California Comprehensive Center

at WestEd

Making the Move:
Transition Strategies at California Schools with High Graduation Rates

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Executive Summary

Education practitioners and policymakers grapple with ways to ensure that students are adequately prepared for college and careers. An important step is ensuring that students graduate from high school. A number of studies indicate that programs and strategies designed to assist middle grades students' transition to high school can contribute toward graduation. To better understand the factors that make such transition programs successful, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) at WestEd, worked with the California Department of Education (CDE) K-12 Innovation and Improvement Office (formerly the Middle Grades Improvement Office) to identify and gather information from schools with high graduation rates.

Using publicly available data, we identified high schools with graduation rates that were substantially higher than statistically predicted given certain characteristics of their student population (such as the percentage of low-income students). We selected nine of these schools, seeking variation in factors such as urbanicity, district type, and size. We then conducted screening interviews with the principals of the nine high schools, and with nine administrators from the high schools' respective districts, to learn about the strategies the schools implemented and the challenges the schools faced in achieving high graduation rates and in helping middle grades students transition to high school. Based on these interviews, we selected four high schools, along with their predominant middle grades feeder school, to visit, where we conducted interviews and focus groups with staff and students.

Respondents commonly cited the following strategies as helping students successfully transition between school levels:

- Creating opportunities for staff across school levels to jointly plan and collaborate

- Preparing students to participate in the high school campus and culture prior to enrollment

- Ensuring all students feel connected to school

- Identifying students who are struggling prior to transition

- Preparing timely and individualized supports for such students

We also heard prevailing themes in the general strategies the high schools use to promote graduation, beyond focusing on transition:

- Enabling strategic collaboration between teachers within the school

- Providing students with multiple opportunities for academic support and credit recovery

- Working diligently to connect all students at the school through programs, activities, and caring staff

- Instituting a strong, individually focused counseling program

- Maintaining school-wide high expectations for all students

Regarding challenges, nearly all respondents mentioned that the state's difficult fiscal climate and declining resources have negatively impacted many school programs, including transition- and graduation-focused programs. However, respondents also conveyed a determination to continue their efforts to ensure students' academic success.

Our findings suggest that middle grades, high school, and district staff should consider the following to help students transition between schools and graduate from high school:

- Engage all students in some aspect of school (e.g., classes, activities, clubs, and sports), and create caring and safe school environments.

- Provide staff collaboration time for teachers and principals across school levels (i.e., between the high school and its middle grades feeder schools) to create partnerships that focus on using data to vertically and horizontally align instruction and curriculum.

- Simplify streaming patterns across schools, which facilitates coordination among staff and minimizes disruption to cohorts of students as they move through the grades.

- Ensure that struggling students are identified early, that information on individual students is communicated across school levels, and that there are multiple opportunities for students to receive academic support.

- Consider ways to leverage open enrollment that lead to healthy competition among schools for students.

In addition, states and county offices of education could encourage collaboration within and across schools, facilitating and encouraging teachers and administrators to form communities of practice to examine data, share information about members' strengths and challenges, and learn from one another.

A topic for future research is gaining a better understanding of successful transition policies and strategies from elementary to middle grades. This will be pursued through additional collaborative efforts between the CA CC and the CDE during the 2011–12 school year.

Introduction

Students dropping out of high school is one of the largest problems facing the United States education system. Students who graduate from high school are, on average, healthier, able to earn higher salaries, less likely to participate in delinquent activities, and less likely to be on welfare (Belfield and Levin, 2007). However, many students fail to finish high school, and in California in 2009–10, over 20 percent of the students who dropped out left school before the end of ninth grade (CDE, 2011). Ensuring that students transition successfully from the middle grades into high school is a critical step in helping students to graduate.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) at WestEd, was approached by the K-12 Office of Innovation and Improvement (formerly the Middle Grades Improvement Office) of the California Department of Education (CDE) to help identify programs and policies leading to successful transition between middle grades and high schools. Specifically, CDE sought to identify schools with strong transition programs to provide case study examples of California schools experiencing high levels of success with such transitions.

Because there are no specific proven measures of success concerning middle to high school transitions, we used high school graduation rates as a proxy to identify potential school sites to explore practices around transition. This project builds on similar work conducted by AIR to identify California high schools that are "beating the odds" in terms of graduation rates (Dunn, Muraki, Parrish, Socias, & Woods, 2007) and to identify and profile high-performing, high-need districts and schools in the state (for examples, see school profiles at http://www.schoolsmovingup.net). We chose this strategy based on the hypothesis that high schools demonstrating unusual success in graduating students would be candidates for strong programs and policies supporting the successful transition of students from middle grades schools. Through this approach, the focus of this study broadened to include strategies leading to high school graduation as well as successful transition.

The school selection approach used in this study statistically controlled for key demographic measures such as poverty, ethnicity, and English learner (EL) status, to allow us to identify schools performing better than predicted in terms of graduation rates. Based on these methods, we calculated a "graduation residual" as the difference between a school's predicted and actual graduation rates. We then excluded low-poverty schools and schools with a similar schools rank[1] of 7 or lower to allow us to focus on schools that are both high need and high performing. The 20 high schools with the highest graduation residuals in California for the time period 2005–06 to 2008–09, given the poverty and performance filters, are listed in Table 1.

While our primary focus in this report is on individual schools, it is also important to examine patterns of student retention across districts. For example, schools may appear especially strong with regard to student retention because a large percentage of at-risk students are clustered into specialized settings within the district. While this may or may not be an effective practice, the result could be that individual schools appear strong within a district, while the district as a whole appears relatively weak. Thus, both district and school foci are important. As part of this study, district administrators were interviewed, and district practices, policies, and supports are cited where appropriate. Also, the school selection process, described in more detail below, included review of district-wide graduation rates to ensure that the schools selected did not appear strong simply because potential dropouts had been transferred to other schools within the district.

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[1] California schools are ranked relative to a group of 100 schools determined to be similar based on certain school, student, and teacher characteristics. The similar schools rank is the decile where a school falls compared with the 100 other similar schools in the comparison group. For more information about how this rank is calculated, see the 2010-11 APR Glossary at http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/glossary11b.asp.

Table 1: Top 20 California High Schools with Highest Average Graduation Residuals from 2005–06 to 2008–09[2]

School	Selected District	District Type	Region	Urbanicity	Size	Poverty[3]	Avg. 4-Year Grad Rate	Avg. 4-Year Grad
Holtville High†	Holtville Unified	Unified	South	Suburban	574	67.9%	97.3%	13.4%
Mendota High†	Mendota Unified	Unified	Central	Rural	666	86.6%	89.5%	13.2%
Calipatria High	Calipatria Unified	Unified	South	Suburban	374	93.3%	94.4%	13.2%
Buena Park High†°	Fullerton Joint Union High	High	South	Suburban	1962	65.5%	96.0%	12.0%
Artesia High	ABC Unified	Unified	South	Suburban	1688	69.8%	93.9%	11.7%
San Pasqual Valley High	San Pasqual Valley Unified	Unified	South	Rural	119	100%	96.8%	11.6%
Los Amigos High†	Garden Grove Unified	Unified	South	Urban	2253	85.2%	95.2%	11.6%
Santiago High	Garden Grove Unified	Unified	South	Suburban	2270	87.0%	93.6%	11.1%
Bellflower High	Bellflower Unified	Unified	South	Suburban	3116	65.8%	91.2%	9.9%
John W. North High†	Riverside Unified	Unified	South	Urban	2401	70.6%	94.1%	9.9%
Estancia High	Newport-Mesa Unified	Unified	South	Urban	1385	51.3%	90.5%	9.3%
Orestimba High	Newman-Crows Landing Unified	Unified	Central	Suburban	738	61.0%	95.9%	9.2%
Caruthers High†	Caruthers Unified	Unified	Central	Rural	539	89.1%	93.2%	9.2%
John F. Kennedy High†°	Sacramento City Unified	Unified	North	Urban	2093	52.5%	93.6%	9.0%
Valley High†°	Elk Grove Unified	Unified	North	Urban	1631	84.2%	82.6%	9.0%
Livingston High†°	Merced Union High	High	Central	Suburban	1198	84.6%	94.7%	8.9%
Rancho Alamitos High	Garden Grove Unified	Unified	South	Suburban	1997	71.9%	95.1%	8.8%
Tustin High	Tustin Unified	Unified	South	Urban	2132	58.6%	96.0%	8.6%
Santa Fe High	Whittier Union High	High	South	Suburban	2932	62.8%	96.8%	8.4%
Sweetwater High	Sweetwater Union High	High	South	Urban	2456	84.1%	88.7%	8.2%

