Today, the vast majority of K-12 students attend schools defined by traditional notions of teaching and learning: teacher-led classrooms, a set daily schedule, and grade progression based on age. For many students, this one-size-fits-all approach works, resulting in a diploma and an onramp to postsecondary options. For others, the results are more grim. Alternative education programming offers at-risk students more customized options to achieve a high school diploma and prepare for college and careers. A sector born of necessary innovation, alternative education typically features flexible scheduling, multiple means to earn credit, differentiated instruction, and creative uses of technology and hands-on learning. These student-centered programs provide, arguably, some of the strongest examples of how to move beyond a “factory model” of K-12 education and create more customized learning opportunities that may benefit all students.

In this policy brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy provides a first-of-its-kind baseline assessment of Massachusetts’ alternative education offerings. This description and analysis of existing alternative practices in the Commonwealth helps to understand how programming for the state’s at-risk students might be improved and how those innovations might be leveraged to guide broader, system-wide reform. Sample findings are summarized here.

**National variation and innovation**

Nationally, alternative education is comprised of a variety of models, including programs within existing schools, self-contained schools, and programs run in community settings. While student populations vary, alternative programs typically target youth who have experienced academic failure or who face external challenges that affect their ability to learn in traditional settings. The most promising alternative education models are characterized by their small size, flexible schedules and structures, supportive relationships with adults, and personalized programming that helps youth set goals and access the variety of resources they need to achieve them.

**A localized approach in Massachusetts**

In Massachusetts, decisions about the provision and design of alternative education are largely local. Despite the state’s promotion of alternative education as a promising dropout reduction strategy, only 61 of the state’s 400 public school districts report having alternative programs. Alternative sites are disproportionately located in large and midsize cities and some suburbs with large numbers of at-risk students; even in these areas, fewer than 1.5% of students are reportedly enrolled in alternative options. Alternatives are generally operated independently of each other and not as a coordinated system.

In an investigation of sample districts, Rennie Center researchers found: a student population that is very diverse (including a greater proportion of students of color, low-income youth, English language learners, and students with disabilities than in the total student population); multiple qualified staff who profess a deep commitment to their students; leaders who take advantage of local autonomy to shape programs to meet the needs of varied youth populations; and youth who experience substantial personal growth and, as a result of their positive experiences, choose to remain in alternative settings through graduation.

**Opportunities for and impediments to scale**

While district leaders, staff, and students all speak positively of the student-focused practices in Massachusetts alternative programs, offerings have not grown to meet potential demand. The highly individualized and resource-intensive approach of most alternative programs has meant that few programs have expanded beyond small enrollments and grassroots approaches. Further, their promising practices have not spread to other schools in their districts or influenced broader reform efforts. One reason for this lack of spread is limited information; due to a high degree of local control and limited data reporting, comprehensive data about alternative sites and their outcomes and practices remains elusive.

**Considerations**

Until this point, alternative education has remained an underexplored resource in the Commonwealth’s education reform efforts. By bringing alternative education into the core of statewide reform and improving data- and knowledge-sharing, state leaders have an opportunity to build capacity where it is needed and leverage lessons from this innovative sector to create a more fluid, seamless system that supports all students to overcome challenges and achieve long-term success. The Rennie Center offers the following considerations for policymakers and district leaders:

- Use recent state legislation as a lever for creating change in alternative education data reporting.
- Increase state resources to guide districts in development of high-quality alternative education options.
- Expand the use of analytic tools to guide development of expanded alternative education options.
- Treat promising alternative education sites as “innovation labs” to benefit a broader student population.
- Provide a range of educational pathways to meet a variety of student needs.

To see the full policy brief, please visit [www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org).