

October 2012

Alternative Education and Pathways to Success



COLORADO CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Special thanks to Sarah Emmons, for her research and support on this project. Additional thanks to the many Children's Campaign staff members who contributed time to editing and designing the publication.

The Children's Campaign wishes to thank JPMorgan Chase Foundation for its generous support of this project.



The Colorado Children's Campaign is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization committed for over 27 years to creating hope and opportunity for all of Colorado's more than 1.2 million kids. As the state's most trusted source for data and research on child well-being and backed by an extensive, statewide network of dedicated child advocates, the Children's Campaign champions policies and programs that help lift children out of poverty, improve child health, early childhood learning and development, and K-12 education, and provide all of Colorado's children the opportunity to reach their full potential. For more information, please visit www.coloradokids.org.

Ensuring Academic Success for All Colorado Students

We may use standards to teach and evaluate students, but we must remember that students are not standard. Each comes with unique learning strengths and challenges. A traditional school room may work well for many students, but there are also many for whom that is not the right place to get a meaningful education. The reasons vary: teen pregnancy, family responsibilities, problems with engagement and discipline. When traditional public schools are unable to meet the needs of young adults facing these life circumstances, they are left with very few quality options.

Currently, students disengaged from the traditional public school environment are either referred to or seek out an alternative education program, enroll in preparation courses or take the General Education Diploma (GED), or drop out. In Colorado, the dropout rate was 3 percent in 2011. Nearly 13,000 students in grades seven through 12 left school. Those numbers are worse when broken out by race and ethnicity with 4.4 percent of Colorado's black students and 4.9 percent of Colorado's Hispanic students dropped out in 2011. All of Colorado's dropouts will cost the state about \$322,000 over the course of their lifetime due to lost taxes, increased costs to support programs such as food stamps and welfare, and higher health care costs.¹ Over the past few years, Colorado's dropout rate has modestly improved, but too many students are still permanently leaving school, severely limiting the opportunities in life, and ultimately decreasing the financial contribution they are able to make through higher income, sales and property taxes.

"The Colorado dropout rate is an annual rate, reflecting the percentage of all students enrolled in grades 7-12 who leave school during a single school year without subsequently attending another school or educational program. It is calculated by dividing the number of dropouts by a membership base which includes all students who were in membership any time during the year."²

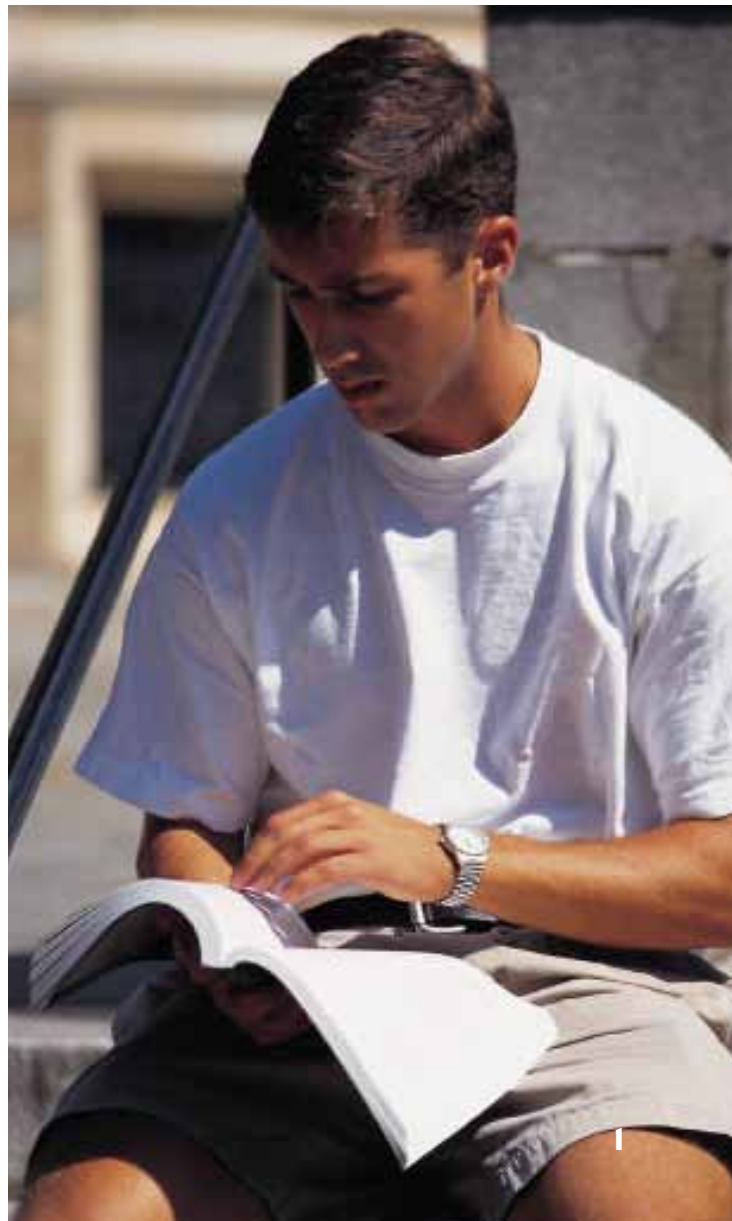
This isn't just a problem in Colorado. Nationally, the dropout rate was 7.4 percent in 2010, with Hispanic and black students experiencing dropout rates of 8 percent and 15.1 percent, respectively.^{3,4} To address this epidemic, states across the country are providing alternative options for students so that all dropouts have the chance, regardless of circumstance, to earn a high school diploma by learning in a quality public school that addresses their educational needs. In order to provide meaningful, relevant and rigorous educational opportunities for all Colorado youth, we must continue to expand rigorous alternative school options for students who do not fit into the mold of a traditional educational experience.

