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AUTHOR Collins, Lyle; Just, Anne
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IDENTIFIERS *Southern California Regional Occupational Center

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Reprint Series

Vocational Education: A Success Story Southern California Regional Occupational Center Among the Nation's Best

Lyle Collins
Anne Just

University of California at Berkeley

National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California at Berkeley
1995 University Avenue, Suite 375
Berkeley, CA 94704

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Vocational Education: A Success Story

Southern California Regional Occupational Center Among the Nation's Best



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Sound like Utopia High? Perhaps you think that such a place couldn't exist in today's system. Well, it can and does, right here in California.

The Southern California Regional Occupational Center in no way resembles your typical California high school — no sports teams or cheerleaders, no organized extracurricular activities — but exciting things are happening in Torrance, 11 miles south of the Los Angeles International Airport.

Recently, in a study conducted by

the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, vocational education programs from nine exemplary schools were reported on, including the Southern California Regional Occupational Center.

A relaxed order pervades classrooms. Students are experiencing success in and enjoyment of learning, some for the first time. Teachers acclaim their good fortune to work here. They willingly spend personal time with their students; their compensation is to see students grow, develop job skills and obtain jobs. One board member says, "In a regular district you see this caring in grammar school. By high school, you've lost it. Teachers see kids only one period a day. At SCROC, you spend more time with them."

Perhaps the success of the program results in part from the fact that it is not a high school in itself, but a program

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that brings together youth from various locales and mixes them with adults taken from the working population in the area known as the South Bay. Many SCROC high school students display a balance between youthful vitality and young adult maturity and responsibility.

The atmosphere of collegiality and cooperation is intended to reflect real life settings. It is enhanced by the teachers' roles in the classroom. They effectively combine authority figure/supervisory functions with those of mentor/colleague. Teachers circulate among the students to supervise the classroom, to answer questions and to critique performance. They readily volunteer or are on call for one-on-one student assistance. Both students and teachers actively participate in and welcome opportunities for individualized student-teacher interaction.

One teacher explained that she directs her attention to the students who try to be invisible. "Teachers do that here—nurture a talent or glow they happen to see. If they don't have it when they come in, they'll have it in a short time. A lot of personal counseling goes on," she added.

There is no ability grouping of students at the Southern California Regional Occupational Center. Students are placed in classes they request and teachers receive no information about the students' test scores, report card grades or attendance patterns. The only exception is special education students, whose records are used by administrators and faculty in planning the students' individual programs.

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Once admitted, special education students are exposed to all course components and, as with all the center's students, progress at individual rates. Many of the special education students,

after completing an introductory one-semester course, continue with the "cooperative" course with classroom training and paid employment if offered in the program. Most of these students, after taking either one or two courses, secure local full-time employment in the appropriate occupational field.

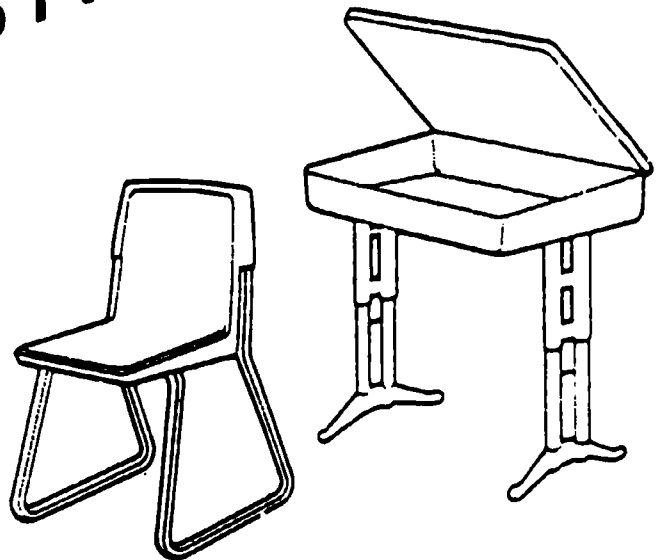
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In addition to high school credit and grades awarded to students, the Southern California Regional Occupa-

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About half of the approximately 4,000 students are from the high schools of six surrounding school districts; they drive or are bused in for three hours a day for one or two semesters. The remaining students are adults, many working in South Bay businesses and industries. The center serves a largely suburban, non-inner city, mixed racial and socio-economic population.

