# A Comparison of State Alternative Education Accountability Policies and Frameworks

Amy Schlessman and Kelly Hurtado
Rose Management Group

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## Abstract

The purpose of this policy study was to report descriptive research on state-level policy and frameworks for accountability systems of alternative education in the United States. The six states; California, Colorado, Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, and North Carolina; identified in the 2010 Jobs for the Futures policy analysis of alternative education comprised the purposive sample. Data was gathered from specified webpages and clarification with staff at state departments of education and Oklahoma's statewide evaluation of alternative education. Findings summarize the categories used for defining "at/high risk" students and describe each state framework for alternative education accountability. Pie charts of 2011 state labeling show results in states where data was available. A comparison matrix provides access to information on alternative education accountability policy and frameworks. This preliminary research provides information to inform state-level policy as decisions are made regarding alternative education accountability. Further research is needed to provide additional context through longitudinal analysis of state alternative education accountability labels. (Contains 7 figures including 4 pie charts and the comparison matrix.)

## Need for State Policy on Alternative Education Accountability

The United States is referred to as a "Dropout Nation." Experts agree that alternative education is a positive solution to the nation's dropout pandemic. For example, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network supports alternative schooling as an effective strategy in response to the nation's dropout problem (Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Policy makers and educational leaders need to set an equitable accountability framework for alternative schools that will lead to quality education. The National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) submitted an Executive Brief to the Obama administration in February 2009. The NAEA strongly encouraged the new Administration to adopt federal policies for alternative education that will "recover dropouts and create productive, service- oriented citizens" (NAEA, 2009, p. 4). In the absence of federal policy regarding alternative education, several recent reports have focused on the importance of state-level policy (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010; Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010; Deyé, 2011).

State legislators are called to action to be leaders, and policy recommendations are being made. Still, there needs to be an examination of the effectiveness of alternative education by monitoring the impact of accountability models (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Despite the role of alternative schools in reducing the dropout rates, policy-makers at the state level struggle to differentiate a state accountability framework that evaluates alternative school effectiveness. State policy-makers often use state-level performance-based accountability frameworks to make high stakes decisions about students and schools (Cobb, 2004). The failure to differentiate an accountability framework for alternative schools can lead to negative consequences that affect alternative schools' abilities to provide education for at-risk students.

To accomplish the bigger goal of examining ways that accountability policies may "exacerbate or ameliorate" (American Educational Research Association, 2011, p. 215) achievement for at-risk populations, a systematic and methodological comparison of existing state alternative education accountability (AEA) frameworks is necessary to determine a fair and consistent approach to evaluating alternative school effectiveness. The purpose of this study is to examine accountability systems for alternative schools and to suggest key elements that lead to quality, state-level alternative accountability policy and frameworks.

## Perspectives

The challenge for policy-makers at the state-level is to meet the prescribed state standards of performance while permitting the flexibility necessary to educate at-risk students. The evaluative criteria established by accountability frameworks need to specify clearly expectations while using fair and appropriate measures to evaluate performance. Accountability frameworks for alternative education are important in current reform efforts because of the role of alternative schools in increasing graduation rates for at-risk students.

"While nearly every state defines alternative education through legislation, the depth of the policies and legislation varies widely among states" (Martin & Brand, 2006, p. 9). State leaders are beginning to recognize that alternative education policies can provide the opportunity to increase graduation rates. According to Jobs for the Future's *Reinventing Alternative Education*, only six states have "clear and separate" (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010, p. vi) accountability measures that recognize achievement, or shortcomings, in alternative education schools and programs. Twenty-two (22) states and the District of Columbia incorporate certain aspects of alternative education in the existing state accountability framework. Of those 23, nine states hold alternative schools to the same standards as other

schools (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010). Other states have yet to address alternative schools with any type of state policy. The general problem is current policy for alternative school accountability is inconsistent across states.

