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Alternative Education and Accountability: An Exploration

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by

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Abstract

As schools grapple with the effects of federal accountability under Every Student Succeeds Act, alternative schools are often over-identified as poorly performing. This research brings together current understandings of alternative accountability in the United States to identify which indicators are effective in evaluating school quality in alternative schools. Alternative schools are defined as schools that serve students, aged 16-24 and deemed at-risk and who have not had success in traditional public schools. This research concluded that the typical accountability frameworks that have been set for traditional K-12 schools are inappropriate for alternative campuses whose students are generally behind grade level or who encounter other obstacles their peers in traditional schools do not. Employing academic growth indicators, short-cycle assessments, re-engagement efforts, and allowing input from localized school voices to determine which outcomes would be most appropriate for the students they teach, facilitates a deeper evaluation of alternative schools.

Keywords: alternative education, accountability, framework, at-risk youth

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I was not a fan of high school or school in general. Although I was sufficiently book smart, I only really enjoyed and excelled in the courses that I was able to choose, but my choices (looking back) seemed limited. I was not really an artist, nor was I the student who thrived in multiple Advanced Placement classes. I also did not feel that I could take the Vocational Technical classes. Although I do not remember my exact feelings, I remember the stereotypes of the students and the programs that existed. I never even investigated them. I continued onto college more because after years of presentations from counselors and discussions with my family, I inherently understood the need for a college degree. I disliked our education system from an early age- disliked how much it felt like one box to check after another. I assumed that when I left school, I would be gone for good. Life though, seemed to have a different idea.

My career journey has not followed a straight line, and in the end, I wound up in education. Although my experiences in education have not been typical, working, for almost nine years, in alternative education has forced me to question many aspects of this educational sector. After teaching in the public-school system for almost three years, alternative education continues to feel very traditional; it seems society is still looking to check those same inevitable boxes. In 2015, Patricia Levesque opined, “Throw away the [school] calendar, and make time the variable and knowledge the constant” (Levesque, 2015). She argued that our school system still looked too much like the original designs of public education; she believed that students should move from one class to the next when they have proven they are ready (Levesque, 2015). My own observations have directed me to the same conclusion, and I see how school-based decisions, such as deciding how students move through a class sequence, can be hindered by the framework

that bridges a local school with the state and finally the federal government: the accountability system.

Holding alternative education programs and campuses accountable has proven challenging. I have seen those challenges firsthand through my career moves. Having worked for two charter schools, I have seen how different institutions approach measures that have already been put in place- either fighting them to be different or simply following suit. Working in the public-school system, in an alternative school, I am a witness to our society's continuous desire to put all students in the same box. But, if the same boxes worked for everyone, alternative education would not have emerged. Alternative accountability systems, like the development of alternative education, should look different from their comprehensive school counterparts. These alternative pathways should be celebrated and defined early for students. More importantly, districts should be holding those pathways and programs accountable in ways that make sense for the population they were built to serve while still providing overseers with enough information about the quality of a school.

Outsider on the Inside

I am not good at setting long term goals for my life. Almost 10 years ago, a potential mentor asked me where I saw myself in the next five years, and I blanched. Five years. Not so long, in the big scheme of things, yet, I had no idea what I envisioned for myself or where I saw myself. At that time, my goals were vague: I did not want to be in the United States, but I had no idea how I would make that happen or what I would do to sustain myself. In the end, it did not matter. My dreams and goals came to me unexpectedly, as they do for so many people. I ended up teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at a small school in a small town in the middle

of southwestern Mexico; the experience has stayed with me in ways I could not imagine. I am still an ESL teacher, but today, I work in the United States, in Washington DC.

I moved to Washington DC without a job and with little direction, but eventually wound up back in a school. This time a charter school for students aged 16 - 24 years old. That was seven years ago, and since that August, I have only worked in alternative school settings and largely only the 16 - 24-year-old population.

That first school was a charter school; I realize now that there was so much I did not know about traditional schools and how they operate; consequently, I did not know it then, but our school was trying things that were different. For example, this school was year-round which provided students the opportunity to keep studying during the summer. It was difficult for teachers and students to be in school during the summer, but over time that cultural shift came and began to succeed. The summer classes were more intimate and provided a safe space for students to grow in a way the typical September return to school did not. Our schedule existed with breaks after six weeks: it ran on a 13–14-week, trimester schedule thus providing students opportunities to attend classes that worked more for their schedule as well as help them feel they had a choice in determining when they would attend school. Classes happened for six weeks then students had a week off; teachers had a week of planning, professional development and resting. Throughout the year, students received counseling and other wrap-around services to ensure that they could be in class *and* learn. This school pushed to be measured according to student growth. I began to get a sense of how school could be different from what I experienced and how these shifts could be beneficial to students who needed different structures from what I grew up with.

Today, I still work in an alternative school; however, it is part of the public-school system. Although it is seven years later and the faces are different, many of the situations our

students face have not and many of the challenges our school faces have not. We still struggle to meet the educational needs of our students who are overaged, under credited and reading far below grade level. It is still a challenge for staff to have honest conversations with our students who find themselves unable to meet the requirements of their academics. We still battle a society that believes students should graduate from high school by 18 years old. I still work in a district that is attempting to pigeonhole alternative education into being the same as it is for traditional education by expecting that we meet the prescribed goals in the same way and at the same time as our traditional school counterparts. One of the problems my school faces comes from our performance measures- How is our school held accountable? Not just my school, but three schools in this city who serve the same age group (16-24) and face the same obstacles that come from being held to the same measures as any other traditional, comprehensive high school.

Other states have worked to counter this trend, to create systems that assess alternative schools based on their unique population and the unique needs of those students. Other states go beyond simply weighting the data that comes from standardized tests. By creating systems that match a school and its students, districts and states can more effectively evaluate whether a program is meeting the needs of a given population. Washington DC is no exception.

This study investigates the measures by which alternative schools are held accountable at the state and federal level to discover the measures that are most appropriate and effective at assessing those public programs that serve students 16-24 years old.

Throughout my time working in alternative schools, I have often critiqued how alternative schools are measured. I have worked with students that no one else wants to work with because they have been deemed ‘drop-outs’ or ‘lost causes’ or ‘challenging’ for any number of reasons. These students are not lost causes, nor are they failures- this has always been clear to

me. What has also been clear is that most schools were not able to reach the student on a level that spoke to the student, nor were those schools consistently able to meet the diverse needs of students because of the programmatic restrictions that come with progress monitoring. I do not dismiss the need for tracking academic growth or achievement, no, I do however, believe that this country must find other ways to hold schools accountable and to hold students accountable in ways that reflect the needs of a population. Tests that are not created for a population do not serve an effective way of evaluating academic growth; growth rates that do not track the growth rate of a student who has experienced interrupted schooling is not effective in evaluating the proficiency of a student in alternative education. There are states that are working to incorporate more accountability criteria that pertain more appropriately to localized schools (Jimenez et al, 2014; Brewer et al, 2001; Colorado Department of Education, n.d.; Jobs for the Future, 2009; Kannam & Weiss, 2019). These moves provide states and districts who are not implementing alternative frameworks to see what processes and measures can be used to assess their populations more equitably and then identify more localized measures that would meet the assessment needs of their populations.

Because there are other states already pushing for the implementation of alternative accountability frameworks, the purpose of this project is to research the literature that more deeply examines the performance measures that are appropriate and effective for the 16–24-year-old students served by alternative education (Chapter 2). Chapter 4 synthesizes those findings and discusses implications and limitations of this current body of research.

Definition of Terms

Alternative education refers to many types of programming. It can refer to programs that exist within public schools or to charter schools; it might, literally, refer to programs that occur in pre-existing schools or they can refer to programs that are schools and exist separately from other schools. For the purposes of this study, "Alternative Education Campus" (AEC) is used to identify the schools that exist as part of the public-school programs and serve all students who have not found success in their traditional comprehensive schools.

The youth that this study discusses are also often referred to by different terms. Opportunity youth, disconnected youth, at-risk youth, at-promise youth, overaged and under-credited, or young adults often all carry the weight of, and stereo-typed identities, that refer to youth who have left their traditional school for any number of reasons. It is because of their background and their non-linear educational path that collided with this society's more linear education system that they often find themselves at an alternative education campus. I often use the phrase "overaged and under credited" because that is the general nature and acknowledgement of our population at the alternative schools in Washington DC (DC Public Schools, n.d.). Furthermore, the age of these students is also important. This study studies those youth aged 16-24 years old, specifically.

Understanding who these schools serve helps to understand and acknowledge that different accountability measures are imperative for schools that are defined as alternative. Alternative measures of student achievement and progress means alternative schools can be measured more fairly. This allows districts to ensure that these programs are, in fact, offering the appropriate resources and programming for this unique population. It also ensures that we are building programs that effectively serve these students. Through the study of accountability

systems, or frameworks, that other states have begun to employ, districts that are not using separate systems can begin to identify why separate measures are necessary and how they can benefit the students these programs are meant to serve.

