

# INVISIBLE STUDENTS

The Role of Alternative and Adult Education  
in the Connecticut School-to-Prison Pipeline

A report from  
A Better Way Foundation • Connecticut Pushout Research and Organizing Project  
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## **About A Better Way Foundation (ABWF)**

A Better Way Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to a sensible shift in drug policy from one that relies on incarceration to one that prioritizes public health and treatment. ABWF believes that strong students and strong schools are vital to reducing our state's reliance on incarceration, restoring justice to our communities, and sustaining community health and wellness.

## **About the Connecticut Pushout Research and Organizing Project (PROP)**

PROP is dedicated to engaged youth, parents, educators, and community members in documenting, exposing and ending push out practices in Connecticut Schools.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**There are thousands of young people across the state of Connecticut pursuing their education outside of traditional high schools. Some have left high school by choice; others have been counseled, coerced, or otherwise forced to leave. This report examines the systematic removal of struggling and vulnerable students from traditional high school. It finds that furtive practices employed by school districts across the state flout the due process and procedural protections promised to students by state law and, in the worst instances, effectually eradicate students' constitutionally granted right to education.**

Nationwide, nearly 1.2 million teens – more than one third of all high school students – drop out of high school every year. Until recently, this devastating reality remained one of our nation's best-kept secrets. Recent efforts on the part of students, parents, activists, advocates and education reformers across the country have led states to report graduation and dropout rates more accurately and to develop new pathways to help youth on the margins get back on track to graduation. While this progress is laudable, there remains another troubling truth we must confront: students rarely “drop out” of school simply because they do not desire to finish; in fact, for many students who stop short of finishing, leaving high school is not really a choice at all. A growing body of research, informed by a decade's worth of analysis of what has come to known as the school-to-prison pipeline, explores and documents how many of our nation's most vulnerable and struggling students do not chose to leave school, but are in effect pushed out.

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to laws, policies and practices that remove students from places of learning and place them on a path towards prison. There are actually two pipelines. One is overt and well documented. A plethora of research, both statewide and nationally, has documented how factors such as zero tolerance school discipline; suspensions and expulsions; school-based arrests; increasingly prison-like school environments; criminalization of everyday student behaviors; pressures created by high stakes tests; and budgets that prioritize incarceration over education, work in concert to place many of our struggling students on a conveyer belt into the justice system.

There is also a “secret pipeline” which has not received adequate attention nor been thoroughly investigated. **The secret pipeline refers to the mechanisms and strategies employed by school districts to remove students who present academic and behavioral challenges while circumventing due process and skirting accountability and responsibility for the educational outcomes of those students.** Once funneled into this secret pipeline, some students never return to school. Those that attempt to finish often find themselves in alternative or adult education programs which are often ill equipped to meet students' needs, yield startlingly low completion rates, and risk accelerating rather than curbing the flow of young people into the justice system. Gaps and loopholes in data collection and reporting mechanisms sustain the secret pipeline by rendering the experiences and outcomes of these students largely invisible.

Using Connecticut as a case study, this report explores the pressures propelling the secret pipeline, documents the “*de facto* discipline” practices that place students on it, examines the educational experiences and outcomes of students that land in alternative and adult education programs, and advances recommendations for reform.

# Key Findings

School districts across the state of Connecticut employ *de facto* discipline tactics – surreptitious practices that conceal what are essentially forced disciplinary removals from school as voluntary transfers or withdrawals – to funnel students into the secret pipeline.

High school students are counseled, coerced and involuntarily placed in alternative and adult education programs through a variety of tactics:

- Although students have a legal right to remain in public high school until the age of 21, students as young as 16 with histories of truancy, academic struggle, and discipline are told by school personnel that high school “is not working for them” or that they will be “too old” to graduate from high school and must withdraw to complete education elsewhere.
- Students with histories of disciplinary problems and truancy have been threatened with expulsion and/or truancy fines unless they “voluntarily” withdraw from school.
- Students who present academic and behavioral challenges or are returning home from incarceration have been administratively withdrawn from school or involuntarily placed at adult education programs without being informed of their legal right to remain in public high school.
- Students are involuntarily placed in alternative schools and programs. Their placement is in part enabled by an ambiguous state statute which grant districts authority to “reassign” students without complying with the reporting, procedural and due process protections afforded in disciplinary proceedings; these alternative programs often become “black holes” where students are trapped in sub-par educational environments and rarely permitted to return to mainstream high schools.
- Schools label certain students as problems and troublemakers and then actively “build a case” for utilizing *de facto* discipline and pushing them into the secret pipeline. One of the strongest recurring themes in the interviews and focus groups was the notion that students who struggle in mainstream learning environments - many of whom are later counseled or coerced out of school - were “targets” of school personnel who wanted to see them removed.

Educators and administrators who make the seemingly benign recommendation to withdraw from public high school to attend adult education often fail to disclose the information required for the student and parent to make an informed decision or, worse yet, misrepresent the law by misleading students and parents into believing that they have no other choice. The practices that push students into the secret pipeline capitalize on youth’s feeling of alienation from school and exploit parents’ trust that the advice they are receiving is truly in their child’s best interest while concealing the true enormity and magnitude of the decision students are being asked – or told – to make: when students withdraw from school, they surrender their constitutional right to education.

**Districts “select” which students they want to be accountable for by using de facto discipline to circumvent reporting, responsibility and accountability for student discipline and achievement measures.**

In Connecticut’s current system, alternative and adult education programs are often posited as a “safety net,” a second chance opportunity for students who are not thriving in traditional school settings. Too often, however, the “safety net” institutions have even fewer resources and are even less equipped to appropriately support and nurture students’ social and emotional well being and develop the academic potential of the students that arrive on their doorstep. Instead of being a safety net, they become an institutional pressure release valve, serving the needs of the mainstream high school by providing a secret mechanism through which struggling students “disappear” without the need to account for them. So though alternative and adult education programs may exist, *in theory*, to enable struggling students to attain their high school diploma or GED, many have become, *in application*, an off-the-radar extension of Connecticut’s disciplinary system, enabling schools and districts to remove their most challenging students while functionally absolving schools of responsibility and accountability for student discipline and educational outcomes.

The use of *de facto discipline* enables districts to manipulate school accountability measures in their favor:

- *De facto* discipline enables school districts to lower their reported number of disciplinary incidents. Recent legislation in Connecticut limiting the use of out of school suspensions, as well as recent announcements from the federal Department of Justice and Department of Education, have rightfully encouraged schools to reduce their use of exclusionary discipline. Some Connecticut districts have responded by implementing new policies and practices. Unfortunately, however, districts have also avoided reporting disciplinary incidents by using involuntary placement in alternative programs and coerced or involuntary withdrawals to summarily remove students who might otherwise increase their reported suspension and expulsion rates.
- *De facto* discipline enables school districts to eliminate potential low-performers from their pool of standardized test takers. When a student withdraws from school to attend adult education, they are no longer required to take standardized tests and districts are no longer responsible for their performance for Annual Year Progress (AYP) reporting required under No Child Left Behind. In some Connecticut school districts, the number of teens (16-18) enrolled in adult education is equivalent to more than 10% of their total high school population, enabling districts to avoid AYP reporting for a sizable portion of their high school-aged students. Although students in alternative schools and programs are required to participate in standardized testing, the reporting gaps and loopholes are so pervasive that it is impossible to ascertain how these students score or whether those scores are accurately reflected in mainstream school and district data.
- *De facto* discipline has enabled districts to artificially boost their graduation rates and conceal their true dropout rate. In the three-year period between 2008-2010 over 22,000 Connecticut high school students left high school prior to graduating, of 72% were publicly reported as “dropouts.” The remaining 28% - more than 6000 students - were coded as “transfers” to the adult education credit diploma program, and simply disappeared from district rosters with none reported as dropouts or with any indication of whether or not they actually went on to enroll or attain their diploma. Fortunately Connecticut’s new graduation formula will address this reporting loophole, but it has nonetheless historically perpetuated a perverse incentive for districts to remove struggling students and deflect responsibility to another educational entity, even when leaving school is not in the best interest of a student.

**Current law, policies and reporting mechanisms work in concert to render Connecticut’s most vulnerable students invisible.**

Youth that are funneled into the secret pipeline are among our state’s most vulnerable students. They are navigating complicated and challenging life circumstances and have often already experienced years of academic struggle. Yet, rather than being used to identify, intervene and address these students’ challenges head on, existing data collection and reporting mechanisms shield the educational trajectory and outcomes of these students from public scrutiny.

- The State Department of Education (SDE) does not track how many students are enrolled in alternative schools or programs, nor does it track how those students are faring. The SDE grants districts discretion to designate alternatives as “schools” or “programs,” and because programs are exempt from completing mandated state reports like strategic school profiles, it is impossible for the broader public to isolate and access information specific to the enrollment, growth, and achievements of alternative education students. There are potentially thousands of Connecticut students engaged in some form of alternative education on a daily basis, and yet we know nothing about who they are, much less how they are being served, what they are learning, if they are graduating, and whether or not the unique educational experience they engage in on a daily basis is equitable and effective.
- While data about students in Adult Education is publicly available, it is held in a separate reporting platform and is not integrated with the Public Student Information System, the statewide database that tracks all information pertaining to students enrolled in grades K-12. Teens that are enrolled in Adult Education are not counted as students “enrolled” in the local district. As a result, the information and data system that both decision-makers and the broader public generally turn to when discussing the educational outcomes of public high school teens summarily excludes a sizable portion of our actual student population. The data that is publicly available about the outcomes of adult education students does not disaggregate data by age or race, making it impossible for the general public to know whether or not specific student populations – such as teens – are being effectively served. The number of teens enrolled in adult education is approximately equivalent to the number of students of all ages enrolled in Connecticut charter schools, yet there has been a striking scarcity of public discourse, debate, and analysis of the educational outcomes of the teens at adult education.

**The overwhelming majority of teens that enroll in Adult Education in any given year do not attain their diploma or GED. Adult Education programs are neither designed nor equipped to effectively serve the teens that they have become responsible for educating.**

Many people understandably – but wrongly – assume that adult education centers simply serve adults. In reality, nearly one-third of the 30,000 students attending adult education in the state of Connecticut are of legal age to be in high school. Statewide, there are more than 5000 teens (16-18) enrolled in adult education. The high rates of enrollment in Adult Education centers are not the doing of the centers themselves; generally speaking, they have little control over who lands on their doorstep. In fact, many adult education staff interviewed in the course of this research expressed concern about their capacity to serve the teen population that they have grown responsible for.

- In 2010, less than one quarter of all teens enrolled in adult education programs statewide earned their diploma or GED. In 2010, 26% of the teens enrolled in the Credit Diploma Program statewide attained their diploma; 17% of teens enrolled in the GED program statewide attained their degree.

- Analysis of 2010 attainment data by race reveals disparities. Statewide, 32% of White teens enrolled in the Credit Diploma Program attained their diploma, compared to 27% of Black teens and 20% of Latino teens. The disparities are even more dramatic in the GED program: statewide, 32% of White teens enrolled attained their GED, compared to 12% of Black teens and 8% of Latino teens. It is possible that the attainment rates for students of color are lower because they enter adult education further behind – in credits or in skill – than their White peers. Even if that were the case, it nonetheless demonstrates that the entire spectrum of educational opportunities – from traditional public schools to the secondary school completion programs at adult education – fail to equitably serve Connecticut’s students of color.

Perhaps the most tragic and disturbing irony is that teens in the Department of Corrections attained their GEDs at higher rates than those in local adult education centers.

- In 2010, 3 out of every 4 GEDs awarded by the SDE to black males under the age of 21 were attained in prison.
- In 2010, 27% of all teens enrolled in the Department of Corrections (DOC) attained their GED, compared to 17% of all teens enrolled in adult education programs statewide.
- In 2010, 26% of Black and Latino teens in the DOC attained their GED compared to 10% of Black and Latino teens enrolled in adult education programs statewide.

The way adult education centers operate and are resourced often exacerbate the very challenges their teen students are confronting:

- Although most teens enrolling in adult education have histories of academic struggle and failure, state mandates require 60% less instructional time per “credit” earned towards a diploma; teens enrolling in adult education also often have histories of truancy, yet attendance policies for the Credit Diploma Program at adult education centers often only permit 3-5 absences per semester, causing large numbers of students to “absentee out” before attaining credit; furthermore, success at adult education requires a high degree of self-direction and independent study, ingredients that these teens struggled with even in mainstream environments with greater supports.
- According to an SDE report released in 2009, only 22% of young adults (21 and under) attending adult education met the state’s adequate progress benchmark of earning 4 or more credits in a year.
- Adult education programs often end up with the highest-need students and the least resources to serve them. There are no special education services at adult education, no opportunities for extracurriculars and other activities that build a sense of connection and investment to a school community. In 2009, the average per pupil expenditure for students in K-12 education was \$13,607, while the average cost per pupil cost for an adult education student was \$1,602.

**While some alternative programs and schools successfully shepherd students across the line to graduation, others serve as “dumping grounds” which accelerate rather than curb the flow of young people into the school to prison pipeline.**

Although existing law and SDE policies do not distinguish the differences between the wide array of alternative schools and programs operating in school districts across the state, this research found that there are two types of alternatives offering students vastly different educational experiences:



- “Alternatives of choice” have protocol and processes that clearly established how a student becomes enrolled, as well as checks and balances to ensure that students enrolled on their own volition. While students attending these schools often had histories of discipline and academic struggle, they see the alternative program as an opportunity, not a punishment, and the majority of them go on to graduate.
- “Placement” or “dumping ground” alternatives, on the other hand, are part of the secret pipeline. Students are placed at these alternatives through *de facto* discipline and for many students it represents the point at which they exit, rather than complete, high school.

The scant data made available about the graduation rates at these dumping ground “placement” alternatives is grim. One alternative school reported a graduation rate of 36% in 2007 and 56% in 2008. Another reported that its graduation rate for the class of 2010 was 0%, with 70% of students in the cohort dropping out and the other 30% remaining enrolled for the following school year. Unfortunately, the prevailing structural invisibility of alternative schools and programs prevents local school districts and the SDE from being held accountable for their intolerably low performance and putting the policies, supports and resources in place to ensure that these students have equal opportunities to succeed.

**The number of students impacted by *de facto* discipline is significant. *De facto* discipline exists in rural, suburban and urban communities across the state, but data suggests it disproportionately impacts students of color.**

Unfortunately, there is no way to determine precisely how many students have been impacted by *de facto* discipline, because it is applied in ways that intentionally conceal its usage. While not all teens that enroll in Adult Education land there as a result of *de facto* discipline, the high percentage of teen enrollment may indicate systemic pushout practices.

Notably, the preponderance with which youth enroll in adult education is not limited to Connecticut’s large, poor urban school districts:

- In 2010, there were nine adult education centers where teen enrollment (16-18) topped 25% - Groton, Newington, East Haven, Meriden, New Milford, Bristol, Middletown, Enfield and Waterbury. Of those, only Waterbury is a large urban center.
- Most of the adult education centers experiencing growth in teen enrollment are in rural and suburban communities.

Nonetheless, a comparison of statewide teen enrollment in Adult Education to statewide high school enrollment reveals that Black and Latino students represent a disproportionately large share of teens enrolled in Adult Education.

- In 2010, statewide, White students accounted for 67% of Connecticut’s total high school population, but made up only 39% of the teens enrolled in adult education programs; Black students represent less than 15% of Connecticut’s total high school population but account for almost **one-quarter** of teens at adult education; Latino students represent 16% of Connecticut’s total high school population, but account for more than **one-third** of teens enrolled at adult education.

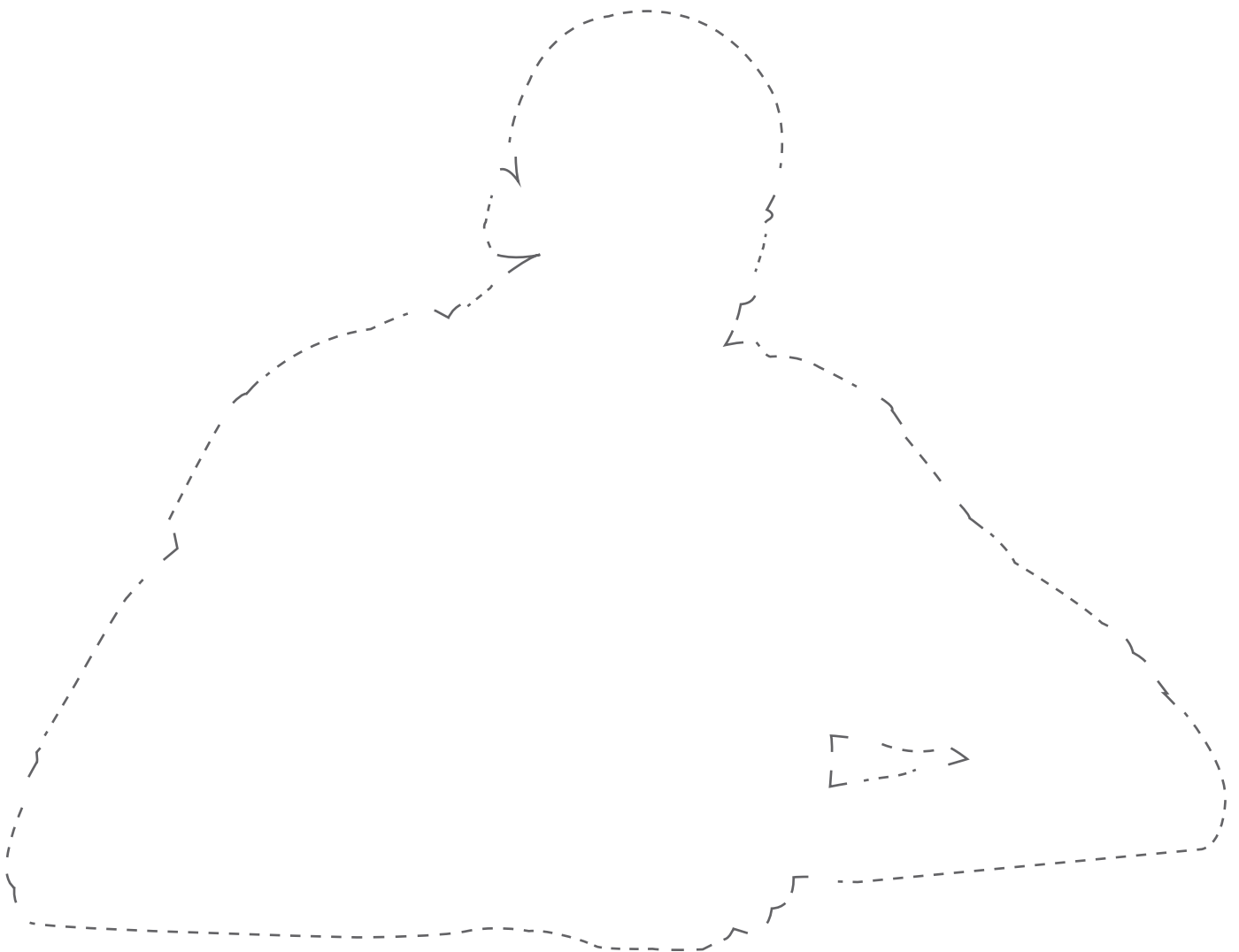
While some may argue that the racial disproportionality in Adult Education enrollment is the result of Black and Latino youth “dropping out” of high school at higher rates than their White peers, data from high school exit codes suggests otherwise. Based on statewide exit code data, Black students transferred to the Credit Diploma Program at more than double the rate of White students, and Latino students transferred to CDP at nearly four times the rate of their White peers. Because transfers to the Credit Diploma Program from mainstream high schools are often the result of administrative counseling or coercion, the exit code data raises deep concerns about the extent and impact of structural racism within Connecticut’s education system, concerns made even more disturbing when one considers that these students who “voluntarily” withdraw from mainstream schools to attend adult education surrender their constitutional right to education.

## Core Recommendations

We must bring *de facto* discipline practices as well as alternative and adult education programs into the center of our conversations about school equity and high school reform. If we do not, we will allow our educational system to quietly divert thousands of teens into the secret pipeline to prison, undercutting the successful reforms already underway. While the challenges presented by the secret pipeline are complex, they are not intractable. There are concrete steps that local school districts, and state agencies, policymakers and legislators can take to dismantle the secret pipeline, end the use of *de facto* discipline, and ensure that *all* of Connecticut’s students have meaningful and equitable opportunities to learn:

- High schools must have a climate that welcomes, engages and values all students, and ensures that all students have the tools and supports necessary to succeed.
- Ensure that local districts cannot “select” which students they want to be accountable for. Improve data collection and reporting mechanisms to make the enrollment and outcomes of students attending alternative schools and programs and adult education programs *transparent* and hold local school districts *accountable* for their performance.
- Eliminate dumping ground alternatives by prohibiting involuntary placement of students, and support the creation of effective, high-quality alternatives of choice.
- Prevent districts from using Adult Education as a repository for challenging and struggling students, and end practices that counsel, coerce, or involuntarily place students in Adult Education. Establish a protocol that explicitly informs young people that they have a right to remain in school and a right to return to school, that describes the difference between high school and adult education, and that discloses the educational outcomes of adult education students.
- Adult Education must only be used as a *last resort* after exhausting all other attempts at intervention and options available within the school district. The students that ultimately enroll there, however, must have access to academically rigorous educational opportunities and appropriate supports that will prepare them for success in the workforce or post-secondary education.
- Monitor the enrollment and transfer of students in alternative and adult education programs to address inappropriate over-representation of certain students. Any district or school within a district where students or a subset of students (race/ethnicity, special education or English Language Learners) have an enrollment or transfer rate that is higher than the state average should trigger an investigation to identify and address school and district practices leading to high enrollment and/or transfer rates.

# INVISIBLE STUDENTS



# INTRODUCTION

**Nationwide, nearly 1.2 million teens – more than one third of all high school students – drop out of high school every year.**

Until recently, this devastating reality remained one of our nation's best-kept secrets.<sup>1</sup> Reporting formulas that could be manipulated to boost graduation rates and mask the true dropout rate, combined with public reluctance to confront the structural economic and racial barriers contributing to educational inequities, have caused too many to ignore the urgency and the origin of the crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Rarely do students “drop out” because they do not desire to finish. In fact, for many students who stop short of finishing, leaving high school is not really a choice at all. A growing body of research, informed by a decade's worth of analysis of what has come to be known as the school-to-prison pipeline, explores and documents how many of our nation's most vulnerable and struggling students do not chose to leave school, but are in effect pushed out.<sup>3</sup>

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to laws, policies and practices that remove students from places of learning and place them on a path towards prison. There are actually two pipelines. One is overt and well documented. A plethora of research, both nationally and in the state of Connecticut, has documented how many factors, such as zero tolerance school discipline, suspensions and expulsions, school-based arrests, increasingly prison-like school environments, criminalization of everyday student behaviors, pressures created by high stakes tests, and budgets that prioritize incarceration over education, work in concert to place many of our struggling students onto a conveyer belt to the justice system.<sup>4</sup> Research shows that these practices, often employed in the name of promoting school safety and positive learning environments, actually deliver lower rates of academic achievement, negatively impact school culture and climate, increase the likelihood that a student will become entangled in the court system, disproportionately impact students of color, and further marginalize the students that are the most at risk of dropping out.<sup>5</sup>

Across the state of Connecticut there are thousands of teens doggedly pursuing high school completion outside of traditional high schools in alternative schools and adult education programs. Their stories and struggles have remained in the dark for far too long. This is an attempt to bring those struggles to light.



There is also a secret pipeline which has not received adequate attention nor been thoroughly investigated. This report explores the secret pipeline and examines a variety of undocumented disciplinary practices that push students out by encouraging or coercing their transfer out of or withdraw from traditional, mainstream high schools. Once those students are pushed out of high school, they face two untenable choices – going to alternative or adult education. Both settings frequently result in low graduation rates, which then puts youth back on the conveyor belt into the criminal justice system.<sup>6</sup>

Whether their rallying cry has been to stem the tide of the nation’s dropout crisis, dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline or to end school pushouts, students, parents, activists, and advocates are making their voices heard, demanding more just and equitable educational opportunities, and seeing real results. Spurred by the work of community residents, states and local districts are addressing these issues through legislation and revising school codes to prohibit the overuse of exclusionary discipline, by committing to raising their graduation rates and by creating new pathways to graduation for nontraditional learners.<sup>7</sup> On the national level, all fifty states have signed onto a Compact Agreement of the National Governor’s Association that will ensure greater accuracy and uniformity of graduation rates, and the US Department of Justice and Department of Education recently issued a joint statement addressing the school-to-prison pipeline as a top priority in their respective federal agendas.<sup>8</sup>

While this progress ought to be celebrated, it also creates new issues that have yet to be addressed. As these laudable reforms efforts have gathered momentum and support, districts caught in the crosshairs feel frustrated, overwhelmed, and struggle to deal with challenges that do not seem to go away, namely: the pressures generated by the No Child Left Behind Act that threaten resources and reputations if schools do not demonstrate adequate gains on standardized tests; an economic climate that threatens to further erode limited educational resources; and vulnerable students who often communicate their academic or emotional struggles by disregarding or resisting classroom norms and school rules.

Under mounting pressure to demonstrate improved performance, as measured almost solely by standardized test scores and graduation rates, while decreasing their overt use of punitive discipline, many school systems have responded by using a kind of subterfuge: hidden, undocumented, and in some cases wholly illegal methods to remove students they perceive as diminishing their performance or boosting their discipline rates. Once funneled into this “secret pipeline,” some students drop out of school altogether. Those that attempt to finish often find themselves in alternative schools and programs or adult education centers which are often ill equipped to meet students’ needs, yield startlingly low completion rates, and risk accelerating rather than curbing the flow of young people into the justice system. Gaps and loopholes in data collection and reporting mechanisms exacerbate the secret pipeline by rendering the experiences and outcomes of these students invisible.

In order to reap the full benefit of the progressive reforms already underway, we must delve into the subterfuge and pull alternative and adult education students out of the shadows. Using Connecticut as a case study, this report will:

- Define the secret pipeline, explore the forces propelling it, and document the occurrence of *de facto* discipline, surreptitious pushout practices that conceal what are essentially forced disciplinary removals from school as voluntary transfers or withdrawals.
- Examine the educational experiences and outcomes of students who are enrolled in district-run alternative programs and schools and district or regional adult education centers.
- Advance recommendations and identifying opportunities to end the use of *de facto* discipline, close reporting and accountability loopholes, and improve the educational outcomes of all Connecticut students.

