

Alternative and Traditional High School Enrollment: An Analysis of One Urban District

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Abstract: *Urban districts are important places to observe the array of non-traditional schooling options in which high school students can be educated. We examined enrollment distributions in 1 traditional and 3 different types of alternative high schools in 1 urban school district. We coded all high schools in the sample district into 4 school types including traditional, innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused. We analyzed demographic data of all high school students enrolled in the sample school district for gender, ethnicity, qualification for free or reduced-price lunch, and disability status. Results showed overrepresentation of male students, Black students, American Indian students, students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and students with disabilities in behavior-focused alternative schools. Hispanic students were overrepresented in academic remediation-focused alternative schools. These findings suggest disparate enrollment practices among urban traditional and alternative high schools.*

Traditional public high schools serve a diversity of students. However, not all students experience success in high school (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011; McFarland, Cui, & Stark, 2018; McFarland et al., 2017). To meet the needs of students who do not experience success in traditional high schools, school districts increasingly rely on alternative schools and programs to provide basic educational services to a subset of students (Hodge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014; Porowski, O’Conner, & Luo, 2014). Furthermore, Carver and Lewis (2010) reported a particularly high reliance on alternative education in public school districts in which a significant number of students are considered at risk.

Alternative schools and programs take many forms but can be categorized into three broad types: (a) schools that offer innovative educational approaches and are often accessible through an application process, (b) schools with a behavior or disciplinary focus designed for students who exhibit social or behavioral difficulties, and (c) schools designed to provide academic support to students who experience credit deficiencies or are otherwise struggling to stay on track for high school completion (Raywid, 1994). These three types of alternative schools are referred to here as innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused, respectively. The three types of alternative schools are defined in contrast to traditional public high schools, sometimes referred to as comprehensive neighborhood schools, which typically account for the largest proportion of student enrollment in a district (Keaton, 2014).

Since alternative schools target specific student populations (e.g., students who fail multiple courses or students recommended for expulsion), it follows that characteristics of students who attend alternative schools differ from those of students in traditional schools. For example, Foley and Pang (2006) and Perzigian, Afacan, Justin, and Wilkerson (2017) noted higher male and Black student enrollment in academic remediation-focused alternative schools compared to traditional schools. Without distinguishing between types of alternative schools, Lehr and Lange (2003) reported that students of color are enrolled in alternative schools at disproportionately higher rates compared to their enrollment in traditional neighborhood schools.

Students with disabilities are frequently overrepresented in alternative schools as well; for example, Perzigian et al. (2017) reported that students receiving special education services for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) were overrepresented in academic remediation-focused alternative schools compared to traditional schools. Additionally, a study examining reading instruction in alternative settings revealed that nearly 45% of all students receiving instruction in alternative schools in one Midwestern state were identified with a disability and received special education services (Wilkerson, Yan, Perzigian, & Cakiroglu, 2016). Collectively, these findings suggest that enrollment in different types of educational settings may vary systematically by gender, ethnicity, and disability status.

As districts rely increasingly on alternative settings to educate students who are not thriving in traditional schools, it is important to understand attendance patterns to better understand the implications of varied outcomes associated with specific types of alternative schools. To date, researchers have reported mixed evidence of the effectiveness of alternative schools at improving students’ academic and behavioral outcomes (Carswell, Hanlon, Watts, & O’Grady, 2014; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, Justin, & Datar, 2016; Schwab, Johnson, Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). For example, Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al. (2016) found that students attending behavior-focused alternative schools were suspended fewer times and received fewer office discipline referrals than a comparison group enrolled in traditional schools. However, the comparison group attended more days of school and earned significantly more credits.

Chiang and Gill (2010) reported lower standardized math and reading scores among students attending alternative schools compared to their peers in traditional neighborhood schools. Franklin, Streeter, Kim, and Tripodi (2007) showed that high school students attending academic alternative schools earned significantly more credits than their counterparts in a comparison group. On the other hand, Franklin et al.’s comparison group had significantly higher school attendance and graduation rates than those attending the academic alternative schools.

Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al. (2016) similarly found that students attending academic remediation-focused alternative schools earned more credits but had significantly lower attendance rates than a matched group of students who attended traditional schools. In another study, Franco and Patel (2011) reported that 70% of students in their study who attended a summer credit recovery program after their freshman year earned sufficient credits to catch up with their chronological age peers, though the program did not have an impact on the students' overall GPAs, underscoring the variability in outcomes within and across school types.

Previous researchers found emerging evidence of disproportionality in enrollment patterns among traditional and alternative schools (Perzigian et al., 2017). However, as reliance on alternative schools grows, it is increasingly important to consider enrollment patterns distinguished by school types. The purpose of this cross-sectional, descriptive study was to examine enrollment patterns across types of high schools. We addressed the following research question: How do proportions of students enrolled in different types of secondary schools vary with regard to (a) gender, (b) ethnicity, (c) socioeconomic status, and (d) disability status? To address all aspects of this question, we conducted a series of chi-square analyses.

Method

This section presents the study setting, data sources, and data analysis.

Setting

The following numbers are rounded to the nearest 10. Roughly 650,000 people populate the city in which the sample district is located, with approximately 20% of households reporting income below the poverty line. Half of the city's population identifies as White (not Hispanic or Latino), 30% as Hispanic or Latino, and 10% as Black or African American. Nearly 25% of households in the urban area speak a language other than English and 15% of the population is foreign born. The median household income is approximately \$50,000 annually with 40% of persons over the age of 25 holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

The sample district serves more than 84,000 students in kindergarten through Grade 12 each year and utilizes a range of traditional and alternative secondary schools for its students. During the 2013–14 academic year (AY), the district reported a four-year high school graduation rate, for students receiving a regular diploma, of about 60% with a 5% dropout rate. Additionally, the state education agency (SEA) reports that in AY 2013–14 approximately 40% and 75% of the district's 10th grade students did not meet proficiency on the state's standardized assessments of reading and mathematics, respectively.

Sample

Our overall sample included data from 20,742 students enrolled in Grades 9–12 during AY 2013–14. This number represents approximately 90% of high school students in the district during AY 2013–14 (23,401 total enrolled). Data were comprised of information regarding each student's current educational placement, ethnicity, gender, free or reduced lunch (FRL) qualification status, and disability

status. Table 1 provides a summary of demographic characteristics of the student sample from AY 2013–14. The student sample identifies predominantly as Hispanic (57.3%) and the majority of students (70.1%) qualified for FRL.

Table 1

Student Characteristics for Secondary Schools in Sample School District AY 2013–14

Characteristic	% (n)
Gender ^a	
Female	49.9% (10,302)
Male	50.1% (10,354)
Ethnicity ^a	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8% (159)
Asian	3.8% (775)
Black	16.4% (3,391)
Hispanic	57.3% (11,841)
White	18.6% (3,835)
NH/OPI	0.2% (32)
Two or More	3.0% (623)
FRL Status ^b	
Yes (Qualified)	70.1% (14,548)
No (Not qualified)	29.9% (6,193)
Student Disability Status ^b	
Yes (Receive special education services)	9.7% (2,005)
No (Do not receive special education services)	90.3% (18,745)

Note. NH/OPI = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; FRL = free or reduced lunch. ^aData for two behavior-focused alternative schools are not included in the reporting of this variable. ^bData for six schools include middle school students in addition to secondary students.

School Coding Procedure

The authors of this study coded all high schools in the participating district to examine the frequency and distribution of student enrollment across the different types of high schools. We coded schools using a researcher-developed protocol to determine school type. Protocol questions included:

1. Is the school identified as alternative, charter, intensive, transformative, or something other than a traditional high school in the publicly reported descriptions provided to the research team by the district?
2. Do the majority of students attend by choice or by referral/assignment?
3. Does the school curriculum focus on a specific skill area, (e.g., arts, technology), or does the school target a select student demographic other than students identified as at risk?
4. Is this school aimed at academic recovery or behavior modification?

