What is 'success’?: Comparing Charter Schools' Discourses and Students' Lived Experiences in Stockton, CA

Introduction

“It is the mission of the Stockton Early College Academy to provide equal educational opportunity for each student to succeed to his/her highest potential; to foster intellectual and social development for all students in order to take advantage of students' individual abilities; to encourage the respect of self and others; and to help students become responsible, productive, and contributing members of society”

“The mission of Edward C. Merlo is to provide a secure and nurturing environment that promotes diversity, equity, rigor, and environmental awareness. We are committed to graduating self-sufficient, independent, and socially responsible adults.”

“The Pacific Law Academy provides a supportive, student-centered college preparatory environment in which all students will develop the academic skills, career/technical skills, and community awareness qualities that will allow them to successfully transition to a university, community college or a professional career.”

“The mission of Weber Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology is to develop students who are both college and career ready. We are dedicated to developing leaders who are prepared for the challenges of the 21st century, who think critically and creatively, who are dedicated to their communities, and who are lifelong learners.”

The above are the mission statements (bold emphasis added) of the top three charters and an additional unranked charter high school in Stockton Unified School District, respectively: Stockton Early College Academy, Merlo Institute of Environmental Technology, Pacific Law Academy, and Weber Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology (“SECA Mission and School Wide Learning Results.”, “Merlo Mission Statement.” “Pacific Law Academy Mission
Statement.”, “The Mission of Weber Institute”). These mission statements share an emphasis on developing successful students - students who will achieve their potential and eventually contribute to society. This success is either implicitly or explicitly tied to measures such as attending college and finding a career. Part of the reason charter schools are doing well in Stockton is because based on the numbers, these schools are fulfilling their mission. Weber Institute has the lowest graduation rate of the charter high schools at 98%. Across the board, charter school students do better on standardized tests, a larger percentage of charter school students are proficient in math and reading, and a greater proportion of their students are deemed “college ready” when compared to traditional public schools (“High Schools in Stockton Unified School District.”).

However, this paper seeks to complicate that dominant narrative of success. Specifically, I question the narrative of “success” when striving for success at the schools in the ways they define it, can actually backfire for students. For context, from 2013-2017, I attended Stockton Early College Academy (SECA), considered to be the best charter high school in SUSD. SECA was recognized as a Gold medal school (among the top 2.5% of high schools in the country) four times by the U.S. News & World Report in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. In the 2020-21 school year, 90% of graduating students were accepted into 4-year universities, and 90% had already completed over 30 units at the local community college (“SECA School Profile 2020-21”). My high school experience was integral to my acceptance into Stanford: coming from a traditional, underfunded public elementary school, I was given opportunities and resources at SECA that my peers who went to traditional public high schools did not have access to.

At the same time, my experiences at SECA were not always positive. Certain staff members made me feel unsafe or unsupported, and I developed what I later recognized to be an
unhealthy and unsustainable mindset around success and achievement. In the summer of 2020, my former principal was promoted within the school district, and upon learning of this information, several alumni and current students spoke out on social media regarding their experiences with said principal, and the school in general. Some examples of things tweeted are outlined below (Mhar; Rosales; Bermudez):

“it’s also really weird that seca normalized having 3+ hours (at minimum) of school work on top of extracurricular activities in the name of becoming “successful” in the future. as a school with a student population of mainly low-income minorities, we should not idolize struggling so much in order to be as successful as everyone else and the predominately (sic) [W]hite staff should NOT encourage this idea either”

“SECA's incessant pressuring that all students go to a 4 year university or else you're basically a failure and the demonization of community college/alternative routes is rooted in classism, ableism, and racism but all [staff] heard was "top 25 schools in the USA!"”

“you can’t have a program that’s geared toward higher education, have a majority of your population be minorities (some first gen!!) and not provide resources that help these minority groups succeed! and on top of this having some staff be racist, islamophobic, perverted, and just overtly insensitive ... i am SWEATING !!! reading all these testimonies from students, current and graduated”

The disconnect between SECA’s reputation as a beacon of success, versus student experiences at the school further highlights the need to include an analysis of student experience whenever we talk about how “successful” charter schools have been.

