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Kentucky Youth At Risk Transitions: A Report to the Commonwealth

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Kentucky Youth At Risk Transitions: A Report to the Commonwealth



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Executive Summary

In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, there are over 22,000 youth being educated in programs that are funded, operated or contracted by state agencies. These state agency children come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and bring a multiplicity of social, psychological, behavioral and educational problems that challenge teachers and staffs. These particular Kentucky students, more than any others, are at the greatest risk of not making successful transitions into adulthood. It is critical that all such young people be afforded the highest quality of transition planning and support so that they can become successful and productive adults.

This report is a detailed and comprehensive account of a year-long study that identified and described key elements of student transition in education programs for state agency children in Kentucky. The study included all 105 non-traditional education programs funded and supervised by the Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children (KECSAC). The study design used a mixed methods approach that included input from state agency youth and administrators.

In brief, the findings of the study reported here include the following:

- A statistical analysis offers a complex picture of inter-school transitions of KECSAC students, describing placements prior to enrollment in a KECSAC program and outgoing transition outcomes, both in aggregated form and by agency.
- Eight descriptive themes regarding transition, originating in student and administrator interview data.
 - KECSAC student entry is experienced by students as unplanned, and by administrators as less than ideal.
 - Significant inter-agency problems exist in the transfer of records and the match of curriculum requirements between programs.
 - KECSAC students are generally described in negative terms, by both themselves and program administrators.
 - Transition planning and programming is primarily conceptualized as academic by administrators, and is almost entirely unrecognized by students.
 - KECSAC students see successful transitions as primarily based on caring relationships with key adults.
 - Collaboration between treatment and education staff, and between sending and receiving schools, is highly problematic in the implementation of transitions for these youth at risk.
 - The structured culture of KECSAC programs is perceived by students as helpful; the negative culture of receiving schools in regard to KECSAC students is perceived as unhelpful.
 - Though at times unrealistic, students express both short-term and long-term goals for their futures, while administrators' perspectives on transition largely focus on a successful student exit from their program.

Overall, the study has discovered that transition is more narrowly defined within KECSAC as movement in or out of a specific program, rather than as movement into successful adulthood; that the transition process for this at-risk student population is a complex inter-agency system with a myriad of coordination difficulties; that students and administrators have very different perspectives on transition; and that there is a widely-perceived discrepancy between the ideal and the real in KECSAC transition practices.

Study Recommendations

- **To the Kentucky Department of Education:** encourage enforcement of federally mandated transition plans; rapid completion of the student identifier system; a state-wide policy in regard to KECSAC students' rights of access to specialized programs in their district, such as vocational education; establish a state-level task force and resource person to improve transition planning and services, with a special emphasis on transitions of students moving between secondary education programs of all types.
- **To Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education:** enter into agreements with Kentucky universities to offer professional development to teachers, counselors, and administrators to effectively implement transitions of youth at risk in alternative education settings.
- **To KECSAC:** strengthen data collection on KECSAC students' transitions, risk factors, programming, and outcomes; provide professional development within KECSAC programs on transitions of youth at risk; and improve transition planning and programming for KECSAC students.
- **For research:** Conduct studies of aspects of transition, including best practices, outcomes, histories of movement between education programs, state adherence to federal mandates, and KECSAC program effectiveness.

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Making the Results Real: Five Transition Narratives for KECSAC’s Youth at Risk

This descriptive report of the status of transition services in alternative education settings provides useful and insightful data to policy-makers, educators, advocates, and service providers. As we consider these findings, it is important that we do not depersonalize this student population with whom we are most concerned. Throughout the report, readers will find case narratives that have been constructed from study data (Appendix A) to provide the reader with personalized examples of students represented in the study that are at the highest risk of unsuccessful transitions to adulthood.

Anthony—Department of Juvenile Justice



“Anthony’s back,’ that’s the first thing I heard when I walked into class that morning. The students were not supposed to be talking to each other, but I heard them as soon as I opened the door. There they were, all in the same color uniform, hands behind their backs, facing forward. At the front of the room was Anthony, sitting quietly. I immediately recognized him from the last time he was here. He’s a pretty normal kid, 16 years old, from Fayette County, small for his age I thought. He has a history of getting in trouble with the law, nothing too serious, but just running with the wrong crowd, not going to school. Typical stuff I see here all the time. Last time he was here, before he went back to his regular school, I had him in class. He had managed to make a connection with one of the other teachers here but I had a harder time connecting with him. My memory told me that he lost his father at a young age and maybe that explained why he was drawn to Mr. Taylor, the only African-American teacher in our program. Anthony occasionally had outbursts in class but I chalked it up to his ‘emotional/behavioral disorder.’ About half of my students have some identified disability, and we work pretty hard to make sure they all get their IEP’s covered. With Anthony, we really worked hard to help him earn some credits in our credit recovery program and he made some great progress in the year he was with us before he went back home. That was about a year ago, and now, every time I walk into my class, I hope that Anthony isn’t sitting there. . . hope he made it at his old school. I hope by now he is finishing his senior year, but I realize I may never really know.”

The Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children (KECSAC)

History and Purpose

KECSAC was established in 1992 to meet the needs of children being served in state agency programs as part of a statewide education reform effort. KECSAC's legislative mission includes the distribution of funds to school districts that serve state agency children. These state funds are for teacher training, data collection, interagency collaboration, and program improvement in education programs operated by, funded by, or contracting with the Kentucky Departments of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Community-Based Services (DCBS), and Mental Health Developmental Disabilities and Addiction Services (DMHDDAS). These "A6 education programs," as identified by the Kentucky Department of Education, are alternative education settings that serve youth from across the state, and thus serve those students most at risk of making unsuccessful transitions to adult life. School districts operate A1, or "traditional" schools, and A5 education programs which are identified as "district alternative schools." Kentucky is one of the few, if not the only, state in the nation with such an innovative and viable education collaborative designed specifically to educate its youth at risk within state agency programs. KECSAC is a true partnership of linkages between school districts, children and family services, community mental health, juvenile justice, private providers, and an institution of higher learning.

KECSAC Education Programs

KECSAC education programs are highly varied in regard to the student at risk populations served. This variety of population includes students from community-based mental health and residential treatment programs, therapeutic foster care, and community-based and residential juvenile justice programs. Fifty percent (50%) of the children served by KECSAC in the study were educated in Department of Community Based Services programs, forty-eight percent (48%) in programs operated or contracted by the Department of Juvenile Justice, and two percent (2%) in Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addiction Services programs (Figure 1).

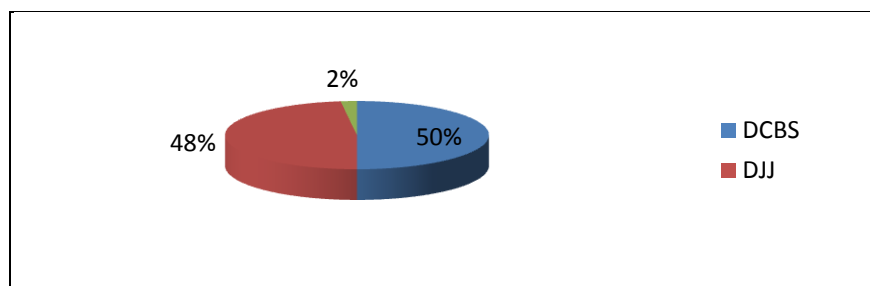


Figure 1. Percentages of Students Educated in KECSAC Programs, by Agency

KECSAC Student Numbers

On December 3, 2007, the KECSAC annual census reported that a total of 3,422 state agency children were provided education services in 105 state agency programs within 54 Kentucky school districts. The number of students served has steadily increased since KECSAC

was established in 1992. However, the 3,422 children counted in programs on the above December 2007 reporting date only represent a small percentage of the total number of students served in KECSAC education programs during the twelve-month period. Due to the varying lengths of stay of students in KECSAC education programs, KECSAC actually served 19,497 different students between December of 2006 and December of 2007. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the students were male and 28% were female.

Student Population Characteristics

Seventy-one percent (71%) of students served by KECSAC are enrolled in high school programs, while others are enrolled in programs ranging from pre-primary to post-secondary. Figure 2 shows the distribution of KECSAC students by grade level of education program over the last five years.

