

OVER-AGE,
UNDER-CREDITED
STUDENTS AND PUBLIC
CHARTER SCHOOLS:

AN EXPLORATION OF SUCCESSES, STRATEGIES,
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPANSION



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INTRODUCTION

America has a dropout crisis, and it is measured in many ways. There are 1.8 million young adults ages 16–21 who neither are enrolled in school nor have completed a high school education.¹ More than 7,000 students drop out of high school every school day, adding up to more than 1 million students each year.² One in five high school students does not graduate with his/her peers.³ Whichever statistic is used, the dropout crisis is gaining momentum as an area of focus for America’s public school system. Federal-level initiatives are pushing states to implement myriad strategies to prevent students from falling through the cracks and dropping out. Most of these strategies focus on keeping students in school and on track to boost graduation rates.

However, dropout prevention strategies cannot reach a critical subset of students—those who have disconnected from education. Some students will invariably fall through the cracks, leaving states in need of options that work for struggling students who are looking for a way back into public education.⁴ Referred to as over-age and under-credited (OU), these students share a common academic background of struggling in traditional schools and failing to keep up with their intended graduating cohort. Though every state has some form of an alternative education option for these students, most offer limited programming, and many fail to produce any better outcomes.⁵

As it has done for many marginalized student populations, the public charter school movement has started to pick up the mantle for serving OU students. Though there is a significant lack of comprehensive data on this subset of students in any public school setting, a few public charter schools across the country have models for successfully re-engaging OU students. Public charter schools were founded on the idea of serving as “laboratories of innovation” within the public school system. To meet this goal, charter schools are given autonomy over personnel, operations, and budget, which leads to more freedom to design their educational program. This freedom allows them to try new strategies or tailor the school environment. A small but ever-expanding group of



public charter schools has seized on the benefits that this autonomy and flexibility can offer OU students, creating an alternative to the traditional school setting, where these students failed.

While select schools, like those profiled in this brief, are finding success, there is a lack of specific data on OU students, OU-focused public charter schools, and why certain approaches are working. Nevertheless, OU-focused public charter schools are finding their way to a common combination of strategies to re-engage these disconnected students. Competency-based progression, project-based learning, and real-world application of classroom learning are all standard educational approaches in these schools, along with measurement of success through alternative accountability frameworks. In addition, flexible calendars, extended learning time, and holistic student supports are critical elements of the schools’ programs. While some of these approaches may not be unique to public charter schools or education for OU students, the combination seems to be working for these OU-focused schools, and the public charter school premise gives them the autonomy to offer it. Public charter schools are serving as perhaps the most open, flexible, and yet tailored “on ramp” for disconnected students looking for way to get back on track.

This brief will explore OU students and how they are being served in public charter schools, using profiles of successful schools across the country. While all of these schools use a common combination of strategies, we will focus on highlighting one strategy in each school to raise up for further exploration what seems to be working. The paper also outlines a few additional ideas that can foster the expansion of these types of schools so more struggling students have access to successful models.

THE ISSUE

Whether they have fallen behind in school or dropped out altogether, over-age and under-credited (OU) students are defined as not having the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade.⁶ For instance, an OU youth may be enrolled in 11th grade for the second time or be 17 years old and still registered as a high school sophomore. These students have struggled in traditional academic settings, and many ultimately choose to leave them. Even those high school dropouts who have left school for reasons unrelated to academic struggles become OU almost immediately upon departure, as they stop earning credits with their intended graduating cohort.

FEW OPTIONS FOR SUCCESS

On the national scale, students who struggle in a traditional school environment are given few other options for success.⁷ Most struggling students show signs long before they drop out: Academic failure, absenteeism, and chronic behavior challenges are all considered to be early warning indicators for dropouts. Most of the country's dropout crisis remediation efforts are focused on creating systems to address these issues earlier, thereby reducing the number of students failed by the education system.⁸ However, those who slip through the cracks are faced with a lack of effective credit recovery options to help them get back on track. In nearly every state, progress through coursework hinges on a "time-in-seat" measure; if students miss enough classes, they must repeat the course, regardless of their level of content mastery, which is a disincentive to graduate.

