

Alternative School Options across the US

MOMENTUM STRATEGY & RESEARCH

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National Opportunity Youth Collaborative Report: Alternative School Options across the US

Introduction

As an organization whose leadership has been working to impact alternative education related policy and practice for more than a decade, Momentum Strategy & Research¹ (Momentum) developed the National Opportunity Youth Collaborative (NOYC) with the vision of providing the best available data and information on alternative schools across the country and their performance. To accomplish this, Momentum has spent a number of years compiling the best available data and information, housed in the NOYC's *Alternative School and Performance Database*—a collection of all alternative education options available to students within the public education system and their relevant student and school outcome data.

By maintaining the most accurate database of alternative education campuses (or AECs)—which we define in greater detail in the next section—Momentum aims to:

- Provide the best available data regarding the number and types of alternative options available to students across the country;
- Provide the best available data and research outlining typical performance trends to inform:
 - The expansion of quality measures and metrics used for AECs in high-stakes accountability;
 - Evidence-based performance targets; and
 - Policies for holding AECs accountable to rigorous and attainable standards.

This report marks the inaugural NOYC publication and is aimed at informing the public on the national alternative education landscape. Specifically, this report outlines the best available assessment of the number and types of alternative education campuses (AECs) to date.

Defining AECs

Over their years of working with state education agencies, charter school organizations, school districts, and education reformers on issues of measurement and accountability for so called “alternative schools”, Momentum was aware that not all states, districts, charter authorizers, and/or policy makers were talking about the same set of schools. In some locations, the definition of an “alternative school” was very specific and codified in statute or in regulation, in others, “alternative education options” were more vague, with no official definition to be found. Even where there are definitions, there is a lot of variation in what it

¹ For more information on Momentum Strategy & Research, see the *About the Authors* section in the back of this report.

means to be an “alternative school”. Therefore, our first task has been to identify where there are commonalities and use those to arrive at a definition that a) makes sense to those in the field and b) demarcates a very small subset of the public education system. Thus, Momentum started by collecting the alternative education and accountability policies from all 50 states, as well as DC, and reviewing the policies for common features to help arrive at our own definition of what we refer to as Alternative Education Campuses (AECS).²

Most often included in the statutory and/or regulatory definitions of AECs are two components: the target student population(s), and the educational unit (i.e., schools or programs). Two additional components that are found, but less often than the former two, include a minimum percentage of the target student population a school needs to be considered an AEC, and/or a specific school mission. The following paragraphs walk through each of these components.

Target student population: State alternative education policies tend to outline a list of characteristics that students could or should have before enrolling in an AEC. Table 1 shows the student characteristics most commonly cited within the state policies. These factors tend to be specified because they have been linked empirically to an increased likelihood of students dropping out of high school. Therefore, we refer to students with these characteristics as High Risk Students or High Risk Youth.³

² Borrowing from the nomenclature used in our home state of Colorado.

³ It should be noted that the definition of High-Risk is not the same as the definition of “at risk” as outlined by Federal Adequate Yearly Progress language, where students qualifying for free meals and/or identified as English language learners are considered “at risk”. However, it is also worth noting that at-risk students may be disproportionately represented among High-Risk Student populations within AECs.

Table 1: Most Commonly Identified Student Factors Defining High-Risk Youth across the 50 States and DC, in 2016-2017

High-Risk Characteristics Specified by States' Alternative School Policies		# of States
Poor academics (retained, failure of state assessments, poor grades)		22
Prior Dropout		17
Disruptive or problem behaviors in school		16
Pregnant or parenting teen		15
Truant, chronic absentee, poor attendance		13
Over-age, credit deficient		11
Criminal activity, juvenile delinquent, court involved youth		10
Alcohol, substance abuse		10
Experienced trauma or abuse		8
Limited English Proficient		8
Homeless		7
Student in foster care or ward of the court		7
Parent with addiction, alcoholism, or incarceration		5
Special education or IEP		5
Mobile or child of migrant family		4

Source: Momentum Strategy & Research

Educational Unit: States vary in whether AECs are defined as schools and/or programs. However, states that define AECs as schools tend to also include more robust systems of accountability in their state laws. States that define AECs as programs tend to hold these programs to compliance based standards, such as maximum student-teacher ratios and specific programmatic components.

Minimum Percentage of high-risk students: In addition, these state laws tend to specify a minimum threshold of High-Risk Students needed to qualify for alternative accountability (Table 2).

Table 2: Minimum Percentage of High-Risk Students Needed for Schools to Qualify as an AEC

State	Percentage
Arizona	70%
California	70%
Colorado	90%
Florida	51%
Ohio	51%
Nevada	75%
New Mexico*	10%
South Carolina	85%
Texas	75%
Average % Needed	64%
*At least 10% over the age of 19 or at least 20% classified as special education students	
(Source: Momentum Strategy & Research)	

School Mission: Finally, while only a few states mention the need to have a specific mission to qualify as an AEC, practitioners in the field have also tended to agree that a school’s mission to serve High Risk Students is important for purposes of identifying the appropriate staff and resources needed to serve the students.

