

Students With Amazing Goals (SWAG) Final Report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Key Findings	1
SWAG Program & Theory of Change.....	2
The Problem of Low Graduation Rates in Context.....	2
Youth Context.....	2
Key Strategy Areas	3
Key Assumptions.....	3
Outcomes.....	4
Implementation Findings	6
SWAG Enrollment	6
School Attended and Grade in School.....	6
SWAG Student Characteristics.....	7
SWAG Eligibility and Risk Factors.....	8
SWAG Program Strategies.....	9
Youth Development & Educational Outcomes.....	16
Youth Assets	16
Educational Outcomes	18
Quasi-Experimental Outcomes Analysis.....	20
Discussion & Implications	22
Conclusion	23
References	24
Appendices	26
Appendix A: Additional Figures, Research Design, & Methodology	26
Appendix B: Students Involved With Probation.....	34

INTRODUCTION

The Students with Amazing Goals (SWAG) program began in 2015, with the goal of improving outcomes for students considered to be at risk of not graduating from high school, in East Palo Alto and the Belle Haven section of East Menlo Park. SWAG represents a multi-sector approach to serving youth. Administered through the San Mateo County Manager's Office, and based primarily at Live in Peace (LIP), a community-based organization in East Palo Alto, the program partners with the Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD) and other agencies to provide holistic services and supports to youth. This report examines educational outcomes for SWAG participants.

The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University has been the research partner for SWAG throughout this three-year partnership, with the goal of understanding both program implementation and student outcomes. The first year of research focused on developing the SWAG Theory of Change (TOC) and research activities to better understand early program implementation. The second year's research focused on providing a deeper understanding of program implementation by incorporating youth participant perspectives, drawing on interviews with SWAG staff and caseworkers, as well as focus groups with SWAG youth participants. In year three we focused on the relationship between student participation in SWAG and educational outcomes.

In this report we begin by describing the SWAG program and its theory of change. Next we describe the implementation of the program, including the characteristics of youth served. We then examine trends in educational outcomes over time for students participating in SWAG. Finally, we present results from a statistical analysis that compares education outcomes of SWAG participants to those of a matched comparison group of similar students who did not participate in SWAG, to better understand the relationship between program participation and student outcomes.

Key Findings

- SWAG serves a population of students who experience risk factors for not graduating from high school at higher rates than their peers.
- Relationship-building is an essential strategy of SWAG that keeps youth engaged and contributes to youth outcomes.
- Supporting youth with authentic goal development maintains youth motivation and bolsters future orientation.
- Youth participants are engaged in the program, building important developmental assets, and motivation to graduate from high school.
- Compared to a matched comparison group of similar students who did not participate, SWAG

youth demonstrate statistically significant:

- Increases in credit accumulation
- Decreases in school attendance rates
- Increases in graduation rates

SWAG PROGRAM & THEORY OF CHANGE

The Problem of Low Graduation Rates in Context

SWAG aims to address the challenge of disparities in high school graduation along racial and socio-economic lines for students in East Palo Alto/East Menlo Park (EPA/EMP). It is important to note that this problem represents the local manifestation of an issue that is systemic and persists across California and nationally. For example, according to a recent report on high school dropout and school completion rates (McFarland, Cui, & Stark; 2018), although the graduation rate in California (four-year adjusted cohort) was 76% overall in 2013-2014, it ranged from 88% for white students to 77% for Hispanic students and 68% for Black students. Among California 16-24 year-olds, just 3.3% of White students had dropped out of high school, compared to 7.2% of Black students, 8.8% of Hispanic students, and 6.9% of Pacific Islander students.

In San Mateo County, the overall graduation rate is above the state's average, yet ethnic minority students complete high school at persistently lower rates than their peers. For instance, in the 2014-15 school year, the overall SUHSD graduation rate was 86%, yet the completion rates for Latinos and African Americans were lower, at 77% and 83% respectively. High school completion among East Palo Alto youth in SUHSD historically has been the lowest of all of Sequoia's eight feeder districts (Castrechini, 2013). Further, racial and ethnic disparities also exist in the area of school discipline. While Latino students comprise less than 50% of the SUHSD student body, they account for more than 70% of suspensions. Similarly, Pacific Islander students account for about 3% of total enrollment, but comprise 29% of all expulsions. The overrepresentation of ethnic minority students in school suspensions and expulsions can significantly diminish their sense of connection to school and opportunities to learn (Skiba et al., 2011).

Youth Context

While SWAG focuses on youth at risk of not graduating from high school based on a number of educational indicators, individual young people are situated within broader settings and systems that contribute to their life outcomes (Dukakis, London, McLaughlin, & Williamson, 2009). The factors influencing student success are complex as well as inter-connected. Therefore, our research considers the individual, as well as the broader setting- and system-level contexts as they relate to supporting East Palo Alto youth's educational and life success. For example, although San Mateo is one of the country's wealthiest counties, it is also home to some of the

highest levels of income inequality (Silicon Valley Institute for Regional Studies, 2015). In East Palo Alto, a city of 30,000 residents, the median household income in 2014 dollars was \$52,716, significantly lower than neighboring cities (e.g., \$115,650 for Menlo Park; \$81,955 for Redwood City). Nearly 20% of the population earns below the federal poverty line of \$20,420 for a family of three. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in housing costs in Silicon Valley has made this once relatively inexpensive area unaffordable for many long-time residents. Many have been priced out of the area, diluting the community's political voice and fragmenting social ties.¹ Those who do stay often face overcrowded or unstable housing conditions.

Key Strategy Areas

The SWAG program targets students from EPA/EMP at risk of not graduating high school as indicated by low credit accumulation, GPA, and attendance rates, as well as a record of suspensions, expulsions, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. Students may be referred to SWAG through a number of sources including an academic counselor or probation officer, or students may self-refer or be identified by LIP or another community program. Each SWAG student is assigned a Life Coach, an employee of LIP who completes an initial intake and needs assessment, then meets regularly with participants. Life coaches also meet with SUHSD school site guidance counselors to develop a plan for students' credit recovery coursework. A SUHSD credit recovery teacher meets with students to assign work and provide academic support, along with other SWAG academic tutors. SWAG also includes a Multi-Disciplinary team comprised of a licensed social worker, LIP staff, Life Coaches, the Credit Recovery teacher, SUHSD administrators and others. The team discusses and makes decisions about individual students. Finally, SWAG offers Exposure Trips (e.g., to colleges and museums), a weekly Family Night, and a retreat. The SWAG program aims to build youth assets such as positive self-identity and attitudes about education; improve academic outcomes including attendance, GPA, and credit accumulation; reduce disciplinary issues; and, ultimately, increase graduation rates. Figure 1 outlines SWAG's theory of change.

Key Assumptions

The success of the SWAG program requires: 1) sufficient resources; 2) a clear system to identify, refer, and enroll youth; 3) active student participation and adult record-keeping; and 4) clear roles, structures, and processes.

¹ While "East Palo Altans have great pride in their rich history of community activism and their struggle to achieve self-determination" (Harris & Cespedes 2015, pg. 3), due to unaffordable housing and the high cost of living, many residents have had to move to the outer fringes of the Bay Area, thus diluting the political voice that used to exist in the community (Cutler, 2015)

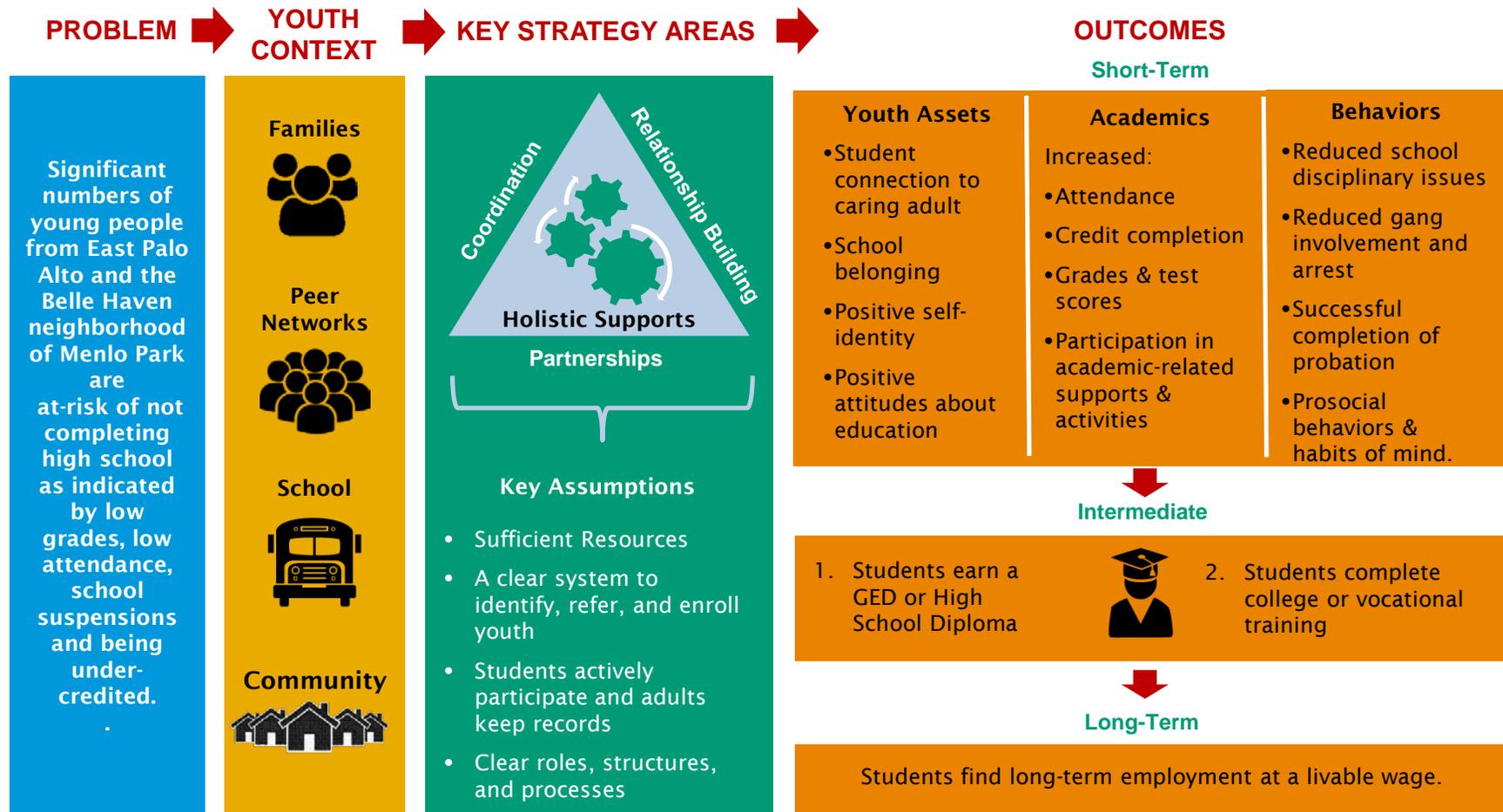
Outcomes

In the short term (1-3 years) SWAG aims to improve a range of outcomes for youth participants including:

- *Youth Assets*. SWAG aims to strengthen a range of youth assets such as connection to caring adults, school belonging, and positive self-identity and attitudes about education.
- *Academic Outcomes*. SWAG intends to increase school attendance, credit completion, grades and test scores, as well as participation in academic-related supports and activities.
- *Behavioral Outcomes*. SWAG intends to improve behavioral outcomes through reduced school disciplinary issues, gang involvement and arrest, as well as successful completion of probation (if applicable) and development of pro-social behaviors

In addition to these short-term outcomes, the anticipated intermediate term outcomes for SWAG participants include earning a GED or high school diploma, as well as completing college or vocational training. The ultimate goal is for SWAG participants to find long-term employment at a livable wage.

