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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

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Background

California's high school dropouts are estimated to cost the state billions of dollars over their lifetimes by lowering tax revenues and increasing payments towards welfare, medical care, and incarceration services (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Before dropping out, many students enroll in alternative education schools, which aim to increase the likelihood of a successful transition to adulthood by offering individualized instruction in a smaller classroom environment. Alternative schools include continuation schools, which are generally long-term placements for students working towards a high school diploma, and community schools, which are generally short-term placements for students with expulsion or juvenile probation histories. Over 10% of all California students were estimated to have enrolled in a continuation or community school during the 2004-05 school year, but little is known about their academic progress (Hill, 2007). Many students do not remain in any one school long enough to be accounted for by either of California's educational accountability systems, the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program and the Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM), and California's educational data systems have not been designed to follow students across multiple school settings (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).

Students in San Mateo County's Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD) who have problems with poor academics or behavior frequently enroll in Redwood Continuation High School or the community schools administered by the San Mateo County Office of Education (SMCOE). The stated goal of SMCOE is for these students "to make significant changes in their lives and return to other less restrictive school sites in their communities" (San Mateo County Office of Education, 2009). This brief examines this stated goal by studying the pathways of "transitioners": students who leave SMCOE community schools and transition into SUHSD. Specifically, we address the following questions:

- What were the characteristics of transitioners, and what factors influenced whether they successfully integrated into SUHSD?

- How did transitioners perform academically in SUHSD, and how did the timing of their transitions affect their academic outcomes?

Characteristics of Students Attending San Mateo County Office of Education Court and Community Schools

In order to track students' transitional experiences, we combined records from SUHSD's four comprehensive high schools (Carlmont, Menlo-Atherton, Sequoia, and Woodside) and Redwood Continuation High School, which serves under-credited 11th and 12th grade students, with records from SMCOE alternative education sites (Table 1). SMCOE is required to maintain juvenile court schools, which serve youth referred by the San Mateo County Probation Department. SMCOE also administers community schools, which serve both expelled and probationary youth. When these students, who local school districts are obligated to serve, enroll in county community schools, the cost is recouped by SMCOE.

Table 1. SMCOE Schools in the 2005-06 to 2007-08 School Year

School Type	School Names	Description
Community	**Canyon Oaks Youth Center, Central, Gateway, North, Propsouth, South, West**	Voluntary sites, though students are frequently referred by probation or school districts; the size and average stay varies by school
Court – Juvenile Hall	**Hillcrest School**	Juvenile facility for students awaiting court hearing; the average stay is 35 days
Court – Camp schools	**Camp Glenwood Boys Ranch & Margaret Kemp Girls Camp**	Minimum security facilities that serve a maximum of 60 and 30 students, respectively; average stays are 2-9 months

There were a total of 418 transitioners – students who exited court and community schools to return to SUSHD – during the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 school years. Table 2 provides demographics for these 418 students, compared to SUHSD students who did not attend SMCOE court and community schools. SMCOE students were more likely to be classified as English Learners, had parents with lower levels of parental education, had higher rates of diagnosed disabilities, and participated more frequently in the Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program, all characteristics associated with worse school outcomes.

Table 2: Descriptive Characteristics of Transitioners and General SUHSD population 2005-06 to 2007-08 School Years

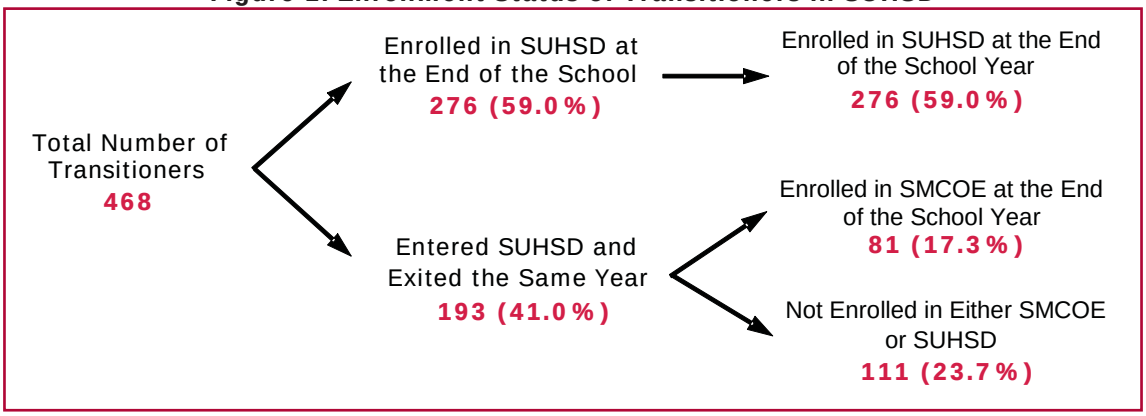
	Transitioners	General SUHSD population
Female	21.8%	50.4%
Male	78.2%	49.6%
African American	14.6%	5.7%
Asian	10.5%	10.5%
Latino	53.8%	41.9%
White	18.9%	39.3%
Diagnosed Disability	29.9%	12.1%
English Learner*	54.3%	41.4%
Free/Reduced Lunch	60.8%	37.9%
Parent Education Less Than HS	36.1%	22.4%
Grade At First Entrance from Court and Community Schools:		
9th Grade	17.2%	-
10th Grade	23.5%	-
11th Grade	36.6%	-
12th Grade	22.7%	-
Number of Youth	**418**	**12,948**

