RENNIE CENTER
EDUCATION RESEARCH & POLICY

POLICY BRIEF

Alternative Education:

Exploring Innovations in Learning

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Introduction

The vast majority of students in K-12 public education attend schools defined by traditional notions of teaching and learning. While there have been significant efforts in recent years to better accommodate diverse learning needs, most students still attend school for a set number of hours each day, sit in teacher-led classrooms, and progress through grade levels based on age. For many students, this model works. They are successful in earning a high school diploma, after which they may pursue postsecondary education and a career.

However, students who struggle in traditional learning environments often have limited options for navigating their way through school. Those who drop out face grim consequences: youth without a high school diploma have fewer job prospects and are more likely to remain low-income, engage in crime, lose work during economic downturns, and rely on public assistance.[1] Massachusetts leaders and educators have recognized the importance of keeping students in school and made substantial progress in reducing the state's overall dropout rate from 3.8% in the 2006–07 school year to 2.2% in 2012–13.[2] Still, significant work remains. The more than 6,000 Massachusetts students who did drop out of high school in 2012–13 will each cost taxpayers an estimated $467,023 in reduced tax revenue and increased demand for public services over the course of their lifetimes.[3]

Alternative education programming—often featuring flexible scheduling, multiple means to earn credit, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning—offers at-risk students more customized options for achieving a high school diploma.[4] While approaches vary considerably, alternative education options expand the number of viable pathways by which students may earn a diploma and prepare for college and career success. Alternative options provide, arguably, the strongest examples of how to develop and scale customized learning opportunities. Alternative education providers have substantial experience in integrating new technologies, comprehensive supports, and work-based learning opportunities into academic programming. As education reform discussions nationally and in Massachusetts increasingly focus on the need to move beyond a "factory model" and create more flexible learning opportunities, such knowledge has the potential to improve the learning experiences of all students.

In this policy brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy engages in a frank discussion of the merits of alternative education. First, the brief provides an overview of alternative education policy and practice throughout the United States. It then presents a description and analysis of existing alternative education practices in the Commonwealth—the first-of-its-kind baseline assessment of the characteristics of statewide offerings. The brief concludes with policy considerations to help understand how programming for at-risk students might be improved and how those innovations might be leveraged to guide broader, system-wide reform.

"Amid all the current talk of school restructuring, alternatives are the clearest example we have of what a restructured school might look like. They represent our most definitive departure from the programmatic, organizational and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform. Moreover, many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered."[5]

Study approach

Through this study, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy aims to establish a baseline understanding of alternative education in Massachusetts, seeking clarity about:

- the types of organizations sponsoring alternative education and their offerings;
- the state-wide distribution of alternative education options;
- characteristics of participating students in alternative education; and
- the connection between alternative education and traditional education settings.

Research methods

This research study was conducted in 2013 using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Review of research. A review of national research and policy literature examines evidence of common and effective practices in alternative education, as well as policy trends. This review details prevalent features in alternative education settings, and provides a basis of comparison for schools/programs and practices in Massachusetts.

Data analysis. An analysis of statewide data provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) describes students who attend alternative programs and schools, with emphasis on enrollment patterns, demographics, representation of special populations, and student achievement. Researchers requested and obtained disclosure of selected Student Information Management System data for students enrolled in alternative education during the 2011–12 school year, the most recent year for which data was available. All student information was anonymous and reported at the school or program level.

Interviews. One-on-one, in-person interviews with school district and alternative education leaders provide insight into the structure, organization, and key features of alternative education, as well as the role alternative programs and schools play in their districts. Researchers selected six school districts and one charter school for participation in interviews. For more information about the sample selection process, see Appendix A. Interviews were conducted in spring 2013 using structured protocols, and each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes.

Limitations

Reported data and findings are not meant to provide an exhaustive catalogue of alternative education activities in the state, nor does this study attempt to represent the state of alternative education in all school districts. Currently, there is no comprehensive data set that captures all of the program options a student can select to earn a high school credential in Massachusetts. ESE maintains the most comprehensive database of existing alternative education sites, which is based on self-reported information from school districts. The Rennie Center acknowledges a reliance on self-reported information may lead to inaccuracies or inconsistencies in reported information.

In addition, this data is limited to alternative education options that are operated by the public school system and that offer a high school diploma; it does not include programs that lead to other credentials, such as high school equivalency. For the purposes of this study, "alternative education" describes those diploma-granting high schools, middle schools, or programs through which students earn credit toward a diploma.

Alternative education: An overview

As far back as the 1990s, alternative education frequently has been noted for its development as a promising strategy in reducing the dropout rate by attending to students' learning styles and needs so they can be successful beyond high school. In the last decade, a renewed focus on addressing the dropout crisis has emerged, catalyzed by national philanthropic foundations like the Youth Transitions Funders Group and America's Promise Alliance. In this context, national and state education policy discussions have begun to consider alternative education options as part of a larger strategy to ensure all students are prepared for success in college and careers.

Several large urban districts have made significant investments in alternative education, often emphasizing community-based partnerships that provide for non-academic needs, such as counseling and mental health services. Portland, Oregon is building city-wide structures for innovative alternatives to serve students both at-risk to drop out and those re-enrolling in school. Oregon state policy allows districts autonomy to award credits towards graduation for proficiency, and the 19 community-based alternative programs in Portland are tightly wound into the educational fabric of the school district.[6] New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia have used student data to differentiate segments of need, disaggregating students into groups such as "off-track and enrolled" (students who are behind their grade cohort in terms of credit accumulation), "on-track but separated from school" (usually determined by life circumstance such as caregiving for family members), and "off-track and older" (students who have been separated from school and were academically behind when they left). These districts have begun developing targeted instructional and support strategies based on students' academic level and life circumstances.

Yet, investments in and examples of effective practice in alternative education are inconsistent, and too often divorced from the larger public education system. A scan of state statutes reveals no common definition of alternative education; the language used across states varies widely, and in several states, alternative education is used only in cases of disciplinary removal or behavioral problems.[7] More information is needed to guide alternative education programming to better serve all students, including those most at risk. Below is a more detailed account of alternative education at the national level.

