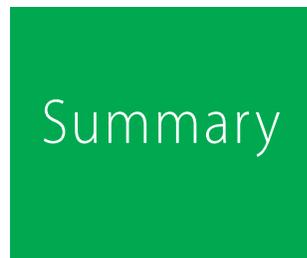




Examining independent study high schools in California



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Institute of Education Sciences
U.S. Department of Education



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Summary

June 2009

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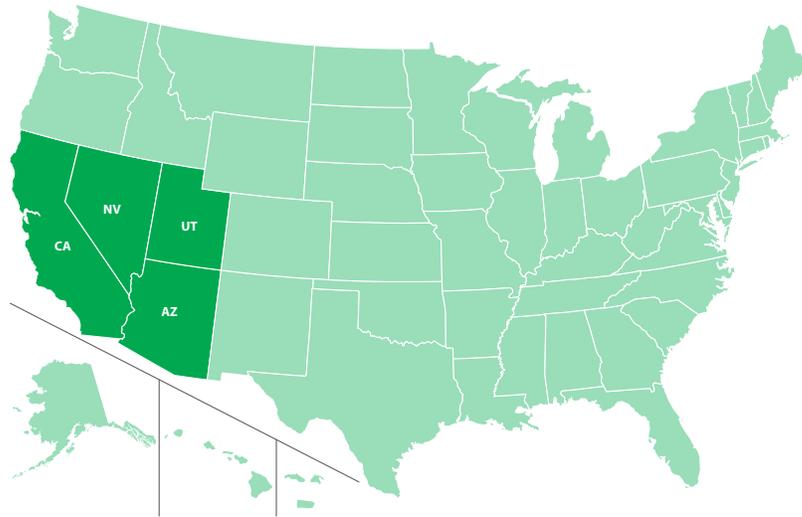
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Examining independent study high schools in California

This examination of California’s independent study high schools—alternative schools in which 75 percent or more of students in grades 9–12 are enrolled in full-time independent study—describes enrollment trends since 2001/02 and the number and characteristics of schools and students as well as teacher qualifications in 2006/07.

Independent study is a public education alternative meant to meet students’ needs, interests, and learning styles while ensuring that students can meet their school district’s curriculum and graduation requirements. All independent study students have an individualized learning plan that guides their education, and the students can complete assignments at any time, pace, or place that conforms to the plan.

While the California Education Code does not recognize independent study schools as a school category, California Department of Education staff have defined independent study high schools operationally as those in which 75 percent or more of students in grades 9–12 are enrolled in full-time independent study.

California policymakers and educators have expressed interest in knowing more about independent study high schools. That interest

emanates partly from an acknowledged necessity for more public education alternatives to meet wide-ranging student needs and partly from continuing parent demand for choice in their children’s education. With the current emphasis on accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, there is also interest in whether independent study high school students are being taught by highly qualified teachers.

The study addressed six research questions:

- What was the independent study enrollment in California’s independent study high schools and other types of high school in 2006/07, and what was the enrollment trend between 2001/02 and 2006/07?
- Do California’s independent study high schools target specific student populations and, if so, which ones?
- What were the characteristics of students in independent study high schools compared with those of students in other types of high school in 2006/07?
- What were the locations of California’s independent study high schools and their school characteristics compared with

those of other types of high school in 2006/07?

- What were the qualifications of teachers of core classes in independent study high schools compared with those in other types of high school in 2006/07?
- What percentage of core classes were taught by highly qualified teachers in independent study high schools compared with other types of high school in 2006/07?

To report characteristics of schools and students and teacher qualifications of all California public schools enrolling students in grades 9–12, the study used a merged school-level longitudinal dataset for 2001/02–2006/07 to track student enrollment and used school-, teacher-, and course-level datasets for 2006/07. The quantitative analysis contrasts the characteristics of independent study high schools with other nontraditional and traditional high schools. Qualitative data from the latest available School Accountability Report Card for each independent study high school identified targeted student population groups.

The main findings:

- In 2006/07, 58,788 students were enrolled in full-time independent study in grades 9–12 in California’s 231 independent study high schools—up 44.2 percent from 2001/02. In contrast, 25,560 students were enrolled in full-time independent study in grades 9–12 in other types of high school—up 12.1 percent from 2001/02.
- Some 54.9 percent of independent study high schools reported targeting a specific student group, while 20.5 percent reported serving the general student population. (Another 24.6 percent provided no information about targeting.) Of schools targeting a specific student group, 45.5 percent targeted students at risk of school failure, 39.8 percent targeted home-study students, 10.6 percent targeted both, and 4.1 percent targeted other groups.
- In 2006/07 the student population of independent study high schools was less diverse than that of other types of high school, with a larger percentage of White students. Independent study high schools also had higher percentages of female students, although the difference in female and male enrollment was smaller than in other nontraditional high schools. And independent study high schools had lower percentages of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, English language learner students, students with disabilities, and migrant students than did other types of high school.
- In 2006/07 independent study high schools were less likely than other types of high school to be located in urban areas and to have been open before 2001/02. They were also more likely to be charter schools and to offer instruction to students below grade 9. Independent study high schools averaged larger enrollments than other nontraditional high schools and smaller enrollments than traditional high schools. In independent study high schools, enrollment increased from

grade 9 to grade 12; in traditional high schools, it decreased.

- Teachers in independent study high schools were less likely than teachers in other types of high school to hold an advanced academic degree and a secondary subject-specific teaching credential, and they were more likely to hold an elementary (multiple subject) teaching credential. While the majority of core classes in grades 9–12 in independent study high schools were taught by a highly qualified

teacher, these classes were less likely than those in other types of high school to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. In independent study high schools, teachers' subject-matter competence for each class was more likely to have been demonstrated through the High Objective Uniform State Standard Evaluation and less likely to have been demonstrated through advanced education, training, or both.

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