Summary

As a beneficiary of alternative systems throughout my education and career, my beliefs have been developed through experiences, mentors, and perspective. Although I did not enjoy the beginning of my education journey, I still benefited from the education system that this country created. That is a privilege I only felt and understood when I began working in education, and it is with that in mind, that I will explore how alternative education developed in the United States and how accountability became standard to all schools. The experiences I have had and seen throughout my career have led me to believe that alternative schools need a framework to measure accountability that speaks to the needs of the students these entities serve. This extended literature review seeks to build understanding around what exists and why this country needs to build that more deeply: *What accountability frameworks are most appropriate and can be most beneficial for alternative education campuses?*

Chapter 2 examines the history of alternative education in the United States; readers learn how it has changed throughout the course of our history, who they serve and how accountability has affected the development of schools, in general. It also looks at the research that has been conducted regarding measures and indicators that would be appropriate for alternative schools serving an older population. Chapter 3 describes the methodology for compiling this research. Finally, Chapter 4 describes my general findings, the limitations of this research, and the implications it could have in various school districts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

What accountability frameworks are most appropriate and can be most beneficial for alternative education campuses? This chapter seeks to provide background understanding of alternative education as well alternative education performance measures by presenting the literature that has already been published to answer this question. It explores how alternative education developed in the United States, who participates in alternative education and how it is assessed at both the state and federal level. As with many ideas, alternative education began as a backlash to the norm- in this case, to public education; today, the overriding sentiment appears to be that it has morphed into programming that is synonymous with underachieving students who have failed in traditional schools or who consistently exhibit behavior problems. Additionally, this chapter dives deeper into the students and how the programs, themselves, are often measured for success. With that in mind, a picture of accountability measures and their appropriateness for the student body these schools serve begins to develop. Many states have begun to recognize that alternative education campuses should be measured with unique measures due to their unique populations. This chapter provides universal understanding to how that is being accomplished in different states as well as the shortcomings of the research itself.

A Brief History of Alternative Education

Alternative education has been growing in the United States for at least the last 60 years (Raywid, 1994; Sagor, 1999). These programs began in the 1960's, a time of social change and recognition in the United States; people began questioning the direction of public education and, so, began looking for alternatives to the norm (Settles & Orwick, 2003). As the idea and successes of alternative education grew, some states looked for ways to incorporate some of the characteristics of alternative education campuses into the public-school system (Lange & Sletten,

2002). They write, “These schools were characterized by parent, student and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; non-competitive evaluation; and a child-centered approach” (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 10). Many of the options that came out of this transition can still be seen today in the public-school system across the country: School without Walls, Multicultural Centers, and Continuation Schools are all existing examples of how public schools incorporated alternative programming (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Building on their own research and the research of others, Lange and Sletten (2002) report that the vision of alternative schools within the public sector seemed to narrow in the 1980’s. There seemed to be less innovation; although programs like School without Walls and School within Schools still exist in some places, overall, alternative education in the public sector does not seem to be as innovative in serving non-traditional students today (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Lange and Sletten (2002) report that Young, in his book, attributes the rise of continuation programs and fundamental programs to the more conservative nature of the 1980’s, overall, as compared to the 1970’s. There is a shift, in the 1980’s, not only in the focus of these schools, but also in the population they serve (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1982). Public alternative schools begin to focus more remedial education- catching students up- and on student populations who were deemed disruptive or problematic.

As alternative schooling opportunities have grown, states have begun defining these programs in their own way. Today, while the Federal government defines alternative education as, “…a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.55), this does not uniformly

reflect the definitions at the state level where alternative education has a variety of definitions. Today, part of categorizing a school as alternative is if the school serves a certain percentage of students who fall into previously specified categories. In Colorado, for example, alternative schools are defined as such if 95% of their learners fall into multiple categories that might include two or more years behind in high school credits, dropouts or persistently truant, or adjudicated youth, in other words, at-risk (Smith et al, 2013). Smith gives other examples: In Texas, that percentage is 75%, and in Arizona, there is no threshold.

It is broadly recognized that alternative education indicates educational programs that serve those students who fall outside of traditional K-12 programming and curricula. That said, states are expected to define and formulate who such programs serve and how they are structured. Most definitions include the target population, the setting, for example, within a school or in a standalone school, the services, and the structure of the program, for example, during or outside of school hours (Porowski et al, 2014). Many alternative education programs seek to implement wrap-around services like counseling, social/life skills, job readiness or behavioral services to engage students and keep them on track to complete their high school studies; but, as research has shown, this type of programming is implemented inconsistently across states (Porowski et al, 2014).

Despite a lack of formality across the country, many researchers still turn to Raywid who described three types of alternative schools in 1994. The following types are still used today to help states structure the programs they create.

- Type 1 describes programs that are schools of choice. They tend to be popular among students and their families. They might be built around themes.

- Type 2 describes programs that exist as almost a last chance for students if they are on the brink of expulsion or described as 'chronically disruptive' (Raywid, 1994) by their schools. There is no option for students to attend these schools, and according to Raywid, they might be described as "soft jails" (1994). Teachers might not make any changes to the classes that students are taking; quite insightfully, Raywid notes, "...some of these programs require students to perform the work of the regular classes from which they have been removed" (Raywid, 1994, n.p.). This indicates that these programs are not likely to consider the individual needs of this population, rather this space that was created to be an alternative to where students came from instead looks like the same comprehensive program with which the student originally struggled.
- Type 3 describes programs that are remedial in nature- both academically and emotionally. Students attend these programs in the hopes of eventually returning to mainstream educational settings.

Raywid (1994) notes that while most alternative education programs can be classified as one of these types, it is possible they will have the characteristics of more than one of these programs. Aaron (2006), similarly, points out that today, many of the programs that can be called alternative usually take aspects especially from Type 1 and Type 2 schools to bring them together into one program. In another perspective on categorizing predominant types of alternative education today, Aaron discusses Roderick's (2006) proposal to categorize a school based on the students a program serves, or hopes to serve:

- Students who have fallen behind in high school for some reason- usually for getting into trouble. The goal of the schools they attend is to catch them up and return them to their home school as soon as possible. Roderick notes that this goal is usually attainable.

- Students who "have prematurely transitioned to adulthood" due to an early pregnancy, the need to stay at home and care for family members, or potentially those recently exiting the criminal justice system (Aaron, p 5, 2006).
- Students who are overaged and under-credited; these students are older and might be returning to transition to community college or, potentially, a certificate program.
- Students who are overaged and under-credited and who have significant learning needs. They likely struggled in the traditional K12 system, may have repeated several grades, will likely have large gaps in their education, and are potentially only between 16 and 18 years old. Aaron (2006) notes that Roderick sees this group as having the most needs but that cities have the fewest resources and programs to support those needs.

By focusing on the educational needs that the students bring, states and schools can work to design their programs to meet those needs as opposed to expecting the students fit the boxes of more traditional alternative programs as Raywid's typology suggests (Aaron, 2006).

With the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and more recently Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), academic programming has moved towards more rigorous demands of the school system with high consequences for failure. The goal has been to create a system that requires high expectations of students and schools to then ensure that every student will be college and career ready by the time they are 18 years old (the typical college entrance age). Researchers point out that when *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983, the country began to fear the '...rising tide of mediocrity' (US Depart of Education, 1983), and, in response, chose to overhaul our education system to become one that would insist on accountability, high standards, and general improvement of the quality of their schools (Aron, 2003; Zweig 2003; Jimenez et al, 2014).

Today, alternative education encompasses many different types of schools; it can refer to any of the programs already mentioned, but it can also refer to charter schools or home-schooling- anything that falls outside of the public-school system. However, research and personal observations from this researcher seem to confirm that the general feeling of alternative education, today, refers to schools that serve those students who have not found success in the traditional K-12 schools (Sagor, 1999; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Aaron, 2006; Zweig, 2003). Because these programs serve a population considered unsuccessful, the schools are also considered, often, to be unsuccessful (Aaron, 2006). Researchers push back arguing that alternative schools offer these same students a place to find success and grow into the education they had not previously received, while also showing that these schools are not always being appropriately evaluated and therefore close more frequently (Jimenez et al, 2018).

Who are the Students?

The learners who participate in alternative education have also evolved over the years in a similar manner to the schools that have grown out of the movement. 'High-risk youth' generally alludes to youth who fall into one of the following categories.

1. Youth who have experienced teen-pregnancy.
2. Youth involved in the juvenile-justice division.
3. Youth in the child-welfare system.
4. Youth who did not complete their high school education (Aaron, 2006).

These factors indicate that these youth might not finish their high school education at the same pace as their peers who have not had similar experiences. At-risk also refers to youth who experience homelessness, live in varying degrees of poverty, who are more than one year older than their peers at a certain grade level, or those who need additional academic support such as

special education services or language acquisition classes (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Zweig, 2003; Aaron 2006, Smith et al, 2013).

Alternative education schools and programs look to re-engage disconnected youth who fall into the above categories and are 24 years of age or younger. Programs exist now to try to bring young adults back into the educational fold to complete their high school diploma or obtain the General Education Development Exam (GED). Programs across the country do this in many ways. Disconnection has been defined in a couple of different ways by researchers. Aaron (2006) notes that initially it was simply those young adults between the ages of 16-19 who were not in school and who were not working. Aaron (2006) also reports that Besharov and Gardiner (1999) expanded the definition of disconnection to take military service and marital status into account. Their expansion also increased the age range to 16-23 years of age; disconnection was defined as being out of work and school for 26 weeks minimum in one year (Aaron, 2006).

In general, alternative programs target populations that include those students who have dropped-out of school and are looking to re-engage, students who are overage and under credited, students who are one year older or more compared to the grade they are expected to enroll, students who are behind or substantially behind their peers, and, in some states, they are places for students who are considered discipline and behavioral problems or have been suspended from their school (Zweig, 2003; Aaron 2006, Smith et al, 2013). The student population very much depends on the state in which the program exists. Most states have alternative programs that target high school age students, but the designated populations served vary from state to state (Porowski et al, 2014).

