

Academic Programs in Alternative Education An Overview

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National Center on Education and the Economy

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Second in a series of papers on alternative education

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I. INTRODUCTION

Reggie, a high school dropout, was referred to YouthBuild Columbus Charter School by his mentor from Big Brothers/Big Sisters when he was 16. He clearly was not ready. He got up and walked out during his initial interview. Reggie returned to YouthBuild the following year and decided to enroll in the program. He attended sporadically and dropped out after a few weeks. He returned again the next year. YouthBuild staff allowed him to enroll again but insisted he sign a contract agreeing to stay in the program. His attendance was sporadic and academic progress slow, but this time he stayed. He was still quiet and angry. Finally, after several months in the program, he started to talk with the counselors on staff. He told them about his family: one brother spent seven years in prison and the other brother was unemployed. The staff called Reggie when he didn't come to school and checked in with him about school and the other aspects of his life each day. It worked. Something clicked. Reggie's attendance improved, he made progress in his GED classes and he began to really enjoy his work on the YouthBuild program's construction site where he was learning vocational skills. His personality changed: he earned the respect of peers and teachers. At the YouthBuild awards luncheon, he was voted the "Most Improved Student". He even gave the commencement address at his graduation from YouthBuild. After Reggie left YouthBuild with his GED and construction skills, he started college at Columbus State University. In the spring, he was selected to be part of a University exchange program and will spend six weeks in London. He is well on his way to a successful life. (Adapted from Stories of Transformation of YouthBuild students by YouthBuild USA)

Reggie's story illustrates the power of second chances. Alternative education programs like YouthBuild give young people the attention and the support they need to succeed, and that they often do not receive in the traditional school system. Before Reggie could make progress on his academic goals, he needed someone to understand his life situation, be willing to prod him on, and have faith in him. Once this happened, "something clicked". But that was not the end of the story. Once something clicked, YouthBuild offered Reggie a relevant and engaging academic program rigorous enough to ensure his entry to college.

This paper is one in a series written for the U.S. Department of Labor on alternative education. The first paper, *An Overview of Alternative Education*, reviewed the literature on alternative education and laid out a typology defining alternative education. This paper examines the academic programming in alternative education programs by reviewing the literature specifically focused on the academic programs in alternative education and summarizing a survey of fifteen alternative education programs. It suggests options for further research on this topic based on the literature review and reports from the programs surveyed.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

- Survey the academic components of fifteen alternative education programs selected to represent the diversity of alternative education programs that exist nationally;
- Report on their successes and challenges of their academic programs; and
- Identify issues about academic programming in alternative education that need additional research based on reports by the programs surveyed and a review of existing literature.

For the purposes of this paper, alternative education is defined as schools or programs that are set up by states, school districts, or other entities to serve young people who, for a variety of reasons, are not succeeding in a traditional public school environment. The creative and individualized environments of these educational programs serve to reconnect and reengage out-of-school youth providing them with an opportunity to achieve in a different setting using different and innovative learning methods. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools and programs, they are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller student-teacher ratios, relevant and career oriented themes, and modified curricula.

Methodology

Information for this report was gathered from two sources: a survey of a diverse set of alternative education programs and a literature review. Criteria for selection of programs in the survey included variations in geographic locations, types of students served, credentials offered, and comprehensiveness of the non-academic services and program components. The programs were asked about the following:

- Population served (age range, education status and other characteristics like incarcerated youth, English-as-Second Language learners, pregnant and parenting teens);
- Average age of participants when they enter the program;
- Average grade participants completed prior to program entry;
- Average reading and math level at entry (measured by assessment tools used by the program);
- Wait list for entry into the program;
- Academic outcomes for students collected and reported by the program;
- Curriculum used and who developed it (publisher, program or teacher);

- Subjects covered by the curriculum;
- Teaching methods used in the classroom;
- Average class size;
- Percent of teachers fully credentialed;
- Instructional background of the school director; and
- Professional development focused on academic content for teachers.

Programs Surveyed

The programs surveyed for this paper include:

- The **Biotechnology Career Academy** in San Jose, California;
- The California Department of Juvenile Justice's **Johanna Boss High School** in Stockton, California;
- Diploma Plus' **Champion Charter School** in Brockton, Massachusetts;
- The **Fairfax County, Virginia Public Schools GED Program**;
- **Fresh Start** in Baltimore, Maryland;
- Portland Community College's **Gateway to College** in Portland, Oregon;
- **Griggs Academy On-line Diploma Program**;
- The **Horizonte Instruction and Training Center ESL Program** in Salt Lake City, Utah;
- **Jefferson County High School** in Louisville, Kentucky;
- The **Latin American Youth Center's (LAYC) YouthBuild Public Charter School GED Program** in Washington, DC;
- Portland Community College's **Multicultural Academic Program (MAP)** in Portland, Oregon;
- **Open Meadow** High School in Portland, Oregon;
- Philadelphia's **Educational Options Program**;
- **SIATech Charter School** at Job Corps Centers in several states; and
- The **Tallahassee Community College GED Plus** program in Tallahassee, FL.

A list of individuals interviewed is attached in Appendix A.

II. Literature Review

There is not a substantial body of research specifically describing or assessing the academic programming in alternative education. In their review of existing research on alternative education Lange and Sletten (2002) note that much of the research on alternative education draws from dropout prevention, at-risk youth, and special education literature. Only recently have there been studies examining alternative education programs broadly, and very few of these have focused on the academic program in particular. The studies Lange and Sletten (2002) reviewed have attempted to identify the key attributes of effective programs. In the first briefing paper of this series, Aron (2006) noted that the lists of key attributes were remarkably similar and synthesized the findings of this literature:

- *Successful programs have a clear focus on academic learning combined with engaging and creative instruction and a culture of high expectations for all students. Learning must be relevant and applicable to life outside of school and to future learning and work opportunities. Applied learning is an important component of the academic program. This is often where employers can play important roles as partners. The curricula address the education and career interests of the students. The curricula are academically rigorous and tied to state standards and accountability systems. Learning goals are known by students, staff, and parents. Students have personalized learning plans and set learning goals based on their individual plans. There are opportunities for youth to catch up and accelerate knowledge and skills. A mixture of instructional approaches is available to help youth achieve academic objectives.*
- *Successful alternative education programs provide instructors with ongoing professional development activities that help them maintain an academic focus, enhance teaching strategies, and develop alternative instructional methods. Staff development involves teacher input, work with colleagues, and opportunities to visit and observe teaching in other settings.*
- *Many alternative education programs are small with a low teacher/student ratio and have small classes that encourage caring relationships between youth and adults.*

Lange and Sletten (2002) caution that the various lists of characteristics of promising programs represent the best judgments of researchers and advocates; there has been no documentation of how common these features are to existing programs or which particular aspect(s) of the academic program is critical for which population of students served by alternative education. Davis, Brutseart-Durant and Lee (2002) suggests that one feature of effective programs often missing from lists of attributes is a "...comprehensive and rigorous mechanism for admitting the 'right students' to the program – the students whose

characteristics and attributes (both positive and negative) suggest that the program has a high likelihood for meeting their educational, personal, and social needs.” Given the diversity of both programs and the profiles of students served (Aron 2006), directing students to the programs best designed to serve their particular needs is critical.

