
Going the Extra Mile: Afterschool in Continuation High School Settings

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Introduction

In this article, we focus on the potential of afterschool programs to serve the multiple needs of older youth in California continuation high school settings. We begin by offering an overview of continuation high schools in California. We next provide a description of afterschool programs currently operating using the 21st CLC funds. We rely on an interview with a program supervisor who oversees several programs in the Bay Area and a survey of programs across the state, which we conducted as part of our research. The reader can view a case study of one program and interviews we conducted at two different afterschool programs at continuation high schools at the link below. The link also includes access to research, resources on continuation schools, and two videos produced by a Bay Area afterschool program serving older youth in a continuation high school setting: <http://www.temescalassociates.com/resources/hsresourcescontinuation.asp>

Overview of Continuation High Schools in California

Continuation high schools have been in operation in the state of California since 1919 as a mandated alternative for students who needed a more flexible schedule, particularly for working students (California Continuation Education Association, 2010). Now, continuation high schools serve a more varied population – youth who are facing credit deficiencies and other life challenges that make participation in a traditional high school program incompatible with their unique needs. (See below, Unique Features of Youth.)

Since 1965, California state law mandates that school districts enrolling over 100 seniors make continuation high school programs available as an alternative route for vulnerable youth to receive a high school diploma. Today, continuation high schools enroll over 70,000 young people ages 16-18 in 525 continuation high schools across California, according to the California Department of Education's latest data from the 2008-2009 school year (California Department of Education [CDE] News Release, 2010).



Graduation requirements at continuation high schools are roughly the same as those at comprehensive high schools. At the local level, continuation high schools have a considerable degree of autonomy, and therefore are variable in terms of their quality, structure, and outcomes (de Velasco et al, 2008).

Unique Features of Continuation Youth

Continuation high schools serve a very vulnerable group of young people who are often considered at-risk because of various challenges in their lives, including family disruption, mental health issues, substance abuse, violence and aggression, and other nonacademic barriers (de Velasco et al, 2008). Many youth arrive behind in the credits needed for graduation, lacking fundamental academic and organizational skills, and are disengaged from school, their communities, and positive adult role models.

Whether they enroll in the continuation school voluntarily or involuntarily, nearly all continuation youth enroll to make up for credit deficiencies that have resulted from repeat bouts with truancy, dropping out, and/or family relocation. For many youth, their goal is to make up for lost credits as quickly as they can, and then move on.

The California Healthy Kids Survey (2006) found that continuation youth were three times more likely than youth in comprehensive high schools to be in foster care or living with a relative other than a parent. Because of frequent changes in foster home placements or family moves, these youth are a very transient population (de Velasco et al, 2008). This has implications for school structure and student learning, which is discussed further below.

This study also found that rates of alcohol and drug use and involvement in violent behavior are higher among continuation school youth. They are also more likely to have been a member of a gang and physically threatened in and out of school than youth at comprehensive high schools (de Velasco et al, 2008). Continuation high schools also serve a higher concentration of English Language Learners and ethnic and racial minorities (de Velasco et al, 2008).

Unique Features of Continuation Schools

Given the unique characteristics and needs of the youth population at continuation high schools, the schools that serve them must be ready to provide appropriate opportunities and support. The features of continuation schools vary across the state. Some schools have large, modern facilities, committed staff, strong community partnerships, and rigorous instruction. Other schools are small, under resourced, and lack strong administration and staff leadership.

“The most successful schools have great principals and teachers that bring support to the youth that is a mixture of authority, partnership, and humbleness.” - Paola Zuniga, Manager of High School Programs, BACR

Despite these differences, continuation schools have a certain amount of flexibility and autonomy when it comes to scheduling and curriculum. They are only obligated to teach four hours per day on the four core subjects. According to the California Department of Education, continuation high schools aim to provide occupational/work-study education, individualized instructional strategies, intensive guidance and counseling, and flexible school schedules to meet student needs (CDE News Release, 2010).



However, not all schools achieve these aims and many do not have the resources or will to serve the needs of their students.

While there are some exceptions, most continuation high schools are small and located on separate campuses. Thus, they do not have the extensive facilities and resources of the larger, comprehensive high schools. As a result, they often lack gyms, kitchens, and libraries. At many of these schools, classroom space is at a premium.

Attendance is also an issue in these schools. High rates of truancy and drop-outs are already established problems by the time a youth enters a continuation high school. As mentioned above, continuation high school youth are a transient group and they are more likely to change schools frequently. This gives continuation schools a narrow period of time to make a lasting impact on youth and often classes are not designed to offer long-term skill building.

Unique Features of Continuation Staff

Another unique aspect of continuation high schools lies in their staffing structure. While some continuation high schools are large, most are small and have limited school personnel and staff. As a result, staff members, including principals, are often responsible for performing many different roles and functions.

The motivation of continuation high school staff is highly variable. Some principals are at the end of their careers and some of the teaching staff appear worn out from being in these settings for a number of years. According to one afterschool program leader, there are also schools that “have great principals and teachers that bring support to the youth that is a mixture of authority, partnership, and humbleness.”