Common alternative education structures. Nationwide, there are three dominant delivery models in alternative education: separate schools, separate programs, and focused strategies implemented within existing schools. Irrespective of structure, multiple organization types may sponsor alternative education programs, including school districts, charter schools, education collaboratives, youth

Dimensions of Alternative Education*

Purpose
- Academic completion and credential
- Career preparation and credential
- Disciplinary
- Short-term transitional (e.g., out of treatment or detention, or back to K-12)

Credentials offered
- Regular high school diploma
- High school equivalency
- Occupational and skills certification
- No credentialing

Students of focus
- Students who are off track to graduate high school
- Students prematurely transitioning to adulthood
- Students needing a few credits to move on
- Students who are very far behind educationally

Funding sources
- Federal funds
- State funds
- Local funds
- Private funds

Sponsoring entity
- K-12 public or private school
- State or local education agency
- Charter school
- Non-profit or community-based organization
- Adult education provider
- Juvenile justice agency
- Health or mental health agency or institution
- National federally funded program

Location and setting
- Regular school during school hours (part or full time)
- School building during non-school hours
- Community college or other post-secondary campus
- Corrections or detention center
- Neighborhood organization
- Public housing project
- Homeless shelter
- Medical or mental health facility
- Community center

*Adapted from: Aron, L.Y. & Zweig, J.M. (November 2003). *Educational Alternatives for Vulnerable Youth: Student Needs, Program Types, and Research Directions.* Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

agencies, community colleges, community-based organizations, private schools, and health/mental health organizations.[8] The result of diverse sponsorship and delivery models is wide variation in how alternative options operate; some are implemented within resource classrooms in a traditional school building, others operate as self-contained schools, and still others take place in community settings. The Urban Institute's typology of alternative education describes common characteristics of alternative education models across the United States. (See side box on previous page.)

Student characteristics. There is limited national data about the students who participate in alternative education. A thorough review of research and policy literature reveals that many alternative education options target specific groups of youth, particularly those deemed "at-risk" academically or otherwise. (See text box at right.) In the United States, up to one quarter of youth ages 16–24 may be considered "at-risk" based on the characteristics above, but less than 10–20% of so-called at-risk youth are currently enrolled in alternative education.[10] Such low participation rates raise the question of whether enough at-risk students are receiving the services and supports they need. Part of the reason for such low participation may be state-to-state variation in the laws and other regulations determining who can participate in alternative education. Another reason may be lack of programming. The first (and only) national study of public alternative schools and programs serving at-risk students estimates that only 39% of school districts nationwide offered alternative options in 2000–01.[11] The absence of a comprehensive inventory of alternative schools and programs in the United States contributes to the lack of clarity about total enrollment and capacity of existing sites.[12]

Characteristics of students in alternative education[9]

- Poor attendance/chronic absenteeism
- Disciplinary removal (suspension or expulsion)
- Learning difficulties or disabilities
- External stressors, family disruption, or conflict
- Social/emotional difficulties or disorders
- Behavior challenges
- Court referral
- Limited English
- Underperforming or need academic remediation (under-credited)
- Dropped out
- Pregnant or parenting
- More likely to live in single-parent families
- Likely to have parents without a high school diploma

Funding. A survey of alternative education sites across the country found they were primarily funded through state and/or local education funds. Many sites also use supplemental resources from federal funding streams, including the Workforce Investment Act, Perkins Vocational & Technical Education Act, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act grants. Alternative schools and programs frequently leverage additional funding from a variety of sources, including private foundations, local businesses, and non-education government programs.[13] The mix of funding approaches presents several challenges, including sustainability, equity of resources across sites, and annual delays and fluctuations.[14]

Promising practices. According to national research, the most promising alternative education models create respectful school climates that encourage learning for all students. These models employ teachers who know how to build strong relationships with students and motivate their success.[15] Alternative options are often characterized by their small size, flexible schedules and structures, and one-on-one relationships, as well as their commitment to granting students substantial control over decision-making and to helping them set and attain long-term goals.[16] Research points to several additional features that support effective alternative education implementation:[17]

- Development of a comprehensive alternative pathway (not an "add-on" or piecemeal approach);
- Clearly identified goals with high expectations for social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth;
- Low adult-student ratios, and significant staff autonomy;
- A non-deficit philosophy (teachers adjust their instructional approaches to accommodate individuals, rather than demanding that students change to fit the approach);
- Training and support for teachers in areas such as behavior management, alternative learning styles, and communication with families; and
- Individualized student support with links to multiple agencies and individuals outside of the school building, including students' families.

Unfortunately, research on the connection between promising practices and academic outcomes remains limited. A handful of studies suggest that alternative education can produce positive outcomes for students, such as improved attendance, motivation, and credit accumulation, as well as greater parent satisfaction.[18] There is also evidence that greater choice and flexibility enhances students' sense of belonging and self-esteem, resulting in fewer disruptive behaviors in alternative settings.[19] However, these results map only to a few specific practices, not to alternative education generally, and specific practices linked to academic outcomes can be challenging to implement with fidelity. For example, one specific alternative model that reports graduation rates over 80% provides comprehensive services includes both academic supports (e.g., credit recovery, dropout prevention and recovery, postsecondary preparation), and non-academic supports for students (e.g., behavioral support and wraparound services).[20] Many districts nationally—as well as those in Massachusetts—would be challenged to implement such comprehensive offerings.

Overall, information about the characteristics of alternative education schools and programs and the students they serve is fragmented. Details about alternative education within and across states vary widely, making it difficult to draw substantive conclusions about the scale and substance of alternative education offerings. In addition, more research is needed to determine whether promising alternative education characteristics provide students with the academic skills they need to be successful in college and careers.