Alternatives outside of traditional high schools offer little refuge in many states, as they are often understaffed and under-resourced.⁹ Though data on alternative schools and programs in states with weaker support structures are generally sparse, what little are available often paint a picture of, at best, short-term options for students and, at worst, a brief final stop before total disconnection from education. As one example, a report from the California Legislative Analyst's Office finds that dropout rates in alternative



schools in the state are at least 2.5 times higher than the statewide dropout rate.¹⁰ This alternative system, comprised of community schools, community day schools, continuation schools, court schools, and independent study arrangements, targets the state's most challenging students, enrolling at least 10–15 percent of all students each year.¹¹ However, site visits to a cross-section of these programs revealed a system fraught with difficulties, ranging from effective programs hampered by limited resources to "situations of structured failure"—alternative programs so neglected and ineffective that they most often result in dropouts.¹²

ECONOMIC BURDEN OF DROPOUTS

Beyond the detriment to each individual failed by the public school system, communities that fail to support these students' success face an economic cost. Individuals who do not earn a high school diploma experience higher rates of unemployment and incarceration; increased health risks; and lower lifetime income, civic engagement, and homeownership rates.^{13,14} Unemployment rates are three times those of individuals with some postsecondary education,



CHARTER SCHOOLS AND OU STUDENTS: PROFILES OF SUCCESS

The fundamental premise of public charter schools is to provide autonomy in exchange for accountability for results.¹⁹ They are given the autonomy to improve student achievement through measures less frequently employed in traditional school settings and are known for groundbreaking work in tailored curricula and next-generation learning models.²⁰ The freedoms that public charter schools have lend themselves to the types of school that OU students need to find success.

and even those high school dropouts who find employment earn significantly less. High school dropouts place a considerable economic and social burden on their communities, calculated in view of costs such as lost tax revenue, criminal justice expenses, and welfare and social services.¹⁵ Recent estimates conclude that each dropout will impose an economic burden of \$258,240 and a social burden of \$755,900 over the course of his/her lifetime.¹⁶

These remarkable statistics are set against a backdrop of changing expectations for America's workforce. By 2018, nearly two-thirds of jobs in the U.S. workforce will require not only a high school diploma but also some postsecondary education.¹⁷ While dropout prevention programs are now working to target students through early warning indicators, students who have already, or will invariably, slip through the cracks are still left with a tenuous and disjointed system of options.¹⁸ This is a missed opportunity not only for these students but also for their communities.

While traditional schools and conventional district alternatives have perhaps failed to help OU students realize this untapped potential, the OU-focused public charter schools are showing promise. Case studies of specific public charter schools that are focused on re-engaging the OU youth show consistent success. The following section details how dropout recovery has grown within the public charter landscape, which offers a combination of flexibility and innovation to best meet the needs of struggling students.

Though the public charter schools focused on OU students and high school dropouts vary in size, demographics, and location, they all incorporate certain key elements to re-engage struggling students. Foundationally, they employ individualized learning plans, meeting the students where they are, and working together to move forward.²¹ Many former dropouts or disengaged students enter these schools with basic literacy and math skills far below grade level. These public charter schools use a host of common strategies, such as competency-based progression, project-based learning, real-world application, flexible calendars, holistic student supports, and alternative accountability measures, to bring students up to grade level by first meeting them at their current level. The following section will take a closer look at each strategy through case studies of success in OU-focused charter schools.

COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRESSION

School for Integrated Academics & Technologies (SIATech)

Mission: We provide a premier high school dropout recovery program engaging students through relationship-focused, high-tech, and rigorous learning experiences resulting in Real Learning for Real Life™.

SIATech is a public charter high school network that serves more than 4,000 students at campuses nationwide. Developed in 1998 as a partnership with the federal JobCorps program, workforce development is a central element of all SIATech schools. The majority of SIATech students are youth ages 16–24 who have dropped out of traditional high school but are committed to re-engaging in education.

One part of SIATech’s innovative curriculum is the use of competency-based programs that shift student progression from seat time to mastery of content.²² Competency-based instruction allows students to accelerate credit attainment in areas that they can master quickly, while spending more time on concepts that they find to be more difficult. For OU youth, this approach makes particular sense, as many have already attended some portion of the classes for a given course. Mastery-based systems also ensure that students have actually mastered concepts that they will need to be prepared for success in the next level of coursework, contributing to student persistence in academics.²³ Competency-based instruction is critical for the accelerated credit recovery that OU students need.²⁴

