The Students Alternative Schools Serve
An Essay for the Learning Curve by Adam Kho and Sarah Rabovsky
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Alternative schools have often been excluded from education policies and research. Yet they are a relatively common education intervention for students deemed unsuccessful in their traditional schools. Increasingly, the limited accountability oversight of the alternative school sector has led to allegations[1] of students being pushed out of mainstream schools to alternative schools to avoid accountability.

As states establish accountability measures more appropriate for highly mobile students in alternative schools, we need to understand the students affected by these schools. To a large extent, understanding the students who attend alternative schools equates to understanding the students who are missing from traditional schools and thus current school accountability systems.

In this analysis of national data, we show that alternative schools serve disproportionately high numbers of Black and Hispanic students, special education students, English learners, and male students, making those enrolled in alternative schools a particularly important population of students to consider in the pursuit of educational equity, but these students are commonly excluded from broader educational policies and research.

Alternative Schools Often Serve Students Struggling in Mainstream Schools

Broadly defined, alternative schools are public schools designed to address the needs of students that cannot be met in traditional or "mainstream" schools. Although originally introduced to serve successful students wanting to enroll in innovative and nontraditional approaches as well as students unsuccessful in mainstream schools, the focus of the alternative sector has shifted decidedly to the latter.

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[1] Heather Vogell and Hannah Fresques, "'Alternative' Education: Using Charter Schools to Hide Dropouts and Game the System" (New York: ProPublica, 2017).

We use "alternative schools" to describe three broad categories of schools:

1. Special education schools that serve students with disabilities. For example, districts and states may have specialized schools designed for students with visual or hearing impairments.

2. Vocational schools offer training in career and technical education. Students in vocational schools are prepared to enter trades such as carpentry, culinary arts, and graphic design after high school. Some vocational schools also offer traditional academic classes and provide students the opportunity to receive a standard high school diploma, while others may offer only nonstandard diplomas or focus on helping students earn certifications in their field of interest.

3. The last category of alternative schools, "typical" alternative schools, is broad and includes schools with various goals. Some focus on academic remediation, while other schools focus on disciplinary or therapeutic goals. Students may attend for a short time with the goal of transitioning back to their mainstream school, or they may attend for the duration of their schooling with the hopes of earning a high school diploma, earning a GED, or transitioning into a postsecondary program such as the military or a job training program.

A fourth class of alternative schools is made up of schools for incarcerated youth, such as juvenile detention centers. Given that students must be incarcerated to be enrolled in these schools, we exclude these from our examination. Additionally, we exclude adult education enrollment counts.

We use data from the US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and Office for Civil Rights to examine the student makeup of these alternative schools.

"Typical" Alternative Schools Have Grown the Most

Growth in Alternative School Enrollment Has Been Driven by "Typical" Alternative Schools

Thousands of students
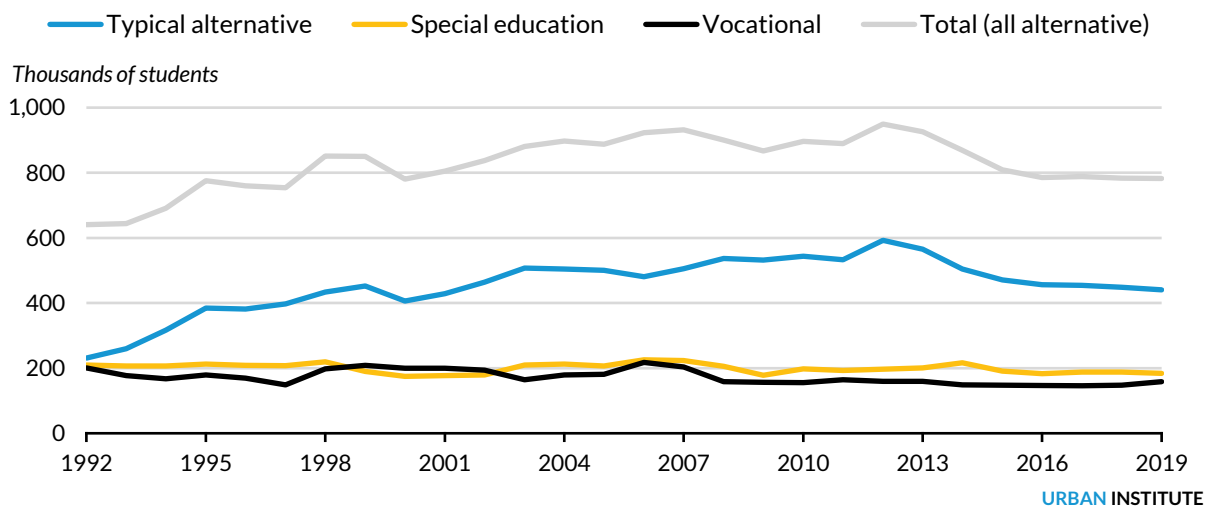
Source: US Department of Education Common Core of Data.

