



OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR
STATE OF MINNESOTA

EVALUATION REPORT

Alternative Education Programs

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OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR

STATE OF MINNESOTA • James Nobles, Legislative Auditor

February 2010

Members of the Legislative Audit Commission:

In 2009, approximately 150,000 Minnesota public school students enrolled in alternative education programs. These programs ranged from area learning centers that served high school students full time in stand-alone facilities, to “targeted services” that served elementary school students in before- or after-school programs. Most students enrolled in alternative education programs—75 percent—enrolled only in “extended-time” programs such as before- or after-school programs or summer school.

We found that students in kindergarten through eighth grade who received targeted services showed higher-than-expected growth when compared with other students and national norms. However, the Minnesota Department of Education has imposed restrictions on which school districts may provide targeted services, effectively limiting access to these services across the state.

We recommend that the Legislature remove the department’s restrictions and allow all school districts to offer targeted services. We also recommend that the department increase its ongoing oversight of alternative education programs and initiate a pilot project to use and evaluate additional measures of alternative education student performance.

This report was researched and written by Judy Randall (evaluation manager), Sarah Roberts, and Dan Jacobson. The Minnesota Department of Education cooperated fully with our evaluation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Nobles'.

James Nobles
Legislative Auditor

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Summary

Alternative education programs have had mixed results, but the Minnesota Department of Education has restricted access to “targeted services,” which have shown the most promising results.

Major Findings:

- Alternative education programs range from full-time “regular-day” schools that substitute for traditional schools to “extended-time” summer school and after-school programs. (pp. 12-16)
- About 17 percent (150,000) of Minnesota public school students enroll in alternative education programs each year. In 2009, 75 percent of these students enrolled only in extended-time programs, such as summer school or after-school programs. (pp. 21-24)
- Many students who attend alternative education programs qualify because they are behind academically. Not surprisingly, alternative education students had significantly lower rates of proficiency on the 2009 MCA-II exams than students who attended traditional schools. (pp. 27, 39-41)
- However, when we measured *growth* on standardized tests between 2008 and 2009, students in kindergarten through eighth grade who attended extended-time programs called “targeted services” generally increased their test scores more than other students. In contrast, other groups of alternative education students made less progress than traditional students. (pp. 41-47)
- Alternative education students had lower attendance and graduation rates than traditional students, but some alternative education

students improved on these measures over time. (pp. 48-51)

- Some school district staff are concerned about the rigor of the curriculum in alternative education programs. (pp. 57-58)
- The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) approves alternative education programs but provides limited ongoing oversight. (pp. 58-60)
- MDE has established policies that limit student access to targeted services. (pp. 60-61)

Key Recommendations:

- MDE should initiate a pilot project to use and evaluate additional measures of alternative education student performance. (p. 54)
- The Minnesota Legislature should allow MDE and school districts with students enrolled in alternative education programs in other districts to challenge the validity of the curriculum provided by those alternative education programs to ensure the curriculum meets state standards. (p. 63)
- The Minnesota Legislature should allow all school districts to offer targeted services, regardless of whether they provide other alternative education programs. (p. 64)
- MDE should increase its ongoing oversight of alternative education programs. (p. 65)

Alternative education consists of “regular-day” programs that substitute for traditional schools and “extended-time” programs that take place outside of the normal school day.

About 75 percent of the 150,000 alternative education students were enrolled only in extended-time programs in 2009.

Report Summary

The Minnesota Legislature established alternative education programs in 1987 as a way to serve secondary students at risk of not graduating from the traditional education system. Over the past 20 years, alternative education programs have expanded from enrolling high school students in separate “learning centers” to also serving elementary school students in before- or after-school programs and during the summer (referred to as extended-time programs).

Alternative education programs are provided by area learning centers (ALCs), alternative learning programs (ALPs), and contract alternative schools. They provide “regular-day” programs that substitute for attending a traditional school, and many also offer “extended-time” programs that take place outside of the traditional school day (either during the summer or before or after school).

Students must meet 1 of 12 criteria outlined in statute to attend an alternative education program.¹ The criteria include (1) performing substantially below the performance level for pupils of the same age, (2) being behind in obtaining credits for graduation, (3) being pregnant or a parent, and (4) having been assessed as chemically dependent.

Of the 150,000 students enrolled in alternative education programs in 2009, 75 percent were enrolled only in extended-time programs. This means that they attended a traditional school during the regular school day and participated in alternative education only before or after school or during the summer. For students

in kindergarten through eighth grade, extended-time programs typically take place at traditional school sites.

Alternative education students are more often nonwhite and poor and change schools more frequently than other public school students.

On the whole, alternative education programs serve significantly larger percentages of nonwhite students and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than traditional schools. In 2009, nearly 50 percent of the alternative education student population was nonwhite. In contrast, only 20 percent of the traditional students in Minnesota were nonwhite. Similarly, 57 percent of alternative education students were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch in 2009 as compared with 30 percent of traditional students.

Alternative education students are more likely than traditional students to change schools during the school year. In 2009, 40 percent of alternative education students changed schools at least once during the school year as compared with less than 4 percent of traditional students.

Students who attended alternative education programs had lower rates of proficiency on the MCA-II exams than traditional students.

One of the eligibility criteria for students to attend an alternative education program is that they are academically behind their peers. Not surprisingly, alternative education students had lower rates of proficiency than other students on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, Series II (MCA-II) exams. In general, 37 percent of students who attended an alternative education program were “proficient” on the 2009 math MCA-II, as compared with 68 percent of students

¹ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.68, subd. 2.

Students in grades K-8 who received targeted services had more growth on standardized assessments than other students.

On average, students in regular-day programs had less growth on standardized assessments than other students.

who did not attend an alternative education program that year. Similarly, 46 percent of alternative education students were proficient on the 2009 reading MCA-II, as compared with 77 percent of students who did not attend an alternative education program. These differences in proficiency rates persisted across grade levels.

Students who received targeted services showed increased growth in test scores, but students enrolled in regular-day alternative education programs did not demonstrate the same level of growth.

Students in kindergarten through eighth grade who received extended-time services (targeted services) showed higher-than-expected growth on two standardized assessments—the MCA-II and the Northwest Evaluation Association’s (NWEA’s) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)—when compared with other students and national norms.

In contrast, students who attended alternative education schools for at least some of their regular school day had less growth on math and reading assessments when compared with NWEA’s comparison groups and other Minnesota students (on the MCA-II).

When we examined subgroups of students who attended regular-day alternative education programs, we found mixed results for students who attended *full time*. These students were more likely to have high growth than low growth on the MCA-II reading exam, although the difference was not statistically significant.

It is difficult to determine appropriate benchmarks for these students because we do not know how they would have performed if they had not

enrolled in alternative education. Some alternative education students might have remained in the traditional setting and graduated from high school; others might have dropped out of school and not obtained a high school diploma.

Alternative education secondary students generally had lower attendance and graduation rates than traditional students, but many students showed improvement on these measures.

In 2009, traditional students had a 95-percent attendance rate; students who attended alternative education schools as part of their regular school day had an attendance rate of roughly 81 percent. We compared students’ attendance rates for 2008 and 2009, and after adjusting for grade-level changes, we found that more than 40 percent of full-time alternative education students improved their attendance rates relative to their peers between 2008 and 2009.

Between 2006 and 2009, 85 to 89 percent of traditional twelfth-grade students graduated by the end of their senior year. In contrast, only 34 to 39 percent of alternative education students who started a given year in the twelfth grade graduated by the end of the year. We examined the graduation rates of full-time alternative education students who were in the twelfth grade in 2006 to see whether they ultimately graduated when given more time. We found that by the end of 2009, 62 percent of these students had graduated.

High school students reported high levels of satisfaction with their alternative education experience.

We surveyed all high school students who were enrolled at least half time in an alternative education program. Almost three-quarters of the 2,847

students who responded to our questionnaire said that their alternative education school had met or exceeded their expectations. At least 70 percent of the students reported that the teachers at their alternative education school cared about them, the school had prepared them for their future, and they had accomplished what they wanted at their school.

School districts provide the primary oversight of alternative education programs, but some school district staff are concerned about the rigor of the curriculum in some programs.

MDE approves new alternative education programs and changes to existing programs, such as expanding from an ALP to an ALC or adding targeted services. MDE staff also provide technical assistance and support to alternative education programs. According to MDE staff, however, the department conducts limited ongoing oversight of alternative education programs.

Primary ongoing oversight rests with school districts. Based on our surveys of school district superintendents and alternative education directors, alternative education programs are treated similarly to other schools in their districts. Program directors are often included in district leadership meetings, and alternative education staff are often included in district-wide curriculum and professional-development meetings.

Despite oversight by the local school districts, there are concerns about the rigor of the curriculum in some alternative education programs. Almost half of the respondents to the superintendent survey and almost 60 percent of respondents to the program director survey indicated that the

rigor of the curriculum varies among alternative education programs. MDE staff reported that several school districts have questioned the rigor of the curriculum provided by an alternative education program in another district serving their students. In response to these concerns, MDE staff said that the department has neither the authority nor the capacity to judge the rigor of an alternative education program's curriculum.

The Minnesota Department of Education has adopted policies that limit access to targeted services.

MDE allows only ALCs to provide targeted services; the department does not permit ALPs to provide these services. This policy contradicts the law, which states that ALPs “may serve the students of one or more districts, may designate which grades are served, and may make program hours and a calendar optional.”² MDE staff estimated that 25 percent of Minnesota school districts do not provide targeted services, in part because of the requirements imposed by the department.

Given the test score results we presented earlier—indicating increased test score growth for students in targeted services programs—we think targeted services should be available statewide and decoupled from other alternative education programs. MDE permits only ALCs to provide targeted services. However, the link between targeted services and ALCs is tenuous at best—targeted services are not a substitute for traditional schools, they typically do not take place in ALCs, and they generally are not taught by ALC staff.

**Minnesota
Department of
Education policy
limits student
access to targeted
services.**

² *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.05, subd. 1.

Introduction

Alternative education programs offer a variety of services to public school students who are not succeeding in the traditional school setting. The services range from an extra class after the regular school day to a full day of classes at an area learning center. In fiscal year 2009, more than 300 alternative education program sites collectively served almost 150,000 students.

In April 2009, the Legislative Audit Commission directed the Office of the Legislative Auditor to evaluate alternative education programs. Legislators had questions about fundamental aspects of alternative education, including the number and ages of students enrolled in the programs, the nature of the programs, and the performance of alternative education students. Additionally, legislators had questions about the oversight of alternative education programs. In response to the concerns raised by legislators, our evaluation addressed the following questions:

- **How does alternative education differ from other public school choice options?**
- **Who attends alternative education programs and for what purposes?**
- **How have students in these programs performed, and how is performance most appropriately measured?**
- **Is there adequate state and local oversight of alternative education programs?**

To better understand the differences between alternative education programs and other school choice programs, we reviewed Minnesota statutes, Minnesota Department of Education policies and documents, and the national literature. To learn more about alternative education programs at the school level, we visited 12 alternative education programs across the state.¹ On these site visits, we typically met with staff who ran the alternative education program; at two of the sites we also met with groups of students and teachers. We conducted a roundtable of alternative education program directors and sent a questionnaire to

¹ We visited the following alternative education programs: Anoka-Hennepin Crossroads Area Learning Center (ALC), Elk River ALC (Ivan Sands), Grand Rapids ALC, Guadalupe Alternative Program (Contract Alternative), Mankato ALC, Minnesota Transitions School Alternative Learning Program (ALP), Intermediate School District 287 (North Vista ALC), St. Cloud ALC, St. Paul ALC (Gordon Parks High School), South Washington County ALP, White Bear Lake ALC, and Willmar ALC.

program directors in the state; we received responses from 70 percent of alternative education programs.²

Evaluating the performance of alternative education students required us to first identify appropriate performance measures. We discussed performance measures on all of our site visits, during our roundtables with program directors, during two roundtables with superintendents, with interest group representatives and academics, and at a session of the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE's) annual conference for alternative education programs. We also reviewed the national literature and spoke with experts in the field to identify appropriate performance measures. Ultimately, we decided to focus on five key performance measures: proficiency on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, Series II (MCA-II) tests; growth on the MCA-II and the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA's) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests; attendance; graduation; and student satisfaction. We considered using disciplinary data captured through MDE's reporting system, but we determined the data were not reliable enough to use in our analysis.

We obtained student-level MCA-II test score data for fiscal years 2006 through 2009 from MDE, and we contracted with NWEA to obtain alternative education students' test scores for the 2008 and 2009 MAP exams. We obtained statewide enrollment data, which included data on attendance and graduation, for 2003 through 2009 from MDE. To gauge student satisfaction, we surveyed all high school students who attended an alternative education program at least half time. We asked alternative education program directors to provide these students with 20 minutes and internet access to complete our questionnaire.³ We received responses from 2,847 students.

To learn more about oversight of alternative education programs, we used information collected through our site visits and alternative education program director survey. We also interviewed MDE staff and reviewed files maintained by the department. To learn more about how alternative education programs fit into school districts generally, we conducted a survey of school district superintendents. We received responses from 75 percent of school districts in the state. We also held roundtables with two groups of superintendents, and superintendents attended the meetings on some of our program site visits.

This report is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of alternative education programs, outlines the evolution of alternative education programs, explains the different types of programs that exist, and describes how funding for the programs has changed since 2001. Student enrollment, demographics, and mobility are examined in Chapter 2. Included in this chapter is a discussion about the grades served by the different types of alternative education programs and the extent to which students are enrolled in these programs. In Chapter 3 we present our analysis of student performance, using the multiple measures outlined above (MCA-II proficiency, MCA-II and MAP growth, attendance, graduation, and student satisfaction). Finally, Chapter 4

² We obtained valid contact information for almost 230 alternative education programs across the state; we received responses from 160 of them, representing a 70-percent response rate.

³ We conducted the survey from September 23, 2009, through October 9, 2009.

outlines our findings regarding oversight of alternative education programs and presents some recommendations for improvement.

Background

The Minnesota Legislature first approved alternative education programs in 1987.¹ As one of the first types of public school choice in the state, alternative education programs were intended to serve students at risk of not graduating from the traditional education system. While other public school choice options have been introduced in Minnesota over the past 20 years, alternative education programs continue to serve large numbers of students. Alternative education programs can be a separate, full-schedule “learning center” that is a substitute for attending a “traditional” public school, or the programs can provide “extended-time” services that take place during the summer or before or after school.² Alternative education programs serve students in kindergarten through grade 12.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AS A CHOICE

In Minnesota, alternative education schools are a public school choice option for eligible students. In this section, we discuss how alternative education differs from other public school choice options in Minnesota and how it differs from alternative education in other states.

Public School Choice Options

Alternative education is one of several public school choice options for Minnesota students and families. Generally speaking, public school choice gives students the ability to attend a public school outside of their resident school district.³ Over the past 20-plus years, Minnesota has increased the number of public school choice options to include charter schools, postsecondary enrollment options (PSEO), The Choice is Yours, and others. Table 1.1 provides a brief explanation of Minnesota’s public school choice options. The options vary in their goals, methods, and target populations. For example, charter schools are public schools that are separate from the resident school district; PSEO allows high school juniors and seniors to receive credit for attending a postsecondary institution; and The Choice is Yours allows certain Minneapolis students to attend schools in nearby suburban school districts.

Alternative education is one of several public school choice options in Minnesota.

¹ This evaluation focuses on schools classified in law as “state-approved alternative programs.” We refer to them in this report simply as “alternative education programs.”

² The term “traditional schools” in this report refers to schools other than state-approved alternative education programs, including standard elementary, middle, junior high, or senior high schools, as well as charter schools. They also include a small number of special education, correctional, or care and treatment programs that are not classified as state-approved alternative education programs.

³ A student’s resident school district is the public school district within whose geographic attendance boundaries a student’s residence is located.

Table 1.1: Minnesota Public School Choice Options

Alternative Education Programs	Alternative education programs provide educational options for students who are experiencing difficulty in the traditional education system. Alternative education is designed for students in kindergarten through 21 years of age who are at risk of educational failure and meet one of the criteria defined in statute. ^a Students can attend an alternative education program in another school district while remaining enrolled in their original public school. In fiscal year 2009, about 150,000 students attended an alternative education program.
Charter Schools	Charter schools are independent public schools that operate outside of the traditional school district structure. They do not charge tuition, and there are no admission requirements to enroll students in charter schools. In fiscal year 2009, more than 30,000 students enrolled in 153 charter schools in Minnesota.
Magnet Schools	Magnet schools are public schools that offer programs with a particular curricular emphasis or theme. Enrollment in magnet schools is often not confined to school district boundaries. In fiscal year 2009, there were more than 100 magnet schools in 22 school districts.
Online Learning	Online learning public school programs are sponsored by independent school districts, intermediate school districts, charter schools, and consortia of public schools. Students can take online instruction from a state-approved program in another school district while remaining enrolled in their original public school. In fiscal year 2009, 21 online learning providers served more than 8,000 students.
Open Enrollment	Open enrollment allows Minnesota public school students to apply to attend public schools outside the school district in which they reside. Almost 52,000 Minnesota students participated in open enrollment in fiscal year 2009.
Postsecondary Enrollment Options	Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) allow students in their junior or senior year to earn college credit while in high school. Each college and/or university that offers PSEO sets its own requirements for enrollment in the program. Students may take PSEO courses on a full- or part-time basis. In fiscal year 2009, more than 8,000 students participated in PSEO.
The Choice is Yours	The Choice is Yours allows students who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch and live in Minneapolis to enroll in selected suburban districts. The state of Minnesota provides transportation to the suburban schools. In fiscal year 2009, more than 2,000 students participated in The Choice is Yours.

^a [Minnesota Statutes](#) 2009, 124D.68, subd. 2.

Students must meet at least 1 of 12 eligibility criteria to attend an alternative education program.

Two key differences separate alternative education programs from other public school choice options. First, alternative education programs are often a choice provided *within* a student's resident school district. Many of the choice programs listed in Table 1.1 are choices for students that are outside of students' resident districts (for example, charter schools, open enrollment, PSEO, and The Choice is Yours). Second, unlike most other public school choice options, students must meet eligibility criteria to enroll in an alternative education program.⁴ To attend an alternative education program, students must meet at least 1 of 12 criteria outlined in statute, as shown in Table 1.2.⁵ Regardless of which of the 12 criteria students meet, the overarching purpose of alternative education programs is to help students who are not succeeding in the traditional schools.