†Conducted phone interview of high school
°Conducted visit to high school

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[2] This list excludes schools whose percentage of low-income students was lower than average in their region and schools that received a Similar Schools Rank of 7 or lower.

[3] Based on the number of students eligible for the free and reduced-price meal program divided by the California Basic Educational Data System enrollment.

After ranking schools based on their graduation residuals, we selected nine schools, seeking variation on factors such as urbanicity, district type, and size. We conducted screening interviews with the nine high school principals and an administrator from their respective districts[4] to inquire about the approaches they used to promote graduation and their approach to transition. Based on these interviews, we selected four sites that appeared to have particularly strong graduation strategies and well-articulated transition plans for more in-depth study. Table 2 indicates the high schools we selected for screening calls and for more in-depth case study investigation as well as their middle grades feeder schools.

Table 2. Selected High Schools and Primary Middle Grades Feeder Schools

Selected High School	Main Feeder School	Feeder School District	% of 9th Graders from Feeder School	Feeder School Size	Feeder School Poverty
Holtville High	Holtville Junior High	Holtville Unified	83%	312	86%
Mendota High	McCabe Junior High	Mendota Unified	84%	409	92%
Buena Park High†	Buena Park Junior High†	Buena Park Elementary	50%	1150	82%
Los Amigos High	Fitz Intermediate	Garden Grove Unified	70%	847	90%
North High	University Heights Middle	Riverside Unified	48%	871	87%
Caruthers High	Caruthers Elementary	Caruthers Unified	52%	778	87%
Kennedy High†	Sam Brannan Middle	Sacramento City Unified	44%	672	62%
Valley High†	Samuel Jackman Middle†	Elk Grove Unified	89%	1009	89%
Livingston High†	Livingston Middle†	Livingston Union Elem.	82%	803	89%

†Conducted site visit

In the following sections of the report, we first briefly describe existing literature on transition and graduation strategies and explain the methodology of this study in more detail. Then we summarize the strategies respondents reported using to help students in two areas: 1) transition between middle grades schools and high schools, and 2) graduation from high school. Finally, we discuss the major challenges respondents reported in helping students transition and graduate and the implications of our findings for practitioners and policymakers.

Literature Review

To identify the most salient issues around the use and implementation of transition plans in the middle grades and general strategies to help students graduate, we conducted a literature review to facilitate the development of a protocol for conducting school- and district-level interviews. This section summarizes these findings.

School Transitions

Adolescence is a pivotal time, when students begin to define their educational course. However, it is also a time when many students tend to become disengaged from school. O'Connell Schmakel (2008) found that students reported decreased engagement in middle school compared to elementary school and a need for more individual time with teachers, more teacher empathy for their developmental needs, and stronger relationships with teachers. The need for adolescents' engagement and connections

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[4] We were unable to conduct interviews with district administrators from Holtville Unified and Riverside Unified because of scheduling conflicts.

in school is telling, given that almost half of students who drop out do not graduate because they feel disengaged from school (Bridgeland et al., 2008).

The physical, mental, and social changes that occur during adolescence may create additional challenges when it is time to enter a higher-level school. The experiences associated with this transition include interactions with older students, increased academic rigor, and increased autonomy. Some students faced with these and other challenges decide to leave school: in 2009–10, approximately 2,900 eighth grade students in California dropped out of school, while over three times as many students dropped out in ninth grade (8,939; Dropouts by Grade, State of California for the Year 2009–10, CDE). Recent research using data from New York State (Schwartz et al., 2011) found changing schools to be associated with lower student performance, indicating the difficulties of school transitions for students. In addition, Schwartz et al. (2011) found certain configurations of schools to be associated with higher academic achievement, which they attributed at least partly to "allowing students' peer groups to remain more stable than … schools that draw from a larger number of elementary schools" (p. 310). Eccles (2008) reported that while some students started to disengage before the transition to high school, it was less pronounced for students in K–8 schools.

The research on student disengagement and the increase in dropout rates when students enter high school suggests that schools and districts need to provide additional supports to help students make this transition. In addition to helping students graduate, attention to student transitions is an important practice differentiating middle grades school academic performance in California (Williams et al., 2010). The CDE report, *Multiple Pathways to Student Success,* discusses the importance of middle grades alignment in preparing students for high school. The report recommends practices such as freshman transition classes, collaboration and articulation between middle grades and high school, and middle grades career exploration to help students transition and ensure that students are prepared for high school and to make post-secondary education or career choices (CDE, 2010).

Some of the most common transition practices mentioned in the literature include student visits to high schools for an information session or an assembly, and meeting with counselors and staff (Epstein & MacIver, 1990). However, such one-day activities may not be sufficient to generate long-term impacts. Dedmond, Brown, & LaFauci (2006) argue that preparing students for graduation and success after high school should include implementing comprehensive and long-term student transition programs. In addition, a report by the California Dropout Research Project at University of California, Santa Barbara, suggests that middle grades schools can help students transition through enhanced academic and social preparation (Rumberger & Arellano, 2007).

Communication with teachers at feeder schools about incoming students also appears to be an important component of a successful transition plan. Aligning curriculum and increasing communication between middle grades and high school staff about curriculum and instructional strategies is cited as a key factor in transition research (Kowal, 2002). Compared to lower-performing middle schools, more teachers at higher-performing middle schools in California reported following up with elementary school teachers about at-risk students to develop intervention strategies for incoming students (Williams et al., 2010).

Graduation Rates

Over one million students who enter high school in the ninth grade fail to graduate in four years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). In 2006, the United States ranked 17th in high school graduation rates and 14th in college graduation rates among 30 developed nations as identified by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2006). California's new longitudinal data system revealed that approximately 74.4 percent of students who enrolled in ninth grade four years ago

graduated in the spring of 2010 (CDE, 2011). The estimates are worse for certain racial and ethnic groups within California; in the spring of 2010, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students had average graduation rates between 59 and 67.7 percent, while average White and Asian student graduation rates are 83.4 percent and higher (Cohort Outcome Data for the Class of 2009–10, CDE). Research shows that there are early signs that students might be at-risk of dropping out; for instance, being over-age in tenth grade, failing ninth grade, and having a low academic GPA in ninth grade are all associated with higher rates of drop-out (Rumberger & Arellano, 2007).

Recent studies of dropout prevention programs have identified several key components for addressing the risk factors. Beyond the transition programs cited above, successful dropout prevention strategies often include early intervention, forging personal connections with students, programs that address the unique needs of students, and community involvement (Bateman & Karr-Kidwell, 1995; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Mellard & Johnson, 2008; Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007; Suh & Suh, 2007).