What limited research has been done on academic outcomes of alternative education has shown mixed and sometimes conflicting results. Lange and Sletten’s review of available studies found little or no change in standardized test scores over the course of a school year. Some of the research they reviewed suggests that these findings can be explained by a negative impact when students returned to a conventional setting after attending alternative schools for a short period of time; lack of student investment in the outcomes of testing; and the need for a longer timeframe for examining the results of programs for students who may need more time to make academic gains. They also refer to a 1997 Mathematica study of three alternative high school programs to make the point that outcomes are quite mixed. One of the programs in the study showed strong gains on measures of academic success like improved attendance and credits earned over time, a second program showed no gains, and a third had limited success.

Researchers also suggest the need to differentiate among program types in order to draw conclusions. Raywid (1994) proposed an often-cited typology of alternative education programs that differentiates among programs by their goal. Type 1 programs are “full-time, multi-year, voluntary education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas”; Type 2 programs are shorter term involuntary programs aimed at discipline; and Type 3 programs are short-term therapeutic programs that focus on the social and emotional problems that are barriers to academic learning. Raywid’s and others research has concluded that the first group of programs is the most successful, while the Type 2 involuntary programs focused on discipline are the least successful on a whole range of indicators, including academic achievement (Aron 2006).

The lack of a rich research base on academic programming in alternative schools does not mean there is no research basis for designing a strong academic program. There is a large body of literature on effective schools that isolates key features of effective academic programs in general, and for at-risk youth in particular, in the K-12 education system. *High Schools That Work*, a high school reform initiative led by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), lists research-based practices that work for high school students. Key practices for the academic program include:

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- High expectations;
- An upgraded academic core program;
- Applying academic content and skills to real-world problems and projects;
- Providing access to intellectually challenging career/technical studies in high-demand fields;
- Integrating challenging high school studies and work-based learning;
- Using research—based instructional strategies and technology; and
- Providing a structured system of extra help for those who need it.

There is also emerging literature on improving the literacy skills of adolescents who are substantially behind. As the survey conducted for this paper finds, many students in alternative education have low literacy and numeracy skills. Therefore, the adolescent literacy research is useful to rely on, even though the population in alternative education programs is a few years older than the adolescents that are the subject of this research. In a review of the research, Biancarosa and Snow (2004) summarize fifteen elements of effective adolescent literacy programs:

- *Direct, explicit comprehension instruction*: instruction in the strategies and processes that proficient readers use to understand what they read, including summarizing and keeping track of one's own understanding.
- *Effective instructional principles embedded in content*: language arts teachers using content-area texts (such as science or history) and content-area teachers providing instruction and practice in reading and writing skills specific to their subject areas.
- *Motivation and self-directed learning*: building motivation to read and learn and providing students with the instruction and supports needed for independent learning tasks they will face after graduation.
- *Text-based collaborative learning*: students interacting with one another around a variety of texts.
- *Strategic tutoring*: intense individualized reading, writing, and content instruction as needed.
- *Diverse texts*: texts at a variety of levels and on a variety of topics.
- *Intensive writing*: instruction connected to the kinds of writing tasks students will have to perform well in high school and beyond.
- *A technology component*: technology as a tool for and a topic of literacy instruction.
- *Ongoing formative assessment of students*: informal, often daily, assessment of how

students are progressing under current instructional practices.

- *Extended time blocks for literacy*: two to four hours of literacy instruction and practice that takes place in language arts and content-based classes.
- *A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program*: interdisciplinary and interdepartmental literacy activities that may even coordinate with out-of-school organizations and the local community.
- *Professional development for teachers*: a commitment to long-term and ongoing training for teachers.
- *Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs*: formal assessments that provide data for accountability and research purposes.
- *Teacher teams*: interdisciplinary teams that meet regularly to discuss students and align instruction.
- *Informed leadership*: principals and teachers with a solid understanding of how to teach reading and writing to the full array of students present in the school.

There is also research emerging that focuses on teaching adults to read which has value for alternative education, as the age range of students in alternative education (16 -24 years old) often overlaps with participants in adult education programs (usually 18 years and up). In 2005, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) released *Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults*, a summary of research-based principles for teaching adults to read. The report outlines recommendations in four basic areas of reading instruction (alphabetic, fluency development, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategy development) that are drawn from the research on teaching children and adolescents and suggests that instructors use the following strategies specifically for adults:

- Encourage adults to identify personal reading-related goals;
- Choose appropriate assessments of reading components to identify individual reading strengths and needs;
- Work with learners to assess skills, and make sure they understand assessment results;
- Create individual learning plans based on assessed needs and goals and ensure that adults understand and are committed to the plans;
- Provide explicit instruction as needed to achieve reading goals;
- Make frequent connections between skills work and goal-related applications, including practice with authentic materials at an appropriate level of challenge; and
- Teach adults how to transfer classroom learning to other life contexts and provide tools for continuing to learn outside of class.

The report authors also confirm the lack of research on the specifics of instruction for adults: “Scientific research hasn’t yet been conducted on many instructional questions that arise in adult education classrooms. Available research doesn’t identify the best textbooks or computer-assisted instructional programs. It doesn’t establish proven principles for strategies for working with multi-level adult learner groups.”

Equal attention has not been paid to research on teaching numeracy to adolescents or adults who are behind, but it is an area of much new research, which the alternative education community should monitor. A major report, *Adding It Up*, synthesizing the literature on teaching mathematics in the K-12 system was released by the National Academy of Science in 2001. In 2003, the National Research and Development Center for Adult Literacy and Numeracy in the United Kingdom completed a review of the literature from around the world on teaching mathematics to adults. Their report concluded that “adult numeracy is fast-developing but under-researched, under-theorised, and underdeveloped.” The Office of Vocational and Adult Education at the U.S. Department of Education is now monitoring research on teaching mathematics to adolescents and adults.

Given the dearth of literature describing the academic programming in alternative education specifically, the National Center surveyed fifteen programs to learn about key aspects of their academic program. The discussion below draws from that survey and highlights successes and challenges related to their academic goals, learning environment, curriculum and assessment, teaching and instructional leadership, and the ways they measure their effectiveness. The information gathered here is limited, however, and this review highlights the need for more research to identify specific aspects of academic programming that are necessary for academic achievement for the different populations of students that participate in alternative education programs.

III. Academic Program Types

The academic component of the fifteen alternative programs surveyed varied by their academic goal(s) for their participants, as well as by the way they were structured to meet the needs of their target population.

