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## “Makin’ It in School”:

### How At Risk Kids Stay in High School and Maintain Optimistic Aspirations

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#### **Introduction**

**A**cademic achievement and school retention are pressing public policy issues today. They also are issues at the core of the sociological mission to understand social mobility and stratification. Highlighting the significance of this policy, California Governor Gray Davis ended his 1999 State of the State address to the legislature with the invitation, “Join me in ringing in the Era of Higher Expectations” (Davis, 1999), referring specifically to implementing higher expectations for high school students. Davis claimed that, because we are not immune to worsening national and international economic conditions and because California schools rank at the bottom of all state educational programs, we must raise our standards and achievement levels for high school graduates. We must replace mediocrity with meritocracy by raising expectations for high school students. But what happens to the students who are limited in their ability to meet these higher expectations – the students who are at risk for dropping out of high school?

#### ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND FAILURE: SOME IMPLICATIONS

Sociologists and academics have found the existence of an achievement gap in schools: although the American educational system prides itself on providing equal opportunities to students of all races, genders, and social classes, unequal educational outcomes continue. Some are “unable, uninterested, or unmotivated to learn” (Fine, 1991, p. 26). What happens to these at risk students? If they drop out of high school, the repercussions are considerable.

High school dropouts are more prone to be unemployed and to live in poverty (Fine, 1991, p. 23), while high school graduates make substantially more income. High school dropouts experienced a 26.2% decline in real hourly wages between 1979 and 1997, compared with smaller losses for high school grads during the same period (-11.7%) and with gains for college grads (+5.6%) (Mishel, Bernstein, Schmitt, 1999, p. 156, Table 3.18). Approximately 66% of California's high school freshmen will receive their high school diploma in four years (Kollars, 1998). The other 34% won't graduate. Some will transfer to an adult education program, receive their equivalency diploma, or attend a continuation school. At a continuation school, at risk kids are given a second chance at receiving their high school diploma. At risk students are those who are unable to meet the high (soon to be higher) expectations of the mainstream comprehensive high school. Whether they drop out of the education system altogether or maintain educational and career aspirations, what happens to these students is quite important to our society today.

The University of California is actively striving to improve student achievement and retention rates through its Early Academic Outreach Programs (EAOP). The EAOP's slogan is helping "California's educationally disadvantaged students turn dreams into reality," referring to dreams of attending a school in the UC system. EAOP was founded in 1976 to help those students whose "economic and social circumstances make such an achievement unlikely." EAOP services assist students who might be at risk or might otherwise not receive adequate information, motivation, and academic support from their schools or families (University of California, Office of the President, 2001).

To learn more about at risk students and their educational outcomes, I conducted the research that I describe in the pages to follow. Despite numerous achievement barriers, the at risk students who were the subjects of my study at a continuation high school formed and maintained surprisingly high educational and career aspirations. By examining different institutional and social factors, I hope to explain the means by which these students held on to optimistic goals for the future. In particular, I will examine the roles played by family, the education system, and peer groups in shaping the efforts of my study partici-

pants to stay in school and in influencing the development of educational and job aspirations.

Webster defines the term *aspiration* as a “strong desire or ambition, as for advancement, honor,” while Jay MacLeod, whose *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995) is a definitive book on youth and aspirations, defined the term as follows: “Aspirations reflect an individual’s view of his or her own chances for getting ahead and are an internalization of objective probabilities” (p.15). In short, aspirations are the future goals an individual views as “reasonable” to achieve. While we know much about the development of aspirations in, and the schooling strategies of, secondary students, those of youth in alternative non-mainstream schools are understudied. In particular, there is little data on the subjective construction of aspirations in these students and the conditions under which students form them. It is important to study aspirations, because depressed aspirations may be key to understanding why kids don’t put in the effort to “make it” in school, while higher aspirations may tell us why kids are willing to give it a try.

To better understand why at risk students worked on “makin’ it” in continuation high school and had optimistic aspirations, I will address the following sociological questions: What influenced the development of continuation school students’ aspirations? What support and informational resources (family, education, and peer groups) helped or hindered the development of their educational and career aspirations?

Continuation high schools must be distinguished from mainstream public high schools. Also known as “alternative,” “second-chance,” or “last-chance” high schools, continuation high schools, as they will be termed in this essay, are designed to educate at risk students who have been removed from mainstream (regular-comprehensive) high schools. Students found under the at risk label include those who tend to be disruptive or who perform poorly in school due to risk factors of “class, race, gender, special needs, pregnancy, abusive home situations, relationship problems, drug use, alienation, boredom, resistance, and orneriness” (Johnson and Wetherill, 1998, p. 178).

Continuation high schools differ in structure, purpose, and student population and were developed to “meet the needs of populations of students who are experiencing academic and social failure in tradi-

tional school programs” and are at risk for dropping out of school (Groves, 1998, p. 252). In short, continuation schools’ general purpose is to provide a means by which those who have failed in the mainstream can continue their pursuit of a high school diploma.

In the following pages, the continuation school model provides the backdrop of my study of high school youth, their schooling strategies and their aspirations. First, I discuss the methods used and data recorded. Second, I identify the key variables of my study as they are suggested in the literature on aspiration development and education, which I follow with discussion of the research setting. Third, I present my analysis, highlighting and analyzing the three major themes that I found. I conclude with a reflection on my major findings, discussing how they illuminate the issue of aspiration development and mobility, and on the additional research that is needed.

## **Methods and Data**

The data used for this research were primarily qualitative. I collected most of the data through participant observation and interviews. My participant observation field notes covered the following: structured and unstructured classroom activities; teacher-to-student interactions, including dialogue and control mechanisms; student-to-student interactions; my conversations and interaction with the student population; the characteristics of the classroom atmosphere; and class handouts and presentations. I collected this data over a four-month period. I conducted one-on-one interviews with thirteen Channing High School (CHS) students, one teacher, one Hawthorne Senior High School graduate, and one continuation school graduate.<sup>1</sup> The interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes and one hour and ten minutes. Reflecting the demographics of the Channing High School student population, seven of the thirteen students were Caucasian (54%), four were Latino (31%), one was African American (7.5%), and one was Native American (7.5%). Nine were male, and four were female. All students willing to participate were interviewed.

According to Lofland and Lofland (1995), the purpose of participant observation is to develop a systematic understanding of a human association in its natural setting (p.18). The purpose of intensive inter-

viewing is to elicit detailed material from the interviewee. I chose these two methods for precisely these reasons. Both participant observation and intensive interviews could produce the kind of data I was looking for: subjective impressions, feelings, emotions, and complex thought processes.

#### PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Although the administration at CHS had reviewed my research proposal and knew of my intentions as a researcher, I was introduced to the students as a “class helper” from the University of Hawthorne. I was a volunteer “helper” one hour a day, four days a week, for four months (October 2000 – January 2001). I helped twice a week in the morning Skills class (to be described in detail) and twice a week in the afternoon Skills class. Carrie, an energetic thirty-four year old Caucasian teacher who had been at Channing for one year, taught both classes. For the first two months the students knew me solely as a “helper” who would offer aid to Carrie and the students. I assisted Carrie with a class discussion about a recently-watched movie, proctored daily journal writing, motivated students to orally share with the class their completed assignments, tutored in math, and helped one student learn basic Spanish.

#### INTERVIEWING

After I perceived a certain level of trust between the students and me, I asked for volunteer interviewees. If weather permitted, the interviews took place outside. Otherwise, the interviews took place in the principal’s private office (if the interviewee was comfortable in that environment).

I divided the interview guide I used into four sections: background information, educational experience, CHS experience, and aspirations for the future. The background sections covered residential history, family, and after-school activities. The educational experience section covered schooling history and the journey to CHS. The CHS experience section covered feelings about the school, feelings about the mainstream high school, goals at CHS, and achievement of goals at CHS. Finally, the aspiration section covered post-high school educational and occupational plans, and asked about advice that students might give to

future high school students. I left time at the end of the interview for the interviewee to ask me questions or provide me with any additional information.