Among the most common programs for addressing the needs of at-risk students are those providing academic support. These programs feature enhanced curriculum, tutoring, attendance goals, social activities, and mentoring and counseling specifically designed to provide students with reasons for completing high school (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). In addition to academic programs, the dropout prevention literature emphasizes the importance of connections between the student exhibiting the at-risk behaviors and an adult (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). The adult could be a teacher, counselor, administrator, district office personnel, or just about any member of the educational community; connections help students remain engaged in their education. Finally, research has shown that students who participate in sports are more likely to graduate (Rumberger and Arellano, 2007).

The literature cited above emphasizes the impact of successful transition between the middle grades and high school on graduation rates, and lists general strategies that may help students. However, there is a gap in the literature with regard to what successful transition looks like on the ground—especially absent are examples and a focus on how schools implement successful transition programs. The goal of this report is to identify specific California high schools with high graduation rates and to learn more about what these schools, and their predominant feeder middle grades schools, are doing to help students transition and graduate, and how they are doing it.

Methodology

School Selection

We selected the high schools in the study based on higher-than-statistically-predicted graduation rates. Our analysis, which includes data from 2005–06 through 2008–09, uses publicly available school graduation, dropout, and student gender data from the California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) and school demographic data for ethnicity, poverty, English learners, students with disabilities, and student mobility from the Base Academic Performance Index (API) databases.

We first calculated the graduation rate for all high schools in California for each school year from 2005–06 through 2008–09. This calculation is based on the number of graduates in a given year divided by that number of graduates plus the dropouts[5] in 12th grade of that same year, the dropouts in 11th grade of

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[5] CDE defines a dropout as a person who "was enrolled in grades 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 or 12 at some time during the previous school year and left school prior to completing the school year AND has not returned to school as of Information Day OR Did not begin attending the next grade (7, 8, 9, 10, 11 or 12) in the school to which they

the previous year, the dropouts in 10th grade two years before, and the dropouts in 9th grade three years before.[6]

We then calculated the graduation rate residual, which is the difference between the school's actual graduation rate and its statistically predicted rate, for each school year from 2005–06 through 2008–09 for all non-charter high schools.[7] The predicted graduation rate is based on multiple regression analyses, which compare the graduation rates of all non-charter high schools across the state serving students with similar characteristics, controlling for the percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; Asian, Hispanic, or African American; female; receive special education services; are identified as English learners; and who are not "continuously enrolled."[8]

A graduation rate residual greater than zero indicates that a school's actual graduation rate is higher than statistically predicted based on the students it enrolls, while a negative residual indicates that a school's actual graduation rate is lower than predicted. We calculated and used the average graduation rate residuals for high schools based on the four school years from 2005–06 through 2008–09 (see Table 1). We also calculated a 4-year average graduation residual for each district by aggregating the school data described above to the district level, which was used as a check to make sure we did not select strong schools in weak graduation districts.

We excluded schools that did not show better-than-expected graduation rates in all four years (i.e., the schools' graduation rate residual must be greater than zero in each year) in order to select schools with a record of sustained graduation success. To ensure that the schools we selected were not simply graduating large percentages of students who were not academically prepared, we also dropped schools with an Academic Performance Index (API) similar schools rank of 7 or lower. As we were especially interested in schools with larger proportions of at-risk students, where the graduation challenges tend to be the greatest, we also excluded schools whose percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch was less than the average for their region. After applying these criteria, we ranked the remaining high schools based on their average graduation rate residual.

To ensure a diverse sample of high schools, we selected at least two from each geographic region (Central, North, and South), at least three urban schools and no more than two rural schools, at least two schools from high school districts, and approximately half above and below the state average for school size, district size, and percentage of African-American students.

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were assigned or in which they had pre-registered or were expected to attend by Information Day" (http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/gls_drpcriteria.asp).

[6] The rationale for the use of this rate, as opposed to the standard calculation used by CDE, was recommended by Russell Rumberger, the Director of the California Dropout Research Project at UC Santa Barbara. Additional information regarding this calculation and the rationale for its use are described in a project brief produced by the Dropout Research Project (Taylor and Rumberger, 2010). For additional approaches for calculating graduation rates see Socias, M., Dunn, L., Parrish, T., Muraki, M. & Woods, L, *California High Schools that Beat the Odds in Graduation.* California Dropout Research Project at UC Santa Barbara, Policy Brief #6, December, 2007. Additional information regarding this calculation and the rationale for its use are described in a project brief produced by the Dropout Research Project (Taylor and Rumberger, 2010).

[7] We did not include charter schools in this study due to the different conditions under which students may transition into such schools.

[8] The definitions for the school-level mobility variable for each year follow:

2007–2009: Percentage of students counted as part of school enrollment in October 2006 CBEDS that has not been continuously enrolled since that date;

2006: Percentage of students counted as part of school enrollment in October 2005 CBEDS that has not been continuously enrolled since that date.

The CDE Middle Grades Improvement Office called the district offices of the selected schools to request approval of their participation in this study. Once agreement was confirmed, the AIR research team contacted the district and the participating high school to schedule phone interviews. One district declined to participate; we replaced the school within that district with a school in another district with similar results and demographics.

Phone Interviews

Between March and June 2011, we conducted one-hour semi-structured interviews with district administrators[9] and the principals of the nine selected high schools to inquire about their high graduation rates and to probe them on their use of transition plans. Interviewers used semi-structured protocols developed based on the existing literature on these topics.

Site Visits

Based on the phone interviews, we identified four high schools that appeared to have particularly well-articulated transition plans, and conducted site visits at these high schools as well as their main feeder middle school between May and June 2011.[10] During each site visit, we conducted a follow-up interview with the principal, interviews or focus groups with assistant principals and other key administrators, teacher and counselor focus groups, and student focus groups, each lasting approximately one hour. Student focus groups consisted of approximately eight students.[11] We also conducted a follow-up interview with the district administrators and a regional principal focus group at Valley High, which included elementary and middle grades principals of schools which feed into Valley High as part of their regional model.

Key Strategies

The two major goals of this study were to identify and describe strategies that schools with higher-than-predicted graduation rates are using to help students transition from middle grades schools and to graduate from high school. While these strategies are often related, there are some specific strategies schools use to prepare, orient, and recruit middle grades students that differ from those used to engage and motivate students once they are enrolled in high school. As a result, this section of the report is divided into two major sections. The first section focuses on what we heard in our interviews and during our visits about the schools' transition programs and the second focuses on the schools' strategies to ensure students graduate on time from high school.

Transition Programs, Strategies, and Practices

While many of the students we spoke to for this study reported that they felt academically and socially prepared to go to high school, the increased dropout rate in ninth grade suggests that this is not the case for a large percentage of California students. Schools and districts can help ease the transition to high school in several ways, including encouraging staff at both school levels to collaborate and articulate instruction, preparing students academically and socially for the high school campus and culture, helping students connect to school, and identifying and providing timely targeted supports for struggling

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[9] We were unable to conduct interviews with the district administrators in two districts (Mendota Unified and Holtville Unified) due to scheduling conflicts and time constraints.

[10] We were unable to conduct a site visit at Kennedy High's main feeder school because the middle school's principal declined to participate.

[11] Although we asked all of the schools we visited to select students randomly to participate in focus groups, one student focus group was not randomly selected, as the visit occurred after the end of the school year.

students. This section of the report describes the key programs, strategies, and practices that the schools in our study reported using to help students transition from the middle grades into high school.

