



Measuring Quality In Alternative Charter Schools: Help For Authorizers And Schools That Serve At-Promise Students

By Naomi DeVeaux and Jim Goenner, PhD, National Charter School Institute; Jody Ernst, PhD and Jim Griffin JD, Momentum Strategies and Research; and Nelson Smith

In theory, public charter schools are allowed to operate free from bureaucratic rules while being held accountable for strong student outcomes. This bargain depends on accurate, reliable accountability measures plus ambitious targets informed by convincing data.

But for Alternative Education Campuses (or AECs) — schools that set out to serve students who have been unsuccessful in traditional settings — traditional measures of accountability may be neither accurate nor reliable. Achievement rates on state tests, four-year graduation rates, and other standard metrics may not say much about the actual performance of a school whose students have a history of academic struggle. And scant data is available to help educators shape appropriate targets for success. For this small group of schools, getting accountability right is a challenge.

And getting accountability right for AECs is the focus of A-GAME (Advancing Great Authorizing and Modeling Excellence), a project funded by a USDOE Charter School Program dissemination grant and led by the National Charter Schools Institute and its partner, longtime AEC research and measurement experts Momentum Strategy & Research.

A-GAME's objective is to work with charter authorizers from across the country to develop tools that can be used by other authorizers to create meaningful accountability strategies with their AECs. The project is informed by a 11 member National Authorizer Leadership Team reflecting diversity of both geography and authorizer type: school and county districts, state departments of education, universities, non-profit organizations, and independent chartering boards.

The first A-GAME resource, *Measuring Quality: A Resource Guide for Authorizers and Alternative Charter Schools*, released in October 2019, provides seven concrete recommendations for authorizers and their charter AECs—including identifying the appropriate set of schools that qualify for alternative accountability; working with charter AECs to develop relevant and rigorous accountability measures and targets, and thinking outside the box about how to measure performance in five specific areas:

1. Student engagement and motivation
2. Academic achievement
3. Academic growth
4. High school completion
5. College & career readiness

What Measuring Quality demonstrates is that authorizers needn't think of alternative accountability as somehow strange or mysterious. It shows how authorizers can look at traditional accountability domains through a different lens, using measures and metrics that make more sense for AECs while still meeting state standards and local requirements.

The A-GAME team stresses that the Guide is not a rigid template but a set of strategies and resources adaptable to any authorizing context. Creating rigorous yet achievable targets for AECs requires a body of comparison data on schools that serve similar populations – which has been notably lacking until now. This is a particular hardship for authorizers with just one or two AECs. Accordingly, A-GAME is now developing a web-based data tool summarizing performance outcomes for AECs using publicly available national and state data. With this tool people can find typical AEC rates on important accountability measures: What do 10th-grade reading scores look like for students like mine? How do other AEC high schools do on grad rates (4-year, 5-year, and 6-year cohorts)? The A-GAME will be adding new data sets as they become available over time.

Additionally, A-GAME has begun working directly with the alternative schools overseen by its authorizer team, collecting data on measures and metrics not available publicly. The goal is to gather enough data to begin assessing typical outcomes for students enrolled in AECs on measures such as social-emotional development, school engagement and motivation, and changes in attendance or credit-earning rates over time –allowing AEC leaders and authorizers a point of comparison when setting their own performance goals.

Watch for another set of resources to be released in early February–rubrics for the review of new AEC applications and renewal of existing alternative charters. These and more resources will be available on the A-GAME website and will continue to be available beyond the completion of the grant.

An analysis of public school count data from the NCES website shows that AECs, as defined by their own state policies, account for approximately 5 percent of all public schools. Charter schools identified as AECs, by state or local policy, account for less than 1 percent of all public schools and less than 20 percent of all public AECs.