



Washington State Auditor's Office

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Performance Audit

Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) in Washington

February 1, 2016

The State Auditor's Office is conducting a long-term study of educational outcomes for students enrolled in Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs. For this, the first full-length report in the series, we visited 10 ALE programs associated with higher student outcomes and reviewed student data. Program staff and participants told us about the role their program fills within their respective districts, current challenges, and the reasons students enroll in ALE programs.

Our analysis of student data has been affected by data quality problems. We were able to identify only about three-fourths of all ALE participants in the 2013-14 school year, which was meant to form our study's baseline cohort (the group of ALE students whose progress we will follow for the next three years). Data quality on course types for the 2014-15 school year may also be unreliable. Some ALE program staff were uncertain how to interpret definitions of the new ALE course types set out in law. We recommend that the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) provide more clarification to districts, as needed, so they can report ALE course types in the same way. We also recommend that OSPI match ALE student counts reported by districts for funding with ALE per-student data reported by districts, and follow up on substantial discrepancies.

Audit schedule

As mentioned above, this is our first formal report in a four-year study of ALE programs. The schedule of future reports is as follows:

- **Audit Report #2** (anticipated publication date: December 2016) – Summary of ALE students during the 2014-15 school year, and the standing of 2013-14 ALE students one year later.
- **Status Update #2** (anticipated publication date: December 2017) – Summary of ALE students during the 2015-16 school year, and the progress of 2013-14 ALE students two years later, compared to their non-ALE peers.
- **Audit Report #3** (anticipated publication date: December 2018) – Summary of ALE students during the 2016-17 school year, and the progress of 2013-14 ALE students three years later, compared to their non-ALE peers. We also plan to visit ALE programs that show strong individual student growth.



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Executive Summary

All children are entitled to receive a basic education under the Washington State Constitution. Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs offer schools greater flexibility to educate Washington's diverse student population by serving students outside traditional classroom settings. The Washington State Legislature has requested "continuing review and revision of the way in which state funding allocations are used to support alternative learning experience courses."

In 2013, the Legislature approved significant changes to the rules governing ALE programs. Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946 was intended to encourage greater accountability and transparency in ALE programs statewide. It also required the State Auditor's Office to conduct a performance audit beginning with the 2013-14 school year and continuing through 2016-17. This report follows an informal audit update on this topic, Status Update #1 published in February 2015, and is the first of three formal reports we will produce during our four-year longitudinal study.

Our visits to 10 ALE programs yielded a wealth of detail

All ALE programs must meet the same state standards as traditional schools, but they have flexibility in how education is delivered. We observed 10 ALE programs associated with higher student performance, and conducted interviews and focus groups with administrators, teachers, staff, parents and students. The ALE programs we visited used online and parent partnership models to serve students.

We were able to learn far more about the nature of ALE programs than could be captured through quantitative data alone. Each program we visited varied in structure, focus, teaching style and curricula, though we identified several common themes and similar characteristics.

The ALE programs we visited shared some important characteristics

The programs we visited were small compared to traditional schools, providing a high level of one-on-one interaction between students and teachers. They allow school districts to offer flexible educational opportunities, which in turn let districts reach a broad student population. The students and families we interviewed were united in expressing great enthusiasm for ALE, which was echoed by administrators, teachers and staff.

We met students who added extra courses so they could graduate early, or to make up credits they hadn't earned at their traditional school. We also met students using ALE to catch up on school time lost due to ill health or other commitments; homeschoolers seeking access to public school teachers and curriculum; and students who prefer ALE's more personal, self-paced, less distracting nature away from a traditional school environment.

Highly successful ALE students:

Our interviewees described the students most likely to succeed in ALE programs as:

- *Self-motivated*
- *Able to teach themselves*
- *Able to effectively manage their own time and schedule*

Several noted that ALE may work well for some students with special needs.

While all ALE programs require a certain amount of contact between instructor and student, how they achieve it varies considerably. Many provide core courses or electives that are taught in a traditional classroom setting. Other courses are taught online; programs usually offered computer labs where students can work on their classes, meet other students, and have their questions answered by an instructor. All the teachers at the programs we visited were employed by the school district. Staff members from several of the programs we visited said they prefer locally employed teachers over teachers employed by for-profit online curriculum providers.

Teachers themselves should be the right fit for the ALE model. We heard them described as adaptable and able to accept that ALE instruction places different expectations and demands on their time than traditional classroom teaching. Interviewees said ALE teachers have the attitude that every student can succeed, and they were praised for being able to quickly assess and respond to a student's specific academic needs.

Staff from ALE programs across the state shared similar concerns

When we asked interviewees to share their concerns about ALE programs, many said that others in their school district or community had negative perceptions of the program, its purpose and its students. Other issues they raised included:

- Documentation requirements that seem unclear or burdensome
- Frequently changing rules and regulations with little guidance
- Inadequate numbers of teachers and support staff
- State testing protocols may affect ALE teaching time and results

But despite their concerns, our interviewees emphasized that it is critical for ALE programs to continue. From their point of view, the programs are meeting their intent: "to give schools flexibility to serve a diverse student population."

Issues in ALE student data collection may pose challenges for future analyses

Using the information from the 2013-14 school year, we were able to identify only about three-fourths of ALE-funded students when compared to reports districts submitted separately for funding purposes. The data used in our analyses were supplied by the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), drawing on data managed by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). We discovered that while OSPI had required districts to identify ALE-funded coursework using a Yes/No field in the data system, it did not enforce the requirement until after the end of the 2013-14 school year due to data entry issues, yielding incomplete data.

Another issue affects our ability to analyze the outcomes of different kinds of ALE courses. The same bill that mandated our audit changed the way ALE is named and defined, eliminating program types and replacing them with three course types. Programs were to use these new definitions beginning in the 2014-15 school year, but some ALE program staff said they were uncertain how to interpret the legislative definitions. Without clear and consistent application of the new definitions, programs may misclassify courses, which will compromise the reliability of any analyses based on ALE course types.

Analyses of student characteristics and outcome data were similar to preliminary analyses

We repeated the analyses conducted for Status Update #1 that described characteristics and academic outcomes for ALE and non-ALE students, taking into account the data limitations we identified.

We defined an ALE student as any student who enrolled in one or more ALE-funded courses during the 2013-14 school year.

2013-14 ALE students compared to non-ALE students

Student characteristics

ALE students were, on average:

- Less racially diverse
- Slightly more likely to be female than male
- Less likely to speak English as a second language
- Less likely to identify themselves as having a disability
- Less likely to be enrolled in programs such as Limited English Proficiency, Highly Capable, special education, or free and reduced lunch

Academic outcomes

ALE students were, on average:

- Less likely to graduate on time
- More likely to be one or more grade levels behind their peers
- More likely to drop out of school
- Less likely to meet standards during state testing
- Less likely to take college-bound coursework
- More likely to have slightly lower grade-point averages

Our analyses for the 2013-14 school year were based on the entire set of students enrolled in the public school system that year. Average ALE student characteristics and outcomes during the 2013-14 school year were consistent with those published in Status Update #1 for the 2012-13 school year.

Recommendations

The inability to accurately identify ALE students in the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) is an issue that must be addressed for purposes beyond this legislatively mandated audit. Researchers, educators, policy makers and other members of the educational system as a whole will not be able to adequately monitor and evaluate ALE student outcomes until data systems are accurate and complete. Consistent and accurate data also demonstrate accountability in the use of public funds.

Therefore, we make the following recommendations to OSPI:

1. Periodically evaluate whether the number of students reported by ALE programs for funding purposes is consistent with the number of students reported as ALE-funded in CEDARS, and follow up with programs where there are large discrepancies.
2. Evaluate whether ALE programs report course types in a way that is consistent and comparable, and provide further clarification as needed.

ALE performance audit timeline 2012-2018

This table shows the timetable of the longitudinal ALE study being conducted by the State Auditor's Office Performance Audit division.

It illustrates recent changes to ALE data definitions and data reporting, the interval between data availability and analysis, and our publication schedule. The current report is highlighted in pink in the last column.

ALE data changes	2013-14 ALE student cohorts		School year	Season	Calendar year	Audit activities and publications
ALE tracked by program type (Online/Digital, Contract-based, Parent Partnership), not by individual student.			2012-13	F	2013	Legislature passes ESSB 5946: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires greater accountability and transparency Redefines ALE from program types to course types Mandates audit of ALE student outcomes from 2013-14 through 2016-17
				W		Audit planning.
				S		Request rosters of 2012-13 ALE students from subset of school districts.
ALE student coursework flagged as Yes/No. ALE course type not yet identified.	enter grade 9	enter grade 12	2013-14	F	2014	Obtain rosters of 2012-13 ALE students subset. Obtain 2012-13 student data for school districts that provided ALE rosters.
	2013-14 data...			W		Analyze data on the subset of 2012-13 ALE students.
		2014 grads		S		
ALE student coursework tracked by course type (Online, Site-based, Remote).	enter grade 10		2014-15	F	2015	Publish Status Update 1. Issues / limitations and preliminary review of academic data from subset of 2012-13 ALE students.
				W		Data from 2013-14 academic year is available .
		1 year post HS		S		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define 2013-14 ALE cohorts and match to traditional instruction students. Visit ALE programs with high academic outcomes. Analyze data on 2013-14 ALE students and matched traditional cohort.
	enter grade 11		2015-16	F	2016	Publish Audit Report 1. 2013-14 ALE vs. traditional.
				W		Data from 2014-15 academic year is available. Obtain post-high school data on 2014 grads.
		2 years post HS		S		Analyze data on 2014-15 ALE students, and follow 2013-14 cohorts
	enter grade 12		2016-17	F	2017	Publish Audit Report 2. First follow-up of 2013-14 cohorts.
				W		Data from 2015-16 academic year is available. Obtain post-high school data on 2014 grads.
	2017 grads	3 years post HS		S		Analyze data on 2015-16 ALE students and follow 2013-14 cohorts.
<i>End of performance audit period</i>				F	2018	Publish Status Update 2. Second follow-up of 2013-14 cohorts.
				W		Data from 2016-17 academic year is available. Obtain post-high school data on 2014 grads.
				S		Analyze data on 2016-17 ALE students, and follow 2013-14 cohorts.
				F		Visit ALE programs with high student academic growth. Focus groups/surveys with ALE students and families. and follow 2013-14 cohorts.
				F		Publish Audit Report 3. Third follow-up and final report.

Background

ALE programs serve diverse needs for a diverse student population

ALE programs date back to the 1980s. According to the Digital Learning Department at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI):

“Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) is primarily distinguished by off-campus instruction. The intent of this type of program is to give schools flexibility to serve a diverse student population. The specific requirements and expectations of these away-from-school learning activities are detailed in a written student learning plan (WSLP) developed and supervised by a public school teacher.”

ALE programs provide an individualized course of study for K-12 students without requiring them to meet the in-class seat-time requirements for traditional instruction. ALE courses may include online courses, or courses in which students receive a limited amount of in-person instructional contact outside the traditional classroom. In addition to offering all students alternative learning opportunities and serving students who may not thrive in traditional settings, ALE programs allow school districts to claim students enrolled in nontraditional programs for the purposes of state funding.

ALE has undergone significant changes since 2013

The same bill that authorized the State Auditor’s Office to conduct financial and student outcome audits also changed the way ALE programs were defined in the 2013-14 school year and beyond. Previously, ALE programs were defined by program types. These types of programs were Online/Digital, Contract-based, and Parent Partnership. The bill redefined ALE in statute as three course types, including Online, Site-based and Remote, rather than as program types. We discuss these definition changes in detail in the report and in **Appendix B**.

Audit objectives

We intend to evaluate the effectiveness of ALE instruction by answering the following questions during our four-year performance audit. Not every objective will be addressed in each reporting phase.

- 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?

This report is part of a four-year study concluding in 2018

We published the first of two planned informal audit updates in February 2015. The first audit update (**Status Update #1**) shared our preliminary results from an analysis of differences in student characteristics and academic outcomes between ALE and traditional forms of education, based on a sample data set of 2012-13 school year students. We also identified several data issues that may limit our evaluation of outcomes from ALE programs and the conclusions that can be drawn from the study.

For this phase of our study, we conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses of ALE programs. Our quantitative analyses are based on academic records for all students enrolled in public schools during the 2013-14 school year, establishing a baseline set of students. The academic and post-high school progress for these students will be monitored over the next three years. Our qualitative analyses are based on site visits to 10 ALE programs across Washington. These visits helped us gain a better understanding of ALE and identify characteristics that may be common to higher-performing programs.

In future phases of our study we will continue to evaluate ALE programs, including comparing ALE students to similar students who did not experience ALE, and following their progress over time. We also plan to conduct additional site visits to ALE programs. The full schedule for our performance audit is illustrated in the timeline graphic on page 6.

ALE students are reported in two ways

1. Student data are supplied by individual school districts to the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) managed by OSPI “to collect, store and report data related to students, courses, and teachers in order to meet state and federal reporting requirements, and to help educators and policy makers to make data driven decisions.” The data used in our analyses were supplied by the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), drawing on CEDARS data.

The 2013-14 school year was the first year that ALE programs were required to report ALE courses on a per-student basis to OSPI through the CEDARS data system. Program staff were required to check a Yes/No for each student course to indicate if it was ALE-funded. Starting with the 2014-15 school year, ALE programs reported ALE courses by selecting one of the three course types rather than by a Yes/No indicator.