## Literature Review: Aspiration Development

### FAMILY INFLUENCE

What does past research tell us about the impact of the family on aspiration development? Jay MacLeod, whose *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995) sheds light on aspiration development and economic attainment, found that familial factors affecting aspiration attainment were family stability, the occupational and educational histories of parents and older siblings, and the length of the family's occupancy in public housing (p. 50). MacLeod studied two groups of male youths who resided in low income suburban housing projects. The group with significantly higher aspirations and optimism had older siblings who served as role models, more frequently had father figures, and came from families whose parental employment was more stable. Also, their familial characteristics influenced them to embrace an ideology of achievement (the idea that society offers opportunities for every individual regardless of class, race, or gender).

John Ogbu, whose *The Next Generation* (1974) focuses on the effects of formal education on the aspirations of youth and the relationship between formal education and stratified levels of attainment, studied the extent to which parents "pushed" their children to excel in and finish high school. He found that, although most parents of minority students did "push" their children, their children still failed in school. Ogbu found six common ways in which parents tended to "push" their children: by providing educational advice, by helping with schoolwork, by supervising schoolwork and attendance, by providing rewards and punishment for grades, by providing financial assistance, and by enforcing behavior rules to help their children succeed in school (p.127). Those parents who did not "push" their children to stay in school were usually uneducated and lacked respect for formal education.

In their book, *The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers, Motivated but Directionless* (1999), Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson look closely at the construction of student life plans and at whether

students' plans are aligned with the resources and skills they need to achieve their occupational ambitions. Schneider and Stevenson found that parents play an important role: "[B]y helping their teenagers strategically organize and manage their lives around educational and occupational opportunities parents also motivate them to reach their ambitions" (p.141). According to Schneider and Stevenson, parents shaped ambitions by providing support for life plans, social capital, and norms of hard work (pp.168-169). They describe a class-stratified system of education: those students who attended schools in middle and upper class communities were more likely to have aligned ambitions, while students who attended school in low-income, non-affluent communities were more likely to have misaligned ambitions.

In *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in the High School* (1989), Penelope Eckert analyzes the reproduction of social strata by focusing on two social classes in the high school: the Jocks, those high school students who served the interest of and were supported by the school, and the Burnouts, those students who were oppositional toward and rejected by the school. Consistent with McLeod's findings, the Burnouts believed there wasn't any point in "makin' it" through high school, because they saw no or few role models who had benefited in material ways from the experience. Thus, "non-mainstream children [Burnouts] frequently come to view education as a humiliating and fruitless pursuit," while "mainstream children [Jocks] [come] to believe that education will ultimately bring rewards and success" (p. 7). Eckert concluded that "the Jocks' and Burnouts' roles in school reflect their parents' roles in the adult community" (p. 175). Jocks tended to come from upper-middle-class families who played a cooperative role with the school and supported their child's educational journey, while the Burnouts were more likely to come from working class families who had an uncomfortable relationship and only interacted with the school to discuss disciplinary problems (p. 176). This parent/school relationship was likely to cause barriers to Burnouts' aspirations.

From these studies, two key themes arise around family influence on aspiration development. First, parental and sibling educational attainment and occupational stability affect ambition. Second, parents' social class affects their ability to "push" their children to "make it" and

develop a positive relationship with the school. These findings suggest that for an “Era of Higher Expectations” to take place, structural barriers in society that contribute to unequal familial support must be addressed.

#### SCHOOL INFLUENCE

What does past research tell us about the role of the educational system on aspiration development and a child’s ability to believe in “making it” in school? MacLeod (1995) concluded that the school is one of the main social structural factors reinforcing, although not necessarily causing, social inequality. Although many may believe that schools level the playing field in the game of success, an opinion that is captured in the maxim that “education is . . . a remedy for social inequality” (p. 98), MacLeod found otherwise. At Lincoln High School, curriculum programs ranged from the Fundamental School, which reflected middle class standards and focused on increasing the rigors of academic work, to the Achievement School, which was for underachievers who had disciplinary problems and focused on polishing basic elementary subjects. According to social reproduction theorists, such educational stratification feeds into the structure of the job market.

While Ogbu sought to understand why minorities and the poor (in particular) fail in public schools, his explanations are useful for theorizing about school failures in general. I will discuss the theory that Ogbu deemed most accurate: the cultural deprivation theory of school failure. This theory claims that the public school system is based on mainstream white middle class culture, a point with which MacLeod would agree. This culture “embodies those qualities of life valued most by Americans such as future orientation, desire for success in life, initiative, good work habits, talent, perseverance, and the like” (p. 6). Thus, children who come from cultures with different or clashing values are destined for poor performance or failure in the system of formal education.

Schneider and Stevenson found that high schools can influence students’ development of aligned ambitions by communicating and emphasizing, through curriculum and advice, important information and knowledge that help them construct realistic life plans. Schools that only provide “good” counseling and advice to some kids, usually the privileged, systematically feed the process through which students’ ambitions become misaligned.

In her study of the school's role in the reproduction of social class, Eckert found that, through academic tracking patterns, the school grouped non-mainstream children (Burnouts) in lower academic tracks and grouped mainstream children (Jocks) in higher academic tracks. Being members of the lower academic tracks, Burnouts tended to view school as a relatively fruitless pursuit because academic success was not easily within reach. Thus, with leveled aspirations, Burnouts tended to do poorly in school, resulting in post-high school lives that were likely to reproduce their lower class standing.

This literature suggests that the educational system influences aspiration development through tracking, counseling, school culture, and the development of life plans. Schools can have a profound effect on whether students fail or succeed within their institutions, and on their post-graduation opportunities.

#### PEER GROUP INFLUENCE

How do peer groups influence the aspirations of their members? MacLeod (1995) found that the aspirations of the peer groups he studied, the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers, were strongly shaped by peers. Aspirations and values were formed from the ways that peer groups defined success and the direction in which they focused their lives. The Hallway Hangers, who were pessimistic about their futures, believed that success entailed being "bad," which included receiving low grades, getting away with crime, consuming alcohol and drugs on a regular basis, being physically and emotionally tough, being racist toward minorities, and being committed to group solidarity. They rejected the notion of meritocracy and the achievement ideology. The peer group values of the Hallway Hangers contributed to their low aspirations: they were focused on just getting by and surviving, and the notion of a career had little relevance to them. If MacLeod focused solely on social structure, he might conclude that because the Hangers were members of the lower class, their values and ideals of success were lower and more obscure than members of the upper class, who might see success more vividly and as more easily accessible. However, the Brothers (also members of the lower class), who valued the achievement ideology and believed that, despite adverse conditions, they could be

successful, were able to maintain optimistic aspirations. This difference suggests that peer group values can have a profound effect on an individual's dreams for the future.

Ogbu found that, while peers can pull children away from their educational aspirations, some children are able to detach themselves from their peers, "recognizing that these friends often have a bad influence on their school work" (p. 127). Particularly among some minority groups, peers tend to pull children away from their aspirations, by ridiculing anyone who "buys into" white achievement norms, at the same time encouraging delinquent behavior such as cutting classes, doing poor schoolwork, fighting, and drinking alcohol.

Schneider and Stevenson also examined the role that peer groups play in influencing the formation of ambitions. Schneider and Stevenson looked at peer group activities, peer group membership, and activity-based groups. Contrary to the findings of many theorists, they concluded that peers have little if any influence on educational goals and career plans because kids rarely talk about their futures with their peers (p. 196). Although friends tended to help shape a teenager's sense of self, peer groups were weakly tied together and offered little, if any, guidance about fulfilling life-plans. Schneider and Stevenson maintained that peer influence on shaping ambition is marginal.

Conversely, Eckert found that peer groups have a strong influence on ambition. She found that peer group identity intensifies class differentiation (p. 11). As peer groups were tracked academically at the school she studied, they were labeled by the school as belonging to a high achieving or low achieving group, often stigmatizing the under-achievers. Also, because friends are chosen based on shared needs, peer groups have little capacity to provide constructive help (p. 178).

These studies suggest conflicting hypotheses about the effects of peer group membership on youth aspirations. Peer group values and activities can shape the aspirations of youth in both positive and negative directions. At the very least, the literature highlights the importance of looking at the potential for peers to exercise influence in some direction.

