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WHITE PAPER • PART ONE OF TWO

Rethinking Accountability for Alternative Education

Why Traditional Metrics Fail Alternative Schools

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RESEARCH AND
POLICY TEAM

A WHITE PAPER SERIES · PART ONE OF TWO

Rethinking Accountability for Alternative Education

Why Traditional Metrics Fail and What Should Replace Them

STUDY DIRECTOR**Laura-Lee Manley, M.A.**

SVP, Policy Strategy · Acceleration Academies

AUTHOR**Acceleration Academies**

Research & Policy Team

STUDY DESIGN**Sarah Campbell**

VP of Marketing · Acceleration Academies

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This white paper was prepared to support policy leaders in understanding why different accountability systems are needed for alternative schools and what dimensions those systems should measure. It is intended to inform policy discussions and support evidence-based reform efforts.

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DISCLAIMER

The contents of this white paper are provided for informational purposes. All information, data, and statements herein are based on available research, interviews, and records as of July 2026, and are presented in good faith.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Designing Fair and Meaningful Performance Frameworks

Alternative education serves students who have fallen off traditional academic pathways due to credit deficiencies, inconsistent attendance, work or caregiving responsibilities, or trauma. These programs create second-chance opportunities for youth who might otherwise drop out permanently. Unfortunately, many traditional state accountability systems consistently misrepresent their performance and impact, labeling as “failures” the very schools that successfully re-engage the most vulnerable students (GAO, 2020).

This white paper makes two core arguments:

1

THE FLAW

Traditional accountability models are **fundamentally flawed** for alternative schools because they ignore the unique populations these programs serve and penalize schools for accepting the most challenging students (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017).

2

THE FIX

A rational framework must **measure what actually matters**: extended graduation timelines, academic growth from low baselines, re-engagement and persistence, multiple pathways to credentials, and preparation for adult life (Rumberger et al., 2017; Ohio Department of Education, 2025).

Drawing on research evidence and emerging state practices, this paper proposes key dimensions for an alternative education accountability system that balances rigor with relevance. The stakes are high: poorly designed accountability not only obscures real performance but creates unintended incentives that can deny at-risk students access to the programs designed to serve them (Lehr et al., 2009).

● KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

68%



of alternative high schools graduate fewer than 60% in four years vs. just 6% of traditional schools (GAO, 2020)

30%



of the lowest-graduation-rate schools are alternative — though they're just 6% of all high schools

10+



states now use extended 5–8 year graduation rates and alternative frameworks

“Different” does not mean “less.”



Rigorous, mission-aligned accountability is both possible and necessary (Gross & Hill, 2016)

INTRODUCTION

The Alternative Education Mission

Alternative high schools and dropout-recovery programs serve a unique and critical student population.

These schools typically enroll students who have fallen off traditional academic pathways due to credit deficiencies, inconsistent attendance, work or caregiving responsibilities, high mobility, or trauma. Many enrollees are over-age and under-credited youth who have struggled in conventional schools (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017).



Programming

Alternative programs use flexible scheduling, competency-based credits, and wraparound supports to re-engage students who might otherwise drop out permanently. Such programs can be life-changing for at-risk students, creating second-chance opportunities for youth to earn a diploma or credential (Moore, 2016). Standard state accountability systems often fail to recognize this value and instead systematically misrepresent the performance and impact of alternative schools (GAO, 2020; NAPCS, 2023).

Accountability

Standard state accountability systems, largely designed for comprehensive high schools serving stable cohorts of students, tend to penalize alternative education settings because they do not account for the unique challenges and mission of these programs (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; GAO, 2020). Conventional metrics like four-year graduation rates and standardized test proficiency rates paint alternative schools as low-performing without context, potentially discouraging innovation, and undermining their mission.

INTRODUCTION · THE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION MISSION

Purpose and Scope

This white paper examines two critical questions:

- 1 Why are traditional accountability models **inappropriate** for alternative schools, given their student population and purpose?
- 2 What outcome dimensions should a rational accountability system **measure** to meaningfully evaluate alternative program success?

The discussion draws on research evidence and emerging state practices to propose a framework that balances rigor with relevance in holding alternative schools accountable (Rumberger et al., 2017; Ohio Department of Education, 2025).

While focused on alternative high schools and dropout-recovery programs, the principles outlined are broadly applicable to any educational setting serving over-aged, under-credited, or otherwise at-risk youth.