Program Goals

Academic program goals for students include: getting a job or a vocational credential, learning English well enough to work towards a credential, obtaining a GED, earning a high

school diploma, gaining entry to college, and earning college credit. Some of the programs surveyed had multiple goals for their students. Ten of the fifteen programs offer vocational training or job placement assistance alongside the academic programs. In addition, a few programs also offer more than one academic pathway. The Sacramento Job Corps Center offers both a GED preparatory program and a charter school that awards diplomas. The LAYC YouthBuild offers a GED preparatory program and a diploma program that is part of its new charter school. These programs reported two reasons for adding a high school diploma option: 1) research suggested that students with a GED do no better in the labor market than students without a high school diploma; and 2) the establishment of charter school programs opened an avenue through which alternative programs could access state education funding to support diploma options. LAYC YouthBuild also received a start-up grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to help start their charter school.

The programs are categorized below according to their academic goals for students. The programs are discussed within these categories throughout the paper.

Chart 1: High School Diploma Plus College Credit Programs' Academic Goals

Academic Goal	Program Examples
High School Diploma Plus College Credit	Biotech Career Academy (San Jose, CA) Champion Charter School (Brockton, MA) Gateway to College (Portland, OR)
High School Diploma	Educational Options Program (Philadelphia, PA) Griggs On-Line Diploma Program (various Job Corps sites) Jefferson County High School (Louisville, KY) Johanna Boss High School (Stockton, CA) Open Meadow (Portland, OR) SIATech Charter School (various sites)
GED Plus College Entry or Credit	Tallahassee Community College GED Plus (Tallahassee, FL)
GED	Fairfax County Public School GED Program (Fairfax County, VA) Fresh Start (Baltimore, MD) LAYC YouthBuild Public Charter School GED Program (regular and Spanish GED) (Washington, DC)
English as a Second Language (ESL)	HORIZONTE Instructional and Education Center ESL Program (Salt Lake City, UT) Multicultural Academic Program (MAP) (Portland, OR)

Student Profiles

The characteristics of the students served by these programs vary widely as well. Student profiles differed by age, number of credits needed for graduation, academic level achieved, English language issues, and life situations. Program designs varied in order to serve the varying student profiles.

Chart 2: Academic Program Design Issues by Student Characteristics

Student Characteristics	Academic Program Design Issues
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age limits on state funding for high school diploma programs • Motivation issues for older students who may not want to stay in school for 3+ years
Grade Level Completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to provide options for older students who have very few high school credits • Need to provide easy ways for students missing only a few credits to complete them
Academic Level Achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to provide 'catch-up' curriculum for students who are far behind academically • Need to provide 'competency-based' curriculum for students at a high school level without high school credits
English Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to provide English mastery classes • Need to provide content classes in foreign languages • How to transition to academic or vocational classes in English
Life Situation (employed, parent, social or health issues)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to accommodate work or parenting schedule or need for break in education program to address pressing personal issues • Need to provide access to childcare and other social or health services

According to the survey respondents, a student's age and the number of credits he or she needs for graduation is key to determining whether a high school diploma or GED program is the most appropriate option for a young person. The programs report that students who are younger and/or have at least a year of high school credits accumulated are better candidates for diploma programs than those with less than a year of credits. Gateway to College, which serves students who are 16-20 years old, counsels students who are approaching the upper age limit of 20 and who have very few high school credits not to enroll in their program. Instead, they refer these students to Portland Community College's Youth Empowered to Succeed (YES!) GED program or to adult diploma options that do not have upper age limits. States usually have age limits on the funding they provide to high

school programs and charter schools, varying from 18 to 21, so many diploma programs are unable to serve students above a certain age.

Directing older students with few high school credits to GED programs is not only a practical strategy related to funding restrictions. It is also an issue of student motivation; program directors surveyed report that it is sometimes difficult to tell a 19-year-old that he needs to complete a three- or four-year academic program in order to get a credential. The Philadelphia School District confronted this issue with its Educational Options Program. That program provides evening classes for students who need to make up high school credits. Students with very few credits faced years of evening classes to earn their diploma and were discouraged. In response, the District began offering an accelerated diploma program specifically targeted at older students with less than eight credits (of the 23 required for a diploma). The new program, Accelerated High Schools, is a 12-month, full-day program.

Academic level is another key variable in determining an appropriate program for students. The survey found that some programs set minimum competency levels for entry into their programs. For example, the Griggs on-line diploma program requires a 9th grade level of reading and mathematics to enroll. The Fairfax County Public Schools requires students to test at a 9th grade reading level to enroll in their GED preparatory classes. Students who test below that level are enrolled in pre-GED, or basic skills, classes. Gateway to College also encourages students who are below an 8th grade level in reading to enroll in YES!, MAP, or a Gateway preparation course instead of, or before, Gateway.

Several programs reported that grade levels completed does not always correlate with students' actual academic level. Fresh Start and Open Meadow both report that entering students have typically completed 8th grade, but test at a 6th grade level in reading and math. The SIATech Charter School at the Sacramento Job Corps Center reports that its students have typically completed 11th grade but are at an 8th or 9th grade level in reading and mathematics. This means that some students have accumulated a significant number of high school credits, but still cannot read or do math at levels needed to pass high school exit exams, the GED test, or to function in a workplace.

Students who are far behind academically need more than the opportunity to complete credits needed for a diploma; they need a program specifically designed to help them catch-up academically. Not all programs provide this. The Educational Options Program, for example, provides the same high school classes students may have missed or failed during the day program in the evenings. Several programs do provide programs specifically designed for

students who are behind. Johanna Boss High School, which serves incarcerated youth, has an intensive basic skills program for students who are below grade 8 in reading and mathematics when they enter high school. SIATech uses the Scholastic Read 180 and Renaissance Math programs for students who are at, or below, a 6th grade reading and math level in Job Corps Centers.

The programs surveyed also report that there are some students with very few high school credits who can read or do math at higher levels than their credits (or grade level) would suggest. Program directors report that they might counsel such a student to enroll in a GED program, as taking a competency-based test is a more efficient way for them to get a credential (and perhaps enroll in college) than spending several years accumulating high school credits. Fairfax County Public Schools report that there are students who are eligible to be placed into their GED classes, which require a 9th grade reading level, even though they left high school at 7th or 8th grade. Competency-based diploma programs are another strategy to serve this set of students. Competency-based programs, like the Champion Charter school, promote students based on how well they “show what they know” not by the amount of “time in the seat.” At Champion Charter School, students spend their first year mastering basic academic skills and need to pass a competency-based assessment at a 10th grade academic level to move on to their second (or Plus) year in the program. During their Plus year, they must successfully complete several major projects, a structured internship, and one or more credit-level college classes in order to earn their high school diploma.

Another variable in the student profile in the programs surveyed is level of English proficiency. Programs serving students who are learning English-as-a-Second language attempt to address this issue using different strategies. Portland Community College’s MAP provides intensive English language instruction aimed at enabling students to enter mainstream education programs (like the College’s YES! program or Gateway to College). The Horizonte ESL program combines English language instruction with instruction in life skills and pre-employment skills. They refer students who are ready to one of the GED or high school completion programs Horizonte operates.