Vertical Articulation and Communication among Staff

Respondents at all schools cited increasing communication between middle grades and high school staff about curriculum and instructional strategies as a key step in helping students transition. Vertical teaming, when educators from different grade levels work together to develop and align curriculum and instructional strategies used in other grade levels, is designed to avoid gaps in content instruction and to help teachers build on what students have already been taught. While this type of alignment and communication may be relatively common within schools, it is less common across schools, perhaps primarily because of logistical and funding challenges.

Elk Grove Unified School District has made a particular effort to promote a regional model of staff collaboration between schools. An Elk Grove district administrator described the model:

> We worked with our [local school] board and principals to establish a regional focus of education: we ask the principals of feeder schools to work with the next level to create a regional brand or identity that communicates to parents that there is a seamless approach to education from kindergarten through 12th grade. The Valley Region [within the district] has truly embraced this and has college-going branding and culture as well. Their motto is, "Go to Prairie [the elementary school], go to Jackman [the middle grades school], go to Valley [the high school], go to college." It's a pact with the community … we want to ensure that students understand that if they attend schools in that region they will graduate prepared to go to college.

The district's focus on the pathway from elementary to high school graduation and on to college was mentioned by a majority of the respondents we spoke with at the middle and high school levels as a key strategy for smooth transition and high graduation rates.

In terms of formal collaboration, teachers in all of the Valley Region schools meet annually for one day to discuss curriculum and instructional strategies. Last year, there were two follow-up meetings for grade 6–12 teachers, and other region-wide workshops for math teachers. Respondents in the Valley Region seem to be aware of these connections between the schools, including the middle grades students with whom we spoke. One student said,

> The teachers [at Jackman Middle School] are very connected to the teachers at Valley [High School]… They really are connected and in sync: "You have to learn this to be able to do this in high school" (Jackman Middle School Student).

The pervasiveness of the regional culture seems to be due in part to the efforts of the high school principal, who takes advantage of any opportunity to promote the high school as a community center. As an example, as part of our visit to this school for the study, the principals from all feeder schools in the region came to the high school for a joint meeting with the study team to discuss their regional approach.

Beyond Elk Grove's intensive regional focus, all of the other schools in the study mentioned some form of communication and articulation between school levels. For instance, with funding from the Orange County Department of Education and California State University, Fullerton, Buena Park High math teachers met on a monthly basis with their middle grades counterparts to discuss algebra articulation and instructional strategies. Teachers from the Program in America and California Explorations (PACE) program at Kennedy High also reported meeting with teachers at the primary feeder school to discuss

and align curriculum. One Kennedy student cited collaboration between her middle and high school teachers as influencing her decision to go to Kennedy and making her feel more prepared:

> *The reason that I chose to come to Kennedy is that the middle school I went to prepares you, because the teachers have meetings with Kennedy teachers. I had math and English teachers that meet with the high school teachers and talk about what they do and what the middle school teachers should teach kids. And I know that some of my middle school teachers still come here—I see them around campus because they still do those meetings. It helps a lot, because when I got here, my teachers were like, "Oh, I know your middle school teacher." They know what we know because they meet weekly after school on certain days. It helped me a lot because I came in here knowing what we need to know as a prerequisite.*

Even when teachers across school levels did not collaborate directly, respondents reported that using the same data system, instructional strategies, academic language, and programs (such as Advancement Via Individual Determination, or AVID) can provide a continuity of experience for students transitioning between schools. This type of cross-school articulation may be more difficult for schools in different districts (for example, for a middle grades school in an elementary district to work with a school in a high school district); however we saw two strong examples of this in our sample. For instance, Buena Park Junior High and Buena Park High (in Buena Park Elementary District and Fullerton Joint Union District, respectively) used the same consultant to provide professional development, which respondents reported encouraged cohesive instruction between their schools.

High School Preparation

Middle grades schools and high schools use many strategies to recruit and prepare students for the transition to high school, including preparing students academically, inviting students to visit the high school campus, sending high school staff and students to the middle grades school, and inviting (or requiring) students to attend programs during the transition summer.

Academic Preparation and High Expectations

Respondents at all three middle grades schools that we visited (Buena Park Junior High, Jackman Middle, and Livingston Middle) cited strong academic preparation of their students as a critical step in helping students transition successfully to high school. While this may seem like an obvious role for middle grades schools, respondents at the schools in the study took responsibility for ensuring that students had the individual support they needed to acquire the study skills and content knowledge necessary to be successful in ninth grade and beyond. In addition to an intense focus on research-based instructional strategies, such as using Direct Interactive Instruction and collaborative lesson-planning and teaching techniques, all three middle grades schools cited strong AVID programs that focus on teaching students necessary study skills and preparing them for post-secondary educational opportunities.

In addition to AVID, middle grades respondents described the importance of making all students aware of college. All three middle grades schools host college and career nights and provide students with opportunities to go on field trips to colleges and expose them to different career options. More informally, middle grades teachers and other staff talk to students and their parents about high school and college requirements to make them aware of what is needed to graduate from high school and continue in their education. Together, these strategies form a school-wide focus on preparing students for the next level of education, which respondents reported as a key factor in students' successful transition.

Visiting the High School

All of the high schools in the study give middle grades students multiple opportunities to become familiar with their campuses and procedures prior to their transition. The two smallest high schools in the study, Caruthers and Mendota High, bring *all* students from their main feeder school to the high school during the school day at least once. (Additionally, all three middle grades schools we visited bring all elementary school students to the middle grades school campus.) The rest of the high schools invite particular groups of students, such as students in AVID, on sports teams, or in honors programs, to the high school during the school day. For example, three high schools (Valley, Buena Park, and Kennedy High) reported inviting all middle grades school students and their parents to open house nights and invite students in AVID or honors programs to visit the high school during the school day. Valley High School holds regional health fairs and college fairs to encourage middle grades students and community members to come to the campus. When eighth graders visit the high schools, they watch presentations by high school students; shadow older students; meet with teachers, coaches, and counselors; and go on campus tours. A Caruthers High administrator reported that eighth graders register for ninth grade classes during their visit in February with the goal of ensuring that incoming students feel more comfortable on the high school campus when they return the following year.

Recruiting Students at Middle Grades Schools

In addition to inviting middle grades school students to their campuses, all high schools sent staff (and sometimes students) to feeder middle grades schools to recruit and orient students and to help them select and register for their high school classes. The focus on "recruiting" middle grades students was a common theme heard across all of the schools selected for this study. All schools reported that some combination of administrators, counselors, sports coaches, academic program directors, and club leaders visited middle grades schools to recruit transition students throughout the year. Four high schools (Valley, Buena Park, Livingston, and Kennedy High) also reported sending students on these visits to give demonstrations and talk to middle grades students about the different programs offered in high school. Respondents noted that students increasingly have a choice about which high school they will attend, creating a more competitive environment for attracting students and keeping them in school.

Counselors at five of the high schools we spoke with (Buena Park, Caruthers, Livingston, Mendota, and North High) help students register for high school classes during the school day in eighth grade in order to avoid losing students through summer registration. In addition, Valley High counselors help seventh grade students create a six-year plan that outlines graduation and A–G requirements so that students are aware of what they need to do to graduate from high school and to be prepared for college.

Summer Programs

Five schools (Buena Park, Los Amigos, Livingston, Valley, and Kennedy High) reported that they had or were planning to have summer programs for incoming students as part of their transition strategy. The goals of these programs are to provide academic support, to orient students to rigorous curriculum and a college-going culture, and to help students get to know each other, and for sports teams' practice or try-outs.