Researchers studying youth, mobility, and subjective aspirations show the interconnections among aspirations, class stratification, and the relationship of structure and agency. These scholars make a strong

case that the family influences aspirations through guidance and support, and possibly through heredity of class; the school influences aspirations through cultural deprivation, tracking, and guidance; and other youth can influence aspirations through peer group values and activities. I will use this literature to assess the effects of the school, the family, and peer groups on the aspirations of Channing High students. Specifically, I will assess the interconnections among the three factors, their positive and negative effects, and the extent to which students were able to maintain optimistic aspirations, steering a course through these contradictory currents.

### **Case Study Site: Channing High School**

Channing High School (CHS) is located in Hawthorne, California, a medium sized college town in Northern California. CHS is one of two high schools within Hawthorne Unified School District (HUSD). Hawthorne Senior High School (HSHS) is the mainstream public high school, while just a few blocks away is Channing, which is comprised of a small one story brown building with a nearby portable classroom. It is known as “the alternative school” or “the continuation school.”

Channing High School was founded in 1969 because of a new California State law requiring that every school district provide a continuation high school as an alternative to the mainstream high school. Seven students made up the first year population of students. These students were taught in a single trailer room next to the city railroad. In 1970 the school was moved to within eight blocks of HSHS. It remained in the same location and condition during the period of my study. The main building had two classrooms, a kitchen, a small computer station, two small offices, and a main teaching room where several classes were often conducted at the same time. The second building was a single classroom, which also served as a computer lab.

Channing has a unique goal for its students: it focuses on helping its students develop the skills needed to be self-sustaining adults at graduation time. CHS’s Mission Statement is as follows: “Students of Channing High School will acquire the necessary knowledge and basic skills to gain life management skills to graduate. They will demonstrate responsibility for self and for others, and learn the vocational and tech-

nological skills in a safe and caring environment.” As explained in CHS’s philosophy of education, “CHS provides a viable alternative education program for those students whose learning styles, personalities, needs and overall interests have not been met within the designed framework of the traditional comprehensive high school.”

According to the CHS administration, approximately 95% of Channing students came from HSHS. Either they had chosen to transfer to Channing, or else the HSHS administration had insisted that the transfer take place. Other students came from the Hawthorne Independent Study Program, from a juvenile detention center (they are court ordered to attend Channing), or, as transfer students, from schools outside the district. Channing served the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, as did HSHS. However, at Channing, a student had to be at least sixteen years old to attend. Due to the school’s small facilities it had a limited student capacity and sometimes had a wait list. When a wait list existed, those students with a court order to attend Channing were given first priority, followed by twelfth and then eleventh graders. Tenth graders are often discouraged from coming to Channing; the school thereby encouraged HUSD students to remain in the mainstream route. Although students knew the number of years they had attended Channing, they did not refer to themselves as “eleventh graders” or “twelfth graders.” While some students referred to themselves as “seniors” to let others know they were close to graduating, most students, when discussing where they were in their educational timeline, referred to the number of credits they had to complete before graduation. This is probably because students graduated after they had met a credit requirement, not necessarily after four years of secondary schooling. Thus, CHS, supportive of a merit-based system, did not support social promotion.

#### STUDENT POPULATION

During this study, CHS served a total of 68 students, while HSHS served 1,729 students, approximately 3.7% and 96.3% of the total HUSD high school population, respectively. The following is a chart indicating the ethnicity of HUSD and CHS students. Sociologically, it is significant, because it is important to know whether students among

and across ethnic groups have an equal probability of being part of non-mainstream education.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>% HUSD</b>	<b>% CHS</b>
American Indian	0.7	1.5
Asian	10.9	6
Pacific Islander	0.3	0
Filipino	0.9	0
Hispanic/Latino	12.7	34.3
African American	3.2	4.5
Indian	0	1.5
Caucasian	70.5	52.2
No Response	0.8	0

These data tentatively suggested that CHS reflected broader patterns of stratification. Significant discrepancies existed among those students whose backgrounds are Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino. While Caucasian students made up 70.5% of the school district, they made up only 52.2% of the CHS population. While Hispanics and Latinos made up only 12.7% of the school district, they made up 34.3% of the CHS population. Thus, while Caucasian students were under-represented at CHS by a factor of 25.9%, Hispanic and Latino students were over-represented by a factor of 270%. The disproportionate number of Latinos and Hispanics is common among continuation school students (May and Copeland, 1998, p. 204).

Another apparent discrepancy was the gender of students at CHS. While student population of HUSD was roughly 50% male and 50% female, CHS's breakdown was approximately 65% male and 35% female. Thus, males were over represented at CHS.

#### CURRICULUM AND GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

The graduation requirements for CHS students did not differ, on the surface, from other mainstream high schools in California. CHS and HSHS had essentially the same core requirements and required units of mathematics, science, English, history, government, and economics. Thus, students at both schools were held to the same unit require-

ments.. For this reason among others, while “continuation school” had previously been printed on CHS diplomas, it was removed so that students didn’t have a long-term stigma as a result of attending a continuation school. Further comparison will take place in the sections to follow.

#### TYPICAL CLASS

The first Monday morning I observed was typical of most days that I was in the classroom. Here are observations from my field notes:

As students trickle into Skills class, Carrie (students call all CHS teachers by their first names) instructs them to pick up their folders (as they do every morning) before they sit down. These are their personal folders with completed assignments, assignments in progress, and a time chart where they are supposed to record their activities in class. The classroom walls are covered in a variety of posters, maps, and informational images. One poster reads: “A Cop saved a kid’s life last night. Never drink and drive!” There is a picture of a cop checking a kid’s driver’s license. Above the chalkboard are Apple Computer advertisements with pictures of famous historical figures like Ghandi and Amelia Earhart and the words “Think Different.” On another wall are posted informational pamphlets: “Your pregnancy test,” “Condom come-backs,” “Substance abuse and sexual assault,” and “Teenagers and AIDS.” Above the wall lined with computers is a student-made poster that reads: “Life or Drugs? Happiness or Death?” On the back wall are three maps: California, the United States, and the World. Next to the maps is a “Scholastic Composition Checklist” poster, which reads: “Communicate ideas clearly, write strong sentences, observe standard usage.” The classroom typically has evolving animal life, a pet snake, rats, and fish.

As students began to sit down with their folders, Carrie instructed them to continue any work they had lingering in their folders, and if all assignments were complete, they were to write in their class journals. After a few comments from Billy about the weekend’s parties, and a

story from Buz about his baby, Carrie asks the class to settle down and get to work. Dean just sat in his chair with his arms crossed. I approached his table and asked him what work he has to complete. "I'm all finished," he replied. Although I could not evaluate the truth of his claim, I recommended he write in his journal, "Why don't you write about what you did this weekend?" "I didn't do anything," he replied. I told him that if he really didn't do anything this weekend, then he should write about what he wants to do this coming weekend.

During the class period, Billy worked on an English worksheet called "complete this sentence." George worked on his multiplication tables. James worked on an English assignment in which he responded to various prompts. Buz inspected his band's website online and typed a letter to local establishments to promote his band. Woudy did research online about cellular phone art. Dean wrote in his journal. Two boys and one girl were missing from class that day. Eight boys and one girl were in the morning Skills class and six boys and two girls were in the afternoon Skills class. While neither class is ever attended by all students enrolled and the class composition periodically changes, females are always a minority.

The students seemed to treat me as someone who was not a part of the Channing administration and not a part of the student body, but somewhere in the middle.

## **Analysis**

### ASPIRATIONS OF CHS STUDENTS

Let me introduce the reader to a handful of the students who participated in my study. Their academic and personal experiences, their race and gender, and their relationship with their parents are important for turning a more illuminating light on the CHS student body and the development and maintenance of its aspirations.

James, a Mexican-African American male, had made some extreme changes to his life in the years prior to our meeting. He used to be a member of a local gang and was arrested in junior high school for chronic fighting. The fights he frequently engaged in were about drugs; thus, the authorities decided to send him to a drug rehabilitation facility for a year, instead of to a boot camp. Feeling out-of-place and bored

at the facility, James decided to use the facility school to catch up on school credits. After the year was over, James entered HSHS, but soon thereafter he got into a heated argument with the principal and stopped going to school. His probation officer informed him that he could not miss a day of school, so he decided to transfer to Channing. He continued to be delinquent in his attendance at CHS, so his probation officer placed him in the California Conservation Corp. He was kicked out of the CCC for reasons unstated and locked up at the county juvenile hall. Since that last visit to juvenile hall, James had stopped most contact with his gang friends, obtained a job doing data entry at the University of Hawthorne's financial aid office, attended school more regularly, and begun to envision his graduation in the near future. James was one of the hardest workers in the two classes I observed at CHS. He was always busy with a school project or he would ask for more schoolwork to do. After graduation, James wanted to join the Marines so that he could receive a scholarship for college. He hoped to become a computer programmer, make a lot of money, and have a large family.