Figure 1. SWAG Theory of Change

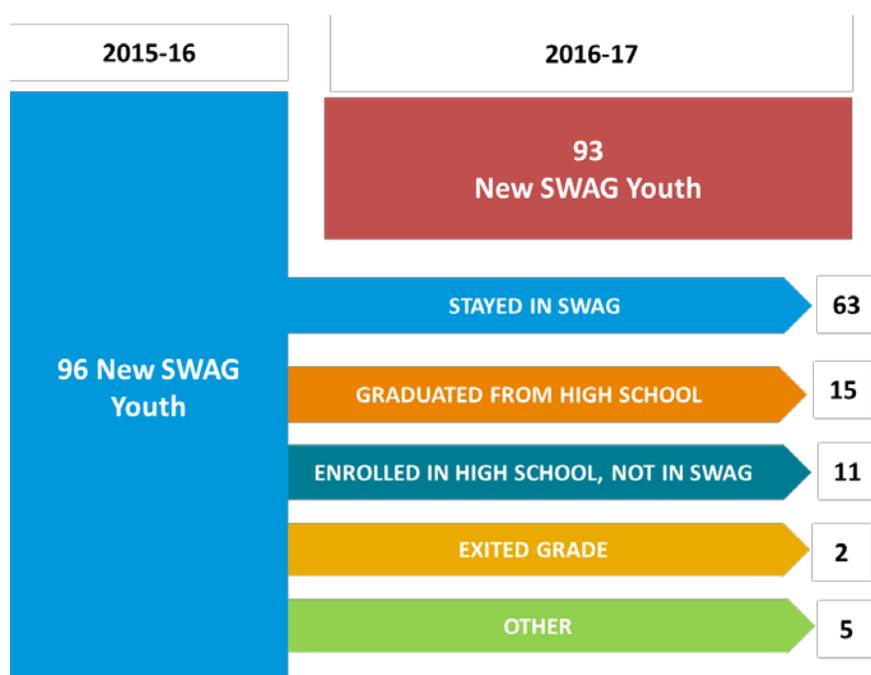


IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

SWAG Enrollment

Over the first two years of the program, SWAG served 189 individual students. The majority of students who began the program in its first year (2015-16), continued to participate in SWAG in 2016-17 for some or all of the year (63 of 96). In addition, 93 students began the program for the first time in 2016-17 (see Figure 2). In 2016-17, the average length of time that youth participated in SWAG was about five months, with some participating less and others participating for the entire year. SWAG served approximately 70-80 students at any given time during the school year, with higher enrollment in the summer of 2017 (See Appendix, Figure A1).

Figure 2. SWAG Student Pathways, 2015-16 and 2016-17



The remainder of this report, which examines outcomes for SWAG students, will focus on all SWAG youth who participated at some time in 2016-17 (for whom educational data is available).² Below we describe this SWAG student population.

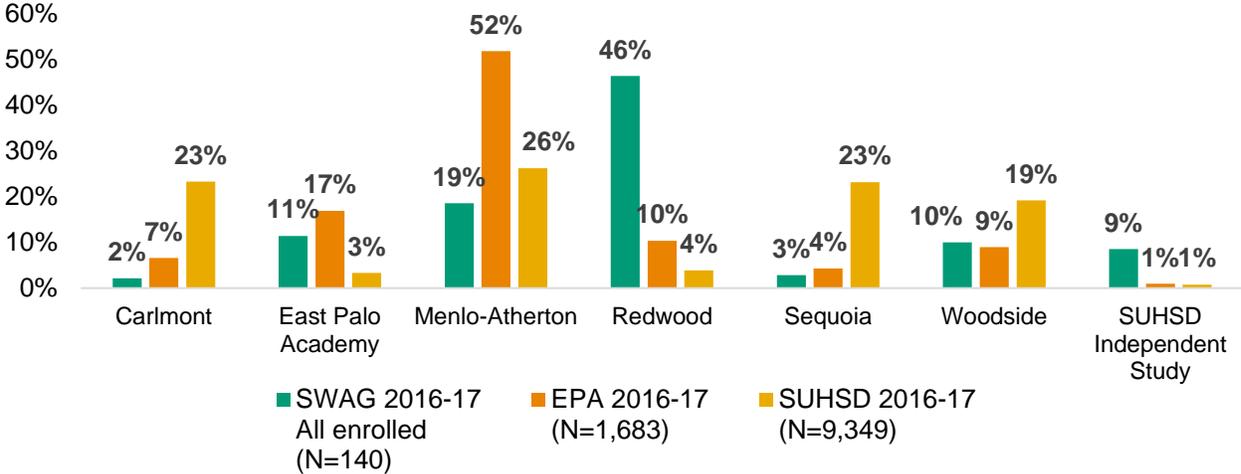
School Attended and Grade in School

SWAG students come from every SUHSD high school. Higher proportions of SWAG students are enrolled in the alternative Redwood High School and in Independent Study than for East Palo Alto and SUHSD overall (see Figure 3). Further, the majority of SWAG students are in the upper grades, with more than 80% of SWAG students enrolled in either grades 12 (52%) or 11 (29%)

² This includes all students who were enrolled in the program for some time between July 1, 2016 and June 30, 2017.

(See Appendix, Figure A2).

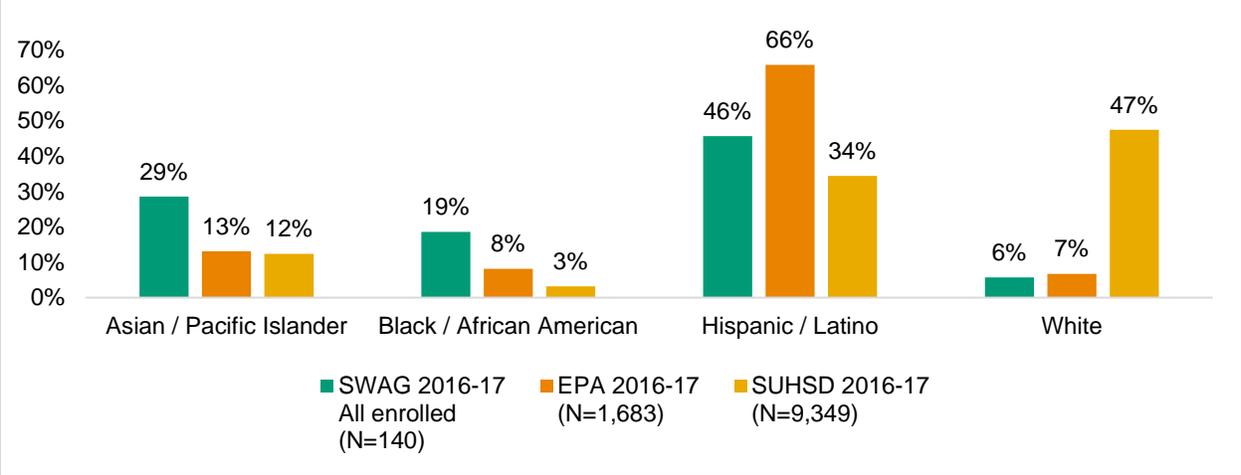
Figure 3. School Attended



SWAG Student Characteristics

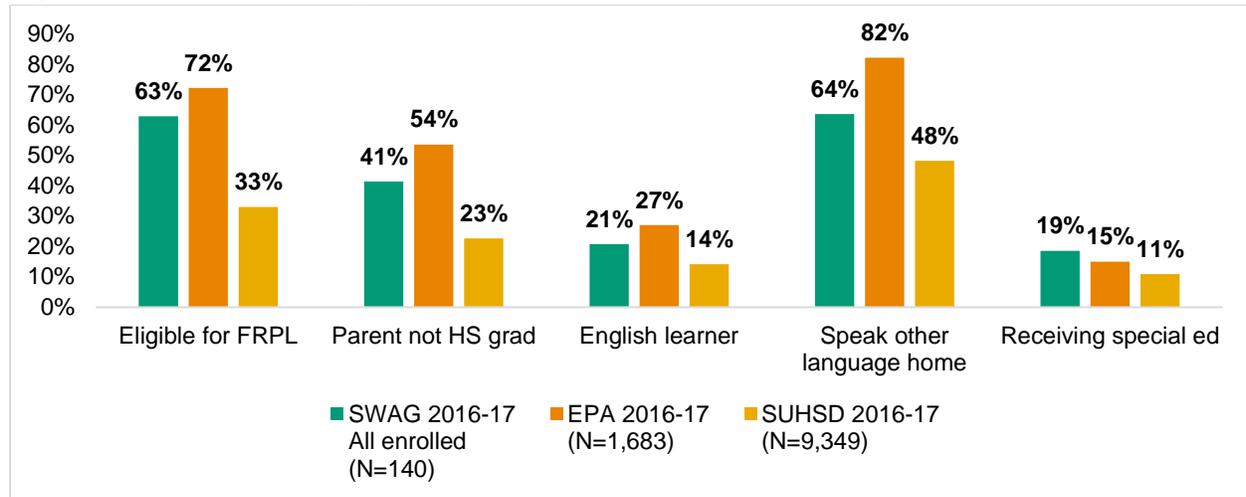
Nearly all SWAG students are students of color. Participants are in many ways demographically similar to students in the community more broadly, although SWAG serves a higher proportion of Asian/Pacific Islander and African American students, and a lower proportion of Latino students than is reflected in the East Palo Alto area overall (see Figure 4). Further, SWAG serves more males (61%) than females (39%).

Figure 4. Demographics of SWAG Youth



The majority of SWAG students (63%) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), and 64% speak a language other than English at home. About 1 in 5 SWAG students were considered English Language Learners (EL) or were receiving Special Education (SPED) services (21% EL and 19% SPED).

