

# Report of the Alternative Education Programs for the Santa Clara County Office of Education

## Executive Summary

---

### Submitted to:

Board of Trustees  
Santa Clara County Office of Education  
1290 Ridder Park Drive  
San Jose, CA 95131

### Submitted by:

Marycruz Diaz, Senior Research Associate  
Rebeca Diaz, Research Associate  
Don Dixon, Research Consultant  
Evaluation Research Program  
730 Harrison Street  
San Francisco, California 94107-1242

**Date: January 12, 2011**

# Executive Summary

The Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) serves students who have been expelled, are academically deficient, are on probation, and/or have severe behavioral and discipline problems through its Alternative Education Programs (AEP) in court and community schools. SCCOE's AEP is operating in a fluid environment where change is occurring.

For many years, there have been concerns by AEP stakeholders that the program is not adequately serving students. In the last two years, various reforms have been implemented. However, the SCCOE Board of Trustees has been uncertain that these reforms are the appropriate way to proceed given the continuity of numerous complaints from the AEP community.

The assessment approach addressed the concerns shared by the SCCOE Board of Trustees and the requirements for the assessment that SCCOE enumerated in its Request for Proposals (RFP). Using multiple research methods, WestEd gathered both quantitative and qualitative data through four main activities:

- An appraisal of current SCCOE programming elements and formative outcomes
- Research on best practices in alternative education programs
- Solicitation of stakeholder input through various forms—a community forum, site visits, interviews, focus groups, and surveys
- A synthesis of trends in alternative education, stakeholder feedback, and site observations culminating into findings and actionable recommendations for effecting change in SCCOE's AEP

## KEY FINDINGS

WestEd's report provides an objective view of the AEP, and in many ways, the unvarnished truth, that may help bring the divided perspectives together to take a step forward in improving students' lives. Key findings from WestEd's assessment of SCCOE's AEP include:

**While alternative education is a developing and fragmented field, both in terms of verified research knowledge and implementation, emerging research indicates there are some common characteristics of successful alternative education programs:**

- Leadership that is coordinated, sets a mission, and is responsive to student needs
- Collaborative partnerships that integrate family, school, and community efforts
- A positive school culture that encourages safety, high expectations, and reciprocity
- A strong academic program with ambitious professional development and regular student assessment
- Students as the focal point of all decisions

**SCCOE has made significant improvements in the last two years, with changes implemented reflecting alignments with best practices of other California counties—a closely-aligned curriculum, assessment, scheduling, and in-service training. The predominant perception across all levels of stakeholders is that SCCOE is improving.**

- A primary focus of the changes implemented have centered on replacing and developing leadership. New staff is on board both as administrators and principals. Further, principals have received regular support to become stronger instructional leaders.
- The roll-out of a newly adopted curriculum with accompanying assessments, scheduling, and in-service trainings is creating consistency and coordination in programming across SCCOE.

**While SCCOE has implemented changes in various areas, there is a need for a stronger organizational and administrative environment that includes high levels of internal two-way communication, a consultative planning and decision-making process, and an organizational focus or mission agreed upon by all levels within the county.**

- School staffs feel there is a great disconnect between the central office and the various sites, with very little consultation and communication regarding decisions that impact schools and students.
- Many AEP stakeholders perceive consultation and communication with the various community agencies as weak. Engaging these critical partners in the AEP is key for providing needed services to students.

**Perceptions of SCCOE’s culture and climate are inconsistent. Students and parents are generally satisfied with the climate. School staff has low morale.**

- Students and parents appreciate the small school setting and individualized instruction.
- Students and parents feel that schools care about student success and safety.
- Teachers do not feel appreciated for their work, their responsibilities are extensive, and they are ambivalent about so much change, particularly related to staff turnover.

**School staffs have mixed perceptions regarding changes in staffing. Staff is pleased with the new support positions, such as the Miri and California Youth Outreach staff. However, staff is dissatisfied with the lack of experience and expertise among principals and teachers.**

- SCCOE increased the number of single subject, highly-qualified teachers, but these teachers instruct subjects beyond those in which they are credentialed.
- Staff perceives the need for training to understand and work with students in alternative education.

**Professional development is plentiful, yet overwhelming and incomplete.**

- There is a need for more follow up to the training provided, technology training, and sensitivity training.
- Teachers want county office staff at schools to facilitate the implementation of reforms.

**Teachers and other stakeholders believe there is value in creating a network to share practices.**

- Teachers would like more time to meet with colleagues about the curriculum, teaching approaches, and student needs.
- Teachers want to be part of the decision-making regarding the implementation of reforms.

