

# Los Angeles Times

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-dropout21feb21,1,5959231.story>

*From the Los Angeles Times*

## California schools with high dropout rates listed

**A UC Santa Barbara study shows 25 sites, many are charter campuses, account for a fifth of dropouts in the state. The findings are criticized.**

By Mitchell Landsberg

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

February 21, 2008

Just 25 of California's 2,462 high schools account for more than a fifth of the state's dropouts, with the problem heavily concentrated in charter and alternative schools, according to a study being released today by UC Santa Barbara.

However, a UCSB researcher said it wasn't clear whether the schools were responsible for the problem or were simply the recipients of a disproportionate share of troubled students. And some educators and school advocates criticized the report -- either for relying on questionable data or for releasing potentially explosive statistics without context.

The [report](#), issued as part of the California Dropout Research Project, used readily available state data to compile a list of every high school in the state ranked by the number of students listed as dropouts last year.

It showed that, of the 10 schools that reported the highest numbers of dropouts, only one was a traditional, comprehensive high school -- and the principal of that school said it ranked so high because of a data error. The rest were alternative schools, most of them charters and all specializing in education for high-risk students who couldn't make it in conventional schools.

Russell Rumberger, a professor of education at UC Santa Barbara and director of the dropout project, said Wednesday that the report wasn't intended to answer questions about why the schools had so many dropouts but rather to give educators a snapshot they could use to map out future research.

"Is the school doing a bad job, or are the kids at risk anyway no matter what setting they're in?" Rumberger asked in a conference call with reporters. Either way, he said, the value of the study is in telling the public, "This is where we should be concerned."

Rumberger stressed that he wasn't judging the individual schools at the top of the list, but added, "If that many kids are dropping out, it's unlikely that you're doing a good job."

That comment angered Buzz Breedlove, director of John Muir Charter School, a Sacramento-based organization that operates programs for at-risk students at 43 locations throughout California. It was No. 1 on the UC Santa Barbara list, with 1,856 dropouts -- more students than are enrolled at the school.

"To reconfigure numbers and come up with a dropout rate of 149%, which on its face is ludicrous, doesn't suggest to me that very much thought went into these numbers," said Breedlove, a former nonpartisan policy analyst for the California Legislature.

More than half a dozen of the schools on the list had dropout rates over 100% because enrollment is based on the number of students attending classes on a single day in October, but alternative schools typically have students arriving and leaving throughout the year.

According to Breedlove, the typical John Muir student is 19, has already dropped out of school two or three times and has completed only 75 of the required 210 credits for high school graduation. The school serves students who are enrolled in several organizations, including the California Conservation Corps.

"I would submit to you that one reason that our students drop out the way they do is that, absent our program, they wouldn't be in school at all," Breedlove said. "They would be terminal dropouts."

Much the same story came from the No. 2 school on the list, SIATech (School for Integrated Academics and Technologies), a San Diego-based alternative charter with seven campuses. SIATech works with the Job Corps to reclaim students who have already dropped out.

Spokeswoman Linda Leigh said a high dropout rate "is one of the pitfalls of trying to recover students who are really high-risk individuals."

The only conventional, comprehensive school among the top 10 was Madera High North in the San Joaquin Valley, listed at No. 9 with 539 dropouts. But the school's principal, Ron Pisk, said that figure was wrong, the result of a coding glitch that occurred when the Madera Unified School District recently switched data systems.

"It's absolutely driving us crazy," he said. "I've been losing sleep over this." The true figure, he said, is about half what is listed in the report.

Four of the schools in the top 10 are charters run by the same couple, John and Joan Hall. Their nonprofit charter, Options for Youth, has campuses ranked sixth, seventh and eighth, and their for-profit charter, Opportunities for Learning, was ranked third. The schools, which allow students to work independently, were the subject of a Times article in 2006 that found they had a poor record of keeping students until graduation.

A spokesman for the organization, Stevan Allen, issued a statement saying it was "not at all surprising that schools specializing in dropout recovery have a high number of dropouts -- just as obesity clinics have higher incidences of diabetes and heart disease among their patients. By definition, we are dealing with a population highly inclined to drop out."

He estimated that the true dropout rate at the four schools ranges from 15% to 35%, rather than the 42% to 49% shown in the report.

Gary Larson, a spokesman for the California Charter Schools Assn., also criticized the UC Santa Barbara report and said it could be interpreted as painting charter schools -- particularly those that specialize in educating troubled youth -- in a bad light.

Charters are independently run but publicly funded campuses that are free from many state and local regulations in exchange for boosting achievement.

Daria Hall, assistant director of the Education Trust, a Washington-based nonprofit dedicated to improving education, complained in an e-mail that the report was based on "state-reported dropout figures that are wildly inaccurate."

As an example, she said that John C. Fremont High School in Los Angeles, ranked No. 16 in the report, has an official dropout rate of 9%, yet it has more than 1,900 students entering as freshmen but fewer than 500 enrolled as seniors.

"Unless almost 70% of the entering class transferred out, and no one transferred in, this school loses more than 9% of its students to dropout," Hall wrote.

Rumberger, the dropout project director, said the data were accurate but conceded that the state's method of calculating dropouts leaves a great deal to be desired.

"I don't think the data are flawed," he said. "I think the data give an incomplete picture."