The Massachusetts context

Alternative education has a long history in Massachusetts and has received increased attention recently as a result of statewide efforts to reduce high school dropout rates. In 2007, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education first calculated high school graduation rates for school and district accountability purposes. Shortly after, in 2008, the state legislature passed *An Act to Improve Dropout Prevention and Reporting of Graduation Rates*, thereby establishing the Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission to identify promising practices in use in the Commonwealth.[21] Reflecting national conversations that linked dropout prevention and recovery to a broader need to improve college and career outcomes, the Commission noted the importance of creating alternative education pathways that would support at-risk students. The Commission's report, *Making the Connection,* highlighted promising alternatives to traditional high schools, emphasizing the need for smaller class sizes, competency-based instruction, accelerated credit recovery, dual enrollment in college courses, case management to increase student support, and access to social services.[22]

Subsequently, the state advanced a number of initiatives to reduce dropout rates which include an emphasis on alternative education. Funded by a five-year $15M grant from the federal High School Graduation Initiative, MassGrad focuses on the 133 high schools in the Commonwealth whose annual dropout rates exceeded the statewide rate of 2.9% in 2008-09. The grant program provides financial and other supports to help districts pursue dropout reduction strategies, including alternative education programming, graduation coaching, career exploration, and re-engagement of disconnected youth. The Commonwealth has also introduced new data systems—such as the Early Warning Indicator System (for grades 1–12) and Edwin Analytics—to identify at-risk students and help educators match students with appropriate interventions that further their progress toward a high school diploma.[23]

There has also been increasing recognition of the importance of alternative education in helping to address behavioral factors that undermine student success. Following the 2012 passage of Chapter 222, *An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School,* districts must adhere to new requirements that ensure students suspended or expelled from school are able to make academic progress while out of school.[24] Districts have the option of expanding existing alternative education sites to accommodate these students, and districts without existing sites may decide to establish new alternative options to serve students who have been removed from school.

As a result of these efforts in the past several years, alternative education has emerged as an important dropout reduction strategy at the state level and in some Massachusetts districts, but it has yet to garner sustained attention in the broader education reform conversation. In the following sections, the Rennie Center presents a baseline assessment of Massachusetts alternative education system, examining how flexible learning strategies designed to meet individual student needs may support greater academic success in school and beyond.

Programmatic characteristics of alternative education in Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) defines alternative education as "an initiative within a public school district, charter school, or educational collaborative established to serve at-risk students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting."[25] All alternative education must be sponsored by a local education agency and offer a high school diploma. The state's definition of alternative education does not encompass private schools, home schooling, preparation for the high school equivalency, or gifted and talented programs, which might be deemed as alternative programming in other states. The state does not require localities to provide alternative education, and school districts who do provide alternatives maintain significant freedom in design and implementation. As a result of this policy context, despite the state's promotion of alternative education as a promising dropout reduction strategy, alternative schools and programs are not offered by most districts. Only 61 of the state's 400 public school districts[A] report hosting one or more alternative education option. Alternatives are disproportionately located in large and midsize cities and midsize suburbs serving high proportions of at-risk students, and even in these areas, the total number of students served remains small (less than 1.5% of the total enrollment of those districts).

To better understand programmatic characteristics, the Rennie Center focused this study on districts of varying size and urbanicity with a higher prevalence of alternative education relative to similar districts. The sample included Boston, Worcester, Pittsfield, Chelsea, Monomoy, North Adams, and Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School. (See Appendix A for details on selection criteria.) Quantitative data was gathered from ESE, and qualitative interviews were conducted with district leaders and alternative education staff to further elucidate structure, scope, and student enrollment patterns. Findings presented below represent analysis of statewide alternative education data and common themes among the seven participating districts.

Requirements of alternative education in Massachusetts

Any alternative education **program** must be affiliated with at least one district and at least one school that has a school code assigned by ESE. The program should submit a "Notification of an Alternative Education Program or School" form to receive an alternative education program code. Programs may function within a single school or affiliate with several schools or districts.

Any alternative education **school** must adhere to the same requirements of any public school, including: a principal with a valid Massachusetts license; at least 180 days in each school year; MCAS administration at appropriate grades; submission of required ESE school-level data reports; and a minimum number of learning hours for every student.

There are far more alternative education programs than stand-alone alternative schools in the Commonwealth. Similar to literature on alternative education programming available nationally, the vast majority of alternative learning opportunities in Massachusetts are programs, not separate schools. The primary difference between an alternative program and school is students' enrollment status: students attending alternative programs—regardless of location—remain enrolled in their home school for reporting and accountability purposes. Most districts participating in this study reported the preference for alternative programs over schools. Dr. Dolores Gribouski, Quadrant Manager for Curriculum & Instruction and School Leadership in Worcester, explained the district's reason for creating alternative programs, rather than schools: "When students keep their home school code, it creates ownership among all. A student who moves to an alternative program in another building is still the responsibility of the home school and district leadership." In participating districts, students typically attend an off-site alternative program, interacting most often with other students enrolled in that program. A few students return to their home school to participate in sports or activities, although this is rare. Separate alternative schools—either in-district or charter—comprise only 15% of reported alternative options in the state.

Alternative education is designed to adjust to students' needs; autonomy is crucial. Within participating districts, alternative programs and schools operate with great autonomy and use this flexibility to develop practices that meet students' needs. District leaders in all participating districts promote alternative education as a means to serve students who are not succeeding in a traditional K-12 environment, and they have developed their own local models to accommodate students' needs. District leadership typically provides oversight and guidance, but alternative leaders are given a fair amount of autonomy in developing and their adjusting program or school's strategy. For example, in North Adams, alternative program lead-

A The total number includes charter and vocational/technical schools, which often are separate districts.

ers have discretion over curriculum, daily operations, student activities, and community outreach, while district leadership provides oversight on financial resources and hiring. Alternative program leaders in North Adams are part of a "continued conversation" with other school leaders and central office leadership about how each fulfills the district's mission of educating all students.

