

J F F POLICY

REINVENTING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION:

An Assessment of Current State Policy and How To Improve It

*This is an advance look at a forthcoming policy brief from Jobs for the Future.
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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



REINVENTING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: AN ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT STATE POLICY AND HOW TO IMPROVE IT

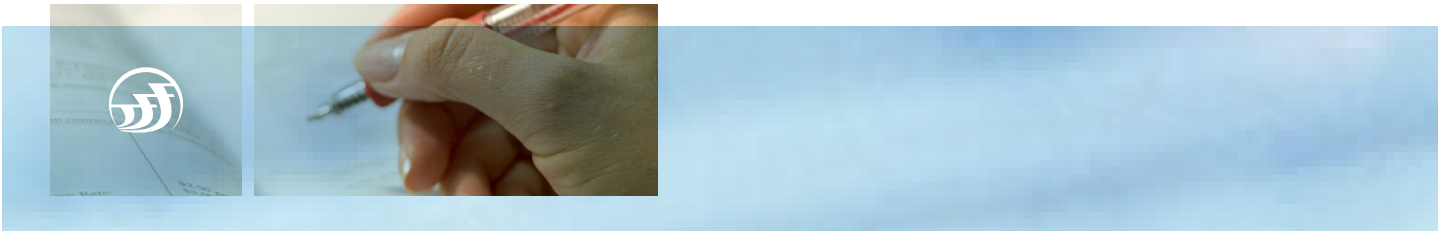
The Obama Administration is sending clear signals of its commitment to addressing the dropout crisis in America's communities. The White House has outlined a national strategy that highlights the importance of early identification of students at risk of dropping out, systemic and transformational reform of the nation's lowest-performing schools, and the development and scaling up of effective models for dropout prevention and recovery, such as transfer or alternative schools that reengage and recover young people who have disengaged and disconnected from school.

The words and actions of the Obama Administration shine a national spotlight on an historically invisible and marginalized sector of the educational system: the alternative schools and programs that work with the young people who have disengaged from or dropped out of school.

Contrary to long-held beliefs, this is not a marginal or small group of students. Moreover, despite these odds against them, a high percentage of the young people who drop out of high school persist in trying to find such a pathway (Almeida, Johnson, & Steinberg 2006). Nationally, one-third of high school freshmen enter already over age for grade and behind in skills (Olson 2006). Getting and staying on track also proves daunting for some of their peers who enter high school with a stronger academic profile but fall behind quickly and begin to drift away. The proportion of struggling students who are not on track to graduate from high school is even higher in low-income, black, and Hispanic communities, and it is especially concentrated in the non-selective, often high-poverty high schools in these districts (Balfanz & Letgers 2004).

This large group of young people requires an alternative pathway that takes into account their academic trajectories and offers the right balance of academic press and support to get them back on track to high school and postsecondary credentials. In the last five years, several large cities, most notably New York City and Philadelphia, have made important strides in developing such a pathway through designing new schools and models and improving old ones. In both cities, evidence is emerging that such efforts contribute to rising graduation rates. Yet in these as well as other states and communities, the number of off-track and out-of-school young people still far exceeds the capacity to help them all get back on track to graduation and postsecondary attainment.

Rather than contributing to a state's economic well-being and competitiveness, young people who cannot find a way to get back on track threaten to be a long-term drain on a state's economy. A recent study by a group of economists concluded that if the number of



dropouts in the present cohort of 20-year-olds was cut in half, the nation would reap \$45 billion through extra tax revenues and reduced costs of public health, crime and justice, and welfare payments (Levin et al. 2007).

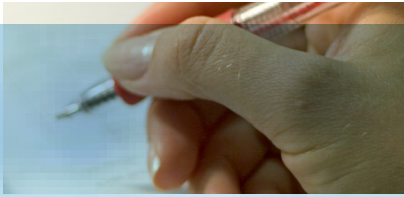
The dropout rate is particularly troubling at a time when state leaders are increasingly aware that their economies depend on their competitiveness—not just with neighboring states but also with developed nations around the world. Once first in the world in the percentage of its people with college degrees, the United States has slipped to tenth, with the erosion accounted for primarily by 25- to 34-year-olds, foretelling worsening news for our world leadership and economic competitiveness (College Board 2008).

