education northwest

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State Policy Profiles: High School Alternatives

High school alternatives play a vital role in our educational ecosystem by serving students who are not well-served by traditional settings (Denton et al., 2022). At their best, high school alternatives provide students with high-quality educational and career opportunities, empowering them to build momentum toward post-secondary success. These learning environments are often innovative and transformative spaces that leverage students' unique strengths and interests to re-define "success" and improve trajectories to high school graduation and postsecondary opportunities (Caspary et al., 2022).

While we have some insight into the instructional and relationship-building practices that support student success (e.g., Chu & Casimere, 2023), the field has less information on how states' policy environments facilitate or hinder these approaches (Denton et al., 2022). State policy environments regarding high school alternatives are diverse in every aspect, from how alternatives are defined to how they are funded and held accountable.

How we learned about state policy

To better understand approaches across the country, identify promising practices, and build collaborative efforts in the field, Education Northwest developed a State Action Collaborative for High School Alternatives to support state teams working toward policy change and innovation in this critical education space. Specifically, we supported teams in their efforts to transform policy to ensure students ages 14–24—especially students of color, students from low-income households, system-impacted students, students with disabilities, and other students who have not been well-served by the traditional K–12 system—have access to high-quality high school alternatives.

State teams were composed of at least one representative from the state education agency directly involved in alternative education, as well as practice experts, state policy advocates, researchers, and other state leaders. From December 2024 to May 2025, Education Northwest worked closely with eight

state teams to strengthen coalitions among alternative education interest-holders and facilitate evidence-sharing and networking across states. This work included monthly cross-state collaborative meetings, regular check-ins with "coaches" from Education Northwest, and ongoing technical assistance to support each state's unique context and approach.[1]

How we developed these profiles

The profiles in this brief were developed in close collaboration with the state teams and reflect the current policy landscape[2] of each state in the collaborative. They reflect a combination of publicly available information on alternative education policy from state department websites and information shared by team members directly.

Along with the eight state policy profiles, we highlight key themes across the states. While the states included in this brief are not representative of state policy approaches nationally—and therefore not generalizable—this brief seeks to offer an initial glimpse into how states are approaching the critical work of supporting and expanding alternative high school opportunities.

High school alternatives include a wide variety of programs, models, and structures designed to support students in earning a diploma. No matter what form they take, high-quality high school alternatives should (Denton et al., 2022):

1. **Provide high-quality educational and career opportunities to empower students who face systemic barriers in traditional secondary schools**
2. **Support flexible and asset-based learning opportunities that students find meaningful**
3. **Serve as a place to build momentum and orient to the future, offering not only a diploma but also skills, connections to people and resources, and workforce and postsecondary preparation**
4. **Nurture healthy relationships with caring adults who affirm students' cultures, identities, backgrounds, and experiences and foster a sense of belonging**

Cross-state summary

While there is no single model, the policy approaches in all eight states include a commitment to flexibility and student-centered learning that specifically addresses the needs of students furthest from educational opportunity. We identified the following themes for how states define alternative learning and the students they seek to serve, as well as how they structure, fund, and hold accountable alternative education schools and programs.

Alternative learning definition

Despite considerable variance, the state definitions of alternative education programs in these eight states share several common principles and themes. Two of the most common are:

Serve students who are not well-served by traditional settings. States' definitions specify that alternative education is for students who, for academic, behavioral, social, or other reasons, are facing barriers to success in traditional learning environments.

Emphasize flexibility and personalization. Specifically, some states describe a focus on personalized educational services, including emphasizing student interests, motivation, and choice.

Alternative learning structure

Alternative schools and programs are most often operated by local education agencies. Some states also allow nonprofit organizations, private schools, or state agencies to operate programs. States support multiple types of alternative education formats, including:

- Programs within traditional schools
- Standalone alternative schools (in districts or charter networks)
- Virtual schools or online learning options
- Adult or transition high schools
- Community or continuation schools

Student eligibility

Some states (e.g., Indiana and Minnesota) provide detailed student eligibility criteria, while others (e.g., California) leave eligibility more open-ended. Though eligibility is often broad, it may include students who are at risk of dropping out of school (e.g., behind in credits, intends to withdraw), pregnant or parenting, or experiencing homelessness.