This paper will begin by outlining a brief history of charter schooling in the US broadly, provide some context around charter schooling in Stockton, CA specifically, and go over the prominent debates in charter school literature. I will then analyze how student experience compares to the statistics around charter schooling in Stockton. Finally, I will close by discussing the importance of student experience when evaluating charter schools, and further research that could be explored.
Numbers such as graduation rates, test scores, and proficiency rates are not the only definitions of success. Key to understanding student success is also understanding students’ lived experiences - what were students’ experiences attending these charter schools? Were they positive, or negative, and what made them that way? For marginalized students in particular, lived experience becomes key, especially considering that so many aspects of the US public education system was built with White, wealthy, able-bodied, English-speaking students in mind (Darling-Hammond; Turner, et al.).

As more and more people continue to flock to charter schools and their promises of student success, it becomes increasingly important to highlight student experiences, and this paper will argue that lived experience is just as, if not more, important to consider when we talk about student “success” than traditional metrics. Lived experience can be a powerful tool in understanding student experience that is not always reflected in the numbers. Lived experience can help to understand whether students felt supported in their learning environments, whether they themselves felt “successful,” and what types of changes could be made to charter schooling. Lived experience helps to develop a fuller understanding of success that is not limited to simply how many people graduate from a school, or how many pass a certain test. In sum, this paper seeks to answer the following: How are charter schools in Stockton defining “success,” and how does this compare to the way charter school students define it? How do these definitions (mis)align, and what are the consequences of this (mis)alignment?

**Background and Context**

**History of Charter Schooling**
Charter schools are funded by the government, but are operated by private companies. In 1983, a report published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled *A Nation at Risk* triggered concerns about a “rising tide of mediocrity” that threatened the United States’ domination in the spheres of commerce, science, and technology (Brouillette 3). As an attempt to address these concerns, charter schools were established to promote innovation and creative ways to better education. The first charter school provision was passed in Minnesota in 1991, and “allowed licensed teachers to create innovative schools, essentially on contract to a public school board” (Brouillette 8). The first charter school opened the following school year, in 1992.

While they tend to be included in school choices within a school district, they operate outside of the system that traditional public schools do. Charter schools are not necessarily subjected to the same rules and regulations that traditional public schools are, but they are still held accountable in other ways, as outlined in their individual contracts with the state or local government agency (Cookson 46). These contracts hold charter schools accountable to achieving specified outcomes that vary by school district, as well as by the charter institution (most often a non-profit). In other words, there are no federal standards applied to charter schools in the same way there are for traditional public schools.

Despite the lack of federal standards for charter schools, some charter school companies have seen significant growth since the time of their establishment. The largest charter school network in the United States, the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) (est. 1994), operates 270 schools throughout the country. Many of these charter schools are aimed specifically at low-income or otherwise marginalized communities, where the public high schools are seen as less than desirable and private schools are often inaccessible (Weinberg 2). Because charter
schools are still considered public schools and are therefore free, they become a way to a better quality of education for communities that would otherwise not be able to access that education. This is not a characteristic unique to KIPP schools either - a number of charter schools across the country are specifically meant to cater to underserved and marginalized communities, as a way to provide students of color and students from low-income backgrounds access to a quality of education that is claimed to be comparable to private schooling.

KIPP is one of a handful of charter companies to operate a charter school in Stockton, CA - a city located in California’s Central Valley. Stockton has a population of about 300,000 people, a majority of whom are not White. The median income in the city is $54,000, and only very few Stockton residents have obtained a Bachelor’s degree or higher (“QuickFacts: Stockton, California”). The primary school district that serves residents of the city is Stockton Unified School District (SUSD).

