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## Supporting Re-Entry Education for Out-of-School Youth

**Youth Council:** Kern, Inyo, and Mono Counties Youth Council

**Elements:** Academic Excellence, Career Preparation, Youth Development and Support, and Youth Leadership

**Function:** Coordinating Youth Services

**Subjects:** Educational Options, Serving Special Populations

**The Challenge:** Located in central California, Kern, Inyo, and Mono Counties extend from the coastal mountain range on the west to the Nevada border on the east. Kern, Inyo, and Mono Counties have very high unemployment overall for both adults and youth, with the unemployment rate falling just below the 10 percent mark in 2004 compared to the estimated statewide average of 6.4 percent. The largest industries are typically government, services, retail trade, and agriculture, with a much larger mining sector than average due to the oil production in Kern County.

Kern, Inyo, and Mono Counties have had a long term struggle with a huge drop out population. For example, between October and March of 2005, over 1300 youth dropped out of high school and were not enrolled in other schools within the consortium. Karine Kanikkeberg, Resource Teacher for Career and Workforce Development in the Career Resources Department, says their staff refer to this as “dropping to nowhere,” and it is the job of their agency to try to find and help these youth. In addition to a high drop out rate, the consortium is experiencing very rapid population growth. For example, the high school population is growing by 1,000 high-school-age youth per year in a district that serves 33,000+ 9-12 graders.

Prior to the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the Consortium hadn't placed a great deal of attention on the out-of-school youth (OSY) population. Previously, the OSY services offered by the districts were limited to continuation and alternative high schools. Simultaneous with WIA Authorization in 1998, the school district made a concerted effort to try to locate OSY over the summer and reengage them on a path towards education. The challenge was how to find and involve these young people.

**The Practice and the Evidence:** The Re-entry Education Attainment Program (REAP) was established in 2000 to address the 12 percent high school dropout rate in the Bakersfield area. REAP is a year-round program for out-of-school youth, supported by the local WIB and the high school district. Its academic and experiential learning activities are customized to meet the needs and abilities of the students while linking training to the economic needs of Kern County. The program goal is that every younger student receives a diploma or GED and each older youth obtains a GED, diploma, or an occupational skills certificate or license, and unsubsidized employment before leaving REAP.

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REAP is designed to give high school drop-out youth, age 15 to 18, the opportunity to get their lives back “on-track,” earn a high school diploma or GED, learn employability skills, and improve self-esteem. Staff motivates, encourages, and assists high school dropouts in a re-enrollment process that eventually leads to self-sufficiency for young adults. Each participant is placed in an educational component based on individual learning style, transportation, work, and childcare needs. Participants are monitored for attendance and progress throughout the school year and summer, provided guidance with goal setting, life skills, and career exploration. Quarterly incentive stipends, paid work experience and project-based learning activities, tutoring, life/soft skills conferences, and supportive services are available to all enrolled REAP students to provide motivation to stay in school and graduate.

REAP matches needs, abilities, and interests of targeted youth by providing a combination of educational, supportive, and training services along with emotional support from caring staff. The youth targeted are in desperate need of educational services, tutoring, academic counseling, and lack self-esteem, work readiness, and soft skills. Because many are parents, REAP individually assigns an educational plan to meet the student’s childcare, work, and transportation needs. Students may attend day, night, or weekly classes. This flexibility encourages the students to believe completion of high school diploma is actually possible. Kanikkeberg adds, “Having caring adults is the most important piece to youth. Youth feel they are being heard for the first time in their lives. Sometimes youth just want to get out of the high school system they’re in, and they don’t want to be placed again. We help them to find placement in the right setting.”

Over the 2004 - 2005 year, more than 130 youth were served and 72 percent were retained in school from start to finish. Twenty-two percent of participants completed the school year with a GPA of 3.0 - 4.0 or higher, despite the fact that most of them started out with failing grades. Over 60 percent of these students were still enrolled in the spring semester.

Since 1997, the Kern High School District/Career Resource Department CRD programs have three times been awarded the PEPNet (Promising and Effective Practices Network) recognition from the National Youth Employment Coalition and U.S. Department of Labor.

