

Februarv 2011

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

Intake Processes at Continuation High Schools: Shaping School Climate through Selection and Enrollment Strategies

By Hoorig Santikian

Introduction

This issue brief is part of a larger study of California Continuation High Schools begun in 2007. As part of this study, researchers did in-depth site visits and data analyses at 22 continuation programs in three California counties from November 2009 to October 2010.¹ During site visits to each school we interviewed student groups, teachers, counselors, and school administrators. To learn about the community and policy context, we also interviewed district and county administrators and organizations serving this population of students.

The transfer and placement of students into alternative programs presents important challenges and opportunities for shaping both the educational trajectories of students and the educational environment of schools or programs into which those students are placed.

We found that selection processes range from no restrictions on enrollment to strict academic criteria for program admission. Similarly, programs differed in the expressed expectations and orientation provided to students. Some schools enrolled new students without any prerequisite steps, while others required students to complete exercises including extended orientation. Tables 1 and 2 provide a full description of selection and enrollment processes. Intake processes can contribute significantly to school climate and mission; schools with more restrictive processes and extended enrollment exercises such as orientation, generally provide student-centered settings. We saw that selection and enrollment strategies operate as integral levers for continuation school principals in their efforts to establish and pursue their visions for the school. District policy and external perception of continuation schools, however, set a context that shapes the strategic design of intake processes and principals' opportunities to affect them.

Background

The transfer process from a comprehensive to a continuation school varies greatly among districts. Selection practices fall into three broad categories. A few schools we visited accept all students referred from comprehensive sites. Others select students

¹ In addition to the author, the research team included Susan Bush, Martha Cortes, Milbrey McLaughlin, Jorge Ruiz de Velasco and Susan Tu.

that meet attendance, behavioral, or academic criteria. Among those that follow selection criteria, some schools stand out for their strategic design of selection processes. To enroll, some schools also require steps such as orientation and signing student and parent contracts. These processes, regardless of their general strategy, often lack transparency and are rarely formalized in writing. In this brief, we describe how these intake processes and policies contribute significantly to students' experiences in alternative education and to the tone of the continuation school environment.

Intake Processes and the Student Experience

The process by which students transfer from a comprehensive school and enroll in a continuation school shapes the alternative education experience for both students and faculty because it determines which students enroll and the understandings with which students begin their education at the continuation school.

Selection

Selection policies range from open access for all students to formal criteria that specify eligibility and thus restrict enrollment to a subset of students. Selection processes also differ in the extent to which student selection involves consultation between comprehensive and continuation schools about student placement. These processes are summarized in Table 1.

Because selection criteria can limit access to continuation schools they also provide opportunity for the continuation school to develop a cohesive and academically oriented plan. When continuation schools can select students according to a clear set of criteria, then shape their academic and support services around the specific needs of students, they are better positioned to enable students' successful outcomes and avoid the reputation as a "dumping ground" for academically vulnerable students. As one principal said, "If I focused on trying to give...a place for every kid that needed me, then I would not be serving anybody." Careful and transparent placement processes allow school leaders to clarify the goals of the alternative placement, define a program for the alternative school, and send clear signals to comprehensive high school counselors, teachers and principals, as well as parents and students about who the school or program is best designed to serve.

Academic criteria for admission focus on English skills, credits earned, and the possibility of earning a high school diploma on time. These criteria allow continuation school faculty and staff to more strategically focus their instruction and services. For example, by implementing academic criteria, one alternative program maintains its mission to facilitate the on-time graduation of under-credited students. According to a counselor involved with this especially rigorous program, students who score a 3 or lower on the CELDT are not accepted because they cannot maintain the pace of the program; teachers also do not specialize in working with students with below basic English skills. Students below the "too low" point in terms of number of accrued credits are also not accepted because they will not be able to graduate high school within four years even with the modified pace of this program.

Similarly, behavioral criteria narrow the spectrum of students for some continuation programs. Filtering out students with serious behavioral problems, such as a recent history of school violence or involvement with drug sales, enables the continuation school to maintain a school climate conducive to learning. As one principal put it, "One kid can disrupt a whole school. That's not the way we run. We're not going to let one

kid disrupt the learning of others.” Some continuation schools also target students who, as one counselor put it, have had a “light bulb” moment and are motivated to take advantage of the second chance offered by the program. In other words, some schools selectively screen “in” for behavioral factors, looking for students who are disconnecting from school (i.e., experiencing absenteeism, tardiness, or “acting out” behaviors), yet who demonstrate a willingness to remain in school. We saw that when continuation programs pay explicit attention to the underlying causes of long-term absenteeism, or other academically disruptive behavior, they could make great progress toward creating an environment that encouraged great academic persistence and success for students. In all cases, we found that placement practices could promote alignment between school programming and the discrete needs of the students placed. This alignment promoted a more stable and supportive environment conducive to student success.