# THE CONNECTICUT CONTEXT

In the spring of 2010, the Connecticut State Department of Education released a sobering memo announcing that its statewide graduation rate is far lower, and the racial disparities in the graduation rate are even more severe, than had previously been reported.<sup>9</sup> The new memo also acknowledged what researchers, advocates, and activists had alleged for years – the methods previously used to calculate the state’s graduation and dropout rate failed to account for all students that fall short of graduating and understated the magnitude of the “dropout crisis.”<sup>10</sup>

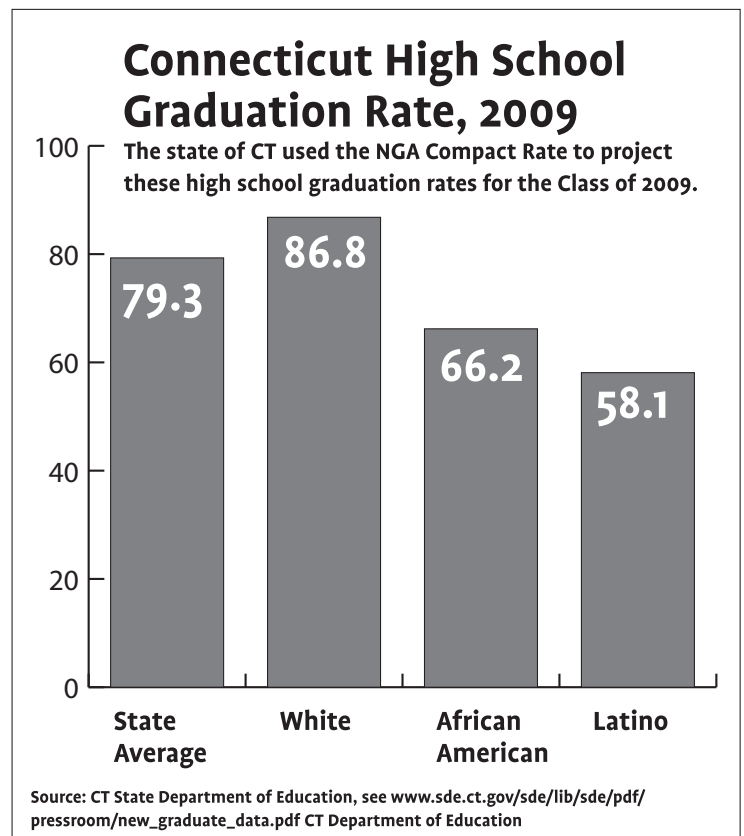
Until recently, Connecticut calculated its graduation rate by dividing the number of graduates for that year by the number of students in the graduating class combined with the number of students that dropped out in the ninth through twelfth grades.<sup>11</sup> Comparing the graduation rates generated by this formula against a widely endorsed more accurate method, reveals alarming reporting gaps.<sup>12</sup>

**A recent report by the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now found that in more than 20 school districts across the state of Connecticut, 1 in 5 students were erroneously reported as having graduated.<sup>13</sup>**

The formula had numerous flaws, among them that students who “voluntarily withdrew” from high school to transfer to one of the adult education secondary school completion programs – regardless of whether or not they went on to attain their diploma -- were not counted as dropouts.<sup>14</sup> In Connecticut, as in other states, this practice has created a perverse incentive to counsel struggling students to voluntarily sign themselves out of school.<sup>15</sup>

Fortunately, Connecticut has joined the other forty-nine states in signing the National Governor’s Association Graduation Counts Compact, wherein all states committed to using the widely endorsed and far more accurate “NGA Compact Rate.”<sup>16</sup> Still, Connecticut graduation rates – particularly for students of color – are disturbingly and unacceptably low. Considering that students who fail to graduate high school are eight times more likely than their peers to end up in jail or prison, the graduation rates are essentially a form of sentencing in their own right.<sup>17</sup>

The racial disparities in graduation rates parallel, and may well be the result of, systemic racism manifested in disciplinary practices. Nationally, it has been widely documented that students of color are disciplined and arrested in school at far greater rates than white students, even when they engage in the same behaviors.<sup>18</sup> Connecticut is no exception. A 2008 study of school discipline in Connecticut found that Black and Latino students were suspended at more than three times the rate of their White peers,<sup>19</sup> and a report the same year, exploring school arrests, found that students of color were not only



disproportionately arrested but were more likely to be arrested than White students even when they committed the same infractions.<sup>20</sup> Numerous national studies have also documented how these exclusionary discipline practices actually lower academic achievement, decrease the likelihood of graduating, and increase the likelihood of a student's involvement of the justice system. One of the most recent and comprehensive studies, an analysis of more than a million of Texas middle and high school students over a six-year trajectory, found that nearly sixty percent of the students who were repeatedly disciplined did not graduate from high school, and that disciplined students were three times more likely to come into contact with the juvenile justice system.<sup>21</sup>

Over the past five years, Connecticut youth, activists, and advocates have made significant headway in dismantling the overt school-to-prison pipeline and stemming the flow of public school students into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. In 2007, Connecticut passed legislation requiring schools to use in-school rather than out-of-school suspensions.<sup>22</sup> In 2008, Connecticut passed legislation that decriminalized offenses like truancy, ensuring that youth who are referred to court for school attendance problems will no longer be incarcerated for noncompliance with probationary orders.<sup>23</sup> Most recently, the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch announced it would use its discretionary authority to refuse to process school-based arrests arising from circumstances it deems "insufficient" for judicial action.<sup>24</sup>

In the midst of this, the Connecticut General Assembly passed the most sweeping high school reform legislation in decades. Starting with the class of 2018, in the spirit of increasing academic rigor and equipping students to graduate ready for college and with "21st century skills,"<sup>25</sup> the legislation will: increase the number of credits required for graduation from 20 to 25; expand mandated coursework in math and foreign language; and require students to pass standardized end-of-year examinations in five subjects.<sup>26</sup> While the legislation requires districts to provide "adequate student support and remedial services" for students who may be unable to meet these requirements, it fails to fully explore and address the root causes of why so many students fall short of meeting the current graduation criteria. By toughening the standards for graduation without addressing the reasons why students are not graduating in the first place, the new requirements risk exacerbating Connecticut's pushout problem and graduating even fewer high school students.

In theory, alternative education programs exist to overcome that problem, and to help bring struggling and disengaged students, on the verge of failing or dropping out, back into the fold. A growing national effort to create "multiple pathways to graduation" for youth that are out of school or not "on track" to graduation has led many school districts across the country to implement innovative approaches to dropout prevention, reduction, and recovery.<sup>27</sup> While noting that many current educational reforms are intended to help all students succeed, but "fail to address youth who have already been 'discarded' by the traditional school options," proponents of the multiple pathways framework have cautioned:

**At least two potential – and serious risks – exist in our secondary school reform efforts. The first is that by making schools more rigorous and alternative programs more plentiful, regular high schools may increase their 'push-out' policies and practices....instead of improving success for all youth, this approach instead risks strengthening the 'school to prison' pipeline...The second serious risk is that alternative pathways can become a second-class system...students that are channeled into weak alternative programs at the first sign of struggle, and policies and practices within the alternative system work to keep them stuck for the duration of their educational career.**<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, many of Connecticut's alternative schools and programs and adult education centers have fallen victim to these risks. While alternative schools of choice and adult education centers in some instances give marginalized students and nontraditional learners a better environment in which to pursue their secondary education, in many instances they represent an extension of the school-to-prison pipeline and actually make it more likely that a student will ultimately become involved in the justice system.

We must bring alternative education programs and adult education centers into the core of our conversations about high school reform. If we do not, we will undercut our own efforts by rendering thousands of Connecticut students invisible, quietly diverted into the secret pipeline.

# ALTERNATIVE & ADULT EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF LAW & PRACTICE

In order to fully understand the scope and impact of Connecticut’s secret pipeline, it is helpful to review five components of existing law and mandates pertaining to school discipline, alternative programs, and adult education.

## THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The Connecticut state constitution establishes a right to free elementary and secondary public education,<sup>29</sup> and its general statutes require that each child shall have an equal opportunity to participate in the activities, programs, and courses of study offered.<sup>30</sup> A 2010 Connecticut Supreme Court decision further clarified that Connecticut public students must not only have equal opportunity to participate, but that all are entitled to a “suitable education” for becoming “responsible citizens” and “mov[ing] on to higher education or productive employment.”<sup>31</sup>

Connecticut’s compulsory education statutes require that students be enrolled in school between the ages of five and 18,<sup>32</sup> and entitle students to remain enrolled in a regular secondary school through the age of 21 provided that they have sufficient credits to graduate by the year of their 21st birthday.<sup>33</sup> Until this year, students in Connecticut could withdraw from school at age 16, provided they have their parent’s documented consent, but effective July 1, 2011, students must be 17 before their parent or legal guardian can allow them to withdraw from school.<sup>34</sup> After withdrawing, students have 10 school days to change their mind and re-enroll in school. If they do so, the local district must make educational accommodations within three school days. Unfortunately, as discussed later in this report, districts do not always meet that obligation. Once the 10-day period has lapsed, withdrawn students have effectively surrendered their constitutionally granted right to an education. Students who wish to re-enroll in regular public high school after being withdrawn for more than 10 school days can do so, but districts can make students wait up to 90 school days before permitting them to re-enroll.<sup>35</sup>

In order to comply with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Connecticut statutes also outline procedures districts must undertake to identify students who may have special education needs and specifies the “prompt referral to a planning and placement team meeting (PPT) of all children who have been suspended repeatedly or whose behavior, attendance, or progress in school considered unsatisfactory or at a marginal level of acceptance.”<sup>36</sup>

## SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

The Connecticut statutes outline and define several tiers of discipline for different types of student infractions. Disciplinary measures range from short-term classroom removal (up to 90 minutes), in-school suspension (exclusion from class for more than 90 minutes, but not from school), out-of-school suspension (exclusion from class and the school building for more than 90 minutes) and expulsion.<sup>37</sup> Schools are required to use in-school suspension unless a student (1) “pose[s] such a danger to persons or property or such a disruption of the educational process” that s/he must be removed from school, or (2) previous attempts to discipline the student through in school suspension or positive behavioral interventions have proven unsuccessful.<sup>38</sup> Although students who receive out-of-school suspensions are entitled to receive their work while suspended, the district is not required to provide an alternative educational placement during an out-of-school suspension.



An expulsion occurs when a student is excluded from school for more than 10 consecutive days or suspended more than 10 times in a single year.<sup>39</sup> The statutes afford students facing expulsion a variety of due process protections, including the right to a formal hearing before a third party hearing officer.<sup>40</sup> An expulsion cannot last more than one 180 school days, and students have the right to return to the school from which they were expelled at the end of their expulsion period. School districts must provide some form of alternative educational placement during the term of the expulsion, unless the student is being expelled for a weapon or drugs, and is older than 16.<sup>41</sup>

## ADULT EDUCATION

In addition to requiring school districts to operate schools to educate students in Kindergarten through twelfth grades, the law requires that each school district operate – or develop cooperative agreements with other districts to operate – adult education centers that offer at a minimum offer instruction in obtaining citizenship, English for adults with limited English proficiency, and elementary or secondary school completion or classes.<sup>42</sup>

According to the State Department of Education’s website, Adult Education Centers can meet the secondary school completion requirement in three ways:<sup>43</sup>

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Students must be at least 16 years old to enroll in adult education, and they must be at least 17 years old to take the GED exam. Before a student can enroll in either the GED or CDP program, they must provide documentation that they have withdrawn from school, unless they are attending adult education as the result of an expulsion.<sup>44</sup>

Adult Education Centers providing CDP must utilize certified teachers, but Adult Education differs from K-12 schools in several important regards. Unlike the K-12 schools, which are required by state law to operate 180 days a year, provide at least five instructional hours per day and at least 900 instructional hours<sup>45</sup> there is no minimum number of days of operation or weeks per semester. Statutes also mandate that in order to attain a diploma through the CDP, students must complete at least 20 credits, and each course for which they earn a “credit” for, must consist of at least 48 hours of instructional time.<sup>46</sup> The minimum instructional time required for earning a diploma at a regular high school is 120 hours of instructional time for each “credit” earned, a difference of 62 hours of instruction per credit.<sup>47</sup> Other key distinctions are that Adult Education programs are not required by state law to provide special education services or transportation to their students.

- **NATIONAL EXTERNAL DIPLOMA PROGRAM (NEDP):** students in this program participate in a portfolio assessment process that offers no classroom instruction. The program is designed for students who have gained skills and demonstrated competence through life experience or work. Students who meet the portfolio requirement are awarded a high school diploma from the local adult education center.
- **GENERAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT (GED) and Adult Basic Education (ABE):** students in this program participate in courses that prepare them to take the GED exam, a five-part examination which requires students to demonstrate attainment of skills and concepts normally acquired in high school. Students who successfully pass the exam earn a State of Connecticut High School Diploma. Students who require additional skill development prior to taking the GED exam are placed into Adult Basic Education until they demonstrate they are ready to take the GED exam.
- **CREDIT DIPLOMA PROGRAM (CDP):** students in this program accumulate credits in a fashion similar to high school; they follow a prescribed plan, process, and structure for earning credits towards a diploma. Once students have attained 20 credits and met any additional criteria that their local adult education center may require, they will receive a high school diploma from that local adult education center.

# ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

The Connecticut General Statutes do not specifically define or describe alternative education, nor do they establish operating criteria, performance standards, or reporting expectations for alternative schools or programs. The statutes do, however, reference alternative education in the context of adult education and school discipline. State law permits districts to place a student “enrolling in school who is 19 year of age or older and cannot acquire a sufficient amount of credits for graduation by age 21” in “an alternative school program or other suitable educational program.”<sup>48</sup> Though the statute does not specifically state that the “alternative” is secondary school completion programs offered at an Adult Education Center, Adult Education Centers certainly play that role, and this reading of the law indirectly defines Adult Education Centers as providers of “alternative education.” Unfortunately, this law has at times been wrongly interpreted by districts to mean that they are not obligated to educate or serve students older than 19 in public high schools.<sup>49</sup>

The other instance where state law references educational alternatives is in the context of school discipline. The law mandates that any expelled student younger than 16 be offered an “alternative educational opportunity” during the period of their expulsion. It also explicitly permits districts to offer adult education as the “alternative educational opportunity” to any expelled students who are 16 or older.<sup>50</sup>

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The sparse statutory references to “alternative educational opportunities” ignore the wide range of alternative schools and programs that actually exist and the divergent roles that they play within Connecticut’s local school districts. In some instances, programs defined as “alternatives” by districts are “out-of-district placements” which provide services that are not available within the school district for students with serious special education needs that cannot be met in a regular school environment. In other instances, alternative programs operate as a self-contained unit housed within the regular high school. Some alternative programs are held off-site from the main school campus but maintain a tangible connection to the referring high school through staffing, counseling, administrative supervision, and supplemental classes or extracurricular opportunities for students. And still, in other instances, what districts deem to be alternative “programs” are schools in their own right, serving students in grades 9-12, in their own separate building and with their own school principal.

State law permits local school districts to “reassign” a student to “a regular classroom program” at another school within the district and that “such reassignment shall not constitute a suspension...or expulsion.”<sup>51</sup> This clause has at times been invoked by districts as

**After identifying more than 50 entities that describe themselves as district-operated “alternatives” during the course of this research, only a small handful actually served to educate students *during the term of their expulsion*. The vast majority serve students who fall into a variety of other categories: students who have special education needs that cannot be met in the traditional school environment; students who have struggled academically, socially or have high rates of truancy; and, notably, students who presented histories of “behavioral” problems but had not been explicitly expelled.**

justification for the involuntary placement of certain students in alternative programs, but the statute is laden with conflicts, not the least of which are whether an alternative program can fairly be deemed a “regular classroom program” and an explanation of what makes “reassignment” functionally different from expulsion.

## DATA AND REPORTING

State law requires that each school district annually file a Strategic School Profile (SSP) for each school in its jurisdiction and for the district as a whole. The SSPs are publicly available on the SDE website and must include data on: student needs; school resources; student and school performance, including scores on state standardized tests, graduation and dropout data, discipline data, and truancy; equitable allocation of resources among schools; and efforts to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation, and special education.<sup>52</sup> According to the SDE, SSPs have two purposes: “to serve as an accountability system which informs the public about what is happening in Connecticut schools” and “to stimulate school improvement through shared information.”<sup>53</sup> Local school districts are granted discretion to designate alternative educational opportunities as either “schools” or “programs.”<sup>54</sup> The distinction has importance far beyond semantics: districts are not required to file strategic school profiles for “programs.” Though the SDE asserts that the information regarding these students is incorporated into the data for their referring school and reflected in the district’s aggregate report, the current data collection and reporting mechanisms make it impossible to know whether that is indeed happening. As this research will demonstrate, students participating in alternative educational opportunities are rendered functionally invisible, and their distinct educational experiences and outcomes are hidden from public view.

Just as schools and districts must file SSPs, each adult education center that receives state and federal funding must complete an annual program profile. The Adult Education Program Profiles are publicly available on the SDE website and contain data pertaining to the “participation and performance of learners” in adult education programs and, like SSPs, they are used as tools for “program improvement and accountability.”<sup>55</sup>

The SDE maintains two distinct data management systems to track the performance of students in public school and adult education centers. The Connecticut Adult Reporting System (CARS) is the data management system used to track the enrollment, demographics, attendance, achievements, and outcomes of all students enrolled in Adult Education. The Public Student Information System (PSIS) is the data management system that tracks the enrollment, demographics, achievements, and outcomes of students in elementary and secondary schools, grades PreK-12. Although every Connecticut student now has a unique student identifier (commonly referred to as a SASID number) there is not currently a data-tracking platform that links PSIS and CARS.<sup>56</sup> Although legislation passed in 2009 will start requiring districts to report the number of teens enrolled in CDP on their SSPs, the students that attend adult education are not included in the enrollment data for PSIS, even when they are students of high school age.<sup>57</sup> As a result, the primary information system that the general public turns to in order to understand what’s happening in their schools fails to reflect the thousands of teens who attend adult education programming.<sup>58</sup>

# METHODOLOGY

The data and findings contained in this report are drawn from four sources of information:

- 1) a review of literature and policy pertaining to the school-to-prison pipeline, school pushout, alternative education, and the dropout crisis;
- 2) an examination of Connecticut education statutes and policy;
- 3) an analysis of quantitative evidence generated through a public records request to the State Department of Education (SDE) and associated correspondence with SDE representatives; and
- 4) an analysis of qualitative evidence gathered from seven school districts within the state of Connecticut, including:
  - a) 13 focus groups engaging more than 150 youth, parents, and state agency staff,
  - b) interviews with more than 60 youth, parents, educators, attorneys, advocates, and service providers, and
  - c) 13 site visits to a total of seven alternative schools and adult education centers which provided the opportunity to observe school and classroom dynamics.

The seven districts from which the qualitative evidence was gathered were selected in order to represent a cross-section of Connecticut school districts. A comparative analysis of practice and policy across districts would be beneficial but is outside the scope of this report. Three of the school districts are characterized as urban, two are suburban, and two are rural. They span the state geographically and are located in four of Connecticut's eight counties. The State Department of Education classifies districts into nine District Reference Groups (DRGs) based on multiple socioeconomic indicators, student need indicators, and size of enrollment.<sup>59</sup> The seven districts selected for this research span the DRG range, from the most affluent to least affluent.

This report also focuses exclusively on public programs operated by school districts or regional educational service centers. It does not explore alternative or adult education programs independently operated by charter schools or other nonprofit organizations.

In order to ensure candid and honest participation, the school districts and all individual interviewees and focus group participants were promised anonymity. Of the more than 60 interviews recorded, 40% were with educators, including teachers and administrators at alternative schools and adult education programs as well as district-level leadership; 37% were with youth, including students who currently attend or previously attended alternative schools and adult education programs; and the remaining 23% were with parents, advocates, community-based service providers, and the staff of state judicial and child welfare agencies. Interviews and focus groups cited throughout the report have been numerically coded. Audio, transcripts, and notes from the proceedings are on file with the author. Requests for site visits were made in all the school districts examined in this report, but two districts did not grant permission despite the promises of anonymity.

The few instances where school districts appear by name in this report are in the context of statewide trends and are the result of quantitative data gathered through public records requests. The quantitative data is statewide in scope. Its use and limitations are discussed in more detail in the Appendix.

# THE SECRET PIPELINE

**It is no secret that the traditional approach to teaching and learning that dominates most schools does not effectively engage all students – if it did, we would not see such large numbers of students fall short of graduating.**

And yet much of the dominant public debate about school reform has focused not on how to effectively engage students in the teaching and learning process, but on how to close “achievement gaps” on standardized tests and get students ready for success in college. What is an educator to do, then, when faced with a student who enters high school years behind grade level and lacks the basic skills necessary simply to participate, much less succeed? One educator describes an all-too-common spiral:

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When faced with a student in this situation, it is understandable – and perhaps even fair – that a school would conclude that the current educational environment is not working. Unfortunately, however, rather than trying to figure out how to alter the educational environment to better meet the needs of such students, many of these students are instead coaxed or coerced into leaving school altogether. As one Superintendent described, “there is that defining moment where the rubber hits the road with a kid, and you have two choices. You can either open the door with your foot on their back, or you can say here’s the restart.” Unfortunately, when perched on that perilous precipice, far too many of Connecticut’s most struggling students catch the foot on the back. For some students, it’s their last encounter with any form of schooling. For others, it marks the point at which they are shuffled into the secret pipeline.

“ Traditional, comprehensive high schools tend to focus on college. That’s coming down from the experts down through the federal government through the state through the boards of education and superintendents down into the schools. Everyone needs to go to college. So you are focusing on that. And then here you have this student who manages to get out of eighth grade and come to your school. This young person is not thinking college. They have their own emotional issues, their environmental issues at home.... They have low skills levels. It has nothing to do with intelligence. It just has to do with the building blocks, and some don’t have them.... They can barely focus on a daily basis, but we’re focusing on college for everybody. And then you have those students who don’t fit that category, and so in many cases they are not getting what they need in terms of learning styles. Maybe they need a different learning style than, ‘read chapter two and three and answer the questions then pass them in.’ They don’t read it, they don’t pass in their homework. And then in many cases there are consequences for not doing homework, so then they get frustrated and angry and that is manifested through behavior, and then suddenly they’re in the principal’s office and then there’s lunch detention, after school detention, Saturday detention, and it’s almost like a domino effect. Suddenly you have students who are spending more time out of the classroom than in the classroom for their behavior BECAUSE of their frustrations, and their emotional issues, and their home environment, and all of those things and then – ‘this student’s not going to college, are you kidding me? They’ll be lucky if they can get into a community college. They can just go get a job. Alright, well, then maybe they don’t need to be here.’ By the time that that conversation has happened that student has spent a year and a year a half in school and has no credits. That’s what happens.”<sup>60</sup>

# PRESSURES PROPELLING THE SECRET PIPELINE

The pivotal role of the individual educator – the power educators have to motivate and inspire or devalue and discourage their students – should not be underestimated or diminished, but there are systemic forces and institutional pressures that fuel the secret pipeline and provide impetus for the pushout of struggling students.

## “JUST GET THEM OUT”

A growing body of research has documented how school districts across the country, under pressure to make the Annual Yearly Progress benchmarks required by No Child Left Behind, have used zero tolerance to “remove students who are unable or unwilling to sit quietly in their seats.”<sup>61</sup> The premium placed on delivering high scores on high-stakes tests place educators in what some describe as the “unenviable position of having to choose between their students’ interest and their own self interest.”<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, students that present behavioral challenges almost always end up on the wrong side of this equation and are pushed out of the schoolhouse doors. If teachers and schools exist in a high-stakes testing pressure cooker, alternative schools and adult education centers have become pressure release valves.

For many educators, the process is a simple, rational, common sense calculation. As one state employee described it, “they see this kid being in their school as being a disruptive component or force. They are trying to minimize the potential for disruption in their school and they don’t know what else to do. So you remove that, and focus on the kids who in their mind want to be there and participate.”<sup>63</sup> One superintendent further explained how administrators have routinely celebrated their ability to swiftly remove students they deem disruptive of the educational process: “If you are in the business to eradicate your school of all ‘wrongdoing’ - and that’s interpreted as you gotta get rid of that 3% that’s causing the problems - you can find a way to do that. There are principals and administrators who will do that and pat themselves on the back, and come to the Superintendent and say ‘you know what, we had 15 incidents in September and I knew by the end of the first quarter all those kids would be gone, and you know what? I got them all gone, it’s going to be an excellent year.’ That exists. That conversation happens.”<sup>64</sup>

The mantra of zero tolerance all too often provides the ammunition schools need to expediently rid themselves of the students they deem to be troublemakers. Fortunately, educators, lawmakers, and the broader public are increasingly acknowledging that the zero tolerance discipline policies are not only ineffective, but actually harmful to students’ educational progress.<sup>65</sup> States and school districts across the country are passing new policies and legislation that focus on developing thoughtful and logical responses to inappropriate student behavior without compromising their access to meaningful educational opportunities.<sup>66</sup>

**The “Secret Pipeline” refers to the mechanisms and strategies employed by school districts to remove students who present academic and behavioral challenges while circumventing due process and skirting accountability and responsibility for the educational outcomes of those students. Students that are funneled into this secret pipeline face the same fate as all the others entangled in the school-to-prison pipeline, but their stories and experiences take place in the dark, shielded from public knowledge and scrutiny.**

In 2007, Connecticut passed legislation reforming school discipline statutes and mandating schools use in-school suspensions, and districts across the state have responded by implementing strategies in order to improve school climate and safety and reduce their use of punitive, exclusionary discipline. These changes have already generated progress in some districts, evidenced, in part, by sizable reductions in the number of youth who receive out-of-school suspensions.<sup>67</sup> Many of the teachers and building-level administrators interviewed in the course of this research stated that they felt strong district-level pressure to drive down their number of reported disciplinary incidents. One educator noted that teachers with high numbers of suspensions would be called into “special” meetings with their administrator.

While this can and should be interpreted as a promising indicator of new reforms and an increased culture of accountability taking root, it has a dangerous parallel effect: it increases schools’ reliance on “de facto discipline” – undocumented, “off the radar” mechanisms for removing students from school. Teachers report that this has led to an increase in the number of undocumented suspensions, that students acting out simply get told to “take the day off.” It also tacitly encourages coaxing or coercing students to transfer to alternative schools or to withdraw and attend adult education. As one educator explained, placement of a student in the alternative school “was an ease to have disruptive students removed from their classroom, and an ease for those principals to have those students out of their buildings.”<sup>68</sup> This educator’s experience is corroborated by a national study on alternative education which found that “in some districts, a move to an alternative education program is a student’s choice, in others it is part of the district’s zero tolerance disciplinary plan and is a coerced move unlikely to improve the students relationship to school and learning. School districts also sometimes assign poor performing and disruptive students to alternative education as a way to remove them from the regular classrooms, with little attention paid to the quality of the program or the range of supports to help students catch up.”<sup>69</sup>

Workers in of adult education described a similar dynamic:

“Clearly some schools want to get rid of behavior issues....

They are going to be happy to have that student any place but there.

**Some kids are just tough to handle so they push them out.”<sup>70</sup>**

**A lot of kids are pushed to come [to adult education]. They are pushed out of the high schools. They are troublemakers, they are truant, they are problems, a problem child, and it’s much easier to get them out and give them to somebody else than to keep them in schools. They just want them out. The schools want them out.<sup>71</sup>**

Some educators use the desire to protect the educational rights of certain students to rationalize the educational abandonment of others. The existence of the secret pipeline and the use of de facto discipline alleviates the burdens of classroom management and allows schools to rid themselves of so-called “troublemakers” without being accountable for reporting disciplinary infractions or, as explained in greater detail below, without being accountable for the educational outcomes of those students.

## “IT’S ALL ABOUT STATISTICS”

The secret pipeline has played a key role in reducing districts’ documented use of exclusionary discipline measures and masking the severity of their dropout problem. Historically, Connecticut students who withdrew from school to attend the Credit Diploma Program (CDP) at Adult Education were simply coded as students who “transferred” out of the school district, and the outcome of their educational experience – whether they actually went on to enroll and finish at Adult Education – was not reflected in dropout and graduation data. This reporting loophole created a perverse incentive for districts to move students out and deflect responsibility to another educational entity, even when leaving school is not in the best interest of a student.

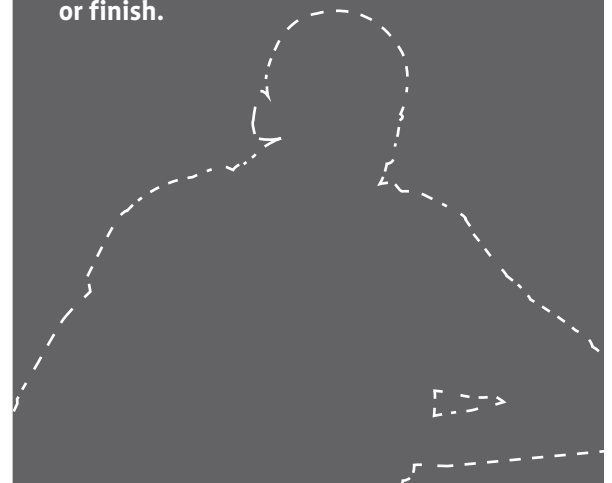
As one attorney commented,

**There is the concern of the impact the kids have on their statistics. What is their graduation rate? How are kids scoring on CAPT? How are their discipline statistics? [Those that are pushed out] are the kids that are constantly getting into trouble and we’re suspending them all the time, but once a kid drops out, they count for one statistic. Otherwise all these other things improve for them. They don’t pay attention to what happens to the student after he leaves.**<sup>72</sup>

This observation was echoed by front-line and district-level educators. One noted, “In local communities where high schools and adult ed are managed by the same Board of Education, there is some ability to play with dropout rates. In other words, if students are in high school and then come to adult [education] and finish in the credit diploma program, they don’t count as a dropout, so if a high school isn’t going to be able to count them as a graduate because they aren’t performing, that’s an incentive to send some students to adult ed.”<sup>73</sup>

## Understanding “Exit Codes”

The CT State Department of Education tracks the enrollment of its students through the Public Student Information System (PSIS). Changes in a student’s enrollment status are tracked through dozens of different “exit codes.” These exit codes are used to determine graduation and dropout rates. There is an exit code for high school graduates, and there are four distinct exit codes that constitute “dropping out.” There is also a unique exit code for “transfer to adult education Credit Diploma Program (CDP).” While some may argue that this particular exit code reflects a continuation or an extension of a student’s education, it is vital to understand that once a student is coded as a transfer to CDP, the district is no longer responsible for reporting that student’s educational outcomes, regardless of whether or not they go on to enroll or finish.





