

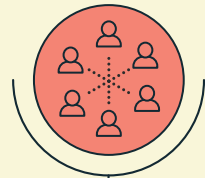
RETHINKING STATE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS

Measuring What Matters

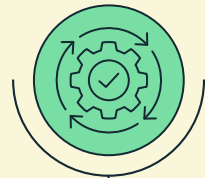
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STEPS

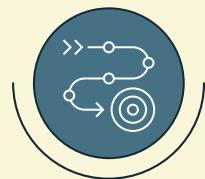
1

Center the specific needs of the people you serveStudents and familiesPolicymakersEducators and school leadersCommunity membersState education agencies

2

Use proven design principlesClear definitionsClarityCollaborative designFlexibilityStudent-centered approach

3

Choose measures that are aligned with the purpose and goals of alternative high schoolsAre students engaged?Are students making academic progress?Are students prepared for life after high school?

4

Use accountability information to increase awareness and drive continuous improvementPublic understandingContinuous improvementTransparencyResource allocation

Introduction

Alternative high schools play an important role in supporting students who are not well-served by traditional school systems (Denton et al., 2022). They often provide smaller classes, trauma-informed practices, wraparound supports, and flexible learning options.¹ Alternative learning environments are designed for students who have become disconnected from school, face significant barriers to success, and/or are overage and undercredited (Jiménez et al., 2018; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017).

This brief explores how state accountability systems can better reflect what matters in alternative education. To inform this work, we reviewed state policies, reports, and research on accountability (e.g., Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Jiménez et al., 2018; Landl et al., 2020; Newton et al., 2022; Wolfe et al., 2026). We also learned from policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in multiple states and drew on insights from Education Northwest's State Action Collaborative for Alternative High Schools, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to better understand how accountability policies affect alternative high schools. This review informed the two questions that guide this brief: Why rethink accountability for alternative high schools? And how can states design alternative accountability systems that work better?

Why rethink accountability for alternative high schools?

Many students who arrive in alternative high schools have experienced or continue to experience interruptions in their education due to personal challenges, housing instability, work responsibilities, family obligations, and a host of other reasons. As a result, their path to graduation is often not a straight line (Jiménez et al., 2018). Traditional measures such as test scores and four-year graduation rates do not always capture the progress these students make. When accountability systems rely too heavily on those measures, they can paint an incomplete picture of school success and overlook the practices that help students reengage and thrive. Here, we rethink what accountability systems are meant to do and what traditional accountability systems miss when it comes to high school alternatives.

This discussion of alternative accountability is focused on **alternative high schools**, which face unique challenges within state accountability systems, such as graduation rate calculations. In addition, accountability systems generally apply only to schools, not programs, whose accountability is held by the home school.

In states with **alternative programs**, this brief can still inform broader discussions around promising practices for state accountability. These states may also consider whether an alternative accountability framework could create pathways for alternative programs to become schools, thereby expanding access to Title I funding and other resources available only to schools.

What are accountability systems meant to do?

Accountability systems function at the federal and state levels and in formal (big “a” accountability) and informal (small “a” accountability) ways. While many states focus on big “a” federal accountability, both forms of accountability are important to consider, especially in the context of alternative high schools.

Big “a” accountability

Big “a” accountability refers to the federal and state systems used to evaluate schools and publicly report results. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states must track and report academic performance, graduation rates, English learner progress, and at least one measure of school quality or student success, such as attendance or school climate (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025). States are also required to identify schools that need additional support, including high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent, which are designated as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Although ESSA sets these requirements, states have considerable flexibility in deciding how their accountability systems are designed (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). States determine how measures are weighted, which additional indicators are included, and whether separate systems are created at the state level (Kannam & Weiss, 2019).

This flexibility creates a policy opportunity: States can design dual accountability systems that meet federal requirements and address state priorities, providing space for small “a” accountability that better reflects the experiences of alternative high schools.

Small “a” accountability

For alternative high schools, small “a” accountability can provide a more complete picture of success by looking beyond compliance measures to include indicators such as engagement, persistence, school climate, and progress toward student goals. As we will discuss later, these measures often focus on three overarching factors: student engagement, growth, and progress toward life after high school. This kind of information is more appropriate to the purpose, goals, and daily practice of alternative high schools. Educators and decision-makers at the state and local level use the information collected through small “a” accountability to make more informed decisions about how to better serve students (Baum-Tuccillo et al., 2024; Domaleski, 2019; Huang et al., 2026).

