



Washington State Auditor's Office Performance Audit Description

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Alternative Learning Experiences in Washington: A longitudinal study of ALE programs and student outcomes

Program background

Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs offer school districts flexibility in educating Washington's diverse student population by serving some students outside of traditional classroom settings. After a slight dip during the Great Recession, enrollment in ALE is on the rise in Washington. ALE programs served more than 32,000 students in the 2013-14 school year at a cost of around \$148 million. As the popularity and prevalence of ALE programs are likely to increase, the state is evaluating how students in ALE models perform academically compared to those receiving traditional schooling.

In 2013, the Legislature approved significant changes to the rules governing ALE programs that receive state funding. Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946 is intended to encourage greater accountability and transparency in ALE programs statewide. The bill states that the State Auditor's Office must conduct biennial measures of ALE student outcomes beginning in the 2013-14 school year and continuing through the 2016-17 school year.

Scope and objectives

This audit will analyze academic and post-high school data on students who receive ALE instruction and compare them with a matched group of similar students who receive traditional instruction only. We will follow these students from the 2013-2014 school year through the 2016-17 school year. In addition, we will visit a variety of ALE programs and obtain feedback from a number of students who receive ALE instruction and their families.

We will evaluate the effectiveness of ALE instruction by answering the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of students who enroll in ALE programs?
- How do academic outcomes for ALE students compare to outcomes for similar students receiving traditional instruction?
- Are there types of students that respond better to ALE instruction than others?
- Does the type of ALE course taken impact academic outcomes?
- What are ALE student outcomes after high school?
- What are the characteristics of high-performing ALE programs?

Timing

We plan to publish the first in a series of ALE audit reports in late 2015. A second report is scheduled for late 2016, and the third and final report is scheduled for late 2018.