In the early 1990s, 640,000 American students were enrolled in alternative schools. Over the next 20 years, the alternative school sector grew by almost 50 percent, peaking in 2012 with just shy of 1 million students (about 1.9 percent of total enrollment nationwide). Since then, the population has slowly declined, hovering steadily at just under 800,000 students (about 1.6 percent of total enrollment nationwide). The growth in alternative school enrollment has been driven primarily by the increase in typical alternative education programs. Enrollment in special education and vocational schools has remained steady (figure 1).

Alternative School Enrollment Varies Widely by State

The enrollment share varies greatly by state (see the appendix). For instance, more than 7 percent of students in Delaware attended an alternative school in 2018–19 (driven primarily by enrollment in vocational and special education schools), whereas less than 0.1 percent of students attended an alternative school in several states, primarily in the North (e.g., Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine) and the Midwest (e.g., Nebraska, North Dakota, and Kansas). Although these enrollment figures represent snapshots of enrollment data, cumulative enrollment in alternative schools is likely significantly higher, given frequent student turnover in the alternative school sector.

Alternative Schools Disproportionately Serve High School and Urban Students

FIGURE 2

Alternative Schools Disproportionately Serve High School Students and Students in Urban Settings
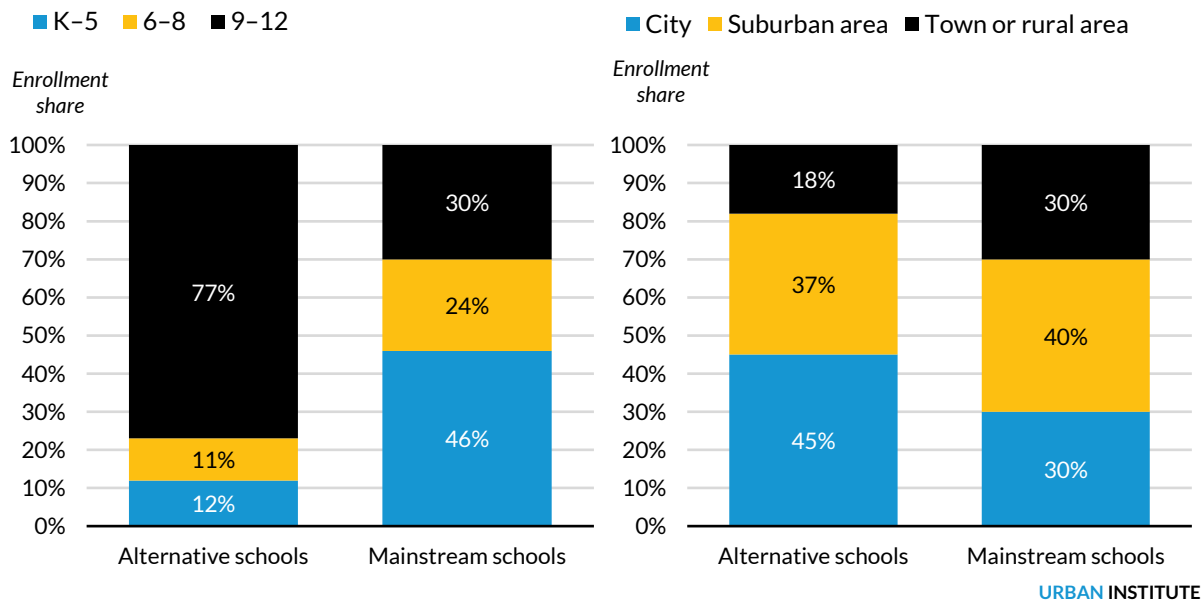
Source: 2018–19 data from the US Department of Education Common Core of Data.

