

What is a Continuation school?

Introduction

Walk into a continuation high school for the first time and the common expectations one has balanced against the realities of the experience are often in sharp contrast. One might expect to find kids wandering at will and hanging out all over the campus and instead find students in class, attentive and performing with no stragglers cluttering up a clean campus! Some expect to see classrooms operating more as lockdowns but find academic environments with active learning going on and students engaged in their own learning. Often exotic hairstyles, personal adornment and fanciful dress are in evidence as well as students who are not shy in asking you who you are and why you are there. Most often these students are also open and eagerly share what they are doing and what they have accomplished at their school. Most frequently when a new visitor leaves the campus a recalibration occurs about these students and this school setting. Also frequently there is a need to revisit, not exactly knowing why.

Who are these kids? When staff is asked that question there an encyclopedia of responses. The answers come from so many directions that it ends up that there is really no “type” of student while there may be some shared experiences these students have prior to coming to the school. Many of them find that they needed to “earn” their way to the continuation school by creating a record of poor attendance, failing grades, bad performance and problematic discipline at their home school. Many soon learn that they are “unworthy” of the benefits of the traditional high school and need to be sent to the school for the “bad kids.” Or others get the picture that for many subtle reasons they simply do not fit into the expected pattern of the traditional school system and they will not be successful there. Whatever the reason, the net effect is one of rejection and a feeling that they have personally failed and are being sent to someplace to be “fixed”.

When they arrive they are very attentive to what is happening around them and they are very sensitive to what people at the continuation school are doing and how their peers are acting. There is usually a time of accommodation for the new student as they learn about the school and its system and they become inculcated into its mores. For some it is an easy and progressive process and for others has it is ups and downs with a lot of tests and resolutions. What they find during this time is usually that there are only a few simple rules to the operation of the campus, that the rules are consistently enforced, that everyone knows the rules and abides by them, and that the rules make sense and help everyone move forward. There seems to be an underlying conviction among these students that fairness is a consequence for everyone.

Rules? In a continuation school? Yes, structure is the name of the game and it is a necessary component of a successful school experience. These students appreciate the predictability of structure on the part of the school and its staff even when they themselves may be unpredictable. They want this institution to remain predictable and a place that can be relied upon consistently. That is what makes it work for them and they will strive to keep it that way.

So, rules about what? Simple rules about attendance, classroom behavior, academic performance, and expectations for mutual respect will do. With those few rules we set goals, monitor results, plan instruction, teach, learn, assess and move on to the

next step. The first thing we do is find out what every student knows how to do and how well when they enter and start from that foundation on an individual path to graduation. The key to success is the knowledge that we learn for ourselves, not to please someone else but to make ourselves stronger, wiser and more capable. Once a student owns this piece of information they will move forward rapidly.

Comprehensive secondary education is not something that happens at one place it is a concept and it happens in terms of a continuum of student placement and the delivery of multiple student services. It includes both curricular and support program options and within those offerings is a variety of incentive for students contained in a number of programs and schools. The traditional secondary school includes program offerings presented in leveled class offerings of expected grade level achievement standards and goals based on an assumption of common student abilities for that grade level. The traditional school also contains Special Education and Advanced Placement classes that are organized around grade level standards, goals and expectations. Traditional schools may also contain career path and academy type organizational schemes as well as other alternative options such as Opportunity Programs and Independent Study.

In the traditional secondary school seat time is the primary standard for school attendance and credit earning and the standard hourly based is 18 hours per credit or 180 hours per school year per course for 10 credits. The typical based for course credit is quarters of 2.5 credits each or semesters of 5 credits each and variable credit is typically unavailable. A limit on the number of unexcused absences means that after a student exceeds that limit the grade assigned will be a fail and the student will need to make the course up at some other time, usually in summer school. The traditional school most typically operates on a six period day and in most cases the number of credits required for graduation leave little room for any failure at any grade level and it is not difficult for a student to fall behind and be in danger of not graduating very early in their four year high school career in this system.

In the continuation school the standards for the adopted curriculum are taught but students have an individual program design to assist them master those standards. There are grade-level courses that are required for graduation but how classrooms are organized to provide students with the opportunity to challenge content, move at their own pace through the course, and exit the course when finished and go to the next course they need for graduation. There is also no set order for classes to be taken except for the demands of a sequential curriculum. One may find “seniors”, “juniors” and “sophomores” all in the same course at the same time completing work for course credit. Students also earn credit for discrete units of work as they are completed so they have a greater sense of accomplishment as they work through the class.

Who Are “Those” Kids?

A unique phenomenon of continuation high school enrollment is that no one seems to know from where these students come and no one seems to have ever had them in school prior to their transfer to your school! They just arrive! But, make sure they usually never find the way back to from wherever they never came! They are now your kids but everyone else retains the right to have an opinion about them. Those seem to be the general rule in most districts.