2. According to WAC 392-121-182, Section 9, ALE programs must also report accurate monthly headcount and monthly full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollments to the Superintendent of Public Instruction (see sidebar). These figures are used to determine basic education funding for the program.

Status Update #1 can be viewed on our website at:

www.sao.wa.gov/state/Documents/PA_ALE_interim_spring2015_ar1013676.pdf

This report uses a number of terms to refer to students:

Headcount measures each unique student served.

A full-time equivalent (FTE) is a measurement of student enrollment for funding purposes. It provides an accurate estimate of the portion of time a student is served by a given program, with 1.0 referring to a full-time student.

A course enrollment refers to a single student enrolled in a single course for a single term. For example, a single high school student taking a full load of courses would have 10 (if the district offers five periods a day) or 12 course enrollments (if six periods are offered) for the school year.

Source: http://www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2015_documents/OnlineLearningJan2015.pdf

ALE instruction during the 2013-14 school year

In the 2013-14 school year, there were 306 ALE programs in Washington, which served more than 30,000 individual students in grades pre-K through high school completion. Exhibit 1 shows the number of ALE programs in each of the previous classifications (current classifications are not available for this data year), and the number of students enrolled in them. While parent partnership programs represent the smallest classification in terms of the number of programs, they represent the largest classification in terms of the number of students enrolled.

Of the state's 295 school districts, 158 offered at least one ALE program and a few districts administered five or more. For districts that do run ALE programs, the proportion of ALE students in a school district varies widely, from less than one percent to more than 70 percent (although these high-ALE proportion districts are rare: only 13 school districts have more than 20 percent ALE student enrollment). Exhibit 2 shows the percent of ALE enrollment by school district.

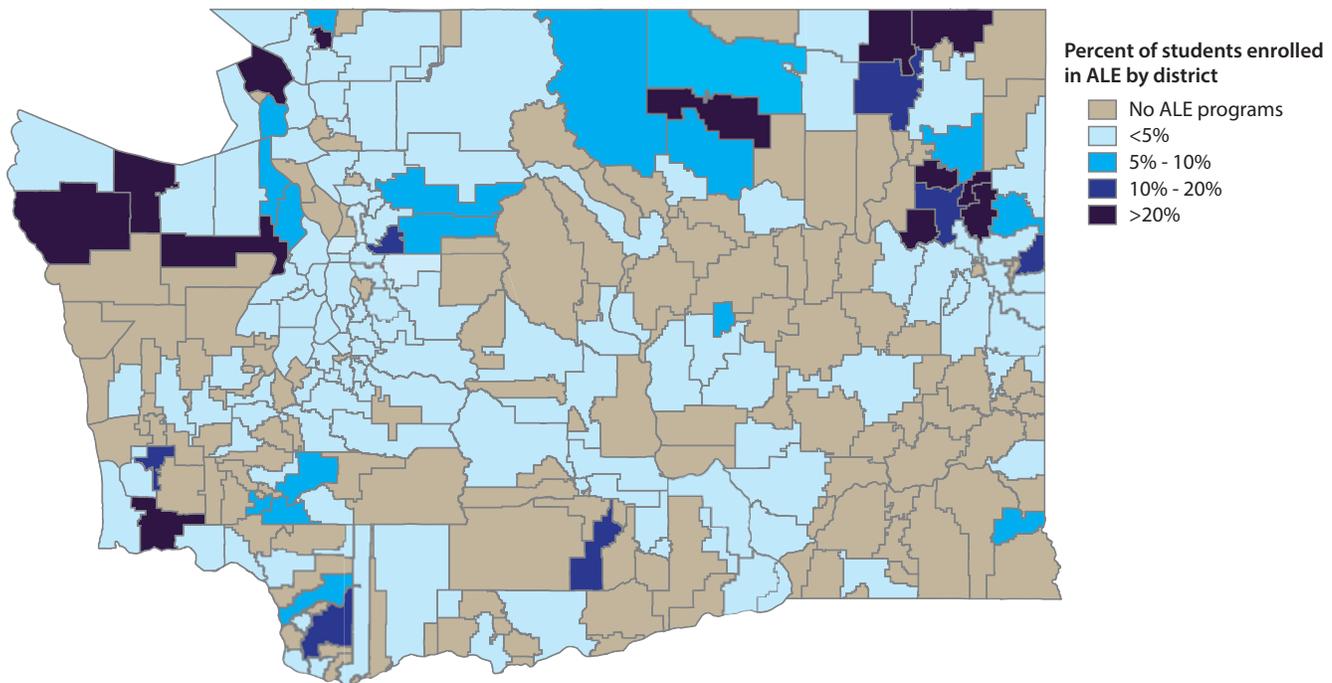
Exhibit 1 – 306 ALE programs in Washington Average monthly count, 2013-14 school year

	Number of programs	Number of students (head count)
Contract-based	125	8,245
Digital/Online	103	11,990
Parent Partnership	78	12,083

Source: SAO Financial Analysis Program report of OSPI data, fiscal year 2013-14.

Exhibit 2 – Proportion of students enrolled in an ALE program by school district

For school districts offering ALE, the median proportion of students enrolled in an ALE program is about 2%, but districts vary widely from less than 1% to more than 70%



Source: 2013-14 ALE enrollment report (as of December 1, 2014), as provided by OSPI.

The state allocated about \$132 million to school districts to administer the 306 ALE programs. School districts receive funding based on the number (FTE) of students enrolled; the percentage of the per-student allotment that gets passed on to an ALE program by the school district varies by district, as discussed in the “Observations from ALE Program Site Visits” section of this report, so the actual amount of funds directly available to ALE programs is somewhat less than this amount.

Scope and Methodology

For this first phase of our four-year longitudinal study, our focus was on gaining a better understanding of ALE programs. We received student records for all students enrolled in public schools during the 2013-14 school year, including their academic history. We used these records to verify our preliminary analyses and establish a baseline set of students. The academic and post-high school progress for these students will be monitored over the next three years.

We also identified several programs associated with stronger student metrics and conducted site visits to 10 of these programs. The site visits enabled us to learn more about ALE programs associated with stronger student outcomes and the people who participate in them.

This report, our first in a series of three, will present:

- **Section 1:** Quantitative analysis of student data for the 2013-14 school year
- **Section 2:** Qualitative analysis of information from site visits during the 2014-15 school year

Analyses of ALE student data

Preliminary analyses were based on voluntarily supplied 2012-13 school-year data

Our preliminary analyses of student records, Status Update #1, included data on students from approximately one-third of the ALE programs operating during the 2012-13 school year. These programs served just under half of all students enrolled in ALE programs during that year. Because ALE enrollment data was not collected in Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's (OSPI) Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) at this time, we asked school districts to voluntarily supply rosters of their ALE students. We then obtained CEDARS data on student characteristics and academic outcomes for these students and all others enrolled in the same school districts.

Current analyses are based on a complete set of student records for the 2013-14 school year

Since that time, a record of ALE participation has become available in CEDARS, reported to OSPI by individual school districts. OSPI provides periodic extracts of CEDARS data to the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) within the Washington state Office of Financial Management (OFM). The ERDC incorporates this information into a data warehouse containing public school, college, trade school, and employment information. The ERDC provided demographic and academic records for all students enrolled in Washington's public school system at any point in the 2013-14 school year. Identifying information was removed from the data we received; individual students were distinguished only by a research number assigned by ERDC.

For purposes of this study, we defined an ALE student as anyone enrolled in one or more courses during the 2013-14 school year and flagged with 'Yes' in the ALE-funded field. The *CEDARS Data Manual for the 2013-14 School Year (January 2014 – Version 6.4)* directs program staff to select 'Yes' if "... the student is receiving, or per WAC 392.121.182(3)(a) could be claimed for, ALE funded instruction for the course being reported."

Site visits to ALE programs

Our review of ALE programs would be incomplete without talking to program participants and observing programs first hand to learn why students and families choose these programs, how ALE differs from traditional education, and the practical advantages and disadvantages of this model.

In this first round of site visits, we focused on programs associated with higher student outcomes for the ALE student body as a whole. Details about how we selected programs to visit and conducted our site visits can be found in **Appendix C**. Later in our study, we plan to conduct a second round of site visits focused on programs that demonstrate higher individual student growth.

We did not visit any programs that were defined as contract-based under the old ALE program definitions. They were rare on our list of ALE programs with strong student metrics, and the one program we visited that was, according to OSPI records, contract-based turned out to be an online program. OSPI staff told us that contract-based programs were typically recommended for students falling behind in school, which may explain why so few appeared on our list of programs associated with higher student outcomes. We may see more programs that have historically used this approach later in our study when we visit programs that demonstrate higher individual student growth as opposed to overall program metrics.

Audit performed to standards

We conducted this performance audit under the authority of state law (RCW 43.09.470), approved as Initiative 900 by Washington voters in 2005, and in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing standards (December 2011 revision) issued by the U.S Government Accountability Office. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. See **Appendix A**, which addresses the I-900 areas covered in the audit.

Next steps

Our performance audits of state programs and services are reviewed by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) and/or by other legislative committees whose members wish to consider findings and recommendations on specific topics. Representatives of the State Auditor's Office will review this audit with JLARC's Initiative 900 Subcommittee in Olympia. The public will have the opportunity to comment at this hearing. Please check the JLARC website for the exact date, time, and location (www.leg.wa.gov/JLARC). The State Auditor's Office conducts periodic follow-up evaluations to assess the status of recommendations and may conduct follow-up audits at its discretion. This longitudinal study continues into 2018. We will issue a second audit report in 2016, a second audit update in 2017 and our final audit report in 2018.

Audit Results

Section 1: Observations from Analyses of ALE Student Data

Reliably identifying ALE students is problematic

We were not able to accurately identify all ALE students in our analyses due to limitations in the data we received. Individual school districts enter student data to the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), which is managed by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). The 2013-14 school year was the first year the new “ALE-funded” data field was recorded in CEDARS and was entered as a simple Yes/No entry. However, we learned that while OSPI required districts to identify ALE-funded courses using this field, it did not enforce the requirement by making the field a mandatory entry until after the end of the 2013-14 school year. Student course records were being rejected by the CEDARS data system in their entirety when the “ALE-funded” field did not contain a valid value. OSPI temporarily turned off the requirement in CEDARS for this field to contain a valid value in order to allow schools time to update their data systems to submit data in a format that would not be rejected. OSPI turned the CEDARS requirement back on after the end of the 2013-14 school year.

We requested official student counts from apportionment reports to verify whether we had identified the full set of ALE students by using student records in CEDARS. We were able to identify only an estimated 78 percent of ALE-funded students.

Identifying ALE students from the CEDARS data system is complicated. The ALE programs report monthly headcounts and student FTEs to OSPI for funding purposes, separately from what is recorded in the CEDARS data system for each student. The CEDARS data system includes enrollment records for every school a student enrolls in, but does not indicate which enrollments are for ALE programs because some ALE programs are separate schools, while others are part of larger, traditional schools.

We attempted to verify the student counts we generated by comparing CEDARS data to monthly student headcounts from apportionment reports. In CEDARS, the only indicator of participation in an ALE program is a flag attached to a specific course record for a student. However, we found that the flag does not indicate precisely when during the school year the student was enrolled in an ALE program, since instruction is often provided on a flexible schedule. Therefore, it is impossible to precisely verify student data reported in CEDARS by using the monthly enrollment information from apportionment reports on ALE-funded programs.

Additionally, some ALE students are not identified anywhere in OSPI’s centralized reporting methods. There are additional ALE students who districts do not claim under ALE funding and therefore don’t appear on monthly apportionment reports and their coursework is not flagged in CEDARS as ALE-funded. For example, some traditional students take ALE courses in addition to a full-time schedule. Funding for these courses may be covered by direct payments from the student or absorbed in the overall district budget. We were not able to identify these students, in addition to the estimated one-fourth of known ALE students who we were unable to identify due to data limitations, as mentioned above.