As of the 2019-2020 school year, SUSD serves primarily students of color - only 5.1% of the population is White, and Hispanic students make up the largest ethnic group of students. In addition, a majority of SUSD students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 11.4% are students with disabilities, and 22.8% are designated as English Language learners. In sum, SUSD serves a student population that is primarily composed of marginalized students (“Stockton Unified”). Historically, however, SUSD has had difficulty meeting the needs of these students - as of the 2018-19 school year, SUSD is ranked within the bottom 50% of all school districts in California, and has a graduation rate of 78%, which is lower than the state average. In addition, fewer than a quarter of SUSD students are proficient in math, and only a third are proficient in reading and language arts, numbers that are once again lower than the state average (“Stockton Unified School District”).
Beginning in approximately 2009, a number of charter schools were founded in the city, and were advertised as a way to guarantee that students would graduate and go to college. Over the past several years in particular, more and more students have enrolled in these charter schools, some of whom even come from outside of the school district. As of the 2018-19 school year, 14.6% of SUSD students are enrolled in charter schools (“Stockton Unified”).

As of January 2018, laws that allow for the creation of charter schools exist in 44 states plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam (“Charter Schools: How Is the Funding for a Charter School Determined?”). In the 2015-16 school year, over 2.8 million students attended charter schools, accounting for about 6% of all public school students and showing a growth in enrollment of 70% from the 2009-10 school year. Charter schools also tend to serve a larger proportion of Black and low-income students than traditional public schools do (“Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools”). As charter schools continue to grow, it becomes increasingly important to interrogate their impact on student achievement.

*Pro-Charter Schooling Arguments*

In the 30 years since its founding in the US, charter schooling has sparked contentious debate around its effectiveness, and whether charter schools are more successful educational institutions than public schools.

New Orleans is often cited as an example of the success charter schools across the country could potentially achieve. Charter schools serve a higher percentage of students in New Orleans than anywhere else in the country, with 93% of students in New Orleans attending charter schools in the 2016-17 school year (Helsa). In *Charter School City*, Douglas Harris explains New Orleans' unique relationship with charter schooling, and how the traditional public
school system was overhauled and replaced with charter school and school choice post-Hurricane Katrina. Harris finds the New Orleans charter school system to “be a noteworthy success on almost every measurable student outcome,” a sentiment not necessarily shared with other researchers (Harris 200; Henry). However, Harris does point out that initially, charter schools aren’t successful, and notes that it takes several years after their founding to produce results that are more positive than results from traditional public schools. Despite these “growing pains,” Harris holds firm that the results seen in New Orleans are “a possible leading indicator of more positive results in the future.” Charter school success stories can also be found elsewhere.

In the closing chapter of Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?, author Jack Buckley acknowledges that despite generally falling short of lofty promises about student achievement, some charter schools do manage to achieve success, highlighting in particular the efforts of Capital City Public Charter School, KIPP DC: KEY (Knowledge Empowers You) Academy Public Charter School, and Josh Kern and the Thurgood Marshall Academy (Buckley 281).

These charter school success stories can be found in Stockton as well - many students and their families see charter schools as a much more desirable alternative to the public schools in the district. I, and many of my peers, attended charter high schools because we and our families believed they were “better” than the public high schools. In recent years, several of the charter schools in the district have even gained national recognition - Stockton Unified Early College Academy (SECA) was ranked by US News and World Report as the #41 high school in the state, and #75 of all charter high schools nationwide, for a total scorecard of 98.24 out of 100 (“Stockton Unified Early College Academy”). In comparison, the top-ranked public high school in SUSD is #1,196 is the state, and has a scorecard of 35.11 out of 100, a far cry from the ranking of charter schools (“Franklin High”).
However, the numbers do not always tell the full story.

_Criticisms of Charter Schooling_

Despite the relatively positive reception of charter schools in Stockton, it is important to acknowledge the other half of the conversation surrounding charter schooling: concerns around accountability and success. Because charter schools are not managed by the district in the same way traditional public schools are, there have been calls for more transparency around the way they operate, as many do not understand exactly how charter schools differ from traditional public schools. The lack of public accountability for charter schools is also a cause of concern for critics who highlight the fact that as government-funded schools, charter schools should be held to a standard that the public decides, and not one that charter management companies decide.

