

What Can States Learn About College and Career Readiness Accountability Measures From Alternative Education?

This *Ask the CCRS Center Brief* provides an overview of the accountability measures used by states and districts to assess the college and career readiness of students who are educated in alternative programs and schools (defined hereafter as *alternative settings*). Alternative settings are designed to serve at-risk students by providing pathways to educational success for students whose needs are not met in traditional school environments. Accountability measures currently used in alternative settings acknowledge the differing needs of students served and offer flexibility for measuring readiness as students progress through alternative settings.

Given that states now have the opportunity to design new accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), they will have the flexibility to consider the needs of, and to develop accountability measures for, students in alternative settings. Whether states develop new accountability systems for alternative settings or revise existing measures, they can use this opportunity to ensure that all students receive a high quality education that adequately prepares them for life beyond high school.

This brief describes various accountability measures used in alternative settings and offers considerations for states as they move forward in designing new accountability systems under ESSA.

Benefits of Serving At-Risk Youth in Alternative Settings

Alternative education is a key mechanism for supporting students who have struggled to complete high school in traditional settings due to a variety of circumstantial factors. Supporting students as they strive to obtain a high school credential benefits the students themselves, the nation's economy, and society as a whole. Students who obtain a high school diploma are more likely to be employed, to earn a family-sustaining wage, and to experience better health outcomes than those who do not complete high school. In addition, students who drop out before earning a high school credential typically contribute less in taxable income to the economy and are more likely to rely on public assistance. For students who are at risk of dropping out of a traditional high school, alternative education options can be a pathway to earning a diploma, which can ultimately lead to greater opportunities for long-term success (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016, May; Martin & Halperin, 2006).

Understanding Alternative Education

According to the U. S. Department of Education, alternative settings are “designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools.”¹ Research indicates that formerly incarcerated youth, students who are pregnant or parents, students with disciplinary problems, and students who are chronically absent from school are much more likely to drop out of traditional high schools and to attend school in alternative education settings.^{2,3} Alternative settings also serve academically off-track or overage, under-credited students, many of whom have dropped out of traditional high schools. Because alternative settings serve varied populations, they are often structured to offer flexible schedules, smaller student-teacher ratios, career-oriented themes, and innovative curricula to meet the unique needs of their students.^{4,5} Given the wide range of services and the general diversity of alternative education programs nationwide, states hold schools and programs accountable for the outcomes of at-risk students using a broad variety of measures.

Currently, some states have separate or parallel accountability systems for alternative settings. Other states have integrated accountability measures that account for the needs of at-risk students within their traditional statewide accountability systems that serve all students.

Accountability Measures Used in Alternative Education Settings

States and districts use a variety of measures to assess how well these settings meet the needs of their students. The measures, highlighted in the following sections, span three major categories:

- **Readiness to receive education.** These measures reveal whether alternative settings are creating the necessary conditions for student learning. They include measures of attendance and behavior.
- **Demonstration of learning.** These measures provide information about whether students are making academic progress and include indicators of credit accumulation and academic growth.
- **Readiness for college and career.** These measures give insight into whether students in alternative education settings have gained the knowledge and skills necessary for post-high school success. Such indicators include measures of completion, credentials, and certifications.

¹ Carver, P. R., & Lewis, L. (2010). Alternative schools and programs for public school students at risk of educational failure: 2007–08 (NCES 2010–026). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010026.pdf>

² Sedlak, A. J., & McPherson, K. S. (2010). Youth’s needs and services: Findings from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placements. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227728.pdf>

³ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2013). Not making the grade: Academic achievement difficult for teen parents. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/teen-pregnancy-affects-graduation-rates-postcard.aspx>

⁴ Porowski, A., O’Conner, R., & Luo, J. L. (2014). How do states define alternative education? Washington, DC: ICF International, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED546775.pdf>

⁵ Brand, B., & Martin, N. (2006). Federal, state, and local roles supporting alternative education. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from: http://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/FINALAlt-Edu_7-20-06.pdf

Table 1 provides examples of current state and district accountability measures and guiding questions in each of these categories. Although these measures were designed to reflect the needs of at-risk students educated in alternative settings, they can potentially apply to all students.

