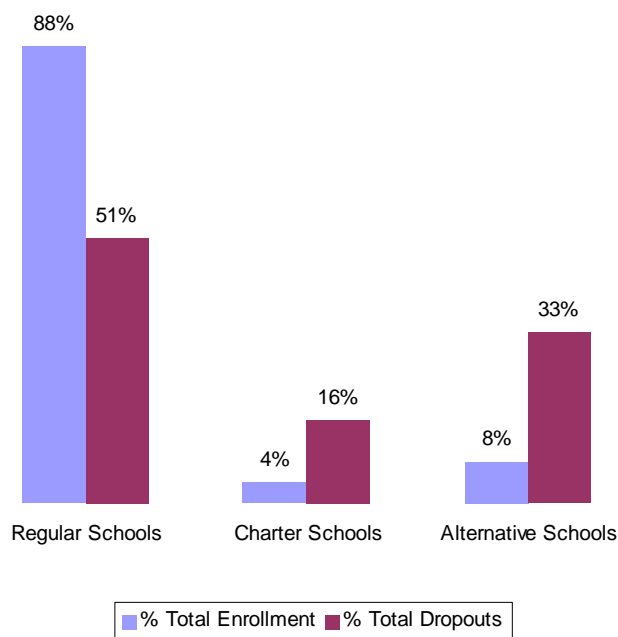


Alternative Education Enrollment and Dropouts in California High Schools

By Susan Rotermund

California has a variety of alternative education options for high school students whose needs are not met by the regular school system. The California Department of Education separates alternative education into two categories, alternative schools housed at their own sites, and alternative programs offered within

Figure 1
California Enrollment and Dropouts, 2005-2006
Regular, Charter, and Alternative High Schools



SOURCE: California Department of Education*

students at alternative schools may reflect the fact that many of the students enrolled in these schools are already at high risk of dropping out when they enter (see CDRP Research Report 3, “Does State Policy Help or Hurt the Dropout Problem in California?”).

It is important to note that overall dropout figures for school types can be misleading. The data suggest that the dropout problem may be concentrated in a relatively small number of schools, with 3% of charter schools accounting for 63% of all charter school dropouts and 3% of alternative schools accounting for 37% of all alternative school dropouts.

regular schools. Charter schools offer another option for students who are looking for a school outside of the regular system. Are these alternative education options meeting the needs of the students they serve?

One way to measure the ability of these schools to meet the needs of their students is to compare the percentage of California high school dropouts accounted for by alternative schools and charter schools with the dropout percentages accounted for by regular schools. Data drawn from the California Department of Education reveal that alternative schools have a disproportionately higher percentage of total California dropouts than their percentage of total enrollment would suggest.

In fact, although alternative schools comprise only 8% of the total high school enrollment in California, they account for 33% of all dropouts. Regular charter high schools enroll 4% of California’s student population but account for 16% of the dropouts. The high percentage of dropouts represented by

* California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved October 2, 2007 from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/studentdatafiles.asp>. and the California Department of Education Academic Performance Index (API) Data Files [Electronic Version]. Retrieved December 3, 2007 from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/apidatafiles.asp>

Table 1
California High School Enrollment and Dropouts by School Type and Alternative Programs

	2000-2001			2005-2006			2005-2006		Enrollment Percent Change
	Schools	Students Enrolled	Percent	Schools*	Students Enrolled	Percent	Number of Dropouts	Percent	
Total	2,066	1,735,576	100.0	2,462	1,974,645	100.0	69,613	100.0	13.8
Regular Schools	934	1,547,232	89.1	1,037	1,739,883	88.1	35,421	50.9	12.5
Charter Schools	97	30,444	1.8	271	76,463	3.9	11,492	16.5	151.2
Alternative Schools	1,035	157,900	9.1	1,154	158,299	8.0	22,700	32.6	0.3
Alternative Education Total		256,219	n/a	n/a	285,413	14.4	n/a	n/a	11.4
Alternative Schools	1,035	157,900	9.1	1,154	158,299	8.0	22,700	32.6	0.3
Alternative Programs in Regular Schools		98,319	5.7	n/a	126,114	6.4	n/a	n/a	28.3
Alternative Schools by Type									
Alternative	165	35,903	2.1	178	36,084	1.8	5,213	7.5	0.5
County Community	19	3,399	0.2	53	14,976	0.8	1,866	2.7	340.6
Community Day	145	5,908	0.3	203	8,777	0.4	1,976	2.8	48.6
Continuation	521	66,430	3.8	522	69,253	3.5	12,188	17.5	4.3
CYA	14	4,752	0.3	9	2,258	0.1	0.0	0.0	-52.4
Juvenile Hall	50	25,394	1.5	58	11,251	0.6	280	0.4	-55.7
Opportunity	24	4,260	0.2	28	3,277	0.2	874	1.3	-23.0
Special Education	94	11,363	0.7	101	11,956	0.6	302	0.4	5.2
State Special	3	491	0.0	3	467	0.0	1	0.0	-4.9
Alternative Programs in Regular Schools									
Community		1,582	0.1		1,871	0.1			18.3
Continuation Classes		1,446	0.1		660	0.0			54.4
Independent study		22,920	1.3		44,594	2.3			94.6
Magnet		55,289	3.2		69,443	3.5			25.6
Opportunity		4,739	0.3		2,448	0.1			-48.3
Other		10,943	0.6		5,719	0.3			-47.7
Pregnancy		1,400	0.1		1,379	0.1			-1.5

*The total number of schools in 2005-2006 does not include 24 Non-Public, Non-Sectarian schools that accounted for 0 enrollment and 132 dropouts.
SOURCE: *Ibid.*, see Figure 1

Overall, the proportion of California students attending alternative schools or participating in alternative programs at regular schools has not changed dramatically since 2000-2001 (see Table 1). Total student enrollment has grown 14%, with alternative education enrollment growing by 11%. The distribution of students among alternative schools and alternative programs in regular schools has changed markedly, however. For example, enrollment at County Community Schools has increased 340% since 2000-2001, while enrollment in other alternative schools, such as Opportunity Schools, has decreased.

The largest change in enrollment in alternative programs at regular high schools has been in the Independent Study program, which has grown nearly 100% since 2000. It is difficult to judge the success of the Independent Study program and other alternative programs at regular high schools, however, because the state does not provide specific dropout information for students participating in these programs.

Charter schools have also grown rapidly since 2000-2001, from 97 schools serving 30,000 students in 2000-2001, to 271 schools serving more than 75,000 students in 2005-2006 (an enrollment increase of 151%). The corresponding percentage of total dropouts for charter schools has also increased, from 6% of all California dropouts in 2000-2001 (not shown) to 16% in 2005-2006.

If charter schools and alternative schools are considered *together* as alternative choices to regular high schools, the overall enrollment in alternative education schools *has* increased, from 188,000 students in 2000-2001, to 235,000 students in 2005-2006, an increase of 25% compared to the 14% increase in regular school enrollment.

Note: This brief has been updated to include data from the California Department of Education Academic Performance Index (API) Data Files [Electronic Version]. Retrieved December 3, 2007 from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/apidatafiles.asp>. This source provided more complete information about charter schools that had closed, thus changing the number of charter schools listed in the October 2007 version of this brief from 80 to 97 for 2000-2001 and from 240 to 271 for 2005-2006.