The Jobs for the Future report identifies seven key areas of current state policies for effective alternative education. Among those is "accountability for results" (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010, p.vi). States should have an accountability system that allows alternative programs the flexibility they need to move students toward proficiency while ensuring expectations of meeting common statewide standards. States should give credit within their accountability system to schools and programs that reengage and hold onto students and for hitting key benchmarks toward graduation and postsecondary readiness (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010). Ambiguous state policies that do not clearly define expectations, or are inappropriate for the population served by alternative education campuses (AECs) defeat the purpose of school reform efforts targeting increased graduation rates. States that do not have an accountability framework for alternative schools create a disincentive for schools to serve at-risk students by labeling alternative schools on inappropriate criteria. A specific problem is the lack of consistent categories used to define which factors to consider when developing a state accountability system for alternative schools.

## Methods, Techniques, & Mode of Inquiry

This study uses quantitative and qualitative data to analyze alternative education accountability policy and frameworks. The following research questions guide this analysis:

1). How do state accountability frameworks for alternative education compare?

2). What are the indicators used when measuring accountability for alternative schools?

3). Does a distinct alternative education accountability framework allow schools to

document better student performance?

## Methodology

### Sampling

This study uses purposive sampling. A recent policy study (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010) identified six states that have adopted alternative education accountability frameworks. Those six states are included this study: California, Colorado, Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, and North Carolina.

### Data sources

Each state's department of education website includes specified webpages for alternative education or alternative education accountability. Staff at most state departments of education provided additional information and clarification.[i] In addition, Oklahoma's statewide evaluation of alternative education was used, (Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center, 2011), and state department reports of 2011 performance for alternative schools.

### Theoretical Approach

As one anonymous reviewer stated, "This is an important and under studied area." Our research reports what currently exists. Even though this initial analysis remains at the descriptive level, the three levels of epistemology (Dewey, 1958; Saunders, 1972) establish inclusive criteria for analysis. Our inquiry follows the minimum canons of logical rigor, i.e., it is legislative and not limited to data collection, measurement, or monitoring; it is constructed based on an informing hypotheses and avoids the error of Baconian simplicism (Cohen, 1926); and satisfies some minimum canons of logic, e.g., no generic fallacy, no reductionist fallacy, parsimony. The syntax chosen for findings reports reflects intended structure and the relationship of concepts and categories. Further, we use a leveled parallel pairs framework, a

relational model (Saunders, 1972), to present the information in an accessible and thorough format, even for this limited, descriptive research.

## State Alternative Education Context

We have emphasized that lack of federal policy on alternative education elevates the importance of state policy. To understand state policy and frameworks for alternative education accountability, it is necessary to consider the context of alternative education in the states selected for this study.

### California

California first established guidelines in 1976 for alternative learning programs to allow students another option for completing graduation requirements. The Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) was developed with the passage of the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) in 1999. The ASAM framework is a separate framework used to evaluate alternative schools and programs. Due to state budget constraints there is little data available on the effectiveness of ASAM.

> In October 2010, the Governor signed the state budget and in doing so vetoed funding for the data collection and reporting of the ASAM program as well as for identifying and disseminating best practices of alternative schools. Due to the lack of funding, in November 2010 the CDE eliminated reporting for the 2009-10 ASAM cycle and a full-time position that had administered the ASAM program. In addition, the CDE has stopped all work on the revised ASAM (California Department of Education, 2011, para. 7).

### Colorado

Colorado first established its AEC designation in 2002 (K. Lanoha, personal communication, March 3, 2012). State statute was amended in 2009 to ensure unique accountability criteria for AECs. Schools self-reported 13,171 students enrolled for 2010-11.

Seventy-four AECs operated in 2010-11. In order for the Colorado Department of Education to designate a school as an alternative education campus, it must serve 95% high-risk students, 95% students with an individualized education plan (IEP,) or 95% students in those two groups.

**Florida**

Florida's alternative schools are defined in regulation as any school that provides dropout prevention and academic intervention services, pursuant to Florida statute. Seventy-four (74) schools received alternative school labels in 2011 (Florida Department of Education, 2011).

