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Educating for Equity:
An Analysis of the Capital Region Educational Pipeline

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Introduction

Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions was designed to provide an analysis of the current status and future trajectory of youth well-being for the 9-county Capital Region. From the outset, our multidisciplinary research team recognized that education would be a key element in our collective view of youth well-being, given its well-documented relationship to major health, workforce preparation, and broader civic engagement outcomes among youth and families. Indeed, while education certainly has a variety of outcomes that are monitored for purposes of gauging the equity conditions of our school communities, it also serves as a critical input in shaping the various dimensions of a young person's life chances. Benner, et al. (2010) estimate that in the 9-county Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study area, high school dropouts earn on average $9,829 per year less than high school graduates. The purpose of this working paper is to provide a view of the opportunities and barriers that exist for the region's youth in their pursuit of quality education.

We frame the educational opportunities and barriers as a discussion of the region's "educational pipeline" from high school to college, showing the educational trajectory as it is experienced by youth in the 41 school districts that comprise the K-12 systems in the Capital Region. In addition, the educational pipeline approach allows us to see the important linkages that exist—and could be expanded—among the K-12 schools and the area's public 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions. We have also approached this analysis with a focus on both the challenges and the strengths that are represented among youth in the region, with special attention to the facilitative and prohibitive factors that have been identified by youth and their adult allies as influencing the educational outcomes that we found in our work. In doing so, we aim through this paper to contribute to Healthy Youth/Healthy Region's analysis of the extent to which the Capital Region supports and facilitates youth well-being through its various systems and communities. Finally, by drawing upon the annual statewide educational equity analyses conducted by colleagues at UCLA, we are able to situate our findings within a broader perspective on the factors and resources that serve as the "drivers" of educational outcome patterns. Our concluding remarks synthesize the key findings to further support a deeper understanding of the crucial role education—and its constituents—play in the long-term well-being of youth and the ongoing development of the region and the state of California.

Data Sources

To describe regional patterns of advancement through the educational pipeline this paper draws on four sources of data. First, the California Department of Education (CDE) maintains records of school enrollment along with some information on the characteristics of school populations. These data can be used to estimate high school graduation and dropout rates, but have some significant limitations that should be noted. The data are collected in the aggregate at the school level and do not track the progress of individual students. This system has some signficant gaps. In particular, there is not an accurate accounting of students who transfer between regional public schools and private schools or schools in other regions. In addition, only limited demographic and geographic information, e.g. their race/ethnicity or where they live, is collected, and the information that *is* collected is collected only in the aggregate at the school level. The CDE is currently in the process of correcting these well-known data limitations by implementing a new data system that will include individual level data and will greatly improve our ability to describe patterns of educational attainment in the region in the near future.

Second, data on progression from high school to college comes from the California Post-Secondary Education Commission (CPEC). The CPEC integrates information from California's public university systems with data from the CDE to inform policy on post-secondary education. These data share the limitations with the CDE data, but are helpful in extending the ability to describe the educational pipeline across the crucial transition from high school to college. In particular, we draw on two measures based on the CPEC data: attainment of sufficient academic credits to matriculate to a 4-year California public college (California State or University of California) and enrollment in a California public college (including 2-year degree programs).

Third, we draw upon youth survey data collected as part of the REACH Youth Program, a five-year effort of Sierra Health Foundation to increase developmental supports for youth in the greater Sacramento region. In fall 2009, the UC Davis California Communities Program administered this survey to 483 7th and 8th grade students in six localities across the Capital Region (Erbstein, 2009). This survey focused on experiences of key community developmental supports, such as support for academic achievement and post-high school career and educational opportunities. Surveys were administered through schools using strategies aimed at reaching samples reflective of student diversity in terms of race, gender, immigration experience, and academic performance. The results provide important insights into the distribution of these resources for youth across the region. One limitation of these data that should be noted is that the sample sizes for some groups of particular interest, such as African-Americans and Native Americans, are too small to allow systematic comparisons.

Fourth, two sets of interviews, one with young adults and the other with adult allies of youth, are employed to examine local perspectives on barriers to educational attainment. Sixteen young adults (age 17-22) who had not graduated from high school were selected from across the Capital Region. Each young adult completed an in-depth, semi-structured *testimonio* interview conducted over three two-hour sessions. The adult allies, were selected to represent people devoted to supporting youth populations most vulnerable to school dropout across a range of organizational settings: health and social services professionals, educators, youth oriented community based organizations, law enforcement, workforce development, parks and recreation, faith-based organizations, and

formal and informal ethnic networks. Fifty-one adult allies were interviewed for about one hour each. An objective of these interviews was to learn more about the interests and needs of youth in the region who are most vulnerable to disconnection from school and work, available resources and gaps, and potential strategies for strengthening support in general and addressing demographic and spatial disparities in particular.

The Educational Pipeline

Ideally, educational institutions in the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions area would provide ample and equitable opportunity for youth to progress through successive educational milestones, beginning from school entry and continuing through post-secondary educational options. This would require a well functioning educational pipeline, supporting youth in their educational pursuits and directing them toward higher levels of attainment. The importance of this pipeline, to individual youth and to the region as a whole, has increased in recent years as the education gap in labor market potential, e.g. in employment and income, has widened. A 2007 report from the California Dropout Research Project (Belfield and Levin 2007) suggests that the gap in annual income between high school drop-outs and high school graduates is about $10,000 for women and $17,000 for men. Those with 2-year or 4-year degree earn considerably more still.

One way to characterize the educational pipeline in the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions study area is to examine 'college opportunity ratios'. These measurements, developed by colleagues at UCLA and used as the basis for the California Educational Opportunity Reports, are intended to gauge the extent to which students in an area pass through successive educational milestones leading to successful completion of a college degree. In this report we focus on three such measures: 1) the dropout rate, as traditionally measured, 2) the proportion of students who graduate from high school having completed coursework that qualifies them for entry into a University of California or California State University 4-year degree program, and 3) the proportion of students who matriculate from high school into a public post-secondary institution (including community colleges as well as a UC/CSU schools). The findings suggest that there are serious disparities in the region's educational pipeline that reflect broader national patterns as well as important intra-regional disparities that could be addressed through policies aimed at promoting regional equity. Perhaps most importantly, the overall performance of the region's educational pipeline does not compare well with other regions of California.

High School Graduation

High school graduation is an important educational milestone, not only paving the way for future educational opportunity but also correlating with higher earning, better health, and increased civic participation. Using more traditional reporting methods to discuss the graduation and dropout rates that affect the Capital Region, we can report that among the area's schools, each year about 5% of high school students drop out—in the 2007-08 school year there were 154,137 public high school students in the region, 7,798 of whom dropped out, according to the CDE definition. The proportion of students who drop out varies dramatically across counties, school districts, and individual schools. The county level dropout rate varies from a low of 2% in Nevada County to a high of 9%-- almost 1 in 10 high school students per year-- in Yuba County. In Sacramento County, where 48% of the region's public school students attend, the dropout rate is 6%. The county dropout rates are based on the rates of all public schools in each county, including alternative schools run by the county offices of education and the school districts, charter schools, and magnet schools.