Funding

All eight states have a student-based funding formula that uses enrollment or attendance to allocate per-pupil base funding (read more about budget policy for high school alternatives here). Additionally, states use categorial or supplemental funding for specific student populations that are likely to be represented in alternative schools and programs. Arkansas is the only state that provides additional funding directly to alternative schools.

Accountability

Most states apply traditional school metrics to alternative programs (e.g., four-year graduation rates, attendance, standardized test scores), even though students in high school alternatives may need additional time and support to thrive. However, some states use modified systems to collect additional data on alternative schools and programs (e.g., California's Dashboard Alternative School Status). These data collection activities support the states' knowledge of successful high school alternatives and are made publicly available through either general reporting or reports to the legislature, but they are not used in federal accountability reporting.

Arkansas

Alternative learning definition

In Arkansas, an Alternative Learning Environment (ALE) is defined under Arkansas Code § 6-48-101 as: "An alternate class or program within a public school or school district that affords all students an environment that seeks to eliminate barriers to learning for any student whose academic and social progress is negatively affected by the student's personal characteristics or situation."

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: programs in schools, charter schools

Operators: school districts, consortia of districts, education service cooperatives

State governance: Alternatives in Arkansas are operated by the Office of Alternative Education housed at the State Department of Education

Number of alternative schools/programs

447 in 2023–24.[†]

Student enrollment

11,249 alternative school students served in 2023–24.

Student ages

Alternative programs serve students in all grades to age 21.

Student eligibility

To be placed in alternative learning in Arkansas, a student must be experiencing or exhibiting two or more of the following situations or characteristics:

- Ongoing, persistent lack of attaining proficiency levels in literacy and mathematics
- Experiencing abuse: physical, mental, or sexual
- Frequent relocation of residency
- Homelessness
- Inadequate emotional support
- Mental/physical health problems
- Pregnancy
- Being a single parent
- Personal or family problems or situations
- Recurring absenteeism
- Dropping out of school
- Disruptive behavior

Funding

Arkansas employs a student-based funding formula with additional categorical funding for specific students (e.g., English language learners) and districts' percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch and geographic isolation. Arkansas also provides categorical funding for ALEs. ALE funding is based on the full-time equivalent (FTE) number of students enrolled in the school for the previous year, as long as the student was enrolled in the ALE program for 20 or more consecutive days.

Accountability

There are currently no alternative accountability metrics. The Arkansas Educational Support and Accountability Act (AESAA) is the state's primary framework for accountability. It establishes academic standards and growth metrics, a statewide assessment system, and a student-focused learning approach (including college and career readiness) to measure and support individual academic growth. The Act emphasizes educator excellence, requiring that all students—and especially students furthest from educational opportunity—have access to effective teachers.

Policy spotlight

The Arkansas Digital Learning Act, passed in 2013, mandates that all public school districts and public charter schools in Arkansas offer at least one digital learning course to students, either as a primary or supplementary method of instruction. This act requires digital learning courses to be of high quality, meet state curriculum standards, and be available in a blended, online, or other technology-based formats. This act provides ALEs with the flexibility to implement innovative scheduling and accommodate attendance models that work for students' needs. Students in an ALE hybrid program must participate on site for direct support at least 20 percent of the total instructional time to be counted for funding.

[†]Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

California

Alternative learning definition

California Education Code sections 58500 to 58512 defines alternative schools as, "a school or separate class group within a school which is operated in a manner designed to:

- Maximize the opportunity for students to develop the positive values of self-reliance, initiative, kindness, spontaneity, resourcefulness, courage, creativity, responsibility, and joy.
- Recognize that the best learning takes place when the student learns because of his desire to learn.
- Maintain a learning situation maximizing student self-motivation and encouraging the student in his own time to follow his own interests. These interests may be conceived by him totally and independently or may result in whole or in part from a presentation by his teachers of choices of learning projects.
- Maximize the opportunity for teachers, parents and students to cooperatively develop the learning process and its subject matter. This opportunity shall be a continuous, permanent process.
- Maximize the opportunity for the students, teachers, and parents to continuously react to the changing world, including but not limited to the community in which the school is located."