Table 1. Alternative Education Accountability Measures by Category

Readiness to Receive Education	Demonstration of Learning	Readiness for College and Career
<p>Reengagement</p> <p>Do students who previously dropped out stay enrolled once they have reengaged?</p>	<p>Academic Credit Growth</p> <p>To what extent do students show growth in academic credits?</p>	<p>One-Year Graduation Rate</p> <p>Do graduation-eligible students graduate at the end of the school year?</p>
<p>Annual Stabilization Rate</p> <p>Do students remain in school until the end of the school year?</p>	<p>Indicators of Academic Progress</p> <p>Do students achieve specified academic goals?</p>	<p>Postsecondary/Workforce Readiness Measures</p> <p>How do students perform relative to various postsecondary and workforce readiness criteria?</p>
<p>Attendance Rate Growth</p> <p>To what extent do students improve their school attendance?</p>	<p>Learning Gains</p> <p>To what extent do students make progressively greater learning gains throughout the year?</p>	<p>Pass Rate on College Readiness Exam</p> <p>Do students pass a college readiness examination?</p>

Examples of some of these measures from each of the categories noted above are considered in the following sections. Some of these examples offer insight into different strategies that states and districts have used to structure their accountability systems to be responsive to alternative education settings. Some state accountability systems are in flux.⁶ Nonetheless, the measures described below illustrate ways in which states and districts can assess the progress and outcomes of students in alternative settings.

Readiness to Receive Education

In Colorado’s accountability system for alternative education campuses (AECs), required by the state’s Education Accountability Act of 2009, AECs can choose among several student engagement measures.⁷ For example, **reengagement** is an optional measure to reward AECs that keep at-risk students enrolled. This measure accounts for students who had previously dropped out of any public school and who subsequently reenrolled in an AEC. Ultimately, the reengagement measure holds AECs accountable for how well they sustain student enrollment through the end of the

⁶ In 2013, New York City’s new mayor, Bill De Blasio, scrapped the city’s accountability framework (including for alternative transfer schools) because he felt that the system was overly punitive and too reliant on test scores. In June 2016, New York City unveiled new report cards for transfer schools. Colorado is in the process of revising its alternative accountability framework and convened a workgroup which met through December 2015 to reconsider alternative accountability. Florida has not posted an updated accountability framework for alternative schools since instituting a new statewide assessment.

⁷ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-11-101-605 (2009). Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/sb_163_052013

school year.⁸ AECs that keep reengaged students until the end of the year are rewarded with more points in the accountability rating system. This measure incentivizes AECs to pay particularly close attention to the outcomes of their recently reengaged population.⁹

As part of its School Quality Rating, the Chicago Public School (CPS) system allows its alternative education settings (referred to as *option schools*) to apply an **annual stabilization rate**. This rate measures the “percent of stable students who are enrolled at the end of the school year, completed the program, or successfully transitioned to another CPS school.”¹⁰ Stable students are those who have been enrolled in an option school for at least 45 days. This measure recognizes that in order for students to be prepared to learn, they must consistently participate in some form of schooling.

Demonstration of Learning

A number of states emphasize **academic credit growth** instead of proficiency for at-risk students. For Colorado’s AECs, academic credit growth measures “the percent of students [who] complete the number of credits/courses necessary to remain on track to graduate within the timeframe established upon enrollment.”¹¹ The New York City public school system measures average credit accumulation for students at different baselines: 0–11 credits, 11.01–22 credits, 22.01–33 credits, and 33.01–38 credits for transfer schools (the school system’s term for alternative education settings serving students who have previously dropped out).¹² This approach differs from that used by traditional schools in New York City, which measures whether students earn a certain number of credits in a given year. Measures such as those used in Colorado and New York City account for credit growth rather than for absolute credit accumulation. This approach offers a useful accountability measure for students in alternative settings because it allows for growth to be recognized even if it takes students in alternative settings longer to accumulate credits in the required courses for graduation than students in traditional settings.

