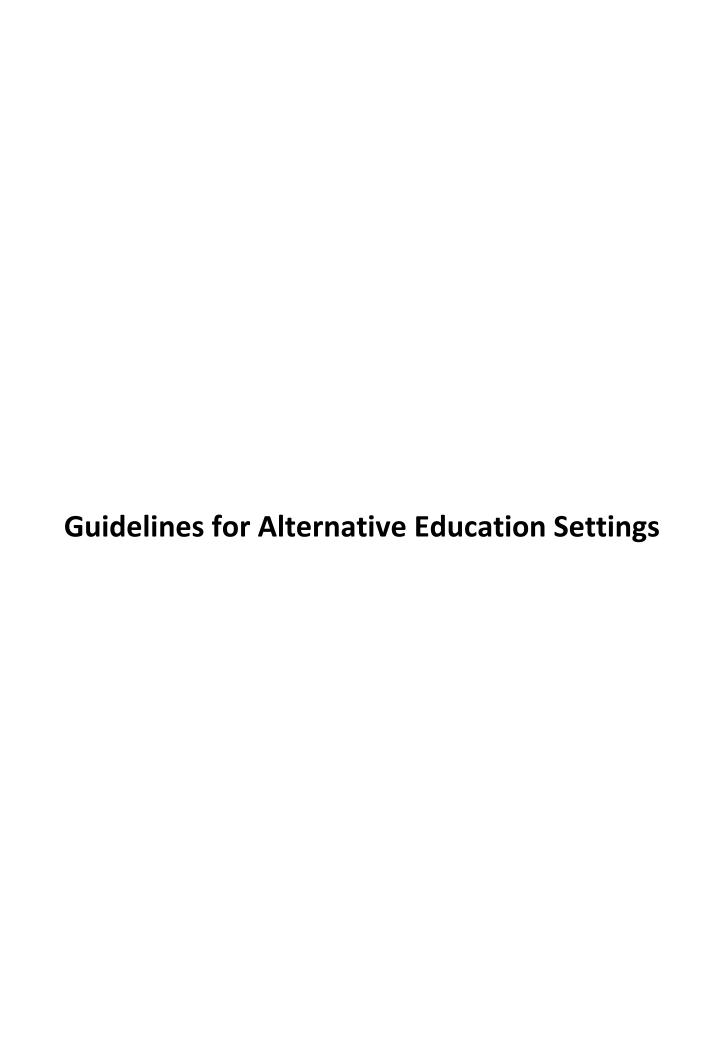# Guidelines for
Alternative Education Settings

![CSDE logo - Connecticut State Department of Education](tree logo)

CSDE

CONNECTICUT STATE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Connecticut State Department of Education

Guidelines for Alternative Education Settings

Contents

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Background and Overview

Public Act 13-122 required the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to conduct a study of alternative school programs offered by local and regional boards of education and produce a report to the Connecticut General Assembly that examined:

- enrollment and discharge criteria;
- methods to obtain parental consent;
- enrollment by gender, race and ethnicity;
- curriculum offered;
- the length of school day and year;
- attendance and truancy rates;
- graduation rates;
- student academic performance;
- program effectiveness in meeting the needs of students enrolled; and
- program compliance with Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) Sections 10-15, 10-16 and 10-16b.

Data were collected for four types of alternative school programs: alternative elementary and secondary programs; expulsion programs; dropout diversion/credit recovery programs; and districtwide special education and transition programs. One hundred and ninety-five school districts were surveyed, including local and regional boards of education, unified school districts, Regional Educational Service Centers and charter school districts. In total, 322 programs were reported by 100 school districts via an online survey. The results did not include Homebound (N=3) and expulsion only (N=20) programs. Based on this analysis, it was determined that there are 55 alternative programs and seven alternative schools across Connecticut accounting for approximately 4 percent of student enrollment. Approximately 90 percent of the alternative schools/programs served students in Grades 9 through 12. More than half of the students served (56.5 percent) were African American/Black or Latino. Almost two thirds were male (61.7 percent) and eligible for free lunch (58.5 percent).