Based on this policy analysis (and vetted with over 80 practitioners during a conference presentation)⁴, Momentum defines AECs as:

Schools that, as their mission, serve a disproportionately high percentage of High-Risk Youth⁵

AECs by the Numbers

In 2017, Momentum updated the entire list of AECs in their *Alternative School and Performance Database*. To identify AECs, Momentum first collected all published “alternative school” lists from the state departments of education.⁶ Second, Momentum conducted a search of the National Center for Education Statistics’ school database, selecting the alternative

⁴ Presented on October 27, 2016 at the Alternative Accountability Policy Forum in San Diego, California.

⁵ Which aligns with the student characteristics outlined in Table 1 of this document.

⁶ However states defined their version of “alternative.”

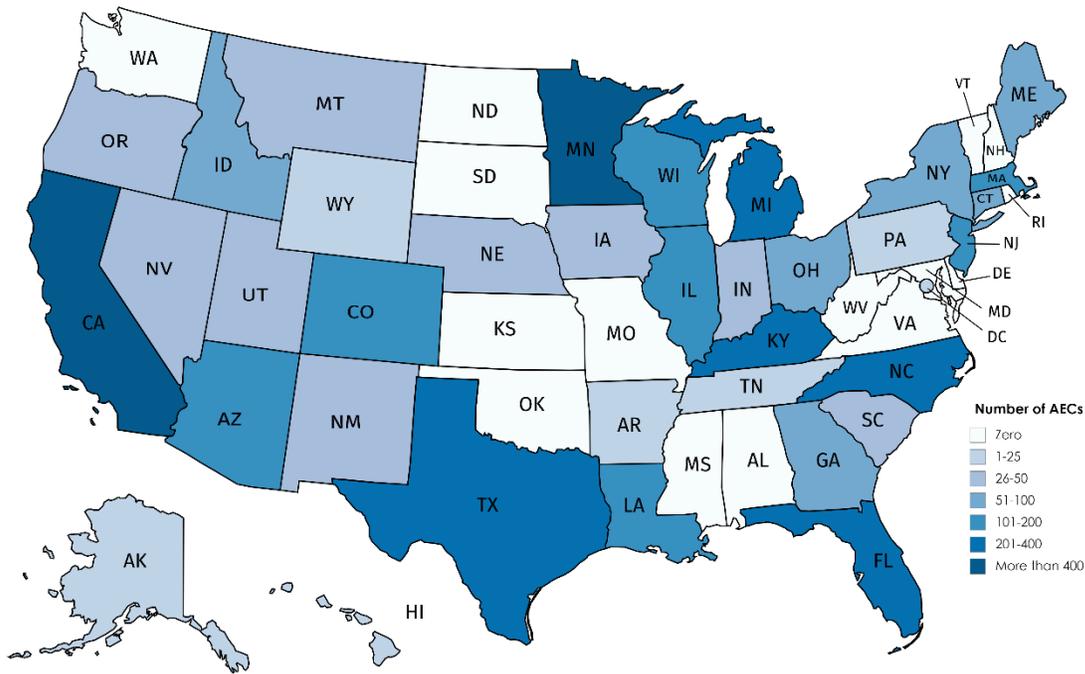
identifier for each state. For each state, these two lists were then cross-referenced, and mismatches were researched further using the following steps:

1. Determine whether the school/program was run by a state agency, such as the state's department of juvenile justice or health and human services division.
 - a. If yes, the school/program was put back into the list of AECs,
 - b. If no, the school/program entered the next series of reviews.
2. Review lowest and highest grades served and determine the following:
 - a. Any on the list that served pre-K and/or kindergarten only were left out of the AEC list altogether.
 - b. Mismatches serving Pre-K/K through 5/6 or K-12 were further scrutinized.
 - i. If they were a school/program for special education students, they were put onto a specific special education AEC list.
 - ii. If the mismatches were part of a state agency (such as a foster home, the DJJ, or state hospital), the school was left in the AEC database.
 - iii. If neither i nor ii applied, the school/program was removed from the list.
 - c. Mismatches serving middle school grades only, middle and high school grades combined, or high school grades only were subject to a website and document review.
 - i. Those that had a clear mission to serve High Risk Youth and/or provide specific services, such as credit recovery or dropout recovery, were kept on the AEC list.
 - ii. Those that did not include any indication as to a specialized mission fitting our criteria were moved to a separate list pending further verification of their AEC status at a later date.

