



K-12 EDUCATION

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION MODELS AND STRATEGIES

Hanover Research provides an overview of research on alternative schools and programs.



INTRODUCTION

While traditional K-12 education meets the needs of most students, 64% of school districts across the nation offer at least one alternative school or program designed to “address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools.” Alternative education encompasses any non-traditional educational activity, and most commonly serves middle or high school students. Alternative education delivery can occur within traditional schools or at separate sites.

The three most common alternative education models are:

- **Alternative schools**, typically housed in a separate facility, requiring students to leave their regular school.
- **Alternative programs**, typically housed within regular schools.
- **Targeted, school-based support strategies**, i.e. academic, behavioral, and health services provided in the school setting.

Alternative education can serve many types of students to meet a range of goals, such as helping students earn academic credits, providing career preparation and credentials, or assisting students in transitioning out of a detention or treatment program and back into traditional schools. The services provided by an alternative school or program depend on the program’s purpose and the specific population served, but may include: regular academic instruction, counseling, behavioral services, social skills and support services, and career education.

This research brief describes the types of alternative education services that school districts may provide, and summarizes the research evidence supporting each type of alternative education model.

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I. ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS (SEPARATE SITE)

Alternative schools encompass a variety of alternative education options including charter schools, magnet schools, and career and technical education programs.

TYPES OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

MODEL	DESCRIPTION	STUDENTS SERVED	RESEARCH SUPPORT
Charter Schools 	Charter schools are privately managed, taxpayer-funded schools that have increased flexibility and autonomy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of students across grade levels 	Mixed Findings. Research suggests that locally- and state-managed charter schools with strong instructional supports can be effective.
Magnet Schools 	A magnet school or program typically has an academic or social focus on a theme (e.g., STEM, performing arts) and intends to attract students of different racial, ethnic, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of students across grade levels Minority and/or low-SES students 	Mixed Findings. Research suggests that magnet schools may improve behavioral and academic outcomes.
Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs 	CTE programs blend rigorous academics with career preparation to prepare students for college and/or careers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically high school, and occasionally middle school students 	Positive Findings. Research suggests that participation in a CTE program improves graduation rates for at-risk students.
Dropout Prevention and Credit Recovery Schools 	Dropout prevention and credit recovery schools (often referred to as “alternative schools”) provide students at-risk of not graduating with an alternative pathway.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High school students at-risk of not graduating Students with academic, behavioral, and/or emotional needs 	Positive Findings. Research suggests that alternative high schools can improve graduation rates for at-risk students but that program effectiveness ranges by program type and implementation.



CHARTER SCHOOLS

Although part of the public school system, charter schools typically have their own appointed school board. An individual or organization hoping to open a charter school must apply to an “authorizer,” which may be a local school district, state education agency, a charter board, or a non-profit organization. To enroll in a charter school, students typically apply for admission, and schools may hold a lottery when the number of applicants exceeds the number of available seats. Evidence is mixed as to the effect of charter schools on student achievement in comparison to that of traditional schools. The National Education Association notes that studies “show very small differences [between the two models], some favoring traditional district schools and some favoring charter schools.” The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute similarly notes that there is mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of charter schools—“when effects are averaged... charter schools demonstrate similar outcomes to traditional schools overall.”

However, charter school management may be associated with student outcomes, with some studies showing that charter schools authorized by districts, states, and regional education agencies outperform those authorized by non-profits.



MAGNET SCHOOLS

A magnet school or program is “designed to attract students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds for the purpose of reducing, preventing, or eliminating racial isolation; and/or to provide an academic or social focus on a particular theme (e.g., science/math, performing arts, gifted/talented, or foreign language).” A single district or group of districts may operate a magnet school. Similar to the charter school system, students may apply to attend magnet schools, which are part of the public education system.

Research suggests that magnet schools may improve behavioral outcomes; however, findings are mixed as to their effects on student achievement. Some studies have found an association between magnet school attendance and positive effects on student achievement, student body diversity, graduation rates, and students’ attitudes and behavior. However, other studies find that, while magnet schools may improve behavioral outcomes, they have no effect on achievement.

SPOTLIGHT: LOWELL MIDDLESEX ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL



Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School

Lower Middlesex Academy Charter School

(LMACS) in Lowell, MA primarily serves students at risk of dropping out or who have left school prior to graduation. LMACS offers a general curriculum, career preparation opportunities, English learner courses, special education instruction, and access to dual enrollment courses at the local community college. Students are grouped by “phases”—rather than grade level—based on how many credits they have earned toward high school graduation. The core academic curriculum is supplemented by daily advising; courses in life skills, ethics, and health; and a requirement that students complete a 50-hour internship. The Boston Globe and the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy have recognized LMACS for its “track record of success” and “powerful learning partnerships” that promote college and career readiness.

