

Accountability for Alternative Schools

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Washington has many types of alternative schools, most of which are relatively small. They tend to serve student populations facing significant challenges, so many have low accountability index scores. Accountability for alternative schools should begin using the approach used for all schools (i.e., receive an index score and undergo a deeper analysis when not making AYP). Additional analyses should then occur before the state makes any AYP-related decisions to determine whether the school is using research-based best practices and showing progress. Areas for improvement should be identified and should be the focus of analysis if the alternative school does not make AYP again in the future.

BACKGROUND

The proposed state accountability system will hold schools accountable by averaging a set of ratings generated for various student outcomes. The average rating determines a school's "accountability index" score. But computing the index is just the first step in the accountability process. Policies are being developed to use the index to make AYP-related decisions (e.g., criteria for not making AYP, consequences of not making AYP). A deeper analysis is needed as part of this process to determine if those not making AYP two years in a row should fall into an "improvement" step. The accountability system also needs to be flexible enough to accommodate special situations, including holding alternative schools accountable (i.e., those not serving regular student populations).¹

Many types of alternative schools exist in the state. More than half the "schools" with this designation serve at-risk students in grades 9-12. Some believe these schools have taken on more challenging students, which allows more traditional schools to generate better outcomes with their remaining students. On the other hand, some alternative schools offer special programs for students who are *not* at-risk and who must meet rigorous academic requirements for admission. In addition, some are considered "alternative" because they do not use a normal school approach. A growing number of schools serve students through distance or digital learning and offer instruction electronically, usually via the Internet. Parent Partnership Programs are a type of "school" where parents are the primary instructor, the district provides instructional materials, and a certificated teacher acts as a consultant. Alternative schools exist at the elementary and middle school levels as well, and some programs are offered through independent contractors. Some schools with this designation target special student populations (e.g., special education, gifted, ELL), and some are held on college campuses or at night.

The wide variation in the focus, structure, and clientele of alternative programs across the state poses unique accountability challenges. Their results are included in district results, but school-level outcomes may be very high or low, depending on the type of students served. As a result,

¹ In this document, "alternative school" is a generic terms that refers to any school that is not identified as a regular school in the OSPI database. This includes alternative schools, ELL and special education centers, psychiatric facilities, private schools on contract, and long-term correctional institutions. It does *not* include tribal schools. Jails and juvenile detention centers are not authorized to give assessments, so they are excluded from accountability decisions.

no “peer” indicator is computed for these schools when calculating the accountability index.² Most of these schools are relatively small—their total 2007 enrollment was less than 4% of enrollment statewide—but many serve student populations facing significant challenges. Alternative schools also frequently have very high mobility rates. Alternative schools, therefore, are over-represented in the Struggling tier: about 25% of all schools with an alternative school designation had a 2-year index average that placed them in the Struggling tier in 2008.

APPROACHES TO ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

Given the specialized nature of many alternative schools, more information is needed to assess these schools accurately. Other states have designed accountability systems specifically for schools serving at-risk student populations. California set up additional or substitute methods to hold these schools accountable.³ Alternative schools there which serve highly mobile and at-risk students (including correctional facilities) can volunteer to be held accountable using 3 of 15 other outcomes over an extended period of time (e.g., 3 years). For example, a school could choose to be evaluated by changes in the number of credits earned, the attendance rate, and the gains on tests given during the year. Moreover, these schools are not compared to regular schools. California’s system is very complex but is viewed as a more valid system for these types of schools. However, these schools could pick three outcomes that are easily reached while ignoring others that may also be important.

The Washington Association for Learning Alternatives (WALA)⁴ has compiled research on best practices among alternative schools. It has drafted a report summarizing the results of an evaluation of the Gates Foundation’s Alternative High School Initiative, an evaluation of alternative schools in Washington state,⁵ and a study by the National Alternative Education Association of exemplary practices in alternative education. WALA has proposed using the findings from these studies, as well as research on effective schools, as a framework to hold all alternative schools accountable. Specifically, WALA proposes evaluating these types of schools in the following eight areas using a process similar to that used in accreditation.

1. Student learning in the real world
2. School atmosphere and support
3. Staff quality and support for each other and students
4. Shared leadership and district support
5. Community partnerships
6. Student re-engagement
7. Family engagement
8. Future (post-secondary) focus

² Alternative schools are not included in the regressions because they have such different characteristics and because excluding them provides a better predicted level for the remaining regular schools in the analysis. The index for alternative schools is based on an average of their remaining ratings.

³ See <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/am> for information on California’s Alternative School Accountability Model.

⁴ WALA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and the oldest continuously operated organization for alternative education in the United States. Its stated primary mission is to “support alternative school students, parents, and communities by providing leadership to school districts, supporting student and staff activities, providing scholarships to secondary alternative school graduates, and grants to alternative schools and programs to develop better instructional models.”

⁵ In August 2008, the BEREC Group completed an evaluation of alternative schools serving high-risk youth. The report (http://www.k12.wa.us/DistrictImprovement/pubdocs/OSPIALtEdFinalReport2008_FINAL.pdf) identified best practices used in these schools.

WALA drafted an initial set of evaluation measures and rubrics to use when reviewing these dimensions of alternative schools. The measures and rubrics used depend on the type of alternative school being reviewed (e.g., an alternative elementary school would not be rated in the “future focus” area). WALA suggested making AYP decisions based on how well an alternative school performs in the applicable areas. But before this can happen, exemplary alternative schools serving at-risk students need to be analyzed to determine how their best practices would be rated on the rubrics. Refinements to the rubrics would then take place. The capacity for the state to carry out analyses of alternative schools using these rubrics would depend on the scope of the rubrics, how they are structured, and the number of schools that need to be reviewed.

Finally, more information is being collected that will help educators and stakeholders understand outcomes in alternative (and other) schools. For example, OSPI has created a database of students who achieve the Certificate of Academic Achievement (CAA) via state-approved alternatives to the WASL. OSPI also has begun collecting dropout recovery data, and it will soon collect data on student credits and courses that will allow for analyses of credits earned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Accountability for alternative schools should begin using the approach used for all schools.** Each would receive an index score using the normal process (assignment of ratings using the same benchmarks, averaging the rating). Those not making AYP two years in a row, and those already in “school improvement,” would undergo a deeper analysis, just like other schools with the same status.
2. **For alternative schools not making AYP two years in a row or in school improvement, the deeper analysis should examine additional factors related to best practices.** Since a high percentage of alternative schools will likely have a low index because they serve at-risk youth, they will be over-represented among those not making AYP and requiring a deeper analysis. The additional data that OSPI will collect (e.g., CAA, dropout recovery, credits earned) should receive closer attention in the analysis. In addition, WALA’s framework provides a way to look at alternative schools through the lens of best practices. Hence, OSPI should work with WALA and other stakeholders to develop the rubrics that would provide a more appropriate framework for evaluating alternative schools. Once these rubrics are in place, OSPI would use them to determine if an alternative school not making AYP was following best practices and showing progress. OSPI would then make AYP-related decisions and recommendations about areas where improvement needs to occur in the future. If a school does not make AYP again the following year, the areas that needed improvement would be the main focus on the deeper analysis.

This approach has several advantages. Initially it treats alternative schools like all the others and generates the same set of data using the same rating system. It also narrows the focus of the deeper analysis to just those that have not met the AYP criteria that other schools must meet. In addition, the deeper analysis is more complete and appropriate for these kinds of schools (although it will initially be more time consuming than for regular schools). Finally, it reduces the amount of time needed to analyze the school the second year if the school does not make AYP.