The study determined that CSDE only had partially accounted for alternative school programs offered by districts. To that end, CSDE issued a May 29, 2014, memorandum to Superintendents of Schools notifying them of data collection needed to further inform the work of alternative schools. After consultation with internal and external stakeholders and the State Board of Education (SBE), the CSDE implemented a policy that required all programs under the purview of a district to request a unique organization code. This included off-site locations, multisite programs, and programs that run after school hours. Additionally, all programs had to report staff assignments; and students had to be reported in these programs through CSDE data collections. Students attending the public school during the regular school day and a separate program after school hours must have both education locations in the Public School Information System (PSIS).

As a next step to develop guidelines and best practices to support the operation of alternative school programs offered by local and regional boards of education, the CSDE established an Alternative Schools Committee in July 2014. The committee met over the course of a year in developing draft guidelines.

Subsequently, Public Act 15-133, An Act Concerning Alternative Education, required the CSDE to develop guidelines for the provision of alternative education. The statute required that such guidelines shall include:

- Description of the purpose and expectations of alternative education;
- Criteria for who is eligible to receive alternative education; and
- Criteria for how and when a student may enter or exit alternative education.

These guidelines are designed to support the operation of alternative education settings (schools or programs) offered by local and regional boards of education. The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure improved program designs and greater outcomes for students in alternative education settings. The Alternative Schools Committee then worked collaboratively to develop the draft guidelines to meet the requirements of the statute.

Scope and Applicability of these Guidelines

These guidelines were prepared in accordance with Public Act 15-133, prior to the passage of Public Act 16-147, and thus should not be construed at this time to govern the mandatory alternative educational opportunity required to be offered to expelled students under Section 12 of Public Act 16-147. The CSDE is in the process of reviewing these guidelines to determine whether any amendments are needed to address the circumstances of expelled students and will develop amended guidelines, as appropriate, prior to the effective date of Section 12 of Public Act 16-147, which is August 15, 2017. School districts, of course, are free to offer expelled students placement in appropriate Alternative Education Settings in accordance with these guidelines as CSDE works to implement the new requirements of Section 12 of Public Act 16-147.

Definition of Alternative Education

PA 15-133 defines <u>alternative education</u> as "a school or program maintained and operated by a local or regional board of education that is offered to students in a nontraditional educational setting and addresses the social, emotional, behavioral and academic needs of such students."

Students enrolled in alternative education benefit from the same academic standards for all students in Connecticut, within a different or unique setting, which addresses barriers found in traditional settings. Alternative education can support student graduation by building positive relationships, focusing on students' individual strengths, talents, social/emotional/behavioral needs and providing academic rigor and cultural relevancy of instruction. Alternative education settings may be responsive to student needs by providing unique programming, nontraditional hours, or hybrid experiences for students. Students enrolled may include those whose academic, social/emotional and/or behavioral needs are not being met by the traditional program or school.

For purposes of the guidelines, alternative education does not include private schools, home schooling, *School Choice* (e.g., lottery based programs such as magnet, charter etc.), adult education programs, approved private special education programs (APSEPs), gifted and talented programs and schools or programs within the CT Technical High School system unless otherwise indicated.

Alternative education may function within a single school or be a program affiliated with one or more schools or districts. Programs must be affiliated with at least one district with a code already assigned by CSDE. Additionally, a specific organization code within the CSDE data system is established for all alternative programs under the purview of the district. Alternative education settings that operate as self-contained public schools in the state must comply with laws and regulations that guide the operation of schools in the state and must be assigned an organization code by the department.

Guidelines for Reporting

Section 12 of Public Act 13-122, An Act Concerning Minor Revisions to the Education Statutes, required the CSDE to study alternative school programs and report to the Connecticut General Assembly by February 1, 2014. The study determined that the CSDE only possesses a partial account of alternative school programs offered by districts. Therefore, after consultation with internal and external stakeholders and the State Board of Education (SBE), the CSDE has implemented the following policy:

- All programs under the purview of a district must request a unique organization code through the Directory Manager application. This includes off-site locations, multisite programs, and programs that run after school hours.
- Ensure all programs have staff assignments reported in the Educator Data System (formerly ED163).
- Students need to be reported in these programs through CSDE data collections. Students attending the public school during the regular school day and a separate program after school hours must have both education locations reported in PSIS using Facility Codes 1 and 2.

