

Measuring Success:

Accountability for Alternative Education

A Report by the
American Youth Policy Forum and Civic Enterprises

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POLICY BRIEF



ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), founded in 1993, is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan professional development organization based in Washington, DC that provides learning opportunities for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working on youth and education issues at the national, state, and local levels. AYPF's goal is to enable policymakers to become more effective in the development and enactment of sound policies affecting the nation's young people, and for education leaders and administrators to have the information they need to implement those policies effectively in order to better serve youth. AYPF achieves this mission by providing information, insights, and networking opportunities to federal, state, and local stakeholders on a range of education and youth topics, such as college access and success, career and technical education, dropout prevention and recovery, alternative education, youth employment, civic engagement, social and emotional learning, and after-school and expanded learning opportunities. This breadth of knowledge allows AYPF to bridge fields and sectors and supports our view of the need for integrated, holistic, and comprehensive academic and support services to help every young person thrive. AYPF conducts an average of 40 annual events such as Capitol Hill forums, out-of-town study tours, webinars, and discussion groups, reaching thousands of policymakers and leaders nationwide. AYPF also publishes a variety of policy reports and briefs, available at www.aypf.org.

Civic Enterprises is a social enterprise firm that works with corporations, nonprofits, foundations, universities and governments to develop innovative initiatives and public policies in the fields of education, national service, civic engagement, conservation, public health and more. We work with organizations that seek to challenge the status quo and grow their impact for the greater good. Working closely with clients to determine what they need to better engage with their stakeholders and serve their constituents, we specialize in research and policy development, strategy and coalition building, state and federal policy analysis, and strategic communications. Each year, Civic Enterprises co-authors the annual *Building a Grad Nation* report, which examines both progress and challenges toward reaching the GradNation campaign goal of a national on-time graduation rate of 90 percent by the Class of 2020.

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Executive Summary

Discussion of alternative education is growing across the country as states and districts look for ways to better serve students whose needs are not met in traditional high school settings. Alternative settings, however, vary greatly in how they operate, whom they aim to enroll, and the methods they use to educate students. The variation of approaches taken in alternative settings has led to significant differences in the quality of these settings and presents challenges in how to best hold alternative schools accountable. Though many innovative and effective alternative models exist, according to the 2017 Building a Grad Nation report, alternative schools are overrepresented in identified low-graduation-rate high schools. If these schools intend to offer a high-quality educational pathway for students at the greatest risk for dropping out – or in some cases, students who have already disconnected from school – it is critical that meaningful accountability measures are put in place for alternative settings to ensure they are serving their purpose and are provided with necessary support and resources. Ultimately, accountability for alternative settings provides an opportunity to focus on the continuous improvement of these settings to better ensure that every student is given the chance to thrive.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states the chance to establish robust accountability systems for this growing sector of schools and programs. This brief aims to address four key opportunities states have both within and outside of ESSA to better understand and ultimately improve alternative education:

- I. **Definition:** What is alternative education?
- II. **Accountability System:** What structures can states put into place to ensure alternative settings are appropriately held accountable?
- III. **Accountability Measures:** What measures can states consider that accurately reflect the quality of alternative settings?
- IV. **Continuous Improvement:** How can states use accountability for alternative settings as a tool for continuous improvement?

Introduction

According to the 2017 *Building a Grad Nation Report*, our current national four-year graduation rate of 83.2 percent is an all-time high, and analysis shows that when including five- and six-year graduation rates, the national rate is closer to 87 percent. However, there is still a troubling number of low-graduation-rate high schools,¹ and data shows that alternative high schools are overrepresented on this list.²

Among these schools, there is also great variation in their intent, purpose, and quality. These differences pose significant challenges to holding these schools accountable while still providing an appropriate level of flexibility given the student populations they serve. The implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is an important opportunity for states and education stakeholders to examine the role alternative settings play in ensuring that *all* students have a pathway to a secondary credential and are ultimately prepared for postsecondary education, careers, and life.

It is also an important time for states to reflect on the general purpose of accountability and its role in ensuring quality and continuous improvement of educational institutions, including alternative settings. Although significant attention to accountability over the past decade has made positive impacts on school performance overall, uniform standards have meant a lack of effective assessment for schools serving students with unique needs. Ultimately, states must provide a sufficiently nuanced and specialized approach to accountability for alternative settings that accurately reflects the extent to which those institutions are effectively serving their unique student populations, while *also* ensuring that those settings are held to equally rigorous standards of quality as traditional settings.

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- III. **Accountability Measures:** What measures can states consider that accurately reflect the quality of alternative settings?
- IV. **Continuous Improvement:** How can states use accountability for alternative settings as a tool for continuous improvement?

¹ The Every Student Succeeds Act designates any public high school in a state that fails to graduate one-third or more of its students as a school that qualifies for comprehensive support and improvement. These schools are commonly referred to as "low-graduation-rate high schools."

² According to data from the 2014-15 school year, as presented in the 2017 Building a Grad Nation report, 12 percent of all high schools would be identified as low-graduation-rate high schools, compared to 60 percent of alternative high schools. These data are explored further in Section IV of this report.

Methodology

The American Youth Policy Form (AYPF) and Civic Enterprises have, for many years, sought to understand how to better serve the nation's most traditionally underserved students. To that end, AYPF has worked with numerous states across the country, along with national, state, and local experts in the alternative education field, to develop a robust knowledge base on many of the challenges and opportunities presented to alternative settings. Civic Enterprises, through their role in the development of the annual *Building a Grad Nation* report, aims to provide accurate data and analysis to better understand the issues surrounding high school graduation, address issues of equity, and contribute to the evidence base on best practices and policy for keeping young people in school and on track to graduate. Together, AYPF and Civic Enterprises have harnessed a shared knowledge of and mutual commitment to the nation's traditionally underserved youth in developing this policy brief. Specifically, AYPF and Civic Enterprises have hosted two stakeholder input sessions to help guide the formulation of this brief: one session with national leaders in alternative education, and one session with state leaders with varying degrees of involvement with alternative education and ESSA implementation.

In addition to direct work with state leaders, AYPF recently conducted a scan of all 50 states plus the

District of Columbia and Puerto Rico to learn about the ways in which alternative education is handled around the country (referred to in this brief as "pre-ESSA scan"). In this scan, AYPF staff and consultants reviewed state definitions of alternative education and the ways in which states have been holding alternative settings accountable *before* the implementation of ESSA. The preliminary results of this scan were analyzed to inform the development of this policy brief. The final results from the scan will be available by the end of 2017.

Additionally, AYPF is currently in the process of scanning every state plan under ESSA to better understand how alternative settings will be held accountable for federal purposes. The final results from that scan will be available in the spring of 2018. Analysis of the state plans that were currently available at the time of writing were used to inform the development of this policy brief.