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Characteristics of Success

The Southern California Regional Occupational Center was one of nine successful urban schools included in a study by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education at the University of California, Berkeley to document factors contributing to their success. The study found the following 10 characteristics which may be associated with the success of these schools.

1. A safe and orderly environment conducive to teaching and learning.
2. A businesslike attitude on the part of students and teachers which creates an atmosphere of constructive energy in the school.
3. A warm and caring school climate.
4. An admissions process that makes students feel special—based on student interest in the career specialty or set of subjects, not solely on student test scores.
5. A dual mission—to prepare each student for an occupation and for college.
6. High expectations for all students to succeed accompanied by attempts to minimize grouping of students by ability.
7. A curriculum organized around an industry or a discrete set of subjects.
8. The integration of theory and practice in the courses of instruction.
9. Strong linkages with business and industry and sometimes with local institutions of higher education.
10. Leadership in the office of the principal that is at the same time inspiring, sensitive and firm.

The extended school day, from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., is broken into four three-hour segments. Three-hour daily classes provide students with intensive opportunities to learn, study and practice the occupational skills taught. Unlike high school teachers, SCROC teachers have a two-hour block between classes to visit local businesses and industries to keep abreast of occupational changes and needs. Finally, evening and Saturday classes are most useful for those who wish to comple-

ment their academic classes with vocational classes.

The curriculum is occupationally centered, with a "hands-on" emphasis to produce saleable skills. The program has an equally strong focus on individual student pacing, allowing each student to progress at his or her own rate in acquiring job competencies. Courses are offered on an open-entry/open-exit basis to facilitate individual learning.

The Southern California Regional Occupational Center began its educa-

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In 1982, with the concurrence of its six cooperating school districts, the center began to offer programs on area high school campuses. Thus, students unable to attend classes in Torrance may still receive vocational education at their home school sites. Currently, the Southern California Regional Occupational Center has 12 divisions offering 60 courses on-site at the Torrance Center and 15 courses off-site on local high school campuses.

The center's brochure provides the first clues to its emphasis on student maturity, responsibility, professionalism and collegiality. For example, words and phrases like "maturity," "adult," "standards," "real working conditions," "appropriate to the occupation," "job performance," "regular attendance and promptness" pepper the document. But these are not just words. They describe the ethos underlying the behavior and performance of both students and staff at the Southern California Regional Occupational Center.

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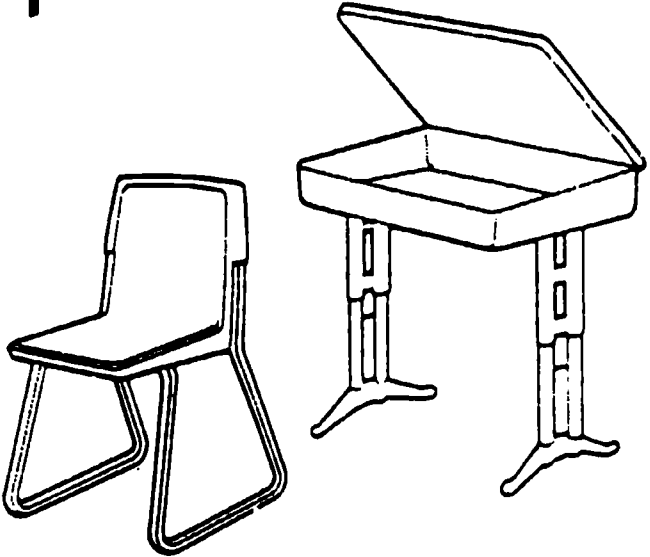
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