



State Alternative Education Grant Program: FY2008 Summary

**A summary of the 2007-08 school year activities supported
by Massachusetts state line item 7061-9614 – Section A**

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OVERVIEW

About Alternative Education

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (the Department) defines Alternative Education as an initiative within a public school district, charter school, or educational collaborative established to serve students at-risk of not earning a high school diploma whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting. For the purposes of this definition, Alternative Education does not include private schools, home schooling, General Educational Development (GED) services, or gifted and talented programs. Alternative Education may serve some students with disabilities but is not designed exclusively for students with disabilities.

State-Funded Grant Purpose

Per state legislation ([Chapter 194 of the Acts of 2004](#)), funding for Alternative Education programs supports the provision of educational services to suspended or expelled students, as well as to students who are at risk of educational failure do to truancy or dropping out of school.

Components of high-quality Alternative Education programs and schools may include: community service learning (CSL), work-based learning, intense academic monitoring and support, small group learning (low student/teacher ratios), parent/family involvement, life skills training, partnerships with community-based organizations including local colleges, and/or flexible scheduling for academic instruction.

Snapshot of the Grantees and Outcomes

In Fiscal Year 2008 (FY08), the Department allocated a total of \$699,954 in grants among 14 districts, with awards ranging from \$31,620 to \$75,000. District grant recipients included Barnstable, Fitchburg, Framingham, Greenfield, Hampshire Regional, Lynn, North Adams, Peabody, Quincy, Salem, Wareham, Westport, Weymouth, and Worcester.

Among the grant funded schools and programs:

- A total of approximately 600 students were served.
- 98 percent of students enrolled in grades 10, 11, and 12 passed the grade 10 MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) required for high school graduation.
- The average daily student attendance rate was approximately 82 percent.
- Less than 10 percent of the participating students dropped out of school.
- Over 18 percent of students participated in community service-learning activities as part of the program.
- Grantees reported that:
 - Parents commented on a change of students' attitudes towards school, noting that the students were no longer in opposition to attending, which then resulted in increased student attendance.
 - Students showed significant gains in formative and summative assessments, and students were often able to get back "on-track" academically with their peers after enrolling in the programs.

Department Activities

The Department provided ongoing technical assistance to the 14 grantees and facilitated two daylong grantee meeting and technical assistance events, which offered grantees the opportunity to network and learn about a variety of topics related to continuous program improvement. The Department also provided information and technical assistance to other school districts interested in improving or creating Alternative Education programs and schools through a statewide conference on the topic of Alternative Education; two regional networking events for staff working in the field of Alternative Education; the Alternative Education website (www.doe.mass.edu/alted); and individual technical assistance via phone, email, and site visits.

GRANTEE HIGHLIGHTS

The remainder of this report briefly summarizes information gathered through the [Alternative Education Self-Assessment Tool](#), completed by all grantees at the end of the fiscal year. The purpose of this Self-Assessment Tool was to enable Alternative Education administrators to assess their program or school's strengths and areas of weaknesses in order to make the necessary steps for program improvement. The Tool was also intended to provide the Department with information on grantee progress to share promising practices throughout the Commonwealth and to assist with identifying topic areas for future technical assistance.

The following information does not include every promising practice or highlight demonstrated by grantees in the 2007-08 school year. Rather it is intended to provide some brief examples of the types of innovative and quality activities grantees implemented.

Organization and Climate

All of the grantees implemented activities that helped to create environments that supported the needs of students enrolled in Alternative Education programs or schools (e.g. establishing a program or school philosophy that is consistent with district and school goals, mission, and vision; holding all students to high expectations and standards; and recognizing each student individually).

Grantee Highlights:

Fitchburg: Formed an eleven member advisory board which included the mayor, middle school resource officer, middle school principal, parents, and business community leaders. This group met bi-monthly throughout the school year and was instrumental in creating an increased awareness about the Alternative Education program throughout the community.

Framingham: The Resiliency for Life Advisory Board has been working to steward the program since its inception in 1999. In the 2007-08 school year the Advisory Board worked to support the Executive Director's fund-raising and public relations activities. They worked to increase community awareness of the program, in order to strengthen communication between the program and Framingham High School staff as well as the Framingham Public Schools.

Wareham: The concept of educating the whole student was imbedded into the curriculum of the school. Each student was assigned to a faculty mentor that frequently communicated with the students to check on any academic or personal issues that the school could help address. Community members reflected ownership for and support of the school, as evidenced by offers donating financial and other resources to enhance the school.

Student Engagement

All grantees implemented activities related to encouraging student ownership over their academic progress and student involvement in continuous program improvement.