Although the *2017 Building a Grad Nation report* does not exclusively address alternative education, much of the data used in this policy brief was drawn from that report, which predominantly utilized high school data from the 2014-2015 school year.

Policy Context

For more than a decade, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers have been working to understand how to better serve vulnerable student populations and advance best practices and effective policies for alternative education settings. This report follows in a line of research starting nearly two decades ago, including: work by The Urban Institute to define and understand alternative education and the students it serves; Jobs for the Future's analysis of state alternative education policies; the National Governor's Association's work to create a more holistic framework for high school accountability; the National Youth Employment Coalition's research and federal policy efforts to reconnect opportunity youth to education and the workforce; the ongoing discussions coming out of the annual Alternative Accountability Policy Forum; the work of the practitioners, policy analysts, and young people who contributed to *Reengagement: Bringing Students Back to America's Schools*; and many others who are working to create high-quality pathways for at-risk and disconnected youth and accountability mechanisms for alternative settings.

I. Defining Alternative Education

There is currently no federal definition of alternative education, other than the designation for data collection purposes put forth by the National Center for Education Statistics, which *states that* an alternative school is a public elementary/secondary school that:

- Addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school,
- Provides nontraditional education,
- Serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or
- Falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education.

Not all states have an official definition of alternative education, and there is significant variation among *those that do*. In the absence of a federally codified definition, states should first define what they mean by alternative education in their own contexts, and then ensure that definition is codified in order to be actionable. Given the significant diversity of alternative education environments, definition and codification are important to ensure that states capture the purpose, needs, and progress of educational institutions that are truly different from traditional schools.

Considerations for the Definition of Alternative Education

A clear definition of alternative education is an important first step to designing a meaningful accountability system for alternative education settings. The fact that alternative education is defined differently across states indicates that various rationales exist for creating a separate classification for alternative schools, however, ideally any definition will be reflective of the populations those schools serve. Although most states generally associate alternative education with serving “at-risk” youth in some capacity, states have taken a range of approaches in selecting criteria for classifying alternative education settings. Ultimately, clear definitions can help states determine if alternative schools should be examined separately, receive special attention in evaluation, receive differentiated services, or even be held accountable via a separate accountability system. Below are a few examples of criteria states currently use to classify alternative settings.

Population Served

Alternative education settings typically are designed to serve the students listed below, or students whose

Alternative Education Landscape

- 6% of high schools in the U.S. are classified as “alternative”
- 85% of alternative schools are traditional comprehensive high schools; 15% are charter schools

Source: 2017 Building a Grad Nation Report

needs are unlikely to be met in traditional schools. Students in alternative settings generally meet one or more of the following “at-risk” criteria:

- Chronically absent
- Pregnant/parenting
- Primary caregivers
- Have disciplinary infractions
- Re-engaging with school
- Returning from incarceration/adjudicated
- Wards of the state (youth in foster care/homeless youth)
- In need of extra assistance (overage/under-credited)
- Newcomer/refugee
- Mental health needs³

ESSA requires that states provide “all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education”⁴ and specifically allows state agency discretion with regard to schools that predominantly serve students who are “returning to education after having exited secondary school without a regular high school diploma” and students “who, based on their grade or age, are significantly off track to accumulate sufficient academic credits to meet high-school graduation requirements.”⁵

Setting Type

States may further classify alternative education based upon the type of setting in which those students are served. The two primary setting types are 1) programs,⁶ which are typically subsets of other, larger schools, and 2) schools, which are independent institutions, generally within the school district and/or a charter school. Some states, like *Connecticut*, are inclusive of both programs and schools in their definition of alternative education. Others are exclusive to one or the other. For example,

3 Students with mental health needs are not necessarily classified as students with disabilities.

4 ESSA Sec 1001.

5 ESSA Sec 1005(d)(1)(C)(i)

6 There is now an NCES code for programs for research purposes, but the code is rarely used.

Kentucky state statute defines alternative settings as programs. Offsite or standalone alternative programs in Kentucky are counted as schools for federal reporting purposes and have their own school report cards available to the public. Onsite alternative programs housed within larger traditional schools, however, are not counted as schools for federal reporting or public accountability purposes.

It is important to note that ESSA requires states to hold all public schools accountable, but many institutions classified as programs are not considered schools and therefore may not be held accountable under ESSA. Additionally, in many states, a “program” designation means that there is not a school report card or similar form of public-facing accountability, and many programs are therefore part of a loophole that leaves them exempt from a meaningful accountability system. Given the complexity of the program/school issue, it is important that states are clear in their definitions of alternative education which setting types are included and, ultimately, how those settings will be held accountable for the outcomes of their students at various levels.

Additionally, in defining the parameters of different alternative education setting types, it is important for states to consider the length of time students typically spend within various alternative settings in the state. For example, many alternative schools are designed to provide a long-term education for students, whereas others may be designed for students in the short term (e.g., for newcomer English learners, credit recovery, discipline, or other immediate services). Even alternative schools that are *not* designed to be short-term placements and that would like to retain students through graduation also see considerable student mobility. Although not necessarily the fault of the school, student mobility does speak to the need to better fit alternative education to students’ needs, rather than cycle students, who are often already experiencing instability, through multiple placements. States should consider students’ length of stay in alternative settings as they seek to define the purpose of alternative education and the parameters of defining those institutions. Like school/program classifications, the amount of time students spend in alternative settings will have implications for how those settings are held accountable for the outcomes of those students.⁷

Instructional/Environmental Characteristics

States also may include parameters about learning environments in their classifications of alternative schools. Characteristics of alternative school learning environments typically include:

- Online or virtual learning environment
- Flexible schedule
- Small student-teacher ratio
- Specific mission
- Career-oriented themes
- Reengagement functions
- Additional supports and/or connection to outside services or other systems⁸

These three categories – population served, setting type, and environmental characteristics – are not mutually exclusive, meaning state definitions may be based on one or multiple of the above criteria. For example, **Massachusetts** includes the population served and setting type in its definition of alternative education and clearly defines instructional/environmental characteristics of alternative settings under a subsection of the definition (“Common Elements”). The variety in state definitions reflects the vast diversity within alternative schools around the country. From academies for newcomer English learners, to reengagement centers, to schools for pregnant or parenting students, there is certainly not a “one size fits all” approach to education for at-risk students. It is critical, however, that states are clear about who alternative education is meant to serve and its functional parameters so that alternative settings within the state can be held accountable in a meaningful way for providing a high-quality education to their students.