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: programs in schools, schools in districts, charter schools, private schools, community schools, virtual schools, juvenile hall schools, continuation schools.

Operators: school districts, county offices of education, and the Department of Juvenile Justice.

State governance: The state provides guidance on school and program alternatives throughout the Educational Options Office webpage. As a local control state, local school districts and county officers of education have oversight over the programs/schools they operate.

Number of alternative schools/programs 1,009 schools (including Alternative, Continuation, Community Day, County Community, Juvenile Court, and Opportunity Schools).†

Student enrollment 148,899 alternative school students served in 2024–25.†

Student ages Alternative schools are open to students of all ages.

Student eligibility

California's school and program alternatives provide students with the environment, curriculum, and support systems needed to ensure that they achieve their full academic potential. Eligibility for alternative learning programs in California is broad and inclusive. Students may be referred to or choose to participate in these programs based on various factors, including academic challenges, behavioral or emotional needs, personal circumstances, or specialized needs.

Importantly, California Education Code Section 58504 specifies that students cannot be excluded from alternative programs based solely on their previous academic performance. Participation is voluntary, and districts must ensure that students can attend alternative schools or programs of choice regardless of their past academic standing. Alternative schools and programs of choice must meet the same standards for curriculum, instruction, and student performance as traditional schools and must be maintained and funded at the same level of support as other educational programs.

Funding

California's Local Control Funding Formula provides a base grant per student, with additional supplemental grants for low-income students, English learners, and foster youth. It also provides additional concentration grants for districts where over 55 percent of students fall into those high-need categories. This funding formula requires districts to create a Local Control and Accountability Plan that outlines how funds will improve student outcomes, with input from the community, and has supported academic growth across the state since implementation (Johnson, 2023).

Accountability

All schools are treated the same under the accountability system, though there is a status label for alternative schools with Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS) on the California School Dashboard that provides alternative measures for school success (described in the policy spotlight below). Additionally, the DASS filter is now included as an option and filter for many of the data

reports available on DataQuest, California's web-based system for publicly reporting information about students, teachers, and schools.

Policy spotlight

California's alternative schools support a higher number of students than some states' traditional high school systems, and its approach to alternative education accountability has evolved over time to better address the unique needs of schools serving students furthest from opportunity. The DASS was approved by the State Board of Education in 2017 to provide a more standardized and equitable framework for evaluating alternative schools. DASS incorporates alternative accountability indicators into the California School Dashboard for information purposes, ensuring that schools serving students furthest from educational opportunity are assessed using relevant and consistent measures.

The DASS framework is designed to acknowledge the distinct challenges faced by alternative schools, such as higher student mobility and diverse educational needs. By integrating alternative accountability indicators into the broader state accountability system (e.g., one-year graduation rate, stability rate), DASS seeks to provide a more accurate and fair assessment of alternative schools' performance, ultimately guiding improvements and supporting student success.

The California Department of Education (CDE) requested an accountability waiver in 2022 from the U.S. Department of Education to use one-year graduation rate and modified cut scores with their alternative schools. Their request was denied based on the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act. However, while federal law prohibits the use of DASS data for accountability, California Education Code Section 52052(d) continues to permit CDE reporting data separately for alternative schools for informational purposes.

[†]Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

Indiana

Alternative learning definition

Indiana Code § 20-30-8-6 defines alternative education as "an educational program for eligible students that instructs the eligible students in a different manner than the manner of instruction available in a traditional school setting." The program must also "comply with the rules that are adopted under IC 4-22-2 by the state board to govern alternative education programs and admission of eligible students to alternative education programs."