**The Details:** REAP is an initiative of CRD, which, in partnership with the Local Workforce Investment Board (Kern, Inyo, and Mono County Consortium), has operated youth development and workforce training programs for over 20 years. “We’ve always done things different in Kern County,” says Kanikkeberg - “Even as far back as during the CETA days [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973], the County has always believed that youth employment services were best provided by the schools, which were already structured to serve the needs of youth.” With the implementation of WIA, the CRD redesigned its system of youth and workforce development service delivery. As mandated by the legislation, 30 percent of youth funds had to be appropriated to serve out-of-school youth. REAP is the component created to serve this population. CRD is the only department in the high school district that has full-time staff dedicated to recovery and follow-up with high school dropouts. Kern County School

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District, over the years, has applied for and received WIA funding through a Request for Proposals (RFP) from the Kern, Inyo, and Mono Counties Consortium. Through WIA, the District serves up to 150 participants annually, enrolling approximately 80-100 new students over the course of a year. In 2004, the CRD received WIA funding for one in-school and three OSY contracts. The CRD has been moving in the direction of focusing on OSY over the last several years, which coincidentally is aligning with federal and statewide efforts.

The CRD is centrally located in a downtown area, which provides easy access and is a “neutral territory,” so they avoid issues with gang turf. The CRD has classroom space, a computer lab for youth, and provides workshops and other services for youth participants.

The REAP program targets Kern County youth ages 15 to 18 who have dropped out of high school and who are interested in earning a diploma or GED certificate. Ninety-five percent are low income and about 50 percent have children. Young women make up 82 percent of the participants and nine to ten percent are pregnant. Sixty-three percent are seventeen or eighteen year olds. Fifty-two percent are living on their own, without families, without foster families, and/or are homeless or living with friends. Fifty-seven percent of the young people are Latino with the rest about evenly divided between non-Hispanic, White, and African American. Each student’s length of time in the program is individual and may range from one to three years or more.

Kanikkeberg says the youth who participate are primarily “interested in getting back into school and want to improve their lot in life.” Participants are referred through the district office or come on their own through word of mouth and in response to youth-friendly radio public service announcements. At times, REAP staff go out and recruit youth from the streets. Once enrolled, participants meet with their case representative who helps them decide which program works best for them, and they develop an Employment and Education Plan. The REAP strategy, according to Kanikkeberg, is to “break down barriers and find solutions. Participants choose among a variety of types of school environments and REAP staff follow through to make sure it happens.” Youth go through an orientation for other CRD services, including work experience, GPA improvement, driver’s license preparation, conflict resolution and decision making, and conferences - all of which build incentive points. The primary goal is to get students connected to postsecondary opportunities and work experiences, and REAP staff stay with them until they graduate.

A majority of the youth in the program begin in their younger years. REAP is no longer focused on enrolling older youth and instead has built their capacity to serve 15 to 18 year olds because that is where they’ve found they can do the best work. Jennifer Chadburn, Career Consultant and REAP Coordinator, says, “We have found older youth much harder to work with [given the structure of their services and programs], and that they either want to be in school or in work. So we’ve found that if we can enroll them in occupational programs, usually through the Bakersfield Adult School, they are much more successful at completion.” Kanikkeberg says, “We’ve found that when we get to them sooner, they are much more successful than the 19 - 20 year old population.”

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Re-engaging students with appropriate academic instruction is a major program objective. As a division of the school district, the CRD can enroll students in a variety of educational settings: independent study, GED preparation, Bakersfield Adult School, Workforce 2000 Academy (three hours of instruction conducted twice a week in the afternoon or evening at various school sites), continuation (alternative) high schools, and comprehensive high schools. The majority of youth in the initiative attend school one to two days a week.

Out-of-school youth are evaluated on a regular basis by the Attendance Specialist, Career Consultant, and Job Coach for supportive service needs. Barriers preventing participants from success in the program are identified in Individual Employment Plan (IEP) at time of enrollment, and they are continually reassessed as many students' lives are in frequent turmoil. Recently added to all CRD programs is the Health Intervention Program (HIP). KHSD's Registered Nurse comes to CRD once a month to provide basic health care screening for all participants. Also, referrals are made to partnering agencies for support ranging from dental to mental health services.