SIATech has used competency-based instruction to further individualize student learning, even developing an accompanying individual student growth model to measure learning gains. Each student is assessed upon enrollment and multiple times throughout each year through short-cycle testing periods. Students’ expected learning gains are calculated and used to measure student and aggregate schoolwide growth.²⁵ Teachers and students alike use assessment information to track learning and “focus in on strategies and behaviors that will support goal achievement.”²⁶ This is all done in service to each student’s individual progress through material, as students move forward only when skills and concepts have been mastered. This approach has served SIATech’s schools well, with nearly 14,000 graduates and students gaining an average of 2.5 grade levels in math and 1.5 grade levels in reading after one year in the program.²⁷

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

YouthBuild Charter School of California

Mission: Our mission is to cultivate collaborative learning communities in which every student has the right to an authentic education, plays a meaningful role in creating positive social change, and becomes an active participant in working towards just conditions for all.

YouthBuild Charter School of California is comprised of 15 campuses (1,600 students) across the state, growing out of the national nonprofit organization YouthBuild. Specifically aimed at students who have been “pushed out” of traditional schools, YouthBuild Charter School offers a community action-oriented curriculum built around project-based learning. At the beginning of each trimester, teachers work together to create one essential question that guides and engages learners in every course. This question eventually guides students through a community action project, which engages the entire school site with its surrounding community.

Project-based learning is used by many public charter schools focused on OU youth as a way to ask students to become active participants in their own learning process. This delivery method looks different from most traditional school models, though it has been introduced in some. It provides students a sense of ownership and gives them an adult level of autonomy and responsibility. Project-based learning focuses on deeper issues, themes, or problems that cannot be answered quickly. Instead, students are expected to take charge of their learning and become responsible for the planning, execution, and completion of the project. This process builds analytic, communications, and teamwork skills and emphasizes real-world skills like problem solving and self-management.²⁸ Simultaneously, the process reinforces students’ skills and provides teachable moments in areas where students have remaining gaps. Teachers provide oversight and facilitation, leaving them much more room to differentiate instruction.

Research has shown that project-based learning engages and motivates students, leading to higher achievement and students outscoring their traditionally educated peers on standardized tests.²⁹ YouthBuild Charter School is showing that this approach can work—the school’s graduation rate is 50 percent higher than the national average for students who have dropped out and subsequently returned

to school. With more than 1,100 graduates to date, YouthBuild Charter School gives students an 85 percent chance of graduating after a year and a half in the program.³⁰

REAL-WORLD APPLICATION **High School for Recording Arts (HSRA)**

Mission: The mission of HSRA is to provide youth the opportunity to achieve a high school diploma through the exploration and operation of the music business and other creative endeavors.

Housed in the country's first public charter school state, HSRA, of St. Paul, MN, began in 1998.³¹ HSRA serves more than 200 students who may have dropped out or been pushed out of traditional schools each year, focusing on individually tailored curricula and project-based learning. However, most unique is HSRA's approach to keeping education relevant to students through workforce development. The school boasts several student enterprises rooted in the music business, including music production facilities, a record label, and a marketing business. Students have the opportunity to gain real-world experiences through these enterprises, but they must earn time doing so through completion of academic projects in core content areas.³² However, even these projects take into consideration how music and the music business engage HSRA students; for instance, language arts classes may include work on student lyrics.³³

Not only does this approach offer students a chance to develop life and business skills, but it also explicitly links academics to the real world. Providing curricular relevance is an important way to re-engage disconnected youth, who often cannot see how sitting through courses that they have already failed will help them achieve short-term goals, such as income and housing. Evidence also shows that, through project-based learning with real-world application, students "become better researchers, problem solvers, and higher-order thinkers."³⁴

In one study, students were asked to submit designs for a playhouse in their geometry course. When architects reviewed their plans, 84 percent were judged to be accurate enough to build. These students not only performed well on traditional tests but also transferred their knowledge to real-world, authentic application of geometric principles.³⁵ Workforce development and curricular relevance is a

central element of many charter schools looking to re-engage students. HSRA's particular approach to this element has seen great success over the past 15 years, graduating 72.5 percent of its students. In the last four years, 100 percent of its graduates have been accepted into college.

FLEXIBLE CALENDAR AND EXTENDED LEARNING TIME **Phoenix Charter Academy Network**

Mission: The Phoenix Network operates schools that challenge disconnected students with rigorous academics and relentless support so that they can recast themselves as resilient, self-sufficient adults in order to succeed in high school, college, and beyond.

