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JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER
for Youth and Their Communities

The Academic Progress of Alternative School Students Transitioning into Comprehensive High Schools
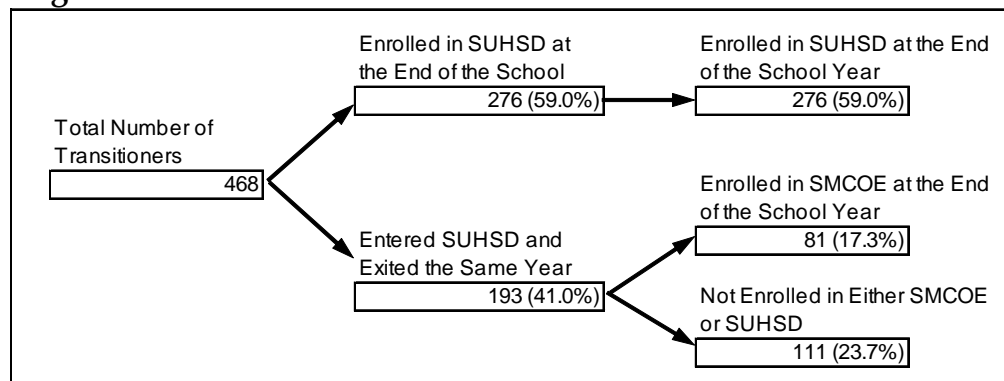
Background

Students with academic or behavioral problems in the comprehensive high school environment frequently enroll in alternative education schools. The San Mateo County Office of Education (SMCOE) administers two types of alternative schools: Community schools, which are generally short-term, voluntary placements for students in need of a smaller, more individualized learning environment, and court schools, including a school at juvenile hall and two minimum security camp facilities for students referred by the San Mateo County Probation Department. Using the Youth Data Archive (YDA), the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University examined the transitions made by students from SMCOE court and community schools to Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD), focusing on their ability to complete the school year.

Findings and Interpretation

Students transitioned from court and community schools to SUHSD a total of 468 times during the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 school years. Figure 1 shows that 59% of these students finished the school year in SUHSD.

Figure 1. Enrollment Status of Transitioners in SUHSD

The following characteristics best predicted the likelihood that a student exiting a court or community school finished the school year after entering SUHSD:

- **Academic Background** – A student's attendance rate and the number of credits completed prior to enrolling in Court or Community schools were strong predictors of finishing the year in SUHSD. For example, students who

were on pace to graduate were almost twice as likely to finish the year as students who had only half or fewer of the necessary course credits.

- **Placement Type** – Students who attended only community schools were more likely to finish the year than students with short-term juvenile hall placements or those students whose juvenile hall placements led to enrollment in community schools (69% vs. 58% and 46%, respectively). Surprisingly, students in the minimum security camp schools, where youth are generally considered to have the highest need, finished the school year at a relatively high rate, 68%.

- **Grade Level and English Learner Status** – English Learners (EL) were less likely to finish the year than non-ELs (50% vs. 64%). Non-EL students who transitioned to SUHSD during 9th grade were much less likely to finish the year than students who entered in 10th or higher grades (49% vs. 66%). This was is in contrast to the normal pattern of student attendance, where SUHSD students in the upper grades were less likely to finish the year than 9th graders.

From Findings to Action

Little is known about the long-term academic progress of students in alternative education settings. Linking data from SUHSD and SMCOE is an initial step that provides new information that can be used to target students for additional supports or alternate pathways to success. Additional strategies for improving the welfare of alternative education students include:

- **Improving Data Collection** – All schools need to accurately collect and electronically store key elements of student attendance and academic progress. More research is needed linking the specifics elements of alternative school programming, such as classroom structure and curricula utilized, to student's long-term educational outcomes, including workforce participation, in order to help compare school sites and develop best practices.

- **Collaborating Across Agencies** – Developing policies through cross-agency collaboration can improve student transitions by, for example, facilitating the transfer of student transcripts between schools or connecting alternative education students and their families to community resources. Pre-existing cross-agency collaborations, such as School Accountability Review Boards, are one possible venue to begin discussions about policies related to alternative school students.

- **Increasing Accountability** – Many students who attend alternative schools are not enrolled at one site long enough to be accounted for under the state's accountability systems. California state legislation SB 651 and SB 219 increase accountability for many students, but districts might also choose to produce Academic Performance Index data specifically for the population of students that enter from alternative schools in order to systematically monitor student progress.

Future analyses can provide a broader examination of the pathways of students in alternative education schools by including data from additional youth-serving agencies and following youth over a longer period of time.

A more detailed version of this report is available at http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/current_initiatives/youth_archive.html