Buena Park High has two summer school "Jump Start" sessions where students whose tests scores are low or who are noted as struggling in eighth grade receive instruction in English language arts and math to prepare them for ninth grade classes. Los Amigos, Valley, and Kennedy High have summer programs for at-risk (based on grades, attendance, or behavior) incoming ninth graders that preview high school class content and graduation requirements, teach study skills, and help students become familiar with each other and high school culture. Valley High plans to expand the program to include a wider range of students in the coming years if funding is available. Livingston High respondents described summer programs for all students who want to play sports (approximately 40 percent of incoming ninth graders) and for AVID students, as well as plans to implement a future program for ELs. Kennedy High students

who are in the PACE program take summer classes, paid for by an active parent group, at California State University, Sacramento to help them get to know one another and become accustomed to the college-going culture promoted by PACE. One student who attended this program reported, "Summer school helped so much … just being there got you used to being at college, which is kind of like high school. You're interacting with peers and you have to go to classes on your own. It's set up so that it really makes you comfortable with that environment." In addition to summer school programs, Kennedy High teachers described home visits to targeted students over the summer to make sure they know what to expect in high school and to answer any questions they or their parents might have. Respondents at Kennedy and Valley High mentioned that there used to be more summer opportunities for transitioning students that were terminated due to the budget crisis.

Respondents from all schools in the study mentioned they hold an incoming student orientation in late summer or on the first day of school. Respondents at three schools (Livingston, Holtville, and North High) mentioned that they currently have programs such as "Link Crew," in which older students are assigned to be buddies or mentors to younger students.[12] Upperclassmen give tours of campus, tell incoming students about high school resources, and play games with students to help them get to know each other and the high school. Upperclassmen involved in the Link Crew program wear t-shirts so that new students know who they are and can ask them for help. One Livingston High student recalled, "Link Crew helped me a lot. They knew I didn't speak English, so they looked out for me. It was easy for me to get lost, so they would find me and help me because they were Spanish speakers."

Engaging and Connecting Students at School

Other strategies cited by the high schools in our sample aimed at helping students feel comfortable and engaged included encouraging students to get involved in sports, clubs, or other school activities, and helping students to form personal connections with other students and staff in the school community.

At all of the study schools, respondents mentioned the importance of getting students involved in school clubs, sports, or activities to help them become a part of the school community. They reported that, even if students do not seem to be particularly academically motivated, participation in these types of activities can serve as a motivator to continue going to school. One school administrator stated, "The more we can do to say '[you] are part of a system and something bigger than yourself—we are going to hand you off, but you are going to *belong* all the way,' the more likely that they will hang in there and finish."

Early Identification of Struggling Students

Respondents at all high schools described the importance of counselors and other school staff carefully monitoring students, particularly early in ninth grade, to ensure that students are not falling through the cracks. Respondents at three schools also mentioned that students create four- or six-year plans to help them select the classes necessary for graduation and to be prepared for college.

School staff across school levels use data on incoming students' performance, attendance, and behavior to ensure that incoming students are enrolled in school, placed in the right classes, and receive targeted individual supports as needed. For example, Holtville High receives a list of students that may need special interventions (e.g., students that did not make the 2.0 required GPA) from the primary feeder school. Respondents at Valley High and Buena Park High noted that staff (particularly counselors) communicate about particular students who might be struggling academically or socially prior to their transition between schools, and that this is vital to supporting students' transition. Middle grades staff can provide insight about what supports or interventions students are most likely to benefit from, saving

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[12] Kennedy and Valley High used to have Link Crew as well, but the program was cut due to budget constraints.

high school staff from having to start from scratch when attempting to meet new students' needs. In the fall, Buena Park High School staff track the enrollment status of all students they expect to attend their school by collecting student contact information from the middle grades school and contacting the families of students who are expected but have not shown up.

Targeted and Timely Supports and Interventions

Once struggling students have been identified, school staff provide individualized academic or social supports as quickly as possible. High school staff use information they receive from middle grades staff, along with any new information they gather on students, to provide appropriate interventions. The Holtville High principal meets with all of the students who did not meet the 2.0 GPA requirement in eighth grade within the first two weeks of school and introduces them to their counselors to ensure that they are aware of the supports available at the school. Buena Park High counselors create Individual English Language Development Plans (in addition to regular IEPs) that focus on helping ELs transition into high school. Fullerton Joint Union School District has an "Opportunity Program" at each high school that is designed to help at-risk students make the transition into high school. A district administrator described the impetus and goals of the program:

> *We completed an informal study of our most at-risk kids in 2003, and we found that with the 380 at-risk kids who came to us in the late 90s, only eight graduated four years later. That is why we placed an Opportunity Program for ninth and tenth grade kids at every school. We gave them a two-year window to see if they could make the transition from junior high to high school. We allowed them to be in a self-contained classroom for two or three periods, depending on their needs, then had them go out and take other things and see if they can get connected in other ways. They needed to have this home base because it was too hard for students to navigate the school and go to six different classes on time.*

Another strategy described at Kennedy High is identifying teachers who are particularly good at forming strong relationships with students and asking them to teach ninth grade instead of some of the higher-level classes, with the theory that if students are engaged in ninth grade, they will gain the skills and make the connections necessary to be engaged throughout high school. Kennedy High School respondents described academies and small learning communities that help ensure that students get individual attention and can take classes in their particular areas of interest. Caruthers High has an advisory period where students learn note-taking, organization, and study skills in ninth grade that support their learning and engagement in core academic classes.

District Role in Facilitating Transition Success

Respondents from 7 out of 11 districts[13] specifically mentioned the district office as playing a supporting and sometimes leading role in transition programs. The description of Elk Grove Unified's regional model is just one strong example of the district's role in facilitating transition. Respondents in other districts mentioned that their districts support transition through applying for grants to help fund transition programs, promoting a common mission among schools, distributing resources equitably across schools, aligning calendars to allow cross-school collaboration, providing district-wide professional development, creating aligned benchmark tests, and tracking and analyzing student data for schools.

We specifically selected schools and districts that varied in geographic location and district type (unified and high) because we hypothesized that these characteristics might influence the strategies schools used to help students transition and graduate. However, we were unable to identify any major patterns that varied based on these characteristics; this may have been due in part to our small sample of schools.

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[13] Includes the nine unified districts and two elementary districts.

In spite of our initial expectation that it might be easier for schools within a unified district to collaborate, an administrator at Livingston High commented that she felt the fact that the high school was not in a unified district with its main feeder school actually helped staff to recognize the need for communication:

> I think not being in the same district makes it more apparent and upfront that you have to go do it [articulate and communicate]. You don't take it for granted that because you're in the same district, that everything is going to automatically flow from them to us. We realize we're doing one set of things and they're doing something else, and if we are going to make those two pieces work, we have to get together at some point and actually make sure those contacts and connections are there.

In addition, while several respondents mentioned that having a single feeder school was useful in helping students transition and graduate, only four of the schools selected for this study receive over 80 percent of their students from a single feeder school,[14] suggesting that schools with more than one major feeder school may be able to overcome the associated challenges. Although fewer feeder schools and unified school districts might make collaboration easier, the schools in the study demonstrate that communication between schools is possible under many circumstances given school staff who are committed to the work.

