

Out-of-Field and Out-of-Mind: Within-District Resource Disparities Between Continuation and Comprehensive Schools

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. 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 study reveals that continuation schools have significantly higher percentages of Out of Field teachers and lower percentages of Fully Credentialed teachers.

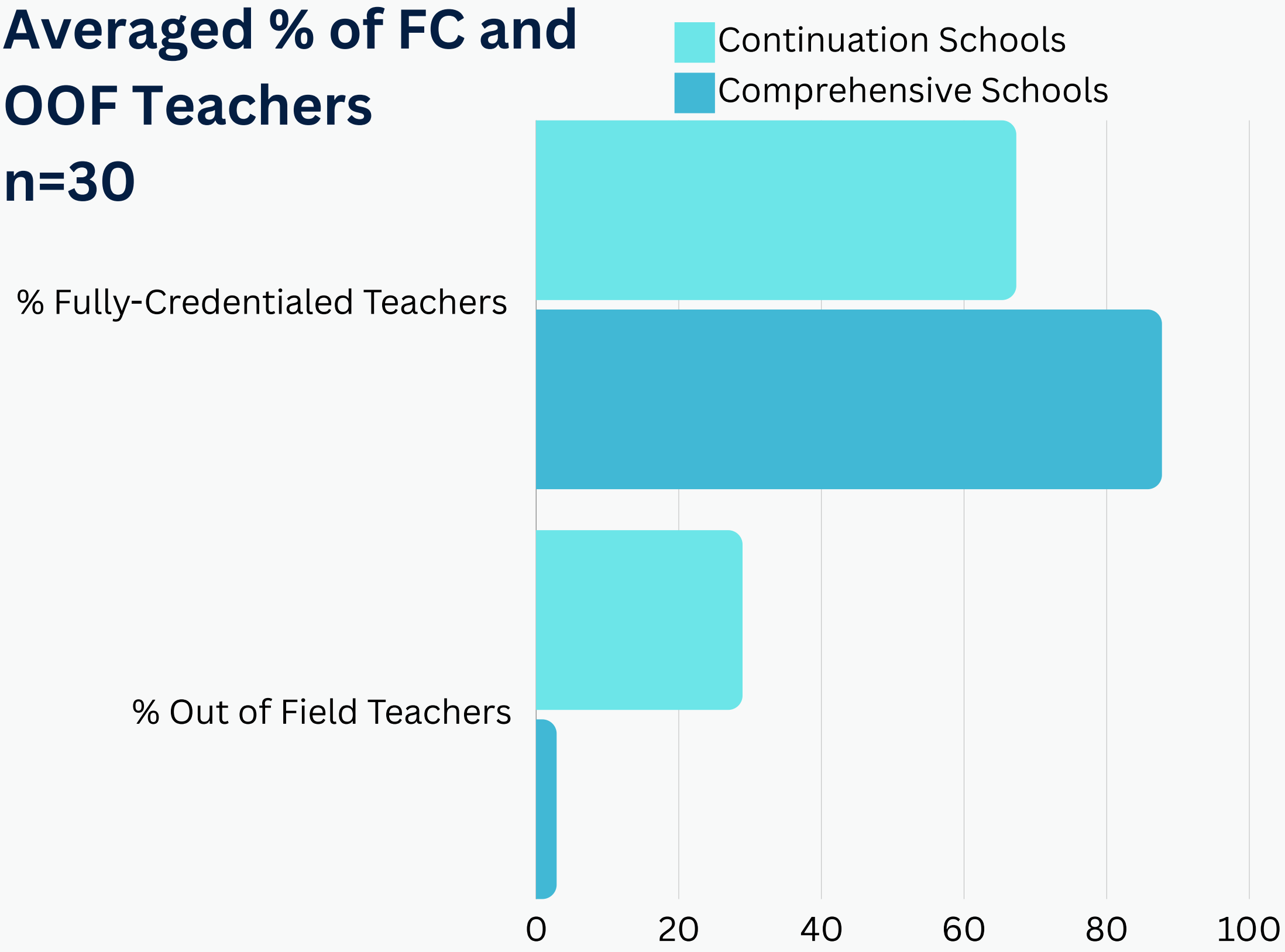
Research Objective

Do continuation schools in high-achieving school districts significantly differ in out-of-field teacher percentages to their comprehensive counterparts?



