



Trends from the Field: Lessons Learned about Alternative Education

By: Jesse Kannam and Anu Anand



Introduction

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) has worked closely with stakeholders at the national, state, local, and institutional level to develop a deeper understanding of what alternative education settings do well, areas for improvement, opportunities for innovation, and issues requiring further inquiry. Collaboration with these stakeholders, as well as additional research, has provided immense insight into the issues faced in developing accountability systems for these settings. This brief summarizes the lessons AYPF has learned from work with key stakeholders, including:

- 1) One Size Doesn't Fit All
- 2) Opportunities Exist for Innovative Academic and Career Preparation and Credentials
- 3) It Is Possible to Balance Rigor and Flexibility
- 4) Accountability Exists at Multiple Levels
- 5) Nuances Matter
- 6) More Research on Accountability for Alternative Education is Needed
- 7) Lessons from Alternative Education Can be Applied to All Settings

Background

The American Youth Policy Form (AYPF) has, for the past 25 years, sought to understand how to better serve the nation's traditionally underserved students. With a vision that all young people have equitable opportunities and supports to become lifelong learners, earn a family-sustaining wage, and actively participate in civic society, AYPF has worked to bridge research, policy, and practice to better inform the education, youth, and workforce policymaking process.

To that end, AYPF has worked with numerous states, along with national and local experts in the alternative education field, to develop a robust knowledge base on many of the challenges and opportunities presented in alternative settings. Additionally, with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, AYPF has taken a particular interest in the opportunities under this new legislation to create and promote high-quality educational opportunities for those served in alternative settings and to better understand how federal and state accountability can be leveraged for continuous improvement in these settings.

Through numerous webinars, discussion groups with thought leaders, and a field trip with state leaders to Colorado, AYPF has engaged with stakeholders with varying degrees of involvement with alternative education at both the national and state levels. AYPF has conducted a scan of all 50 states and Washington, DC to further understand the evolving alternative education landscape *before* the implementation of ESSA. Additionally, AYPF is currently conducting a second scan of ESSA state plans in order to better understand how alternative settings are held accountable under that law. Finally, AYPF and Civic Enterprises recently released a comprehensive policy brief entitled [*Measuring Success: Accountability for Alternative Education*](#), which deeply explores the topic of accountability for alternative education settings.



Lessons Learned

1) One Size Doesn't Fit All

The “one size doesn't fit all” mentality is not new to the education field. Education leaders have long recognized the importance of personalized learning approaches and the value of multiple pathways to postsecondary education and careers. Although it is relatively well known that alternative education settings provide different learning environments than traditional schools, there is also a significant amount of diversity *within* the alternative education field.

This diversity is exemplified in the varying state definitions of alternative education across the country. The primary criteria that states currently use to define alternative settings include: 1) the student populations served; 2) the setting type; and 3) the instructional or environmental characteristics.¹ Alternative settings typically serve “at-risk” students who are often classified as chronically absent, overage and under-credited, re-engaging with school, having disciplinary infractions, or pregnant and/or parenting. The diversity in needs and circumstances of these students is indicative of the fact that, although all of these students may be educated in alternative settings, there is still a need for nuanced instruction and services. Additionally, the setting type (i.e., program, school, short-term, long-term) varies greatly across alternative settings, as do the environmental characteristics and instructional methods of these institutions. Ultimately, these varied purposes and contexts result in a diversity of approaches to accountability, and it is important for accountability systems to recognize this diversity.

