Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Education Approaches: Rethinking California's Alternative Education System

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ABSTRACT

California's alternative education system, particularly its Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS) schools, serves as a vital but often overlooked pathway for historically marginalized and vulnerable students. This report analyzes 2022–23 data from 894 DASS schools, representing 150,009 students, to evaluate the effectiveness of these settings.

The findings reveal that DASS schools disproportionately enroll Black, Latine, Indigenous, foster, homeless, socioeconomically disadvantaged, disabled students, and other populations facing significant systemic barriers. Educational outcomes in these settings highlight profound disparities compared to non-alternative schools, including a 60% chronic absenteeism rate, a 58% five-year graduation rate, and significantly lower proficiency in English Language Arts and mathematics. Furthermore, the analysis identifies systemic challenges in staffing, leadership, and accountability frameworks that often fail to adequately capture or support the unique needs of these students. To address these inequities, the authors propose a comprehensive policy agenda: developing a dedicated Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) category for alternative schools, building a specialized educator workforce, enhancing school stability, establishing meaningful accountability measures, and expanding access to high-quality, differentiated instruction. Ultimately, this report calls for a shift from deficit-based narratives toward equitable, asset-based support systems that prioritize the success and holistic development of California's most vulnerable youth.

INTRODUCTION

Alternative education in the United States represents a critical pathway for addressing systemic shortcomings in traditional K–12 schooling. These programs, which vary in design and implementation, were developed to provide students with educational opportunities that traditional schools too often fail to support.

Rather than being defined by the students they serve, alternative schools are authorized to deliver more intensive services and accelerated credit-earning opportunities that afford young people renewed paths to graduation. Many settings offer flexible learning models, individualized instruction, and integrated supports such as counseling, credit recovery, and career preparation, with resources that aim to respond to diverse learning needs rather than expecting all students to learn and develop at the same pace.

In response to calls for equity, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasized the importance of holding alternative education programs accountable for student outcomes while recognizing their distinct missions (Aron, 2006; Lehr et al., 2008). At the state level, policymakers have worked to incorporate these schools into broader accountability frameworks to ensure that students in non-traditional settings receive access to high-quality education. In California, this effort includes the Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS), an accountability category created to apply tailored measures for schools with distinct missions and student populations.

Research indicates that effective alternative education programs are characterized by smaller class sizes, strong student-teacher relationships, and specialized interventions that address diverse academic and social needs (Aron, 2006). These schools frequently serve students who arrive credit-deficient, yet data show that credit deficiency often

stems from system failures rather than individual shortcomings. For example, one-quarter of students in DASS schools and nearly one-third in continuation schools are Redesignated Fully English Proficient (RFEP); despite outperforming peers on assessments and GPA, many became off track because they were excluded from credit-bearing courses or lacked appropriate supports in earlier grades (Rivera Zabarain, 2024).

Attendance and engagement further illustrate the interplay between student experience and system design. While exclusionary discipline policies do push students out, many young people also disengage from traditional schools because they do not feel connected, supported, or see the relevance of their learning. Chronic absenteeism, therefore, reflects both punitive practices and unmet needs for engagement, conditions that alternative schools seek to address through more personalized and supportive environments.

These challenges are not only educational but also economic. Recent analysis estimates that each chronically absent student costs society more than $5,600 annually, while each suspension or expulsion adds between $27,000 and $70,000 in long-term societal costs (Belfield, Rodriguez, Bowden, & Oas, 2025). Disparities in attendance and discipline among historically underserved groups, including Black, foster, and students experiencing homelessness, compound these costs and reinforce the urgency of investing in equitable and effective alternative education. Addressing these barriers is essential not only to improving student success but also to advancing fiscal responsibility and expanding access to responsive, high-quality education for all learners.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of alternative education in California, where a diverse array of school types, including continuation schools, community day schools, opportunity schools, and juvenile court schools, serve distinct student circumstances. Drawing on statewide administrative data, the report examines variation across these settings in terms of student demographics, school climate, and academic outcomes. Understanding these differences is essential for designing policies and practices that align with the unique missions and challenges of each school type. At the same time, identifying shared characteristics and common issues can inform broader strategies to improve outcomes across the alternative education system.

The report begins with an overview of California's alternative education landscape, building on policy and accountability context, followed by an analysis of educational patterns across specific school types. Findings are presented in two sections: one focused on student characteristics and the other on educational and school climate patterns. The report concludes with a discussion of data limitations and offers recommendations for strengthening policy and practice to improve outcomes for young people in California's alternative education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

National Context of Alternative Schools and Programs

The national policy landscape surrounding alternative education has evolved in response to growing awareness of the systemic barriers many students face within traditional educational settings, particularly for those from marginalized communities. A review of policies across all 50 states and the District of Columbia shows that 94% now have legislation governing alternative education, compared to just 22 states in 1998 (Lehr et al., 2009). These laws typically define alternative schools as institutions serving students excluded from mainstream education due to academic difficulties, behavioral challenges, or punitive disciplinary actions such as suspension or expulsion.

This growing policy attention reflects increased reliance on alternative education as a mechanism for re-engaging students at risk of school failure. Research shows that in the 2007–08 school year, 64% of U.S. school districts reported having at least one alternative school or program (Carver & Lewis, 2010). While these figures demonstrate the widespread adoption of alternative education models, more recent enrollment data provide a picture of their scale and trajectory over time. According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), more than 529,000 students were enrolled in public alternative schools in the 2021–22 school year, representing a modest increase after nearly a decade of decline from a peak of 627,000 in 2011–12 (NCES, 2023). This trend highlights both the persistence and renewed significance of alternative education as a pathway for re-engaging students who might otherwise disengage from traditional schools.

However, this expansion has not been without complications. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), while intended to raise academic standards and accountability, embedded performance metrics that often reinforce structural inequities. These accountability pressures have, at times, narrowed the purpose of alternative education in order to meet compliance benchmarks, rather than supporting holistic student development (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Although many policies now emphasize early intervention and academic rigor, the dominant framing of alternative education remains rooted in deficit-based narratives. The categorization of students as "at-risk" often disproportionately affects those from racially, economically, and socially marginalized communities (Aron, 2006). While recent reforms reflect a shift toward rehabilitative rather than punitive models, this transition remains incomplete.

Importantly, the persistent tension between education and discipline within alternative schools raises critical questions about their role. Rather than serving merely as corrective spaces for students who fail to conform, alternative schools have the potential to function as sites of culturally responsive, student-centered learning. Such a reframing would recognize, not pathologize, the lived experiences of students navigating systemic inequities, positioning alternative education as a transformative and empowering opportunity (Lehr et al., 2009).

Characteristics of Effective Alternative Education Programs

Research on effective alternative education programs suggests that student-centered approaches provide meaningful pathways to academic and personal success. Many of these characteristics closely parallel the 10 features of high school redesign identified by the Learning Policy Institute, such as positive relationships, inclusive school climates, family engagement, and multiple pathways to postsecondary success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). This overlap highlights that the foundations of effective schooling are consistent across both traditional and alternative settings, though the structures through which they are enacted often differ in alternative schools.

Successful alternative education programs maintain low student-to-teacher ratios, allowing for individualized instruction and fostering strong, supportive relationships between students and educators (Aron, 2006; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Whereas larger comprehensive high schools may achieve personalization through advisory systems or academies, alternative schools typically achieve it by operating at smaller scales, with teachers and staff assuming intensive case-management roles. Family engagement is also a critical component, with schools actively involving parents in their children's education and treating them as partners in the learning process (Quinn et al., 2006). In alternative settings, this often extends to wraparound coordination with social service providers to meet the needs of students facing multiple barriers outside school.

Effective alternative education programs also prioritize a non-authoritarian, trust-based approach to student interactions, reinforcing positive behavior through support rather than punitive discipline (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Quinn et al., 2006). These approaches align with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frameworks, which are frequently adapted in alternative settings through level systems, restorative practices, and flexible progress-monitoring tools designed to encourage consistent progress (Wood & Scheuermann, 2021).