The debate around the “success” of charter schooling is also long-standing. In some cases, charter schools have been wildly successful at improving student outcomes. In others, they have been found to do no harm, but still not provide much of a difference than traditional public schools. Still other research argues that charter schools can actually be harmful to students. Even within the same city, research around charter schooling and its results can be mixed. One interesting thing to note is that when talking about the success of charter schooling, charter schools are often compared to other schools in the area, usually public schools. However, charter schools are run very differently from public schools, typically have smaller class sizes, and are held to different standards – all of which brings into question how the two can even be compared in the first place.
Part of the debate about the success of charter schooling is around closing the achievement gap, which generally refers to the “disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White, Latino/a and White, and recent immigrant and White students” (Ladson-Billings 5). Closing this achievement gap is a primary goal of many charter schools, whether explicitly or implicitly. For example, the California Charter School Association has in its mission statement providing “our most historically underserved and vulnerable students with the high quality public education they deserve” and has published various articles on how data has shown that “charter schools in California are significantly closing the achievement gap” (“Who We Are”; “In California, There Are Indeed Measurable Differences in Achievement”; Toney, et.al.). However, rhetoric of an “achievement gap” can actually be detrimental to outcomes of student success and achievement, particularly for Black students - a focus on the achievement gap without a nuanced understanding and incorporation of race and racism (and their historical roots) actually serves to exacerbate disparities, as teachers tend to emphasize conformity to a White, middle-class standard and Black students feel a disconnect between school their lives outside of school (Douglass Horsford).

It is also important to note that despite their goals, charter schools may not even be closing the achievement gap at all. In a study published in March 2021 on school choice in Indiana, the Institute of Education Science found that while charter high school students were more likely to be Black or from a low socioeconomic background, they performed similarly to or worse than traditional public school students on measures of college and career readiness. The same study also found that students in traditional public schools were more likely than students in charter school students to both take and pass an Advanced Placement examination (Austin). In another analysis of charter schools in Washington, D.C., it was found that while charter schools
did no harm, on average there was no major difference in student performance on standardized tests when compared to students in traditional public schools (Buckley 272).

Closing this achievement gap is also a prominent part of charter schools’ missions in Stockton, which makes sense considering a majority of students in the district are from marginalized backgrounds, and on the whole are not performing up to state standards. However, because so much of “closing the achievement gap” is focused on achieving similar numbers as White students (such as test scores, graduation rates, proficiency rates), it is worth noting that perhaps a view of “success” that more directly incorporates student experiences alongside quantitative data would be useful to shift towards. Analyses of lived experiences are “powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people’s motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom,” and would help to enrich the debate around charter school success (Lester).

In sum, the charter school debate existed long before Stockton opened its first charter school, and the debate continues today. Pro-charter school advocates could point to the quantitative data to further the argument that charter schools should continue to exist - charter high schools in Stockton have higher graduation rates, better test scores, and are recognized on a national scale for their academic rigor. However, what is lacking when we talk about charter school success in Stockton is the inclusion of students’ lived experience. While quantitative data is helpful in analyzing whether or not charter schools are fulfilling their charters, it is not necessarily a reflection of “success”.

When we define things purely in terms of numbers, we are leaving out a plethora of data that in some cases, directly contradicts narratives of success around chartering schooling. In addition, it has been long acknowledged within education that test scores and the like are not
always the best indicators of intelligence in students, and therefore should not be the basis of our definitions of student “success.” Instead, we should look at the ways success is being defined by students themselves, and how their experiences within these charter schools fit into their narratives of success.

Findings

At the time of writing, there are five charter high schools in SUSD: Pacific Law Academy, Stockton Early College Academy (SECA), Health Careers Academy (HCA), Weber Institute of Applied Science & Technology, and Merlo Institute of Environmental Technology. There are also four traditional public high schools: Cesar Chavez High, Thomas Alva Edison High, Amos Alonzo Stagg High School, and Franklin High.