Figure 5. Student and Family Characteristics



SWAG Eligibility and Risk Factors

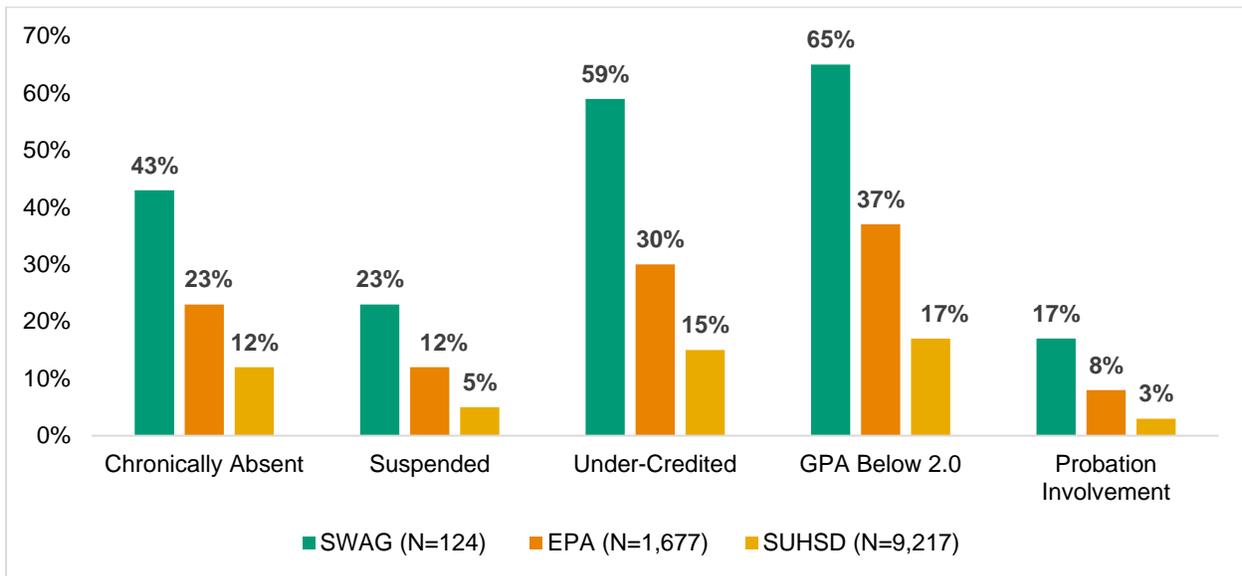
SWAG aims to serve youth from EPA/EMP who are at risk for not graduating from high school. Specifically, SWAG targets youth with low school attendance, low credit accumulation, low GPA, and a history of being suspended and/or involved with juvenile probation. SWAG participants did indeed experience risk indicators for not graduating from high school, prior to participating in SWAG in 2016-17.³

SWAG students experience risk factors at much higher rates than their EPA/EMP peers (see Figure 6). Among student that participated in SWAG in 2016-17, in the prior school year (2015-16):

- More than half were under-credited and about two-thirds had a GPA under 2.0
- Almost one-quarter had been suspended in the prior year, and almost half were chronically absent
- About 1 in 6 SWAG participants were involved with probation

³ Note: Risk indicator data are based on the school year before participating SWAG (i.e. for SWAG students that participated in 2016-17, we examine their risk indicators using 2015-16 SUHSD data). These figures do not include incoming 9th graders because their data are not available in the SUHSD data for the prior year when they were in 8th grade. For some 2016-17 SWAG participants, the 2015-16 risk indicators reflect their first year of participation, rather than “pre” participation.

Figure 6. Risk Indicators for 2016-17 SWAG Youth (based on the prior school year, 2015-16⁴)



SWAG Program Strategies

In our interviews with SWAG participants, youth described concern about the increasing gentrification and inequality in East Palo Alto. Youth highlighted the entry of new businesses (e.g., Facebook, Amazon), the arrival of people not originally from East Palo Alto, and the departure of many families who could no longer afford the cost of living. The increasing economic pressures seem to exacerbate already challenging conditions. Many youth described a wide range of challenges in their personal lives and home environment including mental health issues, overcrowded or unstable housing, food insecurity, parents or guardians working multiple jobs, the responsibility to care for younger siblings, family sickness, and exposure to violence and death. Further, youth also described being exposed to illegal activity (e.g., drugs, prostitution, theft) as a means of addressing their own and their families' pressing economic needs. Staff described the difficult trade-offs youth make between the potential to earn immediate income in illegal activity and/or low-wage jobs, versus the promise of higher earning potential through persistent academic success (i.e., high school graduation and college). Many youth described feeling the pressure (from themselves, and/or family members) of being among the first or few in their families to graduate from high school.

Despite these mounting challenges, youth also expressed tremendous pride in living in East Palo

⁴ Note: for the Under-Credited Indicator, N= 133 for SWAG, N=1,624 for EPA/EMP, and N=9,921 for SUHSD. Thresholds for being under-credited were based on documentation from Sequoia High School Link:<http://www.sequoiahs.org/documents/Resources/Program%20Planning%20Handbook/Sequoia%20Program%20Planning%20Handbook%202017-2018%20English.pdf>

Alto. Youth highlighted the many assets of their community including its diversity, citizens who care about improving the community and the many talented people in East Palo Alto. Youth also expressed feeling out of place, or feeling “looked down on” by adults and authority figures in their schools and elsewhere, or by other communities. In the words of one youth:

One thing that I am proud of about my community is how willing and strong the people are from here.... I was born here. I was born and raised here. But the thing that I would like to change in this community is the statistics that are placed over our heads, both from other communities, like Atherton and Palo Alto saying that we're not enough or good enough for their standards.

In the section that follows, we highlight key strategies that emerged from SWAG youth and staff interviews that, taken together, paint a picture of what makes SWAG uniquely able to serve its intended student population.

Strategy #1: Relationship-Building

Building meaningful relationships with youth is a core SWAG strategy. Soon after joining SWAG, each participant is matched with a case manager or “life coach” to support their success. Case managers have weekly check-in meetings with each youth to review progress and goals, but also to provide ongoing support and advocacy as needed; for example, following up with a student’s teachers or other school staff, or accompanying youth to court dates. Staff and case managers also connect with participants during ongoing daily program activities such as homework help (i.e., tutoring), daily free dinners, and enrichment activities. Further, staff hold weekly “family nights” to build relationships with and provide information to students’ families; for example, on the college admissions process and financial aid applications. These program elements are infused with a commitment to building meaningful relationships with youth. Relationship-building is not only an intentional strategy at SWAG, but staff and youth perceive it as the primary activity. In the words of one staff:

So, it starts off—I wouldn’t call them friendships, but there’s relationships with the students that most programs don’t have with their kids. So, we start with building bonds with these students because without a bond, you can’t force somebody who doesn’t want to go to school into a class or to learn or to read to do packets of homework or anything, no matter the consequences of it.

The constant day-to-day engagement in the program helps staff develop deeper knowledge of and familiarity with participants, building trust between students and staff, and increasing staff’s ability to see when something is “off” and intervene with needed supports. For youth, relationships define their experience at SWAG and makes the program stand apart from other peer programs. To these ends, we synthesize below how youth described their experience of SWAG relationships:

Caring relationship with an adult. Youth feel that SWAG staff genuinely care about them as people. Unlike other programs that feel more impersonal, or are exclusively focused on students' academics, youth feel that with SWAG, "it's way different... it's deeper than just an education program, way deeper. When you're in SWAG, you're family." Youth feel like they can count on SWAG staff to be there when they need them, to always be looking out for them. One young person described how SWAG supported him during a court case, including going above and beyond to advocate for his release and dismissal.

He reflected:

When [SWAG staff] did that big favor for me, I was just like wow, nobody's ever done something so big for me ever, in my whole, entire life, besides my mom and my parents. That's when I started first claiming [my caseworker] as the big brother I've never had before.

High expectations and holding youth accountable. Youth reported feeling that, in contrast to other adults in their life, SWAG staff genuinely believed in them and held them to high expectations. High educational and life expectations have a distinct importance for SWAG youth, as they often experience themselves to be the subject of negative stereotypes and discrimination. Youth described that, whereas, in other programs and settings they could "drop off the radar" or simply stop trying, in SWAG, they experienced staff as genuinely caring about their success and not giving up on them. As one young woman stated:

Personally, I've had lots and lots of people give up on me... I sometimes put myself in that mindset to where it's like you're too far behind. Don't even try anymore. I've expressed that to other people. Those other people will be like 'okay, fine, whatever you want to do. It's your future, whatever.' I've expressed that to people like the staff here at Green Street, and they're just like no, it's not over.... it's nowhere close to being over. You're still young. You still need to be striving for your best because half of the people that you see out there in the streets, that's what their mindsets were, and look where it got them. So you need to change that mindset. You need to keep on striving for the best that you can be because you know that you can do it.

Using terms like "tough love," youth also expressed that SWAG staff helped hold them accountable by calling them out when they were getting off track. They described "long lectures" during which staff "keep it real" and point out the mistakes that youth make, or point out the consequences of negative behavior or bad decision-making.

In contrast to other programs and contexts where youth feel that adults often "sugar-coat," youth felt that SWAG staff are real with them about the consequences of actions and choices. In the words of one youth, describing her interaction with staff:

He would be straight up with you. He would tell you if you keep this up, you're not gonna go to a four-year college, you're gonna go to junior college... or [you're not gonna graduate.] But he never told us 'that's fine, just keep trying' and stuff like that. No, he would tell us straight up, so we'll put things in perspective for you and you'll just be like, oh my God, okay, I actually have to do this. But he did it all because he cared for us.

When youth are on-site, they experience staff as constantly monitoring them and keeping them on-task. As one young person stated: *"They're always on me, 24/7. Whenever I get here, [staff] is like pull out some work. What are you doing? Even the slightest slack that I feel like doing, they're like no. They're just staying on me."* Additionally, youth felt that SWAG staff go above and beyond to keep track of youth when they are not on-site; for example, calling to wake them up in the morning, taking them to and from school, attending court appointments, and following up with their families.

Positive peer support. In addition to providing ongoing follow-up and support, SWAG also provides youth with a positive peer environment that supports academic achievement. Youth describe feeling comfortable and safe with their peers, because they come from the same background, and aren't being judged. The positive peer relationship is something that youth credit staff with cultivating. As one student stated:

We all came here with just not caring about school, but now we all care and now we all care for each other's education. You will see somebody like, oh did you finish your homework? Or there's students helping each other. But, [staff], they set that up for us. [They] built that for us.

Not only do the positive peer relationships keep youth engaged and motivated to spend time at SWAG but, also, their sense of "achieving together" creates collective responsibility among youth to keep each other on track. As one youth said *"we all have the same goal to graduate. So, because of that, we all help each other."* When youth find their peers distracted or getting off track, they intervene and encourage them to do work. In the same way youth describe that staff are "hands on" and "stay on" youth to be productive, youth keep track of and "stay on" each other to be productive.

In sum, case managers and adult mentors' ability to develop meaningful relationships with youth is at the core of the SWAG program. Youth respond by describing a program setting in which they feel genuinely cared about and motivated to keep trying. Together, this leads to a level of engagement that SWAG youth report not having experienced in other academic support programs. These positive mentoring relationships are reinforced by peer relationships that also supports students' academic engagement and motivation.

Strategy #2: Goal-Setting & Plan Development

SWAG programming includes academic supports, college and career development, and skill-building for youth. Specifically, SWAG provides academic tutoring, credit recovery, and college/career planning for youth participants. Local college students offer tutoring daily to help students complete homework assignments; this is augmented by periodic “homework blitzes” to help students catch up on missing assignments. A SUHSD instructor located on site also offers independent studies courses to help students recover needed credits. Finally, with the support of their case managers, students receive college counselling, including support identifying and visiting prospective colleges, navigating the application process, and completing financial aid requirements. Undergirding these activities is an emphasis on helping youth develop meaningful goals for themselves and their future. In the words of one youth: “SWAG ... *helps you set goals for yourself and helps you get where you wanna get to in life.*”

Goal development. Education research has indicated that supporting the development of meaningful goals can be an important protective factor for youth (Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 2006). In SWAG, staff create opportunities to discuss youths’ goals, help identify concrete action steps and milestones needed to reach those goals, and conduct regular check-ins to assess ongoing progress. Goal-development occurs in structured interactions, such as youth intake interviews, weekly check-ins with case managers, and in tandem with programmatic activities (e.g., exposure fieldtrips and college visits). Goal-setting is responsive to youth’s interests, and integrated into the ongoing supports SWAG provides students. As one staff member described:

The first thing that happens is a one-on-one with the case manager. And in that, some youth are just open and just say everything that’s going on in their lives and so we’re able to just do that. But usually what happens is that I work to identify a goal and then the case manager will set up steps to reach that goal. [Not every person can define a goal for themselves.] Some can’t even say what they like to do, what makes them happy. So then the goal is to help them to find that.