While the primary goal of strong transition programs is to ensure that students are prepared for high school, another goal behind helping students transition that surfaced in our interviews is to retain or increase student enrollment and funding. Although all school districts in California technically have open enrollment policies,[15] some districts and schools seem to promote or embrace this policy more than others. Two schools noted that open enrollment and the existence of other nearby high school options for students causes competition among high schools to heavily recruit new students to retain funding based on school enrollment. A school administrator said this:

> The advent of all these new small high schools has made the comprehensive high schools really fight for their kids more. In the past, you did not have to worry about it, but we used to have 2,600-plus and now we have 2,100 students. That's money and staffing. When you put a dollar sign on each kid, you want them here. The district would be hard pressed if you ever closed a school like ours, but we do not want our teachers to lose jobs, and that is based on our enrollment.

School choice and the attachment of funds to student enrollment can influence not only school recruitment practices, but also curricular options that schools offer—schools can choose to specialize in one program (similar to magnet schools), or offer many programs to appeal more broadly to all students. Overall, the schools in our study appear to lean heavily toward the second strategy by offering many options to students, even when there is one magnet program that they feel draws the most students.

Funding Transition-Related Activities

The current fiscal crisis has made it difficult for schools and districts to fund transition-related programs and activities such as Link Crew, middle grades school visits to high schools, student tracking, summer school, and staff collaboration time. Respondents mentioned that many of the transition-focused

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[14] Five schools received 70 percent or more of their students from one feeder, and the other four schools received between 44 and 52 percent of their students from one feeder.

[15] According to Assembly Bill 1114, all California school districts are required to allow students to apply to go to another school within the district, with some limitations. For more information, see http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/93-94/bill/asm/ab_1101-1150/ab_1114_bill_930302_introduced

programs that remain are funded through grants from foundations, partnerships with colleges and universities, school fundraisers, and parent groups.

While many of the activities cited above require supplemental funds to facilitate the successful transition of students, it is important to point out that most respondents reported these as wise investments that may lead to subsequent savings. For example, spending money on transition programs might allow schools to save on future efforts to reengage students. Additionally, school staff reported that they and community agencies (e.g., colleges, businesses, and other public agencies) donate resources and time for the transition efforts. For example, every single teacher at Buena Park High volunteered to tutor students on his or her own time. In addition, some schools and districts chose to redirect existing resources toward a broader focus—for example, counselors might focus on ensuring all incoming students understand high school requirements to try to curb the need for multiple intensive interventions for students who lack necessary credits later in high school.

Some of the potentially most effective strategies appeared to be low cost. For example, Elk Grove Unified District's decision to organize into regions with unambiguous school feeder patterns seemed to greatly simplify vertical articulation across schools. Because Valley High has only one main feeder school, articulation and coordination efforts between these schools is easier than if they had four or five major feeder schools. This regional configuration also provides clear feeder patterns for the elementary schools in the region, greatly facilitating K–12 coordination and articulation.

Summary of Key Transition Strategies

The schools in our study help students make the transition from middle grades to high school through vertical teaming and staff collaboration, preparing students for high school academically and socially, helping students form connections at school, and identifying and providing targeted supports for struggling students. A common theme that ran throughout the particular strategies we heard about is an intense commitment to student success. There seemed to be a keen focus and common understanding, from students all the way to staff at the district level, that school staff would do whatever was needed to help students connect and engage in school at all levels.

While the data collected in this study cannot be used to determine the effectiveness of particular strategies, the transition strategies described in this report provide examples for schools and districts to consider in creating or enhancing their own transition programs. A topic for future research is gaining a better understanding of successful transition policies and strategies from elementary to middle grades. This will be pursued through additional collaborative efforts between the CA CC and the CDE during the 2011–12 school year. In the next section of the report, we describe strategies high schools in our study reported using to ensure that all students graduate from high school.

High School Strategies Promoting Graduation

Although successful transition from middle grades to high school is important for high rates of graduation, high schools must also develop and implement programs and strategies for keeping students motivated and engaged through the end of 12th grade. When asked about the strategies behind their higher graduation rates, respondents mentioned several common themes: dedicated teaching teams with effective professional learning committees, multiple and extensive opportunities for academic assistance, individualized counseling models, the use of data to inform instruction and target interventions, and opportunities for students to feel connected to the school. These strategies are described in the following section.

Team-Oriented Staff with Coordinated and Articulated Plans

Use of professional learning communities (PLCs) or strategic collaboration was cited at the majority of the schools that we studied. Of the nine high schools we interviewed, five (Livingston, North, Kennedy, Valley, and Holtville High) indicated that they use clearly identified small learning community models with built-in collaboration time during the school day.

The Elk Grove Unified district office, which oversees Valley High, has a strong professional learning community focus. District support for PLC work was reiterated by staff at Buena Park, Livingston, and Kennedy High. Kennedy High respondents described their use of "Linked Learning," a nationwide initiative that embeds field-based learning and career technical education into core academic classes, as key in helping teachers collaborate.

Mendota High used common preparatory periods for teachers to collaborate and pace curriculum[16]. An administrator at North High reported that the staff had voted to increase the length of the school day so they could devote one day a week to collaborating. Respondents at Valley High described subject departments that are collaborating and using data especially well:

> *The teachers have taken ownership of the departments and decided what we wanted to do and broke down into course-alike groups and looked at data … We really take pride in the data analysis … it is about the students.*

Data use is an important aspect of PLCs that is described further in the following section.

Data Tracking and Use

High schools throughout the state utilize data in a variety of ways, most of which revolve around California Standards Test (CST) scores and the Academic Performance Index (API), a measure of school and district performance and growth. Of the schools selected for this study, all cited data tracking and use as a vital component of their graduation success. Respondents described how data, often reaching beyond annual CST data to include more frequently produced benchmark assessment information, provided the impetus for a critical examination of student learning across departments and by individual classroom within departments. Respondents cited these data as hard evidence of where important progress was being made and where renewed dedication was needed.

For example, along with individual CST data being used to guide student learning, respondents at Valley, Buena Park, Holtville, Mendota, and Livingston High described close student monitoring through the use of school-wide or district-wide benchmark exams. As stated by a Holtville High administrator,

> *Benchmark assessments are given quarterly to students and then teachers check what needs to be re-taught. They turn in a re-teaching plan to the principal, give a follow-up exam to those students (especially those who scored below 65 percent on the standards), look at the data again, and then they look at it with the entire department.*

This type of detailed data appears to be an important component of enabling the PLCs described above. A teacher at Valley High stated, "We have been trained to look at data and how to analyze. When we focused on that, the climate started to change around being positive and the relationship with the kids, then our graduation rate started to come up because kids started passing their classes and teachers

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[16] Upon review, an administrator from Mendota High noted that they were unable to retain common prep periods in 2011–12 due to the school's small size and challenges with their master schedule.

were doing everything that they could do to figure out why their kids [were struggling]." The ability to utilize benchmark and common assessment data to identify struggling students provides the staff at these sites the opportunity to address non-proficient learners prior to the administration of the CST tests typically conducted in May.

Respondents from four of the nine high schools also described using individual CST data to guide decisions regarding proper course placement, identification of at-risk students, enrollment, and participation in intervention courses.

A final point regarding data use is that respondents from three of the sites (Caruthers, Valley, and Kennedy High) reported that the state data system is helping them to better track students who leave the school and provide more accurate data regarding graduation rates. However, respondents at some schools cited the state data system as a problem, as indicated in the section listing challenges below.

Multiple and Extensive Opportunities for Academic Assistance

The high school respondents in this study emphasized the importance of multiple and extensive opportunities for academic assistance and support. These range from specific programs such as California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) preparation to afterschool tutoring or more structured advisory periods.