Youth Voices

These statements are from afterschool program participants we interviewed at a continuation high school.

"[The school] has low expectations. Except for one teacher. He's real cool. He can relate."

"The teachers don't care about students here. They don't teach. They just hand out worksheets."

"The principal is really cool. He hired afterschool teachers into the school that looked like us. We needed people who understood where we were coming from... The principal saw what we needed and got it for us."

"They don't make us work hard enough. We need to be challenged. But some students fail themselves by not taking advantage of what little there is here."

The Role and Shape of Afterschool Programs

Afterschool programs that are located in continuation schools are operating in a unique environment. These schools are often small and under resourced and operate only four periods per day. They serve a population of older youth with high levels of need. Many of these youth face a number of challenges in their lives and are often highly disengaged, having failed in and been failed by the traditional school system. These youth clearly need more – more caring adults who know them, more ways to complete the requirements for graduation, and more preparation for life after high school. Afterschool programs are well positioned to help this population of youth as well as the continuation schools that work to serve them.

Academic Supports

The primary focus of continuation schools and the youth that attend them is the attainment of a high school diploma. In surveying 16 afterschool programs across California, we learned that nearly all programs offer a bevy of academic supports. (To see a complete summary of the survey, go to

http://www.temescalassociates.com/documents/resources/continuation/Continuation_HS_Survey_Report.pdf).

These supports include instruction and/or remediation, the utilization of credentialed teachers, tutoring, homework help, preparation for the high school exit exam, and the opportunity to collect and recover credits for graduation.

In one Bay Area continuation high school, most students skip first period and use fifth period as a time for "backfill." Their afterschool program has more or less absorbed 5th period, where youth have the opportunity to participate in Cyber High, an online course to do work, gain extra credit, and receive tutoring. Sixth period is used for enrichment activities, such as music and beats, video editing, urban art, sports, and cosmetology. Saturdays are used for driver's education, leadership training, and field trips.



Supporting the Transition to the Real World After High School

Older youth in continuation high schools are keenly aware of the world that awaits them beyond high school. When asked, many say their greatest interests are in preparing themselves for the world of work and the opportunity to make money. Afterschool programs that provide opportunities to develop workforce skills and obtain placement in work-based internships are very popular among youth.

Two thirds of the continuation afterschool programs we surveyed teach work-force skills, two-thirds partner with district Regional Occupational Programs (ROPs), and a third of them offer youth employment opportunities within the actual program. Developing internship placements and opportunities to learn valuable work skills requires the development of relationships and partnerships with businesses and work settings in the nearby community.

"The afterschool program is actually teaching us things. They get us ready for college and we earn extra credits. It's helping me get a job."
– Afterschool participants at a continuation high school



Developing and institutionalizing an internship program was a focus of the afterschool program at Ralph J. Bunche Academy, which is detailed in the case study that follows this section. These partnerships often include community colleges. Eighty percent of the continuation afterschool programs we surveyed have partnerships with their local community colleges. Some of these partnerships are designed to help young people build bridges to enrollment in a community college.

Other afterschool programs offer college tours and assist young people and their families in applying to local four-year colleges.

The other ways youth are connected with their communities beyond the school involves community service and volunteer opportunities. Eighty-percent of the programs we surveyed offer community service and volunteer opportunities for their youth. Career preparation classes included cosmetology and hairstyling, video editing, urban art design, welding, and a green construction program.

Youth Development and Enrichment

Older youth, including those in continuation high schools, are ready to assume leadership opportunities. Nearly all of the programs we surveyed offer leadership opportunities for youth and two thirds describe their program as “student-driven.”

A number of program leaders talked about the importance of sports to not only provide opportunities for physical activity, but also as a way to build school spirit. Sports also teach the lessons of teamwork and offer mentoring that happens between a coach and his or her players and among the youth themselves. This is beautifully captured by the afterschool program at Ralph J. Bunche Academy. This video can be viewed using the link below:

<http://www.temescalassociates.com/resources/hsresourcescontinuation.asp>

One afterschool program created a sports league with other continuation schools. Each team received new uniforms, a team name, and mascot. The program hosted a tournament with other continuation school teams, which helped to build the young peoples’ attachment to their schools. Basketball, soccer, conditioning, and other physical education classes are also offered at afterschool programs in continuation high schools.



Another program created the “Life After High School” Conference, which showcased programs offered at local community colleges. This weekend event was sponsored in partnership with the local community college district and was attended by over one hundred and twenty youth.

Implications for Program Implementation, Technical Assistance, and Policy

Afterschool programs serving continuation high school youth are still very much under the radar. In fact, it was very difficult to assemble a database of these programs, as few leaders at the state or regional levels were aware of which afterschool grantees were operating at continuation schools.