Related Resource

To learn more about how states define alternative education, check out The Institute for Education Sciences (IES)'s publication: [How Do States Define Alternative Education?](#)

2) Opportunities Exist for Innovative Academic and Career Preparation and Credentials

Alternative schools often provide students not only with academic support to obtain a high school credential, but also the ability to develop workforce skills and training. Integrated academic and career education can better prepare students for postsecondary and career success. Opportunities like internships, apprenticeships, career relevant courses, and concurrent enrollment allow students to earn a stipend or get paid, gain important employability skills, and earn college credits, Associates degrees, and industry credentials while working towards earning a high school credential. For example, the three alternative schools visited during AYPF's study tour to Denver, Colorado² offer concurrent enrollment at local colleges and technical institutes, along with a variety of work-based learning opportunities. This

¹ Deeds, C. & DePaoli, J. (2017). Measuring Success: Accountability for Alternative Education. American Youth Policy Forum and Civic Enterprises. Retrieved from <http://www.aypf.org/resources/measuring-success/>.

² American Youth Policy Forum. (2017). Creating a System of High-Quality Education Options to Serve All Students: Study Tour Brief. Retrieved from <http://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Denver-Study-Tour-Brief.pdf>.



provides students the ability to work towards college credits and/or technical certifications while they are still in high school, at minimal to no cost to the student.

The value of career preparation can also be demonstrated through accountability measures. For example, Louisiana developed a strength of diploma index to hold schools accountable for ensuring that students have access to early college and career experiences that will help them be successful post-high school. The index awards points to all schools, not just alternative schools, based on the college and career credentials or certificates that students earn. The index also awards points to schools when students graduate, as well as when they pass an equivalency exam. It is important to note that all schools, not just alternative schools, have innovated in the area of career preparation and credentials for some time. Alternative schools, however, have paid particularly close attention to the ways in which a customized education and tailored supports can prepare the most at-risk students for lifelong careers and postsecondary education. The lessons learned about the importance of credentials and integrated learning opportunities are applicable to all schools, but have been especially useful for alternative settings.

Related Resources

To learn more about Louisiana’s strength of diploma index, check out:

- Louisiana’s submitted [ESSA state plan](#)
- AYPF publication: [Innovations in Accountability Measures and Processes](#)

To learn more about AYPF’s study tour to Colorado, check out the summary brief: [Creating a System of High-Quality Education Options to Serve All Students](#)

3) It is Possible to Balance Rigor and Flexibility

Within the field of alternative education there is a tension, real or perceived, between maintaining high standards of rigor for alternative settings while also allowing for a level of flexibility given the unique conditions, missions, and purposes of these settings. According to the 2017 Building a Grad Nation report, alternative schools are overrepresented among low-graduation rate high schools,³ which is likely due to either low-quality alternative schools *or* to the fact that a four-year graduation rate is only one measure of success and does not paint a complete picture of alternative school quality. To this end, rigor and flexibility in accountability measures may not be at odds with one another. In fact, states have taken a variety of approaches to allow for flexibility within accountability for alternative education settings, while also ensuring high quality education among these settings. As stated by Deeds and DePaoli, “In some states, alternative settings are held accountable to the same system, comprised of the same measures, as

³ DePaoli, J., Balfanz, R. & Bridgeland, J. (2017). Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Raising High School Graduation Rates. Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University.



traditional settings, whereas in other states alternative settings fall under their own, separate accountability system. Many states fall somewhere in between, either having some sort of modifications in the measures used to identify alternative settings, or using the same system and the same measures for all schools, but identifying alternative schools separately from traditional schools.”⁴ Furthermore, a state may not rely solely on a four-year graduation rate or academic proficiency to determine school quality, particularly for alternative schools, but the additional measures they utilize can be equally rigorous.

Regardless of how states decide to include alternative settings in their accountability system(s), ESSA provides flexibility and the opportunity to use rigorous measures that are nimble enough to account for the diversity of student experiences and provide a more holistic perspective. This flexibility can include weighing measures differently, using different cut points, or developing measures that are responsive to the population served by alternative settings, such as reengagement rates, suspension/expulsion rates, or extended-year graduation rates.⁵ States have shown it is possible create and support systems and measures that are relevant and appropriate to the mission and purpose of alternative education and also meaningfully differentiate high- and low-quality alternative settings.