Based on the methods outlined above, Momentum has identified 5,104 schools and programs across the country that are characterized as AECs. Across each state, there is a wide range of the number and type of AECs that have been identified. For example, there are 14 states for which we found no record of AECs, 2 states with more than 400 AECs, and the remaining states range somewhere in between. Figure 1 provides a detailed outline of the number of AECs identified in each state, using a color coded legend. The numbers reflected in Figure 1 are inclusive of standalone schools, school-based programs, district-run programs, treatment facilities, as well as schools and programs run within juvenile detention centers and state residential facilities.⁷

⁷ See Appendix A for a list of the number of schools and/or programs by state.

Figure 1. Map Showing the Number of Alternative Education Campuses Identified in each State, and DC, by Momentum Strategy & Research, as of December 2017.



Created with mapchart.net

Among the 5,104 AECs, at least 3,262 are standalone schools. Of the remainder, 635 have been identified as programs, and around 1,200 have not yet been identified as either schools or programs.⁸ (See Table 3).

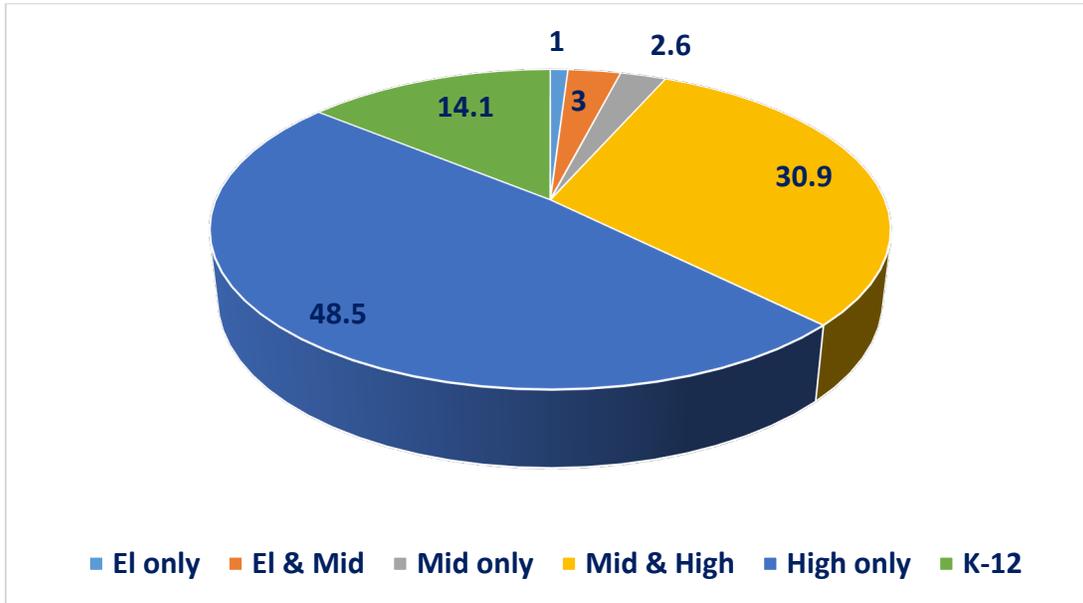
Table 3. Alternative Education Campuses (AECs) by Type in 2018

<i>AEC Type</i>	<i>Count</i>
<i>AEC schools</i>	3,262
<i>Traditional schools</i>	2,578
<i>Charter schools</i>	684
<i>AEC programs</i>	635
<i>Status not yet determined</i>	1,207
<i>Total AECs</i>	5,104

⁸ States vary greatly in the quality of the data provided to NCES, and schools and programs can shift from one to the other over time. Thus, while having an NCES school identifier may provide the best indication of whether an AEC is a school or a program, Momentum found a number of instances where there was conflicting information, such as a state list identifying an AEC as a program, but the AEC had a NCES school code in the NCES database which may indicate that it is a school.

As summarized in Table 3, the great majority of AECs that are standalone schools are run as traditional public schools (79 percent), with just 21 percent (684 schools) operated as public charter schools. In addition, we see that nearly half of the schools and programs identified as AECs serve students in high school only. Another 31 percent of AECs serve both middle and high school students and roughly 14 percent are K-12 schools or programs.

Figure 2. Grades Served by Alternative Education Campuses, in 2017-2018.



Though Momentum has yet to do an exhaustive data collection effort to identify AECs' primary missions and/or target student populations, we did record any data that was evident during the AEC identification project. Table 4 provides a preliminary look at some of the missions that were identified during data collection.

Table 4. Count of AECs with Identified Missions as of August 2018

AEC Mission	Number Identified Thus Far
Credit Recovery	134
Dropout Recovery	231
Residential Facility	493
Special Education	97
Teen Parents	7

To date, we have identified 97 AECs that serve primarily special education students, as well as 493 AECs that are run within residential facilities. Table 5 provides a breakdown of the

types of residential facilities in the AEC database—including adjudication facilities, residential treatment or hospitalization sites and group homes, or other residential facilities. In addition, 134 AECs explicitly stated that their main focus was to help students recover high school credits, and 231 explicitly marketed themselves as dropout recovery schools/programs.