Launched in 2006, Phoenix Charter Academy Network, in Chelsea and Lawrence, MA, specifically serves students most at risk for dropping out. The Phoenix Charter Academy Network operates three schools, serving more than 300 OU students, 54 percent of whom are former dropouts.³⁶ Among its many innovative approaches, Phoenix makes use of the freedom charter schools have in Massachusetts to set their own school calendar. Students participate in an extended day and year, attending school from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. most days and attending for 190 days per year. Phoenix also recruits for quarterly enrollment, offering students four entry points each year. This approach gives students not only more time to learn but also less "off" time to disengage from school.³⁷

As OU youth are, by definition, over-age for their intended grade, a crucial part of their re-engagement is the opportunity to earn credits at an accelerated pace. While specific academic approaches can cater to this need, extended learning time is another strategy that many charter schools focused on OU youth use to help move students forward in their academic careers.³⁸ Phoenix's extended calendar and fairly open entry strategy is allowing the school and its students to find success. The network reports that 100 percent of graduates have been accepted to college, and more than 70 percent of students earned Proficient or Advanced scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

Our Piece of the Pie (OPP®) Inc.—Path Academy

Mission: The mission of Path Academy is to re-engage over-age, under-credited students in education, supporting them through mastery of the critical skills necessary for success in college, career, and community.

OPP has traveled a perhaps less-conventional road to managing a charter school focused on OU youth. A successful, community-based youth development agency, OPP brought its signature approach, Pathways to Success, into high schools beginning in 2009. Now operating a partnership high school with the Hartford Public Schools; a contract school in Bloomfield, CT; and soon-to-open Path Academy charter school in Windham, CT, OPP's school models all focus exclusively on OU youth. All of the models are founded on Pathways to Success, but the most recent iteration will allow OPP to step entirely away from the traditional school experience, employing innovative academic approaches to re-engage struggling students.

Despite differences in academic programs, OPP has remained committed to its Pathways to Success approach in each school setting. Pathways to Success, in its original form, consists of three components—youth development, education, and workforce development. In particular, the youth development element is crucial for this student population, which often deals with challenges beyond academics. Many OU students are justice involved, pregnant or parenting, working, battling mental illness, or facing any number of additional risk factors.³⁹ The youth development component of OPP's Pathways to Success provides students with holistic supports and wraparound services to combat these barriers to success through each student's youth development specialist (YDS).⁴⁰ The YDS works through each student's specific needs, acting as the central hub for the individualized coordination of schoolwide and communitywide services. YDSs take on attendance outreach,⁴¹ personal development, parent engagement, and student access to services through multiple community partners.⁴² They work to connect students with anything that will boost students' academic success, from child care to transportation and health services to food and shelter.

The youth development-centered Pathways approach has been showing successful results in OPP's

community-based settings for nearly a decade. One example of this success is that 82 percent of OPP's youth graduate from high school, compared to the average of 71 percent in the agency's hometown of Hartford, CT. Not only that, but 77 percent of eligible OPP youth also go on to enroll in postsecondary education programs. At OPP's partnership school, the Pathways program is affecting academic success as well. Last year, the average credit accumulation rate was 83.3 percent, compared to an average of 58.2 percent at students' previous high schools. Holistic, wraparound supports are seen as a critical element of most dropout prevention and recovery schools, helping students to remain focused on academic success.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Each of these profiled charter schools is experiencing success by internal measures, but most have struggled to meet state-level expectations. As schools that, by design, focus on students who have already disengaged from education, charter schools serving OU students may fall short on typical measures of student performance, such as state standardized tests. However, this point-in-time measure does not reflect the considerable gains that these schools make when bringing students up from, for instance, a third-grade reading level to a seventh-grade reading level in one year. While these students may not perform well on a standardized test for 10th-grade reading, their personal academic gains have been remarkable and engaging.

