



Office of the Washington State Auditor

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Performance Audit

Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) in Washington

Student characteristics and innovative approaches

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Alternative Learning Experiences (ALE), like alternative high schools and charter schools, are one of a variety of options offered by public school districts outside of traditional school settings. ALE is a program or method of delivering instruction that any school, including charter and alternative schools, could choose to use; it may be an option within an existing public school or an entire school in itself. ALE programs allow school districts to claim funding for students who are not physically present in a classroom for a full day or class period.

In 2013, Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946 required the Office of the Washington State Auditor to conduct a biennial measure of student outcomes of ALE courses, beginning with the 2013-14 school year and continuing through 2016-17. A preliminary audit report, published in February 2015, and the first full report, published in February 2016, described ALE programs and students. Work performed for this report built on previous work, exploring the role ALE plays for certain student populations. (Earlier reports are available on the State Auditor's Office website at www.sao.wa.gov/state/pages/PA_ALEstudy.)

What is a "measure of student outcomes"?

Examples include:

- Months of continued enrollment in school
- Graduation
- College enrollment
- Stable employment

First report revealed data quality issues

In the first phase of this audit, auditors were unable to identify all ALE students in the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), managed by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), because not all districts reported which students were ALE-funded.

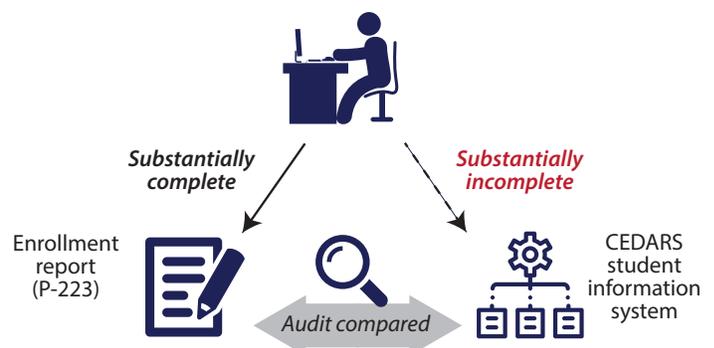
Determining who has received ALE instruction and who has not is essential to connecting students with their individual outcomes. The report made recommendations to OSPI to address these concerns. However, follow-up on these recommendations revealed compliance with ALE reporting requirements in CEDARS remains poor.

View additional materials, including a video and a Tableau data presentation related to ALE performance audits at www.sao.wa.gov/state/Pages/ALEstudy_FinalResults. Also available are financial audit reports on ALE programs in school districts.

School district reporting of ALE enrollment is inconsistent

The current phase of this long-term audit planned to assess academic and post-high school progress for 2013-14 ALE students using CEDARS student data, along with post-high school outcomes from the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)'s data warehouse. However, when CEDARS data was compared to the monthly reports that school districts submitted separately for funding, auditors found that 65 percent of districts reported fewer students enrolled in ALE courses in CEDARS than they claimed for ALE funding.

ALE student data does not align in two key reporting systems



Student outcomes cannot be measured until individual student information can be reliably identified

To identify potential causes of reporting inconsistencies between the fiscal data and the data in CEDARS, auditors contacted eight school districts that either over-reported, under-reported, or did not report having any students enrolled in ALE courses in CEDARS compared to their fiscal reports. Some of the reasons for inconsistencies, as shared by staff at the ALE programs contacted, were misunderstanding the reporting requirements, believing they had received guidance that the information was no longer relevant, and using reporting systems that do not link with CEDARS or do not have a field that aligns with the ALE course type field in CEDARS.

OSPI needs accurate data to carry out its mission

OSPI’s mission is “to provide funding, resources, tools, **data** [emphasis added], and technical assistance that enable educators to ensure students succeed in our public schools, are prepared to access post-secondary training and education, and are equipped to thrive in their careers and lives.”

Measuring such outcomes requires reliable and accurate data and the ability to link it to data about students beyond high school. For OSPI to fully realize its mission, the agency must also ensure that CEDARS data is complete and accurately represented in a long-term data warehouse such as the one maintained by the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) within the Office of Financial Management (OFM).

ALE program staff and participants report these programs provide flexibility, innovative approaches, critical services

Lacking reliable data to measure ALE student outcomes, auditors gathered information directly from ALE programs on how they are meeting their intended purpose, which is to give schools flexibility to serve a diverse student population. Auditors conducted a survey of all ALE programs in Washington, visited eight programs, held focus groups with education professionals, and surveyed students and parents to learn about their experiences with ALE.

When students and parents were asked why they chose ALE, the most common response was that traditional schools were not working for them. For students experiencing certain challenges, such as unavailability during typical school hours; needing to take breaks from their education; or overstimulation presented by the sights, sounds, and crowds of a typical school environment, traditional schools may not work.

School size
Safe/less stress
Learning style
Schedule
Traditional school not working
Better/faster learning

Some ALE programs apply multi-disciplinary and trauma-informed approaches; collaborate with community businesses or organizations to enrich the educational experience; or provide access to childcare, health care or social services directly on campus, to meet the needs of Washington’s diverse student population.

Recommendations to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

In order to be able to measure outcomes of ALE instruction, we recommend:

- ✓ Identify and address factors that hinder school districts from accurately reporting ALE student coursework in CEDARS
- ✓ Engage school district leadership to increase compliance with ALE reporting in CEDARS as required by RCW and WAC

In order to be able to measure long-term outcomes of ALE instruction, we recommend:

- ✓ Collaborate with the Education Research & Data Center (ERDC) to ensure OSPI data in the ERDC data warehouse is complete and accurate
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