



Alternative Learning Experiences (ALE) 101

Background

Alternative Learning Experiences (ALE) exist to provide students a public education option that takes place, in whole or in part, independently from a regular classroom setting or schedule. The ALE rules determine how school districts can claim state funding for students who are not following the “seat time” model used in traditional school settings.

Under current statute and rule, ALE programs fall into three categories:

- *Online programs* are programs where more than half of the content is delivered online and more than half of the teaching is from a remote location.
- *Parent partnerships* include significant participation from parents.
- *Contract-based* serve largely at-risk high school students. (The word “contract” does not mean the outsourcing of a program to another district or company. Instead, the “contract” refers to an agreement between the program and the students.)

There are three core requirements for ALE:

- 1) Students in ALE must have a written student learning plan (WSLP). The WSLP identifies the course or set of courses that make up the ALE. It includes all information necessary to guide student learning and it should be designed to meet the student's individual education needs. The plan must be developed, approved, supervised, monitored, and evaluated by a certificated teacher.
- 2) Students in ALE must make weekly contact with a certificated teacher. Contact may be made through instructional time in the classroom, synchronous online instruction (for students in online courses), or through phone, email, instant message, video, or other means of digital communication.
- 3) Students in ALE must be evaluated at least once each month by a certificated teacher. And, the results of the evaluation must be communicated to the student (and the student’s parent, if the student is in grades K-8). If the student is not making satisfactory progress on their WSLP, then the teacher must create an intervention plan to put the student back on track.

A total of 174 districts reported ALE enrollments in 356 ALE programs. Parent partnership is the largest program type in ALE, with 13,483 FTE in 2011-12. Digital/online programs reported 8,433 FTE, and Contract-Based programs 8,809 FTE. The total ALE FTE for 2011-12 was 30,726. This was down from 35,310 FTE reported in 2010-11. Enrollment continued to drop into the 2012-13 school year, with 27,572 FTE reported through January.

The total annual average FTE for the entire state was 998,201 FTE in 2011-12. ALE enrollment made up 3.1% of all FTEs that year. At an annual average FTE rate of \$5,141.11 per student in 2011-12, ALE enrollments generated approximately \$158 million in apportionment funding.

There are a small number of very large ALE programs, and a large number of small programs. Four programs enrolled over 1,000 FTE and 8 programs enrolled over 500 FTE in 2010-11. On the other end of the spectrum, 274 programs enrolled *under* 100 FTE. Similarly, although there are a number of very large online school programs, most students in online courses were not enrolled in a full-time online program. Only 13.8 percent of students took enough courses (ten or more) to be considered full-time for the entire school year. Sixty-seven percent of high school students taking online courses took fewer than five courses during the 2011-12 school year.

Parent partnerships represent the bulk of K-5 FTEs, making up 78.3% of enrollment in K-5, followed by 19.6% for digital/online programs and 2.2% for contract-based programs. In grades 6-8, digital/online enrollment increases to 29.1% of the total, but parent partnerships still make up 66.7% of the FTE in those grades. In the high school grades, only 19.7% of FTEs are from parent partnerships, compared to 49.7% in contract-based programs and 30.6% in digital/online programs.

Half of ALE students transferred districts to enroll in an ALE program. Seventy-four percent of students (by FTE) in digital/online ALE programs had transferred from another school district. This contrasts with contract-based programs at only 17 percent non-resident FTEs, and parent partnerships at 54 percent non-resident FTEs.

Concerns with ALE

A number of concerns about ALE have emerged in recent years.

Funding Cuts

In 2011, the legislature reduced ALE funding by an average of 15 percent (ESHB 2065). OSPI implemented the funding cut by reducing apportionment by 10% in those programs that were able to provide weekly in-person or online instructional contact time with student and reducing apportionment by 20% in those programs that were not able to provide this instructional time. Nearly two-thirds (63.1%) of FTEs were claimed at the 90% funding level, while 36.9% were claimed at the 80% level.

Operating Costs and Student-Teacher Ratios

Some observers have expressed an opinion that ALE programs cost less to run than traditional seat-time schools. This concern was expressed in the intent section of [ESHB 2065](#): “there is a rational basis on which to conclude that there are different costs associated with providing a program not primarily based on full-time, daily contact between teachers and students and not primarily occurring on-site in a classroom.” The concern is that some districts may be using ALE programs – especially those attracting large populations of non-resident students – as profit centers.