Alternative schools disproportionately serve high school students and students in urban settings (figure 2). Thirty percent of mainstream school students are in grades 9 through 12, but more than 75

percent of alternative school students are in grades 9 through 12. Thirty percent of mainstream school students attend urban schools, but 45 percent of alternative school students attend urban schools. Over the past three decades, the distribution of students across grade levels has remained relatively steady, and although the share of alternative school students in the suburbs has increased, the share in rural settings has decreased since 2012, with these patterns resembling those observed for mainstream schools.

Students at Alternative Schools Are More Likely to Be Black, Hispanic, Male, and English Learners

Students in alternative schools are also disproportionately male, though the difference relative to mainstream schools is perhaps not as large as expected. Fifty-one percent of mainstream school students and 57 percent in alternative schools are male. Black and Hispanic students are also overrepresented in alternative schools: 19 and 34 percent of alternative school students are Black and Hispanic, respectively, compared with 15 and 27 percent in mainstream schools (figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Alternative Schools Serve Greater Percentages of Male, Black and Hispanic, Special Education, and English Learner Students
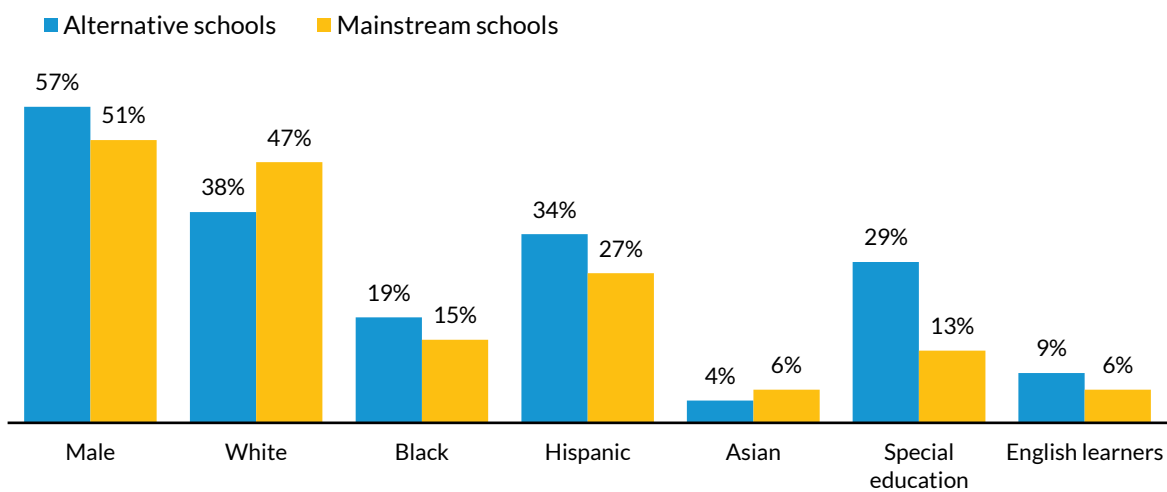
Source: US Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection and Common Core of Data.
Notes: Gender, race, and ethnicity data are from 2018–19. Special education and English learner data are from 2017–18. Our calculation of English learners is restricted to schools that include high school student enrollment.

The share of students with disabilities in alternative schools (29 percent) is more than double the respective share in mainstream schools (13 percent). Approximately half of these alternative school students are enrolled in the special education category of alternative schools. Omitting these schools,

14.5 percent of alternative school students have reported disabilities in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Lastly, because many English learners are reclassified in elementary or middle school, and 80 percent of alternative schools serve high school students, we restrict our calculation of English learners to schools that include high school student enrollment. Nearly 9 percent of alternative high school students are English learners, 50 percent more than the 6 percent in mainstream schools.

Policies Supporting Alternative School Students Can Promote Educational Equity

Alternative schools disproportionately educate students from historically underserved groups. Further, students attending these schools often face additional challenges, such as being teenage parents,[2] struggling with behavioral issues,[3] or being victims of bullying.[4] Nevertheless, these schools provide arguably our highest-need and most vulnerable students another avenue for academic success. School accountability systems are, at least in theory, designed to provide schools incentives to increase educational equity for traditionally underserved students, but students in the alternative sector are largely missing from the accountability systems purportedly implemented to serve them.