A few states have been working toward separate alternative accountability systems for several years to avoid painting this inaccurate picture. For instance, Ohio has instituted a separate report card for its alternative schools, which acknowledges the specific challenges that alternative schools face in serving disconnected students. The new report card captures extended graduation rates (five- through eight-year rates), includes a student growth measure (alongside the standard performance measure), and reduces attendance benchmarks.⁴³ Similar approaches are being implemented in some metropolitan districts as well, including Washington, D.C.; Denver, CO; Chicago, IL; and Portland, OR.⁴⁴

However, these alternative accountability frameworks are limited to a small handful of states and have been slow to emerge in others following the evolution of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Despite the



additional freedom 42 states and D.C. have been granted under recent NCLB waivers, none have been able to create the separate system that alternative schools need to see accurate measures of success.⁴⁵ Although these waivers exempt states from certain Adequate Yearly Progress requirements, new state accountability frameworks are still using standard measures of student achievement, even if thresholds of success under such measures have been changed.⁴⁶

The OU-focused charter schools profiled on the previous pages are clearly supporting struggling students to achieve newfound success with innovative academic models. These schools and organizations have found a way to make charter schools focused on OU students work, given the opportunities within their current environments. However, without certain underpinning supports, they are able to reach only a fraction of the students that need their school models. The lack of these supports presents a challenge in extending to all possible OU students innovative solutions that have proven successful. Without certain key policy shifts, the innovations proving successful in these “labs” will not be replicated. Perhaps even more important, without policy shifts, even the limited work already being done may not be *recognized*. The following section outlines four critical policy considerations to support the work of charter schools focused on re-engaging some of America’s most underserved students.

ISSUES TO EXPLORE FOR EXPANSION

As illustrated through the previous school profiles, charter schools committed to serving OU students are already instituting crucial practical strategies to re-engage struggling students and get them back on the path to success. Although there is a lack of national data on how many OU-focused charter schools exist, what strategies they are using, and why certain approaches are finding success, examples like the schools highlighted on the previous pages show that the public charter community is taking on the challenge of serving OU students. However, without supports to encourage expansion, this success will continue to be seen in only small pockets. While there are many issues to reflect on, we present here four considerations for further exploration that could help to facilitate the creation and growth of OU-focused public charter schools.

CONSIDERATION 1: UNDERSTANDING THE POPULATION AND WHAT WORKS

First and foremost, to truly best serve OU students, they must be understood. OU students have not historically been a “data point” for specific collection and consideration. While each state knows the percentage of students who fail to graduate each year, most have limited data on the students who have dropped out or fallen behind, where they end up, or what strategies work for them and why. Through work by America’s Promise Alliance, Dr. Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins’ Everyone Graduates Center, and others, students who have dropped out or fallen behind are beginning to come into focus as an opportunity for the country to improve the success of its education system. However, data on these students are still inconsistently collected and difficult to find and compare on a national scale.

This brief offers profiles of select, OU-focused public charter schools because comprehensive data on these schools and the students they serve are not available. These data must be collected to prove which strategies are successful and illustrate why they are re-engaging students. This information will allow successful models to be replicated, offering struggling students an effective option to get back on track to high school graduation.

CONSIDERATION 2: FACILITATING PARTNERSHIPS FOR COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES

To truly make a space for OU students in the public charter school landscape, policy must change to facilitate partnerships among separate state oversight agencies and between these agencies and charter schools to serve students and their families. Public charter schools that are offering students a “one-stop shop” experience to access comprehensive supports for themselves and their families are succeeding in re-engaging disconnected youth and their parents and are seeing increased student achievement.

Research affirms the benefit of comprehensive services in student academic achievement. For instance, studies show that “health risks and academic risks impact each other, but health interventions narrow achievement disparities.”⁴⁷ Longstanding models, such as the Harlem Children’s Zone, have been built on this strategy and continue to see gains in student growth and performance compared to students without this assistance. The importance of wraparound services has also been recognized at the federal level throughout the years, with the support of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, community schools, and Promise Neighborhoods. Though they require different tactics for provision of services, all of these models are founded on the understanding that students must be surrounded by the necessary developmental services to find academic success.

This need is particularly acute for OU students, who are often struggling with issues such as poverty, parenting, and criminal activity, all of which contribute to truancy and a disconnection from education.⁴⁸

Due to these risk factors, OU students and their families are often involved with more than one area of state support/oversight, and these areas rarely work together to provide the most comprehensive, efficient, and effective services to support student success. As

a narrow example, a youth may be involved with justice/rehabilitation system for a criminal offense and be assigned a truancy officer through the education system. However, these systems typically do not have the capability to interact, so no one is acting as a central hub for services and outreach to determine and right the root cause of both issues. This example only skims the surface of the many areas in which OU students and dropouts are often involved or in need of assistance. The patterns evident in research on OU students suggest that they have a wide range of behavioral characteristics that would make them unlikely to be assisted by a single reform or policy program.⁴⁹ However, few of these programs are given the capacity to connect and create a single plan for a youth’s future success.