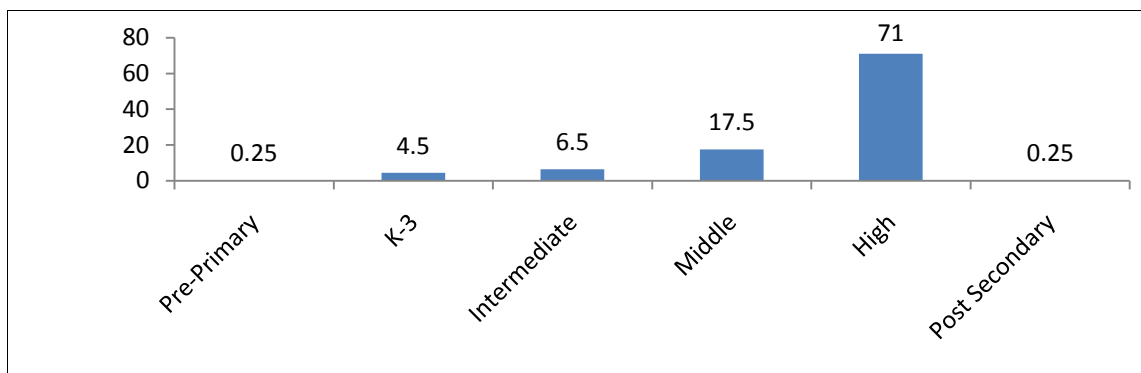


Figure 2. KECSAC students by grade level of education program

High Incidence of Disability in KECSAC Students

On the 2007 KECSAC Census, 43% of students in KECSAC programs had an identified disability. As Figure 3 indicates, of that 43%, 47% of students had an identified emotional or behavioral disorder, 18% had an unidentified disability, 11% had multiple identified disabilities, and 10% had mild mental retardation. The percentage of students with no identified disability was 57%.

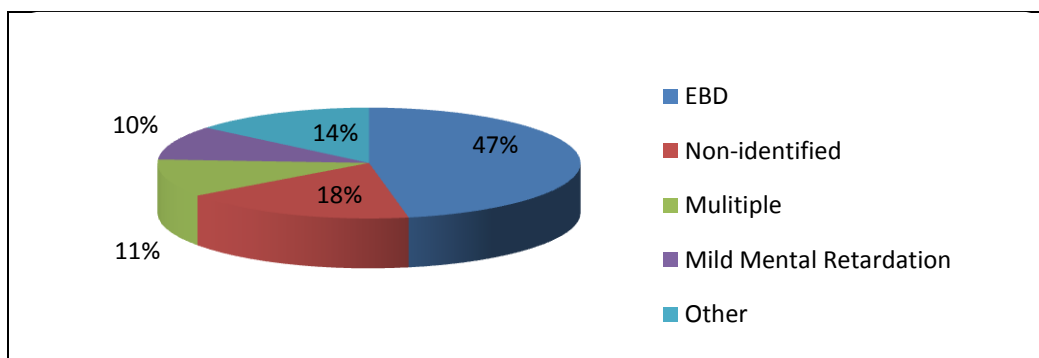


Figure 3. KECSAC Student Disability Incidence

Over-representation of Minorities in KECSAC Programs

Figure 4 displays the composition of the KECSAC student population by ethnic group. The 2007 KECSAC Census reported that 23.5% of the students were identified as African-American. The overall African-American population in Kentucky is 7.5% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau estimate for July 1, 2006.) If the African-American and Bi-Racial portions of the student population are combined, the degree of over-representation of African-American youth in KECSAC is nearly fourfold what would be expected based on the general population.

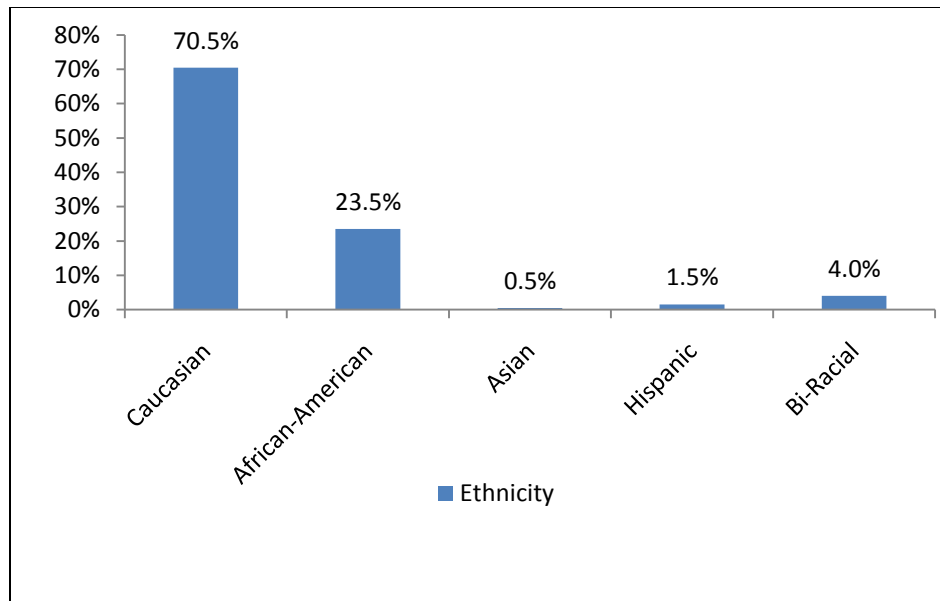


Figure 4. KECSAC Students by Ethnic Group

Literature on Student Transition

Transition Services Defined

According to IDEA 2004, transition services are defined as a coordinated set of activities designed to result in the improvement of both the academic and functional achievements of the student. Transition services are expected to support the student's movement from education programs to post-school activities, including post-secondary, continuing and adult education opportunities, adult services, employment and community participation, and independent living. Education programs must provide evaluation of, and instruction in, these activities that are based on the individual student's strengths, needs, interests and preferences (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

For this study, literature was reviewed related to the transitions of students in alternative education programs, juvenile justice correctional education programs, and other nontraditional education settings. Well coordinated transition services have been identified as a critical link to positive outcomes for students in these programs (Hosp, Rutherford, & Griller-Clark, 2001). The student's knowledge of, and involvement in, developing the transition plan is a crucial element in the successful implementation of the plan (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

Alternative Education Defined

The term, alternative education, refers to instruction that occurs in Kentucky's A5 and A6 programs. Its purpose is to provide for the differentiated learning needs of students who have not succeeded in traditional education environments. Barr and Parrett (2001, as cited in Lehr & Lange, 2003) suggest approximately 20,000 such programs exist in the United States, although an exact count is not available because a common definition for alternative education has not been accepted by administrators, law and policy makers, or practitioners (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

Alternative Education in Kentucky

Swarts (2004) estimated Kentucky had 150 alternative education programs. In 2008 there were 105 A6 programs in Kentucky. In Kentucky, the definition for an alternative education program is "a district-operated and district-controlled facility with no definable attendance boundaries that is designed to provide services to at-risk populations with unique needs. Its population composition and characteristics change frequently and are controlled by the school district student assignment practices and policies" (703 KAR 4:080). Intervention services in the alternative education programs include "any preventive, developmental, corrective, supportive services or treatment provided to a student who is at risk of school failure, is at risk of participation in violent behavior or juvenile crime, or has been expelled from the school district" (KRS 158.44, [2], [1]). Swarts also reported that many of Kentucky's alternative programs serve students with disabilities. The exact percentage is not known because the Kentucky Department of Education does not collect this information for A5 schools. Academic performance of students in alternative education programs was 30% lower than those in general education, attendance was 20% lower, and dropout rates were 23% higher. Lehr and Lange (2003) presented a synthesis of research from a study by the University of Minnesota reviewing alternative education programs across the United States. The authors found considerable variation in the education services and foci of the programs. They reported dropout rates for students with disabilities in these programs were twice that of students in traditional education. Approximately 36% of students with disabilities who drop out have learning disabilities and 59% are students identified as having emotional and behavioral problems. Lehr and Lange suggested that alternative schools may not have the staff, curriculum or resources to provide education services to students with disabilities. Alternative education programs continue to increase in number, despite a lack of research to support current practice or to suggest best practice.