Policy Mechanisms for Codifying Definition

States with official definitions of alternative education have historically codified those definitions using one of two policy mechanisms: legislation or state regulations. **Colorado**, for example, has had statewide legislation since 2002 that includes a specific definition of alternative education. The parameters of alternative education have evolved since then, but the definition has remained the same and has been operationalized throughout the state. Instead of legislation, some states codify definitions by way of the state education agency (SEA). In **Nebraska**, for instance, alternative schools, classes, or educational programs are statutorily required, but the definition of alternative education is not included in state law. The Nebraska Department of Education has instead decided to produce a formal definition of alternative education through administrative code. Finally, states may codify definitions through rules or regulations of the State Board of Education, as **Idaho** and several other states have done. Regardless of the method, it is important for states to codify their definitions of alternative education if those definitions are to be actionable for accountability and continuous improvement purposes.

⁷ ESSA Sec 1005(c)(4)(F) specifies that the performance of students who have not attended the same school within a local educational agency for at least half of a school year may not be used in the system of meaningful differentiation of schools.

⁸ According to an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) scan of alternative education definitions, 39 states include guidance on services that should or might be provided (as of 2014). Services and supports include remedial education, content area instruction, tutoring, counseling services, behavior supports, and several others.

Key Considerations for States under ESSA: Definitions

In establishing a clear definition of alternative education, states should consider the following:

- The student population alternative education is intended to serve.
 - The educational setting types encompassed within the definition and how those various settings will be held accountable for the outcomes of their students.
 - The length of time students typically spend within various alternative settings.
 - The instructional and environmental characteristics of alternative settings.
 - The ways in which the definition of alternative education can be codified in order to be actionable.
-

II. Accountability Systems for Alternative Settings

This section primarily focuses on opportunities for states to develop robust systems of accountability for alternative settings as they construct their ESSA state plans (described below as a federal accountability mechanism). It is important to acknowledge, however, that states may develop relevant models of evaluation and accountability for alternative settings at various levels, within and apart from ESSA state plans. Lessons gleaned from this brief can and should be considered broadly and are not limited solely to ESSA state plans. Ultimately, accountability can be more than an assessment of which schools are successful and which need work. Rather, effective and responsive accountability systems can and should be used as a tool for institutional and systemic improvement.

Accountability Mechanisms

Below are the mechanisms typically used to hold alternative settings accountable at various levels.

- Federal accountability mechanisms:** Accountability at the federal level is tied to the allocation of federal dollars used for school improvement purposes. Under ESSA, states must develop a plan to hold *all* schools accountable (referred to in this brief as “ESSA state plans”). The accountability system(s) under ESSA state plans are designed to help states identify the schools most in need of improvement. Although ESSA holds schools accountable to the federal government, ESSA state plans are developed and data are processed at the state level, as ESSA aims to give states more responsibility and control. In designing their required ESSA state plans, or revising them⁹ in the future, states have the opportunity to ensure that their accountability systems meaningfully measure success in alternative settings and are instructive to the state and to the federal government on how to better serve students in alternative settings. ESSA also specifies a number of federal reporting requirements outside of ESSA state plans, however those reporting requirements are not discussed in this brief. The remainder of this brief will focus on the federal accountability systems and measures states include in their ESSA state plans, as well as additional accountability mechanisms for alternative education at the *state* level.
- State accountability mechanisms:** States may have methods of identifying low-performing schools or programs outside of their federal accountability mechanisms/ESSA state plans. For example, *Arkansas* currently has one single system of accountability

States should use accountability systems as a mechanism for identification and allocation of attention to the schools and programs with the greatest need for improvement.

for all schools in the state according to its submitted ESSA state plan, but has developed a separate set of *alternative education effectiveness measures* to determine the quality of alternative settings in the state. These effectiveness measures are not part of Arkansas’ ESSA state plan and will not affect how schools are identified for improvement under ESSA, but are still useful for state, district, and school leaders in understanding the needs and progress of various institutions. These statewide accountability mechanisms may also be used to inform funding allocations and other internal decisions at the state level.

- Public accountability mechanisms:** ESSA specifies that schools must make certain information available to the public. Whereas federal and state accountability mechanisms are tied to funding, school report cards and other public accountability mechanisms exist in order to provide clear and concise information to the public that specifically helps parents better understand school performance. This public reporting is required under ESSA, but states have some leeway in determining how the required information is presented. Ultimately, the law indicates the information should be presented in an understandable form and be widely accessible to the public.¹⁰

Many alternative settings serve young people starting in K-8, but the vast majority of schools and programs serve youth in grades 9-12. The subsequent discussion of accountability will focus specifically on alternative high schools/programs.

Why ESSA Accountability Matters for Alternative Education

ESSA provides the opportunity for states to ensure that all schools are held accountable for providing a high-quality education to their students. According to the law, states must “establish a system of meaningfully differentiating, on an annual basis, all public schools in the State, which shall be based on all indicators in the

⁹ The law notes that states may periodically review and revise ESSA state plans as necessary to reflect changes in the states’ strategies and programs.

¹⁰ As mentioned in Section I, this information is not required for programs under ESSA.

State's accountability system."¹¹ This means that, as states develop systems of accountability under their ESSA state plans, they should consider how those systems will help them meaningfully differentiate between schools so those that are most in need of improvement can be identified. ESSA requires states to use their accountability systems, as indicated in their ESSA state plans, to identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement in two ways:

- States must identify no less than the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools receiving Title I funds.
- States must identify all high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students (i.e., low-graduation-rate high schools).

Both of these methods of identification will likely have a profound effect on alternative settings, which may not demonstrate success in the same way or on the same timeline as traditional schools. Data analyzed in the 2017 *Building a Grad Nation* report shows that alternative schools are overrepresented in low-graduation-rate high schools. If all, or nearly all, alternative schools in a state fail to graduate one-third or more of their students, it will be difficult to meaningfully differentiate between alternative schools of high quality versus low quality. Additionally, alternative settings may show success on a variety of different metrics that may or may not be included in accountability systems for traditional schools. To accommodate the unique nature of alternative schools and ensure that progress is adequately reflected for these settings, some states have developed distinct accountability systems and/or measures to help them meaningfully differentiate between alternative schools. This can help ensure that the additional attention and support for schools identified under ESSA is allocated to the schools that need it the most. Ultimately, states must develop sufficiently nuanced and specialized approaches to accountability for alternative settings that accurately reflect the extent to which those institutions effectively serve their unique student populations, while also

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ensuring that those settings are held to equally rigorous standards of quality as traditional settings. Alternative settings should provide a different means of getting to the same end – a high quality secondary credential.

Approaches to Accountability for Alternative Schools: ESSA State Plans and Beyond

According to AYPF's pre-ESSA scan of alternative education, states have been taking a variety of approaches to accountability for alternative settings. Although the scan was conducted prior to the submission of ESSA state plans, there continues to be significant diversity in the ways in which states plan to hold alternative settings accountable according to those ESSA state plans that have been approved by the U.S. Department of Education thus far. In some states, both prior to ESSA and within their ESSA state plans, alternative settings are held accountable to the same system (comprised of the same measures) as traditional settings. In other states, alternative settings fall under their own, separate accountability system. Many states fall somewhere in between, either having some sort of modifications in the measures used to identify alternative settings, or using the same system and the same measures for all schools, but identifying alternative schools separately from traditional schools.