Classification of ALE instruction by course type may be inconsistent

The requirement to report ALE courses by course type (Online, Remote, or Site-based) began in the 2014-15 school year. Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946, *Strengthening Student Educational Outcomes*, defines these course types in statute:

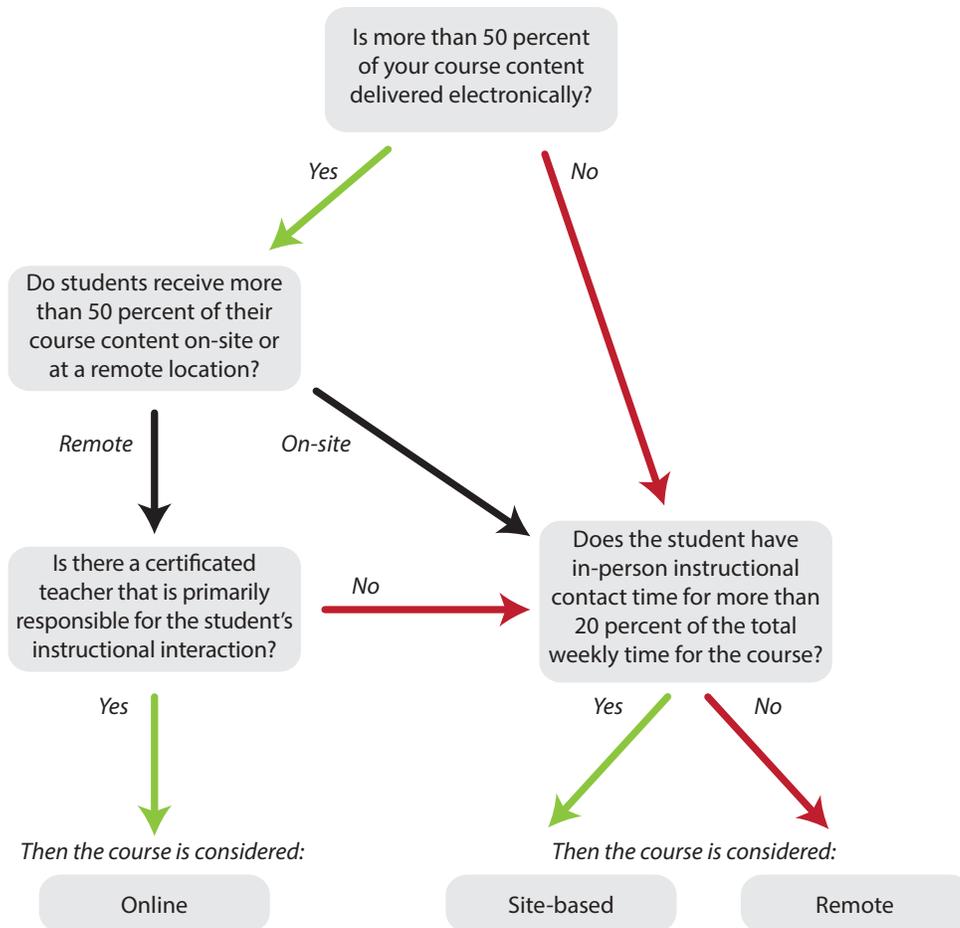
- (A) *“Online course” means an alternative learning experience course that has the same meaning as provided in RCW 28A.250.010 (more than 50 percent of the course content is delivered electronically; more than 50 percent of the content is delivered from a remote location; a certificated teacher is primarily responsible for a student’s instructional interaction and a student has access to the teacher synchronously, asynchronously, or both).*
- (B) *“Remote course” means an alternative learning experience course or course work that is not an online course where the student has in-person instructional contact time for less than twenty percent of the total weekly time for the course.*
- (C) *“Site-based course” means an alternative learning experience course or course work that is not an online course where the student has in-person instructional contact time for at least twenty percent of the total weekly time for the course.*

When we considered the legislatively provided definitions for the new ALE course types, SAO staff identified areas of ambiguity and questioned if individual ALE programs might struggle with applying these definitions to courses within their program or make assumptions that may result in incorrect data being entered into CEDARS. We were uncertain where to classify:

- Online courses delivering less than 50 percent of the course content electronically
- Online courses delivering more than 50 percent of the content electronically, but whose students work primarily onsite
- Courses delivering exactly half of the course content electronically
- Remote or site-based courses that include online coursework that does not meet the formal definition of an “online course”

We asked the head of OSPI’s Digital Learning Department to help us understand OSPI’s interpretation of the new definitions. We created a chart (shown in Exhibit 3) that follows the decision-making process as OSPI envisions it, and OSPI verified the accuracy of our decision tree.

Exhibit 3 – Decision tree for assigning ESSB 5946 ALE course type definitions



Source: Auditor created, verified by OSPI.

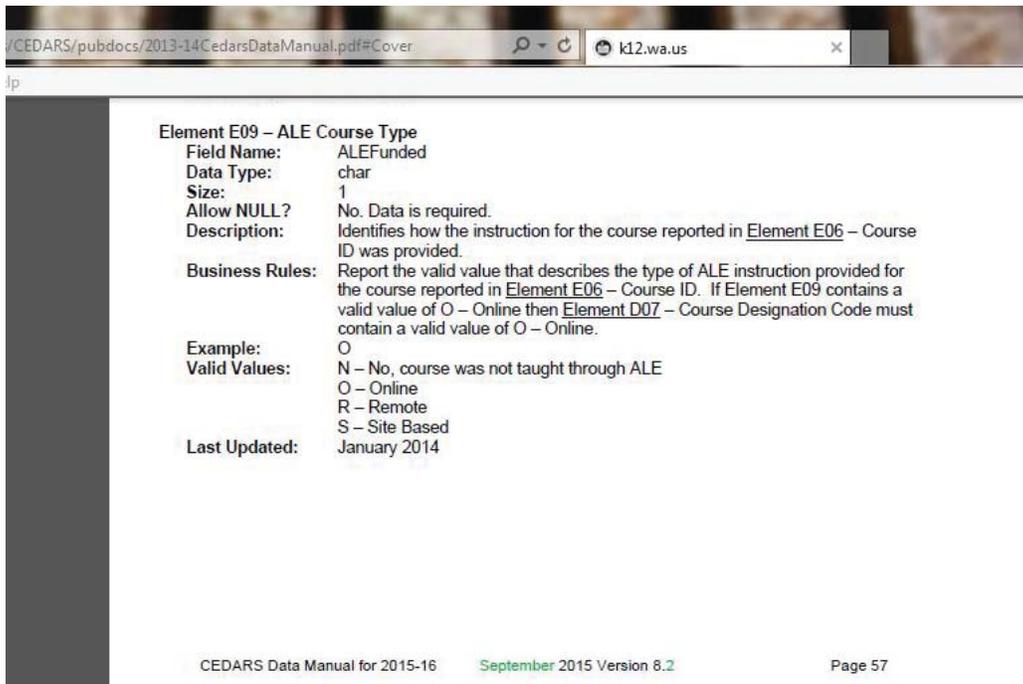
During many of our site visits, we talked to staff responsible for submitting program data to CEDARS. They were able to easily follow our decision tree, but some were uncertain of their choice when their program fell precisely on the minimum value listed at a particular decision point or when different students complete the same course through different methods.

Some staff said that their ALE program received little or no guidance from OSPI on how to interpret the new course type definitions. The ALE program personnel who submit data to CEDARS told us OSPI sends them a list of changes to the reporting system each year. They must interpret the meaning of those changes from the supporting documentation. Some said they consult with staff from other programs, and some accept whatever someone else in their program tells them to enter. If they still have questions, they might contact OSPI directly. Sometimes staff needs to correct CEDARS data mid-year due to misunderstandings about the information they should have entered into the data system.

“It would have been beneficial to have more conversations about the definitions and how to determine what a course is, but we figured it out.”
 ~ ALE administrator

We examined the documentation for selecting course type in the most recent CEDARS Data Manual (illustrated in Exhibit 4) and observed it was technical in nature.

Exhibit 4 – CEDARS Data Manual (issued September 2015 - Version 8.2)



We also reviewed the most recent CEDARS Reporting Guidance (illustrated in Exhibit 5). Based on our own uncertainty regarding these definitions and interview responses, the guidance readily available to program staff, describing course type, may not be adequate to help users enter consistent data.

Exhibit 5 – CEDARS Reporting Guidance (issued April 2015 - Version 8.0)

Reporting ALE Course Type Instruction

Beginning with the 2014-15 school year Student Schedule File (E), Element E09 – ALE Course Type and Student Grade History File (H), Element H27 – ALE Course Type were updated to collect course type information as opposed to funding information. This change was a requirement of WAC: 392-121-182 (3) (a) (ii).

Districts are required to indicate whether or not the course was taught through ALE and, if so, the valid values below must be reported in E09 and H27:

- O – “Online course” means an alternative learning experience course that has the same meaning as provided in RCW 28A.250.010
- R – “Remote course” means an alternative learning experience course or course work that is not an online course where the student has in-person instructional contact time for less than twenty percent of the total weekly time for the course.
- S – “Site-based course” means an alternative learning experience course or course work that is not an online course where the student has in-person instructional contact time for at least twenty percent of the total weekly time for the course.

We therefore have concerns about how accurate this important data element will be when we receive further data for our study. Although we identified an issue with the few programs we visited, we don't know at this time how widespread the issue may be. Even if OSPI provides clarification to individual programs now, the 2015-16 school year data that has already been entered may not be reliable. Further evaluation of whether or not individual program staff are consistently interpreting the legislative definitions, and are following any guidance that OSPI has provided, will need to be conducted in order to determine whether or not information available on ALE course types is sufficiently reliable for data analysis.

Program staff asked for additional clarity on ALE rules and requirements

Ambiguity surrounding how to interpret the new ALE course types may suggest a larger issue regarding clarity in ALE rules and requirements in general. Washington Administrative Code (WAC 392-121-182) documents the requirements for ALE; when printed, they are about 10 pages long. OSPI's website provides an online list of common questions and answers relating to WAC 392-121-182; they are about 50 pages when printed. We did not find any entries regarding the new ALE course type definitions.

During our site visits, program staff said they were frustrated by their own uncertainty regarding the specific documentation that is required for ALE programs. We also observed that different programs had different interpretations on basic issues such as whether non-certificated staff can provide direct instruction and whether a high-school-level education can be reasonably provided in certain ALE formats (such as parent partnerships).

Other data issues

We identified several other issues with the data we received that are beyond the scope of this report, but are relevant to our ongoing study. The SAO has worked closely with OSPI, which obtains the data from individual school districts, and the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), which provides the data we receive for this study, to understand the data issues we identified. Early attention to the completeness and accuracy of the student information will ensure smoother future data requests and improved data reliability as our four-year study proceeds.

We also discovered that the amount of historical information OSPI collects on students is limited and not expected to be available to our audit for a variety of reasons, which will complicate our ability to identify a strong comparison group for ALE students. Some gaps we identified include:

- Centrally located course grade data for students younger than high school age are not collected.
- Records of courses taken by students through homeschooling or private school are not reported to OSPI – students who are part-time enrolled in public school and also homeschooled account for a sizeable portion of ALE program participants; additionally, students who are part-time homeschooled often do not participate in standardized testing.

- Variation in statewide testing over the past several years makes it difficult to track student academic growth over time.
- Only two years of discipline and attendance records are available through CEDARS. The CEDARS database does not require entry of class attendance records for all ALE students because it is impossible to define an absence for non-seat-time courses.

Analyses of student characteristics and outcome data were similar to our preliminary analyses

We repeated the analyses published in Status Update #1 to describe characteristics and academic outcomes for ALE and non-ALE students during the 2013-14 school year. We were aware of the limitations that we discovered from our review of the reliability and validity of this data. The purpose of repeating the analyses was to provide a more complete and precise description of ALE programs and students, because the 2013-14 school year will serve as the baseline year for our four-year longitudinal study. For a more detailed description of ALE student characteristics and outcomes, see **Appendix D**.

The student characteristics and outcomes for ALE students, compared with those of non-ALE students on average, during the 2013-14 school year were consistent with what we found in the preliminary analyses in terms of demographics and educational outcomes (see **Exhibit 6**).

Exhibit 6 – 2013-14 ALE students compared to non-ALE students

Student characteristics	Academic outcomes
<p>ALE students were, on average:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less racially diverse • Slightly more likely to be female than male • Less likely to speak English as a second language • Less likely to identify themselves as having a disability • Less likely to be enrolled in programs such as Limited English Proficiency, Highly Capable, special education, or free and reduced lunch 	<p>ALE students were, on average:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less likely to graduate on time • More likely to be one or more grade levels behind their peers • More likely to drop out of school • Less likely to meet standards during state testing • Less likely to take college-bound coursework • More likely to have slightly lower grade-point averages

Instead of using a sample of public school students as we did for Status Update #1, we used the complete set of all students enrolled in public schools during the 2013-14 school year. An ALE student was defined as any student who took one or more courses during the 2013-14 school year that were indicated in CEDARS as ALE-funded. Our comparison was the set of students who did not have any courses indicated as ALE-funded during that year. However, as discussed above, data limitations meant we were able to identify only about three-fourths of ALE-funded students from the 2013-14 school year.

Data quality issues may affect the longitudinal study

It is only possible to fully evaluate ALE student outcomes if student records are reliably linked to ALE program participation. Until ALE students can be accurately identified and connected to the ALE courses they participate in, we cannot identify an accurate comparison group of students who have not participated in ALE, particularly those whose ALE courses are currently not tracked in any data system. The quality of our comparison group will be negatively affected because some of the students selected for comparison might actually be unidentified ALE students, which will lessen our ability to determine the impact of ALE programs on student outcomes. It is not possible for us to verify the integrity of a selected comparison group of students in order to eliminate any potentially misidentified ALE students because the data that we received for this study does not include student identifiers.

Our original plan was to use data on 2013-14 school year students as our baseline year for this four-year longitudinal study. But if we cannot ensure these students are representative of all ALE students, we will need to change our baseline year to the 2014-15 school year. We expect data on ALE participation will improve for the full 2014-15 school year because OSPI enforced CEDARS reporting of the “ALE-funded” field at that time (even if identifying the specific course type and identifying students exposed to ALE - but not charged for funding purposes - may still be an issue). If we determine that we do need to delay our baseline year, our study period for following ALE outcomes will be reduced to just two years.

We planned to begin exploring differences in student outcomes by ALE course type starting with data from the 2014-15 school year. These data may also be unreliable because there is ambiguity in the “course types” as defined by the Legislature, and the guidance OSPI provides does not include specific direction to programs on how to interpret this legislative language. Students are in the 2015-16 school year as of the time of this publication. Even if programs receive additional guidance on interpreting ALE course types now, evaluations of ALE by course type must wait until 2016-17 school year data is available, the last year of our study. A longitudinal evaluation of student outcomes of ALE by course type is not possible within the timeframe of this study. We will continue to evaluate longitudinal student outcomes of ALE programs over all course types combined.

