

**Little Hoover Commission Testimony  
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Sequoia District Adult School**

Thank you for this opportunity to address the commission and discuss an exciting initiative that is taking place Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. It is refreshing at a time of so many budget challenges to be involved in local efforts that will benefit the students we serve. I will do my best to answer the questions you posed, but please recognize that they do not necessarily reflect the views of other groups involved in Adult Education.

**1. What do you hope to achieve through your participation in the ALLIES Network? To what extent does your school partner with community colleges outside of the ALLIES Network?**

Sequoia Adult School has been partnering with Cañada College to help ESL students transition to the college for over six years. The collaboration began as an informal process whose success depended on the individual initiatives of staff and teachers from both organizations. The adult school refers higher-level students to the college, which in turn refers lower-level students to the school. We learned by trial and error, unaware of other such efforts from which we might have benefited. A grant from the Silicon Valley Foundation this year has allowed us to strengthen this transition program by incorporating functions that have been effective in other programs. I mention this history first to give some context to the benefits that the ALLIES network promises to have on efforts such as this.

The ALLIES Network has already proved valuable. Some of the research we considered in making program changes came to us through our participation in ALLIES. Early meetings of providers involved in the network opened our eyes to the fact that we are not alone in looking for ways to bridge between our adult school and community colleges. We discovered that schools and colleges who were already collaborating faced similar issues. Some schools and colleges realized for the first time that partnering was possible because people around them were already doing it. That realization alone makes organizations like ALLIES valuable.

A challenge in our partnership with Cañada College has always been in tracking students who move between the two systems. Teachers who visit the Cañada campus often recognize students who have transitioned to college from the adult school, but a lack of data has meant that we are unable to quantify these transitions and determine how successful the students are in college. College staff present to students at the school each quarter, but we did not know if interested students were even getting to college. Lack of data also made it difficult to determine which level of college class students placed into at college and limited the partners' abilities to make program adjustments. While the necessary level of data gathering poses an undue burden to isolated partners, it seems like the sort of systemic solution that a coalition such as ALLIES could offer as a support service to all its members.

Our combined abilities to track and serve transitioning students improved greatly this year when Cañada College began teaching a transition class at Sequoia Adult School. Having a collocated class facilitated the process of aligning curriculum and student placements. Teachers "promote" students to the Cañada class based on their scores on the CASAS assessment. This formalizes the process and helps ensure that they have the necessary skills to transition to college. College and adult school faculty collaborate closely; one result is that the school is strengthening its writing curriculum to better prepare students for the college. Likewise, as the college professor became familiar with the skills students had acquired in Sequoia, she adapted and made her curriculum more challenging for

students. This type of curriculum alignment is important in these times of budget restraints if we are to avoid inadvertently (or intentionally) offering duplicated services. Clearly, as ALLIES develops it will be in a good position to encourage and support similar discussions regionally.

One of the benefits of this structure is that students have their first college experience in an environment in which they are comfortable, and at a location that is convenient to them (most of the adult school's ESL students live in zip-codes adjacent to the school). This helps smooth the transition to college by minimizing the “fear factor” that comes along with the change. It also makes it far easier for staff to monitor and discuss the success of transitioning students.

The relationship between the two organizations has strengthened as staff work together to refine the transition process—it is now more formalized and visible at the school. We were fortunate in being able to hire a part-time advisor who also works in the Cañada College system to advise students and help them transition successfully. Discussions also took place between administrators from both organizations and with the community that the schools serve. Developing these relationships is critical to infusing the concept of students transferring from Adult School to college throughout the organizations; success then depends less on the efforts of a few key players and more on embedded organizational processes. ALLIES has a critical role to play in fostering collaborations and helping interested parties navigate the often-difficult waters inherent in any collaboration.

The two organizations have learned through the collaboration that students need more “wrap-around” support than were able to give them in the past. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation allowed the school to hire a transition counselor. This transitional advising is crucial as many students attending the school are unaware of their college options, what it takes to succeed in a college, and how to apply. The counselor also offers sessions on topics such as goals setting and study skills. The idea is to identify students who are interested in continuing to college sooner rather than later and then offer them support and encouragement while they are studying at the school.

Finally, there is always the question of how students pay for college. Staff and volunteers at the school established a foundation—the Sequoia Adult School Scholars—to help cover non-tuition costs for students who need support to attend college. To receive scholarships, students must prove that they have enrolled in a San Mateo Community College District college. This scholarship helps students overcome barriers such as transportation and the cost of books that might otherwise keep them from attending college.

## **2. Are there lessons from your experience working with Cañada College and ALLIES that you have applied, or plan to apply, to other basic skills courses?**

We are already working on incorporating the lessons learned in the ESL collaboration into our ABE/ASE program, although budget restrictions pose a major challenge. Such changes are consistent with the school's goal to prepare students for further education, career training and employment. Some of the lessons learned that we believe will also be effective in other basic skills programs include (some are discussed above): alignment of curriculum and placement, clear promotion criteria, transitional counseling for students, on-site transition classes, gathering data on student transitions and progress, and formal processes for teacher/faculty collaboration and professional development.