We used the resulting information to determine a final school type. Schools coded as traditional met the following criteria: They were not identified as anything other than a comprehensive, regular high school; they served a majority of students who attended by choice; they did not target any particular student demographic or specific skill area; and they were not aimed primarily at academic or behavioral remediation.

Schools coded as innovative met the following criteria: They were identified as alternative, charter, transformative or something other than a comprehensive, regular high school; they served a majority of students who attend by choice; they focused on a specific skill area; and they were not aimed primarily at academic or behavior remediation.

Schools coded as a behavior-focused alternative were identified by the district as nontraditional; they also identified as providing behavior remediation; and they had a primary aim of serving students referred or assigned due to behavioral difficulty.

To be coded as an academic remediation-focused alternative, a school had to be identified by the district as a nontraditional setting; students were either assigned or elected to attend; and the school's primary aim was academic remediation and/or credit recovery.

The first author trained the coauthors as coders. Coders practiced coding with a sample of schools from a district that was not part of this study. In order to be considered successfully trained, coders had to reach 90% agreement with the trainer on a question-by-question basis, as well as in the final classification of each school. Using the participating district's 2013-14 enrollment guide, coders independently coded 53 schools with 92% agreement. We addressed all disagreements in a group meeting where we reached 100% agreement. The district did not include three of the 53 high schools in the publicly available enrollment guide. We extracted information for these three schools from the schools' websites. A researcher who was not part of the coding team summarized this information for these schools in a document. Then, we used this information as the source for coding of those three individual schools. We shared final codes with a district staff member as a validity check for our school coding.

School Types

We removed two of the 53 coded high schools from the analyses because no secondary students were enrolled in them during AY 2013-14. Of the 51 high schools remaining in the sample, six were coded as traditional, 26 were innovative alternative, four were behavior-focused alternative, and 15 were academic remediation-focused alternative. Traditional schools were the largest, with an average enrollment of 1,097. Innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused alternative schools had average enrollments of 426, 99, and 180, respectively. Table 2 provides a summary of enrollment by school type.

Data Sources

We used district and SEA data in this study. We collected student gender and ethnicity data from the SEA. We excluded two schools from the analyses of these two demographic variables due to missing data at the state level. Data for free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligibility and disability status were obtained from the district and represented whole schools (i.e., data were not provided by individual grade levels). Six of the secondary schools in our sample also served students in Grades 6-8. Therefore, FRL eligibility and disability status data for those six schools included students who were in Grade 8 or lower in addition to the data for students in Grades 9-12.

Table 2

Secondary School Enrollment By School Type

School Type	Number of schools categorized in each school type	Total number of students served in each school type	Mean number of students enrolled per individual school
Traditional	6 (11.8%)	6,581 (31.7%)	1,097
Innovative	26 (51.0%)	11,064 (53.3%)	426
Behavior-focused	4 (7.8%)	397 (1.9%)	99
Academic remediation-focused	15 (29.4%)	2,700 (13.0%)	180
Total	51 (100%)	20,742 (100%)	

Data Entry Reliability

Two undergraduate research team member were trained for data entry, and 25% of all manually entered data were selected for a data entry reliability check. Reliability checks were conducted on an item-by-item basis to calculate data entry reliability. Data entry reliability was calculated at 100%.

Analysis

We used SPSS 22 to analyze the data. The dependent variable (DV) was school type. The independent variables (IVs) were gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability status. Socioeconomic status was operationalized as qualification for FRL status. School type included the following four categories: (a) traditional, (b) innovative, (c) behavior-focused, and (d) academic remediation-focused. We operationalized the independent variables as categorical variables: gender (male or female), ethnicity (American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, Native Hawaiian, or two or more races), FRL status (qualifies for FRL or did not qualify), and disability status (identified with a disability or did not identify).