Another educator acknowledged,

**Sadly, it's all about statistics, it's not about kids. The mantra in guidance is make sure the student goes into the credit diploma program because then they are not a dropout...your focus is about a percentage and a number rather than offering a kid best advice.** <sup>74</sup>

Fortunately, new methods for calculating graduation rates will help close the statistical loophole by requiring districts to report students who transfer to the Adult Education Credit Diploma Program as non-graduates. <sup>75</sup>

Despite this step forward, pressures to meet the Annual Yearly Progress benchmarks required by No Child Left Behind still create disturbing incentives to remove struggling and low performing students who threaten to drag down test scores. <sup>76</sup> One recent national report noted “the practice of pushing struggling students out of school to boost test scores has become quite common” and cited the referral of students to alternative schools and counseling students into GED programs as examples of “widely used strategies for manipulating test scores.” <sup>77</sup>

In Connecticut, when students withdraw from schools to enroll in Adult Education, students no longer participate in the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT), the standardized exam used to determine the adequacy of a school's performance for federally mandated No Child Left Behind reporting. By counseling low-performing students out of high schools and into adult education centers, districts unilaterally eliminate their state and federal accountability for a significant subset of their student population. In some Connecticut school districts, the reported number of exits to Adult Education in just a single year is as high as seven percent of that district's high school population. <sup>78</sup>

**In the three-year period between 2008-2010 over 22,000 Connecticut high school students left high school prior graduating. 72% of those students were publicly reported as “dropouts.” The remaining 28% - over 6000 students - were coded as “transfers” to the adult education credit diploma program, and simply disappeared from district rosters without any indication that they had gone or any trace of what happened to them.**

# Black students transfer to Adult Education Credit Diploma Program at more than double the rate of White students, and Latinos transfer at more than triple the rate of White students

Source: Special Records Request to State Department of Education. See Appendix for details.

An analysis of exit code data statewide further reveals that Black students transfer to Adult Education Credit Diploma Program at more than double the rate of White students, and Latinos transfer at triple the rate of White students suggesting that public school systems across the state are not only failing to help students of color make adequate academic gains, but that districts are systematically eliminating their responsibility for providing students of color with an actual high school education.

The educational outcome data of students that transfer to alternative schools and programs has the potential to be similarly manipulated. A national study about alternative education commissioned by the US Department of Labor commented that “because of the pressure to make adequate yearly progress, it is feared that some schools and school districts may place low-performing students in public alternative educational settings if they are too far behind in credits or are not able to pass certain high stakes tests.”<sup>79</sup>

Studies of alternative education programs in other states have likewise warned, “despite the importance of alternative education, existing K-12 accountability programs do not permit an evaluation of whether participating students are making progress. In fact, the state’s accountability system allows schools and districts to use referrals to alternative schools as a way to avoid responsibility for the progress of low-performing students.”<sup>80</sup>

Unfortunately, the same can be said for Connecticut. Because the state does not track or monitor the enrollment of students in alternative programs, it is impossible to know how many alternative schools or programs exist. At the time this report was published, there were fewer than ten self-identified “alternatives schools” that actually file strategic school profiles as mandated by the state. The vast majority of districts designate local alternatives as “programs” rather than schools, thereby enabling districts to avoid reporting enrollment, achievement, and performance measures for those students. Although student enrollment and outcome data, including graduation and dropout rates and performance on standardized tests, is purportedly incorporated in the data reported for the students’ referring school and reflected in the district aggregate scores, there is no publicly available way to verify that this is in fact happening, especially in large districts which have multiple high schools and alternative programs. In some instances, labeling the alternative as a “program” enables districts to conceal or avoid reporting the schools’ inability to deliver sustained educational progress for their students. One educator at a low-performing alternative school openly acknowledged that being a stand alone school, with its more rigorous reporting standards, had a “downside” in terms of low standardized test performance, and noted that the district had “experimented” with turning the school into a “program” of a neighboring, school in order to “avoid” the potential consequences of failing to meet their annual yearly progress requirements.<sup>81</sup>

**In one district, the Board of Education “experimented” with turning the school into a “program” of a neighboring, school in order to “avoid” the potential consequences of failing to meet their annual yearly progress requirements.**

Even if standardized test scores are reflected in the data of the referring school, the aggregated reporting of the other student indicators prevents transparency and eliminates district accountability for an entire subset of students engaged in a distinct educational experience. This is important because despite a designation as a “program,” students often participate

in a substantially different educational experience than those at the mainstream high school: they typically have different teachers; different course offerings; (e.g. often less advanced and fewer options); different curriculum (e.g. often lower level and less rigorous); different school hours and schedules (e.g. sometimes less than what is mandated by law); and different resources (e.g. less books, supplies, instructional supports and dilapidated buildings.)

## “A SORROWFUL BARGAIN”

While a comprehensive analysis of Connecticut’s school finance regulations are outside the scope of this report, for districts that are strapped for resources and struggling to trim school budgets, pushing students into the secret pipeline can sometimes be economically advantageous.<sup>82</sup>

Unlike schools, adult education centers are not required by law to provide special education or transportation service to their students. Furthermore, the majority of adult education instructors are contracted part-time employees and, as such, are not salaried and do not receive benefits such as paid vacation time, health care, or retirement.<sup>83</sup> The end result is that it costs dramatically less to educate a student at adult education than in a traditional district school. Indeed, in a 2009 documentary produced by Youth Rights Media, a student organizing group in New Haven, one state education official describes the process of pushing students out of school as a “sorrowful bargain.”<sup>84</sup> Cautioning that any district advertising adult education as a way to deal dropouts is “selling adult ed short,” one adult educator commented, “we end up with the most needy kids and the least amount of resources to serve them.”<sup>85</sup>

**Alternative schools and programs are similarly under-resourced. An alternative school educator in one district noted that their Board of Education views the alternative school as a “cost savings measure” because it spends less than half per pupil on alternative education students as it pays for those attending the mainstream comprehensive high school.<sup>86</sup>**

One of the alternatives visited during this research served nearly 30 students and had just two teachers responsible for providing instruction in all core subjects areas and electives for students that spanned grades 10-12.<sup>87</sup> Another alternative school, serving more than 80 students, had no guidance counselor; at that school, the principal was expected to serve as the administrative leader, the guidance counselor, and was responsible for teaching a class.<sup>88</sup>

**2009 Average Per Pupil Expenditure for K-12 student:**

**\$13,607\***

**2009 Average Per Pupil Cost for Adult Education student:**

**\$1,602\*\***

\*Source: CeDAR, District and School Snapshot, State of Connecticut, Finance, Per Pupil Expenditure, last accessed online at: [http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct\\_report/StateFinanceReportViewer.aspx](http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct_report/StateFinanceReportViewer.aspx) on October 9, 2011.

\*\*Connecticut State Department of Education, Connecticut Narrative Report 2008-2009, p. 9. Accessed online at: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/deps/adult/accountability/ctreport2008-09.pdf> on October 9, 2011.

## “ONE SIZE DOESN’T FIT ALL...” BUT IT’S ALL WE’VE GOT

One of the most resounding and oft-repeated phrases encountered in the course of this research was that “one size doesn’t fit all.” Educators working in traditional high schools, alternative schools and programs, and adult education centers all observed that the structure, culture, and instructional approach dominating schools today stifles educators’ creativity and innovation and fails to effectively engage all students they are responsible for educating. As one educator noted, “for some the whole culture and experience of high school just doesn’t match their lives. High schools have become very test driven, competency driven, data driven. That’s the name of the game right now across the country, and that doesn’t always fit with the needs of adolescents and young adults.”<sup>89</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Connecticut school districts only operate one high school. Charters, magnets, and other inter-district choice programs expand the pool of options, but they have also been criticized for “creaming” students off the top, skirting responsibility for educating their share of English Language Learners and special education students, and aggressively moving low-performing students off their rosters.<sup>90</sup> Just as impacted by the pressures of No Child Left Behind, the state’s technical school system – which was originally designed to serve students who were interested in the trades, excelled at hands on learning, or who were not college bound – have become increasingly exclusive, only accepting students with strong academic track records unblemished by behavioral incidents. In one district, educators report that one of the admission criteria for the local technical high school is students’ middle school math scores on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT).<sup>91</sup>

Students who may otherwise excel if granted exposure to the unique theme-based focus of magnets or hands-on learning at technical schools become just another student at the comprehensive high school. The “college for all” stance that districts have adopted is laudable in that it communicates to all students that college opportunities ought to be within their grasp if they so choose, but the promise rings hollow without the instructional supports and curricular creativity to engage students with a range of learning styles. As one student noted,

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The demands of managing classrooms that are overcrowded, under-resourced, and facing constant pressure to raise test scores, compromises educators’ abilities to build the personal relationships necessary to help a non-reader read, motivate a student that is depressed, inspire confidence in a student who thinks she is dumb, or accommodate a student economically responsible for raising themselves and their siblings. As one educator noted of students with complicated life circumstances, “eventually whatever their issue is, it’s gonna catch up with them.” According to this educator, rather than altering the educational environment to anticipate and respond to students’ needs, the educational system instead “tries to... to force the square peg through a round hole that’s never, ever gonna be a fit. Somehow they might get through, but the chances are it’s not gonna work, and they are gonna drop out. We need to offer the safety net to these kids.”<sup>93</sup>

In Connecticut’s current system, alternative and adult education programs are posited as this “safety net,” a second chance opportunity for students who are not thriving in traditional school settings. Too often, however, the “safety net” institutions have even fewer resources and are even less equipped to appropriately support and nurture the social and emotional well being and develop the academic potential of the students that arrive on their doorstep. Instead of being a safety net, they become an institutional “safety valve,” serving the “needs of the comprehensive high school” by providing “a mechanism to rid mainstream schools of failures and misfits without holding school administrators fully accountable for their actions.”<sup>94</sup>

“

It was the way things were being taught up there that I could not grasp the concept. Up there the way that they were teaching is ‘this is the way we are going to do it in the book. We are going to show you a couple of examples and then throw you on in your own. And that will work for some people but a lot of people I know need a little extra time, a couple more examples. Like me, I’m a physical kind of guy, you can’t tell me or show me something and expect me to get it. I have to physically be able to do it for me to get it... [At the high school] it was ‘this is the way we are going to do it; this is the way we’ve always done it; this is tradition; we’re going to do it his way; you’re just a kid, your opinion doesn’t matter’ and they move on.... At first I just struggled and then I felt helpless. I would ask teachers for help. ‘No.’ I would ask to stay after school for help. ‘I got other things to do, I can’t stay after for you’. I just started feeling helpless so I just gave up.<sup>92</sup>

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# THE PATH THROUGH THE PIPELINES — — —

## MAINSTREAM K-12 SCHOOL

Expulsion

School-Based Arrest

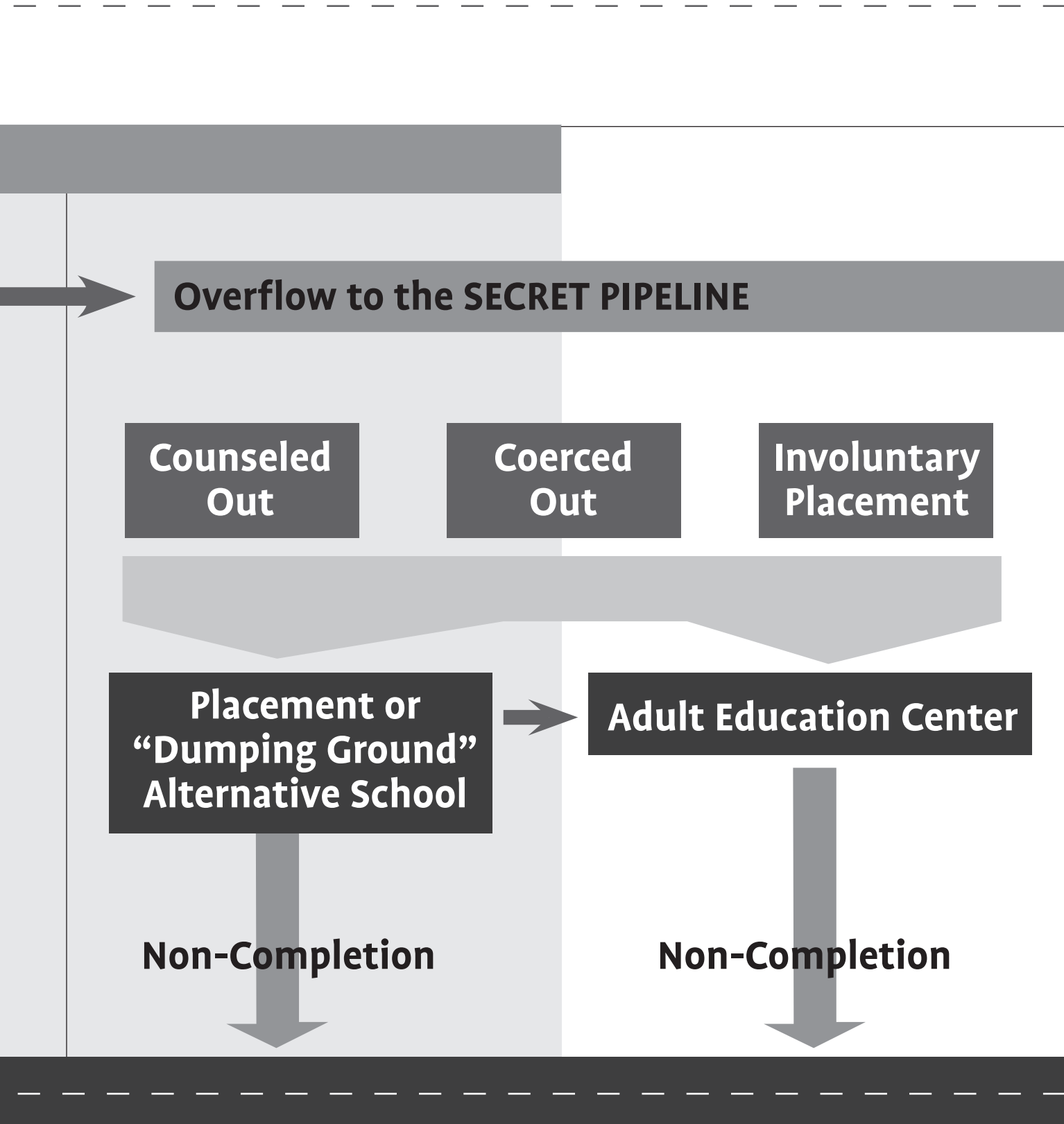
Criminalized Truancy

Out-of-School Suspension

OVERT PIPELINE

Connecticut is sealing off known aspects of the Overt Pipeline, so struggling students are bypassed into the SECRET PIPELINE

Increased likelihood of Prison Involvement — — — — —



# WHO IS FUNNELED INTO THE SECRET PIPELINE AND HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

There is no disputing that some students funneled into secret pipeline never find their way back to school.<sup>95</sup> We just have no way to what proportion. Some are bypassed into district-operated alternative schools, and others are tracked directly out of the K-12 education system and into adult education. In both instances, the process represents a form of *de facto discipline*, wherein schools avoid explicit, overt disciplinary actions and disguise forced disciplinary removals from school as voluntary transfers or withdrawals. In some instances, students are punished for “bad behavior;” in some cases the “punishment” – being pushed out of school – is meted out for academic failure.

Interviews and focus groups revealed a disturbing pattern: students that land in alternative schools or adult education centers have immensely complicated personal and home life dynamics, histories of serious academic struggle and failure, or frequent disciplinary referrals. Not surprisingly, the three often go hand in hand.

When students were asked why they ended up in an alternative school, the initial response of many was simply, “because I was bad” or “because I failed.” Digging deeper revealed dramatically more complicated circumstances. Students opened up to recount story after story of being kicked out of the house, witnessing violence, bearing responsibility for raising younger siblings, and navigating the challenges of growing up with parents facing incarceration or drug and alcohol addiction.<sup>96</sup> An educator in one alternative program noted that one-third of their students were currently homeless and estimated that half of the young women in the program had experienced some form of sexual assault.<sup>97</sup> An adult educator shared that the majority of students in their class were on some form of medication for depression or hyperactivity. One educator simply stated, “most students come to school with backpacks full of snacks and text books, these students come to school with empty stomachs and backpacks full of issues at home and in their lives.”<sup>98</sup>

It is in fact often because of these issues that students accumulated disciplinary infractions more often than they accumulated passing grades. It is impossible to say precisely how often these students get funneled into the secret pipeline. In fact, part of the reason it happens is because there is no way for the broader public to know that it has occurred. There is, however, conclusive evidence to conclude that it happens far more often than it should.

## THE TRACK TO ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

In many states, alternative schools are an explicit part of the school discipline apparatus; students that are suspended or expelled get placed into “alternatives” for the duration of their disciplinary period.<sup>99</sup> In Connecticut, there are some alternative programs that exclusively serve students that have been formally expelled, but the vast majority of alternative schools and programs that currently exist do not enroll students who have been overtly disciplined by the school during that disciplinary period. In many instances, districts use alternative schools as a disciplinary consequence without having to actually document disciplinary actions.

**De Facto Discipline:**  
A process wherein schools avoid explicit, overt disciplinary actions and disguise forced disciplinary removals from school as voluntary transfers or withdrawals. De facto discipline is used to punish students for ‘bad behavior’ or, in some instances, simply for academic failure.



Site visits, interviews, and focus groups revealed two different types of alternative schools. Some alternatives defined themselves as “schools of choice.” They had protocol and processes that clearly established how a student becomes enrolled, as well as checks and balances to ensure that students enrolled on their own volition. While students attending these schools often had histories of discipline and academic struggle, they see the alternative program as an opportunity, not a punishment, and the majority go on to graduate. Teachers at these “alternatives of choice” distinguished their schools from what they called “placement” alternative schools, which they described as “dumping grounds” where districts house “throwaway kids.” Students at “placement” alternatives perceive their placement at the school as a form of punishment, and for many it represents the point at which they exit, rather than complete, high school. These two types of alternatives are discussed in greater detail in a later section of this report, but they bear distinguishing here. The description of the secret pipeline below refers to students funneled into “placement” alternative schools.

## Counsel Outs

Sometimes students with histories of academic failure, truancy, or frequent disciplinary incidents are advised through meetings with school personnel that the current educational environment “isn’t working” and that they would fare better in a “smaller learning environment.” In these conversations, the decision to transfer to an alternative is couched as a “choice,” but it is often the only option presented. As one student explained,

I was having trouble in school. I was skipping class and in with the wrong crowd of people. They had a meeting with me and my mom and they said that if I wanted to stay in school I should go to the alternative school because it would be smaller and have less distractions.<sup>100</sup>

Students did not report being offered additional instructional, social or emotional supports or other forms of school-based interventions.<sup>101</sup>

## Involuntary Removal and Placement

Although counsel-outs to alternative schools and programs certainly happen, interviews and focus groups suggest that students are more frequently involuntarily removed from the traditional high schools and involuntarily placed into alternative schools and programs.

One former alternative school student explained,

I did not choose to go there. I showed up to homeroom one day and they just told me you don’t go here anymore you have to [the alternative school] now. I did not have any choice or say-so in the matter.<sup>102</sup>

During the summer I just got a letter in the mail telling me that was not a student at [the high school] anymore, and had to go to the alternative school.<sup>103</sup>

State employees working with court involved youth corroborated the frequency of these involuntary school removals, reporting that their clients would simply be switched to an alternative school program, without engaging in any conversation or meeting with students and parents and often without even advance notification.<sup>104</sup> In school systems where this happens routinely, districts were unable to provide documented policies and protocols outlining the criteria and process for determining when and how a student should be transferred to an alternative program.

Involuntary removals of this kind meet the legal definition of expulsion, and should entitle students to the due process afforded in expulsion hearings and should require districts to disclose the disciplinary event. Attorneys representing students reported that some districts claim students are not actually being removed from school but placed into a “program” and invoke the state statute that permits local school districts to “reassign” a student to “a regular classroom program” at another school without having “such reassignment” be regarded as a suspension or expulsion.<sup>105</sup> As a later section of this report will discuss, the distinction between what constitutes a “school” and what constitutes a “program” is slippery at best, and there is by definition an inherent contradiction in describing an “alternative” as “regular.” Either way, the district’s defense exposes a dangerous loophole in the existing statute. Rather than being used to allow swift administrative action to protect individual students who may be victims of bullying or other dangers, districts that invoke it protect and conceal their de facto discipline practices and further marginalize the students that are often in the most dire need of support.

Some students attending alternative schools are never even given the opportunity to attend traditional high schools, but are instead placed directly into alternative schools or programs upon completion of middle school, transferring into a district, or returning from incarceration. One student, a seventeen-year-old sophomore attending an alternative school, says that she never officially completed the eighth grade:

**I didn’t graduate from middle school. They said I was doing really bad with my grades and acting bad, but that they didn’t want to hold me back anymore because I was too old because I had already been held back twice; they didn’t want me anymore, so they just sent me to [the alternative high school.]<sup>106</sup>**

In one district, educators noted it had become “standard practice” to place students that failed middle school directly into the alternative school (which doesn’t even have a guidance counselor), even though the comprehensive high school serving area students is significantly better resourced and boasts consistently high graduation rates.<sup>107</sup>

Students transferring into school districts from other towns or places of incarceration are also sometimes tracked directly into alternatives:

**When I came [to this town], I wanted to go to the [mainstream high school]. My mom tried to sign me up over there, and they said no. They said, ‘how old is she? What grade is she in? 16, and a freshman? No she’s not going to graduate with the class.’ And they gave my mom papers for this school. It was my credit. I didn’t have credits, but I did have a lot suspensions.<sup>108</sup>**

**The students at our [alternative] school came in at various points throughout the year, and they could come in at any point in the marking period from September to June, and they came in generally as behavior issues from the two largest high schools [in the district]. Other students were coming out of incarceration and needed to be reintegrated back into the [school system.] Our school was the first stop and sometimes the only stop for those students.<sup>109</sup>**

Students that land in placement alternative schools not only face heightened risk of the becoming entangled in the overt school-to-prison pipeline, such as exclusionary discipline and school-based arrests, they also sometimes find themselves pushed into the secret pipeline once more, this time landing on the track to adult education.

# THE TRACK TO ADULT EDUCATION

Some students at adult education have first had a “layover” at an alternative school; others arrive directly from the mainstream high school. While the practices and conversations are often strikingly similar to the experiences of students that land in alternative school, the consequences in adult education programs can be even more severe: when a student withdraws from high school to attend adult education, they are surrendering their constitutional right to a public education. Students funneled into the secret pipeline enter the adult education system as a result of one of the three following processes.

## Counseled Out

At times, school personnel persuade students that in order to obtain a high school diploma they must actually leave high school and pursue their education through Adult Education instead. In some cases, these students are clearly struggling to progress through high school. But in other cases the students need only a few credits to walk across the stage. Regardless of how well-intentioned these conversation may be, the educators and administrators who make the seemingly benign recommendation to “transfer” to adult education often fail to disclose to the student and parent the information required to truly make an informed decision or, even worse, misrepresent the law by misleading students and parents into believing that they have no other choice.

### “If You Want to Graduate on Time...”

In some instances, the counseling out happens under the guise of presenting students with an opportunity to “catch up” and graduate on time with their class. Whether the school is actively instigating this decision, or simply permitting their student to throw in the towel, school personnel play into the perception that attaining a diploma through adult education will be “quicker” and “easier.” In theory, this could be true. Adult Education centers require fewer hours of instruction for each credit earned, so a student could ostensibly earn more credits in a semester than they could in high school. Often, however, students leave high school only to find that the quick finish eludes them, and the finish line instead becomes even more distant.

In my senior year I was failing two classes that I needed in order to be able to graduate. When I met with my counselor and realized I wasn't going to pass and wouldn't be able to walk with my class, I decided to leave and finish at Adult Ed. I didn't want to do another whole year of high school. So I basically left high school in June of 2008, exactly when I should have been graduating. I thought I could just make up my two classes in the summer at Adult Ed and then graduate. But it didn't end up [that way.]<sup>110</sup>

## Counsel-Out Conversations: In Educators' Words

They are pretty much reasoning with the student that 'you're gonna be here for an extra year' and the student is saying 'no, I don't want to be here for another year,' and the school says 'well, you know you can go to adult education and get four credits and you can be out by the half year mark if you do XYZ because the timeframe for earning a credit is cut in half.'<sup>111</sup>

Students are counseled out of high school - 'Well you are not going to make it here' - particularly some of the [students with] behavioral issues and the constant truancy issues, the high school personnel kind of give up trying to make them fit into this rule-based thing...so finally it's just easier to just send them to adult ed, and then let us worry about them.<sup>112</sup>

I think it happens because the student has just made one too many choices, and despite anything that has been in place to help alleviate whatever those challenges are it hasn't worked and so it's better for everyone if you just disappear and just leave. So it's just push out, slam the door, see you later, don't want to know you, bye. We hear that, we'll get a student who'll say, 'they didn't want me, they told me to leave because that was my only option.' That's a clear indication that that was one of those students that was definitely pushed out.<sup>113</sup>

There are some schools in this area that will encourage behaviorally problematic students to do that. They'll say, 'look Tom, the best you can do is this community college, you don't want to be here in high school anymore, let's just get you out of here.' Absolutely that's encouraged.<sup>114</sup>

I would say in my second year teaching we had at least five conversations with parents, students, and principals discussing the students options, identifying that this setting was not working for them, and the options being you can continue to come here and if you act the way that you are you will likely fail your courses or you can enroll in Adult Ed.<sup>115</sup>

So the pushout conversation is from counseling or administration or a classroom teacher - it's when you have that meeting with a kid in trouble. Most of the time the kid just wants to find a way to bail. They don't want to be there. They hate school. So how do you create a plan that brings the kid off the ledge, offers the child a new beginning, and gives the kid a chance to say, 'the ball's in my court and I'm gonna run with it.' That's what SHOULD happen. Unfortunately what happens is, 'Come on in. Here are the criminal charges; here's what you haven't done; here's how old you are; here are the credits you haven't won; here are the credits that you presently have; here's your class for graduation; and here are the papers to withdraw because you know what, sadly there is no help.' And that conversation happens. It happens everywhere.<sup>116</sup>

### **“This isn’t working for you...”**

Other students leave high school on the advice of guidance counselors or administrators who convince them and their guardians that school is “not working” and that entering adult education is the best way – or the only way – to attain a high school diploma. These students typically are “over-age” and “under-credit,” meaning that their credit attainment status is low relative to the standard expected for someone of their age to be “on track” to graduation. Often these students’ academic records reflect years of educational struggle, in the form of truancy, failed coursework, or disciplinary referrals. Often regarded as “troublemakers” or “problems,” schools feel as though they have nothing left to offer these students, so they are ushered out the door.

I got held back in the 8th grade twice, and I really kind of gave up then because I realized there was no way I’d be able to graduate with my friends. I only earned 1 or 2 credits during my freshman year in high school. In a meeting my principal said, ‘high school is not for everyone.’ I didn’t want to be in school anyway so I wasn’t going to argue with him. When I went back to sign out, the principal said, ‘this is probably for the best,’ but in the back of my head I was thinking, best for who? <sup>117</sup>

### **“You are too old...”**

In the most overtly illegal version of the “counsel out” conversation, educators are untruthful, knowingly or unknowingly misrepresenting the law and inaccurately telling students and parents that they have reached the maximum age for educational services. As one lawyer explained, “the laws are on the books, but districts ignore them or think they don’t have to follow them, especially with respect to allowing kids to stay in school until 21.”

It was my senior year, and I was 19 years old. I was going to be turning 20 in a few months. My principal never really liked me, because he knew I had been locked up and at the alternative school. He told me that I was going to be too old to be in high school and I had to leave. I was in a program that taught me my rights so I knew that I could stay, and I told him that, but he told me that was only for special education. So they next day I went back with a copy of the law, and he let me stay. But he told some of my friends the same thing, and they left. <sup>118</sup>

I was 16 years old, but a freshman, in terms of my credits. I had some problems in school, but part of my credit problem was because they didn’t transfer my [English Language Learner] classes. I moved to [a new school district] and tried to get in school but they told me that I was too old to be in high school so I just wasn’t in school. <sup>119</sup>

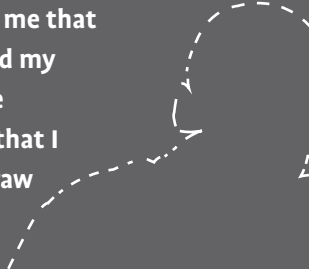
**There is clearly an effort to move kids out. They don’t want older kids in their high schools, and they are clear about that, so they direct them towards adult ed. The law says that a school district can direct a kid to an alt ed experience if they are 19 years of age or older and can’t acquire enough credits to graduate by age 21. In [some districts] they move kids at 16 years old. <sup>120</sup>**

## Coerced Out

Some students and parents are coerced into “voluntarily” withdrawing from school with threats of expulsion. Students who may – or may not – have committed an expellable offense are informed by their administrator that they will be expelled from school unless they withdraw. Students and parents, sometimes fearing the impact of an expulsion on a student’s record and often unaware of the due process rights and procedures associated with an expulsion, comply.

**We’ve had clients who have had school administrators who basically threatened kids who have been discipline problems with ‘we are going to expel you from school unless you withdraw.’ And I think that kids don’t really get a full sense of what an expulsion is, and they don’t understand that it’s not forever, and that they can actually come back to school after a certain period of time.** <sup>121</sup>

I was failing a lot of my classes, and I had a lot of tardies and skips. When I was 16 I got into a fight at school and they told me that because of the fight and my record I was going to be expelled...so they said that I may as well just withdraw now. So that’s what I did. <sup>122</sup>



**We had a kid that had repeated the ninth grade – was on his third time. He had never had a referral to special education, never. They pulled us in and tried to convince us that he would be better served if he went to adult ed. This kid was struggling, suspended repeatedly, three years he repeated, and they never made a referral for services. Well, finally they decided they had had enough of this kid they told the parent you need to withdraw him and send him to adult ed otherwise we will move to have him expelled. So the parent withdrew him.** <sup>123</sup>

## When is a student too old?

### One principal does the math.

As one principal explains, in many cases, it simply comes down to how an administrator chooses to do the math.