Measuring Success: Holding Schools Accountable

Potentially more challenging than defining alternative education or designing programs to meet the diverse needs of the students they serve is deciding how these programs will be assessed and evaluated by the Districts or States within which they operate. Research confirms that not enough states utilize accountability frameworks separate from or even different from those utilized by traditional or comprehensive schools to assess effectiveness or success in alternative education programs (Jobs for the Future, 2009). "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" (Schlessman & Hurtado, 2012, p. 3). The challenges are immense and justified. Although the Federal Government, under ESSA, does allow states to implement different measures to hold alternative schools accountable, it appears that few states have taken advantage of it (Jimenez et al, 2018; Schlessman & Hurtado 2012; Jobs for the Future, 2009; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017), rather, they employ the same, or a slightly different, criteria that is used to evaluate alternative education's comprehensive counterparts.

"An accountability system is the set of policies and practices that a state uses to measure and hold schools and districts responsible for raising student achievement for all students, and to prompt and support improvement where necessary" (EdTrust, 2016, n.p.). The way this country has held schools accountable over the years has changed. In 1994, the Federal Government passed the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) which required states to found standards in Reading and Math and required states to implement standardized testing to show that students were meeting these standards; Martin et al (2016) go on to point out that at the same time, some states began to also hold schools accountable, even employing the same rating systems that are

most common today. With the implementation of the NCLB, testing and high stakes consequences began to play an even stronger role in evaluating schools as states were now required to assess students in math and English throughout middle and high school (Martin et al, 2016). The NCLB left many states feeling like they had little control over testing; under the NCLB, accountability was hyper focused on achievement which was determined by student performance on math and English tests (Martin et al, 2016).

The NCLB used "proficient" to determine if students were meeting previously determined benchmarks, and if a school was doing its job; students could only prove proficiency through standardized tests. The NCLB also tracked sub-groups of students and if schools failed to show that each sub-group met proficiency, then the school failed to meet its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measure (Martin et al, 2016). If schools did not hit their targets, they could be deemed as low-performing and potentially receive consequences that included removing an administrator, as well as other changes including the implementation of a forced tutoring program at the school (Kim, 2015; Martin et al, 2016). As EdTrust (2016) breaks down, developing an accountability system which sets expectations too high means there might be many schools that do not achieve those goals. Districts and governments (both state and federal) must evaluate those systems to decide whether they create a complete picture in presenting who well, or not well, a school is doing. The NCBL was created with the best of intentions to track school's performance each year and to help those schools that were considered low performing (Aaron 2006; Kim, 2015). However, that bill did so in a way that was too stringent and inflexible, showcased by the fact that many states lowered their expectations for both tests, thereby ensuring that schools, and therefore states, could meet the NCLB standards but, as

researchers point out, also ensuring that students were not actually growing academically (Martin et al, 2016; Jimenez et al, 2018).

In 2015, the United States adopted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to correct some of the shortcomings of NCLB. ESSA still seeks to support the lowest performing schools, but it sets out a more flexible path for help and one that is not so reactive to lower test scores (Kim, 2015; EdTrust, 2016). The intention of ESSA is to ensure that states have a plan to address the student populations who are dropping out of school or who are struggling in school, forcing states to bring even more attention and services to this population. Furthermore, ESSA's accountability system includes language that allows states to differentiate the framework they use to hold alternative education schools and programs accountable (Deeds & DePaoli, 2018; Jimenez et al, 2014). As states develop their accountability framework in accordance with ESSA, they must incorporate the following criteria:

- Results on state standardized tests in reading, math, and science
- English language learner proficiency
- Graduation rates
- At least one non-academic measure

If accountability systems are the "main vehicle for communicating expectations and spurring action," then our country has a long way to go with regards to accountability systems for alternative schools (EdTrust, 2016, n.p.). Alternative school accountability frameworks need a more "nuanced and specialized approach" that "...accurately reflects the extent to which those institutions are effectively serving their unique student populations…" while also ensuring that they are held to rigorous standards (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017).

A Jobs for the Future (JFF) report (JFF, 2009) identified seven criteria to measure the effectiveness of state policies with regards to alternative education; one of those criteria is 'Strengthen Accountability'. This report argues that equitable accountability includes flexibility and 'proficiency-based pathways,' and that states should also measure re-engagement efforts and progress towards graduation benchmarks (Jobs for the Future, 2009). This organization labels a state as having 'achieved' a goal, 'partially met' a goal, or 'not met' a goal. In 2009, only six states were identified as having achieved the goal of 'Strengthen Accountability' while many others had partially met it. In the 12 years since this report was released, there has been some movement, both positive and negative, at the state level towards the creation of separate accountability systems for alternative schools. An example of growth towards distinct accountability is in Colorado who continues to develop their framework for holding the alternative education campuses accountable; Texas, on the other hand, seems to have regressed (Smith et al, 2013). Smith et al (2013) points out that Texas will maintain separate Alternative Education Campuses and their new accountability framework will take their AECs into account, but they will use a "...modified performance targets, rather than maintaining a separate system" (Smith et al, 2013).

In their in-depth look at some of the states providing separate accountability frameworks, Schlessman and Hurtado (2014) found that Colorado has gone beyond simply measuring achievement through standardized testing. Colorado holds their Alternative Education Campuses (AEC) accountable to measures such as performance, improvement, priority improvement, and turnaround (Smith et al, 2013). Their system seems to have a lot to offer this country in understanding the direction accountability can take for AEC's. The states who have all implemented or who were working to implement separate accountability systems for AEC's

were all committed to student growth rather than proficiency alone. There was an understanding among the schools that serve this unique population need growth measurements to better determine if a school is in fact meeting student needs. Achievement shows if students are meeting the grade level expectations, but for students who might potentially be behind grade level, achievement does not necessarily document what a student has learned throughout the year. Growth can more precisely indicate how much students are learning (Jimenez et al 2018; John W. Gardener Center, 2020). Deeds and DePaoli (2018) highlight growth as one of the premier indicators alternative education can boast because these schools are designed to serve students who are behind their peers' education level. They point out that growth indicators "...take into account the progress of *all* students, rather than focusing on those students at or on the cusp of achieving proficiency" (Deeds &DePaoli, 2018, p. 16). A measure focused on growth enables schools to highlight student movement rather than be penalized for not meeting the demands proficiency can place on the students and the schools. Focusing on growth does not lessen the expectations set for the school, rather it meets the needs of the students and recognizes the population a school has been designed to serve. Deeds and DePaoli (2018) specify that ESSA requires states to use standardized tests to measure proficiency, but that states can implement criteria to measure growth instead- that is a choice currently available.

Deeds and DePaoli (2018) also offer alternative accountability suggestions for the additional measures schools must include under ESSA. These indicators might measure student engagement or include surveys that reflect student feelings about school climate and safety or even educator engagement (Deeds & DePaoli, 2018).

Objectives/Expectations of Alternative Education

Generally, AECs offer students the opportunity to receive a traditional high school diploma and cater to "significantly different" students, in other words, students who are at-risk (Smith et al, 2013; DeVeaux et al, 2019). As stated earlier, today's alternative schools are often associated with 'at-risk' youth who have been classified as such due to several factors that have occurred in their lives. Today, researchers note that although the definition of alternative education varies according to the state, there are many states that have begun narrowing their definition of alternative education and alternative education campuses; specifications can include a threshold percentage to define a school more accurately as alternative (Smith et al, 2013). As previously mentioned, Colorado requires schools to serve 95% learners identified as 'at-risk' to be eligible for alternative education status. Researchers go on to note that some states do not have a threshold, rather a school may be defined as alternative based on their mission (Smith et al, 2013; DeVeaux et al, 2019). In the research conducted, the use of mission statements to define a school as one that serves at-risk students is to be aimed more at charter schools who serve an older population (Smith et al, 2013; DeVeaux PPT).

When categorizing alternative education programs, the above information is important. As has been previously stated, states are currently defining alternative education for their own states due to a lack of definition and direction at the federal level. To that extent, states must make their own programmatic decisions- including which campuses are defined as 'alternative.' In a report from the American Youth Policy Forum, Kannam & Weiss (2019) identified three categories that must be answered by a state government. States must define alternative education to specifically include who this branch of education will target. After the definition, a state must decide if they are talking about alternative education in terms of programs or schools. Finally,

the state must decide on an accountability framework: Will they have one sole framework for all their schools, will it be slightly modified to account for differences in their alternative education schools, or will alternative education have a unique framework (Kannam & Weiss, 2019)?

The objective of many alternative education campuses is to provide learners who are overage and under-credited with an extended period (usually until age 24) to gain their high school diploma; some states also include the completion of the GED to satisfy that requirement (Smith et al, 2013). Despite the variance in definition at the state level, there seems to be an understanding among researchers that alternative education campuses are designed to "...educate youth who have dropped out, are embroiled in the juvenile justice system, have histories of substance abuse, or have faced other disruptions in their school" (Smith et al, 2013, p. 2). With this general understanding in mind, those who create accountability systems can start to think about the unique situations these students and schools face. Researchers at the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, or NACSA (2014), point out that due to the learners these schools work with, schools have had to rethink what time at their school (for the students) looks like and how completion [of courses] can occur because of the life circumstances and education level of the students these schools serve. Usually, traditional scheduling and attendance rules do not work for this population, so AECs have adapted to meet their students' needs. NACSA points out that because of these circumstances, AECs will almost certainly compare poorly to their comprehensive counterparts (Smith et, 2014).

Accountability is determined to identify the quality of a school, but if the chosen metrics do not match the students a school serves, those schools are more likely to be determined unsatisfactory. Deeds and DePaoli (2018) write that the *Building a Grad Nation* report from 2017 showed how alternative high schools are overrepresented as having low-graduation rates.

