CCSA | Research Division

SERVING DIVERSE STUDENT NEEDS IN THE GOLDEN STATE

Practices and Programs of Nonclassroom-based Charter Public Schools

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Executive Summary

Since the inception of charter schools in California in 1993, **nonclassroom-based charter schools (NCBs)** have played a consistent and crucial role in meeting the needs of students and families seeking an alternative to site-based public schools. NCBs have grown and adapted their offerings to meet a wide variety of student needs in a personalized learning environment, serving more than 190,000 California students in 2020.

In the last year, all public schools have faced hardship and challenge in responding to COVID; many traditional public school districts struggled to adapt to distance learning.[i,ii] Nonclassroom-based charter schools are no stranger to challenge: in 2019 NCBs faced a two-year moratorium on new school creation along with additional conditions for existing schools in newly passed state legislation *(EC 47612.7)*. In 2020, the state's budget froze public school funding for NCBs in the current school year, precluding them from receiving funding for enrollment growth. This was particularly challenging given that many NCBs were among the most effective and successful at educating students in a remote learning environment during the pandemic. In fact, in the past year many families sought alternative education options like NCBs for their children.

The pandemic and the transition to remote learning have provided an opportunity to shine a spotlight on the successful practices of the NCB sector, clear up some misconceptions, and showcase the wide variety of programmatic offerings and learning environments that these charter schools offer for California students and families. These lessons and best practices are now being increasingly adopted by many site-based programs as schools have shifted to distance learning. California has much to learn from the nonclassroom-based charter school sector. This paper shares key learnings from the instructional practices of five NCBs in California representing a variety of programmatic offerings. The interviews and best practices identified in this paper are intended to shed light on what's working at NCBs, and our findings are supported by research demonstrating how and why these practices are effective.

In this paper, CCSA will share some of the programs and best practices adopted by NCBs. **Although NCBs vary in terms of instruction delivery (whether through homeschooling, virtual, or a blend of in person and remote), interviews with NCB school leaders revealed eight key practices in effectively meeting students' needs and creating successful learning environments.**

Key Nonclassroom-Based Practices

1   **Personalized Learning**

While NCBs are mandated by law to form written agreements with families, commonly called the student/family contract – what happens in practice and in theory goes beyond a common formula. Goals, expectations, learning plans, and family engagement are often tailored and individualized to meet students' unique needs.

2   **Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning**

Offering a mix of live classrooms and offline "go at your own pace" courses is relatively common among NCBs, with recorded live sessions to allow for replay in addition to other supplemental 1:1 or small group supports.

3   **Strong Teacher and Student Relationships**

NCBs are required by law to have teachers meet on a regular basis with students and their families. These ongoing, 1:1 interactions allow teachers to form strong personal connections with their students, at a level that may not happen in site-based programs.

4   **Flexibility of Instruction Timing and Style**

To meet the diverse learning styles and personal circumstances of students, NCBs offer a wide variety of both styles and schedules of instruction. Years of adapting to the needs of students has made NCB operators nimble and responsive, adjusting quickly and effectively to unforeseen changes in students' schedules or to traumatic events such as COVID-19.

5   Parents/Guardians are Active Participants In Students' Learning

In the NCB model, the supervisory support of parents/guardians is important, especially for students in elementary school grades who are working mostly independent of a teacher. Even when a NCB was not explicitly advertised as a homeschool program, interviewees for this report talked about some level of adult involvement in students' education.

6   Emphasis on Students' Responsibility

More so than with a site-based education, academic success at NCBs is dependent on the motivation and perseverance of the students. While initially students may struggle with the increased flexibility and freedom of NCBs, particularly if transitioning out of a traditional site-based setting, NCBs offer transitional supports and create structures to emphasize personal responsibility and accountability for learning.

7   Adapted to Meet Diverse Student Needs

According to the leaders interviewed for this report, the students who enroll at NCBs are often those who struggle to conform with or feel alienated from the more structured and less flexible site-based school system. The common practices identified above allow NCBs to structure an individualized program that suits the needs of a diverse range of student circumstances.

8   Providing Needed Educational Options

NCBs often fill a necessary function for a region, engaging in a collaborative relationship with their authorizer to serve students who the traditional school system is struggling to serve properly, rather than being in competition with existing public school options.

Nonclassroom-Based Program Specialties

In addition to shining a spotlight on best practices within the NCB sector, this paper also provides a **taxonomy** of NCB programmatic specialties, developed through a review of each school's website and building off prior research literature. This paper also disaggregates demographic and enrollment trends by the type of programmatic specialty offered at NCBs, illuminating some **key findings**.

> While NCBs overall enroll fewer low-income and minority students than do site-based charter schools, NCBs with reengagement/adult programs tend to enroll higher proportions of historically underserved student groups: More Latinx and Black students, more English learners and more low-income students than site-based charter and traditional public schools. See Appendix D for a full breakdown of student demographics across NCB specialties.

> NCBs meet an important need for students who are more mobile (moving from one school to another after the start of the school year). NCBs have a 17% student mobility rate (compared to 3% in site-based charters).

> NCBs offer a wide variety of programmatic specialties, including numerous offerings under the headers of career-focused, personalized learning, college-ready, reengagement offerings for at-promise and adult students, constructivist, content focused, and 21st century learning options.

This paper adds to the body of knowledge on nonclassroom-based charter schools by providing an important spotlight into the **practices and characteristics** that make them a successful and important option for many California students and families. Since 1993 when the first charter schools opened in California, NCBs have been an integral part of meeting the diverse needs of students and families. NCB enrollment has consistently made up 25-30% of all charter enrollment, since at least 2008 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: NCBs Enrollment as a Proportion of Total Charter Enrollment (2008-2020)