¹ Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement (Producer). (2008) High School Graduation Initiative Video [Video Clip]. Retrieved September 17th, 2012, from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/DropoutPrevention/DPSEVideo.htm>

² Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement. Retrieved September 14, 2012, from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/rv2011Dropout-Links.htm>.

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The Condition of Education 2012* (NCES 2012-045), Table A-33-1.

⁴ Note: The national dropout rate cited here is not comparable to the Colorado dropout rate cited above. The national dropout rate is calculated among 16- to 24-year-olds, while Colorado's graduation rate is calculated among students in grades seven through 12. The national data are provided to show trends only.



Last year, Colorado approved the operation of 76 of such schools, known as Alternative Education Campuses (AECs).⁵ Some of these schools offer programs for pregnant teens or youths who've been involved in the corrections system. Others educate those who don't fit into the traditional school system for a variety of reasons, including social limitations, behavioral needs or academic struggles. For years, these schools operated independently or privately and accountability was limited. In 2011, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) began to hold these schools accountable for their performance using a modified school performance framework created in Senate Bill 09-163.⁶ It took four main measures into account: academic achievement, academic growth, post-secondary/workforce readiness and student engagement. Data and resulting ratings from 2011 shows that these schools varied in performance: 23 alternative education campuses were rated as Performance Schools, 19 were rated as Improvement Schools, 22 were rated as Priority Improvement Schools, and seven received a Turnaround rating.⁷ These initial metrics for accountability can and should be tailored to better measure the variety of alternative education campuses and ensure they are successfully educating students. However, the results demonstrate that Colorado needs to do more to ensure that the existing alternative education opportunities for youth are truly rigorous and relevant, and prepare students with the skills they need to succeed in college or careers.

Colorado School Accountability Framework Ratings: The School Performance Framework assigns to each school one of four plan types⁸:

- 1) Performance Plan: The school meets or exceeds statewide attainment on the performance indicators and is required to adopt and implement a Performance Plan.
- 2) Improvement Plan: The school is required to adopt and implement an Improvement Plan.
- 3) Priority Improvement Plan: The school is required to adopt and implement a Priority Improvement Plan.
- 4) Turnaround Plan: The school is required to adopt and implement a Turnaround Plan.

A report published by *Jobs for the Future* in 2009 outlines seven recommendations to promote successful alternative education opportunities:

- Broaden eligibility criteria to include students who are not succeeding in traditional school settings in addition to disruptive students.
- Clarify state and district roles and responsibilities in creating and maintaining a strong alternative education system.
- Strengthen accountability for student outcomes.
- Increase innovation.
- Employ a high quality staff.
- Enhance student support services.
- Enrich funding.⁹

So far, Colorado has taken two of these steps by broadening eligibility and strengthening accountability for alternative school programs. In 2011, with the passage of House Bill 11-1277, Colorado expanded the definition of the types of students that AECs could educate ranging from students with very specific life circumstances (e.g., homelessness or pregnancy) to include over-age students who are behind in credits.^{10,11,12} This movement from situational qualification to academic qualification will support Colorado's transition to a more rigorous assessment of alternative education campuses, because it will allow us to look at how well specific programs are serving intended student populations and determine which are doing so successfully.