In order to understand student experiences at charter high schools in Stockton, I had conversations with five of my peers, all of whom are alumni of charter schools in Stockton. Ethan, Ash, and I attended SECA from the fall of 2013 to the spring of 2017, while Lily attended HCA during the same time period. Sasha and Carla attended SECA from the fall of 2017 to the spring of 2021. Based on our conversations, charter schooling in Stockton could be improved in terms of making students feel safe and supported, offering more variety in education, and in promoting a healthier work-life balance. In spite of these areas of improvement, charter schooling in Stockton has been successful at fostering community among students.¹

Feeling Safe and Supported

“you can’t have a program that’s geared toward higher education, have a majority of your population be minorities (some first gen!!) and not provide resources

¹ All names and information have been altered at the request of students I talked to.
that help these minority groups succeed! and on top of this **having some staff be racist, islamophobic, perverted, and just overtly insensitive**

Part of SECA’s mission statement is “to encourage the respect of self and others,” but that is not always reflected in students’ experiences, especially with staff at these schools. For example, Sasha remembers how one of her teachers would “gossip” with some students about other students, and how this same teacher made a reference to her sexuality in the middle of class. Sasha had been tired during class, and the teacher had made a joke and asked if she was tired because she was “up late talking to that girl from Stagg?” Sasha didn’t mind too much, since most of her classmates knew about her sexuality, but it was “still weird”. In another instance however, another staff member at the school tried to leverage Sasha’s sexuality in terms of disciplinary action. Sasha’s friend had come to pick her up from school, and had apparently trespassed onto school property in doing so. A staff member talked to Sasha about it the next day, and threatened to out Sasha to her mother as part of the conversation about not allowing her friend back on school grounds. The only reason Sasha wasn’t outed was “because I cried when I asked them not to.”

In his own experiences, Ethan remembers the 2016 presidential election, which happened during his senior year of high school. He notes that because of the issues surrounding the election, a majority of the students came to school very affected the day after the election was called, but it “didn’t affect the teachers the same way it did [the students].” One math teacher in particular, spent the class period talking about Trump, with the implication that he was “so happy that it happened.” This same teacher also had a history of discussing politics in the classroom, including topics such as border control and “illegal” immigrants, leaving students like Ethan with
an “icky feeling” about the environment, especially as he had friends at the school who had 
undocumented family members, or were immigrants themselves.

Carla had relatively positive experiences with most staff members, but did not necessarily 
feel supported by them. For example, she had a “chill” relationship with a math teacher that other 
students did not have a positive opinion of, but this was mostly due to the fact that she was 
“always winning [math] competitions.” In her view, staff “only treated me nicely because I 
excelled as a student, this was a relationship fueled on merit, not true character.” If she was not 
as good of a student as she was, then their relationships would not have been as positive.

Experiences like Ethan’s, Sasha’s, and Carla’s highlight the importance of providing an 
environment that is both safe and supportive for students, and how such an environment 
contributes to fostering a sense of belonging. According to associate professor of educational 
psychology and equity in the North Carolina State College of Education DeLeon Gray, “A sense 
of belonging at school means feeling a sense of acceptance, respect, inclusion and support in a 
learning environment.” When this sense of belonging is not present, students experience issues 
with emotional wellness, and are unable to devote their full cognitive resources to school-related 
tasks (Bowen). Sasha ended up distancing herself from certain teachers, Ethan dropped out of the 
math class, and Carla felt that she could not afford to falter as a student since it would negatively 
impact her relationships with staff.

Variety of Education

Another part of SECA’s mission is “to foster intellectual and social development for all 
students in order to take advantage of students' individual abilities.” Again, however, this is not 
what is reflected in students’ experiences. Instead, students find that SECA is actually lacking in
terms of the variety of education it offers, and often pushes students into one particular mold as opposed to taking advantage of their individual abilities.