*English Learner row only includes Latino and Asian students

Persistence of Court and Community School Students that Transitioned into Comprehensive High Schools

Transitioners who attended SMCOE schools were extremely mobile, with some students moving multiple times between the comprehensive and alternative high school environments. In all, the 418 transitioners had a total of 468 transitions from SMCOE schools to SUHSD schools over the three-year period of study. Figure 1 shows that 59.0% of transitioners finished the school year in SUHSD. Of the remaining transitioners, 17.3% were enrolled in SMCOE court and community schools and 23.7% were no longer enrolled in either school system at the end of the school year.

Figure 1. Enrollment Status of Transitioners in SUHSD



Completing the school year served as a strong initial predictor of students' long-term enrollment, as 44% of transitioners who finished the initial school year in SUHSD were also enrolled in SUHSD the subsequent June. In contrast, only 16% of transitioners who did not finish the school year managed to return to SUHSD and stay enrolled through the subsequent school year.[1]

At this time there is little information about the students who were not enrolled in SUHSD or SMCOE at the end of the year. They may have entered the workforce, pursued some form of career or technical education, been incarcerated, or been disconnected from the educational and workforce systems entirely. Future analyses could include additional data in order to learn more about transitioner pathways.

Factors that Influenced Student School Year Completion in SUHSD

To better understand transitioner pathways, we examined the factors that were correlated with a transitioning student's ability to complete the school year at SUHSD. The type of SMCOE placement, as well as a student's academic background, grade level, English Learner status, and ethnicity were strong predictors of finishing the year in SUHSD, and gender, parental education, disability status, and previous discipline records were not highly predictive of student success. All findings are based on analysis that controls for a variety of academic and demographic characteristics. Even so, the relationship between these characteristics and student outcomes are correlational and do not imply any causality.

Placement Type: Table 3 (on next page) groups students into one of four categories based on their pathway through SMCOE's court and community schools. Students who only attended 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. Surprisingly, students placed in the more restrictive camp schools were as likely to finish the year as students who only attended community schools. Students in camp schools are generally thought of as those with the highest need.

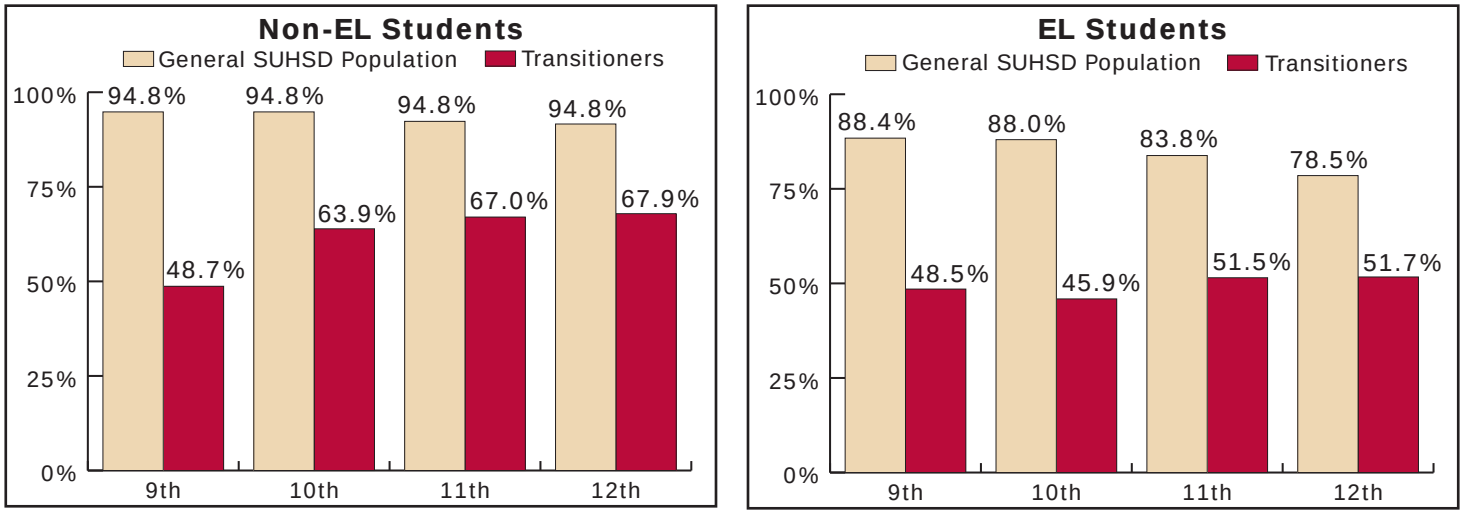
[1] These results are only for 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students who might reasonably be expected to return the following year. Small sample sizes currently prevent us from conducting an in-depth analysis of transitioners enrollment over multiple years.