OSPI collects ALE financial expenditure data (known as “Program 02”) at the *district* level. This gives us an overall picture of ALE spending but it does not provide a fine-grained view into *program*-level categories. In other words, if a district operates multiple types of ALE programs – and many do – the ALE costs are intermingled in the reporting, making it difficult to break out costs by program type.

Overall, 88 districts spend less in Program 02 than the amount they received for ALE students in 2011-12. The total “underspend” for these districts was \$15.8M. Fifty-four districts spent more in Program 02 than the amount they received, for a total of \$12.2M.

Since staffing makes up such a large component of the overall cost for a district to operate a school, examining student-teacher ratios can provide an insight into the relative costs to run ALE programs.

ALE programs are required to report to OSPI on the number of certificated instructional staff (CIS) in each program. From there, we can calculate the ratio of CIS per 1,000 students. In non-ALE settings, districts are required to maintain a ratio of 46 CIS per 1,000 students across the entire district. ESHB 2065 exempted ALE programs from this ratio, but the figure remains useful when comparing online programs to traditional programs.

Looking at the three types of ALE programs in 2011-12, we see that digital/online programs are staffing, on average, at 42.7 CIS per 1,000 students. This staffing level is slightly below the 46/1000 standard. Parent partnership programs staffed at a much lower rate—27.0 CIS per 1,000 students. Notably, contract-based programs are staffing beyond the 46/1,000 standard, at 53.5 CIS per 1,000 students. Because these programs generally deal with at-risk students, they are often staffed to provide students the sort of individualized learning necessary for student success in this population.

Program Type	Annual Average Student FTE	Annual Average CIS	CIS per 1,000 Students
Contract Based	8,294.2	444.0	53.5
Digital/Online	8,027.8	342.8	42.7
Parent Partnership	12,532.3	338.0	27.0
Total	28,854.4	1,124.8	39.0

Note: This calculation excluded programs that did not report the number of CIS in 2011-12. It also excluded programs that reported less than five student FTE, as very small programs aren’t necessarily representative of standard staffing practices. Even with these exclusions, the calculations above include 94% of ALE enrollments.

Reduced enrollment in at-risk programs

As a result of the funding cuts, there has been a decline in ALE enrollments, most notably in contract-based programs. These programs generally target students who are at risk of academic failure, and are often the last alternative for many high school students to complete their education. Of a total 2010-11 to 2011-12 enrollment decline of 4,585 FTE, contract-based programs saw a reduction of 2,946 FTE. While some of the programs appear to have converted from ALE to the traditional seat-time funding model, the declines appear in district after district offering contract-based programs. These programs are often resource-intensive, and so even a 10% funding reduction can reduce a district’s ability to offer a comprehensive ALE program.

Audits

The State Auditor's Office (SAO) has found over \$27M in questioned costs in ALE programs from 2008-09 through 2010-11. SAO audited 67 districts and reported issues at 52 districts. Based on SAO’s risk

analysis, their audits focused largely on parent partnerships, although online programs and contract-based programs were examined as well. According to SAO, the most common causes of errors were:

- Missing or incomplete student learning plans.
- Missing monthly progress reviews.
- Lack of evidence of contact between instructors and students in the 20 days prior to count dates.
- Lack of complete and clear documentation releasing students from their districts of residence to the districts that claim funding for the students.

Participation in State Assessments

ALE students participate in the state assessments at a significantly lower rate than the state average. For example, across all grades in the reading assessment, 79.5% of ALE students were tested, compared to 98.9% statewide. In math, 79.6% of ALE students took the assessment in grades K-8, compared to 99.2% statewide. Participation in the math End of Course exams was higher: 87.1% of ALE students took the exam, compared to 98.0% statewide.

In math and reading, participation rates appear lower in the elementary grades: between 72.4% and 76.2% participation for ALE students. This may be due to a large number of students who opt to not take the test.

The low participation rates could be a result of the logistical challenges of assessing non-resident students. This has been an issue with multidistrict online school programs who enroll a high percentage of non-resident students. Over the past few years, OSPI has made several process modifications, as well as working with the online programs, and as a result the participation rates for online programs have improved somewhat.

