

# EQUITY ALERT: HOLDING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS, DISTRICTS, AND COUNTY OFFICES ACCOUNTABLE FOR ALL STUDENTS' SUCCESS



The Education Trust–West

Alternative schools provide a flexible educational option for students who have unique needs. Generally, students in alternative schools are behind in credits, are pregnant or parenting, have behavior challenges, and/or are involved in the juvenile justice system.<sup>1</sup> While students in alternative schools tend to be among the most underserved in the education system, these schools have received the least amount of attention when it comes to school, district, and county office of education (COE) accountability. This lack of attention is significant, considering alternative schools serve 10 percent of California's 10th through 12th graders.<sup>2</sup> Up until now, the state's general approach to accountability has not provided relevant ways to measure how alternative schools are doing.

Since 2017, the California Department of Education (CDE) and the State Board of Education (SBE) have been developing ways to incorporate California's alternative schools into the [California School Dashboard](#), the centerpiece of the state's COE, district, and school accountability system. In the fall of 2018 the SBE will implement the first alternative school-specific indicator, a modified graduation rate, into the Dashboard.

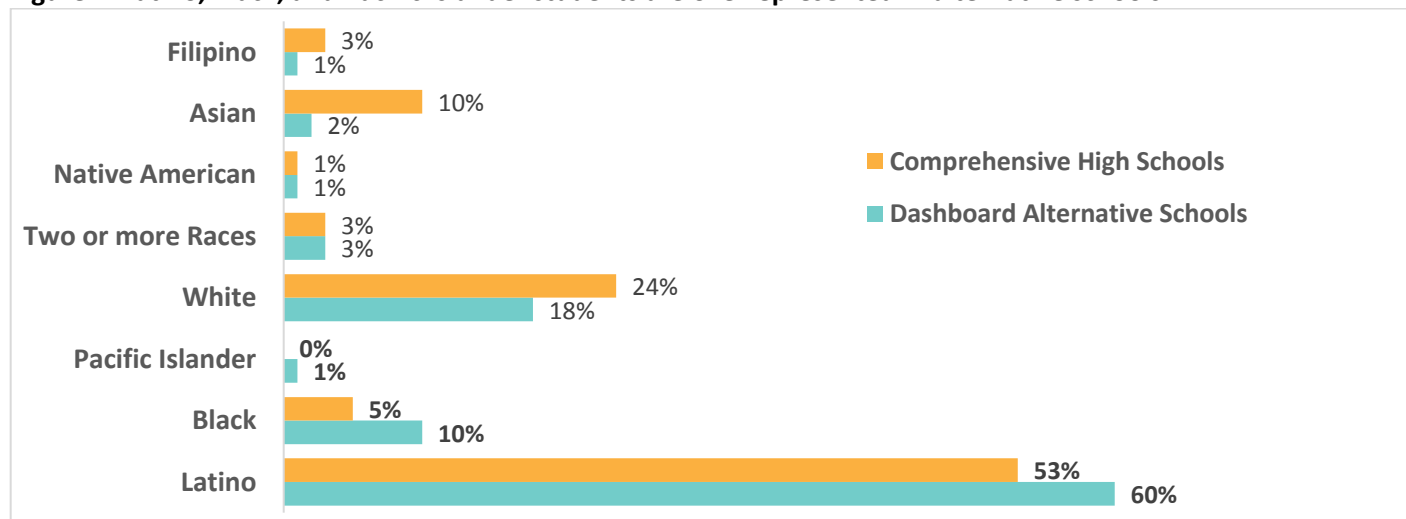
In order to ensure that alternative schools are a part of the system that holds COEs, districts, and schools accountable for fostering educational success in their students, the state must include more indicators that are meaningful measures of alternative school success.

This Equity Alert explains why alternative school accountability is important for equity. It also describes what state leaders have already done to incorporate alternative schools into the accountability system, further steps they can take to provide meaningful accountability for alternative schools, and what stakeholders can do to weigh in as education leaders continue to develop and implement alternative school accountability.

## ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS SERVE A DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH NUMBER OF MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

Education leaders and stakeholders must consider whether alternative schools are adequately meeting the needs of their students. This is particularly critical to equity since Latino, Black, Pacific Islander, and low-income students are overrepresented in alternative schools.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 1.) As such, alternative schools are key to closing racial and socio-economic equity gaps. Moreover, students who are particularly vulnerable— for example students who have experienced violence within or outside of school, or foster youth<sup>4</sup> – are more likely to be served by alternative schools.

**Figure 1: Latino, Black, and Pacific Islander students are overrepresented in alternative schools<sup>5</sup>**



Not only do students in alternative schools have unique needs, they are also less likely to finish high school. Indeed, only about 37 percent of students in alternative schools complete high school in four years.<sup>6</sup> A significant contributing factor to this low completion rate is that students in alternative schools are highly mobile – they usually attend the same school for less than a year.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, to address the needs of students who don't complete, the state must prioritize the success of students in alternative schools.