Suzanne, an 18-year-old Mexican-American female, had a two-year-old daughter. She attended HSHS's Teen Parent Program every morning for 2 hours, where she learned about parenting and responsibility, earning life science and English credit. She attended CHS's afternoon classes and worked in the evening at a local pizzeria. Suzanne lived with her boyfriend and daughter. Suzanne, who had two older sisters, grew up living with her mom, who worked in the human resource field in Hawthorne. Although Suzanne had always had an attendance problem, when she was at school she was a diligent worker; she rarely socialized with other students at school, and was determined to receive her diploma within the year. She was happy that CHS diplomas no longer say "continuation school." Suzanne planned on going straight to junior college after graduation. She wanted to complete a veterinarian assistant program, and ultimately to become a "real vet."

Chester, a 19-year-old Native American male, was a third-year senior. During Skills class Chester was often drawing or working on an art project when he should have been busy with journal writing. During the fall semester, Chester's mother lost her job, and he found himself homeless. At the time of our interview Chester was living with his

girlfriend and her family. Chester came to Channing two years ago, transferring from a high school in a town about 100 miles away, where he was failing most of his classes, selling drugs, and participating in local gang activity. Because of his poor work habits in his hometown, Chester came to CHS missing many credits. At CHS his work ethic had improved: he attended classes regularly and took work home to receive extra credits. Chester was determined to graduate and wanted to apply for scholarships to an art school in New Mexico. He hoped to study drawing and graphic art and someday become a poet, a storybook artist, or a magazine writer.

Spikey, an 18-year-old Caucasian female, came from a challenging, yet inspiring, family situation. Her father was an unemployed recovering drug addict and her mother worked at the HUSD office. Her father, mother, and brother were Channing graduates. Watching her father suffer from the legal consequences of his drug addiction, Spikey hoped to become a lawyer and provide people like her father with superior representation. She was filling out financial aid applications for a local junior college when we spoke. Ultimately she wanted to go to law school, establish her career in the legal field, and then start a family.

Among the common elements in these students' lives was the fact that they have such free-ranging and optimistic aspirations despite living under quite formidable circumstances; these students have directed their goals toward occupational success and upward mobility. Characteristics of students' households also shed light on their lives.

#### STUDENTS' HOUSEHOLDS

I grouped the educational attainment of parents into four categories. In a two-parent household, I categorized the parent with the highest educational attainment achieved. Two students had parents who did not finish high school; four students had parents who finished high school only; five students had parents who completed a college degree; and two students had parents who completed a masters or professional degree. Interestingly, although it is impossible to determine to what extent the aspiration of CHS students will be achieved, they generally aspired to a higher level of educational attainment than that of their parents. All thirteen students hoped to complete a college degree, and three of those

students hoped to complete professional degrees.

I also placed the highest achieving parent (or the only parent in a single-parent household) into one of three class categories: working class, middle class, and upper middle class. To categorize these families, I used the occupational background as a criterion. Occupations such as house cleaner and janitor were placed in the “working class” category; occupations such as social worker, police officer, and nurse were placed in the “middle class” category; and occupations such as lawyer and psychologist were placed in the “upper-middle class” category. Six households were working class, six households were middle class, and one household was upper-middle class. Of the six students from working class households, only one aspired to a working class occupation, four aspired to middle class occupations, and one aspired to an upper-middle class occupation. Of the six students from middle class households, only one aspired to a middle class occupation, one aspired to a working class occupation, and four aspired to upper-middle class occupations. The one student from an upper-middle class household aspired to an upper-middle class occupation. If CHS kids have their way, they would surpass the class position of their parents.

I also categorized the students into single-parent and two-parent households. Six students came from single-parent households (mothers only) and seven students came from two-parent households.

This description of CHS students’ aspirations and families has laid the foundation for analyzing the factors that influence student aspirations and their motivation to “make it” in school.

#### FAMILIAL INFLUENCES

How do families and family experiences inhibit or facilitate school participation and the maintenance of optimism on the part of continuation high school students? Scholarly literature supports the claim that the family plays an important role in the education of children and in guiding them towards a prosperous future. Schneider and Stevenson, for example, find that parents play an important role in the development of aligned ambitions (p. 141). Parents are important informational resources who can help their children draw meaningful connections between their aspirations and a plan for achieving them. MacLeod

strongly makes this point when he discusses the fact that the boys in the group known as the Hallway Hangers (a group of underachieving students) lacked people in their family and social groups who modeled stable or professional work patterns (p. 53).

From this research we can predict two things. First, if family members are supportive of their child's education and future, that child is more likely to be able to fulfill his or her future goals. To be considered "supportive," family members must have expectations for their children, must be available to give advice, and/or must be interested in their child's educational and occupational pursuits. Second, if family members can be informational resources to their children concerning educational and career pathways, their children are more likely to have aligned ambitions. For family members to be considered as informational resources, they must be able to provide information through personal experience or secondary knowledge about education and occupations.

### *Support*

Although some students had family members who served as role models and support networks, the overwhelming majority of the thirteen interviewees had a very limited relationship with their parents. Many experienced benign neglect while others encountered negative reinforcement. Students didn't spend a lot of time with their parents, didn't look to them for primary advice, and/or had conflict-filled relationships with their parents. The following passages, from different interviews, illuminate these relationships:

**KC:** How is your relationship with your parents?

**Billy** (an African American male): Our relationship is all right. Not anymore, I'm never home. I've got places to be. . . . We just do our own thing.

**KC:** What brought on the decision to live on your own?

**Buz** (a Caucasian male): It was kind of a clashing of personal belief, you know? I told them that they didn't respect my life. I see them every once in awhile. About once a month, but it was once a week.

**KC:** How would you describe your relationship with your family?

**Richard** (a Mexican-American male): My parents and I don't really get along. I shouldn't even really live at home right now. I have a lot of trouble; there's stuff that happens. I'm just happy I have parents who let me live there.

Some educational "support" came in the form of negative reinforcement. Educational support in these families was reactive instead of proactive: if kids improved their work habits, it was because they feared parental anger, rather than because the parents had offered to help their child work and succeed. This reactivity is captured in the following excerpts:

**KC:** Do you come to school every day?

**George** (a Caucasian male): My mom gets mad if I don't come [to school], she says there's not much else for me to do, "it's only three hours a day, there's no excuse." Now that I'm going I guess it's self-motivation, and mom.

**KC:** Are your parents involved in your education? Do they support you?

**Woudy** (a Caucasian male): They would all woop my ass if I got bad grades. So I get good grades, I slack off a lot, but I turn in good work.

**Buz:** My parents totally went to college. My mom's a doctor and my dad's a lawyer. . . . Yeah. I mean, my parents from the start said, "You have to go to college." That's the way my parents are, they said, "Read, the more you read the better." They also said, "Do whatever you want, but I'll give you advice and let you know if what you're doing is crap." It's also sort of a given. You go to college . . . Basically there's here and there's there, flipping burgers or being a lawyer or a doctor.

In some cases, however, students perceived their parents as actually supporting a future goal. In response to my question, "Does anyone push you to achieve your goals?", Andrea, a Mexican-American female, replied, "My dad. My mom didn't graduate [from high school]. But my dad graduated. He was an honors student and everything."

Although Andrea claimed that her father supported her future goals, she only perceived her father as a supporting role in her life because of his high achievements. Andrea's father does not help her with her homework or tutor her in reading, a subject she struggles with. Yet, when asked if her parents support her academically and want her to graduate, she claimed: "Yeah, because I have good grades. Yeah, they are really supportive of my grades."