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: alternative classrooms, school-within-a-school programs, schools in districts, charter schools, private schools, community schools, virtual schools, second or "last chance" schools, adult high schools (though they are not considered within the state's definition of alternative education)

Operators: school districts/school operations

State governance: Alternatives in Indiana are generally governed by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE)

Number of alternative schools/programs

Approximately 28 adult high schools and over 300 approved alternative education programs.†

Student enrollment

There is not a clear picture of how many students are enrolled in alternative education in the state. There are 7,800 students in adult high schools.†

Student ages

Alternative programs are funded to serve students up to age 21, but districts can choose to enroll students who are over 21 without funding.

Student eligibility

According to Indiana Code § 20-30-8-10, to be eligible for an alternative education program or school, students must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Intends to withdraw or has withdrawn before graduation
- Has failed to comply academically and would benefit from instruction offered in a different manner from the traditional school
- Is a parent or expectant parent
- Is employed and employment is necessary for the support of the student or the student's immediate family
- Is a disruptive student

While placement is ultimately determined by the school, many programs consider student and parent input.

Funding

Alternative high schools in Indiana are funded through the state's per-pupil funding allocation (known as tuition support), supplemental grants, and, for charter schools in some districts, a mandated share of a district's local property tax.

Supplemental grants used by alternative high schools include:

Alternative Education Grants – offered by the IDOE to public schools that operate programs designed to meet the needs of students at risk of academic failure or who have withdrawn from school

Charter and Innovation Network School Grant – administered by the state board and provides $1,400 per student for virtual charter schools and adult high schools

Accountability

Currently, aside from adult high schools, Indiana alternative schools are subject to the same accountability measures as traditional schools. Schools receive a "report card" with the following datapoints to inform students and families:

- Performance on standardized testing
- Graduation rate
- Percentage of students who enrolled in and passed an Advanced Placement (AP) exam, an International Baccalaureate (IB) exam, a dual credit course, or a Cambridge International exam
- Per student funding

Indiana Code § 20-31-8 establishes alternative accountability provisions for adult high schools, including academic outcomes tailored to adult learners, industry certification, and post-graduation success.

*Indiana's accountability framework is currently under reconstruction. House Bill 1498 mandates that the state board develop a new grading methodology by December 2025.

Policy spotlight

The Alternative Education Grant program is a state initiative established in 1999 that provides schools in Indiana additional funding (up to $750.00 per FTE) to offer specialized services to students in grades 6–12 who face challenges to success in traditional settings. To qualify for this funding, students must meet one or more of the specific criteria provided under the "student eligibility" section above.

To receive this grant, approved programs must:

- Match at least a third of the grant amount through local expenditures on alternative education programs
- Operate a minimum of three consecutive hours per instructional day
- Maintain a student-to-teacher ratio of 15:1 or less
- Employ licensed teachers
- Develop individualized service plans (ISPs) for each student
- Have a clearly stated mission and discipline code

The program assists schools in implementing programs that align with students' unique needs. The grant focuses on evidence-based best practices including individualized support, small student-to-teacher ratios, and flexible learning environments that enhance the likelihood of academic success and high school graduation for at-risk students.

†Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

Kentucky

Alternative learning definition

Under Kentucky Revised Statutes 160.380(1)(b), an alternative education program (AEP) is: "a program that exists to meet the needs of students that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom setting but through the assignment of students to alternative classrooms, centers, or campuses that are designed to remediate academic performance, improve behavior, or provide an enhanced learning experience. Alternative education programs do not include career or technical centers or departments."

AEPs may be conducted either on site (within existing schools) or off site (in separate facilities).

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: programs in schools, virtual schools, programs operated by state agencies

Operators: school districts, Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children (KECSAC)

State governance: Alternatives in Kentucky are operated by the Office of Continuous Improvement and Support

Number of alternative schools/programs

154 programs in 2024–25.†

Student enrollment

19,941 students in 2024–25.†

Student ages

Alternative programs serve students ages 12–18.

Student eligibility

For district-operated alternative programs. While AEPs have historically been linked with at-risk students—many of whom thrive in these environments—they also serve a broad range of learners. This includes students in special education, those who are gifted and talented, adjudicated youth, individuals who have experienced abuse or neglect, students with disabilities, and others who may benefit from a non-traditional approach to learning.

For KECSAC-operated programs. Children housed in state agency facilities such as juvenile detention centers, treatment facilities, and residential group homes.