A National Increase in Alternative Education Programs

Tobin & Sprague (2000) cited the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P. L. 105-17) and zero-tolerance policies for violence and aggression as reasons for the rapid increase in the number of alternative education programs. While the number of programs continues to increase, the authors reported finding little research that demonstrated the effectiveness of the education methods employed. They recognized that the variability in the populations served by the programs make rigorous evaluation difficult.

Literature on juvenile justice correctional education programs addressed transition more fully than did literature discussing alternative education for students with or without disabilities. Pollard, Pollard, Rojewski and Meers (1997) presented the results of a study to determine the strategies used to transition adjudicated youth with disabilities from correctional settings into the

community. The main objectives of this survey were to determine the major types of transition services, rate the effectiveness of these strategies, and identify any obstacles. The article provided the top 11 transition interventions used, which included the categories of individualized assessment and evaluation, basic academic skills instruction, and social and independent living skills training. No one category appeared to be any more or less effective than others. Barriers listed included returning the youth to their home/community environment, lack of support personnel and services, lack of family support, poor interagency collaboration, and the poor attitudes and unrealistic expectations of the youth themselves.

Stephens and Arnette (2000) identified that the successful transition of juvenile offenders back into their home schools and communities is often difficult because of risk factors, including delinquent peer groups, poor academic performance, high-crime neighborhoods, weak family attachment, lack of consistent discipline, and abuse. They gave a theoretical framework for an Intensive Aftercare Program, including the preparation for re-integration that correctional education should provide: special education, pre-employment training, and life skills; the transitional support necessary for leaving confinement; the need for transitional education placements upon release; and criteria for success for school re-enrollment, including curriculum coordination, pre-release visits and information sharing, admissions interviews, and appropriate adult mentors.

Research Design

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe key components of student transition in non-traditional (A6) education programs in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, referred to here as KECSAC Programs. To provide a base for planning improvements to youth transitions within KECSAC Programs, a thorough, multi-faceted understanding of the conceptualization, strengths, and barriers of the present system was required. For this reason, the design of the study utilized a mixed methods approach that sought input from both students and administrators and included data from all 105 KECSAC programs.

Study Participants

The study drew data from two primary groups: administrators and students in KECSAC Programs. The individual administrators of the 105 KECSAC education programs were available for data collection through required KECSAC oversight and development activities in which they are routinely involved, such as site visits and state coordination meetings. The 45 students who participated in the study were enrolled in KECSAC education programs at the time of data collection. Participating students were recommended as appropriate for group or individual interviews by their respective program administrators, ranged in age from 14 to 17 years old, and were 31% female and 69% male. Some of the characteristics that were most common among the student sample included the following: a history of low academic achievement and poor school attendance, two or more grades below expected academic level upon entry into their programs, a below poverty living level, a history of abuse and neglect, little or no involvement from their families, and identified disabilities of emotional and behavioral disorders, learning disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and mild mental retardation (Powell, 2008).

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

In order to develop a valid, trustworthy, and detailed description of youth transitions, the study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Descriptive statistics were produced, using SPSS, to organize, summarize, and contextualize data on the population. Since the study's intent was descriptive, no statistical predictions or inferences were made (Kachigan, 1986). A qualitative grounded theory approach, supported by Ethnograph software, was used to theoretically describe the perspectives that students and administrators provided in the interviews and focus groups (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

A complex overview of key components of student transition in KECSAC Programs was produced through the following analyses.

- Statistical analysis of KECSAC Annual Census Transitions Supplement, data provided by administrators of 105 KECSAC Programs
- Qualitative analysis of five focus group interviews, each including five middle and high school-aged students in KECSAC programs
- Qualitative analysis of 20 individual interviews with youth in KECSAC Programs
- Qualitative analysis of 71 on-site interviews of individual administrators during KECSAC site review visits
- Qualitative analysis of 10 focus group interviews with KECSAC administrators, approximately 10 administrators per group
- Qualitative analysis of 105 KECSAC Program Improvement Reports
- Qualitative analysis of 105 KECSAC Transition Plans

Results of the Descriptive Study of Transitions of KECSAC Youth

Over an intensive year of shared design, data collection, analysis, and write-up, the core team of five researchers produced the following statistical and theme-based description of youth transition, as those transitions are perceived by youth and administrators of KECSAC programs in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Statistical descriptions:

- Outgoing transition outcomes of KECSAC students
- Transition outcomes of KECSAC students who do not transfer to another education program
- Previous placements of KECSAC students
- A comparative view of interagency education program transitions of KECSAC students, by agency

Qualitative theme descriptions:

- Student Entry
- Characterizations of Students
- Transition Programming
- Relationships
- Collaboration
- School Cultures
- Future Planning

Outgoing Transition Outcomes of KECSAC Students

According to the Education Census of State Agency Children (2007) 85% of students who transition out of an A6 program go to another Pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade setting while 15% do not transition to another education program.

When KECSAC students transition to another education program, 61% transition to a traditional A1 school, 16% transition to an A5 program, and 23% transition to another A6 program (Figure 5). Of the 23% that transition to another A6 program, 40% transition to a DJJ Program, 42% transition to a DCBS program and 18% transition to a DMHDDAS program.

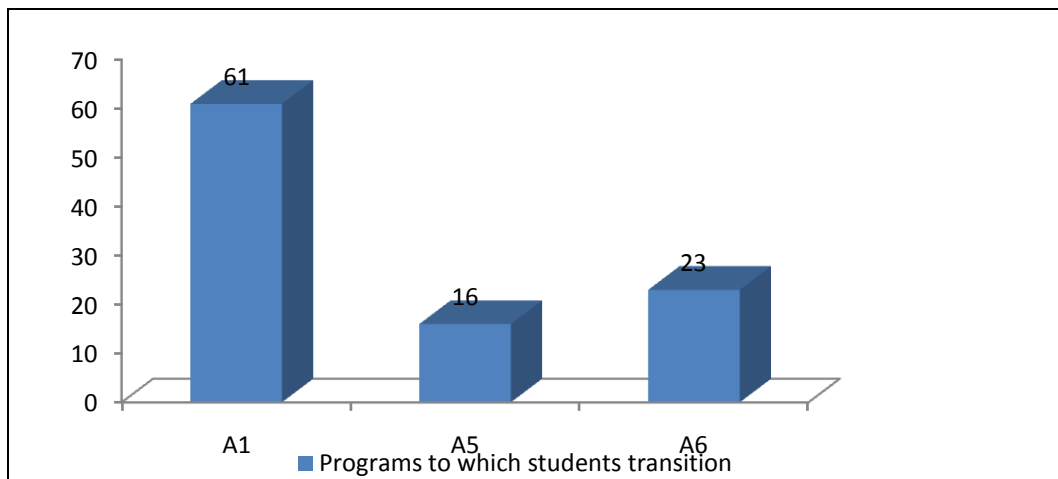


Figure 5. Outgoing Transition Outcomes of KECSAC Students

The Census also provided information relative to each sub-category of state agency programs that serve children. These include the Department of Community Based Services (DCBS), Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addiction Services (DMHDDAS). Within the DCBS programs, 89% of the students transition to another education program when they exit the A6 program. Seventy-eight percent of the students in DJJ programs move to another education program and 99% of students in DMHDDAS transition to another program (see Figure 6).