Title I Part A(4)(v)(c) of the *Template for the Consolidated State Plan*, issued in March 2017 by the U.S. Department of Education, provides a space for states to indicate a different methodology for annual meaningful differentiation for schools for which an accountability determination cannot be made. Some states have used that opportunity to explain the ways in which they will differentiate alternative schools in a different way than they differentiate traditional schools.

This section primarily focuses on how states are proposing to hold alternative settings accountable for federal purposes, as indicated in their ESSA state plans.¹² However, some examples below are illustrative of the fact that states may have ways of measuring and ensuring the quality of alternative settings *outside* of their ESSA state plans, as all levels of accountability can facilitate continuous improvement. Note that in this section, "single accountability system in ESSA state plan" means that the state has *one* system of accountability with the same set of measures that applies to all schools – traditional and alternative – in their ESSA state plan. One state featured in this section (Colorado) includes a separate system of accountability for alterna-

¹¹ ESSA Sec 1005 (c)(4)(C)

¹² At the time of publication, not all of the plans referenced in this brief had been approved by the U.S. Department of Education. Some of the approaches to accountability for alternative settings exemplified in this report are subject to change if the Secretary of Education does not approve of the submitted plans.

tive settings in their ESSA state plan, which may affect how alternative schools in the state are identified for improvement. Below are several examples of states that have developed innovative systems of accountability in a variety of different ways, all of which are, to varying degrees, relevant to alternative settings.

Single accountability system in ESSA state plan, but inclusion of measures that are particularly relevant to alternative settings.

Example: *Massachusetts*

Massachusetts uses a single system of accountability under their approved ESSA state plan, but makes considerable efforts to foster high-quality alternative settings through the inclusion of tailored accountability measures. These measures apply to all schools in the state, but are particularly relevant to alternative settings. For example, Massachusetts includes an “extended engagement rate” measure in their submitted accountability system under ESSA, which is equal to the sum of the percentage of students who graduate within five years plus the percentage of students who are still enrolled in school after five years. This measure is intended to incentivize welcoming students back into the school environment regardless of whether they are on track to graduate in four or five years. According to the plan, “many high schools now have alternative programming designed for off-track students and an accountability system should reward these types of programs rather than negatively impacting schools with a traditional five-year graduation rate calculation.” Massachusetts plans to explore a protocol to differentiate alternative schools for accountability following the 2017-18 school year.

Single accountability system in ESSA state plan, but identify alternative and traditional schools separately. Example: *Idaho*

Idaho has one single system of accountability for all schools under their submitted ESSA state plan, but the bottom 5 percent of traditional schools and the bottom 5 percent of alternative schools will be identified *separately* for improvement. The state affords all schools some flexibility in that they may use the more favorable option of proficiency or growth rates, and state leaders anticipate that many alternative schools will have more favorable growth rates. This means that, although all schools in the state will be measured against the same accountability measures, alternative schools will *not* be overrepresented in the bottom 5 percent of schools, as they are identified separately. This can allow the state to better differentiate between alternative schools of varying

quality. However, alternative schools may still be overrepresented in low-graduation-rate high schools in Idaho, as is the case with many other states.

Single accountability system in ESSA state plan, separate system of differentiating alternative schools outside of ESSA state plan.

Examples: *Wyoming, Arkansas, Arizona*

For the 2017-2018 school year, Wyoming, Arkansas, and Arizona (among others) will use one single system of accountability to identify all schools in the state, as indicated in their ESSA state plans. *Wyoming*, however, is piloting the use of a separate accountability system for alternative schools that is not currently included in their submitted ESSA state plan and will not affect how schools are identified for the 2017-2018 year. This system includes different measures that more accurately reflect progress made in alternative settings. The pilot system is currently used to collect information at the state level, but may be incorporated into the state’s ESSA plan in the future. *Arkansas* and *Arizona*¹³ also have distinct accountability models for alternative schools but, like Wyoming, those systems will not affect how alternative schools are identified under ESSA. All three of these alternative accountability systems were developed in consultation with a wide array of relevant stakeholders and are reflective of the alternative education context within each state. Although neither state is ready to incorporate their distinct system into their ESSA state plans, they currently utilize these systems to evaluate and meaningfully differentiate between alternative schools so those most in need of support can receive extra attention.

It is worth noting that *California* also currently uses one single accountability system for all schools in their submitted ESSA state plan, but the plan notes that they will use a separate system for alternative schools beginning in 2018-2019. This separate system is not currently used for state purposes, like it is in Wyoming and Arizona, but is in the process of development. The inclusion of this separate system in the ESSA state plan in the future *will* affect how alternative schools are identified for improvement under ESSA, as the measures used in the alternative system will be different from those used in the traditional system. According to the state’s currently submitted ESSA state plan, “California will produce an accountability report for every public school in the state. Traditional schools’ reports will be based on the indicators described in this document and alternative schools’ reports will be based on comparable indicators that are more appropriate for their school mission.”

¹³ Arizona’s approved ESSA state plan mentions that there is a separate evaluation framework for alternative schools and that framework is included in the plan for reference, but the plan notes that this framework will not affect how alternative schools will be identified under ESSA.

Single accountability system in ESSA state plan, but close monitoring and evaluation of alternative schools and programs.

Example: *Kentucky*

Although Kentucky's submitted ESSA state plan includes one single system of accountability for all schools, the state has gone to great lengths to ensure that alternative settings are of high quality. The state currently has mostly alternative *programs* rather than schools. As outlined in Section I of this brief, those programs that exist within a traditional school could be exempt from accountability under ESSA as they are not classified as schools themselves. To promote quality practices in alternative settings and to prevent alternative programs from falling into an accountability loophole, the state has developed robust monitoring processes so that all alternative settings are evaluated and receive attention if they need extra support. Additionally, in an effort to promote and share effective practices from alternative programs around the state, Kentucky recognizes a number of alternative programs of distinction each year, based on multiple criteria. These criteria are aligned with the Standards of Quality and Program Evaluation developed by the National Alternative Education Association.¹⁴

Separate system of accountability for alternative schools in ESSA state plan, which will likely affect the identification of alternative schools.