Funding

The Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK) funding formula is the primary mechanism for allocating state funds to local school districts, aiming to ensure equitable educational opportunities across the state. Established by the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990, SEEK is designed to balance disparities in local revenue-generating capacities by providing additional state support to districts with lower property wealth. Each district is guaranteed a base amount per student, calculated by multiplying the per-student amount by the district's Average Daily Attendance (ADA). Districts are required to contribute 30¢ per $100 of the assessed value of their taxable property, then the state covers the difference. Additional funds are also allocated from the state based on student need (English learners, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and students with disabilities), as well as a transportation amount based on analysis of transportation.

Accountability

Kentucky's accountability system includes indicators of postsecondary readiness and a five-year cohort graduation rate to recognize student persistence. Students enrolled in an AEP for a full academic year are attributed to the district they would have attended if not enrolled in the AEP. If a student is not enrolled in any accountable school or AEP for a full academic year but is enrolled in a district, they are assigned to that district for accountability purposes.

*At the time of writing, Kentucky is set to implement new accountability measures through the United We Learn initiative. Significantly, the indicators will fall into two categories: 1) local accountability indicators with options for local choice and 2) state accountability indicators that meet federal requirements and are required statewide. Impacts on alternative programming are yet to be determined.

Policy spotlight

Kentucky provides a range of innovative graduation pathways designed to offer students flexible, personalized learning experiences that reflect their individual interests, career aspirations, and academic readiness. These options aim to boost student engagement, lower dropout rates, and better equip graduates for success after high school. Key approaches include earning credit based on demonstrated mastery—rather than seat time—through methods like capstone projects, dual credit courses, and work-based learning opportunities.

While these flexibilities are offered to students in all schools, AEPs receive additional guidance from the department of education to implement these and other practices. The Persistence to Graduation practice brief from the Kentucky Department of Education emphasizes these flexibilities and highlights additional supports, such as providing smaller student-to-teacher ratios, maintaining high expectations for all learners, and fostering strong connections between AEPs and traditional schools to support student transitions.

To ensure these practices are implemented effectively, the Kentucky Department of Education uses the Alternative Education Program Quality Indicators Rubric. This evaluation tool is structured around three core domains—academic performance, learning environment, and efficiency—with each domain containing specific standards and indicators. The rubric helps schools assess program strengths and areas for improvement, guiding targeted enhancements and professional development efforts.

[†]Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

Michigan

Alternative learning definition

The Michigan Department of Education defines alternative education as "a separate, non-traditional program within a K–12 public school district or a public school academy established to provide personalized educational services for students who are at risk of not graduating with their class; and/or have individual needs not being met in a traditional setting." Additionally, "Alternative Education programs seek to provide added flexibility and alternative instructional models. These often include expanded services from the traditional setting such as online learning, institutional programs, counseling, childcare, and transportation; in an effort to help students overcome barriers and meet the goals of the Michigan Merit Curriculum."

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: schools in districts, virtual schools

Operators: school districts

State governance: Alternatives in Michigan are operated by the Michigan Department of Education

Number of alternative schools/programs

Approximately 200 to 275 programs in 2023–24.†

Student enrollment

Approximately 50,000 students in 2023–24.†

Student ages

Alternative programs serve students in high school up to age 22.

Student eligibility

Eligibility varies by district/school, but alternative high schools typically serve students who have specific needs not being met in a traditional setting or are at risk of not graduating with their class.

Funding

Michigan's alternative schools are funded through the same foundation allowance as traditional schools. This per-pupil allocation was set at $9,608 per student during the 2024 fiscal year. This funding is based on blended count days: a 90 percent fall count in October and a 10 percent spring count in February.

Alternative schools serving students who face unique challenges can supplement this funding with specific categorical funding programs:

- Section 31a At-Risk Funding. Provides additional resources to schools for students identified as at risk. It aims to improve attendance, literacy, and graduate rates. Funds are intended for instructional services and direct non-instructional services but cannot be used for administrative costs.
- Opportunity Index. Introduced to allocate additional funding to districts with higher concentration of poverty, this adjusts funding based on community needs, ensuring that schools in economically disadvantaged areas receive adequate support.
- Section 53a Special Education Funding. Provides full reimbursement for the added costs of operating special education programs for eligible students.