What gets measured and what gets missed when we focus on traditional big “a” accountability systems?

Under federal accountability structures, schools that are designed to provide flexible, responsive pathways for students are frequently misidentified as low performing instead of highlighting successes such as (re)engagement, credit accrual, and progress toward postsecondary readiness. Conversely, underperforming schools are lumped together with alternative high schools that may be thriving, making it

nearly impossible to distinguish schools that are benefiting students from those that are harming them. This limits the ability of big “a” accountability to accurately assess school performance in alternative high schools and to offer clear opportunities for continuous improvement (table 1).

Table 1. What traditional accountability captures and what it misses

Overall goal	Captured in big “a” accountability	Often missed in big “a” accountability
High school progress	• State assessment performance • Proficiency levels • English learner progress • Four-year graduation rate	• Student (re)engagement • Credit accrual • Persistence • Progress on students’ personal goals
Postsecondary readiness	• N/A	• Learning and life skillsⁱ • Career readiness • Workforce credential attainment
School performance	• Performance against standard measures	• Performance compared to similar schools and contexts • Measurement for continuous improvement

ⁱ Learning and life skills (also called transferable skills, 21st century skills, core competencies, or soft skills) include critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, flexibility, leadership, social skills, and others.

Note: Due to the flexibility of school quality or student success measures, some states capture one or more of the “often missed” items in their traditional accountability model. In this context, “often missed” simply means that these items are not consistently measured by states.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of literature related to alternative accountability.

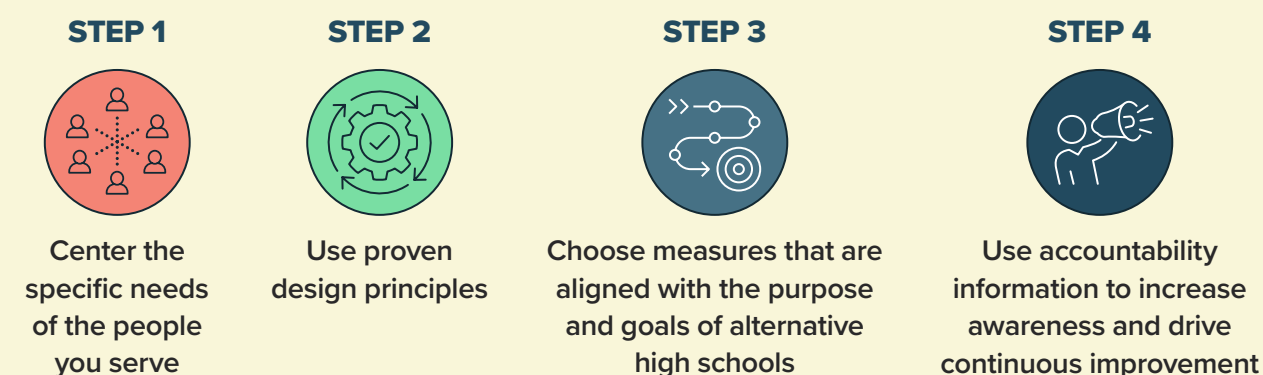
What does this mean for alternative high schools?

Accountability systems vary considerably across states, but many alternative high schools receive low ratings on state report cards or are labeled as underperforming due to the focus on academic proficiency, four-year graduation rate, and performance against standard measures that do not capture the successes of alternative high schools. This impacts public perception of these schools. In addition, because high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent are automatically identified for CSI, alternative high schools are disproportionately identified for intervention regardless of the growth and progress they help students achieve. This lack of attention to schools’ success can have serious consequences: Although alternative high schools represent approximately 4 percent of all schools, they accounted for 14 percent of school closures in 2021–22 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

How can states design alternative accountability systems that work better?

Due to the policy flexibility allowed under ESSA to create a distinct accountability system at the state level, there is an opportunity to reimagine what accountability looks like and to measure what actually matters the most. While federal accountability systems can be adjusted to better align with the outcomes of alternative high schools (see [**Setting the Right Bar: Federal Accountability and Waivers for Alternative High Schools**](#) from the Bipartisan Policy Center for more information), this brief focuses solely on the steps states can take to create a dual accountability system that focuses on more appropriate measures of alternative high schools (figure 1).

