A Cross Case State Analysis of Alternative Education Accountability Policy

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Abstract

This comparative policy analysis examined accountability requirements for alternative education programs as prescribed in state legislation and dictated by state education agency policy. Web-based searches of legislation, policy papers, and government documents from September 2010 through August 2011 found variation in how four states (California, Texas, Kentucky, and Michigan) assessed alternative education programs. Findings indicated school achievement was measured by both standard accountability practices and substitute systems for alternative schools. Ongoing adjustments in state assessment procedures, reforms due to federal mandates, and constraints due to tight budgets were evident. Findings suggest that states support the use of alternative schools to serve students who fall behind or are in danger of dropping out. However, regardless of varied assessment strategies to monitor these schools, there exists little indication of a solid solution to alleviate perennial gaps in at-risk student achievement.

Alternative education programs have emerged as a means to reduce student dropout rates and otherwise serve students not succeeding in mainstream education (Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013). Services commonly provided in these programs include academic remediation; credit recovery; and various types of job, academic, and socio-emotional counseling. Factors such as acute truancy, disruptive school behavior, pregnancy, and unsettled personal histories, result in alternative programs being the last chance for some students to earn a high school degree.

Students who participate in these programs are disproportionally from low income and minority households thus raising questions about equality of access and the need to ensure the parity of these programs compared to regular public high schools (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).
Evidence of increased graduation rates in recent years suggests that alternate interventions may be a valuable tool in serving otherwise failing students (Yerrick & Beatty-Alder, 2011). Current federal and state regulations, at the same time, require strict adherence to college and career readiness standards. The literature suggests that alternative programs are often pulled between opposing forces: the political outcry for more rigor and strict accountability; and the need for flexibility and individualized instruction that helps underperforming students get to high school graduation, further training, and future jobs (Shepperson & Hemmer, 2013).

Problem Statement

While federal and state accountability standards have certainly shaped the context by which to measure success for the traditional schools, beyond local decisions, alternative education programs have been inconsistently required to adhere to accountability measurements set for other schools (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2012). Even with decreasing numbers of students dropping out of school in the last decade (Aud et al., 2013), it remains particularly urgent to understand to what extent state educational agencies and legislatures are providing systems to accurately report how viable these programs are and how successfully these programs provide alternative avenues to graduation, postsecondary training, and careers.

Purpose Statement

In order to better understand how alternative educational systems report student achievement, this study explored how four states include alternative education schools in their accountability procedures and to consider what issues may result from how these states assess alternative schools. Two primary research questions guided the study. First, the researchers sought to describe how states’ accountability systems were set up to report on alternative education programs. Second, researchers asked whether the major measurements of alternative student achievement were comparable across different state systems. Although policies are continually evolving and changing and as with most policy development are particularly time sensitive, a cross-case comparison is likely to reveal trends, changing attitudes, underlying structure, and standards and requirements around alternative school accountability. Discussion will focus on the results of the state-by-state policy review and around the question whether alternative programs should be expected to comply with the same accountability requirements as regular schools. Fundamental to this discussion is whether uniformity in accountability signifies fairness or whether alternative programs warrant appropriately unconventional measures of student success.

Justification and Significance of Study

Fundamental to accountability models are assumptions about equity. By consistently measuring student achievement, it is theorized that administrators and teachers will review results and adjust and improve instruction (Hubbard, Datnow, & Pruyn, 2014). Across-the-board achievement measures particularly benefit less affluent students who, regardless of school,
neighborhood, socio-economic standing, or ethnicity, must receive a high quality education to meet benchmarks. Conceptually, accountability policies should reduce gaps in achievement for traditionally low performing groups (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez-Heilig, 2008).

Musoba (2011) suggests standardized accountability leads to unintended consequences most detrimental to those students who struggle in classes oriented towards academic standards for which they are ill-prepared or ill-suited. More rigorous academic foci leave these students to fall behind and become increasingly alienated in school. The gap between the haves and have-nots may actually widen as is evidenced by the fact that alternative education programs disproportionately serve poor and minority students (Ruiz de Velasco, et al., 2008).

Support for alternative programs most often focus on gains in student grades, reduced truancy, recovery of credits, and rates of graduation (Hemmer et al., 2013; Aron, 2006). Hard data on overall achievement, however, is often lacking. Research often focuses on teacher-student relationships and instructional strategies more than outcomes assessment. This may be due to the character and culture of alternative programs, but also because student records have historically been integrated into home schools or other district reports that do not allow for targeted alternative program assessment (Hemmer & Shepperson, 2012). Many students who attended alternative programs failed to have that information recorded at all (Penning & Slate, 2011). Only 36 states were found to actually collect alternative student achievement data at similar levels to those for traditional students (Lehr et al., 2009).