Paramount to the challenge of accountability implementation in alternative schools is the high level of student mobility and the varying education goals of alternative school students (e.g., earning credits, improving attendance, reducing disciplinary incidences, reentry to mainstream school, earning a GED, high school completion). To help address these challenges, some states are experimenting with modified measures of effectiveness to track alternative school performance. For example, some states have moved toward computing a graduation rate for 12th-graders only and/or emphasizing other measures of academic achievement for alternative schools, such as course completion.[5]

Many of these efforts are still in progress, and the varying goals of alternative school students raise questions on the appropriateness of comparing alternative schools not only with mainstream schools but with each other.[6] Moreover, underlying the push to create more applicable measures of effectiveness in alternative schools is a concern that heightened focus on academic outcomes could crowd out support services that alternative school administrators cite as critical for many of their

[2] Camilla A. Lehr, Chee Soon Tan, and Jim Ysseldyke, "Alternative Schools: A Synthesis of State-Level Policy and Research," *Remedial and Special Education* 30, no. 1 (January 2009): 19–32. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0741932508315645.

[3] Kimber Wilkerson, Kemal Afacan, Aaron Perzigian, Whitney Justin, and Jenna Lequia, "Behavior-Focused Alternative Schools: Impact on Student Outcomes," *Behavior Disorders* 41, no. 2 (February 2016): 81–94, https://doi.org/10.17988%2F0198-7429-41.2.81.

[4] Kate L. Collier, Gabriël van Beusekom, Henry M. W. Bos, and Theo G. M. Sandfort, "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression Related Peer Victimization in Adolescence: A Systematic Review of Associated Psychosocial and Health Outcomes," *Journal of Sex Research* 50, nos. 3–4 (2013): 299–317, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.750639.

[5] Paul Warren, "Accountability for California's Alternative Schools" (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2016).

[6] Hanley Chiang and Brian Gill, *Student Characteristics and Outcomes in Alternative Neighborhood High Schools in Philadelphia* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica, 2010).

students (e.g., support groups for students experiencing drug or alcohol addiction, sexual abuse survivors, teen parents).[7]

Given the challenges of establishing consistent measures of effectiveness among highly mobile and vulnerable students with varying educational goals, a continued effort to understand the statistical trends for alternative school students and the story behind them is an essential step toward ensuring equitable opportunities for these students.

Appendix

TABLE A.1
Alternative School Enrollment Shares, by State

State	Enrollment share	State	Enrollment share
Delaware	7.2%	Nevada	0.6%
Massachusetts	4.3%	North Carolina	0.6%
Washington	4.2%	Louisiana	0.5%
Michigan	3.9%	Iowa	0.5%
Minnesota	3.7%	Missouri	0.5%
New York	3.0%	Ohio	0.4%
New Jersey	2.8%	Alabama	0.3%
Colorado	2.8%	Tennessee	0.3%
California	2.5%	Wyoming	0.2%
Alaska	2.4%	Virginia	0.2%
Idaho	2.3%	Arkansas	0.2%
Connecticut	2.2%	Georgia	0.1%
Florida	2.1%	Indiana	0.1%
Maryland	2.0%	West Virginia	0.1%
Utah	2.0%	South Carolina	0.1%
District of Columbia	2.0%	Oklahoma	0.0%
Rhode Island	1.7%	Kansas	0.0%
Kentucky	1.4%	Hawaii	0.0%
Texas	1.4%	Mississippi	0.0%
New Mexico	1.4%	Montana	0.0%
Arizona	1.2%	North Dakota	0.0%
Oregon	0.9%	Maine	0.0%
South Dakota	0.8%	Nebraska	0.0%
Wisconsin	0.7%	Vermont	0.0%
Pennsylvania	0.7%	New Hampshire	0.0%
Illinois	0.7%		

Source: 2018–19 data from the US Department of Education Common Core of Data.

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[7] Lynn M. Hemmer, Jean Madsen, and Mario S. Torres, "Critical Analysis of Accountability Policy in Alternative Schools: Implications for School Leaders," *Journal of Educational Administration* 51, no. 5 (2013): 655–79, https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-01-2012-0002.

Acknowledgments

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