Figure 1. Steps states can take to develop an alternative accountability system



Source: Education Northwest analysis of literature related to alternative accountability.



Step 1. Center the specific needs of the people you serve



For years, community members viewed City Alternative High School negatively because of its low accountability rating. Yet, students described a school where they finally felt a sense of belonging, built supportive relationships with adults, earned diplomas alongside industry-recognized credentials, and prepared for life after high school. For many of these students, previous schools had failed to meet their needs. Even though City Alternative High School successfully reengaged and supported them, the school was still labeled as “failing” by the accountability system. The rating reflected traditional measures of success, but it did not capture the outcomes that mattered most to students, families, and educators.

Source: This fictional scenario is based on insights we gathered from policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in multiple states and from participants in the State Action Collaborative for Alternative High Schools. It is solely intended to illustrate a common challenge related to alternative accountability systems.

Statewide alternative high school accountability systems should be grounded in the specific needs and priorities of each state and the population it serves. Accordingly, the process should be collaborative—engaging students, families, educators, and community members in identifying priorities and co-developing a system that reflects the local context (Landl et al., 2020). While this may sound obvious, too often states begin accountability design by selecting metrics rather than identifying the key information each group needs and then identifying the measures that will provide that information. In contrast, this approach begins by asking: What matters most to each group and why (table 2)? Another way of stating this is: What does each group stand to gain from an alternative accountability system that actually measures what matters most to them?

Table 2. What different groups gain from measuring what matters in alternative high school accountability systems

Groups	What alternative accountability provides
Students and families	Provides a clearer picture of whether schools are helping students reengage, earn credits, graduate, and prepare for life after high school.
Educators and school leaders	Provides better information about student progress and school practices, helping guide improvement efforts.
State education agencies	Provides more accurate identification of schools needing support and stronger tools for continuous improvement.
Policymakers	Results in accountability systems that better reflect the purpose and outcomes of alternative education.

Groups	What alternative accountability provides
Community members	Provides greater transparency about how schools are serving students and preparing students for future success.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of literature related to alternative accountability.

Step 2. Use proven design principles



Mr. Johnson leads an alternative high school that serves students who have not been well served by traditional school systems. When the state redesigned its accountability system, it did not include any alternative school educators or administrators on the committee. The new system relied heavily on four-year graduation rates and proficiency and did not address credit recovery, school climate, or student reengagement, nor did it consider how students' prior educational experiences impacted their current trajectory. As a result, Mr. Johnson's school was labeled low performing despite helping hundreds of students reengage with school and graduate.

Source: This fictional scenario is based on insights we gathered from policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in multiple states and from participants in the State Action Collaborative for Alternative High Schools. It is solely intended to illustrate a common challenge related to alternative accountability systems.

Once states have identified what matters most in alternative high school accountability, they must determine how to design a system that effectively measures those factors, provides clear and useful information, and promotes continuous improvement. While this will look different in each state, we drew on research, existing state practices, and feedback from our [State Action Collaborative for High School Alternatives](#) and other partners to identify seven design principles that support fair and useable alternative accountability systems (table 3).

Table 3. Design principles for building a state alternative accountability system

Principle	What it looks like	State example
Collaborative decision-making	Students, families, educators, and policymakers help shape the system.	<u>Wyoming convened alternative school leaders, advocates, and state officials</u> to design and pilot its framework before statewide implementation.
Clear definitions	States clearly define which schools qualify as alternative schools.	<u>Colorado's designation for Alternative Education Campuses</u> uses both student population and school mission criteria.

Principle	What it looks like	State example
Focus on student growth and strengths	Accountability recognizes progress, persistence, and growth—not just proficiency.	<u>North Carolina's modified accountability system</u> weighs school growth as 60 percent of the total accountability.
Clear and useful information	Information is clear and useful to the public.	<u>California's Dashboard Alternative School Status</u> supports the state in looking more closely at alternative schools and identifying their strengths, weaknesses, and areas in need of improvement.
Balance of flexibility and rigor	Information allows alternative schools to demonstrate success in different ways while ensuring high expectations for student outcomes.	<u>North Carolina's accountability system</u> includes a pathway for schools to propose alternative measures.
Student agency	Measures offer students an opportunity to set and meet their own goals.	<u>Wyoming's alternative accountability model</u> includes credit for implementing individual Student Success Plans.
Reciprocal accountability	Accountability is shared with the schools and districts that created the conditions for students to enter an alternative school.	<u>Minnesota amended its accountability plan</u> to link schools focused on credit or dropout recovery with the schools from which they draw many of their students. This provides a more complete picture of each student's educational experience and needs.