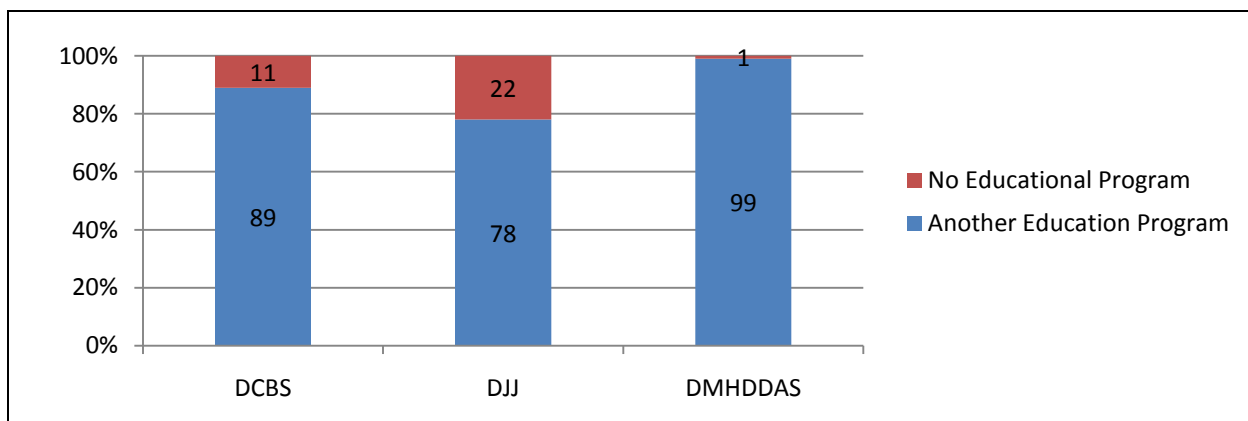


Figure 6. Outgoing Transition Outcomes of KECSAC Students by Agency.

Transition Outcomes of KECSAC Students Who Do Not Transition to another Education Program

The Census also provided information about students who transition out of the A6 program but do not enter another education program. This group accounts for 15% of the total population being served in state agency programs.

Figure 7 illustrates the percentage of students who are involved in various activities outside the traditional Pre-K thru 12th grade education system. Students in this category may participate in more than one of the activities listed, as state agency children may be involved in several activities. Of those who do not transition to another education program, 6% age out of the system.

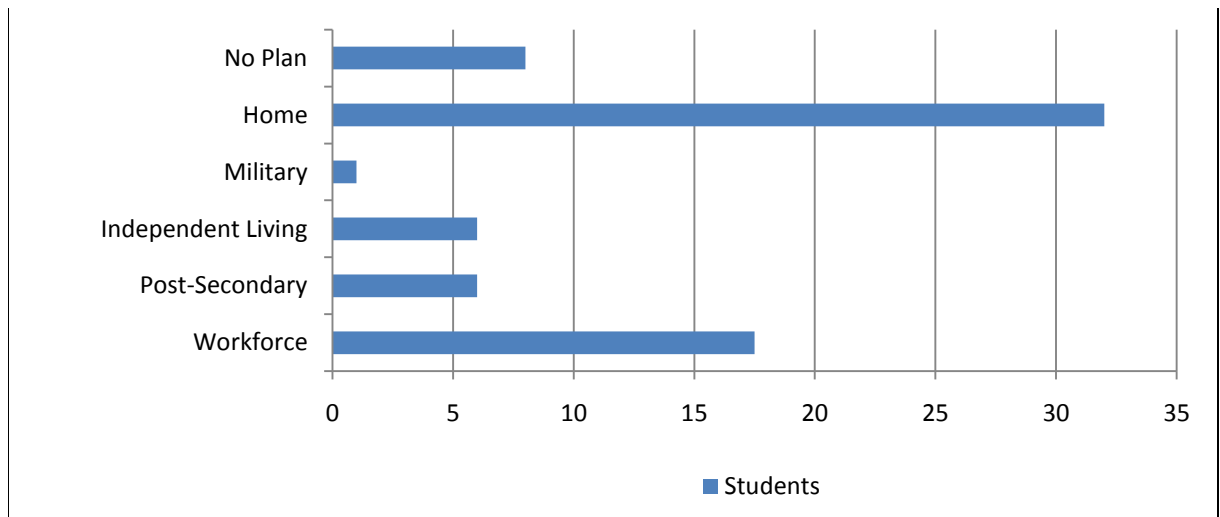


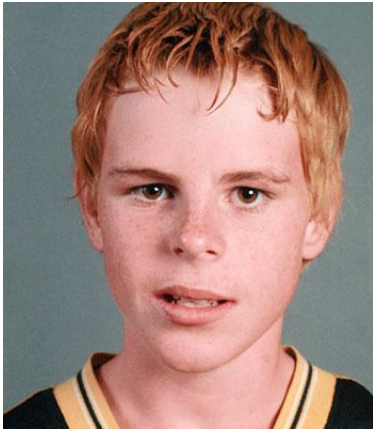
Figure 7. Transition outcomes of students who do not transition to another education program

In addition, Table 1. illustrates the same information above, broken down by agency.

Percentage Who Go to:	DCBS	DJJ	DMHDDAS
Workforce	15	26	33
Post-Secondary	7	9	3
Independent Living	12	3	3
Military	1	2	7
Home	40	39	40
No Plan	10	14	13

Table 1. Students who do not transition to another education program, by agency.

Lee—Department of Juvenile Justice



“I was on bus duty this morning when Lee arrived. He looked like he was mad at the world for being sent to Day Treatment, but I could tell that he was nervous. He was dressed in black clothing with his red hair cut into jagged edges just above his freckled face. I guessed at that time that he was about 13, and later when looking at his records, I confirmed it. He had gotten into some trouble at school and had skipped school several times leading him to be identified as truant. The local judge in our district sent him to us in hopes of him avoiding a detention center. This was his first

time in an alternative placement but he knew several of the kids in our program who were from his regular school. In our first class, after the other kids got started on their assignments, I administered Reggie’s first assessment and the results were very good. He was a smart kid, and unlike many of the other kids here, he didn’t have any identified disabilities that would require any additional support. He just needed our help to get him back on track.”

Previous Placements of KECSAC Students

The Census also indicated the previous placements of students before they entered the A6 program. Fifty-two percent of the students in A6 programs came from an A1 school, 17% came from an A5 program and 29% from another A6 program. The Census noted that 2% of the students had not been previously enrolled in any education program.

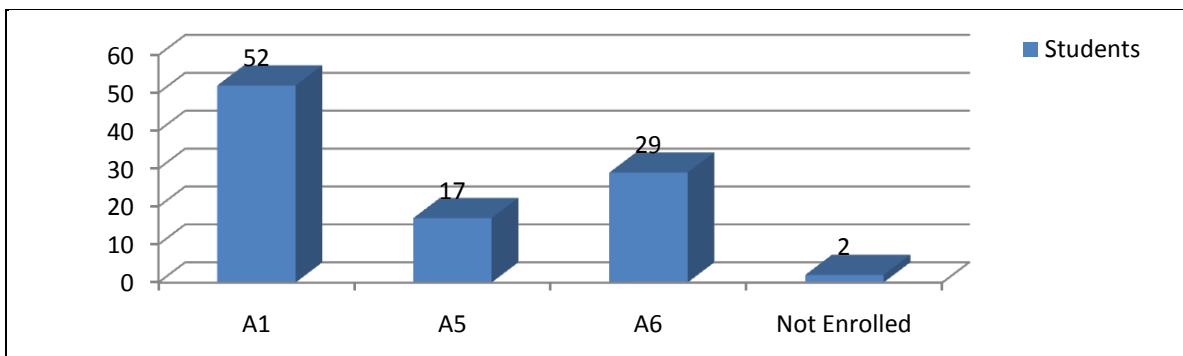


Figure 8. Previous placements of KECSAC students

Overall, 42% of students in A6 programs are in their first A6 placement. However, within each sub-category, there is a range from 37% for DCBS programs to 69.5% for DMHDDAS programs (Figure 9).