Using chi-square tests of independence, we tested for significant differences for student distribution across the four school types with regard to the four demographic variables. Chi-square is a commonly used test to evaluate a relationship between two categorical variables; it is also the oldest test used for this purpose (Agresti & Finlay, 2008). The use of chi-square analyses was appropriate because we examined the relationship between two categorical variables: student demographics and school types. We conducted a separate chi-square test for each independent variable. We created the following contingency tables: 2 (gender) x 4 (school type), 7 (ethnicity) x 4 (school type), 2 (FRL status) x 4 (school type), and 2 (disability status) x 4 (school type). Our data met assumptions of chi-square test: Variables were measured at nominal levels (i.e., categorical data); observations were independent; and sample size was large—expected frequencies were at least five for the at least 80% of the cells.

Privacy and Confidentiality

To accommodate the need for privacy and confidentiality we used deidentified data, minimizing the

risk of privacy or confidentiality breach. We kept digital data files on a password-protected computer at the institution with which the first author is affiliated in keeping with Institutional Review Board recommendations.

Results

Table 3 provides a summary of student demographic characteristics by school type. We indicated significant differences using subscript letters in the table. We summarize results of the chi-square analyses below.

Table 3

Student Characteristics by School Type

Characteristic	Traditional	Innovative	Behavior-focused	Academic remediation
Gender				
Male	51.0% (3,358) _a	48.2% (5,434) _b	77.9% (243) _c	52.9% (1319) _a
Female	49.0% (3,223) _a	51.8% (5,836) _b	22.1% (69) _c	47.1% (1174) _a
Ethnicity				
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.7% (43) _a	0.7% (74) _a	2.2% (7) _b	1.4% (35) _b
Asian	5.1% (333) _a	3.7% (420) _b	1.6% (5) _{b,c}	0.7% (17) _c
Black	15.3% (1,006) _a	16.5% (1,858) _{ab}	28.2% (88) _c	17.6% (439) _b
Hispanic	51.4% (3,382) _a	58.1% (6,553) _b	39.1% (122) _c	71.6% (1,784) _d
White	24.5% (1,611) _a	17.6% (1,981) _b	25.0% (78) _a	6.6% (165) _c
NH/OPI	0.2% (10) _a	0.2% (22) _a	0% (0) _a	0% (0) _a
Two or More	3.0% (196) _{ab}	3.2% (362) _b	3.8% (12) _{ab}	2.1% (53) _a
FRL Status				
Yes	67.0% (4,409) _a	69.8% (7,725) _b	91.4% (363) _c	73.7% (1,988) _d
No	33.0% (2,173) _a	30.2% (3,338) _b	8.6% (34) _c	26.3% (710) _d
Student Disability Status				
Yes	11.8% (775) _{ab}	10.7% (1,191) _b	32.2% (128) _c	13.5% (338) _a
No	88.2% (5,807) _{ab}	89.4% (10,084) _b	67.8% (269) _c	86.5% (2,158) _a

Note. NH/OPI = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; FRL = free or reduced lunch. Means with differing subscripts within rows are significantly different at the $p < .05$.

The overall test statistic for gender representation across the four school types was significant, $X^2(3, N = 20,656) = 122.45, p < .001$. Male student representation differed significantly between traditional (51.0%) and innovative (48.2%), traditional (51.0%) and behavior-focused (77.9%), and innovative (48.2%) and behavior-focused (77.9%) alternative schools. No significant difference in male representation between traditional (51.0%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (52.9%) was noted.

Ethnicity

The overall test statistic for ethnicity was significant, $X^2(18, N = 20,654) = 645.81, p < .001$. We describe enrollment distribution for each ethnic group in the subsections below.

Hispanic students. Representation of Hispanic students in each school type was significantly different when compared to each of the other three school types (see Table 3). The proportion of Hispanic students was highest in academic remediation-focused alternative schools (i.e., 71.6%), followed by innovative (58.1%), traditional (51.4%), and behavior-focused alternative schools (39.1%).

White students. The proportion of White students differed significantly between traditional (24.5%) and innovative (17.6%), and traditional (24.5%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (6.6%). Similarly, White student representation was significantly different between innovative (17.6%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (6.6%). There was no significance in the difference in White student representation between traditional and behavior-focused alternative schools.