GROWING STATE ACTIVITY

The realization that alternative education is potentially a valuable lever to use in raising high school graduation rates appears to be growing among state leaders. While states have long had alternative education legislation on the books, the last decade has occasioned a flurry of new activity. Since 2000, 33 states have passed new legislation and/or put new regulations into place related to alternative education.

This level of activity is likely to grow as state leaders respond to increased pressure from the federal government to measure graduation rates more accurately and to make more progress in raising graduation rates and lowering dropout rates, even as they also raise standards and graduation requirements to align with college readiness. Much of alternative education programming and practice predates the current era of higher state standards and graduation requirements and the economic imperative for higher levels of skills coming from the new global economy. Increasingly, states are realizing the importance of updating and upgrading their alternative education policies.

While significant activity in state-level alternative education legislation has occurred since the authorization of No Child Left Behind, there has yet to be a close look at such policies to see to what extent they reflect the new realities that alternative education must face and address. The purpose of Jobs for the Future's research is to survey the alternative education policies that states have or are putting into place, and specifically to look at how well the new policies accommodate the need to ensure that all young people—even those who have fallen off track before attaining high school and postsecondary degrees—have the skills and credentials required in an unforgiving economy. Achieving this ambitious goal will require more innovative and comprehensive alternative education policy than many states have, as well as larger state investments in new designs and the expansion of evidence-based model programs.



MODEL ELEMENTS OF A NEW POLICY SET FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

As an analytic framework for a 50-state analysis, JFF identified seven key policy elements that define a new alternative education policy set.

BROADER ELIGIBILITY

The intent of state legislation should be to normalize alternative education by making it another pathway to the same goal of high school and postsecondary credentials.

CLEARER GUIDELINES ON STATE AND DISTRICT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

States need to provide guidance on quality standards for the operation and management of alternative schools and programs, while allowing flexibility for districts and schools to design alternative education to meet local conditions and student needs.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS

State accountability models for alternative schools or programs should ensure that schools expect students to meet the common statewide standards. They also should give schools credit for reengaging and holding onto students and hitting key progress benchmarks toward the common standards.

ENRICHED FUNDING

Funding policies should target more resources toward students with greater need, taking into account that alternative education programs not only have to reengage students but also accelerate their learning and provide intensive academic and social supports.

HIGH QUALITY TEACHERS

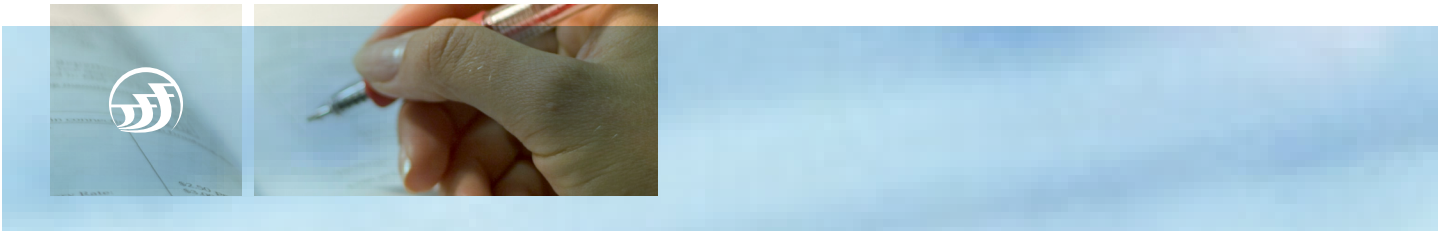
States should improve the academic press and challenge in alternative schools by providing incentives for high-performing leaders and teachers to go into alternative education and supporting ongoing professional development for current staff.

ENHANCED SUPPORT SERVICES

Recognizing that academic success and student supports go hand in hand, states should provide funding and incentives for districts and schools to create the partnerships to ensure that students receive a range of needed supports.

SUPPORT FOR INNOVATION

A more strategic and intentional effort is needed to invent and spread the new models and options required to enable off-track and out-of-school youth to graduate from high school. States have a responsibility to create the space, vehicles, and funding to support this kind of large-scale innovation.



For each element, the report looks at how closely policies across the 50 states compare to current “best in class” examples.