⁵ Accountability, Performance and Support. State Accountability - Alternative Education Campuses. Retrieved September 12, 2012, from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/Accountability/StateAccountabilityAECs.asp>

⁶ General Assembly of the State of Colorado. (2009). *Education Accountability Act of 2009*.

⁷ State, District and School Performance. Retrieved September 17, 2012 from <http://www.schoolview.org/documents/SPFOverview4-21-10.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Almeida, C., Cervantes, R., Le. C., Steinberg, A. (2009) Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State and Policy and How to Improve it. *Jobs for the Future*.

¹⁰ General Assembly of the State of Colorado (2011). HB 11- 1277

¹¹ The Colorado Department of Education defines over-age, under credit students as a student that is over traditional school age for his or her grade level and lacks adequate credit hours for his or her grade level.

¹² Rules for the Administration of Accountability for Alternative Campuses. Retrieved September 14, 2012, from <http://www.sos.state.co.us/CCR/Rule>.

NATIONAL SCOPE

As Colorado identifies different factors that may help support strong AECs, it is critical to look at other cities and states that have successfully improved alternative school opportunities for youth. In particular, New York City, Philadelphia, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Arkansas, Virginia, California and Illinois have been nationally recognized for committing significant resources toward alternative education options and meeting non-traditional students' needs.¹³ A student in New York City who is over-age, has already been in high school for four years, but has not accumulated enough credits for graduation would be guided to enroll in a Young Adult Borough Center (YABC). These centers allows students to both earn their high school diploma and gain workforce skills through the Learning to Work program. Without the YABC program, many students in this situation would likely have dropped out of school.¹⁴

PROGRAMS AND SCHOOL MODELS

Career and Technical Education Schools

- Provide rigorous academic study and workforce skills

Charter Schools

- Focused learning on public schools where students are often admitted through a lottery

I-zone Schools (Innovation-zone schools)

- Provide personalized learning
- Use technology for varying purposes, including offering college-level courses or credit-recovery opportunities

SLCs (Small Learning Communities)

- Small community schools that exist within large schools

Small Schools

- Schools with low numbers of students

Specialized High Schools

- Serve specialized student populations. For example gifted students or English Language Learner populations

Transfer Schools

- Provide personalized, rigorous opportunities for students who were unsuccessful in traditional high schools

Accelerated Achievement Schools

- Provide targeted programming for first-time 9th graders who enter high school over-age

ACCESS GED Programs

- Provide GED preparation and Learn to Work experiences

GED Plus programs

- Aid students who are ages 18-21 in obtaining their GED

Over age/Under-credited schools

- Provide services to students who are over age and under-credit, for example the Young Adult Borough Center in New York City



¹³ Almeida, C., Cervantes, R., Le, C., Steinberg, A. (2009) Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State and Policy and How to Improve it. *Jobs for the Future*.

¹⁴ *Young Adult Borough Centers, NYC Department of Education* (2012). Retrieved September 30, 2012, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/AlternativesHS/YoungAdult/default.htm>

Oklahoma has significantly expanded its alternative educational options. Recognizing that students in different communities have varying needs, Oklahoma allows its grant-funded AECs to determine their educational model. The state still holds them accountable to a set of 17 criteria that ensure schools are providing rigorous and research-based academic offerings. Since 1996, the approximately 250 AECs in Oklahoma have shown significant growth in student outcomes, including a lower state dropout rate.¹⁵ Looking to states like Oklahoma and cities like New York City as examples, Colorado should seek to promote a model for AECs that 1) provides students with targeted academic offerings specific to their needs and 2) allows schools some flexibility in determining the services students need while still maintaining high standards of accountability for student success. 3) provides a set of accountability criteria to choose from that both ensures an effective and meaningful education that accurately measures student academic progress that reflects the unique needs of the students they serve.