SPOTLIGHT: LINCOLN MAGNET SCHOOL



Lincoln Magnet School (LMS) in Springfield, IL is a technology magnet school that uses technology to enrich and empower students in Grades 6 to 8. All district students are eligible to apply to LMS through a lottery system. The school offers learning based on the International Society for Technology in Education's learning standards; career education and "real-world" learning opportunities; accelerated math courses; and extracurricular opportunities such as an after-school enrichment program emphasizing "logic, mathematical thinking, and experimental scientific thinking." The school was recognized as a "High Performing National Blue Ribbon School" in 2011 and as a "Apple Distinguished School" from 2009 to 2014.



CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Career and technical education (CTE) programs combine academics and career readiness to prepare students to be college and career ready. Students can receive CTE instruction either within a comprehensive high school or at a designated CTE center or technical school.

Research indicates that participation in CTE increases graduation rates. A recent review of CTE studies found "strong evidence" that CTE participation improves graduation rates, and some evidence that CTE participation improves post-secondary, employment, and earnings outcomes. On average, CTE participation increases graduation rates for at-risk students by 16 percent, with the effects stronger for male students and students from low-income families.



DROPOUT PREVENTION AND CREDIT RECOVERY SCHOOLS

Schools that focus on dropout prevention—often referred collectively to as "alternative schools" and considered separately from charter, magnet, and CTE

SPOTLIGHT: MONTACHUSETT REGIONAL VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL SCHOOL



Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School, located in *Fitchburg, MA*, offers 21 rigorous programs that combine academic and

vocational education to prepare students for both college and careers. Programs focus on career pathways in fields such as information technology, health occupations, masonry, and engineering. The Cooperative Education program allows Grade 11 students to combine their classroom work with applied work experience through part-time internships with local businesses. Further, graduation requirements ensure that students will be eligible for enrollment in higher education institutions, and the school's students have higher four-year graduation rates than the state average.

SPOTLIGHT: READY PROGRAM



The Regional Alternative for Development Youth (READY) Program provides alternative schooling for students found guilty of misconduct. The program serves Grades 6 to 12 students in districts within two counties in Illinois who have been suspended or expelled, have a criminal history, or who were involved in misconduct. Students are relocated from their home schools to the READY program for a minimum of 18 weeks. Components of the program include service-based projects, social skills training, job training, internship opportunities, and mental health support services. Further, the **student-teacher ratio is 10:1**, much lower than the **state average of 19:1**.

schools and centers—vary widely in purpose, student subgroups served, curriculum, and setting. While some alternative schools may aim to prepare students to return to their regular schools, many provide a permanent alternative route to graduation. Alternative school models that support students who are at-risk of dropping out include residential school, summer school, second-chance school, and early college high schools.

Research indicates that alternative high schools for at-risk students can increase graduation rates.

On average, alternative schools result in a 15.5 percent increase in graduation rates for at-risk students. However, the design and implementation of alternative high schools for at-risk students can vary widely, which impacts their effectiveness. Poor attendance rates and inadequate staffing and high turnover, for example, may negatively affect student outcomes.

II. ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS (SAME SITE)

Alternative programs are alternative education offerings housed within regular schools. Types of alternative program models include school-within-a-school and resource rooms or resource teachers.

TYPES OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

MODEL	DESCRIPTION	STUDENTS SERVED	RESEARCH SUPPORT
 <p>School-Within-A-School Programs</p>	<p>A school-within-a-school program is a “mini-school” within a traditional school that serves a particular group of students who take classes together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school students at-risk of not graduating • Students with emotional or behavioral issues • Students who struggle with anxiety or substance abuse issues 	<p>Limited positive findings. Some research suggests that career academies, a common type of school-within-a-school program, may improve graduation rates and post-secondary outcomes.</p>
 <p>Resource Programs</p>	<p>Students may receive alternative education services through pull-out instruction provided in a resource room.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students across grade levels with a variety of academic, behavioral, and social needs 	<p>Limited positive findings. Research suggests that small-group and individual interventions provided in separate classes can effectively support higher-risk students’ behavioral outcomes.</p>



SCHOOL-WITHIN-A-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

School-within-a-school programs may serve a variety of students, including those with emotional and behavioral issues and/or who are at risk of not graduating. A school-within-a-school program is unit or learning community within a traditional school that focuses on a particular learning area or style. Students participating in a school-within-a-school may take classes only in the program or in addition to mainstream classes. Districts may deliver CTE through a school-within-a-school model rather than a separate site model, which may provide increased access and convenience.