At the school district level, dropout rates are likely to be skewed by alternative schools, which have very high dropout rates. Some districts may have artificially low dropout rates because they are

able to transfer high risk students to specialized alternative schools in other districts or under direct control of county education departments. However, even when alternative schools are omitted, there remains wide variation in dropout rates across districts, as shown in Figure 1. The figure shows the dropout rates for each of the 41 school districts in the region, in rank order from the lowest dropout rate, which is below 1% annually, to the highest, which is over 35%. In interpreting this figure it is important not to focus on individual schools, which may operate under particular conditions that contribute to exceptionally high or low dropout rates, but on the broad pattern of variation. For instance, the two school districts with the highest dropout rates are both small, rural elementary districts which send the majority of their high school students to high schools in other districts. These districts' exceptionally high dropout rates reflect the fact that many students in these areas attend high school elsewhere. A large proportion of high school enrollment in these districts is in local charter schools that provide independent study and home-schooling options for the small number of students who remain in the district at the high school level. Even taking account of these outliers, the extent of variation across the region is remarkable: of the 41 school districts, 13 have dropout rates below 2% of students per year and 10 have dropout rates that are more than twice as high, above 5% of students per year.

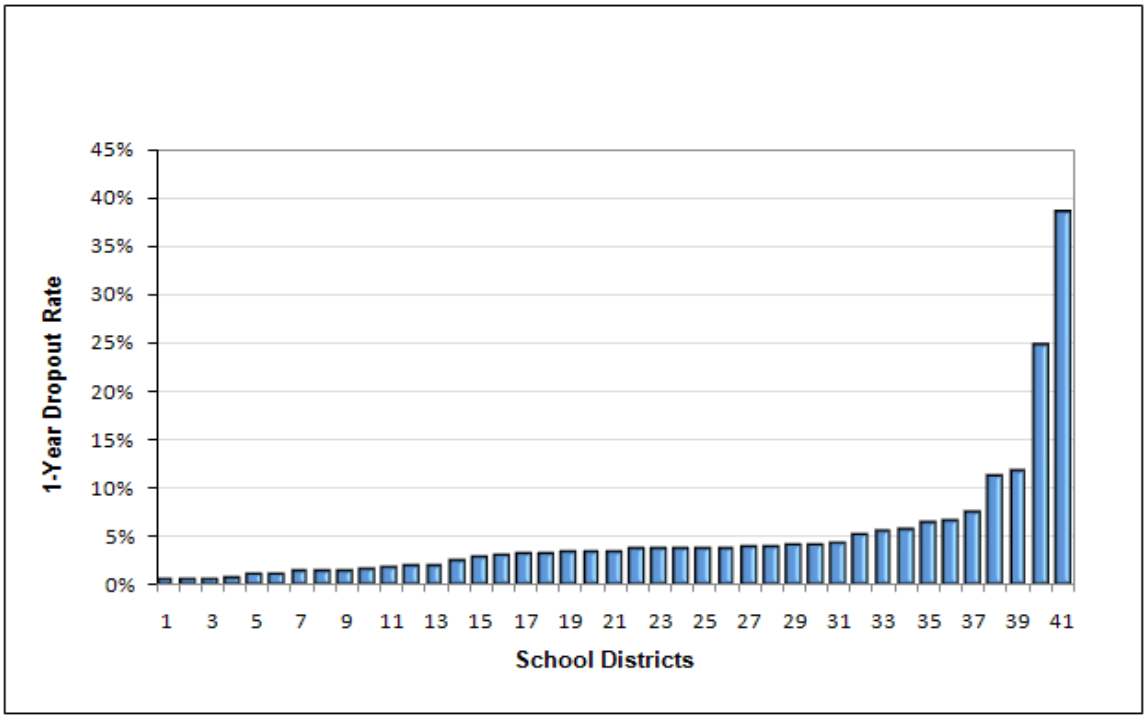

Figure 1. One-Year Dropout Rates Across 41 School Districts in the HY/HR Region

Figure 2 shows how school district dropout rates are distributed geographically across the Capital Region. Light yellow districts have higher dropout rates. The map shows a concentration of districts with high dropout rates in the more urban areas of Sacramento and Yolo counties. However, high dropout for the region also occurs in some rural areas that are the far from the urban center, including districts in northern Sutter and Yuba counties. Low dropout districts are located in a 'donut' encircling the urban center at an intermediate distance.

Wide variation in dropout rates also exists across schools. To examine this variation we grouped all the high schools in the region, excluding alternative schools, into ten groups containing equal numbers of schools, ranked from low to high dropout rates. Figure 3 shows how dramatically these groups of schools differ from each other, with dropout rates across these ten groups ranging from 0.3% per year to 29.05% per year. If we exclude the top and bottom groups, which include schools with selective enrollment, there remains a **23-fold gap** between groups with the 2nd lowest and 2nd highest dropout rates (0.34% and 7.75%).