Several promising models illustrate how alternative education can serve as a transformative rather than merely corrective space (Aron, 2006). For example, programs that combine traditional coursework with vocational training, apprenticeships, or work-based learning experiences create clear postsecondary pathways for students. Some alternative schools establish partnerships with community organizations, higher education institutions, or local industries to offer students expanded educational and career opportunities. Additionally, innovative charter and specialized alternative schools have emerged with rigorous yet flexible curricula designed to meet students' unique needs while maintaining high academic expectations.

Taken together, these findings highlight that effective alternative education programs enact the same design principles identified in high school redesign literature, but do so through structures tailored to highly mobile, credit-deficient, and historically underserved students. By situating alternative education within this wider redesign discourse, it becomes clear that these schools are not marginal "last resorts" but vital laboratories for equity-driven and student-centered reform.

Previous Research on Alternative Education in California

From ASAM to DASS: The Evolution of Accountability in California's Alternative Education

The accountability mechanisms for alternative schools in California have significantly evolved over the past two decades to better assess and support these educational institutions. From 2003 to 2009, the state used the Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) to measure progress at alternative schools. Rather than receiving an Academic Performance Index (API) score, alternative schools generally could choose any 3 of 14 performance indicators[1] to report to the state. However, ASAM was criticized for making

1 These indicators include: Improved student behavior; Suspension/expulsion; Student punctuality; Attendance; Student persistence; Sustained daily attendance; Writing achievement; Reading achievement; Math achievement; Promotion to next grade; Course completion; Credit completion; High school graduation; General Educational Development (GED) completion, California High School Proficiency Examination certification, or GED section completion. https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2015/edu/alt-ed/improving-accountability-051615.pdf

it difficult to compare performance across alternative schools due to the variability in chosen performance measures. Additionally, ASAM's requirement to include only students enrolled for at least 90 days excluded a substantial portion of the transient student population served by these schools, leading to incomplete assessments of school performance (LAO, 2015).

From 2009 to 2013, alternative schools were evaluated under the traditional API system. This approach proved inadequate for alternative schools due to several limitations. Standardized metrics, such as test scores and graduation rates, were less relevant for schools where students typically enrolled for shorter durations. Furthermore, many alternative schools did not receive API scores because they either lacked sufficient enrollment to meet the reporting threshold or had student populations with highly transient enrollment patterns, further compromising the system's applicability (LAO, 2015).

In 2014-2015, the state shifted accountability reporting from API to Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). LCAPs required districts and County Offices of Education (COEs) to develop strategic plans addressing multiple state priority areas, such as student achievement and school climate. However, the transition has been complex, with many districts and COEs failing to include specific data for alternative schools (e.g., school-level performance targets or school-level data in year one of implementation) in their LCAPs. This oversight could hinder effective identification and support for these schools, particularly those serving historically marginalized student populations (LAO, 2015).

To address these ongoing gaps, the Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS) program was introduced in 2017. DASS aimed to provide a more comprehensive and accurate evaluation framework for alternative schools. It aligned with the statewide California School Dashboard but included modified measures tailored to alternative school contexts, such as the use of a one-year graduation rate.

Accountability Challenges and Structural Barriers in California's Alternative Education System

Scholars and policymakers alike have critiqued California's accountability frameworks, both before and after the creation of DASS. These critiques emphasize that traditional metrics such as four-year graduation rates and standardized test scores fail to capture meaningful student progress, particularly for highly mobile and credit-deficient students.

Thornburg (2014) examines social justice in alternative education, emphasizing the structural inequities that disproportionately affect historically marginalized students, including students experiencing homelessness and foster youth, in California's San Joaquin Valley. He critiques what he describes as a school-to-prison pipeline, where punitive disciplinary policies, such as zero tolerance,

disproportionately push alternative school students, many from vulnerable backgrounds, into the juvenile justice system. Additionally, he argues that while alternative schools are designed to support students with complex educational needs, they remain constrained by standardized performance metrics that fail to fully reflect their success in re-engaging and retaining students.

Ruiz de Velasco et al. (2008) examine continuation high schools, a key component of California's alternative education system designed for credit-deficient and at-risk students. While intended as a dropout prevention strategy, many continuation schools suffer from insufficient oversight, inadequate resources, and fragmented support systems, limiting their effectiveness. Students in these settings are disproportionately from historically marginalized backgrounds, including foster youth, English learners, and students experiencing homelessness, and consistently underperform on standardized assessments compared to their peers in comprehensive schools. The study calls for stronger accountability measures, increased funding for academic and mental health support, and expanded partnerships with community colleges, vocational programs, and social services to ensure these schools function as meaningful re-engagement pathways rather than dropout pipelines.

Several studies highlight the systemic shortcomings in the state's alternative education accountability framework (Warren, 2016; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017; Uppal, 2021). These studies reveal that traditional metrics such as four-year graduation rates and standardized test scores do not adequately capture the challenges faced by highly mobile and credit-deficient students, many of whom experience educational disruptions, housing instability, and personal adversities. Additionally, alternative schools operate under fragmented accountability policies, with voluntary participation in performance reporting and inconsistent data collection, making it difficult to assess student progress and school effectiveness. Weak oversight has allowed some schools to underreport student outcomes, masking issues such as low graduation rates, excessive disciplinary actions, and poor postsecondary transitions. To some extent, the lack of clear oversight has enabled some alternative schools to function as de facto charter schools for higher-achieving students, rather than prioritizing the highly mobile and at-risk populations they were originally designed to serve (Warren, 2016). This practice deepens educational inequities, placing vulnerable youth in schools with inadequate academic and socio-emotional support and limiting their opportunities for meaningful engagement and success.

Findings from the California Advisory Task Force on Alternative Schools (2020) reinforce these concerns, noting that California's accountability framework has historically failed to capture meaningful student outcomes, particularly for highly mobile youth. The task force highlights the inadequacy of traditional graduation rates, calling for more appropriate performance indicators, such as credit accumulation, attendance improvements, and positive transition rates. Moreover, it stresses the need for stronger oversight mechanisms to prevent alternative schools from being misused as a means for traditional schools to offload struggling students, mirroring concerns that traditional schools push out struggling students to inflate their own performance metrics (Warren, 2016; Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017; Uppal, 2021).

These long-standing critiques have now been acknowledged in state policy analysis. In its review of County Office of Education Local Control and Accountability Plans, the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) (2024) concluded that many state-required

accountability metrics (e.g., graduation rates, standardized assessments) are not well-suited for juvenile court and county community schools, where enrollment is short-term, and mobility is high. The LAO recommended that the state consider incorporating alternative indicators, such as pre- and post-tests of skills or credits gained relative to time enrolled, into the California School Dashboard. By recognizing the inadequacy of traditional measures and pointing to more appropriate alternatives, the LAO report reinforces concerns long raised in the scholarly literature and signals that these issues are now part of California's policy debate.

Building on this shift toward alternative measures of student success, Pyne (2024) examines **positive transition rates** as an indicator that captures outcomes beyond diploma attainment. His study finds that 82% of students enrolled in DASS schools for at least 45 days experience a positive transition, such as transferring to another diploma-granting institution, enrolling in college or the military, or earning a high school diploma. However, the study highlights disparities across school types, with continuation high schools demonstrating higher transition rates (89%) than DASS charter schools (75%), where negative transition rates are significantly higher. Pyne's (2024) findings reinforce the need for alternative measures of school effectiveness that capture student mobility and diverse pathways to success, aligning with prior research that critiques the use of traditional graduation rates to evaluate alternative education (Warren, 2016; Uppal, 2021).

Challenges in Staffing, Recruitment, and Leadership in California's Alternative Schools

Beyond accountability issues, alternative schools in California face significant staffing and leadership challenges, which directly impact their ability to provide high-quality education for at-promise students. In their study, the California Advisory Task Force on Alternative Schools (2020) highlights the following challenges in staffing, recruitment, and leadership in alternative schools:

- Districts often struggle to attract and retain educators who are adequately prepared for

the unique demands of alternative education. Teachers in continuation and alternative schools require expertise in both subject instruction and youth development, as many students enter these schools with low trust in adults and limited academic motivation. However, traditional teacher preparation programs often fail to equip educators with the skills needed to work effectively in these settings.

- Professional development opportunities for alternative school educators are limited. Many alternative schools operate in isolation within their districts, reducing opportunities for collaboration and peer learning. While some counties, such as Orange and Riverside, have established learning communities for continuation school educators, such initiatives remain underdeveloped statewide.

