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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Education plays a critical role in regional equity. For youth, successful academic progress through high school and on to higher levels of education is key to expanding economic and social opportunity throughout adulthood. The academic success of youth has wide ranging implications for the health of the region as a whole, ensuring a high quality workforce, improving tax resources, reducing poverty, and expanding civic participation. Available evidence suggests dramatic variations across the region in the proportion of students who graduate from high school and pursue postsecondary education by schools and school districts.

The Secondary School Pipeline in the Capital Region
According to figures from the California Department of Education, the region's best performing high schools have dropout rates that are about one-twentieth of those in the region's lowest performing schools. Even across school districts the gap is quite large. Students graduate from some districts at rates 2 ½ times the rate at which students graduate from other districts.
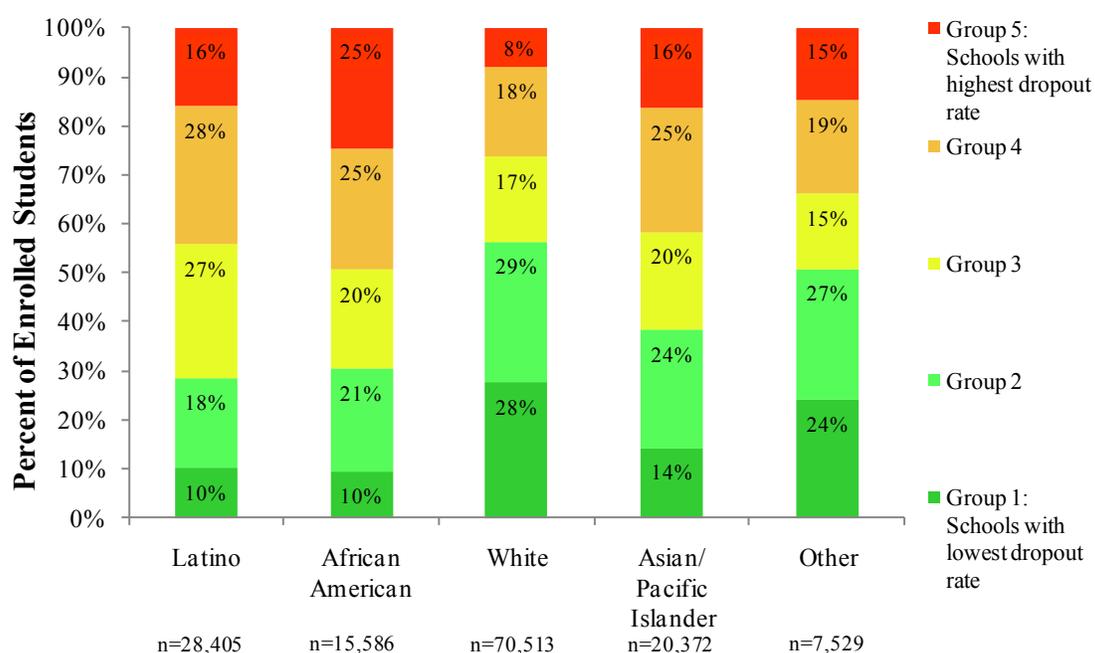

Figure 1. Ethnic Distribution of Enrolled Students Among Schools Grouped by Overall Dropout Rate.

CDE data also show that youth of color, African-Americans and Hispanics in particular, are much more likely to attend schools with low graduation rates than Non-Hispanic White youth. Only 28% of African-American students and 31% of Hispanic students attend schools with high or very high graduation rates (i.e. those with graduation rates in the top 40% of schools in the region). 57% of Non-Hispanic White students attend schools in this group. These patterns of disparity also hold for youth growing up in lower-income families and particular communities.

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Another important measure of the education pipeline is the proportion of students graduating from high school having completed the admission requirements for a University of California or California State University. Students who meet this higher level of achievement are prepared to continue their education beyond receipt of a high school diploma. The data suggest that the region is not performing well on this measure. Of students who entered 9th grade in the 2004-05 academic year, only 23% graduated four years later with the UC/CSU admission requirements—this compares with 37% in California as a whole. These patterns also reflect ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic disparities.

Interviews with young adults suggest a picture of high school persistence that differs from common stereotypes. Overwhelmingly, students who dropped out of high school did not consider themselves to be ending their academic careers at the time. Rather, this decision reflected a variety of school and non-school factors, the effects of which accumulated over time, and the inadequacy of school and other systems' responses to student needs. Young people's assessments of barriers to high school graduation were confirmed in interviews with adult allies in the region, adults who through their work are devoted to improving outcomes for youth.

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Three recommendations emerged from the work of this group.

- First, investment in youth academic achievement in the region is an important strategy for advancing equity in youth outcomes. Youth and youth allies emphasized the need for rigorous curricula that help students see the relationship between school and their future, increased social support, authentic relationships with adults who can offer guidance, safe and socially inclusive school environments, systems that offer early support (rather than punishment) for students who are getting off-track, improved college preparation and support to develop a college-going identity, and strengthening of opportunities for older teens who are behind to complete high school and learn about higher education. Ethnic, socio-economic, geographic, and other patterns of disparate opportunity and outcomes should be an explicit focus of attention. Other less easily counted populations that appear to be especially vulnerable include undocumented immigrant youth, LGBTQ youth, youth involved with the juvenile justice system, youth with incarcerated parents, youth in foster care, youth with untreated substance abuse and/or mental health issues, youth whose care-takers are untreated, and youth experiencing high school/residential mobility due to sustained homelessness or other factors.

- Second, attention needs to be paid to barriers to academic achievement that students face outside of school as well as inside school. Schools are often perceived by students as disinterested in their success or in the lives they lead at home and in the community. Addressing these barriers will require partnership with a variety of other systems and institutions. Communities—including young people themselves-- also have unrecognized and critical strengths and resources to support students.

- Third, in order to respond to specific needs in the region, information on the educational performance of the region's youth needs to be incorporated into the policy-making processes. Recent improvements made by the CDE will dramatically expand the potential for effective monitoring of the region's educational pipeline. These data should be used, along with supplemental efforts to understand student and community perspectives, to identify and respond early to emerging barriers to educational attainment and to evaluate the impact of interventions.

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