Grantee Highlights:

Barnstable: Students all had individualized learning plans, which were supported by the referral process to the program, which included: a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), a Behavior Improvement Plan (BIP), and/or an Individual Student Instruction Plan (ISIP).

Quincy: Each student met with the program guidance counselor to create a six year plan. Additionally, each student met with program staff quarterly to review progress and set goals. Students and the guidance counselor created individualized graduation plans that were regularly updated and communicated to parents.

Salem: All of the students who participated in the program requested to participate; the program was not mandated for any student. All of the recent changes to the design of the Alternative Education program included student input. Every student had an opportunity to meet with a guidance counselor once a week to review progress on their personalized learning plan and to plan for college entry.

Parent/Guardian Engagement

Each grantee implemented activities related to engaging and partnering with parents/guardians to support students' academic achievement (e.g., providing parents/guardians with regular updates regarding their child's success in the program and providing workshops for parents).

Grantee Highlights:

Barnstable: Parents/guardians were part of the decision-making process to place their child into the program. Parents/guardians were included at meetings with guidance counselors, teachers, and/or school psychologist and were part of the process of supporting students' personalized education plans. Parent education forums were held and offered in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

Peabody: Program staff met with all parents during entry process and contacted parents regularly by phone, email, and in person to review both student progress and challenges. Program staff regularly solicited oral feedback from parents on the program. Parents were asked to complete a written reflection on the program at the end of the school year.

Weymouth: Every other month parents were invited into school for an event planned by the middle school Alternative Education program students. These events included a craft day, coffeehouse, ice cream social, movie day, holiday snack hour, and a year end waffle breakfast. The teachers encouraged open communication with weekly verbal contact and biweekly written student evaluations. During the program, parents and guardians generally became more involved than they were previously with their children's school experience.

Staff Engagement

Examples of staff-related activities important to Alternative Education programs and schools included employing and training teachers and staff who meet state licensure requirements, enabling staff to work as part of team to maximize student achievements, and participating in professional development opportunities.

Grantee Highlights:

Quincy: Program staff, and staff throughout the high school, completed surveys to gather input on the program design. Program staff were involved in the hiring of additional staff, including a new program coordinator. Program staff were encouraged to attend workshops, conferences, and professional development opportunities. For example, a substantial amount of professional development time was devoted to examine helping traumatized children learn.

Westport: The Alternative Education grant supported the faculty through training opportunities on topics including legal issues in discipline, motivating students, creating trauma sensitive learning environments, and performance based graduation.

Curriculum and Instruction

Grantees implemented activities related to equipping students with instruction that was individualized, self-paced, goal-oriented, challenging, and appealed to students' interests, as well as with curriculum that held students to high academic standards in preparation for higher education and careers.

Grantee Highlights:

Framingham: Effectively improved the English portion of the MCAS preparation class and the SAT preparation class with a great deal of innovative, experiential, and repetitive activities that were fun for students. The program also had an Academic Monitor who was responsible for tutoring and mentoring students in directed study halls and in an afterschool program, tracked student attendance and tardiness, interacted daily with teachers to monitor academic performance, and acted as the academic liaison between home and school.

Worcester: The program's student to staff ratio of 10:1 allowed staff to provide constant feedback on an individual basis. The curriculum included a community service-learning component which was expanded for 2008 to provide more diverse opportunities. The community service-learning component provided students with experiences in diverse careers, and the program also included visits to college campuses to increase familiarity with the college experience.

Transitions to Careers and Higher Education

Grantees implemented activities to help students transition to careers and higher education. For example, grantees helped students research careers and complete personal interest assessments, hosted college field trips, and assisted students in developing academic and career goals.

Grantee Highlights:

Greenfield: The program included an internship component that gave students the opportunity to experience work ethic, relationships, and responsibilities in a supportive environment with the program assistant as liaison for each site. Students worked weekly at their job sites, completed weekly journals and time sheets, and met with their supervisor and completed self evaluations throughout the year. Students presented PowerPoint slides and displays along with supervisor interviews and verbal presentations about their experiences.

North Adams: Nearly all of the students in the Alternative Education program took dual credit college courses at Berkshire Community College, and 75 percent of the students took part in internships. The internships were varied between on-campus and off-campus sites.

Wareham: All students in the Alternative Education school developed a personalized education plan in partnership with school staff and parents/guardians. The personalized education plan for each student included either a community service-learning or work based learning curriculum component. The school also worked in conjunction with Greater New Bedford Community Workforce Development Board to offer the "Work Certification Program" to all students at the school at no cost.

Assessment

All grantees incorporated formative and summative assessments that supported the academic achievement of students enrolled in the Alternative Education program, and helped engage students in the review of their assessments.