Finally, the students in the surveyed programs have different life situations that impact their ability to participate and succeed in particular programs. Accommodating these life situations is often the key to enabling students to succeed. Several programs have flexible schedules aimed at enabling students to participate while still working or parenting. The Educational Options Program and the Fairfax County Public Schools GED Program offer evening classes. Jefferson County High School offers a choice of three time blocks for its program, including an evening session. Gateway to College students participate in a first

“cohort” term (with a required set of courses) with an option of a day or evening session. After the first term, Gateway students take college courses and can schedule their classes around their other responsibilities. Some programs also allow students to enroll and start their program whenever they are ready so as not to discourage students when they are motivated. Horizonte and Jefferson County High School, for example, are “open entry/open exit” so students can enter at any time. Other programs do not allow students to enter at any time, but schedule frequent and regular intervals during which students can begin the program. Fresh Start does this. It has a modularized academic program with five eight-week modules; new students can start the program every eight weeks.

Other students have life situations that require access to social and other services if they are to succeed academically. Fresh Start, LAYC YouthBuild, and Open Meadow all provide intensive education and career guidance to their participants. In addition to connecting participants to needed services, they offer one-on-one counseling and academic guidance while students are in the program. The two Portland Community College Programs (Gateway to College and MAP) provide extensive academic counseling. Two of the community-based programs surveyed (Horizonte and the LAYC YouthBuild) are part of larger organizations that offer multiple services and programs on site. Horizonte offers childcare, parenting classes, transportation, free breakfast and lunch, and immigration services on site.

Chart 3: High School Diploma Plus College Credit Programs’ Student Profiles and Key Design Features

Program	Eligibility Criteria for Students	Average Student Profile	Key Design Features
Biotechnology Career Academy (San Jose, CA)	At-risk high school students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15-year-old • 8th grade completed • no data on reading and math level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers high school courses adapted to biotech theme and college credit for technical courses taken at the high school

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Champion Charter School (Brockton, MA)	16-22 year old dropouts and at-risk youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17-year-old • No data on grade completed • Below 6th reading and math level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competency-based academic program • College courses and internship required for graduation
Gateway to College (Portland, OR)	<p>16-21 year old dropouts with at least an 8th grade reading and pass a program developed assessment</p> <p>Preparation term is offered for students who are close to meeting entry criteria</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17-year old • 9th or 10th grade completed • 8th grade reading level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located on a college campus • First term is core curriculum of academic foundation courses and study skills • After first term, students take regular college classes • Offers dual high school and college credit • Intensive academic counseling

Chart 4: High School Diploma Programs' Student Profiles and Key Design Features

Program	Eligibility Criteria for Students	Average Student Profile	Key Design Features
Educational Options Program (Philadelphia, PA)	17-21 year olds behind in high school credits but with at least 8 of the required 23 credit for graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-year-old • 10th grade completed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located in 10 local high schools and one prison • Three hour evening classes for students to make up credits for a diploma
Griggs University On-Line High School Diploma Program (Various Job Corps sites)	Serves 16-24 year old high school dropouts at 40+ Job Corps Centers who are above a 9 th grade academic level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No data available on average Job Corps student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three distance learning classes with Griggs teachers • Remainder of credits self-paced, on-line

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Jefferson County High School (Louisville, KY)	16 year olds–adults, all ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-year-old • 10th grade completed • 10th grade reading level, 7th grade math level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located in 5 high schools or education centers, 1 community center, and 1 juvenile detention center • Choice of three time blocks • Open entry/open exit • Competency-based curriculum • Option of college credit for coursework
Johanna Boss High School (Stockton, CA)	16-19 year old incarcerated youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16.5-year-old • No data on grade completed • 6th grade reading level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra supports for below-level literacy • Open entry/open exit
Open Meadow High School (Portland, OR)	Emotionally disturbed and learning disabled youth up to age 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15-year-old • 8th grade completed • 6th grade reading and math level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides services for emotionally disturbed and learning disabled • Curriculum includes community service
SIATech Charter School (Various sites)	16-24 year old high school dropouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17-year-old • 11th grade completed • 8-9th grade reading and math level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-paced curriculum • Combines teacher-led classes and computer-based curriculum • Intensive individualized help for students who are far behind academically

Chart 5: GED Plus College Credit or Entry Programs’ Student Profiles and Key Design Features

Programs	Eligibility Criteria for Students	Average Student Profile	Key Design Features
Tallahassee Community College GED Plus (Tallahassee, FL)	Adults who did not complete high school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No data available on average student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic counseling and college entry planning

Chart 6: GED Programs’ Student Profiles and Key Design Features

Program	Eligibility Criteria for Students	Average Student Profile	Key Design Features
Fairfax County Public Schools GED Program (Fairfax County, VA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adults who did not complete high school 9th grade reading level required for GED prep class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no data available on average student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED preparatory and pre-GED classes Evening and day classes
Fresh Start (Baltimore, MD)	16-19 year old adjudicated male youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 17-year-old 8th grade completed 6th grade reading and math level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GED academic curriculum integrated with carpentry skills training Entry open every 8 weeks, 10 month program Case management for youth
LAYC YouthBuild (Washington, DC)	16-24 year old Latino and immigrant dropouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 19-year-old 7th grade completed 6th-7th grade level reading and math 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic program alternates weeks with construction trades program Options include: GED, Spanish GED and high school diploma

Chart 7: ESL Programs’ Student Profiles and Key Design Features

Program	Eligibility Criteria for Students	Average Student Profile	Key Design Features
HORIZONTE Instruction and Training Center ESL classes (Salt Lake City, OR)	Youth (16+) and adults with limited English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23-year-old • No data on average grade completed, differs by country of origin • 4th grade reading level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple sites in community • Several levels of ESL classes • Also offer GED and high school completion programs
Multicultural Academic Program (Portland, OR)	16-20 year old high school dropouts whose first language is not English with at least a 3 rd grade reading level in English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19-year-old • 9 years of schooling outside the US 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four levels of ESL classes • Connect students to GED or diploma programs when English is advanced • Offer academic counseling + benefits of PCC students (referrals to child care, etc.)

IV. Learning Environment

The learning environment and curricula in the programs surveyed vary a great deal. The programs surveyed were asked about: class size, classroom characteristics, class resources available, and class schedules.

Class sizes of the programs were much smaller than in a traditional high school (which are generally about 30), ranging from four to five in Fresh Start to 32 at the Biotech Career Academy. Most average class sizes in the group surveyed were 12-15. Programs that were based in traditional schools, like the Biotech Career Academy and Jefferson County High School, had higher student-teacher ratios. The programs located on community college campuses also had slightly higher student-teacher ratios since they operated like community college classes. Tallahassee Community College GED Plus program has about 20 students

in their classes, for example. Some of the programs mentioned that their physical space limited the size of their classes, since many are located in facilities that were not built to be schools. The LAYC YouthBuild, for example, is located in a building with rooms that cannot accommodate more than 10-15 students.

Some programs operate in borrowed classrooms. The Fairfax County GED program uses regular high school classrooms in the evening, for example. This means that there are few classroom resources that can be used. These classrooms lack libraries, reference materials, and manipulatives (objects used to teach mathematics). The classes at community colleges also are in classrooms shared with other teachers so charts and materials cannot be left in the classrooms.