Black students. Black student representation was significantly different between traditional (15.3%) and behavior-focused (28.2%), and traditional (15.3%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (17.6%). Similarly, Black student representation was significantly different between innovative (16.5%) and behavior-focused (28.2%), and behavior-focused (28.2%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (17.6%). There was no significant difference in Black student representation between traditional and innovative or between innovative and academic remediation-focused alternative schools.

Asian students. Asian student representation differed significantly between traditional (5.1%) and innovative (3.7%), traditional (5.1%) and behavior-focused (1.6%), traditional (5.1%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (0.7%). Similarly, the proportion of Asian students was significantly different between innovative (3.7%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (0.7%).

American Indian students. American Indian student representation differed significantly between traditional (0.7%) and behavior-focused (2.2%), innovative (0.7%) and behavior-focused (2.2%), traditional (0.7%) and academic remediation-focused alternative (1.4%), and innovative (0.7%) and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (1.4%). There was no significant difference in American Indian student representation between behavior-focused and academic remediation-focused alternative, nor between traditional and innovative schools.

Hawaiian Islander/Pacific Islander students. Hawaiian Islander or Pacific Islander student representation was not significantly different across the four school types.

FRL Status

The overall test statistic for FRL status across the four school types was significant, $X^2(3, N = 20,740) = 132.29, p < .001$. The representation of students who were qualified for FRL was significantly different across all four school types as each one was compared to the other three types. Behavior-focused alternative schools were comprised of

the largest proportion of students who qualified for FRL (i.e., 91.4%), and academic remediation-focused alternative schools (73.7%), innovative (69.8%), and traditional (67.0%) schools followed, respectively.

Disability Status

The overall test statistic for student disability status was significant, $X^2(3, N = 20,750) = 184.19, p < .001$. The proportion of students receiving special education services differed significantly between traditional (11.8%) and behavior-focused (32.2%), innovative (10.6%) and behavior-focused, as well as academic remediation-focused (13.5%) and behavior-focused alternative schools. Similarly, the representation of students with disabilities was significantly different between innovative (10.6%) and academic remediation-focused (13.5%) alternative schools.

Discussion

In this study, we examined enrollment distributions of students attending four different types of secondary schools in one urban school district. We investigated whether student gender, ethnicity, FRL status, and disability status varied significantly across traditional, innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused alternative schools. Findings from the analyses revealed significant differences related to each of these four student characteristics. In the following sections, we discuss our findings in light of previous research.

Variation in Gender Distribution

Though significant differences in gender distributions across traditional and innovative schools were reported, the most highly significant difference in gender proportions was between behavior-focused alternative schools and each of the other three types. Male students were significantly overrepresented in behavior-focused alternative schools when compared to any of the other three types. This study corroborates findings of other studies on enrollment patterns in urban districts (e.g., Foley & Pang, 2006; Perzigian et al., 2017), as well as Conger and Long's (2013) finding that male students were disproportionately placed in settings focused on behavioral remediation. That male students continue to be disproportionately placed in settings that focus on behavior and social skills underscores attributions that are made about male students when they struggle in traditional schools.

Given that outcomes for students in behavior-focused alternative schools are generally negative compared to outcomes for students in traditional secondary schools, (even when controlling for past behavior; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, et al., 2016), the disproportionate number of male students in behavior-focused alternative schools suggest that male students are being disproportionately relegated to segregated educational experiences in settings that emphasize behavior and social skills over academics.