Left: a Comprehensive HS in Pleasanton, CA
Above: The corresponding Continuation HS

Averaged % of FC and OOF Teachers n=30



Background - Continuation Schools

- Continuation High School:** An alternative high school diploma program; “for students who are 16 or older, have not graduated from high school, are still required to attend school, and who are at risk of not graduating” (CDE)
- Lowered academic expectations and social stigma continue to negatively impact students at continuation high schools (Kelly, 1993; Warren, 2007)
 - Marginalized racial and socioeconomic groups are **overrepresented** (de Velasco and McLaughlin, 2020; CDE, 2023)
 - Districts are only required to provide **continuation programs** -- not continuation high schools
 - Districts can **escape accountability** through vague state requirements (Warren, 2007)

Compared to their comprehensive counterparts, continuation high schools differ drastically district-by-district due to the outsized amount of authority each local agency receives from state law.

Comprehensive High Schools: “Traditional”, “Brick and-Mortar” high schools

Background - “Out-of-Field”

Out-of-Field Teaching: Teachers are assigned to teach subjects that they have **inadequate training/qualification** for (Hobbs, 2021)

- Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESSA, 2015) prioritized the **equitable distribution of out-of-field teachers** among schools above just “highly-qualified” teachers (NCLB, 2001)
- Out-of-field teaching is **demotivating for teachers** and leads to **less effective learning for students**-- especially in relative achievement (du Plessis, 2015)

Some explanations for why this happens:

- Teachers want **better conditions and pay**, so they initially choose more well-off districts (Adamson and Darling-Hammond, 2011)
- Within-district hiring may favor tenured teachers, leaving novice, less-certified teachers to teach in any vacant position.

In a perfect world, would a history teacher have to teach calculus?

“References to continuation school boys and girls as dumbbells, laggards, numb-skulls, ad infinitum, especially when given in apparently good faith, simply to prove that those pupils are not understood as they should be”
(Jones, 1929)

Methodology

Participants

- Target Population: Midsize school districts with a district-run continuation school in California that are “high-achieving” (N=50)
 - Correlated with base salary, in order to control for teachers’ preferences for districts with better conditions
- Measure of “Achievement”: Percentage of *all* students in the district who met or exceeded the standards for English (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2023)

Procedure

- Random Sample (n=30). Recorded the total mean difference between the mean percentage of out-of-field teachers in the continuation schools and the mean percentage in the comprehensive schools; Statistical significance set to $p < 0.5$ with a one-tail t-test.
- Source: “Percentage of Credentialed Teachers Out-of-Field”, 2021-2022 state data made available through each individual school’s School Accountability Report Card from 2022-2023.

Literature

- A lack of reliable accountability measures + inherent transient nature of continuation school populations makes quantitative research on continuation school outcomes very difficult
 - Therefore, most literature relies on **case studies** or **state-wide aggregates**
- Researchers find that local educational agencies have outsized authority over the operations of continuation schools, partly due to the amount of freedom given to them by the state (Kelly, 1993; Warren, 2007; de Velasco et al., 2008)
- There is a distinct absence of qualitative and quantitative descriptive studies conducted *within* districts to compare continuation and traditional schools**

Statistical Significance Tests

	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

“Young people who violate white, middle-class heterosexual norms have always been overrepresented in continuation schools”
(Kelly, 1993)

Results/Discussion

Continuation high schools have significantly higher percentages of out-of-field teachers AND significantly lower percentages of fully credentialed teachers than comprehensive high schools when compared within the same district.

Policy Implications

- Supports the argument that despite district-to-district variations, within-district disparities seem to be very prevalent
- Supports more proactive measures to comply with state and federal law about equitable distribution of out-of-field teachers

Limitations

- Publicly available, potentially unreliable data (due to nature of continuation high schools), couldn’t conduct formal interviews

Further Research

- What exactly drives district decisions to make unequal out-of-field distributions? Does any quality inherent to a continuation school affect the process?

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References