Access/Quality of Alternative Education Campuses in Colorado and Applicable Policy Changes

In order to determine the quality and range of alternative education options in Colorado, we analyzed data, conducted interviews with AEC principals and relevant Colorado Department of Education (CDE) employees, and engaged in conversations and data-sharing with various foundations and stakeholders focused on the alternative education. Three main themes emerged:

Academic Pipelines: We need efficient pipelines to help students who are struggling in traditional school settings to find alternative education options that meets their unique needs and are still academically rigorous. They must be available to students in each of Colorado’s school districts and meet each student’s individualized learning needs.

Accountability: State accountability systems should ensure that AECs have incentives and have support to serve the socio-emotional needs of students, and drive significant academic success.

GED Pathways: Pathways to obtaining a GED should be more clearly defined, and support should be provided to students who would otherwise drop out of school but are interested in obtaining their GED.



¹⁵ Almeida, C., Cervantes, R., Le. C., Steinberg. A. (2009) Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State and Policy and How to Improve it. *Jobs for the Future*.

Academic Pipelines

Background: There are 76 programs in Colorado for students seeking alternative school options across 39 school districts, plus the Charter School Institute and the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind, the state must ensure that these schools are meeting the individual needs of students in these districts.¹⁶ Conversations with AEC principals across the state revealed that many of the AECs in Colorado are not specialized in the type of student they serve. Especially in rural regions, an AEC may offer a wide variety of services to students in varying circumstances: pregnant or parenting teens, students with disabilities, over-age and under-credit students, young students who are under-credit, students with social difficulties and even competitive skiers all within one setting. With so many populations in one school, it becomes difficult for schools to meet the extremely broad range of socio-emotional and academic needs of its students.

Some larger districts in Colorado target certain populations of students. Denver Public Schools completed a study in 2009 that analyzed district-wide educational options for students. This study, conducted in partnership with the Donnell-Kay Foundation, found that Denver's alternative school opportunities are lacking in both quantity and quality, and that existing programs are not located in a way to best meet students' needs.¹⁷ Denver Public Schools has also hired six Transition Liaisons who work with schools, families and students to identify the best academic opportunities for youth based on their circumstances. This creates a pipeline of information between the traditional school, student, parent and alternative school.¹⁸ Transition Liaisons identify students who are at risk of dropping out and work to keep them engaged in targeted programming that meets their needs.

Studies of alternative education in other states have found that schools with an emphasis on a specific population of students have strong results. For example, New York City transfer schools that serve students who are specifically over age and under-credit have shown incredible results: these schools graduate students at two to three times the rate of traditional schools in NYC and have contributed to a 15.2 percent rise in the city's graduation rate over the past eight years.¹⁹ Additionally, Philadelphia's Accelerated Schools, which serve former dropouts and other off-track, significantly under-credited students ages 16 to 21, have driven strong skill gains. More than two-thirds of students progressed two or more grade levels in reading and math.²⁰ By focusing on a specific sub-group of students with similar academic needs, schools can better target their services to meet the needs of these students.

¹⁶ Accountability, Performance and Support. State Accountability - Alternative Education Campuses. Retrieved September 12, 2012, from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/Accountability/Downloads/AlternativeEducationCampuses2011-2012.pdf>

¹⁷ Donnell-Kay Foundation. (2009, October). *A Call to Action: Getting Denver Public Schools Students Back on Track to Graduation*. Denver, CO: Dolan, K.K., Perez-Oquendo, R., Sturgis, C.

¹⁸ Boogaard, K. (2012, August 13). Personal interview.

¹⁹ Almeida, C., Cervantes, R., Le. C., Steinberg, A. (2009) *Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State and Policy and How to Improve it. Jobs for the Future.*

²⁰ Jobs for the Future. (2011, November). *Drop-out Recovery is National Recovery: How Federal Policies Can Support the Spread of Back on Track Through College Pathways*. Retrieved from http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/Dropout_recovery_policy_brief_110111.pdf



Recommendations: Alternative education options that allow students to pursue a high school diploma through an alternative pathway should be available in each school district. In order to ensure that students across the state are receiving targeted services tailored to their individual needs, the following policy changes are recommended:

