Out-of-Field and Out-of-Mind:

Within-District Resource Disparities Between Continuation and Comprehensive Schools

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I. Abstract

For students at-risk of not graduating due to significant credit deficiencies, California provides a solution: “continuation high schools.” Today, there are nearly 46,000 students enrolled in these programs, yet these schools too often serve as exit points from the education system. Researchers have documented disparities in resource allocation, risk behaviors, and relative academic growth between continuation schools and comprehensive (traditional) high schools since the early 1990s; yet, most research on continuation schools is based on case studies or aggregated state-wide data. Although this model is useful for advising state-wide policies on continuation schools, current state law and the way in which continuation high schools have always operated allows for an outsized delegation of liberty to individual districts. Subsequently, it is not beneficial to compare continuation and comprehensive high schools beyond their local jurisdictions if our goal is to advise policy where it will be *most* effective. Thus, this paper compares the distribution of “Out-of-Field” teachers among continuation and comprehensive schools (pulled from the 2022-2023 School Accountability Report Cards) *within the same district*. By focusing on *within-district* comparisons, rather than case studies or whole-state comparisons, as prior literature has done, this descriptive analysis discusses how the prioritization of continuation high schools and their traditional counterparts compare, evaluating within-district differences in instructional preparedness. Ultimately, compared to comprehensive schools within the same district, this analysis finds that continuation schools have significantly higher percentages of out-of-field teachers, motivating a discussion of how resources are prioritized for the most vulnerable students.

II. Background

Continuation High Schools

One of four types of alternative education in California, continuation high schools serve students at risk of dropping out within the same local education agency (LEA). These schools service students who, for a myriad of reasons, struggled at their comprehensive (traditional) high school. Continuation schools are just one solution to *school pushout*, a term coined to add more weight to the passive "dropout," which can assume that students disappear from the system without any external factors like criminalization and over-policing at their own schools (Baker, 2017). Usually referred to these schools by their comprehensive high school, students at continuation high schools often have a shortened school day, more chances to earn credit through faster grading periods, and at times, lowered academic expectations (Baker, 2017). Continuation schools have existed in some capacity across the United States as early as 1912, albeit sparsely and mostly on an experimental basis, beginning as part-time schools for working-class children and non-English-speaking immigrants (Zueblin, 1922; Malagón & Alvarez, 2010, p. 152; Nygreen, 2013).

Today, the state estimates around 46,000 students are enrolled in continuation schools (California Department of Education). In general, it is worth noting that continuation schools have more concentrated populations of marginalized students. Continuation schools are more racially concentrated, with Hispanic and African American students overrepresented at district levels and Asian and white students underrepresented statewide (de Velasco and McLaughlin, 2020)**.** Additionally, these schools tend to be lower-income, with 76.15% of continuation high school students were eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch, far more than the state average of 62% (NCES, California Dept. of Educational Statistics). For these overrepresented groups, studies show that earning a high school diploma has an outsized impact on their income later in life than

other socioeconomic groups, stressing the importance of resolving school pushout (Haskins, 2016).

I chose California for this study because it is the only state maintaining some form of continuation school since 1919, allowing more research to have been conducted on the diverse student population (Kelly, 1993). This study specifically discusses *district-run* continuation high schools, as opposed to *county-run* continuation high schools, which have significantly worse educational outcomes and few comparable traditional options (Cobb et al., 2023).

Unlike comprehensive high schools, which have extensive accountability measures and requirements in order to continue receiving funding, state law gives local districts much freedom in determining what their continuation high schools look like. Since 1965, state law requires that most districts with over 100 12th graders make available a continuation *program* for at-risk students– not necessarily a continuation *high school* (de Velasco et al., 2008). To have a continuation high school at all is a financial commitment–even schools with under 10 students can cost more than $120,000 to operate (Layton, 2012). Districts often choose to close their schools and offer online options, merge with neighboring districts, or simply offer alternative classes at the comprehensive schools; all options that are technically permissible due to the vague wording of "continuation program" in state law. Even when districts do operate their own continuation high schools, state law is inconclusive about what they should look like. For example, the EdCode has no requirement for courses taught in continuation high schools to hold an equal certification to the comprehensive schools–including A-G certifications, necessary to apply to any state university in California (Cal Ed Code 51055).