● NCB Enrollment   ● Site-Based Enrollment   ● Percent of Charter Students at NCB
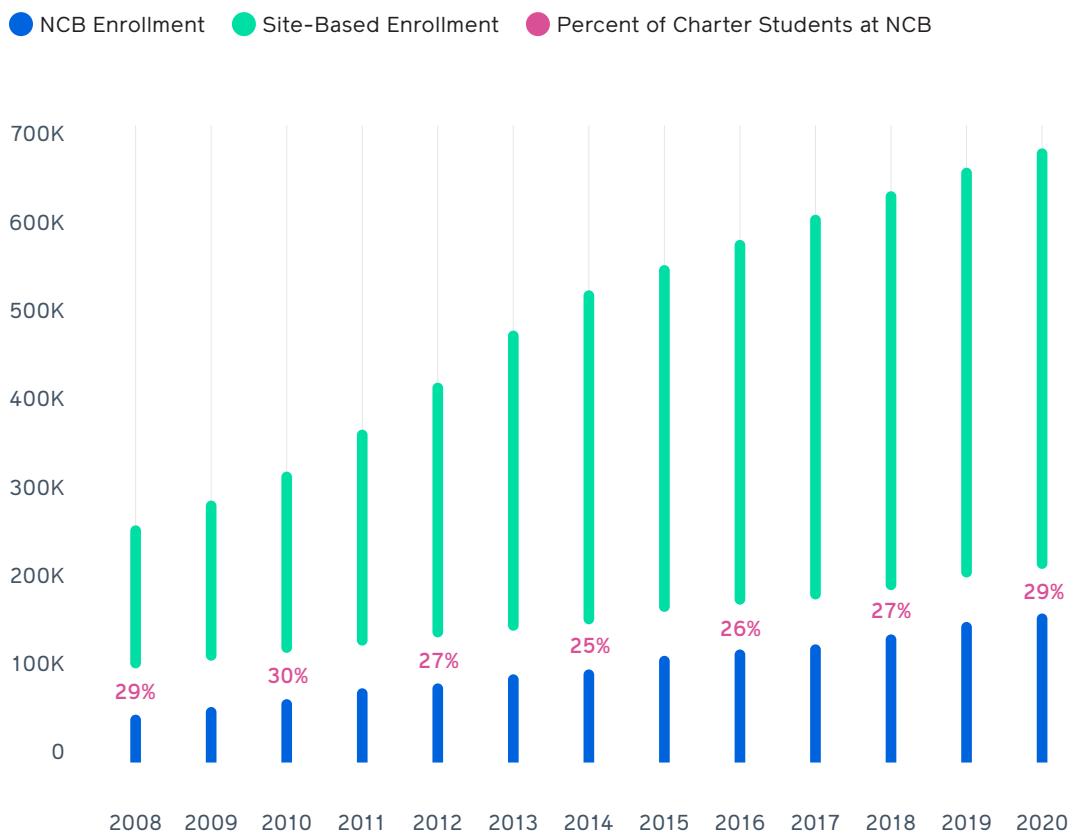
Nonclassroom-based Charter Facts

As the number and types of student attending NCBs has grown, these schools have had to adapt to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students. With the pandemic, California's K-12 education system as a whole has had to adapt instruction delivery models, and now is the perfect time to learn from the lessons and best practices acquired over the years by NCB leaders.

In fact, many NCBs have been proactive in sharing their best practices widely with both other charter schools and the traditional public school system, and throughout the world (see CCSA Portrait of the Movement 2020). Before exploring the best practices mentioned by nonclassroom-based charter school (NCB) leaders, here are some facts about NCBs.

Nonclassroom-based is a catch-all term for schools with a variety of instructional programs. Some NCBs are online-only, others require students attend a site-based classroom four to five days in the week. As long as a school's students spend less than 80% of their time in a physical classroom, the school qualifies as nonclassroom-based.

On average, NCBs enroll fewer historically underserved students (Latinx, Black, English learner, and low-income students) than site-based charter or traditional public schools. However, this may be due to geography: 70% of all NCBs are located outside of urban areas, compared to just 41% of site-based charters.

About 33% of all NCBs are classified as Dashboard Alternative Status Schools (DASS), which is a designation given by the California Department of Education to schools that serve a high proportion of at-promise students (students with multiple expulsions, or are chronically absent, high school dropouts, adults, or teen parents). This is much higher than the proportion of site-based charter schools that are DASS (only 4%).

On average in 2019, NCB students scored lower on the CAASPP compared to site-based students and had lower graduation and post-secondary attendance rates. However, NCBs that offered multiple instructional modalities for families had higher average academic outcomes, closely resembling the outcomes of site-based charters.

Best Practices Highlighted by NCB Leaders

NCBs vary considerably in the way instruction is delivered (e.g. through homeschool, online-only, or a blend of site-based and remote instruction) and in the types of programs emphasized (e.g. a focus on college preparedness or career pathways). Even so, CCSA was able to identify some **common best practices** across NCBs through interviews with five NCB leaders whose schools offer a variety of instruction delivery methods and programming specialties. These practices were credited by NCB leaders as being critical to each school's success and could be considered best practice for schools operating with any form of distance learning program. Many of the practices listed below have been adopted by site-based schools during the mandatory distance learning caused by COVID-19. **Eight common practices** are described in detail below, including detailed explanations, examples and important context from interviews with the leaders of NCBs. The interviewees represent a variety of school and instructional types with successful outcomes (see Figure 2 for a brief description of each school and CCSA's rationale for selecting the school for an interview).

Figure 2: NCB Organizations Profiled by CCSA For This Paper

	TOTAL STUDENTS	GRADES SERVED	SCHOOL NOTES
California Connections Academy Schools	6,377	K-12	Above average student outcomes with college-ready program.
Compass Charter Schools	2,674	K-12	Above average student outcomes given demographics, fully virtual.
Connecting Waters Charter Schools	2,274	K-12	Home school focus with personalized learning plans and teacher support.
The Learning Choice Academies	926	K-12	Above average student outcomes with a college-ready program.
Motivated Youth (MY) Academies	102	6-12	DASS school with an emphasis on student' socioemotional well-being.

1   **Personalized Learning**

NCBs feature a high level of individualization or personalization for students. NCB curriculum and instructional style and timing are adapted to fit into the lives of each student. For example, MY Academy has every student, new or continuing, take an interest survey at the beginning of the school year. "Even with the core curriculum, we try to offer supplemental work that's related to what their interests are, to help them refine and verify exactly what their interest is." The leader of Compass stressed that "whether that's 2/4-year, military, gap year, we want to make sure that after your time with Compass, you find the tools and skills you need to be successful in your next chapter." The specifics of how schools prepared students for their next phase of life varied. One example we heard came from Connecting Waters, where "counselors now offer a class which all incoming 9th graders take, where they start thinking about how much do I need to make if I want to live, how expensive are homes and things like that. Really, that's really the nuts and bolts of life, right? What are you going to do after, what is your plan?"

The personalization of student learning evolves based on the feedback teachers receive through students' assessment results. A study by the RAND Corporation showed that a program developed in this way can improve student achievement.[iii] At The Learning Choice in the San Diego area, all students are assessed when they first enroll. Following this initial assessment, teachers discuss the results with parents and students to decide on what kind of a learning plan would make the most sense. The Director of The Learning Choice explained, "We test all of the students right when they come in on NWEA. From that our teachers understand where the students are academically, allowing them to tailor the curriculum to the kid." At MY Academy, a new student's learning plan "gets tweaked every week, based on what the student's done and where they're going."

The personalized learning model provides choice and flexibility in curriculum, learning environments, and pacing for every student and can include a tailored blend of distance learning, independent study, home study, site-based instruction or other services at resource center facilities, community and project-based learning, internships and career technical education pathways. For a deeper dive into personalized learning and to learn more about the Association of Personalized Learning Schools & Services (APLUS+) please see Appendix A.

2   Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

Even when NCBs didn't explicitly advertise live classes through their website, NCB leaders talked about offering at least some form of live (synchronous) instruction either virtually or in-person. The Learning Choice was a fully independent study program when it first started in 2004; however, the school has since moved to a mixed model, which they refer to as hybrid. "In our hybrid model, the students come to the campus for instruction three days a week at two of our sites and two days a week at the other, but just because of space." Staff at The Learning Choice made this decision after finding that students were struggling in certain subjects, especially at higher grades, and that guardians were struggling to support their children's learning.