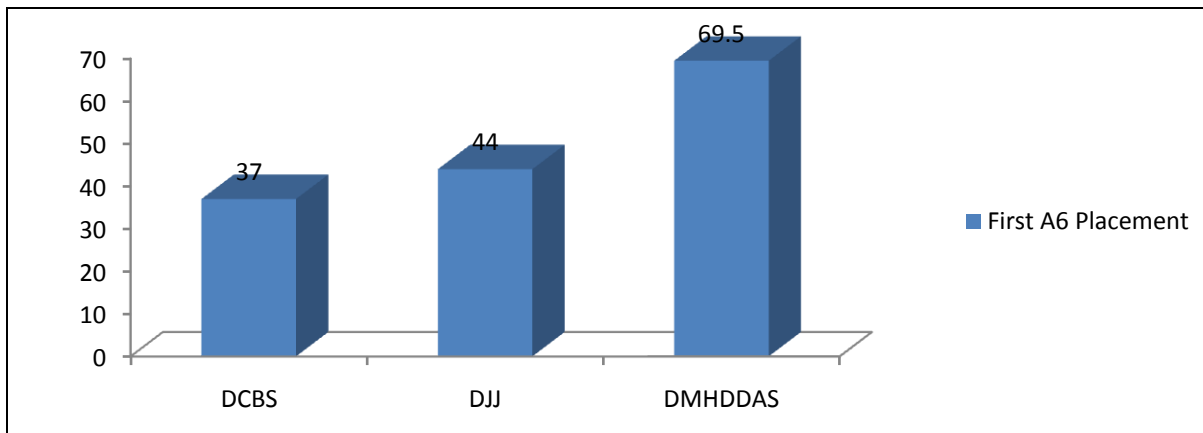


Figure 9. First placements of KECSAC students, by agency

Of those students who entered an A6 program directly from a previous A6 program, 46% came from a DJJ program, 37% came from a DCBS program and 15% came from a DMHDDAS program (Figure 10).

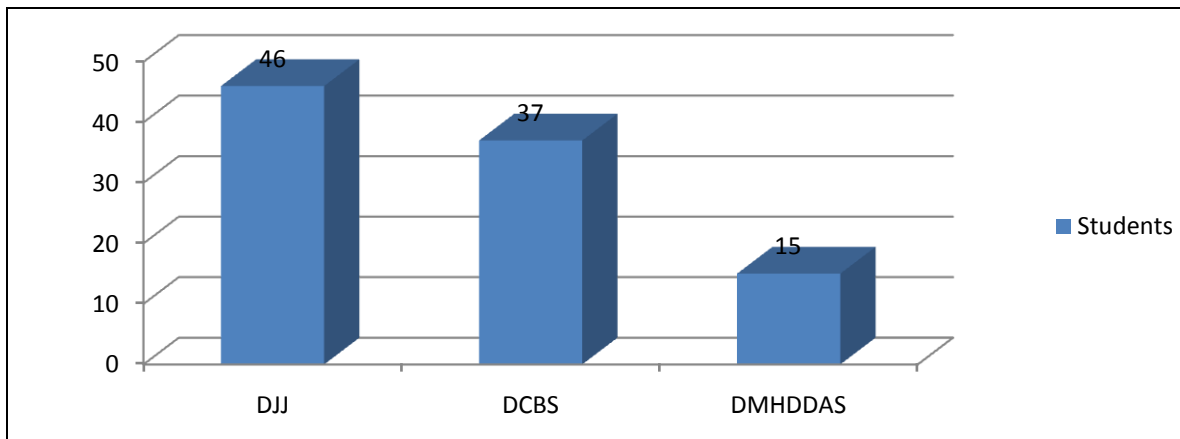


Figure 10. Previous placements of KECSAC students, by agency

Student Entry Patterns (in the data, this was a shared concern of administrators and students)

Students’ experiences with unplanned entry. All students stated that they were treated well upon entry, although some also said that they didn’t think that the sites expected their arrival or were prepared for them. One student described his experience:

In the morning you go to class and they just call everybody’s names. And they say, whose name didn’t I call?’ And you raise your hand and they ask for your name, and then you just get put in a class after that.

Brittney—Department for Community Based Services



“I remember precisely when Brittney arrived. It was just at the end of the day when I saw her walk into the home, duffle bag in hand. We were ending our studies for the day and the other students all turned to watch her walk in, just like they do every single time someone new comes to the shelter. She was 17 years old, but looked older I thought. She also didn’t look very happy to be at the home, but you could see a sparkle in her big blue eyes. I would later find out that her parents were not able to control her behavior and the “department” stepped in. She would be with us only a short time until she was placed in a group home for girls. It was pretty typical for our students to move to a more permanent group home, although some move back home with their families. This was her first time in an “out of home” placement. She was a hard worker in my class, but she didn’t stay long enough to really get into too much core content, probably about 10 days. When she left us, she moved to a group home in Woodford County. I sent her records, but haven’t heard anything about her recently.”

Administrators experience a difference between current and ideal student entry practices. Often, programs have a fairly similar process for entry into their programs, including at minimum a referral, assessment/screening, records request, intake meeting, and orientation period. Administrators confirmed some students’ perceptions of largely unplanned entry into their programs. *“Students just show up on the doorstep.” “Often we open the school doors and we’ve got a child that wasn’t sitting there the day before.”*

Ideal entry practices, those that were desired by administrators but not currently in effect, were often described and included: transition beginning before students’ entry in a *“timely manner;”* early evaluation of academic needs; teacher involvement; teachers being well prepared for relevant work for the student including any remedial needs; and teachers providing differentiated instruction. While some sites described initiating transition programming at entry, more sites identified this as desirable but not yet in place. *“Discharge planning should be started at entry.”*

Administrators often stated that, at best, transition programming should be coordinated by a full-time transition coordinator. A primary and much-discussed problem of student entry was inter-school communication of student information, which is more fully discussed under Inter-agency Problems: Transfer of Records and Requirements.

Initial student assessments used. Individualized student assessments usually occurred at program entry and focused almost entirely on academic skills, in order to support effective instruction. There was high variation in the assessments used. The most frequently mentioned assessments were the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System, the Test of Adult Basic Education, Accelerated Reader, and learning styles inventories. Occasional mention was made of assessments more supportive of planning for transitions to adulthood, such as career plan

assessment. Administrators frequently noted the need to further develop academic student assessment within their programs.

Inter-agency Problems: Transfers of Records and Requirements (Primarily an administrator concern)

Problems getting records. A very strong finding of this study was that administrators perceive that problems with access to student records were a primary barrier to successful transition. Lack of funding for a transition coordinator and for after-care was also mentioned frequently. Difficulties with obtaining records occurred at the student's entry into the program and persisted during enrollment. Administrators also noted difficulties in successfully transferring student records to the next school.

Records seldom arrived with the student. Lengths of time between when the student arrived and when records were transferred ranged from a few hours to a few weeks. Sometimes the student left the program before the records arrived. Lost education time was clearly attributed to not receiving records in a timely fashion.

Kentucky is now moving to an online Individual Learning Plan but this has not yet been fully implemented. While the Educational Passport was originally designed to expedite the records transfer process, some alternative education programs reported that they did not have Internet access. In juvenile justice settings, Internet access is often a restricted privilege.

Student movement out of a program, especially a juvenile justice program, can happen abruptly and without information as to destination. This leaves no time for planning, coordination, or transfer of records.

“When you don't know they're leaving, there's no time to prepare, there's no way to get that paperwork in their hands in time to have a seamless transition from, say, my school to a school somewhere else, and I think that's key.”

Curriculum alignment. Lack of consistent requirements and curriculum programming between districts and schools was identified as an important barrier to successful transition. Administrators in the study often remarked that there is little to no curricular alignment with the home school or district. In addition, administrators noted that several of the receiving school districts were less flexible about what classes or credits they would accept upon the return of a student from an A6 program. Students with identified learning disabilities are often in vocational education in their home districts, but this curriculum is not available in many KECSAC programs. In these situations, the student may be unable to finish requirements for graduation from the vocational program, and instead, may be working on assignments that will not lead to a diploma.

“Two high schools in the same district will have different graduation requirements, all right, and the problem is and then some schools are on year-long schedules, some are on a block schedule, some are on a modified block and it's trying to work to give these kids credits but then also like in my situation there is no way to do vocational classes, I'm a detention facility, so if both Johnny comes in and he's a junior, if he's in carpentry, electricity, or plumbing I cannot continue that.”

Characterizations of Students (A shared concern of students and administrators)

Students' negative self-labels. Students frequently characterized themselves with the following labels: *“getting into trouble with police, probation violator, poor sleeper, bad nerves, drug user, troublemaker, party-goer, delinquent, drop-out, don't care about anything, and ballistic”*. In particular, students identified themselves as angry or aggressive, stating that they were in trouble for fighting other students or for violent acts against teachers.