Subsequently, the quality of continuation high schools vastly differs from district to district (de Velasco and McLaughlin, 2015). Even student experiences differ from district to district, where some report that transferring was the best decision for them, whereas others see

their school as a near-prison-like environment (Baker, 2017; Malagón, 2010; Malagón & Alvarez, 2010). In some cases, this can create an educational environment lacking a strong college-going culture, as school officials have very low expectations of their students (Fitzsimmons-Lovett, 2001; Malagón & Alvarez, 2010). Some researchers even posit that continuation schools serve as a method for districts to avoid accountability, but due to the lack of data for reasons listed above, they have not fully evaluated this claim with evidence. Regardless, achievement gaps, already pervasive in the state of California, are only augmented by remedial programs and their external perceptions–making it even more difficult to progress with these students.

Out-of-Field Teaching and Unequal Distribution

One potential factor that can impact student outcomes and exacerbate these achievement gaps, especially when unevenly distributed, is the quality and preparedness of teachers. In both national and international studies, researchers have identified direct correlations between instructor preparedness and student outcomes (Ingersoll, 1999; du Plessis, 2015).

Definitions play an important role in determining the standards for acceptable teaching; although everyone likely agrees that all students deserve good teachers, the federal and state requirements and metrics for teacher quality change what this looks like in practice. For instance, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) renewed a federal focus on the instructional *quality* of teachers by introducing the term "highly-qualified teacher": an educator with a bachelor's degree, full state certification or licensure, and demonstrating subject matter competency (Remer, 2017; NCLB, 2001**).** In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act shifted from the *quality* of teachers to the *equitable distribution* of qualified and licensed teachers, as districts have concentrated their highly-qualified teachers into schools that were disproportionately white and higher-income. Across different school levels, disadvantaged students have access to less

effective teaching than their more advantaged peers, *regardless of which indicators* are used to measure student disadvantage or teacher qualification (Isenberg et al., 2013; Kalogrides and Loeb, 2013; Lankford et al., 2002; Goldhaber, 2015). Goldhaber (2015) discusses this as a predictable pattern due to the extensiveness of the pattern in schools.

This paper specifically examines a metric called "out-of-field" teaching. In California, out-of-field teachers are defined by the state as "a credentialed teacher who has not yet demonstrated subject matter competence in the subject area(s) or for the student population to which he or she is assigned" (California Department of Education). These teachers may hold a Short Term Waiver, Local Assignment Options, or the General Education Limited Assignment Permit or the Special Education Limited Assignment Permit (EC §44258.3). Although local teacher shortages and urgent teacher vacancies within the districts may lead to teachers being assigned beyond their credentialed positions, research shows that both teachers and students are negatively impacted by out-of-field instruction; new teachers are especially affected and can become demotivated (du Plessis, 2015; du Plessis and McDonagh, 2021). More importantly for this paper, however, is the impact on students; teachers employ less effective teaching strategies (i.e. worksheets and repetitive work instead of interactive instruction), as they may have gaps in pedagogical and content knowledge, leading to less desirable educational outcomes (du Plessis, 2015; Clotfelter et al., 2010).

There are a couple rational explanations for why unequal distributions of these out-of-field decisions may come to be. First, when teachers decide which districts to teach in, salary and benefits are an influential factor in their decisions–which has led to many between-district inequalities in teacher quality (Adamson and Darling-Hammond, 2011**).** Districts with higher pay attract more well-educated and highly-qualified teachers, whereas districts that offer lower wages have more out-of-field teachers, novice teachers, and high

turnover (Adamson and Darling-Hammond, 2011**).** This is an individual-choice explanation to the inequitable distribution of out-of-field teachers between districts. If there is a noticeable discrepancy *within* districts, especially between continuation and comprehensive high schools, however, individual district-level policies around teacher allocation may be at fault.