Three of the students interviewed had a parent who was limited in his or her ability to help his or her child. Chris, a Caucasian male, was an only child whose father was deceased and whose mother was mentally and physically disabled. Often, he had to play the role of parent and caretaker because his mother depended on him for help when she was misunderstood or physically hurt. When asked about his relationship with his mom and whether he went to her for advice, Chris described his situation as follows: "Our relationship is pretty good. I don't go to my mom for advice, she is disabled; she can't understand all words. And she is not understood easily. . . . I'm by myself mostly. . . . I was at the high school [HSHS] for two years, but I had to help my mom more, I had to miss school. She has a back problem."

Chester, a Native American male, also grew up with a single mother. He claimed that while he discovered his talents, his mother was supportive of most of his career plans: "My mother has always seen my potential. She said, 'you could be a therapist, or a physical therapist, or a lawyer, or an artist.' My mom was very supportive, but she was not very supportive of a drug dealing career." Indeed, an artist is what Chester aspires to become. Thus, it might be said that Chester's mom played a supportive role in their relationship, urging him to realize his goals. Chester's mother, like Chris's, however, was limited in her ability to play a supportive role. During the fall semester and at the time of this interview, Chester's mom didn't have a place to live. Chester had been living day-to-day, sometimes unsure of where he would spend the night. The last time we spoke he had taken up temporary residence with his girlfriend's family.

Spikey's father was also not capable of support. As a recovering drug addict, Spikey's father's condition required support and assistance from her.

**KC:** Do you have a close relationship with your parents?

**Spikey** (a Caucasian female): When I was in junior high, when I was experimenting with drugs, I was closer to my dad. He could like relate more because he was a drug addict himself. Of course, that's not really the kind of relationship I want to have with my dad. . . . Nowadays, I'm not really close to my dad at all. I kind of grew up. The anger I felt in me growing up, taking care of my dad. . . . Like, he would always cook food and spill it all over the place, I'd have to clean it up. And all those times I had to check up on him to make sure he didn't OD. And all those times I had to go to the hospital because he overdosed. . . .

These three students were not in situations where their family environment provided them with support for their educational and occupational journeys. Wrangling with their parents' messes placed a heavy toll on the kids. Carrie confirmed that this pattern was common and that these were not the only CHS students in such challenging situations: "A lot of times, you know, the parents are in transition. Sometimes parents are drug and alcohol abusers. They have never set a regular life for their kids. So the kids need some sort of normalcy. . . . Some of the kids haven't had a real Thanksgiving meal. When we have parents being evicted out of their homes, the kids are just at the mercy of whatever happens." The life-sustaining priorities of these parents were more likely to take center stage.

According to Eckert, students whose parents support their educational and career goals are more likely to achieve their aspirations. From the CHS students I interviewed, it was evident that few students had parents who had taken a supportive role. Carrie speculated about other possible reasons for such a situation: "At this point the parents probably don't get involved with assignments or school work because by the time the kids who have ended up here have reached high school level, their parents are exhausted. I'm sure if their parents were going to try, they tried in elementary school. By the time the rebellion started in junior high, that probably broke down a lot of the family components of school, family resources, and homework help."

I should note that, as Carrie's comments highlight, the child/parent frustration might be seen to flow in either or both of the two pos-

sible directions. Did the kids' problematic behavior lead to parental frustration by the time the kid reached high school? Or did the parents' neglect and problematic lives lead to "bad" behavior by the kids? An argument can be made either way. In either case, and whether the parents were exhausted or had other priorities, it was evident that most CHS students could not look to their parents for support. Nevertheless, whatever source brought them to their situation, the kids were able to maintain surprisingly high aspirations and an optimistic outlook on their futures.

To find support for their educational and career goals students had to look to other sources. In some cases, the school or peer groups can fill this role. Such a possibility is explored in a later part of this paper. For now, I look to the possibility of whether, although parents did not play an active support role, they might have assisted their children's aspiration in other ways—specifically, by providing information to their children regarding advanced education or career paths.

### *Informational Resources*

According to Schneider and Stevenson, parents can help their children "align" their ambitions by providing them with information about education and careers. Although I had found that the parents in my study played a minimally supportive role at best, I wanted to determine the extent to which parents or siblings served as informational resources to their children, or modeled to them positive and productive professional behavior, thus demonstrating to their kids what is possible with respect to career attainment.

I used moderately low criteria for judging whether students had an informational resource within their households. If a student had an older sibling or parent who attained a level of education equal to that aspired to by the student, or if the role model's occupational attainment was related to the student's desired occupation, I considered that student as having an informational resource at home. Six of the thirteen students interviewed had such a resource.

James wanted to join the Marines, go to college, and ultimately become a computer programmer. Although his mother was a social worker, a profession substantially unrelated to computer programming,

she completed an undergraduate and masters degree, and therefore she could offer James information about applying to college and completing a graduate education. Bob's mother, a college graduate, could help him apply to junior college, while his father, whose friends were in the construction business, could help him find construction-work information. Two students had siblings who served as informational resources, providing information on junior college and university admissions.

Chester's experience is typical of the seven students who did not have a substantial informational resource in their families. His mother was unemployed and did not have any education beyond high school. Chester was also unable to look to his extended family for information or advice about his educational and career pursuits. He told me: "Of my family, although I'm late, I'm the only one trying to get a diploma. Most are dropouts or had kids at fifteen. They say, 'Chester is the hope for our family.' I don't want to be like them. When I was bad – I tried not to go too far because I didn't want to be like that side of the family. This is why I'm headstrong about receiving my diploma." Chester may be headstrong about receiving his high school diploma and going on to art school, but he lacks family members to assist him through this process. Perhaps this lack of an informational resource at home is why it took Chester three years to complete his senior year.

From the literature reviewed it is evident that families, especially parents, can have a forceful impact on aspirations and on a child's drive to "make it" in school and in the workforce. As for Channing students, parents and siblings minimally fulfill that influential capacity. With very little support and mostly indirect informational resources in the homes of CHS students, it is unlikely that the family plays a large role in directing CHS students toward high aspirations.

### **Education System Influences**

Americans usually place emphasis on the school's role in preparing young people for desirable occupational roles. . . . People who are successful are praised as being ambitious, imaginative, industrious, persevering, talented. . . . It is also believed that every American has equal opportu-

nity and that any individuals with ability can succeed not only in school but also in society (Ogbu, 1974, p. 4).

Do schools provide every student with the resources and opportunities to succeed? According to the meritocratic theory of achievement, as described in the passage above, the only explanation for CHS students to have been at a continuation school was individual agency. These young people, according to this individualistic ideology, are responsible through their own actions for being rejected from mainstream schools and relegated to a stigmatized continuation program. I analyze the school issue, critical of this reasoning. In the following discussion of the influence of the education system on the aspirations of high school students I will focus on the institutional support and informational resources available to students through their educational journey.

### *Channing High Revisited*

Just as the CHS student body differs from that found at the mainstream high school, its structure of classes and its curriculum also differ from that at HSHS and at other mainstream public high schools. While mainstream public schools require each student to attend school six hours each day, CHS students were only required to attend school three hours per day. Each semester, a student's schedule included three classes, one hour each, everyday. Part of the reason for this is stated in their Annual School report: CHS is "constantly striving to draw the relationship between education and work or career." While this characteristic of CHS encourages students to hold after-school jobs, it assumes that teenagers learn just as much at work as they do in school. Do students really make up those three hours of knowledge during work shifts? A part-time school structure frames academic work as marginal at CHS, compared to the central place such work holds at HSHS. It also conveys an impression that CHS is vocationally rather than academically oriented.