Section 2: Observations from ALE Program Site Visits

This section of the report presents information gathered during site visits, focus groups and interviews we conducted with individuals representing 10 ALE programs associated with higher student outcomes. We would like to thank the programs that voluntarily hosted us for a site visit (listed in Appendix C).

Note: This section describes common themes that arose across the variety of programs we visited. We did not independently verify individual statements for accuracy or as fact, and the opinions expressed may not apply to other ALE programs in the state.

As we noted in the “Background” section of this report, recent changes in law have revised program types to course types. We tried to select a variety of ALE program types and course types, but neither the old program type definitions nor the new course type definitions seemed to accurately categorize the ALE programs that we visited. From our observations, there appeared to be only two distinct categories of ALE programs – online or parent partnership. The new concept of remote course versus site-based course also did not readily describe the programs. Some students in online programs prefer to work from home, while others prefer to work onsite at computer labs offered by the ALE program. Parent partnerships include a broad variety of delivery models, so that students might take some classes through home study (parent-led or online) and others in a traditional classroom setting. We did not visit any programs that classified themselves as contract-based under the old program definitions.

The ALE programs we visited share some important characteristics, but also differ

While the programs we visited varied in structure, focus, teaching style and curricula, we identified several similar characteristics:

- Great enthusiasm for ALE expressed by students, parents, administrators, teachers and staff. Nearly everyone we interviewed was passionate and proud to be a part of their ALE program.
- Small program size compared to traditional schools
- High level of one-on-one interaction between students and teachers. Staff and students in the online programs we visited said that students have regular contact with their teachers through face-to-face meetings, emails, phone calls or online chats. Some students and parents in parent partnership programs said that they regularly keep in touch with the teacher through these means as well.
- Teachers typically were employed by the school district (they were not contractors or employed by the online curriculum provider)

The differences between them are also important. ALE programs varied in resources available to them and in the composition of their student populations.

- **Infrastructure:** Some programs are housed in portable buildings on the campus of a traditional public school, or wherever space could be made available. Others operate out of modern, independent buildings designed specifically for their programs. While some of the ALE programs have their own building clearly marked with their identity, others use unmarked spare rooms or other spaces. One program, housed within a large traditional high school, was located in a tiny room that previously served as the food service office and was still labeled as such. Another program operated from a conference room at the district office, and students relocated when district office staff held their yoga class or other functions in the room.
- **Funding:** Some programs receive 100 percent of per-student funding provided by the state, while others receive only a portion (85 percent to 90 percent) of per-student funding from their district (the school district retains the remaining 10-15 percent for its portion of the costs involved in operating the program).
- **Student enrollment:** Some students attend ALE programs full-time, while others attend their program part-time and take additional courses through a traditional school, home schooling, Running Start, or other programs. Some programs accept only students from within their district, while others allow students from outside the district to enroll.
- **Student attendance:** The amount of time a student is required to be onsite varies from program to program, and even from student to student. Some ALE teachers and administrators stated that they may require students who are falling behind to have more frequent contact with the program; teachers may initiate contact when a student seems to need extra support as well.

All ALE programs must meet state standards

ALE programs must meet the same standards as other forms of public education. District administrators often referred to their ALE program as “just one of our schools,” or “just a part of our district.” Some of the online programs we visited were heavily aligned with the districts’ traditional school curriculum and teach the same content in the same order as the same course in a traditional classroom. This alignment requires ALE programs to design their own curriculum or adapt the traditional school’s curriculum to the ALE format, rather than using a commercial product. Several programs mentioned that they are also aligned with the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

“Graduates complete every graduation requirement the same as every other student in the district. They do everything everybody else does.”

~ ALE administrator

ALE programs allow school districts to provide flexible educational opportunities

Article IX, section 1 of the state Constitution states that: “It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex.” Program and district administrators told us that because children are each unique, experience a variety of life circumstances, and learn in so many different ways, complying with this law would be difficult unless school districts are able to offer multiple forms of education. Several administrators described their ALE program as one of many valid options for students and families. They told us that ALE programs are able to fulfill many roles for districts, and may fill needs or gaps not covered by other district options.

The flexibility of ALE programs can help school districts mitigate geographical and logistical challenges. In rural areas, for example, a student’s distance from home to school, compounded by problems accessing transportation, may limit the number of days he or she can travel to school; ALE courses can make up for days when travel is impossible. ALE courses are offered through an individualized written student learning plan (WSLP), allowing the district to tailor the program of study to student interests and make courses available where there would not otherwise be sufficient students in any one area to fill an entire class. In one program a teacher told us, “I teach Latin, which is a very niche class. Because it’s available online, I’m able to teach students in varying areas ... It gives them an opportunity to learn something they wouldn’t [otherwise] have a chance to take.”

ALE programs also help districts reach out to and attract homeschoolers to the public school system who might not otherwise interact with a certificated teacher at all throughout their education. As one administrator said, “We’re talking about a homeschool partnership program, that’s really our goal, to bridge that gap between home-based instruction and what we can offer our families in the school district. Our goal is to serve children and their families in a way that meets their specific needs in regard to education.”

A district’s flexibility is reflected in the student populations ALE reaches

Due to their flexible and more self-paced structure, ALE programs can help students catch up to their peers when they fall behind, stay on track during long absences, or advance in their studies to a greater degree than would be possible in a traditional classroom.

Several of our interviewees stated that a primary goal of their program is to help struggling students stay in school and graduate. Others indicated that some students simply do not thrive in a traditional setting – whether because of learning style, social pressures or other reasons – but find a supportive and adaptive learning environment in an ALE setting that allows them to flourish. One student mentioned experiencing “a lot of distractions in the classroom setting” that are not present in the ALE setting.

Interviewees told us that ALE also helps students keep up with their studies when they must be absent from school for long periods due to health issues, competing commitments, suspension or expulsion. One student related how a chronic illness results in extended absences, but that the program’s flexible schedule allows her to stay engaged and catch up as needed.

“Right now, if this program weren’t here, the district would have no alternatives.”

~ ALE administrator

“It’s unique. We provide a bridge back into the public school system with oversight and accountability.”

~ ALE administrator, parent partnership

Other students are on track but have little time to meet increasing graduation requirements while benefiting from school district offerings such as electives, vocational programs (e.g., Skills Centers), or college-level courses (e.g., Running Start programs). For these students, taking an ALE course may help them add an extra class period into their school day. ALE online courses allow the district to offer students the opportunity to take an interesting course not offered at their traditional school. We heard that some programs' online courses are included in the course catalogs for the traditional schools in their district, which broadens the choices of courses available to all students.

Students and families offered dozens of reasons why they chose ALE programs

Students and their parents told us they chose ALE programs for a variety of reasons, ranging from the philosophical to the pragmatic, such as holding down a full-time job. During focus groups, we heard that students who experienced breaks in their education or who needed to modify their school hours around their own schedule found ALE programs to better align with their needs than traditional school. The range of experiences described included: frequent hospitalizations; episodes of mental illness; pregnancy and parenting; training for the Olympics; pursuing professional dance, sports or circus careers; and extended travel abroad. These students would have difficulty continuing their education, or staying on track with their home district's curricula, without the flexibility of ALE. One ALE student said, "It gives you a lot of time to pursue other things. I dance 25 hours per week, so [ALE] allows me to focus on that and train extra ... so I can do the school when I want rather than eight to three. It's more flexible."

ALE's online courses are attractive to many students. At one end of the spectrum, the student may be making up a failed course from a traditional school; at the other, a student may want to work at an accelerated pace toward graduation. Others might choose to take their core courses online so they can free up time in their schedule to take advantage of electives, or to take an interesting class that is not available at their local school.

Some students experienced school anxiety or had negative or disappointing experiences in a traditional setting, wanted more individualized attention from teachers, desired self-paced or customized instruction, or wished to avoid the often intense social atmosphere and large size of a traditional school. Several people we spoke with mentioned that they are seeing an increasing number of students entering ALE from traditional education because the student felt anxious about school. The ALE program allowed them to feel safe continuing their education.

Some students said they entered ALE because it was their last available option. However, the majority of students and families we talked with seem to have actively selected ALE programs. When asked where they would go if their ALE program was no longer available, many students and parents said they would exclusively homeschool or join another ALE program, but would not return to a traditional school.

“It's parents and kids and the school working together to provide a quality education.”

~ Parent of ALE student

Homeschoolers are a key demographic for ALE programs

For homeschooling families, ALE allows parents to be integrally involved in their child's education while benefitting from the guidance and expertise of certificated teachers and to access the program's curricula, educational tools and other resources. ALE also supports families with certain aspects of their child's education that may be more difficult to provide at home, such as opportunities to collaborate on group projects, access to art and science labs, and upper-level or special-interest courses that may be beyond the parent's ability or interest to teach.

Examples of some of the resources we saw in parent partnership programs include lending libraries with a variety of curricula for parents and teachers to explore in order to find the best fit for a particular student, traditional science labs, and community rooms with kitchens and places for parents and their younger children to play while their siblings attend classes. Participating in an ALE program also allows students and families to network and socialize with other homeschooling families, which many cited as a valuable aspect of their ALE experience.

Some students respond better to ALE courses than others

According to many interview and focus group participants, successful ALE students must be self-motivated, and able to teach themselves and effectively manage their own time and schedule. These skills are important to student success in any setting; however, they become even more essential in ALE courses where students are given more independence and less structure than in a traditional schoolroom. We were told that new students might struggle at first in an ALE program until they develop these skills, particularly if they enrolled in ALE courses expecting that they would be easier than comparable traditional courses.

People we interviewed said that strong parental support and a home environment conducive to learning are important for ALE students, since a large amount of learning takes place at home. Many interviewees said that both online and parent partnership programs work best if a student has at least one stay-at-home parent. We also heard about exceptions such as children who have been successful in an ALE program whose parents work full-time. Some interviewees felt that poor support at home could potentially be overcome through extra monitoring and encouragement from teachers and staff. Some ALE program staff said that not all parents in a parent partnership program fully understand or respond to the level of involvement and responsibility required of them as the student's primary instructor.

Some online programs assist with the transition from traditional to ALE learning by providing an online orientation course that the student must pass to be admitted to the ALE program. These orientation courses test a student's ability to learn through ALE methods and introduce skills a student will need to participate in an online ALE environment. Topics covered in the online orientation include teaching students how to use chat boards, submit assignments and ask questions, and address online etiquette and cyberbullying. Parents of students in online programs told us that they need to monitor their children closely to ensure that they are doing their coursework and not playing games or browsing the Internet.

“Without this program my son would have given up and was looking at the GED route. It is keeping a goal or dream alive.”

~ Parent of ALE student

“The atmosphere makes it so anybody can be successful; students can make a connection with teachers here.”

~ Parent of ALE student

Interviewees also described the characteristics of students less likely to succeed in ALE

Most programs we visited use a screening process prior to admission to ensure that students will have a high chance of success in that particular ALE program. For example, one program hosts a “child study team” meeting in which the teachers, administrators and school counselors discuss the reason for enrolling the child in the ALE program, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the child and family, and determine whether it is a good fit for that student. Administrators stated that they try to steer students and families toward other available programs when they think ALE might not be a good fit for their child, taking into account the characteristics and preferences of the student. For instance, students who need or want daily interaction with their peers (before school, after school, between classes, recess, clubs and sports) might not like ALE courses.

Several people we interviewed told us that some students will struggle in any learning environment, ALE or non-ALE. This includes students who lack motivation or are unwilling to take responsibility for their own learning, those who require a great deal of structure, or whose life circumstances distract them from learning. Teachers and administrators provided many examples of students with external challenges to achieving academic success, regardless of instructional setting: children who are homeless, abuse drugs and alcohol, care for sick family members, work full-time to support their families or whose parents are migrant workers. However, sometimes these students are more successful in an ALE environment than they were in a traditional school environment.

ALE programs may work well for some students with special needs

Because ALE programs are generally small, lacking therapists and special education specialists, they typically cannot meet the needs of students who require intensive special education services. However, several interviewees said that for students whose disability is in the mild range, an ALE program may work well. For example, we heard the stories of many students who struggled in a traditional school due to developmental delays, Asperger’s syndrome and autism, or mental illness, who thrived in an ALE program. Some teachers and administrators noted that certain children were not enrolled as special education students because the ALE model worked well for them and instruction could easily be modified to suit their needs. These students, they said, probably would be enrolled in special education services if they attended a traditional school.

“Kids who are successful at a traditional school are likely to be successful here, too; the ones that struggle in a traditional setting will struggle here, too, but we are capturing some of them.”
~ ALE teacher

ALE programs tailor the amount of contact to individual students' needs

Just as ALE programs offer flexibility in course content, they also offer a great variety of interaction options to their students. While all programs require a certain amount of contact between instructor and student, how this is achieved varies considerably. Regular ongoing contact gives teachers more time to provide direct instruction, to ensure the student is grasping material and completing assignments, and isn't practicing new skills incorrectly in between their required weekly contacts. Many students in ALE programs spend some of their time onsite in computer labs or traditional-style classrooms. They may be assigned to complete work in a group with other ALE students, which might be completed onsite, by getting together at an offsite location, or by remote meetings through chat rooms or video chats (for example, using Skype). Some teachers emphasized that the onsite component of their program is critical, and the more time a student spends onsite, the better.

While many ALE students do some of their schoolwork onsite and interact with other students in their programs, others may have more limited interactions. Some students meet with their teacher once a week for one hour to discuss the previous week's assignments and to prepare for the next week's coursework, then prefer to work at home or somewhere else offsite.