Ash is autistic, but they didn’t know that in high school. However, even without the diagnosis, they did know that the way they learned best was incongruent with teachers’ expectations, especially around assignments and organization. During Ash’s freshman year, all SECA students were expected to carry a 5in binder that contained the materials for all their classes. They were taught how to organize this binder, and during one of the classes (mandatory for all freshmen), there would be binder checks to ensure you were doing it correctly. However, Ash hated the binders, because they were not congruent with the way they learned. This led to frustration, as there was not really any room to explore other forms of learning, and the messaging from staff they received was that “if you had a problem with it, then you need to change yourself,” as opposed to being offered alternatives to the strict enforcement of the binder.

In Lily’s experience, her entire school was dedicated toward one career path. HCA is one of the charter schools in Stockton that is intended to help students get a head start in specific career fields - in this case, health. By the end of her first year however, Lily had already realized she had no intention of going into the health field after high school. However, she stayed at HCA because it would have been too much to try to get a fresh start at another high school. For the next three years, Lily was stuck taking classes “I didn’t need” instead of being given the option to explore other pathways.

Carla was an officer for the National Honor Society (NHS) at her school at the time of George Floyd’s murder and subsequent rise in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement. As such, she had included a link in the club’s social media account to various resources and

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2 Lily attended HCA, but there is currently no mission statement for that school on their website, which is why this paper mostly uses SECA's mission statement as a reference. Based on other charter schools’ mission statements, though, I imagine HCA's missions would fall along similar lines as SECA's.
information about petitions, organizations, and other relevant information. However, the advisor of the club told her to take it down, as it was “not part of our agenda.” Later that year, when Carla pushed to start including land acknowledgements during club events, and wanted to hold workshops on topics such as capitalism and imperialism, she was told not to by the advisor. When Carla continued to do so anyway, the advisor left the club and NHS was forced to function without the help of an advisor for the remainder of the year.

If SECA's mission is to help their student’s take advantage of their “individual abilities,” then it does not make sense to enforce just one type of learning or form of organization on all students. When students are not given the opportunity to explore and figure out what type of learning works best for them, then maintaining the binder Ash had to use becomes busy work, and not learning. In addition, schools such as HCA that track students into a certain field right at the beginning of high school send the message that students should know what they want at the age of thirteen. They are not given the opportunity to explore and find what they are passionate about, and are, such as in Lily’s case, just trying to force themselves to like something because they have been told that path will lead them to “success.” Students should also be given the opportunity to learn about topics relevant to their experiences even if they are not necessarily already part of the established curriculum. When Carla wanted to provide more education around the BLM movement, capitalism, and imperialism, she was shut down and unable to further explore these topics. Ash said overall, the enforcement of such a particular form of organization was “tedious, and made me start to not like school.” Post-high school, Lily’s health-related coursework wasn’t much help to her. Carla felt that she wasn’t trusted and frustrated that she ended up having to lead NHS on her own.
Narrow Definitions of Success

“[there was] incessant pressuring that all students go to a 4 year university or else you're basically a failure and the demonization of community college/alternative routes”

“seca normalized having 3+ hours (at minimum) of school work on top of extracurricular activities in the name of becoming “successful” in the future. as a school with a student population of mainly low-income minorities, we should not idolize struggling so much in order to be as successful as everyone else.”

SECA’s mission statement claims to “help students become responsible, productive, and contributing members of society,” but again, it appears to be an area in which they fall short.

Part of Ash’s identity in high school was that they wanted to go to law school. Part of that, they said, is because it felt like if you didn’t want to go into STEM, then you weren’t valued as much. Therefore, as someone who did not want to go into STEM, they picked something that still helped them to “fit in” and “feel success.” While this worked during high school, they eventually came to the realization that they did not actually enjoy the path they had chosen in college. This led to them having a breakdown during the second semester of their first year, and they ended up having to withdraw for the remainder of the semester.