Table 1.2: Student Eligibility Criteria for Attending an Alternative Education Program

The student:

- performs substantially below the performance level for pupils of the same age in a locally determined achievement test;
- is behind in satisfactorily completing coursework or obtaining credits for graduation;
- is pregnant or is a parent;
- has been assessed as chemically dependent;
- has been excluded or expelled;
- has been referred by a school district for enrollment;
- is a victim of physical or sexual abuse;
- has experienced mental health problems;
- has experienced homelessness sometime within six months before requesting a transfer to an alternative education program;
- speaks English as a second language or has limited English proficiency;
- has withdrawn from school or has been chronically truant; or
- is being treated in a hospital in the seven-county metropolitan area for cancer or other life-threatening illness or is the sibling of an eligible pupil who is being currently treated, and resides with the pupil's family at least 60 miles beyond the outside boundary of the seven-county metropolitan area.

NOTE: To enroll in an alternative education program, a student must meet at least one of the criteria listed above.

SOURCE: [Minnesota Statutes](#) 2009, 124D.68, subd. 2.

School districts provide many services to students at risk of falling behind; alternative education is just one approach. Other interventions include tutoring

⁴ Students must also meet eligibility criteria to participate in The Choice is Yours (eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and live in Minneapolis) and PSEO (eligibility criteria are established by each participating college and university that offers PSEO).

⁵ [Minnesota Statutes](#) 2009, 124D.68, subd. 2.

programs, smaller class sizes, after-school programs, and providing information about other school choice options.

Alternative Education in Other States

Based on a review of the national literature, we determined that:

- **Minnesota’s alternative education programs differ from those in most other states.**

The national literature suggests that Minnesota is one of a few states where students can choose whether to participate in an alternative education program. In most other states, alternative education enrollment criteria are “placement oriented and disciplinary in nature.”⁶

In fact, the national literature we reviewed did not discuss alternative education in the spectrum of public school choice—largely, it seems, because many states use alternative education programs as student *placements*, where students are required to enroll, rather than as an education *option*. In Tennessee, for instance, alternative education schools “provide educational opportunities for students suspended or expelled from regular schools, and in some instances for students who request alternative placement.”⁷ In Pennsylvania, an alternative education program “...removes disruptive students from regular school programs in order to provide those students with a sound educational course of study and counseling designed to modify disruptive behavior and return the students to a regular school curriculum.”⁸ Virginia assigns students to regional alternative education programs because they have been suspended, held in juvenile detention centers, or are “otherwise identified by school divisions” as needing an alternative to regular schools.⁹

In 2001, the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveyed more than 1,500 school districts nationwide regarding their use of alternative education schools and programs. In a 2002 report presenting the survey results, NCES limited its discussion to reasons students might be placed in or transferred to alternative education programs, rather than why students might *choose* to enroll in an alternative education program. According to NCES,

Students are removed from regular school...for a variety of reasons. Some are removed for disruptive behavior, such as possession of weapons, fighting, disruptive verbal behavior, criminal activity, or the use or distribution of alcohol or drugs.

In contrast to Minnesota, students in most other states do not choose whether to attend an alternative education program.

⁶ Camilla A. Lehr, Eric J. Lanners, and Cheryl M. Lange, *Alternative Schools: Policy and Legislation Across the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 16.

⁷ Russell Moore and Jessica King, *Tennessee’s Alternative Schools* (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Education Accountability, 2005), i.

⁸ *Pennsylvania School Code*, art. XIX-C, act 30.

⁹ Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Education, *Regional Alternative Education Programs* (Richmond, VA, 2007), 7.

Others are removed for other reasons that put them at risk of education failure, such as chronic truancy, continual academic failure, teen pregnancy/parenthood, or mental health problems.¹⁰

NCES's description of students' removal from regular schools and transfer to alternative education programs suggests that alternative education programs throughout much of the nation are punitive placements rather than choices for students and their families, as is the model in Minnesota.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY IN MINNESOTA

The Minnesota Legislature first established alternative education programs in 1987 to serve high school students struggling in traditional schools.

Alternative education programs in Minnesota were first established by the Legislature in 1987 to serve high school students struggling in traditional schools. The 1987 law allowed school districts to establish “area learning centers” or work with “contract alternatives.” The law did not explicitly identify “alternative learning programs,” a third type of alternative education school, until 2009 when the Legislature made a number of changes to the alternative education statutes.¹¹ (These alternative education schools are defined and further discussed in the following section.)

The 1987 Legislature also established the High School Graduation Incentives Program (HSGIP). Initially, the purpose of the HSGIP law was to:

Provide incentives for and encourage all Minnesota students who have experienced or are experiencing difficulty in the traditional education system to enroll in alternative programs in order to complete their high school education.¹²

Over time, the purpose of the HSGIP has changed. The current law simply states the purpose is to encourage students who “have experienced... difficulty in the traditional education system to enroll in alternative programs.”¹³ The explicit purpose of having students complete their high school education has been removed.

The 1987 law establishing alternative education programs and the 1987 HSGIP law collectively outlined the eligibility criteria for enrolling in an alternative education program. Initially, the alternative education law identified eligible students as:

Secondary pupils..., who are chemically dependent, not likely to graduate from high school, need assistance in vocational and

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students at Risk of Education Failure: 2000-01* (Washington, D.C., 2002), 17.

¹¹ Although alternative learning programs were not identified in law until 2009, they have been in existence for more than ten years.

¹² *Laws of Minnesota* 1987, chapter 398, art. 8, sec. 15.

¹³ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.68, subd. 1.

Over time, alternative education programs have expanded to also serve elementary and middle school students. Services range from full-time schools to after-school programs.

basic skills, can benefit from employment experiences, and need assistance in transition from school to employment.¹⁴

The HSGIP law provided additional eligibility criteria, specifying that students who were at least two grade levels behind their peers on a test or one year behind in obtaining credits for graduation, were pregnant or parents, had excessive absences, or who had been assessed as chemically dependent were eligible to attend an alternative education program. Over time, the Legislature has amended the alternative education eligibility requirements to their current form as listed in Table 1.2, effectively broadening them to include more potential students.

Although the alternative education law initially focused on secondary school students (middle and high school students), over time it has expanded to include elementary school students. In 1988, the Legislature amended the alternative education law to give priority to students between the ages of 16 and 21, although any eligible secondary school student could attend.¹⁵ The Legislature amended the law again in 1990 to allow elementary school students “at risk of not succeeding in school” to participate in alternative education programs.¹⁶

As the Legislature expanded the eligibility criteria for alternative education, the types of programs offered also expanded. Initially, alternative education programs were center-based schools focused on serving high school students. Now, alternative education programs range from full-time schools to extended-time programs, such as summer school and after-school programs.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN MINNESOTA

Alternative education programs vary significantly. In this section we discuss the three kinds of schools that provide alternative education. We then present an overview of the two different types of programs—“regular day” and “extended time”—that alternative education schools in Minnesota provide.

Schools Providing Alternative Education

Three kinds of schools provide alternative education programs in Minnesota: (1) area learning centers (ALCs), (2) alternative learning programs (ALPs), and

¹⁴ Additionally, “dislocated homemakers and workers and others who need basic educational and social services” were eligible to attend an area learning center. *Laws of Minnesota* 1987, chapter 398, art. 8, sec. 35, subd. 2.

¹⁵ *Laws of Minnesota* 1988, chapter 718, art. 6, sec. 15.

¹⁶ *Laws of Minnesota* 1990, chapter 562, art. 4, sec. 4, subd. 2(e).

(3) contract alternatives.¹⁷ We describe each kind of school below and summarize some of their similarities and differences in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Characteristics of Alternative Education Programs

Alternative education is provided by area learning centers (ALCs), alternative learning programs (ALPs), and contract alternatives.

	Area Learning Centers	Alternative Learning Programs	Contract Alternatives
Number of sites (fiscal year 2010)	252	54	18
Grades served	K-12	K-12 ^a	K-12
Public school	Yes	Yes	No
Must collaborate with other school districts	Yes ^b	No, Optional	Not Applicable
Percentage of general education funding allocated to program	90%	90%	95%
Must offer a middle-school program	Yes	No, Optional	Yes
Must offer programming for the entire year	Yes	No, Optional	Yes
<u>Regular-Day Programs</u>			
Serve students enrolled full time	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can offer independent study	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Extended-Time Programs</u>			
May provide targeted services ^c	Yes	No	Yes
May provide credit recovery programs ^d	Yes	Yes	Yes

^a As outlined in *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.05, subd. 1, alternative learning programs (ALPs) may serve students in any grade. However, as of 2009, ALPs only served students in grades 6 through 12.

^b Area learning centers must serve the geographic area of at least two school districts, except for those centers located in a city of the first class. *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.05, subd. 1.

^c Targeted services are extended-time programs, such as summer school or after-school programs, for students in kindergarten through eighth grade who meet the graduation incentives criteria of being “at risk” of not graduating from high school. Contract alternatives may only provide targeted services in school districts that have an area learning center. The Minnesota Department of Education does not permit alternative learning programs to provide targeted services.

^d Credit recovery programs are extended-time programs, such as summer school or after-school programs, that provide opportunities for students in grades 9 through 12 to make up failed course credits.

SOURCES: Minnesota Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education, *State Approved Alternative Programs Handbook, Revised Summer 2009* (Roseville, 2009); and *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, subds. 123A.05-123A.09.

¹⁷ ALCs, ALPs, and contract alternatives are schools in the traditional sense when they provide regular-day alternative education programs. For targeted services (a type of extended-time program discussed later in this chapter), alternative education schools serve largely an administrative function. Targeted services programming is typically delivered in school districts’ traditional elementary and middle school buildings.

Area Learning Centers. ALCs are operated by independent school districts, intermediate school districts, or school district cooperatives. By law, ALCs must provide “comprehensive educational services” for both middle and high school students and are required to provide programs throughout the year.¹⁸ Except for ALCs in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth, ALCs must “serve the geographic area of at least two [school] districts.”¹⁹ Eligible students may enroll full or part time in an ALC; part-time students may be concurrently enrolled in another school. Students graduating from an ALC may receive a diploma either from the school district in which the ALC is located or from the student’s resident school district.²⁰ In the 2009-2010 school year, there were 252 ALC sites in Minnesota.²¹ ALCs are located throughout Minnesota, with the exception of the southwest corner and the north central part of the state.

Alternative Learning Programs. ALPs are typically operated by a school district. Unlike ALCs, ALPs can choose whether they serve students from other school districts or only students from their own district. In addition, ALPs can choose which grades they serve and are not required to provide a program for middle school students. ALPs can only grant diplomas from their school district. Often, ALPs that serve middle school students are structured as a “school within a school.” In these cases, students may attend the ALP for some classes and the traditional school for the remaining classes. In 2010, there were 54 ALP sites scattered across the state.

Contract Alternatives. Unlike ALCs and ALPs, contract alternatives are nonpublic, nonsectarian schools with which a school district contracts to provide services to eligible students. Contract alternatives can serve students in all grades. Contract alternatives differ from ALCs and ALPs in that they are nonpublic and run by private nonprofit organizations. As such, contract alternatives are governed by the board of a nonprofit organization and the contracting school board. In 2010, only the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts used contract alternatives to provide alternative education services; there were 18 contract alternatives serving these two districts.

Minnesota’s Alternative Education Programs

Minnesota has two distinct types of alternative education programs.

Two distinct types of alternative education programs exist in Minnesota. One type of program provides “regular-day” alternative education as a substitute for attending a traditional school. Students in kindergarten through grade 12 may attend a regular-day alternative education program, although most students enrolled in this type of program are in high school.²² The second type of program provides “extended-time” services, such as summer school or before- or after-school programs, for students in kindergarten through grade 12. Students participating in either type of alternative education program must meet at least 1

¹⁸ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.05, subd. 1, and 123A.06, subd. 2.

¹⁹ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.05, subd. 1.

²⁰ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.06, subd. 4.

²¹ Henceforth, the dates in this report are expressed in fiscal years, which correspond with school years. For example, 2010 is fiscal year 2010 and corresponds with the 2009-2010 school year.

²² We discuss enrollment trends further in Chapter 2.

of the 12 eligibility criteria outlined in Table 1.2. Though regular-day and extended-time programs offer different curricula and often serve different students, they are typically linked organizationally and administratively.

Regular-Day Alternative Education Programs

ALCs, ALPs, and contract alternatives all provide regular-day alternative education programs. Students who attend these programs may participate in “seat-based” or independent-study instruction. Seat-based instruction is similar to instruction in a traditional school where students attend classes on a regular schedule. However, students in the same class may be at different grade levels or may be studying different course work. Students 16 years of age or older may participate in independent study.²³ Students in independent-study programs have some face-to-face time with a teacher but the majority of the schoolwork is conducted by the students outside of school. Based on responses to our survey of alternative education program directors, half of Minnesota’s alternative education programs offer a mix of seat-based and independent-study programs.²⁴ Seventeen percent of the programs offer only independent study and 26 percent offer only seat-based instruction.

**“Regular-day”
programs
substitute for
attending a
traditional school.**

Regardless of the structure of the regular-day alternative education program (ALC, ALP, or contract alternative), we found that:

- **Regular-day alternative education programs differ from traditional schools and each other, in part depending on the characteristics of the students they serve.**

For example, schools that serve pregnant students or teen-aged parents may have an on-site daycare and provide parenting or prenatal classes. Schools that serve large numbers of students with limited English proficiency may adjust their curriculum to accommodate the needs of these students. Some alternative education programs do not have a specific focus but offer an alternative (through smaller classes or instruction presented in different ways) to the traditional education system. Based on responses to our survey of program directors, more than 30 percent of regular-day alternative education programs are located within or connected to a traditional school while 43 percent are in stand-alone sites.²⁵

Alternative education staff and students identified smaller classes as a key difference between their programs and traditional schools. More than 90 percent of program directors who responded to our questionnaire said their programs had smaller classes than nearby traditional schools, as shown in Table 1.4. Alternative education students also identified smaller class and/or school size as

²³ School districts may receive special approval to provide independent-study instruction to students who are less than 16 years of age.

²⁴ We received responses from 160 alternative education programs, a 70-percent response rate.

²⁵ Other programs are co-located with a business, nonprofit organization, university, or have other arrangements.

Table 1.4: Differences between Alternative Education Programs and Traditional Schools, Identified by Alternative Education Program Directors

	Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Identified as a Difference
Smaller class sizes	91%
Students develop relationships with teachers	85
Adapted/differentiated curriculum	84
Smaller school	73
Students have the option to complete coursework through independent study	63
Students complete required coursework at their own pace	59
Specialized programs (e.g., pregnancy, parenting, or chemical dependency classes)	39
Other	19

NOTES: The question asked: "How does your alternative education program differ from nearby traditional schools (select all that apply)?" "Other" includes different grading periods; classes taught in multiple languages; and hands-on, "experiential," learning. We received responses from 70 percent of alternative education programs.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Alternative Education Program Director Survey, 2009.

a difference between their school and the school(s) they had attended previously.²⁶ Students also identified one-on-one attention, more helpful teachers, an environment more conducive to learning, and easier coursework as differences between their alternative education and traditional schools.

Alternative education and traditional school staff also identified the relationship-building aspect of alternative education programs as an important difference from traditional schools. Staff we met with at several regular-day alternative education programs spoke about how the smaller school size made it possible for staff to develop stronger relationships with the students. Staff at one alternative education program said that the school works hard at building a sense of community and ensuring that each student connects with a staff person. Staff at two regular-day programs we visited cited strong advisory systems for the students who attend their school. In one of these programs, every student is placed on a grade-level team with two or three teachers and a mental health professional. These teams review each student's progress and make sure the student is moving forward academically. A superintendent in another school district said that students are more likely to have a relationship with a caring adult at the ALC, and that it is harder for a student to "get lost in the shuffle" in an alternative education program, as compared with a traditional school.

²⁶ We surveyed all high school students who attended a regular-day alternative education program at least half time. We asked program directors to provide 20 minutes and internet access to allow these students to complete our online questionnaire. We conducted the survey from September 23, 2009, through October 9, 2009; we received responses from 2,847 students.

Staff also commented that students in alternative education programs can complete coursework at their own pace. For example, staff from one school district said that if a student missed several days at the traditional school, the student might jeopardize the credits he or she would have earned that quarter. In contrast, if the student missed a few days at the ALC, the student could simply pick up where he or she had left off upon returning to class. Staff noted that students may not earn credits as quickly as in a traditional school, but they will not necessarily lose a whole quarter due to absenteeism. Staff from another ALC said the curriculum is tailored to the individual student and students are given one-on-one support as they work through the material. The director from another alternative education program said that because their students have different learning styles, staff present the curriculum in several different ways. He said, for example, that students read the material, have the material read to them, are given presentations on the material, and have other students explain the material.

Extended-Time Alternative Education Programs

“Extended-time” programs are supplementary programs that take place before or after school, on the weekends, or during the summer.

In addition to providing regular-day alternative education, ALCs, ALPs, and contract alternatives can also provide supplemental, extended-time services. There are two primary types of extended-time programs—targeted services and credit recovery—each of which is further discussed below.

Targeted Services. Targeted services are supplemental programs for students in kindergarten through eighth grade who meet the eligibility criteria outlined in Table 1.2. Targeted services include extended-year or extended-day programming, such as summer school or after-school programs, and are not a substitute for a traditional school. Currently, MDE allows only ALCs to provide targeted services.²⁷ Targeted services are not stand-alone programs; they must be associated with an approved ALC program. However, the students served through targeted services are typically distinct from those served through the ALC’s regular-day program. Targeted services students are in kindergarten through eighth grade; most regular-day ALC students are in grades 11 and 12.

Targeted services can take many forms, depending on the school district and students’ needs. Typically, the services are provided in the elementary or middle school the students attend, not at the ALC. Students may participate in targeted services after school, on the weekends, during the summer, or any other time outside of the regular school day. In one school district we visited, targeted services are offered to middle school students twice each week during the school year and four hours each day for 25 days during the summer. This same district provides targeted services for its elementary students before and after school during the school year and during the summer. Targeted services must be provided by licensed teachers, although they are typically not provided by the teachers from the ALC.

Targeted services are often focused on developing students’ math and reading skills, but the services should address the broad needs of students. According to

²⁷ Contract alternatives may also provide targeted services if the school district that has an agreement with the contract alternative has an approved ALC. We discuss MDE’s restrictions on which schools may provide targeted services in Chapter 4.

“Targeted services” (grades K-8) and “credit recovery” (grades 9-12) are extended-time programs.

MDE, the intent of targeted services is not simply to be a remediation program. Because targeted services are for students who are struggling in the traditional education setting, MDE emphasizes that targeted services should be different from what happens during the traditional school day. MDE encourages school districts to provide hands-on and project-based learning activities in their targeted services programs.

Credit Recovery. Credit recovery programs are similar to targeted services in that they take place outside of the school day or during the summer. In contrast to targeted services, credit recovery programs are more focused on helping students with specific courses. Credit recovery enables students in grades 9 through 12 to make up failed course credits needed for graduation. Credit recovery programs may at times serve as an “intervention” to help students make progress and remain in the traditional education system.

