. This paper documented different approaches to building an effective learning environment within those higher performing continuation schools that we selected for this study, while describing the tensions that arose among these practices along the way, due to challenges in operationally aligning practices and balancing competing objectives. For example, the tension between scholastic rigor and learner engagement was emphasized in the discussion of several elements, particularly regarding potentially pathway-determinant programs.

Balancing competing goals and aligning associated practices is a significant challenge for California's continuation high schools, especially considering budgetary constraints. To this end, school-based practitioners must engage in a collaborative, adjustive process to ensure that educators and students work with multiple objectives in mind, and indeed, that they set those goals organically by first determining the needs of their particular communities. It is essential that continuation school staff carefully consider the potential unintended consequences of adopting different programs, to avoid implementing conflicting or overly restrictive practices.

Given the small school size and the wide range of student needs, teachers and principals at continuation high schools have a significant impact on the vision, mission, and practices at the school level. Strong principal leadership was one factor that seemed to contribute to balance and alignment in the schools that we visited. The presence of a specific school objective contributed to staff unity—and thereby standardized and leveled classroom instruction—by ensuring that all teachers engaged in school-wide practices. In addition, enhanced professional development opportunities within schools, across the district, and statewide may also aid schools in strengthening school-wide objectives and aligning their own practices. In our interviews, teachers reported that there were too few opportunities for professional development and that professional development was not appropriately tailored to the needs of their specific school context and student population.

Additionally, districts can aid school sites by encouraging increased collaboration between traditional schools and alternative schools with regard to placement practices, shared resources, and professional development. Districts should seek to provide schools with high quality staff with the aim of improving options for over-aged and under-credited youth. Principals and teachers in higher performing continuation high schools are designing and implementing innovative programs and practices to reach their students. Districts should take an interest in these creative practices, ensure that their schools universally provide a rigorous, engaging educational program for all students, and help to drive improvement in California's continuation high schools.

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