Table 1: Selection Criteria & Processes

Selection Criteria	
No criteria	Institutions with no selection criteria accept all students who either voluntarily seek out the continuation school or are involuntarily transferred to continuation by the comprehensive school.
Academic	For some schools, there is a “too low” point. These schools require students to have sufficient credits to support a “mathematical probability” of accruing the necessary units to graduate and sufficient English reading and writing skills to keep up with the modified schedule.
Behavioral	Behavioral criteria vary greatly in design and implementation. Often schools that serve students who are behind academically limit behavioral criteria to serious offenses, such as probation or incarceration. In many cases these criteria are flexible policies that administrators apply as needed to control entry to the continuation school. Following initial admission to the continuation school, behavioral criteria can also determine who continues in the program. In some schools, those who exhibit poor behavior are referred to other alternative sites, including community day schools.
Selection Processes	
No participation	Continuation schools that are not involved in the decision-making process accept all students referred from comprehensive schools.
Inter-school collaboration	Through diverse administrative structures, such as weekly or monthly meetings, some continuation schools collaborate with their respective comprehensive schools to decide if a student should be transferred to alternative education. During meetings, counselors or assistant principals from both sites discuss the placement of each potential student. In other cases, continuation schools access transcript or other student files to make their recommendations.
Intra-district collaboration	In some districts, the Child Welfare Attendant (CWA) – a district employee – oversees the transfer process from comprehensive schools to alternative education. These CWAs receive both voluntary and involuntary transfer requests and decide who will be reassigned to the continuation school. In some cases, the continuation school administrators collaborate with the CWA to make placement decisions.
Case-by-case decisions	Not all continuation programs that actively select students follow standardized criteria. For a few, screening is a highly individualized process. These continuation schools individually consider each potential student and decide if the particular student can benefit from the alternative program. Often this process occurs in small districts with only one comprehensive school and one continuation school.

Both in large districts with formalized selection criteria and in smaller districts with informal case-by-case decision-making, inter-school collaboration ensures that the continuation school has a say in determining who is right for their school. By contributing to the process of identifying a "good fit", continuation schools define their niche. According to one Child Welfare Attendant (CWA), the continuation school principal is the "expert here with the kids, and who can fit and who can't". The continuation school principal and the CWA in this district meet regularly to, as the CWA put it, "get down deeper" into the students' issues and decide if the student should attend the continuation school.

Enrollment

Enrollment processes vary significantly across continuation programs, as summarized in Table 2. These differences in enrollment strategies also can influence school climate and mission.

Table 2: Enrollment Processes

Parent/Student Communication	
In-take meeting	Counselors/principals meet with each student and their parent or legal guardian. During this meeting, the continuation school administrator reviews an individualized academic plan, specifying each course and number of units that the student needs to complete in order to graduate.
Contract	A few continuation schools require parents and students to sign contracts recognizing that they understand the school's goals and expectations and they are committed to these objectives.
Orientation	
No orientation	Students begin without any orientation to the new school.
Basic	Some schools provide an orientation session for just a few hours or one day with the goal of introducing the student to a new school and helping the student feel comfortable in a new environment.
Extended	<p>Extended orientation programs last from several days up to four weeks. These sessions include academic and social skills trainings to build the study and social skills that students will need to be able to focus on credit recovery. Topics also may include anger management, respect for faculty and peers, and responsibility.</p> <p>One orientation program we visited lasts for four weeks, three hours each day. Students are encouraged to build their communication skills but are simultaneously taught to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate times to talk with their peers. Guest speakers conduct sessions on substance abuse and career assessments. Students also set intermediary goals, such as not arguing with their parents that week.</p>
Start Date	
Rolling	Most continuations schools enroll new students on a rolling basis. Some schools enroll new students daily, immediately following their referral from a comprehensive site.
Regularized	Other continuation schools have regularized the flow of students, enrolling students weekly, biweekly, or monthly. One continuation school, for instance, only takes new students every six weeks.