**Background of Study**

In the last several years, the authors have independently and together studied alternative schools, their personnel, and student outcomes at various locations in California, Texas, and Kentucky (Hemmer, 2011; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2012; Hemmer et al., 2013; Shepperson, Reynolds, & Hemmer, 2013; Shepperson & Hemmer, 2013; Hemmer, 2014). It quickly became clear that while schools differed in geography and design, there was a similarity in purpose and character. Those programs most successful had staff with a strong desire to help students and an ability to engage students through highly individualized instruction. Less apparent was a simple connection between school climate, student engagement, and high accountability scores. Our research and others (e.g. Aron, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr et al., 2009) have often found that alternative programs face an uphill battle in providing instructional remediation, academic credit recovery, and personal counseling in a manner that could quickly translate to students performing at grade level. In recent years, college readiness standards have placed additional pressure on alternative program staff and district officials to increase alternative programs’ academic credentials while at the same time responding to more and more students at risk of failing or dropping out into these schools. In a quickly changing landscape increasingly focused on achievement data, it seemed important to investigate how alternative student progress in different states was actually measured.

**Accountability Systems**

Fundamental to accountability models were two assumptions. First, that measurements of student achievement will be used to improve instruction and adjust programs, and second, that
increased across-the-board measurements will lead to more equitable education for all students (McNeil et al., 2008). As an ideal, accountability policies are neutral without favoring any group of students over another. Meaning that standardized accountability does not delineate by neighborhood, school, or student make-up, thus ensuring equivalent benchmarks for all students regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, or location (Stecher, Hamilton, & Gonzalez, 2003). By holding all schools to the same standards, it is postulated that all schools would work to ensure student success and high rates of graduation; ultimately reduced gaps in achievement of traditionally low performing groups (McNeil et al., 2008).

Accountability and Alternative Settings

Alternative education programs disproportionately serving poor and minority students performance and expectation gaps are especially concerning (Shepperson et al., 2013; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). The extent to which alternative programs improve to minimize gaps may be influenced by how they are included in state accountability policies. Recent evidence of how alternative education programs are assessed through state accountability procedures suggests little is known about outcomes expected under these programs (Shepperson et al., 2013; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Martin & Brand, 2006). Aron (2006) found that alternative school success most often is measured by improved grades, increased attendance, recovery of credit, and ultimately graduation rates of students enrolled. Rather than rely on the prescriptive academic benchmarks, often found in current accountability procedures, to measure a school’s success, alternative education programs focus on heightening meaningful instruction, and cultivating nurturing environments oriented towards authentic student engagement and development (Shepperson & Hemmer, 2013)

Research Methods

Sample Selection

The analysis of this study focuses on the legislative enactment of including alternative schools in state accountability procedures in four states: California, Texas, Kentucky and Michigan. These four states were selected based on a 2009 report from Jobs for the Future (JFF). For the purpose of this study, each of the four states represented a case of alternative assessment, ranging from fully developed to an absence of state policy around alternative school accountability (JFF, 2009).

Data Collection

California, Texas, Kentucky, and Michigan, offered maximum policy variation that served the across case sampling strategy of this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). Policy documents including state legislation and administrative codes were analyzed. State education agency policies, guiding principles, summary reports, accountability requirements, college and career readiness standards, and where applicable, alternative school models were also investigated.
Data were obtained using publicly available state education agency websites from September 2010 through August 2011. The online search included a comprehensive scan of active legislative, regulatory policies, alternative school information and accountability procedures, and legislative policy publications. A review of literature augmented web-based documents and provided additional information about alternative education state accountability procedures and policies. Specially noted was evidence of legislative changes regarding alternative education and accountability taking place between 2001 and 2011.

Analyses and Interpretations

A qualitative strategy of thematic data interpretation was used to code, categorize, and interpret document data (Morse & Richards, 2002) deductively using the theoretical frame of a theory of action to identify critical themes (Boyatzis, 1998), and then compare to accountability and alternative education research literature. The unit of analysis was a sentence or group of sentences (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), alpha coded into seven categories: education code, administrative code, program overview, implementation processes, accountability standards, accountability reporting, and compliance. Variability in states’ policies resulted in inconsistency across all categories for all states.

Findings

Accountability for Alternative Education

With research question 1, we asked, “To what extent have distinct accountability systems been devised for alternative education programs?” Under federal accountability, alternative schools are treated like all other schools. States must maintain reporting systems that ensure academic achievement for all public school students (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002) but reporting systems may vary by educational program. Technical constraints such as high mobility and small school enrollment may limit full applications of standard accountability models to these schools. California and Texas, in turn, use alternative accountability procedures, whereas neither Kentucky nor Michigan uses separate accountability procedures for alternative education programs.