Accountability

The primary framework for school accountability is the Michigan School Index System, which assigns each school an overall index ranging from 0 to 100 based on key performance indicators including student growth, proficiency levels, graduation rates, closing achievement gaps, and college and career readiness.

Michigan's accountability model primarily focuses on traditional high schools, but it also includes provisions for alternative education programs. Alternative education schools are not exempt from identification for support categories but may receive different supports to acknowledge the different circumstances and need identified by the system.

Alternative high schools and programs are evaluated in the following ways:

Graduation rate. Alternative high schools are often judged by their ability to get students to graduate, which can be more difficult given the unique challenges their students may face. Some alternative programs may have different graduation rate benchmarks or longer timelines (e.g., five years instead of four).

Student growth. Like traditional high schools, alternative schools are evaluated based on how much their students progress academically over time. This ensures that even if students start behind, there is still an emphasis on improving their knowledge and skills.

Policy spotlight

To help schools implement the state's Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) in a more adaptable and student-centered way, the Michigan Department of Education created the Flexibility Guide. The guide provides options for personalizing how students can meet the MMC graduation requirements and allows schools to tailor education pathways to students' strengths and needs.

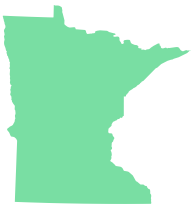
Key elements of the Flexibility Guide include:

- **Personal Curriculum.** The guide supports the use of a Personal Curriculum, which is a formal process that allows changes to certain MMC requirements based on a student's unique needs—such as credit recovery or career interests
- **Alternative credit structures.** Schools can offer non-traditional methods of earning credit, such as project-based learning, work-based learning, online classes, or performance assessments
- **Competency-based learning.** Instead of traditional seat-time requirements, the Flexibility Guide supports awarding credit based on demonstrated mastery of skills and knowledge, which benefits students who learn at different paces
- **Support for at-risk students.** The guide emphasizes strategies that help at-risk youth (including students who are behind in credits) to graduate by providing individualized instruction, flexible scheduling, and social-emotional support

With the support of the Flexibility Guide, Michigan's alternative high schools can customize graduation paths while ensuring students meet core academic standards, provide greater flexibility in how and when learning happens, use competency-based approaches to accelerate progress for students who may be behind, focus on credit recovery and re-engagement, and integrate career and technical education and real-world learning to align with students' future plans.

[†]Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

Minnesota



Alternative learning definition

Minnesota Statute 123A.05, Subdivision 1, defines the types of State-Approved Alternative Programs (SAAP) that Minnesota authorizes:

- "An **area learning center** is encouraged to cooperate with a service cooperative, an intermediate school district, a local education and employment transitions partnership, public and private secondary and postsecondary institutions, public agencies, businesses, and foundations. Except for a district located in a city of the first class, an area learning center must be established in cooperation with other districts and must serve the geographic area of at least two districts. An area learning center must provide comprehensive educational services to enrolled secondary students throughout the year, including a daytime school within a school or separate site for both high school and middle school level students.
- An **alternative learning program** may serve the students of one or more districts, may designate which grades are served, and may make program hours and a calendar optional.
- A **contract alternative** is an alternative learning program operated by a private organization that has contracted with a school district to provide educational services for students."

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: programs in schools, schools in districts

Operators: school districts

State governance: Alternatives in Minnesota are operated by the Minnesota Department of Education

Number of alternative schools/programs

235 Area Learning Centers, 50 Alternative Learning Programs, and 15 Contracted Alternatives during the 2023–24 school year.

Student enrollment

Nearly 160,000 students are served by alternative programs in K–12. There are approximately 50,000 students served in secondary alternative programs.[†]

Student ages

Alternative programs serve students through age 21 or until age 22 for qualifying students in specific student groups.