Variation in Ethnicity Across School Types

Hispanic students have the highest risk of dropout of any ethnicity in the United States, with Hispanic males and Hispanic females more at risk than the rest of their gender, and Hispanic males the most at risk of any gender

and ethnicity combination as of 2010 (Aud et al., 2012). The significant overrepresentation of Hispanic students in our sample academic remediation-focused high schools, which provide services to students with credit deficiencies, aligns with that national data. However, Hispanic students were significantly underrepresented in our sample of behavioral remediation-focused settings, whereas both Black and White students were overrepresented. We recommend that future research focus on the decision-making process that prompts educators to refer students to specific types of alternative schools. It is possible that educators make different attributions to students' poor trajectories based on ethnicity. For example, prior research suggested that cultural deficit thinking was a factor in educators' performance expectations and the ensuing school placements of Black youth (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). Further, the finding that Black students were overrepresented in behavior-focused alternative schools was not uncommon, as several past studies documented the removal of Black students from traditional settings (Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Smith & Harper, 2015; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018).

Variation in Proportion of Students Receiving FRL

Overall a relatively high percentage of students in our sample district qualified for FRL. Across school types, traditional schools reported the lowest percentage of students who received FRL with 67.0% of the students in the traditional schools so designated. The proportion of students designated as receiving FRL was 69.8% at innovative schools. Behavior-focused alternative schools served the highest proportion of students who received FRL at 91.4%, followed by academic remediation-focused alternative schools at 73.7%. The significantly disproportionate number of students who qualified for FRL in behavior-focused alternative schools, combined with the significantly disproportionate representation of males and Black students in these schools, merits further attention.

We know from past research that students removed from traditional, general education settings and placed in more restrictive and segregated placements for reasons related to poor behavior were at increased risk for school disengagement, dropout, and psychosocial effects, such as feelings of alienation and not belonging, depression and worthlessness (Ahram et al., 2011; Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011). For these reasons, marked patterns of disproportionality should be investigated thoroughly as they suggest inconsistencies in our nation's ability to provide students from all ethnicities equal access to educational resources.

Variation in Proportion of Students with Disabilities Across School Types

Students with disabilities accounted for 11.8% of the student body in traditional schools and 10.7% in innovative schools. Behavior-focused alternative schools served the highest percentage of students with disabilities at 32.2%. Academic remediation-focused alternative schools served 13.5% students with disabilities. Behavior-focused alternative schools serve higher percentages of students with disabilities than any other school type, suggesting

that districts place students with disabilities who exhibit behavioral challenges in segregated settings at higher rates than students without disabilities. However, the percentage of students with disabilities in academic remediation-focused alternative schools suggests that is not true for students with disabilities who exhibit academic challenges.

Conclusions and Limitations

Our cross sectional analysis of enrollment across four school types (i.e., traditional, innovative, behavior-focused, and academic remediation-focused alternative schools), reveals significant differences in demographic characteristics of students who attend each type. Our findings, in addition to findings from previous research (Perzigian et al., 2017), suggest a pattern of disproportionate representation across school types within districts. Although limited in scope due to the nature of data from a single district, our work calls for closer examination of district policies and practices that lead to qualitatively different educational opportunities for subgroups of high school students.

Districts should consider the purpose of alternative education in their school communities and review identification processes that allow teachers and school administrators to determine which students are best served by alternative programs to avoid needlessly referring students out of traditional high schools or steering them away from innovative options. The overrepresentation of males, students who are Black or Hispanic, students who qualify for FRL, and students with disabilities in academic remediation and behavior-focused alternative schools is a call for further investigation of district- and school-level practices and policies that lead to students' removal from traditional settings.

The type of school a student attends often denotes the educational opportunities and academic and social experiences the students are afforded—or denied. Given the patterns of disproportionality, we recommend that future research examine school outcomes for students attending specific types of alternative schools. Data related to achievement in different educational settings could add to the discourse on our nation's widely acknowledged achievement gaps.

Our lack of access to special education data indicating the incidence of specific disability categories across school types is a limitation to our study. Understanding whether students with specific disability labels are more likely to be referred to a specific type of alternative school would deepen our understanding of enrollment patterns. Another limitation of our study is that we analyzed data from only one district. We therefore also recommend future research that includes additional school districts of varying size and composition. By doing so, we might develop a more comprehensive picture of student enrollment trends across the increasingly myriad school choice options being offered to students and families across the nation.

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