Deeds and DePaoli (2017) point out, “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” (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017, p. 10). This is important because students often arrive at alternative schools one-to-two years behind their peers, and if they arrive at the school with major education gaps, following the traditional timeline to graduation is difficult. As Deed and DePaoli imply here, students not graduating according to a designated timeline does not necessarily indicate that an alternative school is failing. These researchers later point out, “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” (Deeds & DePaoli, 2018, p. 17). In accordance with this understanding, it is important to choose appropriate measures for this population.

With these understandings in mind, readers can start to see why it is imperative for an alternative framework for accountability of AECs. Of course, the question then becomes, *what measurements would work for alternative schools?* There is a fear across the country that alternative schools are not rigorous enough and that by allowing them to be measured by different standards, the government is simply allowing for a less rigorous model (Birioukov, 2018). These fears are bolstered when alternative schools often represent a bulk of schools that are described as “not making AYP” (Smith et al, 2013, p. 14). As NACSA notes, NCLB required schools to make gains in all measures to make their annual yearly projection measure; meeting these goals is, and was, already troublesome for AECs who work with a population that struggles

with standardized tests and does not attend school regularly- out of habit (Smith et al, 2013). As the country transitioned to ESSA, the federal government acknowledged the need for the opportunity to implement equitable accountability frameworks for alternative settings (Deeds & DePaoli, 2018; Kannam & Weiss, 2019). ESSA provides the states some additional flexibility for holding their schools accountable. However, in a 2019 scan of 38 states, it was shown that although the parameters have expanded, 30 out of 38 states still have the same accountability frameworks for both alternative and traditional schools. Kannam & Weiss (2019) go on to note that for nine of those states, "...although accountability was the same for federal purposes, additional strategies and mechanisms were being used at the state level to provide more nuanced accountability for state purposes" (Kannam & Weiss, 2019, n.p.).

Alternative Accountability: The Options

What is worth measuring? Raywid (2002) posed this question in an opinion piece in 2001; she pointed out that, at that time, accountability was moving towards a framework that was centered around standardized testing, and she did not agree with those strict changes (Raywid, 2002). At its heart, Raywid believed in accountability, writing that as supporters of the public school system, accountability should be open and available to the public always providing "...information on just how well or how poorly each public school is doing. And what accountability then demands is that something be done about those schools that are failing" (Raywid, 2002, p.433). She goes on to outline what she sees as being goals for accountability. In the end, her message includes that accountability can have commonalities across all states and schools, but can also be more individualized for the school itself, and that not all data needs to be quantitative (Raywid, 2002). We see these sentiments more represented in the expectations set

by ESSA. But, as previously noted, not many states are incorporating measures that are appropriate for AECs. So, what works?

There is limited research regarding which indicators would be most beneficial to AECs as it pertains to public education, but that is not the case in charter schools. Charter schools must also grapple with the same at-risk populations their public AEC counterparts work with and determining a framework that can work for charter schools is just as important. This section analyzes some of the measures that have been deemed more appropriate for the at-risk population that AECs are known to serve, measures that will require rigor for the students and schools but still take the student population into account.

Researchers in Colorado have done extensive discovery work into showing the growth rates for students in AECs (Ernst, 2009; Ernst, 2010; Beckler & Ernst, 2015). This work has been accomplished to better direct authorizers of charter schools to create stronger charters and missions that will equitably define quality of education for students in alternative schools (DeVeaux et al, 2019). Ernst (2009 & 2010) and Ernst & Beckler (2015) have performed important research to determine if students in AECs are meeting the same growth rates as their counterparts in traditional schools. Initially, researchers used normed data from the Northwest Education Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) to compare data sets of students in traditional schools and students in AECs. Ernst (2009) explains that NWEA intentionally does not include students who attend AECs in their norming data, so Ernst set out to fill that gap. When the norming data from NWEA was collected and compared to the data coming from a sample group of AEC students, it was obvious that in every grade level, most students in AECs demonstrated that while their levels grew at the previously normed, it was not at the same rate as their peers (Ernst, 2009). In a separate report that was geared specifically

towards students attending AECs in Colorado, Ernst (2009) had similar findings. She writes, "Regardless of the patterns observed within or between grade levels, Colorado's AEC students do not display the same "typical" growth rates as students attending the same grade levels in traditional education campuses" (Ernst, 2009, p. 7). This pushed researchers to wonder if AECs should not have different growth targets- Not because they were looking to make expectations for AECs and the students they serve less rigorous, but rather to meet the needs of the students and produce a framework that would help define the quality of an AEC (Ernst, 2009; DeVeaux et al, 2019).

As recently as 2016, Ernst had similar findings after researching a slightly larger sample size of students in AECs, but also after expanding her research to look at the Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) (Ernst, 2016). She found that, as with previous research, students in AECs consistently grew at a slower rate than their traditional education counterparts, still she cautions that the research was conducted for information gathering purposes only (Ernst, 2016). Her research shows that students attending AECs could benefit from indicators that reflect what they bring to the table. Building on these outcomes, some researchers were able to identify practices and language that could improve indicators to be more inclusive of the needs of AECs and their populations.

Like the NCLB, ESSA also requires all students in public schools to demonstrate grade level proficiency in reading and math through a standardized test. ESSA, though, allows for a second indicator in which states can choose to show growth in their schools. As Smith et al (2013), note, it is important to include achievement scores simply because it is important to know where a student is, but growth rates show where a student starts and ends a year of school. This aligns with what was previously mentioned, that growth can capture a more complete

picture of student movement and learning over the course of a year. Ernst (2009) argues that status measures, or proficiency models, are more likely to give a limited look at where the students are who test that same day whereas a growth measurement can provide longitudinal context of how a student has grown in a particular year. Having this information gives a state the opportunity to make more reasonable judgements about how effective a school is (Erst, 2009). DeVeaux et al (2019), at the Annual Charter Authorizers Conference, agree that it is important to know where students are in their education level, but they also recognize the need for language that tracks the at-risk population in a way that makes sense for these students. In their presentation, the presenters make recommendations as to how AECs could be measured based on their student population seen here in Table 1 (DeVeaux et al, 2019, n.p).:

Table 1

Sample Metrics for Alternative Schools- Recommendation #2: Achievement

Academic Achievement Measure	**Traditional Metric/Target**	**Example Alternative Metric/Target**
Achievement on state-required assessment (ELA and math)	Percent of students to score proficient or better	For students whose attendance rate is at least 60 percent; the percent of students who receive a passing score on the statewide assessment
Achievement (comparative) on state-required assessment (ELA and math)	Percent of students to score proficient or better will meteor exceed the average percent of "similar schools"	Percent of student scoring proficient or better will meet or exceed the statewide average for alternative schools
Achievement on nationally normed, valid, and reliable assessment	Percent scoring at the or above grade level	Percent scoring at or above grade level PLUS (for students that are more than one year behind) the percent

		who increased more than one grade level equivalent by the end of the year.
Achievement on nationally normed, valid, and reliable assessment	Percent score at or above grade level	Average scores equal to or greater than their same grade peers enrolled in other alternative schools

(DeVeaux et al, 2019, n.p.)

Although the above table speaks to charter schools specifically, there is still much public alternative schools can take from these suggestions. In the column that provides a targeted option for AECs, the students' historic obstacles with attendance are considered as is the potential gap in education level this population of students often brings. The same right-hand column demonstrates how AECs would still be held accountable to proficiency measures while still taking student level into consideration. In at least two of the alternative options, AECs could be measured against themselves which is more equitable because students would be compared to like groupings of students.

Researchers consistently push for the use of a growth model which is now possible to incorporate into an ESSA plan. Smith et al (2013) share that charter schools have for a long time been pushing for growth data to be incorporated into school accountability because looking at the aggregated growth data over a longer period can show what impact a school is having on students throughout their academic journey, regardless if a student stays at the school for a year or longer. This relates to at-risk students in alternative environments whose attendance can be erratic and might not reflect the linear expectations of traditional education (Smith et al, 2013). DeVeaux et al (2019) agree and again provide sample language for schools and districts to speak to the alternative education population more efficiently in Table 2.

Table 2

Sample Metrics for Alternative Schools- Recommendation #2: Improvement

Academic Growth Measure	Traditional Metric/Target	Example Alternative Metric/Target
Growth on state-required assessment (ELA or math)	A median growth percentile of 50 or higher	A median growth percentile of 40 or higher
Growth on state-required assessment (ELA or math)	A median growth percentile of 50 or higher	A median growth percentile at or above that of other alternative schools in the state, district, or country
Growth on a normed, short-cycle assessment	Average scale score growth compared to the norming sample	Average scale score growth compared to an alternative norming sample

(DeVeaux et al, 2019, n.p.)

It is not about lowering the rigor or expectations for students or these schools. The language above simply provides schools a scaffold to ensure growth is happening and that is appropriate for their student population.

Short cycle assessments are also imperative for appropriately holding schools accountable; they can help reach students throughout the year and provide teachers useful data at regular intervals (Smith et al, 2013). Researcher shows that computer adaptive tests are more effective for determining the growth of students, and therefore, the success of a school (Smith et al, 2013). A computer adaptive test ensures students will see work that is at their grade level while also ensuring that schools can capture a more secure picture of the student's proficiency (Smith et al, 2013).

Something researchers studying this subject also agree on is changing the N-size. Kannam & Weiss (2019) note that ESSA requires a minimum number of students form a group that will be evaluated by the district and state. They write, "...states are required to set the minimum number of students needed to form a subgroup for accountability and reporting purposes" (Kannam & Wiess, 2019, p. 8). This number is referred to as the N-size, and it is the same for schools across a state. If a school does not have enough students in a group or subgroup to meet the N-size, then the school does not report their data. Kannam & Weiss (2019) show that the N-size varies from state to state, being as little as 10 in some places or as many as 30 in the case of two states. Additionally, they point out that ESSA does not require states to work for the improvement of schools that serve under 100 students. In this case, schools that are so small might not meet the N-size requirements and are never put on a plan for improvement if they are needed.