At Compass Schools, every subject has a live instructional component, but attendance is not mandatory. According to Compass'

superintendent, "We know that folks are coming to our program for flexibility so you're not required to attend and if you can't make it, the learning lab is recorded, and you can still access it after." The leaders of California Connections pointed out that while live instruction was important, they blended synchronous and asynchronous instruction for a reason: "There is a good 20 years' worth of research on what makes something more effective, and it's definitely not just all day long synchronous sitting in front of me." In fact, half of all research articles on distance learning published in the past 20 years have focused on what works in distance learning classrooms, and rubrics have been developed for evaluating the effectiveness of a distance learning course. [iv,v]

| 3 | **Strong Teacher and Student Relationships** |

Given that teachers are not seeing most NCB students in a physical classroom five days a week, NCBs are required by law to sign written agreements with each student's family outlining the division of responsibilities between school staff and the family, and NCBs must maintain a 25:1 student-teacher ratio *(EC 51745.6)*. NCBs have turned this requirement into an opportunity, assigning teachers a group of students to connect with regularly outside of class. At MY Academy, "we assign a teacher of record to a roster of 25 students in that teacher's geographical area to support learning." Those teachers are expected to have 1:1 weekly, in-person interactions with their students. California Connections Academy has a similar expectation of their teachers, requiring that they meet with students once every two weeks. As the leader of MY Academy puts it, "Fundamentally, we realized that for any of us, relationships are the key to success, and the stronger and more personal those relationships can be, the better."

As a result, NCB leaders say their teachers have a stronger connection with students compared with site-based teachers. According to the leaders of California Connections, "In a traditional brick and mortar, you have 35-40 kids sitting there. Sure, you address the class, but have you talked to Richie individually?" The level of personal connection is not necessarily uniform. "Those who seem to be doing pretty well, maybe there's less check-ins," says the leader of Connecting Waters. The main goal is to get to the level of the student and understand

their concerns and how best to support their success. From the leader of MY Academy: "Getting on their turf, in their community, and their environment… it really breaks down a lot of barriers that you'd typically have to work through when you're first beginning this type of a relationship." This mindset of engaging a student in his/her community is emblematic of a three-part engagement strategy (the Family-School-Community Engagement strategy, FSCE) that the US Department of Education considers critical to effectively prepare students for adulthood. [vi]

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4 Flexibility of Instruction Timing and Style

A big draw for students at NCBs is the flexibility to choose the time, pacing, and delivery method of instruction. Every school leader interviewed for this report mentioned the importance of students being able to design their own schedule. As the leaders of California Connections put it, "as long as they can get access to the internet, we can supply a school computer, and they can participate in a really high quality program with a lot of options, which they may not have access to otherwise because of where they live." Many students choose a NCB program because the typical school day just will not work for them. If a student could not attend Compass Schools, "They would miss the independent nature of a program like this, where you don't have to live in the 8-3 zone. The [students] can find the time they need to be successful, which is a key ingredient to what NCBs are doing in general."

Increasingly during COVID-19, students are contributing to the family income or helping to raise brothers and sisters. The leader of MY Academy describes this flexibility: "Our teachers may meet with [the students] at four or five in the afternoon for an hour, whenever they happen to be available. And they're also available by text, email, phone, or FaceTime additionally later in the afternoon or even into the evening. That enables the students to have more work options during the day." NCB students value this flexibility to set their own schedules and choose the curricula that works best for them. As another example, at schools serving at-promise youth or adults, students may opt into an intensive schedule where courses are taken one at a time every three to four weeks.

Interviewed leaders also talked about being flexible with the instructional tools used by students. The leader of MY Academy pointed out that "the way kids learn has changed quite a bit. It's rare that you run into a kid and they can tell you the last book they read. But kids these days can tell you all kinds of great ways to find resources using the internet and social media." As a result of being in the remote learning space for so long, the leaders we spoke with talked about adapting to the needs of students and moving away from the routines of traditional site-based learning. The goal of these educators is to create a student-centered program through technology. As the leader of Connecting Waters described, "I realized everybody has their language and their communication style. For some people, it's email. For some it's text. For some people it's phone. So just finding out what works best." At Compass, students had the option of a virtual program delivered through the computer, or an Options program, which featured paper/book-based learning and more closely resembled homeschooling.

5   Parents/Guardians are Active Participants In Students' Learning

NCB operators recognize that students will most likely need the support of an adult if they are to stay on track with schoolwork. In fact, this type of engagement between a parent and their child's education has been shown to result in higher student achievement.[vii] To ensure that schools and families act in partnership, many NCBs host trainings for new parents/guardians when students first enroll. At Connecting Waters, "we make sure that parents go through an intake process where all the parents are hearing the exact same thing about the school. How the school runs, what your responsibility is, what's needed."

The level of parent/guardian participation varies by curriculum and student age. Elementary-aged students require a lot more involvement from parents, while the content in higher-grade subjects often demands help from subject-matter experts. For elementary students at California Connections, "just the way a kindergartner engages with the program looks really different from an older student, and so the adult has to have a bigger role in helping their [child's] learning." By the time a student reaches middle or high school though, Compass Schools

has found that parents' "involvement is lighter because the scholars are independent and working directly with their teachers." Nevertheless, NCB leaders saw parents as an important contributor to students' academic success regardless of age. In the words of the Director of The Learning Choice, "there's a constant communication between parents and teachers in the school. It's even in our mission – our learning triad is the parent, teacher, and the student."

6 Emphasis on Students' Responsibility

Every school leader we interviewed acknowledged that nonclassroom-based instruction may not be for everyone. The independence offered by this instructional approach means that students have to assume personal responsibility for their learning. As the leader of Compass Schools put it, "The biggest thing that folks have to realize is that now they're the ones setting their schedule. They're controlling their destiny. They have to take responsibility. That's our mission and vision: preparing scholars to take control of their future success."

Schools did not leave students on their own when figuring out a schedule that worked. All the school leaders we spoke with understood that transitioning to an NCB form of instruction can be a challenge for students who are used "to having a teacher in class telling them to do everything," as the leader of MY Academy put it. That is why at his school, "our teachers do a great job of using Google Sheets to create individual pacing plans. Those are shared with both students and parents, so they can check off for themselves when they're making progress."

NCBs focus on developing an infrastructure and process that will guide students to lead their own instruction. At Compass Schools, "our scholars set their own goals for the year, so they can define that success." It is then up to the teachers and staff to give students the supportive structures that will help the student get to where they want to go.

Adapted to Meet Diverse Student Needs

Families appreciate the NCB model because of the possibility for a high degree of accommodation for special or unique needs. Some students want to move at a much faster pace than was offered at their site-based neighborhood school. Other students are semi-professional athletes and need the flexible schedules offered by an NCB program. The leaders we interviewed also mentioned that some students arrived at NCB programs because of bullying or emotional distress. At California Connections, "we often have students coming to us because there were negative social interactions happening in their current school and they're looking for a way to get away from that." That is why the school developed a "robust counseling department… with a lot of social-emotional support."