Related Resource

To learn more about accountability measures for alternative settings, check out the College and Career Readiness and Success Center’s brief: [What Can States Learn About College and Career Readiness Accountability Measures from Alternative Education?](#)

4) Accountability Exists at Multiple Levels

ESSA requires that states hold all public schools accountable, and develop a state plan that indicates how states plan to identify schools most in need of improvement. States can also develop mechanisms for accountability apart from their ESSA state plan. Additionally, ESSA requires that states engage in public reporting. States may develop relevant models of evaluation and accountability for alternative settings at various levels, within and apart from ESSA state plans, and many states are leveraging these various levels of accountability to develop innovative systems and measures in order to paint a more complete picture of success in alternative education. Additionally, depending on the size and classification of the alternative setting, these settings may be exempt from accountability under ESSA state plans,⁶ thus states and localities are employing other mechanisms for ensuring quality.

⁴ Deeds & DePaoli, 2017.

⁵ Deeds & DePaoli, 2017.

⁶ As described further in the following section, ESSA requires states to hold all public schools accountable in their state plan. Yet since some programs are not be classified as schools, these settings may be exempt from accountability and improvement efforts. Additionally, under ESSA, states can forego the implementation of improvement activities in schools with fewer than 100 students.



For example, Wyoming’s pilot accountability program for alternative education is not a part of the state’s ESSA plan (i.e., federal accountability) but rather is informing the development of a state framework that is more reflective of the performance of Wyoming’s alternative schools. This pilot will expand the research base on accountability for alternative settings and could influence policy design both in Wyoming and nationwide.

Kentucky is another example of a state that has not incorporated a separate system of accountability for alternative settings within their ESSA state plan, but has innovated *outside* of their state plan to ensure high quality among alternative settings. The state has utilized accountability mechanisms and processes at the state level to employ and promote accountability for alternative settings. In Kentucky, where many alternative settings exist as programs rather than schools, alternative program quality is monitored on a rotating basis. The Kentucky Department of Education also recognizes Alternative Programs of Distinction, and supports these programs in sharing their best practices. Kentucky’s processes illustrate that accountability can happen at multiple levels and states have multiple strategies for ensuring quality outside of ESSA state plans.

As a national policy organization, AYPF’s initial lens on accountability for alternative education began with considerations of how accountability under ESSA would affect these settings. Through stakeholder discussion and collaboration, it is clear that while ESSA provides a framework, accountability for alternative settings both precedes and transcends ESSA and efforts to improve accountability systems for these settings are not solely motivated by the legislation. While ESSA is a motivating factor for some states to start considering this subpopulation and engage with stakeholders, for others it is a lever and potential support for already existing work.

Related Resources

To learn more about accountability systems and mechanisms at the federal, state, and local level, check out the latest policy brief from AYPF and Civic Enterprises: [Measuring Success: Accountability for Alternative Education](#)

To learn more about the alternative accountability systems mentioned:

- [Wyoming’s Pilot Accountability Program for Alternative Education](#)
- [Kentucky’s Alternative Education Programs](#)

5) Nuances Matter

Language used to define alternative education can have significant impacts on how those settings are held accountable. AYPF has sought to understand how the classification of an alternative setting as a “school” or “program” impacts how the setting will be held accountable. In regards to accountability, while ESSA requires that states hold all public schools accountable, “programs” may or may not be included within ESSA state plans. Additionally, classification as a program can sometimes result in these settings not being held accountable to the public via school report cards or other public reporting mechanisms, as they are not technically schools. For these reasons, it is important that states are intentional about how they



choose to define their alternative settings and how this setting type will impact their ability to ensure quality.

Additionally, given that different alternative settings are designed to serve students for various lengths of time, accountability systems should be aligned with the purpose of the setting. For example, four-year graduation rates are a required accountability indicator under ESSA. However, alternative settings typically serve students at the greatest risk of dropping out, or in some cases, students who have already disconnected from school and are operating on extended academic trajectories. Additionally, some alternative settings do not intend to graduate students, as they are designed for reengagement purposes or to serve as short-term placements before students transfer to other high schools. It is important to keep these nuances in mind as states determine which measures and systems are most appropriate to assess the quality of alternative settings.