“A student who is over 18 but can’t reach graduation by 21, needs to find education elsewhere. You can deny that student education. But, well, it depends how you do that equation. So let’s say, when [a student] came to us he had 10 ten credits and he was 18. Now in our district he needs, 24 credits to graduate, so that means he needs 14 more. Well, you could sit back and say, ‘I looked at your last four years of high school and you’ve averaged two and a half credits a year. So if you try REALLY hard you might be able to get five in a year. Five and five, ooh, that gets you to 20, but it’s not 24, so we can’t take you. And that’s what a lot of schools do. And the reality is you COULD say he gets seven and seven that’s fourteen and he’s done. He can realistically do it. Many schools will say we don’t think that’s a realistic expectation.” <sup>124</sup>

Some districts may argue that engaging in a formal expulsion is moot, and an ineffective use of both district, student, and parent time. According to this line of argument, since state law permits districts to offer adult education as the “alternative” for expelled students aged 16 and older, and because until recently even expelled students were required to withdraw from school in order to attend adult education, some assert that because the student is likely to end up at adult education anyway, engaging in the mandated expulsion procedure is unnecessary. But it is undeniable that when schools can convince a student to voluntarily withdraw from school rather than proceed with an expulsion, the local district benefits in several ways: they do not have to report an expulsion on their discipline data; they are freed from the procedural due process requirements and notifications associated with an expulsion; they do not have to spend district resources on a hearing officer, school attorney and administrative representation at the expulsion hearing; and, perhaps most significantly, that student is permanently off of the district roster, and the district is permanently freed from accountability or responsibility for the education of that student.

Some districts use threats of other sanctions as well. Although it is seldom employed and rarely enforced, state law permits local districts to issue fines for truancy. In one district, however, it is a common practice for administrators to use the fines to essentially harass parents into withdrawing their students:

**I got a call from a mother who was getting fined \$25 a day for every day that her daughter was out of school. It's processed through the community court. You get fined, but if you can't pay you can get out of it by doing community service, which is still really difficult if you are poor and you have a job that you have to go to. So, in this case, the daughter had been really depressed, I mean I don't know even know all the abuses this girl had. She kept refusing to go to high school, and the mom kept getting these fines. She went to court and tried to explain that she couldn't do the community service because she had a job. She was sick of getting calls from everyone, and she had asked for help, and no one had given her any help. She kept saying, 'I've asked them to do whatever they can.' She hadn't asked for a PPT [Planning and Planning Team meeting] because she didn't know she had a right to ask for a PPT, but she had asked to meet with the teachers. So she was like, forget it, I'm going to sign her out of school because it's not worth this heartache.**<sup>125</sup>

**On the day [my client's] son turned 16, she was basically told by the principal that if she didn't withdraw him she would get fined \$25 per day that her son was truant... but this is of course a poor city, with poverty, high unemployment, so parents can't pay that. They offer them community service if they can't pay, but they won't offer support and services to try to get that child back in school. So parents just withdraw them.**<sup>126</sup>

In another district, one student explained he withdrew after school personnel, rather than offering intervention and support, threatened to call social services:

**I ended up at [Adult Education] because [the high school] was a struggle for me....at the time I was starting to take Welbutrin which is for my depression and my schedule was ruined. I would sleep 12 hours a day still be tired. I stopped showing up at school. I would go one day a week and then not at all. I had missed almost three months of school and then my mom got a call from [the school] saying that they were going to get social services involved...so we set up a meeting. At that meeting I told them that it's a struggle for me, that going to school every day is a battle for me. So he [the administrator] told me that an Adult Ed program would be great... The next day I got withdrawn.**<sup>127</sup>

## Involuntary Removals and Placements

Prior to July 1, 2011 students were required by law to be 16 years of age and have parental consent to withdraw from school. Effective July 1, 2011, this age was increased to 17. “Parental consent” seems to be rather loosely interpreted by local districts. As one student shared, “I just went to the office with my mom and asked for the papers to withdraw. They gave me the forms and I showed my mom where to sign, and she signed them. But she doesn’t speak or read English so it wasn’t like she knew what she was signing.”<sup>128</sup>

Even more troubling, in some districts, students have been removed from school without student or parental knowledge, much less consent. A legal aid attorney, for example, discussed one district notorious for processing “administrative withdrawals” for students who had significant histories of truancy or who were deemed by the district – in a gross misapplication of state law – to have “aged out” of the educational system:

**[This district] had a policy of administratively withdrawing students who had too many absences or who were not looking like they would be able to graduate by the time they were 19. So they were sending out mass mailings basically telling parents unless you come in and reenroll your student, they are not going to be allowed to attend high school in the fall....and my student – he was a ninth grader. They had an obligation to educate him. He wasn’t even 16 years old. He wasn’t even at a point where he could withdraw from school.**<sup>129</sup>

A teacher in the same district, familiar with the practice of administrative withdrawals added, “A lot of those removals happen in between schools years, over the summer” leaving many youth entirely unaware that the district no longer considers them to be students.

Students who have already become entangled in the justice system and are returning home from a residential placement or period of incarceration are also sometimes funneled permanently out of the school system without their knowledge or consent. In some instances, students returning home are simply unable to re-enroll in school because the district personnel simply do not make themselves available to meet with students and parents. Educational advocates working for community-based organizations and state agencies both report that despite court orders requiring students to be in school, students have at times gone months without attending school while waiting to get an appointment with the individual responsible for re-enrolling students. When they do get an appointment, students are simply directed off of district rosters.

**We have had some clients that are coming back from CJTS [Connecticut Juvenile Training School] or Mason Youth Institution, and they are 18 years old, and they want to go back to high school because they have pretty much missed out on that experience for most of their high school career, and [they] are told either ‘you are too old to come back’ or ‘you have to go to adult ed.’ This is a really big issue because kids are legally entitled to come back to school. If they can graduate – if they are 19 when they are coming back and they have enough credits to graduate by 21 – they can come back. If they are 18, they can come back. It is their decision to make, not the schools’.**<sup>130</sup>



Let's say the kid is 17 and is coming back from residential or a traditional placement through the judicial system. There is a person at the [local] Board of Education you have to go through. The kid goes down to register, and [this person] determines where the kid goes. They'll look at the kid's records and credits and say, 'oh he needs to go to adult ed.' But THEY make that decision, and it's based on what THEY think. It's not based necessarily on what the law says they can or cannot do. Our belief is that that's the parent's decision whether the child withdraws from school, not a Board of Education decision, and they have to keep the door open unless the kid is over 19 and can't get the credits to graduate by 21. So there is gatekeeping going on to weed out.<sup>131</sup>

## PRIMING THE PUMP

Of course, not every student that transfers or withdraws from school to attend an alternative school or adult education does so because an administrator or counselor has counseled or coerced them into doing so or inappropriately violated their rights. In some instances, as discussed in a later section of this report, enrolling in an alternative school or adult education program is exactly what students need, and it enables them to graduate. The interviews and focus groups suggest, however, that systemic educational neglect and hostile school climates often make it difficult for students to progress in high school, in effect priming the pump for the secret pipeline. Educators cite examples of students and parents become so hopeless and frustrated with the circumstances that they throw up their hands and pull out of school.

**I've had parents who come in and their kids are 16, 17 and say to me, 'I've had enough. I'm tired of arguing with them to come to school. I'm tired of them staying out late and not getting up. I'm tired of them not passing your school. I'm tired of it. They need to get out and get a job.' That's what they say to me. And that happens a lot where parents have just had enough and just withdraw their students.<sup>132</sup>**

While some educators dismiss a student's disengagement as beyond their scope of influence, others suggest that schools must shoulder a greater share of responsibility. As one principal unequivocally put it, "As far as we're concerned, anyone who withdraws means for some reason we didn't give them a reason to stay."<sup>133</sup>

**“Anyone who withdraws means for some reason we didn't give them a reason to stay.”**

### Systemic Educational Neglect

Sustained inaction on the part of schools can have the same effect as directly talking students into leaving. Interviews with educators underscored that many of the students who struggle in school and land in alternative or adult education programs lack stable home environments and parental supports, but it was equally evident that educational institutions have – through their inability or unwillingness to identify, acknowledge and support struggling students that are clearly demonstrating academic, emotional, or special education needs – actually cultivated that student's failure.

The Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) recognizes the need for and has invested significant time and effort in developing a comprehensive "Response to Intervention" (RTI) framework that draws on "scientific research-based interventions" (SRBI) that are intended to identify and support these very issues.<sup>134</sup> Unfortunately, however, the framework – as currently implemented and resourced – permits the needs of too many students to be ignored. Interviewees provided example after example of how schools let students languish in place without developing a plan for intervention and support:

**We have some that are 16 and 17 years old and come over here [to Adult Education] directly from middle school. Yes, they are 16 and 17 years old still in middle school. They never even make it to high school. They just come straight here.** <sup>135</sup>

**There was a young man in our program, and this young man did not have an attendance problem, but he had been in school for five years and had only six credits. Now I have a question – whose responsibility is it that this young man was walking in that school door nearly every day for five years and has only 6 credits?** <sup>136</sup>

**It's failure of the schools in that they are not targeting those students effectively when they do get to high school and helping them figure out what their plan is going to be.... If you come in and don't do any work and are silent, I'll fail you at the end of the marking period, but I have no problem with you coming in if this is a safe space for you and you don't want to be outside during the day or not be at home during the day, I think that's the mindset of a lot of teachers - I don't have a problem with you being here and not doing work as long as you are not disrupting the other students or disrupting me.** <sup>137</sup>

**I had a guidance counselor in here this morning who had to return a call to parent of a 15 year old. This 15 year old, already his plan is to come to adult education, and I find that troubling. [His mom] ought not to be calling adult ed and find out how we can serve her son. I think she needs to get into the high school about what the problem is and what they can do to address it.** <sup>138</sup>

Parents interviewed expressed frustration at the school system's inability or unwillingness to put adequate supports and interventions in place:

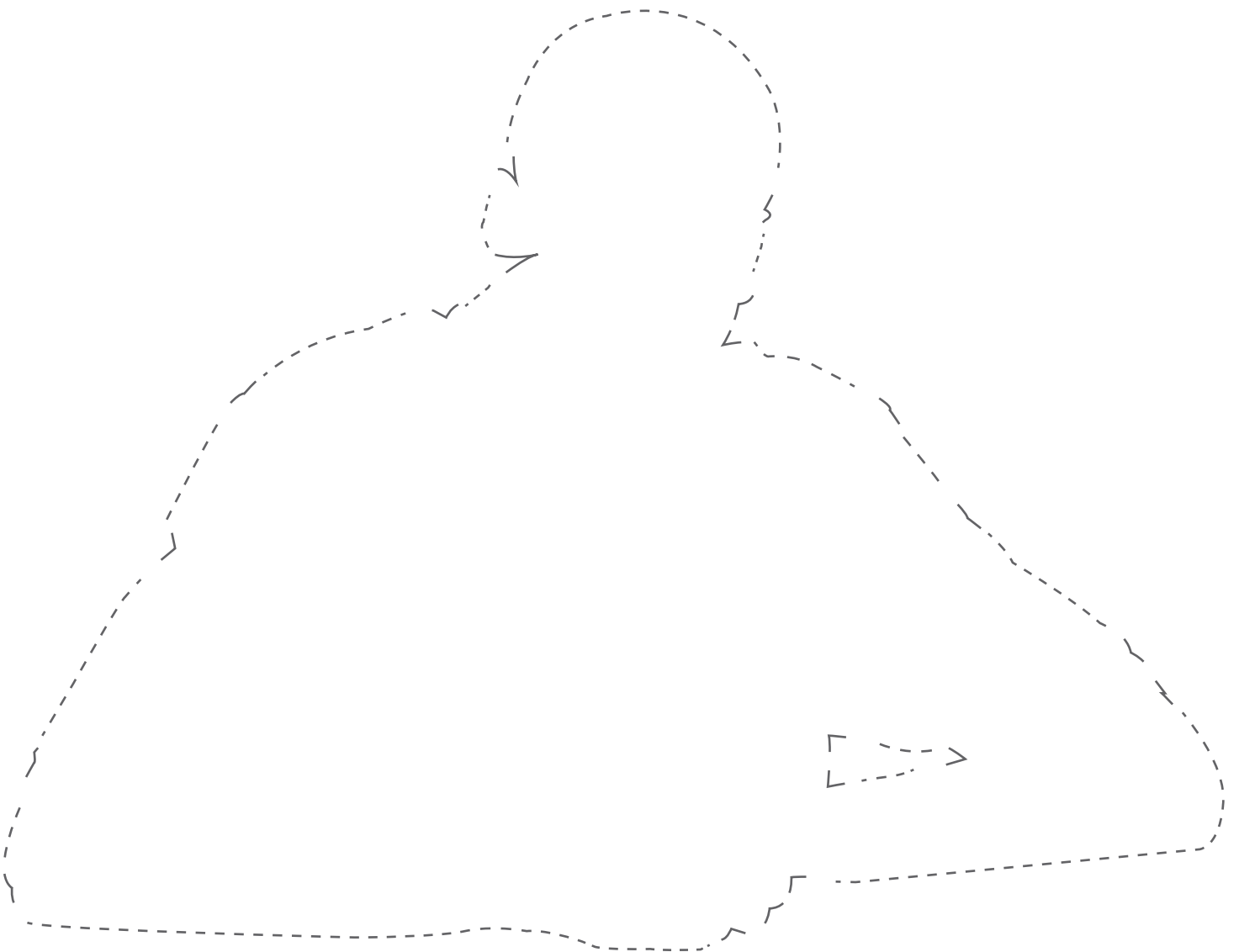
**I get them to school, it is your [the school's] job to keep them here. I can't keep them here for you unless I quit my job and follow them from class to class. I've been told if my kid doesn't want to apply to themselves or doesn't want to take advantage of the educational system there is nothing they can do; and I've said to them they are OBLIGATED so they have to come up with something. Every suggestion I come up with you tell me you can't do, so tell me what you can do. There has to be something you CAN do. There may be something you don't want to do, but you do have the ability to do it. It makes it really difficult when you have a child who can't self-sustain within the school system, who doesn't have a powerful self-confidence, or a powerful path they want to follow. I get them here, but what are you going to do to keep them here.** <sup>139</sup>

In other instances, districts have failed to follow state and district mandated procedures regarding truancy interventions. In focus groups service providers and state agency staff frequently noted that schools fail to implement the intervention steps required before filing a Families With Service Needs referral; they also noted that schools fail to take action early on, citing referrals that occurred in May and June after students had already accrued over a hundred absences. <sup>140</sup>

In other cases, districts are clearly failing to meet state and federal standards for identifying and assessing struggling students and providing special education services for students with learning or emotional disabilities.<sup>141</sup>

I would miss tons of school so it ended up to the point that I wouldn't have enough credits to graduate. I decided along with my school counselor to go to [adult education.] The process was definitely stressful because I didn't necessarily want to drop out because I loved everything about my old school. The reason why I missed so much school is because when I was in school my stress and anxiety caused me to go on multiple medications – one being a sleeping pill so when it came time to wake up in the morning, my body wouldn't let me which caused me to miss a lot of days.<sup>142</sup>

I have a client who should have been [special education] identified a long time ago. He's got ADHD and major depression. He has been failing everything starting in late middle school, and the school never did anything about it. At this point, he doesn't see any point to keep going. He hasn't earned any credits in high school so he sees school as hopeless. And several of the guidance counselors have mentioned the option of a GED.<sup>143</sup>



## Hostile School Climate

Other interviews highlighted how, in some instances, schools label and target certain students and then actively “build a case” for utilizing de facto discipline and pushing them into the secret pipeline. One of the strongest recurring themes in the interviews and focus groups was the notion that students who struggle in mainstream learning environments - many of whom are later counseled or coerced out of school - became “targets” within the school or were “set up to fail” by school personnel.

### Labeling and Targeting Students: In Educators’ Words

Adults sort of set kids up based on whatever behavior they bring to the school, and that makes it easier for them to be told that they would actually be better off on the other side of the fence.... But they are set up for that. A staff will say, ‘I saw you looking at me, giving me a dirty look, you are out of here.’ And there were some people in this district that were known for doing that all the time.<sup>144</sup>

We discredit the student...on the first day of school a student can walk in to a classroom, and I believe this, and just by making that eye exchange with that classroom teacher, that teacher is telling that student either, ‘you know what, I know your reputation, come on in, I’m going to be all over you, and I’m not gonna to lose,’ or that teacher can be ‘it’s a brand new beginning, come on in, we’re going to make this thing better.’ Students are very, very perceptive.<sup>145</sup>

I have a student that is a retained junior. This was a kid who was really academically challenged. He got into a conflict with the teacher. I asked him what the conflict was about, how it started, and after some time pulling it out of him he told me, ‘my teacher told me that I was never going to amount to anything but selling drugs on a corner.’<sup>146</sup>

Students can’t shake their past. Everyone always sees who they used to be or what they used to do and that is the image stuck in the person’s head and that is how the get treated.<sup>147</sup>

One of the commonalities is that [these students] have burned a lot of bridges. They’ve got a bad rep. This happens in big districts too, but in small districts especially, in a small district everybody knows each other... a lot of them they were doomed from the beginning when they walked through the door on September 1st because of their rep.<sup>148</sup>

[One of the] main reason kids come here is the respect issue – kids will say ‘I never feel I got the respect from the teachers/staff at my school.’<sup>149</sup>

Adults become scared – stereotypically scared –about behavior that they have no reason to be scared about. If somebody’s been arrested, a lot of teachers – because you have to remember most of our staff in this district is majority, not minority – automatically think it was for something related to drugs or violence. Not that they were standing somewhere where they shouldn’t have been or that they swore at a police officer who was arresting mom, or dad, or a friend. They just hear the kid was arrested so all of a sudden they get this fear factor like, ‘oh this kid is dangerous – we gotta get these kids out of here.’ So that kind of stereotypical fear drags kid along and they never even knew what hit them. More students are getting pushed out for stupid reasons like that.<sup>150</sup>

**“ We don’t do a good job of teaching teachers how to work with a kid that challenges your authority. It really is all about how you look at kids. We don’t do what is right. We prefer to do what is easy, and we flush those kids that are hard. ”**

In all fairness, educators who encourage students to see completion of their education elsewhere are not acting from a malicious place. In many cases, the educators – and the broader school systems in which they operate – are overwhelmed and lack the resources, if not the will and capacity, to commit to what is “hard.” As one adult educator explains, “You can certainly get overloaded because everyone has a million things to do, and it’s always easier to just say withdraw. If you have nothing else to offer a student it doesn’t make sense to just sign on the dotted line or ‘it’s not my problem.’ I don’t think many people have that attitude. I think they sincerely think that it’s the best thing for the student to do especially if they’ve been in trouble with the law or they’ve had other situations that are more family or personally challenging, we get those calls all the time. I think everybody tries to do a good job, but they don’t always do that. We don’t agree all the time when they send students to us, but we understand where they are coming from.”<sup>151</sup>

That sentiment was echoed by others working at both the high school and district level. As one principal said, “It’s much easier to remove a student than to program for a student. A student who’s over 18, who is almost 21, who’s taken that long to graduate through high school comes with a lot of baggage, and if you take that student in you have to program for the baggage.”<sup>152</sup>

The “sad part,” explained an administrator in another district, is that “when adults don’t know what to do with behavior that’s not the norm, they look for somebody else to handle the problem.”<sup>153</sup> Or, as one superintendent bluntly asserted, “It’s HARD to work with a kid that tells you to fuck off and still love them. We don’t have models for that; we don’t do a good job of teaching teachers how to work with a kid that challenges your authority. It really is all about how you look at kids. We don’t do what is right. We prefer to do what is easy, and we flush those kids that are hard.”<sup>154</sup>

While the decision to transfer to an alternative or withdraw from school is in theory a “voluntary” act on the part of the student and his or her guardian, school systems are exercising just as much a “choice” as the student who is “choosing” to transfer or withdraw. As one educator said, “the only reason that you would end up with a student who’s been in high school for three years and has only one credit is that that school has at some point decided they are not responsible for or going to make the effort to provide that student with the academic support they need to get through.”<sup>155</sup> And when schools choose to abnegate their responsibility for a student’s education it becomes, in the words of one superintendent, “a self-fulfilling prophesy. That kid ends up shot or arrested, and then we turn around and say to ourselves, ‘See I was right about that one. I told you where he’d end up.’ We have to own that we are part of the reason why. We have to own our students. It’s up to principals and administrators to stop that practice.”<sup>156</sup>

Unfortunately, too few share that stance. The practices and conversations that push students into the secret pipeline are particularly insidious because they capitalize on youth’s feeling of alienation from school and they exploit parents’ trust that the advice they are receiving is truly in their child’s best interest while it hides the true enormity and magnitude of the decision they are being asked – or told – to make. The findings in the next section of this report, which examines the educational experiences and outcomes of students in alternative schools and adult education centers, reveal the serious implications of that decision.

# A LOOK INSIDE: ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS & ADULT EDUCATION CENTERS

The secret pipeline that tracks students into punitive alternative schools and adult education centers is obscured from public view. What students experience once they land there is similarly shielded from public scrutiny. This section of the report offers a look at how these institutions operate and examines their impact on the students they serve.

## ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

### What Is An Alternative School and Who Attends?

There is no single commonly held, universally accepted definition of “alternative education,” but it has been broadly used to describe schools or programs that serve students who are not finding success in traditional school environments.<sup>157</sup> In some instances, alternatives are designed to meet the particular needs of a specific student demographic, such as students with special education needs; in other instances alternative education is invoked as a strategy for reducing dropouts, better supporting students that are failing academically or disciplining students that are not behaving.<sup>158</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the number of students attending alternative schools nationwide is growing. The proportion of referrals to alternative schools for behavioral reasons is also rising. Consistent with studies of the school-to-prison pipeline, which have found that students of color are disproportionately impacted by school discipline, the NCES report indicates that alternative school referrals for “disruptive” behavior remain highest in districts where color constitute the majority.<sup>159</sup> It is impossible to know whether Connecticut mirrors these national trends because the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) does not document how many alternative schools or programs exist, much less who attends them.

Some states have statutes that define and mandate each school district to provide alternative education. Connecticut does not. In fact, a national state-by-state scan conducted by Jobs For the Future found that Connecticut failed to meet all seven of the model policies identified as necessary for developing high quality alternatives for struggling students.<sup>160</sup> As discussed earlier in this report, Connecticut law references alternative educational opportunities in the context of expulsion from school, but it does not provide a legal framework or guidance for defining, operating, monitoring and assessing neither the educational alternatives provided to expelled students nor the plethora of other district-defined alternatives that purport to serve “at risk” or struggling students. In some instances, programs defined as “alternatives” by districts are “out-of-district placements” which provide services that are not available within the school district for students with serious special education needs that cannot be met in a regular school environment. In other instances, alternative programs operate as a self-contained unit housed within the regular high school. Some alternative programs are held off-site from the main school campus but maintain a tangible connection to the referring high school through staffing, counseling, administrative supervision, and supplemental classes or extracurricular opportunities for students. And still, in other instances, what districts deem to be alternative “programs” are schools in their own right, serving students in grades 9-12, in their own separate building and with their own school principal.

Attempts to clarify departmental interpretation of alternative education with the State Department of Education (SDE) yielded unclear results. The Connecticut SDE permits school districts to designate the alternatives they provide as “schools” or “programs.” When asked to distinguish between the two, a department representative stated: “the definition of what

is a school is something that we have struggled with here at the Department. With over 1,100 different public schools and programs all with their own unique qualities it becomes difficult to have definitions that fit everyone.”<sup>161</sup> SDE does offer “certain guidelines” for determining what can be classified as a program, including:

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The guidelines are so broad they fail to make clear how programs differ – in purpose or function – from schools. It could be argued, for example, that “accomplishing a predetermined set of curricular objectives” is a fundamental obligation of any and all schools. Even if the criteria were more precise, the SDE has no process for reviewing or monitoring whether the entities districts deem as “programs” are in fact aligned with these guidelines. “Our basic approach” the SDE representative explained, “is one that relies on the districts to make the choice that works best for them.”<sup>162</sup> Unfortunately, as noted in an earlier section in this report, enabling districts to do what “works best” for them is not always the same thing as what “works best” for their students. Because “programs” are exempted from the strategic school profile and annual yearly progress reporting requirements that exist for “schools,” the current structure propels the secret pipeline, incentivizes de facto discipline and gives districts tacit permission to dodge accountability and circumvent due process for the students that are often the most vulnerable and at risk.

Given the absence of concrete criteria and protocol for the classification of what constitutes an alternative school or program, it is no surprise that the SDE does not have any system in place for documenting how many alternatives schools or programs exist or for tracking the enrollment and achievement data for the students that attend them. As such, it is nearly impossible to paint an accurate portrait of who attends alternative schools because the gaps and loopholes in the state’s current data and reporting systems render these students – and their outcomes – invisible.

- **It is designed for a particular stated purpose to accomplish predetermined set of curricular objectives;**
- **It is designed to meet the needs of a particular stated population;**
- **Students remain the fiscal responsibility of the school district that placed them in the program;**
- **Faculty is assigned to the program, not a school;**
- **Certified instructional personnel are supervised/evaluated by a certified administrator who may also have responsibility for another building and/or who may report to another school’s administrator, and**
- **It does not award its own diplomas**<sup>163</sup>



A preliminary online search confirmed that alternative schools and programs can be found in a wide range of districts – from poor to affluent, suburban, urban, and rural. The state does track enrollment data of certain alternatives that are classified by the state as “90 Programs,” a term that stems from an identification code number assigned within the Public Student Information System. Correspondence with SDE representatives during the course of this research clarified that the SDE defines a 90 Program as a “district administered schools and programs for at risk students.”<sup>164</sup> Many, but not all, of the 90 Programs on the state roster specifically and exclusively serve students with special education needs, and they disproportionately enroll students of color.

Curiously, the SDE tracks the enrollment demographics of 90 Program students, but not their educational attainment. A representative explained,

**High school graduation rates are calculated for only high schools, according to Connecticut Education Statues. Students who are enrolled in alternate programs such as a 90 Program, when they graduate are counted under their home high school’s graduation rates because the alternate programs do not issue high school diplomas.**<sup>165</sup>

Even if one were to accept that a student should be able to attain a diploma from an educational institution that they did not actually attend, this spurious reporting practice ostensibly enables schools to conceal the actual academic outcomes of students who on a daily basis participate in an educational experience that is, by its very definition as an “alternative,” different than the one offered by the traditional high school.

Equally disturbing, the scant data that is available about 90 Programs does not even begin to capture the true volume of students participating in district-operated alternatives. During the course of the research, a cursory web-based search identified more than 50 district-defined alternative schools or programs across the state, only 9 of which are included on the 90 Program list provided by the SDE.

There are potentially thousands of Connecticut students engaged in some form of alternative education on a daily basis, and yet we know nothing about who they are, much less how they are being served, what they are learning, and whether or not they are graduating. Although these students are in theory “counted” as part of their referring school and reflected in the district aggregate, there is no way to discern whether or not the unique educational experience they engage in on a daily basis is equitable, effective, and aligned with state law.<sup>166</sup>

## “90 Programs” in the State of Connecticut, 2009

**50** - # of 90 Programs in operation in 2009

**27** - # of school districts operating 90 Programs

**5** - # of regional education service centers (RESA) operating 90 Programs

**1588** - # of students enrolled in 90 Programs

**1479** - # of 90 Program students in grades 9-12

**77** - % of 90 Program students identified as having special education needs

**60** - % of 90 Program students that are Black or Latino

**31** - % of CT students that are Black or Latino

**ZERO** - information available through SDE about graduation rates of 90 Program students.

Source: Special Records Request to State Department of Education. See Appendix for details.



## The Educational Experience

What is clear, from the existing literature on alternative education, along with interviews and focus groups conducted in the course of this research, is that there are two very different kinds of alternative schools in Connecticut. While some alternative schools represent an authentic departure from the philosophy, pedagogy and environment at work in mainstream high schools and shepherd struggling students across the stage to graduation, other alternatives are, in practical application, an extension of schools' disciplinary apparatus that circumvents state-mandated due process procedures and, in the worst instances, may deprive students of their constitutional right to equal educational opportunity.

There are two distinct philosophies at work in Connecticut alternative schools. Some alternatives operate from the premise that students need to be in an environment that teaches them how to “behave” and appropriately engage in school; others operate from the premise that the structure of the students' educational environment, not the student him or herself, needs changing.<sup>167</sup> Alternative school educators describe schools that take the former approach as “placement” alternatives, punitive schools that become “dumping grounds” for students funneled into the secret pipeline.<sup>168</sup> Conversely, alternative educators describe those that take the latter approach as “alternative schools of choice,” which are successful in rebuilding marginalized students' desire to reengage and take ownership over their educational experience.<sup>169</sup> Both types of schools are stigmatized and labeled by their broader communities as “where bad kids go” and the two types of schools serve very similar student populations - students with long histories of behavioral incidents at schools, challenging life circumstances and unstable home environments that have disrupted their ability to focus solely on school, and poor academic records – but there are stark differences in both the educational experiences and academic outcomes of students that attend these schools.