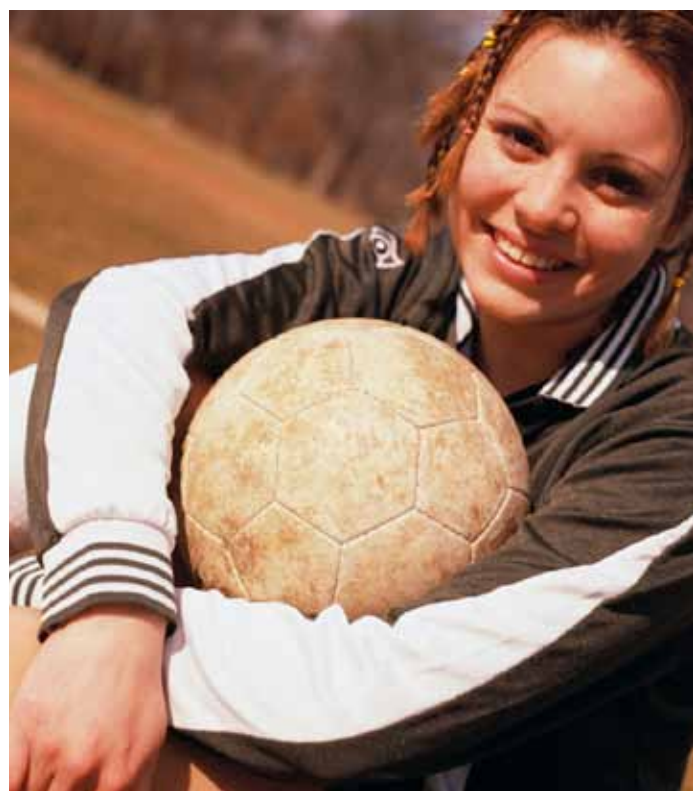
- Each district, regardless of size, should provide tailored learning opportunities for at-risk students in a variety of circumstances. This tailored programming can come in the form of a school that educates this specific population or through an individualized learning plan within a traditional public school that meets the needs of the student. These tailored learning opportunities should provide a rigorous and comprehensive high school experience that results in a high school diploma for students prepared for college, career and life. Additionally, establishing a fair and equitable process for assigning students to these programs is recommended.
- Schools should have incentives to collaborate with similar schools in their own and other districts or community partners to expand alternative opportunities for specific groups of students.

Accountability

Background: The current modified school performance framework for AECs in Colorado is a step in the right direction to ensure that AECs are meeting their students' needs. However, additional efforts are needed to ensure the accountability systems push AECs to provide both socio-emotional support and a rigorous academic standards. In order to develop a strong academic system, various state policies should be amended to support improved academic outcomes for students in alternative education programs.

AEC principals frequently cited relationship-building as a critical component in promoting academic success among students on Alternative Education Campuses. With a group of students from diverse and often unstable backgrounds, many AEC principals emphasized the importance of ensuring students have their basic needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, self-esteem) met before being able to engage them in academic study. To meet students' basic needs, schools must provide a variety of services: counseling, life skills courses, referrals to public services, mentoring and advisory groups, among others. Because many of these schools have limited staff, most of these wrap-around supports were provided by teachers and administrators. Most principals noted that their staff, who often themselves are from challenging backgrounds, were effective due to their own experiences. The relationships formed through this support, according to AEC principals, were key in promoting academic success. Recruiting and retaining high-quality staff is critical to ensuring student success.

The 2011 AEC accountability data shows that many AECs did not perform well. Even schools that attained a Performance rating, the highest rating awarded to schools, academic achievement and growth scores (based on Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) results) were very low. Many AEC principals cited their frustration that TCAP was used as a measure of academic proficiency and growth, as the test is based on grade-level and typically the majority of students at AECs are significantly below grade level. The TCAP assessment only extends through 10th grade and cannot assess the academic achievement or growth of students in their junior or senior years, who make up the majority of students in AECs. Additionally, all juniors in Colorado must take the ACT, which factors into School Performance Frameworks, but again that assessment is based on grade level proficiency. Therefore, the academic achievement/growth rankings of many AECs were based on the test score from an assessment that does not recognize the level of achievement of the students it is assessing.



The 2011 AEC accountability data also found relatively high dropout rates and low graduation rates for AECs statewide. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Office of Student Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement reports that while only 5 percent of all students in grades seven through 12 are enrolled in AECs, 27.4 percent of the dropouts in Colorado come from these schools.²¹ Additionally, studies have shown that re-engagement becomes increasingly difficult the more times a student drops out: after dropping out once, a student has a 25 percent re-engagement rate, but once they drop out for a second time, their re-engagement rate is almost zero.²² Keeping these at-risk students in school is a high-stakes endeavor. The accountability framework needs to continue schools to accept all students, regardless of age or circumstance, and make sure that they are continuously enrolled and earning credits as they work toward a high school diploma.