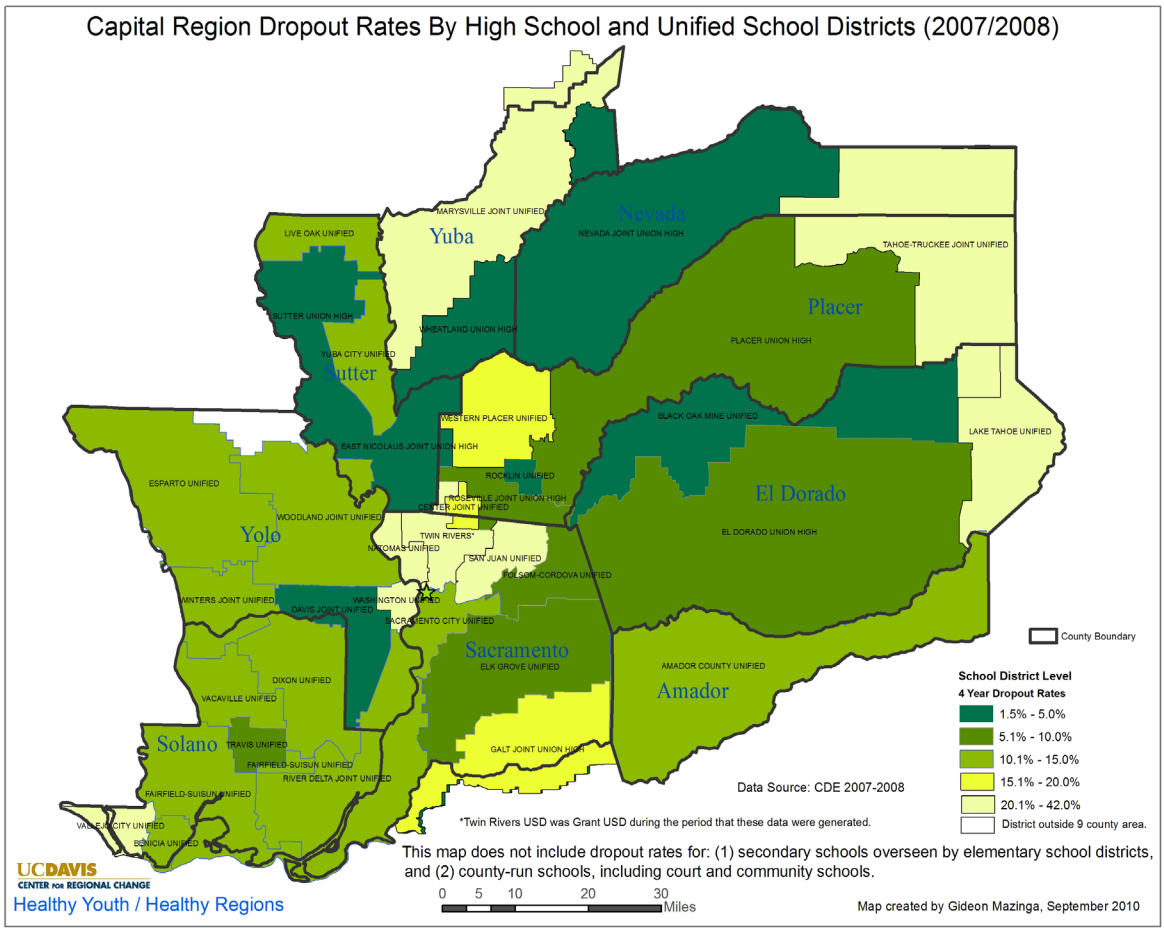

Figure 2. 4 Year Dropout Rates for School Districts in the HY/HR Region (2007/2008)

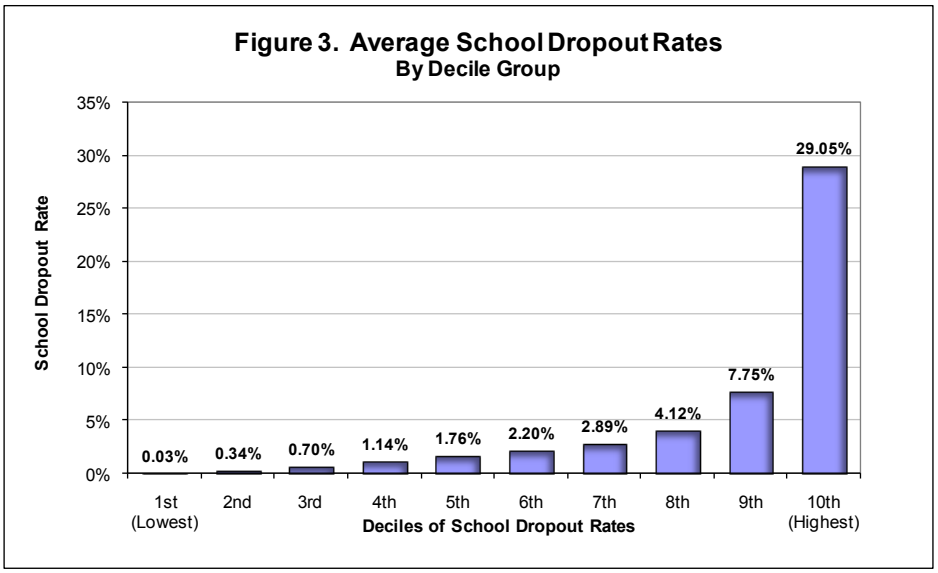

Figure 3. Average School Dropout Rates by Decile Group.

One implication of this variation is that many students attend schools where dropout is quite rare, while others attend schools where dropout is very common. Figure 4 shows how students from different ethnic groups are differentially affected by this important qualitative difference in school environments. This table shows the percentages of each ethnic group who attend schools in the low vs. high dropout groups (here grouped into five levels from lowest dropout at the bottom to highest dropout at the top). Twenty-eight percent of white students attend schools in the lowest dropout group compared with only 10% of Latino and black students. At the other end of the scale, only 8% of white students attend schools in the highest dropout group, compared with 16% of Latino students and 25% of black students. As a group, Asian-American students fall in the middle; they are more likely to attend high dropout schools than white students and less likely to attend high dropout schools than black or Latino students.

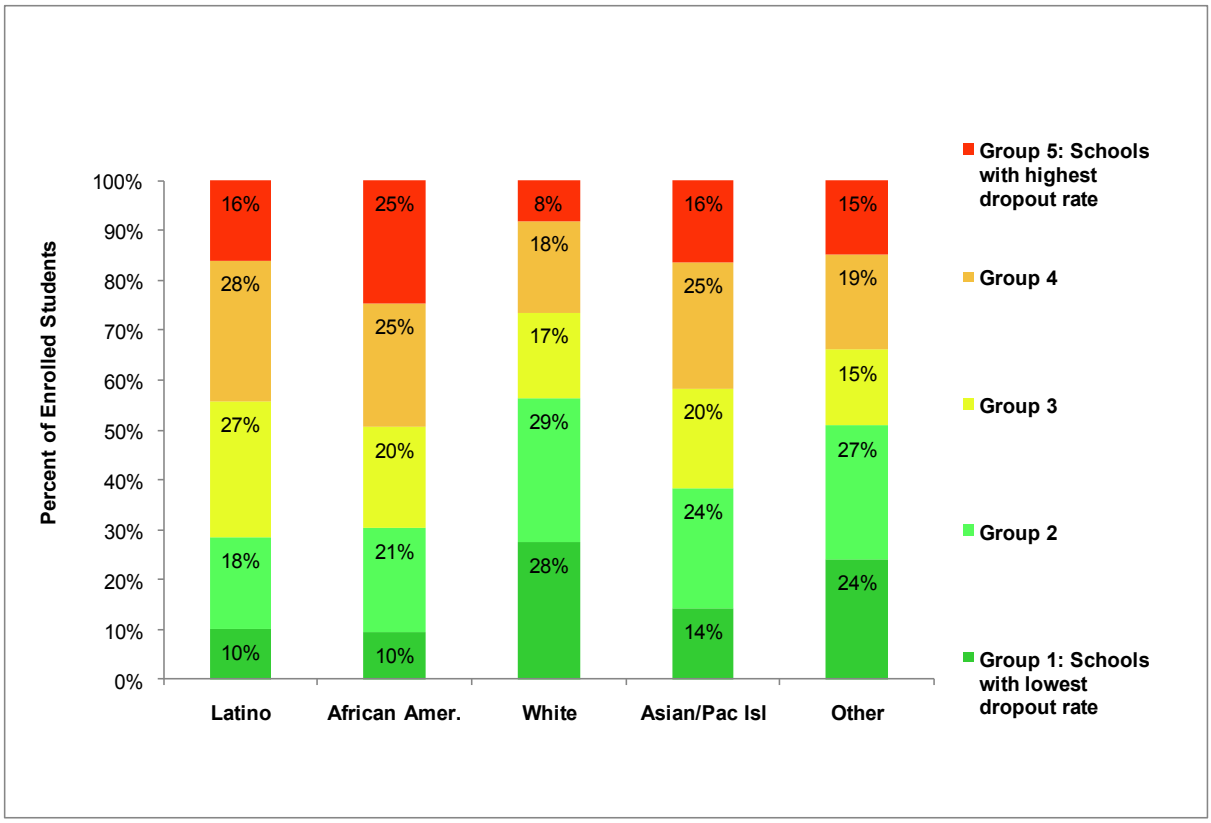

Figure 4. Ethnic Distribution of Enrolled Students Among Schools Grouped by Overall Dropout Rate