III. Literature Review

Continuation high schools, as the "most under-studied sub-sector of secondary education in California and nationally," have proven difficult to study across time due to a lack of reliable data–thus, most studies conducted are either case studies or based on data estimates (de Velasco et al., 2008). Perhaps the most comprehensive review of the history and operation of continuation high schools comes from Kelly (1993) and her analysis of the factors that cause a continuation school to thrive or stagnate. In her book, *Last Chance High: How Girls and Boys Drop In and Out of Alternative Schools*, Kelly investigates two continuation high schools in suburban California, evaluating them through prolonged qualitative observations and interviews.

Critically, the book points out the outsized authority that local education agencies have over the operations of continuation schools, partly due to the amount of freedom given to them by the state (Kelly, 1993). Kelly (1993) alludes to the potential for schools and districts to subsequently use alternative schools as a method to avoid taking responsibility for low-performing students–a claim discussed more quantitatively by researchers in the late-2000s. Researchers have identified a wide spectrum of continuation high school quality, differing on a district-by-district basis and usually quantified by the presence and quality of support programs, a willingness to extend instructional hours beyond the state mandate, and traditional graduation/dropout rates (Warren, 2007; Cronin, 2019; de Velasco et al., 2008).

However, a lack of reliable accountability measures for continuation schools makes quantitative research on continuation school *outcomes* very difficult. For instance, because students who attend continuation high schools often transfer at odd times that do not align with a traditional school year, or only attend for a few months for remedial purposes, the student population is inherently transient. This transiency makes using traditional performance indexes very difficult. In one example, this meant that students' scores were not counted for the State Accountability Performance Index for both their home and continuation school–effectively erasing their data from the district (Warren, 2007). Not only is longitudinal data extremely difficult to obtain, but it is currently impossible to construct comparable comparison groups with similar behavioral and prior performance characteristics (de Velasco et al., 2008). Researchers have difficulty even accurately measuring how many students are serviced by continuation high schools (Warren, 2007).

In addition to the aforementioned lack of reliable measurements on continuation schools and the outsized differences between districts, there is a distinct absence of qualitative and quantitative descriptive studies conducted *within* districts to compare continuation and traditional schools. As discussed earlier, there seems to be a research consensus that local oversight matters most when it comes to continuation high school operations. When studies compare schools state-wide, low socioeconomic status schools are likely overrepresented, making it difficult to identify the exact variable that is causing disparities between continuation and traditional high schools. Because this paper specifically looks at a form of resource distribution (FTE teachers), it is important to know if these resources are disproportionately diverted among the study population. Thus, this paper will specifically focus on comparing *within-district* differences between continuation high schools and comprehensive schools.

IV. Methodology

Participants

The target population of this study was midsize school districts *with* a continuation school in California. For this study, I designated midsized school districts as a) unified school districts with less than 40,000 students overall but more than 5,000 students, or b) high school districts with at least 4,500 students enrolled. Most districts in California fall into this population range–this requirement eliminates districts such as Los Angeles Unified, San Diego Unified, and Fresno Unified, which combined account for more than 12 percent of the entire statewide enrollment. Districts smaller or larger than the midsize districts have very different administrative regulations and rules around resources, making them difficult to include in this sample. I eliminated the following districts from the pool: those without any continuation high schools, districts with continuation schools labeled as "Closed" or with an enrollment of 0 in the 2022-2023 school year (California Department of Education).

From this pool of districts, I narrowed it down to "high-achieving" school districts, as these districts tend to have higher base salaries and test scores are more convenient than salary schedules to form a sample (Garcia and Han, 2022). The measure of performance was the percentage of *all* students who met or exceeded the standards for English in that district, according to the 2023 Smarter Balanced Tests (part of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress). I defined high-achieving school districts as school districts (N=50**)** within the 35 top percentage points; districts with no independently operated continuation high school *or* elementary-only districts were not included (CAASPP, 2023). From this sample of districts, I randomly selected 30 districts (n=30) and recorded data from every continuation high school and comprehensive high school within the district.