**North Carolina**

The State Board of Education in North Carolina established procedures for implementation of alternative programs and schools in 1999 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2003). In 2000, the Alternative and Safe Schools Instructional Support Section was tasked with creating minimum guidelines for alternative learning programs. Since 2000 there have been various revisions to the procedures in place for effective alternative learning programs, including the creation of alternative learning program standards and accountability framework.

**Oklahoma**

Oklahoma legislated its statewide system of alternative education programs in 1996-97 and permits a seven-year phase-in. Beginning in 2002-2003, legislation required all school districts to provide an alternative education program (Oklahoma State Department of Education, n.d.). Of the 522 public school districts in the state, 454 receive funding for alternative education. Many of the 454 districts form cooperatives of two or more districts to provide alternative education. According to statute, each alternative education program must provide 17 research-based components including an evaluation component (Oklahoma State Department of

Education n.d.). In the 2010-11 school year, 246 alternative education programs served 10,930 students. Oklahoma defines at-risk children and youth as "individuals whose present or predictable status (economic, social-cultural, academic, and/or health) indicates that they may fail to successfully complete their secondary education and acquire basic life skills necessary for higher education and/or employment."

**Texas**

Alternative performance measures for campuses serving students at-risk were developed in late 1994 and implemented in 1995-96. Since 2000-01, alternative education campuses are required by Texas Education Code (TEC) §29.081(d) to serve "students at risk of dropping out of school (p. 82). Texas defines in statute the at-risk categories for students under 21. (See Figure 1). Texas AECs must serve 75% students at risk of dropping out of school. In May 2011, there were 451 registered AECS serve around 72,542 students in grades 3 – 12 (Texas Education Agency, 2011a, 2011b).

## Findings

### State Policy: Statute and Regulation

All of the states included in this study have state legislation that guides state regulation on alternative education accountability. Oklahoma and Texas cite their alternative education accountability policy activity back to the mid-1990s. Colorado began designating alternative education campuses in 2005, yet established AEC accountability with 2009 legislation. Several states define at/high risk students in statute or regulation. Certain characteristics of "at/high – risk" are found in more than one state's definition. Figure 1 presents a summary of categories shared by more than one state definition of "at/high risk."

| **State** / **"At/High Risk" Characteristic** | Colorado | Oklahoma | North Carolina | Texas |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Psychiatric disorder or behavior | * | * | * | * |
| Academic progress | | * | * | * |
| Dropout | * | * | | * |
| Drug or alcohol use | * | * | * | |
| Pregnant or parenting | * | * | | * |
| Retention | | * | * | * |
| Adjudication | * | | | * |
| Child abuse or neglect | * | | * | |
| Expulsion | * | | | * |
| Homeless | * | | | * |
| Limited English proficiency | | | * | * |
| Truancy | | * | * | |
| Domestic violence | * | | | |
| Grades | | * | | |
| Gang involvement | * | | | |
| Migrant | * | | | |
| Over-aged & under-credited | * | | | |
| Parent/guardian in prison, on parole or probation | * | | | |
| Socio-economic status | | * | | |
| Suspension | * | | | |

Figure 1. State definitions of at/high risk

## Alternative Education Accountability Framework

There is variability among the alternative education accountability frameworks. State frameworks range from one indicator and measure used in Florida for their School Improvement Ratings to the choice of three among 15 data elements in California's Alternative School Accountability Model. Although school accountability is required in every state, most of the states' alternative education accountability models include some element of choice for the AEC. An AEC in Florida or Colorado can choose the framework for traditional schools or the alternative education accountability framework. Colorado's framework seems to offer the greatest amount of choice within mandated parameters; the Colorado Department of Education can approve an AEC specific, individualized framework that uses the required indicators.