Example: *Colorado*

Colorado includes a separate system of accountability for alternative settings in their submitted ESSA state plan, which may be used to differentiate alternative schools separately from traditional schools. According to the plan,

"Alternative Education Campuses (AECs), as designated by Colorado state law (C.R.S. 22-7-604.5) will first be evaluated according to the same measures and indicators as all other schools. If the general statewide accountability system will not meaningfully differentiate among AECs, as has been the case historically, we will implement an additional system of specific measures to further differentiate them into those needing Comprehensive Support and Improvement, Targeted Support and Improvement, or 'neither' based on state law for alternative accountability measures for these schools." The measures used in the alternative accountability system will include elements that are particularly relevant to AEC programs and outcomes, such as specific local measures of academic achievement and progress, high school completion, attendance, and truancy rates. This separate system¹⁵ will aid in the meaningful differentiation of alternative schools and will be used to allocate resources and support rather than the initial rating received on the single statewide accountability system. In many states, it is likely that using one single system could result in most or all alternative settings being identified as "failing" or in need of improvement. Colorado's approach allows the state to meaningfully differentiate alternative schools in order to appropriately allocate attention and support for improvement.

It is important for each state to consider its own landscape of alternative education in designing a comprehensive accountability system that is reflective of the needs and progress of alternative settings and their students. These systems can help states fully and accurately understand the extent to which alternative settings are providing a high-quality education to their students.

Key Considerations for States under ESSA: Accountability Systems

In establishing a system of accountability for alternative education, states should consider the following:

- States must provide a sufficiently nuanced and specialized approach to accountability for alternative education settings that accurately reflects the extent to which those institutions effectively serve their unique student populations, while also ensuring that those settings are held to equally rigorous standards of quality as traditional settings.
- Accountability systems should serve as a mechanism for identification and allocation of resources and support to the schools and programs with the greatest need for improvement.
- States may develop a separate and distinct system of accountability for alternative settings that may or may not be used for federal accountability purposes (i.e., ESSA state plans). These distinct systems can allow states to meaningfully differentiate alternative schools in order to allocate attention and support for improvement appropriately.
- As illustrated by the examples above, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to accountability for alternative education. States may utilize a variety of methods to ensure that alternative settings receive the appropriate amount of attention and support for improvement.

¹⁴ National Alternative Education Association, Exemplary Practices 2.0: Standards of Quality and Program Evaluation.

¹⁵ It was important for Colorado to develop and codify a clear definition of alternative education campuses (AECs) in order to inform the development of this separate accountability system. This clear definition is particularly important to avoid potential loopholes through which struggling schools could be considered "alternative" without actually serving the requisite populations.

III. Accountability Measures

Regardless of the approach states take in developing accountability systems for alternative settings, there is significant opportunity within ESSA's required indicators to be responsive to the unique conditions of alternative education. Although this section is organized based on the four indicators required under ESSA for high schools, the discussion is not meant to be limited to ESSA state plans. Before the passage of ESSA, many states and districts used various accountability measures to determine areas of strength and to identify areas of improvement specifically for alternative schools. The measures discussed in this section are drawn from many different accountability systems (local, state, and federal), including longstanding accountability systems as well as newly developed ESSA state plans. The tables and subsequent discussions are meant to: 1) illustrate that state and local entities have been measuring the success of alternative settings in myriad ways preceding ESSA state plans, and many will continue to do so under ESSA, and 2) provide states and other stakeholders with a range of measures that *could* be included in ESSA state plans or other accountability mechanisms. Although these measures are particularly relevant to alternative settings, they can also be useful for assessing the quality of all educational settings, including traditional high schools.

Example Measures

Table 1 describes the first three of the four required indicators for high schools under ESSA: academic achievement, graduation rate, and English-learner progress. The table also outlines opportunities within each of those indicators to include measures that adequately reflect progress made in alternative settings.

These measures acknowledge the differing trajectories of students served in alternative settings and offer flexibility for measuring student achievement, progress, and readiness. It is important to note that student growth, in general, can be a useful metric for all educational settings, as absolute proficiency may not paint a sufficient picture of the progress students are making. It is especially important, however, to prioritize student growth when assessing alternative settings, as students in alternative settings often come to those settings already behind standard proficiency targets.

In addition to academic achievement, graduation rate, and English-learner progress, states are also required to include an indicator of school quality or student success (SQSS). ESSA requires that states choose at least one SQSS indicator that allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance that is "valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide."¹⁶ This indicator is to be given less weight than the academic measures in accountability calculations.

Table 2 includes potential categories of measures states can use within the SQSS indicator to meaningfully differentiate schools' "nonacademic" success. Although ESSA mentions five potential categories¹⁷ of measures states may want to consider for inclusion within the SQSS indicator – student engagement, postsecondary readiness, student access to/completion of advanced coursework, school climate and safety, and educator engagement – this table combines the categories of postsecondary readiness and student access to/completion of advanced coursework, as many states incorporate the latter into their measures of postsecondary readiness. Additionally, the postsecondary readiness category has been amended in this table to include postsecondary *and workforce* readiness, as many states have included combined measures for both.

States may consider the measures in Table 2 for inclusion within the SQSS indicator in their ESSA state plans.¹⁸ Additionally, given that states hold alternative settings accountable in a variety of ways and using various mechanisms, including but not limited to federal accountability under ESSA, states and other stakeholders may also consider these example measures for inclusion in any system of evaluation or accountability for alternative settings. Please note that at the time of publication, almost all states appear to include some measure of chronic absenteeism in their ESSA state plans as part of their SQSS indicator. In order to showcase other, lesser known measures, this table does not include chronic absenteeism as a measure of student engagement.

¹⁶ Sec 1005(c)(4)(B)(v)(I)

¹⁷ Sec 1005(c)(4)(B)(v)(II)

¹⁸ AYPF and Civic Enterprises suggest the consideration of the inclusion of these measures on a case-by-case basis but are unable to verify that each of these measures would be approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