Leaders also described students who had children of their own or who had already dropped out of several site-based programs. As the leader of MY Academy put it, these students "haven't had success somewhere else and they're trying to take advantage of our opportunity." The NCB leaders talked about having support services outside of the student's primary teacher who can step in to help. MY Academy for example, "works to connect them [the students] with wraparound services in the community to ensure that they're not operating in a silo, that they have the ability to interact with other people beyond just Zoom." The leader of Compass Schools pointed out, "A lot of our colleagues at other [site-based] schools talk about student-to-counselor ratios of 500:1; we strive for 200:1 or less. We're proud of the levels/layers of support so scholars can find their success." In 2019, the average student-counselor ratio for California public schools was 612:1, whereas the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of at most 250:1.[viii]

NCBs are open to all and attract students who do not want the typical schedule of a site-based school. NCBs have adapted their programming to meet the needs of these students, and the leaders all believed that this reputation of support and flexibility had led to an increase in short-term attendance from students who were fleeing difficult situations at their site-based schools. California Connections' leaders believe this is why NCBs often have high mobility rates: "Many students are only coming to us for a particular time where they are trying to solve an issue, whether it is medical, social, or getting caught up with academics. When they are done with that, they are ready to go back to a more traditional setting."

Providing Needed Educational Options

NCB leaders saw their schools as an integral part in a suite of potential educational opportunities for their community. Over the years, many NCB's authorizing school districts grow to see the local NCB as an important supplement to the traditional school system. The leader of MY Academy explained that "we work with our district to support learners. We also have a resource center within our district on the Campo Indian reservation and serve about 25 Native students." Similarly, the leader of Connecting Waters explained she and her authorizer "work collaboratively together in supporting the students. We're just here to serve the kids who need what we have to provide. We're not trying to go and grab kids from a site-based program." NCB leaders see their schools as one option among many, an alternative to the traditional site-based school setting that may better suit some learners.

Program Specialties

Although NCBs share some key practices, they are characterized by the **great variety of instruction delivery methods and program specialties available**. This rise in school choice has allowed families to consider academic quality as well as specific program offerings to find the right "fit" for their children. Before the advent and growth of NCBs, parents and families were limited by geography in terms of their ability to choose the format of their child's K–12 education.[ix] With the advent and growth of NCBs however, many families have been able to overcome this challenge and have access to more choices.

This section explores the variety of academic offerings provided via California's NCBs. CCSA analyzed the websites of all NCBs in California to craft a taxonomy of program offerings, shown in Figure 3. This taxonomy was based on the work of previous efforts to categorize K–12 schools based on the type of programming a school offers.[x] This should not be considered a comprehensive list. Given the evolving nature of public education, this taxonomy is a first attempt at identifying the program specialties offered at NCBs and may require further refinement.

Figure 3: Taxonomy of Common NCB Program Specialties

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Personalized learning as a program typically include the best practices mentioned in the section above. In particular though, it refers to the individualization of content, pace, and focus of instruction to meet the needs and goals of each individual student. NCBs are required to have some degree of personalization via the legally required student/family contracts, but schools with a personalized learning program further tailor a student's educational experience to the student's unique needs.

CAREER-FOCUSED

Career or vocational focused programs emphasize job skills and training, offering programs like internships, job placement, and career-technical education (CTE) pathways.

COLLEGE-READY

A curriculum that emphasizes college access and preparation. This can be accomplished via the courses offered or by working with a local college to offer dual enrollment, giving students college credits while still in K-12 public school.

REENGAGEMENT / ADULT

A curriculum tailored to students who are classified by the state as "at-promise" *(EC 7.96)*. At-promise students include teen parents, students who have previously dropped out or are credit deficient, and/or adjudicated youths. This term also includes programs that are designed to serve 18+ year-olds.

CONSTRUCTIVIST

Schools that are built more on a constructivist based educational theory where students own the active process of learning via problem solving, real world skills and knowledge building with instructors acting as facilitators. These types of programs are often referred to as "project-based", "Montessori," or "Waldorf".

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY (21ST CENTURY)

"Twenty-First Century" and "Global Education" refer to programs that emphasize students' ability to become well-informed and engaged citizens. In 21st century curriculum, students are self-directed and
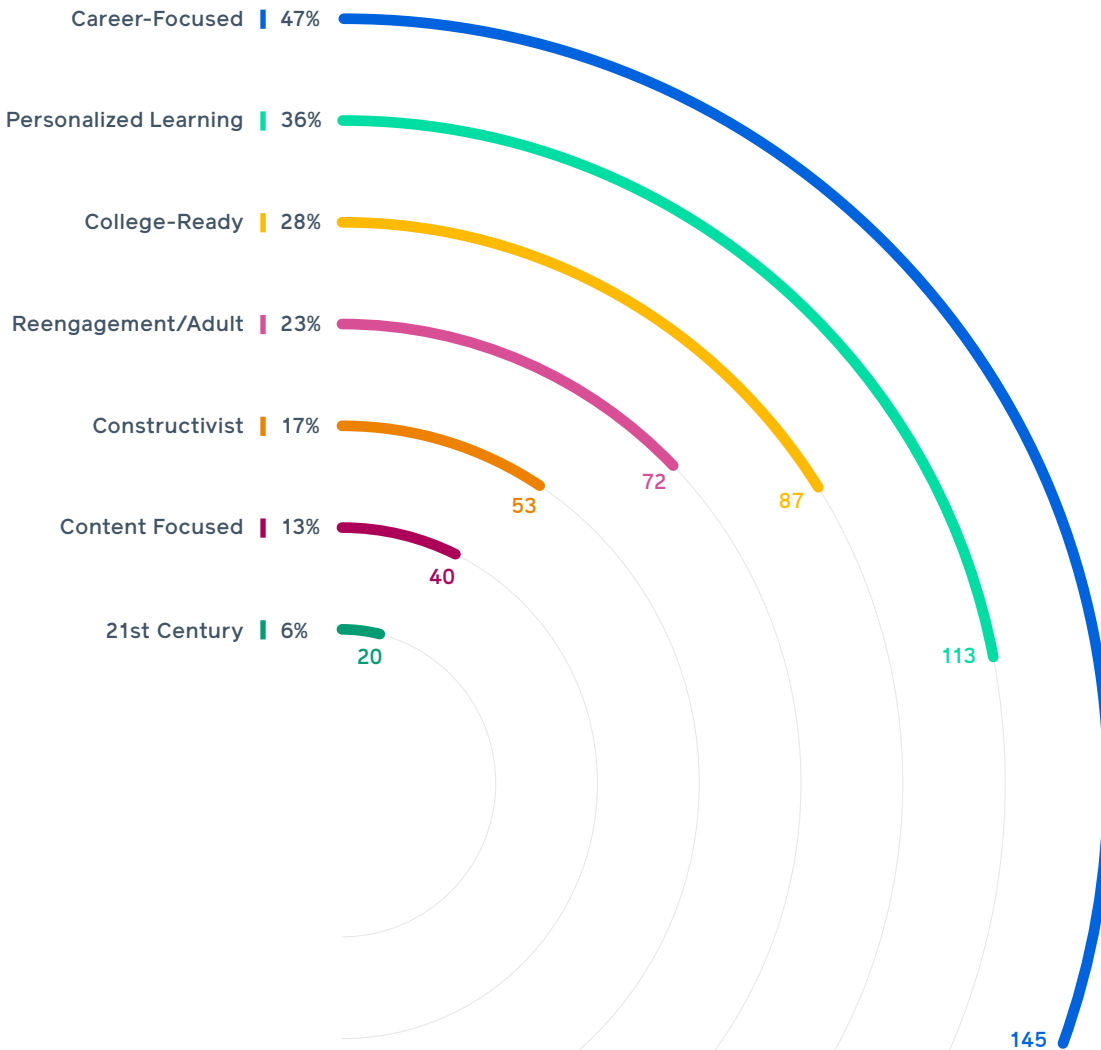
receive encouragement from the teacher.[xi] In Global Education, curriculum focuses on the interdependence of modern society.[xii]