When Gardner Center staff asked SWAG focus group participants to share a goal they were working on, each youth was able to identify at least one area they were actively working on. Youth stated they wanted to graduate and go to college. Some youth had specific school-centered goals, such as increasing their GPA or not missing as much class. Many of these goals were specific and measurable, such as “I want to increase my GPA from 2.8 to 3.3.” Youth also had goals of working toward specific careers, such as becoming a physical therapist, a sociologist, a high school history teacher, or going into business. Identifying specific goals is important in that it provides youth with a positive future to work toward, and can motivate academic achievement (Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 2006).

Mapping out a plan. Most youth were also able to identify concrete action steps and milestones needed to reach their goals. For example, one young woman who aspires to become a high

school history teacher describes how SWAG staff helped her develop concrete action steps toward her goal:

What we do every year, [our caseworker] gets our transcript, and she asks, how do you want your grades to change? What do you wanna do [with your life], 'cause we're gonna start working on personal statements [for college], which is scary to think about... So she's like, okay, [this is what] we're gonna talk about first semester, second semester, [this is] what you're gonna do, and [this is when] you're gonna come to Green Street to get homework done. So we set this goal and she always reminds us every day. 'Good morning. I'll expect all you guys to show up today.' All the tutors are here and then everybody's like okay ... So, yeah ever since sophomore year they started working on me with that. I started getting a clear picture every year to know what I'm gonna do. Before that it was just like yeah I wanna become a history teacher, but I didn't know how I was gonna actually get it done and they made sure that I knew how.

Identifying concrete action steps to support youth in reaching their goals is important to help keep youth on track with their progress. SWAG staff actively work to keep youth on track by providing ongoing follow-up and support. As described in the passage above, not only did the case worker help the student develop concrete action steps toward her long-term academic and career goals, but she also provided daily encouragement and reminders (e.g., to stay on top of homework), and a supportive study environment. Providing this ongoing follow-up and support is important to youth, as many described getting distracted or getting off track as primary challenges they faced in reaching their goals. These holistic academic supports and case management help keep youth focused on and making progress toward their academic goals.

In sum, SWAG supports students' academic achievement through helping youth identify meaningful academic and career goals, providing academic supports and case management to help keep them on track, and cultivating a positive peer group to reinforce students' efforts.

Strategy #3: Culturally Responsive Programming

SWAG's programming also includes pro-social activities that help youth develop positive behaviors and habits of mind. In practice, this occurs through much of the day-to-day program offerings, such as tutoring, enrichment activities, and exposure trips. Additionally, SWAG has built in social time, such as daily free meals to engage students and encourage them to stay on the Green Street campus. Permeating all of these activities is a cultural responsiveness that youth and staff describe as essential to addressing barriers to student success. Specifically, SWAG activities "use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of... youth to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them" (Gay, 2013).

Positive racial identity. One of the principal ways in which SWAG staff support students in

culturally responsive pro-social programming is by cultivating a positive racial identity. Education research shows that building students' positive racial identity and providing a sense of ethnic belonging can lead to more positive academic and behavioral outcomes, including improved attendance, GPA, and credits (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2016). Fostering positive racial identity is especially important for minority students, as schools can often be sites of alienation for young people of color (Hall, 2006).

Similarly, the youth who participate in SWAG are acutely aware of the economic and racial inequalities surrounding their community, and often feel themselves the subject of negative stereotypes at school and other environments outside their home community (as described above). As one young woman stated:

I don't like statistics that's held over my community's head.... This is my community. This is not murder capital. ... We're not delinquents. We're not just colored people with ignorance... We're very aware of where we live and what's happening around us.

For SWAG staff, an important part of the program is supporting youth to be successful in the face of racial and class bias—including institutional racism and dysfunctional systems that do not favor poor young people of color. As one staff described his aims:

... finding a way to get the students to understand the impact that they have on their own lives. How much their own reality can be changed through having an education. And building confidence in an area they're uncomfortable in... in a predominantly white world. Feeling comfortable and confident and bringing honor to themselves and their family.

Community belonging. Staff actively work with youth to shift the narrative of their racial and ethnic identity from stereotype to positive racial identity and community belonging. This happens through formal programming (e.g., a weekly “Roots” social studies class that covers culture, identity, and environment) as well as unstructured opportunities such as talking with youth about current events and their future plans during tutoring and homework help. Staff also work with youth to build a sense of community belonging, focus on success, and give back to the community to help the community thrive. As one youth stated:

I'd say SWAG, as a whole, is pretty much a community that serves its community, that helps boost the community that's been so overlooked and overthought and pushed out. We're grasping at the last little bit that's here. And so SWAG is just trying to save our city. And we're trying to prepare our youth that's from here, that was born and raised, that doesn't come from anywhere else but here, or at least has family roots tie here, to be able to stay here. ...that's what SWAG is all about is getting our kids to graduate—to be able to thrive in an environment in this community. So, it's a platform. It's a platform to be able to keep ours here.

Culturally competent staff. The majority of SWAG staff themselves are from the community,

connected with youth participants' social network, and of similar economic and cultural backgrounds as SWAG program participants. Staff are sensitive to the racial- and class-inflected experiences of youth, and can catch subtleties that others might miss. They are also embedded in young peoples' lives in a way that for many youth builds a sense of trust and care that they do not experience in other programs. As one young woman stated:

[Other programs], they make you feel so distant and it just makes you want to fall off and be like, 'okay well then I don't trust you or I don't have this certain relationship or bond with you on a level where I can talk to you about my personal being or my struggles that are happening.' Then they'll be like, 'oh what are you going through at home?' But then they'll go and then you probably just won't see them throughout the day. They will just like smile at you. Wave hi but they won't actually be engaged with your life as how people here [at SWAG] do.

In sum, building positive racial identities and a sense of belonging for young people of color can be an important lever to support student success. Education research has shown that culturally responsive instruction can boost student engagement, as well as promote other positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Olneck, 1995, Wakefield & Hudley, 2007, Dee & Penner, 2016). SWAG staff actively work to build youth's capacity to challenge reinforced stereotypes, provide role models youth can relate to, and create a sense of belonging to the program and the East Palo Alto community. By employing culturally competent staff and embedding cultural responsiveness into holistic programming, SWAG shows a promising practice of engaging youth who have previously felt marginalized and disengaged by traditional institutions and systems. Sustained engagement in SWAG activities increases the likelihood that youth will indeed experience growth in important academic areas.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

SWAG aims to influence a range of desired outcomes for youth, as outlined in the Theory of Change. In the short term, SWAG intends to improve youth assets, academics, and behaviors. Further, intermediate outcomes for SWAG youth include earning a high school diploma or GED and completing college or vocational training, with a long-term goal of finding employment at a livable wage. Below, we explore early evidence regarding the extent to which these short-term outcomes as well as the intermediate goal of high school graduation are improving for SWAG students.

Youth Assets

In the short term, SWAG aims to support and build youth assets, specifically including connections with adults, sense of school belonging, positive self-identity, and positive attitudes about education. Interviews with SWAG staff and youth themselves shed light on these youth assets for SWAG participants. We describe several below.

Connection to a Caring Adult

Youth in SWAG experience a connection to a caring adult. Connection between youth and others (e.g., peers, adults, community members) is considered a key element of positive youth development. Connection, along with the other elements (e.g., competence, caring) is associated with greater civic engagement and healthy behaviors (Lerner & Lerner, 2012). SWAG staff actively build trust and develop relationships with youth. Youth believe that SWAG staff genuinely care about them as people beyond their academics. One youth shares:

When I came [to SWAG], I never wanted to go back to [my previous program] because it was different. [Staff at my previous program] were just on kids about school, but this program worried about you personally and education wise. Just knowing that they care about those two things, they're prioritizing people's lives, make kids want to do it, make kids want to push for it, make kids want to accomplish more.

As detailed above, meaningful relationships with a caring adult are a core SWAG program strategy and an important protective factor (DuBois et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2013).

Self-Concept

Youth in SWAG develop confidence in their ability to accomplish any goal they set for themselves—what youth themselves often refer to as a “positive” or “productive” mindset. Youth believe they have control over their lives and feel empowered to accomplish what they set their mind to. One youth shares:

I had a very non-productive mindset. So, I would just go home knowing that I had homework and would just stay home and be on my phone and do nothing or go out or just stay out, not at programs like this. But when I came [to SWAG] they were just like ‘oh pull up your school, let's see your grades, let's see what you're gonna work on tomorrow’...they were just so ready to help you. So, I started coming – but I feel like if I wasn't here, I would probably have really horrible grades and my mindset wouldn't have changed. Also, because they made it clear that if we put our mind to something, it would actually get done.

A young person's sense of their own competence is another protective factor that has been linked to improved academic, behavioral, and life outcomes, especially for youth who have been involved in the juvenile justice system. (Schwartz, 2000; Durlak et al., 2010)

Sense of Belonging

Youth who experience a positive sense of group belonging are less likely to be socially withdrawn, anxious, depressed, delinquent, and aggressive toward others (Newman, Lohman & Newman,

2007). In SWAG, youth describe feeling welcomed, accepted for who they are, and included. Youth, however, did not report feeling a sense of belonging to their school. The relationships that SWAG staff actively build with youth and the friendships that youth build with one another foster a sense of belonging to the SWAG and East Palo Alto/Belle Haven community. One youth shares how the bonds she developed with SWAG staff and her peers give her a sense of belonging and keep her engaged in the program:

We all have bonds with each other and with our case managers and with [staff] and all of those little bonds makes us. If we don't have that, then it breaks us 'cause then we'll feel left out, and we wouldn't want to show up. We don't want to come. Just having those little bonds, I feel like that's the most important thing, and that's what makes SWAG.

For low income and minority youth participants, this sense of belonging to the program and to a positive peer group, as described above, is especially important as a protective factor that can support positive life and academic outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2013; Schwartz, 2000; Durlak et al., 2010).

Positive Attitudes about Education and Future Orientation

Youth who are future-oriented tend to see education as critical in achieving success in life. Future orientation is also associated with higher academic motivation and performance (Brown & Jones, 2004). For the youth in SWAG, the initial goal-setting process and ongoing conversations clarify what goals they are working toward and keep these goals at the forefront of their minds. Succeeding academically with the support of SWAG can expand what youth consider possible for themselves in the future. Despite the challenges he faced, one youth managed to graduate from high school and now has a sense of his future career path. Before his involvement in SWAG, he reported, he thought *"I'm not gonna graduate. I'm not gonna pass high school. I don't even think I'm gonna go to college."* Now, as a SWAG graduate, he aspires to attend college and eventually become a computer programmer.

Educational Outcomes

In this section, we examine outcomes for SWAG students in key academic areas that have been found by prior research to be associated with high school graduation, including credit accumulation, GPA, attendance, and having been suspended (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). We also examine graduation for 12th grade participants. We draw on educational data from SUHSD for the 2016-17 school year, as well as for the 2015-16 school year in order to provide a baseline for student outcomes. We first describe trends in educational outcomes for SWAG students and compare them to those of other students in EPA/EMP and SUHSD more broadly. However, we note that because SWAG serves a population of students at particularly high risk, general comparisons to other students in EPA/EMP or the district as a whole are not adequate in assessing how SWAG may influence student outcomes. Following the description of trends in

academic outcomes, we detail our process of constructing a matched comparison group of students from EPA/EMP who did not participate in SWAG yet are similar in many ways to SWAG students. We then present findings from this quasi-experimental analysis which more rigorously accounts for the differences between SWAG participants and non-participants to estimate the relationship between participating in SWAG and student outcomes.