> **"Alternative education picks up the pieces of a student's life to provide motivation, experience, and efficacy to succeed."**
>
> Monomoy Regional Schools Superintendent Carolyn Cragin

Qualified and committed staff help alternative education to thrive. Hiring the right people is key to the functioning of the alternative school. Margaret McDevitt, executive director of Lowell Middlesex Community Charter School says, "They must love the students without judgment." Teachers and staff typically have multiple certifications, in addition to several years' experience working with at-risk youth in an educational or community setting. The ability of alternative education staff to develop a strong rapport with students is vital for building student trust. Their prior experiences and additional training—in such topics as classroom management, socio-emotional issues, and competency-based education—allows alternative teachers to tailor their instruction and support to individual students. Typically, larger districts employ at least one social worker or adjustment counselor as part of each alternative education program or school; that person works in coordination with district and alternative staff to coordinate non-academic services.

SPOTLIGHT: Staff commitment at Monomoy Regional High School Alternative Program

The alternative program at Monomoy Regional in Harwich is a model for small districts with limited financial resources. The program seeks to help students achieve goals in three areas: academic (graduate from high school); college and career (prepare to function in society by developing vocational experience, a connection to community, relationships, and social skills); and character (build sense of self through honesty and integrity). The structure of the program—academic content in the morning and vocational experience in the afternoon—allows students to pursue all of these goals.

Program details: The program targets students at-risk of leaving high school before graduation, particularly those who have been disenfranchised or marginalized by personal experiences and home life, or who struggle with emotional or behavioral issues, anxiety, or substance abuse. It enrolls 10-12 students per year, in a single classroom, and employs two full-time staff: a lead teacher who oversees academic content and partnerships with community organizations, and a paraprofessional who serves as the vocational coordinator. Students spend each afternoon engaged in paid work experiences, service learning, or volunteering. Partnerships with the local business community provide work and volunteer placements tailored to students' interest and skills. Other community organizations provide mentors and subject-area tutors (through the Elder Services of Cape Cod) and offer applied learning opportunities in English language arts (through the Cape Cod Cultural Center).

Exemplary teacher: Alternative program teacher George Sowpel, a former private sector employee who made a career change to teaching over a decade ago, has worked hard to engage students and meet their learning needs. The program has blossomed under his leadership. As is typical of many staff that work in alternative education settings, George cares deeply about his students and seeks to motivate, mentor, and build lasting relationships with each student. He personalizes learning by finding connections between academic content and students' individual interests and skills, and he models a commitment to learning for his students. He reports that the keys to the program's success to date have been collaboration and communication within the district, and vocational learning options for students. George is also very willing to have frank conversations with students about life choices—whether that be drug use/abuse, behavioral incidences, or with whom students are socializing with—attempting to build on students' past difficulties. He has also forged innovative partnerships to better serve students. For example, he has enlisted the help of a retired school psychologist to come into the program once a week to evaluate student needs and co-develop a plan for meeting students' personal goals. As a result of George's tireless commitment, students thrive and almost every student goes on to receive a diploma, and Superintendent Carolyn Cragin attributes the success of the program to his commitment.

Districts may contract with external organizations to host, run, or share resources. Massachusetts requires all alternative education programs or schools to be sponsored by a public school district, however the district is free to contract or partner with other entities to extend program or school capacity. Study districts described strong partnerships with external organizations, such as community colleges, national youth organizations, and community-based organizations to help supply other resources and specialized skills that the district cannot provide on its own. For example, Boston-based William J. Ostiguy High School is an alternative high school operated by the community-based organization Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) that serves youth from more than 20 communities who are recovering from substance abuse and addiction. The majority of school staff are ABCD employees, although a few are employees of the Boston Public Schools. All participating districts report frequent connections with outside agencies to address students' non-academic needs. Alternative sites work with a wide variety of organizations to provide non-academic services—including mental health and substance abuse counselors, regional employment boards, legal support services, state agencies (e.g. Department of Children and Families, Department of Youth Services), and cultural centers—to address a wide variety needs.

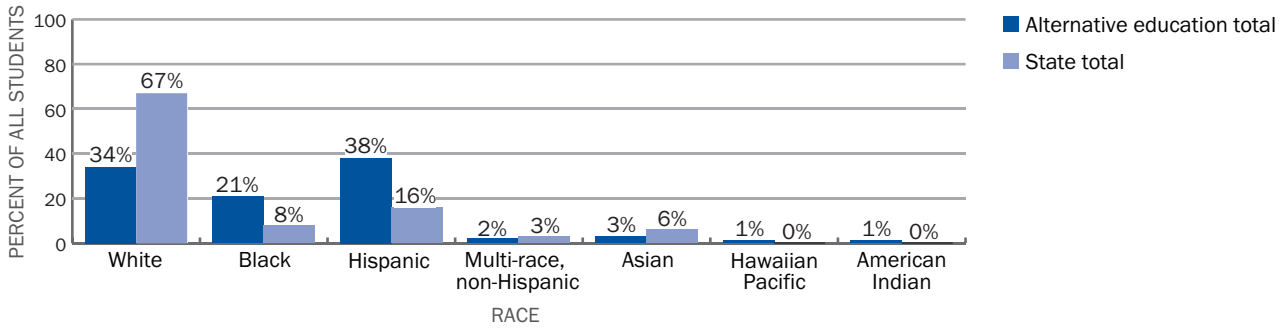
Student characteristics and experiences

Students enrolled in alternative education in Massachusetts often experience one or more risk factors affecting their ability to make academic progress. According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), "at-risk" students may include youth who are: former dropouts, pregnant or parenting, truant, suspended or expelled, involved in the criminal justice system, or not meeting local grade promotion requirements. Alternative education may also serve some students with disabilities but is not explicitly designed for these students.[26] The following findings describe common characteristics of students in alternative education across the state and in the study's sample programs and schools.