The state of Washington’s Open Doors system uses **indicators of academic progress** to evaluate its dropout reengagement programs. The system measures and allocates funding for programs based on the extent to which students meet certain markers of academic progress, including but not limited to:

- Earning high school or college credit
- Passing a state high school equivalency test in one or more subjects
- Making a significant gain in mathematics and/or reading skills levels

⁸ Colorado Springs School District 11. (2012, August). Rules for accrediting alternative education campuses (AEC) and guidance for calculating selected accountability measures on the AEC framework. Colorado Springs, CO: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.d11.org/edss/Current%20Accreditation%20Information/Alternative%20Ed.%20Campus%20Accreditation%20Version%201%201.pdf>

⁹ The high-risk measure of overage and under-credited students was added to state statute in 2011 (Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-7-604.5 [2013]) to allow for the majority of AECs with students falling behind academically to be included.

¹⁰ Chicago Public Schools. (2015, October). School quality rating policy (SQRP) handbook: Guide to the policy, indicators, and ratings. Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from <http://cps.edu/Performance/Documents/SQRPHandbook.pdf>

¹¹ Colorado Springs School District 11. (2012, August). Rules for accrediting alternative education campuses (AEC) and guidance for calculating selected accountability measures on the AEC framework. Colorado Springs, CO: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.d11.org/edss/Current%20Accreditation%20Information/Alternative%20Ed.%20Campus%20Accreditation%20Version%201%201.pdf>

¹² New York City Department of Education. (2013). Progress report 2012–2013. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2012-13/Progress_Report_2013_HST_M515.pdf

- Completing approved college readiness training
- Completing approved work readiness training
- Completing a work-based learning experience¹³

These indicators of academic progress, which are weighted equally, offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate growth. This system acknowledges that programs should be recognized for the progress each student makes.

Readiness for College and Career

In Chicago Public Schools and Portland (Oregon) Public Schools, a **one-year graduation rate** is used as a completion measure for alternative settings.¹⁴ This rate measures the percent of *graduation-eligible* students who actually graduate by the end of the school year. Graduation-eligible students are those who have accumulated the necessary credits to be on track for end-of-year graduation, regardless of when they started or how many years they have been in school. This measure, used in lieu of cohort graduation rate, accounts for the fact that at-risk students may take more than four years to graduate and holds schools responsible for graduating all students.

In Colorado, the **postsecondary and workforce readiness** category of measures used by all schools provides AEC high schools with additional flexibility.¹⁵ Under this category, AECs can choose among different college and career readiness measures including completion rate¹⁶ (best of four, five, six, or seven years), dropout rate, and college ACT score average. AECs can also propose their own measures that fall under the category of postsecondary and workforce readiness to the Colorado Department of Education for approval. Other possible measures listed by the state include credit/course completion, workforce readiness, post-completion success, successful transition (for non-degree granting schools only), and graduation rate. With this broad range of potential options, AECs can tailor their measures to the specific characteristics of their programs and the populations they serve.¹⁷

¹³ Wash. Admin. Code § 392-700(001–195) (07/16/2015). Retrieved from <http://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=392-700>

¹⁴ Gay, C., Robison, J., & Templin, T. (2013, October). Local initiatives for alternative accountability. Presentation given at the fifth annual Alternative Accountability Policy Forum, San Diego, CA. Retrieved from http://www.alternativeaccountabilityforum.org/uploads/2/1/9/4/21949220/06_local_initiatives_for_alternative_accountability_jennifer_peggy_tracy_carla.pdf

¹⁵ Colorado Department of Education. (2016). Accountability for alternative education campuses: Policy guidance. Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/policy_guidance_accountability_for_aecs

¹⁶ Completion rates are different than graduation rates because they also include high school equivalency diplomas and certificates of attendances.