However, the ALE format may not be as isolating as it first appears. Some districts allow students enrolled in ALE programs to participate in activities such as school dances, sports teams, science fairs, drama productions and other events at their local traditional school. In addition, programs themselves may offer group classes, field trips, travel experiences and activity nights.

Parent partnership programs usually provide core courses or electives that are taught in a traditional classroom setting, though typically with only a small number of students. Families in such programs often establish relationships and their children interact regularly outside of school.

Online programs usually offer computer labs where students can work on their classes, meet other students and have their questions answered by the lab instructor or peers. Some online classes include chat rooms where students can discuss material or collaborate. One administrator pointed out that today's students are used to interacting remotely with their peers through texting and email. He said that, "It's the way that students already learn and communicate outside of school. Technology is actually an extension of the student's self; it's how they learn."

Participants described many advantages of ALE programs

ALE students, families and staff spoke with enthusiasm about the many advantages they see in this educational approach. ALE content can be highly individualized and self-paced. Students can choose to do their work when they are most alert and focused (for example, in the evening), rather than following the fixed schedule of a traditional school. Course content can be tailored to a student's interests, minimizing distraction and boredom, and students with particular interests and passions can be kept engaged in learning by integrating these activities with the course curriculum. For example, a few students we interviewed preferred to learn by focusing on one course at a time; that is, completing an entire semester of English in a few weeks, then focusing exclusively on another subject.

I like that the teachers have smaller classes and the teachers can work with you more one-on-one.

~ ALE student

The nature of self-paced ALE courses allows students to move through the curriculum quickly, though, as one student pointed out, “It’s self-paced [only] if you’re ahead.” Students must keep on track with their learning plans to avoid repeated reminders to do so. Self-pacing is helpful to students who need to catch up on credits or who want to graduate early. Students told us they learn more in less time due to the small class sizes and individualized instruction. One student stated, “You’re not doing the same thing over and over till all the kids get it.”

The ALE teachers we spoke with said they are able to monitor students closely to ensure they’re grasping course material. Students can take their time with difficult material and move more quickly through material that is easier for them. Online courses are often “mastery-based,” meaning that students must demonstrate understanding of the material before they can move on to the next lesson. This is in contrast to traditional classrooms, where course material is typically presented on a schedule, whether or not everyone in the class is ready to move on.

Many regarded the close personal relationships that form between teachers and students as common and desirable. Students spoke of the bond they have with their ALE instructor, and indicated that these relationships allow teachers to become strong motivators and mentors for their students. Several teachers told us that they have developed long-lasting relationships with students and their families. Teachers may work with students over multiple years or through multiple courses, and may have taught their siblings. Students at several online programs we visited said that their teachers were very available, flexible and caring, and that their teachers’ one-on-one support was behind their success in the program.

In all the programs we visited, we observed a strong sense of community among students, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators. Many we spoke to described their ALE community as “family,” and said that students and parents are often on a first-name basis with their teachers, principals, and other school staff. ALE participants and staff also stressed that students of all abilities are accepted and welcomed, regardless of how far ahead or how far behind their peers they may be, and students of varying ages may be taking the same class together. As one parent said, “I don’t know which kids are in which grade – not till you get the yearbook. They’re just all together.” Another parent, referring to traditional classrooms, asked, “Where in life do you work with your same age peers? There’s something valuable in being able to work with all sorts of ages and groupings.”

Participants and staff at the ALE programs we visited told us that they tend not to experience some of the behavioral issues and bullying that sometimes occur in traditional schools. They attributed this to the small size of the program, strong relationships and close oversight of students. Many students reported feeling very safe within their ALE program. Several students reported they look after one another and do not tolerate inappropriate behaviors of fellow students such as teasing or bullying.

“During orientation, you have to take tests about the dangers of cyber bullying. There is an expectation of no swearing or texting language in online work assignments.”
~ ALE student

Benefits from ALE participation may last beyond graduation day

Participants and staff described a number of long-term benefits and life skills that they believed were linked to participation in ALE programs. They cited learning how to learn by teaching yourself, developing self-discipline, interacting collaboratively with others of varying ages, mentoring peers and younger students, and gaining experience with online instruction.

These skills may be especially useful if a student goes on to college, where self-direction and the ability to teach oneself are necessary due to the less-structured setting and more limited teacher oversight. One online program we visited works with its regional four-year university to create a curriculum interface similar to that used by the university. As more colleges offer online courses, students will benefit from entering college with well-developed online learning skills.

Once in the work force, students discover they are expected to work independently, take online trainings and interact with co-workers of a variety of ages. According to those we interviewed, ALE students might be more prepared for the workplace environment because they have worked independently and with students of varying ages throughout their education.

Teachers should be the right fit for the ALE model

Teachers and administrators from many of the programs told us that staff needs to be the “right fit” to teach in an ALE program. The characteristics we often heard mentioned – by a wide range of interviewees – include:

- They are adaptable
- They have the attitude that every student can succeed
- They can quickly assess and respond to a student’s specific academic needs

Many program administrators said they prefer to have direct control over hiring teachers so they can be selective and ensure hires are a good fit for this style of education. We heard that ALE teachers often come from other alternative education models or have homeschooled their own children, and teacher turnover is low. In the programs we visited, some teachers were recent hires, while others have been teaching for many years in a variety of settings. Several of the program administrators we met have been with their program since its inception.

“You cannot put [just] any staff person in an ALE program. It’s a different environment. If the student is late, it’s not, ‘How come you’re late?’ It’s ‘I’m glad you made it here today.’”

~ ALE administrator

ALE teachers find different expectations and demands on their time

We heard many examples of how ALE teachers go above and beyond to support their students by responding to emails late at night, helping them with courses taught by other teachers and seeking out students who are falling behind by going to their homes or local schools to connect with them.

Teachers and administrators we spoke with explained how ALE instruction is very different from teaching in a traditional classroom. For one thing, ALE teachers see their students in the classroom for only a limited amount of time each week, which they say means they must plan carefully to maximize class time. Some ALE teachers told us that the majority of their work occurs outside of the classroom. As one district administrator pointed out, “A huge difference here is the way staffing works. It’s not just taking 2 hours a day from a district math teacher to teach math here. They offer more support than that, more time.” Additionally, ALE teachers may teach multiple courses at the same time, have students at different stages in the curriculum, teach students of different ages or grade levels, and may have students doing completely different assignments within the same course. This means they achieve little to no economies of scale in their workload.

One program administrator, who also teaches within the ALE program, told us:

“I have eight math classes, two PE classes, and a senior seminar class. I have one class with one student in it, and one with 40 students. So it’s different than traditional school because there aren’t seats in a class to fill. The [standard teacher employment] contract has language about students per day and students per class, but our classes are different. And that flexibility really allows us a lot of opportunity, that we can offer so many classes. And we can offer the fall semester class material in the spring and vice versa. Our English teacher has, I think, 19 different classes.”

We heard that while the teacher is the content knowledge expert in a traditional classroom, ALE teachers serve more as guides to help students find information and gain knowledge. A couple of district administrators mentioned that, given the amount of information now readily available through the Internet, the traditional model of teaching is antiquated and they suggested that all teachers, including those in traditional classrooms, should move toward the role of being a guide rather than the expert. But both teachers and administrators noted that there is little available training specific to ALE models to help teachers make this transition. They may attend trainings offered to all teachers in their school district or attend more specialized conferences on alternative learning. Online learning software companies sometimes offer webinars on teaching remotely. However, we were often told that ALE teacher training is primarily learning on-the-job and through mentoring by experienced teachers and administrators.

“In traditional education the students ask the teacher, ‘What are we going to do today?’ In ALE, the teacher asks the student, ‘What are you going to work on today?’”

~ ALE teacher

ALE staff has concerns about for-profit online programs

Staff members from several of the programs we visited were critical of for-profit online programs. One ALE online instructor said:

“I’m a pretty strong advocate for districts ... to be involved in student learning, not companies. Companies put making money first; it’s a different world – they go out and recruit kids, and make all these promises, but they don’t necessarily have the staff to make that really happen.”

Teachers commented on the marketing techniques used by these programs and the limited interaction between teachers and students. The online programs we visited used self-developed or commercially available courses overseen by local teachers rather than by teachers employed by the software company. Their programs emphasized the importance of local control over the curriculum and oversight of the students, with local teachers responsible for instruction and providing onsite labs for students to do course work, ask questions and get help.

ALE staff across the state shared similar concerns

Negative perceptions of the program, its students, its needs

In the recent past, a handful of ALE programs (not ones we visited) were criticized for inappropriate spending of public funds, and staff at many of the ALE programs we did visit believed that the reputation and credibility of their program was tarnished by the wrongdoing of others. One district administrator suggested that ALE programs are experiencing “group punishment” as the result of the actions of very few. Some of the programs we visited referred to themselves as the “black sheep” of the school district, while other programs were highly praised and valued within their district. We also visited schools where program staff said that they were not included in important district meetings or trainings. Some saw a lack of respect for their program in the makeshift arrangements their district provided to house their administrators, teachers and students. Having a place to call their own, or needing a new facility, was on the wish list of many of the programs we visited.

Many ALE participants and staff mentioned that there’s a public perception that ALE programs are easier than traditional programs and house the students who are seen as “bad kids” or “kids who can’t hack it” in traditional school. Yet we met with many ALE students who are advanced in their studies, and we heard from many sources that behavioral issues are rare in ALE programs.

“Sometimes we feel tolerated, sometimes we feel valued, sometimes we feel ignored.”
~ ALE administrator

“We have kids in the top five academic standings; we also have kids who probably wouldn’t graduate without this program.”
~ ALE administrator

Documentation requirements that seem unclear or burdensome

Staff from every ALE program we visited expressed the view that documentation is a major challenge, describing it as “very burdensome,” “time-consuming,” and “a lot of work.” One staff member expressed a common sentiment: “Record keeping is too time consuming and takes away from time spent with the kids.” Others singled out documentation requirements for student contact and learning plans. Those responsible for documenting ALE instruction appeared to have little sense of how much documentation was “enough” and whether they were doing too much or too little. Several people said that they err on the side of doing more documentation than necessary, but expressed that knowing the correct amount of documentation is a major challenge.

Some teachers, administrators and staff told us that they have developed elaborate documentation processes to reduce the risk of receiving audit findings during reviews by the State Auditor’s Office and expressed concern that auditors may have inconsistent documentation expectations.

Some individuals we interviewed suggested that OSPI should provide common software for all ALE programs to use, to help standardize and streamline documentation. They said such a system would ease the burden on individual programs to develop their own documentation systems and would clarify the requirements.

All schools must deal with the housekeeping of proving students’ attendance, generating progress reports, and creating individualized student learning plans (as well as intervention plans if students fall behind), but documentation expectations differ between traditional and ALE schools. Several of the teachers, administrators, and staff we spoke with stated that they felt as if they are held to a higher standard than traditional schools.

For example, ALE teachers must document weekly two-way communication regarding academics with each student: an email sent and returned, or a telephone or in-person conversation later written up in detail. Several teachers explained that seeing a student in class, conversations that are not written up, or conversations with anyone other than the student’s appointed staff person do not count toward the weekly contact requirement. If weekly contact is not fully documented, ALE programs risk losing student funding from the district as well as audit findings. One ALE teacher said that “In [traditional] schools, if [teachers] don’t talk to a kid for a week because they’re absent, they don’t have to chase the kid down – but we do. If the kid misses three weeks of school, traditional schools don’t lose their funding, but we do.”

Documentation and other requirements may seem more burdensome to ALE teachers because teachers in traditional schools are not required to do these things. Traditional schools employ attendance keepers, truancy officers and guidance counselors to handle these tasks; the scale of a large school means the workload can be distributed to people other than teachers.

“I felt like I spent as much time documenting what I was doing as I was actually teaching them. I was documenting things that were not authentically purposeful, just to check a box.”

~ ALE teacher

“We go kind of overboard on keeping records, mostly for auditors.”

~ ALE teacher

Rules and regulations that change frequently

Staff at many of the programs we visited said they struggle with the volume of rules and requirements for ALE programs and how often the rules seem to change. Several interviewees mentioned instances when they felt they received short notice when rules changed, making it difficult to comply in a timely manner. We also heard that the proliferation of rules and requirements restricts the ability of individual ALE programs to be flexible and unique to the needs of their districts and distinct from traditional programs. New high school graduation requirements, we were told, make it difficult to offer high school instruction in an alternative setting. As a result, ALE high school programs look much more like traditional instruction than alternative education.

Inadequate numbers of teachers and support staff

Many of the programs we visited employed a small number of staff, most of whom were not full-time employees of the ALE program, sometimes splitting their hours between the program and a traditional or alternative school. Some administrators told us that it is difficult to get some staff fully committed to the program if ALE is only a very small portion of their overall job duties. They also reported that it is difficult to find someone willing to take a position for only a few hours a week.

According to people in our site visit interviews and focus groups, programs are challenged by federal rules that require involvement of “highly qualified” teachers in core academic areas (defined in the sidebar). Several persons that we spoke with stated that their program had previously relied on community professionals, such as artists and scientists, to teach certain credit bearing courses because of their highly specific expertise, but had to drop these instructors due to recent rule changes. Their choice was to eliminate the course offering or use certificated teachers who met the highly qualified requirement, even if they were less knowledgeable on the specific course topic.

