

Accountability for Alternative Education

Thought Leaders' Meeting Summary

Washington, DC | July 25, 2017

Despite progress in improving our nation's high school graduation rate, [data shows](#) that alternative high schools are overrepresented in low graduation rate high schools, or schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is an opportunity to examine the important role these 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. Presenters at this meeting previewed multiple forthcoming resources on alternative education and accountability. Presentations were interspersed with dialogue among a range of national stakeholders aimed at growing our understanding of accountability for alternative settings and improving the development of tools and resources. A summary of the presentations and key themes from discussion are included below.

Preview of Forthcoming Resources

50-State Scan of Alternative Education

American Youth Policy Forum

Expected Completion: Fall 2017

AYPF is conducting a scan of all 50 states and Washington, DC, designed to collect key information on state policies and practices regarding alternative education. As state plans under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have not yet gone into effect, this scan focuses on the states' approaches to alternative education writ large. The scan includes states' definitions of alternative education, system of accountability, relevant accountability measures, and systems of continuous improvement. Information for the scan is gathered via research of publicly available state code, state regulation, and state practices regarding alternative education. In some cases, AYPF is speaking directly with state leaders to dive deeper into the existing structures for alternative education. In gathering this information, AYPF is hoping to provide critical information to state policy leaders as they consider inclusion of alternative education in their accountability systems compliant with ESSA.

Policy Brief: Building Robust Systems of Accountability for Alternative Settings

American Youth Policy Forum and Civic Enterprises

Expected Release: Fall 2017

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes that all students should have access to a high quality education, and requires states to hold all schools accountable to that end. This policy brief will explore four key features of accountability in the context of alternative education, aligned with the information collected in the 50-state scan of alternative education, including definitions of alternative education, robust systems of accountability, relevant accountability measures, and systems of continuous improvement. The brief will also consider broader questions about the purpose of accountability and its role in ensuring that all schools, including alternative settings, provide students with a pathway to a high quality secondary credential.

As an accompaniment to the policy brief, AYPF has identified a few innovative and noteworthy state-level practices that will be shared as case studies. A preview of two of the case studies, one on Georgia’s school climate rating system, and one on Wyoming’s pilot program for alternative setting accountability was shared at the meeting. A third case study will also be released, which will share Louisiana’s model for including credentials that supplement or replace a high school diploma into the state’s accountability system.

Alternative Accountability Toolkit

Education Northwest

Expected Release: TBD

Education Northwest is currently developing an Alternative Accountability Toolkit to assist states in their considerations of accountability systems for alternative settings. The toolkit considers how accountability for these spaces can be inclusive of the perspectives of practitioners, school and district leaders, and state officials. The three primary tenets of the toolkit are:

1. Accountability should exist to allocate attention and resources where improvement is necessary.
2. Common measures are necessary to achieve this goal. Such measures should be readily available, valid for their intended use, usable, and useful for improvement at the site level.
3. Schools are best compared to their nearest peers.

The toolkit will include resources to facilitate conversations amongst key stakeholders considering effective designs principles, effective selection of common measures, and planning for improvement.

Related Resource (Forthcoming):

Policy Brief: Leveraging ESSA to Improve Outcomes for Youth in Juvenile Justice Facilities

This brief, produced by AYPF and the Council for State Governments Justice Center (CSG), will focus on the opportunities under ESSA to improve educational and workforce outcomes for the 35,000 youth currently served in long-term juvenile justice facilities. As documented in [CSG’s Locked Out report](#), these youth often do not receive adequate educational services or opportunities. This brief will explore factors that impact accountability for education at long-term juvenile justice facilities – data collection and sharing, accountability system structure, and accountability measures – and will outline key considerations for all state agencies including education, justice or corrections, health and human services, and others, that may be tasked with providing education in these facilities. The brief is set to be released in the fall of 2017.