¹⁷ Colorado Department of Education. (2010, August). School performance framework: Technical guide (Version 1.6). Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.d11.org/edss/Current%20Accreditation%20Information/Accreditation%20Rules%202010%20to%20present.pdf>

Considerations

Below are considerations for states that aim to incorporate measures inclusive of alternative settings into their accountability systems in order to better serve all students.

- 1. Assess college and career readiness using a variety of measures throughout students' academic trajectories.** Although completion measures often are the predominant indicators of college and career readiness, other measures may also be appropriate to assess students' true preparedness for life after high school. While *completion* specifically applies to the end of a student's high school career (and therefore falls into the "readiness for college and career" category), other measures that assess how schools are preparing students may appear in the "readiness to receive education" and "demonstration of learning" categories because preparedness begins much earlier than completion. Measures that account for attendance, behavior, and experience outside the classroom, such as work-based experiences and trainings, can be applied throughout high school and are especially relevant for students educated in alternative settings. States should consider more than completion measures in order to ensure that a student's full academic trajectory is acknowledged in the accountability system.
- 2. Identify measures that reflect the overall growth of the student and not just academic proficiency.** Accountability systems should take into account that at-risk students often start from different academic baselines and may learn at different paces than students who are educated in traditional settings. Assessing the growth of students' college and career readiness over time, therefore, may be a more appropriate means of ensuring preparedness than measures of absolute academic proficiency. For example, the Denver Public School system uses the flexibility allowed by Colorado's statewide alternative accountability system to measure the extent to which an AEC's student body makes some improvement in attendance from the previous year. The Denver system uses this engagement measure in tandem with a measure of average daily attendance; both improvement in attendance and average daily attendance are weighted equally to ensure that schools with typically high attendance rates are not penalized.¹⁸ In addition to measuring attendance growth, states can use other growth measures related to conditions for learning, such as student behavior, suspension rates, student punctuality, persistence, and academic growth measures.¹⁹
- 3. Leverage ESSA to support at-risk students.** ESSA presents an opportunity to review state accountability systems, ensuring that they create equal opportunities for all students to graduate college and career ready.²⁰ For example, extended-year graduation rate—a measure included in several state accountability systems—provides states with an incentive to support at-risk students who may take longer to graduate due to circumstances external to the classroom.²¹ In these states, districts and schools have the ability to report four-, five-, six-, and seven-year graduation rates for students who need additional time to meet their high school graduation requirements. Under ESSA, all states are allowed to set goals relative to extended-year graduation rates.^{22, 23} This example and the other measures highlighted in this brief illustrate how states can use the flexibility afforded by ESSA to develop new accountability systems that better ensure a high-quality education for students in all settings.

¹⁸ Denver Public Schools. (2011). 2011 School performance framework rubrics: Alternative educational campuses. Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved from http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Denver_AlternativeSchoolPerformanceFrameworkRubric_2011.pdf

¹⁹ California Department of Education. (2016). Previous ASAM documentation: Documentation relating to prior years of the Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM). Sacramento, CA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/am/asampriordocuments.asp>

²⁰ Every Student Succeeds Act. Pub. L. No. 114-95 Stat. 1177 (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177/text>

²¹ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2013). The effect of ESSA waiver plans on high school graduation rate accountability. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nnstoy.org/download/high-school/The%20Effect%20of%20ESEA%20Waiver%20Plans%20on%20High%20School%20Graduation%20Rate%20Accountability.pdf>

²² The target extended-year graduation rate must be higher than the target four-year graduation rate.

²³ Every Student Succeeds Act. Pub. L. No. 114-95 Stat. 1177 (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177/text>

Conclusion

Regardless of a state's approach to ensuring accountability for alternative education settings, there is value in measuring schools based on student data in three core areas: readiness to receive education, demonstration of success in education, and postsecondary readiness. Adopting flexible measures that serve at-risk students across these categories can incentivize alternative *and* traditional education settings to meet the needs of all students. The examples and considerations discussed in this brief can provide options for states as they modify their systems of accountability within the next year.

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