Guidelines for Student Placement

Local education agencies (LEAs) must have a clear written policy regarding student placement in an alternative education setting to include the following:

Prior to Referral

Prior to consideration of alternative placement, the following need to take place:

- A review of the student's academic, health and behavioral records including planning and placement team (PPT) or 504 records, student success plans (SSP), and the efficacy of tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions;
- Assurance that Child Find requirements have been complied with;
- Students may be referred from the following sources:
  - Parent
  - Student (self or peer)
  - School or district

Entrance Criteria

The LEA Board of Education is required to approve the development of alternative education settings to ensure the following:

- The alternative education program/school has a transparent and defined purpose, including a description of the types of students that may benefit most from the program/school environment.
- Alternative education schools and programs develop clear and objective criteria for admission consistent with stated program guidelines that are provided to students and their parents/guardians at the time of admittance into the alternative setting.

Process

The student and parents/guardians are provided with an accurate and comprehensive description of the alternative education delivered. There are culturally and linguistically responsive family and student engagement practices regarding all aspects of decision-making as it relates to placement. The team will ensure that parents/guardians know and understand how the alternative education placement will benefit their child.

Determination of enrollment is made by the student support team involved in the placement, which includes, but is not limited to the following:

- Parent or family representative
- Student, if in secondary school

- Appropriate representative of the alternative environment
- Student's teachers
- School administrator (sending school)
- If the student has an identified disability, special education administrator or designee
- PPT/504 Team

If there is disagreement with the placement decision, there must be a clear process written in policy by the LEA Board of Education delineating a family's right of appeal.

The entrance criteria and procedures are explicitly written in each alternative education program/school handbook and provided to parents/guardians and students in the language of the home at the time of admittance into the alternative setting.

Guidelines for Continued or Discontinued Student Placement

To ensure that continued placement in the alternative setting is appropriate, LEAs must have a clear process written in policy to include the following:

Annual Review

A review of the appropriateness of placement occurs at least annually with a team. The following issues are to be considered:

- A review of program goals to reinforce student and parent choice regarding placement.
- A review of the student's program of study and alignment to the goals of their Individualized Education Program(IEP), where it is appropriate.
- Members of the team include, but are not limited to the following:

  - Parent or family representative
  - Student, if in secondary school
  - Appropriate representative of the alternative environment
  - Student's teachers
  - School administrator or designee (receiving school – if applicable)
  - If the student has an identified disability, special education administrator or designee

Exit Criteria

Alternative education settings adopt clear and explicit criteria and procedural frameworks to address the following:

- A return to the traditional school setting by an informed choice of the student and their family.
- A determination that the setting is no longer beneficial to the student.

Process

Student transition from an alternative education setting shall be made as follows:

- Transition planning for placement outside of the alternative education setting is related to the annual review to ensure the continuity of support.
- The transition plan provides recommendations that are consistent with the student's future educational plans as evidenced by their student success plan.
- The transition plan is aligned to the goals of the student's IEP, where it is appropriate.
- Members of the team include, but are not limited to the following:

- Parent or family representative
- Student, if in secondary school
- Appropriate representative of the alternative environment
- Student's teachers
- School administrator or designee (receiving school – if applicable)
- If student has an identified disability, special education administrator or designee

If there is disagreement with the placement decision, there must be a clear process written in policy by the LEA Board of Education delineating a family's right of appeal.

The exit criteria and procedures are explicitly written in each alternative education program/school handbook and provided to parents/guardians and students in the language of the home at the time of admittance into the alternative setting.

Best Practice Guidelines for Program Implementation

High quality alternative education occurs in a context of respectful, supportive, reciprocal relationships among the district leadership (superintendents and local boards of education); the alternative school administration and staff; and students and their families. Alternative education settings are organized around well-developed and articulated indicators of student success characterized by small individualized learning environments. These indicators include a well-articulated program philosophy; a commitment to collaboration particularly among educators, students, and their families; and strong programmatic features grounded in high academic and behavioral standards to support the overall growth and development of students. In this section, guidelines to support the implementation of high quality programming in alternative settings will be described in the following areas: program philosophy; approaches to the engagement of students and their parents/guardians/families; roles of administrators and staff; services delivery in specific areas to include assessment, curriculum and instruction, community-based social services; and facilities.

Program Philosophy

There are two core philosophical foundations found in high quality alternative education settings:
1) alternative education is a student focused perspective based on a respect for who students are and the belief that all students can learn given the right environment; and
2) participation in an alternative setting is an informed choice made by students and their families.