- Principals in alternative schools play a critical role in creating student-centered learning environments, restructuring traditional disciplinary practices, and building community partnerships. However, finding leaders who can successfully implement these changes remains a major challenge.

In addition to these findings, practitioners have also raised concerns about the shortage of credentialed teachers in core academic subjects such as English Language Arts (ELA) and math. Because many students in alternative schools are referred due to significant gaps in literacy and numeracy, the absence

of subject-certified teachers in these areas represents a critical challenge. Research demonstrates that credentialed teachers play a crucial role in supporting students' academic and behavioral success, particularly in high-need educational contexts. Studies show that subject-specific licensure and preparation is strongly associated with higher achievement, especially in math and science (Clotfelter et al., 2010; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Hill et al., 2005). In alternative and continuation schools, uncertified or out-of-field staffing is linked to weaker credit recovery and lower persistence, whereas schools with credentialed teachers show improved outcomes (Aron, 2006; Ruiz de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2008). For students with disabilities, certified special education teachers produce stronger learning gains and reduce attrition compared to uncertified peers (Billingsley et al., 2011; Feng & Sass, 2013; Nougaret et al., 2005). Juvenile justice facilities, which often struggle to recruit certified staff, experience higher credit accrual, stronger compliance with individualized education programs, and improved behavior when fully credentialed teachers are present (Houchins et al., 2005; Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). At the systemic level, inequitable assignment of uncertified and out-of-field teachers to disadvantaged schools contributes to persistent achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; Podolsky et al., 2019). Credentialed teachers provide essential expertise, stability, and support, making them especially critical in alternative educational settings.

Collectively, these existing studies on alternative education in California highlight the critical need for increased data transparency, public reporting on student progress, and modified accountability indicators that go beyond traditional academic metrics. Additionally, staffing and leadership challenges must be addressed through targeted recruitment strategies, enhanced professional development, and stronger leadership pipelines to ensure alternative schools can effectively serve their high-needs student populations. Without these reforms, alternative schools risk reinforcing educational stratification rather than serving as equitable pathways to academic and personal success for underserved youth.

OVERVIEW OF CALIFORNIA'S ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM

California provides a critical context for studying alternative education due to the size, diversity, and complexity of its public school system. With over 150,000 students enrolled in Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS) schools across nearly 900 campuses, including a growing number of charter schools, California has one of the largest and most varied alternative education systems in the United States.

The state's long-standing use of differentiated school types and accountability categories offers insights into how alternative education can be tailored to improve outcomes for at-promise and historically marginalized student populations. This section provides an overview of California's alternative school landscape, beginning with a description of the major educational option types and followed by an explanation of the DASS accountability framework used to evaluate these schools.

Under California law, the California Department of Education (CDE) designates certain types of schools every school year as DASS schools based on specific eligibility criteria. Schools may qualify for the DASS designation through one of two methods. First, schools classified under California Education Code (EC) Section 52052(d) are automatically granted DASS status (California Department of Education, 2025b). These include, but are not limited to, continuation schools, community day schools, opportunity schools, county community schools, juvenile court schools, schools under the California Education Authority (CEA) within the State Division of Juvenile Justice, and county-run special education schools. Second, other schools, including alternative schools of choice and charter schools primarily serving high-risk students, may be eligible for DASS through an application process.

Tables 1 and **2** provide a detailed breakdown of DASS school[2] qualifications and district oversight for the School Year 2022-2023. The majority of DASS schools are Education Code-defined and are administered by County Offices of Education (COE), unified school districts, or high school districts.

Table 1. *Distribution of DASS Schools by Qualification Type, 2022–23*

DASS Type	School Count
By application	139
California Alternate Assessments	32
Education Code Defined	723

Note. This table presents the distribution of DASS schools by qualification type for the 2022–23 school year. A total of 894 DASS schools are included in the dataset. Data source: California Department of Education, 2023a

Table 2. *Distribution of DASS Schools by District Oversight Type, 2022–23*

District Type	School Count
County Office of Education (COE)	208
Elementary School District	48
High School District	114
State Board of Education	2

Note. This table presents the distribution of DASS schools by district oversight type for the 2022–23 school year. A total of 894 DASS schools are included in the dataset. Data source: California Department of Education, 2023a

2 In this study, the terms "DASS schools" and "California alternative schools" are used interchangeably.

Educational Option Types

During the 2022–2023 school year, California had 894 DASS schools, including 123 charter schools, representing approximately 13.8% of all DASS-designated schools. These schools encompass a diverse range of educational option types designed to serve at-promise student populations through targeted instructional models and support services. **Table 3** presents a detailed breakdown of these school types within the DASS accountability category, including the number and proportion of each, the count of charter schools, and the specific educational purposes or services each type is intended to provide.

Table 3. *Distribution and Characteristics of DASS School Types, 2022–23*

Educational Option Type	School Count	Percentage of Total DASS Schools (%)	Share of Charter Schools	Purpose/Service
Continuation School	418	46.8%	0	Students enrolled in continuation education programs are often credit-deficient or in need of a flexible schedule due to employment, family obligations, and/or other critical needs.
Community Day School	112	12.5%	1	Community day schools serve expelled students, students referred by a School Attendance Review Board or probation, high-risk youth referred through a district-level process, who need a separate setting that is better matched to their academic, social, and emotional development strengths and needs than what can be provided in a traditional school setting.
County Community School	74	8.3%	17	County community schools are public schools operated by county offices of education to serve students in kindergarten through twelfth grade who are expelled from their regular schools, referred by a School Attendance Review Board (SARB) or at the request of the pupil's parent or guardian, referred by probation, on probation or parole and are not in attendance in any school, or homeless.
Juvenile Court School	47	5.3%	1	Juvenile court schools provide an educational placement for students who are under the protection or authority of the juvenile court system and are referred and incarcerated by the juvenile court system, and include students who have been expelled from their school.
Opportunity School	17	1.9%	0	Opportunity Education schools, classes, and programs provide additional support for students who are unsuccessful academically, possibly due to being irregular in attendance, or behavior challenges, that may themselves represent situations and practices within their own lives and/or the school as a learning community.
Alternative School of Choice	27	3.0%	0	Alternative schools and programs of choice offer a different structure, learning philosophy, or academic emphasis to accommodate different student needs, interests, and learning styles. The effective use of such instructional strategies as independent study, community-based education, focused or thematic education, and flexible scheduling increases attendance and improves performance while fostering student engagement.
Special Education School	87	9.7%	0	Special education schools serve students with disabilities who require specialized instruction, supports, and services that cannot be fully provided in traditional school settings. These schools implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and may offer intensive academic, behavioral, and therapeutic services tailored to students with diverse learning and developmental needs.
District Special Education Consortia	4	0.4%	0	District special education consortia are collaborative partnerships among multiple school districts or local educational agencies (LEAs) that pool resources, funding, and specialized staff to provide comprehensive special education services. These consortia often operate within a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) to ensure compliance and services for students with disabilities.
Alternative Schools by Application	108	12.1%	104	Alternative schools by application are those that participate in DASS through an application process and are mostly charter schools.

Note. This table presents the distribution and characteristics of DASS school types in the 2022–23 school year. It includes the number and proportion of each school type within the DASS accountability category (N = 894), the number of charter schools in each category, and a summary of the educational purposes or services associated with each type. Data source: California Department of Education, 2023a.

Continuation schools form the largest category of DASS schools, comprising 418 schools, or nearly half (46.8%) of all DASS schools. These schools primarily serve students who are credit-deficient or require flexible schedules due to employment, family obligations, or other critical needs.

Community day schools, accounting for 112 schools (12.5% of DASS schools), is the second-largest category. These schools cater to high-risk students, including those expelled from traditional schools, referred by a School Attendance Review Board (SARB) or probation, or requiring a more specialized setting to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs.

County community schools, comprising 74 schools (8.3% of DASS schools), including 17 charter schools, are operated by County Offices of Education and serve students expelled from regular schools, referred by a School Attendance Review Board, or on probation.

Juvenile court schools, comprising 47 schools (5.3% of DASS schools), provide specialized educational services for students under the authority of the juvenile court system, including those who are incarcerated or have been expelled. Among these, only one is a charter school.