## INCORPORATING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS INTO THE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

The state's accountability system tracks how well schools, districts, and COEs are doing at providing quality, equitable educational opportunities to California's students, using indicators that measure different aspects of student success. It also provides the supports that schools, districts, and COEs need to do this important work. It is crucial that the state not limit the opportunities of students in alternative schools by leaving these sites out of the accountability system. There has been no meaningful state accountability for alternative schools for the past eight years. Previously, the Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) provided alternative school-specific measures beginning in 1999, but participation in this system was voluntary and it was suspended in the 2010-11 school year. When the CDE launched the California School Dashboard in 2017, the webpages for alternative schools were left empty. This is because the indicators currently included in the Dashboard don't accurately capture how well alternative schools are serving their students and the state did not initially address the outcomes expected of alternative schools.

Alternative schools will have Dashboard pages complete with indicators for the first time in December 2018 as part of the Dashboard Alternative School Status, or DASS, dashboard-based accountability program for alternative schools. The DASS indicators will be slightly different from those for comprehensive California high schools.

**Figure 2: Alternative and Comprehensive High School Dashboard Indicators**

High School Dashboard Indicators				
Indicator	2017		2018	
	Alternative Schools	Comprehensive High Schools	Alternative Schools	Comprehensive High Schools
Chronic Absenteeism	✗	✗	✗	✗
Suspension Rate	✗	✓	✓	✓
English Learner Progress	✗	✓	✗	✗
Graduation Rate	✗	✓ 4 year Cohort	✓ 1 year Cohort*	✓ 4 year Cohort
College & Career	✗	✓	✓ (Alternative-specific changes planned)*	✓

✓ Means the indicator is or will be available.

✗ Means the Indicator is not or will not be available.

\* Means that the indicator is modified for alternative schools.

Alternative schools will have many of the same measures on the Dashboard as comprehensive high schools. (See Figure 2.) However, there are differences in two indicators -- the Graduation Rate and the College & Career Indicators. In the following section, we highlight what works and share our equity concerns for each indicator.

- 1. Graduation Rate Indicator.** While traditional high schools are held accountable for the percentage of freshmen who receive diplomas four years later (called the four-year cohort graduation rate), alternative high schools will be held accountable for one-year graduation rates. Using a four-year graduation rate for alternative schools isn't a feasible measure because the majority of alternative school students will graduate in more than four years since they likely entered an alternative school to make up credits. To measure whether alternative schools are supporting students in finishing high school, the one-year graduation rate first identifies students classified as 11th or 12th graders, and then determines the percentage of these students that finish high school within one year.

**What works with this indicator:** The shift from a four-year to a one-year graduation rate ensures a more meaningful measure for alternative schools. This will allow stakeholders to better understand how well alternative schools are supporting their students in completing the coursework necessary to graduate.

**Equity concerns:** Since districts and COEs don't have standard graduation requirements across the state, alternative schools often have less rigorous graduation requirements than comprehensive high schools. These differing requirements may incentivize districts to move students from comprehensive high schools to alternative high schools. Alternative schools may be the best option for some students, but the one-year graduation rate shouldn't encourage districts to transfer students if those students would benefit from staying in comprehensive high schools. Also, the one-year graduation rate may misrepresent the effectiveness of certain types of alternative schools, such as dropout recovery schools, due to their unique purposes and missions.

We appreciate that CDE staff plan to monitor transfer patterns from comprehensive to alternative schools after the state implements the one-year graduation rate to observe any changes in the trends of students moving to alternative schools. We hope that the CDE makes this information public so that stakeholders are aware of the effects of the one-year graduation rate and can be fully equipped to weigh in on possible solutions if needed.

- 2. College/Career Indicator.** This indicator is a composite of several measures that indicate a student's preparedness for college or career, including things like Smarter Balanced tests, Advanced Placement (AP) Exams, completion of the course sequence necessary to be eligible for California's four-year colleges or universities (A-G courses), and completion of a Career Technical Education Pathway. State leaders plan to begin collecting and adding more measures to this indicator in 2018 and subsequent years. Some of these additional measures are specific to alternative schools, such as Exploratory Work Experience, a Workforce Readiness Certificate, or completion of a Pre-Apprenticeship Program.

**What works with this indicator:** Adding alternative school-specific measures to the College/Career Indicator will make it a more useful tool in determining how well alternative schools are preparing their students for life after high school.

**Equity concerns:** While leaders have proposed alternative work preparation measures for this indicator, they haven't done the same for academic measures. Although they could, alternative schools typically don't offer college preparation options like AP or A-G courses. State education leaders should address the need to make more academically rigorous coursework available to students in alternative schools. The CDE and SBE should consult with practitioners, researchers, advocates, and other experts in order to identify additional ways in which academic progress and proficiency could be measured and reported for alternative schools through the Dashboard.