Classes are organized in very different ways, depending on the mode of instruction. Some depend heavily on computer-based materials and are situated in computer labs. Students working on an on-line diploma through Griggs Academy work in computer labs at the Job Corps Centers that offer the program. The SIATech Charter School curriculum is also heavily dependent on computers. Students in the charter school spend much of their time in computer labs, although there are also group projects and some teacher led instruction during which students are in small groups or participating in a full class discussion. The programs that are in traditional classroom settings like Biotech Career Academy and Jefferson County High School have desks or small tables for students. LAYC YouthBuild uses conference-style tables for class, which may enhance discussion and lead to a more collegiate atmosphere.

The programs that offer vocational training have schedules that alternate student time between academics and vocational training in different ways. The LAYC YouthBuild program alternates weeks of study: students spend one week in an academic classroom and one week at a job site learning construction skills. Fresh Start students spend two hours a day in a classroom and the rest of the day (their program operates for a full day) involved in hands-on skills training and work experience. Students at the SIATech Charter School at the Sacramento Job Corps Center spend half of their day in academic classes and half of their day in vocational training.

The Fairfax County Public Schools GED Program groups students studying different subjects in the same classroom with a single teacher. Students work individually and the teacher rotates around the room helping students. Sometimes teachers gather everyone for a group lesson. The larger GED programs often have multiple teachers and divide classes between subjects. LAYC YouthBuild, for example, has different teachers for different

subjects. Fresh Start has a single teacher, but devotes different class days to different subjects. For example, math is taught on Monday, reading comprehension on Tuesday, and science on Wednesday.

Chart 8: High School Programs' Learning Environment

Program	Teaching Methods Used	Average Class Size
Open Meadow High School (Portland, OR)	Variety including project-based, portfolio	12 students
Educational Options Program (Philadelphia, PA)	Mostly lecture but time for one-on-one	15 students
SIATech Charter School (various sites)	Computer-assisted instruction with teacher support via learning labs	20 students
Johanna Boss High School (Stockton, CA)	Mostly lecture but also cooperative learning groups and one-on-one assistance	12 students
Jefferson County High School (Louisville, KY)	70% individualized competency-based 20% computer-based 10% literacy and math labs	25 students (2 teachers per class)
Griggs On-Line Diploma Program (various Job Corps sites around the country)	Computer-based	Varies by center
Biotech Career Academy (San Jose, CA)	Lecture plus projects relating to theme	32 students
Champion Charter School (Brockton, MA)	Contextual learning, portfolio development, projects, internship, college coursework	15 students
Gateway to College (Portland, OR)	Mix: lecture, small group, project-based, etc.	20-25 students

Chart 9: GED Programs’ Learning Environment

Program	Teaching Methods Used	Average Class Size
Latin American Youth Center YouthBuild (Washington, DC)	Small group differentiated instruction	8-10 students
Fairfax County Public Schools GED (Fairfax County, VA)	Mix of lecture and small group	10-12 students
Fresh Start (Baltimore, MD)	Lecture, academics linked to skills training	4-5 students
Tallahassee Community College GED Plus (Tallahassee, FL)	Mix of lecture, small group, project-based	25 students

Chart 10: ESL Programs’ Learning Environment

Program	Teaching Methods Used	Average Class Size
HORIZONTE Instruction and Training Center (Salt Lake City, UT)	Mix of whole class and small group	20 students
Multicultural Academic Program (Portland, OR)	Mix of whole class, small group, computer work, and tutoring	15-20 students

V. Curricula and Assessment

The programs surveyed were asked about: what curricula they use and who developed it, what subjects the curricula covers, how the curricula is delivered (whole class instruction, computer-assisted instruction, individualized study) and how students are assessed when entering and exiting the programs. The discussion below addresses these issue by type of program: diploma programs, GED programs, and ESL programs.

High School Diploma Programs

The high school diploma programs surveyed all use curricula based on district standards. Some are school district curricula, some were bought from commercial publishers, some are program-developed, and some are teacher-developed. The Educational Options Program, a school district-based program, uses the Philadelphia School District curricula. The Biotechnology Career Academy, also a school district-based program, uses the San

Jose, California school district curricula but has adapted it to their biotechnology theme. For example, the senior English class reads *Frankenstein* and *Brave New World* and the science class does a unit on cloning. Johanna Boss High School uses curricula developed by the California Education Authority, based on California State education standards. The competency-based high school programs, Champion Charter School and Jefferson County High School, do not use school district curricula. Champion uses curricula developed by Diploma Plus, the national model program it implemented, which is aligned with state and district standards. Diploma Plus is a competency-based high school diploma model currently operating in 14 schools across Massachusetts and in New York City, Providence, RI, and Hartford, CT. Jefferson County High School developed its own curricula mapped to district standards. Gateway to College offers students a choice of college courses that are matched to the Oregon high school requirements.

The private schools (Open Meadow, SIATech, Griggs) all have proprietary curricula. Open Meadow and SIATech adapt their curricula to the needs of a student population disaffected with traditional school curricula. Open Meadow uses community service and project-based learning to engage students. SIATech's curriculum incorporates work readiness and 'real-world' themes into its lessons. The Griggs Academy's diploma curriculum requires three distance-learning classes with on-line teachers before students progress to the remainder of the curriculum which are self-paced on-line courses. It is a 22-credit curriculum based on the Maryland State standards. The diploma they award is a Maryland State diploma.

Several of the high school programs describe their curricula as 'self-paced', including SIATech, Jefferson County High School, and Griggs On-Line Diploma Program. SIATech and Jefferson County High School students work individually and in groups on projects that are assessed as they are completed. For the on-line diploma program, students complete lesson modules and tests on line at their own pace. Champion Charter School's competency-based program means students do not take the assessments (an interim one and a final one) until they and their teachers feel they are prepared.

In addition, several of these programs have intensive basic skills programs for students who are academically behind. As mentioned, SIATech Charter School uses the Scholastic READ 180 curricula for students who are below 6th grade level in reading and the Renaissance Math program for students who are below the 6th grade level in mathematics. The Biotechnology Career Academy requires students whose grade drop below a 'C' average to participate in after-school tutoring specifically focused on the academy curriculum. Gateway to College offers a prep curriculum for students who do not meet their eligibility criteria for the program.

Only some of these programs are required to give their students state accountability tests or state exit examinations. Two of the private schools — SIATech, and Griggs — are not required to test their students. Johanna Boss High School and the seven other juvenile justice schools in California are categorized as alternative schools (defined by the State Education Department as schools serving very high-risk populations). Students at these schools are not required to take state tests required of regular high school students under the state accountability system. The Educational Options Program, Jefferson County High School, the Biotech Career Academy, Champion Charter School and Gateway to College are all required to test their students under the state testing system.