Relatively few public school students enroll in alternative education. Districts historically have developed alternative options to serve high school students at-risk of not graduating; as such, the majority of students who engage in alternative education options do so in the high school years. In the 2011–12 school year, 5,244 Massachusetts high school students enrolled in alternative education programming, 1.8% of the total 287,055 students enrolled in public high schools.[B] Limited and inconsistent data make it challenging to track alternative education enrollment more precisely: in some districts, up to 300 students are reported as attending alternative options, while other districts report only a handful, despite the presence of multiple programs. Participating districts reported a significant increase in the number of younger students who are falling behind in school due to socio-emotional factors; they expressed concern about the absence of alternative options for elementary and middle school students. Currently, Massachusetts has only a handful of alternative programs serving younger students; in 2011–12, 449 students in grades 5 through 8 reportedly engaged in alternative education.

Alternative education educates a more diverse population than traditional public schools. As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of black and Hispanic students reported as enrolled in alternative education is far greater than in the general state student population.

Figure 1. Racial composition of students in alternative education, 2011–12

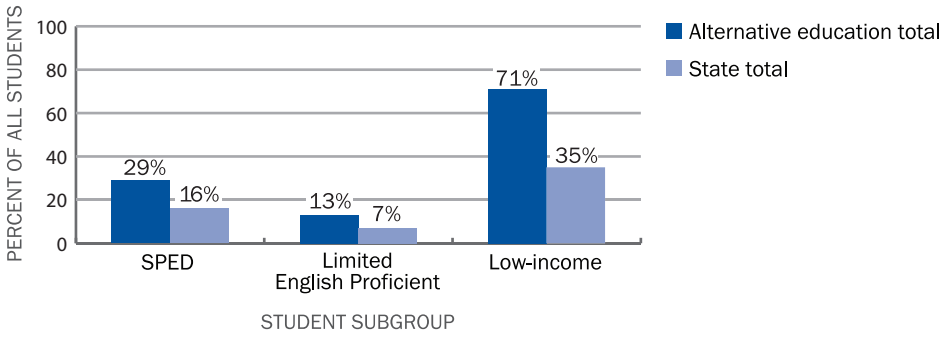


Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

B A total of 5,709 students across all grade levels reportedly engaged in alternative education in the 2011-12 school year.

Likewise, the proportion of low-income students is far greater than in the general state population, as is the proportion of students with special needs and who are limited English proficient. (See Figure 2.) In addition to these demographic differences, staff working in alternative education report that most students referred to alternative programs and schools face multiple external challenges, including poverty, hunger, unstable home lives, and mental health issues.

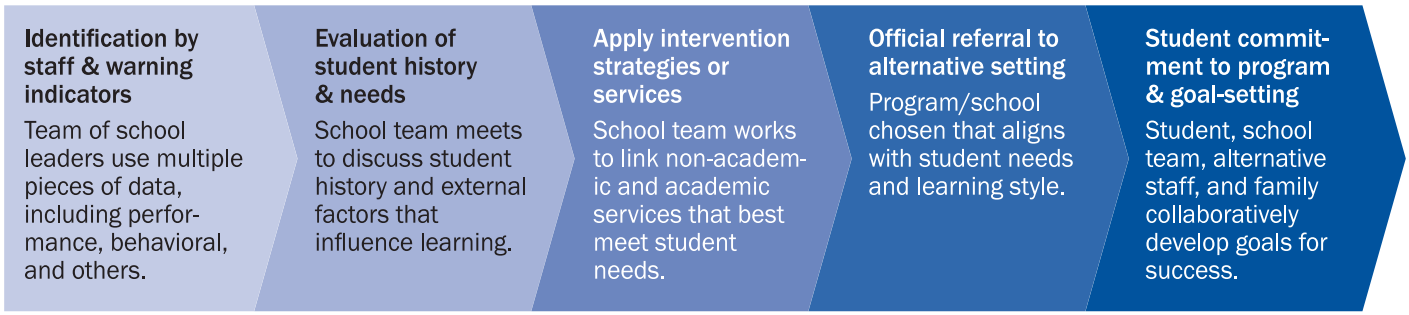
Figure 2. Proportion of student subgroups in alternative education, 2011–12



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Students benefit from a comprehensive referral processes when enrolling in alternative settings. Districts typically use multiple sources of student data before making a decision about an alternative placement. After a teacher or school staff identifies a student as struggling academically (and possibly socially or behaviorally) and in need of additional supports, a cross-departmental team meets to determine additional services or placements that may better support the student's needs. This process often includes several parties and results in dialogue across departments and between staff and family members. In all participating districts, the referral process follows a general model depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Process by which students are referred to alternative education settings



In Chelsea, the STARS alternative program at Brown Middle School utilizes a rigorous referral process akin to the processes reported by other districts. Initially, teachers identify students demonstrating behavioral and academic challenges and report them to the Instructional Support Team (IST) for intervention. The IST further defines the student's needs and identifies a strategy for addressing these needs to be implemented over a six-week period. The IST uses academic and non-academic data collected during the review period to assess the student's progress and, if more support is needed, to develop recommendations for additional services required to meet a student's needs. Recommendations may include a referral to external providers and/or enrollment in the STARS alternative program; ultimately, referral to the alternative education program requires a conversation between district leadership, the Brown Middle School principal, and the STARS program coach. In many participating districts, this cross-party communication continues after a student's referral and lessons learned about the student are shared among all involved.

SPOTLIGHT: College and career readiness at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School

As one of the first charter schools in Massachusetts—and one of the handful of standalone alternative schools in the state—Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) seeks to support students to reach high school graduation, while also preparing them for postsecondary education and participation in the workforce.

School details: LMACS serves up to 120 students aged 16-21. Students in the school are grouped by "phases" rather than grade level: Phase 1 (student has fewer than 10 credits towards high school graduation); Phase 2 (student has passed the MCAS and accrued 10-12 credits); and Phase 3 (student is ready for graduation). Although students are welcome to join LMACS at any phase, most come in at Phase 1 and advance quickly to Phase 2. The curriculum of LMACS is built around core academic subjects and supplemented by required psycho-educational courses and groups that address life skills, workplace readiness, and life skills. The target population is students identified as "about to drop out" by Lowell High School staff, or those out-of-school youth who have left school before graduation. Scheduled classes occur throughout the day, and the school is staffed by 10 teachers, three full-time social workers/special educators, and five administrative staff. All students are required to participate in a school-to-work component, daily advising, and dual enrollment (if appropriate) at Middlesex Community College.