**California.** (Figure 2 on next page)

| Indicator | Performance Standard | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Immediate Action** | **Growth Plan** | **Sufficient** | **Commendable** |
| **1. Improved Student Behavior**<br>The percentage of classroom-based long-term students recommended for suspension or expulsion under *Education Code (EC)* 48900 (i) and/or (k). | 78.0–100.0% | 42.0–77.9% | 7.0–41.9% | 0.0–6.9% |
| **2. Suspension**<br>The percentage of long-term students who received out-of-school suspensions. | 71.0–100.0% | 36.0–70.9% | 9.0–35.9% | 0.0–8.9% |
| **3. Student Punctuality**<br>The percentage of days all classroom-based long-term students were present on time at the beginning of the school day. | N/A | 0.0–89.9% | 90.0–100.0% | N/A |
| **4. Sustained Daily Attendance**<br>The percentage of days all long-term students were present in class and completed their full assigned instructional day. | 0.0–69.9% | 70.0–89.9% | 90.0–97.9% | 98.0–100.0% |
| **5. Student Persistence**<br>The percentage of classroom-based long-term students and/or long-term students in independent study considered accounted for by the October California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) School Information Day. | N/A | 0.0–89.9% | 90.0–100.0% | N/A |
| **6. Attendance**<br>The percentage of apportionment days claimed for all long-term students. | 0.0–64.9% | 65.0–83.9% | 84.0–94.9% | 95.0–100.0% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **8. Writing Achievement**<br><br>(See *SBE Approved Instruments for Indicators 8, 9, and 10* on page 3) | School reports show the total number of students with growth and with no growth on the achievement test selected by the ASAM school. Schools are not provided with their school year performance levels for the academic achievement indicators (i.e., Reading, Writing, and Mathematics) because of the early stage of data collection on these indicators; additional data are required to ensure reliable school classification. | | | |
| **9. Reading Achievement**<br><br>(See *SBE Approved Instruments for Indicators 8, 9, and 10* on page 3) | | | | |
| **10. Math Achievement**<br><br>(See *SBE Approved Instruments for Indicators 8, 9, and 10* on page 3) | | | | |
| **11. Promotion to Next Grade**<br><br>The percentage of K–6 long-term students promoted to the next grade level. | N/A | 0.0–89.9% | 90.0–100.0% | N/A |
| **12A/B. Course Completion (Actual)**<br><br>The percentage of courses passed by all middle school long-term students based on the number of courses attempted. | N/A | 0.0–89.9% | 90.0–100.0% | N/A |
| **12C. Course Completion (Average)**<br><br>The average number of courses passed by all middle school long-term students per month of enrollment. | N/A | 0.0–0.6 | 0.7–2.0 | N/A |

| Indicator | Performance Standard | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Immediate Action** | **Growth Plan** | **Sufficient** | **Commendable** |
| **13A. Credit Completion (Actual)**<br>The percentage of graduation credits earned by all high school long-term students based on the number of graduation credits attempted. | 0.0–66.9% | 67.0–81.9% | 82.0–96.9% | 97.0–100.0% |
| **13B. Credit Completion (Average)**<br>The average number of graduation credits earned by all high school long-term students per month of enrollment. | 0.0–3.9 | 4.0–5.4 | 5.5–9.4 | 9.5–15.0 |
| **14. High School Graduation**<br>The percentage of high school long-term students who passed the California High School Exit Examination and received a high school diploma. | 0.0–49.9% | 50.0–72.9% | 73.0–95.9% | 96.0–100.0% |
| **15A. General Education Development Completion**<br>The percentage of General Education Development (GED)-eligible long-term students who passed all tests for GED certification. | N/A | 0.0–74.9% | 75.0–100.0% | N/A |
| **15C. General Education Development Section Completion**<br>The percentage of GED sections passed by all long-term students eligible to take the GED. | N/A | 0.0–74.9% | 75.0–100.0% | N/A |

Figure 2. California's Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM)

Source: J. Volkoff, personal communication, March 21, 2012

**Colorado**. Statute requires demonstration of progress toward the key performance indicators of Achievement, Growth, Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness, and Student Engagement. Statute stipulates that AEC frameworks must give the greatest weight to Postsecondary Readiness and Growth. When available, state data must be included in an AEC's framework.