## FURTHER STEPS THE STATE CAN TAKE FOR MEANINGFUL ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

The addition of alternative school-specific indicators into the Dashboard is a significant step forward. Still, decision makers can take more action to ensure that systems of accountability and support for alternative schools are tailored to how these schools operate. We recommend the following next steps:

1. **Continue momentum in incorporating alternative school-specific measures into the Dashboard.** The state has made progress in incorporating alternative schools into the accountability system; however, there is much more to be done. Here are a few more steps state leaders can take in developing more alternative school-specific measures:
  - a. Add a Credit Attainment Measure. A credit attainment measure would determine how well an alternative school supports its students in gaining credits toward graduation. While the one-year graduation rate will show how many students in alternative schools are completing, it is also important to know how well students are advancing toward completion. This measure could rate schools on whether students are gaining the number of credits they need to remain on track to graduate over a certain period of time.
  - b. Add a Successful Transitions Measure. Often alternative school students age out of the education system before they are able to complete high school. Our accountability system should track and recognize when alternative schools support their students in transitioning to other programs where they can continue their education, such as adult school and community college.
  - c. Clearly Identify Teacher Misassignments. While districts and COEs are required to report whether they are providing basic services -- like up-to-date materials, facilities in good repair, and properly assigned teachers -- alternative schools are more likely to have teachers without appropriate credentials when compared with traditional schools. Districts and COEs should be required to report whether there are properly assigned teachers *by school* within the district or COE. This will reveal whether there are particular schools, including alternative schools, that require greater support in recruiting, retaining, and appropriately placing effective and qualified teachers.
2. **Provide Alternative School-Specific Support Where Necessary.** As the state continues to develop its system for supporting struggling schools, districts, and COEs, decision makers cannot overlook alternative schools. Education leaders and stakeholders, as well as COEs and districts that oversee alternative schools, must be mindful of the ways this system will provide tailored support to alternative schools. The SBE and CDE should provide a clear plan explaining how districts and COEs will provide support to alternative schools identified for assistance.

## How Can You Get Engaged?

- The California State Board of Education is the governing body making significant decisions about alternative school accountability. Share your ideas about what you'd like to see with alternative school accountability by writing letters or testifying at a State Board of Education meeting. You can access their meeting minutes, agendas, and watch meetings live, at [www.cde.ca.gov/be/](http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/).
- Ask your local district and COE leaders and school board members how your local alternative schools are doing. Ask them to explain how decisions are made about which students attend alternative schools, how they measure progress, and how they help students graduate.
- Make sure your district's and/or COE's Local Control and Accountability Plan, or LCAP addresses the unique needs of alternative schools and the students attending those schools.
- Share stories of what's happening in alternative schools by talking with your representatives and groups like ours.
- Share this Equity Alert with your colleagues, friends, and other equity champions in your community.
- Attend the Reaching At Promise Students Association's Alternative Accountability Policy Forum in November 2018. This conference is a great place to learn more about the policy and practice issues facing alternative schools and draws a strong network of practitioners and leaders who firmly believe in the ability of students in alternative schools to succeed. You can learn more about this conference by visiting [www.alternativeaccountabilityforum.org/](http://www.alternativeaccountabilityforum.org/).
- Join Ed Trust–West's email list to receive updates, resources, and learn more about alternative schools, California's accountability system, and other equity issues: [www.edtrustwest.org/join](http://www.edtrustwest.org/join).
- Share this Equity Alert on social media using the hashtag #AltEd and connect with us:



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this Equity Alert, we define alternative schools based on the state’s definition for the Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS), the accountability program for alternative schools. The following school types are automatically part of the DASS:

1. Continuation
2. County or district community day
3. Opportunity
4. County community
5. Juvenile court
6. California Education Authority, Division of Juvenile Justice
7. County-run special education schools
8. District-run special education with at least 70 percent of students in 3rd through 8th grade participating in the California Alternative Assessments (CAA)

The following school types must apply to participate in the DASS:

1. District-run special education with less than 70 percent of students in 3rd through 8th grade participating in the CAA
2. Alternative schools of choice and charters that serve the following groups of students:
  - a. Expelled students
  - b. Suspended students
  - c. Wards or dependents of the court
  - d. Pregnant or parenting students
  - e. Dropout recovery students
  - f. “Habitually truant” or “habitually insubordinate and disorderly” students whose attendance is directed by a school attendance review board or probation officer

More details on DASS eligibility available at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/eligibilitycriteria.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Warren, “Accountability for California’s Alternative Schools” (San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2016), [http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R\\_516PWR.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_516PWR.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Mac Taylor, “Next Steps for Improving State Accountability for Alternative Schools,” (Sacramento, CA: Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2015), <https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2015/edu/alt-ed/improving-accountability-051615.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Ruiz de Velasco and Daisy Gonzales, “Accountability for Alternative Schools in California,” (Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, 2017), <https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/Accountability%20for%20Alternative%20Schools.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Source: The Education Trust--West analysis of school enrollment and demographic data from the California Department of Education, including active DASS schools (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/activeschools.asp>), active traditional high schools (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>), and school enrollment data (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>), 2018. Percentages rounded to nearest 1 percent.

<sup>6</sup> Warren, “Accountability for California’s Alternative Schools.”

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, “Next Steps for Improving State Accountability for Alternative Schools.”