TABLE 1

POTENTIAL MEASURES FOR INCLUSION WITHIN ESSA INDICATORS

REQUIRED ESSA INDICATOR

RELEVANCE TO ALTERNATIVE SETTINGS

POTENTIAL MEASURES WITHIN REQUIRED INDICATOR

Academic Achievement	Graduation Rate	English Proficiency
<p>ESSA requires states to measure academic proficiency in reading/ language arts and mathematics, based on students' performance on state assessments. States may also choose to measure academic growth in these subjects over time.</p>	<p>ESSA requires states to include the four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) and long-term graduation rate goals for all students and subgroups in their accountability framework. States may choose to include extended-year adjusted cohort graduation rates (EYGRs), but they must set more rigorous goals for these rates. EYGRs (five-, six-, and seven-year rates) may be included and given different weights within the graduation rate indicator.</p>	<p>ESSA requires states to include an indicator that measures progress in English Language Proficiency (ELP), as measured by state ELP assessments.</p>
<p>Because students in alternative settings are often academically behind on standardized benchmarks, the opportunity to measure students' academic growth on key subjects is particularly important, as absolute proficiency may not adequately reflect student progress and success in alternative settings. ESSA does not specify parameters around the weights that states must use for growth versus proficiency.</p>	<p>Students in alternative settings are historically less likely to graduate in four years due to mobility, transfer, and other external factors. Under ESSA, graduation rates must include all students who have attended the same school within a Local Education Agency for at least half of the school year. States should consider how to account for alternative settings that are intended to be short-term placements or credit recovery options that do not intend to graduate students. This particularly affects youth who transfer in and out of the juvenile justice system.</p>	<p>More research is necessary on the extent to which English learners participate in alternative education and how to best serve them. Quality of ESL instruction, access to ESL teachers, and participation of alternative schools in ELP assessments could be important metrics in the future.</p>
<p>Mean Scale Score (or Average Scale Score) Mean scale score measures the average score of <i>all</i> students within a school on a given assessment. <i>Colorado</i> has shifted to using mean scale score as the metric for accountability reporting within their Academic Achievement Indicator in their submitted ESSA state plan. This measure is reflective of the performance of all students, including those very behind traditional benchmarks. This method of measuring academic achievement is an incentive to focus just as much on students far below proficiency as students who are close to proficiency. Mean scale score will be used in <i>Colorado</i> for all settings, but can be particularly useful for alternative settings whose students are primarily academically off-track or behind traditional benchmarks.</p> <p>Academic Credit Growth A credit growth indicator tracks the amount or percentage of students who complete a number of courses or credits over a given period of time, at various baselines, to account for growth rather than absolute credit accumulation. The <i>New York City</i> public school system measures average credit accumulation for students at different baselines (0–11 credits, 11.01–22 credits, 22.01–33 credits, and 33.01–38 credits) for alternative or “transfer” schools. This approach differs from that used by traditional schools in <i>New York City</i>, which measures whether students earn a certain number of credits in a given year. Academic credit growth can be a useful accountability measure for all settings, but particularly for alternative settings, as it allows for growth to be recognized even if it takes students in alternative settings longer to accumulate credits.</p> <p>Academic Progress Academic progress measures allow for the demonstration of various types of academic progress apart from standardized test scores. <i>Washington State's Open Doors</i> system of alternative programs uses indicators of academic progress to evaluate their dropout reengagement programs. Funding for programs is based on the extent to which students meet certain benchmarks, including earning high school or college credit, passing high school equivalency subject tests, completing college readiness or workforce training, and work-based learning experiences. Many states are using similar measures for all schools under their School Quality or Student Success indicator in their ESSA state plans, but academic progress is particularly relevant to alternative settings whose students often demonstrate academic achievement in multiple ways.</p>	<p>Extended-Year Cohort Graduation Rate (EYGR) EYGRs are a critical metric of student success for all schools and may be included and given different weights within the graduation rate indicator under ESSA. In <i>Arizona's</i> approved ESSA state plan, the graduation rate indicator is worth 20% of a school's overall rating, comprised of the following weights for each rate: 4-year rate at 10%, 5-year rate at 8%, the 6-year rate at 5%, and the 7-year rate at 1%. Many states with alternative systems of accountability may assign even greater weight to EYGRs than they do in their traditional accountability system. The inclusion of extended-year graduation rates can provide greater flexibility for alternative settings that serve students who are historically less likely to graduate in four years but are nevertheless progressing toward graduation. Inclusion of EYGRs can also be an incentive for schools to re-engage students who have withdrawn from school or who are academically off track to graduation.</p> <p>One-Year Graduation Rate As of now, no states have included one-year graduation rates in their ESSA state plans, as it is unclear if one-year rates are allowable within the graduation rate indicator. Many states and districts, however, calculate one-year rates for purposes of measuring student progress outside their ESSA state plans. <i>Chicago Public Schools</i> and <i>Portland (Oregon) Public Schools</i> have long used a one-year graduation rate as a measure of completion for alternative settings. This rate measures the percent of graduation-eligible students who actually graduate by the end of the school year. Graduation-eligible students are those who have accumulated the necessary credits to be on track for end-of-year graduation, regardless of when they started or how many years they have been in school. This measure accounts for the fact that at-risk students may take more than four years to graduate and holds schools responsible for graduating all students regardless of their academic trajectories.</p>	<p>English-learner Growth <i>Oregon</i> will use two indicators for English-learner progress toward proficiency under its approved ESSA state plan. One will measure the percentage of English learners on track to English proficiency, and the other will measure growth as measured by median growth percentiles. The use of growth measures to demonstrate progress toward English learner reclassification may be a particularly important metric for alternative settings, as student timelines and trajectories vary.</p>

TABLE 2

POTENTIAL MEASURES FOR INCLUSION WITHIN SQSS INDICATOR

Student Engagement	Postsecondary/Workforce Readiness	School Climate & Safety	Educator Engagement
<p>Reengagement Rate In <i>Colorado's</i> accountability system for alternative settings ("AECs"), required by the state's Education Accountability Act of 2009, reengagement is an optional measure to reward AECs that keep students who previously dropped out enrolled once they have reengaged.</p>	<p>College Credits or Industry Certificates/Credential Earned <i>Louisiana's</i> submitted ESSA state plan includes a Strength of Diploma measure, which awards points for attainment of a diploma as well as postsecondary credit and/or workforce or industry credentials. Points are also given when students complete a high school equivalency (HiSET) diploma.</p>	<p>Climate Surveys <i>Wyoming's</i> pilot accountability system for alternative schools includes a measure of school climate, measured by a mandatory student survey. The survey aims to measure students' feelings of support, trust, high expectations, and respect from peers and staff.</p>	<p>Teacher Attendance Teacher attendance plays a critical role in creating a positive school climate and ensuring quality instructional time. Though no state with an approved ESSA plan is using teacher attendance in their accountability system, <i>Tennessee</i> will be collecting and studying data on student days of missed instruction due to teacher attendance over the next three years and will potentially include this as an accountability measure in the future.</p>
<p>Attendance Improvement The <i>Denver Public School</i> system uses the flexibility allowed by Colorado's statewide alternative accountability system to measure the extent to which an alternative setting's student body makes some improvement in attendance from the previous year.</p>	<p>Preparation for Postsecondary and Career Readiness Coursework <i>Connecticut's</i> approved ESSA state plan includes a measure of the percentage of 11th and 12th grade students who participate in at least one of the following during high school: two courses in advanced placement (AP)/ international baccalaureate (IB)/ dual enrollment; two courses in one of 17 career and technical education (CTE) categories; or two workplace experience courses.</p>	<p>Suspension/Expulsion Rate <i>California's</i> submitted ESSA state plan includes a suspension rate measure, which includes both in-school and out-of-school suspension incidences. This will include both the current suspension rate (or "status") as well as the change in suspension rate from the previous year.</p>	<p>Educator Attrition High turnover of teachers and administrators strain school resources and hurt student learning. No state with a currently approved ESSA plan is factoring educator retention into their accountability system, but <i>Delaware</i> is planning on reporting on it as a measure of school climate in their Excellent Educator Dashboard.</p>
<p>Annual Stabilization Rate For years, the <i>Chicago Public School</i> (CPS) system has allowed its alternative settings to use an annual stabilization rate as part of its School Quality Rating. This rate measures the percent of students enrolled for at least 45 days who stay enrolled until the end of the school year, completed the program, or successfully transitioned to another CPS school."</p>	<p>Completion Rate <i>South Dakota's</i> submitted ESSA state plan uses a Completer Rate as one of their SQSS indicators, defined as the percent of students who, in the current school year, have obtained either a high school equivalency (GED) or a traditional diploma. The completer rate does not take the place of the state's graduation rate indicator (a four-year rate), but allows for schools to get credit within the overall accountability system for all students who graduate high school or earn a GED.</p>		
<p>Annual Dropout Rate <i>Massachusetts's</i> approved ESSA state plan includes an annual dropout rate measure because "it is often difficult to make large gains in a graduation rate calculation in one year because much of the rate has been determined in grades 9-11." The inclusion of the annual dropout rate allows for a more actionable indicator for high schools on an annual basis.</p>	<p>Graduation Rate Growth <i>New Mexico's</i> submitted ESSA state plan includes a measure for graduation rate growth over three years. This measure incentivizes schools that work with underserved populations (e.g., alternative schools) to work toward timely graduation goals, aligned with New Mexico's long-term goals for graduation rates. This measure applies to all settings.</p>		