Of the nine high schools in the study, six stated that they utilize teachers as tutors to support students who are struggling and need extra help. Buena Park High provides students with a list of every teacher on campus, including their subject area and availability, so that students can go to any teacher to get tutoring, not just their own. Valley High School has a grant that allows them to run evening enrichment and remediation courses. This program allows students to attend five evenings a week, while another site (Buena Park High) funds an extensive after- and before-school tutoring program that provides students access to the library for up to four hours a day beyond the regular school day. This allows all students, including those involved in extracurricular activities, to take part in peer and teacher tutoring.

Respondents from Buena Park and North High described their use of peer tutoring. These tutors are college students at Buena Park, and high-achieving students that are part of the California Scholastic Federation at North High. North High's peer tutoring model is based on the AVID program.

In addition to the three middle grades schools in our study that have AVID (described in the transition strategies section of the report), six of the high schools in the study specifically mentioned AVID as an important resource for addressing academic support and remediation. Livingston High invested significant time and energy in reestablishing the AVID program due to its importance at their primary feeder, Livingston Middle School. Livingston Middle, Jackman Middle, and Valley High are AVID demonstration schools, which requires that they be models of the program. Respondents at Kennedy High mentioned that while all of the middle grades schools within the district have AVID programs, the program was cut at the high schools. Three high schools (Kennedy, Los Amigos, and Caruthers High) have modeled other intervention programs on AVID. Los Amigos High has an "Academy" that focuses on student motivation, self-regulation, study skills, and time management. Caruthers High has a grade 9–12 advisory course that teaches study skills and time management in the first year, then shifts to high school exit exam preparation in tenth grade and SAT preparation in eleventh grade, and culminates with a post-secondary preparation course. All students are required to attend this 25-minute advisory course.

In addition to ongoing academic assistance, respondents mentioned developing credit remediation programs as important in allowing students who have fallen behind in credits to catch up. Respondents

described strategies ranging from an eight-period day to summer school to support credit remediation programs. All nine high schools arranged for students to remediate credits while remaining on the high school campus. Buena Park and Livingston High appear to be similar in nature; they allow students to remediate credits without losing their connection with their comprehensive school by having those identified students attend a continuation high school program for half of the day and then attending the comprehensive campus for the other half. The goal is to allow students enrolled in the program to remain connected to their home school. As an administrator at Buena Park High stated, "we remediate them for a semester—they are not stuck there for a year—and then they transition back into the comprehensive campus." Several other schools, including Livingston, Buena Park, and Mendota High, also identified the connection to the comprehensive high school as an important component.

Valley, Los Amigos, Mendota, and Kennedy High reported providing credit remediation programs after school. A Holtville High administrator stated that "if a senior is lacking in credits, they can start the credit recovery program their second semester because we want them in the classroom, getting the instruction from the teacher as much as possible, and because it is online they're able to work at their own pace." Los Amigos, Mendota, North, and Livingston High offer academic support classes that focus on developing study skills for students, helping them complete homework, learn time management skills, and set goals. These intervention courses focus on at-risk 9th and 10th grade students in an attempt to keep them from failing courses. Two of the nine schools use summer school as a way to provide remediation for students who are behind in credits, although a North High administrator stated that budget cuts have forced the school district to centralize the summer school program and have deeply affected access for students.

Strong Counseling Model

All of the high schools in the study cited the importance of strong and involved counselors in attaining their high graduation rates; however, the models and strategies counselors used varied somewhat between schools. For example, Buena Park High uses a case carrier model, where they assign students to counselors who follow them from grade to grade throughout high school. Three of the nine high schools require students to develop long-term plans: as described in the transition strategies section of the report, Buena Park and Valley High counselors have students develop six-year plans that help guide not only their high school courses and goals but also their post-secondary options, while Kennedy High staff described a four-year plan. Elementary schools in Elk Grove Unified's Valley High region are now developing 10-year plans for students to help them understand the A–G college requirements and how best to prepare to graduate from high school and go on to college.

All nine of the schools in the study stated that their counseling staff attempt to make personal connections with their students. Counselors make personal connections in a variety of ways, from financial aid workshops for students and parents to student study teams for struggling students. An Elk Grove district administrator stated that their counseling department has an "amazing" relationship with its students and that they go "above and beyond," making sure to treat each student as an individual and connect students to classes and to teachers.

Counselors at Livingston High reported regularly spending time meeting with parents and students at risk. They described preparing summary listings of students who are deemed to be at risk of not graduating every three weeks, and using a home dialer to invite parents to come and meet with them. They also reported meeting with the parents of all students at least twice a year to advise them of their status. A district administrator reiterated the power of the strong counseling model at Livingston, stating,

One of the things that Livingston does quite well is to identify students who are struggling, whether academically or socially, and provide supports for them. I'm not just talking about career and guidance counseling, but also social and emotional counseling.

Forming Connections with School

Beyond just the counselor-student relationship, respondents from all of the high schools emphasized the importance of helping students to form connections with the school. The most commonly cited approach was through extracurricular activities. These ranged from the Future Farmers of America cited as an example by Caruthers, Buena Park, Holtville, and Livingston High, to sports programs that are typical to virtually all high schools. Although all California high schools undoubtedly offer extracurricular activities, based on our visits, the study schools seemed unusual in their depth of commitment, the degree of emphasis, and the breadth of offerings. For example, respondents from Caruthers High indicated that all of their students are expected to join an extracurricular program, and Livingston High is exploring the possibility of requiring all students to participate.

The degree of emphasis is indicated by an administrator at Caruthers High, who stated,

> *When we hire teachers, we emphasize the need for commitment to the extracurricular mission here. We have an afterschool program and the expectation is that our teachers aren't done with their job when the bell rings at 3:10. Our kids still need something to do until 5:30. So we've had a staff wide commitment for many years to the extracurricular mission. … Every single one of our teachers probably knows about 90 percent of our students by name if they were to pass them in the hall.*

The emphasis on school connections is further exemplified by all of the high schools' focus on creating "caring environments" for students. For example, an administrator at Buena Park High stated that as a "core value of the school, [teachers] want to notice every kid that comes through their door and they want to find ways to help them." Students at two of the high schools specifically mentioned that students get along with each other and acknowledge one another with respect on campus, while students at the other schools noted that teachers made them feel safe, respected, and cared for. An administrator at Valley High summarized, "If you talked to any kid on campus you would find that they have a relationship with more than one adult on the campus that they would feel safe to get advice from." Staff at Livingston and North High made similar statements in interviews regarding the importance of establishing caring environments.

To reinforce the goal of caring environments for students, four schools (Valley, Buena Park, Kennedy, and Livingston High) employ strategies to engage parents in the education process, especially with the idea of "parent institutes" that include classes for parents on high school requirements, college applications and financial aid, and other relevant topics. Kennedy High respondents also reported home visits by teachers to reach out to at-risk students and families. Additionally, at Los Amigos, respondents indicated they were establishing a computer lab at a local apartment complex as a learning center for parents so they can keep track of their students' grades and attendance.

Respondents also reported activities beyond school events to get the larger community involved. For example, Livingston High described their partnership with the local company, Fosters Farms, in the form of career technical assistance. Kennedy High respondents described their "Junior Ride Program" partnership, which provides African-American students in 10th grade with mentoring by UC Davis students. North High respondents described California Partnership Academies for education, law and protective services, and global business and information technology. An administrator at Caruthers High cited a partnership with Doctors Academy to promote a college-going culture for their students, while

respondents at Valley High mentioned their Health Tech Academy, which links the school to the local Kaiser hospital and doctors.