Project-based learning activities, supportive services, tutoring, life/soft skill workshops, and follow-up activities complete the REAP offerings. Paid industry-based and project-based learning activities combine creativity, technology, work readiness, soft skills, and academic skills. This blend is good for participants because they are very interested in working and earning money, but may not be ready to be placed at a worksite.

In addition, "3-D Conferences" engage the students in topics that affect them daily. They are allowed to express themselves in discussion and ask questions of professionals in the community about such topics as how to control their baby's asthma, how to stop binge drinking, and where to go for drug counseling, or get tested for HIV. Topics are "real" and touch upon here-and-now situations they are facing in their own lives. Chadburn explains that when they held regular workshops, "no one was showing up. Our [youth] are really the type that we have to engage them. Instead of calling them workshops, we call them '3-D conferences' and we give them treats and 'really pump it up.'" 3-D Conferences were modeled after adult conferences and participants responded. "Now we fill up all the rooms. We created something that was similar to what adults experience," says Chadburn. In addition, the Youth Leadership Team members from the youth program decide on a topic together and come up with a catchy name for it. 3-D Conferences run three days in a row, and youth receive stipends for participation. "And what happens is that they learn at least the skill of coming three days in a row, and it teaches them to be on time and responsible," says Chadburn.

REAP places a special emphasis on providing supportive services to help participants stay in school, and uses the Individual Service Strategy to identify potential barriers. Each participant receives a backpack full of supplies as a "welcome" to the program. Ninety-five percent of the REAP students use public transportation to get to and from school and work, a process that can take one to two hours each way. REAP can't change the commute time, but the program does provide monthly bus passes. Other ongoing services may include child care assistance,

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drug/alcohol abuse counseling, health services, family planning/contraceptive counseling, and emergency food baskets. Job coaches also will take students shopping to purchase two to three work outfits when they get a job.

REAP ties its project-based learning opportunities to the economic needs of Kern County, based on employer interviews and the Regional Outlook Directory. Four of the programs are the Customer Service Training Program; Focus on Facilities, a custodial and groundskeeping training program; Basic Quilting as an Art; and Computer Office Microsoft Basics (COMB). For more information on these programs, please see [Kern County REAP Program: Additional Information about Programs, Supportive Services, 3-D Conferences, and Success Stories](#). Certificates of completion from projects and portfolios created during the project help youth communicate what they have learned.

**Breakthrough Moment:** The breakthrough moment occurred when participants started showing up for the 3-D conferences. REAP staff discovered the solution to marketing and structuring learning environments that really appealed to participants. In addition, youth learn valuable employability and life skills, and the Youth Leadership Team actively participates in identifying topics for and planning each conference.

A second breakthrough took place when CRD received its own Independent Study instructor. This provided an opportunity for students to participate in the program on location at the CRD, rather than having to go to school every day. Since many of the participants are parents, Independent Study allows them flexibility with child care. In addition, many participants struggle with social skills, and Independent Study allows students to focus on work and not have the pressure of in-school settings. Chadburn says that they are not using Independent Study to avoid addressing social issues; instead, they address them through support services, and “we’ve found that if we are able to work with them one-on-one with their school work and emotional support, they are more successful overall.”

### **What’s Next for this YCidea?**

They would like to increase funding and build upon strategies that are working. They plan to continue the Independent Study program and add more project-based learning activities over the school year. In response to their successful quilting project, they plan to add more hands-on experiences with practical vocational application. Chadburn shares her dream: “I would love to be able to have a youth center where we could actually have a day-care, a place where participants could eat and work [in food services], and a hang out room that’s comfortable - like a youth One-Stop.”

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## Where to Go for More Information

Kern, Inyo, and Mono Counties Youth Council

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## Tools/Resources

[PEPNet Awardee Profile](#)

(<http://www.nyec.org/pepnet>)

[Kern County REAP Program: Additional Information about Programs, Supportive Services, 3-D Conferences, and Success Stories](#)

(<http://www.nww.org/yki/ycideabook/kernreapaddlinfo.pdf>)