CONTENT FOCUSED

There are three types of programs that had specific content foci. Some NCBs focus on visual/performing arts (VAPA), science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), some also include arts (STEAM), and others focus on the four core subjects within Common Core State Standards (CORE).

The programmatic specialties categorized in Figure 3 are not 'exclusive' programs; in fact, two-thirds (66%) of NCB websites advertise more than one of these programs within the same school. The most common programs at NCBs from our survey of websites were **career-focused, personalized learning, and college-ready programs** (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Count of Program Specialties at NCB

Program	%	Count
Career-Focused	47%	145
Personalized Learning	36%	113
College-Ready	28%	87
Reengagement/Adult	23%	72
Constructivist	17%	53
Content Focused	13%	40
21st Century	6%	20

Most NCBs Serve All Grades (K-12)

Most NCBs (87%) serve a **broad range of grades (K-12) or are high schools**. This holds true regardless of the program specialties a charter offers, except for NCBs offering a reengagement or adult program. As might be expected of a program designed to serve older students, NCBs with an adult or reengagement program are less likely to serve grades K-12 and more likely to specifically serve high school grades.

A Third of All NCBs are Classified as Alternative Schools

One third (32%) of NCBs qualify as **Dashboard Alternative Status Schools** (DASS, see Appendix C for a definition of the DASS designation). Charter schools can apply to be classified as a DASS school, and in order to qualify, 70% or more of students must be considered "at-promise." As such, DASS NCBs tend to work with older student populations that have had difficulty in the traditional school system. There are 98 DASS NCBs, and the two most common types of programs advertised by DASS NCBs are career-focused (82% of all DASS NCBs) and reengagement/adult programs (70% of all DASS NCBs, Figure 5). Although DASS NCBs are not synonymous with reengagement or adult programs, most emphasize such a program.

Figure 5: Specialty Programs offered by DASS NCBsProgram Specialties at NCB

82%
62 Career Focused

DASS NCB Program Offering

70%
53 Reengagement / Adult

Number of Students Served Varies by NCB Program

In general, NCBs **enroll more students per school than site-based charters** (Figure 6). This is understandable given that most NCBs serve all grades (K-12) while 90% of sitebased charters serve specific grade ranges. Average enrollment at NCBs vary though, depending on the

program specialties being offered. NCBs with websites that offered constructivist programs or personalized learning programs had higher enrollment than the NCB average. Those with a college-ready program tended to be smaller sized schools.

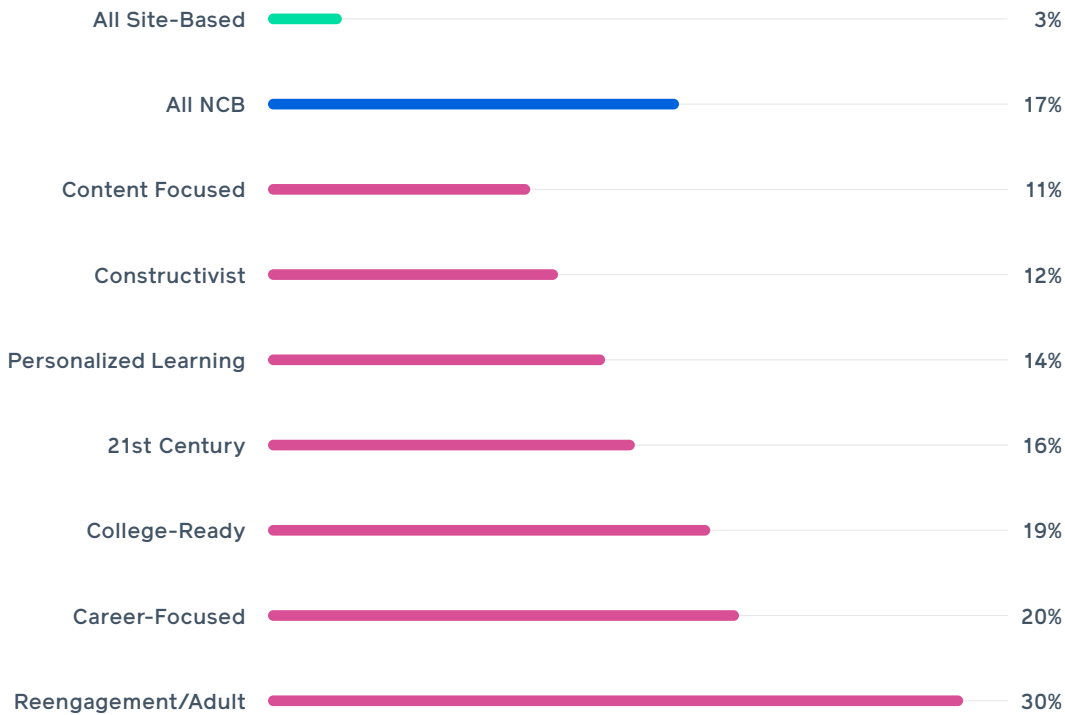**Figure 6:** Average Enrollment by NCB Program Specialty (2020)