Targeted services and credit recovery programs are often called “extended-time programs” because they take place beyond the typical school day. In this report, we use the term “extended-time programs” to refer collectively to targeted services and credit recovery programs. We refer to alternative education used to replace at least some of a student’s regular school day as “regular-day” alternative education.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION FUNDING

For the most part, funding for regular-day alternative education programs is simply a redirection of money the state has already allocated to public schools. The state provides school districts with a legally prescribed amount of funding per pupil whether a student attends a regular-day alternative education program or goes to school in a more traditional setting. School districts offering alternative education receive *additional* funding only when students attend extended-time programs, such as targeted services or credit recovery programs.

We examined how much revenue the state allocates to alternative education programs and how this has changed over time. Based on our analysis, we found that:

- **Once adjusted for inflation, the total amount of revenue allocated to alternative education programs has decreased since fiscal year 2001; however, total revenue allocated to targeted services increased significantly during this time period.**

In the following sections we first outline how alternative education is funded and how the funding formula has changed since 2001. Next, we discuss trends in revenue for alternative education in general. Finally, we evaluate revenue trends for specific types of alternative education programs and services.

Alternative Education Funding Formula

State funds are allocated to school districts based in part on student enrollment or “average daily membership” (ADM). Typically, each full-time student counts as

School districts receive additional funding when students attend extended-time programs.

1.0 ADM. Prior to 2004, students could be counted as more than 1.0 ADM if they attended a “learning-year program,” such as summer school or extended-day programming.²⁸ In these cases, school districts received additional funding based on the hours of additional service these students received.

The 2003 Legislature limited the amount of a student’s ADM to 1.0 but added a new funding component called “extended-time” revenue. Under this new revenue stream, a learning-year program can receive extended-time revenue based on up to an additional 0.2 ADM for the time a student attends extended-time programming, such as summer school or after-school programs.²⁹ All alternative education programs must be learning-year programs and are therefore eligible for extended-time revenue.

By law, school districts must allocate to ALCs and ALPs at least 90 percent of the district’s average general education revenue per pupil unit for each student attending the alternative education site.³⁰ If a school district uses a contract alternative to provide alternative education programs, the school district must allocate to the contract alternative at least 95 percent of the district’s average general education revenue per pupil unit for the students attending the program.³¹

Total Alternative Education Revenue

Table 1.5 shows the amount of revenue the Legislature allocated to alternative education programs for fiscal years 2001 and 2005 through 2008. The table shows the revenue in both nominal dollars and adjusted for inflation (in 2008 dollars). As illustrated in the table, nominal alternative education revenue increased by 1.6 percent since 2001, from \$139 million to \$142 million. Once adjusted for inflation, however, alternative education revenue decreased by 16.5 percent over that same time period, from \$170 million (in 2008 dollars) to \$142 million. This decrease may be explained, in part, by the change in the funding formula described above. After 2003, school districts were limited in how much revenue each student could generate; this likely had a dampening effect on alternative education revenue. Although school districts were able to receive extended-time revenue in 2004 and later, each student could only generate 0.2 ADM for this purpose. Additionally, a lower funding amount (\$4,601 per pupil), rather than the current general education formula amount (\$5,124 per pupil), is used for calculating extended-time revenue.³²

In 2008, the Minnesota Legislature allocated almost \$142 million to alternative education programs.

²⁸ By law, learning-year programs must provide instruction throughout the year on an extended-year calendar, extended school-day calendar, or both. See *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.128, subd. 1.

²⁹ This change was effective in fiscal year 2004. The additional 0.2 ADM for extended-time services is currently funded at the basic formula allowance amount from 2005 (\$4,601). The 2009 basic formula allowance is \$5,124. See *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 126C.10, subds. 2 and 2a.

³⁰ Some adjustments to the general education revenue amount are made prior to allocating the funds to ALCs or ALPs. See *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 127A.47, subd. 7, and 126C.05, subd. 15(b).

³¹ Some adjustments to the general education revenue amount are made prior to allocating the funds to contract alternatives. See *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.69, subd. 1.

³² Adjusted for inflation, the funding rate for extended-time revenue (\$4,601) decreased 9.3 percent between 2005 and 2008.

Table 1.5: Alternative Education Revenue, Fiscal Years 2001, 2005 to 2008

(In millions)	2001	2005	2006	2007	2008	Percentage Change (2001-08)
Nominal dollars	\$139.4	\$134.8	\$140.1	\$146.1	\$141.6	1.6%
2008 dollars	169.5	148.6	149.7	151.7	141.6	-16.5

NOTE: Revenue includes limited English proficiency (LEP) revenue for all years, even though school districts were only required to allocate LEP funds to alternative education programs starting in fiscal year 2006.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education revenue data.

During this same time period, total state education revenue increased more than 9 percent, after adjusting for inflation. In 2001, Minnesota allocated approximately \$5.7 billion to K-12 education; in 2008, the state allocated \$7.6 billion to K-12 education.³³ During this time period, the proportion of total state K-12 education aid designated for alternative education declined from 2.5 percent to less than 2 percent.

Revenue by Alternative Education Program

As discussed earlier, three types of schools provide alternative education programs: (1) ALCs, (2) ALPs, and (3) contract alternatives. These schools provide regular-day alternative education as well as targeted services and credit recovery programs. Based on our review of MDE alternative education revenue data, we found that:

- **The amount of revenue allocated to targeted services has increased significantly over the past eight years while revenue for other alternative education programs has decreased.**

As illustrated in Table 1.6, revenue allocated to targeted services increased from \$22 million in 2001 to almost \$35 million in 2008, an increase of more than 58 percent.³⁴ About 16 percent of alternative education revenue in 2001 was allocated to targeted services; this grew to almost one-quarter of alternative education revenue in 2008. In contrast, the amount of revenue allocated to ALCs (for regular-day and credit recovery programs but not targeted services), ALPs, and contract alternatives decreased during this same time period. Specifically, ALC revenue decreased from almost \$93 million in 2001 to \$86 million in 2008, a decline of 7.5 percent, and ALP revenue decreased from \$9 million in 2001 to

Total revenue allocated to alternative education programs other than targeted services has decreased.

³³ In 2008 dollars, Minnesota allocated \$6.9 billion to K-12 education in 2001.

³⁴ Once adjusted for inflation, revenue allocated to targeted services increased by 30 percent during this time period.

Table 1.6: Alternative Education Revenue, by Program Type, Fiscal Years 2001, 2005 to 2008

(In millions)	2001	2005	2006	2007	2008	Percentage Change (2001-08)
Area Learning Centers ^a	\$ 92.9	\$ 80.7	\$ 85.6	\$ 89.9	\$ 86.0	-7.5%
Alternative Learning Programs	9.1	7.7	8.0	8.5	8.2	-9.5
Contract Alternatives	15.5	16.2	16.6	15.7	12.6	-18.4
Targeted Services	<u>22.0</u>	<u>30.3</u>	<u>30.0</u>	<u>32.0</u>	<u>34.8</u>	58.2
Total	\$139.4	\$134.8	\$140.2	\$146.1	\$141.6	1.6%

Revenue trends for alternative education parallel enrollment in these programs.

NOTES: Revenue is presented in nominal dollars. Revenue includes limited English proficiency (LEP) revenue for all years, even though school districts were only required to allocate LEP funds to alternative education programs starting in fiscal year 2006.

^a ALC revenue is for regular-day and credit-recovery programs only.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education revenue data.

about \$8 million in 2008, a decline of 9.5 percent. During this same time period, the amount of revenue allocated to contract alternatives decreased more than 18 percent, from \$16 million to \$13 million.³⁵ These revenue trends parallel the enrollment trends for these programs, which are further discussed in Chapter 2.

³⁵ Once adjusted for inflation, the declines were larger: ALC revenue (for regular-day and credit recovery programs) decreased by 24 percent, ALP revenue decreased by 26 percent, and contract alternative revenue decreased by 33 percent between 2001 and 2008.

Alternative Education Students

In their first year, alternative education programs served about 4,000 students. More than 20 years later, in 2009, about 150,000 students were enrolled in alternative education programs. These students vary in the extent to which they participated in alternative education. Some students only enrolled in summer school or other extended-time programs, while others attended alternative education programs for all or part of the regular school day. In this chapter, we discuss (1) the number of students enrolled in the various types of alternative education programs, (2) the demographic characteristics of the alternative education student population, and (3) mobility rates among alternative education students.

STUDENT ENROLLMENT

We analyzed the enrollment trends of alternative education students between 2003 and 2009 and found that:

- **About 17 percent (150,000) of Minnesota’s K-12 public school students enroll in alternative education programs each year. In 2009, 75 percent of these students participated only in “extended-time” programs, such as summer school or after-school programs.**

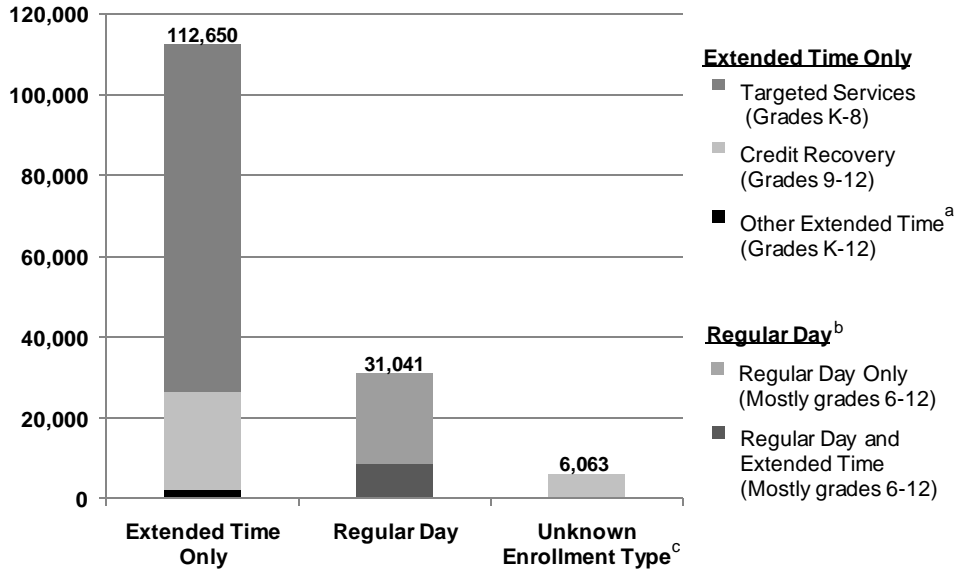
In 2009, nearly 150,000 students enrolled in alternative education programs.

As discussed in Chapter 1, extended-time programs consist of targeted services and credit recovery programs. Targeted services serve students in kindergarten through eighth grade during the summer or before or after school. Targeted services are designed to supplement the traditional school day by providing an intervention for younger students before they fall further behind. Credit recovery programs are geared toward students in grades 9 through 12 who have failed courses or are behind in credit attainment. When participating in credit recovery programs, students attend the alternative education program only to make up work in a specific subject area.

Of the students enrolled in alternative education programs in 2009, 75 percent enrolled only in extended-time programs. This means that they attended a nonalternative program during the regular school day and participated in alternative education only outside the regular school day or year, such as before or after school or during the summer. As shown in Figure 2.1, in 2009, the majority of alternative education students were enrolled in targeted services. More than 86,000 students (57 percent of all alternative education students) participated in targeted services as their only alternative education enrollment. Students receiving targeted services accounted for 91 percent of all kindergarten through eighth-grade students enrolled in alternative education in 2009. More

Figure 2.1: Alternative Education Extended-Time and Regular-Day Student Enrollment, 2009

Seventy-five percent of students enrolled in alternative education participated only in extended-time programs.



NOTE: Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data.

^a “Other Extended Time” includes students who appeared to be enrolled in both targeted services and credit recovery during the course of the school year, as well as cases in which we were unable to determine the nature of the extended-time program.

^b Only a very small number of students in kindergarten through fifth grade attended alternative programs during the regular school day; these students typically attended contract alternative schools.

^c About 6,000 students had enrollment records with no indication of whether the enrollment took place in regular-day or extended-time programs.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

than 24,000 students (16 percent) participated only in credit recovery. The ninth-through twelfth-grade students participating in credit recovery constituted 44 percent of the high school students enrolled in alternative education in 2009.

More than 31,000 students (21 percent of alternative education students) attended regular-day programs, meaning they attended alternative education as a substitute for at least a portion of their regular school day. Of these 31,000 students, roughly 22,000 attended only regular-day alternative education programs and the remainder were enrolled in both regular-day and extended-time programming.¹

¹ We identified students as extended-time or regular-day alternative education students using a combination of school classification and type of average daily membership (ADM) reported to the state. ADM is a measure of enrollment and the basis for general education revenue. Due to missing ADM information, we were unable to determine the program classification for about 6,000 students. We excluded these students from much of the analysis in this report.

Based on our analysis of student enrollment data and conversations with a national researcher, we found that many students attend an alternative education program for only a few days. We were reluctant to identify these students as “alternative education” students in our analysis. As a result, we limited most of our analysis to students enrolled in a single alternative education program for at least 30 calendar days. Between 2003 and 2009, almost 80 percent of students who were in an alternative education program at some point during the year remained in a single alternative education program for at least 30 days.²

Program Types

Almost 27,000 students were enrolled in a regular-day alternative education program for at least 30 days in 2009.

As described in Chapter 1, three different kinds of schools provide alternative education: area learning centers (ALCs), alternative learning programs (ALPs), and contract alternatives. Each of the three types of alternative education programs offer middle and high school students the opportunity to attend during the regular school day, using alternative education as a substitute for all or part of their traditional education. Contract alternative schools also serve elementary students during the regular school day (though only very small numbers of kindergarten through fifth-grade students attended a regular-day alternative education program in 2009). When we limited our analysis to students who attended alternative education for at least 30 days, we found that almost 27,000 students attended a regular-day program in 2009. ALCs enrolled the largest number (more than 21,000) of these regular-day students.³ ALPs and contract alternatives generally served much smaller regular-day student populations—about 2,300 and 1,200 respectively in 2009. More than 1,200 students attended more than one type of regular-day alternative education program in 2009.

Some alternative education programs also offer extended-time services—targeted services for students in kindergarten through eighth grade and credit recovery for high school students. After limiting our analysis to students who attended an alternative education program for at least 30 days, we found that more than 87,000 students were enrolled only in extended-time programs. In 2009, the majority of these students (almost 68,000) participated in targeted services. Nearly 18,000 students attended an ALC to supplement their regular school through credit recovery, and more than 1,400 students attended an ALP for credit recovery extended-time programming.

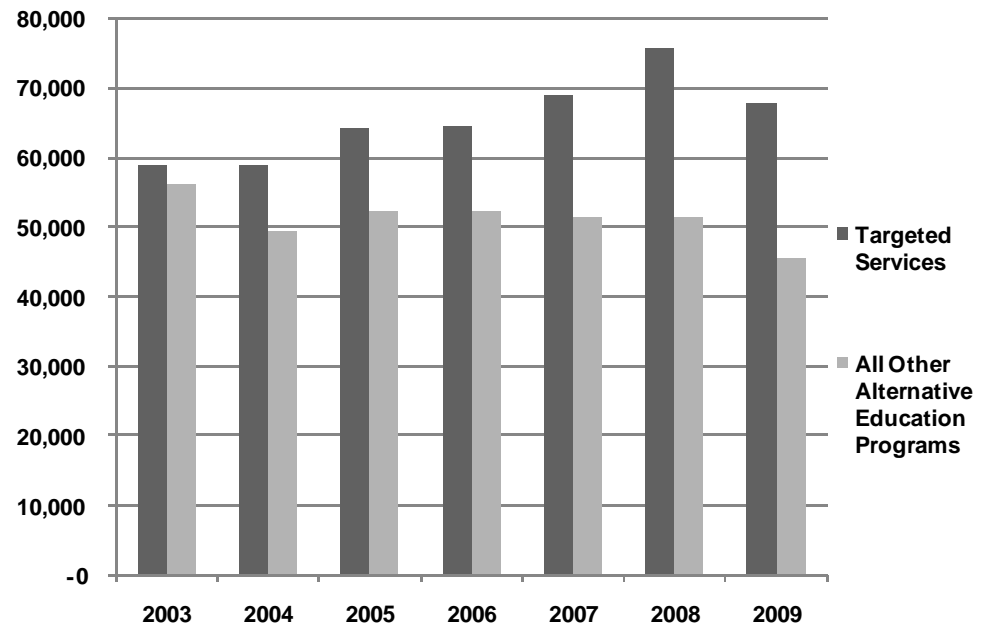
Not only is targeted services enrollment the largest of all the alternative education options, but it has grown over the past several years. In 2003, almost 59,000 targeted services participants accounted for just over half of alternative education students enrolled for at least 30 days. In 2009, almost 68,000 alternative education students participated in targeted services, representing 60

² Some of the students who did not have a 30-day stay in alternative education (almost 10,000 students per year, or 7 percent of the alternative education students) may have completed summer programs shorter than 30 days in duration. We assumed that a school had a short summer program if more than 90 percent of its summer-time records lasted fewer than 30 days. While these students may have completed an entire summer program, we were unable to verify program durations. Therefore, we excluded all students with enrollments less than 30 days.

³ Due to limitations of the student enrollment data, our tabulation may overstate the number of regular-day alternative education students and understate the number of credit recovery students.

percent of those enrolled in alternative education programs. Figure 2.2 shows the growth of targeted services and the gradual decline in the enrollment of other alternative education programs between 2003 and 2009.⁴

Figure 2.2: Student Enrollment in Targeted Services, 2003 to 2009



NOTES: The data above reflect only students who remained in alternative education for at least 30 days. Student enrollment data for 2009 is preliminary.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

Enrollment Types

Students can attend alternative education programs through a variety of enrollment arrangements and instructional methods. Enrollment arrangements include dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and part- or full-time enrollment in an alternative education program. Additionally, alternative education students who are at least 16 years old may have the option to participate in independent study.⁵

The term “dual enrollment” refers to a student who is enrolled full time in a traditional school and enrolled in an alternative education program outside of the traditional school’s normal instructional day (either before or after school or

⁴ Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data.

⁵ School districts may receive special approval to provide independent-study instruction to students who are less than 16 years of age.

during the summer).⁶ The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) classifies students receiving targeted services as dual enrolled. For the purposes of our analysis, credit recovery students were also considered dual enrolled if they attended traditional school full time during the regular school day. In 2009, more than 80,000 students were dual enrolled in traditional schools and alternative education programs.⁷

The term “concurrent enrollment” refers to a student who is enrolled less than full time in a traditional school and who is also enrolled in an alternative education program. The student could receive instruction at the alternative education program either during or outside of the traditional school’s normal instructional hours. Concurrent enrollment encompasses a wide range of alternative education participation options. A student could spend most of his or her day at the traditional school and only attend the alternative education program for one class. Alternatively, a student could take most of his or her classes at the alternative education program and attend a traditional school for a single class (for instance, an elective that is not available at the alternative education program). In 2009, more than 3,000 students were concurrently enrolled in traditional schools and alternative education programs.