Students' positive self-labels. Students also describe themselves at times using more positive characterizations including, for example, the enjoyment of: cooking, working on bikes or cars, playing sports, skateboarding, and building things like furniture or school projects. Some students have recognized that they have accomplished a lot while being at their alternative programs.

“Like, I'm turning 18, and I can't get out until I'm 18, for what I done. . . [and Mr. G]has been here for me . . . helped me through my hard times. . . . So, I'm going to college in the fall of 2008, Eastern, I've already applied. And he's going to try to help me get a job. And Mr. G is trying to help me find a place, because there's this independent living place, and I could get in there when I turn 18. I'm going to college. And Mr. G is going to tutor me when I get out. And when I start going to Eastern, they're going to help me with some classes.”

High recidivism rates. Both administrators and students recognized the high recidivism rates of students and remarked on the frequency with which students move from facility to facility. Some youth seem to feel proud of having been in multiple placements. An administrator said, *“Back and forth they're coming: our place is a revolving door. They'll go there for a couple of weeks, come back to our school. Go back, come back . . .”*

Often students have been in and out of trouble for many years, have multiple offenses, and have been in three to 10 different schools. Another commonly mentioned characteristic, mostly by administrators, is the institutionalization of the student, including their tendency to *“self-sabotage”* in order to stay in the system. For example,

“All of a sudden they're getting three meals a day and they're safe and they're not on drugs and nobody's being mean to them. So when they get ready to leave, especially if they're going home, they will act out.”

Characteristics attributed to students or their families by administrators.

Administrators noted increasing trends in students including poor reading skills, truancy, drug use, low socioeconomic status, increasingly serious weapons charges, and increasing mental health issues, including bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, oppositional defiant disorder, attachment disorder, and self-mutilation.

Brandon—Department for Community Based Services



“Brandon, a 15 year old boy from Jefferson County was sitting in my office yesterday when I got to work. His social worker was there too; I have met her so many times over the years and we shared a familiar smile with each other as I walked in. She and I talked for several minutes and she told me a little more about Brandon. He was going to be in my group home for several months, his third placement so far. He has a history of poor school attendance and achievement, but he is a good kid. His family wasn’t able to take care of him and he didn’t have any other family member who could serve as a guardian. He hopes to reunite with his mother soon, but his worker and I both know he will be in our program for a few months first. She told me that Brandon didn’t have any identified disabilities, but it would have been just as easy to say he did; about half of our students do, so I would not have been surprised. I glanced into the lobby to take a quick look at Brandon. He was sitting patiently, his blond hair falling into his face as he looked at the floor. I thanked his worker for sharing his information with me and we then met with Brandon to discuss his plan.”

Transition Programming (A strong concern of students, as well as administrators)

Administrators and students were often unable to identify academic or non-academic programming in which they had participated at their sites to facilitate successful transitions. Types and amounts of transition programming greatly varied between sites. Examples of transition programming that were named in interviews included: “*independent living curriculum,*” “*social skills unit,*” “*parenting classes,*” “*money management,*” “*searching newspaper job ads,*” “*job interview skills,*” “*balancing a checkbook,*” “*phone skills,*” “*making pillowcases and quilts,*” “*planning a garden,*” “*canning and freezing vegetables,*” “*cooking,*” “*basic grooming of horses,*” “*chores,*” “*rolling firewood for money,*” and Jobs for Kentucky Graduates (JKG).

Administrators’ conceptualizations of transition programming. In general, transition programming was conceptualized in terms of planning for students’ exit from the education program. Administrators rarely thought of transition in terms of non-academic programming (e.g., life skills training). Instead, they focused on credit recovery and accurate record-keeping. They acknowledged that in order to do this, they would require a part-time or full-time transition coordinator to implement activities related to transition. Almost entirely, administrators indicated that they wanted a transition coordinator for tracking and record-keeping purposes, with a few stating that they wanted someone who could physically visit and follow up on students in their receiving schools. Administrators rarely discuss transition plans with students.

Students’ knowledge of transition plans. The majority of students did not know if they had a transition plan. Those who did know of a transition plan were unsure of what it included. “*A transition plan is when people fill out a paper when they come in and a survey when they*

leave.” Very few students reported that they were involved in the development of their transition plan. One administrator said he had never seen a student’s transition plan from his or her previous placement.

Exit transition programming. Exit transition programming refers to activities of KECSAC programs during or after a student’s movement out of the program. The type of programming most frequently discussed by administrators was “*horizontal transition,*” “*phased transition,*” “*step-down facilities,*” or “*partial programming*” such as halfway houses. As one administrator said, “*we inch kids slowly over a period of time into their regular school.*” Partial programming was primarily for students in secure facilities or hospitals. A few instances of transition programs in receiving schools were mentioned, including “*SOS: Save our Students,*” in which students are matched with a supportive adult mentor in their home schools, a “*Choices and Changes*” de-escalation room, and peer mentor programs.

Relationships (Primarily a student concern)

One-on-one relationships with adults in the KECSAC program are valued by students. In the smaller settings of A6 programs, students typically have the opportunity to receive more individualized attention from adults, in contrast to their previous school settings. “*In regular school it seems like they really don’t have time or they just don’t really... care about you as an individual.*” Students value the small class size and teachers’ close proximity in the classroom. “*They stand right next to you and help you if you ask.*” Some students described that they feel like certain teachers have “*raised them,*” and have been “*really nice*” to them. They often perceive their successes to be a direct result of these important relationships.

“I feel that what [students] need, it’s not, it’s not just about the school work. You need to build relationships with the students, also. I’ve been to all kinds of different schools. . . . I didn’t [care] whether I learned nothing or not. And I was like, ‘You know what? If they don’t [care], why should I?’ . . . So, I just went and gave up, and then I came here, and [my teacher] said, ‘You can do anything; you just have to put your mind to it.’ And he has been with me ever since.”

Although students emphasized the importance to them of positive relationships with adults, it would be inaccurate to state that students described no negative relationships with adults. Some students described what they considered to be a lack of respect from teachers or staff.

Positive and negative peer relationships in the KECSAC programs. It was apparent in many students’ comments that peer friendships are very important to them. Students rely on each other for academic, social, and emotional support in these nontraditional settings. “*I believe that the residents [peers] are the biggest part of our healing process.*”

Negative behaviors by some students in the programs were also seen as distracting to those who desired to succeed in the alternative schools. Some students acted up in class, getting others in trouble along with them by trying to “*bring others down to their level.*” “*They want to drag everyone down with them. I’ve fallen into that trap before.*”

Collaboration (Largely an administrator concern)

On-site collaboration between treatment and education staff. On-site collaboration was widely recognized by administrators as both challenging and necessary to treat “*the whole child.*” Collaboration mainly refers to relationships between the treatment and education staff. Specifically, it was suggested that treatment and education staff should: collaboratively administer pre-tests, integrate their curriculums, develop shared goals, and spend more time together on a daily basis. “*It’s important for all stakeholders to see the value in education and treatment. Sometimes we’re too segmented.*”

Thomas—Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addiction Services



“‘Thomas,’ that’s the first name that came to mind when she asked me to describe a typical student in my program. He was a cute kid, corn rowed hair and the biggest brown eyes I had ever seen. This was the first time he went to school somewhere different, the first time he wasn’t with all the other kids from his neighborhood and he was nervous. I could tell immediately. He was 10 years old and in the 3rd grade at the local elementary school, a shy kid, but friendly. My heart really went out to him, like it does for all our kids, when I realized he, at such a young age, was already diagnosed with multiple disabilities. It was pretty typical for our students to have a disability: in fact, I’d say 9 out of 10 had at least one. He spent several hours a day working with our mental health staff, but when he was in class we spent our time working on his classes. We tried to make sure he was staying up with his regular core content. After all, most of our students transition back to their regular schools after just a few months with us.”

On-site interdisciplinary collaboration. On-site collaboration beyond that between teaching and treatment staff also occurred by attending weekly meetings with all staff and teachers, attending principal/counselor meetings, presenting lunchtime in-services about programming, collaborative student discharge meetings, planned contacts with the receiving school in preparation for student exit from the program, and working with the records clerk.

Interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration beyond the KECSAC program. While cited as being very important to transition success, collaboration between persons in the KECSAC program and with staff and teachers of sending and receiving schools and case workers was described as a primary barrier to successful student transition. Attempts to collaborate with other agencies included going to faculty meetings to do presentations on returning students, requiring that teachers and administrators in the receiving school meet with them before transitioning the students back, and developing a community work force comprised of administrators, students, parents, counselors, and workers from the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Department of Community Based Services. Another way that this collaboration occurred was through entry and exit meetings. Most administrators concede that not nearly enough collaboration takes place.

School Cultures (A shared concern of students and administrators)

KECSAC programs are highly structured. Students identified their current KECSAC program as more structured than previous school placements. In contrast to previous schools, students described reduced pressures to wear the right clothes, have the best grades, and be identified with a particular peer group. They noted the presence of more rules and regimentation in A6 programs. They described a culture with high behavioral expectations and policies in place to ensure that those expectations were met. The students stated overwhelmingly that the increased rules and “*structure*” helped to keep them “*out of trouble.*” Behavior systems used to maintain appropriate student behavior included token or phase systems that offered increased rewards and privileges as a student successfully progressed through phases. Students also reported an increase in boredom in A6 programs as a result of the structured system. The behavior systems often included restrictions on open discussion, private discussion, and peer interaction.

Receiving school cultures are highly negative. Both students and administrators identified the cultures of the receiving A1 schools as a barrier to successful transition. According to administrators, returning students were often identified as “*losers,*” “*bad kids,*” and “*trouble.*” The receiving schools “*still have a target on the kids’ backs.*” The receiving or sending schools viewed the A6 programs as “*holding tanks*” or “*babysitters,*” and believed that it was the A6 education programs’ responsibility to “*cure*” or “*fix*” students with emotional, behavioral or academic problems. “*Students [in receiving schools] are looked down upon if they befriend our kids.*” In addition, both students and administrators believe that, at best, the receiving schools give students very little leeway upon return and, at worst, do everything they can to get the student quickly removed from the A1 schools.

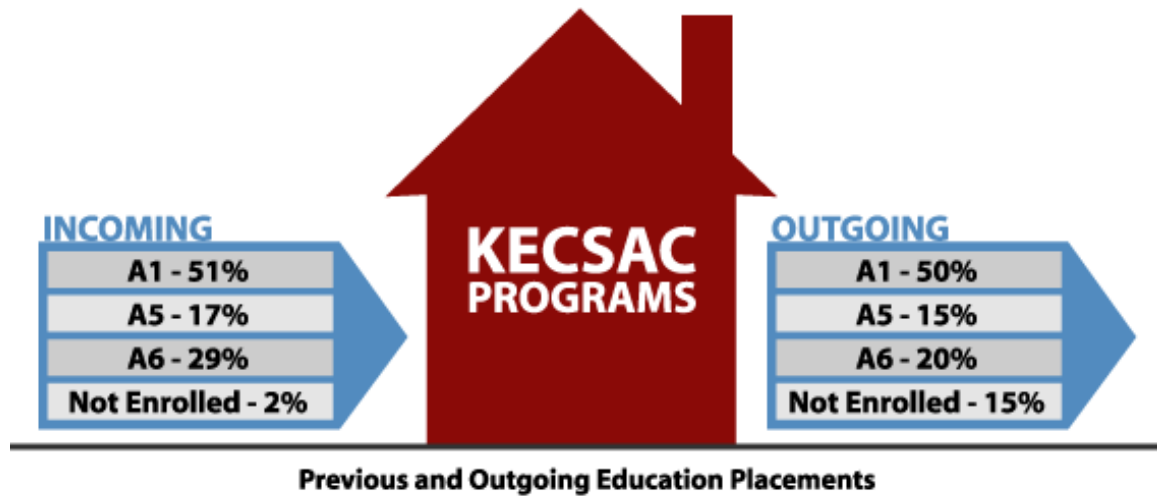
Students also identified issues with the culture of receiving schools. They noted that the receiving school contained “*too much drama*” (fighting and arguing). One student said, in describing the reason for his placement, “*a lot of people got on my nerves at my old school and I went off.*” Students also noted that they typically did not get much one-on-one attention from their teachers at previous schools. Students described negative experiences with other A1 school students. One student said that he would rather not be around A1 school students so they “*could not judge us.*”

Future Planning (A shared concern of students and administrators)

Students’ perspectives on their future include long-term and short-term goals. Students’ short-term goals include such aspirations as getting out of a current placement, staying out of trouble, staying sober, graduating from high school, and getting a job. Their long-term goals were varied and sometimes unrealistic, and included a variety of vocations: “*social worker,*” “*cosmetologist,*” “*nurse,*” “*tattoo artist,*” “*OBGYN,*” “*gas station attendant,*” “*Walmart clerk,*” or “*pro-football player.*” They also had hopes for changes in living arrangements and education programs, such as “*going to an independent living facility,*” attending “*culinary school at Sullivan,*” “*live with Grandpa in Illinois,*” “*go to independent living and get an apartment and job,*” and “*get my own place to live.*”

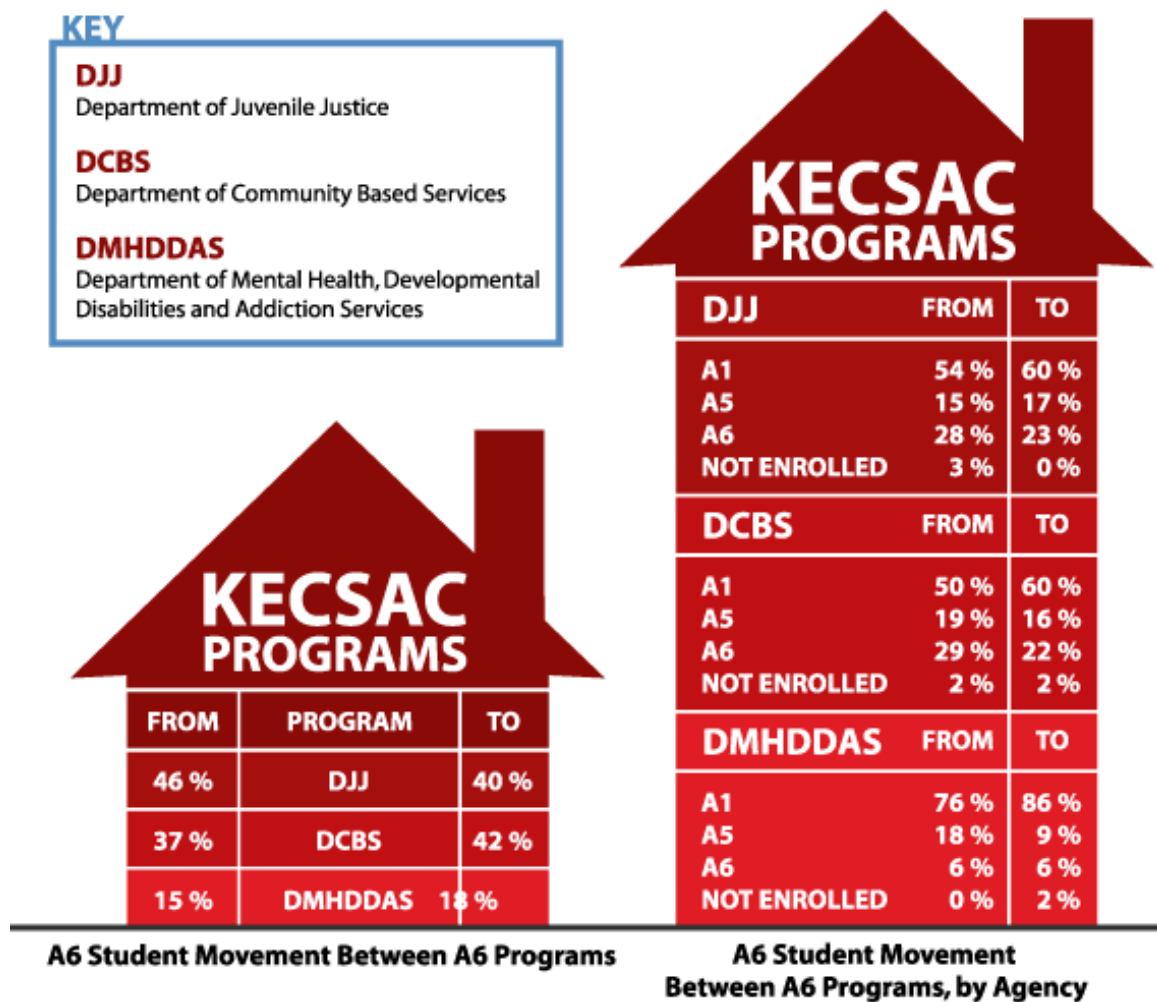
Administrators were primarily concerned with students' futures in terms of transitions out of current programs and into the next education setting. Frequently mentioned challenges to the successful movement of the student to a future program were the lack of collaboration with receiving programs and problems of curricular and credit alignment between programs. Most administrators felt that, due to a lack of resources, they did not do an adequate job of tracking students once they left their programs. They did the best they could under the circumstances, encouraging students to call and update them following a move. Administrators' criteria for the transition success of students ran the gamut, from "staying out of trouble" and "not seeing them again," to specific hopes for students' careers, entry into the military, or marriage.