Ethan felt the pressure at SECA to go to a four-year university straight out of high school. However, as a first-generation college student, there were challenges he faced that others did not. Ethan wished that there was more understanding from staff about why a four-year university is not feasible for all students - from financial hardship, to navigating the application process, to other life circumstances. Instead, it was expected that all students apply to four-year universities, and there was an expectation to attend one and to avoid attending the local community college.

At SECA, “success” was defined in a narrow way: you are successful when you go to a four-year college, graduate, and get a “good job.” However, life is not that straightforward, and
having to learn that there are different ways to define success can cause problems later down the line. Ash ended up re-enrolling at a different university, studying philosophy and now works in education. Ethan finished college at 20, and is among the youngest of his coworkers. While he doesn’t necessarily regret anything, he does acknowledge that where he is now has come at the cost of always feeling like he is not doing enough, because his time at SECA ingrained in him a mindset that he always needed to get ahead.

*Sense of Community*

Despite the improvements that need to happen with charter schooling in Stockton, there is one area where charter schooling shines. Despite the negative experiences, of the five people I talked to all but one said that if they could go back, they would still choose to attend their charter schools. A large part of the reason has to do with the community they found with other students at these schools.

Charter schools in Stockton are much smaller than traditional public schools - SECA currently has an enrollment of 432 students, and HCA 494 students. My graduating class was only 87 students. In contrast, the public high schools enroll an average of 2,000 students - Stagg enrolls the least at 1,581 students, and Edison enrolls the most at 2,267 students. Fewer students means students can get more attention from teachers and staff, and also form deeper connections with each other. At SECA, we all took mostly the exact same classes (with one or two differences based on your electives), and the small class size meant you likely shared at least one class with nearly everyone in your grade. You were also able to bond over shared experiences - whether it be the stress of exams, or going to the same school events.

Sasha mentioned how she appreciated that there was a good community at SECA, and how it felt “tight knit.” Ethan talked about how he was also able to develop strong friendships
with classmates, a number of whom he is still close friends with today. He also talked about there being support from upperclassmen throughout his time at the school, especially with the transition into SECA during his first year. He mentioned how upperclassmen helped to teach him how to focus during college courses, and generally helped to navigate SECA. Lily said that part of the reason she stayed at HCA despite not having an interest in health is because of the friendships she developed there, and that despite her experiences, she doesn’t regret HCA because she “met great people.”

What is interesting to note is how when talking about a sense of community, students specifically spoke about how that community was built among other students, not staff. This community that students found and built among themselves fostered a sense of belonging, and combatted the feelings of not feeling safe and supported that were perpetuated by staff members, as described earlier. A sense of belonging is an important factor in students’ motivation, and how they cope and learn in school. Belonging fosters positive attitudes toward learning and improves students’ well-being (Allen). While it is positive that students were able to find this sense of belonging amongst themselves, it also calls into question why staff, who are the adults and authority figures in these schools, are not contributing to this sense of belonging.

Conclusions

What is “success”? 

“It is the mission of the Stockton Early College Academy to provide equal educational opportunity for each student to succeed to his/her highest potential; to foster intellectual and social development for all students in order to take advantage of students' individual abilities; to encourage the respect of self and others; and to help students become responsible, productive, and contributing members of society”
Does SECA fulfill its mission statement? In terms of “providing educational opportunity for each student,” yes. SECA provides students with resources and opportunities not readily available at the traditional public high schools. Many students graduate with a completed Associate’s Degree from the local community college, and if not, they graduate with at least a year of completed college credits under their belt. However, the issues are with SECA’s mission to help each student “succeed to his/her highest potential.” There is a fundamental misalignment of the definition of “success” between staff at charter schools, and students. For staff, success is straightforward: get good grades, graduate and go to a four-year university, study something (ideally) STEM-related, graduate from college, and land a good job. For students, however, success is not so cut and dry, and they question why “success” has to be tied to going to college, or to certain career pathways.