Powerful learning partnerships: LMACS staff credit strong partnerships for the array of resources they are able to provide students. LMACS is located in the midst of the Middlesex Community College (MCC) downtown campus; this location allows students to access many campus resources, including arts and cultural activities, technology resources and services, and the library. The physical proximity, and the strength of the partnership, enables LMACS educators to create a college-going culture and develop options that prepare students for postsecondary education. For example, LMACS offers a dual enrollment option in which students can earn college credit for courses at MCC. These connections demystify the transition to postsecondary education, encouraging LMACS students to plan for and engage in their postsecondary future.

In addition to its postsecondary programming, LMACS prepares students for the workforce by giving them access to real-world employment situations. The school has a strong connection to The TJX Companies' Youth Business Institute, through which high school seniors gain valuable work experience, career advice, and networking opportunities. Students may have opportunities to participate in tours of TJX headquarters where they can interact with employees and see "work culture" in action; seminars by TJX employees that introduce them to the realities of applying for a job, workplace etiquette, and employment responsibilities; career exploration activities that describe the steps required to secure each type of position within the corporation; and interviews for actual positions within the company. The Youth Business Institute allows students to apply what they have learned in the LMACS career readiness curriculum and build the self-efficacy they need to enter the workforce.

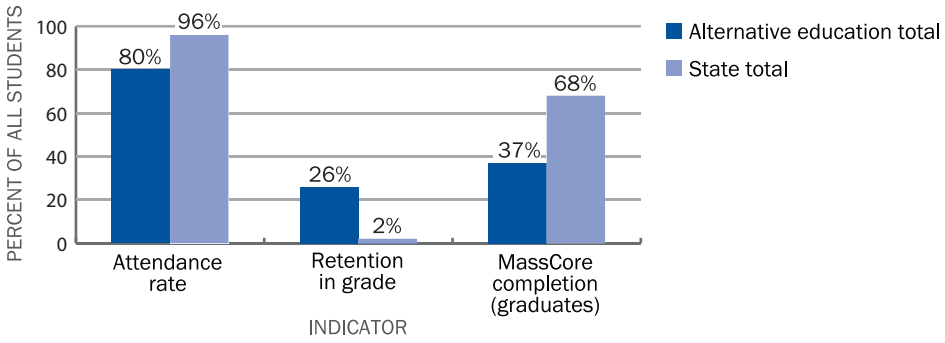
Districts closely monitor students to make data-driven decisions. Alternative education staff maintain detailed records for all students, and individual student information is closely tracked by the program or school and district. Several districts use formal and informal data systems to record and share student data among alternative and district staff; these data include indicators of academic progress, external service referrals and interventions, and areas of concern. At the Gerald Creamer Center in Worcester, students and staff work together to develop academic and non-academic goals. During intake, students take an assessment in reading, writing, and mathematics, and data is used in developing student goals. The assessment is re-administered every five weeks, and staff combine this data with other sources (e.g., student academic progress and non-academic factors) to perform a growth analysis for each student. Adjustment and guidance counselors from the home school use this analysis to inform discussion of student needs and to devise an individualized strategy for Creamer Center teachers to implement.

Students develop positive attitudes about learning and are likely to experience significant personal growth. Regardless of the events leading to referral, students' trajectories once engaged in an alternative program or school often have similarities. Many students thrive in these small, personalized environments rich with non-academic supports, and they experience academic success after years of struggling in traditionally structured classrooms. This success is both supported by and can

lead to positive changes in behavior and attitudes about learning. While such experiences may not characterize all students in alternative education, educators are often impressed with how quickly students progress towards academic and personal goals once engaged in a new learning setting. Margaret McDevitt of Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School comments, "It's amazing what these students are capable of when given the chance."

For students, challenges do not disappear entirely. While many students experience more success in alternative settings than they did previously, challenges often do not disappear. Educators express concern about the strong influence that external factors (such as family or community instability) continue to have on student engagement and progress. Students in alternative settings have lower attendance rates and higher in-grade retention rates than the statewide student population (see Figure 4). Despite these continuing challenges, educators in alternative education settings persist in their efforts to ensure students remain in school until earning a diploma, and gain skills to be college- and career-ready. However, their efforts are met with mixed results. In the 2011–12 school year, 1,558 students graduated from high school while enrolled in an alternative program or school. About a third of these students completed MassCore, the state's recommended program of study that aligns high school coursework with college and workforce expectations. While not all students in Massachusetts public high schools graduate having completed MassCore, a substantial percentage of students engaged in alternative education may graduate from high school without meeting ESE's expectations for college- and career-readiness.

Figure 4. Student indicators in alternative education, 2011–12



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

System characteristics and opportunities for scale

Districts implementing alternative education programs report that students thrive in these small, personalized environments and experience higher levels of success than in the past. However, offering such personalized learning presents challenges. The districts in this study report that they are stretching alternative education capacity based on current enrollment; further, they have not figured out how to provide student-focused support at a scale that would meet the needs of all students who might benefit. The successes and challenges of these alternative education options offer lessons as ESE and districts consider what it might take to reach scale state-wide.

> **"We don't want to exclude alternatives, but include them with purpose."**
>
> North Adams Superintendent James Montepare

Within alternative education, keeping student needs in focus is a driver of innovation. District and school leaders report that they use specific information about their students when developing alternative education options, and some have forgone the "alternative education" designation altogether to remove any negative stigma and keep options open to all students who might benefit. Some districts have designed programming flexible enough to serve several types of students, with different strands using strategies attuned to different needs, such as online courses for students who need to make up course credit and competency-based advancement for those who need a different learning environment. Another district blends alternative education with other non-traditional learning options, including work-based learning. These teaching and learning strategies are not common in traditional education, which suggests alternative education can serve as a key driver of education reforms in districts of all sizes that have existing alternative options. As Superintendent Jim Montepare of North Adams reasoned: "Aren't most of these students 'at-risk' not to graduate? We're doing what we can to get them there."