The philosophy of alternative education utilizes a whole student approach. Such an approach would promote programming to address the personal, social, emotional, intellectual, work skills, safety, and security needs of all students in addition to academic achievement. Given the nontraditional needs of the student body, programming is individualized. The development of the student's plan for learning is a collaborative venture among students, their families, and educators with the individual needs and strengths of each student both recognized and embraced. This approach encourages students to partner with educators and to understand the value of their educational program while accepting responsibility for their academic, social and emotional growth.

Enrollment in an alternative setting is not a punishment but a learning opportunity. One of the main program goals is centered on creating a safe school climate where effective teaching and learning takes place and exclusionary practices towards discipline are minimized. There is a positive, individualized approach to discipline and all members of the community feel safe, staff and students alike.

A philosophy of high expectations is evident through mission and vision statements that are documented and clearly visible to all members of the school/program community. These expectations are consistent with district goals and state standards. The school/program embraces the concept that all students are capable and can be successful. It is with student success in mind that the program design is developed, implemented and refined. This will involve the use of researched/evidenced based practice including the value of parents/guardians and families.

Parents/Guardians and Families

As a part of the overall philosophy of the alternative education setting, family involvement is welcomed and actively supported. Families are recognized as equal partners and involved in all decision-making processes for their child's learning and personal success. In order to be equal partners, parents/guardians must understand their rights as it relates to the following:

- consent to or decline services;
- privacy;
- procedures to file grievances; and
- timely and effective communication in a format and language that the families can understand.

All education settings must create a climate that supports receiving input from families. Therefore, structures for bi-directional communication must be developed to share information about students' progress at home and at school. Regular opportunities for parents/guardians and families to support students is facilitated by creating access to parent leadership and parent education training regarding how to support their child to achieve maximum learning and personal success. Similarly, all staff needs to demonstrate family engagement practices from a family-centered approach and continually participate in ongoing training related to research-based, culturally relevant, family engagement strategies for working with parents/guardians from diverse backgrounds as equal partners in supporting student success.

Administrators

Administrators in alternative settings must meet all local and state certification requirements. In collaboration with staff, they are responsible for the alternative school/program and actively plan and participate in establishing a quality learning experience for students. As instructional leaders their duty is twofold. First, they need to ensure that the students in their care receive a high quality, efficacious, educational experience. Secondly, they are responsible for representing that school/program within the larger school/district and to ensure that their program is compliant with all related federal and state laws and regulations.

School district leaders support administration in a respectful manner that is consistent with all educational programs in the district. Administrators in the alternative education setting collaborate with district leadership, staff, and community members to develop relationships

that reflect ownership and support for the alternative education setting. Leadership is responsible to develop and support reasonable expectations by staff and students. The rules are positively stated such that they are clearly understood by staff, students, and parents/guardians. They need to be applied consistently to guide and teach appropriate student behavior, monitor progress, and manage the learning experience. Programs are prepared to support students for whom the monitoring system indicates more intensive supports are required (e.g., services provided by external providers). Please see section on *Community/Social Services* below.

District administration is accountable to students, their families and the community for the quality of education that students in their jurisdiction receive. Therefore, LEA Boards of Education are responsible for the following:

- Development of policies to appeal decisions regarding placement or programming including levels of appeal.
- Development of a policy regarding the number of days for transition planning to limit the length of time that the student is without educational services.
- Develop a policy that outlines the relationship between the administration of the alternative education setting and the administration of the traditional education setting.
- Resources to support the alternative education setting that are equitably allocated and that programming is of high quality.
- A budget for the alternative setting that allows for the implementation of all standards required to comply with state/federal guidelines and district practices.
- Administrators of the alternative education setting are held accountable for the school/programs outcomes. Therefore, the LEA board of education will require the submission of performance reports at least annually to respective local boards of education.

Staff

Teaching within the alternative school/program is a choice by all staff. Therefore, the process for the recruitment of staff requires that candidates evidence the value of high expectations for themselves and their students. They are actively committed to building a trusting school environment and understand their position as role models for students. Their practices reflect a holistic perspective of care for students' overall development (i.e., personal, social, emotional, intellectual, life success) and create a climate of safety/security. Emphasis on the process of learning is valued, embraced, and implemented as the means to creating the primary motivation to want to learn.

Teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff meet local and state certification/licensure requirements. As such, staff is subject to an annual evaluation as governed by their district's system and/or approved by CSDE for evaluation. School and

district administrators collaborate to ensure that the evaluation system is appropriate for the alternative education setting. As a part of their system for evaluation, each staff member participates in professional learning opportunities such as *Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)*, for self-improvement as indicated by their student learning objectives. Supports to staff may address needs specific to the environment such as burnout, building family-school-community relationships, culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural competency and reflective practice. Small learning environments are needed to ensure that students receive individualized attention and staff is able to meet their goals for teaching. Teacher/student ratios are at most 1:12[1] based on total students served and total teachers available.

Students

Students and their families are active members of the student support team involved in placement. Practices are designed to support student and family voice such that enrollment in the alternative setting is an informed choice by students and their families. It is important that administrators in conjunction with members of their staff provide an orientation to students and their parents/guardians prior to admission where expectations are explained, understood and agreed upon. Upon enrollment, students participate in the development and shaping of their personalized learning environment and activities of the school. This will encourage a sense of belonging and ownership of a culturally responsive learning experience. Students are able to take responsibility for their own learning, including attendance, work completion, and timelines for completion, with support from administration and staff.

A focus on student growth and development is at the center of the programming. Students are encouraged to advocate for their needs and be fully informed about the requirements for graduation and readiness for college or career. Therefore, students and their families need to be regularly informed of their progress and be able to continuously monitor their credits earned with regard to personal goals, completion and graduation. This occurs in the context of their personalized Student Success Plan[2], as mandated by state law.

Assessment

Educators select assessments for both formative and summative purposes such as to guide instruction, monitor student progress, design interventions in the context of a multi-tiered system of supports, and provide appropriate services to benefit the student. Staff, students, and parents/guardians must be able to clearly identify and articulate the purposes of assessment. Multiple measures are utilized to guide student learning that are aligned with districtwide measures to allow progress reporting within the community. Assessments also include standardized measures to identify student overall achievement as well as student progress as deemed appropriate by CSDE.

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[1] http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Framework_20080325.pdf

[2] For information on Connecticut's Student Success Plans: https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/SSReform/SSP/Student-Success-Plan

Curriculum and Instruction

All students receive instruction based on a curriculum aligned to the CT Core State Standards[3] (CCSS) unless modified as indicated by the goals and objectives of an IEP, in particular curricula areas. Implementation of the CCSS allows students and families to be confident that their curriculum prepares them for life, career, and future training in higher levels of education. Approaches, such as the Mastery Based Learning frameworks, are encouraged due the emphasis on the following:

- rigorous college and career learning competencies;
- high quality instruction;
- curriculum based on state content standards; and
- learning based on authentic experiences and application of critical knowledge.

Instructional practices are culturally relevant to promote understanding and respect for who students are including their perspective and interests. These practices are consistent with an inclusive learning environment to accommodate different learning styles and abilities in large and small flexible groupings. The promotion of 21st century skills such as, but not limited to, abstract thinking, problem-solving and critical thinking, collaboration and use of technology is evident throughout the curriculum. Technology may be used as a part of the curriculum delivery process that allows for immediate feedback systems, monitoring of individual progress and needs, and adjustments to personal choice, needs, and learning capacity. Funding allocations by districts are documented and must ensure that sufficient and relevant material resources are available to allow for the accomplishment of these practices and standards of learning.

Vocational/Technical/Career

With the goal of college and career readiness in mind, all students are provided with supports to transition into postsecondary training and employment. Students actively explore career options and complete personal assessments to promote career development. Consistent with family and community engagement practices, partnerships with the private and public sectors are fostered to support the learning community. Opportunities to provide internships, apprenticeships, career exploration, service learning opportunities, and paid work experiences are developed and made available to students in order to help them enter the workforce. Students may want to explore and participate in available college courses at the community college or 4-year college level.

Personal/Social/Life Skills

Programming is designed to meet the needs of the whole child to prepare the student to be a productive member of school and larger community. The development of students in the areas

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[3] For information on Connecticut's Core Standards http://ctcorestandards.org/

related to personal, social, emotional, behavioral, career and other essential learnings, which are not addressed by the CCSS are embedded in the program delivery and/or evidenced in specific course content. Instructional practices include cooperative learning, team building, and other group activities, which are practiced to exercise the development of personal/social behaviors important to the success of the community. Opportunities for mentorship will be considered.