One of CHS's main goals is to provide individual attention to each student's needs through the means of personal education plans. When new students enter CHS, they are tested for subject skill, and, after

consultation with teachers, parents, and counselors, given a personal education plan. Suzanne's Personal Education Plan looked like this:

1. Goal at Channing: Graduate early
2. Personal Skills to Achieving Goals: Determination, Hard-Working
3. Personal Barriers to Achieving Goals: Skills out of Practice
4. Ways to Earn Credit outside Channing: HSHS Teen Parent Program, work, homework
5. Current Job/Hours: Pizza Delivery, 20-30 hours/week
6. Job Career Goals: Vet Technician
7. Other Goals: Making Money, Owning a Home
8. Activities/Interests: Animals
9. Resources for Help/Support/Encouragement: Boyfriend, Mom
10. Total Credits Needed to Graduate: [unavailable]
11. Credits Needed to Graduate by Subject: [unavailable]

Unlike mainstream high school students, CHS students were not given a fixed number of credits for each class passed. Instead, each student was told how many credits he or she would need to graduate and it was up to the individual to decide how quickly those credits were earned. A student's efforts in class, the quality of completed assignments, and any extra credits earned outside of school time determined the number of credits earned at "credit check" each week. Thus, CHS students completed credits in a much different manner than did HSHS students, who earned credits by way of percentage of work completed and scores on graded assignments and exams. At Channing, students had assignments, tests, and quizzes, but were not bound by a strict grading scale or binding deadlines. Students were only graded on work submitted; if they didn't do any work for a period of time, they did not receive any credit, but they did not receive an F. Carrie said that this credit earning system empowers the students.

Another important difference between CHS and mainstream public schools involved intra-subject levels. At a mainstream high school, such as HSHS, subjects were separated by levels of advancement and grade levels. For example, math classes were separated into pre-algebra,

algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, and advanced placement calculus. Because CHS students came to the school from a variety of disparate schooling environments—from HSHS, from other mainstream high schools, from independent study, or from a period of time without schooling—students exhibited wide variation in their skill levels. Thus, while eight students were in math class for the 10:30am – 11:30am period, each student may have been completing separate assignments at different skill levels. Class size was small at CHS, averaging twelve students per class, and frequently individualized to meet the differing needs of the students.

Also, CHS did not offer advanced placement (AP) courses (HSHS offered sixteen), intra-curricular clubs (HSHS offered thirty-one), or sports teams, all activities that are attractive to college admission officers. In fact, meeting CHS graduation requirements did not prepare a student to enter a four-year college. This difference between HSHS and Channing is of great importance because it means that the possibilities for achievement in high school top off at different levels. While the most successful HSHS student can enter college at the Ivy League level, the most successful CHS student can enter only at the junior college level. Thus, while HSHS serves as a college preparatory high school, and boasts a yearly average of 62% of its graduates entering a four-year college, CHS serves as a non-college preparatory/vocational high school, with almost all graduates entering the workforce or a junior college program.

Another difference between CHS and HSHS is that CHS offered a “Skills class” for those students needing extra help in a certain subject area and extra time to complete schoolwork. Most Skills students had one of a variety of learning disabilities, ranging from reading difficulties to Dyslexia. The structure of the class was rather relaxed: on any given day, one could variously find Carrie giving a brief lecture, the class watching a movie and having a discussion afterwards, or the students working individually on their respective school work.

### *Comparing Mainstream and Continuation School Support*

The point of all these discussions of school reform, restructuring, and changing of policies is that our current

system is not reaching all of our children. In addition to many personal and social problems that put children and youth at risk, the schools themselves also may contribute to pushing our young people out of the school doors before they are adequately trained for the working world (West, 1991, pp. 40-41).

The passage above raises the following troubling question: Even if it is acknowledged that some of the difference in the success rates between students from continuation and from main-stream high schools can be attributed to social and family factors outside of the schools, do the structure, programs, and services of the schools themselves provide an equal playing field for all students, or a field slanted against at risk students? To address this question I compared the perceptions of CHS students toward the mainstream high school (HSHS) and toward the non-mainstream high school (CHS). According to the achievement ideology, all students are on an equal playing field aiming for educational and occupational success. This belief assumes that if every youth works with equal diligence on his or her studies, he or she will have an equal chance at success. Such an assumption, however, overlooks the possibility that some students have barriers to their ability to work hard in school. For an "equal playing field to exist" the educational system must provide those with educational barriers *extra help* and support, so that equal ambition can translate into equal chance for success. Did CHS students, most of whom had personal and familial barriers to their educational and career aspirations, see HSHS, the mainstream high school they had previously attended, as having provided the extra support they needed to achieve educational success?

Spikey believed that it had not:

When I went to HSHS and when my brother went to HSHS, we had problems with attendance and stuff. HSHS didn't really want to help us. I only went there for a semester, and they didn't offer any help; you know, they didn't say "you need to improve your attendance." They just said, "we don't think this school is appropriate for you, you'd better go to Channing." They shove all their problem kids to Channing, even those that don't have big

problems, just attendance problems like me, they just want to get them out of their school. They are really bad about that. . . . For every problem I had at that school, they offered no help, they just pushed me over to Channing. If I'm not a perfect A student and a cheerleader, they don't want me there.

Spikey needed a teacher, a parent, a counselor, or an administrator to tell her about the importance of attendance in class and to help her address what may have been keeping her from school—a need that she felt was neglected before her referral to CHS.

Research shows that students also learn in a number of different ways. If an educational institution gives every student an equal opportunity to learn and succeed in school, different educational needs should be met and different learning styles should be accommodated. Spikey's experience at HSHS in that regard is also telling: "I did not like the teachers, and I did not like that school. They weren't teaching how I needed to learn. I'm more of a hands-on visual type person. Show me how to do something or I won't learn how to do it. And most of the teachers just like to lecture. I had one science teacher, she would lecture and lecture and lecture, and she would tell us what to do out of the book but didn't explain how to do it. She'd lecture about something we weren't even doing and say 'Ok, your homework is this page.' I need someone to tell me how to do it." According to Spikey, the teachers and administration at HSHS were not concerned with making sure their style of teaching was conducive to the learning needs of all students.

Although other CHS students were not so direct in their comments about HSHS, a very common feeling towards HSHS was animosity. The following interview excerpts provide examples of CHS students' views of HSHS:

**Andrea:** I don't like them [HSHS students]. Like I think they're a lot of trouble. . . . [HSHS students seem to think that they're better off without] all the people that go here . . . because [we] are nothing but drama and trouble. The teachers [there] don't care about kids like they do here. . . . They favor the jocks and the cheerleaders and everyone like that. I mean, here everyone is treated equal.

**Chris:** There are too many people [at HSHS]. There's peer pressure to have a certain image and a certain aspect on life. . . . At HSHS people want you to be someone you're not. . . . I didn't like the teachers, they get on your case for reasons that aren't important. There was this science teacher who, after I came to class two minutes late, gave me a dirty look and said I had to talk to him after class.

A common theme running throughout these comments and others is the feeling of ostracism that continuation students felt. Those CHS students who had gone to HSHS felt ostracized for not conforming to the "typical" HSHS image. CHS students rarely received passing grades at the mainstream high school, had imperfect attendance records, and were not members of student clubs on campus. Using Eckert's distinction between the Burnouts and the Jocks in the high school she studied, we can see that CHS students meet her definition of "Burnouts" in one way or another. The stereotypic Burnout "came from a working class home, enrolled primarily in general and vocational courses, smoked tobacco and pot, took chemicals, drank beer and hard liquor, skipped classes, and may have had occasional run-ins with the police" (p. 3). Although most CHS students met this definition only partially, it is Burnouts' role in the educational system about which I am primarily concerned. According to Eckert, Burnouts are those "who reject the hegemony of the school and in turn feel largely rejected by the school" (p. 2). CHS students commonly felt institutional rejection by mainstream education, but experienced institutional inclusion at the non-mainstream school.

### *Barriers to "Makin' It" in the Mainstream High School*

It seems evident from this data that mainstream high schools can play a deleterious role in at risk kids' ability to make it through high school. Those students on the lower end of the intra-school social stratification spectrum who needed extra help to overcome or accommodate the educational barriers at home felt abandoned by HSHS.

Mainstream high schools might institutionally reject Burnouts because of a desire to maintain a reputation for educational success by their students, something that is more challenging to achieve with stu-

dents who enter the schools with educational barriers. HSHS's website provided the public with a wide variety of information, including a brief description of the Hawthorne community, the school, and a follow-up study on graduates. The HSHS website described the Hawthorne community as "primarily a middle to upper-middle income community placing a high value on education." The school was described as "a 3-year, public, comprehensive high school with a reputation for academic excellence and an emphasis on preparation for college." The follow-up study reported that 62% of the class of 2000 went to four-year colleges or universities, while 26% went to two-year colleges or vocational programs (total: 88%). Such a description of HSHS suggests that the typical student is from a middle class or upper-middle class family, places a high value on education, receives an excellent academic experience, and goes on to a four-year college or university.