**Florida**. Florida's indicator is student growth, learning gains for Reading and Math, on the state examination with three ways to calculate those gains.

**Oklahoma**. Oklahoma statute requires its alternative education programs to participate in a state-wide evaluation. Data is collected on five variables: grades, courses passed, absences, credits earned, and disciplinary referrals.

**North Carolina**. Alternative programs are integrated into the state ABC Accountability Framework; however, alternative program evaluation has distinct criteria as the basis for labeling these schools.

**Texas.** Alternative education accountability uses four base indicators:

- performance on the *Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)*,
- English Language Learners (ELL) Progress,
- Completion Rate, and
- Dropout Rate for grades 7–12.

| Indicators/Features | AECs of Choice | Residential Facilities | Charters |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Assessment Indicators** | | | |
| ***TAKS Progress***<br>All Students and each student group that meets minimum size criteria:<br>African American<br>Hispanic<br>White<br>Econ. Disadv. | Meets 55% Standard<br>or<br>Demonstrates Required Improvement (RI)<br>or<br>Meets 55% Standard Using District At-Risk Data<br>or<br>Demonstrates RI Using District At-Risk Data | | Meets 55% Standard<br>or<br>Demonstrates RI |
| ***ELL Progress***<br>All Students only<br>(if minimum size criteria are met) | Meets 55% Standard<br>or<br>Demonstrates RI | | |
| **Completion/Dropout Indicators** | | | |
| ***Completion Rate II***<br>All Students only<br>(if minimum size criteria are met) | Meets **60.0%** Standard or Demonstrates RI or Meets **60.0%** Standard Using District At-Risk Data or Demonstrates RI Using District At-Risk Data | Residential Facilities are not evaluated on Completion Rate II. | Meets **60.0%** Standard<br>or<br>Demonstrates RI |
| ***Annual Dropout Rate***<br>All Students only<br>(if minimum size criteria are met) | Meets **20.0%** Standard or Demonstrates RI or Meets **20.0%** Standard Using District At-Risk Data or Demonstrates RI Using District At-Risk Data | | Meets **20.0%** Standard<br>or<br>Demonstrates RI |
| **Additional Features** | | | |
| ***Required Improvement (RI)*** | RI is calculated for the TAKS Progress, ELL Progress, Completion Rate II, and Annual Dropout Rate indicators when the standards are not met and when prior year minimum size requirements are met. | | |
| ***Use of District At-Risk Data*** | TAKS data of at-risk students in the district are used when the 55% standard and RI are not met based on fewer than 10 tests or when there are no TAKS tests. | | Performance results of all students in the accountability subset are used in determining the charter rating. The charter rating is not limited to evaluation of at-risk students. |
| | Completion Rate II of at-risk students in the district is used when the 60.0% standard and RI are not met or when students in any grades 9-12 are served but there is no Completion Rate II. | Residential Facilities are not evaluated on Completion Rate II. | |
| | Annual Dropout Rate of at-risk students in the district is used when the 20.0% standard and RI are not met. | | |
| ***Special Analysis*** | Special Analysis is conducted when there are fewer than 10 at-risk TAKS tests in the district or charter. | | Special Analysis is conducted when there are fewer than 10 TAKS tests in the charter. |
| ***Data Integrity*** | None | | Charters are subject to under-reported student standards, although the charter AEA rating is not affected. |
| ***AEA ELL Progress Provision*** | If the ELL Progress indicator is the only cause for an *AEA: AU* rating, then the AEC or charter is assigned the *AEA: AA* label. | | |
| ***Federal Race/Ethnicity Provision*** | See *Appendix J* for information on the 2011 Federal Race/Ethnicity Provision. | | |

Figure 3. Texas Alternative Education Accountability Framework

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2011 Accountability Manual

The indicator found in all state frameworks for schools is student growth on the state mandated test. Oklahoma's alternative education system is distinct because that state delivers alternative education in programs, usually not via an AEC.