GED Programs

GED programs followed a different pattern. Two of the programs (LAYC YouthBuild, and Fairfax County Public Schools) use Steck Vaughn or McGraw-Hill Contemporary materials. Steck Vaughan and McGraw Hill are the leading publishers of GED preparation materials, including Pre-GED materials and Spanish GED materials. None of these materials is actually a curriculum. The materials consist of test preparation workbooks with skills lessons and practice. Both now have computer-based versions as well. Students generally work through the practice materials at their own pace with some support and coaching from the instructors. When these materials are used, there is often no whole class teaching or small group work. There are, in fact, very few GED curricula commercially available, so programs that want to use a curriculum either adapt lessons from other curricula or develop their own materials. In addition to the Steck-Vaughn test preparation materials, LAYC YouthBuild uses other supplemental materials gathered from a wide array of sources including traditional K-12 textbooks, activities and lessons available on the Internet, and lessons teachers developed themselves. The GED programs surveyed report placing more emphasis on preparing for the mathematics, writing, and reading comprehension exams than the social studies and science exams. Until recently, these two exams were considered reading comprehension exams (with subject-based texts) and students did not focus on preparation for them. The 2002 revision of the GED added some content to these exams, however, and teachers are still experimenting with the most effective ways to prepare.

Tallahassee Community College and Fresh Start developed their own curricula. The adult education staff at the Tallahassee Community College worked with representatives of the local workforce board to design the GED Plus program. Their GED curriculum incorporates lessons on workforce readiness. Students are also required to take courses in a specific vocational area (like construction, office management, or cabling). Fresh Start links the academic work in their GED classes to their vocational skills training in carpentry.

The GED programs surveyed assess their students when entering the program using either the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS). Fresh State also uses GED practice tests. Some of the GED programs have a cut-off score for students to participate in the GED preparation class. Students who score below that are directed to a pre-GED, or basic skills, class. Fairfax County Public Schools use a 9th grade reading level on the TABE as the eligibility requirement for GED preparatory classes. Job Corps Centers used to require a 9th grade reading and math level on the TABE, but now allow individual centers to make placement determinations. The LAYC YouthBuild program does not divide the students into GED and pre-GED classes. Instead the program groups them all in the same class, but differentiates the instruction for the students.

ESL Programs

MAP at Portland Community College developed its own curriculum and selects textbooks to support the curriculum. MAP faculty have also developed an extensive website with resources for instructors and students. Horizonte developed its own curriculum and supplements that with traditional adult ESL textbooks. ESL classes rely on much more conversation in their instruction. Classes at both MAP and Horizonte are primarily teacher-led and discussion-based. Both programs have students work with partners and small groups as well. Some of the writing and grammar practice work is done individually, in workbooks or practice sheets.

Chart 11: High School Programs' Curriculum and Subjects Covered

Program	Curriculum Developed By	Subject(s) Covered
Biotechnology Career Academy (San Jose, CA)	District curriculum adapted for biotech focus	English, Social Studies, Math plus technology classes
Champion Charter School (Brockton, MA)	Developed by Diploma Plus (competency based)	English Language Arts, Writing, Math, History, Biology
Educational Options Program (Philadelphia, PA)	Developed by School District of Philadelphia	Philadelphia Schools district requirements: English, Math, Science, Social Studies

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Gateway to College (Portland, OR)	Developed by Portland Community College	Reading, Writing, Math, and Study Skills during the cohort term. Select major and choose courses from college general education and professional technical education courses to meet high school requirements after first term
Griggs On-Line Diploma Program (Various Job Corps sites around the country)	Developed by the program	English, Math, Science, Social Studies, some electives
Jefferson County High School (Louisville, KY)	Developed by the program	Core academics, some academic electives, Spanish, dual credit college coursework
Johanna Boss High School (Stockton, CA)	Developed by California Education Authority	English, Math, Science, Social Studies, academic catch-ups, electives
Open Meadow High School (Portland, OR)	Developed by the program	Portland Public Schools' required academic courses plus some electives
SIATech Charter School (various sites)	Core curriculum developed by the program. Purchased computer-based programs for students who are behind and advanced.	English, Math, Science, Social Studies, electives (Job Corps vocational courses count)

Chart 12: GED Programs' Curriculum and Subjects Covered

Program	Curriculum Developed By	Subject(s) Covered
Fairfax County Public Schools GED (Fairfax County, VA)	Steck-Vaughn GED materials	Five GED subjects
Fresh Start (Baltimore, MD)	Program developed, teacher modified	Five GED subjects
LAYC YouthBuild (Washington, DC)	Steck-Vaughn GED materials plus supplemental materials and lessons developed by program staff	Five GED subjects (in English and Spanish)

Tallahassee Community College GED Plus (Tallahassee, FL)	Adult education and continuing education staff in partnership with local workforce board	Five GED subjects
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Chart 13: ESL Programs' Curriculum and Subjects Covered

Program	Curriculum Developed By	Subject(s) Covered
HORIZONTE Instruction and Training Center ESL Program (Salt Lake City, UT)	Program developed plus use of traditional adult ESL textbooks	Grammar, reading, writing, math
Multicultural Academic Program (MAP) (Portland, OR)	Developed by Portland Community College	English language development (reading, writing, speaking, listening)

V. Teaching and Instructional Leadership

All of the teachers in the high school programs surveyed are certified, with the exception of Johanna Boss High School and Champion Charter School (where 90 percent are certified). Most of the teachers in the GED and ESL programs are also certified, with the exception of Fresh Start and the LAYC YouthBuild program. There is no national certification for GED teachers, so it is up to the program to determine requirements. The programs surveyed that are operated by school district and community college systems do have certified teachers for their GED classes. Portland and Tallahassee Community Colleges require teachers to have master's degrees and extend this requirement to GED teachers. The two community-based GED programs surveyed, Fresh Start and LAYC YouthBuild, do not have these requirements. LAYC YouthBuild, which currently has two-thirds of their teachers certified, is working towards full certification for all teachers as the same set of teachers will be teaching in their GED and diploma programs.

Certification does not necessarily mean certified for all of the subjects teachers teach, however. This is an issue for GED programs in particular, since they often have one teacher teaching five subjects, as is the case at Fresh Start. The high school programs that are accountable under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) do need to meet 'highly qualified teacher' guidelines under the law that specifies certification in the subject area. College instructors with master's degrees are "highly qualified" under NCLB.

Eleven of the programs surveyed offer professional development focused on academic content of some sort for their teachers, but the amount varies dramatically. Jefferson County

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High School and Fairfax County Public Schools GED Program report that teachers have only 6 hours per year of content-based training per year, while Horizonte teachers receive 80 hours of training per year. Of the four who do not train teachers on content, only one provides no training (Griggs); the other three provide training on instructional methods.

Most school directors surveyed have some instructional background. The only exception among the fifteen programs is Fresh Start. Directors with instructional background do not necessarily have grounding in the full range of subjects areas taught at their school, however.