Opportunity schools, with 17 schools (1.9% of DASS schools), focus on supporting students facing academic challenges, often stemming from irregular attendance or behavioral issues.

Alternative schools of choice, representing 27 schools (3% of DASS schools), offer flexible and innovative educational structures tailored to diverse student needs. These schools employ strategies such as independent study, community-based education, and flexible scheduling to enhance student engagement, attendance, and academic performance.

There are 91 **Special education schools,** including 4 District Special Education Consortia, which focus on providing specialized services for students with disabilities.

Alternative schools by application, which participate in DASS through an application process, comprise 108 schools (12.1% of all DASS schools), the majority of which are charter schools (104 schools).

METHODOLOGY

This study examines student characteristics and educational outcome patterns in alternative schools under California's Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS) framework. It also compares these patterns across different educational option types and student subgroups. The following sections describe the data sources used in the analysis, as well as the procedures for data aggregation and analytical approaches.

Data Sources

This study draws on multiple statewide datasets to provide a comprehensive view of student characteristics and academic outcomes in alternative schools. Key indicators analyzed include chronic absenteeism, student stability, suspension rates, five-year graduation rates, five-year dropout and non-completer rates, and student academic achievement in English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA) and math. A summary of the datasets used in this analysis is presented in **Table 4**. Detailed definitions of the selected educational outcome and school climate indicators are provided in the Appendix.

Table 4. *Summary of Datasets*

Dataset Name	Description	Data Source
Active Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS) Schools List (SY 2022-23)	Contains 968 DASS schools, reporting year 2023.	California Department of Education, 2023a)
Student Characteristics		
Census Enrollment (SY 2022-2023)	Contains Census Day Enrollment data by student group that are reported in the California School Dashboard. Includes 892 DASS schools for the 2022-2023 academic year.	California Department of Education, 2023d)
School-Level CALPADS UPC Data (SY 2022-2023)	2022-23 California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) Fall 1 Submission, Data certified as of February 1, 2023. Includes 894 DASS schools for the 2022-2023 academic year.	California Department of Education, 2023b)
Educational Outcome and School Climate Data		
Chronic Absenteeism (SY 2022-2023)	Contains absenteeism rates by race/ethnicity, gender, and grade.	California Department of Education, 2023c)
Stability Rate (SY 2022-2023)	Includes stability and non-stability rates disaggregated by demographics.	California Department of Education, 2023f)
Suspension (SY2022-2023)	Includes suspension data disaggregated by demographics.	California Department of Education, 2023g)
Five-Year Cohort Graduation Rate and Outcome (SY 2022-2023)	Includes five-year graduation rates and five-year dropout and non-completer rates by race/ethnicity, gender, and student group.	California Department of Education, 2023e)
California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) Research File (2022-2023)	Contains Smarter Balanced Assessment data (math and ELA) for all students.	(California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2023).

Data Aggregation and Analysis

To examine patterns in student characteristics and educational outcomes, data were aggregated at three levels: (1) by DASS status (DASS vs. non-DASS schools), (2) by educational option type (DASS school type), and (3) by student subgroup. Unique County-District-School (CDS) codes were used to merge multiple statewide datasets, enabling consistent integration of student demographics, school climate indicators, and academic performance metrics.

The California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) served as the primary source for identifying educational option types, supporting comparisons across various alternative school types. After data integration, descriptive analyses and visualizations were conducted to highlight key differences in student profiles and outcomes across DASS status, school types, and student groups, as well as in comparison to statewide benchmarks.

Student Characteristics

- State-level comparison: The DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) was merged with census enrollment data (California Department of Education, 2023d) using unique County-District-School (CDS) codes to compare student characteristics across DASS schools, non-DASS schools, and the statewide average.
- School-type comparison: The DASS list (California Department of Education, 2023a) was merged with CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) using unique CDS codes to profile student characteristics across educational option types (e.g., Continuation, Community Day, Opportunity, and Juvenile Court Schools).

Educational Outcomes and School Climate Indicators

- State-level comparison: Educational outcome and school climate data were aggregated by DASS status to assess performance trends across all grade levels between DASS and non-DASS schools.
- School-type comparison: The DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) and CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) were merged with educational outcome and school climate datasets using unique CDS codes to analyze performance indicators across different types of DASS schools, highlighting variation by school type.
- Student group-level analysis: Educational outcome and school climate data were aggregated for different student subgroups within DASS schools to evaluate disparities and performance trends across these groups.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS IN CALIFORNIA'S ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

This section examines the demographic and enrollment patterns of students attending alternative schools in California, with a focus on differences by DASS status, educational option type, and student subgroup. The findings highlight three key patterns. First, students from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups are disproportionately represented in DASS schools compared to non-DASS schools. Second, DASS schools enroll significantly higher proportions of vulnerable student populations, including socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, foster youth, and students experiencing homelessness. Third, student characteristics vary substantially across different types of alternative schools, reflecting the diverse missions and specialized roles these schools play within California's educational system.

1. Students from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, particularly Black, Latine, and Indigenous students, are overrepresented in DASS schools compared to non-DASS schools.

Figure 1. *Racial/Ethnic Composition of Students in DASS and Non-DASS Schools, 2022–23*

Students from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups are notably overrepresented in DASS schools compared to non-DASS schools. As shown in Figure 1, Black/African American students comprise 7.7% of the DASS school population, compared to 4.6% in non-DASS schools. Similarly, Latine students account for 65.4% of DASS enrollment, a significantly higher proportion than their representation in non-DASS schools (55.9%). Additionally, the share of American Indian or Alaska Native students in DASS schools (0.8%) is approximately double that observed in non-DASS settings (0.4%).

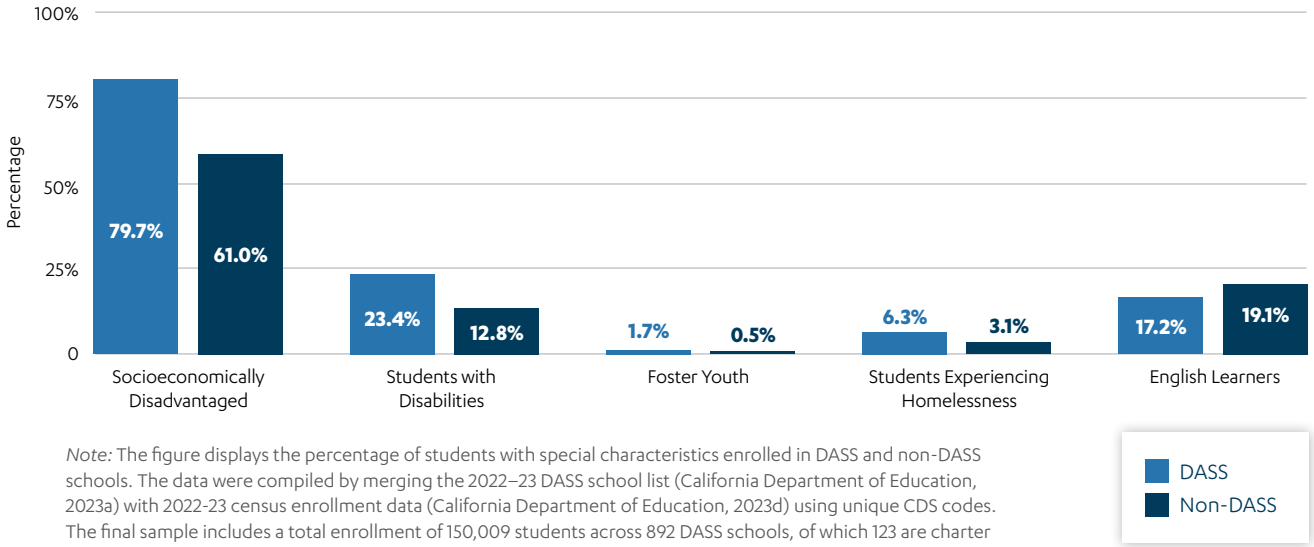
In contrast, Asian students make up a substantially smaller share of enrollment in DASS schools (3.2%) compared to non-DASS schools (9.7%). Filipino students also represent a lower proportion in DASS schools (0.8%) relative to non-DASS schools (2.2%). The percentages of Pacific Islander students (0.5% in DASS vs. 0.4% in non-DASS) and students identifying with two or more races (3.2% in DASS vs. 4.3% in non-DASS) show relatively minor differences between the two settings. White students, while comprising a sizable portion of both DASS and non-DASS enrollments, represent a slightly smaller share in DASS schools (17.0%) compared to non-DASS schools (20.2%).