BROADER ELIGIBILITY: States play a key role in defining the purpose of alternative education by the eligibility criteria they establish for student participation. In too many states, alternative education remains narrowly defined as an option for troubled or troubling youth. Of the 50 states, 17 define eligibility narrowly in terms of behavioral or disciplinary criteria; 19 have broadened eligibility to incorporate a broader group of at-risk students, based on school performance or life circumstances that interfere with school success; and 14 combine a focus on at-risk youth with an even broader definition of alternative education as an option for any young person not thriving in school.

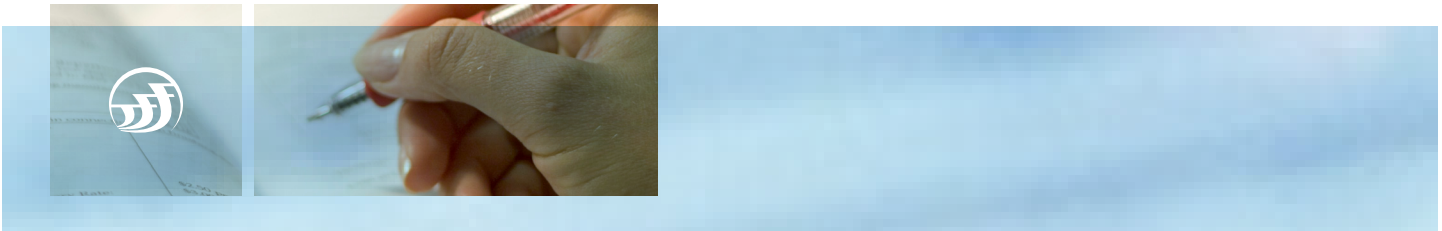
This last subset of states points the way to how policies can help “normalize” alternative education by making it another pathway for young people who need to get back on track to high school and postsecondary credentials. *Tennessee* and *Georgia* are two noted examples of how states can take steps in that direction.

CLEARER GUIDELINES ON STATE AND DISTRICT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: Districts and states, and in some cases counties, share the responsibility for alternative education. Local education agencies (LEAs) need flexibility to adapt alternative education to local conditions and student needs. At least 41 states recognize this by placing primary authority for day-to-day operations of alternative schools and programs in the hands of LEAs. Several explicitly state that school districts may contract with nonprofit or private institutions to provide alternative education. However, for the most part, state policies have been unclear, confusing, and inconsistent in providing guidance on quality standards for the operation and management of alternative schools and programs.

A few states, notably *Oregon* and more recently *Tennessee*, provide extensive guidelines to districts that clarify roles and responsibilities for alternative education schools and programs. The intent is to ensure that young people who need alternative education across the state have the same opportunity to get a quality education.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS: In most states, the rules and regulations authorizing alternative education schools and programs are vague and indefinite in specifying for what and how these schools are to be held accountable. Over half of the states appear to be silent on the matter. Nineteen states explicitly include alternative education in their state-level accountability systems, but only a handful use any type of improvement rating based on student performance in these schools and/or require any form of annual reporting.

The challenge for states is to balance holding all schools accountable for helping students reach a common statewide standard with rewarding schools for reengaging and educating overage and under-credited students. New York State and New York City are working on a model in which alternative education students remain in their original cohort for district cohort graduation rate accountability, but the transfer schools (one of the city’s alternative education models) “restart the clock” with overage and under-credited students.



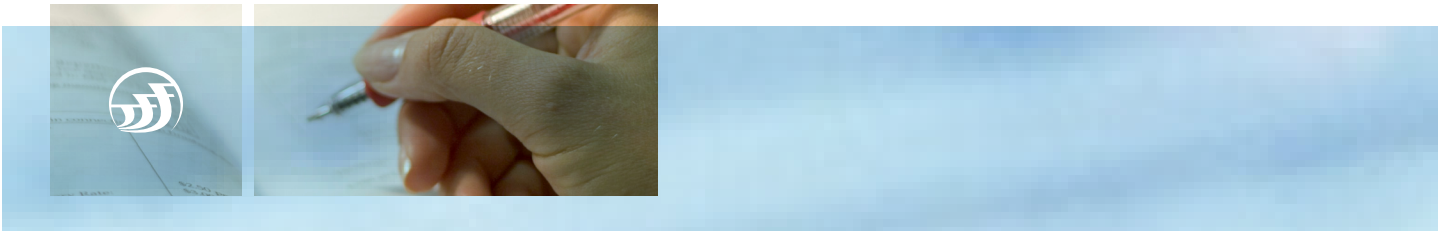
ENRICHED FUNDING: Alternative schools are generally charged with doing more in less time and, in the case of contracted providers, with fewer resources per student. Young people who need the most help to catch up and move ahead often get the least. Since 2000, about half of the states have passed legislation providing or setting aside funding for alternative education or setting new education funding formulas. In most cases, it is difficult to sort out how far these go to redressing current inequities. In states where LEAs may contract with nonprofit or private institutions to provide alternative education, most appear to leave the funding of these providers to the discretion of the district, a practice that has resulted in serious inequities.