**Highlights from 2011 Summaries and Reports**

Oklahoma's alternative education report shows that students enrolled in an alternative education program:

- were absent less often,
- made higher grades,
- failed fewer classes,
- earned a greater number of credits, and
- were referred less often for disciplinary problems (Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center, 2010).

The other five states use school labels, type of improvement plans, or school improvement ratings for their AECs. Figures 3 – 6 present the percentage of AECs in each state that received various labels/ratings for 2011.

Colorado's Department of Education calculated accountability for 74 AECs in 2011. Seventy-two (72) schools received a final performance plan recommendation using the AEC accountability framework.

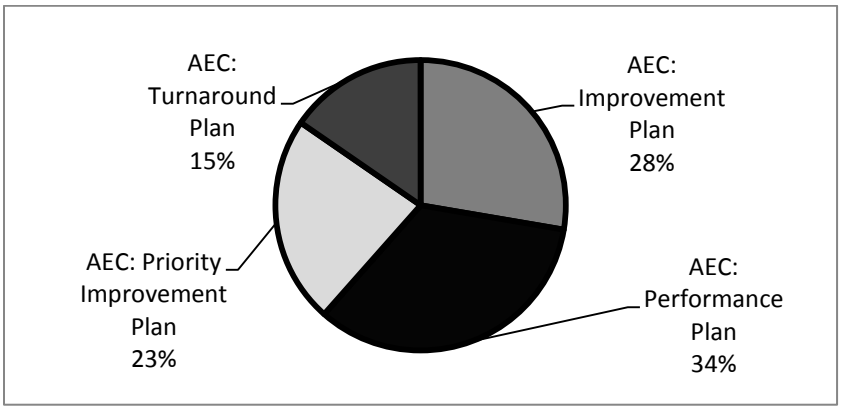


Figure 4. Colorado's Alternative Education Campuses' School Improvement Plans

Source: Colorado Department of Education 2011

Seventy-four (74) AECs in Florida received school improvement ratings

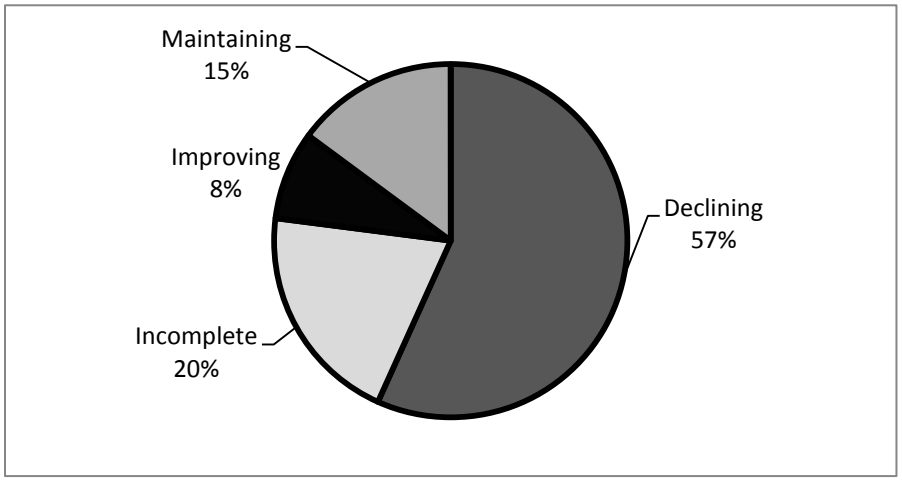


Figure 5. Florida's Alternative School Improvement Ratings

Source: Florida Department of Education 2011

Ninety-one (91) AECs were rated using the North Carolina alternative school formula.