Recommendations: We know students who attend AECs in Colorado have a variety of risk factors and need additional support in order to be successful, both in life and in academics. In order to promote gains in these areas, the following changes are recommended:

- Require and financially support AECs to maintain instructional support staff including , but not limited to: assistant principal, school social worker, school or career counselor, school psychologist, school nurse, special education teacher (if needed), and teacher assistants to ensure wrap-around support.
- Require AECs to engage in community partnerships that provide socio-emotional support or workforce readiness skills to students. These partnerships would allow schools to provide socio-emotional support to students outside of the classroom setting, so that teachers can focus on instruction and academic achievement.
- Provide additional support for AEC principals to improve academic outcomes for their student populations. Coach principals in research-based instructional support methods so that can ensure teaching staff members are providing rigorous and standards-based instruction to students using innovative, data-driven methodology.

Furthermore, changes need to be made to the existing accountability framework to more accurately measure the ability of AECs to provide academic success for their students:

- Include an alternate measure, such as North West Education Association MAPS which are given to students locally two or three times per year, often formatively, to measure academic growth. Due to the fact that the TCAP ends in 10th grade and reflects grade-level mastery of concepts and skills, it is an ineffective measure of growth for students on AECs;
- Include credit completion as a measure for the Post-Secondary and Workforce Readiness component of the accountability framework. This, in addition to the school's completion rate, would provide a more accurate picture of how students are doing each year, regardless of grade level;
- Include examples of research-based metrics that could be used by schools to measure socio-emotional and psychological growth. Providing examples of appropriate metrics would allow AECs to better measure the effectiveness of the wrap-around supports they offer; and
- Require that all educators in AECs be effective or highly effective, ensuring our most vulnerable students are learning from our highest quality educators.



²¹ Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement. Retrieved September 14, 2012, from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeprevention/DropoutPrevention1.htm>

²² P. Fritz, personal communication, August 16, 2012.

GED Pathways

Background: For some students in Colorado, earning a high school diploma in a traditional school setting is difficult. Students who are over age 16 and significantly under-credit are often unable, even with credit recovery opportunities, to obtain the number of credits necessary to graduate before age 21. There are other students for whom high school graduation is challenging due to health issues, family responsibilities or other personal challenges. For these students, a GED becomes an opportunity to complete high school and move into post-secondary opportunities or the workforce.

While obtaining a GED is a valuable option for many students, the pathways to receiving a GED are limited in Colorado. For students who already have the skills necessary to pass the test, their path is relatively easy: pay to take the test, and show up on test day. However, many students who seek their GED lack the skills and knowledge needed to pass. GED preparation programs are limited in Colorado and vary in quality. Currently, the state does not fund any GED preparation programs and does not conduct any sort of evaluation of existing programs. Importantly, GED preparation programs and testing sites do not communicate with school districts or the state about which students fail the GED or fail to take it. This prevents districts from drawing students back into their schools or help them to pass the GED. Consequently, students seeking additional support in passing the GED are limited.

Recommendations:

- Require ongoing communication between the school district and GED preparation programs and GED testing sites. This would allow districts to more easily identify students that do not follow through with pursuing their GED after dropping out and subsequently re-engage them.
- Require students who express interest in leaving school and taking the GED to take a GED pre-test prior to leaving a traditional or alternative school in order to assess their likelihood of passing the GED examination.
- Better track the link of credit completion and attendance to the student identifier to students earlier on in their high school careers so they can be reengaged before they drop out and pursue their GED.

CONCLUSION

Colorado's traditional public school system cannot meet the needs of many students with unique, and often challenging, life circumstances. For many of these students, alternative education campuses (AECs) are a valuable way to earn a high school diploma and acquire the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in postsecondary education or the workforce. Colorado has made strides in improving the quality of AECs across the state in recent years, but much work remains to be done to ensure that all alternative education programs are of high quality. We must ensure educational programs and pathways support students both socio-emotionally and academically by putting our best teachers and leaders in front of our most at-risk students, providing the wrap around supports necessary to ensure a rich academic environment and thoughtful pathways that better align student's needs and the programs directly correlated to their success. All Colorado kids deserve and education that prepares them to pursue college, careers and happiness. It is our job to ensure that happens by providing high quality educational options that meet the needs of every child.



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