

Independent study high schools

An alternative to the traditional classroom

While most California high school students pursue a diploma by attending classes Monday through Friday in a school building filled with other students and teachers, some of their peers are taking a different route to graduation: They are enrolled in an independent study high school, operationally defined as schools in which 75 percent or more of grades 9–12 students are full time in independent study. In California, full-time independent study is an alternative form of attendance intended to meet student needs, interests, and learning styles as well as school district curriculum and graduation requirements. This alternative to traditional classroom instruction offers each student an individualized learning plan to complete assignments at any time, pace, or place.

While some research exists about independent study as an instructional strategy, virtually none exists about schools in which most or all students are enrolled in full-time independent study.

A new report prepared by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd¹ begins to shed some light on schools where a majority of students are enrolled full time in independent study. *Examining independent study high schools in California* describes enrollment trends of these high schools and the student populations that they target; it also contrasts the student and school characteristics as well as teacher qualifications with those of other nontraditional and traditional high schools.

What the study found

Enrollment. In 2006/07, 4 percent of California's nearly 2 million high school students were enrolled in full-time independent study and most of those students were enrolled in the state's 231

independent study high schools. Since 2001/02 the number of grades 9–12 students in independent study in those schools increased by 44 percent.

In contrast, the number of grades 9–12 students enrolled in full-time independent study in other types of school increased by 12.1 percent, a rate comparable to the growth in other types of enrollment.

“While independent study high schools have shown a sharp increase in enrollment in California, little is known about these schools and even less is known about this type of alternative – or if it even exists – in other states.”

Targeted student populations. While 24.6

percent of the independent study high schools did not identify an intended student population, 20.5 percent described serving a general student population, and 54.9 percent reported targeting a specific student group. Of those schools, 45.5 percent targeted students at risk of school failure, 39.8 percent targeted home study students, and 10.6 percent targeted both student groups.

¹ Barrat, V.X., and Berliner, B. (2009). *Examining independent study high schools in California* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2009-No. 074). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.

School characteristics. Independent study high schools were less likely than other schools to be located in urban areas or to have opened before 2001/02, while more likely to be charter schools or offer instruction to students below ninth grade. On average, independent study high schools had larger enrollments than other nontraditional high schools and smaller enrollments than traditional high schools. In independent study high schools, enrollment increased from grade 9 to grade 12, unlike in traditional high schools, where it decreased.

Teacher qualification characteristics. While the majority of grades 9–12 core classes in independent study high schools were taught by highly qualified teachers, these classes were less likely than those in other types of school to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. In independent study high schools compared to the other school types, teachers' subject-matter competence for each class was more likely to have been demonstrated through California's High Objective Uniform State Standard Evaluation and less likely to be demonstrated through advanced education, training, or both.

Student characteristics. The student population of independent study high schools was less racially/ethnically diverse than in other types of high school, and enrolled smaller percentages of socioeconomically disadvantaged, English language learner, disabled, and migrant students.

Methodology: study data and analyses

- * Publicly available data were collected from several sources: the California Basic Educational Data System; the state's Education Options Office Independent Study Database;

the California Public Schools Directory; the California's Growth Academic Performance Index data file; the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data; and School Accountability Report Cards for all independent study high schools in California.

- * To report characteristics of schools, teacher qualifications, and students of all California public schools enrolling grades 9–12 students, the study used a merged school-level longitudinal dataset for 2001/02–2006/07 to track student enrollment and school-, teacher-, and course-level datasets for 2006/07.

The quantitative analyses contrast the characteristics of independent study high schools with other nontraditional and traditional high schools.

- * Qualitative data from School Accountability Report Cards for each independent study high school identified any targeted student population groups.

In California, high schools where most of the students are enrolled full time in independent study have shown tremendous enrollment growth since 2001/02. Currently it is unknown if independent study high schools, as described in this report, are a fast growing alternative, or even exist, in other states.

"About half of the independent study high schools target either students at risk of school failure or home study students."

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