One administrator noted that because they employ a small number of teachers who must teach multiple subjects, it is difficult to find people who are highly qualified across all necessary subjects. She said that the concept of highly qualified does not fit well with ALE since “what you want is really well-rounded teachers who can teach many levels, many subjects.”

Support staff levels are also a source of concern in some programs. ALE teachers often find themselves called upon to fill other roles. Some mentioned acting as office workers, attendance monitors, counselors, and doing other non-instructional work as needed.

Unequal access to online curriculum

Despite the proliferation of computers and the prevalence of the Internet, some students still do not have access to these resources. Staff members at several ALE programs mentioned low-income students with limited or no access to computers, which makes completing online courses difficult. Administrators and staff at some ALE programs said they lend laptop computers to these students and direct them to sources for free Internet access, such as libraries or cafés. Many online programs also provide access to computer labs where students can work on their courses. However, reaching the lab can be problematic for students with limited transportation options or who live far from the ALE site.

“The feeling might be, ‘Well it’s alternative education, you don’t need as much staff.’ But you do. The other teacher and I can’t do all the paperwork; we really need those support staff.”

~ ALE teacher

The federal definition of a **highly qualified teacher** (HQT) is one who meets **all** of the following criteria:

- Holds at least a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution
- Fully **certificated** or licensed by the state
- Demonstrates competence in each **core academic subject area** in which the teacher teaches

The 2014 list of core areas:
Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Civics/ Government, Economics, Foreign Languages, Reading, English/Language Arts, Music (general choral instrumental), Visual Arts, Dance, Theater, and Elementary Curriculum.

From the OSPI website:
www.k12.wa.us

Even if a student has access to a computer, poor reading skills may prevent him or her from absorbing online course content, much of which is delivered by reading text on a screen. While the online curriculum used by many of the programs we visited offers text narration or Spanish translation of course content, some teachers said that students with a low reading level still struggle with online courses. Teachers said that they work individually with the student or provide other accommodations to help these students. One of the ALE programs we visited is exploring other commercial online curricula that may be easier to use for students with limited reading ability.

State testing protocols may affect ALE teaching time and results

Washington tests students statewide on a set schedule, allowing various periods of time for all students to take the required examinations. These testing protocols may similarly affect students in traditional schools, but according to the staff we spoke to, the effect on ALE students may be more pronounced.

They may lose core teaching time with instructors

When testing does occur, all students taking the tests lose instruction time. Traditional programs can test students during elective class times, but students in ALE programs often lose core instructional time because they may only have contact with their instructor weekly or only be onsite one day per week.

ALE students may also miss their weekly meeting with their public school teacher to review their previous week's assignments, receive direct instruction and get the coming week's assignments. Some teachers said this amounts to missing an entire week's worth of in-person instruction during state testing times in order for an ALE student to complete a single state test. Teachers and students may have informal contact during a week, but these contacts are to answer questions and provide clarification, and are not formal instructional time.

Courses may not align with the statewide testing schedule

ALE programs involve individually designed learning plans, so the subjects that a student is learning at a particular time may not align with the state testing schedule. Students may not yet have taken a course in the subject area for the state test or may have finished that course many months earlier.

Students may have been struggling academically before ALE

Teachers and administrators from ALE programs told us it is important to consider that many of their students came to the program because they were struggling in a traditional school environment, so they were already performing well below their peers before they even entered ALE instruction.

ALE students often opt out of state testing

Several administrators from parent partnership programs said that students in ALE programs often opt out of state testing. They may purposely limit their participation in the program so that testing is not mandatory (for example, by enrolling in an ALE program at 80 percent time or less and taking the remainder of their courses through homeschooling), or simply refuse to take the test.

“No one in the district outside of this building really understands how disruptive state testing is, especially when you miss out on that one chance a week to teach kids ... The testing schedule can mean we don't see our kids for normal classes for three weeks at a time.”
~ ALE teacher

What would we have missed if we only looked at test scores to evaluate ALE programs?

We chose to conduct site visits as part of our ALE performance audit to capture aspects of these programs that would not be apparent by looking only at student performance metrics. During our visits we asked what we would miss in our understanding of ALE programs if we looked only at student test scores. We were told we might miss or overlook:

- The personalized, individualized nature of ALE programs
- The sense of community within these programs and the close relationships that develop between ALE students and teachers
- That test scores do not reflect the personal stories of these students, how much they've overcome and progressed, their small day-to-day successes, and the joy, engagement and love for learning that students experience
- The "21st century skills" that ALE programs emphasize and foster, such as problem-solving, cooperation, and critical thinking

Are the ALE programs we visited meeting their intent?

In the "Background" section of this report, we mentioned that, according to OSPI Digital Learning Department's webpage, the intent of ALE programs is "to give schools flexibility to serve a diverse student population." Flexibility came up in the description of every program we visited. Many of the people we spoke with emphasized the importance of ALE programs in helping districts meet their obligation to make education available and accessible to all students by offering the flexibility to customize an educational program to fit each student's unique needs or circumstances. We heard the stories of many students who, for a variety of reasons, could not or would not attend a traditional public school, but whose ALE program allowed them to connect with their local school district, access curricula, and work with certificated teachers in a setting best suited to their needs. Our interviewees emphasized that it is critical for these programs to continue. From their point of view, the programs were indeed meeting the intent of the law.

In addition to the many questions we asked, we also offered interviewees a chance to tell us what they would like others to know about their program. Here is a sampling of their responses.

ALE students said ...

It's so flexible. It's not like a set course and everything is planned out for you. The teachers really get to decide what they're doing with the students. And that means they do exciting things, and stuff you care about.

It's really awesome classes; it is very convenient. Parents say I wish I had that when I was in school.

The teachers really cater to your situation. They help you if you struggle, and they make ways for you to really shine in your strengths. You can contact them anytime. They really do everything in their power to help you pass and to learn. This is what all teachers should be like.

You miss the stories ... knowing their life circumstances; I can't believe they're here and functioning. If you're only looking at test scores, you don't see them grow and flourish here.

~ ALE administrator

ALE parents said ...

When I was in school and dyslexic, I would look at everybody else and wonder why I couldn't do everything. I felt stupid and behind. My kids don't feel that way. There's a lot of kids here with different needs and abilities – everybody helps each other. There's a range of ages and nobody knows where everyone else is at in their learning.

It offers really high quality education. The teacher-parent communication is excellent. The flexibility is there and wonderful. There is a lot of support; it's not just you and the computer.

ALE teachers said ...

Students learn to advocate for themselves because they are in an environment where their opinion matters and where they are listened to. Kids take ownership over their own education.

We can take a student ... who would not make it in a traditional school, and we can tailor their education to help them thrive. Not just survive, but thrive. We can make a place for any kid to fit in.

ALE administrators said ...

The kids I know in the outreach and alternative school, I don't know what would happen to them without these programs. They would be lost, or they would just continue to struggle in regular school, or they would drop out. Some would get their GEDs, but my fear is that they would just drop out.

If these kids don't get a chance at education, you'll pay for them somewhere else down the road – in the penal system, the social service system. Don't you want people to be informed citizens, and work and pay taxes?

Systems need to evaluate ALE – what it matters to on-time graduation, what does it mean for 4.0 kids who want to get ahead, what does it mean to honor different learning styles?

Recommendations

The inability to accurately identify ALE students in the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) is an issue that must be addressed for purposes beyond this legislatively mandated audit. Researchers, educators, policy makers and other members of the educational system as a whole will not be able to adequately monitor and evaluate ALE student outcomes until data systems are accurate and complete. Consistent and accurate data also demonstrate accountability in the use of public funds.

Therefore, we make the following recommendations to OSPI:

1. Periodically evaluate whether the number of students reported by ALE programs for funding purposes is consistent with the number of students reported as ALE-funded in CEDARS, and follow up with programs where there are large discrepancies.
2. Evaluate whether ALE programs report course types in a way that is consistent and comparable, and provide further clarification as needed.

Agency Response



SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Randy I. Dorn Old Capitol Building · PO BOX 47200 · Olympia, WA 98504-7200 · <http://www.k12.wa.us>

January 26, 2016

Troy Kelley, State Auditor
Insurance Building – Capitol Campus
302 Sid Snyder Ave, SW
Olympia, WA 98504-0021

Dear Mr. Kelley:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the performance audit of Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs. While we are supportive of the longitudinal study mandated by the Legislature, increased collaboration and communication between the auditors and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) would have improved the accuracy of the audit conclusions.

The auditor's decision to rely on subjective commentary from a limited sample raises concerns as to whether the audit conclusions represent an accurate reflection of ALE programs.

The auditors visited selected ALE programs to learn why students and families chose ALE, how ALE differs from traditional education, and the practical advantages and disadvantages of this model. The programs visited were limited to 10 of the 306 ALE programs. Our concern with the small sampling of programs is heightened by the decision to only visit programs associated with higher student metrics and who agreed to voluntarily host the auditors. This resulted in potentially excluding the largest group of a program type (a hybrid of on-site and remote).

The report identifies data quality issues and makes two recommendations:

1. Periodically evaluate whether the number of students reported by ALE programs for funding purposes is consistent with the number of students reported as ALE-funded in CEDARS, and follow up with programs where there are large discrepancies.
2. Evaluate whether ALE programs report course types in a way that is consistent and comparable, and provide further clarification as needed.

In response, we will form a work group between Student Information and the ALE department to evaluate the quality of the data reporting at a district level and continue to offer assistance to those districts that may not be reporting accurately. We will also continue offering multiple training and outreach opportunities as well as maintaining a comprehensive website for ALE programs. Because data accuracy and training are paramount considerations at OSPI, we will continue encouraging ALE programs and host districts to avail themselves of our guidance and training that have been made available for many years. We look forward to collaborating more closely with the auditors for future reports about the longitudinal study to ensure an accurate reflection of the educational outcomes for students engaged in ALE. OSPI is committed to providing high quality opportunities and success for all of our students.

Sincerely,


Randy I. Dorn
State Superintendent
of Public Instruction

Appendix A: Initiative 900

Initiative 900, approved by Washington voters in 2005 and enacted into state law in 2006, authorized the State Auditor’s Office to conduct independent, comprehensive performance audits of state and local governments. Specifically, the law directs the Auditor’s Office to “review and analyze the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of the policies, management, fiscal affairs, and operations of state and local governments, agencies, programs, and accounts.” Performance audits are to be conducted according to U.S. General Accountability Office government auditing standards.

In addition, the law identifies nine elements that are to be considered within the scope of each performance audit.

I-900 element

1. Identify cost savings
2. Identify services that can be reduced or eliminated
3. Identify programs or services that can be transferred to the private sector
4. Analyze gaps or overlaps in programs or services and provide recommendations to correct them
5. Assess feasibility of pooling information technology systems within the department
6. Analyze departmental roles and functions, and provide recommendations to change or eliminate them
7. Provide recommendations for statutory or regulatory changes that may be necessary for the department to properly carry out its functions
8. Analyze departmental performance, data performance measures, and self-assessment systems
9. Identify relevant best practices

For this legislatively mandated audit, we were directed by Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946 Sec. 502, (4c) to: “[b]eginning in the 2013-14 school year and continuing through the 2016-17 school year [conduct a] biennial measure of student outcomes ...” of ALE. ESSB 5946 did not provide specific criteria for our evaluation, nor did it direct us to address specific I-900 elements.

Given our mandate by I-900, we considered the nine elements of the Initiative for this performance audit. Based on the data quality issues we encountered during our effort and detailed in this report, we were unable to fully address the I-900 elements. However, we partially addressed four of the nine elements in this report:

Element 4: Several school districts said that ALE programs fill gaps not addressed by other programs within their district. We did not directly analyze gaps or overlaps in programs and services, as this was not within the scope of the audit.

Element 6: We describe the roles and functions of ALE programs insofar as they meet the needs of a diverse student population. We did not recommend changing or eliminating departmental roles and functions, as this was not within the scope of the audit.

Element 8: We compared ALE student characteristics and academic outcomes to those of non-ALE students for descriptive purposes. While our intent for upcoming phases of the audit is to conduct a formal analysis of departmental performance, data performance measures and self-assessment systems, the current unreliability of data needed to conduct an analysis may make this portion of our project impossible to fulfill using formal analytic techniques.

Element 9: We identified characteristics common to 10 ALE programs associated with higher student outcomes and visited them for descriptive purposes, but we did not evaluate whether any of these common characteristics constitute best practices.

Appendix B: ALE Program Types Become Course Types

Classifications of ALE programs prior to the 2013-14 school year

Before the 2013-14 school year, ALE was defined by three broad categories based on program types:

- **Online/Digital Learning:** Instructor-led coursework through online lessons and tools. Online delivery was considered ALE only when the student was engaged in learning outside the school building and when a school district claimed it toward the student full-time equivalent (FTE) for basic education apportionment.
- **Parent Partnership:** These programs required significant participation by the student's parent or guardian as the primary instructor and in the design and implementation of the student's learning experience. Unlike homeschooling, parent partnership programs were subject to public school district oversight and rules, including curriculum approval and testing.
- **Contract-Based Learning:** A learning contract or plan between the teacher and the student, usually in high-school grades. Many contract-based programs offered flexibly structured programs for gifted students; students requiring remedial academic work or credit retrieval; students not succeeding in a general education format due to behavioral or other issues; or students transitioning back to public school from drug rehabilitation, juvenile detention or hospitals.

