



Washington State Auditor's Office Performance Audit

Integrity • Respect • Independence

Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) in Washington

First report in our longitudinal study of ALE programs and student outcomes

Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs offer school districts greater flexibility to educate Washington's diverse student population by serving students outside traditional classroom settings. In 2013, the Legislature approved Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946, which required the State Auditor's Office to conduct a performance audit of ALE beginning with the 2013-14 school year and continuing through 2016-17.

For the first of the three full-length reports in the series we will produce during our four-year study, we conducted interviews and focus groups with administrators, teachers, staff, parents and students at 10 ALE programs associated with higher student outcomes. We also reviewed student data, provided by the Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI) for all students enrolled in public schools during the 2013-14 school year.

Our visits to 10 ALE programs yielded a wealth of detail

The ALE programs we visited used online and parent partnership models to serve students. Each program we visited varied in structure, focus, teaching style and curricula, but we identified several common themes and characteristics.

The ALE programs we visited share some important characteristics

- Course enrollments were small compared to traditional schools
- High level of one-on-one interaction and close personal relationships between students and teachers
- Highly individualized and self-paced instruction
- Students feel safe; bullying and teasing are rare

Students choose ALE programs for a variety of reasons

- They can add extra courses to graduate early or to make up missing credits
- They can catch up on school time lost due to ill health or other activities
- Homeschoolers seek access to public school teachers and curricula
- A preference for a more personal, self-paced, less distracting educational environment

Teachers should be the right fit for the ALE model

- Adaptable
- Have the attitude that every student can succeed
- Able to quickly assess and respond to a student's specific academic needs

Staff from ALE programs across the state shared similar concerns

- Negative perceptions of the program, its purpose and its students
- Documentation requirements that seem unclear or burdensome
- Frequently changing rules and regulations with little guidance
- Inadequate numbers of teachers and support staff
- State testing protocols may affect ALE teaching time and results

The students and families we interviewed were united in expressing great enthusiasm for ALE, which was echoed by administrators, teachers and staff. Despite their concerns, our interviewees emphasized that it is critical for ALE programs to continue. From their point of view, the programs are meeting their intent: "to give schools flexibility to serve a diverse student population."

Three characteristics of highly successful ALE students

Our interviewees described the students most likely to succeed in ALE programs as:

- Self-motivated
- Able to teach themselves
- Able to effectively manage their own time and schedule

Several noted that ALE may work well for some students with special needs.

Our review of 2013-14 student data confirmed preliminary analyses

We repeated the analyses we conducted for the status update we published in February 2015, which described characteristics and academic outcomes for ALE and non-ALE students. We took into account the data limitations we identified, and the results of our analyses did not differ significantly from our earlier work. (That report is available online at www.sao.wa.gov/state/Pages/PA_ALEstudy.aspx)

2013-14 ALE students compared to non-ALE students

Student characteristics

ALE students were, on average:

- Less racially diverse
- Slightly more likely to be female than male
- Less likely to speak English as a second language
- Less likely to identify themselves as having a disability
- Less likely to be enrolled in programs such as Limited English Proficiency, Highly Capable, special education, or free and reduced lunch

Academic outcomes

ALE students were, on average:

- Less likely to graduate on time
- More likely to be one or more grade levels behind their peers
- More likely to drop out of school
- Less likely to meet standards during state testing
- Less likely to take college-bound coursework
- More likely to have slightly lower grade-point averages

However, issues in ALE student data collection may pose challenges for future analyses

Using information from the 2013-14 school year, we were able to identify only about three-fourths of ALE-funded students when compared to reports districts submitted separately for funding purposes.

- While OSPI required districts to identify ALE-funded coursework using a Yes/No field in the data system, it did not enforce the requirement until after the end of the 2013-14 school year due to data entry issues, yielding incomplete data.

The same legislation that mandated our audit changed the way ALE is named and defined, eliminating program types and replacing them with three course types. Programs were to use these new definitions beginning in the 2014-15 school year.

- However, some ALE program staff told us they were uncertain how to interpret the new definitions. Without clear and consistent application of the new definitions, programs may misclassify courses, which will compromise the reliability of any analyses based on ALE course type.

Recommendations

The inability to accurately identify ALE students in the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) is an issue that must be addressed for purposes beyond this legislatively mandated audit. Researchers, educators, policy makers and other members of the educational system as a whole will not be able to adequately monitor and evaluate ALE student outcomes until data systems are accurate and complete. Consistent and accurate data also demonstrate accountability in the use of public funds.

We recommend that OSPI...

- ✓ **Periodically evaluate whether the number of students reported as ALE-funded in CEDARS is consistent with the numbers reported by ALE programs for funding purposes**
- ✓ **Follow up with programs where there are large discrepancies**
- ✓ **Evaluate whether ALE programs are reporting course types consistently and comparably**
- ✓ **Provide further clarification as needed**

Audit schedule

Additional reports and updates will appear as our longitudinal study progresses:

Audit report #2 (expected publication: December 2016)

Summary of ALE students during the 2014-15 school year, and the status of 2013-14 ALE students one year later.

Status update #2 (expected publication: December 2017)

Summary of ALE students during the 2015-16 school year, and the progress of 2013-14 ALE students two years later, compared to their non-ALE peers.

Audit report #3 (expected publication: December 2018)

Summary of ALE students during the 2016-17 school year, and the progress of 2013-14 ALE students three years later, compared to their non-ALE peers. We also plan to visit ALE programs that show strong individual student growth.