Describing Trends in Academic Outcomes

Examining academic outcomes for SWAG participants in 2016-17 compared to their prior-year outcomes, SWAG participants demonstrate:

- Positive trends in academic indicators including:⁵
 - Considerable increases in the average number of credits earned (from 49 to 61), especially academic (as opposed to elective) credits (from 28 to 37)
 - Small increases in average GPA (from 1.7 to 2.0)
 - Small decreases in suspensions (from 22% to 20%)
- Decreased average attendance (from 87% to 78%) and increased chronic absence⁶
- High graduation rates among SWAG 12th grade students⁷
 - More than 90% of SWAG students in 2016-17 who could have graduated did so (72 of 78)⁸
 - A total of 89 SWAG students graduated as of August 2017, including SWAG participants in 2015-16 and 2016-17.⁹

We note that these trends for SWAG students, and comparisons with EPA/EMP students and the district as whole, do not account for the differences between SWAG students and their peers in, for example, their prior academic preparedness and achievement, the school that they attend, or their demographics. Therefore, we conducted a quasi-experimental outcomes analysis with a matched comparison group of similar students who did not participate in SWAG as described

⁵ Note: for some students these two years represent the year before participating in SWAG compared to the year they first participate in SWAG whereas for continuing SWAG students this captures the change from their first year of SWAG to their second.

⁶ We note that attendance tends to decline in high school as students get older. Further the large proportion of SWAG students that attend Redwood High School, an alternative school, attendance patterns may be different than in traditional high schools. See analysis including matched comparison group in Quasi-Experimental Outcomes Analysis section of this report.

⁷ SWAG graduation figures include 12th graders as well as a small number of 11th graders that graduated

⁸ Of those who did not graduate, 5 were still enrolled in school, and 1 was no longer enrolled (this includes 74 seniors and 4 students listed as 11th graders who graduated).

⁹ This represents a 90% graduation rate out of a total of 99 students (92 twelfth graders and 7 eleventh graders).

below.

Figure 7. Credits Earned

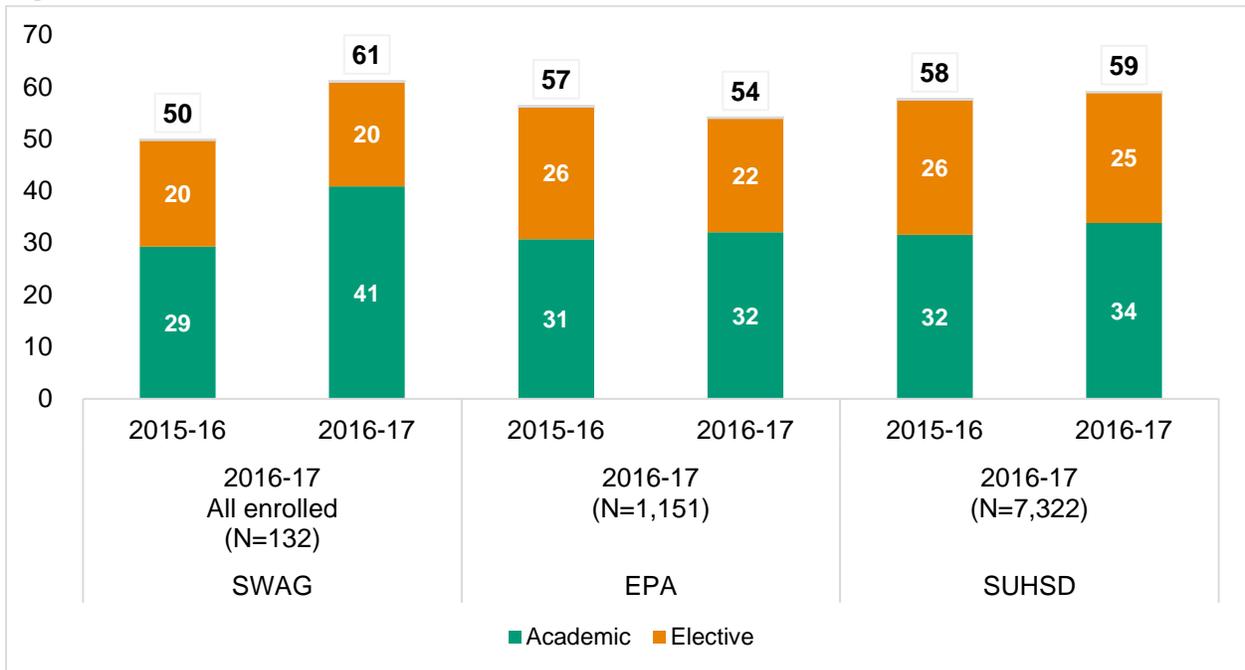
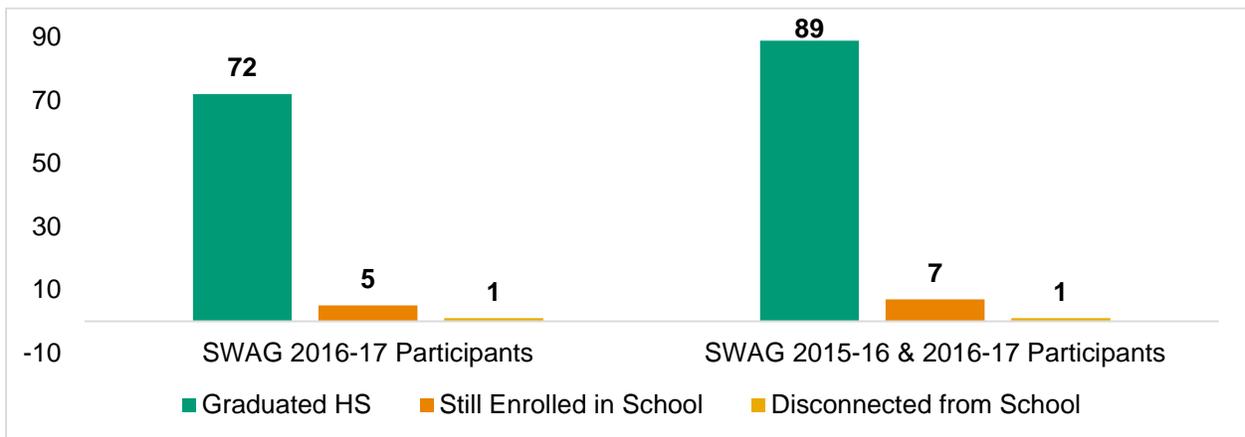


Figure 8. Graduation for SWAG Students



Quasi-Experimental Outcomes Analysis

Matched Comparison Group

Assessing the effectiveness of any program requires some comparison between the observed outcomes for program participants and what we would have expected their outcomes to be had they never participated in the program. In order to more rigorously analyze SWAG student outcomes relative to what would have been expected, we identified a comparison group of similar

individuals who did not participate in SWAG, and tested whether there are statistically significant differences between the outcomes of the two groups.

We note that for this quasi-experimental analysis to produce meaningful results, we must be able to identify a comparison group that is similar enough to SWAG participants that they provide a plausible representation of what the outcomes would have been for SWAG participants had they not participated in the program. In the case of SWAG, there is no clear, easily available comparison group. For example, SWAG students attend all schools in SUHSD (i.e., there are not treatment schools versus comparison schools). In order to construct a comparison group of non-SWAG participants, we use a statistical strategy known as propensity score matching (PSM). This statistical process matches SWAG students to students who did not participate but are similar to participants based on available data. That is, PSM first matches students with similar “propensity” to participate in SWAG, then compares the outcomes of these groups. Further, because the composition of students in EPA/EMP is so different from those in SUHSD outside of EPA/EMP, we constructed the comparison group limiting the sample to other students from EPA/EMP. To form this comparison group, we matched SWAG students to non-SWAG participants using available data from SUHSD and SMC Probation, including students’ race/ethnicity; language spoken at home; gender; special education status; free/reduced-price lunch eligibility; parent education (high school or above); English language learner status; grade in school; academic outcomes in the prior year including credits earned, GPA, attendance rate; and suspensions; school attended, and; involvement with SMC probation. This process yielded a comparison with baseline characteristics that are quite similar to those of SWAG youth, although not identical. See Appendix for a more detailed discussion of the matching process and comparison group characteristics.

Key Findings

Compared to a group of similar students who did not participate, SWAG youth demonstrated:

-  • Statistically significant increases in credits of about 8 credits (plus or minus 4 credits)
-  • Statistically significant increases in graduation rates of about 16 percentage points (plus or minus about 5 percentage points)
-  • Statistically significant decreases in attendance rate of about 2.5 percentage points (plus or minus about 2 percentage points)
- No statistically significant change in suspensions or GPA

As described above, these findings are based on a quasi-experimental analysis that compared outcomes for SWAG participants to those of similar youth who did not participate. This analysis

more rigorously estimates the relationship between participating in SWAG and student outcomes by accounting for a range of student characteristics such as the school that they attend and their prior academic achievement, and more. Put another way, these findings represent our estimate of how outcomes for SWAG youth compare to what we would have expected their outcomes to be had they not participated in SWAG. For instance, note that the estimated decrease in attendance is considerably lower than when simply examining attendance rates from year-to-year (see p. 8). Similarly, the estimate of the increase in the number of credits of about eight credits is slightly smaller, and more conservative, than the simple year-to-year change demonstrated in Figure 7.

Finally, we must note that, although the matched comparison group of non-participants is quite similar to SWAG students based on observable characteristics, they may differ in ways that we are not able to measure and that may influence their academic outcomes. For instance, youth who did not participate (but could have) may lack prior connections with adults or peers, or the capacity or motivation to participate, that were key for SWAG youth enrolled in the program. Thus, it is possible that some of the differences in outcomes between SWAG youth and youth who did not participate may be due to differences in the youth themselves (e.g., in motivation levels) that we were not able to account for in creating the matched comparison group. At the same time, the existence of this group of similar students suggests that there may be additional youth who could benefit from SWAG who have not yet been served.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Based on this analysis, participating in SWAG is associated with increased credit accumulation and graduation for youth at risk of not graduating from high school. In considering how and why SWAG youth demonstrate these improvements in educational outcomes it is worth drawing on the perspectives and experiences of the youth themselves. Based on interviews with SWAG students we found that a key aspect of the program for youth was relationship building, both with caring adults who held them to high expectations, as well as peers who provided positive support. SWAG youth also believed that the program and its staff help them set goals for themselves, and map out a plan to achieve them. Finally, SWAG youth expressed a feeling of belonging in the program, due in part to culturally competent staff who they could relate to and who could relate to them.

It appears that by creating a space where youth feel comfortable, cared for, and part of a community, SWAG has been able to engage a population that by and large have previously felt disengaged from, and not thrived within, more traditional institutions and settings. At the same time, the SWAG model includes a teacher from the school district who works with youth on credit recovery, providing access to and support with needed academic activities to earn credits towards graduation.

Finally, it is important to note that the majority of SWAG students are either in the district's alternative high school, or in Independent Study. Statewide, more than 10% of California high

school students age 16 or over are in alternative option high school settings for students considered at risk of not graduating (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). The finding of decreased attendance is consistent with other similar settings which focus on credit recovery as the primary goal, which can in turn decrease the incentive for frequent attendance as long as students are earning credits. Many schools offer credit accrual options that can be obtained “anywhere anytime” (e.g., online or by performance-based assessment). These strategies incentivize independent work which do not require attendance or seat time.