Important Concepts in Measuring Success in Alternative Settings

Regardless of the measures states choose to assess the quality of alternative settings, the following general concepts are important to keep in mind when considering how best to hold alternative settings accountable:

- **Growth:** Because most alternative schools are designed to serve students who are already behind academic benchmarks, measures of growth may allow states to more meaningfully differentiate between high quality and low quality alternative settings. Additionally, growth measures take into account the progress of *all* students, rather than focusing only on those students at or on the cusp of achieving proficiency. Research indicates that leaning too heavily on proficiency rates can *unfairly target* schools for intervention even though they are making significant progress, while ignoring or failing to identify schools where student learning is stagnant.
- **Extended timelines to graduation:** All states are required to include four-year graduation rates within the graduation rate indicator under ESSA. However, many states emphasize other rates *in addition* to four-year graduation rates to reflect the various trajectories and timelines of students who attain a secondary credential.¹⁹ States can consider including extended-year graduation rates within the graduation rate indicator and completion rates within the SQSS indicator, as four-year graduation rates alone may not paint a complete picture of success in alternative settings. Utilizing multiple measures in addition to four-year graduation rates allows states to acknowledge the ultimate goal of a four-year graduation timeline while recognizing that schools can still be rewarded for getting students across the finish line, however and whenever that may happen.
- **Equal emphasis on career preparation:** States across the country have recognized that, in addition to postsecondary readiness, it is important to ensure all students are ready for the workforce as well. This is especially important for alternative settings, which often have career-oriented themes or specific missions related to workforce preparation. Measures of postsecondary *and* workforce readiness can ensure that preparation for future success is recognized in multiple forms, not just in the form of a postsecondary education pathway.
- **Weights:** Regardless of the measures used, states may assign different weights to measures in their accountability systems for alternative schools. For instance, *Arizona's* SQSS indicator (college and career readiness) is worth much more in the accountability framework for alternative education than it is in the traditional accountability framework (35% and 20%, respectively). Although the alternative accountability framework is not used to identify schools under ESSA, Arizona has nevertheless recognized that the "non-academic" measures are especially important in assessing the quality of alternative schools. Additionally, many accountability frameworks for alternative settings assign greater weight to growth, rather than proficiency. These approaches to the weighting of measures help ensure that states can meaningfully differentiate alternative schools.

Key Considerations for States under ESSA: Measures

In establishing appropriate measures for holding alternative education settings accountable under ESSA, states should consider the following:

- Regardless of their systems of accountability, states should consider flexibility within ESSA's required indicators – both with the measures themselves and the weighting of those measures – as they develop their ESSA state plans.
 - ESSA's required SQSS indicator is an important opportunity to consider measures that reflect the progress and success of schools outside of traditional academic benchmarks.
 - In general, accountability for alternative settings should emphasize growth, completion, and the importance of career preparation so as to more comprehensively reflect the progress made in alternative settings.
 - Many measures used by states to measure success in alternative settings can have applicable lessons for all settings.
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¹⁹ Under current federal requirements, students who earn a high school equivalency diploma such as a GED are counted as dropouts, even though they have completed high school.

IV. Continuous Improvement

ESSA state plans must reflect ESSA's mission to provide a high-quality education to all students and should therefore exist to identify schools that are not adequately educating their students, for the purpose of continuous improvement. Although continuous improvement can happen at many levels, this section will focus on the continuous improvement structure as outlined in ESSA: the identification of schools and interventions for improvement.

Identification

Under ESSA, states must identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement²⁰ no less than every three years. Schools are identified for comprehensive support and improvement in two ways, both of which have implications for alternative settings:

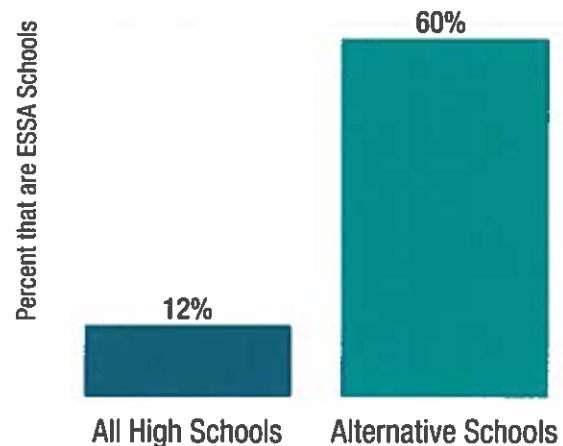
- Using their accountability systems as outlined in their ESSA state plans, states must identify no less than the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools receiving Title I funds.
- States must also identify all high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students.²¹

Both of these methods of identification could potentially affect alternative settings. For instance, if proficiency measures are weighted more heavily than growth measures, alternative settings will likely be disproportionately identified, as these settings are designed to serve students who are already off track to meet academic proficiency targets. Similarly, four-year graduation rates alone do not sufficiently reflect the progress toward graduation that students make in alternative settings, and states that *only* include four-year rates in their required Graduation Rate indicator may risk the over-identification of alternative schools.

According to the 2017 *Building a Grad Nation* report, which uses federal graduation data from the 2014-2015 school year, alternative schools are overrepresented among low-graduation-rate high schools (defined in the report as “ESSA schools”). The report takes a deep dive into the makeup of ESSA schools and closely examines alternative schools in that context. According to the data from the report, based on the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate:

- 6 percent of all high schools are alternative, but 30 percent of ESSA schools are alternative.
- 12 percent of all high schools would be identified as in need of support and intervention under ESSA, but 60 percent of alternative schools would be identified (Figure 1).

