The Center for Assessment in New Hampshire strives to increase student learning through more meaningful educational assessment and accountability practices. Chris Domaleski manages the operations of the Center and plays an active role as a consultant to multiple states supporting the development, implementation, and evaluation of assessment and accountability systems. Alternative high schools serve a vital role in improving outcomes for students, particularly for those students who are most at risk. While there isn't a uniform definition for “alternative,” the term typically describes a school that primarily serves students who have not been successful in a traditional environment. Alternative high schools often receive students with cumulative academic deficits and take on the vital work of helping students prepare for opportunities after high school.

How Effective are Alternative High Schools?

Given the key role of alternative schools, it’s essential to ask how effective they are in providing high-quality education to students. One would expect to find the answer by reviewing the state’s school accountability ratings. After all, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to provide uniform information about school quality and performance for all public schools in the state. However, alternative schools almost always wind up in the lowest performance categories of a state system. A low rating for all alternative schools can be interpreted in one of two ways: either all alternative schools in the state are, in fact, performing very poorly; or, the accountability model does not fit these schools very well. I find the latter more persuasive, and, increasingly, state education leaders are reaching the same conclusion. Wyoming recently adopted a system geared at meaningfully measuring alternative schools.

Promising Practice: Wyoming

Wyoming Senate Enrolled Act (SEA) 87 called for revisions to the Wyoming Accountability in Education Act (WAEA) to include the establishment of a separate alternative school accountability system. State education leaders responded by empaneling an advisory group comprising alternative school leaders along with broad group of experts and advocates. Working with the Center for Assessment, the advisory group developed a framework for the new system, and then conducted a multi-year pilot to evaluate the initial design and inform refinements and improvements to the system. The new system was finalized in the fall of 2018. Wyoming’s alternative accountability system includes indicators that overlap with the general model as well as distinctive elements. Some overlapping indicators have been adapted to better reflect the priorities identified by the advisory group. For example, the alternative system emphasizes progress toward proficiency using a...
performance index, and substantially weights academic growth. Distinctive elements include a climate survey and credit for implementing individual Student Success Plans. These latter elements were selected in part to promote an environment characterized by personalized support and mentoring, seen as crucial to helping students reach their post-secondary goals.

The new model helps leaders and stakeholders differentiate between schools that are more or less effective at preparing students for post-secondary success. While some schools still receive feedback that indicates performance is below expectations, the ratings are seen as fairer and more useful to inform improvement planning. And the fact that some schools are recognized as meeting or exceeding expectations provides evidence that while the performance goals may be ambitious, they are attainable.

**One Size Doesn’t Fit All**

There is no one “right way“ to design an accountability system. What may work well in one state may be poorly suited for another. The Wyoming case provides a great example of a process for creation of an alternative school accountability system which included mechanisms to:

1. elicit input from a diverse group of experts and stakeholders
2. develop and document policy priorities
3. pilot and fine-tune the system before fully operationalizing it

Ultimately, both the process and the product are vital. A thoughtful process develop appropriately-customized solutions for alternative schools that improves outcomes for all students.

One size doesn’t fit all. It’s time to rethink accountability for alternative schools.

Mr. Domeleski’s full article published by The Center for Assessment can be reviewed here: https://www.ncliea.org/blog/assessment-systems/rethinking-accountability-alternative-high-schools