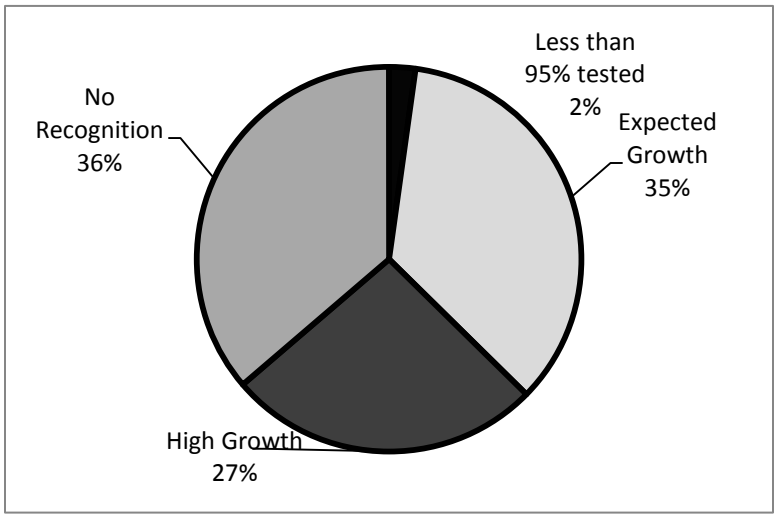


Figure 6. North Carolina's Alternative Schools' ABC Status

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.

451 AECs were rated in Texas.

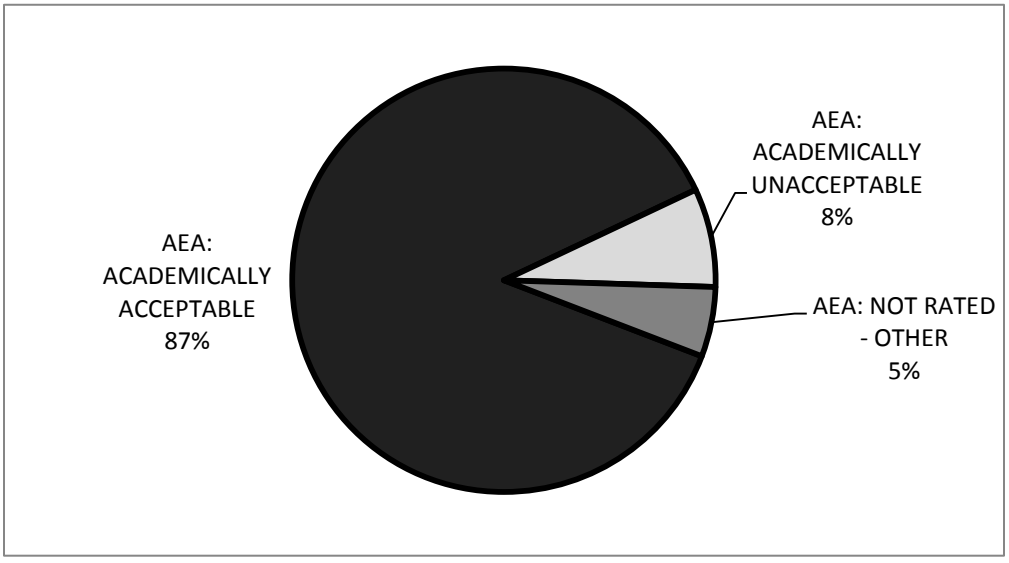


Figure 7. Texas's Alternative Education Accountability

Source: Texas Education Agency 2011

**Comparison Matrix**

This matrix presents a comparison of the alternative education accountability policy and frameworks in the states selected for this analysis. (Figure 7 on next page)