[mitchell.landsberg@latimes.com](mailto:mitchell.landsberg@latimes.com)

---

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](http://latimes.com/archives).

**TMSReprints**

Article licensing and reprint options

## Dropout stats not a clear picture

Daily News

Article Last Updated: 02/20/2008 10:02:34 PM PST

California's high school dropouts are concentrated in relatively few districts, with just 10 school groups accounting for nearly 40percent of all dropouts in the state, according to a study set to be released today.

The California Dropout Research Project also found that the annual district dropout rate statewide was 3.5percent in 2005-06, although some districts have a dropout rate as high as 90percent.

Because it is five times larger than any other district in the state, Los Angeles Unified has the highest number of dropouts - with 10,588, accounting for 15percent of dropouts in the state.

Still, the study's authors admit the data might not provide a complete picture.

Students who entered a school late in the year and dropped out could skew the dropout rate higher, because they were not counted in the enrollment tally, said Russell Rumberger, director California Dropout Research Project.

Options for Youth charter school in Burbank,

which takes troubled students from other schools, had the seventh-highest number of dropouts in the state, with 597 from a student population of 1,242 - a rate of 48.1percent.

"By definition, we're dealing with a population highly inclined to drop out. We're dealing with kids who oftentimes are on the bottom rung of the ladder," said Stevan Allen, spokesman for Options for Youth, a nonprofit with more than 20 school locations.

But school officials also said in a statement that they believe the report miscalculates the dropout rate at the schools and doesn't use improved student tracking measures.

"A truer measure of our dropout rates is closer to 15(percent to) 35percent," Allen said. "This is a tremendous accomplishment with an extremely challenging demographic and actually helps lower the dropout rates of our sponsoring school districts."

At Options for Youth-Burbank, students meet with a teacher twice a week, and study on their own the rest of the time, school officials said. The average student stays six months, and some return to traditional schools.

Some of the students are pregnant teens, while others are gang members or have been bullied, Allen said.

Rumberger, in a conference call with reporters, acknowledged that some schools with low dropout rates send their low-performing

dailynews.com

students to other schools.

The study showed that Verdugo Academy in the Glendale Unified School District had a dropout rate of 55.1percent.

But Sherry Stockhamer, who oversees Verdugo Academy, said the high dropout rate reflects poor record-keeping for a night-school class that met at a continuation campus, Daily High School. The class was counted as part of Verdugo Academy, because it was independent study.



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Sacbee](#) / [Opinion](#).

---

## Editorial: The real dropout problem remains out of view

### Alternative schools allow districts to duck accountability for many at-risk students

-

***Published 12:00 am PST Thursday, February 21, 2008***

If you want to understand California's high school dropout problem, take a look at two new studies by the California Dropout Research Project.

They reveal that dropouts are concentrated in 500 of the state's 2,500 high schools. These schools account for 80 percent of the dropouts in California.

That's not all. Kids who aren't succeeding at traditional comprehensive high schools increasingly are sent to alternative schools. The hope is that these schools can serve as a safety net for these kids – either giving them the skills they need to return to a traditional high school or the courses they need to graduate. But the new studies show that dropouts are concentrated in these alternative schools – with little accountability.

Those results certainly hold true in our region.

Take a look at three school districts: San Juan Unified, Elk Grove Unified and Sacramento City Unified. The traditional comprehensive high schools show dropout rates of 0 percent to 5 percent, and no wonder. Struggling kids are referred to alternative schools, where dropout rates are in double digits.

For example, in the San Juan Unified School District in 2005-06, the highest dropout rates were at alternative schools: Options for Youth Charter (60.6 percent), Palos Verde Continuation (50 percent), Sierra Nueva Continuation High (45.1 percent), La Entrada Continuation High (40.2 percent), Via Del Campo Continuation High (27.8 percent), Choices Charter (22.1 percent).

The same pattern holds in the Elk Grove Unified School District. The highest dropout rates were at alternative schools: Capital Community Day (75 percent), Daylor Continuation High (43.7 percent), Las Flores High (27.7 percent), Elk Grove Charter (21.6 percent), Calvine High (16.8 percent), Rio Cazadero Continuation High (16.8 percent).

And in the Sacramento City Unified School District, only one high school showed dropout rates of more than 4 percent in 2005-06 – American Legion Continuation High (14.8 percent).

For complete school and district results, see: [www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/sb8table.php](http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/sb8table.php).

Clearly, California's alternative schools deserve greater scrutiny. Their purpose is to help kids who aren't succeeding in traditional high schools. Are they serving that purpose? Or are they serving as a way for schools and districts to put struggling students out of sight and out of mind?

A February 2007 report by the Legislative Analyst's Office suggested that schools and districts too often "use referrals to alternative schools as a way to avoid responsibility for the progress of low-performing students," rendering their test scores invisible.

Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, pushed through a bill that would require traditional high schools that refer students to alternative schools to include the test scores of those students in their own school data. But that law, signed last October, doesn't take effect until 2011.

We can't wait that long. Alternative schools, where dropouts are concentrated, need to come out of the shadows. In our region and across the state, put alternative schools – and the traditional high schools that refer students to them – in the spotlight.

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

---

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.  
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852  
Phone: (916) 321-1000

[Copyright](#) © [The Sacramento Bee](#)