THE BALANCED LEARNING FRAMEWORK





01

PART ONE

Why Traditional Accountability Models Fail Alternative Schools

- 1.1 The Unique Populations and Missions of Alternative Schools
- 1.2 Misaligned Metrics and Systematic Penalization
- 1.3 Unintended Consequences and Unrecognized Successes
- 1.4 The Case for Reform

1.1 The Unique Populations and Missions of Alternative Schools

Alternative schools were created to address the needs of students who are not well-served by regular high schools.

By definition, an alternative school is “a public school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school program” (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017, p. 6). Students in alternative education often have one or more “at-risk” characteristics:

- Over-age for their grade level
- Previously dropped out of school
- Chronic absenteeism history
- Behavioral challenges or disciplinary removals
- Involvement with the juvenile justice system
- Teen parenthood or caregiver responsibilities
- Working to contribute earnings to the family
- Severe credit deficiency
- Mental health needs or trauma that interrupted education

35%



OF STUDENTS ARE
BEHIND IN CREDITS IN
ALT-ED SCHOOLS

In a national survey of alternative schools, approximately 35% of students were behind in credits and a significant proportion had experienced discipline or justice system involvement (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; NAPCS, 2023).

Many also face socioeconomic hardships that compound their educational challenges. These circumstances mean that alternative school students start far from traditional academic benchmarks.

Re-engaging youth requires intensive support

Research on dropout prevention underscores that re-engaging such youth requires intensive support (Rumberger et al., 2017). Effective programs provide early warning systems, case management, and personalized interventions to address both academic and non-academic needs. Schools monitor attendance, behavior, and course performance continuously and intervene as soon as a student shows signs of falling off track (Rumberger et al., 2017). Students often receive extra academic help — tutoring and double-dose literacy and math instruction — alongside social support such as counseling, mentoring, childcare assistance, and transportation.

The mission of alternative schools is fundamentally about re-engagement and recovery, not a seamless four-year progression to graduation.

Success for these programs might mean helping a young adult who is two or more years behind to stay in school, make progress toward a diploma or GED, and develop life skills — all outcomes that cannot be captured by a single test score or four-year graduation metric.

Because of these differences, alternative schools often operate using nontraditional educational models. They may offer flexible scheduling (evening classes, year-round enrollment, self-paced credit accrual), competency-based learning, smaller class sizes, and career-oriented programming. Many partner with community organizations to provide wraparound services like job training or counseling (Osher et al., 2020).

The ultimate goal is to remove the barriers that prevented students from thriving in traditional schools and put them on a path to a high school credential and post-secondary opportunities. Alternative schools fill an essential niche in the K-12 system by serving learners who would otherwise be left behind. **Any accountability system must therefore consider the distinct starting points and growth trajectories of these students to fairly evaluate school performance** (Lehr et al., 2009).

1.2 Misaligned Metrics and Systematic Penalization

Most state accountability systems historically applied the same metrics and targets to alternative schools as to traditional schools.

This one-size-fits-all approach is problematic (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; GAO, 2020). Key accountability indicators are often misaligned with the reality of alternative schools and unfairly penalize them (GAO, 2020). While only 1-3% of public school students attend alternative education programs at any given time (NCES, 2022), alternative high schools comprise 6% of all public high schools. Additionally, alternative high schools represent roughly 30% of the nation's high schools with the lowest graduation rates, a key accountability indicator often used by states to identify schools as "failing" or needs "comprehensive support" status (ECS, 2018).

TRADITIONAL METRIC	ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL REALITY	THE PROBLEM
Four-Year Graduation Rate	68% of alternative schools graduate <60% in four years (vs. 6% of traditional schools)	Most students need five to eight years; measuring at four years captures failure, not progress
Test Proficiency	Only 14% have ≥20% math proficiency (vs. 79% of traditional schools)	Students enter years behind; growth from fifth- to eighth-grade level = success, but goes unmeasured
Attendance Rates	High chronic absenteeism upon entry	Improvement from 40% to 70% attendance = major win, but raw rates look “failing”
Cohort Stability	High mid-year enrollment, designed transitions	Students entering and exiting throughout the year creates volatility for which metrics don't account

Adapted from: GAO (2020)

The Four-Year Graduation Rate Problem

The four-year graduation rate is a cornerstone of school accountability under federal law. However, applying a strict four-year timeline to alternative high schools makes the rating a function of who enrolls rather than what the school does, because most of their students require more than four years to graduate. Many alternative students enroll after having already dropped out once or fallen multiple years behind (GAO, 2020).