## Placement or “Dumping Ground” Alternatives

Our alternatives are putting on a façade that they are going to help these students, but in reality they just get shuffled through a side door so that teachers don't have to worry about them anymore.<sup>170</sup>

### Placement of Students

The secret pipeline and its de facto discipline practices place students in dumping ground alternative schools. Whether or not it is explicitly stated in their mission or purpose statements, these schools and programs function as a punitive consequence for struggling students. As noted in an earlier section of this report, districts manipulate the “involuntary placement” clause in state education statutes, and circumvent due process discipline procedures by touting their right to “reassign” students to the setting they deem most appropriate. The “appropriateness” of the placement is not determined through a documented, standardized review process that assesses students' challenges and needs, nor does it take into account the capacity and resources available at the alternative in which the student is being placed. As one student said, “There is no process. It's just, ‘you no longer go here, now you go there.’ ”<sup>171</sup> If students and parents have little say in the decision, staff at the alternatives also lack control over how, when, or who joins their student roster. Even in instances where these alternatives are led by their own, independent principals, the placement and enrollment of students is subject to the referrals and directives of administrators at the traditional high schools or district. As one interviewee explained, “The bottom line is that what [this district] calls alternatives are just a catchall for students that [the district] doesn't want to deal with.”<sup>172</sup> The students that land in these alternatives have little information about and even less choice in their new school placement, and this sets up the students – and the school itself – to fail even before they have begun. As one student noted:

What is the best way to make sure a student doesn't come to school? Put him somewhere everyone thinks is for bad kids. Make him feel like he is being punished and make him go there even though he doesn't want to be there. Why WOULD you actually want to show up and learn something?<sup>173</sup>

National research has similarly emphasized that alternative schools and programs that preclude student choice and serve a punitive purpose are not only ineffective, but counterproductive: they fuel the school-to-prison pipeline and students ultimately exercise their “choice” by dropping out.<sup>174</sup>

### **Instructional Approach and Expectations**

Apart from their designation as an “alternative” and a smaller number of enrollments than the traditional high school, there is often little to distinguish these schools and programs from the traditional high schools from which their students come. Many cited the smaller class size as beneficial because it allowed for more relationship-building with students and more opportunities for one-on-one attention to students in need instructional support. One teacher noted, for example, that all of her students had – and many regularly used – her cell phone number, noting “it would not work that way in a traditional high school.”<sup>175</sup> Nonetheless, smaller size alone neither makes the educational experience substantially different nor addresses the reasons why students were not experiencing success in the traditional high school. As one educator noted,

**If you are going to be an alternative setting and remain true to being an alternative setting, something needs to be different other than school size. And I think expectations need to be clearer for what your school is going to do and actually as a district providing what you say you are going to provide. So, if a student needs that type of setting and you promise it to them, then you actually have to have something to show for it.**<sup>176</sup>

According to some of these educators, the fundamental instructional approach was unchanged:

**These kids obviously have not succeeded in what the traditional setting is and we’re not doing anything different. You are still expecting us to teach the same curriculum so what’s going to change and make them improve if it’s not the teacher doing something different. I think that’s what I did... but I think some of the other teachers stuck by the curriculum and stuck by methods that weren’t successful and proved to still not be successful.**<sup>177</sup>

In some instances the “smaller” class size at dumping ground alternatives is simply the result of high levels of truancy and absenteeism, further evidence of the alternatives’ inability to effectively address the very challenges they were created to help students overcome. One teacher stated that at a school of 100 students, only about 50 or 60 showed up on a daily basis. If every student on their roster actually showed up on a daily basis, the teacher’s class of 10 students would actually be closer to 25.<sup>178</sup> Another teacher had trouble providing an estimated count of the total student population at their school, noting that “so many students come in and out throughout the year it’s just a revolving door.”<sup>179</sup>

There are many potential reasons for the high rates of absenteeism, but research suggests that one of the least acknowledged by teachers and most frequently cited by students is the impact of low educator expectations for student achievement.<sup>180</sup> The low expectations and reduced academic rigor at dumping ground alternatives may in fact contribute to driving students away. One student who left alternative school prior to graduating noted,

**At that school it was expected that we would not do our work; expected that we would roam the hallways; and so that’s what it was. It felt like a waste of my time to be there because I wasn’t learning. I wasn’t expected to.**<sup>181</sup>

Advocates and others working to support youth enrolled in alternative schools likewise observed,

**The alternative schools are catering to kids' needs in a negative way rather than driving them forward. They acquiesce to the students' mindset rather than pushing them to get the skills they need to go on. Teachers act laid back, like they are trying to be a friend rather than an authority, and it's hindering [students'] progress. For example, students will tell me 'oh my teacher is cool because he'll just let me leave school early.' It is difficult to build rapport with some of these kids, so they'll find one thing to be a 'friend' but it's hindering more than helping.**<sup>182</sup>

**Academically - that's the biggest problem. The kids I've talked to - they get work that describe as ridiculously easy. They always say that it reminds them of Kindergarten. That they are given a few sheet and are just told to do the work. When I go in, I see students just sitting down at a desk with handouts, and not even doing those handouts and no one even really seems to care. The quality of work is really poor. I don't think there are any expectations for academic achievement at all.**<sup>183</sup>

Alternative school teachers themselves echoed these perspectives:

**I think the public perception is that well you're teaching in an alternative school, so you're going to have to work at a slower pace because the students can't handle going at a quicker pace...and I think if that's the public expectation then teachers aren't going to go beyond that expectation... There was a teacher in my building who every Friday brought her classes to the computer lab just to hang out because she said, 'we don't learn anything on Fridays anyway.' So then you're giving up 20% of the school year to that.... There was never a worry of, 'am I doing enough academically for the students to please my principal.'**<sup>184</sup>

**Less, less on all accounts. There is less work. I mean, they do what they need to do to get the credit and the high school diploma. But it's not as rigorous. It's not a college prep school. We're a 'we want to teach you how to survive in the real world' school.**<sup>185</sup>

Lower expectations also lead to reduced student learning and growth. One teacher noted that it was “challenging” figuring out how to grade students at an alternative school, explaining “I don't think an 'A' student at [this alternative school] was anywhere near equivalent to what it would be at the other traditional high school. I had no student who at any point did every single assignment of achieved mastery on every single assignment...If a student turned in 60% that would be up there in terms of volume [of work] that we were receiving in and quality of student work.”<sup>186</sup> Another teacher reported that educators in their school were pressured by their school administrator to change the grades of students who had failed or enter “Fs” with a “50” rather than the actual numerical grade value so that “there would be a higher chance that the student would average a 60 at the end of the semester and therefore pass with a D- instead of flunking.”<sup>187</sup>

The invisibility of these schools and the plight of their students enables districts to under-resource them. Educators frequently noted that they lacked the instructional supports and necessary staffing to be able to appropriately address the academic shortcomings that were often at the root of students' “misbehavior” at the traditional high school. One school, with nearly 100 students on the enrollment roster, had no guidance counselor. These schools often lack access to the kinds of hands-on learning activities, like technical and vocational offerings, that could potentially pique students' interests and motivation, and very few had student-sponsored field trips, sports, clubs, or other activities that help promote a sense of community, engagement and pride in school. Others lacked even the basic materials and technology – such as textbooks and functioning computers - required for learning, and in some instances, the alternative schools and programs simply do not offer opportunities to complete the coursework necessary to meet the graduation criteria required by the local district and state law.

Education advocates have also pointed out that the lack of oversight and accountability for alternatives enables districts to ignore or disregard state mandates regarding required instructional time, awarding of credits, and curricular offerings.<sup>188</sup> Targeted legal efforts have successfully moved some districts to redress violations of state standards, but the lack of oversight makes it impossible to gauge their frequency and extent. As one advocate noted:

**It is possible that children are receiving the appropriate hours of instruction by highly qualified teachers and have access to appropriate books, materials and support personnel. It is possible that the children are receiving an educational program that is uniquely tailored to their individual needs and that their success in school is enhanced through the provision of an alternate learning environment. Unfortunately the lack of available information makes it impossible to conclude this is the case.**<sup>189</sup>

## **Discipline**

The expectation that seems to be most consistently held of students in dumping ground alternative schools is the expectation that they will not behave. According to one alternative school teacher, “I don’t think many [teachers] had high academic expectations, but I think several had high expectations for what you should look like in my classroom and how you should behave in my classroom.”<sup>190</sup> Although interviewees working in dumping ground alternatives noted that they were able to talk things out and avoid the “knee jerk” reactions to minor things that sometimes got students into trouble at traditional high schools, student behavior didn’t change. In fact, the qualitative data suggests that the more alternatives focused on behavioral control, the more problematic student behavior became. The rubric of rules, codes, and policies pertaining to student behavior were no different than traditional schools, and student teacher relationships, though perhaps more nurturing, replicated the same power and authority paradigm that pervaded the traditional school. Students, teachers, service providers and others frequently described the alternative school environments as “chaotic” and “out of control.”<sup>191</sup> In interviews and focus groups many questioned the wisdom of grouping all the students labeled as “problems” in one setting, often underscoring that these alternatives end up with the most struggling students the least resources. As one district-level administrator observed,

**The resolution was to put them all together in one school, and put them in a crappy [building], make sure they don’t get any more services than a mainstream school, even though we know that these kids are already beyond high risk. They’ve got drug, alcohol, violence, they’ve got juvenile justice, adult justice already in their lives, [but] we put them all together in one building and think they will be okay.... We have the possibility to do something but we don’t. The neediest kids get the least amount of services. And I think that’s why things like [the alternative school] fail.**<sup>192</sup>

The data and reporting loopholes discussed earlier make it difficult to analyze the number and type of disciplinary incidents at these alternative schools. Discipline data provided by the State Department of Education for an alternative program in one of the districts selected as a research site for this report, revealed that students in the alternative program were disciplined at a rate more than 7 times the district average. The school, which had a reported enrollment of just over 100 students, had more than 1200 reported disciplinary incidents, more than 7 times the discipline rate for that district’s traditional high schools.<sup>193</sup> While some might argue that a higher disciplinary rate is to be expected given the profile of students they serve, it is undeniable evidence that the school is not effectively achieving its goal of improving student behavior. Interviews and focus groups also reported that dumping ground alternatives have higher rates of school-based arrests.<sup>194</sup> In this regard, dumping ground alternative schools not only represent a part of the secret pipeline continuum, they also embody the most damaging aspects of the overt school-to-prison pipeline.

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## Educational Outcomes

It is difficult to determine, in quantitative terms, the extent to which alternative schools are delivering positive educational outcomes for their students because of the gaps in reporting and accountability structures. Studies of alternative schools in other states have noted that their accountability systems are demonstrably weaker than those in place for comprehensive high schools.<sup>195</sup> In Connecticut, an accountability system for alternative schools and programs does not exist at all. Because there is no data collection or transparent reporting mechanism that makes information about alternative schools available independent of the districts' traditional high schools, it becomes virtually impossible to hold schools publicly accountable even for attendance and truancy, much less academic growth, achievement and graduation. The qualitative data gathered in the course of this research parallels both national studies and reports from other states: punitive alternatives not only fail to develop students' academic skills, but they undermine the likelihood that students will graduate, thus accelerating the likelihood that a student will become involved in the justice system.<sup>196</sup>

**One alternative school, with a reported enrollment of just over 100 students, had more than 1200 reported disciplinary incidents, more than 7 times the discipline rate for that district's traditional high school.**

## Educational Black Holes

One common feature of dumping ground alternative schools is the stated intention that students will “transition back” to the traditional high school once they have modified their behavior.<sup>197</sup> In light of this, one potential indicator of “success” for these alternatives would be the number of students that return to the mainstream school. Far too often, however, it seems that students who land in alternative schools do not make their way out. That students do not transition back to their referring school is, in part, attributable to the absence of objective, clearly stated and well-defined criteria for return. The three districts in this report which had alternatives that could be characterized as “dumping grounds” had no documented, publicly available policy or protocol for what a student must do or demonstrate in order to return.

**I don't think the benchmarks were clear or explicitly stated, and I think if you were to have asked our principal at the time it would have been [decided] on a more one on one basis with the students. A lot of students were not happy to be in the setting that we were in. A lot of them just wanted to be back with friends at their larger schools, have a little bit more of a diverse course selection, so many of them did say what do I have to do to get back to [the traditional high school]. And usually our principal would say, 'well what are three things you need to improve. What are the constant things that teachers are asking you to do, that I'm asking you to do in the hallways.' Usually it didn't hinge on anything academic, it was more a behavioral or student readiness type of measurement, so are you wearing your hat in the hallways, are you being sent to my office, are you being disruptive in class... Realistically, to get them back to the larger setting was a district higher-level process that would have required a lot. In [two years] there were only two instances where the student was transferred back, and one of those was special ed and that required a PPT [Planning and Placement Team meeting].<sup>198</sup>**

**They'll say 'we're not going to send you back to your regular high school if you can't act well here.' But the environment is so much worse there, so they are stuck there. There is the rare kid that gets out, but usually they don't. I had a kid who was actually doing really well...and they kept saying, 'no, he's not following the rules here so he should not go back to [the traditional high school]'. And the kid had actually been attending every day. Teachers said they had some problems with his medication making him fall asleep, but as soon as they woke him up he was back on task. The incidents [they gave for not allowing him to return] were one day he wore a hoodie and the other day he was listening to his iPod when he shouldn't have...<sup>199</sup>**

The subjective transition criteria, when combined with a school climate that communicates low expectations while relying heavily on exclusionary discipline, effectively traps students in educational black holes, trapping them in inequitable, sub-par learning environments and locking them out of ever being able to return to a traditional high school.

In the rare instances when students do return to the traditional high school, they are at a disadvantage and not equipped to succeed because the quality and rigor of education at the alternative school is so reduced that students returning to the traditional school will struggle even more because they remain so far behind.<sup>200</sup>

It would perhaps be less problematic for students to remain in the alternative schools if they actually went on to graduate, but the qualitative data suggests that graduating is almost as rare as returning to the referring school. They do not return to their referring school and they do not walk across the stage at graduation. One teacher estimated that only 40 to 50% of the students enrolled any given year actually return the next. The high turnover rates also meant that the actual population served by the school was grossly undercounted: "while we only had 100 kids on our books at one time, I think we probably got up close to 200 different student that had been in the building." According to this teacher, "a lot of those students just disappeared completely. I just don't know where they went."<sup>201</sup>

**“Kids only go into alternative programs. I never see them go back to their regular school. They go to adult ed or never finish at all.”<sup>202</sup>**

Indeed, many of the adult education students interviewed attended alternative schools prior to enrolling at Adult Education. Noting that a disproportionately large number of students that enroll in their center come from alternative schools, one adult educator acknowledged, "I am confused about the alternative...I don't have the answers, but I would like to know why the alternative is not doing the job."<sup>203</sup>

The scant data made available about the graduation rates at these dumping ground "placement" alternatives is grim. One alternative school reported a graduation rate of 36% in 2007 and 56% in 2008. Another reported that its graduation rate for the class of 2010 was 0%, with 70% of students in the cohort dropping out and the other 30% remaining enrolled for the following school year.<sup>204</sup> Unfortunately, the prevailing structural invisibility of alternative schools and programs prevents local school districts and the SDE from being held accountable for their intolerably low performance and putting the policies, supports and resources in place to ensure that these students have equal opportunities to succeed.

## Alternative Schools of Choice

There are district-operated alternative school models in Connecticut that offer real opportunities to the students they serve. They sometimes share certain characteristics with the dumping ground “placement” alternatives – they are often labeled and negatively stigmatized by the broader community; they serve similarly troubled students; they are often under-staffed and under-resourced to meet student needs which risks compromising the range and rigor of their curricular offerings; and they are similarly “off the radar” in terms of data and reporting. But the characteristics that set them apart – their enrollment process, philosophical and instructional approach, and the nature of the relationships they forge with their students make them educational models to which all schools ought to aspire.

### Choice in Enrollment

Unlike “placement” schools, these alternatives have clearly documented enrollment processes and checks and balances to ensure that students desire to and have control over their enrollment in the school or program. Sometimes students were encouraged to explore transferring by teachers or counselors at the traditional school, but many of the students enrolled in these schools requested to attend, after hearing stories of success from peers or family members. Regardless of where the idea for transferring originated, there were written protocols in place guiding the enrollment process. Although the exact procedures varied slightly by school, students were required to complete an application form stating why they wanted to transfer; students participated in a “shadow” period at the school to confirm that it was a good fit; and parents had opportunities to meet with alternative school staff. One school even had a student advisory committee where students along with teachers interviewed applicants to ensure they were a “good fit” for the school.<sup>205</sup> Perhaps the most important aspect of the enrollment process is that students could say “no” and choose not to enroll if, after the site visit, they decided it was not their ideal setting. The level of ownership students had in enrolling profoundly affected how they related to their educational experience. When asked in focus groups and interviews if they perceived attending the school as a form of punishment, students frequently joked that the “punishment” would be returning to the mainstream high school.<sup>206</sup>

### It’s Not About Behavior It’s About Relationships

Where dumping ground alternatives explicitly or implicitly operated with the goal of “modifying” student behavior, educators at alternatives of choice did not view their students through a behavioral lens. While they recognized that students had often demonstrated bad behavior and made poor choices in their prior school setting, they were adamant that it was the structure of the prior school environment that failed to meet the needs of the student. While all noted that the students’ life circumstances remained as challenging as ever, students behavioral problems generally “disappeared.” When asked why, one teacher responded, “because they have a stake in it. They have a real stake in their own education. They have a say in what’s going on. They make it part of themselves and themselves a part of it. There is an investment that they’ve never had at the comprehensive school.”<sup>207</sup> Another educator, acknowledging the role educators and school policies play in exacerbating student misbehavior explained, “behavior isn’t an issue because we don’t make it one.”<sup>208</sup>

Teachers understood and embraced roles as mentors first. Emphatic that “students learn **for** teachers, not **from** teachers,” one educator made a subtle, but important distinction:

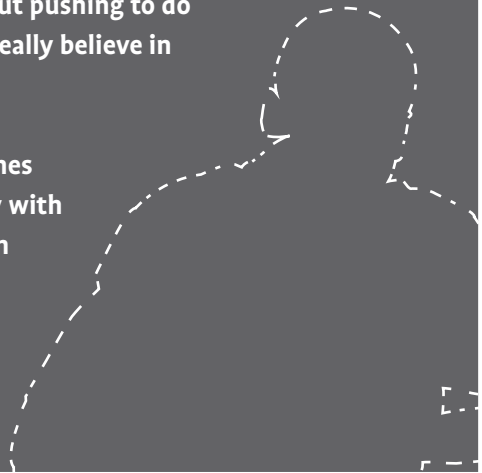
**At the high school, you ask a teacher what they teach, and they’ll rattle off their subject areas. You know the ‘what’ we teach here? Kids. We teach kids first. I am a math teacher. But I don’t teach math. I teach kids how to do math. It’s different, and these kids can tell the difference between someone who is just there to teach them a subject and someone who cares about them.**<sup>209</sup>

Students at these schools repeatedly emphasized that their success hinged on the love, respect and support they got from their staff:

Most adults today, in my understanding, think of respect as ‘don’t back talk me, don’t raise your voice to me, do what I say when I say.’ That’s their definition of respect, when it’s not. A true definition of respect is treat others the way you want to be treated. But as a teenager... when you try telling [an adult] this, ‘I’m 46 years old. I earned my respect. I don’t need a 19 year old to tell me.’ And that’s a lot of the teacher mentality too. They’ve been teaching so long, they are so old, there is nothing a 19 year old can do to tell me different. In my eyes, I feel [my alternative school teacher] doesn’t have that opinion. He doesn’t think of us as children. He sees us for our true potential. He sees us no better than he is. He is going to talk to us as he would his own son, or his wife. He never yells, he never demands us to do anything – other than get off the computers and come work. He is the one teacher in my entire life that once I’m done with, I come back and still talk to him.... Another teacher if I saw them in the store I would go out of my way to avoid them, but not [my alternative school teacher]. It’s that sense of he’s not going to make you feel downgraded. At high school it felt as if the teachers were of a higher power, and I think that’s what really got me down here and what helped me down here was the different meaning of respect that [our teacher] shows. <sup>210</sup>

Every other school I’ve been in, when I asked for help the answer is ‘you’re not trying, just try.’ So then I try but their is answer is ‘no, you did it wrong.’ Here, it is ‘we are going to figure it out.’ They don’t step on you and put you down, they are pushing you, but pushing to do better. They make me feel like a person, like a whole person, and really believe in myself for the first time in my life. <sup>211</sup>

I grew up in DCF and I’ve moved a lot from place to place. Sometimes I feel like a doll, a Barbie doll. People feel like, ‘I don’t want to play with this doll anymore, goodbye.’ And it makes me feel trapped, like I’m in a box and someone taped it, and I can’t get out. Being here [at this alternative school] changed it. My friends, teachers, the way I was treated, the love given to me, seeing how others treated each other. <sup>212</sup>



Students returned teachers’ investment in them by investing and engaging in the school culture, norms, and classroom learning, frequently noting that they “worked harder” and “felt smarter” than they had in the traditional high school. <sup>213</sup>

Educators at alternative schools of choice often embraced being “out of the spotlight” because it enabled them to utilize creative, innovative and sometimes unorthodox strategies to meet and accommodate students’ needs. They, like researchers on effective alternative education, emphasized that alternatives must be granted what some have termed “rigor without the mortis” <sup>214</sup> – a rigorous education but one with enough flexibility to provide an experience different from the traditional approach that failed to effectively engage students. <sup>215</sup>



In keeping with their philosophy that the prior educational environment, not something inherent in the student him or herself, was at the crux of their students' struggle, alternative schools of choice reject the idea of alternatives being "transitional." They seek to have students stay at the school through graduation rather than return to an environment where they were unsuccessful. The outcomes of students at alternatives of choice are, like all other alternatives, not separately reported to the SDE, but documents provided by educators at these programs suggest that, unlike dumping ground alternatives, the majority of students graduate. One program reported that 74% of the nearly 100 students it had served over the past 10 years had graduated, a rate higher than the district average. Another program reported that in the three-year period from 2008-2010, 93% of its "seniors" (defined as a student starting the year with at least 13 credits) graduated.<sup>216</sup>

### **District wide effort**

Although it was not the case everywhere, it is worth noting that many of the districts with effective alternatives also seemed to have administrative leadership at the traditional high school and district level that openly acknowledged the existence of the secret pipeline and prioritized the role of individual leadership in creating a district that "owns" responsibility for all their students. One such district had a 21 year-old student in their alternative school. Although the student had been rejected from another school district two years prior on the grounds that he was "too old," this district not only permitted him to enroll, but supported him through three years at the traditional high school. When the high school determined that the student would still be a few credits shy of meeting the district's graduation requirements, he was not coerced out of the district but rather was given the option of transferring to the alternative program so he could recoup credits through their credit recovery program. Later that year, he graduated.

Nonetheless, even alternatives of choice suffer from resource constraints and other challenges. Like placement alternative schools, they sometimes struggle to piece together the academic programs and offerings necessary to ensure students meet district graduation requirements, and economies of scale often mean that teachers are juggling multiple subject areas spanning multiple grade levels. One educator lamented that three seniors recently dropped out that year because they had gotten jobs or become pregnant, both situations where students could have potentially been retained if the program had a guidance counselor able to work with youth to navigate obstacles to graduation.<sup>217</sup> In some cases, these programs are hesitant to "rock the boat" by asking for increased resources because they keenly aware that, in the absence of a state mandate to provide their form of alternative education and with districts pressured to reduce their financial bottom line, the programs could be eliminated and teachers returned to traditional high school classrooms.<sup>218</sup> Many of the educators spearheading these alternatives are nearing retirement age and express concern about the extent to which their distinct educational philosophies are understood and embraced by their districts.

The tragic disparities between the successful and unsuccessful approaches and philosophies make it all the more urgent that Connecticut develop reporting and accountability mechanisms for all alternatives, so that dumping grounds are eradicated and the successful models can be promulgated and better supported. Otherwise, districts and the state are losing the opportunity to learn promising practices from the effective alternatives that do successfully support struggling students, while permitting districts to "select" which students it wants to be accountable for by using de facto discipline to push the others into the secret pipeline.

# ADULT EDUCATION

## What Is Adult Education and Who Attends?

Many understandably – but wrongly – assume that adult education centers simply serve adults. In reality, nearly one-third of the 30,000 students attending adult education in the state of Connecticut are of legal age to be in high school.<sup>219</sup>

Teens (16-18) and young adults (19-21) that enroll in adult education typically enroll in either the Credit Diploma Program (CDP) or the General Education Development (GED) program.

The Credit Diploma Program is offered at about two-thirds of Connecticut’s 47 district and regional adult education centers.<sup>220</sup> In CDP, students accumulate credits in a similar fashion as they would in high school; they follow a prescribed plan, process and structure for earning credits towards a diploma. Once students have attained at least the credit threshold for completion at their particular site, and have met any additional criteria that their local adult education center may require, they will receive a high school diploma from that local adult education center.

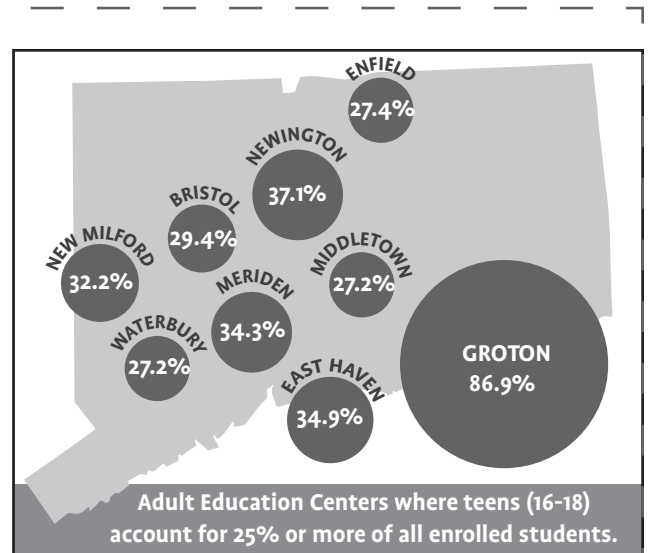
The GED Program is offered at all adult education centers. In addition, the state contracts with a number of community and faith-based GED program providers who offer GED courses. Students in the GED program participate in courses that prepare them to take the GED exam, a five-part examination that requires students to demonstrate attainment of the skills and concepts normally acquired in high school. The GED exam is created and assessed by the GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education; adult education providers in Connecticut design courses to help students successfully pass the exam. Students who successfully pass the exam earn a State of Connecticut High School Diploma. Students who wish to take the exam but require additional skill development are placed into Adult Basic Education until they demonstrate that they are ready to take the GED exam. Students in Adult Basic Education are counted and reported as students participating in the GED program.

Teachers and staff who have been working in the adult education field for decades say that their student body has not always been so young. As one educator noted, “when I first came to adult education [more than twenty years ago] you didn’t see the young kids. It was people in their 30s, 40s...the more mature adults, those are the people that you saw...now you just see huge numbers as far as the young kids go.”<sup>221</sup>

Indeed, in 2010, 30% of the students enrolled at Adult Education statewide were 21 or younger, and 16% were actually 18 or younger.<sup>222</sup>

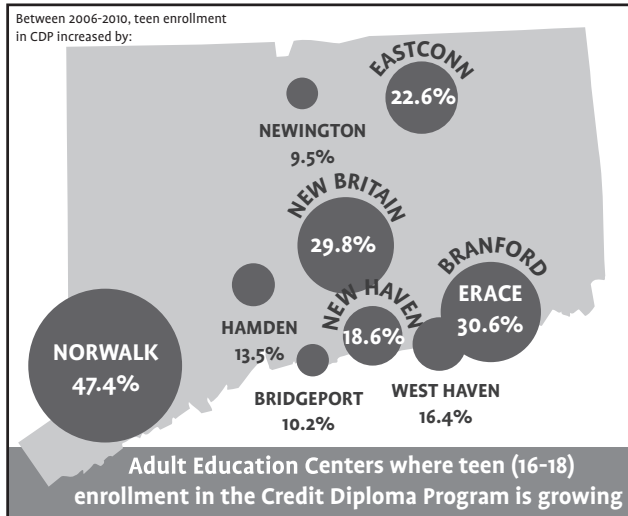
**There are roughly as many teens (16-18) completing high school at adult education as there are students of all grades attending charter schools in Connecticut.**<sup>223</sup>

The preponderance with which youth roll in adult education is not limited to Connecticut’s large, poor urban school districts. In fact, in 2010, of the 9 adult education centers where teen enrollment (16-18) tops 25%, only one is from a large urban center.<sup>224</sup>

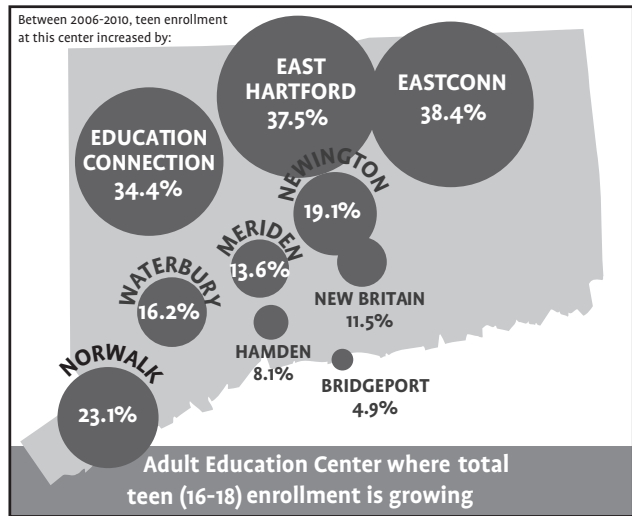


Source: CT State Department of Education Adult Education Program Profiles. See Appendix for details.

