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Accountability for California's Alternative Schools

Technical Appendices

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Appendix A. LCAP Performance Indicators

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SOURCE: California Education Code section 52060.

NOTE: LCAP = Local Control Accountability Plan.

Appendix B. Problems with the State System of Alternatives

“Alternative” is not clearly defined

State law and CDE policy generally defines the terms “alternative” and “school.” Five of the seven types of alternative schools—continuation, community, community day, opportunity, and juvenile court schools—are automatically considered “alternative” for accountability purposes unless a district requests that the school not be listed as an alternative. The other two types—district schools of choice and independent alternative charter schools—must apply for the “alternative” designation and show that at least 70 percent of students fall into one of several “at risk” categories. This practice results in inconsistencies in the types of schools that are considered alternative.

Are K–8 students who attend K–12 independent study programs really at-risk students? A small number of alternative charter and community schools operate K–12 independent study programs where the high school students are at risk, but the at-risk status of its K–8 population was in question. For example, 16 large alternative K–12 charter schools account for 30 percent of all K–6 students (or 1,188 students) who were enrolled in an alternative school in the fall of 2013. The school qualifies because of the very large number of at-risk juniors and seniors. Similarly, four county offices that enrolled more than 100 K–6 students in 2013–14 accounted for two-thirds of all community school students in these grades.¹ Two of these schools are charter home study schools. Are these K–8 populations also at risk? Are the charter and community schools really the students’ home school? Depending on the answers to these questions, the state may want to consider including the K–8 or K–10 portion of these schools in its regular accountability program.

CDE may recognize schools as alternative that do not meet the 70 percent criteria required of schools of choice. For instance, the Los Angeles County Office of Education lists the Los Angeles School for the Arts as an opportunity school. As an alternative operated by the county office, CDE does not publish four-year graduation rates for the school. It appears unlikely, though, that the school serves a population of students that would be considered particularly at risk. For instance, the school website shows that more than half of its students earned a grade point average over 3.5 in the first semester of 2014–15. CDE data for that year show very few students were suspended and none was expelled. Reported one-year dropout rates were also low—1 percent, compared to the state average of 3.1 percent.

Large county community schools also appear to enroll students who are not particularly at risk. CDE describes community schools as serving students who are expelled from school or are referred by county probation or the county attendance board. Because these categories define students with more serious behavior issues, county community school programs are fairly small—on average, community schools enrolled 0.67 percent of the counties’ students in 2013–14. State law allows community schools to enroll other students as well.² As a result, some counties enroll a much higher proportion of high school students. Santa Cruz County’s community school enrolls over 5 percent of high school students. Community schools in Glenn County enroll 4.8 percent of the county’s high school students and El Dorado enrolls 3.6 percent. In fact, 12 county community schools that each enroll more than 2 percent of their respective counties’ high school students account for almost 60 percent of all county community schools.

Our review suggests that community schools that serve a relatively large proportion of students are educating a wider range of students than counties with small programs. A review of state test scores for Glenn and El Dorado

¹ Amador, El Dorado, Placer, and San Diego County offices.

² County offices may serve non-severe students under agreements with the students’ home districts.

counties shows that the proportion of community school students meeting standards is about 50 percent.³ The average alternative high school reported 14 percent of its students met the state’s English standard.⁴ In Fresno, by comparison, none of the community school students met state standards.

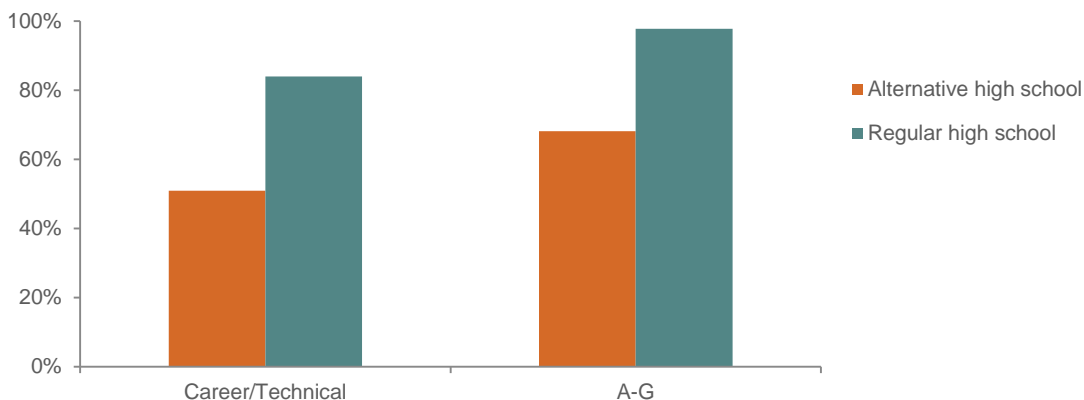
Some “non-alternative” schools serve an at-risk population that is similar to alternative schools. In contrast to the situation where alternative schools may not be serving at-risk populations, we identified schools that are not identified as alternative but serve students that appear to qualify as at-risk. For instance, Twin Rivers Unified administers two alternative continuation schools. It also operates Keema High, an independent study school of choice, as an alternative school of choice in 2013–14, but not in 2014–15. Nevertheless, Keema reports a four-year graduation rate of 44 percent—low for any type of school. Its one-year dropout rate was 22.3 percent—more than twice the rate of the two continuation schools. Turnover of students at Keema—83 percent of fall enrollment—was also slightly higher than in the two continuation schools.

Schools may not offer a broad range of courses

A significant number of alternatives also do not provide a full range of courses that are expected at the high school level. A study of continuation schools found the range of courses restricted. Gym classes or other sports programs are mostly not available in continuation school.⁵ Similarly, access to career/technical or college-preparation courses are often unavailable on the alternative school campus.⁶

Alternative schools are much less likely to offer even one vocational or college-level course than regular high schools. Figure B1 displays CDE analyses of the proportion of alternative and regular high schools that offer at least one vocational or college preparation course. More than 80 percent of regular high schools offer at least one career/technical class and almost all offer at least one college-preparation course that the two state universities would accept (known as the “A–G courses”). In contrast, half of alternative schools fail to offer at least one career/technical course and one-third offer no a–g courses.

FIGURE B1
Schools offering at least one career/technical or one college-level academic course



SOURCE: California Department of Education, Public School Accountability Act Advisory Committee Meeting, October 3, 2014
NOTE: “College” academic classes describe the “a–g” course requirements for students seeking to attend the University of California or the California State University.

³ Glenn reported that 56% of community school students tested met state standards; in El Dorado, 49% of its community schools met the standard.

⁴ The average unweighted scores of 475 alternative high schools with 11 or more test scores.

⁵ Ruiz de Velasco, et al, 2008.

⁶ Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin, 2012.



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