These enrollment patterns suggest that students from historically underserved communities are more likely to be concentrated in alternative educational settings, reflecting broader systemic inequities that limit access to and success within traditional public school pathways.

Note. The figure shows the percentage distribution of student enrollment by race/ethnicity across DASS and non-DASS schools for the 2022–23 school year. The data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with 2022-23 census enrollment data (California Department of Education, 2023d) using unique CDS codes. The final sample includes a total enrollment of 150,009 students across 892 DASS schools, of which 123 are charter schools (13.8%)..

2. DASS schools serve a significantly higher proportion of vulnerable student populations compared to non-DASS schools, reflecting the critical role DASS schools play in supporting students who experience significant educational instability and systemic barriers.

Figure 2. *Enrollment of Students with Special Characteristics in DASS and Non-DASS Schools, 2022–23*



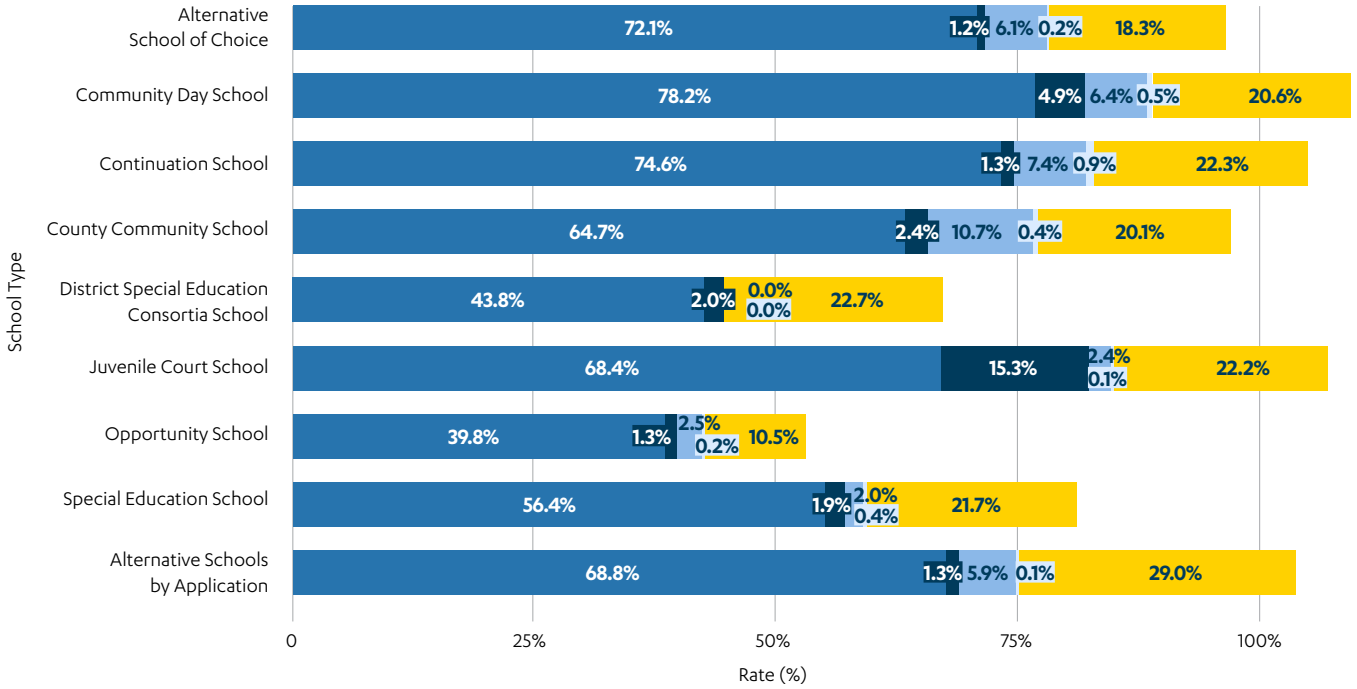
Note: The figure displays the percentage of students with special characteristics enrolled in DASS and non-DASS schools. The data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with 2022-23 census enrollment data (California Department of Education, 2023d) using unique CDS codes. The final sample includes a total enrollment of 150,009 students across 892 DASS schools, of which 123 are charter schools (13.8%).

DASS schools enroll markedly higher proportions of students with identified vulnerabilities compared to non-DASS schools. As shown in **Figure 2**, 79.7% of students in DASS schools are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, compared to 61% in non-DASS schools. Similarly, students with disabilities represent 23.4% of DASS enrollment, nearly twice the proportion observed in non-DASS settings (12.8%).

DASS schools also serve higher percentages of highly mobile youth populations. Foster youth account for 1.7% of DASS students, compared to 0.5% in non-DASS schools, while students experiencing homelessness represent 6.3% of DASS enrollment, double the proportion in non-DASS settings (3.1%). Together, these patterns underscore the critical role DASS schools play in supporting students who experience significant educational instability and systemic barriers.

3. Student characteristics vary substantially across different types of alternative schools, highlighting the diversity of missions among alternative schools and the need for differentiated policies, equitable resource allocations, and support systems.

Figure 3. *Special Student Characteristics by DASS Educational Option Type, 2022–23*



Note: The figure presents the distribution of key student characteristics, including socioeconomically disadvantaged status, foster care involvement, homelessness, migrant status, and English learner status, across different types of alternative schools. The data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with 2022-23 CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) using unique CDS codes. The final sample includes a total enrollment of 150,436 students across 894 DASS schools, of which 123 are charter schools (13.8%). Percentages do not sum to 100% because these student characteristics are not mutually exclusive.

Different types of alternative schools in California serve distinct student populations, resulting in notable variations in special student characteristics. As shown in Figure 3, alternative schools of choice (72.1%), community day schools (78.2%), and continuation schools (74.6%) enroll the highest percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals, highlighting their critical role in supporting socioeconomically disadvantaged youth.

Juvenile court schools serve the highest proportion of foster youth (15.3%), reflecting the intersection between the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. County community schools enroll the largest share of students experiencing homelessness (10.7%), while continuation schools serve the highest proportion of migrant students (0.9%). These enrollment patterns emphasize the important role that specific types of alternative schools play in supporting highly mobile and vulnerable student groups.

English learners are enrolled across most types of alternative schools, but are notably less represented in opportunity schools. Opportunity schools also serve the smallest proportions of students with special characteristics overall. These differences underscore the diversity of missions among alternative schools and highlight the need for differentiated policies, equitable resource allocations, and support systems that address the systemic barriers shaping student enrollment and outcomes.

EDUCATIONAL AND SCHOOL CLIMATE PATTERNS IN CALIFORNIA'S ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

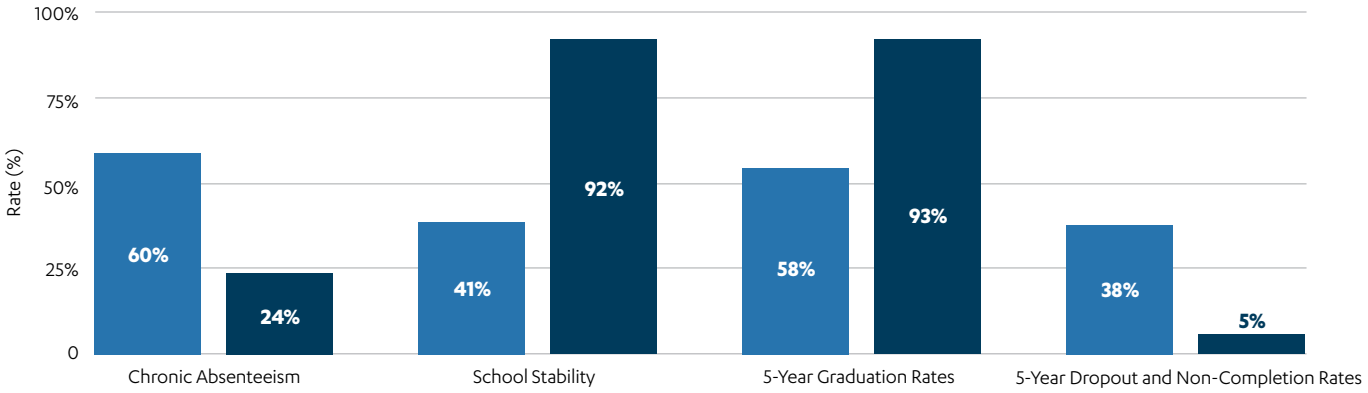
This section examines seven key indicators of educational outcomes for students in alternative schools, including chronic absenteeism rates, stability rates, suspension rates, five-year graduation rates, five-year dropout and non-completer rates, and student academic performance in English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA) and math. These indicators are analyzed at three levels: state-level (comparing DASS and non-DASS schools), school-level (examining differences across various types of alternative schools), and student group-level (identifying vulnerable student populations within DASS schools that perform below the overall DASS school average). By analyzing these metrics, the study highlights patterns and disparities, offering insights into areas of improvement for accountability systems, targeted support, and workforce development in alternative school settings.