Student eligibility

A student is eligible if they:

- Perform substantially below the performance level for pupils of the same age in a locally determined achievement test
- Are behind in satisfactorily completing coursework or obtaining credits for graduation
- Are pregnant or are a parent
- Have been assessed as having substance use disorder
- Have been excluded or expelled according to sections 121A.40 to 121A.56
- Have been referred by a school district for enrollment in an eligible program or a program pursuant to section 124D.69
- Are a victim of physical or sexual abuse
- Have experienced mental health problems
- Have experienced homelessness sometime within six months before requesting a transfer to an eligible program
- Speak English as a second language or are an English learner
- Have withdrawn from school or have been chronically truant
- Are being treated in a hospital in the seven-county metropolitan area for cancer or other life threatening illness or are the sibling of an eligible pupil who is being currently treated and reside with the pupil's family at least 60 miles beyond the outside boundary of the seven-county metropolitan area

Funding

SAAPs are year-round programs funded with General Education Revenue according to their Average Daily Membership (ADM). This ADM calculation is based on the number of instructional hours a student participates in, including both teacher contact time and independent study time. Students enrolled in an SAAP may generate an additional .20 ADM during after-school and summer extended time programs.

Accountability

Minnesota's North Star Accountability System evaluates school performance using five main indicators: academic achievement, academic progress, English language proficiency progress, graduation rates, and consistent attendance. Districts are identified for support based on the

percentage of schools identified for comprehensive or targeted supports. SAAPs can then receive support through coordination with their linked schools (where schools draw 30 percent or more of their students).

Policy spotlight

Established in 1987, SAAPs provide options for students in Minnesota who are experiencing difficulties in the traditional educational system. Key features of the program include:

- Requirement to collaborate with postsecondary institutions, interagency collaboratives, culturally based organizations, mutual assistance associations, and other community resources, businesses, and public agencies to coordinate the use of other available educational services, social services, and health services in the community and services area in order to provide comprehensive student supports. Programs are also encouraged to help facilitate students' individualized pathways through vocational training and work-based learning opportunities
- Targeted support for marginalized students in grades K–8 to reduce disparities in educational access and success.
- Year-round education and flexible schedules to meet students' unique needs.
- Extended time revenue for districts to support students enrolled in alternative programs. The additional instructional time afforded by this funding is particularly beneficial for students who need more personalized attention.

[†]Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

Oregon

Alternative learning definition

Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 336.615 defines an alternative education program as "a school or separate class group designed to best serve students' educational needs and interests and assist students in achieving the academic standards of the school district and the state."

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: programs in schools, schools in districts, private schools, community schools, virtual schools

Operators: districts, nonprofit organizations, private entities

State governance: Alternatives in Oregon are operated by the Oregon Department of Education

Number of alternative schools/programs

Oregon had 32 private and 40 public alternative schools in 2024–25.†

Student enrollment

There were approximately 5,147 students enrolled in 2024–25; however, this does not include 24 public alternative programs that are invisible to ODE because of reporting rules.†

Student ages

Alternative programs serve students through age 21 or high school diploma.

Student eligibility

Parents or guardians may enroll a student in a public or private alternative education program if:

- The enrollment is necessary to meet the student's educational needs and interests
- The program is appropriate and accessible to the student
- For a program in a school district in which the student is a resident, the resident school district approves the enrollment
- For a program in a school district in which the student is not a resident, the resident school district and the attending school district approve the enrollment
- For a private alternative education program, the program is registered with the Oregon Department of Education

Funding

Oregon calculates Per Pupil Net Operating Expenditure (PPNOE) by dividing total district revenue by the weighted student count. To account for increased support needs, students who are pregnant, parenting, or receiving special education services are counted as two full-time students in the formula, doubling their funding weight.

School districts that contract with private alternative education providers must fund these programs at the greater of 80 percent of the district's PPNOE or the actual documented cost of serving the individual student.

A student enrolled in an alternative education program is considered enrolled in the schools of the district offering the program for purposes of the distribution of the State School Fund. An alternative education program that is offered to a student who is not a resident of the school district may bill tuition to the school district where the student is a resident.