Chart 14: High School Programs' Instructional Leadership

Program	Percent of Teachers Fully Certified	Director with Instructional Background	Professional Development Time Devoted to Academic Content Area
Biotechnology Career Academy (San Jose, CA)	100%	Yes	Yes, mixed with cross curricular teaching focus
Champion Charter School (Brockton, MA)	90%	Yes	Yes, 120+ hours/year, focus on instructional strategies, differentiated instruction, cooperative disciplines, etc.
Educational Options Program (Philadelphia, PA)	100%	Yes	Yes, 80 hours/year, 100% content
Gateway to College (Portland, OR)	Required master's degree in subject area	Yes	Yes, mixed with instructional strategy focus
Griggs On-line Diploma Program (various Job Corps sites around the country)	100%	Varies by center	No
Jefferson County High School (Louisville, KY)	100%	Yes	Yes, part time instructors receive 24 hours, full time instructors receive 48 hours

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Johanna Boss High School (Stockton, CA)	67%	Yes	Focus is teaching methods, not content areas
Open Meadow High School (Portland, OR)	100%	Yes	Not much focus on curriculum
SIATech Charter School (various sites)	Required master's degree in subject area	Yes	Yes, mixed with instructional strategy focus

Chart 15: GED Programs' Instructional Leadership

Program	Percent of Teachers Fully Certified	Director with Instructional Background	Professional Development Time Devoted to Academic Content Area
Fairfax County Public Schools GED (Fairfax County, VA)	Unknown	Yes	Yes, minimum of six hours/year
Fresh Start (Baltimore, MD)	0%	No	Focus is youth-services based, not content areas
Latin American Youth Center YouthBuild (Washington, DC)	67%	Yes	Focus is teaching methods, not content areas
Tallahassee Community College GED Plus (Tallahassee, FL)	Adjunct instructors with at least a BA, some with MA	Yes	Yes, six hours/month

Chart 16: ESL Programs' Instructional Leadership

Program	Percent of Teachers Fully Certified	Director with Instructional Background	Professional Development Time Devoted to Academic Content Area
HORIZONTE Instruction and Training Center (Salt Lake City, UT)	100%	Yes	Yes, 80 hours/year, 100% content

Multicultural Academic Program (Portland, OR)	Required master's degree in subject area	Yes	Yes, mixed with instructional strategy focus
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VI. Measuring Effectiveness

Programs surveyed use different measures of academic program effectiveness, including credential attainment, progress on reading or math by grade level or score on a particular assessment, ESL level progress, and intention to enroll or enrollment in further education. There is a striking lack of consistency among programs in terms of what is measured and how.

The attainment rate for GED and high school diplomas varies widely among the programs. The public school-based Biotechnology Career Academy has the highest attainment rate with 95 percent of students graduating with a diploma. The program serves primarily students who have not yet dropped out of school and the students tend to be younger and able to stay enrolled for three years. Gateway to College has a credential attainment rate of 22 percent. Staff suggest that this is probably due to several factors. First, many students have significant numbers of credits they need to earn for a diploma. As many are enrolled in college only part time, it is likely to take them several years to earn all the credits they need. Second, some students transfer to other educational institutions after an initial period at Portland Community College. Some students also leave for a period of time to take care of personal situations with the intention of returning. Portland Community College reports that 38 percent of students who leave the program without a credential continue their education. Some GED programs measure which students received a GED and some programs just track which students are tested. LAYC YouthBuild tracks attainment while Fresh Start tracks how many students get tested. Tallahassee Community College tracks how well students do on the GED, as well as whether or not they pass.

Fresh Start and Tallahassee Community College report gains on assessments of basic academic skills in addition to GED attainment. Fresh Start uses the TABE and Tallahassee Community College measures grade level gains according to a Florida State tracking system for higher education. The programs report that tracking academic gains allows them to show progress even if students are not ready to take the GED test. This is an issue when students are several grades behind and spend only a few months enrolled in a program. Several of the programs surveyed (both high school diploma and GED) measure attendance, as this is an indicator of whether or not students are even able to benefit from the academic program. Attendance rates for the programs surveyed that report it are quite high. Open Meadow,

Jefferson County High School, and the Portland Community College programs are all reporting attendance rates over 80 percent.

The ESL programs report on ESL gains and what happens to students when they leave the programs. Horizonte reports on gains in ESL level while MAP reports on several factors including ESL proficiency gains and how many students attain credentials or continue on to further education when they leave MAP.

Chart 17: High School Programs' Academic Results

Program	Program Reported Academic Results
Biotechnology Career Academy (San Jose, CA)	95+% graduation rate 83% post-secondary enrollment
Champion Charter School (Brockton, MA)	62% high school graduation rate
Educational Options Program (Philadelphia, PA)	50% earn their diploma
Griggs On-Line Diploma Program (various Job Corps sites around the country)	Varies among Job Corps Centers (no overall data collected)
Gateway to College (Portland, OR)	92% attendance 70% complete the initial term 22% earn credential (high school diploma, associates degree or GED) 38% of those who exit PCC w/o credential continued their education elsewhere
Jefferson County High School (Louisville, KY)	82% attendance rate 70% graduation rate (estimate)
Johanna Boss High School (Stockton, CA)	No data available
Open Meadow High School (Portland, OR)	83% earned diploma in 2002-03 92% attendance rate in 2004
SIATech Charter School/ Sacramento Job Corps Center (Sacramento, CA)	50% graduate with diploma 80% pass rate on CA HS Exit Exam

Chart 18: GED Programs' Academic Results

Program	Program Reported Academic Results
Fairfax County Public Schools GED Program (Fairfax County, VA)	No data available
Fresh Start (Baltimore, MD)	Data from 2000-2004 show an average of 1.6 grade level gain in writing, 1.8 in reading comprehension and 2 grade levels in math as measured on the TABE Average 250 point increase on practice GED tests, which are used as pre and post tests 30-40% take GED test
LAYC YouthBuild (Washington, DC)	50% earn GED 73% graduate from the program (2004)
Tallahassee Community College GED Plus (Tallahassee, FL)	First year of implementation so data not analyzed yet In the first year, more students received GED and had higher scores than previous year. Increase in Learning Completion Points, a FL state reporting tool that measures grade level gains in basic skills, over previous year.

Chart 19: ESL Programs Academic Results

Program	Program Reported Academic Results
HORIZONTE Instruction and Training Center ESL Program (Salt Lake City, UT)	50% post ESL gains of one level or more after 3 sessions (36 days each)
Multicultural Academic Program (Portland, OR)	78.9% positive completion (defined as earning a high school diploma or GED, continuing in program, transferring to another school, returning to home school, or getting a job) 89% attendance Reading and math scores on 10 th grade Oregon state tests (TESA) better than students statewide 19.89% average gain on Idea Proficiency Test (IPT) reading test

VII. Strengths and Challenges

The programs surveyed had many of the features of effective alternative education programs. They also reported many challenges they face in their academic programming to help participants to succeed. What follows is a summary of the strengths and challenges reported by the survey participants.