Changes in data collection mechanisms make it difficult to do a long-range analysis of enrollment trends, but an analysis of the past five years indicates that statewide teen enrollment peaked in 2007 and has been declining since, largely due to Hartford Public School system’s decision to permanently close its Credit Diploma Program, which was once the largest in the state, with over 1000 students. Nonetheless, the overall level of teen and young adult enrollment in Adult Education remains alarmingly high, and in some centers, teen enrollments are climbing.



Source: Adult Education Program Profiles. See Appendix for Details.

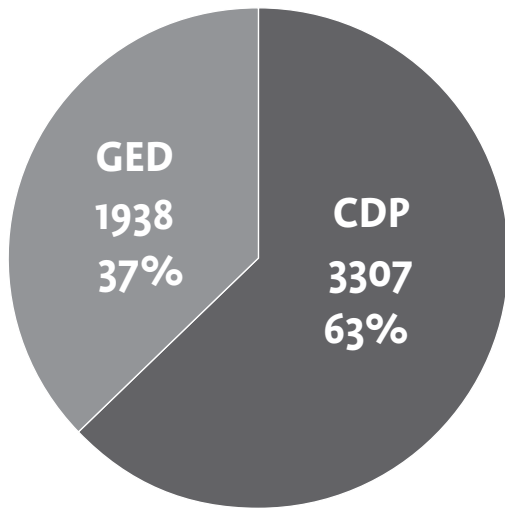


Source: Special Records Request to Adult Education Bureau of State Department of Education. See Appendix for details.

The high rates of enrollment in Adult Education centers are not the doing of the centers themselves; generally speaking, they have little control over who lands on their doorstep. In fact, many adult education staff interviewed in the course of this research expressed concern about their capacity to serve the teen population that they have grown responsible for. The youth who enroll in adult education come with complicated histories and face a myriad of challenges personally and academically. When describing their young students, adult education staff often noted that students lack support systems:

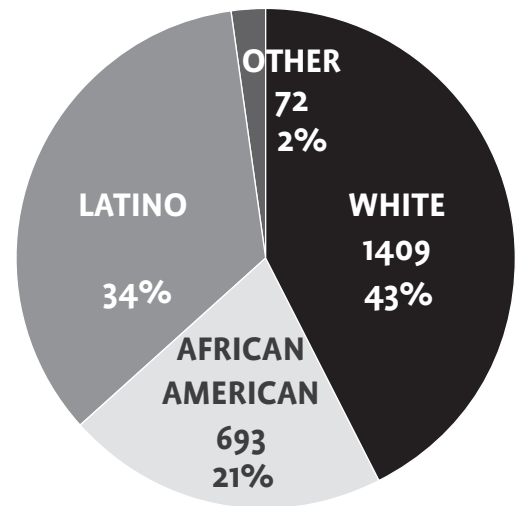
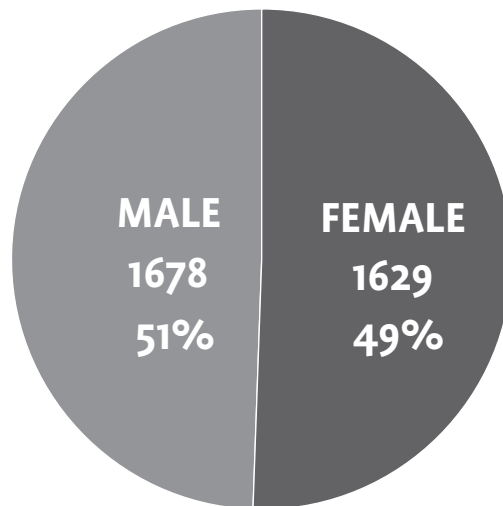
**I think a lot of our students have issues. A lot have baggage. There is a range of support at home, from none to maybe minimal. Most of our students are somehow working, trying to find a job, working two jobs. They don’t have the support system like other students who are successful, who can be focused and can just worry about school. [Our students] are worried about eating, and where they are going to sleep, and finding money for gas, or in some cases, the next pack of cigarettes. But these students are trying in whatever way they can do to make their lives better. And these kids believe, somehow, somehow that education will make their life better...they already know that it won’t be easy because they all have a story to tell, and they just want someone who will listen, no strings attached.**<sup>225</sup>

# Statewide Teen 16-18 Enrollment at Adult Education 2010

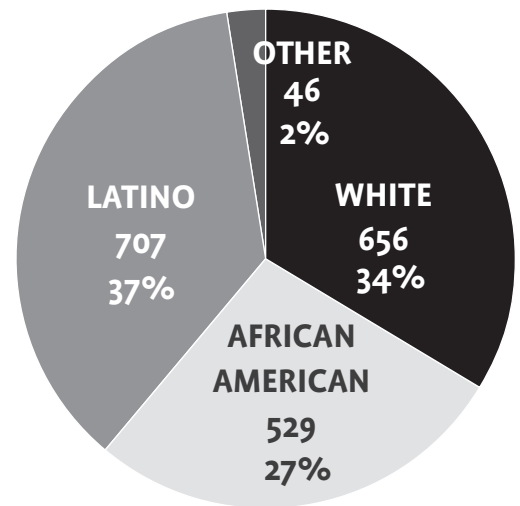
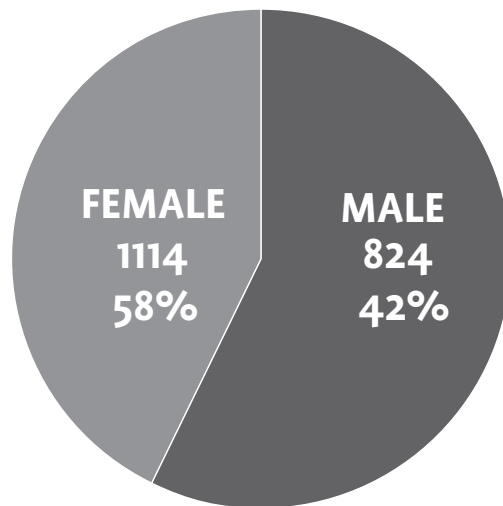


Statewide, teens (16-18) attending adult education most often enroll in the Credit Diploma Program. The statewide program enrollment trends hold true for most of the local adult education centers, with the notable exception being regional adult education programs that serve students in rural parts of the state, where transportation obstacles often make enrolling in the GED program, which doesn't have a daily attendance requirement, a more practical option. Teen (16-18) enrollment in Credit Diploma Program breaks down relatively equally along gender lines, but students in the GED program are more often male.

## CREDIT DIPLOMA PROGRAM



## GED PROGRAM



Source: Special Records Request to State Department of Education. See Appendix for Details.

Students interviewed were also keenly aware of their precarious situations. For many, life circumstances make success at Adult Education urgent. Failure to attend and complete could mean getting kicked out of their homes, becoming re-entangled in the justice system, or being unable to attain work opportunities they needed to be able to support their own young children.

In addition to extremely challenging personal circumstances, many of the students that enroll in adult education have also faced serious educational struggles. As one educator put it, “so many of our students have very, very low self esteem because an adult or teacher or whoever influenced them in their life made a reference that you can’t do this or you’re not going to go anywhere. They don’t see themselves as good students, as able to learn, able to be successful.”<sup>226</sup> In describing the educational histories of young adult education students, this educator noted that when these students were in high school “attendance was a problem, frustration was a problem, skills in reading and math were problems.”<sup>227</sup> Another highlighted students’ behavioral histories, saying, “they were all discipline. They all have memories of being in the principals office, or more detentions, or suspensions.”<sup>228</sup>

In interviews, adult education staff said that they have, at times, become a “dumping ground” for students that districts have a difficult time serving. As one educator put it, “we all know that the same size doesn’t fit all, so there are some kids that need an alternative, and the high schools aren’t working for them and never will work for them, so there is a place for us, but I think we’ve been used as a dumping ground for far too many kids.”<sup>229</sup> Another echoed, “I don’t like to see high schools give up on students and just push them out, and I can’t say that I see a lot of that here, but...I know that it happens, that adult ed just becomes the dumping ground, and that I think that’s too bad.”<sup>230</sup>

**“We all know that the same size doesn’t fit all. There are some kids that need an alternative, and the high schools aren’t working for them and never will work for them. So there is a place for [Adult Education], but I think we’ve been used as a dumping ground for far too many kids.”**

If Adult Education centers have become dumping grounds, then students of color are more often “dumped.” A comparison of statewide teen enrollment in Adult Education to statewide high school enrollment reveals that Black and Latino students represent a disproportionately large share of teens enrolled in Adult Education. While some may argue that the disproportionate rates of adult education enrollment among students of color is simply because they “drop out” of school at rates higher than their white peers, an analysis of high school exit codes

reveals that school districts are, at minimum complicit in – if not coercing – their withdrawal. Based on school exit codes, Black students transferred to CDP at more than double the rate of White students, and Latino students transferred to CDP more than three times the rate of their White peers. As noted earlier in this report, withdrawal from school to attend Adult Education is often coerced, and the exit code data raises alarming concerns about the extent and impact of structural racism within Connecticut’s education system.

### The Educational Experience

The adult education staff that participated in this research insisted that there is a real and urgent need for the services they provide to teens and that too many teens are not being effectively engaged by their high schools. They were also nearly unanimous in their assertion that teens should ideally complete high school in an actual high school, often noting that adult education centers are neither designed nor resourced to meet the unique and complex needs of the youth they have come to serve. One educator said simply, “there are many students here that don’t belong here.”<sup>231</sup> Another said, “we are happy to serve anybody, but the right place for them, for most of them, is in high school.”<sup>232</sup>

“Adult Ed is the best place for some students because high schools were not made for them.

But do I think Adult Ed should always be there? No.

**There need to be other ways, more choices in the high school.”<sup>233</sup>**

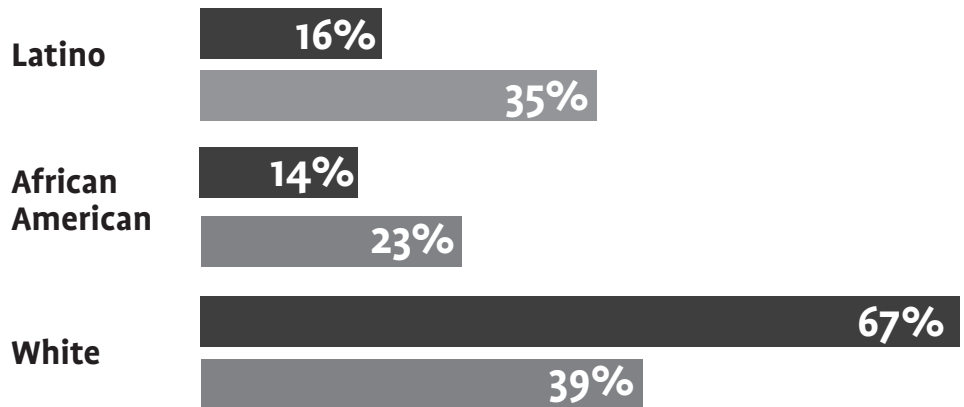
The state itself has acknowledged the limitations of Adult Education’s capacity to serve young adults. In March of 2009, in an interim report submitted to the General Assembly, the SDE noted, “Connecticut’s current adult education structure does not have the resources and capacity for the integration of complementary and wrap around services necessary to attract young adults and **sustain** them [emphasis added] through a high school completion program.”<sup>234</sup> The following year, in 2010, the Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Education released a memo noting that the Department ought to be “discouraging districts from using Adult Education as an alternative high school for 16- and 17-year-olds” and instead “encouraging districts to create more flexible options for students who want to stay in school.”<sup>235</sup>

## Students of Color Are Overrepresented in Adult Education Programs

Statewide, teenaged (16-18) students of color are disproportionately enrolled in both the Credit Diploma and GED programs.

■ % of students enrolled in high school statewide 2010

■ % of 16-18 year olds in GED and CDP program at adult education statewide 2010



Source: Special Records Request to State Department of Education. See Appendix for Details.

In the words of one educator, adult education is admittedly a “no frills” education:

**When I sit and talk to parents about adult ed, one of the things I say to them is I think of us as kind of a drive through. When kids come to us, especially for the credit diploma program, they get only what they need and no frills attached. There is no study hall, no gym, no homeroom, no clubs, no prom, nothing. You come to class, do your work and then you leave. That’s it.** <sup>236</sup>

Educators were quick to underscore that this approach to education may be a better fit for some students: For some kids that’s a good thing because they are socially phobic or they need to work to help support the family, they are a teen mom that needs less time in the classroom and more time outside of the classroom. <sup>237</sup> Another said, “I’ve seen it just work wonders for a student that – if the high school scene is not appropriate for them – many times you get a student who is plenty smart enough to handle high school but they just don’t fit in emotionally.” <sup>238</sup>

Unfortunately, however, many of the students in adult education need more than it is able to provide. As one educational advocate observed,

**I think that Adult Ed can work for some kids – but I think the bigger issue and the problem is that the kids who [the district] tries to convince that - maybe Adult Ed would be a better option for you – are typically the kids who are already struggling in school. They are failing academically, they often have attendance problems, and there is no explanation whatsoever about why adult ed would be a better option for those kids.** <sup>239</sup>

Indeed, many students and their caregivers withdraw from school and enroll in Adult Education without being told or understanding the key ways in which it differs from high school.

### Education Requirements Mandated by Connecticut State Law

	Public High School	Adult Education – High School Credit Diploma Program
Minimum number of credits required to graduate	20 currently; 25 starting with the graduating class of 2018.	20
Minimum number of instructional hours required per credit earned	120	48
Minimum number of instructional hours per year and days of school	900 instructional hours yearly 180 days of school 5 hours of ACTUAL SCHOOL WORK daily.	At the discretion of the local Adult Education program.
Special Education	Districts must identify, assess and provide special education services to eligible students.	Programs are not required to provide special education services to students.
Transportation	Districts must provide transportation to and from school.	Programs are not required to provide transportation for students.
Due Process in discipline and school removal.	State statutes define reasons for which a student can be removed from the classroom, suspended or expelled, and statutes outline procedures schools and districts must follow in the event of a suspension or expulsion.	None.

In fact, the matrix of state mandates and local discretionary policies create an environment that often ends up exacerbating the very challenges that caused youth to be pushed out in the first place.

### **Entrance and enrollment**

Once a student is registered for high school, they can typically show up, get their schedule and start attending school all on the same day. The process for enrollment at Adult Education tends to be much more elaborate and drawn out. While timelines differ depending on the local adult education center, enrollment is a multi-phase process, requiring a student to express intent to enroll, gather the necessary withdrawal forms, transcripts and other documentation from the high school; meet with a counselor, take a placement exam, review the results of the placement exam and/or transcripts to determine placement in the appropriate program and/or level, and then begin coursework. This process could take as little as a week, or it could take months. Some argue that this “weeds out” students that simply are not ready to commit and be successful, but it also further alienates students that are already on fringes.

## **One Process, Two Educator Perspectives**

If they are teenage we try to get them in rather than say, oh, we started already come back next September’ because it’s not great having them out on the street. By the same token, we don’t necessarily the day they walk in the building say ‘oh okay, we’ll talk to you today, test you today, and you can have a class that starts in the morning.’ I have learned that it’s important for them to show a little bit of dedication to this process, not necessarily the first day they land here. So I think it’s worthwhile for the office to be supportive and positive with them but then give them an appointment with the counselor. Make them come back. And the counselor will schedule with them the assessment. Because if they have to show up a few times at our schedule then they are a better risk of they are going to last here. We had a discussion about this at our last statewide meeting. Some people feel, ‘Grab them when the walk in the door and get them right into services.’ Others say ‘Community colleges don’t do that, employers don’t do that – what kind of world are we getting them ready for if we just drop everything as soon as they show up.’ I think something in between. Try to meet them at their schedule, but I always say give them a few hoops to jump through and if they are interested enough to jump through them, fine. If you set up an appointment for testing, and they don’t come back to do the testing, then you know what, they aren’t ready to make the commitment to adult education. We’ll catch them when they come back.<sup>240</sup>

Someone convinces you to go over to Adult Ed, and then you go over there and talk to somebody and they tell you, here’s some stuff and come back in about two weeks when we can then set up filling out the forms, and in-between that, make sure that you go withdraw from school. Alright, so now you’ve already lost a month, if not more. And then you go back, and did you do this, are you withdrawn from that, let’s fill out these forms. We need to set you up for testing, the testing is only offered at this time – so that whole process takes forever, and I don’t know why it should take forever... it’s almost like it’s designed to keep pushing you. So for me what I see is, when you’ve done that for 3, 4, 5 months, you’ve been out on your own. Even if you’ve taken their initial assessment to see if you qualify for one program or another, so that leaves you all the other hours of the day to get yourself in trouble – get arrested, have somebody stop you for being truant, not be able to get a job because you don’t know when you are going to be in school, drink during the day, convince some of your other friends not to go to school. It’s a disastrous process. So I really would like to see this whole thing rethought.<sup>241</sup>



## Program Placement

At the end of the enrollment process, students are placed in either the Credit Diploma Program (if offered at that center) or the Adult Basic Education/General Education Development Program. Placement criteria are at the discretion of the local adult education centers and vary across the state.

Some programs require that students have a certain number of credits already established and/or score at a threshold on the placement test (referred to as the “CASAS”) indicating that they have math and or reading skills at or very near the high school level. In these centers, students that are not already high school proficient are instead placed into the ABE/GED program until they have built literacy and numeracy skills that would make them eligible for CDP or take the GED exam.. In other centers, any student can enroll in the CDP program regardless of the number of high school credits they’ve already attained or their pre-test placement score. Members of the adult education community offer differing perspectives on where and how teens are best placed. Some argue that placing youth with low skills levels into the CDP program is doing them a disservice because it compromises the academic rigor and ultimately devalues the diploma:

**It doesn’t make sense to me. We are not doing kids any favors if we say to them, ‘come here, we’ll take care of you.’ We lower the standards so that... now if they are looking a) for a job or b) to get into college or training they are certainly not at a high school level. We are not doing them any favors.** <sup>242</sup>

Others argue that placing teens with such serious skill deficiencies in the ABE/GED program, which demand a great deal of self-direction and independent focus, will just further stall a young student’s educational progression:

**I don’t really subscribe to the notion that you must score [a certain level] on CASAS testing to be in high school credit classes because they’ve been in high school classes wherever they’ve been. If their skills are deficient they are 17 years old, I’m not sure our ABE classroom can in a semester address those deficiencies and get them up to level...They could be in ABE for the next four years. What are we saying to our high schools? That you were awarding them credit for the last four years, but suddenly they aren’t good enough for adult education credit? So to me, we need to take our students from where they come.** <sup>243</sup>

## Attendance and Truancy

Adult educators acknowledge that having a history of truancy is one of the most commonly shared characteristics of their teen and young adult students. One educator said that it was not uncommon, when reviewing transcripts upon enrollment at adult education, to see students that have missed more than one hundred days of school in a single year. <sup>244</sup> Yet, when these students get funneled into the secret pipeline, few understand that attendance requirements in the Adult Education Credit Diploma Program are even more stringent than in high school. As one advocate notes: “kids have this idea about what Adult Ed is going to be, what it’s going to be like, and I think a lot of times kids don’t understand that adult ed attendance policies are actually more strict than school policies. Adult Ed, many of them, you miss more than three classes, and you’re done.” <sup>245</sup>

While the specific number of absences permitted varies across adult education centers, the reason for such strict attendance policies is the same. In high school, students must complete 120 hours of instructional time in order to earn a “credit.” In Adult Education CDP, however, the state mandates only 48 hours of instructional time per “credit” earned. Some adult education centers require only the state mandated minimum; others require as many as 72 hours of instruction. Either way, the proportionate reduction of instructional times affords fewer opportunities for “missed” days. Once students accrue the maximum number of permitted absences, they lose that credit and cannot return until the next term. In this way, as one educator notes, Adult Education centers are actually “sometimes less forgiving” than high schools yet “habits that they had in high school weren’t changing tremendously when they came here.” <sup>246</sup> Such strict attendance requirements could

be challenging for even the most stable and focused of students to meet. For students dealing with the life circumstances and known histories of truancy that adult ed teens face, they are virtually set up to fail even before they have begun. As one educational advocate explained:

The population of kids they are putting in [there] don't follow through, have a history of not attending. And you expect them going to adult ed is going to change that? The only chance of success is if they have a setting where they can get support and service to encourage and foster the want to go and participate in school, instead of shipping them to a setting where this is no pressure, no support, no insurances. It's doomed for a lot of these kids they ship over there because they are not going to follow through. Here [in high school] they have a hard time even with people on them and the support services. What makes you think they are going to be successful there?<sup>247</sup>

During the course of this research, teens and young adults who were once enrolled in CDP frequently cited “absenteeing out” as the reason why they were no longer enrolled in school at all. One student recounted his experience:

I was on my way to Adult Ed, but there was crime tape in front of the steps to my apartment building because there was a shooting there the night before. I had to go under the crime tape to get out of my building, but when I did I got stopped and arrested by the police for interfering with a crime scene. That was the last time that I could miss classes, so I never got those credits, and I haven't been back since.<sup>248</sup>

The compounded consequence of this state of educational limbo is not only damaging in that it deprives students of much needed instructional time, it also creates more unstructured, unsupervised times for teens, and in communities where law enforcement and justice policies disproportionately target and impact youth of color, the consequences can lead to entanglement in the justice system.

### **Instructional Supports**

In addition to offering less instructional time, adult education centers offer fewer educational support services than traditional high schools. While adult educators state that they often have smaller class sizes and that teachers are able to build stronger relationships with students and provide more one-on-one support, educational advocates argue that the skills needed for success at adult education – such as the ability to self direct and work independently – collide with the histories and habits of the students that end up there.

There are also services that young people are entitled to in high school that adult education centers do not provide. Although some adult education centers have staff members that are credentialed in special education or may utilize special education strategies in the classroom, adult education does not provide special education services:

**With adult ed, we don't have special ed funding, we don't offer special ed. And a lot of kids are leaving special ed programs and coming to adult ed. They give up all those rights once they come in to adult ed, and while we differentiate learning and do whatever we can to help students learn, we aren't special ed and we don't have the resources that special ed has. So the kids are getting less than what they should have in order to be successful in education.** <sup>249</sup>

In high school, students with language barriers participate in English Language Learning programs, which are designed to help them master the English language while advancing the skills and accruing the credits needed to graduate. While all adult education centers offer English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, students with limited English proficiency would need to first enroll and complete ESL courses before working towards their diploma, making the finish line even more distant:

**If a 14 year old lands at the door of a high school and they don't speak English, the high school can't say 'we're an English speaking high school...'. The high schools have to figure out something to do with these students in credit bearing classes and towards their diploma...but if they've dropped out of high school and they don't read or write English, we aren't compelled to put them in credit classes. We can't create on our \$1000 a student limit a Haitian Creole algebra class. All we can do is give you English classes for a while and then you can do credit classes.** <sup>250</sup>

While a few centers offer Spanish-language GED courses, the absence of integrated language supports within most CDP and GED programs is concerning, particularly given the disproportionately large number of Latino teens and young adults that enroll in Adult Education.

### **Discipline and Zero Tolerance**

When a student withdraws from high school they relinquish the right to an education and, along with it, the due process protections that are otherwise afforded to public school students. Adult educators note that the overwhelming majority of their students had histories of disciplinary incidents during their time in high school, but adult education centers are not bound by the same kinds of procedures for handling student discipline.

Many of the educators involved in this research said that after enrolling in Adult Ed students did not seem to present the same kind of behavioral problems they once did in high school. As one educator noted,

**I think a lot of the 'trouble' that kids get into is because they can't sit, they can't focus for long periods of time. Here we deal with that. If you need to go to the bathroom, go, you don't need a pass. You need to get up and walk around the room a few times, go for it, nobody is going to stop you. And they are here shorter hours, not here six hours a day five days a week, so we can make those allowances to help them through. When you have the smaller groups, there is no one to show off for. You don't have an audience here.** <sup>251</sup>

Adult educators also recognized that working with teen students requires a different style, approach and philosophy:

**You can't expect that just because they walked through that threshold that all of a sudden they are instant adults. They are children....Just because we have an adult education name, doesn't mean you are an adult as soon as you sign the withdrawal papers.** <sup>252</sup>

Although programs have the discretion to employ lenient or progressive discipline policies, they are not required to. As one educator observed, Adult Education programs have the authority to exercise an even more extreme version of “zero tolerance” than high schools because students have no recourse or due process procedural rights:

**We don't have to keep them at adult ed, like a high school. You are misbehaving, you are not doing your discipline stuff right - you can go. We can make you go.** <sup>253</sup>

**This is the first place they land that doesn't really have to tolerate any behavior....The difference with adult ed is that when they land in our doors, if their behavior continues to be negative – where the high schools would be suspending them, giving them detention, expelling them - we don't really have to go through all those things....It's just, we've got certain standards if you're not meeting those standards, I'm sorry but we need to eliminate you and come back when you grow up. So, it works, but some of them have to learn a time or two or three that it's not going to be easy or automatic, and it's like 'what do you mean you're throwing me out,' and it's like that's the way it is.** <sup>254</sup>

**It's a quick fix, because we are not mandated to keep them here. If you can't act like an adult, come back another time when you are ready. And they are gone.** <sup>255</sup>

Given that so many of the students enrolled in adult education are not in fact adults, but adolescents with complicated lives and often with histories of disciplinary problems, unchecked “zero tolerance” risks further jeopardizing some students' opportunities to complete. One student recounts:

**I stopped out of the credit program halfway through the semester. I had already missed four days, and then I got in trouble in class. I was wearing my mp3 player, which some teachers say is okay while we did our classwork. But this teacher said that we couldn't, but I didn't hear him tell me that. So then he kicked me out. It counted as an absence, and that was the last absence I could have, so I was done.** <sup>256</sup>

### **Curriculum and Academic Rigor**

For the teen Adult Education students that do manage to persist and complete, the educational experience is a mixed bag. All students interviewed during the course of this research could point to aspects of adult education that they like better than high school. Among the most frequently cited was the sentiment that they felt more independent and in control of their education, that they took it more seriously than they did previously because they realized how much was at stake and were in school not because they had to be, but because they wanted to be. In one particularly strong program tailored to meet the unique needs of teens, students spoke glowingly about the relationship with their teacher-mentor, noting that they felt more respected and worked harder than they did for any of their teachers in high school.

At the same time, however, some students expressed regret that they were “missing out on the ‘teenage’ aspect of life.” Others expressed that the work they received was not challenging enough.

One student said of her English class,

**I feel that it is definitely easier than regular school because a lot of the books that we have to read here, I've already had to read for school in lower grades and classes. I'm not getting the most learning that I could possibly get from doing packets and worksheet work.<sup>257</sup>**

Other students interviewed stated that during their time at Adult Education they hadn't ever been assigned to read an entire book at all.

Educators interviewed acknowledged that the level of academic rigor in the CDP, simply based on the severely reduced instructional hours they offer – as much as sixty percent less than what is required to earn a traditional high school credit – is not on par with comprehensive high schools.