The typical four-year graduation rate is also problematic for alternative schools. Jimenez et al (2018) discuss how difficult it is for AECs to perform well in this category. In speaking about New York's transfer schools (their public-school alternative option), they write, "In 2017, for example, of the 51 New York City transfer schools with sufficient data to report four-year graduation rates, only two schools would have met the 67% graduation rate needed to avoid the underperforming designation under ESSA" (Jimenez et al, 2018, n.p.). Under NCLB, it was expected that schools would graduate students on a four-year continuum: If a student started in the Fall of 2000, that student should complete their senior year and graduate by the Spring of 2004 (Smith et al, 2013). Changes in 2008, and then major changes under ESSA, allowed states to offer some leeway in creating an extended year graduation rate (Martin et al, 2016). Those extended year rates can include a five-, six-, and even a seven-year rate. These extended rates

can be helpful for alternative schools who are generally receiving students when they are already in their third or fourth year of high school; the expected four-year graduation rate does not usually work for these students who have already shown that absenteeism and other challenges have hindered their ability to get to school. Furthermore, depending on the grade level a student enters an AEC could influence how long they remain at the school. Some states do not even expect for students to stay at AECs for longer than a year; in fact, in California, the goal is for students to return to the home school or graduate after less than a year (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). Jimenez et al (2018) suggest that placing students in cohorts based on how many credits they need to complete might be a more telling data point than how long they were a senior.

In addition to the above measures, ESSA also asks states to evaluate school quality or school environment, and this is an opportunity to see where alternative schools might shine. There are several additional measures that researchers have brought up because of the population these programs serve as well as a reflection of that population. When any school is trying to find measures that appropriately quantify their school quality index, school climate surveys are key; these measures also work in the alternative setting (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; DeVeaux et al, 2019). These surveys can indicate how well schools are doing in the eyes of the students. Another promising indicator is re-engagement. In many states, a defined purpose of alternative education is to bring students back into school and back into a space where they might complete their high school studies (Deeds & DiPaoli, 2019). This can be challenging; as this chapter previously discussed, this population is unique in that these learners have faced challenges and obstacles that the education system was not initially designed to address. These learners have not followed the prescribed pathway for education, but as schools work to re-engagement them,

those schools should be measured by how well they do that. It is telling if a school can retain a student who has not previously shown he or she might stay in a school. Colorado and Washington DC's accountability framework, for example for AECs has re-engagement listed as an optional measure (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; DC School Report Card and STAR Framework Technical Guide, 2018). In that same vein, researchers also suggest a student-persistence measure, in other words, a measure to see how students' attendance or participation has risen, as well as an indicator that measures how attendance has stabilized (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; DeVeaux et al, 2019). Attendance stabilization and participation is another form of growth that can reflect how the school has brought a student back into the fold, thereby showing a positive school environment.

In addition to the above options, DeVeaux et al (2019) point out that collaboration with the schools themselves is imperative in choosing indicators during this process. Although the presentation from DeVeaux et al (2019) was geared towards authorizers and the charter schools they create, this is a valid recommendation. Whether or not a school is public, private or charter, the schools know their populations the best, and districts would be remiss in not bringing the local schools to the conversation. In fact, North Carolina was initially lauded for their efforts in this area. North Carolina used to use an accountability framework that took alternative education in account and really concentrated on school choice. At first, there was push back from the community that too much freedom and schools would choose measures that would be easy to reach (Brewer et al, 2001). In fact, the research found that alternative programs did not generally choose options (indicators) that they were more likely to reach (Brewer et al, 2001). Of course, these researchers pointed out that there was also a built-in mechanism to stop such behavior, but regardless, they proved that several schools did not hit the targets they set for their local option.

Localized control is also something Colorado also takes into consideration. Schools can choose from options including workforce readiness skills or successful transition, for example (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017).

Louisiana has recently implemented important changes in the way they grade their alternative schools. After the Louisiana Department of Education found that currently 63% of their alternative schools received a grade of "C" or lower and through simulations were never found to receive an "A," there was the realization that things needed to change to ensure equity and quality among all schools (Hasselle, 2018). The changes that the education department have recently voted on are important for this population. Today, "…alternative high schools will get performance scores based on three criteria: students' progress, the number of students who get a high school diploma and the number who stay in school" (Hasselle, 2018). The switch from achievement measuring only, to progress and retention rates ensures that students will be monitored more closely, furthermore, the schools are encouraged to ensure these students stay engaged and at school. Even more important, schools will be able to focus on the needs of their students because the state will be looking at student growth (Hasselle, 2018).

California has been building an alternative accountability framework since the early 2000's when the state initially created the Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) (LAO, 2015; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). With the ASAM model, schools that had been identified as *alternative* chose three performance indicators from a set of 14, see Table 3 (LAO, 2015).

Table 3

Alternative Schools Accountability Model Performance Indicators

Alternative Schools Accountability Model Performance Indicators	
- Improved student behavior - Student punctuality - Writing achievement - Match achievement - Course completion - High school graduation	- Suspension/expulsion - Attendance - Sustained daily attendance - Reading achievement - Promotion to next grade - Credit completion - General Educational Development (GED) California High School Proficiency Examination certification, or GED section completion

(Lao, 2015, p. 11)

In California, the LAO (2015) goes on to report that schools being able to choose from such a variety of indicators meant that comparing AECs to one another became difficult. As previously indicated, this model had another obstacle in that it only counted students who had been at the school for a minimum of 90 days (LAO, 2015). Because California's alternative education schools are built around short-term goals, students do not always stay with a school for 90 days making the picture created by ASAM incomplete (LAO, 2015). LAO says, "Specifically, two of alternative schools' primary goals are to help students recover credits and transition back to their traditional schools" (p. 5). In the end, ASAM was discontinued due to budget cuts (LAO, 2015; Ruiz de Velasco, 2017).

For three years, California's alternative schools had no way to measure performance that would speak more directly to the schools' and students' needs (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). Despite measures put in place by the state government, Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales (2017) highlight that since 2013, there has been no research done on the effects of the legislation and how it might have shaped alternative schools throughout the state. In addition to improving

data collection among California's alternative schools and encouraging appropriate professional development for all staff, Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales (2017) also recommend specific changes the accountability framework that include a progress indicator, a progress to graduation indicator, a school connectedness measure and an additional indicator that might show how a school has served subgroups that often attend alternative schools. In 2021, California's alternative advisory board made several recommendations that reflect the earlier work of Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales (2017).

Since 2002, Colorado has worked with their system to ensure an equitable framework for alternative education campuses. Initially this state defined alternative education for Colorado, recognizing that there were students in the state who needed additional educational support and that that support could come in the form of alternative education. Colorado recognizes that the mission of these schools is highly specialized, and their methods will not look like those of traditional schools (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.). Their accountability framework is heavily focused on growth and post-secondary readiness, it includes a measure for achievement, but compared to their traditional counterparts, it is weighted differently. Colorado's framework also includes a measure for student engagement- a measure their traditional schools are not measured on. Additionally, alternative schools can augment the required measures by including an additional, optional measure. These options include credit/course completion, workforce readiness skills, post-completion success rates, successful transitions to non-degree granting schools or graduation rate (Colorado Department of Education, 2020; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). Colorado has found that these additional measures and weighting indicators differently for their AECs reflects the mission of their alternative education as well as the

experiences of the students who attend these schools (Colorado Department of Education, 2020; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017).

For states that do not utilize separate frameworks, accountability could start to mirror traditional school accountability. As has been highlighted in this study, this means that districts might not have an accurate assessment of school quality because the indicators being judged do not take the student population into account (Smith et al, 2013; Ernst, 2016; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017; DeVeaux, 2018). In Washington DC, the district serves older youth and those in trouble of not finishing high school at Opportunity Academies. Students are 16-24 years old, and they must be six or more credits behind their grade level "...relative to their first 9th grade year" (DC Public Schools, 2020, n.p.) These schools also offer complete special education support and interventions. The population they serve is initially identified as being behind on credits and overage, furthermore, students may come from outside of DC public schools and potentially even further behind (DC Public Schools, 2020, n.p.). Despite the acceptance of students with from various educational backgrounds and educational histories, the indicators for quality and success are very similar to those set for traditional schools. For example, the assessments used to judge grade level proficiency, and therefore one ways to evaluate quality of the school, are limited to one possibility and all of the metrics rely on a minimum n-size of 10 for inclusion (DC Public Schools, n.p.).

In 2019, of the three Opportunity Academies in DC, only one of them even received a Star-Rating (of one star) because the other two schools did not meet the minimum population standard to generate a score across all indicators (DC Public Schools, n.p.). The two schools not included in the star-rating are both significantly smaller schools which might partially explain why they did not meet the minimum population for evaluation (DC Public Schools, 2020, n.p.).