College Opportunity

Dropout rates alone do not fully describe the educational pipeline. To focus in greater detail on the extent and distribution of college opportunity we also estimated proportions of the region's students who graduate with sufficient high school credits to qualify for admission to a California public 4-year college program (either UC or CSU). Completion of these requirements indicates a higher level of academic achievement and is measured by a more consistent standard. Moreover, students who complete this higher standard of academic achievement have further demonstrated preparedness for post-secondary education.

We examined completion of the UC/CSU requirements for the cohort of students in the Capital Region who entered high school as 9th graders in 2004-05. Of this cohort, only 23% graduated having completed the requirements in the summer of 2008. This rate is quite a bit lower than the statewide proportion for this cohort of 37%. Just bringing the region up to the level of the rest of California would increase the proportion of students graduating with the UC/CSU requirements by 60%, with over 5,000 additional students meeting the requirements each year.

The region's performance is similar with respect to another measure of college opportunity, the proportion of students who enroll in a public post-secondary school, including community colleges as well as the UC/CSU systems. Data collected by the California Post-Secondary Education Commission (CPEC) show that of the class that entered 9th grade in 2004-05, 39% were enrolled in a public post-secondary educational institution in the fall of 2008. This figure compares to the 55% of the cohort enrolled in a public post-secondary educational institution statewide.

Figures 5 and 6 show the geographic distribution of the two college opportunity measures, the proportion graduating with UC/CSU requirements and the proportion attending a public post-secondary educational institution, across the region's public high schools. The colored dots represent schools. Schools with higher levels on the depicted college opportunity measure are shown in darker colors. The background for both of these maps shows the median income of each census tract, with darker colors indicating higher median incomes. Although there are some differences between the two college opportunity measures depicted, the maps provide a consistent story with concentrations of schools with higher college opportunity measures in and around Sacramento and Davis.

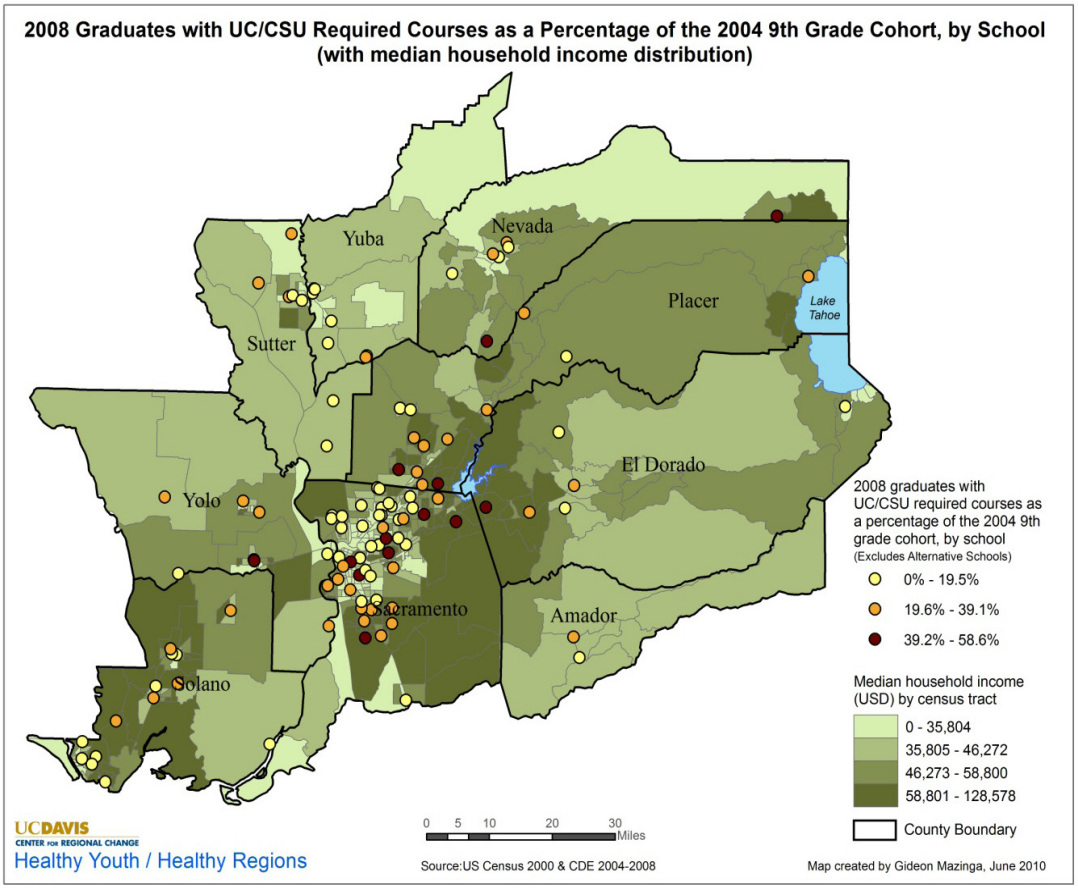

Figure 5. 2008 Graduates with UC/CSU Required Courses as a Percentage of the 2004 9th Grade Cohort, by School (with median household income distribution).