As a result of this misalignment in definitions of success, students at charter schools do not always feel safe or supported in their pursuits. Ash felt they had to force themselves to learn in ways that were not compatible with their learning style, Ethan constantly feels as though he is never doing enough despite being the among the youngest of his coworkers, Sasha and Carla were left feeling as though staff did not truly care about them, and Lily felt a twinge of shame for attending community college after high school.

“Success” at charter schools is embedded in an ideology of white supremacy and heterosexism. Teachers policed whatever was ‘outside' the norm, such as Sasha’s sexuality or Ash’s learning style. In turn, this made students feel unsafe, which impacted their ability to learn. This ideology was exacerbated by very narrow definitions of “success” that are rooted in capitalism and pressured students to conform to certain pathways - such as the emphasis on
STEM and other career pursuits considered to be “successful” and the pressure to go to a four-year university upon graduating from high school.

This ideology can also be traced back to the implicit mission to close the achievement gap. Charter schools in Stockton are predominantly attended by students of color, and SUSD has a record of falling below state averages. Charter schools, to some degree, seek to reverse that by producing “successful” students. However, as discussed earlier, a focus on the achievement gap without a nuanced understanding and incorporation of race and racism (and their historical roots) actually serves to exacerbate disparities, as teachers tend to emphasize conformity to a White, middle-class standard and students feel a disconnect between school and their lives outside of school. That emphasis to conform played out at various levels for students - from the use of the term “illegal aliens” by teachers despite there being students with undocumented family and friends, to threatening to out a student to her homophobic family, to shutting down students when they want to explore systems such as capitalism and imperialism that have a direct influence on their lives, to forcing students to use very specific learning strategies despite it not working for them, to the incessant pressuring to attend a four-year university despite it not being financially feasible.

Possible Solutions

The three main issues with charter schooling identified by students were that they felt unsafe and unsupported, there was very little variety in the type of education offered, and success was defined in a very narrow way. When asked what they would change about their schools, students talked about increasing diversity among staff, de-stigmatizing pathways outside of attending a four-year university, and providing more opportunities for learning outside of STEM and other traditionally “successful” fields. Staff at SECA were mostly White and from
middle-class backgrounds, which meant students did not always feel understood by their staff. More openly discussing pathways after high-school that take into account students’ financial and other life circumstances that are barriers to a four-year university would help them to confidently make the best possible decision for their situation. Opportunities to explore fields outside of STEM would give students the chance to figure what they are passionate about, as well as provide them with educational breadth.

This paper is an account of the experiences of a handful of people, all but one of whom attended one specific charter school in Stockton. I cannot claim to understand the experiences of students in other charter high schools in SUSD, but I can imagine there are similar stories. Student experience is an integral part of understanding the success or failure of charter schooling, but all too often the focus is on quantitative data. When student experiences such as the ones described above are brought to light, we are able to better understand where we can make improvements to charter schooling, and how we can better align our definitions of what makes students “successful.”


Bermudez, Benjamin [@benjsprout]. “i’ve been swamped with work but i’m done so i’m here to say 😊😊😊😊 seca is a broken system bc even though a majority of the student population are low income and/or minorities, a majority of the staff are white! make that make sense!” *Twitter*, 03 August 2020, https://twitter.com/benjsprout/status/1290


Mhar [@mhnphy]. “it’s also really weird that seca normalized having 3+ hours (at minimum) of school work on top of extracurricular activities in the name of becoming “successful” in the future.” Twitter, 03 August 2020, https://twitter.com/mhnphy/status/1290408317588664320


“Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by School Level, Type, and Charter and Magnet Status: Selected Years, 1990-91 through 2015-16.” *National Education...*
Rosales, Nat [@soymlllk]. “SECA’s incessant pressuring that all students go to a 4 year university or else you’re basically a failure and the demonization of community college/alternative routes is rooted in classism, ableism, and racism but all th*m heard was ‘top 25 schools in the USA!’.” Twitter, 03 August 2020, https://twitter.com/soymlllk/status/1290412410986098688


“Who We Are.” California Charter Schools Association, California Charter Schools Association, https://www.ccsa.org/who-we-are