Program Specialty	Average Enrollment
All Site-Based	484
All NCB	629
College-Ready	446
Reengagement/Adult	526
21st Century	625
Career-Focused	707
Content Focused	728
Personalized Learning	906
Constructivist	925
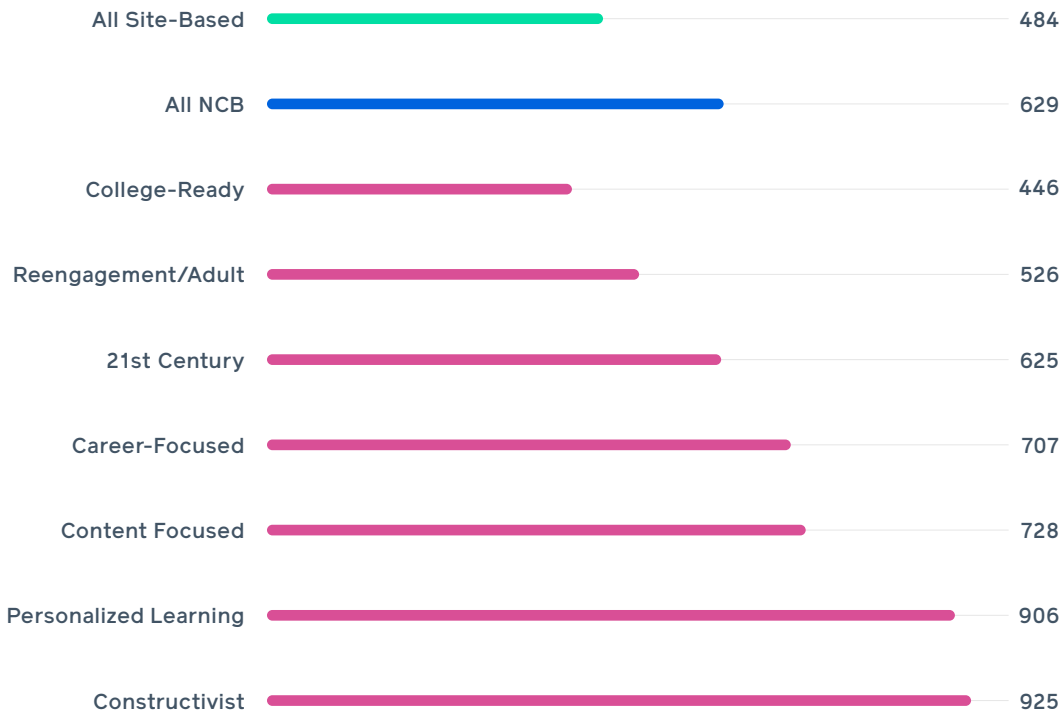
NCBs Have Higher Mobility Than Site-Based Schools

Another key NCB characteristic is **higher student mobility**: students are more likely to enroll in or exit from an NCB mid-year than they are at site-based programs. CCSA defines a mobile student as any student who exits or enters a school after the start of the school year. CCSA estimates a mobility rate for every public school in California (see Appendix B for methodology), which is the proportion of a school's enrollment that exits or enters after the start of school. In California, an estimated 3-4% of students

move schools over the course of a school year. On average, NCBs have a much higher mobility rate than site-based charters (17% vs 3%) with variation across specialty (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Mobile Students by NCB Program Specialty (2019)

All Site-Based	3%
All NCB	17%
Content Focused	11%
Constructivist	12%
Personalized Learning	14%
21st Century	16%
College-Ready	19%
Career-Focused	20%
Reengagement/Adult	30%

NCBs with reengagement or adult programs had the highest mobility (30%), while those with constructivist or content-focused programs had the lowest (12% and 11% respectively). Student mobility is an expected trait of running an NCB, as their programs often act as a necessary, short-term alternative from traditional site-based schools. For example, one leader gave the example of a student who joined the NCB while undergoing a gender transition. In other cases, students join the NCB to catch up academically, such as high school students who have failed several courses at their site-based high school and no longer qualify to graduate in four years. Credit deficient students enroll at an NCB for a semester, and after recovering enough credits to be on track for graduation, return to their site-based program.

NCBs with Reengagement Programs
Enroll High Proportion of Disadvantaged Students

About 23% of NCBs offer a reengagement/adult-focused program, and these schools enroll higher proportions of **historically underserved student groups** than both the NCB and site-based charter averages. In fact, NCBs with a reengagement/adult program serve a higher proportion of low-income students than either site-based charters or site-based traditional public schools (Figure 8). A more complete breakdown of student demographics at NCBs by program specialty is available in Appendix D.

Figure 8: Selected Student Group Attendance by School Program (2020)

● Reengagement/Adult ● All NCB ● All Site-based (Charter and Non-Charter)