| State / Accountability Category | **California** http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/am/ | **Colorado** http://www.cde.state.co.us/OPP/AEC.htm | **Florida** http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/pdf/1011/AltSchoolRatingGuide2011.pdf | **Oklahoma** http://ok.gov/sde/alternative-education-programs | **North Carolina** http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/alp/ | **Texas** http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/aea/ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Policy**: Statute and/or Regulation | California Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 Work stopped on the revised ASAM due to lack of funding | CDE Rules pursuant to State Statute, http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdedocs/OPP/1CCR301-57AccountabilityforAlternativeCampuses4-15-11.pdf | Florida Statutes - Sections 1008.34 & 1008.341<br>FL Administrative Code Rule 6A-1.099822 | Statute 70 O.S. § 1210-568<br>http://ok.gov/sde/alternative-education-programs | State Statute<br>G.S. 115C-12(24) | Texas Education Code - Section 29.081. Compensatory, Intensive, and Accelerated Instruction<br>http://law.onecle.com/texas/education/29.081.00.html |
| **Framework** | See Figure 2. California's Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) | Achievement, Growth, Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness, Student Engagement<br>http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdedocs/OPP/AECPolicyGuidance.pdf | Learning Gains on state exam (FCAT) for Reading & Math | Statewide Evaluation of Alternative Education Programs<br>Grades, courses passed, absences, disciplinary referrals | Two components based on State Testing – End of Course Tests and change in Competency passing rate<br>+ Menu of Local Options | Indicators: Assessment Completion/Dropout<br>Plus Additional Features<br>See Figure 3 |
| **Outcomes** | State level reporting eliminated in November 2010 due to lack of funding | AEC Plan Type:<br>Performance 34%<br>Improvement 28%<br>Priority Improvement 23%<br>Turnaround 15% | School Improvement Rating<br>Improving 8%<br>Maintaining 15%<br>Declining 57%<br>Incomplete 20% | Absent less, higher grades, fewer failed classes, earned more credit fewer referrals<br>http://www.otac.info/storage/eval-files/Statewide2010_11.pdf | High Growth 27%<br>Expected Growth 35%<br>No Recognition 36%<br><95% Tested 2% | Alternative Education Accountability (AEA)<br>Academically Acceptable 87%<br>Academically Unacceptable 8%<br>Not Rated 5% |

Figure 7.
Alternative Education Accountability Policy and Frameworks: Key Elements in Various State Systems

## Discussion

A review of the indicators shows that accountability for AECs in some states, such as Colorado, Texas, go beyond results on standardized achievement testing. There is evidence of movement toward aligning accountability for alternative education to educational goals appropriate to the student population being served (Rothstein, & Jacobsen, 2006).

Texas AECs seem to fare best with their alternative education accountability. Texas has been using a distinct accountability system for close to two decades. That state revised their AEA system in 2005. If AEC labels/ratings reflect the quality of schooling offered to at/high-risk students, it appears that Texas' effective and appropriate accountability framework with multiple indicators does allow better schooling for targeted students. Florida's AEC performance in 2011 suggests that AEA may need more than a single indicator of school success.

Our study shows that states use one of three types of AEA:

1. Program Evaluation of Alternative Education
2. Distinct Accountability for AECs
3. Parallel Accountability for AECs but with distinct formulas

Oklahoma uses the first AEA type. All alternative education programs in the state participate in an annual state-wide evaluation. Oklahoma's emphasis seems to be on evaluating alternative education as a system within the state. The second type of AEA is illustrated by the frameworks in Florida and Texas. The third framework type, accountability for AECs similar to the one for traditional schools yet with customized indicators and formula, is used in Colorado and North Carolina.

## Areas for Further Research

This study furthers the limited research currently available for making informed decisions on alternative school accountability. Multiple reports emphasize the importance of developing alternative pathways for at-risk students to graduate; however, there is still a need to increase the quality of alternative schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Almeida, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010; Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Le, 2010; Deyé, 2011, Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Our inquiry is limited by looking only at the most recent year of AEA results. A longitudinal analysis of state AEA labels would provide more insight. Over half, 57%, of Florida AECs show declining scores on the state exam; less than a tenth, 8%, show improvement. Is this a yearly trend? Texas AECs show a very high percentage, 87%, of schools that are "academically acceptable." Texas's current AEA started in 2005 and dates back to the mid-1990's. What does AEA in Texas look like over time? Has there always been such a high percentage of AECS getting desirable results? Texas has a wealth of information about AEA on their state department of education's website. Have clearly articulated goals for AECs helped the schools improve toward better alternative schooling for their students?

## Conclusion

This preliminary research should inform state-level policy and decision-makers as they make decisions regarding accountability frameworks for alternative education. State policy-makers have responsibility to create clear expectations for quality alternative schools and an accountability system that articulates how success will be measured.

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