National data reveal the systematic nature of this problem:

- In 2015–16, **68% of alternative high schools** had a four-year graduation rate below 60%, whereas only 6% of non-alternative high schools fell below this threshold (GAO, 2020)
- Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), any high school graduating fewer than approximately **67% of its students** in four years is flagged for intervention
- By this criterion, the majority of alternative high schools nationwide would be labeled as **failing schools** (GAO, 2020)

5–8
YEARS MANY ALT-ED
STUDENTS NEED TO
GRADUATE

A success story for the student,
but the standard four-year metric
deems it a failure.

This is not because alternative schools do a worse job educating students; it is because their students' schooling has been interrupted and extended. Many of these students will graduate in five, six, or even eight years — a success story for the student, but the standard metric deems it a failure.

Conventional graduation-rate accountability “may actually disincentivize schools from enrolling dropouts or credit-deficient students, since doing so hurts their reported rates.”

— Lehr et al. (2009), p. 26

In summary, the four-year clock is a poor fit for schools designed to give students a second chance at graduating.

The Test Proficiency Trap

Similar issues arise with test-based performance measures. Students in alternative high schools often enter with significant academic skill gaps — sometimes reading or performing math at elementary-school levels despite being teenagers. Expecting them to score “proficient” on grade-level state assessments within a short time is unrealistic (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Federal data confirm that academic proficiency rates in alternative high schools are extremely low. According to a GAO (2020) analysis, in 2015–16 most alternative high schools reported fewer than 20% of their students scoring proficient in reading/language arts and math:

- Only **14% of alternative high schools** had $\geq 20\%$ of students proficient in math, compared to **79% of traditional high schools**
- The vast majority of alternative campuses had proficiency rates below 20%

14%

**ALT-ED HIGH SCHOOLS WITH
 $\geq 20\%$ MATH PROFICIENCY**

79%

**TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS, SAME
MEASURE**

A student who enters reading at a fifth-grade level and improves to an eighth-grade level in one year has made tremendous progress — even if they still fall short of the tenth-grade “proficient” standard.

While low test scores certainly indicate the need to improve instruction, using raw proficiency as the sole metric fails to credit the academic growth that alternative-school students often achieve from a very low baseline (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Traditional frameworks that focus on status measures (percent proficient) ignore this growth and thereby undervalue schools that are successfully closing gaps for severely behind students.

Attendance and Stability Challenges

Many state systems also evaluate schools on attendance (average daily attendance or chronic-absenteeism rates) and on student retention or cohort outcomes. Alternative schools face contextual challenges here as well (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017).

Their students often have a history of chronic absenteeism — sometimes the very reason they transferred to an alternative program — stemming from difficult life circumstances including housing insecurity, work obligations, illness, or family responsibilities. Expecting immediate full attendance can be impractical.

Moreover, alternative schools experience high student mobility and mid-year enrollments, as they commonly accept students throughout the year who have dropped out elsewhere. This makes it difficult to compare their attendance rates to a traditional school with a stable cohort.

Additionally, some alternative programs are designed as short-term interventions or transitional programs (e.g., 6–12 month credit-recovery academies or behavior-intervention centers). By design, students may only stay until they catch up or stabilize, then return to a traditional school or graduate early. Standard accountability systems often lack mechanisms to account for these positive but non-linear trajectories (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017). They might count a student who exits to transfer back to a regular school as a negative outcome — even if that was the program's goal.

40% → 70%



**A REALISTIC
ATTENDANCE WIN**

Moving a student from 40% to 70% attendance is a major success — yet raw rates still look like “chronic absenteeism.”

This reflects a broader issue: **alternative schools' success is often measured in individualized, incremental gains that blunt, cohort-based accountability metrics simply don't capture** (Altschuler & Schak, 2019).

1.3 Unintended Consequences and Unrecognized Successes

Applying traditional accountability models to alternative schools not only paints an inaccurate picture — it leads to harmful unintended consequences.

Three ways traditional accountability harms alternative schools:

1

Disproportionate “failing” labels

- Virtually all alternative schools fall into the bottom 5% when ranked with traditional schools
- Schools serving the highest-need students are more likely to face sanctions, regardless of instructional quality

2

Unintended negative impacts

- Traditional schools hesitate to refer struggling students (transferring to a non-diploma program hurts their graduation rate)
- Alternative schools feel pressure to exclude the most behind students — contradicting their mission
- Creates barriers to access for the students who need these programs most

3

Invisible successes

- Re-engaging 50 dropouts and guiding them to GEDs over 6 years = labeled “failing”
- Improving a student from fifth- to eighth-grade reading level = not measured
- Moving attendance from 40% to 70% = still looks like “chronic absenteeism”
- Job certifications, workforce entry, life-skills development = not counted