After the 2013-14 school year: ALE defined as course types

The Legislature defined ALE instruction as course types rather than program types in Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946 *Strengthening student educational outcomes*:

(A) "Online course" means an alternative learning experience course that has the same meaning as provided in RCW 28A.250.010 (more than 50 percent of the course content is delivered electronically; more than 50 percent of the content is delivered from a remote location; a certificated teacher is primarily responsible for a student's instructional interaction and a student has access to the teacher synchronously, asynchronously, or both).

(B) "Remote course" means an alternative learning experience course or course work that is not an online course where the student has in-person instructional contact time for less than twenty percent of the total weekly time for the course.

(C) "Site-based course" means an alternative learning experience course or course work that is not an online course where the student has in-person instructional contact time for at least twenty percent of the total weekly time for the course.

Appendix C: Details of Site Visits to ALE Programs

Selecting programs for site visits

During the initial stages of this study, we asked a number of school districts to voluntarily provide ALE student rosters for the 2012-13 school year. We collected ALE student rosters from 80 (out of 295) districts.

For programs where we had rosters for ALE students during the 2012-13 school year, we provided these names and identifiers to the Education Research Data Center (ERDC) within the Office of Financial Management (OFM) for the state of Washington. The ERDC houses a data warehouse of information from public schools, technical and trade schools, higher education and the Employment Security Department. The ERDC provided academic records for our list of ALE students in a de-identified format. We calculated a variety of overall student metrics for each ALE program.

Student metrics (a-h):

a-d) Percent of students in a program meeting standard on End-of-Course Math 1, End-of-Course Math 2, and general Math and Reading state tests

e) Average achievement level (mean and median) of students within a program on those tests

f) Percent of students in a program that are on track to graduate on time (“on track” is defined by determining whether a student has received the appropriate number of credits for the enrolled district for that student’s grade level).

g) Percent of students in a program that are college bound (“college bound” refers to a student who has taken college preparatory courses or a combination of courses that predict college attendance). We defined college-bound students as:

- 8th- and 9th-grade students who completed Algebra 1 by the end of 8th grade
- 10th- and 11th-grade students who completed Geometry, two Standard or Above Standard level English credits, and one foreign language credit by the end of 10th grade
- 12th-grade students who completed Algebra 2 and two foreign language credits by the end of 12th grade
- Students who participated in the International Baccalaureate, College at the High School, Running Start, or Cambridge International programs

h) Average number of years students in a program are ahead or behind their peers given their current age and grade level

Not all programs had scores for at least 10 students on every metric, so we calculated the average ranking across all metrics available for a program.

Determining a program’s primary “course type”

We determined the primary course type by the percentage of student FTEs a program told OSPI it intended to report under the new course type classification scheme. Programs were grouped by the course type the programs anticipated reporting for 75 percent or more of its student FTEs. We defined the program as “mixed” if none of the course types accounted for more than 75 percent of student FTEs.

We selected the top five programs by primary course type (online, remote, site-based, mixed) for consideration based on the overall results for our selected student metrics. Programs that had invited us to visit during outreach presentations were also added to the list for consideration.

Criteria for selecting specific programs to visit

We limited our assessment of ALE programs to districts with more than 10 students in their ALE programs. Programs selected included all those that provide primarily site-based, primarily remote, primarily online, or multiple course type options. Programs were selected across all grade levels. Our goal was to visit about 10 to 12 programs.

1. We selected the top two programs for each of the primary course types by looking at the highest mean ranking and percent of outcomes ranked in the top five. We also noted the number of rankings available. For example, we eliminated programs ranked in three or fewer categories.
2. The other four programs were selected from the list of the top 20 programs. This gave us a broad variety of ALE programs for our visits based on location (to represent both eastern and western Washington), program characteristics not captured by the top two programs in each category, expert recommendation, and program type. Selected programs also needed to represent strong performance on a variety of metrics.
3. Our list of programs to visit was then modified slightly to include one additional program, a large online provider that was suggested by OSPI (since we did not have other large programs among our selections). This program had also invited us to visit at a stakeholder presentation.

After considering these factors, we selected 11 programs as potential site visit locations. We contacted each program's administrator and district superintendent to request their assistance in scheduling a site visit. Ten programs accepted our request to host a site visit.

Information gathered about each program through desk research and site visits

Desk research

For the final list of selected programs, we gathered background information to familiarize our team with each program. Potential sources of background information included:

- The program's website
- The School Report Card from OSPI's website
- SAO's Entity Information Suite, to identify the audit liaison for each school district and the SAO local team
- Student handbooks, brochures, or other information provided by the program
- Feedback from SAO's Schools Team on recently conducted compliance audits

Site visits

Site visits were conducted between April and June 2015. These visits consisted of a facility tour and a series of interviews and focus groups with a variety of people who are familiar with the program, such as teachers, students, parents, teaching assistants, counselors, and program and district administrators. We asked program leaders to invite staff, students and families to talk with us during a series of separate meetings during our visit. Programs were free to select the specific individuals to participate in focus groups/interviews based on particular individuals' interest and availability; however, we did let programs know that we were interested in talking with a broad range of individuals and not just their highest performing students, families or staff.

A focus group/interview consisted of one or more individuals from each of the categories above, where applicable. Some programs did not have counselors or teaching assistants, or were unable to arrange parent interviews. Although we asked to meet with each group of individuals separately, sometimes it was necessary for groups to be combined (such as program and district administrators, teachers and staff, parents and students). The host for our visit, typically the program administrator, sometimes sat in on other focus groups as well.

The purpose of these interviews, focus groups and observations was to gain an understanding of how ALE programs differ from traditional education and what factors are the greatest contributors to high quality ALE program performance. We also conducted focus groups with students and parents/guardians at each of the programs when possible. The purpose of these focus groups was to obtain the perspective of students/parents/guardians on why they chose a particular ALE program, what characteristics of ALE education are most important to them, and their satisfaction and experiences with participating in an ALE program.

Prior to the site visits, the audit team developed protocols for the interviews and focus groups. We asked certain questions of all participants, while other questions were targeted to specific interviewees or groups. Protocols included required questions as well as additional questions to ask as time allowed. Suggested prompts were provided in the protocols to ensure full discussion of each question. Interviewers had flexibility to change the order or exact wording of questions and to add additional follow-up questions or prompts as needed to keep the discussion as free-flowing as possible while still gathering the required information.

Prior to the site visits, SAO staff received training specific to conducting focus groups in schools. Our audit contractor, The BERC Group, provided the training and assisted onsite with the first two site visits to model focus group facilitation and documentation. Teams of two audit staff attended each of the remaining eight site visits. Typically, one staff member facilitated the interview or focus group and the other took notes.

Immediately following a site visit, staff discussed and recorded key observations and program attributes. The primary note taker for each interview or focus group reviewed and edited their notes for accuracy and clarity. The second staff member, who facilitated the interview, made additions and revisions as necessary so that the notes were as complete and accurate as possible.

Once all site visits were completed, the audit team compiled and compared key findings and final notes from each program. We identified recurring themes and important factors across programs to answer the following questions, based on the programs that we visited:

- What are the characteristics of ALE programs associated with strong student outcomes?
- What role do ALE programs fill for school districts?
- Why do students and families choose ALE programs?
- What kinds of students would be successful in ALE programs?
- What kinds of students would not be successful in ALE programs?
- How is ALE similar to traditional education?
- How is ALE different than traditional education?
- What are the advantages of ALE programs?
- What are the disadvantages of ALE programs?
- What are the current areas of concern for ALE programs?

Programs we visited

Clark County Skills Center

Location: Vancouver / Consortium of nine participating school districts and ESD #112
Program type: Digital/Online
Grades: 11-12
Number of students: 90 HC / 18 FTE

PARADE (Parents and Riverview Actively Delivering Education)

Location: Carnation / Riverview School District
Program type: Parent Partnership
Grades: K-12
Number of students: 119 HC / 113 FTE

Edmonds eLearning

Location: Lynnwood / Edmonds School District
Program type: Digital/Online
Grades: 8-12
Number of students: 292 HC / 134 FTE

Sequoia Online High School

Location: Everett / Everett School District
Program type: Digital/Online
Grades: 9-12
Number of students: 140 HC / 38 FTE

Home Education Exchange

Location: Shoreline / Shoreline School District
Program type: Parent Partnership
Grades: K-8
Number of students: 108 HC / 97 FTE

Spokane Virtual Learning

Location: Spokane / Spokane School District
Program type: Digital/Online
Grades: K-12
Number of students: 138 HC / 48 FTE

Kelso Virtual Academy

Location: Kelso / Kelso School District
Program type: Digital/Online
Grades: 8-12
Number of students: 24 HC / 18 FTE

Three Rivers HomeLink

Location: Richland / Richland School District
Program type: Parent Partnership
Grades: K-12
Number of students: 391 HC / 299 FTE

Lake Stevens HomeLink

Location: Lake Stevens / Lake Stevens School District
Program type: Parent Partnership
Grades: K-12
Number of students: 164 HC / 122 FTE

Tonasket Outreach

Location: Tonasket / Tonasket School District
Program type: Parent Partnership
Grades: K-12
Number of students: 53 HC / 50 FTE

HC = Head count, FTE = Full time equivalent

Appendix D: ALE Student Characteristics and Program Outcomes in the Student Population

In the 2013-14 school year, approximately 33,000 of the state’s million-plus K-12 students enrolled in an ALE course, representing just over 3 percent of all students (see Figure 1). Some students enroll in ALE part-time and receive the remainder of their instruction in another setting (traditional public school, private school, or homeschool), so these 33,000 students account for the equivalent of about 28,000 full-time students.

Figure 1 – Just over 3% of Washington public school students are in ALE

May 2014 headcount data

ALE students	All students	Percent ALE
33,498	1,055,517	3.2%

Source: ALE students - OSPI Enrollment for 2014 (Report 1251H).
All students - Washington State Report Card (for school year 2013-14).

Using student information collected by OSPI, we analyzed the student characteristics and academic outcomes of all ALE and non-ALE students enrolled during the 2013-14 school year.

Data limitations

Due to data limitations, we were not able to identify all students who took ALE courses. Our ALE group captured approximately 78 percent of all ALE-funded students. The ALE students we could not identify are included in the group of non-ALE students. We considered any student enrolled in any ALE course during the school year an ALE student, without regard to part-time or full-time enrollment or transferring between ALE and non-ALE courses during the year.

Given that we could not identify all ALE students in the 2013-14 school year, but were able to identify a significant proportion of them, the following results should be interpreted as estimates. The purpose of these comparisons is to describe differences and similarities between ALE students and non-ALE students, on the average. The cause or causes of these differences cannot be determined at this point in our study – differences in student population characteristics and academic outcomes may be due to differences in who selects to enroll in an ALE program, or a variety of other internal or external factors.

Student enrollment

Figures 2a and 2b show that enrollment in ALE courses increases substantially as grade level increases, starting in the middle school grades and peaking in 12th grade. For example, in the 2013-14 school year, approximately 22 percent of all ALE students – over 7,000 – were in the 12th grade, while fewer than 1,000 ALE students (3 percent) were enrolled in kindergarten. By comparison, non-ALE enrollment is more evenly distributed across all grade levels; roughly the same number of students were enrolled in each grade.

Figure 2a and 2b – Distribution of students across grade levels for the 2013-14 school year

Figure 2a - Percent of ALE students in each grade by headcount

Population is about 33,000 students

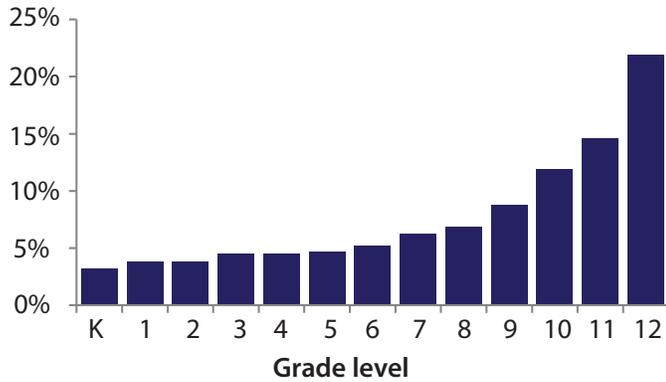
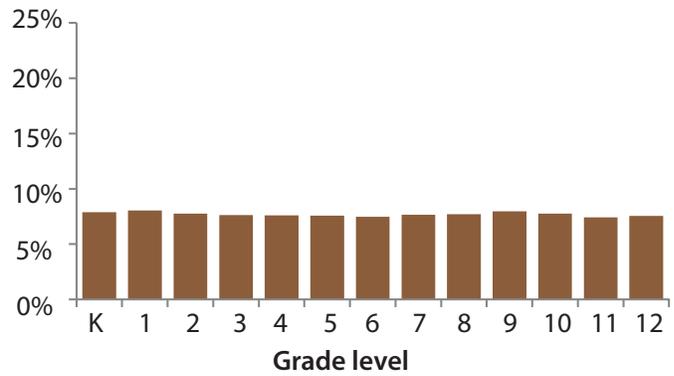


Figure 2b - Percent of non-ALE students in each grade by headcount

Population is about 1.1 million students

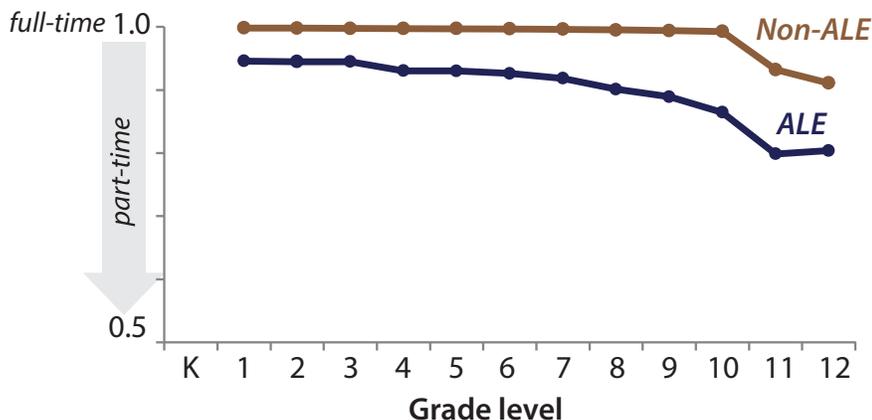


Source: CEDARS data 2013-2014 school year.