Grantee Highlights:

Peabody: Included both formative and summative assessments in program design, such as exams, class presentations, and course projects. Assessment results were incorporated into regular communication with students and parents. Assessment results were used by program staff to develop and refine curriculum and services.

Hampshire Regional: Assessed students upon entry into the program with Holyoke Community College's Accuplacer/Ability to Benefit Test (ABT). Ongoing formative assessments were also conducted through a software program aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

Personal/Social/Life Skills

All grantees incorporated activities that developed students' personal, social, and/or life skills that supported the need for addressing the "whole child" in the academic setting.

Grantee Highlights:

Greenfield: Engaged an external mental health partner to provide weekly group meetings focused on Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. Students learned mindfulness techniques, healthy responses to stress, and raised their awareness on how they manage their response to conflict. The skills were utilized in other areas of the program, such as classroom settings, enrichment time, and academic support sessions.

Lynn: Provided intensive counseling and clinical work with individual and group counseling twice a week for students. The program also included a partnership with Raw Arts, a local therapeutic youth arts organization, which addressed student personal, social, and emotional needs.

North Adams: A middle school transitions program provided students with a social skills curriculum and individualized academic instruction, with the goal of transitioning students back into their regular classes. The program resulted in a decreased need and utilization among all students for the services provided in the transition program because students were able to better self-modulate in their regular classrooms.

Westport: The program included a focus on helping students develop the coping skills and the life skills necessary for post high school living. Students received support in achieving these skills during both individual and family therapy. In addition, psycho-educational group therapy was offered on the topics of life skills, anger management, and drug awareness.

Community and Social Services

All grantees implemented activities that involved either establishing collaborative relationships with community service providers or assisting students and their families with accessing community support services and training opportunities.

Grantee Highlights:

Fitchburg: Collaborated with the Salvation Army to provide students a twelve week program that met twice weekly called Bridging The Gap, which featured family nights where students prepared meals for their parents. Fitchburg also collaborated with LUK Crisis Center to educate students on the subjects of substance abuse, life skills, and job training.

Salem: The mayor in Salem and the staff at City Hall provided the Alternative School staff and student body with political support by promoting awareness in Salem of the program's existence and programmatic needs and opportunities. Local businesses provided materials to use as incentives to motivate the students toward academic achievement within the program. The North Shore YMCA supported the program by providing a site for Health and Wellness Programming as well as donating individual memberships to each student.

Weymouth: An advisor from the District Attorney's office visited the program weekly. Students participated in role playing and group discussions on a variety of challenging topics such as underage drinking and drug use. In this group students felt comfortable expressing themselves and asking questions which they did not feel comfortable asking parents or teachers.

Facilities and Resources

Each grantee implemented activities that helped create facilities and resources necessary to operate a high-quality program or school, for example, accommodations for group and individualized learning, technology, and private areas for counseling.

Grantee Highlights:

Hampshire Regional: The Mt. Tom program was based at Holyoke Community College, which provided high-quality facilities for the program operations. Computers available within the class environment and the program had individual space on the college campus. The facilities allowed for individual and group counseling which was enhanced in the 2007-08 school year.

Lynn: Transformed a small space into a room where counseling, group work, and activities could be complete in a private and confidential manner. Despite district budget constraints, the district prioritized the operation of the middle school Alternative Education program, and the program was provided adequate resources for staffing, technology resources, and other necessary student supports.

Worcester: The program was based at the Worcester Youth Center, which was prompted by input from community members and community service organizations. In 2007-08, the program added computer terminals to 20 sites in the classroom, equaling the maximum program capacity. Personal lockers were made available for each student. Despite several years of significant budget constraints, the district continues to provide adequate support for all alternative programs.

SUMMARY

Summary of FY2008 Activities

In FY08, the Alternative Education state grant program – funded by line item 7061-9614 – supported the implementation of Alternative Education programs or schools in 14 school districts throughout the Commonwealth. Districts used the Alternative Education grant funds to support the creation of a new Alternative Education option or to significantly enhance an existing option. Approximately 600 students that were identified to be most at-risk for school failure or dropping out of school benefited from the additional services and supports that districts provided through the grant funds.

The grant funds also supported statewide training and technical assistance activities targeted for the 14 grantees, as well as activities to spread promising practices to all districts statewide. The lessons learned from the grantees were shared in order to strengthen the entire field of Alternative Education programs and schools throughout the Commonwealth.

For more information about this report or Alternative Education, visit the Department's website, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/alted>, or contact coordinator Jenny Caldwell Curtin via jcurtin@doe.mass.edu or 781-338-6839.