1. Students attending alternative schools face significant challenges related to learning engagement, school conditions and climate, and academic performance, often experiencing greater barriers compared to their peers in non-alternative school settings.

As shown in **Figures 4–6**, substantial gaps in educational outcomes exist between DASS and non-DASS schools across key indicators, particularly in five-year dropout and non-completer rates[3], and math performance.

1a. Engagement

Figure 4. *Comparison of Student Engagement Indicators in DASS and Non-DASS Schools, 2022-23*



Note. This figure compares student engagement outcomes between DASS and non-DASS schools, including chronic absenteeism, school stability, five-year graduation, and five-year dropout and non-completer rates. Each engagement dataset, chronic absenteeism (California Department of Education, 2023c), school stability (California Department of Education, 2023f), five-year cohort graduation rates, and five-year dropout and non-completer rates (California Department of Education, 2023e), was aggregated by DASS status to assess performance trends across all grade levels between DASS and non-DASS schools.

Sample sizes for each indicator are as follows:

- Chronic absenteeism: DASS = 663 schools; non-DASS = 5,876 schools; Total = 6,539 schools
- School stability: DASS = 468 schools; non-DASS = 4,454 schools; Total = 4,922 schools
- Five-year graduation rates and five-year dropout and non-completer rates: DASS = 537 schools; non-DASS = 1,048 schools; Total = 1,585 schools

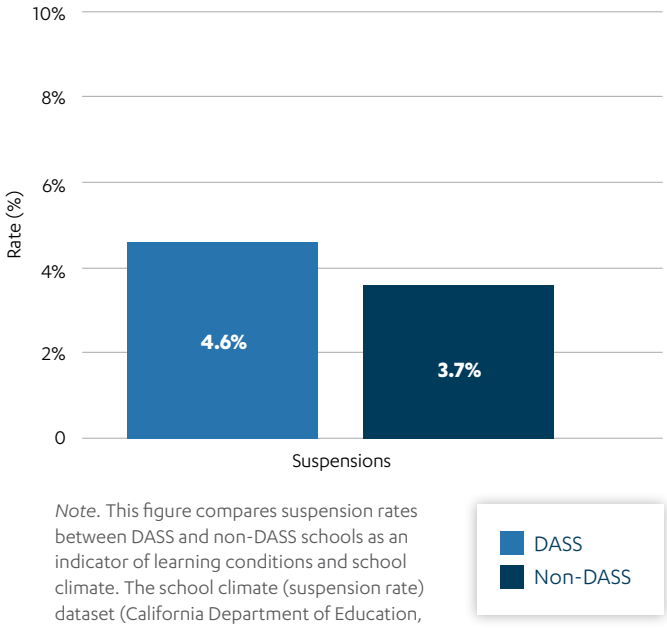
3 Five-year dropout and non-completer rates represent the percentage of students who fail to graduate, do not otherwise complete high school, or remain enrolled without earning a diploma by the end of the five-year period (California Department of Education, 2024b).

At the state level, DASS schools report a chronic absenteeism rate of 60%, more than double the 24% observed in non-DASS schools. Stability rates are also markedly lower, with only 41% of DASS students remaining at the same school throughout the year compared to 92% of non-DASS students. This stark contrast underscores the highly transient nature of the DASS student population, many of whom experience housing instability, frequent relocations, or involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

Graduation, dropout, and non-completion patterns further reveal significant disparities. The five-year graduation rate for DASS schools stands at 58%, substantially lower than the 93% rate in non-DASS schools. Conversely, the five-year dropout and non-completer rates in DASS schools are 38%, compared to just 5% in non-DASS schools. These figures highlight the ongoing systemic barriers DASS students face in completing a regular high school diploma.

1b. Conditions and Climate

Figure 5. *Comparison of Learning Conditions and Climate in DASS and Non-DASS Schools, 2022-23*



Note. This figure compares suspension rates between DASS and non-DASS schools as an indicator of learning conditions and school climate. The school climate (suspension rate) dataset (California Department of Education, 2023g) was aggregated by DASS status to assess performance trends across all grade levels between DASS and non-DASS schools. The final sample includes 529 DASS schools and 5,129 non-DASS schools, for a total of 5,658 schools.

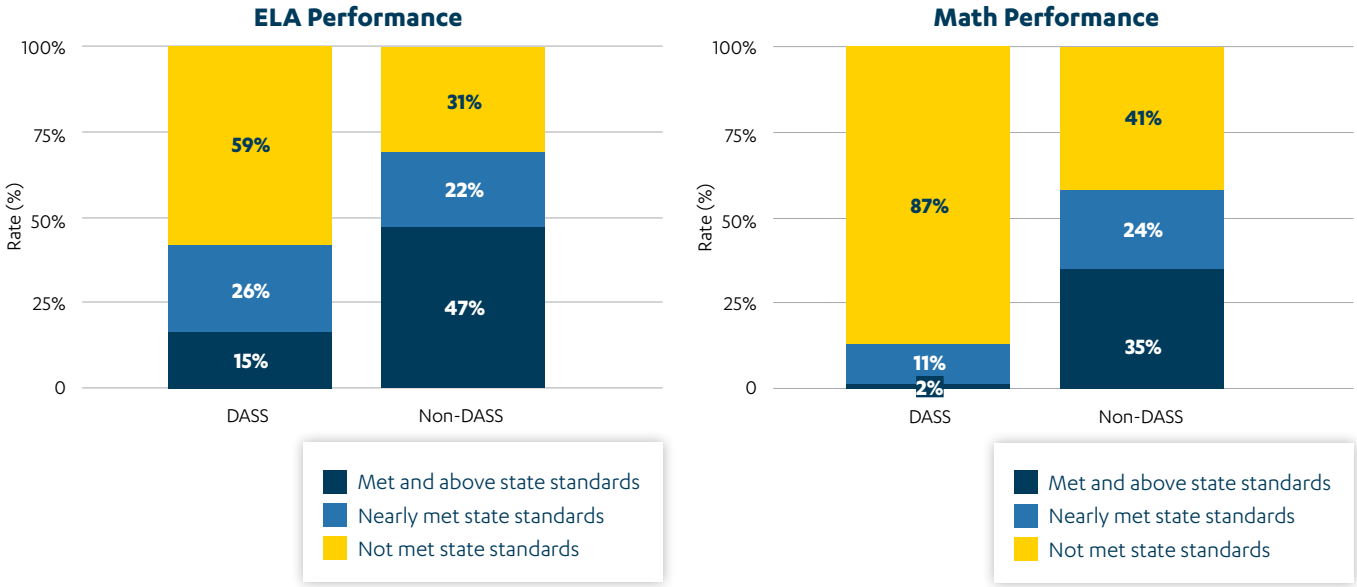
Suspension rates are also higher in DASS schools, with 4.6% of students receiving at least one suspension compared to 3.7% in non-DASS schools. While the overall difference is smaller than for other indicators, it reflects the complex impacts of prior exposure to trauma, housing instability, systemic disciplinary practices, and socio-emotional needs among the student populations these schools serve.