Washington DC Public Schools use the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career, or PARCC, to assess achievement among students. This assessment is also used to assess growth in some alternative schools, but not the alternative schools that serve high school level students, the Opportunity Academies (DC School Report Card and STAR Framework Technical Guide, 2018). At the high school level in DC, the test is used in Algebra 1, Geometry, English I and English II; but the Opportunity Academies have no control over how many students they receive each year who need those courses which is in line with the findings of Smith et al (2013) who pointed out that AECs do not control the grade level of their incoming students. So, despite the district's efforts to include indicators that would effectively measure the quality of alternative schools, it could be difficult to account for a complete picture of school quality using the indicators DC public schools require. Surprisingly, school environment is graded quite low for alternative schools as compared to traditional schools (DC School Report Card and STAR Framework Technical Guide, 2018). There are indicators to improve chronic absenteeism and to push for re-engagement, but that is all that is accepted for alternative schools (DC School Report Card and STAR Framework Technical Guide, 2018). Furthermore, a school could be excluded from evaluation because they do not meet the minimum number based on their changing student population, so not all alternative schools are being evaluated and might receive the necessary attention for improvement nor be recognized for what they are doing well (Smith et al, 2013; DeVeaux et al, 2019; DC Public Schools, 2020, n.p.).

Washington DC public schools also rely on a five-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (DC School Report Card and STAR Framework Technical Guide, 2018). As previously mentioned, an adjusted cohort rate is helpful, but if a school serves students who are multiple years behind their peers of the same age, graduation within a short period of time might not be

feasible (Smith et al, 2013; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Jimenez et al, 2017; DeVeaux et al, 2019). Additionally, as other researchers have alluded to, the obstacles students have previously encountered do not suddenly disappear when they enter an AEC, many of these students will still struggle through their education, making graduation in a short period of time elusive (Smit et al, 2013).

In 2015, Wyoming worked to fix the obstacle DC Public Schools are currently experiencing. As Wyoming set out to create a system that would better serve students attending alternative schools in that state, they created a pilot program to begin in 2016 (Flicek & Magee, 2016). Wyoming public schools, in a report, noted that when the traditional accountability framework was applied to the alternative schools in the state, officials could not meaningfully differentiate among the schools and that some of the alternative schools were not counted because they did not meet the minimum n-size to be included in evaluations (Wyoming Public Schools, n.p.). As they moved through out of the pilot phase and into the practice of having a separate accountability framework, it was identified that Wyoming's alternative schools would use the same measures as traditional schools, but have different cut scores (Flicek & Magee, 2016). Alternative schools could prove readiness in multiple ways including graduation, career or industry certification, or transfer to a post-secondary program (Magee, 2016). These options would have provided alternative schools multiple ways to support students and for students to showcase success. Wyoming also unveiled an intensive mentoring program, the Student Success Plan (SSP), that would include visits and check-ins with individual students and semi-intensive coaching for students to move through school to completion (Magee, 2016). This researcher found no studies that followed this process, but it appears the program has formally started, and the indicators are in use currently (Wyoming Public Schools, n.p.). The persistence and research

completed by Flicek (2016, 2018) and others proves that that deeper research on alternative schools is possible and that finding indicators that match the school can work to provide improved programming for alternative schools.

Summary

Alternative education began as an alternative to public education; it was, initially, built as a way for students and parents to have more choice in how schools operated and, ultimately, in the education they provided. As alternative education evolved, the public sector saw the need for alternate pathways for students. But, as public education developed its own form of alternative, innovation was lost, and alternative felt less and less different from traditional schools. Public alternative schools became more remedial in nature and began to serve students who were falling further and further behind in traditional settings. Accountability has also changed over the decades. The Federal government has changed how it evaluates individual school performance with major legislation, such as No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds. These laws have changed how states define and measure the performance of alternative schools.

With little guidance, few states define alternative education in the same way, and they do not measure the accountability of the schools that serve these alternative populations in the same way either. The most recent federal accountability framework, ESSA, has enabled states to diversify how they hold alternative institutions accountable within their states, but many states do not differentiate how alternative campuses are measured. Charter schools can start to provide a roadmap for the public sector in how to expand accountability frameworks to be more equitable for the alternative education population. In addition to rewriting targets and goals to make sense for the at-risk population, schools can include measures that would track re-engagement or persistence and school surveys can capture how students view their schools.

Some states have been using separate frameworks for a long time while some have only just made the change. Colorado offers an interesting plan for initiating and creating a long-lasting system. Chapter 3 enables readers to see how this information was compiled.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Accountability is a large question to tackle. This country continues to work towards determining the best indicators and the most relevant criteria to incorporate into accountability

frameworks for comprehensive schools and these traditional schools have existed for much longer than their alternative education counterparts. The previous chapter outlined the history and the various measures of accountability that would work for the alternative education population. Looking at the history of alternative education, the students, and the expectations of these programs, and identifying measures that could better assist districts in creating strong schools all add to better answering the research question at hand: *Why should this country measure alternative education campuses with an alternative education framework?*

This chapter examines the methodology of the research. Each subsection in this chapter includes a description of the project, the research framework, the data collection process, and parameters used throughout the search for appropriate literature. The description of the project and research framework explain how the project was framed. The data collection section includes important keywords and search engines. The parameters section helps showcase how the literature was found and incorporated into this project. Finally, the data analysis section explains how different sources were analyzed for use.

Project Description

This project is the result of eight years working with alternative education programs in both the public and private sectors of education, and six months of intense research about the chosen topic. This project is an extended literature review to build deeper understanding around what research and knowledge already exists about alternative education as it relates to accountability. As readers will see in Chapter 4, having this understanding allows for fact-based recommendations within districts that are not currently utilizing separate accountability frameworks for their alternative education campuses.

Research Paradigm

This research is grounded in a mix of the constructivist and transformative worldviews, as put forth by Creswell (Creswell, 2017). Both worldviews are generally associated with qualitative or mixed-methods research projects. The constructivist worldview grew from the idea that individuals are compelled to build meaning around a topic that interests them (Creswell, 2017). They build understanding through lengthy interviews with parties who can provide diverse perspectives; these conversations encourage researchers to listen and build meaning based on these conversations as well as on the context their participants come from. The role of context is extremely important to the constructivist because this worldview acknowledges that humans often develop their ideas and beliefs based on their own culture, so knowing the cultural perspective of these diverse parties builds deeper understanding and awareness of a topic.

The transformative worldview takes the constructivist approach to research inquiry a step further, by incorporating an action step to ensure political change that will ultimately benefit a marginalized population. The transformative worldview is grounded in the belief that the research project at hand must be influential in future change that will benefit a marginalized group (Creswell, 2017).

As readers saw in Chapter 2, the population that is the focus of this project is a marginalized group. The learners most often characterized as “at-risk” tend to be minorities and/or face challenges not typical of the wider population (Aaron, 2006). This population has often been marginalized by their lack of education and skills which can lead to further marginalization in the workforce. Alternative education campuses and programs have stepped in to find ways to fill the education gaps of these learners, provide them education and life skills, and, ultimately, level the playing field. However, many states and districts have not succeeded in

providing equitable programming to these students at a systematic level. It is imperative that this country more broadly understands how an equitable accountability framework would benefit this population, thereby ensuring that the programs and schools providing an education to these learners are adequate and, in fact, doing their job.

Hamline University uses the Extended Literature Review to provide student researchers the opportunity to discover the current state of knowledge about a topic. The ultimate hope, though, is that the researchers will take that new knowledge and be able to apply it to their own professional lives. To that extent, this extended literature review works to ascertain the current research on accountability measures that are being used throughout the United States, in the hopes of determining the most effective practices to hold alternative education campuses accountable to their students.

Alternative education spaces must prove themselves to be effective places to learn and build their skills. But, if districts are asking these schools to meet goals in the same way traditional schools must, the same traditional schools where these youth have already failed, are districts doing a disservice to these youth? Effective accountability measures can show that an educational program is, in fact, effective and successful for a unique population. Performance measures evaluate this population in a way that highlights their unique needs. Evaluation of current systems is imperative to better understand if alternative accountability frameworks are working, or not, in states or districts that have already implemented them, and how those measures might benefit other states and districts to measure what alternative education programs more effectively. By gathering effective data, schools can better align their programming to fit the needs of the students. Districts can begin to make goals more aligned with the student population as it is. Knowing and understanding what is already happening and working to apply

that to more schools becomes a steppingstone for transformation in ultimately serving the most underserved communities of students.

As readers have seen, the constructivist worldview asks researchers to dive deeply into all perspectives of a research inquiry, and the transformative worldview ensures that there can be political change to benefit a marginalized population. It is the hope that this extended literature review can provide a basis for understanding the changes that are already taking place in some states that might be effectively transferred to a greater number of districts, thereby providing a more equitable lens through which to view successes and failures of current alternative education options. This ensures that learners who have been marginalized for much of their educational careers can experience more equitable education systems in the future.

Data Collection

Keywords

alternative education	outcomes
accountability measures	performance indicators
state-specific searches	

Search Engines

The search for this research began on Google and Google scholar to ascertain some of the more important researchers associated with alternative education. The Key Words and noun phrases have proven incredibly important throughout this process. Due to the variability of definitions surrounding alternative education and the population these institutions might serve the yield for these searches has been erratic. Using the same keywords in Hamline Online

Library Databases, specifically, in CLIC search, produced similar results. Additionally, there were results that analyzed and researched Alternative Teaching Certification. The results were generally varied. In Hamline's research database, it was easier to limit the search by using "and" and "not;" for example, "alternative education + accountability" "not" "teachers." The "not" feature eliminated the issue of research associated with teacher certification as well as research associated with home schooling and schools for elementary and middle schools. Hamline's databases were most useful when there were specific authors or article titles to look up because Hamline can provide student researchers direct access to academic journals and other works that Google Scholar prohibits.

Parameters for Selection

Parameters included years of the research, specific topic of the article, how often the authors had been cited in separate research of the same topic and whether the research pertained to the appropriate population. This particular project is interested in the alternative schools within the public school system, so the chosen research generally reflects that. However, I have also used research that comes from studies conducted by working groups representing charter schools. Charter schools have faced many of the same obstacles that the public sector has when working with the at-risk population. However, researchers speak directly to authorizers of charter schools, so their research direction has been more focused on what alternative indicators can look like.