Alternative Education Program Strengths

- The programs surveyed are *small and have low teacher/student ratios* that allow personal relationships between the students and the teachers and individualized attention to each students' learning needs, strengths, and life situations.
- Most of the programs develop *individualized academic plans* for students that are critical for students with a range of educational issues. These plans can both map out pathways for academic success and help identify and organize a range of services and supports a student might need to achieve academic success. Some of the programs ask students to sign a contract agreeing to this plan.
- *Flexibility in scheduling* is crucial for the subset of students who want or need to work or take part in a training program while enrolled in school. This is particularly true for students who are far behind and will need several years of academics to attain a credential.
- *Academic counseling and support* is a very important feature of the programs surveyed, and often makes the difference in terms of keeping students on track, retaining them in the program, and customizing academic offerings to their needs and interests.
- *Relevant curriculum* linked to credential attainment and work is key for students who are disaffected with traditional classrooms. The programs surveyed try to link academic curriculum to vocational skills training and to community-based learning in ways that keep students engaged and focused on the applications of knowledge. There is often a specific career focus, guidance and opportunities for career exploration. Also, staff from the surveyed programs report that many students in these programs learn better through experiential learning methods.
- *Competency-based programming* allows flexibility in the time it takes different students to master content, which is a more practical strategy for many students who are behind or who need an accelerated curriculum because they are overage. It also allows students to mark progress and to learn at their own pace.
- *Performance-based assessment* is a strategy that many of the surveyed programs use to assess students in their class work. This allows students to demonstrate mastery of the content in different ways, including portfolio assessment and project completion.

Alternative Education Program Challenges

- ***Duration of programs and credential attainment:*** Even if learning is accelerated, programs report that students may not be able to attain a GED or a high school diploma during the abridged time period of many programs. Students who are far behind academically (or face crises in their lives) often need significant amounts of time to catch up with their peers. This raises a host of issues for the programs, including unrealistic targets for student and program success and a lack of motivation of students when they are asked to reach unattainable goals. Programs staff report a need for interim milestones for students to work towards that are portable and recognized by education institutions.
- ***Creating pathways among programs:*** The programs surveyed report that there is a need to connect students with continuing education options that are practical next steps, as a large percentage of students leave programs without credentials. Programs report that many of their students are ready for a job or more vocational training by the time they spend several months in a program (particularly ones that offer no stipends) and they need options that allow them to work while continuing in school.
- ***Inconsistent data collection and little focus on long-term data:*** The surveyed programs suggest that limited staff resources make it difficult to collect long-term data or to spend time analyzing the program data that they do collect. Many collect data only to satisfy funders' requirements, not to use for program monitoring or improvement.
- ***Need to validate the GED:*** Program staff report that the GED remains the most viable option for many older students and some younger youth who are ready to start college and worry that it is not always considered a positive educational outcome. This has become a particular concern of school districts that need to report graduation rates defined as high school diploma attainment under the No Child Left Behind Act. In addition, a set of research was released which suggested that GED holders do no better in the workplace than high school dropouts.
- ***Lack of effective and efficient curriculum, training, and diagnostic tools to build literacy and numeracy skills of older students who are far behind:*** Programs report that they lack curriculum, materials, and instructional strategies that are proven effective with young people that are over age and lag behind their peers in literacy and especially mathematics. They also report that there are limited funds and limited resources for training instructors on how to work with these students. One element in particular — better diagnostic tools to determine reading and math levels and specific learning issues among students — was reported frequently as a need among programs.

- ***Lack of connections among programs:*** Programs report being isolated from best practices and from each other. Many programs are community-based and have few opportunities to learn from each other, problem-solve together and share best practices. Programs that are not school district-based report having limited contact, if any, with the school systems within their jurisdiction.
- ***Difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers:*** Programs report that teachers' pay and benefits are often lower than in the K-12 school system. High turnover rates are reported as well.
- ***Need for strategies for teaching in multi-level classrooms:*** Many alternative education programs serve students who are at different academic levels and have different needs. Programs report a need for strategies to differentiate instruction for different levels of learners in the same classroom, rather than have all students to work individually all the time.
- ***Lack of criteria available for choosing among curricula and technology tools for the classroom:*** The programs that purchase their own materials report that it is difficult to choose among available curricula and technology tools for their students. They voiced a need for objective criteria and advice to inform decision-making.

VIII. Suggestions for Further Research

The following suggestions for further research on academic programming in alternative education are based on reports from the fifteen alternative education programs surveyed and the literature review.

Alternative Education Programs Components

- Research the effectiveness of GED programs that offer services to students that help them use the GED as a gateway to further education.
- Examine the outcomes of rigorous competency-based diploma programs that allow students who are far behind in credits but able and motivated to work towards a diploma.
- Research the effectiveness of case management services in assisting youth who do not attain an academic credential while in the program to continue their education once they leave the program and enter employment. This may involve looking more closely at developing interim milestones or portable records of achievement.

Alternative Education Program Curricula, Assessment, and Learning Environments

- Evaluate the effectiveness of standards-based curricula that is designed to ramp up the basic academic skills (literacy and numeracy) of those farthest behind as well as the strategies for training teachers how to use this kind of curriculum.
- Research the availability of accurate assessment tools for diagnosing academic levels and specific learning needs of older youth.
- Research the availability and effectiveness of standards-based curriculum for GED preparation that covers test content as well as test preparation.
- Examine how alternative education programs are responding to the increased need for teaching science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).
- Evaluate if explicit connections between learning and work through applied learning, career exploration, internships, etc. are effective strategies to reengage youth and improve their educational outcomes.

Additional Research about Teaching and Leadership in Alternative Education Programs

- Identify communities where alternative education programs are leveraging the resources and expertise of the school district in areas like professional development and curriculum selection.
- Identify alternative education programs that have developed comprehensive staff development plans related to improving the quality of academic instruction.
- Identify alternative education programs that have created professional learning communities that allow teachers to discuss teaching and assessment strategies and learn from each other.
- Identify efforts to train instructional leaders to manage high performance alternative schools

Additional Research about Measuring Effectiveness in Alternative Education Programs

- Synthesize existing research on the level of academic gains to expect from older students at various academic starting points in relation to the different kinds of interventions used for each group evaluated.

- Identify communities and programs that are collecting data on academic programming in alternative education systematically and using the data to assess and improve programming.
- Monitor the impact of new standards and accountability requirements on alternative education academic programs, including the US Department of Education's program to pilot growth models of accountability that measure the progress of individual students in addition to the number of all students who reach set benchmarks.

IX. Conclusion

Despite the lack of research and in-depth studies on academic programming in alternative education, this paper and others have identified programs that have been successful with the hardest-to-reach students. The programs' success is evidenced by their students' ability to academically achieve, or to get on a pathway to achieve, the academic credentials they need to transition to post-secondary education or employment. Expanding and strengthening programs like these is an area that would benefit from further research and analysis. Serving students in these programs well is a critical issue for the social and economic well-being of our nation.

Appendix A: Program Interviews

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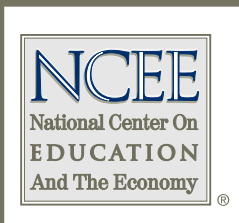
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