The number of students who attend alternative education programs full time is relatively small.

Some students choose to attend an alternative education program full time. In many school districts, the alternative education programs parallel the traditional system, allowing students who do not wish to return to the traditional system the opportunity to attend full time and meet all of their graduation requirements in the alternative education program. The number of students who attend alternative education programs full time is relatively small (fewer than 4,000 in 2009).⁸ Of these, less than 2,000 attended a single alternative education program full time and for the whole year; the others attended more than one alternative education program during the school year.

A final enrollment option is for a student to enroll less than full time in a regular-day alternative education program and to *not* be concurrently enrolled in a traditional school. Some alternative education students choose to attend school part time due to their work schedules or other obligations. More than 8,500 students in 2009 were enrolled part time in alternative education without being concurrently enrolled in a traditional school.

Students at least 16 years of age who are enrolled in alternative education may have the option to participate in independent study.⁹ During independent study, the majority of the coursework occurs outside of the traditional classroom. In 2009, roughly 7,000 alternative education students enrolled in at least one

⁶ The term “traditional school” refers to standard elementary, middle, junior high, or senior high schools, as well as charter schools. It also includes special education, correctional, or care and treatment programs that are not classified as state-approved alternative education programs.

⁷ The data presented in this section are restricted to students enrolled at least 30 days in alternative education.

⁸ We considered a student a full-time alternative education participant if he or she generated at least 0.95 regular ADM in one or more alternative education settings.

⁹ As noted previously, school districts may receive special approval to provide independent-study instruction to students who are less than 16 years of age.

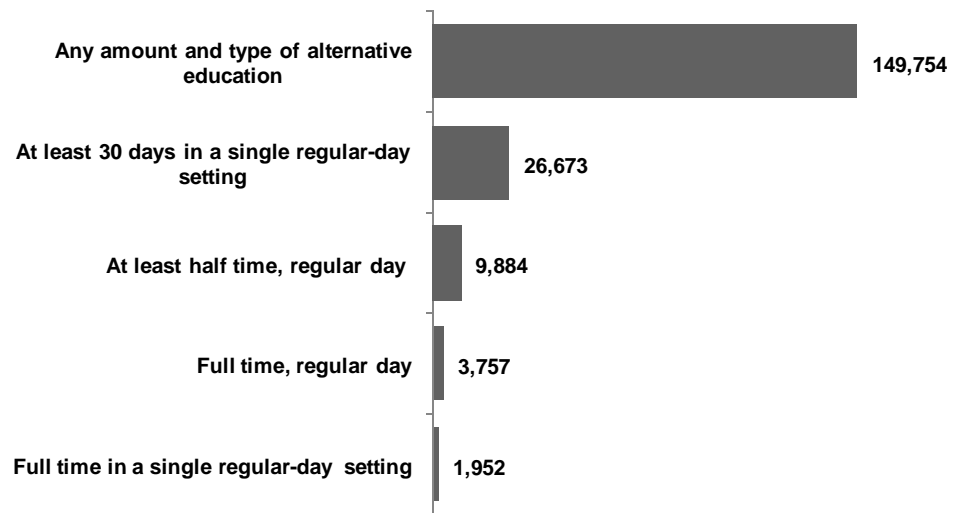
independent-study course. The remainder of the alternative education students were engaged solely in seat-based instruction, in which students are scheduled for specific classes and education is more teacher directed.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENTS

In much of the analysis that follows, we present data for different subgroups of alternative education students, including (1) students enrolled in any amount or type of alternative education, (2) students enrolled for at least 30 days in a regular-day alternative education program, (3) students enrolled at least half time in alternative education, (4) students enrolled full time in a combination of alternative education programs, and (5) students enrolled full time in a single alternative education program for the entire year.¹⁰ Figure 2.3 shows how many of the 150,000 alternative education students belong to each group. In this section we discuss the characteristics that make students eligible for alternative education programming, as well as how the various subgroups of the alternative education student population compare with traditional students demographically and in terms of age and grade distribution.¹¹

Figure 2.3: Alternative Education Student Enrollment, 2009

In 2009, fewer than 4,000 students enrolled full time in alternative education programs.



NOTES: The top bar is the total number of alternative education students in 2009, including students enrolled in any type of alternative education and for any length of time. Each of the subsequent bars represents a subset of the bar above it. Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

¹⁰ Half- and full-time alternative education students were enrolled in alternative education for at least 30 calendar days.

¹¹ The term “traditional students” in this chapter refers to students enrolled in “traditional schools” as defined in footnote 6.

Student Eligibility

Given that students must meet certain eligibility criteria (see Chapter 1, Table 1.2) in order to enroll in alternative education programs, we expected the alternative education population to be different from the population of traditional K-12 public school students in Minnesota. We surveyed alternative education program directors and asked them to estimate the number of students who met each of the eligibility criteria defined in law (a student could meet more than one criterion).¹² We found that:

- **Most alternative education programs serve large numbers of students who are behind academically.**

In response to our questionnaire, 48 percent of alternative education program directors indicated that “All” or “Most” of their students were eligible for alternative education because they had “performed substantially below the performance level for pupils of the same age in a locally determined achievement test.” In addition, 14 percent reported that about half of their students had performed substantially below grade level. Similarly, 45 percent of alternative education directors indicated that all or most of their students were “at least one year behind in satisfactorily completing coursework or obtaining credits for graduation.” More than 20 percent reported that about half of their students fell into this category. Overall, about 93 percent of the alternative education program directors reported that at least some of their students were meeting the low performance criterion; 94 percent indicated that at least some of their students were behind on coursework or credits.

While few alternative education program directors reported that all or most of their enrollees were either chemically dependent or pregnant or parenting students, 80 percent or more of the respondents said that at least some of their students fell into these categories. Similarly, 2 percent or fewer of the respondents reported that all or most of their students spoke English as a second language, had been excluded or expelled, or were victims of abuse. However, more than 60 percent of respondents reported enrolling at least some students in each of these categories. Even more respondents (almost 70 percent) reported having at least some students who had experienced homelessness within six months of enrolling in the alternative education program.

Student Demographics

We used student enrollment data to compare the demographic characteristics of alternative education students with students in traditional K-12 schools in Minnesota’s public education system. We found that:

Many students enrolled in alternative education programs are behind academically.

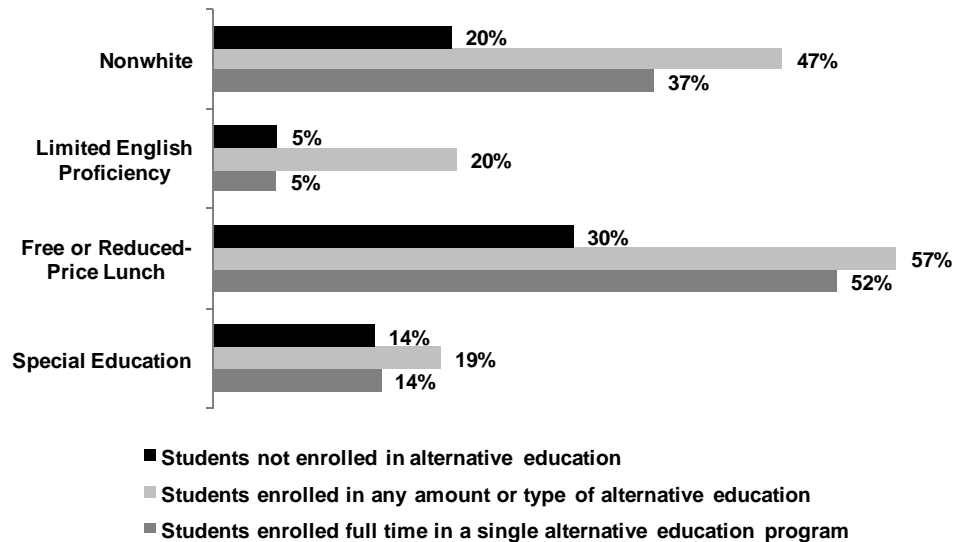
¹² We received responses from 160 alternative education programs, a 70-percent response rate.

- **Overall, the alternative education student population is demographically different from the population of traditional students. However, students who attended alternative education programs full time more closely resemble the traditional student population.**

On the whole, alternative education programs serve significantly larger percentages of nonwhite students, students with limited English proficiency, and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than traditional schools. Figure 2.4 shows the demographic characteristics for three student subgroups: traditional students (students not enrolled in alternative education), students enrolled in any amount or type of alternative education, and students enrolled full time in a single alternative education program.¹³ The figure shows that a much greater percentage of alternative education students were nonwhite than traditional students. In 2009, 20 percent of the traditional students in Minnesota were nonwhite. The total alternative education student population, in contrast, was nearly 50 percent nonwhite; 37 percent of students that attended a single alternative education program full time for the entire year were nonwhite.

Figure 2.4: Student Demographic Characteristics, 2009

Alternative education students are more likely than other students to be nonwhite and poor.



NOTES: Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data. The category “students enrolled full time in a single alternative education program” is a subgroup of the category “students enrolled in any amount or type of alternative education.”

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

¹³ The category “students enrolled in any amount or type of alternative education” includes all students enrolled in any type of alternative education for any length of time, including those enrolled for less than 30 days. The category “students enrolled full time in a single alternative education program” is a subgroup of the category “students enrolled in any amount or type of alternative education.”

In 2009, 57 percent of alternative education students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

In 2009, 5 percent of traditional students in Minnesota had limited English proficiency. In contrast, 20 percent of the total alternative education student population had limited English proficiency. This higher rate of limited English proficiency was heavily influenced by extended-time alternative education students. Almost one-quarter of targeted services students and about 17 percent of credit recovery students had limited English proficiency. On the other hand, the students who attended a single alternative education program full time for the entire school year had a limited English proficiency rate of only 5 percent, the same as that found among traditional students.

The most noteworthy difference between alternative education and traditional students is in eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (which is used as a poverty indicator). Among traditional students, 30 percent were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch in 2009. In contrast, 57 percent of the total alternative education student population was eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. As with the other demographic indicators, the poverty rates for students enrolled full time in a single alternative education program were somewhat lower than those for the total alternative education population. However, the proportion of full-time alternative education students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch was still more than 50 percent, considerably higher than the proportion observed in the traditional student population.

Several alternative education staff we interviewed believed that special education students are overrepresented in alternative education programs. However, our analysis of student enrollment data indicated that special education is the area in which alternative education students most closely resemble traditional students. In 2009, 14 percent of traditional students in Minnesota received special education services. The total alternative education population had a somewhat higher rate of special education students (19 percent), again resulting from high rates (20 percent) among the targeted services population. However, the percentage of students receiving special education services among those who attended a single alternative education program full time was 14 percent, the same as that found among traditional students.

Student Grade and Age Distributions

We analyzed student enrollment data in order to determine whether the grades and ages of students served by alternative education programs were distributed differently than in the traditional student population. In analyzing student grade level, we found that:

- **With the exception of targeted services programs, high school students are overrepresented in alternative education programs, with twelfth graders comprising the largest percentage of students.**

Traditional students were spread fairly evenly across the grade levels in 2009, with between 7 and 9 percent of the student population starting the year in each

grade between kindergarten and twelfth grade.¹⁴ As shown in Table 2.1, the distribution of elementary, middle school, and high school students is relatively similar for the traditional student population (shown as having no alternative education) and the total alternative education student population (consisting of students who had any amount or type of alternative education). This distribution, however, results from the large number of targeted services students enrolled in grades one through eight.¹⁵ On the other hand, 90 percent of the students who used alternative education as a substitute for part of their traditional school day were in high school.

Table 2.1: Student Grade Distribution by Type and Extent of Alternative Education, 2009

	Number of Students	Elementary (K-5)	Middle School (6-8)	High School (9-12)
No alternative education	701,816	45%	22%	33%
Any amount or type of alternative education	149,754	41	21	37
Targeted services	67,660	71	28	NA
Credit recovery	18,004	NA	NA	100
Regular-day alternative education	26,673	<1	10	90
At least half time in regular-day alternative education	9,884	1	7	92
Full time in regular-day alternative education	3,757	1	7	92
Full time in a single regular-day alternative education program	1,952	1	8	91

Most regular-day alternative education students were in high school.

NOTES: Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. With the exception of “No alternative education” and “Any amount or type of alternative education,” all subgroups include only students enrolled for at least 30 calendar days in a single alternative education setting. “NA” means not applicable and is used to indicate that a particular subgroup should not have students in a particular grade range. For instance, targeted services programs serve students in kindergarten through eighth grade; there should not be any high school students enrolled in targeted services. Similarly, credit recovery programs serve students in grades 9 through 12; there should not be any elementary or middle school students enrolled in credit recovery.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

¹⁴ In our analysis of student grade level, we used the student’s first recorded grade level during the 2008-2009 school year. If the student was only enrolled in Minnesota public schools during the summer, we used the first grade level recorded overall.

¹⁵ Less than 2 percent of alternative education students (either regular day or extended time) were in kindergarten, as compared with almost 9 percent of traditional students. There were some students in the middle grades (grades six through eight) who attended alternative education during the regular school day, but a much larger number were enrolled in targeted services. Only a handful of elementary students attended regular-day alternative education; most of these were in contract alternative schools.

When we looked more closely at grades 9 through 12, we found that the percentage of alternative education students enrolled increased with each grade level. For instance, less than 9 percent of the regular-day alternative education students were in ninth grade in 2009. About 14 percent of the students were in tenth grade and 20 percent were in eleventh grade. Twelfth-grade students comprised almost half of the regular-day alternative education students.

The alternative education student age distribution in 2009 was similar to the grade distribution discussed above. Traditional students were fairly evenly distributed between the ages of 5 and 17; much smaller percentages of students were 4 years old or older than 17.¹⁶ Students enrolled in targeted services were also fairly evenly distributed between the ages of 6 and 11; as expected, targeted services usage dropped off between the ages of 12 and 15. In 2009, 32 percent of traditional students were “high school age”—or started the school year between the ages of 14 and 17. A much larger percentage (64 percent) of regular-day alternative education students were between the ages of 14 and 17. This is not surprising given that regular-day alternative education students were concentrated in the upper grade levels.

In analyzing the number of older students enrolled in Minnesota public schools in 2009, we found that:

- **In 2009, alternative education programs served a disproportionately high number of students age 18 and older as compared with traditional schools.**

More than one-quarter of regular-day alternative education students started the 2008-2009 school year at age 18 or older.

According to Minnesota statutes, students through the age of 21 may attend a public school, including an alternative education program.¹⁷ In 2009, there were very few older students in the traditional system; only about 2 percent of students started the school year at age 18 or older. Regular-day alternative programs served a much higher percentage of older students. More than one-quarter of regular-day alternative education students started the 2008-2009 school year at age 18 or older; most of these older students were between the ages of 18 and 20.

STUDENT MOBILITY

In addition to analyzing alternative education student demographics, we also examined the extent to which alternative education students changed schools during the school year. To evaluate student mobility, we identified and counted instances in which a given student’s enrollment in one school ended and was followed by an enrollment record in a different school.¹⁸ We limited our analysis to students who started the 2008-2009 school year in grades 6 through 12,

¹⁶ In our analysis of student age, we used the student’s date of birth to calculate his or her age as of September 1, 2008, just before the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year.

¹⁷ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 120A.20, subd. 1, and *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.68, subd. 2.

¹⁸ Our method may underestimate mobility somewhat because it does not include changes in concurrent enrollments. We focused on cases in which a student underwent a complete change in school setting. In this section, we compare alternative education students to all students that did not attend alternative education as a substitute for part of their regular school day, including alternative education students who attended only extended-time programs.

because only a very small number of elementary students enrolled in regular-day alternative education. We found that:

- **Students enrolled in alternative education programs for at least some of their regular school day changed schools mid-year more often than students who did not attend alternative education programs during the regular school day.**

Table 2.2 shows a comparison between regular-day alternative education students and other students with respect to their number of school changes.¹⁹ In 2009, about 40 percent of regular-day alternative education students changed schools at least once during the school year, as compared with 4 percent of traditional students.²⁰

Table 2.2: Student Mobility, 2009

	Students Not Enrolled in Regular-Day Alternative Education	Students Enrolled in Regular-Day Alternative Education
No school changes	96%	60%
Changed schools once	3	28
Changed schools 2 to 4 times	1	11
Changed schools 5 or more times	<1	1

NOTES: The data above include all students enrolled in Minnesota’s K-12 public schools during the 2008-2009 school year. Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

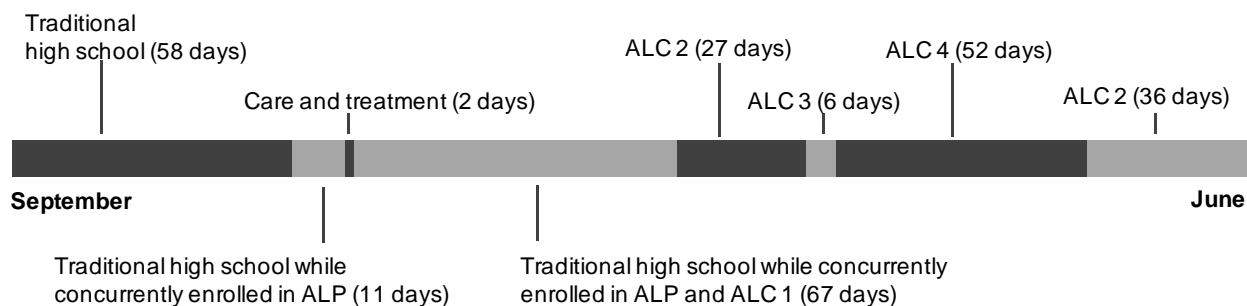
In 2009, 40 percent of regular-day alternative education students changed schools at least once.

More than one-quarter of regular-day alternative education students changed schools one time during the school year, as compared with about 3 percent of traditional students. Roughly 11 percent of regular-day alternative education students changed schools between two and four times and 1 percent changed schools five times or more. In contrast, only 1 percent of traditional students changed schools between two and four times and just 0.1 percent attended five or more schools. A handful of alternative education students changed schools as many as 11 times during the 2008-2009 school year. Figure 2.5 illustrates the path that one highly mobile alternative education student took through several different schools in 2009.

¹⁹ In this section, “regular-day alternative education students” refers to students who have any amount of regular ADM in an alternative setting and thus attended alternative education for at least some part of their regular school day. Since this section focuses on mobility, and we are specifically interested in the number of school changes, we *did not* restrict the regular-day alternative education student population to those with 30-day stays.

²⁰ It cannot be assumed that the remaining 60 percent of regular-day alternative education students attended the same school for the entire school year. Students could have dropped out or transferred to a school outside of the Minnesota public school system. Neither of these cases would have registered as a school change in our analysis.