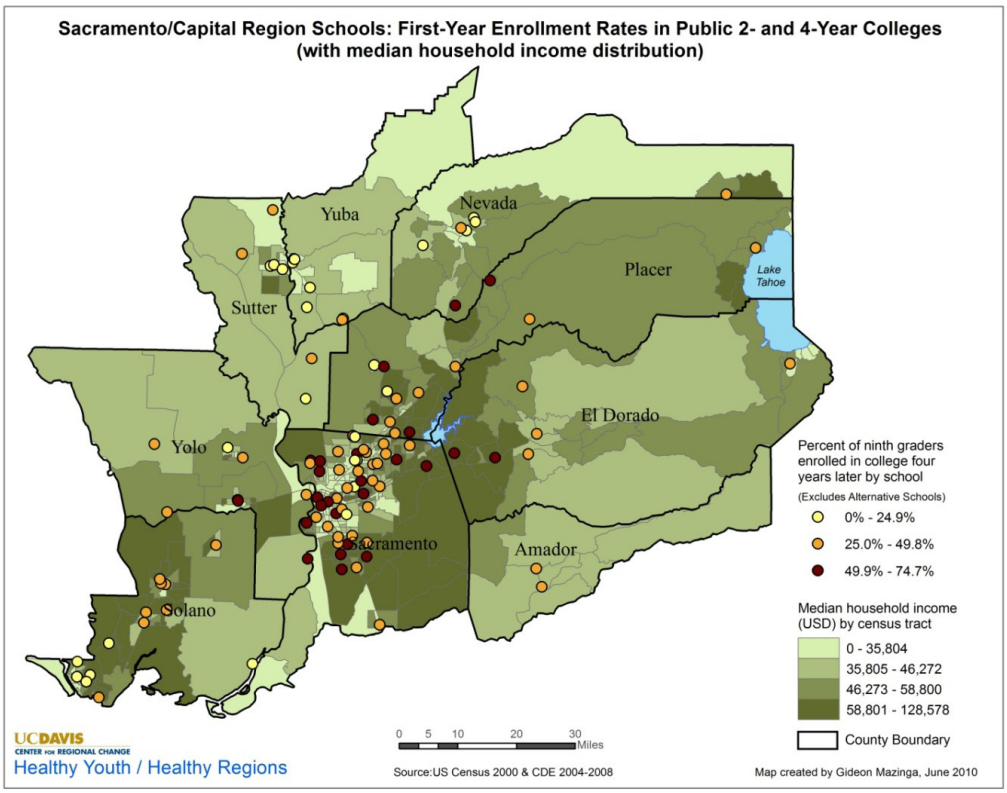

Figure 6. 9 County Capital Region Schools: First-Year Enrollment Rates in Public 2- and 4-Year Colleges (with Median household income distribution).

There are some important variations that suggest some particular aspects of the educational pipeline that should be investigated further. Among students who enter college, there is variation across school districts in the proportion of students attending 4-year colleges versus California community colleges. For instance, as displayed in Table 1, 70% of Sacramento County graduates who attended college in 2008 were enrolled in California community colleges, and this pattern was consistent across all the districts in the county. In contrast, in two of the districts in Yolo County, also presented in Table 1, the Davis Joint Unified and Woodland Joint Unified School Districts, the majority (59% and 62% respectively) of college-enrolled graduates were attending public California 4-year colleges, while in two other districts, over 40% were attending public California 4-year colleges. The remaining district, Washington Unified School District, followed the pattern in Sacramento County, with 76% of college-enrolled graduates attending a public California community college. Certainly, given the interconnections among education and workforce preparation that have surfaced as critical issues for youth in the region, additional attention to the role of California community colleges in providing a gateway for longer term educational and employment opportunity is imperative. (Note: We present in Table 2 comparable data that includes information on all high schools, including alternative high

Table 1. College Pipeline for Districts in Sacramento and Yolo County - Traditional[1] High Schools Only

	Percent of 9th graders who…			*Percent of college-goers:*	
	graduated 4 yrs later	graduated with A-G reqs	enrolled in any college	enrolled in 2 yr college	enrolled in 4 yr college
Region Total	65.47%	23.01%	39.33%	67.06%	32.94%
Statewide Total	65.90%	37.10%	51.90%	60.51%	39.49%
Sacramento County Total	64.35%	22.46%	44.49%	70.45%	29.55%
Elk Grove Unified	66.74%	29.89%	52.91%	67.79%	32.21%
Folsom-Cordova Unified	62.56%	26.55%	48.20%	68.98%	31.02%
Galt Joint Union High	69.14%	12.92%	34.89%	66.67%	33.33%
River Delta Joint Unified	74.53%	15.09%	34.91%	59.46%	40.54%
Sacramento City Unified	61.99%	27.35%	47.40%	67.82%	32.18%
San Juan Unified	72.26%	26.02%	42.08%	72.47%	27.53%
Center Joint Unified	70.28%	14.86%	43.12%	74.47%	25.53%
Natomas Unified	70.08%	NA	53.50%	76.92%	23.08%
Twin Rivers Unified	44.30%	4.59%	26.87%	79.13%	20.87%
Yolo County Total	67.48%	32.14%	39.12%	49.18%	50.82%
Davis Joint Unified	76.20%	54.92%	56.65%	41.31%	58.69%
Esparto Unified	84.62%	30.77%	33.33%	57.69%	42.31%
Washington Unified	61.24%	17.53%	40.00%	76.29%	23.71%
Winters Joint Unified	66.46%	NA	32.30%	57.69%	42.31%
Woodland Joint Unified	62.08%	26.69%	25.32%	37.56%	62.44%

[1]Includes only junior, middle, high and K-12 schools serving grades 9-12 that are classified as traditional schools and that were open between 2004 and 2008. Includes schools run by County Offices of Education and the State Board of Educaton. Schools in the HY/HR region that were excluded from the COR reports for the region are also excluded here (includes some schools that appear to be alternative schools though they were categorized as traditional schools).

Sources: California Department of Education, 2004-08, California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2008

Another way of considering the data presented in Table 2 is to see how these percentages translate into a more vivid picture of the transition to college for youth in Sacramento and Yolo Counties (as illustrations). For example, considering River Delta Joint Unified (Sacramento County) and Davis Unified (Yolo County) School Districts, we begin with fairly comparable cohort graduation rates at 75% and 76%, respectively. This means that for every 100 ninth graders entering high school in 2004-05, 75 completed high school four years later in the River Delta school system (76 in Davis). However, for River Delta students, of ninth graders who graduated 4 years later, 10 completed their UC/CSU-required coursework (and thus, 65 students graduated without completing this coursework). Of the 31 students from this cohort who enrolled in any public college in the fall of 2008, 13 enrolled in a 4-year public college/university and 18 enrolled at a community college. These figures differ when we review the trajectory for Davis Unified students. Of the 76 graduates, 38 (50%) completed their UC/CSU-required courses. Of the 55 total students who enrolled in any public college in the fall of 2008, 30 (54%) enrolled in a 4-year institution, while 25 (46%) enrolled at a community college. As noted, these patterns allow us to see a more dynamic process in the transition to college, as well as the utilization of the local community colleges, as illustrated by these two sample districts.