Accountability

Oregon's school accountability system evaluates schools using a variety of indicators including academic achievement, student growth, graduation rates, chronic absenteeism, English learner progress, and grade 9 on-track data. According to Oregon Administrative Rule 581-022-2505, school districts are required to adopt policies and procedures for the approval and annual evaluation of both public and private alternative education programs receiving public funds. However, there is no accounting for a school's alternative status in state accountability reporting, and the four-year cohort graduation rate of students in these programs is attributed back to their "most recently accountable high school."

Policy spotlight

Oregon recognizes that districts cannot always meet the needs of all students, so they allow for community-based organizations to fill gaps in services (ORS 336.631). Parents/guardians can enroll their child in a public or private alternative education program if it meets the student's educational needs and interests and the program is appropriate and accessible. Additionally, those community-based organizations are not required to have all teachers appropriately certified, allowing for staffing that is more flexible and more likely to mirror the demographics of the student population (ORS 336.635). Contracts with private programs must be included in the school district's effectiveness assessment (ORS 329.085), ensuring oversight and quality control.

†Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

Rhode Island

Alternative learning definition

Rhode Island does not currently have a formal definition of alternative education. However, statute § 16-21-27 mandates that "each school district shall adopt a plan to ensure continued education of students who are removed from the classroom because of a suspension of more than ten (10) days or who are chronically truant. The plan shall be adopted by the school committee and shall be submitted to Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as part of its annual strategic plan submission."

Alternative school/program structure

Formats: programs in schools, schools in districts, adult high schools/transition programs

Operators: districts

State governance: Alternatives in Rhode Island are operated by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE)

Number of alternative schools/programs

Two programs self-identified as alternative schools ("Skip" Nowell Academy and Chariho Alternative Learning Academy).

With a clearer definition of alternative education, many more schools throughout the state might be identified as alternatives, but the state does not currently have a formal metric.[†]

Student enrollment

Approximately 300 students are enrolled in the two self-identified alternative schools.

Student ages

Alternative programs generally serve students to age 22.

Student eligibility

Eligibility for alternative education varies by program. Most programs enroll students who have faced challenges such as academic difficulties or behavioral issues that have impeded their success in traditional school settings.

Funding

Rhode Island's weighted student funding formula allocates state education funds based on factors including student enrollment, student needs (e.g., those requiring special education or English language services), and the local community's ability to contribute through property taxes. As part of the state's Basic Education Plan (BEP), local education agencies must submit detailed budgets to RIDE for annual review to ensure appropriate allocation of funds in alignment with district needs.

While the BEP includes provisions for additional funding for "educationally disadvantaged students" (defined as students whose educational readiness or achievement is below average for their age or grade level), disparities in funding remain for lower income districts who are not able to generate as much revenue.

Accountability

Rhode Island uses the Comprehensive School Profile (CSP) to assess schools annually. The CSP combines multiple indicators, including:

- Performance on state assessments
- Student growth
- Graduation rate (four-year or extended cohorts)
- College and career readiness (participation and performance in AP, dual enrollment, and career and technical education)
- Chronic absenteeism
- School climate

Schools are categorized into different levels based on their performance, which guides supports they receive from RIDE.

Policy spotlight

Rhode Island's Alternative Learning Plan (ALP) is a policy that empowers alternative high schools to provide customized, flexible, and equitable education to students who might otherwise be at risk of falling through the cracks of the traditional education system. ALPs allow alternative programs to:

- Provide flexible learning opportunities where students can learn at their own pace and through various modalities, such as online courses or hands-on internships
- Support re-engagement by allowing students to remain in school and continue working toward graduation, even if they have faced significant academic or behavioral challenges
- Facilitate transitions for students returning from juvenile facilities or students who have been out of school

- Address diverse needs, recognizing that students have varied learning styles and life circumstances
- Implement creative and effective strategies for preparing students for college and careers

[†]Information provided by State Action Collaborative members.

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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] Education Northwest used the Policy Change Process Model developed by the Oregon Health Authority to guide our technical assistance.

[2] These profiles capture a snapshot in time. Many of these policies are undergoing revision at the time of writing.