Latinx
- 63%
- 40%
- 57%

Black
- 10%
- 6%
- 8%

Asian
- 2%
- 3%
- 6%

White
- 18%
- 40%
- 22%

English Learner
- 14%
- 6%
- 19%

Low-Income
- 72%
- 48%
- 61%
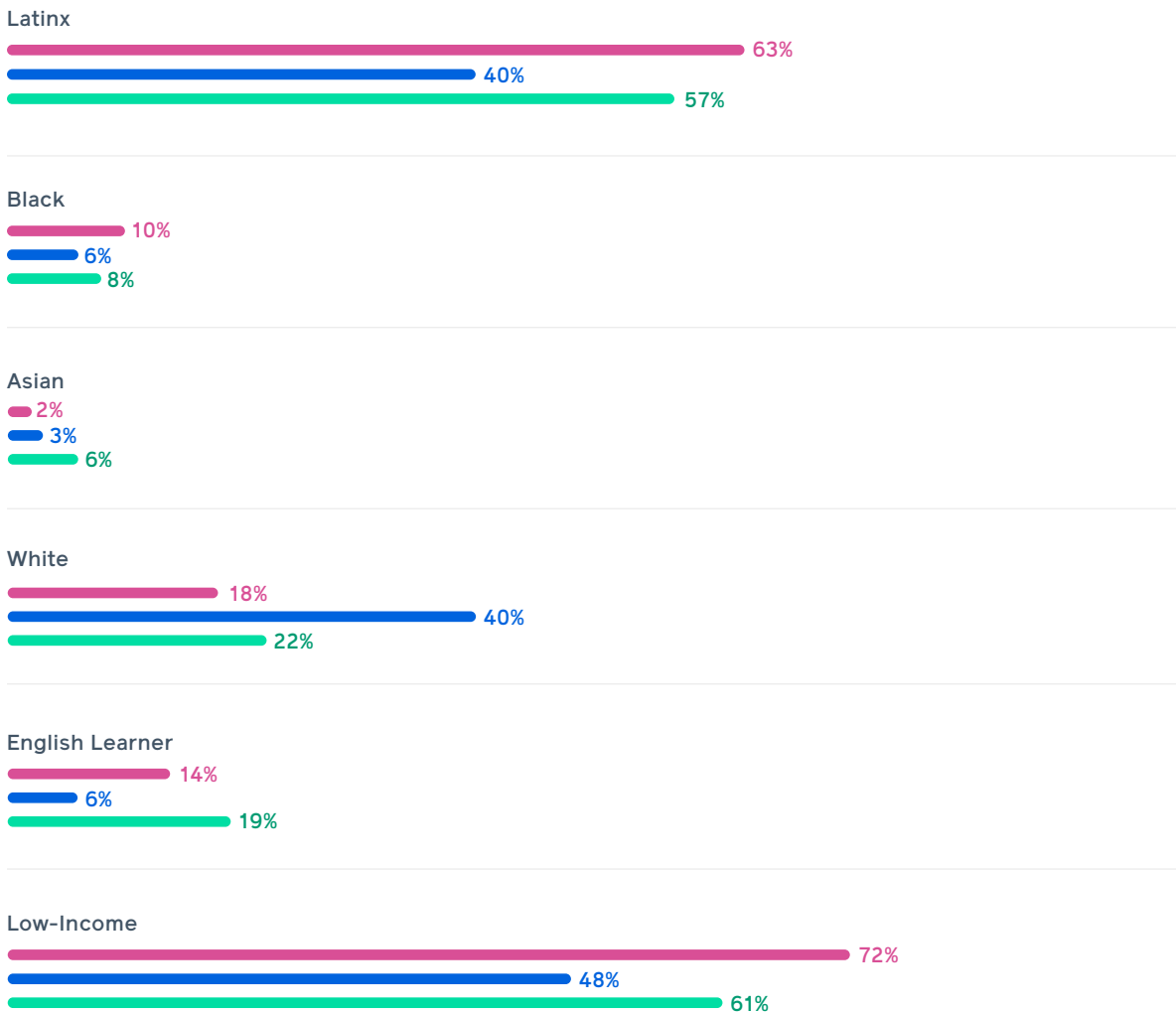
Conclusion

NCBs have evolved over the past 30 years to meet the diverse needs of California families, and their ongoing popularity is clear given the steady rise in NCB enrollment over the past 10+ years. Rather than a monolithic educational format, **NCBs have innovated and adapted a variety of program specialties designed to effectively serve students with particular life experiences**. For many California students the traditional model of education simply does not work, and **NCBs offer an alternative**.

Through a review of NCB websites and interviews with the leaders of five NCB organizations serving over 10,000 students collectively, CCSA offers the following key findings regarding NCBs as a whole:

1

KEY FINDING
Great Variety Across NCBs

The term nonclassroom-based is a broad catch-all, referring to any charter school where less than 80% of total instruction is supervised by a teacher *in a classroom*. There is great variety across NCBs in terms of the amount of seat-based instruction students receive. Some NCBs fall just below the 80% threshold, with most student time spent under the direct supervision of a teacher at a school site.

2

KEY FINDING
Common Practices Integral To NCB Success

Although NCBs vary considerably in terms of program specialty or instructional modality, there are common practices that appear to be integral to the success of NCB learning. The best practices that CCSA noticed across interviews with NCB school leaders were:

Personalized Learning
Tailoring course of study to each students' unique needs.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning
Giving flexibility about when and how to study.

Strong Teacher and Student Relationships
Developed through regular 1:1 check-ins.

Flexibility of Instruction Timing and Style
Allows for students at the same school to learn at times and in ways that best suit their living situation.

Parents/Guardians are Active Participants in Students' Learning
Especially with elementary schoolaged students.

Emphasis on Student's Responsibility
However, students are supported through their transition from a more structured, site-based curriculum.

Adapted to Meet Diverse Student Needs
Possible because of the flexibilities & personalization listed above.

Providing Needed Educational Options
Especially for school districts with limited resources.

3 KEY FINDING
NCBs Offer Program Specializations

NCBs typically offer one or more of seven program specializations. The most common programming specialties were career-focused (47% of all), personalized learning (36%), and college-ready programs (28%). We also identified: reengagement/adult, constructivist, content-focused, and 21st century programs. About two-thirds of NCBs advertised more than one of these program specialties.

4 KEY FINDING
NCBs Enroll More Students Than Average Site-Based Charters

Most NCBs enroll more students than the average site-based charter school. NCBs with a constructivist program (Waldorf, Montessori, or project-based learning) had the highest average enrollment (925 students on average), while those with a college-ready focus were smallest (446 students).

5 KEY FINDING
NCBs with Reengagement Programs Enroll High Proportion of Disadvantaged Students

NCB students tend to be less disadvantaged (according to publicly reported demographic metrics) than site-based students, except for NCB students attending reengagement or adult programs. NCBs with reengagement or adult programs serve a more disadvantaged student population than either the site-based or NCB average, with 72% of students qualifying as low-income and 30% of students moving in or out of the school within the school year (also known as a school's mobility rate).

NCBs have faced increasing pressure in California - from a two-year moratorium on new NCBs, to a freeze on funding for new NCB enrollment in the 2020-21 school year, to calls for wider reform. Yet there is **much to be learned from the innovations of NCB operators**, particularly during a global pandemic that has forced traditionally site-based educators into a distance learning model. During this pandemic, NCB operators **rose to the challenge** by enrolling students over and above their funding cap, partnering with school districts to train site-based staff on a transition to distance learning, offering free worldwide access to NCB curriculum, and sharing consultation and insights on their best practices.

From CCSA's experience, NCB school operators are **student-driven, professional educators** who are keen to innovate for the sake of students' learning. NCBs answer the call for a more **individualized, tailored and responsive learning environment to meet a wide variety of student needs** – from students who have been chronically underserved by the traditional public school system and are on the brink of leaving school altogether, to students and families choosing a specialized programmatic model that better fits their learning styles, family needs, and other life circumstances. All NCBs appear to have developed **flexible programming structures**, allowing for a **high degree of customization** to the individual needs of students. In fact, the decades of innovations pursued by NCB operators on behalf of their students should be held as a source of inspiration for the wider K-12 education community.

This paper on nonclassroom-based charter schools (NCBs) represents a first step by CCSA to codify NCB programming categories and to shine a light on NCB best practices. More research is needed to continue deepening understanding of the NCB sector and ensure that site-based public schools can learn from and incorporate NCB practices so more students and families find the right learning environments to meet their needs and thrive.

Research questions such as those listed below will help to further contribute to a better understanding of this educational format:

How can the experience and learnings of NCB programming be shared constructively with site-based schools?

What site-based schools have had to begin figuring out in the past year, NCBs spent decades evolving to meet the needs of their students. There are hard-earned lessons in the NCB sector that would greatly benefit the traditional public school system's response to distance learning programs and even after their return to site-based programming.

What is the typical academic progress of NCB students over the course of a year? Does student progress differ depending on the instructional model received or a school's program specialty?

Although the status of NCB students' academic outcomes is lower than site-based charters, studies have also shown that students progress academically at higher rates through a well-established personalized learning program.[vi] Since NCBs have much higher mobility rates than site-based charters, it may make sense to evaluate NCB student progress over short periods, across a single term, as has been suggested by other researchers.[xiii]

What are the outcomes of students who attend NCBs for a brief period and then return to site-based programs?

NCBs have high average mobility, and the leaders we interviewed talked about a significant number of high school students who enroll at an NCB for a short period and return to site-based programming

for graduation. It would be interesting to see these students' academic standing before attending an NCB, progress during their NCB enrollment, and outcomes after returning to a site-based program.

Q What are the longer-term post-secondary outcomes for NCB students?