Reciprocal accountability includes improvement plans at the point where students start to become undercredited or disconnected from school, and resources dedicated to improvement at both traditional and alternative schools.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of literature related to alternative accountability.

Step 3. Choose measures that are aligned with the purpose and goals of alternative high schools



Jasmine had missed nearly two years of school while caring for younger siblings and working a part-time job. This left her behind in credits and uncertain about her future. During her first year at an alternative school, she earned eight credits, completed a welding certification program, and secured an apprenticeship. Yet when Jasmine and her family reviewed school report cards, they saw that her new school was rated much lower than the traditional high school she had attended, despite being far more successful at supporting her needs and helping her make meaningful progress toward her goals.

Source: This fictional scenario is based on insights we gathered from policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in multiple states and from participants in the State Action Collaborative for Alternative High Schools. It is solely intended to illustrate a common challenge related to alternative accountability systems.

States across the country have developed different accountability approaches for alternative high schools,² but many focus on answering three overarching questions that speak to the fundamental purpose and goals of these programs: Are students engaged in school? Are students making academic progress? Are students prepared for life after high school? Additionally, our partners have also suggested adding the question: Do alternative schools have what they need to support students? Again, measures that are designed to answer these questions should be collaboratively developed with state partners, but they can also be informed by other states' approaches (see examples in table A1 in the appendix).

Are students engaged in school?

Students who engage in school and understand its benefit to their future plans are more likely to make academic progress and persist toward graduation. Measures such as reengagement after unenrollment, improvements in attendance, and continued enrollment may capture whether schools are successfully connecting students to education, although it is critical that these measures reflect actual school climate and reengagement efforts and not student coercion or forced compliance. Alternative schools often succeed because they create supportive, trust-based environments that enable students to persist. Climate and engagement surveys can provide nuanced insights into where schools are successfully supporting student engagement and where there are opportunities for growth. These surveys should include the contextual factors that shape students' experience, balancing quantitative data with qualitative data to ensure that alternative high schools can accurately demonstrate their holistic effectiveness (Baum-Tuccillo et al., 2024; Newton, 2022).

Are students making academic progress?

Academic growth is an important indicator of success in alternative schools. When accountability systems focus only on proficiency, they can miss meaningful progress that students make (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017). Measures such as credit accumulation, growth, and modified graduation rates³ often provide a more accurate picture of progress for students who enter alternative schools behind in credits or on a nontraditional path to graduation. States may also consider measuring all positive student transitions (e.g., graduating high school, earning a GED, transferring to another school, joining the military) to provide a more complete picture of students' pathways who exit alternative schools (Payne, 2024).

Are students prepared for life after high school?

Alternative schools play a critical role in preparing students for success after high school. Accountability systems should recognize this by measuring progress toward meaningful postsecondary outcomes, including career and technical education participation, work-based learning, industry-recognized credentials, dual credit attainment, and FAFSA completion. Additionally, students in alternative settings can make significant progress in learning and life skills related to critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, flexibility, leadership, social skills, information and civic literacy, and more that can help prepare them for life after high school. States may also consider indicators of workforce readiness and other post-completion outcomes, such as employment, postsecondary enrollment, or earnings after graduation (Horn, 2021). By including these measures, states can better capture how alternative schools help students prepare for college, careers, military service, and other pathways after high school.

Together, these measures provide a more complete picture of whether alternative schools are helping students reconnect to education, make meaningful progress, and move toward their goals (Deeds & DePaoli, 2018; Newton et al., 2022; table 4). Critically, these measures should be disaggregated by key student characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, disability status, language background, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, housing status, parenting status, foster care involvement, justice-system involvement) to assess differential outcomes and ensure schools are equitably supporting all students.

Do alternative schools have what they need to support students?

