



ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN COLORADO:
Recommendations for Improving State Outcomes
for Opportunity Youth



DONNELL-KAY
FOUNDATION

SNAPSHOT OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN COLORADO



In 2002, the Colorado General Assembly passed a law allowing schools that serve special needs and high-risk populations to be designated as Alternative Education Campuses (AECs).¹ The state evaluation system² for AECs highlights their troubling performance:

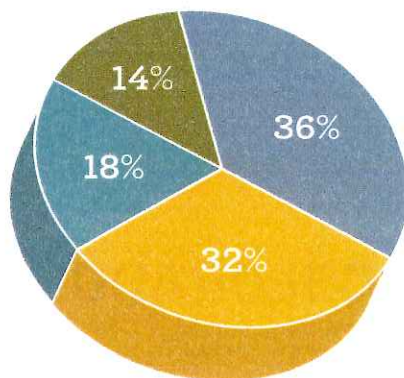
2011-2012 SCHOOL YEAR (76³ AECs)

- **27** AECs received the “performance” rating (highest level)⁴
- **49** AECs received some type of improvement rating, with 11 (of the 49) receiving a turnaround designation

A look at dropout rates⁵ reveals the challenges associated with student success at AECs:

- **15%** 2010-2011 AEC dropout rate
- **2%** 2010-2011 all non-AEC schools dropout rate

2011 AEC OUTCOMES



Performance	36%
Improvement	32%
Priority Improvement	18%
Turnaround	14%

Source: Colorado Department of Education

¹The Educational Accountability Act of 2009 (SB-163) authorized the Colorado Department of Education to conduct an annual review for the performance of public schools in the state, including alternative education campuses. The [2011 CDE School Performance Framework](#) released in December by the state was the second year for evaluating AECs.

²All AECs receive data on the traditional School Performance Framework (SPF), but accountability is based on a separate AEC SPF using three of the same performance indicators and one that is modified. Improvement planning, expectations, and consequences are the same as for traditional schools, but there are different weights than for traditional schools. Within indicators, the AECs use many of the same measures and metrics but different cut-points. Districts may opt to submit supplemental measures for CDE's review. Denver Public Schools and Boulder Public Schools use a district performance framework to evaluate their alternative schools. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/Accountability/State/Accountability/AECs.asp>

³These designations are somewhat misleading because several top-ranked schools were missing data in many of the growth and performance categories – often due to low student numbers.

⁴In 2011-2012 there were 79 AECs in the state, but 3 closed so only 76 received ratings.

⁵The Colorado dropout rate is an annual rate, reflecting the percentage of all students enrolled in grades 7-12 who leave school during a single school year without subsequently attending another school or educational program.

Executive Summary

Youth ages 16-24 who have either dropped out of high school or are not participating in the workforce have become recognized nationally as “opportunity youth.” In their efforts to finish high school and start a career path, these students often face severe personal and academic challenges including pregnancy, drug addiction, homelessness, psychological and behavior problems, low skill levels, and boredom. Schools serving these youth face unique challenges for meeting students’ academic needs when personal challenges are so immense. Colorado is not alone in struggling to meet the challenges presented by this population, especially in the current Alternative Education Campus (AEC) system. In response to the recent Jobs for the Future report entitled “Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current State Policy,” the Donnell-Kay Foundation has issued seven key recommendations for improving alternative education for opportunity youth in Colorado:

COMMON LANGUAGE: The State should convene key stakeholders to determine a common definition of the “alternative student” that is focused not only on student’s personal challenges, but also their academic needs.

QUALITY CONTROL: The State should take on an increased role in ensuring quality alternative options, including providing incentives for serving the population, promoting innovation, and adapting accountability measures.

INCREASE RIGOR: Increasing the academic rigor of AECs requires clearer school missions/definitions, removing accountability disincentives for districts to take on alternative schools, providing incentives for advanced coursework, revising the performance indicator framework for AECs, and alignment with Common Core Standards.

MODIFY FUNDING: The State should consider revising funding mechanisms for AECs, including multiple student count dates, a consideration of the additional cost of serving this population, and leveraging federal turnaround funds.

IMPROVE QUALITY OF STAFF & LEADERSHIP: As AECs serve some of the most challenging students, mechanisms should be in place to ensure they do not become a repository for poorly performing teachers. Those receiving poor evaluations or performance ratings should be prohibited from working in AECs, and teachers and leaders in AECs should receive professional development specific to meeting the needs of this population.



ENHANCE WRAPAROUND SUPPORT: Financial and accountability incentives should be in place for schools to engage in outcome based partnerships with government, social service, or non-profit organizations that help meet the needs of students in AECs.

PROMOTE INNOVATION AND NEW SCHOOLS: The Charter Schools Institute and local districts should be able to authorize a limited number of new, breakthrough school models that have incentives to partner with a myriad of organizations (e.g. higher education, non-profits, and other community based organizations); additional funding; flexibility around seat time; and quality blended learning.

Opportunity youth represent some of the most difficult students to serve in the traditional education system. The current system overseeing AECs predates our enhanced accountability framework and Common Core alignment. The State needs to help build capacity for AECs to refocus on improved academic rigor, promote learning gains, and provide necessary wraparound services.