**I don't see how it could be as rigorous...[a credit is] thirteen weeks versus a whole year...what they may do in one full year in algebra, we have to break it because it's an impossibility to do their 180 hours in our 60.<sup>258</sup>**

**No way is it as rigorous. You don't have the luxury of compulsory education so you can broaden them. You are just trying to credential them.<sup>259</sup>**

Others went even further:

**Many programs are not at the right level at all... There are guidelines, but I think I had said to you if the student took English One or Freshman English with me or in another district's program, chances are [the students] did very different things. If they were in my program, they would be aligned with the Common Core of State Standards. They still certainly wouldn't be anywhere near what they should accomplish [in high school], and I don't pretend that they would, but they would get material to work on that was high school equivalent...rather than doing fourth or fifth grade work. Learning how to write a paragraph? That is not high school work. We don't respond to the same criteria as high schools do for their accreditation. We've all got frameworks and we've all got standards but as to how many adult ed programs are really aware of them, use them, align them with their curriculum and challenge their students? No, it doesn't work that way.... We are supposed to be doing that, and I guarantee you we are not all doing that.<sup>261</sup>**

**“Do I think it's the same as a high school diploma? No.**

**I think it's an adult education diploma. You earn credits quicker.... Our math tends to be more practical so maybe they'll take consumer math with us, so they'll learn about ratios and percentages and a little bit about taxes and how to pay bills and how to keep a checking account, and then they graduate. Are they functionally equipped with a high school level math? No they're not...”<sup>260</sup>**

With adult educators torn between the need to meet students where they are – which is often skill-deficient – and grossly limited resources, a student’s academic course load is often determined more by the distribution of credits they need to attain their diploma and the offerings that each particular program happens to have available, rather than by the goal of ensuring that youth are academically prepared to successfully meet the demand of continued education or prospective careers. <sup>262</sup>

Some educators point out that, in spite of the different matrix of expectations, some students enrolled in Adult Education centers nonetheless succeed in making gains that they did not in high school:

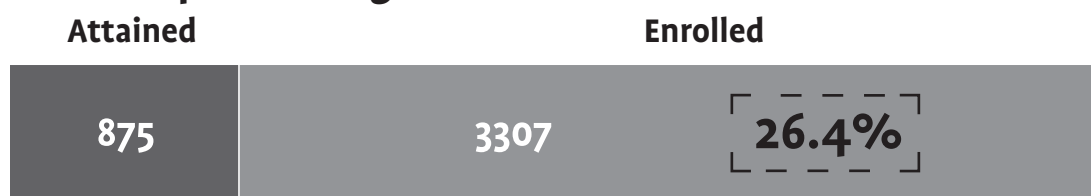
**If you are teaching in a high school credit class, and you are helping nonreaders read, that’s really rigorous FOR THEM. I don’t care if it’s not at an 11th grade level. You take them where they are and make them work damn hard to get some skills and move on. We have nonreaders that leave here reading at a fourth grade level, and that’s huge because they weren’t reading AT ALL before.** <sup>263</sup>

**Sometimes [the work] is easier, because we are meeting them where they are, and that may in fact be below grade below. They are actually doing work at an appropriate skill level so for some of them it feels easier.... For a lot of our kids, it’s clear that [they] checked out in the 8th grade, and it was not handled by the district. So if they come in at a 6th grade level and they leave on a 10th, that’s a whole lot better than the district did.** <sup>264</sup>

Programming designed to meet students where they are is both necessary and admirable, but it is not enough; students should be met where they are but also participate in an academic experience that will enable them to get where they want to go. One student interviewed, who intended to enroll in college and was attempting to find an SAT math tutor, produced samples of her in-class math assignments. She had already taken and passed algebra and geometry in high school, and her current math class was learning how to do “parts of a whole” using pie diagrams. <sup>265</sup> In the end, the pragmatic trade off to simply provide students with what seems necessary in order to “survive” ultimately enables students to do just that: merely survive.

## Statewide Teen (16-18) Attainment Rates, 2010

### Credit Diploma Program



### GED Program



Source for charts pgs 68, 69 & 70: Special Records Request to State Department of Education. See Appendix for details.

## Educational Outcomes

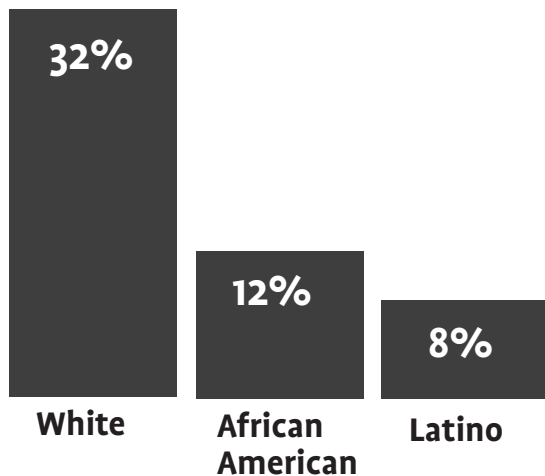
While it is certainly true that some teens who failed in high school enroll in Adult Education and attain their diploma or degree, a preliminary analysis of attainment data makes it painfully clear that for the overwhelming majority of teens, and particularly for students of color, Adult Education is an ineffective pathway to high school completion.

Though the data used for this analysis has limitations (described in more detail in the Appendix), the results are nonetheless sobering, particularly in light of how frequently the youth funneled into this secret pipeline are advised they will have a greater chance of success. In 2010, only 26% of teens enrolled in the CDP statewide attained their diploma, and only 17% of teens enrolled in the GED program attained their GED.

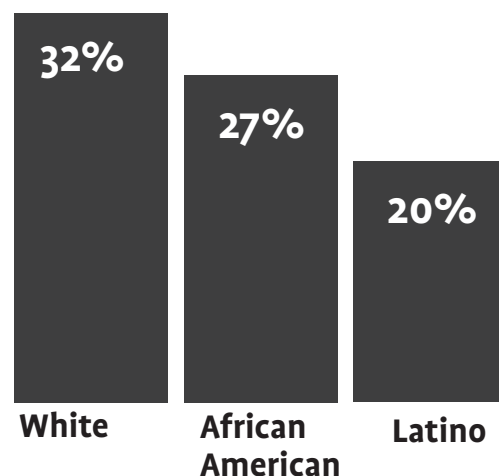
Disaggregating teen attainment rates by race reveals that students of color in Adult Education fare worse than their White peers. Statewide, 32% of White teens enrolled in CDP attained their diploma, compared to 27% of Black teens and 20% of Latino teens. The racial disparities in GED attainment were even more dramatic. While 32% of White teens enrolled in the GED program earned their GED, only 12% of Black teens and 8% of Latinos did. It is possible that the attainment rates for students of color are lower because they enter adult education further behind – in credits or in skill – than their White peers. Even if that were the case, it simply demonstrates that the entire spectrum of educational opportunities – from traditional public schools to the secondary school completion programs at adult education – fail to equitably serve Connecticut’s students of color.

There are ways other than diploma or degree attainment to analyze the progress of students at Adult Education, including examining how many credits students in the Credit Diploma Program attained during the course of a year or how many students in GED/Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses advance through a “level.” Unfortunately that data is not readily available by age cohort, so it was unavailable for analysis in this report. An interim report on Young Adult Learners submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly in 2009, however, indicated that statewide only 22% of teens and young adults (ages 16-21) earned four or more credits in a single year, that SDE’s benchmark for adequate student progress in CDP. The report also found that 41% of the students (16-21) that did not graduate failed to return the following year.<sup>266</sup>

**2010 Statewide 16-18 Year Old GED Attainment Rate by Race**



**2010 Statewide 16-18 Year Old CDP Attainment Rate by Race**

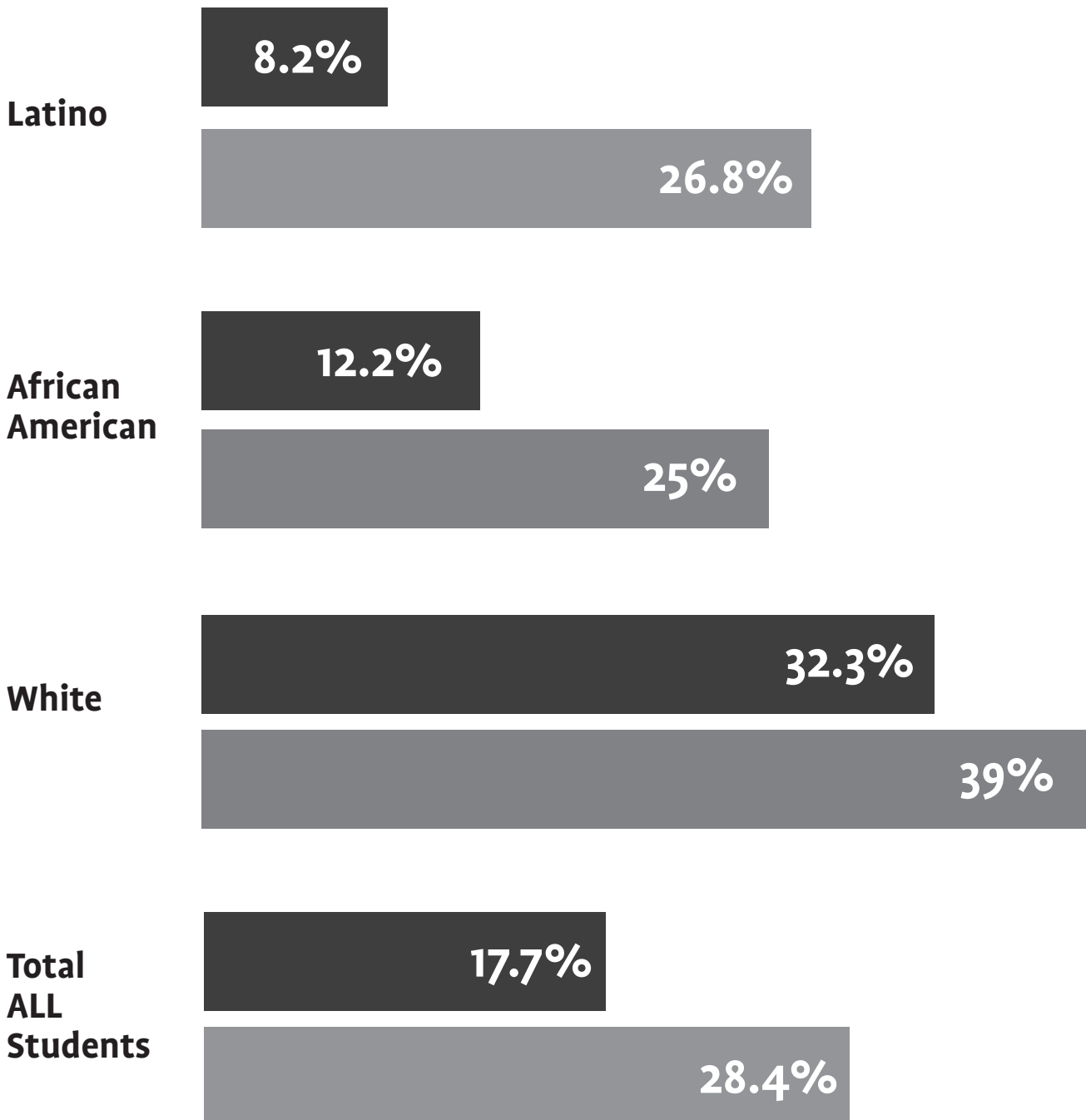


**An astounding 75% of the GEDs awarded by the state department of education to black males under 21 were attained in prison**

Perhaps the cruelest irony is that the teens who become incarcerated and pursue high school completion through the educational programs the Department of Corrections end up significantly outperforming their peers that are enrolled in local Adult Education centers. Diploma in hand as they “graduate” from facilities and are released home to their communities, these teens and young adults find their opportunities for educational and career advancement crippled by the felony record that ultimately eclipses their degree.

## GED Attainment for Teens (16-18) 2010

Statewide    Dept of Corrections





# RECOMMENDATIONS



We must bring *de facto* discipline practices as well as alternative and adult education programs into the center of our conversations about school equity and education reform. If we do not, we will allow our educational system to quietly divert thousands of teens into the secret pipeline to prison, undercutting the successful reforms already underway. While the challenges presented by the secret pipeline are complex, they are not intractable. There are concrete steps that local school districts, and state agencies, policymakers and legislators can take to dismantle the secret pipeline, end the use of *de facto* discipline, and ensure that all of Connecticut's students are treated with respect and dignity in their schools and have meaningful and equitable opportunities to learn.

## RECOMMENDATION ONE

**High schools must have a climate that welcomes, engages and values all students, and ensures that all students have the tools and supports necessary to succeed.**

### **Recommendations for Local School Districts:**

- Create safe platforms, through student-designed forums for youth to express concerns about unwelcoming or hostile school climate.
- Encourage and enable the development of curriculum that is relevant to students' lives and innovative teaching techniques that engage multiple learning styles.
- Develop sustained opportunities for meaningful student-teacher mentorship and relationship building.
- Provide educators with strategies and resources for implementing positive behavioral interventions and training on youth development principles and practices that are proven to help build young people's sense of confidence and self-efficacy.
- Put special support systems, services and flexible options in place for students that enter high school over-age for their grade (because of middle school retention) and for any student that failed to attain credit for two or more classes during their first semester of their freshman year in high school.
- Eliminate truancy fines and replace them with appropriate, effective supports and intervention for truant students.
- Comply with state statues that require prompt referral of students with truancy, behavioral, and academic challenges to a Planning and Placement Team meeting.

### **Recommendations for the State Department of Education and the Connecticut General Assembly:**

- Require that existing efforts and initiatives of the State Department Education to monitor and improve school climate:
  - 1) incorporate student voices and perspectives not just on their peer relationships but on their relationships with teachers, administrators and school faculty;
  - 2) provide students and parents safe platform for sharing if school and district personnel have treated students in an unwelcoming way.
- Appropriately resource schools to utilize the state's framework for Scientifically Resource Based Interventions (SRBI)

and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS).

- Eliminate the state provision that permits local school districts to implement truancy fines.
- Create incentives and rewards for schools that develop innovative curriculum relevant to students' lives and interests, successfully engage multiple learning styles and embrace teachers-as-mentors.
- Specify that district-level application and lottery processes for magnets and other schools of choice give students with histories of behavioral or academic challenges equal opportunity for participation and enrollment.
- The existing state task force on vocational and technical schools should revisit and address the exclusive entry criteria for state technical schools.

## RECOMMENDATION TWO

**Ensure that local districts cannot “select” which students they want to be accountable for. Improve data collection and reporting mechanisms to make the enrollment and outcomes of students attending alternative schools and programs and adult education programs transparent and hold local school districts accountable for their performance.**

### **Recommendations for local school districts:**

- Any educational entity housed in its own building with an autonomous administrator must be characterized as a “school” and should comply with all state and federal reporting required of schools.
- Publicly disclose and make available online the existence, purpose, enrollment, demographic and achievement outcomes for all district-operated alternative schools and programs.
- Publicly disclose and make available online the enrollment and achievement outcomes of teens (16-18) and young adults (19-21) enrolled in adult education programs.
- Identify and address disproportionality in rates of transfer, enrollment and attainment for student sub-groups (race/ethnicity, special education, and English Language Learners) at alternative schools and programs and adult education centers.

### **Recommendations for the State Department of Education and the Connecticut General Assembly:**

- Require the State Department of Education to develop and publicize an accurate and comprehensive list of all alternative school and programs in the state.
- Require local school districts to disclose the existence and purpose of alternative schools on their Strategic School Profiles.

- Ensure that data pertaining to students in alternative schools and programs is accurately incorporated in the data of their referring school and district and is captured in school and district Annual Yearly Progress reports.
- Develop and make publicly available a parallel data collection and reporting mechanism that discloses student data and outcomes enrolled in alternative schools and programs. (See the Recommendation 3, below, for further detail).
- Develop a platform to link the Public Student Information System and Connecticut Adult Reporting System so that the student enrollment, demographic and attainment data of students that are of high school age but that currently attend adult education are reflected can be accessed through the online Connecticut Education Data, Assessment and Reporting (CEDaR) tool.

## RECOMMENDATION THREE

**Eliminate “placement” alternative schools and programs that serve as dumping grounds for struggling students, and support the creation of effective, high-quality alternatives of choice.**

### **Recommendations for Local School Districts:**

- End the involuntary placement of students at alternative schools and programs.
- Develop written procedures guiding the process for student enrollment in alternative schools and programs. The protocol must minimally include:
  - 1) documentation of efforts made by school personnel to address the student’s needs and support that student’s success within the traditional high school prior to the recommendation of an alternative school or program;
  - 2) explanation of how the proposed alternative will address the unique challenges that student is facing;
  - 3) disclosure of performance and achievement data of the recommended alternative school or program;
  - 4) the opportunity for the student and parent to visit the recommended alternative;
  - 5) the right of the student and his/her parent or legal guardian to refuse the alternative placement;
  - 6) signed consent by the student and his/her legal guardian to transfer to the alternative school or program;
  - 7) periodic “check-ins” to review the student’s progress and ensure that the alternative is serving their needs;
  - 8) the right of the student and his/her parent or legal guardian to revoke their consent at any time and return to the referring school.
- Ensure that alternatives are appropriately resourced in order to meet existing state law and mandates regarding hours of instruction, curriculum, and course offerings.
- Align alternative schools and programs with the best practice recommendations of the Connecticut Association of Alternative Schools and Programs and the National Alternative Education Association.
- Equitably resource alternative schools and programs to meet student needs, recognizing that this may require more resources than the standard per pupil allocation given the unique needs and challenges of students attending alternative schools.

## **Recommendations for the State Department of Education and the Connecticut General Assembly:**

- Revise existing statutes to prohibit the involuntary placement of students in alternative schools and programs and put protections in place to ensure that enrollment in alternative schools happens with the informed consent of students and parents.
- Create a working group of stakeholders – including students and teachers at alternative schools and programs and advocates – to reform alternative education in the state of Connecticut. The working group should be tasked to:
  - 1) define alternative education in the state of Connecticut, including its purpose and population it is intended to serve.
  - 2) develop criteria for distinguishing between alternative schools and programs.
  - 3) articulate and advance best practice recommendations for high quality alternative schools and programs.
  - 4) develop an appropriate accountability framework for requiring alternative schools and programs to annually publicly report on their performance, including information pertaining to: enrollment, demographics, attendance, discipline, academic achievement, graduation and dropout rates. Because the students entering alternative schools are often academically further behind than their peers, the accountability framework should also enable an analysis of how an individual student’s outcomes and success indicators at the alternative compare to that student’s performance at the traditional high school.
  - 5) clearly articulate the role that alternative schools and programs play in the (SRBI) framework.
- Require alternative schools and programs to meet standards and mandates for all schools (curriculum course offerings, instructional hours, etc.), but allow them the flexibility needed to create an educational experience that is truly different in philosophy and methodology from traditional school.
- Establish a Learning Network of experienced and effective alternative educators who can provide training, support and technical assistance to other alternative education providers and share effective engagement strategies with educators and administrators at comprehensive high schools.
- Establish incentives, rewards and competitive funding streams that will adequately resource alternative schools and programs and encourage districts to implement best practice standards for high quality alternatives.

## **RECOMMENDATION FOUR**

**Prevent districts from using Adult Education as a repository for challenging and struggling students, and end practices that counsel, coerce, or involuntary place students at Adult Education.**

### **Recommendations for Local School Districts:**

- Provide legal training to district-level and high school administrators and faculty about student’s legal right to remain in school and how adult education offerings differ from those of district high schools.
- Distribute “student rights” handbooks at student orientation and hold student rights assemblies to inform youth of their right to remain in school until the age of 21 and their rights in school discipline and expulsion.

- Students returning from secure confinement or incarceration should have the option of returning to a traditional comprehensive high school, and the district should implement a process that ensures their re-enrollment within five school days of their release.
- Prior to withdrawal from high school, the student and his/her parent or legal guardian must participate in a review process that minimally includes:
  - 1) documentation of the efforts made by the school and district personnel to address the student’s needs and support that student’s success within the traditional high school.
  - 2) explanation of how the educational opportunities at Adult Education will accommodate the needs of the student that the public high school has been unable to meet.
  - 3) signed verification that the student and his/her parent or legal guardian have received information about the student’s right to remain in school until the age of 21, the student’s right to instructional support and interventions, the right to re-enroll in school after withdrawing and the different resources and legal parameters at Adult Education.
  - 4) disclosure of enrollment and attainment outcomes for youth that attend Adult Education.
- Remove obstacles to school re-enrollment for students who previously dropped out or withdrew and wish to return to school, including holding re-enrollment drives targeted out of school youth at the start of each school year and waiving the 90-day “wait” period for withdrawn students that wish to re-enroll.
- Annually review the rate of transfer to adult education programs, including by student subgroups (race/ethnicity, special education, and English Language Learners), and implement steps necessary to reduce the overall rate of transfer and eliminate the disproportionate representation of all student sub-groups.

### **Recommendations for the State Department of Education and Connecticut General Assembly:**

- Require that districts must – in addition to securing signed student and parental consent in order to withdraw from school as currently required by law –document the efforts made to support the student prior to withdrawal and have informed the student and parent or legal guardian of their right to remain in school and their right to instructional supports and assessments according to existing education statutes and mandates.
- Monitor both district and school-level rates of exit code transfers to adult education Credit Diploma (CDP) and GED programs. Any district or school within a district where students or a subset of students (race/ethnicity, special education or English Language Learners) have a rate of transfer that is higher than the state average should trigger an investigation to identify and address school practices leading to high transfer rates.
- Monitor enrollment of teens in Adult Education programs. Districts where the total teen enrollment constitutes more than 5% of the district’s high school population or where the enrollment of students by subgroup (race/ethnicity) is out of proportion to their enrollment in the district high school should trigger an investigation to identify and address school practices leading to high rates of enrollment.
- Establish a mechanism to verify whether or not students coded as transferring to adult education have in fact gone on to enroll.
- Amend existing statutes to eliminate the 90-day waiting period for withdrawn students to return to school.
- Create incentives and rewards for school districts that re-enroll students who have dropped out or withdrawn from school.

# RECOMMENDATION FIVE

**Adult Education must only be used as a last resort after exhausting all other attempts at intervention and options available within the school district. The students that ultimately enroll there, however, must have access to academically rigorous educational opportunities and appropriate supports that will prepare them for success in the workforce or post-secondary education.**

## **Recommendations for Local Districts**

- Reduce the number of students that “absentee out” by offering more flexible attendance policies and opportunities to make up missed hours and coursework.
- Create opportunities for teens at adult education students to participate in the “regular” high school experience like high school dances, sports and other activities.
- Develop age-appropriate instructional techniques for teens (16-18) and young adults (19-21) that are enrolled in the Credit Diploma Program and the GED program.
- Provide comprehensive supports and services to address the unique needs of adolescents and young adults.

## **Recommendations for the State Department of Education and Connecticut General Assembly**

- Increase the number of instructional hours required in order to attain a “credit” in the Credit Diploma Program.
- Ensure that CDP curriculum offered at adult education programs is aligned with the Common Core of State Standards.
- Adequately fund adult education programs to provide the instructional, social and emotional supports for the adolescent and young adult population they serve.

# APPENDIX

## Notes about the Quantitative Data Contained in This Report.

### Data Sources

Unless otherwise noted, the quantitative data contained in this report derives from data made available through the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE). Data was drawn from five sources:

The Connecticut Education Data and Research (CEDaR) portal, available online at [http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct\\_report/CedarHome.aspx](http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct_report/CedarHome.aspx)? The data contained in CEDaR is drawn from the Public Student Information System (PSIS). CEDaR provides access to strategic school profiles as well as state, district, and school level of data including but not limited to: student enrollment, demographics, and need; student performance and achievement; discipline; resources; and staffing.

Adult Education Program Profiles, available online at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2620&q=321924>  
The data contained in the Adult Education Program Profiles is drawn from the Connecticut Adult Reporting System (CARS).

Public Records Request submitted to the Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services, and Adult Education, CT State Department of Education on January 10, 2011, responded to by Ajit Gopalakrishnan on June 23 2011, on file with the author. The records request provided statewide enrollment and attainment data for 16-18 and 19-21 year olds in adult education, disaggregated by program of enrollment, race, and gender from 2004-2010. It also provided identical data sets for each adult education program operated by school districts, regional educational service centers, and the Department of Corrections.

Public Records Request submitted to the Bureau of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation on April 19, 2011 responded to by Alison Zhou, Ed. D. on June 2, 2011 on file with the author. The records request provided data pertaining to Exit Codes, including statewide totals of student exit codes, disaggregated by race, for 2008-2010. It also provided totals of student exit codes by district, for 2008-2010.

Public Records Request submitted to the Bureau of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation on June 27, 2011 responded to by Alison Zhou, Ed. D. on July 13, 2011 on file with the author. The records request provided data pertaining to enrollment in 90 Programs.

### Uses and Limitations of the Data

#### CEDaR.

*How It Was Used In This Report:* CEDaR was used to determine statewide enrollment totals and demographic data pertaining to high school students in grades 9-12. It was notably *not* used as a source for high school dropout and graduation data, as the CEDaR data available on these outcomes only extends through 2008 and therefore does not reflect the graduation rate calculated in accordance with the NGA Compact.

#### Adult Education Program Profiles

*How It Was Used in This Report:* Adult Education Program Profiles were used for calculating district-level growth trends in the age of students enrolled in adult education from 2006-2010 as well as the 2010 percentage of teen (16-18) and young adult (19-21) enrollment in adult education programs. The Program Profiles were used because they provide an aggregated district-level counts of total student enrollments by age group.

*Limitations of the Data:* The Adult Education Program Profiles only report as “enrolled” those students who have attended at least 12 program hours. Students who enroll, but attend less than 12 hours are not reflected in Program Profile data. In 2010, 83% of GED and CDP students (of all ages) were retained for 12 hours. This means that 17% of GED and CDP students statewide were excluded from Program Profile reporting.



## **Public Records Request submitted to the Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services and Adult Education, CT State Department of Education.**

*How It Was Used In This Report:* The Public Records Request to the Bureau of Adult Education was used to generate statewide program enrollment and attainment data for teens (16-18) and young adults (19-21) in the CDP and GED programs. It was also used to calculate district-level growth trends in teen enrollment in the Credit Diploma Program.

*Note About the Suppressed Cells and Cell Values:* Compliance with federal privacy law prohibits the CT SDE from releasing data where any cell value less than five. In the data provided, any cell with a value of zero was left blank, and values between 1 and 4 were suppressed and reflected as <5. A median value of 2.5 was inputted for any suppressed cell used in calculating enrollment and attainment data. No attendance filter was applied to this data request, so unlike the Program Profiles, this data reflects all students enrollment, not just those who attended 12 or more hours of programming.

*Other Limitations of the Data:* The enrollment and attainment data contained in this report provide a snapshot-in-time of enrolled students and their degree attainment status.

The attainment data contained here simply provides an annual snapshot for a single academic year. It is important to note that there is a potential distinction between the total number of students enrolled in the CDP or GED program and those that are eligible to actually attain their diploma or GED in that year. **Credit Diploma Program.** Each local adult education center sets its own criteria for entry in the Credit Diploma Program, and there is wide variation in the number of credits enrolled students need in order to attain their diploma. A student may enroll needing 15 credits to graduate and therefore require at least two full years of enrollment in the program in order to complete. Alternatively, a student might enroll only needing two credits to complete, and could realistically finish in a single semester or a year. Further analysis of attainment rates in the context of credits already accrued at the point of enrollment would be beneficial and provide an even more concise picture of student success in the Credit Diploma Program. SDE does not have a cohort standard by which they analyze attainment in the Credit Diploma Program, nor have they explicitly defined a standard period of time in which they expect students to be able to complete the Credit Diploma Program. **GED Program.** Students who wish to enroll in the GED program that still need basic skill development are placed in Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses. SDE includes students in ABE in their count of students enrolled in the GED program. The attainment rates reported here are based on the total number of students enrolled in the entire program, *not* the passage rates of the smaller number of students who actually attempt the exam each year. It should also be noted that GED testing requirements state that students must be at least 17 years of age to take the exam, so it is possible that 16-year-olds enrolled in the program were precluded from taking it. Again, this is an area that would benefit from further analysis, including an examination of the levels teens and young adults place into, the number of teens that advance in levels, and the number of teens that actually take the exam. Finally, these figures only reflect the number of students that attained their GED through participation in SDE educational programs; it does not include students who were prepared through other entities.

## **Public Records Request to the Bureau of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation, CT State Department of Education.**

*How It Was Used in the Report.* The first Public Records Request to the Bureau of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation was used to generate data pertaining to exit codes, including the reported number of students who were coded out of PSIS as “transfers to the Adult Education Credit Diploma Program.” A chart of all exit codes and definitions is included below. The second Public Records to the Bureau of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation was used to generate data pertaining to 90 Programs.

*Note About the Suppressed Cells and Cell Values:* Compliance with federal privacy law prohibits the CT SDE from releasing data where any cell value less than five. In the data provided, any cell value of 5 or less was suppressed and reflected as “na” and were excluded from analysis.

*Limitations of the Data.* **Exit Codes.** Exit codes are inputted by local school personnel who have varying degrees of skill and experience with interpreting and appropriately applying exit codes. It should also be noted that while SDE verifies changes made within PSIS, it does not currently verify that students coded as leaving school to enroll in the GED or CDP program actually go on to enroll. **90 Programs.** As discussed in the body of the report, the 90 Program list does not include all programs that districts designate as “alternative.” As such, the information provided in this data does not represent the total number of students participating in alternative education in CT.