**A Comparative View of the Complex System of
Interagency Education Transitions of KECSAC Students, by Agency**



KEY

- DJJ**
Department of Juvenile Justice
- DCBS**
Department of Community Based Services
- DMHDDAS**
Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addiction Services



Summary of Results

Unique Perspectives on Transition in KECSAC Programs

A narrow view of transition. In an overview of the study's results, it is clear that within KECSAC education programs, which serve those Kentucky youth who are most at risk for unsuccessful transitions to adulthood, transition is narrowly viewed in terms of managing a student's frequently unplanned movement into and out of a particular KECSAC program. This is in distinct contrast to usual conceptualizations of transition as the student's prepared movement out of secondary education into new adult roles.

A complex inter-agency system with difficulties in coordination. The study's statistical descriptions of student populations and their movement between education programs clearly demonstrate the fluidity of student transitions within a system of multiple programs and agencies. The data also shows that there is relatively poor coordination of education requirements, procedures, culture, and communications between sending and receiving schools in what is, for many students, not a single transition, but a continuing cycle of transitions.

Administrators and students see transition differently. Administrators and students view the supports and barriers to successful transition quite differently. Administrators are thinking broadly and in terms of management of multiple students flowing through their own program. They are most concerned with the movement of student records needed to support student learning within their programs. They often do not consider potential transition supports beyond the basic core curriculum, such as life skills training, creating supportive community relationships, or mentoring. They think in terms of the time span that the student will be in their specific program, rather than in terms of the time span leading up to and through a successful transition to adult life. Students, on the other hand, think of transition in terms of key personal relationships with teachers or peers who see them as individuals with unique needs and problems and reach out with emotional investment in their futures. Students, although often vague and unrealistic in their perspectives on the future, usually think in more long-term plans than do administrators.

The gap between the ideal and the real in transitions of, and transitions services for, KECSAC students. Administrators and students do agree on two things, however. They recognize that a gap between the ideal and the real in terms of transition exists. They know that there are problems with the current system of transition and imagine how it might be done better. But they also know that, although school-wide transition procedures may be planned or in place, individualized student transition planning and supports remain fairly limited in KECSAC education programs serving Kentucky's most at risk youth.

Key Recommendations

Based on the results of this mixed methods, state-wide study of transitions of students in KECSAC education programs, the following recommendations are made to the Kentucky Department of Education, to the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, to KECSAC, and for future research.

Recommendations to the Kentucky Department of Education

- Audit and enforce federal mandates that all students with special needs in all types of education settings have a transition plan in place and actively implemented, beginning at 14 years of age
- Rapidly complete information technology initiatives, including the student identifier system and the online Independent Learning Program
- Establish a state-wide policy in regard to the rights of KECSAC students to access specialized programs, such as vocational education, that are available to other students in the district within which their program is located.
- Establish a state-level task force and resource person to address the continuum of transition planning and services, with a special emphasis on inter-agency transitions of students moving between secondary education programs of all types, in order to specifically improve:
 - individualized inter-school coordination of transition, from movement of records to smooth implementation of effective curricular plans,
 - positive and strength-based supports to students transitioning between programs,
 - timely evaluation and planning for students whose movements between education programs endangers their likelihood of graduation.

Recommendations to Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education

- Enter into agreements with Kentucky universities to offer professional development, such as certificate programs, to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers, counselors, and administrators to effectively address the needs of youth at risk within alternative education settings.

Recommendations to KECSAC

- Improve mechanisms for tracking aggregated and individualized data on KECSAC students' transitions, risk factors, transition programming, and transition outcomes, from entry through follow-up.
- Provide KECSAC teachers, staff, administrators, and transition coordinators with professional development in regard to transitions of youth at risk.
- Develop an improved continuum of transition planning and programming for KECSAC students, from entry through follow-up, that is:
 - Individualized,
 - effective despite fluid movement of students between Kentucky schools due to increased standardization of processes,
 - relationship-based and strength-based,

- supported by KECSAC transition coordinators at the state, regional, and program levels,
- timely in evaluating and planning for students whose movements between education programs endangers their likelihood of graduation,
- dependent on an engaged team collaboration between treatment and education staff,
- built upon effective inter-agency relationships between KECSAC programs and schools which frequently send students to them, or receive students from them,
- and documents improvements in transition outcomes over time.

Recommendations for Research

- Study collaborative on-site development by selected KECSAC programs of model transition practices.
- Complete a five-year, longitudinal study of transition outcomes of KECSAC students, that includes comparative measures reported by typical high schools.
- Use a mixed methods study, to describe frequently occurring types of histories of movement between education programs (i.e. multi-program recidivistic type, single KECSAC enrollment type).
- Initiate a state-wide records review of federally-mandated individual transition plans and levels of transition services.
- Support studies by KECSAC of their students' transitions, risk factors, transition programming, and transition outcomes.

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Appendix A

Statistical Profiles of State Agency Children by Agency

Department of Juvenile Justice Profile

- 83% of students are in high school
- 16% are in middle school
- 60% are ages 16-18
- 38.5% are 11-15 years old
- 68% are Caucasian
- 24.5% are African-American
- 81.5% are male
- 18.5% are female
- 33.3% have an identified disability, most likely EBD (47% of those identified)
- 39% of African-American students have a disability while 32% of Caucasian students are identified
- 44% of DJJ students are in their first placement
- When students leave the DJJ program, 60% go to an A1 school, and 24% go to another A6 program
- When entering the A6 program, 54% come from an A1 school and 27% from another A6 program
- 7.5% of the population will age out of the system while in the program

Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addiction Services Profile

- 50% of the students are in grades K-3rd
- 37% are in grades 4-6
- The remaining students are in grades 7-8.
- 69% are ages 6-10 years old, with no children identified as younger than 6. The remaining students are ages 11-15.
- 79% of students in MHDDAS programs are male
- 95% of students in MHDDAS have an identified disability
- 50% of the students have a disability not included on the census (those listed include: autism, EBD, hearing impairment, mild mental retardation, orthopedic/physical, severe mental retardation, specific learning disability, visual impairment and multiple)
- 35% have EBD
- 15% have multiple identified disabilities
- 53% of students in MHDDAS programs are Caucasian, 42% are African-American and 5% are bi-racial
- 69.5% are in their first A6 placement
- 85% return to an A1 school when they leave the A6 program
- 77% of these students were enrolled in an A1 school directly before the A6 program
- Only 2.5% age out of the program while enrolled in the A6 program

Department of Community Based Services Profile

- 62% of students are in grades 9-12 (high school),
- 18.5% are in grades 7-8 (middle school)
- 10.5% are in grades 4-6.
- 49% are ages 11-15 years old
- 39% are ages 16-18
- Students in DCBS programs are evenly split with 50% identified with a disability and 50% without
- 72% of the students are identified as Caucasian
- 23% are identified as African-American
- 64% are male
- 36% are female
- 37% of these students are in their first A6 placement
- 59% return to an A1 school when they leave an A6 program, while 22% are placed in another A6 program
- 50% of these students were enrolled in an A1 school directly prior to the A6 placement
- 5.5% of the students age out of the program