



Alternative Education Programs

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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Alternative education students had lower attendance and graduation rates than traditional students, but some alternative education students improved on these measures over time.

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

Key Recommendations:

- MDE should initiate a pilot project to use and evaluate additional measures of alternative education student performance.
- 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.
- The Minnesota Legislature should allow all school districts to offer targeted services, regardless of whether they provide other alternative education programs.
- MDE should increase its ongoing oversight of alternative education programs.

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.

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 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

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.

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

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

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

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.

Summary of Agency Response

In a letter dated January 22, 2010, Minnesota Commissioner of Education Alice Seagren said that the department “will consider the recommendations and information contained in this report and determine the modifications to improve Alternative Education Programs and the application process.” In response to OLA's recommendation to allow all school districts to provide targeted services, Commissioner Seagren said, “MDE can use this opportunity to refine the application process and expand targeted services.” In response to OLA's recommendation that MDE increase its ongoing oversight of alternative education programs, Commissioner Seagren said, “MDE supports this recommendation. However, the capacity to implement the recommendation is limited due to budget constraints.... 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.”

The full evaluation report, *Alternative Education Programs*, is available at 651-296-4708 or:
www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/ped/2010/alted.htm

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