School-wide High Expectations

Another approach uniformly cited by respondents from the high schools was establishing and clearly conveying high expectations for students; respondents often referred to a college-going culture. Five of the nine schools in the study stated that they have various ways in which they engage students in the college-going culture and high expectations. For example, an administrator at Kennedy High stated,

> *It's definitely a college-going culture. All 10th graders take the PSAT and then we push them to take the SAT in 11th and 12th grade. A couple of nights throughout the year we hold meetings at the school to assist with filling out the financial aid forms for college. This year, we had Congresswoman Matsui come on campus to promote the financial aid forms. We meet with the kids in the ninth grade to lead "tours" on college websites and set up their individual learning plans. We make sure they're aware of all of the graduation requirements and what kind of ACT and SAT scores are required for specific colleges.*

In addition to the use of AVID to help students learn study skills, described in the section on academic assistance above, respondents reported that AVID is a strong program for establishing college awareness and readiness, even though not all students participate in the program. Valley High respondents cited their use of AVID, Gear-Up (a federally funded program designed to help prepare students for post-secondary education), and partnerships with local universities and community colleges to help students prepare for college. Valley High respondents also described college and career fairs that they hold four times a year, during which they distribute t-shirts for students with the A–G college requirements printed on them.

In addition to AVID, North High features a large International Baccalaureate (IB) program at the school and promotes high expectations through rigorous coursework. Caruthers reported fostering high expectations through the use of a broad array of Advanced Placement (AP) courses. They expose students to AP courses in 9th and 10th grade so that they are more prepared to take them in 11th and 12th grade.

Community partnerships were also cited as an important way to create an environment of high expectations for students. For example, Buena Park, Kennedy, and Mendota High have partnerships with colleges and universities. At Buena Park High, students who enroll in the "middle-college" program take college classes for dual credit and will have the opportunity to graduate from high school with an associate college degree. A Mendota High respondent described their Academic Talent Search (ATS), which is a partnership with California State University, Sacramento to identify qualified students and enroll them in a summer institute at the university.

The District Role in Facilitating Graduation

Respondents from five of the nine high schools in the study specifically mentioned the importance of their district office in realizing their high graduation rates. At two of the five schools, the importance of the school district vision for creating high expectations was mentioned, while at the other three the primary focus was on fiscal support as well as the provision of professional development for site administrators and teachers.

Funding Graduation-Related Strategies and Programs

Five of the nine study schools mentioned the importance of grant-funded programs in achieving high graduation rates. Also, several respondents mentioned that funding flexibility allowed schools and districts to allocate resources more appropriately to programs and support activities that were deemed

core to their mission. However, several respondents expressed concerns regarding their ability to maintain programs in the face of declining funds. Valley High respondents reported cutting their counseling staff by almost two-thirds and possibly facing more dramatic cuts. Valley High also mentioned that a loss in funding for summer school programs providing remediation to at-risk students could place their high graduation rates at risk.

Challenges

While respondents shared their successes with transition programs and dropout prevention strategies, the schools and districts also discussed challenges. The most commonly cited challenges related to the state's fiscal crisis, which has substantially cut education resources statewide. A number of transition- and graduation-related programs and supports either had been, or were in danger of being, cut.

Although consistently mentioned as critical to transition success, vertical teaming also presented challenges. First, vertical teaming takes time and therefore requires investment. Second, schools receiving students from different schools have to find ways to collaborate with staff in multiple locations, which can substantially increase the challenges associated with doing this right. A third obstacle to successful articulation across schools, as described by a Valley High administrator, can occur when "blame" is conveyed to teachers at lower grade schools for not adequately preparing students for the upper grades. To counter this, the respondent emphasized that he actively encourages high school teachers to learn from elementary and middle grades teachers instead of blaming them for poor student performance: "I caution my teachers, 'Don't ever tell a teacher that our kids can't do this because you didn't do that.' … Our teachers are becoming aware of what is actually happening in elementary [grades]." The administrator further noted that this heightened interaction between teachers at all levels led to an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Several respondents referred to a third challenge—the difficulty of tracking students between middle grades and high school to assess the degree to which they are losing them in transition. Ideally, the state student-level data system would facilitate this, but respondents expressed concerns that these data are not tracked and submitted accurately in some school districts.

A fourth challenge identified by respondents was the difficulty of forging a new culture and focus on articulated and well delivered instruction. Some cited struggles in redirecting staff to hold high expectations for all students, reconsidering how their instruction was monitored and delivered, and developing a strong culture of sharing and collaboration. Most respondents, however, cited the considerable progress their schools had made in this redirection and that staff had largely been motivated by the power of data to measure progress and indicate where learning is taking place.

Finally, a fifth challenge cited at three schools—which seems somewhat surprising given the strong statistical evidence of their success—concerned their efforts to get the word out about their positive academic performance. These concerns were exacerbated by the open enrollment provisions most of these schools had. Schools with high populations of low-income and typically at-risk students may suffer from a bad reputation in the community if they are surrounded by schools that perform similarly, but serve more affluent populations. An administrator at Lincoln High reported, "One of our greatest challenges is getting the word out about all of the programs and benefits of attending Lincoln High in an open enrollment climate."

Implications for Practice and Policy

Although respondents generally agreed that there is no perfect program or "silver bullet" to achieve smooth student transition or high graduation rates, five practices emerged across the interviews as most

important for both of these goals: 1) provide ways for students to connect with school, 2) encourage collaboration and partnerships among staff within and between schools, 3) streamline school feeder patterns, 4) provide multiple avenues for students to receive academic support, and 5) encourage healthy competition as an additional motivator for schools to attract and retain students through graduation.

Middle grades schools and high schools can help students connect to school by offering multiple programs, activities, and clubs, and through organizational structures (such as advisory periods, or a counselor case load model where counselors follow students through all four years of high school) that allow students to connect to school. In addition, schools can foster caring environments that help students feel like they belong in the school community and have supportive adults who care about them.

Districts and schools can encourage collaboration and partnerships among staff across school levels by providing them with specific time to align curriculum and instructional techniques, and to learn from each other about strategies to meet individual student needs. School leaders can help to make collaboration successful and avoid placing blame on teachers or students by setting clear goals and expectations for the outcome of the partnership work.

To simplify cross-school collaboration and transition activities and potentially reduce costs, district administrators should consider streamlining school feeder patterns. Streamlined feeder patterns not only facilitate coordination among staff, but also minimize disruption to cohorts of students as they move through the grades. Respondents in several study high schools reported advantages associated with many of their students having known each other since elementary school.

Middle grades schools and districts can help students successfully transition and graduate by identifying struggling students quickly using student data and teacher feedback, and providing them with multiple avenues for academic support. Academic assistance can come in the form of tutoring, summer school, online support classes, and remediation classes.

Finally, as mentioned earlier in the report, a number of respondents commented on the increasingly competitive school environment, and how this has spurred their efforts to attract students, ensure their successful entry into high school, and form strong bonds with students as key strategies in facilitating academic success and graduation. Even in schools where respondents emphasized how much additional work they have to do in this area, impressive programs and interventions were reported. However, open enrollment is emphasized to varying degrees in different districts. District and school administrators should consider ways to leverage this policy, given that healthy competition for students may encourage schools to use innovative approaches to attract and retain students that result in higher transition and graduation rates.

In conclusion, although we have learned about specific strategies that some successful schools use to improve transition and graduation, an important question remains: What state and county policies and strategies could encourage practices that facilitate school transition and graduation? Given what we heard about the importance of collaboration within and across schools, states and county offices of education could encourage this by creating further opportunities for partnerships between schools and districts—partnerships in which teachers and administrators form communities of practice to examine data, share information about members' strengths and challenges, and learn from one another.

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