CONCLUSION

SWAG represents a model that aims to leverage the resources and strengths of county agencies, the school district, and a community-based organization to support underserved youth and improve their educational outcomes and life trajectories. The SWAG program has engaged youth in EPA/EMP who by and large have not thrived in traditional educational settings and are considered at risk of not graduating from high school. Based on a quasi-experimental analysis, compared to a similar group of students who did not participate, SWAG youth demonstrate increases in credit accumulation and graduation that are both substantial in magnitude and statistically significant.

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APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL FIGURES, RESEARCH DESIGN, & METHODOLOGY

Additional Figures

Figure A1. Enrollment in SWAG by Month

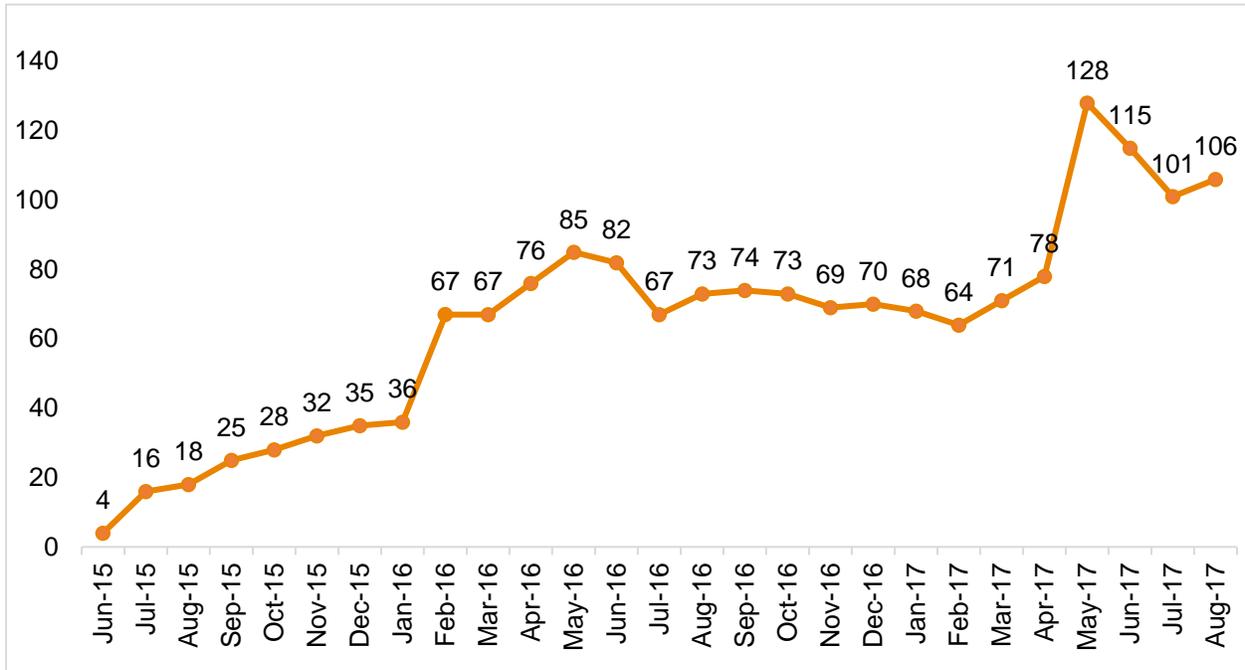


Figure A2. Grade in School for SWAG 2016-17 Participants and Peers

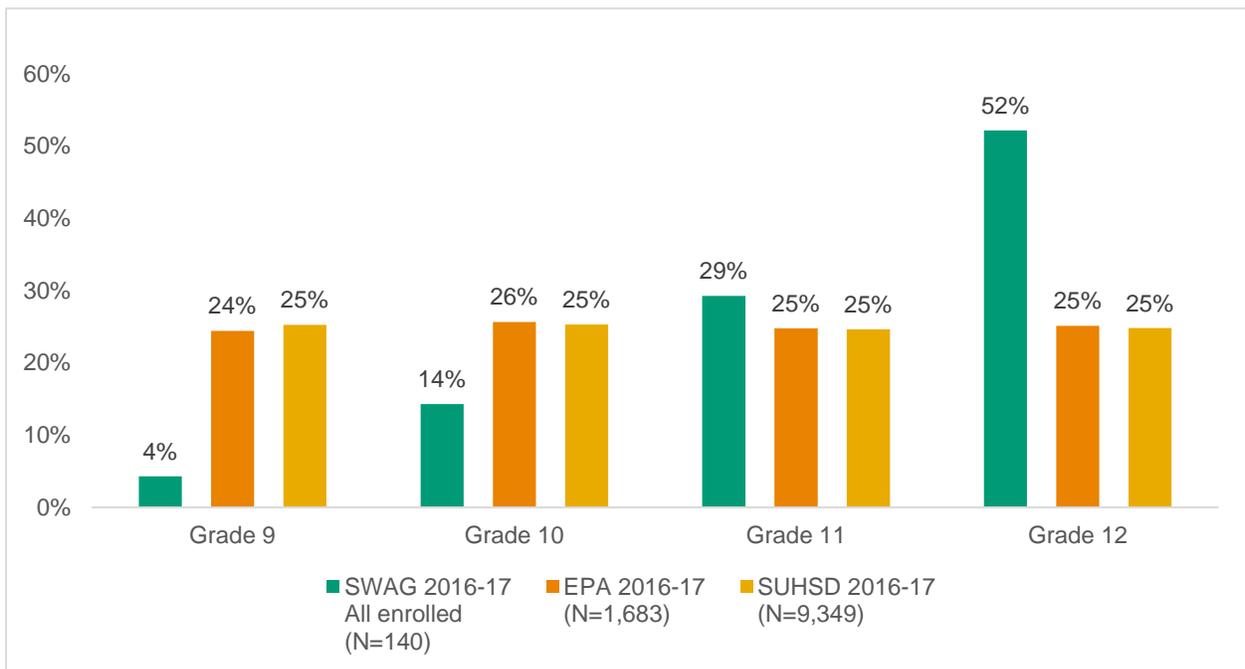


Figure A3. GPA for SWAG 2016-17 Participants and Peers

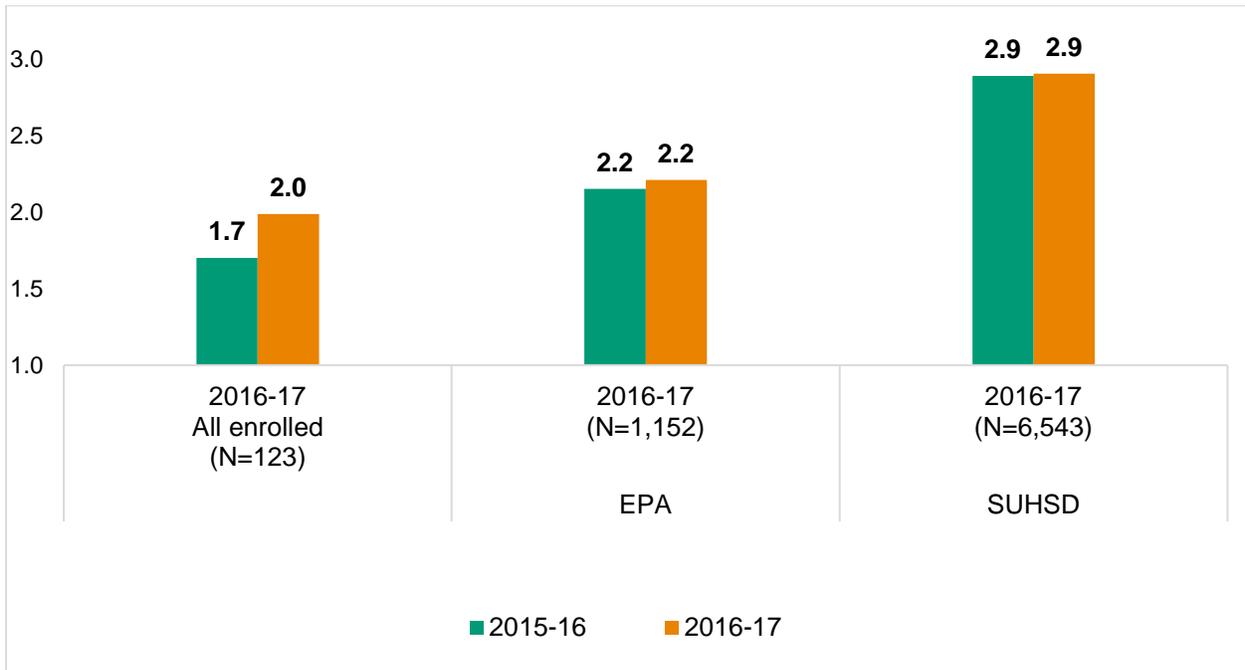
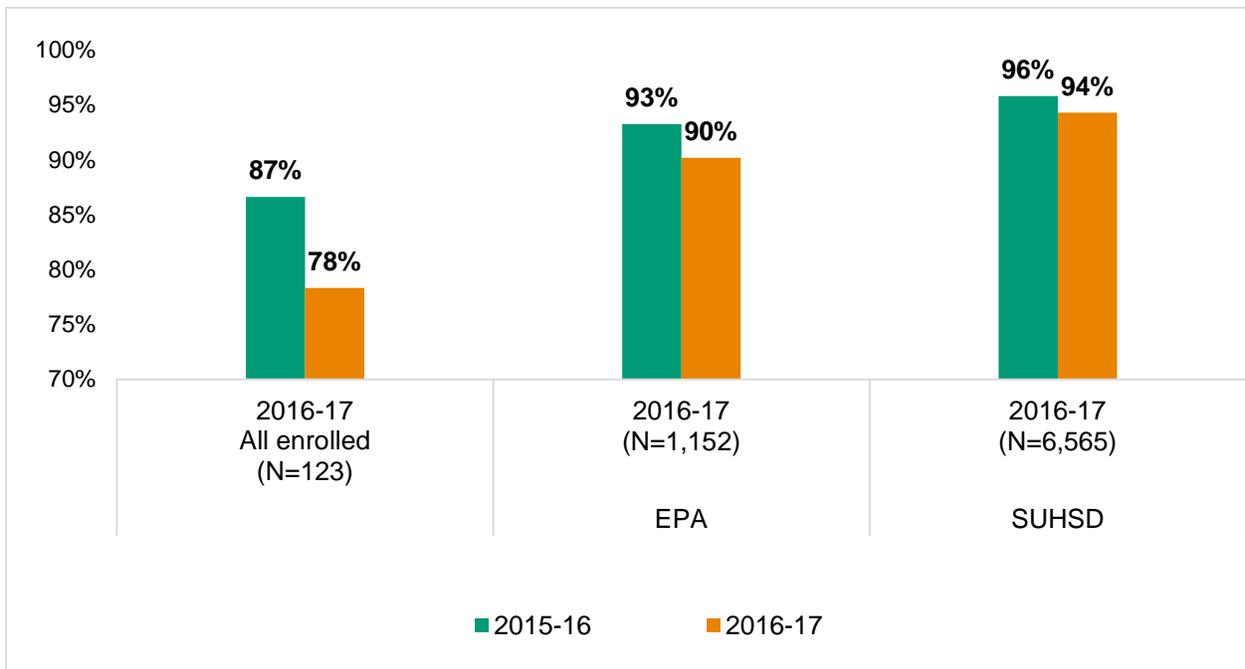


Figure A4. Attendance for SWAG 2016-17 Participants and Peers



Research Design and Methodology

Research Questions

The 3-Year SWAG Study is guided by the following set of research questions:

1. How is the SWAG model being implemented?
 - a. How many students is the program reaching? What are the demographics and other characteristics of these students? What is their intensity and duration of program participation?
 - b. What key elements of SWAG have been fully implemented? What, if any, key elements of SWAG have not yet been fully implemented?
 - c. What do program staff consider to be the primary challenges to program implementation? What aspects of the program do staff consider to be going well? What suggestions do staff have for program improvement?
 - d. What barriers (if any) do students and parents see to program participation? What aspects of the program do students and parents consider to be going well? What suggestions do students and parents have for program improvement?
2. What is the relationship between participation in SWAG and student outcomes compared to similar students who do not participate?
 - a. Student outcomes may include school attendance rate, school suspensions, credits earned, high school graduation, employment, college enrollment, contact with the justice system, or others.