To inform the forthcoming policy brief, AYPF is conducting a 50-state scan of education in long-term juvenile justice facilities, including the accountability structure for these facilities. The scan addresses questions such as who provides education in these facilities, how facility schools/programs are funded, and what educational information and data is collected and reported. The scan is conducted through phone and email interviews with education and juvenile justice agency representatives.

Key Themes from Discussion

Overrepresentation of Alternative Schools among Low Graduation Rate High Schools

An impetus for discussions surrounding accountability for alternative settings is the overrepresentation of alternative schools among low graduation rate high schools as defined by ESSA. In discussing potential causes of alternative school overrepresentation, participants noted that alternative schools are either not doing their job to get students to graduation and these low graduation rates are reflective of poor quality, and/or four-year graduation rates alone may not be adequately depicting the value and quality of alternative schools. This is particularly relevant for schools and programs that typically do not operate on a four-year graduation timeline, such as dropout recovery programs. This overrepresentation may lead state and local agencies to make assumptions about alternative school quality and discourage them from building and growing alternative schools and programs. The flexibility and expansion of indicators provided by ESSA represents an opportunity for states

to expand the knowledge and research base surrounding alternative settings, a necessary step towards ensuring that alternative settings are evaluated according to metrics that accurately represent the progress of their students.

Extended-Year Graduation Rates: Important for All, Used Differently across States

ESSA provides states the ability to use extended-year graduation rates (EYGR) as part of the required graduation rate indicator in state accountability systems. The inclusion of EYGR is particularly important for demonstrating alternative school quality, as these settings are tasked with leading “at-risk students” students to a secondary credential who enter alternative settings already off-track to graduate in four years. Currently, 8 of the 21 states that have been scanned are not using extended-year graduation rates as measures of alternative school quality, though many more may include them under their forthcoming ESSA state plans. Of the state plans available for review, extended-year graduation rates are being incorporated in variety of ways.

Areas for Further Exploration

More research is needed to determine what works in alternative education and what makes for a robust and effective accountability system. This research will be critical in developing accountability systems and measures inclusive of alternative education. Participants raised several issues in the alternative education space that need further research, including:

- **Defining the “setting type” for alternative education:** States currently define alternative settings in a variety of different ways, and many classify those settings as programs, schools, or some combination of the two. This classification has implications for the structure of accountability in each state. Understanding the ways in which states can design alternative settings that meet their students’ needs will be necessary to ensuring that all settings are held accountable for the progress of their students.
- **The role of GEDs:** GEDs (term used broadly to include all state varieties of high school equivalency credentials) are meant to provide credentials based on proficiency rather than time spent in school. However, GED completers are considered dropouts for federal accountability purposes. If completer rates are used in some capacity, it may incentivize both alternative and traditional schools to connect youth who are considering dropping out to attend adult education programs that work towards a GED.
- **The role alternative settings play in student reengagement:** In many states, alternative settings are designed to serve students who have previously dropped out of a traditional school environment. For alternative settings, measures inclusive of student persistence or reengagement rates may be useful in demonstrating setting quality.
- **How to include English learner measures:** One of ESSA’s required accountability indicators requires states to demonstrate progress in English learner proficiency. Given the uncertainty surrounding innovative measures to use under this indicator, particularly for alternative settings, AYPF is seeking to connect with others who have ideas regarding accountability measures that are reflective of progress made by English learners in alternative settings.
- **Interventions:** Alternative settings have specific practices designed to serve their unique student populations, and they should therefore utilize interventions and improvement activities that are responsive to their unique environments. Under ESSA, interventions are required to be evidence-based, however there is a dearth of necessary research evidence on the effectiveness of interventions in alternative settings. It is also important to note that ESSA allows for differentiated improvement activities for schools that primarily serve students returning to education and/or overage, under-credited students, which may impact alternative education settings.
- **Accountability systems, federal and public reporting:** Participants also discussed the reality that schools are required to be accountable to the federal government, and to states in varying degrees, but that

schools are also accountable to their local communities through public reporting. States should also consider the powerful role that local communities can play in school improvement.