Career academies are a common type of school-within-a-school program originally intended to support high school students who are at risk of dropping out. Some research suggests that career academies may improve graduation rates and post-secondary outcomes. A study that meets The What Works Clearinghouse's rigorous quality standards suggests that career academies may have a positive effect on completing high school. Other evidence suggests that career academies can raise future earnings and may increase the likelihood of completing complete college-required coursework.



RESOURCE PROGRAMS

Students may also participate in an alternative education program based in a resource room. This program model parallels the special education “pull-out” model where students receive support in an individual or small group setting for part of the day in a separate room. Programs based in resource rooms may address a variety of students' cognitive, behavioral, and social needs, as well as provide counseling supports. A meta-analysis of research on school-based interventions to address aggressive and disruptive behavior—many of which involve “pulled-out” small-group or individual supports—indicates that this model can be effective in improving behavioral outcomes, especially when interventions are well-implemented and target higher-risk students.

SPOTLIGHT: MONOMOY REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL'S ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PROGRAM



The Alternative Learning Program in Monomoy Regional High School in Harwich, MA is designed for any student who would like to learn in a smaller setting. The program is open to any student who wishes to apply; however, the program targets students who have experienced personal challenges at home or social and emotional challenges. In the morning, students have core academic instruction in a small, contained classroom. In the afternoon, students participate in career, job, service, and community learning. The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy recognized Monomoy's program in a recent review of alternative education as an example of quality alternative learning in a small district with “limited financial resources.”

III. DIAGNOSTIC: CHECKLIST FOR EVALUATING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION MODELS

Districts can use the Checklist to evaluate the current status of their alternative education models, or as a guide for developing alternative education models. *(Circle the answer)*

	VISION	YES NO	Does the alternative school or program have a clear vision statement, purpose, and objective?
	RESULTS ORIENTATION	YES NO	Does the alternative school or program use data to monitor student progress and develop goals?
	STRATEGIC FINANCING	YES NO	Does the alternative school or program have adequate funding sources?
	ADAPTABILITY	YES NO	Is the alternative school or program able to adapt to changes in its community, financial situation, and education policies?
	INTERNAL SYSTEMS	YES NO	Does the alternative school or program have established internal processes in the areas of finance, human resources, information technology, and communication?
	SUSTAINABILITY PLAN	YES NO	Does the alternative school or program have stated goals and a plan to meet those goals?
	DIVERSITY	YES NO	Do student selection efforts promote equal access for all students?
		YES NO	Do district and school policies and activities promote the integration of a wide variety of students?
	INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	YES NO	Are all activities aligned to the alternative school or program's purpose?
		YES NO	Is time dedicated to job-embedded training and collaborative planning?
	ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE	YES NO	Does instruction involve collaboration among students, formative assessment, and multiple intervention levels?
		YES NO	Is there evidence of improved student academic performance?
	HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEMS	YES NO	Does the alternative school or program's leadership recognize exceptional teachers?
		YES NO	Are teachers provided adequate professional development and support?
		YES NO	Does the district or school support the alternative school or program in terms of resources and decision-making?
	FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS	YES NO	Does the alternative school or program engage in partnerships with community organizations and businesses?
		YES NO	Does the alternative school or program actively involve families in its operations?
		YES NO	Does the alternative school or program regularly communicate with families?

ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

Hanover Research provides high-quality, custom research and analytics through a cost effective model that helps clients make informed decisions, identify and seize opportunities, and heighten their effectiveness.

HANOVER'S K-12 EDUCATION SOLUTIONS

Hanover guides K-12 leaders in tackling academic and administrative challenges to ensure that students, parents, and staff have the tools they need to ensure all students succeed. Our comprehensive solutions use a multi-methodological approach including data analytics, survey research, benchmarking, best practice identification, and in-depth interviews and focus groups to help K-12 leaders in every department manage their toughest challenges.

ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS

- **College & Career Readiness:**
Support on-time student graduation and prepare all students for post-secondary education and careers.
- **Program Evaluation:**
Measure program impact to support informed, evidence-based investments in resources that maximize student outcomes and manage costs.
- **Safe & Supportive Environments:** Create an environment that supports the academic, cultural, and social-emotional needs of students, parents, and staff through a comprehensive annual assessment of climate and culture.

ADMINISTRATIVE SOLUTIONS

- **Family and Community Engagement:**
Expand and strengthen family and community relationships and identify community partnerships that support student success.
- **Talent Recruitment, Retention & Development:**
Attract and retain the best staff through an enhanced understanding of the teacher experience and staff professional development needs.
- **Operations Improvement**
Proactively address changes in demographics, enrollment levels, and community expectations in your budgeting decisions.

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