Alongside classification and definition, given the value and priority typically given to graduation rates in accountability systems, alternative settings tend to navigate the nuance between and within graduation rates and completion rates, the latter of which are inclusive of students who earn their GED.⁷ However, GED completers are considered dropouts for federal accountability purposes, potentially creating a disincentive for states and localities to support alternative settings that are reconnecting youth who wish to earn their GED. Many states acknowledge the unique circumstances of the student population served by alternative settings and are including completer rates and extended-year graduation rates in their accountability systems.⁸

Related Resource

To learn more about important nuances related to alternative education, including graduation and completer rates, check out AYPF's [blog post](#).

6) More Research on Accountability for Alternative Education Is Needed

ESSA outlines the requirements for identifying schools, evidence-based intervention, and subsequent support for continuous improvement. However, there is very little research evidence about effective interventions in alternative settings. ESSA requires that interventions be evidence-based, but the law also allows for differentiated improvement activities for schools that primarily serve students returning to education and/or overage and under-credited youth (i.e., students served in alternative settings). Interventions should be selected based upon the needs of students to ensure meaningful improvement,

⁷ The term GED is used broadly to include all state varieties of high school equivalency credentials.

⁸ While ESSA requires that states include a four year graduation rates within the graduation rate indicator, states may choose to include extended-year graduation rates (EYGRs) within this indicator and when identifying schools for comprehensive support and improvement.



and thus more research is needed on what interventions work in which alternative settings and with which students. Research evidence could help provide insight into how to improve low-quality alternative settings in practice and how school, local, and state policy can facilitate that meaningful improvement.

Related Resources

To learn more about research on academic interventions in alternative education high schools, check out Pyle, Brown & Pyle's [presentation](#) on their upcoming report to be published in early 2018. Additionally, Schwab et. al 2016 have conducted a [literature review](#) of research on academic interventions in alternative education settings.

7) Lessons from Alternative Education Can Be Applied to All Settings

Alternative settings often take nuanced approaches in practice and accountability, and many of these lessons can be helpful for traditional schools, as well. For example, alternative settings have long recognized that prioritizing the academic needs of students is not enough to ensure that they stay engaged with and succeed in school. Students often withdraw from traditional schools and enter alternative settings for personal, social, and emotional reasons. Hence, high-quality alternative settings typically provide wraparound services and social and emotional support to ensure students' needs are met and they have the support they need to learn.

Additionally, many alternative settings utilize personalized learning approaches. Alternative learning settings typically include characteristics like flexible schedules and small student-teacher ratios, which provide more individualized attention and the opportunity to tailor instruction to student's needs, to progress along a timeline that works for them. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in the brief, alternative settings also typically provide integrated academic and work-based learning opportunities. This personalized learning approach and prioritization of non-academic supports and services, in which schools structure their programming with the needs of their students in mind, can be beneficial to all students.

Finally, strategies related to accountability for alternative education can inform accountability for all academic settings. States have created nimble systems and measures for alternative education that recognize the diversity of student experiences. Measures of academic growth, completion, career preparation, school culture, and student and teacher engagement can be relevant to all settings, as a strategy to ensure students stay engaged and are ready to learn.⁹

⁹ For potential measures within ESSA's four required indicators for high schools, that can be applied to both alternative and traditional settings, reference Table 1 and Table 2 in Deeds and DePaoli (2017)'s brief *Measuring Success: Accountability for Alternative Education*.



Final Reflections

These central lessons provide insight into the key tensions, issues, and promising areas of opportunity within the field of alternative education. Moving forward, these themes will continue to inform AYPF's work to support local and state leaders in their efforts to create high-quality alternative settings and to create meaningful systems of accountability to reflect their success.