

Frequently Asked Questions about Alternative Education

1. What is alternative education?

Alternative education, as a grant program in Indiana, was established by the state legislature in 1999. School corporations may create programs for students in grades 6-12 that instruct eligible students in a manner that is different from that found in a traditional school. Alternative education programs are designed to meet the needs of highly at-risk students who are not succeeding in the traditional setting. In alternative education programs, students are provided with a variety of options that can lead to graduation and are supported by services for themselves and their immediate families that are essential to success. While each program is unique, they share characteristics identified in research as common to successful alternative schools and programs, including;

- Maximum teacher/student ratio of 15:1;
- Small student base;
- Clearly stated mission and discipline code;
- Caring faculty with continual staff development;
- High expectations for student achievement from staff;
- Learning programs specific to the student's stated goals and learning style; and
- Community involvement and support.

2. Are there different types of alternative education programs?

Yes. Alternative education types include, but are not limited to: alternative classrooms, school-within-a-school programming, separate alternative schools or programs, and second or last-chance schools or programs for students who are disruptive. Just as there are many types and settings for alternative schools, there are many delivery models based on the programs' philosophy and the needs of the students they serve. Some focus primarily on helping academically at-risk students become successful. Others may combine academics vocational programs and/or school-community partnerships to make school meaningful and relevant while preparing students for the future. Still others employ a behavioral intervention model to guide students back on the right track. In Indiana, the programs and models designed to meet the needs of disaffected youth are as diverse as the students themselves, but every program must address the academic and behavioral needs of the student as well as services required by the student, and the student's immediate family to meet the educational and behavioral goals in the student's Individual Service Plan, in accordance with IC 20-30-8-11.

3. What are the criteria to qualify as an eligible student in an alternative education school or program?

To qualify as an eligible student, a student must meet at least one of the following criteria, according to IC 20-30-8-10:

- Intends to withdraw or has withdrawn before graduation,
- Has failed to comply academically and would benefit from instruction offered in a different manner from the traditional school,
- Is a parent or expectant parent,
- Is employed and employment is necessary for the support of the student or the student's immediate family, or
- Is a disruptive student.

4. What is the difference between an alternative education school and an alternative education program?

Alternative education **programs** are considered to be part of the traditional school. The program's accreditation status flows from this association. Alternative programs are included in their traditional school's School Improvement Plan (SIP), and test scores are reported through the traditional school.

Alternative **schools** have separate school numbers and must follow the same process as any school to become accredited. They submit their own SIP and test scores are reported directly to the school. Accredited alternative high schools are eligible to award diplomas.

5. Do alternative education teachers have to be licensed?

Yes! All teachers in alternative education settings must be licensed teachers.

6. What is the minimum session time for an alternative education program?

To be eligible for funding under IC 20-30-2, an alternative education session must be conducted for a minimum of three consecutive hours. Organizers of alternative education programs should keep in mind, however, that the student instructional day for students in grades 7-12 is a minimum of six hours of instructional time per day.

7. Where can an alternative education school or program be located?

Programs and schools may be located within a traditional school, in a separate school corporation facility, in a vocational or career center, or in a community setting like a mall. Whatever the setting, all sites must meet health and safety codes and provide access to appropriate materials and technology.

8. Can certain diploma requirements be waived for students in alternative education programs?

Students in alternative education programs or schools must meet the same state diploma requirements as students in traditional high schools. However, if the school corporation has added additional local requirements for graduation, they are free to waive those additional requirements for students in the alternative education program.

9. Do alternative education programs or schools have their own graduation ceremonies, or do their students participate in the traditional high school ceremony?

Since most programs grant diplomas through their traditional high school, students in the alternative education program participate in the traditional high school ceremony, although some programs choose to have celebrations within the program as well. Alternative schools that award their own diploma have their own ceremonies.

10. Are school corporations required to offer an alternative education program?

No. School corporations may establish an alternative education program on their own, or participate in an area alternative education program. There is no requirement that a school corporation must provide an alternative to the traditional school program.

11. May a special education student be enrolled in an alternative school where there are no certified special education teachers?

The case conference committee in developing the Individual Education Plan (IEP) would have to recommend the alternative program or school placement as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for the placement to be made. The key issue is whether the services indicated in the IEP could be delivered at the alternative school. In addition, the Teacher of Record (TOR) requirement would have to be met (e.g. a properly certified teacher in the student's exceptionality area), though the TOR would not necessarily have to be physically located at the alternative program or school. If these conditions are not met, the school might be out of compliance, which could jeopardize funding or open the school corporation to litigation.