This study is not concerned with schools that work with younger learners, rather, the research here is geared towards a young adult population- students who range from about 16 or 18 years old to no older than 24 years old. Furthermore, research needed to consider the various characteristics this population often encompasses. Because a lot of these schools serve

populations that are often far behind their grade level, they are more than year older than their peers in the same grade level, and many of these learners often face additional challenges, like homelessness, early pregnancy, and other obstacles that often place them into the high risk or at-risk category. A good number of these youth also face additional obstacles that might include the need for English language services or specialized instruction. Due to this, the research for this project highlights indicators, programs and services that have been designed to meet the needs of youth identified as being "high-risk." So, the research and the suggestions that will eventually be considered must take all these factors into consideration.

At the beginning of this research journey, there was no push to limit the year of the research, but naturally research began to limit itself. There was more research available from the late 1980's to the early 2000's. Then, there seems to be a pause in the research. Initially, it was identified that more research needed to be done in alternative education (Raywid, 1983; Aron, 2003; Aron, 2006). However, there are few studies that exist from the early 2000's; there has been a resurgence of interest and long-term research in the United States in the last 15 years (Jimenez et al, 2018; Smith et al, 2013; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017; DeVeaux et al, 2019). Again, much of the existing research has been limited to a scope beyond this study, including best practices when working with at-risk populations. However, that appears to be changing with some very impressive research coming from various states, including California, New York, Arizona, Wyoming, and Colorado. Consequently, the year of research is noted for the timeline, but was not necessarily a limiting factor in the chosen research.

An important parameter was whether the author had been cited in multiple publications. Because alternative education has not had a lot of in-depth studies over the years, many of the researchers who offer their knowledge and understanding of this group are cited multiple times.

As previously mentioned, Hamline enabled access to many of the articles and studies I used for research once I had the name of the author or authors.

Data Analysis

As I collected the literature, the sections that became my literature review naturally delineated themselves. I was able to read through a good bulk of the literature and then focus on each section as I was more ready and able to write. As I began to dive more deeply into individual states, the existing research became more limited and more specific. Throughout the paper, there was sometimes a stronger focus on people as opposed to overall literature categorized by the theme because those in the field have done a lot of research within the field. To go through the actual research, I started in the conclusions and recommendations page because that is where I was able to identify if an article or piece of research would answer the question I had identified at the beginning.

Quite naturally, I take notes in the margins of articles and highlight ideas and valuable words in a color-coded fashion. I made mental notes or immediate internet searches of words or names that continuously came up. Initial searches were easy to come up with simply by using my key words, but as the research progressed, it was necessary to find specific authors and search through their related work. As was the case in Wyoming, the work I found was so state specific, I never found it on a database or search engine; instead, I found the work by going through Wyoming's public-school webpage.

Summary

Despite the size of the obstacle that is accountability and the frameworks used to measure it, some states have already begun to dive deeper into this issue. They have already seen how separate accountability systems and frameworks for alternative education campuses is vital to the

success of these programs and is legal, as well, per federal legislation. The Constructivist and Transformative world views aided in recognizing a need for the type of research- Society must understand what already exists to move forward in a way that will touch and benefit those furthest from opportunity. Chapter 4 provides readers the opportunity to see initial findings and learn about the implications of this research.

Chapter 4: Synthesis

Why should this country measure alternative education campuses with an alternative education framework? This is the question that I have been asking myself since I began working in education nearly 10 years ago. Having worked only with this population, I have experienced

how traditional educational targets and measures can seem more like a straitjacket than a guiding hand for alternative campuses. The word equity is one that I often hear touted in educational circles, but I cannot help but feel when it comes to equity, many districts and states have not thought about how different populations are affected by inequitable measures. If alternative education really is a place for students who have struggled to succeed with the expected pathway that is education in the United States, then we must raise it up to be the pathway that is needed for these learners. This country cannot do that if we cannot say how a school is doing or if we assume, based on flawed data, that many alternative education campuses are doing poorly (DePaoli et al, 2017). Rather, we must find ways to uplift alternative education to meet the needs of the students it has been designed to serve.

The first section will include a short reflection of my own process of this journey. The second section will revisit some of the more salient points from my literature review. Next, readers will discover some of the implications of this project as well as the limitations. Finally, I will share recommendations and some next steps for me personally as I continue in this branch of education.

Reflection of Process

This process has been difficult for me. I have never viewed myself as a particularly good or efficient student and this process has very much reminded me of that, I am sorry to say. Despite the organizational challenges I face in the classroom, outside of the classroom, I am a life-long learner; I have always enjoyed learning in different forms- the more hands on the better. One thing this project really pushed me to consider is communicating what I have learned to the public. Going into this process, I believe I just thought that this work would be for me, and only me, as opposed to something that would go out to the public or, potentially, be used by others.

As I came into January, I still did not know my end goal- a proposal for the district I work in or an extended literature review. My advisor provided me with sound advice asking me which would most benefit me when I left Hamline and this program. Through further reflection, I realized that an extended literature review would allow me to gain more specific knowledge about what is happening across the country as well as provide more background about what can work for this population. This in turn gives me a deeper well to pull from when I construct arguments to administration. This project and process have really allowed me to see the connections throughout the complete cycle which have enabled me to see how I could use the information I have gathered. I am still nervous and insecure about publicly sharing out my knowledge and recommendations, but this process has facilitated my confidence in doing so. While a public share out still frightens me, knowing I have gained new understandings and new vocabulary to describe and support what I believe in is empowering. I only hope I have done this topic justice.

As a researcher, I have improved. From beginning to end, I feel that I am a better researcher. Midway through this process I truly recognized the importance of the research question. I realized early on that my usual methods of organizing would not work and that I would need to be more orderly. I have managed to improve on my methods of organization somewhat, but still find myself looking through the categories and charts that I have made in my head, too often, and then going back and sorting through my printed articles to find just what I am looking for. In terms of information gathering, I have improved. In this project, I benefited from using the bibliographies of others to double check my work and to ensure I had not missed someone. I have allowed myself time to go down the rabbit hole, if you will, but in a smarter

way, especially towards the end, so I was able to find some last-minute resources that truly improved the shape of my research.

This process of writing this study has been quick, but the process of choosing this topic and building the work has been happening inside of me for almost a decade. I feel thankful to have had the time to research, more thoroughly, an argument and critique that has been building in my head for many years and through my work with many students.

Recurring Themes from the Literature Review

As I reflect on the last few months, there are themes that continually come up in thinking about accountability for alternative education campuses. In acknowledging that accountability is about determining the quality of a school to decide if that school should continue along its course or if it needs support in providing strong programming for the students it serves, then it must be also acknowledged that much of the country continues to use inappropriate measures to determine quality as it pertains to AECs. Fortunately, research and practice have shown that it is possible to create measures and goals that can determine quality and still meet the needs of this unique population.

Many charter schools have been serving the at-risk population for a long time, and the research they provide for this community reflects that. Smith et al (2013) showed that testing continues to be important, but it must reflect the population alternative schools serve. That means, the tests should be computer adaptive to show proficiency at the appropriate grade level; also, these assessments can be run on a short cycle assessment basis to show growth (Smith et al, 2013). Measuring graduation rates, even adjusted graduation rates, might not be the most appropriate for AEC's (Jimenez et al, 2018, Smith et al, 2013; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). Most importantly, when creating indicators around graduation rates, states can do so in a

way that speaks directly to AECs, as opposed to treating them in a similar fashion as traditional schools. For example, Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales (2017) point out that Oregon has implemented a one-year graduation rate for eligible seniors reflecting that many students who arrive at an alternative school do not need to be at the school for four years. Jimenez et al (2018) believe placing students in cohorts based on number of credits and then setting a graduation date would be more attainable for AECs. DeVeaux et al (2019) provide example indicators that can benefit AECs because they create language that is meaningful for these campuses as they serve students who do not fit a traditional mold or meet traditional expectations of schooling. Utilizing this language reflects the findings of Ernst (2009, 2016) and Ernst & Beckler (2015) whose research shows that at-risk students do not show the same rates of growth on standardized tests largely because they often enter an AEC at a different educational level than their peers of the same age. The language of the example indicators still shows growth because these students do grow in their educational journey, but the language reflects that these students might not grow as quickly as their counterparts in traditional schools.

Adjusting language and providing choice in indicators is not about lowering rigor or making school easier for students in alternative education. It is about creating a set of measures that will ensure AECs are counted and evaluated, but in a way that reflects the population these institutions were designed to serve. By comparing AECs to each other with data that makes sense for these schools, states can ensure that they are producing programming that meets the needs of the students to the fullest. Additionally, by creating goals and indicators that reflect the population, states can create a more accurate picture of quality as it relates to these schools that do not look like traditional campuses. An important take-away from this research is that public

school districts can learn from charter schools to build accountability frameworks that work for an at-risk population.

Implications

As more research happens about this population, student and school needs become more obvious to this country. Understanding those needs ensures that districts and schools can meet their needs from the ground up. Therefore, this research is so important. Researchers have seen that implementing the same framework for both traditional and alternative schools could mean overidentifying AECs as not being of good quality, or it could mean that alternative schools are not counted at all and therefore receive no support when support might be needed (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Smith et al, 2013; DePaoli et al, 2017).

Providing guidelines and goals that speak directly to AECs can help in influencing the programming meets the needs of students, that teachers and administrators are receiving the appropriate support to develop staff to meet the needs of students, and that districts see a more complete picture of schools that provide instruction for this more vulnerable population.