Parent/Student Communication

All of the continuation schools that we visited require some form of pre-enrollment consultation with incoming students and their parents or legal guardians. These continuation school administrators believe that these procedures help students and parents understand the credit recovery process, establish expectations for behavior and participation, and commit to completing the program. At the beginning of each academic year, counselors at several schools we visited host a presentation for all incoming students and their parents. The presentation details the rules of the program and the academic plan, including the syllabus for each of the core courses. Counselors also review with parents how to read a transcript, so that parents can follow their child's academic progress. One principal said the mandatory initial meeting with parents symbolizes the start of a "partnership" between parents and the school to share information about their students' academic progress and potential challenges.

Orientation

Extended orientation sessions equip students with study and social skills intended to help them succeed in their classes. One student who went through extended orientation explained that the sessions helped him learn time management: "The way they showed us in orientation was like you...if you try to...mix them all together you won't get them done but like if you put...the most important things first, then you're always going to have time to do like the other things like you like to do." Another student who had completed the same orientation program added that the sessions also teach you how to have patience, respect your teachers and, as he said, "survive through the school."

Extended orientation also can promote a positive social environment. Students leave orientation with, as one principal described it, "their own little cadre of peers". In a new environment they have an established social network, which eases the transition. In addition, the social skills that students learn in orientation, such as conflict resolution, help maintain a safe and calm environment. One principal in a setting with an extensive orientation noted that in 19 months there was only one fight on campus, despite the gang affiliations of students and attributes this low rate to orientation and other social and emotional supports available at the school.

Start Date

A rolling enrollment policy, typical of most continuation programs, complicates an already challenging teaching environment because teachers find it difficult to develop education plans or instructional strategies when students come and go throughout the year. One teacher described the challenges associated with teaching a subject like math that builds on preexisting knowledge; when students enroll sporadically, students consistently vary in their grasp of prerequisite material making it difficult to teach advanced levels. Teachers at schools that accept new students as they show up stated that the unpredictable flow of students makes it difficult to do direct instruction because student churn frustrates efforts to develop a sequential, integrated curriculum. As a response to the ever-changing composition of their classroom, many teachers in these settings – including schools with high performance on state measures – use individualized packets or a combination of packets, group work, and direct instruction to meet their students where they are academically.

Alternatively, by regularizing the timing of enrollment, continuation schools can create some stability within the classrooms and student cohorts. Teachers prepare lessons in units that align with the rate of enrollment periods. When new students enroll, they start with the other students at the beginning of a unit; this strategy enables, as one teacher noted, “the continuity of instruction”. For example, at one school we visited incoming students start classes on one designated Monday of each month. Teachers try to prepare four-week units and begin a new module the same day new students enroll. The math teacher at this school said that while math lessons often build on previous modules making it difficult to strictly follow this timeline, she separates each math course into blocks to accommodate students who enroll after the start of the academic year and make it easier to give partial credits.

Effect on School Climate

In addition to qualitative evidence gathered during site visits, California Healthy Kids Survey data on “school connectedness” and “school environment” supports the positive association between intake processes and school climate. The “school connectedness” scale measures the student’s sense of belonging at the school, and “school environment” considers student-adult relationships on campus and academic expectations.² Continuation schools with strategically designed intake processes report higher ratings on these scales compared to continuation schools without such policies. In many cases, the mean differences in these ratings are statistically significant. These indicators suggest that the intake processes contribute to building a positive school climate.

Table 3 shows the relationship between intake processes and school climate. The table lists “school connectedness” and “school environment” ratings for four of the continuation schools which had elaborated selection and enrollment processes. These ratings are compared to two schools with minimal selection and enrollment criteria. The table shows that the association between school climate measures and intake processes is stronger and significant for schools with comprehensive plans that include selection criteria, inter-school collaboration, regularized enrollment, and orientation. Mission and North Star report “school connectedness” and “school environment” averages that are significantly higher than the same measures at Stevens and Cedars at the, at minimum, 0.05 significance level.

However, other programmatic features also influence school climate, mediating the effect of intake protocols on the tone of the school environment. For example, the Conrad “school connectedness” rating is not

² School Connectedness scale includes the following questions:

- 1) Strongly agree or disagree with I feel close to the people at this school.
- 2) Strongly agree or disagree with, I am happy to be at this school.
- 3) Strongly agree or disagree with, I feel like I am part of this school.
- 4) Strongly agree or disagree with, the teachers here treat students fairly.
- 5) Strongly agree or disagree with, I feel safe in my school.