Procedure

I collected general data on school demographics (enrollment breakdown, free/reduced lunch eligibility) from the National Center for Education Statistics' Elementary/Secondary Information System (ELSi) and from the California Department of Education. The State of California mandates that each school submits an annual public report called the School Accountability Report Card (SARC), mandated by Proposition 98 in 1988. This study is based on data from the 2022-2023 SARC (the latest SARC submitted). For each school, this study recorded the "Percentage of Credentialed Teachers Out-of-Field ('out-of-field' under ESSA)," collected from 2021-2022 state data. At the time of the 2022-2023 SARC deadline, the latest teaching data available was from the 2021-2022 school year.

For each district, the mean difference between the mean percentage of out-of-field teachers in the continuation schools and the mean percentage in the comprehensive schools was recorded (see Appendix I). The same process was repeated for the mean percentage of Fully Credentialed teachers at each type of school within the district. I ran a one-sample t-test for significance for each variable, null=0; statistical significance was set at $p<0.5$ (see Appendix II).

V. Results and Discussion

Results and Key Findings

Continuation high schools have significantly higher percentages of out-of-field teachers (M=26.06551, SD=20.73796413) than their corresponding comprehensive high schools within the same district, $t(29) = 5.695793578$, $p=0.000001840297908$. Additionally, continuation high schools have a significantly *lower* percentage of fully credentialed teachers (M=-20.419905, SD=21.02653917) than their comprehensive high schools within the same district, $t(29) = -5.31920279$, $p=0.00000522375102$

Policy Implications

The above results, as well as the background presented in this paper point to the glaring within-district disparities in resource allocation between continuation schools and comprehensive schools. Especially as we held the achievement level and base salary roughly constant among schools, the inequalities noted seem to be the district's responsibility.

These findings add more evidence to the dialogue around continuation schools and the broader conversation of educational equity in the United States. Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) attempted to remedy inequalities in teacher allocation between schools within a district, continuation schools may be in a gray area under this requirement. Furthermore, because out-of-field teaching has such negative impacts for student outcomes, districts and the state should consider to what extent they are complying with the "equitable distribution" requirement of the ESSA–nationwide, one in five teachers are "underprepared" (Hobbs and Porsch, 2021; Lambert, Willis, Xie, 2022). To some extent, state legislators have already admitted this. In January 2023, Governor Gavin Newsom proposed a new budget plan to redirect $300 million of funding, expanding the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to *every* low-performing school group (Fensterwald, Gallegos, and Willis, 2023). Although this shows some promise, this plan makes an assumption that has already been made in the history of continuation schools: districts will always redirect general funds into their most underperforming districts (de Velasco and McLaughlin, 2015). This study makes no causal claim to support any solution–rather, this descriptive analysis

Limitations

As previously discussed, the main limitation with this research is that the data on continuation high schools is usually at least somewhat unreliable. Additionally, Warren's (2007) observations regarding the near-impossibility of finding comparable populations still stands. Although I tried to mitigate cross-district differences in resources, there are differences and

available resources inherent in an alternative education campus with a few dozen students located in the same district as a comprehensive school(s) with thousands of students. This is why I specifically used ESSA logic and the distribution of out-of-field teachers, but I still recognize the potential for the income and race to be confounding variables in the results I observed. Finally, because this entire project was conducted with publicly-available data, there were limitations on what questions I could feasibly answer. My main priority for this project was the research design that was unique from past studies, but a more thorough descriptive analysis may have been possible with Institutional Review Board approval to conduct interviews on sensitive hiring processes.

Further Research

Although beyond the scope of this paper, these results demonstrate a need to conduct a more comprehensive study of how districts make staffing decisions in relation to continuation schools. Past literature has already alluded to this tangentially, as some suggest that there is a punitive aspect for staff in being sent to a continuation school (Warren, 2007; Kelly, 1993**)**. This study has attempted to exhaust most of the obvious, logical explanations for the findings observed, drawing from individual rational choice theory perspectives. In a future study, I would like to approach this question from a more qualitative, policy-review perspective, much like the biyearly policy reviews by the Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities at Stanford Universities. Future questions that I would like to explore, especially with prior approval from the Institutional Review Board, include the following: How long do continuation teachers stay with their schools? Is there any evidence to suggest that being assigned to continuation schools is, in fact, punitive? What do administrative conversations look like in relocating staff *within* the district? When all evidence shows that giving more resources to the *lowest-performing,* most

disadvantaged students causes the greatest academic growth, what is the rationale for not doing so?