Figure 2.5: Example of Alternative Education Student Mobility, 2009



NOTES: The above example is the 2009 enrollment history of a single alternative education student. All enrollments take place between September 2008 and June 2009. Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

Alternative education programs, on average, had much higher student mobility rates than traditional schools.

In addition to the student-level mobility data discussed above, we analyzed student mobility at the school level. MDE calculates school-level student mobility each year by dividing the total number of transfers throughout the school year (students who move into or out of a school between Labor Day and the end of the regular school year in June) by the school’s enrollment count on October 1 of that school year. Student transfers are counted over the entire school year; enrollment numbers are a snapshot of a single day. As such, a school could have a mobility rate of 100 percent or higher if the number of students who entered or left the school at any point during the year exceeded the number of students enrolled on October 1. The department’s data for the 2007-2008 school year reveal that alternative education programs (ALCs, ALPs, and contract alternative schools) had an average mobility rate of 180 percent.²¹ In contrast, traditional schools had an average mobility rate of 12 percent and charter schools had an average rate of 54 percent during this same time period.²²

²¹ In the mobility calculation, both the number of students entering or leaving the school and the students enrolled on October 1 take into account only regular-day students. Students beginning or ending extended-time programs do not figure into mobility as calculated by the department or our office.

²² In the school-level mobility analysis we used a narrower definition of “traditional schools.” We excluded charter schools (which are reported separately) as well as special education, correctional, and care and treatment programs, some of which are designed to provide short-term interventions rather than long-term enrollment options.

Alternative Education Student Performance

We used several different measures to evaluate student performance.

Evaluating the performance of any group of students is always challenging. Many factors affect students' success in school, and it is difficult for researchers to obtain data on all of the potential contributing variables. The challenge of measuring the performance of alternative education students is especially difficult because traditional performance measures (for example, performance on standardized tests) may not provide a complete picture of these students' academic growth.

To more fully assess the performance of alternative education students we used several different measures, including some that evaluate growth or changes over time. Specifically, we used the following performance measures in our analysis: (1) two standardized assessments—the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, Series II (MCA-II) and the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA's) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP); (2) attendance and graduation rates; and (3) student satisfaction, as measured by responses to a survey we conducted of all high school students who attended an alternative education school at least half time. The chapter begins with a general discussion of student performance measures.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

The national literature on alternative education suggests that alternative education programs are inherently different from traditional schools and should be evaluated using different measures. For example, in an overview of alternative education programs published by the Urban Institute, one researcher stated that accountability measures used in traditional schools "...may not be sufficient for alternative education," and that accountability measures should include "...interim measures and measures that track continuous 'added value.'"¹

In another review of alternative education programs, researchers Lange and Sletten wrote that the emphasis on academic outcomes puts alternative education programs in a difficult situation. While conceding that all academic programs have the ultimate goal of increasing students' academic skills, the authors argue that alternative education programs need to be successful in other areas before educational attainment becomes a possibility. They wrote, "To ignore nontraditional outcomes for alternative students may negate the positive outcomes that have emerged in the areas of increased satisfaction, self-esteem,

¹ Laudan Y. Aron, The Urban Institute, *An Overview of Alternative Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006), 18.

and connection to school—those outcomes that may ultimately keep a student in school.”²

Several states have used nontraditional measures to evaluate the performance of their alternative education students and programs. For example, California has established an accountability model designed specifically for alternative schools. The accountability model requires alternative schools to select 3 of a possible 14 pre-determined performance measures. These three indicators (which could include attendance, suspensions, and credits earned, among others) are used to hold local alternative education programs accountable.³ Similarly, the Standards and Assessment Committee of the Pennsylvania Department of Education issued a report saying that schools should use multiple measures and give pre- and post-assessments to measure the progress of an alternative education student.⁴ Several other states or school districts—including Georgia; Virginia; and the Portland, Oregon, School District—have used a combination of credits or grade promotion, attendance, student behavior, graduation, and other indicators to measure the performance of alternative education students.

Alternative education staff and others we spoke with frequently promoted the use of nontraditional and multiple measures to evaluate the performance of alternative education students. During our site visits, several staff spoke about the different performance measures they use in their schools, such as credits earned toward graduation, growth in attendance, and locally developed assessments. A superintendent who attended one of our roundtables commented that one should not use traditional measures in isolation to measure the performance of alternative education students. Several superintendents attending our roundtables said they use attendance and credit attainment as additional performance measures for alternative education students.

As part of our evaluation, we sent questionnaires to school district superintendents and alternative education program directors.⁵ Among other things, we asked both groups to rate the usefulness of different ways to measure the performance of students who attend alternative education programs. As shown in Table 3.1, around 90 percent of superintendents and program directors who responded to our surveys indicated that graduation is a “Useful” or “Very Useful” way to measure the performance of alternative education students. Both

Program directors and superintendents support the use of graduation, attendance, and growth on standardized tests to measure alternative education student performance.

² Cheryl M. Lange and Sandra J. Sletten, *Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis* (Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2002), 22.

³ California Legislative Analyst’s Office, *Improving Alternative Education in California* (Sacramento, CA, 2007), 21-25. The California Legislative Analyst’s Office found a number of problems with the accountability model, including the fact that most measures are self-reported by the schools. The report also notes that the ability of schools to choose their own performance indicators thwarts cross-school comparisons.

⁴ Pennsylvania Department of Education, *Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth: Recommended Parameters and Best Practices for Effective Programs, January 2005* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2005), 66, http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED500507&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED500507, accessed June 4, 2009.

⁵ We received responses from 75 percent of school districts and 70 percent of alternative education programs.

Table 3.1: Superintendents’ and Alternative Education Program Directors’ Ratings of Performance Measures for Alternative Education Students

	Useful or Very Useful		Somewhat Useful		Not Very Useful or Not at all Useful		Other ^a	
	Supt.	Director	Supt.	Director	Supt.	Director	Supt.	Director
Graduation	89%	91%	7%	5%	1%	1%	4%	3%
Attendance	74	75	16	18	6	6	4	1
Growth on standardized assessments	74	71	17	19	5	9	4	1
Proficiency on standardized assessments	62	37	24	37	8	19	6	8
Measures of self esteem	56	69	28	24	7	6	9	2
Enrollment in a post-secondary institution	55	51	25	29	15	14	5	6
Disciplinary actions	51	40	31	34	13	21	5	4
Measures of hope	49	78	27	17	6	1	17	4

NOTES: “Supt.” indicates Superintendents’ responses and “Director” indicates Program Directors’ responses. Survey question stated: “Please rate the usefulness of the following ways to measure the performance of alternative education students.” We received responses from 255 (75 percent) of school districts and 160 (70 percent) of alternative education programs. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

^a Other includes “Don’t Know” and blank responses.

SOURCES: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of School District Superintendent Survey, 2009, and Alternative Education Program Director Survey, 2009.

groups also supported attendance and growth on standardized assessments as useful measures. In addition, alternative education program directors identified measuring students’ hope for their futures as a useful performance measure.

Based on our research and data availability, we used the following measures to evaluate the performance of alternative education students: proficiency on the MCA-II tests, growth on the MCA-II and NWEA’s MAP assessments, attendance, graduation, and student satisfaction.⁶ We further discuss each of these measures below.

STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS

The MCA-II is Minnesota’s standardized test that measures students’ proficiency relative to the state’s math and reading standards. The MCA-II math and reading assessments are administered in grades 3 through 8; additionally, a reading assessment is administered in grade 10 and a math assessment is administered in grade 11. Using MCA-II assessment data collected by the Minnesota

⁶ We also obtained and analyzed student disciplinary data from the Minnesota Department of Education’s disciplinary incident reporting system. However, we determined that the data were not reliable enough to use in our final analysis.

Department of Education (MDE), we were able to evaluate the proficiency rates of alternative education students.

Measuring student achievement only on the basis of proficiency rates provides a limited view of student performance. For example, an eighth-grade student who reads at the sixth-grade level will likely do poorly on the eighth-grade MCA-II assessment. However, if that student had started the year at the fourth-grade level, he or she would have experienced significant academic growth. This type of growth is important, particularly when assessing alternative education students, but would not be reflected in the MCA-II proficiency rates for any one year. To evaluate the academic *growth* of alternative education students, we analyzed MAP assessment data from 2008 and 2009.⁷ We also evaluated student growth by analyzing students' MCA-II assessment data from 2006 to 2009.

To measure academic growth, we used two standardized tests (MCA-II and MAP) widely used in Minnesota schools.

The MAP and MCA-II tests have different advantages and disadvantages; taken together, they provide a more complete assessment of the academic progress made by Minnesota alternative education students. An advantage of the MCA-II test is that almost all Minnesota students in tested grades take the test. This helps ensure that test results are representative of Minnesota students, including alternative education students, and that the sampling error is small. In addition, the MCA-II is aligned with Minnesota's education standards, so that it measures achievement on curricula offered in Minnesota schools. In contrast, the MAP test is not used as widely in Minnesota schools and may not be as representative of Minnesota students. In addition, the MAP test uses national norms instead of Minnesota norms. While these national norms are based on test results from across the country, they may not be representative of students in the whole nation because many schools do not use the MAP test.⁸

An advantage of the MAP test is that it can more accurately measure the performance of students well below or well above grade level, an area in which the MCA-II test lacks precision. Since the MCA-II was designed to assess whether students have mastered grade-level concepts, it has few questions that can help distinguish how many grade levels a student is behind. This is a disadvantage for assessing academic progress made by students in alternative education because many perform well below grade level in reading and math. In contrast, the MAP test is a computer-administered "adaptive" test that measures students' achievement levels, irrespective of grade level. The MAP test adjusts the difficulty of questions depending on how the student answers previous questions. As a result, the MAP test can more accurately assess the performance level of students who are not at grade level.

Another advantage of the MAP test is that it was designed to measure growth in reading and math. In contrast, the MCA-II test was originally designed to

⁷ The MAP test is not required by the state; it is a test that individual school districts choose to administer. We contracted with NWEA to obtain MAP test data for all students who had attended an alternative education program in 2008 or 2009 and took the MAP test in reading or math.

⁸ To make the norm sample more representative of the nation's students, NWEA bases the norms on a sample of students taking the MAP test that matches the national student population on two characteristics: student racial-ethnic background and school poverty level. School poverty level is measured in terms of the percentage of the school's students who are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

measure academic proficiency rather than growth. Even with this limitation, we consider it useful to examine growth on the MCA-II test by comparing test performances on successive tests.

In the next section, we discuss student proficiency on the MCA-II. In the following section we discuss students' academic growth, as measured by both the MAP and MCA-II assessments.

Proficiency

Low proficiency rates among alternative education students are not surprising, given that poor academic performance is an eligibility criterion.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, one of the eligibility criteria for students to attend an alternative education setting is that they are academically behind their peers. Not surprisingly then, when we analyzed MCA-II test score data for alternative education students, we found that:

- **Students in alternative education programs had significantly lower rates of proficiency on the 2009 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, Series II (MCA-II) exam than students who attended traditional schools.**

As shown in Table 3.2, 37 percent of students who attended any form of alternative education for at least 30 days were “proficient” on the 2009 math MCA-II exam, as compared with 68 percent of students who did not attend an alternative education program that year.⁹ Similarly, 46 percent of alternative education students were proficient on the 2009 reading MCA-II exam, as compared with 77 percent of students who did not attend an alternative education program.

When we examined the test scores based on the type of alternative education program in which students were enrolled, we found that all types of alternative education students performed worse on the MCA-II assessments than traditional students.¹⁰ However, the gap was larger for students who attended an alternative education program as a substitute for at least some of their regular school day. Only 8 percent of students who attended a regular-day alternative education school were proficient on the 2009 math MCA-II assessment as compared with 47 percent of traditional high school students and 71 percent of traditional students in grades 3 through 8.¹¹ About 29 percent of students who attended regular-day alternative education programs were proficient on the 2009 reading MCA-II assessments as compared with 77 percent of traditional students. Table

⁹ All of the academic analysis of alternative education students presented in this chapter is limited to students who enrolled in a single alternative education program for at least 30 calendar days. MDE defines proficient as meeting or exceeding state-determined standards for math or reading on the MCA-II assessments.

¹⁰ The term “traditional students” in this chapter refers to students who were not enrolled in any alternative education program during the year in question. This includes students that attended standard elementary, middle, junior high, or senior high schools, as well as charter school students. It also includes a small number of students in special education, correctional, or care and treatment programs that are not classified as state-approved alternative education programs.

¹¹ In 2009, about 62 percent of regular-day alternative education students who took the math MCA-II test were in high school.

Table 3.2: Proficiency Levels of Minnesota Students on the MCA-II, 2009

	Percentage of Students Proficient in Math and Reading on the MCA-II Tests, Spring 2009:			
	Math		Reading	
	Number of Students	Percentage Proficient	Number of Students	Percentage Proficient
No alternative education				
Grades 3-8, 10, 11	345,772	68%	348,052	77%
At least one 30-day stay in any alternative education				
Grades 3-8, 10, 11	58,573	37	56,449	46
Subgroups of students with no alternative education				
Grades 3-8	293,496	71	292,852	77
Grades 10-11	52,276	47	55,200	79
Subgroups of students with at least one 30-day stay in alternative education				
Targeted services only (Grades 3-8)	45,980	43	45,827	48
Credit recovery only (Grades 10-11)	5,115	15	4,191	49
Regular-day alternative education	5,986	8	4,940	29
Half-time alternative education	2,495	5	1,732	29
Full-time alternative education	1,053	5	673	30
Full time in a single alternative education program	598	7	416	34

NOTE: The Minnesota Department of Education defines proficient as meeting or exceeding state-determined standards for reading or math on the MCA-II exams.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education MCA-II data.

3.2 also shows that students who attended a single alternative education program full time in place of a traditional school also had lower rates of proficiency than traditional students.

The proficiency gap between alternative education and traditional students was smaller for targeted services students who, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, are in kindergarten through eighth grade.¹² The data presented in Table 3.2 show that 43 percent of students who participated in targeted services were proficient on the math assessment and 48 percent were proficient on the reading

¹² The term “targeted services students” in this chapter refers to students who were enrolled in a single targeted services alternative education program for at least 30 calendar days and were not enrolled in any other type of alternative education program for at least 30 calendar days.

assessment, 28 to 29 percentage points lower than the corresponding percentages for traditional students in grades three through eight (71 percent who were proficient in math and 77 percent who were proficient in reading). As shown above, the gap between traditional students and regular-day alternative education students was 39 percentage points or larger.

Growth

As noted earlier, many students attend alternative education programs because they have not been successful in school. That most of these students are not meeting proficiency standards is to be expected. Evaluating students' academic *growth*, however, may provide more insight regarding how well alternative education programs are serving students.

We compared students' growth on standardized assessments to three benchmarks: national norms, a matched comparison group, and other Minnesota students.

To assess academic growth on the MAP tests, we used two different benchmarks: national norms and matched comparison groups. For each Minnesota student tested, the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) used national norms to estimate expected growth for students in the same grade with the same starting score. NWEA provided another estimate of expected growth based on the average growth of a matched comparison group. For each student tested, NWEA selected a comparison group of up to 51 students from across the country with the same grade, fall test score, time between tests, location type (urban or rural), and school economic status (based on percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch).

We evaluated growth on the MCA-II by tracking the change over time in each student's relative standing with other Minnesota students in the same grade. For example, if a student in alternative education started off behind other students in the same grade, we classified the academic progress made by the student according to whether the student fell further behind, kept pace with, or became less far behind other students in Minnesota.¹³

Based on our analysis of growth measures for the MAP and MCA-II, we found that:

- **Students who received targeted services generally increased their MAP and MCA-II test scores more than expected. Other groups of alternative education students did not fare as well.**

¹³ We determined how much growth students made on the MCA-II tests between 2009 and the previous test taken. For students in grades four through eight, the previous test year is 2008. The previous test year is 2007 for tenth-grade students taking the 2009 reading test and 2006 for eleventh-grade students taking the 2009 math test. Students who kept pace with other students would be at the same number of standard deviations below or above the mean for both tests. We classified growth between two MCA-II tests as medium if the test scores (expressed as standard deviations above or below the mean, known as "z-scores") did not change by more than one-third of a standard deviation. We classified growth as low if the z-score declined by more than one-third of a standard deviation and as high if the z-score increased by more than one-third of a standard deviation.

The following sections discuss this finding in more detail. We first present the assessment results for targeted services and then follow with a discussion about how regular-day students performed on these assessments.¹⁴

Targeted Services

As discussed previously, targeted services are extended-time programs for students in kindergarten through grade eight. The programs typically take place before or after school or during the summer. Because this group of students is fairly distinct from those who attend an alternative education program during the day in place of a traditional school, we analyzed their assessment data separately. We found that:

- **Students who received targeted services generally increased their MAP and MCA-II math and reading scores more than other students.**

Students who received targeted services in 2009 exceeded all three benchmarks for math and two out of three for reading.

Targeted services students experienced increases in MAP and MCA-II test scores that exceeded expectations when compared with other students. As discussed above, we used three benchmarks to measure the progress made by alternative education students, two for the MAP test (one based on national norms and the other based on a matched comparison group) and one for the MCA-II test (based on other Minnesota students). Overall, we found that students who received targeted services during the 2009 school year made more gains than other students on all three benchmarks for math and two out of three benchmarks for reading. On the third benchmark for reading (the matched comparison group), the difference was slightly negative but was not statistically significant.¹⁵

Students participating in targeted services experienced more growth in their MAP math and reading scores than did the comparison group reflected in the national norms, as shown in Table 3.3. For example, students enrolled in targeted services in 2009 on average had an increase in their math MAP score of 11.8 units, compared with an expected increase of 9.5 units based on the national norms.¹⁶ The differences between Minnesota targeted services students and the national norms were statistically significant for both math and reading and for tests taken in 2008 and 2009.

When we compared the growth in targeted services students' MAP scores with a matched comparison group, the students who received targeted services outperformed the comparison group in math in both 2008 and 2009. In reading,

¹⁴ We did not include students who received alternative education only through credit recovery in our growth analysis. We had minimal MAP test data for these students, thus limiting the usefulness of the data.

¹⁵ Students receiving targeted services in 2008 had similar outcomes on the MAP test benchmarks except the one negative outcome for reading was statistically significant, though the difference was small.

¹⁶ NWEA uses the "Rasch Unit" (RIT) to report students' MAP test results.

Table 3.3: Growth on Northwest Education Association Tests (MAP) for Students Enrolled in Targeted Services Compared with Other Students, 2008 and 2009

	Number of Targeted Services Students Tested	Test Score Growth Between Fall and Spring:		
		Targeted Services Students	Comparison Group	Difference
Comparison with national norms^a				
2009				
Math	20,867	11.8	9.5	2.2*
Reading	20,915	10.1	8.9	1.2*
2008				
Math	20,412	10.9	9.1	1.8*
Reading	20,519	9.2	8.5	0.7*
Comparison with matched students^b				
2009				
Math	20,487	11.8	11.2	0.6*
Reading	20,551	10.1	10.3	-0.2
2008				
Math	20,070	10.9	10.2	0.7*
Reading	20,158	9.2	9.5	-0.3*

Generally, students who received targeted services had greater gains on the MAP exam than other students.