1 Disproportionate Identification as “Failing”

Because of the factors discussed — low four-year graduation rates and low proficiency — alternative schools are far more likely to be identified as low-performing under state and federal accountability criteria. **By ESSA rules, states must identify the bottom 5% of schools for comprehensive support. If alternative and traditional schools are ranked together, virtually all alternative high schools could fall in the bottom tier (GAO, 2020).**

Recognizing this problem, some states like Idaho have begun separating alternative schools in accountability rankings to avoid unfair comparisons (GAO, 2020). Without such differentiation, alternative schools may face sanctions or stigma primarily because of the high-need students they serve, not because of poor quality. This misidentification diverts attention and resources in unhelpful ways.

2 Unintended Consequences for At-Risk Students

When accountability systems do not take student context into consideration, schools may feel pressured to game the system in ways that harm at-risk students. Under a rigid accountability structure:

- A regular high school might be reluctant to refer a struggling student to an alternative program if that student would then count as a non-graduate in the cohort (since transferring to a non-diploma program hurts the school’s graduation rate)
- Alternative schools themselves could feel incentivized to exclude the most academically behind or challenging students to improve their metrics — which is completely at odds with their mission

These unintended incentives were observed under No Child Left Behind, when some schools found ways to systematically transfer out low-performing students (Ravitch, 2010).

A poorly designed accountability system can undermine open access to alternative education for the students who need it most (Lehr et al., 2009).

3 Undervaluing Critical Outcomes

Perhaps the most significant consequence is that the true successes of alternative schools go unrecognized. State accountability frameworks tend to focus narrowly on academic metrics (test scores, graduation rates). But alternative programs often achieve success in forms like:

- Re-engaging a young person in school after months or years of disconnection
- Improving attendance and behavior
- Helping students earn intermediate credentials (GEDs, job certifications)
- Preparing students for employment and independent living



These outcomes typically do not show up in state report cards. For example, a dropout-recovery school might have a low four-year graduation rate, but if it manages to re-enroll 50 former dropouts and guide them to diplomas or GEDs over several years, it is making a profound contribution to both students' lives and the community (Osher et al., 2020). Traditional models typically do not count GED completion or successful workforce entry as indicators of school performance — whereas from an alternative-education perspective, those are significant positive outcomes.

Research consistently shows that alternative schools play a critical role in re-engaging disconnected youth (Urban Institute, 2022). However, conventional accountability models remain poorly aligned to this mission, relying on indicators that fail to capture re-engagement, persistence, and incremental progress (Almeida & Steinberg, 2017; Rice & Malen, 2017). As a result, alternative schools may be labeled low-performing **despite evidence of meaningful student growth** — a disconnect that can undermine morale among educators and students working under markedly different conditions.

1.4 The Case for Reform

Holding alternative schools to the exact same accountability yardstick as traditional schools is neither fair nor useful.

It obscures real performance — both strengths and weaknesses — and can punish schools that take on the hardest-to-educate students. As the Ohio Department of Education (2025) stated when developing separate accountability for dropout-recovery schools:

“Traditional report cards do not accurately reflect the quality or progress of schools designed for credit-deficient and at-risk students.”

Ohio Department of Education (2025)

Dropout Prevention & Recovery report card guidance, p. 2

THE PATH FORWARD

There is a clear need for accountability done differently for alternative education — one that respects the different starting point of these students and measures the outcomes that truly matter for their success.

Part Two of this series applies these principles to practice, examining state accountability frameworks and the cross-state lessons they offer for alternative education reform. Each model illustrates different approaches to measuring success for over-aged and under-credited students, balancing rigor, flexibility, and data validity.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

A two-part examination of accountability reform

THE SERIES

This white paper is the first in a two-part series examining accountability reform for alternative education.

The second paper will provide detailed, evidence-based accountability recommendations and guidance for alternative providers, states, and districts.

PART I • YOU ARE HERE

**Why Traditional Metrics Fail
Alternative Schools**

PART II • COMING NEXT

**Toward a Rational Accountability
System — recommendations for
providers, states, and districts**

Acknowledgments

This white paper draws on extensive research and policy analysis conducted by leading scholars and practitioners in alternative education. We are particularly grateful to the state education agencies pioneering work to develop more appropriate accountability frameworks for alternative schools. Their innovations provide invaluable models for other states to follow.

We also acknowledge the contributions of the U.S. Government Accountability Office, whose comprehensive 2020 report on alternative school accountability informed much of this analysis, and the numerous researchers, educators, and policy experts whose work is cited throughout this document.

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