As described earlier, alternative schools often provide students with smaller class sizes, trauma-informed practices, wraparound supports, and flexible and innovative approaches—all of which can increase operational costs. Yet alternative schools often receive less resources than traditional schools (Fresques et al., 2017). Alternative accountability systems should track alternative high schools' funding relative to their program costs. Additional measures should include state and district support for educator professional development, career-connected learning, and wraparound supports for basic needs, including direct support or partnerships to provide physical and mental healthcare, food, childcare, transportation, and others. Focusing on the systemic factors that shape alternative schools and enable alternative schools to provide opportunities for students can shift accountability from students and schools to systems.

Table 4. State alternative accountability measures

Question	Example measures	State examples
Are students engaged in school?	Attendance, persistence, school climate, reengagement after unenrollment.	<u>Colorado's alternative accountability</u> includes student engagement measures and allows schools to report student survey data as part of accountability. <u>Wyoming's alternative accountability</u> uses credits for schools that implement individual Student Success Plans.
Are students making academic progress?	Credit accumulation, academic growth, modified graduation rates.	<u>Louisiana's alternative accountability</u> includes credit accumulation as a major component of its accountability system, while <u>North Carolina's alternative accountability option</u> places substantial weight on academic growth.
Are students prepared for life after high school?	Learning and life skills, career credentials, work-based learning, FAFSA completion, postsecondary enrollment.	<u>Arizona accountability plan</u> heavily weights college and career readiness, while <u>Idaho's accountability system</u> includes industry credentials and workforce readiness indicators.
Do alternative schools have what they need to support students?	Funding allocation; state and district support for educator professional development, career-connected learning, wraparound services.	<u>California's guidance for alternative schools of choice</u> requires that they be maintained and funded at the same level of support as other educational programs.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of literature related to alternative accountability.

Step 4. Use alternative accountability information to increase awareness and drive continuous improvement



As a district leader, Ms. Patel reviewed accountability results each year to decide where to focus resources. The data showed that the district's alternative high school had one of the lowest ratings in the district, so it appeared to be struggling. But when she visited the school, she saw students reengaging with education, earning credits, and developing plans for life after high school. The traditional accountability system didn't capture those successes, and Ms. Patel realized she did not have the information she needed to understand which schools needed support, which were helping students thrive, and where resources would have the greatest impact.

Source: This fictional scenario is based on insights we gathered from policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in multiple states and from participants in the State Action Collaborative for Alternative High Schools. It is solely intended to illustrate a common challenge related to alternative accountability systems.

Because many alternative high schools are automatically identified as CSI schools, their successes can be overshadowed by accountability systems that focus primarily on on-time graduation. As a result, students who are succeeding in alternative settings may attend schools labeled as underperforming, thereby reinforcing deficit-based narratives about both students and schools (Huang et al., 2026). These narratives can have harmful consequences (Garriott, 2020). In contrast, by emphasizing growth, engagement, and progress toward student goals, alternative accountability systems can improve public understanding by providing a more accurate picture of school effectiveness and highlighting the unique strengths of alternative learning environments for the community.

This type of transparency allows for nuanced conversations about what models are and are not working for students. When designed well, alternative accountability helps states move beyond simply labeling schools as successful or failing. It can provide students, families, educators, communities, and policy-makers with the information they need to make decisions and support continuous improvement.

Alternative accountability can also ensure that support and resources are directed to the schools that need them most. Schools with graduation rates lower than 67 percent often receive a significant portion of a state's school improvement dollars. However, these resources may be going to alternative schools that are otherwise high-performing. This limits the availability of school improvement resources for schools that are not serving students well. To ensure that alternative schools are still adequately funded if they do not receive improvement resources, states should replace a reliance on school improvement funds with funding approaches that better align with the needs of alternative schools and their students (for more information, see [**From Patchwork to Purpose: Building Sustainable Funding for High School Alternatives**](#)).

Conclusion

Alternative high schools are a critical component of the educational landscape, providing pathways for students who are not well-served by traditional school systems. Yet, many state accountability systems do not reflect or account for this critical role: While the schools offer real alternatives for students, the accountability systems do not. Designing and implementing alternative accountability systems that work for alternative high schools requires states to rethink development, measurement, and use. Accountability should support big “a” accountability, but also better prepare states for small “a” accountability—supporting actual improvement rather compliance-driven identification for improvement.

Alternative school accountability is not about lowering expectations. It is about measuring the outcomes that matter most for students served by these schools. States that invest in these systems gain a more accurate picture of school quality, stronger tools for improvement, and better information for students, families, educators, communities, and policymakers (Landl et al., 2020; Newton et al., 2022).