Common characteristics of alternative education schools and programs in this study

- Attentive and nurturing staff who build connections and trust with students
- Flexible schedule to accommodate work, family obligations, or other needs
- Curriculum structure that allows for personalization and accelerated advancement
- Focus on students' experience and future goals
- Consistent tracking of student progress towards goals
- Vocational or hands-on components, creating connections with employers in the community
- Non-academic support services, including socio-emotional, childcare, or legal
- Willingness to adjust strategies as needed to help students succeed

Alternative education practices have not yet influenced districts more broadly. Teaching and learning innovations seen in alternative education have the potential to shape reforms in traditional education settings, but lessons learned are rarely communicated district-wide. Alternative education programming has largely been developed in response to federal and state policy initiatives to reduce the dropout rate, and primarily serves districts' most at-risk students. Yet, alternatives' flexible learning structures can provide widespread benefits to students, schools, and the surrounding community; even students who are academically advanced can gain from opportunities for individualized learning. Tammy Gage, student services coordinator in Pittsfield, proudly says, "Alternative education is where the good stuff happens." But while these innovative practices could be adapted to serve a range of student needs, there is little evidence educators are infusing lessons learned throughout districts.

Alternative education capacity is stretched, with more student demand than schools and programs can accommodate. Students in alternative settings report to staff greater levels of motivation and success than in the past, and most opt to remain in the alternative setting until graduation. This trend presents a tension: the alternative programs in most participating districts are at maximum capacity with few, if any, seats available for additional students. While educators are sympathetic to the desires of students currently enrolled in alternatives, they recognize some students may be able to transition successfully to a more traditional environment. District leaders reported that they are currently unable to expand alternative programming beyond the neediest students in the district, despite popularity of these programs and schools and their desire to meet the needs of what they report to be a growing population who could benefit.

SPOTLIGHT: Blended learning at Pittsfield Positive Options Program

The Positive Options Program (POP) is an alternative option in the Pittsfield Public Schools that utilizes shared resources and technology to provide an individualized learning experience for every student.

Program details: POP serves 16 students at a time in grades 11 and 12 from the two Pittsfield high schools, targeting those at-risk of not graduating and those who are high achieving but need a different learning environment. Located in a classroom on the campus of Berkshire Community College (BCC), students have access to a wealth of resources on the BCC campus, including computers, health services, the library, and athletic and recreational facilities. Students are also welcome to participate in Pittsfield High School sports and activities, special education services, vocational programs, and access student support services. POP reports 100% of seniors graduated in the 2010–11 and 2011–12 school years.

Learning in a variety of settings: POP helps students to earn credits towards graduation while also preparing them for life beyond a diploma through college exposure. Students can enroll in a mix of online and in-person courses and BCC offerings to complete their academic requirements. The daily schedule is personalized for each student and typically includes one or two blocks for completing academic requirements (online courses, physical education hours, participation in BCC forums, or college courses) and a 21st century skills class. The majority of coursework is self-paced and completed through the PLATO online learning platform, with support from a certified teacher and paraprofessional. Students with strong attendance are invited to enroll in BCC courses for dual credit. Staff often report that the model keeps students self-motivated, allowing them to provide individualized attention as needed and supplement online learning with enrichment activities.

Across the Commonwealth, knowledge about alternative programs is incomplete. Due to the high degree of local control over educational decision-making in the state, comprehensive information about alternative education in the Commonwealth remains elusive. While districts are required to report basic information about alternative education programs to the state, some district leaders express confusion about what qualifies as alternative education; some have not reported new programs because they serve students beyond those at-risk of not graduating. This lack of consistency in reporting, coupled with the lack of a clear understanding of what qualifies as alternative education, creates uncertainty about the state of alternative education in the Commonwealth. Further, communication among districts offering alternative education options is not a priority for all district leaders, resulting in lost opportunities to share knowledge and deepen practitioners' understanding of the most effective practices. With the exception of districts participating in MassGrad activities, educators report they are largely unaware of other alternative education strategies, even in neighboring districts.

Data about students in alternative education is difficult to gather. To determine how many students attend alternative education and gather information about those students, ESE provides a unique "alternative education" code to all reported programs. Districts are asked to use this code for reporting information to the state Student Information Management System. The unique alternative education code—a necessity for the state to gather and report student data for alternative education programs—should attach to any student attending an alternative in the district.[C] However, this method of identifying students enrolled in alternative education depends on the district having previously reported an alternative program to ESE and a code being assigned. These issues in tracking and reporting suggests there may be far more students participating in alternative settings across the state than are represented in state data. In reviewing statewide data for this study, it appears some districts have not reported on all of their current alternative education offerings, and understanding of participation in alternative education remains incomplete.

Policy considerations

Informed by the findings presented in this report and previous research, the Rennie Center offers the following considerations for state policymakers and school and district leaders.

Use recent state legislation as a lever for creating change in alternative education data reporting. Currently, it is difficult to monitor the trajectory of students in alternative education from year to year due to limited data availability. Data about students who attend alternative education exists in the state data system, but is not easily accessible by school districts or the general public. The passage of Chapter 222 legislation—through which school districts are faced with new requirements to ensure students suspended or expelled from school are able to make academic progress while out of school—presents an opportunity to improve and expand upon statewide data reporting. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) may consider reporting annual alternative education data to the general public in the same manner as other public reports (e.g., school and district profiles) available on the ESE website. This public data reporting can include enrollment by race and other demographics, risk indicators (such as attendance and suspension rates), student discipline, and graduation rates. Over time, more sophisticated information about alternative programs may be included in these reports, such as staffing and finance data. Improved data quality and reporting will allow for evidence-based decision-making about alternative education programming statewide, and better knowledge sharing about effective practices among districts.