**The new curriculum has generally been well-received, yet there are concerns about its implementation.**

- Too much curriculum is being rolled out too fast and staff is uncertain they can implement the curriculum with fidelity.
- School staff is aware of and beginning to use the new curriculum, but its adoption for some illuminates the AEP's move toward a traditional school, causing disappointment about this shift.
- While staff like the move toward current technology, there is a need for technology that works efficiently and training to use it for instruction.

**Parents, students, SCCOE administrators, some teachers, and referring district staff believe greater academic rigor is necessary for students. Administrators, teachers, and district staff see the curriculum adoption as a step in the right direction.**

**Measures of student and school academic growth need to be used jointly to provide a more complete view of SCCOE school performance and may include data from the California Healthy Kids Survey, the California School Climate Survey, the Academic Performance Index, indicators of annual yearly progress, the Alternative School Accountability Model, the California High School Exit Exam, and graduation rates.**

- Students' self-reported drug use and violence-related acts are generally higher than students in model practice counties, particularly regarding drinking or being high on school property.
- CAHSEE pass rates for SCCOE 10<sup>th</sup> grade students are lower than the pass rates for two of the model practice counties.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While creating change and seeing results often takes time and focused effort, WestEd’s recommendations can be stepping stones toward creating a best practice AEP. WestEd recommends the SCCOE Board of Trustees and administrators consider key actions in this report as steps to improve the AEP.

**For SCCOE’s AEP reform to be successful, reform should proceed from the ground up and be teacher based.** Without teacher buy-in, all of the efforts devoted to change may prove unsuccessful. Garnering the support and leadership of a small number of teachers, respected by their colleagues, to be change agents for the AEP would respond to teacher and community members’ desire to have teachers more involved in decision-making. Teachers can drive curricular change and other changes, such as creating more time for teacher collaboration. This may also help improve teacher morale in SCCOE.

**SCCOE should spearhead the coordination of services among a greater number of community agencies and individuals invested in improving circumstances for alternative education students.** Various stakeholders with extensive knowledge of services to support young people would like to work with SCCOE. Developing a steering committee representing the several key agencies—including probation—that convenes a summit to discuss a specific topic each month and identify action steps in response to that topic is essential to informing the direction of the AEP.

**WestEd suggests that SCCOE develop a coordinated system of service delivery so that all staff, students, parents, and referring districts are aware of the supports available.** The responsibility to intake, track, and produce reports on all students who enter the AEP may need to go beyond one person. For SCCOE to measure its impact in sending students back to their home districts, in graduating students, or in failing students, the county needs to have a consistent mechanism for gathering this information. One step toward this coordination is the creation of a team that reviews student records and identifies learning, behavioral, and health needs. This team, for example, can ensure each student is appropriately identified for an individualized education plan, matched to a school based on specific criteria, and referred to community agencies as needed.

**SCCOE should create a stronger sense of community in its AEP.** Reports of connectedness to SCCOE and schools were varied among staff. Full implementation of a reward system, such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support model, for student growth—both for academics and behavior—at each school may support student connectedness. Recognizing staff for hard work and for going above and beyond their role is another step toward creating community. Additionally, SCCOE administrators can hold quarterly “community meetings” to engage with staff, students, and parents and discuss concerns about and progress of the AEP.

**To ensure fidelity of curriculum implementation, SCCOE should consider slowing down the training and implementation schedule of the new curriculum.** While there was general agreement for the need to adopt a new curriculum, teachers are overwhelmed by the amount and

intensity of training. Teachers need more time to process the information and also need more guided information about implementing the curriculum. Teachers and principals expressed the desire to have more time for on-site staff meetings to discuss professional development, the new curriculum, as well as the challenges and successes of implementation. These minor changes may have a lasting impact on practice.

**SCCOE needs to create more positive relationships among staff and between staff and students.** SCCOE hired many new staff in the last two years. There is the sense that many teachers are not prepared to work with alternative education students who often have severe academic deficiencies and behavioral problems. Further, it is perceived that SCCOE teachers and administrators do not understand students' lives. Training in youth development approaches and sensitivity to work with students of color can benefit all SCCOE staff to ensure relationship building with students. Additionally, SCCOE can establish a shadow program for teachers to learn from those who have positive rapport with students.

**WestEd strongly encourages SCCOE to develop a plan based on some of the findings and actionable recommendations presented in this report to guide the AEP efforts moving forward.** A steering committee can establish goals, indicators of progress and success, a timeline for meetings and products, and responsibilities for each of the participating individuals or agencies. Further, progress of these developments should be regularly communicated to the community to increase transparency between SCCOE and the various stakeholders.