School environment scale includes the following questions:

- 1) At my school there is a teacher or adult who, really cares about me.
- 2) At my school there is a teacher or adult who notices when I’m not there.
- 3) At my school there is a teacher or adult who, who listens to me when I have something to say.
- 4) At my school there is a teacher or adult who, who tells me when I do a good job.
- 5) At my school there is a teacher or adult who, who wants me to do my best.
- 6) At my school there is a teacher or adult who, believes I will be a success.
- 7) I do interesting activities at school.
- 8) At school, I help decide things like class activities or rules.
- 9) I do things at school that make a difference.

significantly higher than the average for schools with less elaborated selection and enrollment strategies. Interview data suggests that the limited opportunities for students to participate in school activities and governance explain this “school connectedness” outcome.³ The Conrad “school environment” rating, however, is significantly higher compared to schools without elaborated selection and enrollment strategies. This finding is supported with testaments from students in a focus group about their interest in the orientation program on campus and their appreciation of the support from adults on campus.

Table 3: Comparing School Climate, by Intake Processes

School	Intake Processes	School Connectedness		School Environment	
		Stevens Comparison	Cedars Comparison	Stevens Comparison	Cedars Comparison
Mission (n=70)	Comprehensive schools forward student transcripts and behavioral records for review by Mission administrators. Mission implements academic criteria requiring students to have some proficiency in English for admission. Those who are selected enroll every two weeks. All new students complete a two-week orientation session on learning strategies.	3.52**	3.52**	2.79*	2.79**
North Star (SC n=18) (SE n=173)	All prospective students must pass “Passport”, a two-week orientation session on learning strategies and social skills. Students who do not pass are referred back to the comprehensive school site. New students are accepted to North Star every two weeks.	3.49**	3.49***	2.78*	2.78*
Valley (SC n = 80) (SE n = 76)	Valley accepts new students every four weeks. Students go through a four week orientation session that focuses on social and emotional development.	3.60***	3.60***	2.70	2.70
Conrad (SC n = 57) (SE n = 54)	Students complete 60 hours of orientation, three hours each day (four weeks). The orientation focuses on developing appropriate social and “life” skills. Guest speakers provide sessions on substance abuse, and personality and career assessments. Students also set intermediary goals, such as not arguing with their parents that week. The Conrad principal meets regularly with comprehensive school administrators to discuss incoming students. The school does not follow strict behavioral and academic criteria. New students are accepted every four weeks.	3.41	3.41	2.81*	2.81**

³ School participation is one of the five components of the “school connectedness” measure.

Comparison Schools					
Stevens (SC n = 54) (SE n = 51)	Stevens does not have an orientation process. The school accepts all students referred from the comprehensive school and does not collaborate with comprehensive school colleagues to decide who will be referred to Stevens.	3.21	—	2.56	—
Cedars (SC n = 83) (SE n = 79)	Cedars operates a provisional orientation session that students must pass in order to be able to enroll. Administrators and faculty note that students are often moved from the orientation to Cedars “out of frustration.” The program does not filter students.	—	3.17	—	2.55

Factors Affecting Selection and Enrollment Processes

Continuation school principals recognize that intake processes comprise powerful levers with which to shape their schools’ missions. As one said, adopting a strategically designed selection and enrollment plan was his “number one action plan” for reforming his school. But, continuation program leaders are constrained in developing and implementing intake policies by two external factors: perception of the continuation school in the broader community, and the district’s “menu” of alternative options.

External Perception

Comprehensive schools’ referrals to continuation programs depend to a significant extent on principals’, counselors’ and teachers’ perception of this alternative option. When counselors and others at the comprehensive school believe that the continuation school provides, as one counselor put it a “Mickey Mouse” or academically poor program, they are likely to treat the continuation option as a “safety valve” to remove problematic students. The poor reputation of the continuation school also motivates the comprehensive school counselors to dissuade students from attending who could benefit from credit recovery, but who otherwise do not pose serious problems. For instance, students in some focus groups said that their counselors told them that the continuation school was for “bad kids” and that they did not want to go there. Often, these students only made the transition after finding information from alternative sources or once continuation became the only option for graduation; negative perceptions of the continuation program compromised early identification and credit recovery of under-credited students.