Hawaii allows schools to use funds provided through its weighted student funding formula, based on student need, to develop and implement alternative programs. *Virginia* and *South Carolina* have funding formulas that attempt to consider the additional academic and support needs of students attending alternative education. *Minnesota*, *Wisconsin*, and *Oregon* have long been models for how a state can support public-private partnerships in providing alternative education. Each requires a high percentage of per-pupil dollars (80 to 95 percent) to follow students to third-party providers contracting with districts.

HIGH QUALITY TEACHERS: Helping off-track young people meet state and district standards for graduation and postsecondary education requires skilled teachers who know how to combine academic press and challenge with support for struggling learners. Yet only 15 states have policies governing staffing patterns for alternative education programs, and these range from ensuring that poorly performing staff are not assigned to alternative education to requiring staff to possess special certification to setting student-teacher ratios or limits to class size. To entice more teachers into alternative education, states have also experimented with changing requirements for teacher licensure and certification.

This could be a positive development—if such experiments are not simply geared to addressing an immediate supply problem but rather are an intentional attempt to attract and build a cadre of teachers who combine content knowledge, perhaps across several subject areas, with a deep understanding of youth development and the skill to accelerate student learning. *North Carolina* stands out for adopting a policy that explicitly urges schools boards to prohibit superintendents from assigning teachers with poor performance evaluations to alternative learning programs.

ENHANCED SUPPORT SERVICES: Efforts to accelerate student learning in alternative schools cannot be separated from the need to address the many barriers these students often experience. At least 22 states offer some direction or provisions around support services for alternative education. However, much of this policy is vague and indistinct and seldom emphasizes the connection of support services to academic success. These states generally require or encourage alternative education to provide the range of support services students may need to succeed. Most often, this refers to a case management approach rather than an integrated model of academics and wraparound supports. Vocational, employment, or work-based training or experience is the other type of support service that is frequently cited in policy.



Arkansas is one of the few states to recognize the significance of comprehensive supports to academic success. It requires alternative education schools and programs to provide the supports to ensure that students continue to make progress toward their education goals.

SUPPORT FOR INNOVATION: Addressing the sizeable population of students who are significantly off track to graduation or have left school altogether will require more than incremental efforts. A more strategic and intentional effort is needed to invent and spread new models and options that draw on evidence-based designs that “beat the odds” with off-track students. Only a very few districts and states have created space, vehicles, and funding that could potentially be used for this kind of innovation. At this point, *New York City* is the primary “existence proof” that new models for off-track youth, as the centerpiece of a multiple pathways to graduation strategy, can be implemented at scale. States—many of which have smaller populations of students—can draw lessons from this work. As a result of systemic changes and public and private investment in new, evidence-based models for this group of young people, New York has posted an 11 percent rise in its four-year cohort graduation rate over the last three years. In the last two years, nearly 7,000 young people, who were so far off track as to be highly unlikely to graduate, now have NYC diplomas, having graduated from new programs and schools designed to meet their needs.

North Carolina’s high school redesign initiative is a state model for wide-scale systemic innovation. *North Carolina* has embarked on the redesign of low-performing high schools and the design and implementation of 75 “Learn and Earn” high schools—intended to enable thousands of students across the state to earn both a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit or an Associate’s degree, tuition-free, in five years. A primary support vehicle for this work is the North Carolina New Schools Project, a public/private partnership that operates as the state’s premier school development and redesign entity.

Similarly innovative state-level efforts to redesign alternative education are sorely needed. Piecemeal policy changes at the state level and innovative reform efforts by individual school systems cannot, by themselves, create enough high-quality learning environments to enable all the young people currently off track to graduation or who have dropped out altogether to get back on track to graduation and postsecondary education. States have the responsibility to provide leadership in the form of policies that support meaningful, large-scale reinvention of alternative education.

References will be available in the final report.



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