Table 3. Types of SMCOE Placements

Placement Description	N	Percent of transitioners who finished the year at SUHSD
Community Schools Only - Students who attended community schools but have no record of a placement at any court school.	125	68.8%
Juvenile Hall Only - Students whose only placement in SMCOE prior to entering SUHSD occurred at Hillcrest Juvenile Hall. Approximately 70% of these placements were 1 month or less.	170	57.6%
Juvenile Hall and Community Schools - Students who had placements at both Hillcrest Juvenile Hall and other community schools. These students had longer placement histories in SMCOE than Juvenile Hall Only students.	117	46.2%
Juvenile Hall and Camp Schools - Students placed by Probation/Juvenile Court Judge in the most restrictive court school environments.	56	67.9%

Grade Level, English Learner Status, and Ethnicity: Figure 2 shows that English Learners (ELs) were less likely to finish the year in SUHSD than other transitioners. Non-ELs transitioners who entered SUHSD in the upper grades were more likely to finish the year than students in 9th grade; this is opposite of the "normal" pattern of SUHSD attendance, where students in higher grade levels were less likely to finish the year. Among transitioners, 71.3% of White youth and 65.2% of Asian students finished the school year, compared to 60.9% of African-American and 52.5% of Latino youth.

Figure 2. Percentage of Students who Finished the School Year in SUHSD, by Grade Level and English Learner Status



Academic and Discipline 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, 45% of transitioners with half or fewer of the necessary course credits finished the school year in SUHSD, compared to 81% of transitioners who were on pace to graduate.[2] GPA and previous discipline record had little predictive power, but this may be due in part to consistently poor GPA and discipline records for most SMCOE students.

Other Factors: Students who entered SUHSD's Redwood Continuation High School performed as well as students who entered one of SUHSD's comprehensive high schools. Other characteristics, including gender, parental education, and disability status, were not predictive of student success.

[2] These results are only for 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students who might reasonably be expected to return the following year. Small sample sizes currently prevent us from conducting an in-depth analysis of transitioners enrollment over multiple years.

Academic Outcomes for Transitioners in SUHSD

Completing the school year helps satisfy SMCOE's goal to have students "return to less restrictive school sites," but it is also important to assess students' long-term outcomes, such as their progress towards high school graduation. There is not enough data at this time to examine graduation rates, so we focused on some other common academic measures in Table 4. Overall, students who entered SUHSD from SMCOE schools exhibited worse academic outcomes and attended school less frequently than other SUHSD students. Only one-third of transitioners were on pace to graduate by the end of the school year.

Table 4: Academic Outcomes for Transitioners and General SUHSD population, 2005-06 to 2007-08 School Years

	Transitioners	General SUHSD population
Average GPA	2.2	2.6
Proficient on Math CST	4.6%	31.1%
Proficient on English CST	14.0%	50.9%
Pass CAHSEE on first attempt	44.1%	78.7%
Average attendace rate	81.9%	91.5%
Course credits on pace to graduate	33.3%	74.2%
Number of youth	**468***	**12,948**

* The specific number of students in each row varies as 9th graders do not take the CAHSEE, not all students take a CST, and some students have missing data. General SUHSD population numbers are taken from the most recent academic year available. Data only include students that stay enrolled in SUHSD through the end of the school year.

Did Mid-Semester Transitions Affect Transitioners' Academic Outcomes?

Finally, we examined differences in academic outcomes for transitioners who entered mid-semester, defined as September through mid-December and February through May, and those who entered at the beginning of the first or second semesters. Approximately half of all transitioners entered SUHSD mid-semester, but the majority were students exiting from juvenile hall, many of whom had short stays outside SUHSD. In this current analysis, there were not enough students who transferred mid-semester to draw strong conclusions about the effects of mid-semester transfers on student performance. There was no evidence that mid-semester transfer students had more disciplinary incidents immediately after entering SUHSD or lower GPAs than students who entered at the beginning of the semester. Students who returned mid-semester, especially those returning from long stays in community or camp schools, were more likely to be initially enrolled in self-paced, internet-based English and math courses rather than in the traditional classroom. We cannot evaluate student performance in these classes at this time.