Ultimately, the plight of continuation high schools and their students within the U.S. simply illustrates a question of prioritization. As described through the "out-of-field" teacher lens, individual districts must reconsider what they are willing to provide to their students most at-risk.

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Appendix I

District	cont mean % (FC)	comp mean % (FC)	**Difference (FC)**	cont mean % (OOF)	comp mean % (OOF)	**Difference (OOF)**
Alameda USD	90.46	81.33	**9.13**	0	2.34	**-2.34**
Piedmont City USD	100	91.13	**8.87**	0	2.09	**-2.09**
Chaffey Joint Union HSD	93.65	89.92125	**3.72875**	3.91	2.78	**1.13**
Sequoia Union HSD	84.4	82.1	**2.3**	5.3	2.26	**3.04**
Castro Valley USD	90.8	94.32	**-3.52**	6.99	0.34	**6.65**
William S. Hart Union HSD	84.29	83.0842	**1.2058**	13	6.2729	**6.7271**
Palos Verdes Peninsula USD	85.47	88.715	**-3.245**	14.32	3.99	**10.33**
Davis Joint USD	87.26	84.59	**2.67**	12.9	1.48	**11.42**
Pleasanton USD	59.58	90.88	**-31.3**	11.73	0.26	**11.47**
San Dieguito Union HSD	77.38	91.6575	**-14.2775**	17.25	2.5175	**14.7325**
Milpitas USD	84.36	86.89	**-2.53**	15.52	0.7	**14.82**
Torrance USD	76.1	89.025	**-12.925**	23.9	4.75	**19.15**
Fremont USD	77.41	88.434	**-11.024**	22.59	2.076	**20.514**
Walnut Valley USD	58.44	91.925	**-33.485**	23.58	2.33	**21.25**
Carmel USD	75.94	97.15	**-21.21**	21.25	0	**21.25**
El Segundo USD	68.44	87.32	**-18.88**	31.11	9.32	**21.79**
Tamalpais Union HSD	71.31	88.563	**-17.253**	27.6	2.283	**25.317**
San Mateo Union HSD	69.94	79.0717	**-9.1317**	28.85	0.4483	**28.4017**
Redondo Beach USD	67.8	87.33	**-19.53**	32	2.87	**29.13**
Oak Park USD	67.22	82.16	**-14.94**	32.78	2.67	**30.11**
ABC USD	56.18	84	**-27.82**	32.38	2.2275	**30.1525**
Rocklin USD	66.2	91.585	**-25.385**	33.8	2.27	**31.53**
Mountain View-Los Altos Union HSD	62.5	94.79	**-32.29**	35.58	1.415	**34.165**
Clovis USD	57.99	86.092	**-28.102**	41.93	6.672	**35.258**
Poway USD	56.67	82.916	**-26.246**	42.52	3.42	**39.1**
San Ramon Valley USD	45.57	90.7875	**-45.2175**	54.43	2.37	**52.06**
Placer Union HSD	29	91.11	**-62.11**	60	4.0875	**55.9125**
Santa Monica-Malibu USD	29.23	82.405	**-53.175**	69.34	4.695	**64.645**
San Luis Coastal USD	26.25	91.145	**-64.895**	73.75	2.265	**71.485**
Beverly Hills USD	20	82.01	**-62.01**	80	5.15	**74.85**
COLUMN AVERAGE	67.328	87.747905	**-20.4199905**	28.94366667	2.878323	**26.06534**

*(FC) = Fully Credentialed
**(OOF) = Out of Field

Appendix II - Statistical Significance Tests; Fully Credentialed and Out of Field Teachers

	Mean	Standard Dev.	Test Statistic	P-Value	Statistically significant difference?
Mean Difference in Means - Fully Credentialed (FC)	-20.419905	21.02653917	-5.319202794	0.00000522375102	Yes
Mean Difference in Means Out-of-Field (OOF)	26.06551	20.73796413	5.695793578	0.000001840297908.	Yes

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