12. Is it legal to deny a special education student access to the alternative education program or school?

No. Access to the alternative program or school should be an option available to students with disabilities. That is, students with disabilities should not be excluded on the basis of disability. The case conference committee should make the recommendation based on what constitutes a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the LRE for the student. If the alternative program or school is that place, then the student should be served. Alternative education programs are not intended as special education programs so the case conference committee would need to determine if the appropriate staff and services are available and whether the student meets the eligibility criteria listed above.

13. How is funding affected when a special education student is enrolled in an alternative school? Do special education dollars need to follow the child to the alternative school?

Though it might seem reasonable that dollars would follow the student, it is not a requirement. Rather, the state funding support generated by a special education student goes into the general fund and is drawn upon as needed, or in conjunction with other funding sources, to provide special education and related services. The federal funds generated flow to the special education planning district to provide overall administrative support and provide eligible resources (instructional materials, transportation, etc.) and related services.

14. Can a school corporation claim a student for both special education and alternative education funding?

An alternative program or school cannot claim funding for both special education and alternative education at the same time, unless placement in the alternative school is unrelated to the disability. For example, if a student entered the alternative program or school because she was pregnant (alternative education eligibility criteria) and she also happened to be a special education student, then the program could claim both alternative education and special education funding. However, if placement was simply because it was the LRE then the student could not be counted for alternative education funding purposes.

15. What is an Individual Service Plan (ISP)?

An Individual Service Plan or ISP is a plan that outlines the educational goals, behavioral goals, appropriate alternative education program for the student, and the services required by the student and the student's immediate family to meet the educational and behavioral goals specified in the ISP. An ISP is required for each student in an alternative education program or school.

16. Must transportation to the alternative education program be provided?

No. Schools, including alternative education programs or schools, are not legally required to provide transportation.

17. May a student attend an alternative education program or school and the traditional school in the corporation at the same time?

Yes. The student can attend both settings. In order to be included in the FTE Report for alternative education funding purposes, the student must be enrolled and attending the alternative education program or school a minimum of three hours each day.

If a student is attending both an alternative education school (not a program) and a traditional school, the student may be enrolled in only one school, either the alternative school or the traditional school. This is important for reporting, testing, and funding considerations.

18. Can an alternative education program or school award a Core 40 Technical Honors or Academic Honors Diploma?

Yes. As long as the students in the alternative program or school have completed the requirements associated with the diploma. Some small programs do not have the resources available to offer all the courses needed for honors diplomas. Students who wish to pursue honors diplomas would need to return to the traditional school for the courses not offered in the alternative education program or school, with the approval of both the alternative education program or school and the traditional school. Students enrolled in both an alternative education program and the traditional school need to be enrolled and attending the alternative education program for a minimum of three hours each day.

19. Who determines placement of a student in the alternative education program or school?

Ultimately, the placement of a student is the decision of the school corporation. Research indicates students who choose to enroll in an alternative education setting have better outcomes than students who are placed into the programs or schools. Some programs have students complete an application and an admissions committee makes the final decision. Other programs have teachers, counselors, or administrators make referrals that are then reviewed by a panel or the alternative administrator. Still other programs are created as alternatives to suspension or expulsion, but still take parent input into consideration when making the placement decision. Alternative programs generally involve the parent in the intake process and try to take into consideration parent requests and concerns.

20. Can students be mandated to attend an alternative education program or school if the parents don't agree?

While parent and student concerns are certainly considered in the placement process, the final determination for placement rests with the school. However, students who disagree with the placement in an alternative setting may appeal to the governing body of the school corporation in which the student is enrolled. (See IC 20-30-8-12.)

21. Do alternative education programs or schools take students who are on probation?

The placement of students in an alternative education program or school is the decision of school personnel and depends on the mission and admissions criteria for the program. An alternative education program or school may, but is not required to, admit these students. If juvenile judges want to court order placement in an alternative education program or school, there should be communication with the alternative education administrator prior to that decision in order to ensure that it would be an appropriate placement and that the program was not full.

22. How do alternative education programs or schools involve community groups and services?

Community groups often serve on alternative education advisory boards during their developmental process. They often serve the same population and may collaborate with the alternative education program by offering their services on site or through referrals, acting as mentors, or donating space. Many groups and businesses get involved in service learning projects with the alternative school or donate services or supplies.

23. Can students over 21 attend the alternative education program or school?

Yes. Indiana does not have an age limit for individuals to earn a high school diploma. Placement in the alternative program is at the discretion of the school.

24. Do students in an alternative education setting have to take the Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE), qualify for a GQE waiver, or complete the Graduation Pathways?

Yes. Graduation requirements for students enrolled in alternative education settings are the same as those for students enrolled in a traditional school. (See <https://www.doe.in.gov/school-improvement/student-assistance/indiana-graduation-requirements> for the most up-to-date information on graduation requirements.)