There is a good deal of variation in program participation rates and scores. While we haven't done an in-depth analysis, the participation rate is likely correlated to the number of non-resident students served by the program. Programs that serve largely resident districts seem to be able to test students. Programs that serve non-resident students seem to have high refusal rates. For example, we examined participation in the 5th grade reading assessment for several large ALE programs that served non-resident students:

- In the Valley School District's Columbia Virtual Academy (CVA) program, of the 139 students eligible for the assessment, 118 were "Unexcused Absence, Refused".
- In the Meridian School District's MP3 program, of the 28 students eligible to take the 5th grade reading assessment, we have no score for 15 students. Seven were listed as "Unexcused Absence, Refusal".
- In the Orcas Island School District's OASIS K-12 program, of the 35 students eligible to take the 5th grade reading assessment, we have no score for 20 students. Thirteen of those were listed as "Unexcused Absence, Refusal".

A note on methodology: OSPI is currently adding a student-level ALE indicator to CEDARS. This addition will help to better report on assessment results for ALE students. Currently, the only way to analyze ALE assessment results is at the school level. This approach leaves out ALE students enrolled in programs that serve both ALE and non-ALE students (such as a traditional high school or alternative school).

The assessment rules for part-time students also play a factor in participation rates. (Part-time being defined as a student who is enrolled at less than 1.0 FTE in the public school system, with the rest of the student’s time either being in an approved private school or homeschooled.) Part-time students are not required to take the assessments, and the student’s “no score” is not included in a school or district’s calculation. Some ALE programs had enrolled students at very high FTEs (0.99, for example) in order to exempt students from the assessment results, while still collecting nearly full funding. In 2011, OSPI adjusted the rules to count any student enrolled at 0.8 FTE or greater in the assessment results. This likely reduced the number of students enrolled at high FTE for assessment purposes, but some programs have taken to enrolling students just below the new threshold.

Assessment Results

If we remove the students who didn’t take the assessment from the equation, we see that ALE students are nearly on par with the state in reading, writing, and science (except for the End of Course Biology exam). But, the math scores are well below the state average.

Subject	Met Standard		Met Standard Excluding No Score	
	ALE Schools	State Average	ALE Schools	State Average
Reading	57.1%	72.0%	71.9%	72.8%
Writing	54.7%	73.0%	72.4%	75.1%
Math	37.8%	61.2%	47.4%	61.6%
Math EOC	32.2%	62.3%	37.0%	63.6%
Science	52.7%	66.7%	65.7%	67.4%
Biology EOC	35.4%	64.9%	52.3%	69.0%

“Substantially Similar” purchased services/experiences

Prior to 2011, there had been significant concerns around ALE programs that either offered “stipends” or reimbursements to parents, or who purchased services or activities. In 2011, OSPI changed the ALE rules to prohibit payments to parents, and ESHB 2065 introduced a requirement that districts that purchased or contracted for ALE services or experiences must provide a “substantially similar” version of that service in the regular educational program. ESHB 2065 also required districts to report their expenditures to OSPI.

OSPI has reports from 48 districts, totaling 4,534 expenditures. Districts spent \$4,593,103 on these items. Nearly all expenditures were made by parent partnership programs, and most were targeted to students in grades K-8. Thirty percent of the expenditures were for music lessons or activities, and 23% were for physical education. Expenditures for art were also common: 6% for visual arts, 5% for dance, and 2% for theater.

OSPI has not verified if the expenditures met the “substantially similar” requirements. When working with an ALE program, SAO will be examining this as a part of their 2012-13 audit program.

Instructional Models

We have seen instructional models emerge in the ALE program where the public school is clearly not overseeing and providing the educational program to students. In effect, some ALE programs are allowing parents to use state funds to homeschool their children. This is not the intent of either the ALE or homeschool statutes.

The common thread across these programs is the certificated teacher often provides less oversight of student learning and is in contact with students less than what is typically required to achieve the goals of student learning plans. This trend is especially prominent in parent partnerships where students do not have regular in-person contact with a teacher. This instructional model shows up in the measurement of CIS per 1,000 students, where parent partnerships are, on average, staffed at 27.0 CIS per 1,000, significantly below the 46/1,000 standard in the brick and mortar classroom.

Resources

There are three statutes that relate to ALE:

- RCW [28A.150.325](#) - Alternative learning experience programs — Generally — Rules.
- RCW [28A.150.262](#) - Defining full-time equivalent student — Students receiving instruction through alternative learning experience online programs — Requirements.
- RCW [28A.250](#) – Online Learning

The ALE rules are found in WAC [392-121-182](#). OSPI also provides an [annotated version](#) of the rules with additional guidance.

OSPI’s 2011-12 [Online Learning Annual Report](#) provides detailed information about online learning in the context of ALE. [Appendix B](#) contains ALE enrollment information broken out by ALE program.