California. Given the technical considerations, California law exempts alternative programs from State Academic Performance Index (API) rankings and interventions (Hill, 2007). Instead, California allows schools that serve at-risk student populations (at least 70%) to use the Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) to frame adequate yearly progress (AYP) and supplant state accountability procedures. While conforming to the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 and other related legislation (e.g., California Education Code Section 52052(h); California Department of Education [CDE, 2011a]), there are four guiding principles of ASAM: 1) support parental and public right to know student performance levels; 2) measure growth in student knowledge of content, skills, and competencies reflecting state standards; 3) recognize the importance of student populations served by alternative schools; and 4) mirror standards and principles of the regular accountability model (CDE, 2011b). Inherent to these
principles is that the ASAM adds flexibility by allowing alternative assessments that better align to the actual learning taking place within these schools.

While comprehensive high schools in California are held accountable based on students’ mastery of standards tested on the California Standards Tests and the California High School Exit Examination, the State Board of Education approved several indicators separated into three areas of achievement—readiness, context, and academics and completion—to measure the performance of ASAM schools. It is thought that these programs should first establish the readiness of a student to learn, and then context and academic indicators are included to improve student performance. Recognizing the need for local autonomy, state policy allows ASAM schools to designate which indicators (one from each of the three areas of achievement) they will hold their program accountable for (CDE, 2011a).

**Texas.** Similar to California, in order to use the Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) procedures, Texas alternative schools must serve at-risk students (at least 75% enrollment) and have a primary mission to serve potential dropouts (Texas Educational Agency [TEA], 2011). Traditional schools, even those serving students with high-risk factors, must use regular accountability standards. The AEA process allows alternative campuses and charter schools to choose either an absolute performance standard or designate degrees of improvement for state achievement tests, school completion measures, and annual dropout rates (TEA, 2011).

Several significant, if not conflicting, differences set Texas alternative school assessment apart from the traditional schools. First, the AEA uses a single performance indicator that sums performance across grades (3-12) and across subjects to determine the alternative school rating. This indicator is based on the number of tests taken, as opposed to the number of students tested as found with traditional school accountability (TEA, n.d.). Second, district dropout data may replace school data if school level data is limited. Third, the ranking system for alternative schools differs from traditional schools. According the AEA manual (TEA, 2011), the highest a high-performing alternative schools can rank is acceptable compared to exemplary or recognized for high performing traditional schools. With this ranking system it appears the state requires less from a high performing alternative school than an acceptable traditional school. For example, a high achieving alternative school need only 55% of tests taken to meet passing standards, 60% of students identified as completers and less than 20% of students drop out. Whereas, it is expected that 70% of students pass reading/ELA, writing and social studies, 60% pass mathematics and 55% pass science. Further, cohort completion rates must be 75% or more, with less than 1.8% annual dropout rate.

**Kentucky.** In contrast to California and Texas, Kentucky (and Michigan) does not have in place alternative accountability procedures. Rather, Kentucky links students to their school of origin, whether or not they attend an alternative program all or part of the year. Currently, Kentucky identifies alternative schools as programs rather than separate schools. Student data are reported to and incorporated with data of the home campus. In so doing, Kentucky state law requires all students, traditional and alternative, to meet grade-level standards and attain proficiency as defined under the current Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA; Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2011).
Michigan. Similar to Kentucky, Michigan makes no consideration of achievement differences between alternative and regular students and requires the same standards of accountability for all. While Michigan has no established procedures for alternative accountability, unlike Kentucky, allows alternative programs to self-report student data. Each school in Michigan, whether traditional or alternative, is required to distribute aggregate student-level achievement data in an annual report. As a central feature of state-mandated accountability, schools must present evidence of ongoing improvement, including reports on student achievement, evidence of adequate yearly progress, and measures of teacher quality. In addition, all schools must adopt core curriculum, identify learning outcomes, and meet school accreditation requirements. In Michigan, accountability requirements for alternative and traditional schools are essentially the same (Michigan Department of Education, [MDE], 2011).