Conclusions and Implications

Alternative schools support tens of thousands of California youth each year, but little is known about these students' educational outcomes and the role that alternative schools play in creating a successful transition to adulthood. The majority of research on alternative schools has attempted to identify best practices for alternative education programming, such as having a supportive environment that accommodates learning differences between students (Queen & Poirier, 2006; Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). There has been little research linking students to their long-term educational outcomes, such as high school graduation rates or workforce participation, because existing data systems are not set up to track highly mobile students across institutions and over time. The small body of research that focuses on student outcomes has provided mixed results, with some evidence of improvements in attitude, attendance, and behavior for students in alternative school settings, but little consistent evidence of academic improvements (Carruthers, 1999; Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Lange & Lehr, 1999; Lange & Sletten, 2002).

This analysis shows that readily available data help predict the likelihood that a student exiting a community school finishes the school year after entering a comprehensive or continuation high school. Some groups of students, including 9th grade students who are dealing with the difficult adjustment from middle school to

high school and those with weak attendance and course credit histories, may lack the necessary structure in their lives to transition into a comprehensive high school environment. Key predictors of student success are presented here so that schools in SUHSD can better monitor and provide support to these high-risk students. SMCOE could also use these predictors to better target students for additional supports or increase opportunities for alternate pathways to success, for example, by expanding their current GED or career and technical education programs.

More generally, the current state of alternative education leads us to three main recommendations. First, the data currently collected about alternative schools are insufficient to measure the effectiveness of alternative education services. At the district level, both alternative and comprehensive high schools need to accurately collect and electronically store key elements of student progress, including attendance, credit completion, and changes in student placement. Some fields are not collected because they are not mandated by state accountability measures and some schools' data systems cannot keep track of multiple entrances during the course of a school year. At the state level, more research is needed linking the specifics elements of alternative school programming, including classroom structure, curricula utilized, and school management techniques, to student's long-term educational outcomes in order to help compare school sites and develop best practices (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). One recent improvement has been the implementation of California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), which allows student tracking between educational agencies across the entire state. Efforts should also be made to integrate data on student outcomes after leaving the secondary school environment, such as workforce participation, welfare receipt, and incarceration data, in order to provide more comprehensive details about the pathways of alternative education students over time.

Second, the highly mobile nature of these youth means that no one agency can be held solely responsible for their welfare. Many issues need to be coordinated between multiple agencies, including sharing of information between alternative and comprehensive high schools about student entry and exit, timely transfer of student transcripts between educational agencies, and connecting alternative education students and their families to community resources. As one example of coordinated care, the SMCOE hosts a monthly Community School Advisory Group (CSAG), consisting of representatives from SMCOE, school districts, the Probation Department, and community-based organizations, that meets to discuss ideas specifically around court and community students, such as mid-semester transfer policies. Through this work, the Cleo Eulau Center, a local community-based organization, initiated a new program for the 2009-10 school year which provides parent information and individual counseling to help students transition from SMCOE schools into Sequoia High School. Previous research has supported the idea that students in alternative education schools might benefit from these types of transitional services (Carruthers, 1999). Where possible, communities can attempt to capitalize on pre-existing cross-agency collaborations, such as School Attendance Review Boards, as a venue to begin discussions about alternative school policies.

Finally, there must be more accountability for the educational progress of students in alternative schools. As stated previously, many students who attend alternative schools are not enrolled at one site long enough to be accounted for under the state's accountability systems. Recently approved California legislation, SB 651 and SB 219, increase accountability by requiring that a student's standardized test performance be assigned to the API of their initial school and district of residence, even after they transfer to an alternative education school. This approach could be augmented if comprehensive high schools produce separate API data for just the population of transfer students, similar to other designated subgroups, in order to systematically monitor student progress. This may not be appropriate as a state mandate, especially given the API minimum subgroup size requirements, but districts with larger numbers of alternative education transfer students might choose to implement this approach as one way to track the progress of this important population.

This analysis serves as a preliminary investigation into just one issue facing students who attend alternative education schools. By linking data from multiple youth-serving agencies, future analyses aim to investigate additional topics in order to improve the educational outcomes of alternative school students.

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For more information about the study on "The Academic Progress of Alternative School Students Transitioning into Comprehensive High Schools," please contact Kara Dukakis at kdukakis@stanford.edu.

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