Increase state resources to guide districts in development of high-quality alternative education options. Despite increased attention to alternative education in policy conversations across the Commonwealth, financial resources to support knowledge-sharing are declining. The Massachusetts state budget line item for alternative education has drastically decreased from a high of $1.5M in 2006 to less than $150,000 each year since 2010.[27] In the past, ESE has used this budget for substantial district grants, online resources, and statewide convenings through which educators share best practices—a set of technical activities no longer funded given existing resources. While the activities of the federally-funded MassGrad initiative have made strides in disseminating information about effective practices in dropout prevention and recovery models, this information is not universally accessed by districts. This research study found that districts are largely unaware of alternative education approaches beyond their own offerings. Information about effective practices is available on ESE's website, but

C This is not the case for separate alternative schools, which use their individual organization code.

many districts need more direct guidance on what high-quality programming for at-risk student populations should look like. State education leaders can improve collaboration and knowledge-sharing among districts by investing once more in regional and statewide convenings, and by further supporting districts with technical assistance to guide the development of alternative education.

Expand the use of analytic tools to guide development of expanded alternative education options. While districts are responsible for ensuring all students are prepared to succeed beyond high school graduation, the majority of Massachusetts school districts do not currently provide alternative education. Districts across the Commonwealth are beginning to explore reform options that can serve a greater number of at-risk students. A key step in this development and expansion process is aligning alternative options with student need. Educators already have access to tools to develop needs-based programming: the state's Early Warning Indicator System and Edwin Analytics can help educators identify students in need of alternative options, and will allow districts and state policymakers to monitor how well student needs are being met. But not all districts are using these tools to guide development of alternative options. With nuanced analysis of student need, districts can begin to develop an array of non-traditional strategies to ensure all students are supported to high school graduation and beyond.

Treat promising alternative education sites as "innovation labs" to benefit a broader student population. Districts can use alternative education settings to pilot high-quality, non-traditional teaching and learning strategies. Pockets of innovation are already happening in alternative education settings throughout the state. It is now time to evaluate and expand promising models beyond a small number of at-risk students. With more consistent data, state and district leaders can identify programs and schools that have the greatest impact on particular student populations and share these practices with more traditional schools, scaling up effective practices so many more struggling students can benefit. Over time, districts can develop a keen sense of which practices have the greatest potential impact and for which students. In turn, knowledge-sharing between districts becomes more powerful, as more ideas for practices have been tested and adapted for particular students in these "innovation labs."

Provide a range of educational pathways to meet a variety of student needs. Instead of treating alternative education as separate from the mainstream, districts can use alternative learning environments to create a menu of options that meet diverse student needs and contribute to dropout reduction. Districts may consider how they can leverage different settings and approaches in which students can earn credits, such as online learning labs, evening courses, accelerated earning of credits, or project-based learning. Then, these different options—all of which maintain high expectations for students—can be connected in multiple seamless pathways for students. Recognizing that the high school experience is not a "one-size-fits-all proposition," this pathway approach allows all students to be connected to their school community and supported by multiple adults to reach critical milestones.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, alternative education has moved into the spotlight as a pivotal element of state and local dropout prevention and recovery efforts. Yet, while district leaders express pride in the innovative, student-focused practices implemented in local alternative sites and many students experience progress to meet critical education milestones, the state's alternative options may not meet current levels of demand. Further, the promising practices implemented in alternative education—flexible learning, non-academic supports, and individualized strategies to meet student needs—have not influenced district-based practices or broader educational reform efforts. With more consistent data about student enrollment and performance in alternative programs, and strategic guidance and investment to build capacity where it is needed, districts could develop a full menu of alternative offerings that help many more students achieve a diploma and college and career readiness. State policymakers can lead the charge to explore new funding mechanisms and accountability measures that support the diverse needs of alternative learners and settings.

The Commonwealth faces a significant opportunity to make a shift in its approach to alternative education by bringing it into the core of statewide reform and leveraging its lessons for the benefit of all public school students. Breaking down the false divide between traditional and alternative education by considering what blend of opportunities and services each studet needs can create a more fluid, seamless system that engages all students and supports them to achieve at high levels.

Appendix A

Sample selection for interviews with district leaders and alternative education staff

The Rennie Center identified a sample of Massachusetts public school districts for qualitative data collection. Sample selection followed the process below:

- Researchers linked all alternative education programs and schools listed on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (ESE) website to host school districts.[28]
- All districts on this list were matched to an urbanicity classification provided by the National Center for Education Statistics.[29] Categories within "town" and "rural" were combined.
- Within each classification category, the district with the greatest number of reported alternative education options was selected for participation.
  - In the case of more than one district in a given category reporting the same number of alternative education options, the district with greater variety in alternative education programs and schools was selected for participation in the study.
- Researchers then selected one alternative education program or school within each identified district; alternative programs and schools were eligible for participation based on variety of identifying characteristics (grade levels, target population, location) and superintendent recommendation. See Figure 5 below for participating districts and alternative education sites.
  - Although charter schools were not including in sampling methods, researchers included one such school with guidance from ESE.

Figure 5. Participating districts and alternative education sites

District	Community size classification	Enrolled students	Reported alternatives (#)	District 4-year cohort graduation rate	Participating alternative education program/school
Boston	Large city	54,539	18	65.9%	William J. Ostiguy High School
Worcester	Midsize city	24,390	6	72.3%	Gerald Creamer Center
Pittsfield	Small city	5,982	6	79.8%	Positive Options Program
Chelsea	Large suburb	5,691	6	58.3%	Brown Middle School Alternative Program
Monomoy	Midsize suburb	1,313	4	85.2%	Harwich High School Alternative Program
North Adams	Town/Rural	1,546	2	80.9%	E3 Program
Charter	Charter	112	N/A	14.6%	Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2010-11); Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2011–12)

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In an effort to promote public discourse on educational improvement and to inform policy discussions, the Rennie Center periodically publishes policy briefs, which are broadly disseminated to policymakers and stakeholders in the public, private, nonprofit and media sectors. Policy briefs contain independent research on issues of critical importance to the improvement of public education. Briefs are designed to present policymakers and opinion leaders with just-in-time information to help guide and inform their decisions on key educational issues.

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