Table 2. College Pipeline for Districts in Sacramento and Yolo County - All High Schools

	Percent of 9th graders who…			*Percent of college-goers:*	
	graduated 4 yrs later	graduated with A-G reqs	enrolled in any college[1]	enrolled in 2 yr college	enrolled in 4 yr college
Region Total	64.38%	20.53%	36.29%	68.16%	31.84%
State Total	68.50%	23.20%	49.70%	61.70%	38.30%
Sacramento County Total	63.39%	20.10%	41.33%	71.55%	28.45%
Elk Grove Unified	62.64%	25.35%	47.00%	69.30%	30.70%
Folsom-Cordova Unified	66.14%	23.97%	46.60%	71.04%	28.96%
Galt Joint Union High	68.08%	10.60%	29.54%	67.71%	32.29%
River Delta Joint Unified	75.31%	13.39%	30.96%	59.46%	40.54%
Sacramento City Unified	61.49%	26.01%	45.91%	68.35%	31.65%
San Juan Unified	71.48%	24.49%	40.59%	73.12%	26.88%
Center Joint Unified	71.40%	13.71%	40.10%	74.68%	25.32%
Natomas Unified	69.15%	NA	50.15%	77.98%	22.02%
Twin Rivers Unified	47.35%	4.02%	25.02%	80.50%	19.50%
Yolo County Total	64.10%	27.81%	35.35%	51.34%	48.66%
Davis Joint Unified	75.88%	49.53%	55.18%	45.63%	54.37%
Esparto Unified	85.39%	26.97%	29.21%	57.69%	42.31%
Washington Unified	57.69%	14.86%	34.62%	76.77%	23.23%
Winters Joint Unified	71.67%	NA	30.00%	59.26%	40.74%
Woodland Joint Unified	58.43%	23.51%	22.50%	38.12%	61.88%

[1]College-going rates were calculated by dividing the number of entering freshmen aged 19 and younger from public high schools by the total number of graduates from public high schools. All categories of public high schools are covered including comprehensive schools, continuation schools, and other categories of schools.

Sources: California Department of Education, 2004-08, California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2008

For youth, support from a wide range of adults, in their families, communities and schools, is an important determinant of successful progression to higher levels of education. To examine support for youth we examined data from a survey of middle school students in the Capital Region. These students were asked about three important types of support: 1) support for future work and educational opportunities; 2) support for academic learning, and 3) personal support.

Opportunities to Explore Future Work and Education

In order to be prepared for life beyond high school and make decisions in high school that support those aspirations, middle school youth need opportunities to explore career interests and post-secondary education options. Youth were asked about their access to five types of support for exploring their future: (1) conversation with an adult about career interests, (2) learning about careers of interest, (3) conversation about college requirements with an adult at school, (4) conversation about college requirements with an adult outside school, and (5) adult advice about how to get an after-school and/or summer job. Overall, the level of youth reporting high levels of support (experiencing at least 3 opportunities for each of these supports in the last school year) is quite low (less than one in ten surveyed), while approximately one in four report low levels of support (meaning they experienced one opportunity or less of each type of support) (Table 3). While the sample is relatively small, and we are unable to report on the experiences of African American youth due to the small sample size, data also suggest patterns of racial, and socio-economic disparity in access to support. Socio-economic status is identified using students' housing as a proxy. Here and throughout the paper we differentiate between living in a family-owned home and not owning a home (including living in rental housing, a group home, and/or a variety of temporary housing).

Table 3. Youth Experience of Support to Explore Future Work and Education
REACH Survey, Fall 2009

Reported Level of Support	Youth Characteristics						
	Total (n=483)	Latino (n=163)	White (n=82)	Asian American (n=78)	Multiple Ethnicities (n=57)	Renting Home (n=198)	Family-owned Home (n=190)
Low Support	25.67	33.13	21.95	25.64	21.05	31.82	22.63
Med Support	65.22	60.12	64.63	66.67	70.18	62.12	67.37
High Support	9.11	6.75	13.41	7.69	8.77	6.06	10.0

Variation in reported levels of support for the future suggest two important patterns. First, Latino youth stand out in reporting low levels of opportunity at a rate of one in three, and were least likely to report receiving "high" levels of support amongst all populations for which we are reporting data. White youth reported receiving "high" levels of support at the highest rates. Second, young people with a relatively lower family income were more likely to report low levels of opportunity and less likely to report high levels of opportunity than young people growing up in higher income households.

Support for Academic Learning

Developing key academic skills and knowledge provides an important foundation for succeeding in school, work, and life. Youth were asked about their access to various types of support for academic learning in and out of school, including, effective assignments, school-based resources necessary to succeed, and help with homework when needed. Approximately 16% of youth surveyed reported receiving "high" levels of support, meaning that they had on average experienced strong support across all these areas in the past school year—clearly a community goal for all students. 79% experienced "medium" levels of support, and 5% reported "low" levels of support.

Table 4. Youth Experience of Academic Support
REACH Survey, Fall 2009

Reported Level of Support	Youth Characteristics						
	Total (n=483)	Latino (n=163)	White (n=82)	Asian American (n=78)	Multiple Ethnicities (n=57)	Renting Home (n=198)	Family-owned Home (n=190)
Low Support	5.18	6.13	2.44	3.85	7.02	6.06	4.21
Med Support	79.09	84.05	73.17	79.49	71.93	80.30	75.26
High Support	15.73	9.82	24.39	16.67	21.05	13.64	20.53

Here again we see patterns of disparity in young people's reports, with Latino and multiracial youth reporting low levels of support at higher rates than other populations. While only one in ten Latino youth report experiencing high levels of support, almost one in four white youth report this to be the case. Youth from higher income backgrounds were more likely to experience high levels of support than youth from lower-income backgrounds.

Personal Support

Meaningful, authentic relationships with caring adults are one of the most critical factors in young people's well-being and success (Scales et al., 2000). Optimally, young people have such relation-

ships with both adult family-members and adults beyond their family. Youth were asked whether they could get personal advice from an adult family-member, and whether there are adults outside family who would help them with a personal problem. While many local youth can count on family-members and adults outside their family for personal support, significant numbers of youth support and mentoring makes a difference in young people's trajectories, this is an important area for consideration and action. Less than half of survey participants—approximately 39%-- report having experienced this type of support from family-members and adults beyond their family. The balance of participants reported receiving support from either family members or other adults, but not both.

Table 5. Youth Experience of Adult Personal Support
REACH Survey, Fall 2009

Reported Level of Support	Youth Characteristics						
	Total (n=465)	Latino (n=154)	White (n=81)	Asian American (n=78)	Multiple Ethnicities (n=56)	Renting Home (n=193)	Family-owned Home (n=181)
No Support	12.90	11.04	4.94	24.36	19.64	16.06	10.50
Family OR non-family support	48.39	50.65	51.85	41.02	42.86	49.74	46.96
Family AND non-family support	38.71	38.31	43.21	34.62	37.50	34.20	42.54

Again here we see evidence of disparate levels of support. Of particular concern are the very high rates of Asian/Asian American youth (primarily Southeast Asian) and youth who identified as multi-racial reporting not having any adults they would turn to for support (24% at 20% respectively). Young people growing up in lower income households also reported low levels of adult support at relatively high rates (16%), and were less likely than youth in higher income households to report access to adult support both within and beyond their families.