While the total number of students who enroll in an ALE course increases in higher grades, these students are likely to be enrolled in ALE part-time. Figure 3 shows that elementary-aged students in both ALE and non-ALE programs tend to be enrolled full-time, meaning they receive all of their instruction in one setting. Non-ALE students tend to remain enrolled full-time throughout the majority of their educational careers, while older ALE students are likely to be enrolled part-time. A student who is enrolled part-time in ALE may receive additional schooling through traditional non-ALE courses, homeschool, or private school, or they may be taking a reduced course load as part of a credit retrieval plan or a need to accommodate other commitments.

Figure 3 – Average FTE of ALE and non-ALE students for the 2013-14 school

The average student FTE is the average full-time equivalent enrollment of students divided by the year-end average head count, by grade level



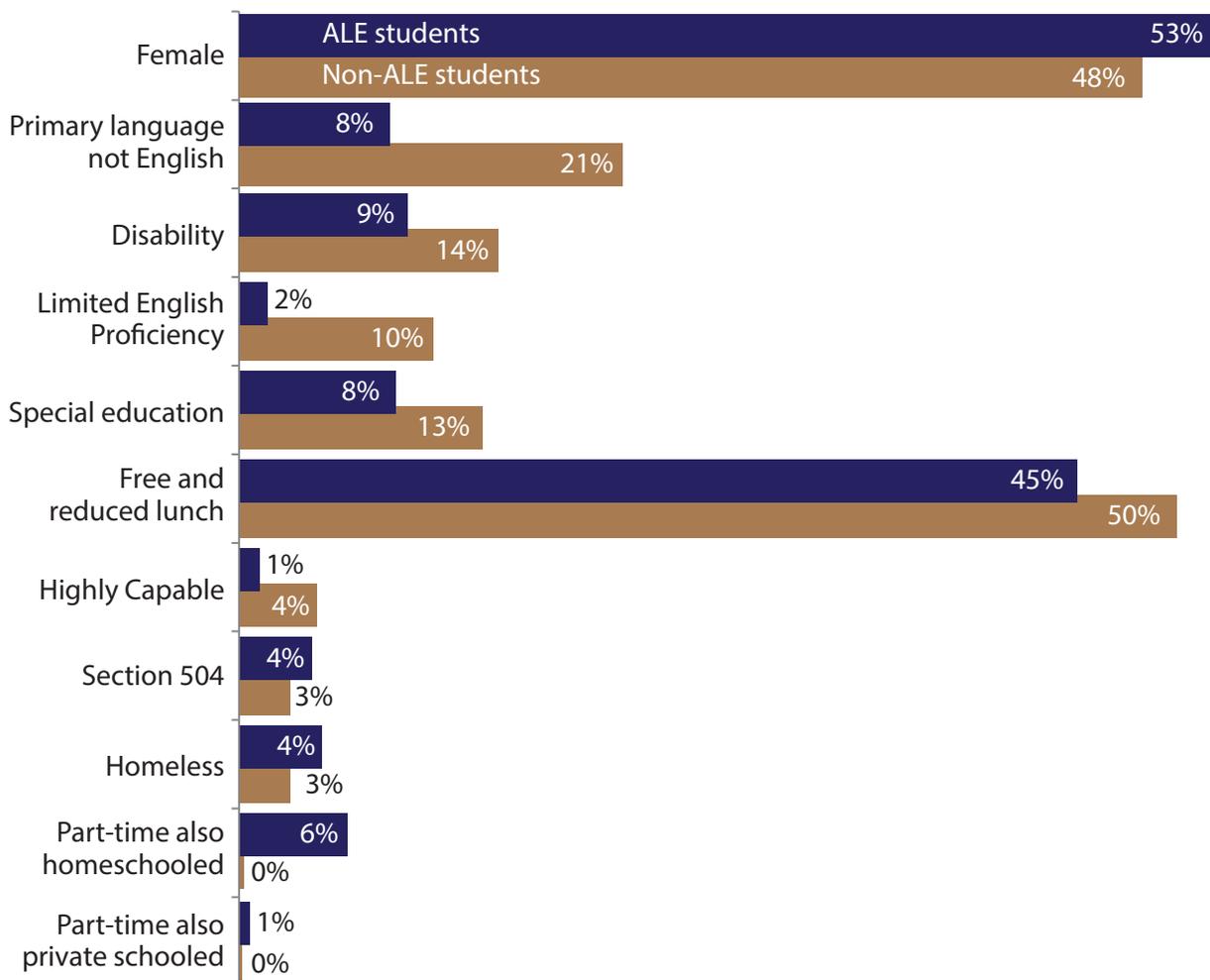
Source: CEDARS data 2013-2014 school year.

Student demographics

Figure 4 shows that, on average, in comparison to non-ALE students, ALE students are:

- Slightly more likely to be female
- Less likely to speak English as a second language
- Less likely to identify themselves as having a disability
- Less likely to be enrolled in programs such as Limited English Proficiency, Highly Capable, special education, or free and reduced lunch
- Equally likely to have a Section 504 plan
- Equally likely to be homeless
- More likely to be part-time homeschooled in addition to attending public school
- Equally likely to be part-time private schooled in addition to attending public school

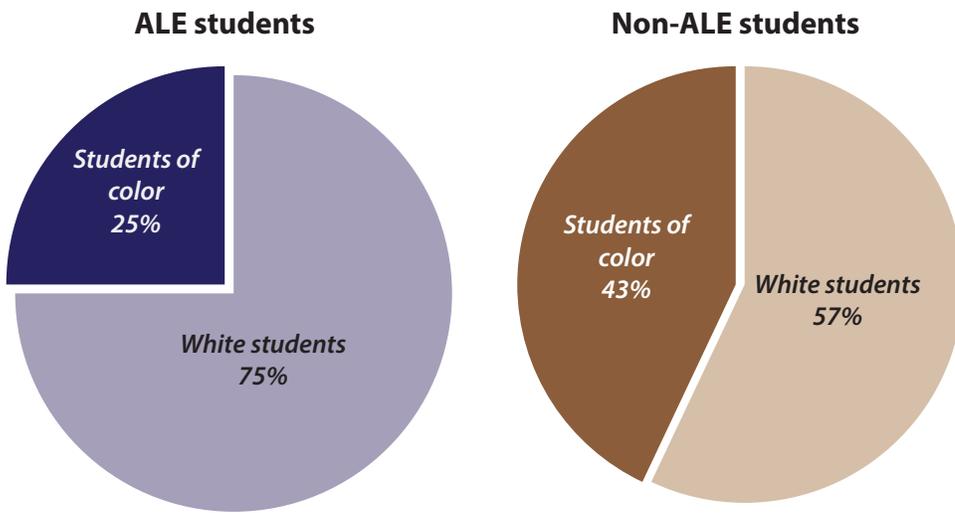
Figure 4 – Student characteristics for ALE and non-ALE students



Source: CEDARS data 2013-2014 school year.

In comparison to non-ALE students, we also found that ALE students are less racially diverse, as **Figure 5** illustrates.

Figure 5 – Federal race and ethnicity classifications



Students of color include:	ALE	Non-ALE
Hispanic/Latino of any race(s)	12%	21%
Asian	2%	7%
Black/African American	3%	5%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2%	2%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1%	1%
Two or more races	6%	7%

Source: CEDARS data 2013-2014 school year.

Academic achievement

On average, ALE students tend to perform less well academically and are more likely to drop out of school than non-ALE students. ALE students also tend to be slightly behind non-ALE students in terms of achieving the same grade level as their non-ALE peers of similar age, and being on track to graduate from high school within four years. Figure 6 compares nine key indicators.

Figure 6 – Compared to non-ALE students, ALE students tend to ...

	ALE	Non-ALE	Based on
Perform less well on standardized tests	47%	58%	Students who met standards on all standardized tests taken during the 2013-14 school year
Be more likely to be one or more grade levels behind	25%	12%	Students who are at least one grade level behind their expected grade level given their age
Be less likely to take honors courses in high school	10%	32%	High school students who have enrolled in one or more honors courses
Be less likely to take college-bound coursework	12%	24%	8th- through 12th- graders who have taken courses that predict college enrollment or who participate in programs that prepare them for college
Be less likely to be on track to graduate on time	30%	65%	High school students who have earned the expected number of credits for their grade level and district in order to graduate in four years
Be more likely to graduate late	60%	34%	High school students who have graduated, or earned a GED, after the year they were expected to graduate; or were expected to have graduated and have not yet graduated
Be more likely to drop out of school	7%	2%	High school students who withdrew from school because they dropped out
Have failed or withdrawn from more courses	3.2 credits	1.5 credits	Mean number of high school credits students have attempted and not earned
Have slightly lower GPAs	2.1 GPA	2.7 GPA	Mean grade-point average (GPA) for high school students

Source: CEDARS data 2013-2014 school year.

We defined college-bound students as:

- 8th- and 9th-grade students who completed Algebra 1 by the end of 8th grade
- 10th- and 11th-grade students who completed Geometry, two Standard or Above Standard-level English credits and one foreign language credit by the end of 10th grade
- 12th-grade students who completed Algebra 2 and two foreign language credits by the end of 12th grade
- Students who participated in the International Baccalaureate, College in the High School, Running Start or Cambridge International programs

On-time graduation is defined as students who were expected to graduate in 2014 and received a high school diploma, GED, Associate's degree, International Baccalaureate High School Diploma, or completed an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in 2014. Students are considered behind if they were expected to graduate in 2014 but did not, or if they were expected to graduate before 2014 and either graduated late or have not yet graduated.

Standardized test performance

Washington uses standardized assessments to test student academic progress. These tests include Measurements of Student Progress (MSP) for reading, writing, math, and science in grades 3 through 8, High School Proficiency Exams (HSPE) in reading and writing for high school students, and End-of-Course exams for certain math and biology high school courses.

Figure 7 shows that ALE students are slightly less likely to meet standards on state tests than their non-ALE counterparts. The difference in performance on standardized tests is particularly pronounced for ALE students taking state math tests. However, ALE and non-ALE students perform similarly on state reading, writing and general science tests.

From our site visits we were told that some ALE students, particularly those in parent partnerships, opt out of state testing and therefore are not included in these assessment results.

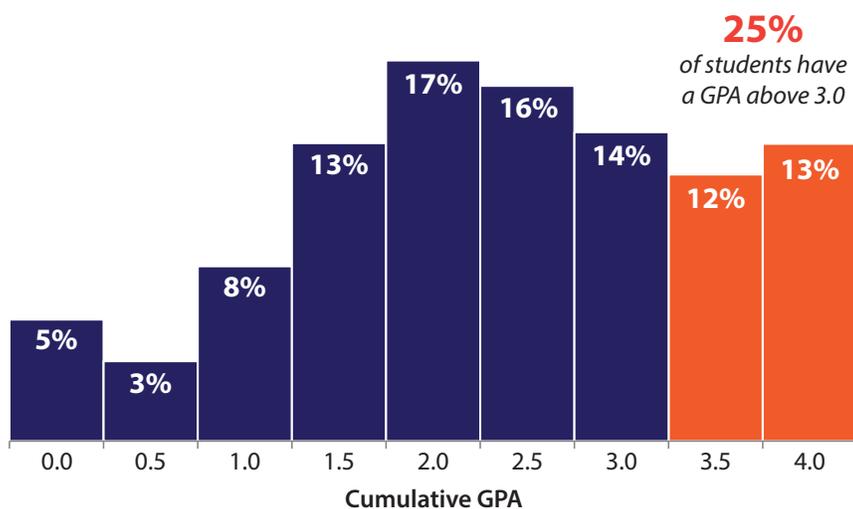
ALE students with high academic achievement

Even though ALE students perform less well (on average) than non-ALE students, struggling students are not the only ones who enroll in ALE programs – some ALE students excel academically. For example, Figure 6 shows that, of all ALE students:

- 40 percent graduated on time
- 75 percent are working at or above grade level
- 47 percent met or exceeded standards on all standardized tests that they took during the year

In addition, while Figure 6 shows that high school ALE students have slightly lower GPAs on average than non-ALE students, Figure 8 shows that 25 percent of ALE students have a GPA above 3.0.

Figure 8 – Cumulative grade point average (GPA) for middle and high school ALE students



Source: CEDARS data 2013-2014 school year.

Figure 7 – Percent of students meeting or exceeding standards on standardized tests

Test	ALE	Non-ALE
Reading	76%	75%
Writing	80%	79%
Math	45%	62%
Science	67%	68%
End-of-Course Math 1	63%	77%
End-of-Course Math 2	69%	77%
End-of-Course Biology	73%	80%

Source: CEDARS data 2013-2014 school year.