The staff may need to identify and give consideration to students' specific personal/social and other life skills in developing personalized planning, instructional delivery, and support services. Students have access to participate in extracurricular activities, including sports and other team and/or individual activities. There are professional learning opportunities for staff to be able to address the needs of students and/or families in crisis and provide accommodations via the development and implementation of personal plans to assure success in the alternative learning environment.

All staff, students, and families will consider cultural differences as critical to understanding personal needs. Accommodations for cultural differences are made to allow for personal success within the learning alternative/s.

Community/Social Services

In an effort to support the needs of the whole child, resources for support service agencies and relevant community organizations are collected and coordinated to provide multiple support systems for both student and family including opportunities for mentorship and service learning. The administration and staff will work with local and state agencies and build relationships with community organizations. Based on the resources available through these relationships, a reasonable effort to accommodate the delivery of community-based support services to students and families will be made as needed based on personalized planning. Additionally, there are regular opportunities for students and their families to receive information and personal assistance to ensure access to relevant community-based support services. Staff receives professional learning opportunities that are related to effectively collaborating with community-based support services and how to connect students and families with such support services. The alternative school/program may prioritize these areas for professional learning over larger school and district professional learning as necessary.

Facilities and Resources

Administration will ensure that the physical facilities adequately accommodate the needs of staff and students to accomplish the established goals with high quality. These will be consistent with all local, state, and federal laws and regulations regarding physical plant. This includes the provision of adequate space to accommodate the following:

- group activities without interfering with individualized learning;
- technology as a resource to students and educators; and
- "privacy areas" for counseling and the delivery of community-based support services.

Public Act No. 15-133: AN ACT CONCERNING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

- **Definition**: Section 1. (*Effective July 1, 2015*) Alternative education means a school or program maintained and operated by a local or regional board of education that is offered to students in a nontraditional educational setting and addresses the social, emotional, behavioral and academic needs of such students.

- **Applicable Laws**: Alternative education shall be provided in accordance with the provisions of sections 10-15 and 10-16 of the general statutes and shall be subject to all federal and state laws governing public schools, including length of school year and hours.

- **Public Information**: Each local and regional board of education shall make available on its Internet web site information relating to alternative education, including, the purpose, location, contact information, staff directory and enrollment criteria for such alternative education.

- **CSDE Guidelines**: Sec. 2. (*Effective July 1, 2015*) The CSDE shall develop guidelines for the provision of alternative education, such guidelines shall include, a description of the purpose and expectations of alternative education, criteria for who is eligible to receive alternative education, criteria for how and when a student may enter or exit alternative education.

- **School Codes**: The CSDE shall assign an identification code and organization code to each school or program of alternative education provided by a local or regional board of education for purposes of collecting, tracking and monitoring such alternative education in the public school information system.

- **Equal Advantage**: Section 3. (*Effective July 1, 2015*): provide all children in the school district who receive alternative education equal advantages as compared with other children in the district based on C.G.S. 10-220a.

- **Strategic School Profiles**: Section. 4. (*Effective July 1, 2015*): Boards of education annually submit a strategic school profile report for each alternative education school or program under its jurisdiction.

- **Cooperative Arrangements**: Section. 5. (*Effective July 1, 2015*): Pursuant to C.G.S. 10-158a, any two or more boards of education may agree to establish cooperative arrangements to provide school accommodations services, programs or activities, special education services, health care services or alternative education.

- **Assessment of Disparities**: Section. 6. (*Effective July 1, 2015*): Pursuant to C.G.S 10-4p, SBE must assess alternative education and alternative education opportunities as part of

its statewide assessment of disparities among local and regional school districts to make comparisons to relevant national standards or regional accreditation standards. By law, this assessment is required before SBE develops a five-year implementation plan with appropriate goals and strategies to (1) achieve resource equity and equality of opportunity; (2) increase student achievement; (3) reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation; (4) improve effective instruction; and (5) encourage greater parental and community involvement in the state's public schools.

- **Commissioner's Network**: Section 7. (*Effective July 1, 2015*): Pursuant to C.G.S. 10-223h, CSDE shall perform an operations and instructional audit for any school selected to participate in the commissioner's network that inventories, among other things, any alternative education that the school offers to students.