NOTES: This table shows growth on Northwest Evaluation Association’s (NWEA’s) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests in terms of Rasch Unit (RIT) scores. Comparisons are restricted to students with targeted services stays of 30 days or longer and no 30-day stays in other types of alternative education. In addition, they include only students who had half or more of their extended-time enrollment during the regular school year rather than the summer.

* The difference is statistically significant at the 0.1-percent level. This means that if the targeted services students had the same actual growth as the comparison group, there is less than a 0.1-percent likelihood that a difference in growth as large as or larger than the observed difference reported above would have occurred by chance alone. The margin of error for the difference is 0.2 RIT units.

^a National growth norms were developed by NWEA for each grade and starting RIT score based on growth results for students from across the country who took the MAP tests. NWEA weighted the results to ensure the norm sample reflected the nation’s students in terms of racial-ethnic background and school economic status (based on percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch).

^b Matched students include up to 51 students from NWEA’s database with matching grade, fall test score, time between tests, school economic status, and urban-rural location. Not all students had a matched comparison group.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress test score data and Minnesota Department of Education student enrollment data.

the targeted services students, on average, grew slightly less than the comparison group students, though the difference was not statistically significant in 2009.¹⁷

The increased rates of growth for targeted services students that we observed on the MAP test held when we analyzed growth on the MCA-II assessment. As shown in Table 3.4, a larger percentage of students who received targeted services experienced high growth (29 percent in math and 30 percent in reading) than experienced low growth (25 percent and 26 percent, respectively). Additionally, more than 40 percent of targeted services students experienced “medium” levels of growth on the MCA-II reading and math assessments, which means those students made about the same amount of progress as other students.

More students enrolled in targeted services showed high growth than low growth on the MCA-II tests.

Table 3.4: Growth on MCA-II for Alternative Education Students Enrolled in Targeted Services, 2008 to 2009

	Number of Targeted Services Students	Test Score Growth Between Spring 2008 and Spring 2009:		
		Low	Medium	High
Math	33,589	25%*	46%	29%*
Reading	34,242	26*	44	30*

NOTES: Low growth means the student fell further behind (or became less far ahead of) other students in the same grade during the time interval between tests; medium growth means the student made about the same amount of progress as other students; high growth means the student became less far behind (or became further ahead of) other students. To classify students into these categories, for both years we determined how many standard deviations each student’s score was above or below the statewide mean for students in the same grade. Students who kept pace with other students would be at the same number of standard deviations above or below the mean for both tests. We classified growth between two MCA-II tests as medium if the tests scores (expressed as standard deviations above or below the mean, known as “z-scores”) did not change by more than one-third of a standard deviation. We classified growth as low if the scores declined by more than one-third of a standard deviation and as high if the score increased by more than one-third of a standard deviation.

* The difference between the percentage of students with high growth and low growth is statistically significant at the 0.1-percent level. This means that if the percentage of students with high growth was the same as the percentage with low growth, there is less than a 0.1-percent likelihood that a difference in growth as large as or larger than the observed difference reported above would have occurred by chance alone.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data.

The faster rate of growth for students receiving targeted services largely held across demographic groups. On average, targeted services students gained on the

¹⁷ The gains for targeted services students were consistently smaller when compared with the matched comparison groups than when compared with the national norms. These differences may be because Minnesota has a lower child poverty rate than the nation as a whole. It is not clear, however, that the matched comparison is the most appropriate standard to use. The matched comparison groups are based in part on the *school* poverty indicator instead of the *student* poverty level. Since Minnesota’s targeted services students may be poorer than other students from their school, using a school-level poverty indicator may result in a different benchmark than an individual-level poverty indicator.

The growth results for students who received targeted services are encouraging.

MAP test relative to national norms and on the MCA-II tests relative to other Minnesota students whether they were white or nonwhite and whether or not they were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.¹⁸

Taken together, the growth results on both the MAP and MCA-II assessments for students who received targeted services are encouraging. We cannot definitively conclude that the targeted services caused larger gains because we did not have an ideal control group with which to compare results. Nevertheless, the results suggest that targeted services may contribute to improving academic performance of alternative education students.

Regular-Day Programs

In general, data regarding growth in test scores was more limited for students who attended regular-day alternative education programs (substituting alternative education for at least some part of their regular school day). This is true for two reasons. First, 90 percent of students who attend an alternative education program as a substitute for some of their regular school day are in grades 9 through 12. Most school districts who use the MAP test administer it to students in grades two through eight; as a result, we had significantly less MAP test score data for students in regular-day alternative education programs. Second, as discussed earlier, the MCA-II reading and math tests are administered to almost all students in grades 3 through 8, but only once at the high school level, namely grade 10 for reading and grade 11 for math. To evaluate growth based on the tenth-grade reading or eleventh-grade math test, we had to compare the score with the student's eighth-grade test. This two- to three-year gap placed some limitations on the usefulness of the data. Despite these limitations, we were able to draw some conclusions about growth in regular-day alternative education students' performance.

Overall, we found that:

- **Students who participated in regular-day forms of alternative education generally had less academic growth than other students.**

On average, students enrolled in regular-day alternative education programs fell short of all three benchmarks.

As with targeted services students, we used three benchmarks to measure the academic progress of regular-day alternative education students, two for the MAP test (based on national norms and matched comparison groups) and one for the MCA-II test (based on other Minnesota students). We found that students who attended a regular-day alternative education program made smaller average gains than other students on all three benchmarks for both math and reading. One subgroup for which results were sometimes more positive was students who attended an alternative education program full time.

As a whole, students who attended regular-day alternative education programs experienced less growth in their MAP math and reading test scores than the

¹⁸ As we discussed previously, targeted services students had more growth on the MAP test than the matched comparison group for math but not for reading. This advantage for math held for students whether they were eligible or ineligible for free or reduced-price lunches, but among racial-ethnic groups, the gains made by nonwhite students in targeted services was not statistically different from gains made by their matched comparison group.

growth expected from national norms and the matched comparison group (as shown in Table 3.5). We found similar results for the MCA-II scores, as shown in Appendix Table A.1. More students attending regular-day alternative education programs experienced low growth than high growth for both math and reading. For example, 15 percent of regular-day alternative education students had high growth on the MCA-II math assessment as compared with 45 percent who experienced low growth.

Table 3.5: Growth on Northwest Education Association Tests (MAP) for Students Enrolled in Regular-Day Alternative Education Compared with Other Students, 2009

On average, students enrolled in regular-day alternative education programs had less growth on the MAP tests than comparison groups.

	Number of Regular-Day Alternative Education Students	Test Score Growth Between Fall 2008 and Spring 2009:		
		Regular-Day Students	Comparison Group	Difference
Comparison with national norms^a				
Math	2,861	2.9	4.4	-1.5*
Reading	2,887	1.5	3.9	-2.4*
Comparison with matched students^b				
Math	2,666	3.0	4.6	-1.6*
Reading	2,717	1.6	4.0	-2.4*

NOTES: This table shows growth on the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA's) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests in terms of Rasch Unit (RIT) scores. We classified students as being enrolled in regular-day alternative education if they had at least one stay of 30 days or longer in a regular-day alternative education program.

* The difference is statistically significant at the 1-percent level. This means that if the regular-day students had the same actual growth as the comparison group, there is less than a 1-percent likelihood that a difference in growth as large as or larger than the observed difference reported above would have occurred by chance alone.

^a National growth norms were developed by NWEA for each grade and starting RIT score based on growth results for students from across the country who took the MAP tests. NWEA weighted the results to ensure the norm sample reflected the nation's students in terms of racial-ethnic background and school economic status (based on percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch).

^b Matched students include up to 51 students from NWEA's database with matching grade, fall test score, time between tests, school economic status, and urban-rural location. Not all students had a matched comparison group.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress test score data and Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

When we examined subgroups of regular-day alternative education students, the results were mixed for students who attended an alternative education program full time (shown in Appendix Tables A.1, A.2, and A.3). On the MAP test, the average growth by full-time alternative education students was not significantly different from national norms or the matched comparison group for math. However, full-time alternative education students experienced significantly less growth than both comparison groups for reading. On the MCA-II test, students who enrolled full time in alternative education in a single setting were more likely to have high growth than low growth on the MCA-II reading assessment, although the difference was not statistically significant. On the MCA-II math assessment, full-time alternative education students were more likely to have low growth than high growth.

Discussion

The results presented above illustrate a mixed picture of alternative education student performance. Students who were enrolled in targeted services showed an increase in math test scores compared with other students on both the MAP and MCA-II assessments. Targeted services students showed relative increases in reading on the MAP test and on the MCA-II test when compared with national norms and other Minnesota students, although not when compared with the matched comparison group for the MAP test. In contrast, alternative education students enrolled in regular-day programs, in general, demonstrated less academic growth than other students. The one exception (which itself had mixed results) was the group of students enrolled full time in an alternative education regular-day program. That different grades are served by these different programs (elementary and middle school for targeted services, mostly secondary school for regular-day alternative education programs) may be a factor in these results. Other factors in students' lives for which we could not control also undoubtedly affect these results. While we were able to control for some demographic factors in our analysis (race and socio-economic status), we did not have data on other potential factors (such as mental health, parents' education level, or chemical dependency).

Additionally, we do not know how alternative education students would have performed if they had not enrolled in an alternative education program. Some alternative education students might have remained in the traditional setting and graduated from high school; others might have dropped out of school and not obtained a high school diploma. As a result, it is difficult to establish appropriate benchmarks for these students. Some growth, even if below average, may be better than the growth they would have experienced if they had dropped out of school.

The test score results presented above are only one piece of student performance. The following section looks at student attendance and graduation, two other important measures of student performance.

It is difficult to establish appropriate benchmarks for students in regular-day alternative education programs because we cannot know how they would have performed if they had not enrolled in alternative education.

ATTENDANCE AND GRADUATION

As discussed previously and shown in Table 3.1, superintendents and alternative education program directors identified attendance and graduation rates as among the most useful performance measures for alternative education students. In this section we present analysis of these measures using student enrollment data collected by MDE.

Attendance

As noted previously, we conducted site visits of 12 regular-day alternative education programs. On these visits, some alternative education staff said that attendance is a useful measure, but that alternative education students should not be measured against a specific attendance threshold. According to some staff, many students enter their programs with very low attendance rates; as such, improved attendance should be acknowledged, even if it falls short of typical student attendance expectations.

We used student enrollment records to analyze alternative education student attendance rates and compare them with the attendance rates of traditional students. In addition, we selected a group of full-time alternative education students and examined their attendance history to see whether their attendance rates improved over time.¹⁹ As anticipated by many alternative education staff, we found that:

- **Alternative education students had lower attendance rates than students who attended traditional schools.**

We compared the average attendance rates for traditional students and students enrolled in regular-day alternative education programs for at least 30 days. Students who were not enrolled in alternative education in 2009 had, on average, a 95-percent attendance rate. In contrast, students who attended alternative education schools as part of their regular school day had an average attendance rate of roughly 81 percent.

In 2009, alternative education students had lower attendance rates than traditional students.

We also examined the attendance history of certain alternative education students in order to evaluate changes over time. We looked specifically at students who attended a single alternative education program full time during the 2008-2009 school year and compared their attendance rates during that year with their attendance rates from the 2007-2008 school year (during which they could have attended traditional schools, one or more alternative education programs, or a combination of alternative education and traditional schools). Almost 1,500

¹⁹ We limited both types of student attendance analysis to enrollment records that occurred during the regular school day and year; we did not incorporate attendance information from extended-time programs. We excluded independent-study students from our attendance analysis. We also restricted our analysis to students who started the school year in sixth grade or higher, because very few elementary students attend alternative education programs during the regular school day. We calculated the percent attendance (also referred to as attendance rate) for each enrollment record by dividing the student's average daily attendance (ADA) by average daily membership (ADM).

For the Minnesota student population as a whole in 2009, attendance rates decreased as grade level increased.

alternative education students who were in grades 6 through 12 in 2009 had matchable records in 2008. Twenty-seven percent of these alternative education students had better attendance rates in 2009 than in 2008. More than 30 percent had worse attendance rates during 2009 than in 2008.²⁰

However, we analyzed average attendance by grade for the entire sixth- through twelfth-grade student population and found a steady decline in attendance rates as grade level increased. The average attendance rate for all sixth-grade students in 2009 was 96 percent; twelfth-grade students, on the other hand, attended less than 92 percent of the time in 2009.

Given the inverse relationship between attendance rate and grade level, we revisited the attendance records for the group of students enrolled full time in a single alternative education setting. In order to adjust for the average attendance slide between grades (observed not just in alternative education students, but in the total student population), we analyzed the 2008 and 2009 attendance rates for these students relative to the appropriate average grade-level attendance in those years.²¹

When accounting for typical attendance declines between grade levels, the percentage of students whose attendance rates improved increased. Rather than the 27 percent presented earlier, 40 percent of the full-time alternative education students had better attendance rates in 2009 than in 2008, once the analysis was adjusted for grade level. Table 3.6 shows that 33 percent of the full-time alternative education students had worse attendance rates in 2009 (relative to other students in their grade-level) than in 2008. More than one-quarter of the students showed no significant change in relative attendance rates between the two years.

Graduation

During our site visits, several alternative education staff indicated that the primary goal of their program was to help students graduate. And, as noted previously, around 90 percent of superintendents and alternative education program directors identified graduation as a useful performance measure for alternative education students.

²⁰ Attendance was “better” if the 2009 attendance rate was more than five percentage points higher than the 2008 attendance rate. Attendance was “worse” if the rate was more than five percentage points lower than the 2008 attendance rate. If the 2008 and 2009 rates were within five percentage points of each other, we determined that there was no significant difference in attendance rates between the two years.

²¹ To measure how alternative education students’ attendance rates changed relative to other students in the same grade level, we compared how many standard deviations above or below the grade-level mean their attendance rates were in 2008 and 2009. We classified the 2008 and 2009 attendance rates as “similar” if the attendance rates (expressed as standard deviations above or below the mean, known as z-scores) did not change by more than one-third of a standard deviation. We classified 2009 attendance rates as “better” if the z-score increased by more than one-third of a standard deviation and as “worse” if the z-score declined by more than one-third of a standard deviation.

After adjusting for grade level, 40 percent of full-time alternative education students improved their attendance rates between 2008 and 2009.

Table 3.6: Grade Level-Adjusted Attendance of Full-Time Alternative Education Students as Compared with Previous Year Attendance, 2008 to 2009

	Number of Students	Percent
2009 attendance rate better than 2008 attendance rate	601	40%*
2009 attendance rate similar to 2008 attendance rate	392	26
2009 attendance rate worse than 2008 attendance rate	<u>500</u>	<u>33*</u>
Total	1,493	100%

NOTES: The data above include only alternative education students in grades 6 through 12 who attended a single alternative education program full time during the 2008-2009 school year. Students who participated in independent study are excluded. Analysis is based on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

To measure how alternative education students' attendance rates changed relative to other students in the same grade level, we compared how many standard deviations above or below the grade-level mean their attendance rates were in 2008 and 2009. We classified the 2008 and 2009 attendance rates as "similar" if the attendance rates (expressed as standard deviations above or below the mean, known as z-scores) did not change by more than one-third of a standard deviation. We classified 2009 attendance rates as "better" if the z-score increased by more than one-third of a standard deviation and as "worse" if the z-score declined by more than one-third of a standard deviation.

* The difference between the percentage of students with better attendance rates in 2009 and worse attendance rates in 2009 is statistically significant at the 1-percent level. This means that if the percentage of students with high growth was the same as the percentage with low growth, there is less than a 1-percent likelihood that a difference in growth as large as or larger than the observed difference reported above would have occurred by chance alone.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

For the purposes of our evaluation, we measured graduation based on whether students who began the year in grade 12 graduated by the end of the school year. We also analyzed the extent to which alternative education students who did not graduate during their twelfth-grade year went on to graduate in subsequent years. We tracked twelfth-grade students who did not graduate in 2006 to determine whether they graduated in 2007, 2008, or 2009. We found that:

- **Although students in alternative education programs graduated at lower rates than traditional students, many alternative education students ultimately graduated when given additional time.**

Between 2006 and 2009, graduation rates of traditional students were consistently higher than those of alternative education students. Among students who did not participate in any alternative education programming, between 85 and 89 percent of the students who started a given year in the twelfth grade graduated by the end of that year. In contrast, between 34 and 39 percent of regular-day alternative education students who started a given year in grade 12 went on to graduate during that year. These graduation rates held across several

subgroups of alternative education students: all students who attended a regular-day alternative education program for at least 30 days, students enrolled half time in alternative education, students enrolled full time in one or more alternative education settings, and students enrolled full time in a single alternative education program.

Some school district and alternative education staff we met with spoke in more detail about graduation, indicating that it was an important measure, but that there should be more flexibility in how graduation rates are calculated. The staff we spoke with stated that many of their students take longer to graduate than traditional students.

Alternative education student graduation rates increased when allowing additional years for graduation.

To allow for the extra time alternative education students may need to graduate, we evaluated the extent to which twelfth-grade alternative education students graduated after three additional years. Table 3.7 shows the percentages of 2006 twelfth-grade students who graduated by the end of each year between 2006 and 2009. Only 39 percent of the twelfth-grade students who attended a single alternative education program full time in 2006 graduated that year. However, by the end of 2009, 62 percent of the full-time students had graduated. Students with smaller amounts of regular-day alternative education were somewhat less likely to graduate within three additional years. While the two subgroups of full-time alternative education students exhibited similar graduation rates each year, the group of all regular-day alternative education students (made up of all students enrolled in a regular-day alternative education school for at least 30 days) showed less improvement in graduation rates over time. Just under half of these students graduated by 2009.

Table 3.7: Percentage of 2006 Grade 12 Students Who Graduated in Subsequent Years

	Number of Grade 12 Students	Percentage that Graduated			
		In 2006	By 2007	By 2008	By 2009
No alternative education	55,058	89%	91%	92%	93%
Regular-day alternative education	12,830	36	45	48	49
At least half time in regular-day alternative education ^a	5,176	37	50	55	55
Full time in regular-day alternative education	1,994	37	54	60	61
Full time in a single regular-day alternative education program	981	39	54	61	62

NOTES: The data above include all traditional students and regular-day alternative education students enrolled in grade 12 during the 2005-2006 school year. With the exception of “No alternative education,” all subgroups include only students enrolled for at least 30 days in a single alternative education setting. Analysis is based in part on preliminary 2009 student enrollment data.