3 Five-year dropout and non-completer rates represent the percentage of students who fail to graduate, do not otherwise complete high school, or remain enrolled without earning a diploma by the end of the five-year period (California Department of Education, 2024b).

1c. Snapshot of Student Academic Achievement

Academic achievement indicators highlight substantial gaps between students enrolled in DASS schools and their peers in non-DASS schools. In English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA), only 15% of students enrolled in DASS schools met or exceeded state standards, compared to 47% of students in non-DASS schools. Moreover, 59% of DASS students did not meet ELA standards, a stark contrast to 31% in non-DASS schools.

Figure 6. *Comparison of ELA and Math Performance in DASS and Non-DASS Schools, 2022–23*



Note. The figures compare English Language Arts (ELA) and math performance between DASS and non-DASS schools, based on the proportions of students scoring at each achievement level: not met, nearly met, and met and above. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS enrollment and program data (California Department of Education, 2023b), and then integrating the merged dataset with the 2022–23 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) Research File (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2023). The final sample includes 545 DASS schools and 8,417 non-DASS schools, for a total of 8,962 schools. Results should be interpreted with caution given differences in grade spans, enrollment duration, and the relatively small numbers of students tested in some settings.

Disparities in math are even more pronounced. Only 2% of DASS students met or exceeded math standards, compared to 35% of students in non-DASS schools. Additionally, 87% of DASS students did not meet math standards, significantly higher than the 41% rate for non-DASS students.

These results should be understood as indicators of student achievement at a point in time, not as measures of DASS school performance. Students in alternative settings are typically enrolled for relatively short periods, and only a small number of 11th graders take the CAASPP assessments in DASS schools. Furthermore, standardized assessments may not capture the most relevant skills for alternative education students. Reading comprehension and writing proficiency are more meaningful indicators of progress, yet these skills are not systematically measured statewide. The very low math scores also reflect the substantial language demands of the CAASPP math exam, which can obscure actual numeracy skills.

2. The nature and extent of educational challenges vary across different types of alternative schools, emphasizing the need for context-specific policies and support systems that align with each school's distinct mission and student population.

While DASS schools face greater educational challenges compared to non-DASS schools, the nature and extent of these challenges reflect the structural conditions and policy contexts in which different types of alternative schools operate. Each school type serves a distinct student population shaped by broader systemic inequities, leading to variations in student engagement, stability, disciplinary outcomes, and academic performance.

Different types of DASS schools serve varied student populations based on specific needs. Juvenile Court Schools primarily serve students involved in the juvenile justice system, often facing compounded barriers to educational continuity. Community day schools support students referred for disciplinary reasons or those needing re-engagement services, addressing gaps created by exclusionary disciplinary practices. Special education schools and district special education consortia schools provide tailored services for students with disabilities, navigating resource and accessibility challenges. Continuation schools support students who are behind in credits, often due to systemic gaps in academic and socio-emotional support. Opportunity schools offer intensive academic programs for students requiring alternative pathways to graduation, responding to the limitations of traditional school structures.

This section presents a comparative analysis of key performance indicators across different alternative school types, highlighting their respective strengths, areas of systemic need, and implications for policy and practice. The findings are illustrated through data visualizations (**Figures 7–12**), followed by a summary table (**Table 5**) that synthesizes key patterns to inform targeted policy interventions and support strategies.

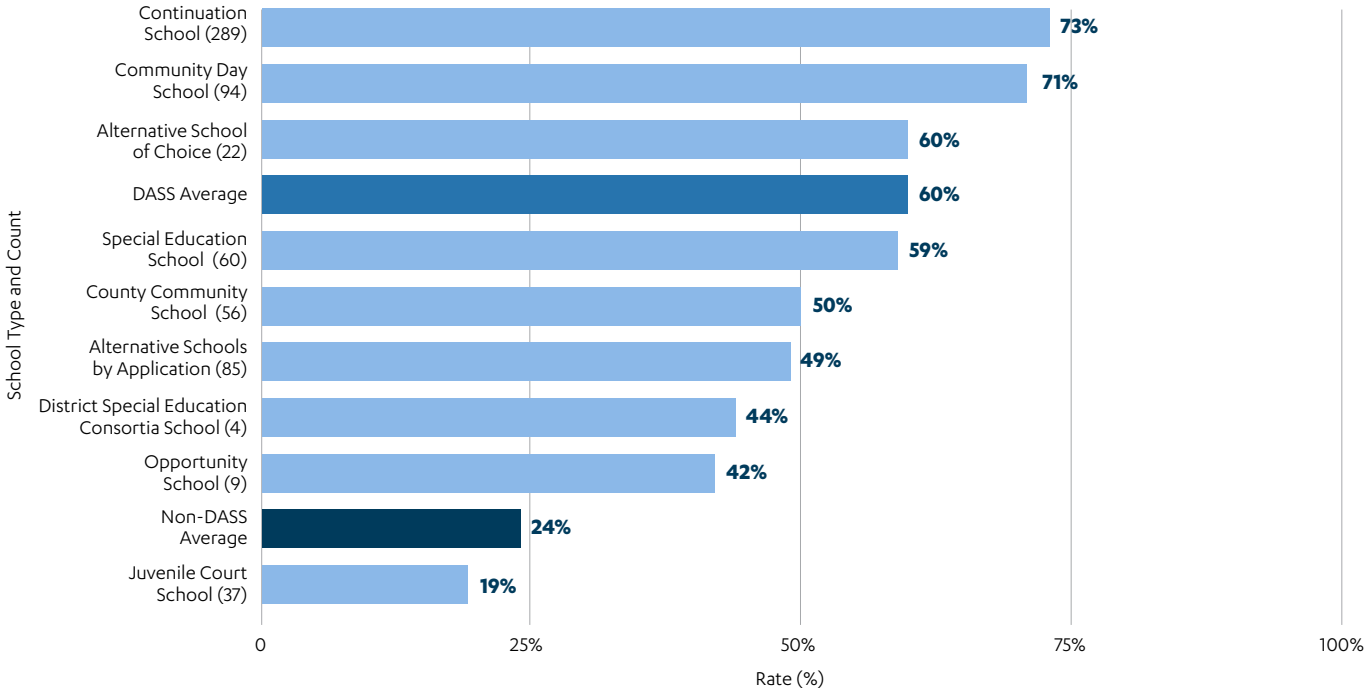
Chronic absenteeism rates vary substantially across different types of alternative schools. Continuation schools (73%) and community day schools (71%) report the highest absenteeism rates among DASS schools, highlighting the significant attendance challenges in these settings, where many students experience academic disruptions, housing instability, or other barriers to consistent attendance. In continuation schools, absenteeism rates must be understood in the context of program design. Students typically attend for a half day and are encouraged or required to work during the other half. Work schedules often conflict with school attendance, and while some schools offer morning and evening sessions to provide flexibility, many lack the resources to do so. Consequently, absenteeism in continuation and community day schools reflects not only student engagement and external barriers but also structural and resource limitations in how programs are organized.

2a. Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism rates vary substantially across different types of alternative schools. Continuation schools (73%) and community day schools (71%) report the highest absenteeism rates among DASS schools, highlighting the significant attendance challenges in these settings, where many students experience academic disruptions, housing instability, or other barriers to consistent attendance. In continuation schools, absenteeism rates must be understood in the context of program design. Students typically attend for a half day and are encouraged or required to work during the other half. Work schedules often conflict with school attendance, and while some schools offer morning and evening sessions to provide flexibility, many lack the resources to do so. Consequently, absenteeism in continuation and community day schools reflects not only student engagement and external barriers but also structural and resource limitations in how programs are organized.

In contrast, juvenile court schools report the lowest absenteeism rate at 19%, likely reflecting the placement structures and enrollment conditions associated with juvenile justice system involvement. County community schools, alternative schools of choice, and special education schools fall within a moderate range, with absenteeism rates between 50% and 60%, indicating varying levels of student engagement and attendance challenges across these settings.