Alternative Student-Learning Outcomes

With research question 2, we asked, “How are alternative student-learning outcomes measured?” By all accounts, in all four states, in order to earn a high school diploma, all students (even those enrolled in alternative schools) must pass their respective state assessment. While traditional accountability procedures tend to be narrowly focused, relying exclusively on standardized testing, attendance and dropout rates, historically, alternative program success was measured using indicators of student behavior, academic, and attitudinal changes. Embedded in these broader measures were competency-based performance standards, where improvements were looked for not only in grades and test scores, but also increased attendance, behavior, self-assurance, and motivation that led to improved graduation rates (Aron, 2006; Hemmer, 2011; Hemmer et al., 2013). Alternative education programs generally addressed the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of students through a continuum of services that offered remediation and recovery for students not performing at grade level, which decries intractable measures focused primarily on test scores (Martin & Brand, 2006; Musoba, 2011; Ravitch, 2010).

Of the four states, California appears to be the only state with policy that attempts to capture the complexity of addressing the educational and social needs of at-risk students while responding to standards based reform pressure to define the yearly progress schools must make on assessments. As mentioned previously, with alternative programs in California, policy allows these programs to first establish the readiness of a student to learn, and then context and academic indicators are included to improve student performance.

Texan lawmakers, on the other hand, have sought to ensure that alternative measures do not mean lower standards, and therefore all students on all campuses must demonstrate competence by passing the state proficiency test (at the time of this study, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [TAKS]) to graduate (TEA, 2011).

Discussion

According to the Jobs for the Future report, California and Texas have well-established, statewide alternative accountability systems that represent key tenets necessary in developing such systems. Kentucky had few policies in place to differentially account for alternative
schools. At the time, Michigan proffered no separate procedures. This exploratory study demonstrated the variation across states, and the difficulty in identifying consistence policy patterns. One pattern that was found in all four states is the requirement that students take a minimum number of classes and that they pass proficiency tests in order to graduate high school. In general, it appears that reporting differences in some states did not lessen the basic requirement that all students reach a level of competency before leaving school. While some systems provided for more flexibility in interim reporting, the culminating requirements remained generally the same between alternative programs and traditional high schools.

While these states are moving towards redesigning their accountability system, and for the most part, recognizing the unique role alternative programs play, it is still too early to truly assess the impact alternative accountability procedures has on improving at-risk student achievement. In many regards, the current standards are particularly unfair to large, diverse districts, as well as works to exclude alternative schools because the accountability procedures insist on using the lowest score of any subpopulation of students on any one state assessment or participation.

Increasingly, as evident in this study, states are also constructing accountability models that emphasize college and career readiness skills. In addition to more rigorous readiness skills, new accountability models are striving to drive behavioral changes to yield steady growth for all children to be proficient and prepared for success. Because of the high-stakes nature of current accountability models, it is incumbent upon policymakers to understand the limitations of their state’s accountability procedures.

To facilitate valid and fair comparisons of student outcomes across schools researchers are examining value added models able to estimate contributions of schools, classrooms, regardless of schools serving different student populations (Meyer & Dokumaci, 2010). The use of multiple measures (such as those found in California’s proposed revised ASAM: readiness, academic, and transition) in traditional state and federal models may permit a more accurate assessment of both student and school. However, if states do not articulate their expectations for alternative school performance through accountability procedures that consider context, mobility, and low enrollment, then systemic improvements in education reform are limited.

Implications

Within the limitations of this study, a major finding is that different types of indicators, such as readiness, academic, and proposed transitional, are either used by the four states or are under consideration. However, again, high mobility and low enrollment in these schools threaten the validity of any accountability reporting. Therefore, this study has important implications for future studies. It would be prudent for states considering an alternative accountability model to consider the challenges other states have experienced. Further, in light of the finding that California has put on hold any further changes to the ASAM due to state budget constraints; policymakers should give serious consideration to the cost of developing an alternative model versus changing an existing model so that it includes alternative schools fairly. Having alternative schools included in the traditional state model may likely eliminate the problem related to validity of determinations and classifications, which can potentially decrease issues of inequity. However, current state administrative databases fail to include important
students characteristic indicative of at-risk students attending alternative schools. Taking the lead from Meyer & Dokumaci’s (2010) examination of value-added models, we hope states with a single accountability procedure consider student level variables (poverty, language, special programs, interventions) with value-added productivity (attendance, college and career readiness, student achievement) measured by pre and post data.

Still yet to be resolved is how student achievement for this vulnerable population will be assessed. While central provisions of the NCLB law are under revision, and as part of the current administration’s reform agenda, states may request waivers for increased flexibility in measuring accomplishments of students, teachers, and principals, especially in low-performing schools. However, there continues to be much reliance on outcomes driven by standardized test scores, with no latitude for understanding educational quality within alternative schools. With value-added models being discussed/debated across the nation, it is suggested that state policy makers consider how alternative education programs are valued in their respective states as unique institutions.

References