^a Students enrolled at least half-time in alternative education may also have been concurrently enrolled in a traditional school.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

STUDENT SATISFACTION

As part of our evaluation of alternative education programs, we surveyed all high school students who attended an alternative education program at least half time. We asked alternative education program directors to provide these students with 20 minutes and internet access to complete our questionnaire.²² We received responses from 2,847 students.

Based on responses to the questionnaire, we found that:

- **High school students who attend alternative education programs are generally satisfied with their alternative education experience.**

Almost three-quarters of students who responded to our questionnaire said that their alternative education school had met or exceeded their expectations. Only 4 percent responded that the school had not met their expectations.

We also asked alternative education students a number of questions about how their alternative education school compared with the previous schools they had attended. As displayed in Table 3.8, students were generally more satisfied with

Table 3.8: Alternative Education Students' Opinions Regarding Their Current Alternative Education School and Previous Schools They Have Attended

	Agree or Strongly Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Disagree or Strongly Disagree		Other ^a	
	Current	Prior	Current	Prior	Current	Prior	Current	Prior
I am satisfied with the education I am receiving at this/my previous school	79%	31%	7%	22%	3%	33%	11%	15%
I am satisfied with how much I learn at this/my previous school	78	30	8	22	3	34	11	14
The teachers/staff at this/my previous school care about me	73	28	10	23	3	32	14	16
This/my previous school is preparing me for my future	71	33	12	24	4	28	12	16
I have been able to accomplish what I wanted to at this/my previous school	70	19	13	21	4	44	13	16
This/my previous school is preparing me to attend college	63	35	17	23	6	28	14	15
This/my previous school is preparing me for getting a job	56	24	22	23	8	37	14	16

NOTES: "Current" refers to the students' current school. "Prior" refers to the students' previous school(s) they attended. We received responses from 2,847 high school students who were attending an alternative education program at least half time. The survey was conducted from September 23, 2009, through October 9, 2009. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

^a Other includes "No Opinion" and blank responses.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Alternative Education Student Survey, 2009.

²² We conducted the survey from September 23, 2009, through October 9, 2009.

Alternative education students we surveyed generally felt positively about their alternative education programs.

their current alternative education school than they were with their previous school. Given that they had chosen to switch schools, this result is not surprising. However, it is noteworthy that 79 percent of students who responded to the questionnaire reported that they are satisfied with the education they are receiving at their alternative education school.

Seventy percent or more of students who responded to our questionnaire reported that the teachers at their alternative education school cared about them, the school had prepared them for their future, and they had accomplished what they wanted at their alternative education school. These responses are in contrast to only 28 percent of students who said the teachers at their previous school had cared about them, 33 percent who said their previous school prepared them for their future, and 19 percent who said they had accomplished what they wanted to at their previous school.

We also asked students to evaluate the extent to which their behavior or performance had changed between attending their current alternative education school and their previous school. As shown in Table 3.9, almost 70 percent of students who responded to our questionnaire reported that they were making better academic progress in their alternative education school than they had in their previous school. Sixty percent of respondents reported that they had better attendance in the alternative education school than in their previous school and 55 percent said their behavior had improved.

Table 3.9: Alternative Education Students’ Opinions Regarding Their Performance

	Better than in My Previous School	About the Same as in My Previous School	Worse than in My Previous School	Other ^a
My academic performance in this school is:	69%	10%	2%	20%
My attendance in this school is:	60	21	3	15
My behavior in this school is:	55	29	2	15

NOTES: We received responses from 2,847 high school students who were attending alternative education programs at least half time. The survey was conducted from September 23, 2009, through October 9, 2009. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

^a Other includes “I Don’t Know,” “Other,” and blank responses.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Alternative Education Student Survey, 2009.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the national literature; our surveys; the analysis presented in this chapter; and conversations with alternative education staff, school district superintendents, and others; we think it would be prudent for Minnesota to develop some additional performance measures to evaluate alternative education students and programs. As a result, we make the following recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION

The Minnesota Department of Education should initiate a pilot project to use and evaluate additional measures of alternative education student performance.

As discussed in this chapter, most students who attend alternative education programs have not performed well on several standardized measures. However, alternative education staff and others (superintendents, program directors, and academics) have attested to the effect of alternative education beyond test scores and graduation rates. Students themselves report relatively high levels of satisfaction with their alternative education programs and relative levels of success.

We think it makes sense for the state to develop additional measures to use when evaluating the performance of alternative education programs. It is important for Minnesota to have a collaborative effort in developing alternative measures that would be appropriate and useful. As a result, we recommend that MDE work with a group of alternative education programs to develop and track alternative performance measures. Such measures could include credits earned, grade promotion, postsecondary enrollment, and job attainment or retention, among others. “Nontraditional” performance measures, such as measures of hope or self-esteem should also be considered. The results from this pilot test could be used to develop additional performance measures for alternative education and provide information to the Legislature regarding the performance of alternative education students and programs.

Oversight of Alternative Education Programs

As discussed in Chapter 1, area learning centers (ALCs) and alternative learning programs (ALPs) are typically operated by independent school districts, intermediate school districts, or school district cooperatives. Contract alternative schools are operated by private nonprofit organizations and provide alternative education through contracts with school districts. Given these organizational structures, oversight of alternative education programs is typically within the purview of the school districts or cooperatives within which they operate. However, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) also has a role.

This chapter discusses oversight of alternative education programs and is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the oversight that local school districts provide for alternative education programs. Next, we examine the oversight provided by MDE. The third section discusses alternative education policies implemented by MDE. The chapter concludes with recommendations for improvement.

OVERSIGHT BY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Because alternative education programs are part of a school district (either directly or through a contract or other type of agreement), the laws that generally apply to districts also apply when considering alternative education programs. For example, *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 120B.021, outlines the state's required academic standards. Among other things, the law states:

For purposes of applicable federal law, the academic standards for language arts, mathematics, and science apply to all public school students.... A school district, no later than the 2007-2008 school year, must adopt graduation requirements that meet or exceed state graduation requirements established in law or rule.

Because ALCs and ALPs are public schools, the academic standards and graduation requirements set forth in this statute apply equally to students of ALCs or ALPs and students of traditional programs. The same is true for other requirements of public schools. Although contract alternatives are operated by private nonprofit organizations, students who attend these schools are also considered public school students. As a result, the above requirements apply to contract alternatives as well.

In addition to the laws that apply to all public schools, alternative education programs must meet some additional requirements. For example, state law

Laws that generally apply to school districts also apply to alternative education programs.

School districts may operate their own alternative education program, provide access to a program in a neighboring district, or participate in a multi-district cooperative arrangement.

requires school districts to develop a “continual learning plan” for each student that attends a state-approved alternative education program.¹

General Oversight

School districts provide access to alternative education programs in a variety of ways. Many school districts operate an ALC or ALP within their district. Other school districts access an ALC operated by a neighboring school district. Still other school districts participate in an intermediate, cooperative, or education district that operates alternative education programs on behalf of its members.

To learn more about the oversight of alternative education programs, we surveyed all school district superintendents in the state.² Forty-five percent of respondents reported operating their own alternative education program (either an ALC or ALP or contracting with a contract alternative school). Just over 100 school districts (40 percent of respondents) reported participating in a cooperative alternative education program but not operating their own program. Based on responses to our questionnaire, we found that:

- **Primary oversight of alternative education programs is provided by the school districts that operate the programs.**

Survey respondents from a number of school districts that operate their own alternative education programs reported that alternative education schools are treated the same as their traditional schools. For example, one associate superintendent said:

The alternative education programs in [our district] are led by principals, assistant principals, and/or directors. These leaders are held to the same expectations and standards as all other principals at the secondary level. The alternative education leaders attend the same meetings, trainings, etc., that all secondary principals in the district participate in.

Another respondent from a school district that operates its own ALC said:

Oversight of our ALC is the same as our other schools. They are included in every discussion and activity, which includes things such as evaluations, curriculum reviews, professional development opportunities, etc....

Staff we met with during our site visits also reported that their alternative education schools are integrated into their school districts and treated like the other schools in their districts. For example, many of the alternative education administrators we visited said they are included in district-wide administrator meetings and their staff are included in district assessment and curriculum

¹ The plan “must specify the learning experiences that must occur during the entire fiscal year and are necessary for grade progression or, for secondary students, graduation.” See *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.128, subd. 3.

² We received responses from 255 (75 percent) of Minnesota school districts.

The school district operating the alternative education program generally provides oversight.

meetings. Many of the alternative education administrators with whom we met said they receive the same oversight as the other schools in their districts.

Survey respondents from school districts that accessed alternative education programs run by neighboring districts stated they had much less oversight of these programs and instead relied on the district operating the program. For example, in response to the question, “What type of oversight of alternative education programs does your school district provide?” one superintendent said:

There is no oversight by our district, the alternative program operates under [a nearby] school district and would follow their guidelines. We accept credits earned based on their standards.

Another superintendent said, “We let the host district provide the oversight,” and a third superintendent said, “We do not provide any oversight as it is in a neighboring district and part of a larger alternative educational program.”

School districts that access alternative education programs through a cooperative or education district tend to have oversight through a governing board, rather than through direct oversight of operations. For example, one respondent from a school district that uses an alternative education program run by a cooperative said, “The superintendent sits on the board of the cooperative providing the alternative education program.” Similarly, one superintendent responded:

Superintendents from the member districts of the cooperative meet monthly with the Cooperative Director and will from time to time have the ALC as a topic for our meetings. Superintendents also are able to ask questions any time. I have made visits to the ALC and our high school principal works closely with the ALC coordinator in placement of students and determination of learning needs.

Our survey of alternative education program directors also included an open-ended question about the type of oversight provided by school districts.³ More than 60 percent of respondents reported that their school districts actively oversee their alternative education programs, including monitoring student performance, evaluating teachers, conducting site visits, and requiring regular reports from the program. Although not direct oversight, more than 20 percent of the respondents said that their school districts support their alternative education programs by providing reporting assistance, staff development, and other such services.

Alternative Education Curriculum

One key part of oversight is ensuring that the curriculum provided by alternative education programs meets district and state standards. More than 56 percent of respondents to our superintendent questionnaire “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that “alternative education programs use curriculum that aligns with district standards.” However, we found that:

³ As noted previously, we received responses from 160 of almost 230 alternative education programs, a 70-percent response rate.

- **Some school district staff are concerned about the rigor of the curriculum in alternative education programs.**

Only 15 percent of respondents to our superintendent questionnaire said that alternative education programs use curriculum that is as rigorous as the curriculum in traditional school district programs. More than 45 percent responded that curriculum rigor varies from one alternative education program to another.

In response to the survey, one superintendent commented, “The state needs to make sure there is rigor...if I have to provide the diploma.” Another survey respondent wrote:

It is irksome when some programs deliver less than we expect and then send students to us. The student will not be successful and has been given a false sense of efficacy.

Several school districts have questioned the rigor of the curriculum provided to their students by an alternative education program outside of their district.

According to MDE staff, several school districts have questioned the rigor of the curriculum provided by an alternative education program outside of their district that serves their students. For example, one student was two credits short of being able to graduate from the student’s resident district. According to MDE staff, this student enrolled in an alternative education program outside of the resident district and, within a few weeks, the student had supposedly taken the courses and earned the credits necessary to graduate. The resident district was reluctant to accept these credits and asked MDE for advice. MDE’s guidance to this district and others in this situation has been that, by law, they are obligated to accept the credits earned through alternative education programs.⁴ MDE staff have said that the department has neither the authority nor the capacity to judge the rigor of an alternative education program’s curriculum.

In contrast to the comments above, some superintendents who attended our roundtables said that alternative education programs should not be as rigorous as traditional schools. One superintendent said it is important to balance a program’s rigor with flexibility for the students’ real-life issues. Other superintendents said that increasing rigor may damage an alternative education program and lead to higher dropout rates. They were concerned that with increased rigor, the schools will lose the students they are designed to serve.

OVERSIGHT BY THE MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Based on our review of Minnesota statutes and discussions with MDE and alternative education program staff, we found that:

- **The Minnesota Department of Education approves alternative education programs but provides limited ongoing oversight of these programs.**

⁴ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.03, subd. 9.

The Minnesota Department of Education approves new alternative education programs and changes to existing programs.

By law, ALCs must be approved by MDE.⁵ The statute provides some criteria MDE must consider when approving these schools:

Any process for designating and approving an area learning center must emphasize the importance of having the area learning center serve students who have dropped out of school, are homeless, are eligible to receive free or reduced-priced lunch, have been suspended or expelled, have been declared truant or are pregnant or parents.⁶

MDE approves new alternative education programs and changes to existing programs, such as expanding from an ALP to an ALC, adding an independent-study program, or adding targeted services. MDE staff conduct a site visit in conjunction with approving a new or expanded program. Department staff use a rubric to conduct the site visit, which includes a review of the facilities, curriculum, schedule, and teacher licensure, among other things. Programs that apply but do not receive department approval may continue to revise the application until it is approved. In calendar year 2009, MDE approved 14 programs, including 5 new ALPs and the conversion of 2 ALPs to ALCs. MDE does not keep documentation regarding its site visits or programs that unsuccessfully applied for alternative education program approval.

MDE also approves independent-study programs. Specifically, the law states:

For an alternative program having an independent study component, the commissioner shall require a description of the courses in the program, the kinds of independent study involved, the expected learning outcomes of the courses, and the means of measuring student performance against the expected outcomes.⁷

However, the department conducts limited ongoing oversight of these programs.

According to MDE staff, the department conducts limited ongoing oversight of alternative education programs. MDE staff said they provide professional development for alternative education programs and conduct site visits of programs on an “as-needed” basis. MDE staff do not conduct site visits of all programs on a regular or rotating basis. Instead, MDE documentation states that “Reviews are typically initiated by concerns or complaints, changes in leadership, follow-up review to a new program application, or at the request of the program.”⁸

When MDE staff conduct site visits, they review a program’s compliance with its original approved application. If MDE staff observe a problem, they can suggest that it be addressed, but MDE staff told us they have limited tools at their disposal to require a change.

⁵ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.09.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 126C.05, subd. 15(b)(iv).

⁸ “SAAP Program Review and Site Visit,” (internal document, Minnesota Department of Education, undated).

Most of the alternative education program personnel with whom we met said they have little interaction with MDE on an ongoing basis. In response to our survey, 15 percent of alternative education program directors said that the department does not provide any oversight or that they themselves have had no contact with MDE. One interviewee suggested that there should be more oversight and accountability from the department. Staff from two alternative education programs suggested that MDE provide more information on best practices for alternative education assessment and teaching methods. In response to our survey of school district superintendents, one superintendent wrote (regarding oversight of alternative education programs):

I don't believe Minnesota has ever really provided leadership in this area. These are the kids who are a "problem" to the schools, and quite frankly, many administrators are happy to have someone else deal with the kids. I do not think there is adequate oversight, standards, or consistency in programming.

Many alternative education staff reported that the Minnesota Department of Education provides resources and training as needed.

Some alternative education staff, however, said that the department is available to them as a resource when needed. Similarly, more than 40 percent of the program directors who responded to our survey said that MDE provides support as needed, including providing staff training, written resources, and other guidance.

As of January 2010, MDE had minimal staff devoted to alternative education programs. The department has one full-time alternative education specialist and some of a supervisor's time dedicated to alternative education programs.

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION POLICIES

MDE has developed and regularly updates the *State-Approved Alternative Programs Handbook*.⁹ This handbook explains the role of alternative education programs in Minnesota and sets forth the department's policies related to these programs. Based on our review of this handbook and conversations with MDE staff, we found that:

- **The Minnesota Department of Education has established policies regarding alternative education that contradict the law.**

MDE has implemented policies that contradict or go beyond statutes in two areas in particular: targeted services and independent-study programs. In addition, the department's policies regarding the determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), while not going beyond statutes, result in some potentially troubling consequences for alternative education programs. MDE's policies in each of these areas are further discussed below.

⁹ Minnesota Department of Education, *State-Approved Alternative Programs Handbook, Revised Summer 2009* (Roseville, 2009).

Targeted Services

We found that:

- **The Minnesota Department of Education’s policy regarding which schools can provide targeted services limits access to these services.**

The Minnesota Department of Education allows only ALCs—and not ALPs—to provide targeted services.

As outlined in its handbook, MDE allows only ALCs to provide targeted services. The department does not allow ALPs to provide targeted services. This policy contradicts the law, which explicitly states that ALPs “may serve students of one or more districts, may designate which grades are served, and may make program hours and a calendar optional.”¹⁰ In explaining the department’s policy, MDE staff said that because alternative education programs must submit an application and receive department approval, the department can provide additional oversight and impose requirements on these programs.

As a result of the department’s policy, some alternative education programs want to provide targeted services but are not allowed to because they are not ALCs. For example, in response to our superintendent survey, one superintendent wrote:

Each school should be able to provide targeted services to their own students instead of having to go through an ALC. If we have an ALP we should be able to have our own targeted services!

MDE staff estimated that about 20 to 25 percent of Minnesota school districts do not provide targeted services programs, in part because of the department’s restrictions on which schools may provide these services.

While some school districts are not permitted to provide targeted services, other school districts are providing targeted services based on program approvals that took place several years ago. Because MDE does not conduct ongoing site visits or program reviews of all alternative education programs, it is not clear that MDE is applying the same standards to all programs. For example, one school district we visited changed its middle school program from being a stand-alone program to a “school within a school” located in the traditional school. Based on conversations with MDE and program staff, it is not clear that this new program would meet the department’s requirements as an ALC if it were to go through a new approval process. Nevertheless, it has retained its ALC status and is therefore eligible to provide targeted services.

MDE staff acknowledged that the department does not have an ongoing mechanism for checking whether a school district has an acceptable ALC. Staff agreed that their inability to monitor the appropriateness of existing centers can lead to inequity when determining whether other programs may provide targeted services.

¹⁰ *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 123A.05, subd. 1(c).

The Minnesota Department of Education requires a minimum amount of “seat time” for students in independent-study alternative education programs.

Independent-Study Programs

MDE requires students in independent-study programs to have “seat time” for at least 20 percent of the time a student in a seat-based program would spend in a classroom to earn the same credit. According to MDE’s policy, 20-percent seat time is required for the school to receive full funding for the student. This requirement is not stated in law.

MDE staff said the 20-percent requirement provides time for the teachers to meet with the student, ensure that the student is on the right track, and continue to provide instruction. MDE staff said that because alternative education programs are for at-risk students, it is appropriate for the department to impose a minimum contact-time requirement. Additionally, MDE staff said the department has an independent-study advisory group that has supported a minimum contact time requirement for independent-study programs.