Previous research has shown that historically, the college attendance rate was lower among NCB graduates than it was for site-based graduates, except at community colleges. It's possible that the same NCB graduates attending community colleges would go on to a four-year college/university a couple years later, after they have completed prerequisite courses at a community college. This question could be answered if the CDE were to make publicly available the four-year post-graduation outcomes of public high school graduates (currently the CDE only offers a 12 month retrospective after students' graduation). We also showed in this paper's section titled Program Specialities that 145 NCBs offer a career-focused program, the outcomes of which are not captured in the CDE's publicly available post-secondary data. Showing the number of CTE certifications awarded at the school level would be one easy step for the CDE to increase the amount of leading indicators publicly available in the area of career-based post-secondary success.

SPOTLIGHT

Aplus+ and Personalized Learning

APLUS+, The Association of Personalized Learning Schools & Services, is a membership association dedicated to advancing the Personalized Learning model for students, and to supporting schools to provide a more personalized education for their students. Since its inception, APLUS+ has been a leading voice to raise awareness and understanding of the critical need for parent and student choice in public education, and specifically for a personalized learning option in education for the growing number of students for whom a classroom-only model is not a good match for success. APLUS+ Personalized Learning public charter school members are required to demonstrate their strong commitment to the Personalized Learning model, and to uphold high standards of accountability, integrity, and academic excellence. Of the 75,000+ students being served by 85 APLUS+ member schools, 54% are economically disadvantaged and 12% are students with disabilities.

Personalized Learning is a successful alternative to a one-size-fits-all education model. It provides choice and flexibility in curriculum, learning environments, and pacing for every student and can include a tailored blend of distance learning, independent study, home study, instruction/other services at resource center facilities, community and project-based learning, internships and career technical education pathways.

Key benefits of the flexible and adaptable personalized learning model include a studentcentric, individualized education that provides choice, flexibility, and a variety of options for every student in how, what, when, where and with whom each student learns that is tailored to their needs, interests and goals. It typically includes small class sizes of 20 or fewer students and strong relationships where a credentialed personal advisory teacher/guide works collaboratively with each student and family to develop and refine, as needed, each student's Personalized Learning Plan. Teachers receive ongoing professional development training based on current state standards.

The personalized learning model affords students to attend programs designed like a university model, where students can attend in-person classes at their resource center campus and fulfill their other learning requirements off campus. Students also benefit from partnerships with local colleges, universities and businesses, and can access and have exposure to postsecondary pathways and opportunities prior to high school graduation. Common reasons for students attending Personalized Learning charter schools, range from shorter term academic recovery so that they can return to their district public school and graduate with their cohort, to longer term enrollment because Personalized Learning is a better match for their needs and interests.

To learn more, please see this Personalized Learning Factsheet

Methodology

Website Surveys

In October 2020, CCSA undertook a comprehensive review of nonclassroom-based charter websites, to understand the instructional delivery methods and curriculum specialties of this group of charter schools. We were able to view the websites of all but two NCBs (308 of 310). Our survey team specifically searched the About Us, FAQ, and Program Description pages of school websites, and took note of any description of the school's instructional delivery program or any curriculum specialties that the school focused on. If a school did not have those pages or if no keywords could be found, surveyors looked at a school's student or parent handbook. After visiting each NCB website and noting instructional practices and curriculum specialties, each school's entries were coded into broad categories. We developed four instructional delivery methods (blended learning, independent study, online-only, and homeschool) and seven program specialties (see Figure 3). A school was identified with a particular program or instruction method if its website explicitly listed the category, or if the website's description of the school's programming met the definitions listed earlier in this paper.

Academic Performance Comparisons

NCBs differ from site-based charter schools in two important ways: 30% are DASS schools (just 4% of site-based charters are) and NCBs serve a higher proportion of high school students than site-based charters. Since DASS schools, by definition, serve a predominately at-promise student population (high school dropouts, expelled students, pregnant teens, etc.) who historically score lower on state tests, these schools were removed from

our comparison of academic performance. To ensure we were looking at the academic outcomes of similar groups of students, our comparisons of academic outcomes only look at schools that the CDE identifies as K–12 or 9–12. That is, schools serving any grade, or schools which serve high school-aged students only. Figure 9 shows the total counts of NCBs and site-based charters, how many qualify as non-DASS, and how many qualify for inclusion due to being K–12 or 9–12 schools.

Figure 9: NCBs and Site-Based Schools Included in CCSA's Academic Performance Analysis

	TOTAL SCHOOLS	NON-DASS	K-12 or 9-12
NCB	310	212	139
Site-Based	1,000	965	255

Mobility Rate

CCSA estimated the mobility rate of schools by comparing the count of state test-takers in the CDE's CAASPP research file with the number of tested students reported in the CA School Dashboard's English and Math indicators. According to the CDE's Technical Guide, certain categories of tested students are excluded from the Dashboard's final English and Math Status calculations. The primary group of excluded students are any who transferred to the school after Fall Census Day (first Wednesday in October) or who had a gap in enrollment of 30 consecutive days. Other groups of students are also excluded from the final Dashboard calculation:

• Medical Emergencies

• English learners who are new to the country

• Students with parent waivers

Only English learners who are new to the country would take the CAASPP and have their scores removed from the Dashboard's Status calculation. So, schools with a large English learner population who are also new to the country would appear to have a high mobility rate under CCSA's methodology.

Definitions

±**Low-income** (California Department of Education "CDE" Definition)
Students who qualify for the federal Free/Reduced Price Lunch program.

°**Low-income** (CDE Definition)
Students who received the designation of socioeconomically disadvantaged. These are students who qualify for the federal Free/Reduced Price Lunch program or whose parents did not receive a high school diploma.

Dashboard Alternative Status Schools (DASS)
Charter schools can apply for DASS status on an annual basis. Once approved, charter schools must renew their DASS status at least every three years. In order to qualify, at least 70 percent of a charter school's enrollment must be comprised of at-promise student groups. For a full list of qualifying student groups, see the CDE's DASS eligibility criteria page.

Mobile Students
CCSA defines these students by what they are not: continuously enrolled. The CDE definition for "continuously enrolled" is: the student was enrolled from the Fall Census Day (first Wednesday in October) through the first day of testing without a gap in enrollment of more than 30 consecutive calendar days.

Any student that does not meet the CDE's continuous enrollment definition is defined as a 'mobile student' by CCSA. See Appendix B for CCSA's estimation of student mobility.

Additional Analysis

Figure 10: Student Demographics of Program Specialty and Charter Site Types (2020)

	LATINX	BLACK	ASIAN	WHITE	ENGLISH LEARNER	LOW-INCOME	STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
Career-Focused	47%	8%	2%	32%	8%	55%	12%
Personalized Learning	32%	5%	3%	47%	4%	43%	12%
College-Ready	40%	6%	3%	39%	6%	49%	12%
Reengagement /Adult	63%	10%	2%	18%	14%	72%	11%
Constructivist	45%	6%	2%	37%	8%	51%	13%
Content Focused	36%	6%	4%	44%	5%	44%	13%
21st Century	38%	6%	4%	37%	6%	52%	11%
NCB Average	40%	6%	3%	40%	6%	48%	11%
Site-Based Average	57%	8%	6%	22%	19%	61%	11%

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