The first task that is needed is raising awareness and the knowledge of existing programs and any available evidence of their effectiveness. We believe that these programs have the opportunity to greatly advance the outcomes of these forgotten youth and the schools that serve them. Below are a few implications for program implementation, technical assistance, and related policy.

Program Implementation

As described above, continuation high schools have a number of unique characteristics: They are generally smaller in size, under resourced in terms of available school personnel and facilities to support learning, and offer instruction for only four periods. In addition, they serve a group of high risk, transient youth who also have variable schedules, depending on what credits they need to graduate and whether or not they are enrolled in independent study.

To learn more about program implementation, we conducted an extensive interview with Paola Zuniga, a staff person at Bay Area Community Resources and supervisor overseeing several afterschool programs in continuation schools. Ms. Zuniga emphasized that the above characteristics offer both opportunities and challenges for those implementing an afterschool program.



In her experience, afterschool programs in continuation schools and school personnel must work closely together if they are to be successful in helping youth achieve their goals of graduation. In the case of her programs, it took program leaders a full year to win the trust of the school and fashion the programs into an extended day model. In the second year, program leaders focused their efforts on improving the quality of academic support, including providing support for the high school exit exam, tutoring, and college tours.

According to Ms. Zuniga, it is very helpful if the afterschool program can create a system by which school day teachers can communicate regularly with afterschool staff, send them the students' weekly homework packets, and identify youth who are falling behind and would most benefit from attending the program. Ms. Zuniga also found that bringing in academic tutors from outside of the afterschool program helped improve students' academic outcomes. By the end of the second year, her programs were given full license to operate the school's 5th period as their own.

"SSShhhhhhhh! The students don't know the difference between day school and afterschool – we want to keep it that way!" – Ms. Q, a continuation school day teacher.

Ms. Zuniga observed that many continuation high schools and their students lack a sense of "school spirit" and positive attachment to the school itself. She suggested that this is in part due to the lack of afterschool sports teams. To address this deficit, the afterschool program leaders worked to improve the quality and professionalism of the sports teams. Teams were provided with brand new uniforms, a mascot, and the opportunity to participate in weekend tournaments with other continuation high schools. Taking sports to this new level of seriousness attracted many youth to the afterschool program who might otherwise not have joined.

Technical Assistance

Afterschool programs in continuation high school settings would be served by efforts to bring them together to exchange promising practices with their peers. In regards to technical assistance content, when surveyed, continuation afterschool program leaders named the following topics as their highest priorities:

1. Program strategies to employ youth;
2. Support for recent graduates;
3. Opportunities for community service and volunteerism;
4. Accessing multiple funding streams, and;
5. Partnerships with community colleges.

According to Ms. Zuniga, afterschool staff must be aware of the challenges that are often presented in working in these settings. This must be addressed in their training and supervision.

Policy

The expectations regarding program attendance, adult-to-student ratio, and cost per student should be amended for programs operating in continuation high schools. This is because they serve a higher concentration of high-risk youth, there are fewer resources afforded by the school, or the school structure and schedule is very different than a comprehensive high school. There should be a focused attempt to coordinate other relevant funding streams that target high-risk youth and which could bring supplemental services to the youth and the program. This includes funding that promotes healthy choices, the prevention of high-risk behavior, mental and physical health, career preparation, college access, etc.

Because of the “last chance” nature that these settings represent, it is important that these afterschool programs work very closely, almost merging with the continuation school.

This “extended day” way of working could be easily misinterpreted as using the afterschool resources to supplant the responsibilities of the regular school day. It is recommended that policies are in place that do not penalize stakeholders in developing a closely aligned, extended day model.

Finally, there should be efforts to build bridges between the programs that serve continuation high school youth and those that serve young adults who are 19 years and older – youth who were formally considered high-risk and disconnected. Often, young people beyond the age of 18 are no longer supported by local programs. As a result, the only systems that exist for these youth are ones that come into play after they’ve gotten in trouble. A good example of a positive program supporting young adults is the Special Foundation Course and separate learning communities that exist at Los Positas Community College in Livermore, CA. This course and subsequent learning community provides extra support to high risk, disengaged youth who entered the college, many from continuation high schools.

Photos courtesy of Garfield High School, Ocean Shores High School, Laney College’s Machine and Technology Program, and Ralph J. Bunche Academy.

About Temescal Associates

www.temescalassociates.com

This article was authored by Sam Piha and Laura Karosic of Temescal Associates with support from the William T. Grant Foundation. Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. Temescal Associates clients include leaders of youth serving institutions and organizations, school and youth program practitioners, public and private funders, intermediary organizations, and policy makers. Temescal’s work ranges from helping clients build large-scale youth and community initiatives to supporting those who provide services to young people on a day-to-day basis. To accomplish this, Temescal Associates draws on a pool of gifted and highly experienced consultants who excel at eliciting the internal knowledge and wisdom of those we work with while introducing new knowledge and strategies that can transform the day-to-day practices that lead to improved youth

References

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For additional resources on afterschool programs within continuation high schools and other high school settings, please visit www.temescalassociates.com