These data reveal that many youth in our region lack strong support for envisioning and pursuing future life and career goals, developing academic skills, and accessing adult help. In addition, there appear to be troubling racial/ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic disparities in access to these opportunities-- opportunities that contribute in critical ways to school persistence. In the remaining discussions we take up the findings that were produced by our analyses of interviews with young adults facing considerable challenges in their educational pursuits, as well as with adult allies whose perspectives are grounded in the day-to-day efforts aimed at supporting youth well-being in its many dimensions.

Perspectives of Youth and their Adult Allies

Qualitative data offer the opportunity to begin examining what causes the disparate patterns of school dropout. The experiences of adult allies and young adult interviewees frame school dropout not as a failure of individual youth and families, or particular populations, but rather a failure of multiple systems to ensure that all children, youth, and families have access over time to the variety of supports and opportunities that contribute to school persistence. Counter to the language of "drop-out," and the actuality that very few youth who leave high school without graduating go on to get a degree and pursue postsecondary education (Finn, 2006), 15 of 16 young adult interviewees perceived what is typically referred to as "drop-out" as more of a pause in their formal schooling trajectory, viewing future graduation from high school as aligned with their aspirations; in the one case where the young adult did not intend to pursue a high school equivalency degree, this was not central to his career plan. The aspirations of these young adults, coupled with their persistence in navigating considerable challenges within and beyond school (in some cases with limited adult support, and in others with the committed support of family and friends who are also contending with difficult conditions) offer a powerful counterpoint to dominant perceptions of youth that leave school as simply deficient.

Adult allies across sectors and fifteen of sixteen young adult interviewees echo the prevalent finding in school dropout research that leaving school is typically a process that plays out over time, as opposed to a single event, although a particular event might ultimately trigger the decision to leave school. They describe a cumulative "falling behind" at school, along with, for some youth, a process of disengagement, which leads to academic challenges such as limited academic skills and inadequate credits. Barriers to high school completion are encountered both within school and outside school.

School-based barriers identified by young adults and adult allies include the following, in no particular order:

- Classroom curricula are experienced as irrelevant to current life circumstances and future aspirations.
- Social and institutional environments range from unsupportive to hostile. Young adults report experiencing punishment rather than much needed outreach and support.
- Academic and non-academic support and advising are too limited and too late. Schools have inadequate systems for tracking academic achievement and attendance data—particularly in secondary schools—that might help them identify struggling students early; they also lack timely information about events that might affect their students and warrant outreach (for example, arrest of a family member, foster care placement). Evidence suggests limited school capacity and/or commitment to identify and engage in proactive, supportive ways with vulnerable youth and their families, and disconnection from grassroots community leaders and other potential partners that could help connect with students in authentic ways.
- Schools have limited strategies for working with 16-18 year olds who are behind in credits for graduation. Our qualitative data suggest a potential tendency towards encouraging youth to leave comprehensive high schools, and in some cases alternative schools, and enroll in either GED/high school equivalency programs or independent study programs, rather than

getting them needed support on site. Neither of these programs are necessarily designed to support youth who are dealing with academic and other life challenges; evidence suggests that the additional free time and flexibility afforded by independent study programs can ultimately exacerbate existing barriers to high school graduation for some young people.

Adult ally and young adult interviewees also consistently noted that young people's school trajectories are shaped across multiple interconnected contexts and that promoting high school persistence requires attention to this ecological setting. Factors *beyond school* cited as barriers to high school completion include, in no particular order:

- Lack of adequate, stable employment opportunities for youth and their families
- Lack of healthy, welcoming, supportive, physically and emotionally safe places to be
- Inadequate adult care/support over time (from families, foster system, and/or other adults)
- Youth and their families' unmet basic needs (including stable housing, nutrition, mental and physical health care)
- Inadequate opportunities to develop healthy living skills
- Immigration policies and regulations with respect to unauthorized individuals
- Neighborhood/community social cohesion and safety
- Intergenerational dynamics
- Abuse and neglect
- Substance abuse
- Lacking alternatives that offer the perceived benefits of gang involvement and/or supports for safely disengaging
- Inadequate support for pregnant/parenting teens
- Arrest, incarceration and limited re-entry support
- Accessibility, outreach, and quality of institutional/programmatic resources across sectors
- Transportation access.

For a given individual, specific factors, and combinations of factors, may be more or less relevant, or completely irrelevant. All young adults and allies spoke to the effects of multiple factors—always including school AND non-school based-- on any given individual, typically over a long period of time. Each noted the inability of any one system to help young people overcome barriers presented by others. However, it is important to note that some of these barriers to completing high school are also cited by young people as powerful motivating factors in their persistence. For example, several teen parents described their desire to do well by their children as role models and wage earners as driving their return to school, despite the significant challenges associated with doing so.

Allies consistently identified particular populations and places as disproportionately likely to face barriers to high school graduation. They noted populations identified through the quantitative data analysis above: youth from low-income families and youth of color. They also drew attention to particularly vulnerable youth populations that our quantitative analysis was not able to easily identify: youth of specific ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Iu-Mien, Hmong, and Laotian youth), youth in foster care, pregnant and parenting teens, LGBTQI youth, incarcerated/previously-incarcerated youth, youth with incarcerated family-members, gang-involved youth, youth with un-met mental health needs, homeless youth, undocumented youth, youth living in particular housing complexes or neighborhoods, youth with high rates of mobility across schools and districts, and youth from

isolated, lower income rural communities navigating school in more densely populated areas.

Allies were remarkably consistent in describing the combined role of a deep internal drive (sometimes catalyzed by an "aha" moment—the counterpoint to the catalyzing event associated with a final decision to dropout) and at least one caring adult mentor in helping youth persist in graduating from high school, despite the barriers described in the previous section. All echoed a Sacramento Youth Employment Specialist's comment,

> *There's some responsible adult that's mentoring them, that's providing that. Whether it's a caseworker or whether it's a friend, whether it's an uncle, parent, grandparent, there's somebody there that's giving that support.*

All young adult interviewees who have returned to school echoed this analysis.

These adults were characterized as playing several pivotal roles: actively and respectfully reaching out to youth; encouraging and supporting youth to think about their future; helping youth develop a critical analysis or "big picture thinking" about barriers to educational and workforce attainment and situate themselves and their communities in that as both having been affected AND as potential change agents; offering models of life paths youth might not see in their family or neighborhood and detailed information, step-by-step guidance and individualized support to access resources and opportunities; intervening at key points with institutions when youth can't navigate them alone; recognizing successes; and being there and being real even when mistakes are made. Shared ethnic and/or cultural background and experience was often noted as a powerful factor in adults' ability to play this role effectively, although not the only factor.