Table 5 AECs Found within Residential Facilities

AEC Facility Type	Count
Adjudication	313
Hospital or Treatment	116
Group Home or Unspecified Residential	64
Total	493

What’s Next?

Late in the 2017-2018 school year, Momentum formed a partnership with the National Charter School Institute (NCSI) to capitalize on their individual assets. Through its data and compliance platform, Epicenter, NCSI has a robust and well supported data and information management portal that will be used by Momentum’s NOYC participating schools and organizations to upload data and information in a way that is secure and user friendly.

Epicenter was developed by NCSI as a compliance platform for charter schools to store and maintain data and information relevant to their charter authorizer. As such, Epicenter is well staffed with experts that can 1) assist Momentum in training and providing technical support to National Opportunity Youth Collaborative (NOYC) participants, 2) maintain a secure data warehouse so that participating users can be confident that any data shared is safe and stored in a way that is compliant with state and federal laws around student and family data privacy, 3) assist Momentum in the development of data tools that will allow NOYC participants to view typical performance patterns among AECs nationally and locally on a variety of measures and metrics, and 4) help Momentum bring their longstanding vision to reality. This vision is allowing AECs to compare their own measured outcomes against that of similar schools and/or programs.

When schools and organizations become participating partners in Momentum’s National Opportunity Youth Collaborative, they are not only gaining access to the Epicenter database, but they are also providing resources that support future data collection and research efforts. In the coming months, Momentum will be updating the Alternative School and Performance Database with recently published outcomes on measures such as cohort graduation rates, student attendance rates, PARCC and SBAC outcomes, and more.

In addition, it is only through alternative schools' NOYC participation that Momentum gains access to student level data on measures that are more central to the missions of AECs, such as student engagement, social-emotional adjustment, and other non-academic measures of growth and success. Our ability to conduct research and analysis on these types of data will help alternative schools to set expectations for both students and their schools into the future.

Appendix A: Number of AECs by State

State	School	Program	Unknown	Total
AK	24	0	0	24
AL	0	0	0	0
AR	20	0	0	20
AZ	179	0	0	179
CA	996	2	71	1069
CO	94	10	0	104
CT	10	60	18	88
DC	11	2	3	16
DE	0	0	0	0
FL	354	19	27	400
GA	59	0	0	59
HI	1	0	0	1
IA	35	0	1	36
ID	46	1	12	59
IL	32	2	139	173
IN	20	1	17	38
KS	0	0	0	0
KY	161	9	55	225
LA	31	112	0	143
MA	19	177	1	197
MD	0	0	0	0
ME	4	56	0	60
MI	316	0	80	396
MN	0	0	477	477
MO	0	0	0	0
MS	0	0	0	0

State	School	Program	Unknown	Total
MT	2	33	0	35
NC	100	105	2	207
ND	0	0	0	0
NE	0	0	38	38
NH	0	0	0	0
NJ	0	1	140	141
NM	36	0	0	36
NV	1	0	26	27
NY	73	0	0	73
OH	85	0	0	85
OK	0	0	0	0
OR	29	17	3	49
PA	0	0	6	6
RI	0	0	0	0
SC	12	30	0	42
SD	0	0	0	0
TN	18	0	3	21
TX	369	0	7	376
UT	33	0	14	47
VA	0	0	0	0
VT	0	0	0	0
WA	0	0	0	0
WI	37	0	102	139
WV	0	0	0	0
WY	11	0	7	18
Total	3218	637	1249	5104

About the Authors

Momentum Strategy & Research (Momentum) is a Colorado based organization that collaborates with other organizations nationally to collect data and conduct research and analysis to inform public K-12 education policy. Momentum's work largely focuses on research and development efforts to inform how atypical schools can be effectively assessed within accountability systems. Of particular interest are the measures and metrics used to hold alternative education campuses (AECs) accountable within state, district, and charter school authorizers' systems.

Over the last decade, Momentum's leadership has worked to shape alternative accountability policies and practices, working collaboratively with state departments of education, school districts, charter school authorizers, and large networks of alternative education providers. Momentum's research and development efforts have directly impacted statewide alternative school policy and practice in Colorado, Arizona, and Ohio, as well as district and/or charter school authorizers in states such as New York, Illinois, Minnesota, Nevada, and Idaho. Currently, Momentum is partnering with groups to impact policy in California, Michigan, and New Mexico.

To find out more, or to connect with us directly, visit our website at:

<https://momentumstrategyandresearch.godaddysites.com>