It goes without saying that the students at CHS did not live up to this standard of the typical mainstream student. Although I have no longitudinal data for CHS students, Gloria, a teacher who had been at CHS for over a decade, stated that graduates typically took a few years off after graduation, attended a junior college, and went on to a four-year university. Some CHS students (approximately 30%—no reliable records were available) did not receive their diplomas, choosing to take the GED or attend adult school. Many of these students later attended junior college and four-year universities. Graduates and former students often returned to Channing to report success. Some exceptionally successful graduates were medical students, Ph.D. candidates, and "techies" in the San Francisco Bay area.

Additionally, the Hawthorne Unified School District's Star Test Report showed a strong discrepancy in average scores between HSHS students and CHS students. In the year 2000, in the areas of reading, language arts, and math, HSHS students scored on average in the 71<sup>st</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup>, and 84<sup>th</sup> percentiles, respectively, while CHS students scored on average in the 20<sup>th</sup>, 34<sup>th</sup>, and 34<sup>th</sup> percentiles, respectively. If those students who do not meet the goals and academic expectations set by HSHS are sent to CHS, the Star averages of HSHS increase. An op-ed piece by *Sacramento Bee* editor Peter Schrag (2001), titled "SAT 9 days: California's thriving test-prep culture," indicates the stakes around pre-

serving a school like HSHS from at risk kids, such as those who are typically sent to CHS. According to Schrag, “[A] lot rides on the [standardized] test scores—money for teachers and schools, prestige (or humiliation, in case of failure) for administrators.” Given HSHS’s school philosophy and the enormous pressure riding on the test, it is not difficult to imagine that, either intentionally or by neglect, HSHS “weeded out” at risk students, who would have tended to decrease its Star Test averages. Such a finding would fit the cultural deprivation theory of school failure. If the public school system is based on middle class culture, with its values of academic success, talent, and good work habits (Ogbu, 1974, p. 6), then CHS students can be seen to have failed in the mainstream school because they did not live up to these cultural standards.

#### *Support for Educational Aspirations at the Continuation School*

CHS seemed to meet the needs of its students, particularly their needs for help in keeping on an academic track. CHS did not prepare its students to directly enter a four-year college or to enter certain professions, but it picked up to the best of its ability where the mainstream high school gave up. CHS worked for its students in ways that the mainstream high school did not. CHS students could not work under the atmosphere of HSHS: peer conflicts, instructional styles that were geared to normative learning abilities, attendance requirements, impersonal teachers, and a strict assignment and grading schedule.

In understanding why this is so, it will be useful first to examine how the youth felt about their transition from HSHS to Channing. The following comments, from two separate interviews, exemplify the contentment of CHS students concerning the change in academic atmosphere from that at HSHS. In response to my question, “How did you feel when you first started attending CHS?”, one student answered, “It’s shorter, easier, I can work at my own pace. When you have class 8 hours a day, you want to leave,” while another replied, “It’s a lot better than the High School. You don’t do as much and it’s easy to get your stuff done and get out. . . . [T]here’s less people, smaller classes. HSHS had too many rules, they were too up tight, and the school day was too long.”

But how exactly does CHS meet those needs of its students that were not met by the mainstream educational system? The CHS website described the school as “an extremely ‘student focused’ school with an emphasis on tolerance, self-esteem, problem-solving, and recognition of accomplishment. Each teacher is responsible for a portion of the student enrollment and serves as a ‘teacher-counselor’ to monitor student progress. Safety and security are recognizable qualities of the campus. All efforts are directed at making the campus and curriculum ‘student friendly’ and relevant to today’s learning needs.”

I witnessed this “student focused” emphasis daily at CHS. With most classes sized at ten or fewer students, each student was able to receive individual help from his or her teachers. Each student was also able to receive individual counseling during weekly “credit check” sessions. I sat in on such sessions regularly. Each CHS teacher had a set number of students he or she counseled. During “credit check” time a student spent one-on-one time with his or her teacher-counselor. The teacher-counselor had the student’s personal folder, which had a check list of credits needed to graduate on one side and a list of educational and career goals on the other (from the Personal Education Plans described earlier). The teacher-counselor and student discussed the week’s progress and the number of credits completed. If the student had met the expectation of completing at least two credits that week, he or she was congratulated and urged to continue the good work. Then the pair might discuss short-term future plans, if the student was approaching graduation that semester, or possible ways to increase credits outside of school. If the student had not met the two-unit expectation, they would discuss what the source of the problem might have been. Some students were unable to make it to school for two days the previous week. Others may have been unproductive, tired, or depressed. When students weren’t making credit check due to personal problems, CHS helped when intervention was appropriate. For example, the teachers at CHS helped Andrea find a support counselor and drug-rehabilitation group. Drug addiction is one example of a forceful barrier to the learning process. CHS supported Andrea during her rehabilitation and helped her overcome the barrier. Such dedication of the CHS staff can help students learn to see that high aspirations are within reach.

*Informational Resources at the Continuation School*

Because each Channing teacher also serves as a counselor to a portion of the student body, reviews her students' personal education plans weekly, and supports her students' future goals, each becomes part of the effort to paint a realistic picture for every student. Put another way, each teacher helps CHS students attain "aligned ambitions." One teacher, Gloria, instructed the required "career class" at Channing. In this class, students flip through junior college books and informational brochures, evaluating where they want to go after graduating from Channing (or passing the GED). Spikey describes the career class as follows: "Pretty much for me, I've found out so much through Channing. Gloria has all kinds of college pamphlets, I've found out which schools are for me. Meredith helps me get financial aid forms. Teachers here want to help kids that actually want to do something with their life, they help them as much as possible." The career class also sponsored professional speakers who told the kids about how they developed their careers. For example, in December all the afternoon students gathered in the portable classroom for a seminar about "starting your own business." The career class also had a Hawthorne University law student talk to the students about the education needed to pursue a career in law. Even though CHS students were far away from undertaking such projects, these career seminars at least began to bridge the gap between educational and career aspirations and a plan for achieving those goals.

Channing's student-focused approach, counseling, personal education plans, informal atmosphere, and career class seminars helped to motivate students. Channing provided an atmosphere conducive to helping students strive to "make it."

## PEER GROUP INFLUENCES

What influence do peer relations have on the CHS students? Ogbu argues that while students may be pushed by parents to succeed in school, this effort is "neutralized by the 'pull' of peer groups" (p. 132). However, Ogbu also finds that some youth are able to recognize bad influences from peers. I found that peers and peer groups play a strong role in shaping kids' goals, but that they did so in unexpected ways.

*Peer Group Activities*

A comment by James corroborated Ogbu's contention that students could recognize the effect of peer groups. When I asked him, "When you have a family of your own in the future, what kind of goals and advice will you have for your children?", James replied: "Don't hangout with uneducated, gang-related people. It's the people you hang out with that matter." From his past experience with delinquent peers, James had realized that his peers negatively influenced his life. Hoping to discover the typical peer group activities of CHS students, I asked each interviewee to describe a typical weekday and weekend. The most common responses were "getting high" or "smoking weed," "cutting classes" or "ditching school," and "partying with friends." Other common activities included going to raves, fighting, hanging out with significant others, and simply "hanging out" with friends. Andrea said most of her typical weekdays and weekends are spent with friends: "I wake up, go to school and talk to my friends [at school]. When I get done with school, I go downtown. Do you know where River Café is? Have you ever seen all those kids who hangout in the sitting area? That's all of us, we are all there. We all just hangout all day. . . Friday is when it all starts. We do the same things after school, but there's a lot of parties on the weekends. . . we'll go downtown and wait for an hour for our friends to pick us up and we'll go to a party and not get home until like 3am."