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For more information about the State Action Collaborative or questions regarding the information presented in this brief, please contact Ashlie Denton ashlie.denton@ednw.org.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The Gardner Center provides several case studies as examples: <https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/project/case-studies-what-makes-great-alternative-high-school>
- ² Newton and colleagues (2022) identify a robust framework for alternative school accountability which includes academic, health, occupational, social, and staffing indicators for students, schools, and families/communities. This framework accounts for schools being part of a larger community context. Not all elements of this comprehensive accountability system may not be feasible for all states, districts, and schools.
- ³ Rather than relying solely on four-year graduation rates, many states include extended graduation timelines (e.g., five-, six-, or seven-year cohorts) or one-year completion rates. A one-year graduation rate measures the percentage of grade 12 students who earn a diploma within that year.

Appendix

While each state’s alternative high school accountability framework should address the needs of its students, families, educators, communities, and policymakers, there is much to be learned from the strategies and structures of other states (table A1). These states’ alternative accountability systems were identified as examples of the accountability measures described in this brief. More information can be found on Education Commission of the State’s [50-state comparison of school accountability systems](#) for 2024 and the Government Accountability Office’s 2020 report, [Information on How States Assess Alternative School Performance](#).

Table A1. State examples

State alternative accountability model	What it highlights
<u>Arizona has a separate accountability system for alternative schools</u> that places a strong emphasis on college and career readiness (35%) and progress toward graduation, including persistence and credit accumulation (30%). The system also includes two bonus categories including grade 9 students’ participation in ACT Aspire (up to 3% bonus) and student group graduation rate (e.g., when five-year graduation rate is 80 percent or higher for students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and students in special education (up to 6% bonus).	Postsecondary readiness and extended graduation timelines
<u>California’s Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS)</u> provides additional accountability information for alternative schools (e.g., continuation, county day, schools that apply due to the population served). Although DASS schools are included in the state’s broader accountability system, they are identified separately on the California School Dashboard and receive a one-year graduation rate to better reflect the experiences of students in alternative settings.	Transparent data systems and extended graduation timelines
<u>Colorado’s accountability system</u> uses many of the same indicators for traditional and alternative schools but adds a student engagement measure and weights indicators differently. Academic growth receives the greatest weight (35%), followed by postsecondary and workforce readiness (30%), student engagement (20%), and academic achievement (15%). Schools receive ratings on each indicator and use those results to inform improvement planning through the state’s Unified Improvement Planning process.	Engagement measures and flexible indicators
<u>Idaho’s alternative academic framework</u> evaluates alternative schools based on academic growth, progress toward graduation, and postsecondary readiness. The framework is designed for schools serving students who are considered “at-risk” and recognizes measures such as credit completion, workforce readiness, and preparation for success after high school, in addition to traditional academic outcomes.	Postsecondary and workforce readiness

State alternative accountability model	What it highlights
<u>Louisiana's alternative accountability system</u> equally weighs four components: student progress on state assessments, current year core credit accumulation, second year dropout/credit accumulation, and grade 12 strength of diploma (i.e., graduation outcomes for grade 12 only).	Credit accumulation and progress toward completion
<u>Minnesota has modified its accountability system</u> for schools focused on credit recovery and dropout recovery. The state uses a seven-year graduation rate to determine whether these schools require comprehensive support. Minnesota also links alternative schools with the schools from which they receive many of their students, helping ensure accountability for students' educational experiences both before and after enrollment in an alternative setting	Transparent accountability and modified graduation timelines
<u>North Carolina has three options for school accountability.</u> Schools can use the traditional school accountability model (Option A), a modified model (Option B), or propose an alternative model that must be approved by the state (Option C). The modified model emphasizes academic growth (60%), student persistence (20%), and achievement (20%). Schools are rated as progressing, maintaining, or declining based on year-to-year performance.	Multiple accountability pathways and emphasis on growth
<u>Wyoming's alternative accountability model,</u> developed collaboratively with local partners, uses traditional measures plus school climate and student engagement. Additionally, Wyoming compares alternative schools to each other using the following school performance ratings: exceeding alternative expectations, meeting alternative expectations, partially meeting alternative expectations, and not meeting alternative expectations.	Collaborative design and transparent, growth-focused accountability

Source: Education Northwest analysis of literature related to alternative accountability.