Wraparound services are a crucial element of the success of the OU-focused public charter schools described in the previous section. All of these schools have worked to forge relationships with state agencies and community-based organizations to ensure that the schools are prepared to holistically support their students. In addition, they have taken advantage of the freedom that the public charter model allows to prioritize funding differently from traditional schools and even raise additional funds to help cover the additional costs of comprehensive services. These schools often funnel resources toward fashioning themselves as a central hub for student services from all areas of the community. State policies facilitating these partnerships will help public charter schools focused on OU youth offer students the holistic supports that they need to find academic success.

CONSIDERATION 3: PROVIDING EQUITABLE FUNDING

Public charter school funding varies widely across the nation but rarely matches the level of funding for traditional schools.⁵⁰ Some states fund public charters similarly to other public schools, including them in the state education funding formula. For instance, last year, California created a new weighted student funding system and included public charter schools.⁵¹ Historically, public charter schools in California had been underfunded by hundreds of dollars per student. The new funding formula has given them the same “base grant” as traditional schools, even allowing for the additional weighted funding given to school systems for students with risk factors, such as poverty, involvement in the foster system, or status as English language learners.



However, these additional weights are given to public charter schools by offering only the same funding level as the school's authorizer or (for multiple site schools) the poorest district with a public charter school site. While this rationale may serve some public charter schools well, for those aiming specifically at the most at-risk, struggling students, funding is cut short of what traditional schools would get to serve the same population. One example is SIATech, a school profiled in this brief. SIATech runs schools with 100 percent of students from very low-income families. However, no district in the state can match this demographic, so SIATech is not funded at 100 percent weighted per-pupil reimbursement. Other states fund public charter schools through the standard education formula, such as Colorado, Minnesota, and New Jersey, face similar per-pupil funding shortfalls.⁵²

Still, this approach in California is one of the better mechanisms nationwide. Some other states oblige public charter schools to negotiate a per-pupil funding level through their charter contract or state appropriation process.⁵³ In still others, like Connecticut, the legislature sets a per-pupil reimbursement rate during each biennium budget process, through a single line-item appropriation. This calculation limits

not only the per-student funding amount but also the number of "slots" that will be funded for the year. This set dollar amount is the same for each student, regardless of risk factors that would garner additional funding in traditional district schools. It falls far short of the amount that traditional schools would get to educate the same student, with public charters historically receiving only 75 percent of what districts would be reimbursed.⁵⁴

Public charter schools must be equitably funded. This essential policy change is not a battle unique to public charter schools that serve OU students but may be the most critically needed for this subset of the charter landscape. In fact, public charter schools focused on OU students face even greater fiscal challenges than many other public charter schools, as their student populations have significant barriers to overcome. The strategies that work for OU students are costly. OU students require smaller class sizes to build engaging relationships, alternative accountability systems to ensure rigor within groundbreaking academic delivery strategies, and the provision of wraparound services and workforce development to maintain relevance. Some of the most successful models also offer extended days and years to encourage engagement, requiring more staff time than traditional schools. These additional costs are certainly not taken into consideration as states fund the public charter schools that are offering to take on the challenge of disconnected youth. Instead, schools are forced to raise funds through donations or grants—funding streams that are often willing to support start-up of innovative education models but cannot provide ongoing operational subsidies.

Every student deserves the same chance to succeed, regardless of the environment in which he or she is best supported to do so. Policy solutions must afford public charter schools, at the very least, funding that is equitable to their traditional counterparts in the public school system.

CONSIDERATION 4: ALLOWING ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

Most public charter laws allow a great deal of flexibility for what happens daily within the schools. However, public charter schools are by and large expected to meet the same accountability measures as traditional schools. As previously noted, only a select

few states have actually created separate systems of accountability for alternative schools (which include public charter schools like those focused on OU students). Some charter authorizers have adopted similar alternative frameworks to use during the renewal process, but they acknowledge that they can do only so much to affect accountability measures and need state-level policies to help them support schools targeting challenging populations.⁵⁵ The vast majority of states are still assessing these schools by the same measures as traditional schools with “traditional” students. These measures do not accurately reflect the work accomplished and gains achieved in public charter schools focused on students who are far behind grade level in credit accumulation and, most often, basic skills.