### **3. How could the state encourage more integration at the local level to ensure that students who take ESL courses through Adult Education programs, if interested, successfully transition to a community college?**

The model that ALLIES is evolving deals with this issue directly. Central to the model is need for structured communication and problem solving mechanisms between organizations. This includes establishing a shared agenda, common measurements of success, including the means to track and report on these measures, and support organizations to facilitate collaboration between different groups and/or organizations. Also inherent in the success of such a model is the buy-in of major stakeholders. One way of encouraging integration is to establish and fund teams to follow a similar process to that used by ALLIES. A critical aspect of this is developing the skills and capacity necessary to establish and maintain coalitions.

At a more tactical level, resources need to be allocated within Adult Schools (and colleges) to advise and assist students through setting goals to attend college and to actually transitioning to college. I believe that the structure under which Adult Schools were funded in the past (the ADA model) tended to discourage funding for the support services needed by students setting out on career or college paths. Roles that might be considered include transition counselors to work directly with students and transition coordinators whose task would be to build the relationships between Adult Schools and college departments (admissions, financial services, academic programs etc.) that collectively contribute to successful student transitions. The goal here must be to create a transition system such as exists between, for example high schools and colleges, rather than relying on the initiatives of individuals and individual institutions to provide a solution.

### **4. What are some of the barriers or challenges to successful student transitions from one system to the other?**

Many students face practical barriers such as transportation, childcare, and the cost of books, fees and tuition when they begin to attend college. For instance, a majority of students in Sequoia Adult School's ESL program live within walking distance to the school. Attending class at any of the regional community colleges poses a tremendous difficulty for them. In addition, many of these students already work to support themselves and their families, which compounds the impact of barriers like transportation and the cost of attending college.

Although other organizations have established collaborations such as the one described earlier between Sequoia Adult School and Cañada College, the two systems tend to operate in isolation from each other, which leads to a lack of the cross-system knowledge needed to best advise students and prepare them for the transition. Such knowledge gaps range from curriculum alignment to knowledge about admissions process and requirements to the simple issue of accurately informing students of what to expect in college. This organizational gap poses a barrier for students.

Students attending Adult Schools also face a barrier of confidence. Not only does college seem unattainable, if indeed they have even considered it as an option, but they lack the study and persistence skills needed to succeed in college. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of cross-system expertise discussed in the prior paragraph; in a population that most needs transitional support there is little available.

**5. What are the benefits of maintaining basic skills programs in both the Adult Education and community college systems? Are there some categories of courses more appropriate for one system than the other? Is there a need to further delineate roles?**

I believe there is value in maintaining both systems because students benefit from the presence of the two systems. Maintaining as many locations for students to access classes across the two makes sense to me. There is also a need for more than the combined capacity that exists in the two systems today. Can either system alone meet that need, especially in this budget environment?

It is also important to realize that the two systems serve very different students. Adult schools have traditionally been low-cost and effective providers adept at serving a population that has low levels of literacy, are low income, have had negative prior educational experiences. In addition, adult schools tend to be located at sites that seem familiar and accessible to students—close to home and to their childrens’ schools. While some adult school students choose to attend college and are successful there, many are more likely to succeed in the adult school environment. My own experience working with Cañada College indicates that a relatively small portion of adult school students have the academic depth or can commit the time needed in a more rigorous college environment. Those who are college bound deserve access to the kind of transitional program discussed earlier.

There is a need for clear delineation of function between these two major providers as a way to support more effective collaboration, a fact that has become clear during meetings of the ALLIES network. Sequoia is fortunate as the geography makes clear which community college to partner with to define pathways for students to transition along. However, other schools must interface with multiple colleges and some colleges are served by multiple feeder schools. Among Adult Schools the curriculum is aligned according to CASAS levels, and all students take the same assessments, so that lateral transfers are easy and possible. Delineating the roles of each group clearly is a necessary precursor to defining a common transition pathway for students transitioning from one system to the other. As an analogy, establishing the equivalent of the A-G requirements, perhaps based on CASAS assessments, would help simplify and align the two systems in a way that would benefit both educators and students. CASAS seems like a natural alignment criteria given its widespread use across the entire Adult Education system.

**6. In your opinion, would there be value in consolidating some or all basic skills programs into a single system?**

There may be cost benefits to combining the two systems. However, the cost of consolidating systems must not be overlooked. Mergers in the corporate world often fail because the costs and difficulty of merging very different cultures is overshadowed by the promises of cost savings that never materialize. The Adult Education system is already very cost-efficient in its provision of basic skills programs so there is unlikely to be much savings there. I assume the same is true of the community colleges. The question then becomes where to focus very scarce resources—combining systems or on finding ways to have the two systems better align their “product” for the benefit of the students? The danger here is that one assumes that by the combining systems this alignment happens automatically. That is likely not the case—the work to align offerings and provide effective transition mechanisms from Basic Skills classes to more advanced classes would still need to be done. Given the limited resource environment, I believe that this should be the focus of any system changes.