This research has endeavored to see what indicators and goals can work, and it has shown that there are schools and states who are making important strides to serve this population. The research here shows that the public sector can find inspiration by looking at their counterparts in charter schools. Because charter schools have, potentially, more freedom in developing a school's mission as well as targets that can benefit their populations, research and suggestions already exist not just on indicators that work but also on the language that can be used to affect the at-risk youth AECs most directly are serving. Research has shown that charter schools have provided great insight into what has worked for them in creating indicators for these youth regarding AECs. There are also states that have implemented incredible changes to meet the

needs of their AEC populations. Colorado is a standout in how they have modeled their alternative accountability framework and how they continue to build on evidence and best practices to continue the improvement of that framework. Public schools, across the country, can learn from charter schools and states who have already begun this process. Due to the growth of AECs, it is imperative that this country find ways to address the needs of the schools serving this population.

Limitations

The limitations of this project come specifically from the time limit. This project officially began in the Fall of 2020 and will finish early Spring, 2021. Barely a year later, this extended literature review answers a narrow question to compile the research that exists in this field. More time studying this topic might have uncovered further revelations from the United States and allowed for time to explore what is happening in other countries. The research that has been conducted in this field not only spans more time but is often produced by more than one person. Some of the most effective research I have explored has been conducted by teams of people. If this project had been more than just me, I believe we could have done a more thorough search of what the states are doing with alternative education. The actual amount of research that has been conducted in this field is also limiting. There is not much research, and that which does exist is not necessarily expansive, geographically. Ernst (2009, 2010, 2016) in her research, has admitted that the sample sizes she used were not large. Research in this field would benefit from data analysis that is wider spread to include more communities, a more diverse population, and more states and districts within the country.

The question itself might have been limiting. I was interested in indicators that would better demonstrate the quality and AECs as well as tell the story of what is happening in

alternative education, but there are so many other questions that branch away from that central question. For me, there will always be a question of what standardized tests might be most appropriate for this age group. Smith et al (2013) make clear their preference for computer adaptive tests and I agree with them. But does that mean that all standardized tests that are not computer adaptive do not work, and if so, why? There has been some research into standardized testing (Ernst, 2009; Ernst & Beckler, 2015; Ernst, 2016), but not much, and it has been limited to NWEA and the STAR Reading and Math; moving forward it will be important to have data that also reflects progress on the World Class Instructional Design Assessment (WIDA) of English language learning students in AECs. Understanding and norming students attending AECs is crucial for implementing indicators to effectively evaluate a school's performance, and while I believe the research, I have found bolsters the feelings I have towards WIDA when applied to this population, I can also feel my own bias at work.

Perhaps my topic itself was limiting. I did not want to focus on incorporating teaching strategies or socio-emotional strategies into schools that would benefit the at-risk population. Not because these topics are not essential to the success of AECs, but because I see those as a band aid to the bigger problem. Too many states are holding AECs accountable in the same way that traditional campuses are held accountable leading to over identifying of 'poor' schools and not always ensuring that AECs will get the help they need to improve their standing. Overall, the body of work regarding accountability was limited- especially as it pertained to public alternative schools. There have been a handful of multi-state scans to identify what is happening at the state level, but there are limited bodies of work that study the effects or consequences the current state of accountability has on public alternative schools. I agreed with the research that I found, but perhaps that was due to the size of the body of work- it is small.

My bias has influenced how I researched this topic. I knew coming into this project that I believed alternative education campuses deserved alternative frameworks to evaluate the population appropriately and effectively I was under the impression these schools were meant to serve. Targets are meant to be rigorous, but also reflective of what is happening on the ground in a school. I anticipated, initially, finding more research and when I did not find it, I focused on a small portion of research that directly pertained to the population and accountability frameworks. On reflection, I wonder how my paper might have evolved if I had also investigated arguments for maintaining similar accountability systems or why students in alternative schools do not need special measures. Presumably, this research did not exist because it did not come up immediately. What might I have found if my searches had been worded differently?

Recommendations

The Federal Government has provided states an opportunity to re-imagine the way they build accountability for alternative schools, and more states need to take advantage. This project has shown what happens when alternative schools are held accountable to the same goals as their traditional counterparts. They are far too often qualified as not good enough either because they are not counted at all or because they are overly identified as not performing to standard. I have worked hard to compile research about what is happening in other states as well as provide examples of indicators that would be appropriate for this population. These examples are critical in moving towards a more equitable system of accountability for schools that serve this unique population.

Many current researchers acknowledge the need for improved data systems within alternative education- both at the public-school level and the charter school level (LAO, 2015; Ernst, 2016; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). More districts would benefit from eliminating

minimum numbers simply so that AECs would be counted. It is vital that AEC's can compare themselves to other schools that serve the same population and the same characteristics. An accountability working group, like what has occurred in Colorado, Arizona, Massachusetts, and other states, would prove useful (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017; DeVeaux et al, 2019). It is challenging to make recommendations to a locality when not enough information or data exist. A working group can take part of the process from the beginning and provide space to revisit and address potential changes that need to be made after a few years (Colorado Public Schools, 2020, n.p). Pilot programs may help localities determine the best indicators for them. Potentially more important is ensuring the voice of staff and educators who work within AECs. Knowing what they experience day-to-day appropriate for one area than another. Bringing together these voices can be extremely beneficial to the unique population these schools serve.

Within my own school district in Washington DC, we have three incredible Opportunity Academies who serve at-risk students that have transitioned out of mainstream education. As previously discussed, these schools operate in much the same way as their traditional counterparts even though these programs are designed, specifically, for students who need specialized instruction and are often over-age and under-credited (DC Public Schools, n.d.). Washington DC claims a similar, but distinct, accountability framework for its traditional and alternative schools. Although the district attempts to differentiate between the systems that serve an alternative population of students, there is room for growth and improvement. For example, this district does not utilize a growth measure at the district level to evaluate students' improvement over the school year. While the schools might employ a short-cycle assessment at the school level, like the NWEA test, that is not something the district uses to judge growth or quality of the school. My recommendation is to build on the recommendations of researchers:

Washington DC could implement a rigorous, computer adaptive assessment like NWEA MAP to assess both reading and math for growth and achievement. It is a test that can be used with the entire population of a school to more accurately determine if a school is meeting their goals and creating effective programming. Since, the Opportunity Academies offer educational opportunities to students up to 24 years old, a test that can be used for the whole population is a benefit.

Additionally, as a district moves forward in building an accountability framework for alternative schools, it would be beneficial to include a diverse group of voices from each school's staff to make recommendations for those changes in indicators. Teachers and other staff members can provide crucial insight into understanding the specific population these schools are serving as well as provide recommendations for what indicators could work for their programming.

Moving forward

Despite my fear of becoming an expert, of any level, on this topic, I feel more confident overall with how I approach my administration and my district. Washington DC has three alternative schools, and those schools work hard to meet the needs of their students. Regardless of the work, these schools are still held to the same standards and goals of an accountability framework that does not meet the needs of the students they serve. It is in my best interest to continue bringing up how we are held accountable at the district level and to then make more informed recommendations for moving forward. I plan to start small- with my English Language Department- pushing for a different approach to knowing our students' level of English. Although my research was not specifically developed around standardized tests, my research has given me the confidence to speak about the shortcoming of assessments like WIDA. With

respect to age and expectations, this test does not make the most sense for our students. My school, and other schools like it, need an assessment that will determine the level of proficiency of my students and demonstrate if they are growing in their ability. Ernst et al (2009, 2016) showed that at-risk students in AECs did not make the same gains as students in traditional schools at the same educational level on NWEA; it seems likely that the same would be true for an assessment like WIDA and older English Language Learners. Additionally, that assessment needs to reach students who are over the age of 22. This project has built my confidence to speak those needs with people above me who will listen.

This research could be beneficial as it brings together insights from charter schools as well as specifics about what is happening on the ground within states moving towards distinct accountability frameworks and why they have moved in that direction. A lot of the previous research is focused on strategies that work for this age group as well as diving more deeply into who makes up this population. This previous research is valid and extremely important to improving the overall quality of alternative schools. But this research has affirmed my belief that this country cannot talk about improvement without defining how an alternative school will be viewed at the district level and beyond. Most today's states are not considering the full picture of their AECs. Improved on the ground instruction and services links directly to the goals a school is trying to attain, but the goals need to reflect the population. This research helps point future researchers and policymakers in the right direction of addressing the top of the organization. Refining the goals and indicators alternative schools are meant to meet helps facilitate improved programming and instruction for the students these schools are designed to help.

Summary

This research showed that this country continues to struggle to adequately define alternative education as it pertains to the public-school sector and to the students most in need of additional resources and pathways to become independent, informed citizens in this country. The research that has been done is clear about who these programs serve, and the various ways programs might be designed, but if the United States is not able to find a way to build a collective system of accountability that effectively surveys if the schools are serving the students they claim to serve, this society only continues to falter. Despite the overall dearth of research about what can work for this population, there are some promising starts that many states can implement. The Federal Government has provided states with flexibility in finding what works for accountability, including with the alternative schools. A greater number of states must make the first move- perhaps through a pilot program to implement more specific indicators- to ensure that alternative schools' quality is being assessed in an equitable way, and in a way that makes sense for the populations served at these schools. Alternative indicators to measure student achievement and progress ensures alternative schools can be measured more fairly. This country cannot continue to operate in a way that treats alternative schools too similarly to traditional schools. There are too many students in this country whose paths will not follow the traditional education road, but, as a society, we are still responsible for meeting their needs. Alternative schools are a way to meet those needs, and structures must be enacted to provide clear and equitable measures that will facilitate quality programming for the learners furthest from opportunity.

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