Qualitative Analysis:

The qualitative findings presented here draw primarily upon analysis of interviews with SWAG staff and youth participants. In spring and summer 2017, Gardner Center staff interviewed 8 SWAG program staff, including all caseworkers, about their day to day responsibilities and experiences administering the program to youth. We also conducted group interviews with over 20 youth participants about their experience in the program (e.g. “how would you describe SWAG to a friend?” or “what do you do or get from being part of SWAG”), their academic and life goals, the challenges they face, and the conditions that help them succeed.

We had each of these interviews transcribed, then uploaded into qualitative data analysis software to be coded. To better understand the SWAG model in practice, we followed an eclectic coding approach, “a purposeful and compatible combination of two or more coding methods” (Saldaña 2016). The research team read six complete transcripts together, and over the course of those reviews compiled a coding structure of key ideas and themes. We drew from “in-vivo” coding, in which we let participants’ own words guide our early articulation of themes; process coding, to help identify the process by which youth learn about, join, and engage with SWAG over time; and

evaluation coding, to capture evidence of key program elements identified in the theory of change (for example, specific youth outcomes). These early codes reflected the central, and multi-faceted role that relationships play in youth's experience of the program. We were especially concerned with ensuring that youth's own perception and experience guided our interpretation of the findings; as such, most of our in-vivo codes drew from language youth themselves used in the interviews: "love", "tough love", "family", "friends", "hands on", and "second home." After finalizing our coding structure and coding all the interviews, we crafted analytic memos about each of these thirteen themes. The analytic memos allowed us to not only summarize the data, but to reflect and expound on them (Saldaña 2016). Subsequent analysis included reviewing these initial codes and "lumping" similar themes together into broader categories that helped to answer our research questions and loosely corresponded to the SWAG program theory of change.

Quantitative Data Matching and Sample Sizes

The outcomes analysis includes students who participated in SWAG at some time in 2016-17, matched to SUHSD data, and had data available for both 2016-17 and 2015-16.

Table A1. Sample of SWAG Students with Available Data for Outcomes Analysis (credits, GPA, attendance, suspension)

	Number of Students
Students who participated in SWAG at some time in 2016-17	156
Matched to SUHSD data	140
Data available in 2015-16 & 2016-17	126

In addition, we matched data for SWAG students and other SUHSD students to data from San Mateo County Office of Probation in order to determine the percentage of students involved with probation. Based on this linking, 24 of 140 SWAG, 130 of 1,638 (or 8%) of SUHSD students from EPA/EMP matched to probation records and 315 of 9,349 (or 3%) of students in SUHSD overall matched to probation. Overall, in the first 2 years of the program SWAG served 26 youth involved with probation.

Propensity Score Matching

The propensity score matching analysis was done using the `teffects psmatch` command in STATA with 4 nearest neighbors (with replacement) and a caliper of 0.2. Thus, each SWAG participant was matched to four similar non-participants with some non-participants matched to multiple SWAG youth. The comparison group includes a total of 232 unique non-participating youth.¹⁰ Note that for the purposes of constructing the matched comparison group, we included non-participants who had an EPA/EMP address and/or who had previously attended Ravenswood School District (which serves EPA/EMP), prior to entering SUHSD.¹¹ To form this comparison group, we matched SWAG students to non-SWAG participants using the following data elements:

- Students' race/ethnicity
- Language spoken at home
- Gender
- Special education status
- Free/reduced-price lunch eligibility
- Parent education (high school or above)
- English language learner status
- Grade in school
- Academic outcomes in the prior year including:
 - credits earned
 - GPA
 - attendance rate
 - and suspensions
- School attended
- Involvement with SMC probation

See Table A2 below which describes the matched comparison group (both weighted and unweighted) relative to SWAG participants as well as to all EPA/EMP students that did not participate in SWAG.

¹⁰ For the graduation analysis we specified two nearest neighbors (with replacement) and a caliper of 0.2.

¹¹ For example, while there are 95 students in EPA/EMP listed as speaking Tongan at home (5.6% of all EPA/EMP students in SUHSD), 20 of whom are in SWAG; there are only 26 other Tongan speaking students among all SUHSD who don't live in EPA/EMP (0.3%).

Table A2. SWAG/Comparison Group Characteristics

	SWAG	EPA/EMP Before Matching	CG After Matching (Unweighted)	CG After Matching (Weighted)
Prior Year GPA	1.71	2.18	1.80	1.63
Prior Year Credits	50.64	56.87	51.05	50.02
Prior Year Suspended	0.23	0.12	0.21	0.27
Prior Year Attendance	85.98	93.84	88.65	85.66
Latino	0.48	0.76	0.61	0.50
Native American	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01
White	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.07
PI	0.26	0.08	0.16	0.22
Black	0.18	0.06	0.13	0.20
Asian	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
Male	0.61	0.52	0.58	0.58
Spanish at home	0.46	0.78	0.63	0.50
English at home	0.36	0.15	0.28	0.37
Samoan at home	0.04	0.00	0.02	0.02
Tongan at home	0.14	0.05	0.07	0.12
Grade 10	0.15	0.34	0.20	0.13
Grade 11	0.30	0.32	0.32	0.30
Grade 12	0.55	0.34	0.47	0.57
FRPL	0.62	0.70	0.64	0.61
SPED	0.21	0.16	0.21	0.19
ELL	0.20	0.23	0.25	0.21
Parent HS Grad	0.56	0.43	0.48	0.56
Carlmont	0.02	0.09	0.01	0.01
EPA/EMP	0.10	0.15	0.11	0.07
MA	0.18	0.49	0.29	0.17
Redwood	0.48	0.11	0.39	0.55
Woodside	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.12
Independent Study	0.10	0.01	0.04	0.06
Sequoia (need to add)	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.02
Probation	0.15	0.05	0.13	0.15
n	126	1,053	232	504

Robustness Checks

We also explored a number of alternative sample specifications and analytical strategies to test the robustness of these findings to alternative approaches. First, rather than limit the comparison group to students living in EPA/EMP, we estimate the propensity score model instead including all SUHSD students as potential matches for the comparison group. This does not change the sign or statistical significance of the variables of interest. In addition, as an alternative to PSM, we test the sensitivity of the results using OLS regression and find similar results in terms of sign,

size, and statistical significance. Finally, we estimate OLS regressions limiting the comparison group to those who do not live in EPA/EMP (and are not in SWAG), and again find similar results with the one exception that the relationship between SWAG participation and GPA is statistically significant and positive in these models.

Finally, to explore whether the results regarding attendance could be driven by a small number of outliers with low attendance we estimated models removing from the sample those with attendance below 50% (and also below 25%). The sign and significance of the results did not change. As a note, just under half of comparison group is chronically absent, and just under two-thirds of SWAG students. Further, 10% of comparison group students and 13% of treatment group have attendance below 50%.

APPENDIX B. STUDENTS INVOLVED WITH PROBATION

This appendix includes additional information about characteristics and outcomes specifically for students that were involved with the San Mateo County Office of Probation; a population of particular interest for the SWAG program. The figures below describe SWAG students involved with probation and, where appropriate, the population of students involved with probation in EPA and SUHSD more broadly. Please note that the figures describing SWAG students include all SWAG students involved with probation who participated in SWAG in 2015-16 or 2016-17. We note that the number of students involved with probation represented in the figures below is considerably less than the total number of students included in the figures in the main body of this report which was not limited to those involved with probation.