- 1 Balfanz, Robert, Joanna Hornig Fox, John Bridgeland, and Mary McNaught. *GradNation: A Guidebook To Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis* (America's Promise Alliance) February 2009, at 9.
- 2 Richmond, Eric. *Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability*. (Alliance for Excellent Education) March 2009, at 3. ("The reliance on inappropriate data, the use of misleading calculations, and the lack of accountability for improvement created an environment in which the graduation rate crisis could go unacknowledged and unaddressed"). See also, Balfanz, Robert and Nettie Legters. *Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation's Dropouts? Where Are They Located? Who Attends Them?* (Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk at John Hopkins University) September 2004, at 2. ("[T]he graduation rate formula developed by the National Center for Education Statistics is ultimately depending on high schools accurate self reporting how many students dropout... As a result, there is no ready understanding of how many high schools have high dropout and low graduation rates"); NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund *Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline* last accessed online October 17, 2011 at <http://naacpldf.org/case/school-prison-pipeline>, at 6-8 ("Despite a decades-long fight to desegregate schools and a decades-long fight to desegregate schools... it has become increasingly clear that the problems of access to quality education for African-American students are deeply entrenched and rooted in the legacy of this country's racial caste system....Instead of rectifying structural barriers to academic success...schools have replicated the inequities by shuttling countless numbers of African-American students into lower educational tracks and removing them from schools altogether...").
- 3 Youth United for Change, *Pushed Out: Youth Voices on the Dropout Crisis in Philadelphia Public Schools* February 2011 at 2; Advocates for Children and The Public Advocate for the City of New York. *Pushing Out At Risk Students: An Analysis of High School Discharge Figures* November 2002, at 3. Balfanz et al., *supra*, at 26.
- 4 See, among others, Fabelo, Tony, Michael Thompson, Martha Plotkin, Dottie Carmichael, Miner Marchbanks III, and Eric Booth. *Breaking School Rules: A Statewide Study of How Juvenile School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement* (Council of State Governments Justice Center) July 2011; Advancement Project *Test, Punish, Pushout: How Zero Tolerance and High Stakes Testing Funnel Youth Into the School to Prison Pipeline* January 2010; Dufrense, Alexandra and Taby Ali *Missing Out: Suspending Students from Connecticut Schools*. (CT Voices for Children) August 2008; Advancement Project *Arresting Development: Addressing the School Discipline Crisis in Florida* 2006; Advancement Project *Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track* March 2005; Advancement Project *Derailed: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track* November 2003.
- 5 *Ibid*.
- 6 The term "pushout" has become shorthand for describing both the students that become entangled in the school-to-prison pipeline and the institutional mechanisms by which they are removed. See Dignity in Schools Campaign Fact Sheets *Pathways to Pushout, Who Gets Pushed Out?* and *Dignity in Schools Campaign* 2008 Campaign Statement, available online at [www.dignityinschools.org/resources](http://www.dignityinschools.org/resources). For the purposes of this report, pushout more narrowly refers to the practice of encouraging or coercing students to transfer out of or withdraw from traditional, mainstream high schools.
- 7 Gregor, Matt and Damon Hewitt "Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline: A Survey From the Field" 20 *Poverty and Race* (January/February 2011), at 6-7; Youth Transitions Funders Group *Multiple Pathways to Graduation: A Collaborative Philanthropic Initiative* (MetisNet) October 2007.
- 8 "Attorney General Holder, Secretary Duncan Announce Effort to Respond to School-to-Prison Pipeline by Supporting Good Discipline Practices" Press Release. July 21, 2011, last accessed online on October 17, 2011 at <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/july/11-ag-951.html>.
- 9 "Commissioner Calls for Action: New Formula, Unique Student Data Produce More Accurate State Graduation Rates" (Press Release) Connecticut Department of Education, March 2010. Accessed on October 17, 2011 at: [http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/pressroom/new\\_graduate\\_data.pdf](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/pressroom/new_graduate_data.pdf).
- 10 Balfanz and Legters, *supra*; Pinkus, Lyndsay *Who's Counted? Who's Counting Understanding High School Graduation Rates* (Alliance for Excellent Education) March 2006.
- 11 Connecticut State Department of Education, Strategic School Profiles, Terms and Definitions ("The percentage of students within the high school graduating class who graduated in the given year. To obtain this percentage, the number of graduates for the year is divided by the number of graduates plus the number of students who dropped out each year as the class progressed through Grade 9, 10, 11 and 12.") Accessed online October 17, 2011 at: <http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ResearchandReports/SSPReports.aspx>.
- 12 See Alexander, Jennifer, Alex Spurrier and Jordan Sauer *Connecticut Graduation Rates* (Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now) September 2011, at 16. This which compares CT SDE's published graduation rates against the Cumulative Promotion Index method, which is aligned with the guidelines established by National Governor's Association Compact.
- 13 *Ibid* at 17.
- 14 Connecticut State Department of Education, Strategic School Profiles. Terms and Definitions. ("Students who transfer to another school or program, including adult education credit-earning programs, are not counted as dropouts.") Accessed online at: <http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ResearchandReports/SSPReports.aspx>.
- 15 Advocates for Children, *supra* at 3 ("What is alarming is that discharge rates may be used mask potentially higher drop out statistics."). See also Pinkus, *supra*, at 14 ("Several states, notably New York and Texas, have been criticized for practices that use a variety of discharge codes to conceal the number of students dropping out of school").
- 16 Curran, Bridget and Ryan Reyna. *Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date 2010*. (NGA Center for Best Practices) December 2010, at 2; The NGA Compact Rate has been endorsed by the Alliance for Excellent Education, among others, see Richmond, *supra* note 2 at 5. Connecticut signed the Graduation Counts Compact in 2005, and will report the Compact Rate beginning with the class of 2010. At the time of this report, Compact Rate graduation data was not publicly available through the Connecticut Education Data Accountability and Reporting online portal.
- 17 Balfanz et al., *supra* note 1 at 11.
- 18 See note 4.
- 19 Dufrense and Ali, *supra* note 4 at 6. Notably, the racial disparities in suspension rates persisted despite the socioeconomic classification of their district.
- 20 Dycus, Jamie. *Hard Lessons: School Resource Officer Programs and School Based Arrests in Three Connecticut Towns* (American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut) November 2008, at 9.
- 21 Fabelo et al., *supra* note 4. Researchers used a multivariate analysis to eliminate the possibility that factors other than disciplinary event were related to academic outcomes, and found that 59.3% of students disciplined for 11 or more times did not graduate during the study period (at 54-58). Researchers also used a multivariate analysis to analyze likelihood of juvenile justice involvement and found that a suspension or expulsion for a discretionary disciplinary action nearly tripled the likelihood of juvenile justice contact within the subsequent academic year (at 70).
- 22 Connecticut General Assembly Public Act 07-66 amended Connecticut General Statute §10-233c by requiring districts to use in school suspensions. The statute as currently written does still permit school administrators the leeway to assign an out of school suspension if "the administration determines that the pupil being suspended poses such a danger to persons or property or such a disruption of the educational process that the pupil shall be excluded from school during the period of suspension, or (2) the administration determines that an out-of-school suspension is appropriate for such pupil based on evidence of (A) previous disciplinary problems that have led to suspensions or expulsion of such pupil, and (B) efforts by the administration to address such disciplinary problems through means other than out-of-school suspension or expulsion, including positive behavioral support strategies."
- 23 State of Connecticut, Public Act 08-86.
- 24 Letter written by the Court Support Services Division of the Connecticut Judicial Branch to Superintendents and Local Chiefs of Police. A copy was obtained via the National Juvenile Justice Network on July 19, 2011. The letter notes that "effective immediately, and pursuant to CGS § 46b-128, the Juvenile Probation Department of Court Support Services will be screening all police summonses to determine whether the facts, if true, are sufficient to be a juvenile matter and whether the interests of the public or the child require that further action be taken. Any summons determined to be either insufficient or not requiring further action will be returned to the sending police officer notifying them that the complaint is not accepted."
- 25 Connecticut State Department of Education. "Secondary School Reform In Connecticut" Powerpoint Presentation. January 2008. Last accessed online October 9, 2011 at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2702&Q=322264>.
- 26 Connecticut Public Act 10-111, An Act Concerning School Reform, Section 16.
- 27 Youth Transitions Funders Group, *supra* note 7, which describes efforts undertaken in Boston, New York, Portland, Oregon, San Jose, and Philadelphia.
- 28 Hoye, JD and Christ Sturgis. *The Alternative Pathways Project: A Framework for Dropout Reduction and Recovery*. June 2005, at 5-6.
- 29 Connecticut Constitution. Article 8, § 1.
- 30 Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) §10-15(c).
- 31 See Case Summary of *Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding, Inc., et. Al. vs. Governor M. Jodi Rell et. al.* 295 Conn. 240 (2010), published by Kathryn Scheinberg in June 2010, accessed online at: [www.kidscounsel.org/caselibrary\\_education\\_ccjef.htm](http://www.kidscounsel.org/caselibrary_education_ccjef.htm) on October 19, 2011. This case is notable as it marks the first time a "quality" standard has been attached to the right to education.
- 32 CGS § 10-184.
- 33 CGS § 10-220(a) and CGS §10-186(a).

- 34 CGS § 10-184.
- 35 CGS § 10-186(d).
- 36 CGS § 10-76d.
- 37 CGS § 10-233a.
- 38 CGS § 10-233c.
- 39 CGS § 10-233a.
- 40 CGS § 10-233d.
- 41 CGS § 10-233d.
- 42 CGS § 10-69.
- 43 Connecticut State Department of Education website, accessed on August 17, 2011 available at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2620&q=320686&sdePN avCtr=|45467|#45494>.
- 44 CGS § 10-67. Note that CGS § 10-73d permits mothers under the age of 16 to appeal to the Board of Education to complete their education at an Adult Education Center. Public Act 11-126, effective July 1, 2011, exempts expelled students from having to withdraw from regular public school if they are attending adult education as the alternative educational opportunity during the term of their expulsion.
- 45 CGS § 10-16.
- 46 CGS § 10-67; CGS § 10-69(b).
- 47 CGS § 10-221a.
- 48 CGS § 10-220(a).
- 49 Interview 4 on February 8, 2011.
- 50 CGS § 10-233d. Effective July 1, 2011, any student attending adult education as an expulsion placement is exempted from the requirement to withdraw from public school prior to enrolling at Adult Education, see note 42.
- 51 CGS § 10-233f(b).
- 52 CGS § 10-220(c).
- 53 CT SDE website, "What Are Strategic School Profiles" accessed on August 22, 2011 available at: <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/profiles/about.htm>
- 54 Raymond Martin, email message to author, on September 16, 2011.
- 55 CT SDE website, "What Are Strategic School Profiles," *supra* note 53.
- 56 Phone conversation with Kendra Shakir of the Connecticut State Department of Education, April 25, 2011.
- 57 Connecticut General Assembly September Special Session, Public Act 09-6, § 54.
- 58 Still awaiting confirmation from SDE that these students are not counted in the district totals; also clarify whether it is all CDP students or just those under the age of 21.
- 59 Connecticut Voices for Children. *District Reference Groups, Formerly Educational Reference Groups* June 2006.
- 60 Interview 2 on February 7, 2011.
- 61 Advancement Project, *Test Punish Pushout*, *supra* note 4 at 28.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 Interview 54 on August 3, 2011.
- 64 Interview 9 on March 2, 2011.
- 65 "Attorney General Holder, Secretary Duncan Announce Effort to Respond to School-to-Prison Pipeline by Supporting Good Discipline Practices" Press Release. July 21, 2011, last accessed online on October 17, 2011 at <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/July/11-ag-951.html>.
- 66 Gregor and Hewitt, *supra* note 7.
- 67 Dufrense, Alexandra and Annemarie Hillman, Cari Carson, and Tamara Kramer. *Teaching Discipline: A Toolkit for Educators on Positive Alternatives to Out of School Suspension* (Connecticut Voices for Children) June 2010, at 30-36; Kettle, Bob. *Keep Kids in School: Improve School Discipline* (ConnecticutAppleseed) November 2010, at 6-7.
- 68 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 69 Martin, Nancy and Betsy Brand. *Federal, State and Local Roles in Supporting Alternative Education*. (American Youth Policy Forum, Commissioned by United States Department of Labor) June 2006, at 26.
- 70 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 71 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 72 Interview 4 on February 8, 2011.
- 73 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 74 Interview 9 on March 2, 2011.
- 75 Francis Apaloo, email to author on August 10, 2011.
- 76 Advancement Project, *Test Punish, Pushout*, *supra* note 4, at 6, 28-29.
- 77 *Ibid.*
- 78 Public records request made to the Connecticut SDE, on file with author. See Appendix for detailed notes pertaining to sources and analysis of quantitative data contained in this report.
- 79 Martin and Brand *supra* note 67, at 7.
- 80 Warren, Paul and Elizabeth Hill. *Improving Alternative Education in California* (State of California, Legislative Analyst's Office) February 2007, at 3.
- 81 Interview 2 on February 7, 2011.
- 82 The economic incentives fueling the secret school-to-prison pipeline warrant further analysis. This report does not examine the proportion of local district dollars (versus state and federal dollars) allocated for K-12 schools and Adult Education programs. Connecticut's Educational Cost Sharing formula, which is used to determine state allocation of funds to local districts, has been the subject of ongoing litigation (see <http://ccjef.org>). Some may argue that per-pupil allocation to local districts from the state is greater for K-12, thereby generating more resources for the district than the per-pupil allocation for students in adult education. Others note that because districts allocations are based on an October 1 census date, schools actually benefit from pushing students out because they receive full funding for a student regardless of whether that student remains enrolled for the remainder of the year.
- 83 Interview 26 on April 20, 2011; Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 84 Jack Hasawaga, State Department of Education, interviewed in *Pushed*, a documentary produced by Youth Rights Media in June 2010.
- 85 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 86 Interview 2 on February 7, 2011.
- 87 Interview 42 on May 19, 2011.
- 88 Interview 2 on February 7, 2011.
- 89 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 90 Winerip, Michael "Message from a Charter School: Thrive or Transfer" *New York Times* July 12, 2011 accessed on October 17, 2011 at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/11/nyregion/charter-school-sends-message-thrive-or-transfer.html?\\_r=2&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/11/nyregion/charter-school-sends-message-thrive-or-transfer.html?_r=2&emc=eta1).
- 91 Interview 3 on February 7, 2011.
- 92 Interview 19 on March 16, 2011.
- 93 Interview 1 on January 31, 2011.
- 94 Warren and Hill, *supra* note 75, at 14.
- 95 This report focuses on students funneled into the school to prison pipeline that go on to enroll in other educational institutions. It should be noted that withdrawn students are sometimes homeschooled or transferred to other institutions, like Jobcorp, both of which merit further study.
- 96 Interviews 35, 36, 36, 37, 38 on May 17, 2011; Interviews 45, 46, 47, 49, 50, 51 on June 22, 2011; Focus Group 1 on February 15 2011; Focus Group 2 on March 22, 2011; Focus Group 5 on April 14, 2011; Focus Group 7 on April 29, 2011.
- 97 Interview 1 on January 31, 2011.
- 98 Interview 15 on March 16, 2011.
- 99 Youth United for Change and Advancement Project, *Zero Tolerance in Philadelphia* January 2011 at 19-21; Dycus, Jamie *Missing the Mark: Alternative Schools in the State of Mississippi* (American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi) February 2008 at 15-17; Fowler, Deborah Fitzgerald Texas' School-to-Prison Pipeline: Dropout to Incarceration, The Impact of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline (Texas Appleseed) October 2007 at 18.
- 100 Focus Group 5 on April 14, 2011.
- 101 *Ibid.*
- 102 *Ibid.*
- 103 *Ibid.*
- 104 Focus Group 12 on August 4, 2011; Focus Group 13 on September 29, 2011.
- 105 CGS § 10-233f(b).
- 106 Interview 37 on May 17, 2011.
- 107 Interview 2 on February 7, 2011; Interview 3 on February 7, 2011.
- 108 Interview 36 on May 17, 2011.
- 109 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 110 Interview 58 on October 1, 2011.
- 111 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 112 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 113 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.

- 114 Interview 6 on February 15, 2011.
- 115 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 116 Interview 9 on March 2, 2011.
- 117 Interview 33 on May 5, 2011.
- 118 Interview 59 on October 1, 2011.
- 119 Interview 8 on February 15, 2011.
- 120 Interview 54 on August 3, 2011.
- 121 Interview 4 on February 8, 2011.
- 122 Interview 60 on October 1, 2011.
- 123 Interview 54 on August 3, 2011.
- 124 Interview 6 on February 15, 2011.
- 125 Interview 12 on March 11, 2011.
- 126 Focus Group 12 on August 4, 2011.
- 127 Focus Group 8 on May 5, 2011.
- 128 Focus Group 5 on April 14, 2011.
- 128 Interview 4 on February 8, 2011.
- 130 *Ibid.*
- 131 *Ibid.*
- 132 Interview 2 on February 7, 2011.
- 133 Interview 6 on February 15, 2011.
- 134 Connecticut State Department of Education. *Connecticut's Framework for RTI: Using Scientific Research-Based Interventions, Improving Education for All Students* February 2008, accessed on October 17, 2011 at [http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/Pressroom/RTI\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/Pressroom/RTI_Executive_Summary.pdf)
- 135 Interview 26 on April 20, 2011.
- 136 Interview 29 on April 26, 2011.
- 137 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 138 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 139 Interview 56 on September 7, 2011.
- 140 Interview 5 on February 9, 2011; Interview 13 on March 11, 2011; Interview 53 on June 29, 2011; Focus Group 12 on August 4, 2011; Focus Group 13 on September 29, 2011.
- 141 This observation is not limited to the districts examined during the qualitative research. See e.g. Steven Good and Vanessa de la Torre, "State to Hartford Schools: Fix Special Ed Services" *The Hartford Courant* October 19, 2011 accessed on October 21, 2011 at [http://articles.courant.com/2011-10-19/community/hc-hartford-special-education-1020-20111019\\_1\\_special-education-superintendent-christina-kishimoto-evaluators](http://articles.courant.com/2011-10-19/community/hc-hartford-special-education-1020-20111019_1_special-education-superintendent-christina-kishimoto-evaluators).
- 142 Focus Group 8 on May 5, 2011.
- 143 Interview 12 on March 11, 2011.
- 144 Interview 5 on February 9, 2011.
- 145 Interview 9 on March 2, 2011.
- 146 Interview 29 on May 26, 2011.
- 147 Interview 15 on March 16, 2011.
- 148 Interview 1 on January 31, 2011.
- 149 Interview 25 on May 15, 2011.
- 150 Interview 5 on February 9, 2011.
- 151 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 152 Interview 6 on February 15, 2011.
- 153 Interview 5 on February 9, 2011.
- 154 Interview 30 on April, 2011.
- 155 Interview 2, February 7, 2011.
- 156 Interview 30 on April 29, 2011.
- 157 Aron, Laudan. *An Overview of Alternative Education* (The Urban Institute, Commissioned by the US Department of Labor) January 2006 at 3.
- 158 *Ibid.*, at 6.
- 159 Carver, Priscilla Rouse. and Laurie Lewis (2010) *Alternative School and Programs for Public School Students at Risk of Educational Failure: 2007-2008* (NCES 2010-026) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; Kleiner, Brian, Rebecca Porch, and Elizabeth Farris (2002). *Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000-01* (NCES 2002-004) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. According to the NCES reports, total student enrollment in district-administered alternative schools grew from 612,900 in 2000-2001 to 645,500 in 2007-2008. In 2000-2001, 45% of districts that youth could be referred to an alternative school or program for "disruptive verbal behavior." By 2007-2008, that figure had increased to 57%.
- 160 Almeida, Cheryl and Cecilia Le, Adria Steinberg, and Roy Cervantes, *Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State Policy and How to Improve It* (Jobs for the Future) September 2010.
- 161 Raymond Martin, email message to author, on September 16, 2011.
- 162 *Ibid.*
- 163 *Ibid.*
- 164 Francis Apaloo, email to author on July 6, 2011.
- 165 *Ibid.*
- 166 In fact, recent news reports suggest that in several districts across the state alternative schools are not in compliance with state mandates. See e.g. Danielle Capalbo, "New Principal Tells of Changes for Briggs High School" September 20, 2011 and Danielle Capalbo, "Alternative programs make changes" *The Hour* October 5, 2011.
- 167 This categorization of alternative schools is drawn from an alternative school typology outlined by Ruiz de Velasco, Jorge *Alternative Education in Continuation Schools: Meeting the Meets of Over-Aged, Under-Credited Youth* (Earn Warren Institute at UC Berkeley for the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University) April 2008, at 9-14.
- 168 Interview 1, January 1, 2011; Interview 39 on May 18, 2011; Interview 42 on May 19, 2011.
- 169 *Ibid.*
- 170 Interview 43 on May 26, 2011.
- 171 Focus Group 12 on August 4, 2011.
- 172 Interview 29 on April 26, 2011.
- 173 Focus Group 9 on May 31, 2011.
- 174 Hoye and Sturgis, *supra* note 28 at 15-16.
- 175 Interview 44 on June 24, 2011.
- 176 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 177 *Ibid.*
- 178 *Ibid.*
- 179 Interview 44 on June 24, 2011.
- 180 Bridgeland, John, Robert Balfanz, Laura Moore, and Rebecca Friant. *Raising Their Voices: Engaging Students, Teachers and Parents to Help End the High School Dropout Epidemic* (Civic Enterprises) March 2010. The study finds that "Although students said that higher expectations would have mitigated the factors leading to their dropping out, only 32 percent of teachers agreed that we should expect all students to meet high academic standards and graduate with the skills that would enable them to do college-level work, and that we should provide extra support to struggling students to help them meet those standards" (at 7). The report further notes "for students in these discussions, high expectations were synonymous with the teacher's belief that they could and would meet those expectations. High expectations also suggested a teacher's willingness to engage with students to help them meet goals rather than simply leaving students to fend for themselves and miss the marks set for them" (at 18).
- 181 Focus Group 5 on May 14, 2011.
- 182 Interview 43 on May 26, 2011.
- 183 Interview 12 on March 11, 2011.
- 184 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 185 Interview 3 on February 7, 2011.
- 186 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 187 Interview 44 on June 24, 2011. Studies on alternative schools in other states have likewise noted that "in their desire to help students graduate, teachers essentially 'pushed through' this group of students by giving them credit for substandard work." See Warren and Hill, *supra* note 75 at 16.
- 188 See note 157.
- 189 Memorandum, Connecticut Legal Services at 13. Document on file with author.
- 190 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 191 Focus Group 5 on May 14, 2011; Focus Group 8 on May 5, 2011; Focus Group 12 on August 4, 2011; Focus Group 13 on September 29, 2011.
- 192 Interview 5 on February 9, 2011.
- 193 District not identified for purposes of anonymity. Documents on file with author.
- 194 Focus Group 12 on August 4, 2011 and Focus Group 13 on September 29, 2011.
- 195 Ruiz de Valasco, *supra* note 158 at 20.

- 196 Dycus, *Missing the Mark*, *supra* note 94 at 5 (“Where alternative schools neglect their remedial role and overemphasize punishment, they may contribute to a nationwide trend, known as the school-to-prison pipeline, toward pushout out and criminalizing students who misbehave. Alternative schools ought to work against the school-to-prison pipeline, by helping to rescue students who might otherwise fall through the cracks.” See also Warren and Hill, *supra* note 75 at 11 (“Dropout rates in alternative schools are significantly higher than regular high schools....Thus, despite their attempts to keep students in school, alternative schools represent a place where many students exit the education system.”).
- 197 Warren and Hill, *supra* note 75 at 15-16; Dycus, *supra* note 94 at 46.
- 198 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011
- 199 Interview 12 on March 11, 2011
- 200 Interview 3 on February 7, 2011; Interview 12 on March 11, 2011; Interview 43 on May 26, 2011.
- 201 Interview 22 on March 30, 2011.
- 202 Interview 42 on May 26, 2011.
- 203 Interview 26 on May 20, 2011.
- 204 Districts not identified for purposes of anonymity. Documents on file with author.
- 205 Districts not identified for purposes of anonymity. Documents pertaining to admission and entry procedures on file with author.
- 206 Focus Group 3 on March 29, 2011; Focus Group 4 on April 12, 2011; Focus Group 7 on April 29, 2011 Focus Group 10 on May 18, 2011.
- 207 Interview 42, May 19, 2011.
- 208 Interview 1, January 1, 2011.
- 209 Interview 20, March 29, 2011.
- 210 Interview 19, March 16, 2011.
- 211 Interview 8, February 15, 2011.
- 212 Interview 45, June 22, 2011.
- 213 Focus Group 3 on March 29, 2011; Focus Group 4 on April 12, 2011; Focus Group 7 on April 29, 2011 Focus Group 10 on May 18, 2011.
- 214 Hoye and Sturgis, *supra* note 26 at 7.
- 215 Aron *supra* note 148 at 19 (Discusses the challenge of “how to introduce high academic standards in alternative education systems without sacrificing the elements that make alternative programs successful, and without compromising the integrity of the high standards”). See also Martin and Brand *supra* note 67 at 6 (“Non traditional schools, that provide an alternative to the comprehensive high school and espouse an educational philosophy of performance based education are pushing up against the accountability requirements [of NCLB], causing them to change some of their instructional strategies...The shift to testing-based accountability may ironically change the profile of many alternative education programs to look more like the traditional schools students left.”).
- 216 Districts not identified for purposes of anonymity. Documents on file with author. It should be noted that these totals were provided by educators at the alternatives, as part of reports made to their local Board of Education. They do not necessarily reflect the methods or standards used for reporting graduation rates employed by the State Department of Education.
- 217 Interview 42, May 19, 2011.
- 218 *Ibid.*
- 219 Adult Education Statewide Program Profile, 2010, accessed on October 17, 2011 at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2620&q=321924>. See Appendix for more information about the use of Program Profiles in this report.
- 220 Totals are generated from Adult Education Program Profiles, accessed on October 17, 2011 at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2620&q=321924>. See Appendix for more information about the use of Program Profiles in this report.
- 221 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 222 Adult Education Statewide Profile, 2010, accessed on October 17, 2011 at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2620&q=321924>. Note that these figures only account as enrolled students that have actually completed 12 or more hours of course time, so the actual number of students who attempted to enroll is likely even greater. See Appendix for additional notes pertaining to quantitative data and analysis.
- 223 Adult Education Statewide Program Profile, 2010, accessed on October 17, 2011 at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2620&q=321924> indicate that there were 5,056 16-18 year olds enrolled in adult education statewide. See Appendix for more information about the use of Program Profiles in this report. *Public School Choice in Connecticut 2010-2011*, accessed on October 17, 2011 at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/equity/choice/choicebooklet1011.pdf> indicates that there were a total of 5219 students enrolled in charter schools at the time the guide was published.
- 224 Public records request made to the Connecticut SDE, on file with author. See Appendix for detailed notes pertaining to sources and analysis of quantitative data contained in this report.
- 225 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 226 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 227 *Ibid.*
- 228 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 229 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 230 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 231 Interview 25 on April 15, 2011.
- 232 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 233 Interview 24 on April 15, 2011.
- 234 Connecticut State Department of Education, “The Young Adult Learner Initiative, An Interim Report: September 2006-June 2008.” March 2009 at 1. Report provided by Paul Flinter on March 31, 2011 and is file with the author.
- 235 “Commissioner Calls for Action: New Formula, Unique Student Data Produce More Accurate State Graduation Rates” (Press Release) Connecticut Department of Education, March 2010. Accessed on October 17, 2011 at: [http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/pressroom/new\\_graduate\\_data.pdf](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/pressroom/new_graduate_data.pdf).
- 236 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 237 *Ibid.*
- 238 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 239 Interview 4 on February 8, 2011.
- 240 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 241 Interview 5 on February 9, 2011.
- 242 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 243 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 244 Interview 26 on March 20, 2011.
- 245 Interview 4 on February 8, 2011.
- 246 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 247 Interview 54 on August 3, 2011.
- 248 Focus Group 5 on April 14, 2011.
- 249 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 250 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 251 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 252 Interview 26 on April 20, 2011
- 253 Interview 24 on April 15, 2011.
- 254 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 255 Interview 11 on March 8, 2011.
- 256 Interview 61 on October 1, 2011.
- 257 Focus Group 8 on May 5, 2011.
- 258 Interview 26 on April 20, 2011.
- 259 Interview 24 on April 15, 2011.
- 260 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 261 Interview 31 on May 2, 2011.
- 262 For students with academic skill deficiencies, programs that focus on credit attainment do not support students needs. See Brown Ruzzi, Betsy and Jacqueline Kramer *Academic Programs in Alternative Education: On Overview* (National Center on Education and the Economy, Commissioned by the US Department of Labor) April 2006, at 11 (“Students who are behind academically need more than the opportunity to complete the credits needed for a diploma, they need a program specifically designed to help them catch up academically.”).
- 263 Interview 10 on March 8, 2011.
- 264 Interview 25 on April 15, 2011.
- 265 Focus Group 5 on April 15, 2011.
- 266 Connecticut State Department of Education, “The Young Adult Learner Initiative, An Interim Report: September 2006-June 2008.” March 2009 at 5. Report provided by Paul Flinter on March 31, 2011 and is on file with the author.





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