CHS students did not fill their free time with group study sessions. Importantly, however, consistent with Ogbu's (1974) findings, I found that the students' encounters with delinquent peer groups and peers who have little or no ambitions seemed to push them to leave the peer group or aspire to higher achievement levels. In other words, negative or delinquent peers led the kids I studied to double their efforts to make it, to not follow the fate of their peers. The following interview excerpts exemplify this point:

**James:** When we all got locked up and got out I guess I was the only one who started changing. I didn't get in trouble anymore, and he [a friend] started getting an adult record. With an adult record you can't get a job. Yeah, he can't even get a good job. I mean, I work at the University of Hawthorne data entry, and from that I'm going into the military, and from there I'll go on

to college. Then I told that fool that I don't know, he know he fucked up. In five years my friends, who are into all this fighting, they don't go to the high school or junior college. They will be either selling drugs, in jail, or bums.

**Andrea:** I don't want to be where my friends are now. You know, I have friends that are twenty-two and don't have a job. They didn't graduate. And what do they have now, to show that they did something in life? Nothing.

These were common interviewee responses. Carrie also saw detachment from peer groups as a pattern common to many CHS students: "One of our students just the other day said finally, 'I don't want to hangout with them anymore. I'm the only one who doesn't have a record. I'm the only one that isn't in jail right now. I'm the only one . . . who doesn't have a kid.' So, after seeing all of this and hanging out with that one side of the influence, it's thrown him clear one hundred and eighty degrees the other way. Now he says, 'I'm ready now, I'm going to make something, I'm going to do it.'" Comments from both students and teachers showed that students who were "making it" had the courage and wherewithal to detach themselves from their peer groups when thinking about their future plans.

It is important to note that peer group activities were not the only activities occupying CHS students' after-school time. Two students (of the thirteen students interviewed) lived on their own and thus spent time on individual survival and self-care activities that more typically might be taken care of by parents. Two students had their own children to care for, feed, and provide for. Five students were employed, working between fifteen and forty hours per week. Chris, who cared for his disabled mom, said he rarely hangs out with people his own age and was mostly by himself. For these students, if school was further down on their priority lists, it was not peer groups that pushed them, but rather non-school related responsibilities. Carrie explained this situation: "There's a few who are on their own, who take care of themselves. So they're busy meeting their basic needs. They have to survive, they have to find their food, and they have to find shelter. So school does take somewhat of a back seat."

*Role Models*

I found that CHS students often looked to a member of their peer group or a person in their age group who stood out as a role model. For example, Woudy saw his girlfriend as a role model: “My girlfriend went to Channing, she graduated from Channing. She said it helped her out a lot. She wanted to go to college and she ended up going to college because she came here. She slacked off a lot and then she started working. So I came here [to CHS] to try that.” Woudy could relate to his girlfriend and believed that, if she could achieve her educational goals, then he could, too. Andrea found similar inspiration in a friend who had previously experimented with drugs, as Andrea herself had, but ultimately achieved her educational dream of being accepted as an undergraduate at UCLA: “My best friend, Lizzy, wants to go to UCLA. She’s really smart. She’s graduating next year from Windland High. She was in a lot of trouble, she was in drug rehab. She just made a turn-around and everyone is so happy for her. I’m really happy for her, she inspired me. Going through something really bad and doing something good, and graduating and going to UCLA. That’s just wonderful.”

Other students were inspired by being the role model in their peer groups or within their family. For example, Suzanne had two older sisters who never completed high school. She was inspired by their lives to be the first child to complete high school. Suzanne planned to graduate from CHS and go directly to River Junior College to attend the veterinarian assistant program. Eventually, she hoped to become a veterinarian.

James was also a role model to his peers. In the past he associated and spent most of his time with a local gang. While all of his peers in the gang were still getting locked up in juvenile institutions and adult prisons, he claimed to be the only one who had changed for the better. James hoped to join the Marines, go to college, and ultimately become a computer programmer.

Peer groups influenced the educational and career aspirations of CHS students in several unanticipated ways. First, negatively speaking, peer group activities impacted the amount of time spent on schoolwork outside the school. Second, however, low peer aspirations inspired my interviewees to have ambitions higher than those of their peers. Third, peer role models inspired others to achieve similar goals and told others

that such goals are in reach. Fourth, teenagers were inspired by being role models in their peer groups. It is important to emphasize that peers can have both positive and negative influence. In my case study, peers had motivating effects for most youth, although the motivation was both negative (“I don’t want to end up like X”) and inspirational (“I’d like to be like Y”).

## **Conclusions**

### SUMMARY

My findings have provided insight into the sources in a youth’s life that help him or her develop a sense of the possible and the drive to “make it” in school. It is the ubiquitous sense of the possible, whether conveyed by the school, the family, or peers, that kept this group of youth striving to make it. Channing High students faced mixed influences from the school, the family, and peer groups. While the mainstream environment was likely to level their aspirations, the Channing kids were able to draw from the encouraging factors provided at their alternative school, in their families, or within their peer groups. The findings on peer groups were particularly surprising because researchers have generally found that peer group values and activities breed group aspirations. However, I found that peers could find positive role models in generally negative peer groups. Also, students detached their individual values from their peer group values when pondering goals for their futures. On the whole encouraging factors were powerful enough to buoy their efforts to make it at CHS and to sustain a surprising level of optimism.

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During George W. Bush’s campaign for the American Presidency, his famous line for education reform was “No child will be left behind” (Sack and Dao, 2000). Parts of his proposal echo California Governor Gray Davis’s proposal for an “Era of Higher Expectations.” But what about the students who have already been left behind? More standardized tests and college grants for low-income students will not help. What about the at risk students who have to hike uphill on their educational journey? From this study we know that those at risk are able to

maintain optimism in their goals for the future. Now the question is, how can we make use of this optimism and help at risk kids further develop aligned ambitions and achieve their goals?

While families provide at risk students with minimal support or informational resources and while peer groups inspire high achievement only sporadically through role models and negative influence, it is the educational system that has the highest probability of helping at risk kids develop high aspirations and of providing the resources to attain their goals. In this case study, CHS provided stability in the students' lives, above the family and peer group. While peer groups could change and parents could give up on their children, CHS couldn't give up on their students and provided continual support. Because continuation school is the institution that provides the most stability to at risk kids and seems to provide them with the resources needed to maintain optimism, it is within the continuation school that I perceive the possibility for meaningful educational reform. It is also important to note that educational failure was not necessarily aligned with social class, the factor to which many educational reforms are currently directed. CHS students came from low, middle, and upper-middle social classes.

One recommendation for reform would be that schools such as CHS establish a mentoring program for their students. An EAOP Program, such as the one at the University of California, would be an appropriate resource for developing a mentoring program. Each continuation student could be paired with a university undergraduate who could answer questions about applying to college (or junior college), negotiating college life, and juggling adult responsibilities. During the course of my study at CHS, several students identified with me as a young adult and seemed to have the attitude, "if you can 'make it' in college, I can too."

A second recommendation is that continuation high schools should enhance their career classes. The impact that career class speakers have on continuation students might increase if speakers have traveled the same educational track as the students. For example, the continuation high school could invite alumni to give presentations about their educational and occupational journey after graduation. The career class could have workshops focused on interview skills or resume guide-

lines. These additional services might help to align students' ambitions, causing them to be more academically engaged with school and more realistic about how to achieve future educational and occupational goals, thereby further enabling them to achieve their aspirations.

We can help continuation schools further their ability to meet the needs of at risk students if we point education reform in their direction. Government funding and social support are essential.

#### FURTHER RESEARCH

The following questions remain unanswered or only partially answered: How can we minimize the number of students who are at risk of dropping out of school? Is a continuation school the best place for at risk students, or is it possible for their needs to be met at a mainstream school? What kind of education reform is most appropriate for helping at risk students? What are the psycho-emotional costs of ghettoizing at risk kids in segregated continuation high schools? To find concrete answers to these questions, further research is needed.

#### A FINAL NOTE

It is important to recognize those students who have been and are likely to be "left behind" by the educational system. This research has provided some insight to sources that increase at risk students' efforts to "make it" in school. The students studied here were left behind by the mainstream educational system, but maintained optimism primarily through a continuation school, but secondarily through their family and peers. I hope that either I or other researchers will take the opportunity to delve deeper into the issues of the achievement gaps among students, of possible ways to prevent institutional rejection by the mainstream schools, and of solutions for helping continuation school students achieve their aspirations.

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#### Notes

1. Names of schools, cities, and participants have been changed, and the school internet addresses referred to later in this essay have been withheld, for purposes of confidentiality.



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