Forming authentic relationships with adults at school and receiving positive attention and recognition there were cited by many school-based allies as supporting school persistence. This type of school connection also emerged as important to young adults who had left high school and re-enrolled in an equivalency program or other education programs. Meaningful civic engagement, social, recreational and work activities were also noted by allies as both ways that youth establish important mentoring relationships, as well as the types of activities that might be engaged in through a mentoring relationship. They suggest that youth who might have left school but do not, or who leave and return, have often come to see high school graduation as a means to a desired life or professional path.

In sum, adult allies often pointed out that most youth who do not graduate from high school, or consider dropping out, are young people who are facing tremendously difficult circumstances. But their challenge is not simply one of deficit—in fact many youth draw in creative ways upon a rich set of personal and community resources. By way of example, one ally shared the following story.

> *There's a story in the Oak Park about an eight year old family hero … this kid was responsible for two siblings and his mom. He actually got the welfare check, he went to the store and bought the food, took it home and cooked it. He prepared the meals, he paid the bills, he was eight years old. What a sad story, right. But think how smart this eight year old is to actually be able to function to do that, and if given the right support, what that kid could become.*

This insight was very much born out by participating young adult interviewees (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2010) who speak to not only the complexity of circumstances that contributed to their leaving school, but their sustained efforts to negotiate them, the extent to which key supports have fallen short, their deeply held aspirations for themselves, their families and their communities, and, in almost every case, their desire to complete high school and pursue postsecondary education.

Allies stress the critical role of individuals, institutions and systems across multiple scales, shifting how they view our most vulnerable youth, coming together on their behalf, proactively reaching out, and actively reforming policies and practices that continue to marginalize specific populations and places, echoing the comment of a southern Sacramento county job placement specialist:

> *Youth need people behind them and a broad spectrum of people. You know, not just you and me people, but business owners, chambers of commerce who see the community not just as a source of revenue but a place where they live, and who see themselves and their families as part of that community. Like this kid who shops at my store is the same as my kid. The whole 'taking a village to raise a child' concept needs to be supplemented with this idea that the foundation is that none of us are successful unless this person is successful, so we need to do something to make sure that they are successful. That idea, that community responsibility, has got to be a part of it, otherwise kids are going to just keep walking away from school and nobody is going to ask where they are going.*

As part of this vision, allies also highlight the necessity of partnerships amongst institutions, adults who have shared the experiences of our most vulnerable youth populations, and young people themselves. One adult interviewee reflects on an example of such a strategy in this way:

> *…we have to empower people in the community. Get ourselves out of the way, because Aunt Mary knows what's needed more so than [an institutional leader], you know, who lives across town behind the gates. So those are the kind of things we've got to do, and that's the only way we're ever going to be effective, is empowering people in their own community to do these things.*

Conclusions

Educational attainment is perhaps the most important single indicator of the success or failure of policy to support regional equity in youth and young adult outcomes. Inequity of input into youth academic success, evidenced in our surveys, contributes to disparities at all levels in the educational pipeline. Inequity in educational attainment has wide and long-term implications for regional inequities in life chances. Evidence from national research suggests that youth who achieve higher levels of education have much higher income potential and employability. They are also likely to be in better health and to participate more actively in social and political institutions. Disparities in educational attainment thus set the stage for regional disparities across a wide range of social outcomes.

We synthesize here our major findings to assist in identifying areas of potential action aimed at improving the educational pipeline for the region's youth.

1. Available data demonstrate extremely wide variation in educational outcomes across schools that contribute to differences across populations based on socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity in reaching important educational milestones of high school graduation and continuation onto post-secondary education. However, the data available provide only a limited picture. Improvements currently being made to the data collected on students and academic performance in California should greatly enhance our ability to identify and analyze inequalities in educational attainment in the region.

2. The results from the youth survey and the youth and adult ally interviews suggest that school persistence requires multiple forms of support over time. They highlight the importance of addressing barriers to student success that are both internal to schools and rooted beyond school walls, suggesting that K-12 public schools offer an important venue for coordinated family-school-community partnerships. While some gaps in data collection with respect to individual student progress through the educational system will be closed by the CDE CALPADS system, there are good reasons to consider possible extensions of this system to encompass surveillance of a broader range of factors affecting school success. In a report entitled "Critical Conditions for Equity and Diversity in College Access: Informing Policy and Monitoring Results", our colleagues at UCLA suggest a framework for monitoring equity in support for academic achievement (Oakes, 2003). The report recommends consistent measurement and monitoring of a broad range of educational inputs including 1) academic and social supports for students, 2) college-going school cultures, 3) opportunities to develop a multicultural college-going identity, and 4) family-neighborhood-school connections. Our data confirm the value of this approach.

3. Qualitative data suggest race, economic status, immigration experience, and gender factor into school persistence in multiple ways, including (1) experiences of outright racism/classism, (2) institutional practices that have resulted in more barriers and fewer supports for school persistence accumulating for Black, Latino, Native American, specific Southeast Asian populations, lower income populations and places, (3) under-recognition of and under-engagement of individuals and networks that could and do serve as important resources for our most marginalized youth populations. The barriers to achievement identified in this paper echo concerns voiced by youth in

the Participatory Action Research component of the Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions project (Owens et al., 2010).

4. In the Capital Region, most school districts are relatively small and therefore have limited resources to dedicate to generating and analyzing data. One important policy goal is to develop information systems, which would provide early warning regarding youth needing additional support, track educational outcomes, and provide a basis for monitoring the impact of policy interventions. Regular reports could help focus policy and programmatic attention on specific populations or places.

5. Our limited analysis of charter, online, and home school programs suggests the need of further investigation and careful monitoring for several reasons, including: (a) their growth in numbers, (b) the very high dropout rates of some programs, (c) the difficulty that some of our highly mobile young adult interviewees had in retrieving records from programs that had subsequently closed down, and (d) the appearance that they are being used to offer additional options for youth in rural elementary school districts who would have to travel some distance to their local public high school, and, in some cases, youth who are especially vulnerable to dropout. While the current data system makes assessment of alternative schools' opportunities and outcomes difficult, their critical role in supporting and accelerating students who are not on track to graduate from high school makes them an important focus of regional attention and investment.

6. Policies and practices should also be driven by people living and working with youth on a regular basis in local communities, and incorporate input from young people who are most affected by them. Our qualitative data shows enormous active concern in communities across the region with improving educational opportunities for youth, particularly youth who have been disconnected from the educational system. Tapping these resources will require building authentic, respectful partnerships between and within schools and local communities (including youth) that focus explicitly on improving conditions for young people and addressing persistent disparities in support and opportunity.

7. With regard to the opportunity structure for pursuing postsecondary education among students from this region, we are alarmed to find that even among the best performing school districts there are surprisingly low UC/CSU required course completion rates. These courses are certainly not the only component needed for a student to be "college ready" upon high school graduation. However, we believe it is important to raise concern about the extent to which the entire region may be at a disadvantage in supporting youth in their higher education aspirations. Beyond this general concern, of course, are the within-region variations in UC/CSU course completion, as it affects low-income communities and students who are underrepresented in higher education setting.

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