A typical behavior our students share when they arrive at our schools is poor school attendance. This condition is often a result of family situations that include frequent movement, job loss, unstable family situations and disorganization. Most often these students exhibit alienation from adult and/or majority society and mistrust of the accepted social order and rejection of the traditional social roles. Many of our students come from families that can be described as high risk and are very dysfunctional and for many of these families these students may be the best organized and most discipline member of that family. Frequently these students taken on many adult roles in the family and take care of younger siblings or infirm adults in the family on a regular basis that may interrupt regular school attendance or consistent school performance. In many cases these student may be parents themselves and in need of support for the care of an infant or toddler.

Many of these families live in poverty and have low educational achievement and a history of a poor relationship with schools and formal education. When their child is regularly enrolled and is making progress and eventually graduates he/she will be the first of their family to earn a diploma and it is a major event for the entire family. It is also very common for many of these student's families to have many chronic health problems that also contribute to poor attendance and lagging achievement either directly or indirectly. Part of the job of the school staff is to address the change of a culture that places a low value on education and regular school attendance and a commitment to performance. That challenge is a primary task that is addressed with the initial enrollment of each student and occurs in the orientation program and the early attention to the mission and vision of the school community.

What Are The Goals of Continuation Schools?

Orientation programs introduce new students in the continuation school to the outcomes that are the focus of this program for every student in three areas: academic, personal and behavioral. The academic outcomes are presents to students with a focus on a high school diploma as the first and foremost outcome. This goal is presented to them as the primary predictor of their future life over the next 60 years! No small matter! The staff also lays out their aspirations for possible post-secondary opportunities for further education or training and being able to acquire vocational preparation and entry-level school. The programs available to them are described and the pathways to those programs are explained and the assistance to achieve those programs will be explained. The foundation for all of this to happen is a primary adjustment in attitude that is explained in the fundamental responsibility on the part of the student for their learning and respect for their learning as their own and enduring for a lifetime.

The personal outcomes involve developing a value system that shows positive self-worth, self-confidence and personal satisfaction. The school system involves small classes and personalized interaction that builds a sense of responsibility and recognition of personal responsibility. The school staff consistently shows tolerance and understanding of a variety of viewpoints and cultural contexts and expects the same in return from all students toward others. The ultimate goal is the development is a respect for self and others and the realization of an objective assessment of one's own attributes, strengths and needs.

The behavioral outcomes are directed toward constructive recreational and leisure-time activities where students clearly understand and obey laws and are able to participate in civic and community affairs. To also recognize the value of the use of wise health practices. The control of impulsivity is an important value that involves being able to suspend judgment, assess a situation, respect others and be able to invest in common efforts to participate in community efforts.

What Makes The Continuation Program Successful?

Continuation High School are established under Education Code 48430 in which the legislative intent for continuation education schools and classes are to provide:

1. An opportunity for pupils to complete the required academic courses of instruction to graduate from high school.
2. A program of instruction which emphasizes occupational orientation or a work-study schedule and offers intensive guidance services to meet the special needs of pupils.
3. A program designed to meet the educational needs of each pupil, including but not limited to, independent study, regional occupational programs, work study, career counseling, and job placement services, as a supplement to classroom instruction.

With this legislative intent and subsequent education codes continuation high schools became the only mandated secondary schools and traditional high schools are an accepted exemption to the mandated attendance requirement for students over the age of sixteen. Continuation schools are voluntary school placements and involuntary placements are possible only by using the required involuntary hearing process required under Education Codes 48432.5, 48903 and 48917. Continuation schools are essentially schools of choice.

Curriculum in the continuation school is based on the district requirements, its curriculum and textbook adoptions. Because the continuation program is individualized and self-paced and also because there are new students coming into the program all throughout the school year the operation of the classroom delivery system is obviously very different from that in a traditional school setting. The continuation program uses variable credit so student can earn credit in small amounts as they complete discrete units or sections of a course rather than by quarters or semester amounts. Classrooms are significantly different than those in the traditional school in that it is possible that every student in the room could potentially be working on different assignments during the same time period, as it is very individualized. In one classroom students could be working as a unit in a thematic curriculum while in yet another classroom they might be engaged in a problem based curriculum that blends English, history and math subjects.

Students in different classes might earn credits based on demonstrated competency exams or performance units, others might be using productive hours in which their product has to match their attendance and productive use of time to gain assigned credit, and others might be using technology that has unit value gained on completion. The key element is that no earned time or credit is lost for a student by arbitrary time frames or conditions. When a student completes the course that student

moves on to the next class needed without waiting for quarter or semester end. As long as the rules are known the students understand how to negotiate their way through the various classroom systems, somewhat what it is like in real life situations.

Students are in relatively small classes in a caring community. Rules are taught before the class moves forward and the best socializers in the school are the other students. The emphasis is on students taking on personal responsibility for their own learning and in a school of this size teachers are aware of student progress instantly. When a student is struggling or does not understand it is very apparent to the teacher and intervention is made quickly. With early diagnostic assessment and distribution of the results to teaching staff student strengths and weaknesses are known and are used by teachers to develop the individual learning plan for each student and monitor its progress in class. The size of the school facilitates personalized guidance support for students in a timely fashion, especially during the first months of enrollment as students are adjusting to the new school setting. What is accomplished with each student is a collaborative partnership between student and teacher that is focused on a common goal.

Find out how all of these things become operational by attending the next Continuation High School Principal's Institute.

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