Adequate Yearly Progress Determinations

As discussed in Chapter 3, most students who attend alternative education programs did not meet proficiency standards on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, Series II (MCA-II) assessments. As a result, alternative education programs often struggle to make “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) as required under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

AYP determination is made up of four factors: attendance, graduation (when relevant), participation on a standardized assessment, and meeting proficiency standards on the standardized assessment. Minnesota primarily uses the MCA-II assessments as its standardized assessments for meeting NCLB requirements.

According to MDE staff, students enrolled in an alternative education school during the “testing window” (the period of time in the spring when the MCA-II tests are administered) are counted in that school’s *participation* calculation. This is true regardless of the amount of time they are enrolled in the program.¹¹ For example, if a student attended a traditional school full time and attended a credit recovery program during the testing window to make up one credit, the student’s test participation would be credited to both schools. If the student did not take the MCA-II as required, it would count against both the traditional school’s and the alternative education school’s AYP participation rates.

Test scores for students who are enrolled in a school on October 1 through the testing window are included in the calculation of a school’s *proficiency* rate. Again using the example of a student who attends a credit recovery program for

¹¹ According to MDE staff and materials published by MDE: “Schools are required to administer a statewide assessment to all students enrolled in grades three through eight and grades 10 and 11. Schools that do not meet the 95-percent participation requirement are identified as Not Making AYP.... Enrollment is based on the number of students enrolled over the testing window as reported on MARSS [the statewide student reporting system].” Minnesota Department of Education, *Functional Requirements for the 2009 No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress Calculations* (Roseville, June 28, 2009), 23.

Students' test scores on the MCA-II exams are included in alternative education schools' adequate yearly progress calculations, regardless of which classes the students took at the alternative education schools.

one credit, that student's test score would be counted towards both the alternative education school and the traditional school the student attends full time. More specifically, MDE documentation states:

For multiple enrollment records where an assessment record is found, all schools reporting the student in that tested grade will be allocated the assessment record with its corresponding codes and indicators for use on the AYP measures.¹²

This rule applies even if the school is not instructing the student in the subject being tested. For example, eleventh-grade students are required to take the MCA-II math assessment. Some eleventh-grade students may be enrolled in credit recovery programs to make up a failed English course. If these students do not meet proficiency on the MCA-II math assessment, their scores will be counted against the alternative education programs even though the schools were not responsible for the students' math instruction.¹³ Staff from some alternative education programs said they have been confronted with this situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented in this report, we make recommendations regarding reviewing alternative education program curriculum, providing targeted services, and providing ongoing oversight. We also make a recommendation regarding MDE's AYP determination policy as it relates to alternative education programs.

RECOMMENDATION

The Minnesota Legislature should allow the Minnesota Department of Education and school districts with students enrolled in alternative education programs in other districts to challenge the validity of the curriculum provided by those alternative education programs to ensure the curriculum meets state standards.

In some instances, school districts work together to develop the curriculum for an alternative education program. However, when a school district is not involved in curriculum design for an alternative education program that its students attend, we believe the school district should have the ability to review the curriculum and ensure that it meets state standards.

This recommendation requires a change to the alternative education laws that would parallel *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.095, subd. 7(b), regarding online learning. Specifically, the online-learning law states:

¹² Minnesota Department of Education, *Functional Requirements for the 2009 No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress Calculations* (Roseville, June 28, 2009), 23-24.

¹³ The student would have to attend both the traditional school and the credit recovery program for the whole year to have the score count for both schools.

An enrolling district may challenge the validity of a course offered by an online learning provider. The department must review such challenges based on the certification procedures under paragraph (a).¹⁴ The department may initiate its own review of the validity of an online learning course offered by an online learning provider.

If a parallel requirement was in place for alternative education programs, MDE could review the curriculum used by alternative education programs as warranted. If MDE determined that an alternative education program's curriculum was insufficient, the department could require the program to re-submit to its approval process. Alternative education programs would have to demonstrate that they have adequate curriculum in place to receive approval from MDE to continue to operate their programs.

Currently, school districts must accept credits earned by their students in alternative education programs, even if the district questions the rigor of the curriculum. This recommendation would enable school districts and MDE to ensure that the curriculum in alternative education programs meets state standards. This change would also give MDE explicit authority to act if an alternative education program's curriculum does not meet the expected level of rigor.

RECOMMENDATION

The Minnesota Legislature should allow all school districts to offer targeted services, regardless of whether they provide other alternative education programs.

Targeted services are the result of an evolution in Minnesota's alternative education programs. Originally intended to serve high school students who had dropped out of school, alternative education programs have expanded to include programs for middle school and elementary school students, including targeted services. However, MDE staff estimated that 20 to 25 percent of Minnesota school districts do not provide targeted services, in part because of the department's restrictions on which types of schools may provide them.

Given the test score results we discussed in Chapter 3—indicating increased test score growth for students in targeted services programs—we think targeted services should be available statewide and decoupled from other alternative education programs. MDE permits only ALCs to provide targeted services. However, the link between targeted services and ALCs is tenuous at best—targeted services are not a substitute for traditional schools, they typically do not take place in ALCs, and they generally are not taught by ALC staff.

If our recommendation is adopted, students would still be required to meet eligibility criteria and school districts interested in providing targeted services

¹⁴ Paragraph "a" referenced in the above citation refers to MDE's review and approval process for online-learning providers.

would have to submit to MDE's approval process. However, approval would not be contingent upon whether the district provides other types of alternative education programs.

MDE staff have told us that removing the department's restriction on which school districts are eligible to provide targeted services would lead to an expansion of summer school across the state and a commensurate increase in state funding. We estimate the potential increase in state funding to be between \$12 and \$30 million per year (based on current usage and expenditures and the proportion of school districts that currently do not provide targeted services).¹⁵ We think equal access to these services and the potential for improved academic achievement are worth the additional cost.

RECOMMENDATION

The Minnesota Department of Education should increase its ongoing oversight of alternative education programs.

To some extent, the limited ongoing oversight provided by MDE may be sufficient because alternative education programs operate within a school district structure with the attendant oversight of the district. However, if the department requires new alternative education programs to meet a set of standards, it has a responsibility to ensure that previously approved programs continue to meet those same standards.

To increase its ongoing oversight, the department could take several different approaches. One method would be to simply conduct regular site visits of all alternative education programs on an ongoing basis. Another approach would be to increase the number and depth of desk audits alternative education program staff conduct. MDE could identify key data that would provide department staff with an idea of how the programs are operating. Finally, MDE could use a strategy from its Quality Compensation (Q Comp) program and implement a peer review system. If the department implemented a peer review program, it may require fewer MDE resources than some of the other options listed above. Additionally, a peer review system would help program directors share practices and learn new approaches.

RECOMMENDATION

The Minnesota Department of Education should review its policies for determining whether schools make adequate yearly progress and ensure that alternative education programs are held accountable only for instruction they provide.

¹⁵ If use of the program among school districts already eligible to provide targeted services increases, the additional costs may exceed this estimate.

Under the current AYP determination process, alternative education programs can be held responsible for a student's performance on the MCA-II in a subject the school did not teach the student. MDE should review its policies and consider changing the AYP calculation for situations where the student is dual enrolled (when the student is enrolled for the entire school day at the traditional school and attends an alternative education school outside of the normal school day) or when the student did not receive the relevant instruction at the alternative education school.

List of Recommendations

- The Minnesota Department of Education should initiate a pilot project to use and evaluate additional measures of alternative education student performance. (p. 54)
- The Minnesota Legislature should allow the Minnesota Department of Education and school districts with students enrolled in alternative education programs in other districts to challenge the validity of the curriculum provided by those alternative education programs to ensure the curriculum meets state standards. (p. 63)
- The Minnesota Legislature should allow all school districts to offer targeted services, regardless of whether they provide other alternative education programs. (p. 64)
- The Minnesota Department of Education should increase its ongoing oversight of alternative education programs. (p. 65)
- The Minnesota Department of Education should review its policies for determining whether schools make adequate yearly progress and ensure that alternative education programs are held accountable only for instruction they provide. (p. 65)

Additional Data Analysis Tables

APPENDIX

Table A.1: Growth on MCA-II for Students Enrolled in Regular-Day Alternative Education Programs, 2009

	Number of Regular-Day Students	Test Score Growth Between Previous Test Year and Spring 2009:		
		Low	Medium	High
Students with at least one 30-day stay in regular-day alternative education				
Math	5,011	45%*	40%	15%*
Reading	4,168	34*	41	25*
At least half time in regular-day alternative education				
Math	2,138	49*	38	12*
Reading	1,415	34*	39	27*
Full time in regular-day alternative education				
Math	886	44*	43	14*
Reading	551	30	40	30
Full time in a single regular-day alternative education program				
Math	517	43*	43	15*
Reading	336	28	36	36

NOTES: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Since most regular-day alternative education students are in grades 9 through 12 and the only MCA-II tests given during those grades are the tenth-grade reading test and the eleventh-grade math test, growth on MCA-II tests can only be measured over a multi-year period for most of these students. Specifically, we measured MCA-II test score growth between grades 8 and 10 for reading (Spring 2007 to Spring 2009) and between grades 8 and 11 for math (Spring 2006 and Spring 2009).

Low growth means the student fell further behind (or became less far ahead of) other students in the same grade during the time interval between tests; medium growth means the student made about the same amount of progress as other students; high growth means the student became less far behind (or became further ahead of) other students. To classify students into these categories, for both years we determined how many standard deviations each student's score was above or below the statewide mean for students in the same grade. Students who kept pace with other students would be at the same number of standard deviations below or above the mean for both tests. We classified growth between two MCA-II tests as medium if the tests scores (expressed as standard deviations above or below the mean, known as "z-scores") did not change by more than one-third of a standard deviation. We classified growth as low if the scores declined by more than one-third of a standard deviation and as high if the score increased by more than one-third of a standard deviation.

* The difference between the percentage of students with high growth and low growth is statistically significant at the 1-percent level. This means that if the percentage of students with high growth was the same as the percentage with low growth, there is less than a 1-percent likelihood that a difference in growth as large as or larger than the observed difference reported above would have occurred by chance alone.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data.

Table A.2: Growth on Northwest Education Association Tests (MAP) for Students Enrolled in Regular-Day Alternative Education Compared with National Norms, 2009

	Number of Regular-Day Alternative Education Students	Test Score Growth Between Fall 2008 and Spring 2009:		
		Regular-Day Students	National Norms	Difference
Students with at least one 30-day stay in regular-day alternative education				
Math	2,861	2.9	4.4	-1.5*
Reading	2,887	1.5	3.9	-2.4*
At least half time in regular-day alternative education				
Math	1,290	2.4	3.6	-1.2*
Reading	1,307	0.5	3.3	-2.8*
Full time in regular-day alternative education				
Math	702	3.0	3.3	-0.3
Reading	721	0.1	3.1	-3.0*
Full time in a single regular-day alternative education program				
Math	350	2.5	3.2	-0.7
Reading	368	0.3	3.0	-2.7*

NOTES: This table shows growth based on Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA's) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests in terms of Rasch Unit (RIT). National growth norms were developed by NWEA for each grade and starting RIT score based on growth results for students from across the country who took the MAP tests. NWEA weighted the results to ensure the norm sample reflected the nation's students in terms of racial-ethnic background and school economic status (based on percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch).

* The difference is statistically significant at the 1-percent level. This means that if the regular-day students had the same actual growth as the comparison group, there is less than a 1-percent likelihood that a difference in growth as large as or larger than the observed difference reported above would have occurred by chance.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress test score data and Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

Table A.3: Growth on Northwest Education Association Tests (MAP) for Students Enrolled in Regular-Day Alternative Education Compared with Matched Comparison Groups, 2009

	Number of Regular-Day Alternative Education Students	Test Score Growth Between Fall 2008 and Spring 2009:		
		Regular-Day Students	Matched Comparison Group ^a	Difference
Students with at least one 30-day stay in regular-day alternative education				
Math	2,666	3.0	4.6	-1.6*
Reading	2,717	1.6	4.0	-2.4*
At least half time in regular-day alternative education				
Math	1,213	2.5	3.5	-0.9*
Reading	1,247	0.7	2.8	-2.2*
Full time in regular-day alternative education				
Math	665	3.2	2.9	0.2
Reading	700	0.1	2.3	-2.1*
Full time in a single regular-day alternative education program				
Math	341	2.4	2.9	-0.5
Reading	363	0.3	2.2	-1.9*

NOTE: This table shows growth on Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA's) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests in terms of Rasch Unit (RIT) scores.

* The difference is statistically significant at the 1-percent level. This means that if the regular-day students had the same actual growth as the comparison group, there is less than a 1-percent likelihood that a difference in growth as large as or larger than the observed difference reported above would have occurred by chance.

^a Matched students include up to 51 students from NWEA's database with matching grade, fall test score, time between tests, school economic status (based on percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), and urban-rural location.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, analysis of Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress test score data and Minnesota Department of Education enrollment data.

Glossary

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The minimum level of improvement that schools and school districts must achieve under the federal No Child Left Behind act (NCLB). AYP is measured using attendance, graduation (when relevant), participation in a state-determined standardized assessment, and proficiency on the standardized assessment.

Alternative Education Programs. Schools designated by the Minnesota Department of Education as state-approved alternative programs, including area learning centers, alternative learning programs, and contract alternative schools.

Alternative Learning Programs (ALPs). Alternative education programs that are characterized by the following:

- Typically tied closely to one school district, serving a defined grade-level population.
- Has the option of serving students only from the district within which the program is located.
- Students must meet the at-risk criteria outlined in *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.68.
- Has the option of serving at-risk students year round or just during the traditional school year.
- All students must have a continual learning plan (CLP).

Area Learning Centers (ALCs). Alternative education programs that are characterized by the following:

- Provides a wide array of educational services for students in high school and middle school. Providing targeted services (for kindergarten through eighth-grade students) is optional.
- Must serve students from two or more districts (with the exception of Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth).
- Students must meet the at-risk criteria outlined in *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.68.
- Must operate year round.
- All students must have a continual learning plan (CLP).

At-Risk. Characterization of students who meet the criteria outlined in *Minnesota Statutes* 2009, 124D.68.

Average Daily Attendance (ADA). Days (or hours) attended divided by instructional days (or hours).

Average Daily Membership (ADM). Days (or hours) enrolled divided by instructional days (or hours). ADM is the basis for general education revenue.

Concurrently Enrolled. An enrollment status for students who are enrolled during the school day in both a traditional school and an alternative education program.

Continual Learning Plan (CLP). All students enrolled in an alternative education program must have an annually updated CLP that addresses their learning objectives and experiences, assessment measurements, and requirements for grade-level progression.

Contract Alternative. Nonpublic entity that contracts with a public school district to provide instructional services to at-risk students.

Credit Recovery. Extended-time program for secondary students to make up missing or failed credits needed for graduation.

Dual Enrolled. An enrollment status for students who are enrolled full time at a traditional school and receive extended-time instructional services in an alternative education program.

Extended Time. Instructional time that occurs outside of the traditional school day or year. Extended-time programs are typically summer school or before or after school.

Independent Study. An instructional method (typically reserved for students of at least 16 year of age) in which the majority of the education consists of self-directed work completed outside of the traditional classroom. Students participating in independent study generate membership hours based on successful completion of coursework; 20 percent or more of the membership hours earned must be student-teacher contact time.

Learning-Year Program. State-approved program that provides instruction on a year-round basis. All alternative education programs are learning-year programs.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). A federal act ensuring accountability (among other things) for schools designated as Title I and Title III. Under this act, schools must demonstrate that they are making “adequate yearly progress.”

Targeted Services. State-approved elementary and middle-school programs for at-risk students. Programming occurs on an extended-time basis.



January 22, 2010

James Nobles
Office of the Legislative Auditor
Room 140 Centennial Building
638 Cedar Street
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Mr. Nobles:

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has received and reviewed the Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) report on alternative education programs. MDE appreciates the very thorough review of our state's alternative education programs and this letter is in response to the OLA's recommendations. MDE will consider the recommendations and information contained in this report and determine the modifications to improve Alternative Education Programs and the application process.

The following represents MDE's responses to each of the OLA recommendations.

OLA Recommendation #1

The Minnesota Department of Education should initiate a pilot project to use and evaluate additional measures of alternative education student performance.

MDE Response:

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), MDE is required to have the same set of reporting standards for all public schools. MDE will consider working with the alternative education program community to develop additional measures for alternative education programs to use and evaluate student performance that are in addition to the required reporting standards.

OLA Recommendation #2

The Minnesota Legislature should allow the Minnesota Department of Education and school districts with students enrolled in alternative education programs in other districts to challenge the validity of curriculum provided by those alternative education programs to ensure the curriculum meets state standards.

MDE Response:

School districts have the ability to review curriculum offerings of alternative education programs and should exercise this authority when it is determined the curriculum does not meet state and local standards. MDE holds all public schools accountable for the state academic standards through a statewide accountability system and imposes consequences for failing to meet school and student proficiency levels on the reading and math MCA-II.

OLA Recommendation #3

The Minnesota Legislature should allow all school districts to offer targeted services, regardless of whether they provide other alternative education programs.

MDE Response:

The approval process for targeted services has been in place since its inception. The rationale for targeted services being attached to the area learning center (ALC) is because students, who access either, or both, are subject to meeting the entrance criteria outlined in Minnesota Statute 124D.68. MDE can use this opportunity to refine the application process and expand targeted services.

Recommendation #4

The Minnesota Department of Education should increase its ongoing oversight of alternative education programs.

MDE Response:

MDE supports this recommendation. However, the capacity to implement the recommendation is limited due to budget constraints. It should be noted that MDE provides technical assistance to alternative education programs and staff are in the process of refining procedures for supporting alternative education programs through site evaluations focused on increasing student achievement.

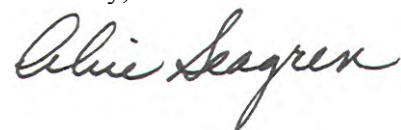
Recommendation #5

The Minnesota Department of Education should review its policies for determining schools' adequate yearly progress (AYP) and ensure that alternative education programs are held accountable only for instruction they provide.

MDE Response:

MDE agree that alternative education programs should be held accountable only for the instruction provided. The process used to determine AYP is as follows: Alternative education programs are included in AYP because of federal statute that requires MDE to assess all students in public schools in reading and math. Students who are enrolled at ALCs full time are expected to test in applicable subjects and students who are dual enrolled (i.e. enrolled at the two different schools over the testing window) share results across both schools as both schools are involved in their education. All students must be tested on test days regardless of the site(s) they attend. If the student is enrolled at an alternative education program and tested, MDE is required to include their scores. If not, the student is counted against the alternative education program in participation only. MDE does not use graduation as an indicator for alternative education programs because students can graduate under any of their contributing districts requirements. Also, MDE will give the site the benefit of the doubt in the "other indicator" category by allowing the site to use attendance rather than graduation rate.

Sincerely,



Alice Seagren
Commissioner

cc: Chas Anderson; Patricia K. King; Glory Kibbel; David Bakke

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