Many continuation school principals actively work to improve the perception of their programs in the district and community. When they are able to generate district “buy-in” for a school mission designed around academic and social supports for students’ graduation, continuation school principals receive support to set selection criteria and enrollment processes. For example, one principal said that by convincing the district administrator that his continuation school could achieve “model” status if he modified intake processes, he garnered support from the district to alter the selection process; comprehensive schools now refer “kids that really deserve it and need it” instead of “every minor behavior issue”. In many cases, continuation school principals directly advocate for their programs with comprehensive school administrators and members of the

community. By hosting district-wide meetings at the continuation school or inviting their colleagues for site visits, continuation school principals, as one put it, “educate” assistant principals and counselors about the role and value of this alternative program. This process helps comprehensive and continuation schools be, according to one principal, “on the same page” about the role of the continuation school.

District “Menu”

Districts differ in the breadth and organization of the alternative education “menu” available to students unsuccessful in the comprehensive high school. In some districts, the continuation program and independent study are the only alternative options. Other districts support a broader network of alternative options; in addition to a continuation school and independent study, these districts may offer credit-recovery programs at the comprehensive school sites, specialized programs to accommodate illness, pregnancy, or another circumstances, and adult school.

In districts with limited options, continuation or independent study is the only alternative to expulsion; this context adds pressure for continuation to absorb students with behavioral, social, or academic issues. In one such district, students who violated their “safe school” contract⁴ at the comprehensive school were referred to continuation as involuntary transfers. An involuntary transfer is, as one of the comprehensive school counselors put it, a “done deal”. This policy qualifies efforts to control entry to the continuation school through weekly intake meetings between comprehensive and continuation school administrators.

Continuation schools have more opportunity to implement selection and enrollment criteria in districts with a broader menu of alternative options. In one case where the district provides adult education, the continuation school sets behavioral criteria, such as consistent attendance, for continued enrollment; students who do not attend regularly are moved to adult education. Similarly, in another district with multiple specialized alternative options, including a work readiness program, a pregnant minors institution, and a technology academy, continuation and comprehensive school administrators work together to decide if the continuation school or one of these other alternatives is an appropriate fit for each student.

Alternatively, when district sponsored supplementary services are housed at the continuation school, access to these resources can drive enrollment. In one district with parenting teen courses and daycare at the continuation school, students who would benefit from these services request to transfer to the continuation site; this transfer may occur regardless of students’ academic record. According to the continuation school principal, some of his female students were in advanced placement classes at the comprehensive school and only transferred in order to access the parenting resources at the continuation school.

Where continuation fits on the menu of alternative options also determines the intake strategies available to continuation schools. The range of available alternatives substantively influences intake strategies available to a continuation program—from taking all comers, to working with students to determine the best fit. Some districts sponsor independent study programs on the comprehensive school campuses; the first step for students that need to recover credits is to enroll in the on-site independent study. Only if the student is unable

⁴ An assistant principal initiates a safe school contract after students’ first violation of a school rule. Students agree in the contract to follow all school rules.

to complete courses in an independent format is the student referred to continuation. This design sends to continuation schools students with more serious academic challenges.

Conclusion

Intake processes from selection to enrollment to orientation often are overlooked as factors affecting continuation schools' mission and climate. Yet, we see that these processes are powerful levers for setting the tone of the continuation school. Selection and enrollment strategies determine who transfers to continuation and the process that they go through to enroll. In turn, the background, needs, and skill sets, both academic and social, of the student population shape the continuation program's purpose and environment. Student-centered intake processes align academic and social interventions to the specific needs of students making for a more productive learning environment. How well these processes attract students who fit the target profile shapes the potential for reforming the tone of a school through these processes; clear and transparent processes send signals to students and parents about who is best matched with the program, further determining the composition of the student body.

The strategies continuation schools can implement, however, depend heavily on the context set by district policy and external perception of the continuation school. Continuation school principals work in this context to promote their schools as institutions for credit recovery and not "dumping grounds" for all students who are unsuccessful at the comprehensive school. A reform strategy seeks to revamp placement practices must also consider the context set by the district's alternative education policy.

*The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) would like to thank **Stuart Foundation** for making this issue brief possible.*

For more information about the study on "Intake Processes at Continuation High Schools: Shaping School Climate through Selection and Enrollment Strategies," please contact Hoori Santikian at hooris@stanford.edu or Milbrey McLaughlin at milbrey@stanford.edu.

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