Percent of High Schools Identified as ESSA Schools



The over representation of alternative schools in low-graduation-rate or “ESSA schools” means either that these alternative schools are not high quality and are not doing enough to get young people to graduation, or that these mechanisms for measurement are not reflective of the progress actually made within alternative schools. This is an important opportunity for states to strategically focus attention on the schools that truly need the most support, and to use multiple, relevant measures to determine where and how best to intervene.

For instance, many alternative schools are not designed to lead students to graduation. Rather, they are institutions to which students are assigned for a specified, short-term window of time allowing them to temporarily enroll while they reconnect with a traditional school. Additionally, alternative schools in general are not positioned to graduate a large majority of students in a four-year time frame, as the students served in those

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²⁰ States must also identify schools for targeted support and improvement, which is distinct from comprehensive support and improvement. These processes are not discussed in this brief.

²¹ The law does not specify that states must use the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate to make this determination.

settings are often already behind academically and in many cases have previously withdrawn from school. States can use this moment as an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which alternative schools will be impacted based upon these mechanisms for identification and the ways in which interventions can be developed or selected accordingly.

Intervention

Although schools will not be identified for improvement until the 2018-19 school year, states should keep a few considerations in mind when planning for appropriate interventions for improvement of alternative settings. First, ESSA permits the use of differentiated evidence-based interventions in schools that predominantly serve students who are returning after having exited without receiving a diploma or who, based on grade or age, are significantly off-track to meeting high school graduation requirements. Second, the law notes that states may permit local education agencies to forego the implementation of improvement activities in schools that serve fewer than 100 students.²² This caveat may affect a large number of alternative schools, as alternative schools more commonly enroll fewer students. Finally, ESSA requires interventions for school improvement to meet one of the established levels of “evidence-based” based on the following categories:

- Strong evidence: At least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study
- Moderate evidence: At least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study
- Promising evidence: At least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for bias

ESSA's evidence-based requirement raises the bar from the standard set by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), so many of the interventions that were acceptable under NCLB may not meet the definition of evidence-based laid out in the new law. To help schools and districts choose appropriate evidence-based interventions, states can set clear parameters on acceptable interventions, work with thought leaders to develop a list of evidence-based interventions, and approve only those partners/vendors whose interventions meet ESSA criteria. The *What Works Clearinghouse*, *Evidence for ESSA*, and tools and resources from the *Regional Education Labs* can be useful as states consider interventions that are most likely to improve student outcomes. It will be important for states to consider the differences between the needs of and interventions designed for alternative schools versus evidence-based interventions in traditional schools, although little research has been done to this level of specificity. Ultimately, interventions should be selected based upon the needs of the learners in order to better ensure that meaningful improvement occurs. This is true for all settings, but is particularly important in alternative settings who serve unique student populations.

Creating a system of continuous improvement is an often overlooked but critically important piece of the continuum in ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education. These considerations can help build states' capacity to function as continuous learning organizations that are better positioned to effectively serve all students.

Key Considerations for States under ESSA: Continuous Improvement

In developing a robust and effective system of continuous improvement for alternative settings, states should keep in mind that:

- Alternative settings will likely be disproportionately represented in low-graduation-rate high schools and the bottom 5% of high schools identified for improvement under ESSA.
 - Whether embedded within an ESSA state plan or provided through a separate system of accountability within a state, states should ensure that there is a mechanism in place to appropriately identify which alternative schools are serving their students well and which are not, for the purposes of providing an improvement strategy to ineffective alternative settings.
 - It is important to consider the differences between the needs of and interventions designed for alternative schools versus evidence-based interventions in traditional schools, although little research has been done to this level of specificity.
 - Systems of continuous improvement can help build states' capacity to function as continuous learning organizations that are ultimately better positioned to effectively serve all students.
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²² Sec 1005(d)(1)(C)

Areas for Further Exploration

AYPF and Civic Enterprises have harnessed a shared knowledge of and mutual commitment to youth educated in alternative settings to inform this policy brief. A number of outstanding questions remain, however, in how states and other stakeholders can most effectively hold alternative settings accountable. These questions are previewed below, and will remain at the center of our work as we seek to better understand the ways in which accountability systems for alternative education can function.

- What about schools that are exempt from federal accountability?** Under ESSA, schools with fewer than 100 students are exempt from federal accountability. What does this mean for alternative schools, given that many have small student populations by design? Additionally, educational settings classified as “programs” are often exempt from accountability as they are not freestanding schools. Exemption from accountability could lead to these settings being ignored even though they may be in need of improvement. Under current circumstances, some alternative settings may intentionally remain out of the accountability spotlight as to avoid punitive action, but if states can create an effective accountability system for alternative schools, the small schools and programs and others exempt from federal accountability should get the benefit of continuous improvement as well.
- Can schools and districts use alternative education to hide bad results?** Students who are at risk of dropping out or who are struggling academically are often encouraged to attend alternative schools. In many cases, this can be a positive transition for students whose needs are more likely to be met in high-quality alternative settings. In other cases, however, schools or districts can send struggling students to alternative schools so as to not include them as dropouts and to avoid using their test scores in their school data, even though those alternative settings are exempt from accountability and may be low-quality. How big is the issue of using alternative settings to “hide dropouts” and how can it be avoided? Additionally, how can states ensure that all settings, including those alternatives that are exempt from accountability, are providing a high quality education to students?
- To whom should alternative students be compared?** Are alternative settings best compared to their peers, or should they be compared to all settings? Is it possible to compare progress made by students in alternative settings to the progress of similar students in traditional schools? For instance, if a student starts an alternative school two years behind in credits, but earns more than one year of credit in one school year, it could demonstrate that the alternative school is doing a better job than the traditional school of moving that student toward graduation. Additionally, the fact that states take different approaches to accountability under their ESSA state plans will inevitably lead to a concern of comparability between alternative settings, given that not all states will hold alternative settings accountable in the same way.
- What kinds of support will states need to be able to actualize their systems of accountability for alternative schools?** Some states wish for more clarification from the federal government on what is allowed for alternative schools, whereas other states wish to make those decisions themselves. In some states, more support is needed in building public and political understanding of alternative education, but others have enjoyed statewide support for alternative education for a long time. Similarly, many states have longstanding mechanisms for ensuring quality for alternative settings whereas others have not yet considered how accountability systems, under ESSA or otherwise, will affect alternative settings. A better understanding is needed of the support states most need in order to develop, implement, or update their systems of accountability for alternative settings.

As ESSA state plans and other accountability mechanisms are developed and implemented, these types of questions should guide national education leaders and assistance providers as they seek to share information and innovative practices with state leaders and other stakeholders.

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