Figure A1. School Attended by Students Involved with Probation

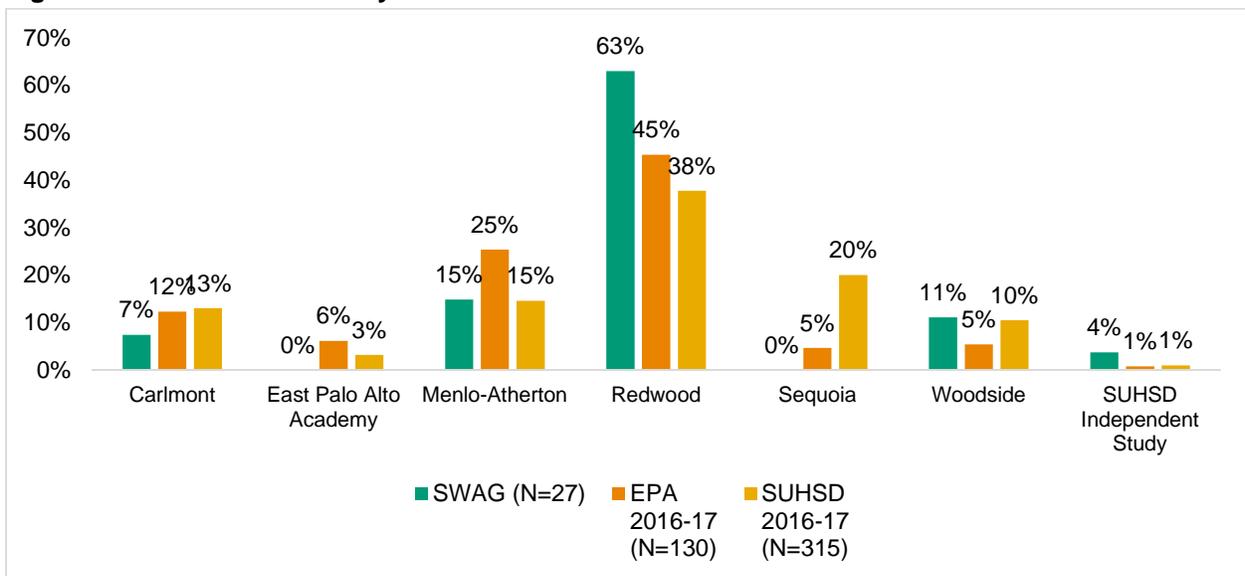


Figure A2. Demographics of Students Involved with Probation

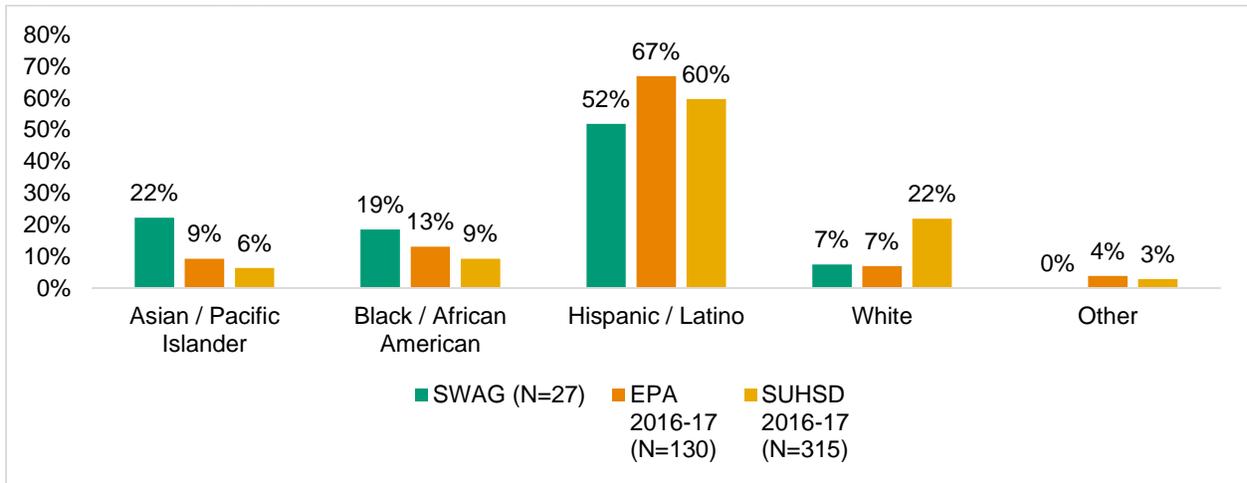


Figure A3. Student and Family Characteristics for those Involved with Probation

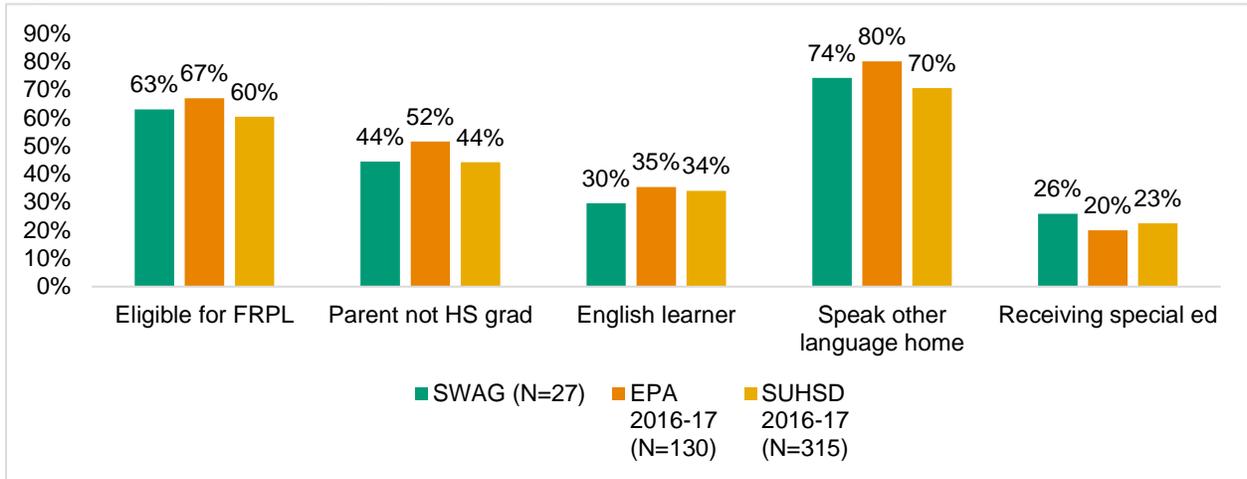


Figure A4. Risk Indicators for Probation-Involved Students (based on the prior school year, 2015-16)

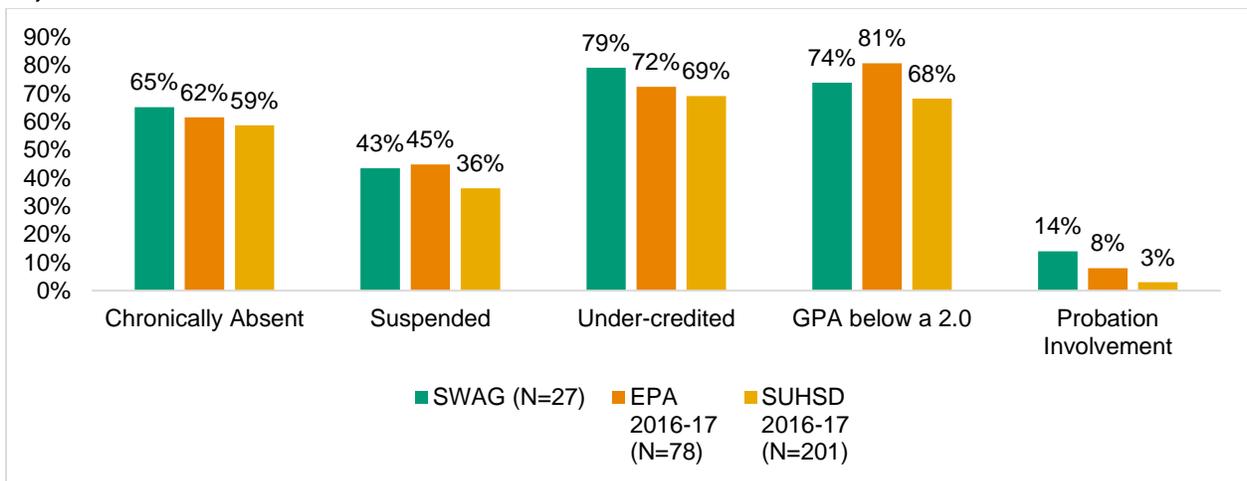


Figure A5. Credits Earned by Students Involved with Probation

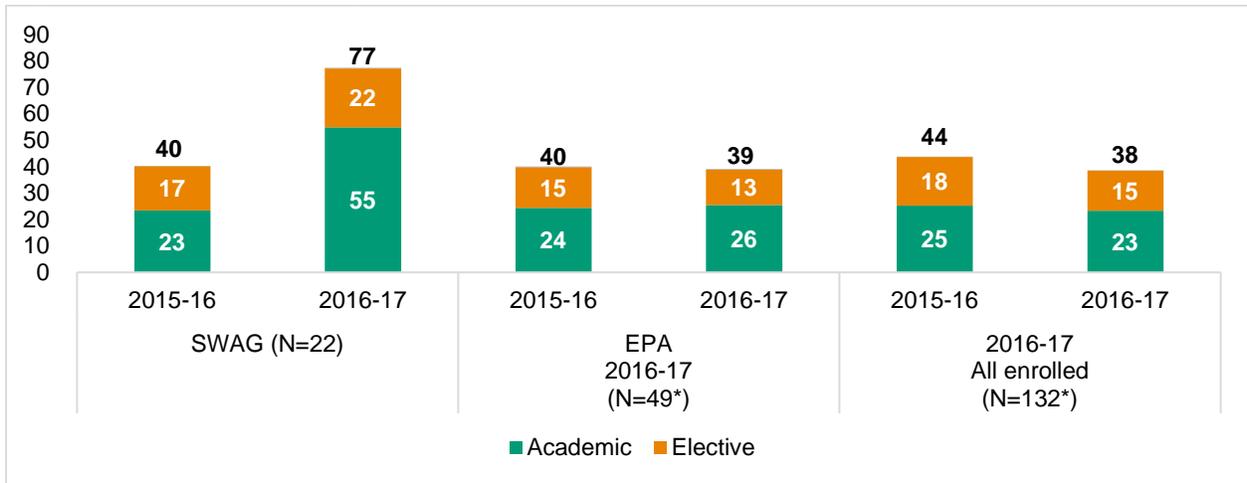


Figure A6. Graduation for SWAG Students Involved with Probation

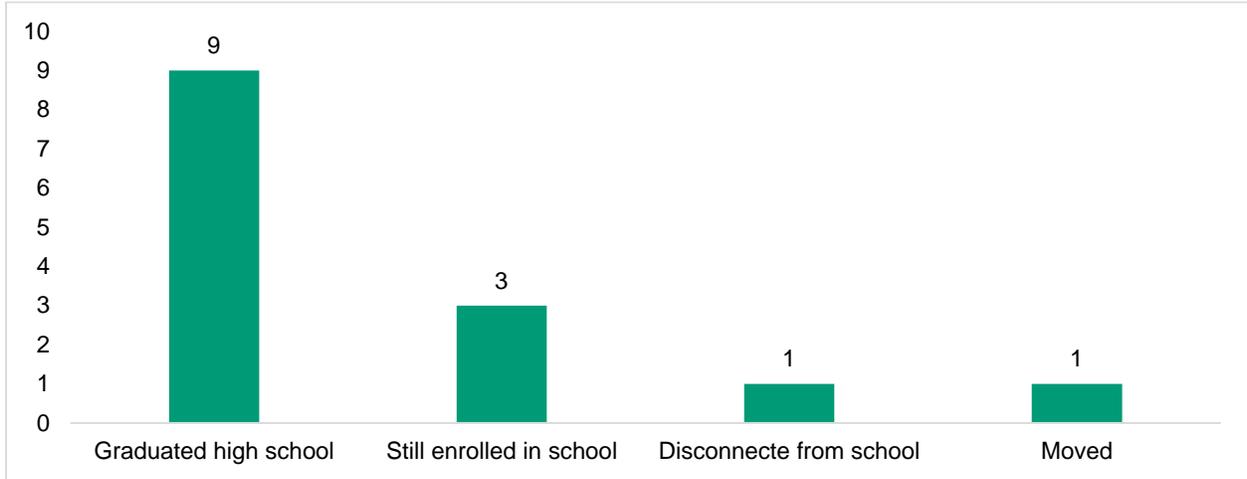


Figure A7. GPA for Students Involved with Probation

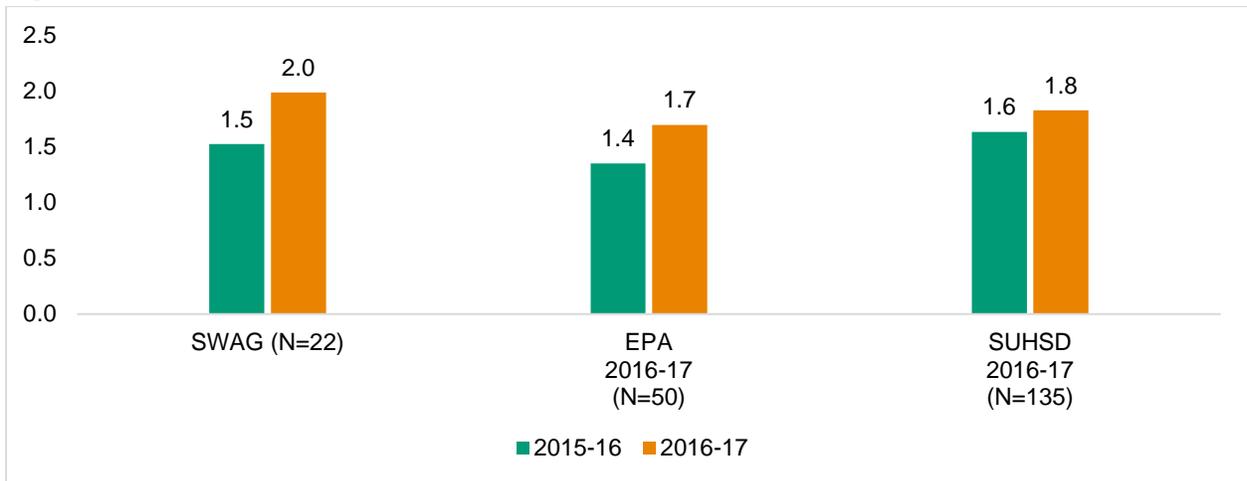


Figure A9. Attendance for Students Involved with Probation