For schools serving OU students in particular, alternative accountability measures are a critical extension of the unique curricula, school culture, and next-generation learning opportunities that charter schools afford.⁵⁶ Evaluating the performance of public charter schools focused on these students requires both a wider range of measures and a shift in how certain measures are weighted in terms of factoring overall success.⁵⁷ Research in these areas indicates that the measures must be broad enough to include academic, behavioral, and qualitative measures of student achievement and must be weighted to focus on growth and how that factors into postsecondary readiness, rather than point-in-time performance.⁵⁸

Two specific recommendations can be derived from this research, which must be considered in building the foundation for an alternative accountability system. First, measures of performance should be holistic in nature, taking into account not only academics but also multiple measures that particularly apply to students who have previously disengaged from school. Measures including attendance, credit accumulation, career readiness, behavior, and social/emotional skills not only are a crucial part of how the school understands each student but, when aggregated, can also be a crucial part of how the school is understood by the system.⁵⁹

This holistic performance index must also consider growth its main objective, rather than point-in-time measures. Although the end goal for any student would be to earn a high school diploma, even those re-engaged students who are never able to graduate will still progress toward higher levels of postsecondary readiness through any period of



re-engagement. Public charter schools serving OU students and high school dropouts are focused on this element of success for re-engaged students, particularly as many use competency-based progression. Accordingly, the baseline from which a student or aggregated school performance level has grown must be considered in the context of an alternative accountability framework.⁶⁰

Second, and perhaps the largest accountability hurdle for schools focused on OU youth and dropouts, standard cohort graduation rates of four years exclude students who fall behind or drop out. Without cohort graduation rates that extend past four years, many students are discounted, leaving public charter schools focused on disengaged students holding the bag for previous district failings.⁶¹ Ten states have won waivers to consider five-year cohort measures—a start on the right path for alternative schools such as these. However, even a five-year measure may be meaningless in the dropout recovery context, as research shows that many students may take longer than five years to attain a high school diploma, and the actual graduation rate for re-engaged dropouts is most often in the 18–23 percent range.⁶²



Public charter schools focused on OU students should be rewarded rather than penalized when they succeed in re-engaging these “long-term” students and supporting them through high school graduation. An alternative accountability framework must consider a way to measure the cohort of former dropouts who have re-engaged, no matter which cohort they may have enrolled with at the first start of their high school career. This goal could be accomplished by creating a separate “re-engagement cohort,” which would include any former dropout who has re-engaged for one academic year.⁶³ That is to say, after re-engaging for one academic year, a student would be taken from his/her original cohort and placed into this “extended cohort” to be measured for success from that point forward. The re-engagement cohort would both differentiate students who are making a significant second attempt and remove an important accountability disincentive for schools considering re-enrollment.

These alternative accountability measures are critical for the continued success and future expansion of public charter schools committed to serving OU youth and dropouts. Without them, this work will not be recognized, and the schools will continue to be seen as ineffective. Although some states and authorizers have implemented alternative accountability systems that reduce the crippling effect traditional measures have on these unconventional schools, a truly alternative framework must be implemented to best serve OU students.

CONCLUSION

Despite positive trends in graduation rates, the dropout crisis is still a real problem across the country. Students who have already fallen behind or dropped out are most often left to fend for themselves in largely ineffective and limited alternative options. This student population represents untapped economic potential. If served properly, it could transform from being an economic and social burden to one resulting in increased spending, tax revenue, and job creation.

A small subset of public charter schools are taking on the challenge of developing effective alternatives for OU students. These schools are using the flexibility of the public charter model to create learning environments that work for OU students, as evidenced by profiles of successful schools across the country. Though they are succeeding in small pockets, their impact could be far more widespread with the right supports. OU student-specific data collection, partnerships for wraparound services, equitable funding, and alternative accountability measures will encourage more schools to take the risk and reap the rewards of offering struggling students a way to get back on track. These policies will support the growth and creation of a true space for OU students within the public charter landscape—a place of critical importance for students who cannot find the right academic home anywhere else.

So, why public charter schools for OU youth? Part of this answer lies in the unique autonomies that public charter schools are afforded, leading them to be able to tailor school environments to specific populations, such as OU students. However, the other part of the answer is simply that these schools are seemingly the only ones willing and able to pick up the mantle of serving these struggling students, proving once again their critical role as a part of the public school landscape.

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