Figure 7. *Chronic Absenteeism Rates by DASS Educational Option Type, 2022–23*



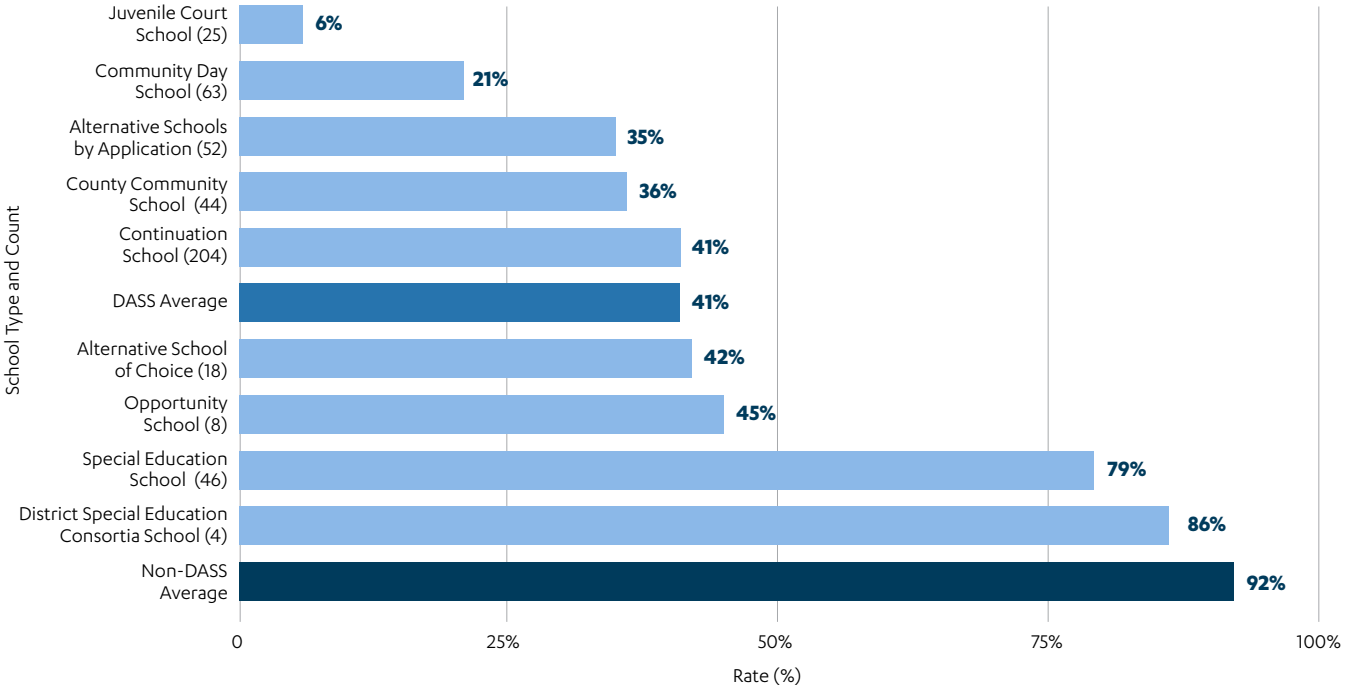
Note. This figure displays chronic absenteeism rates across different types of DASS schools. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) using unique County-District-School (CDS) codes. CDS codes were also used to integrate the merged dataset with 2022–23 chronic absenteeism data (California Department of Education, 2023c). Numbers in parentheses represent the number of schools of each type included in the analysis (total n = 656). Results for school types with fewer than 10 schools should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

2b. School Stability

School stability rates also vary widely across different types of alternative schools. Juvenile court schools have the lowest stability rate at 6%, reflecting the highly transient nature of their student population, many of whom are placed for short-term stays within the juvenile justice system. Community day schools also exhibit a low stability rate of 21%, reflecting the enrollment patterns of students who have experienced exclusionary disciplinary practices and require intensive behavioral and academic supports.

In contrast, schools designed to provide more specialized or structured support, such as special education schools (79%) and district special education consortia schools (86%), report much higher stability rates. Other school types, such as continuation schools (41%) and opportunity schools (45%), demonstrate moderate levels of stability, reflecting varying degrees of student mobility and programmatic focus across these settings.

Figure 8. *Stability Rate by DASS Educational Option Type, 2022–23*



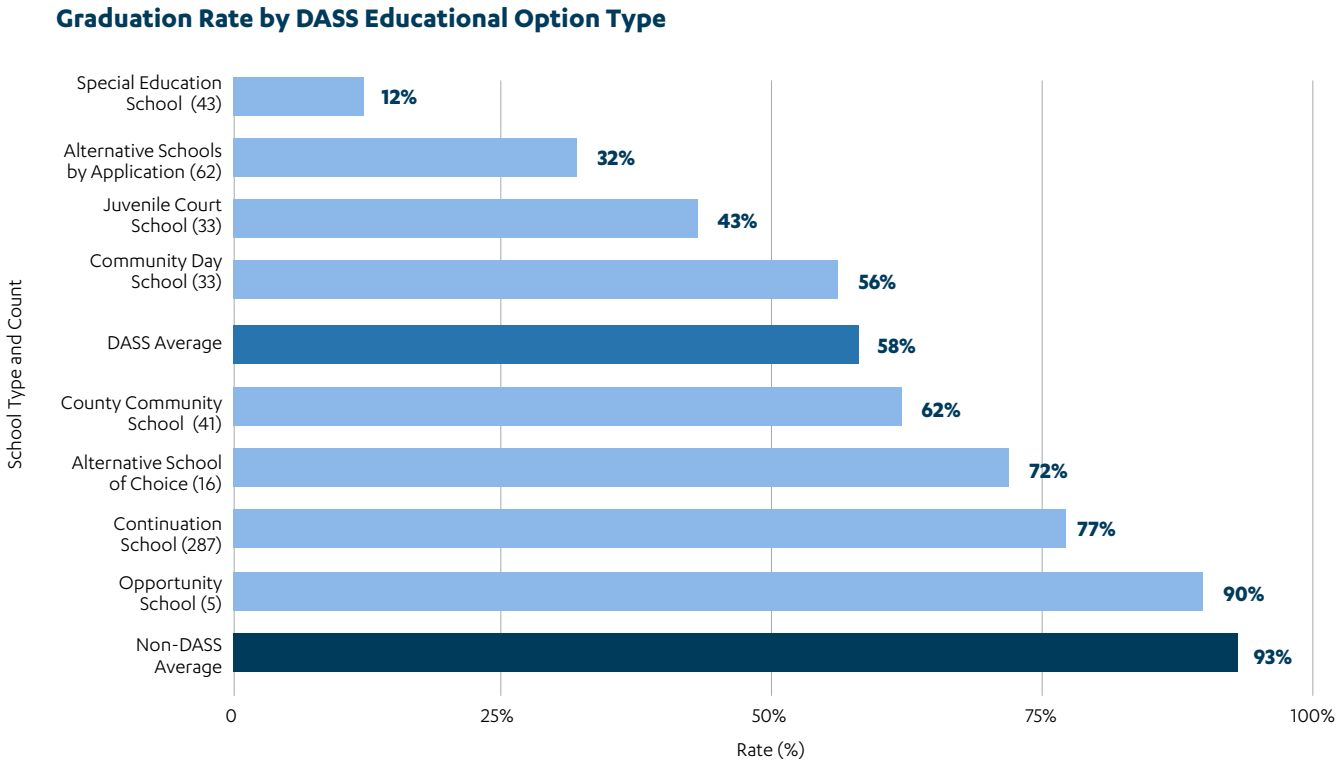
Note. This figure displays student stability rates across different types of DASS schools. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) using unique County-District-School (CDS) codes. CDS codes were also used to integrate the merged dataset with 2022-23 school stability data (California Department of Education, 2023f). Numbers in parentheses represent the number of schools of each type included in the analysis (total n = 464). Results for school types with fewer than 10 schools should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

2c. Five-Year Graduation Rates and Five-Year Dropout and Non-Completer Rates

The five-year graduation rates and five-year dropout and non-completer rates vary significantly across different types of alternative schools. Opportunity Schools report the highest graduation rates at 90% and the lowest dropout and non-completer rates at 10%, reflecting their targeted efforts to support small, focused student populations. Continuation schools and alternative schools of choice also demonstrate relatively strong outcomes, with graduation rates of 77% and 72%, and drop-out and non-completers rates of 18% and 22%, respectively.

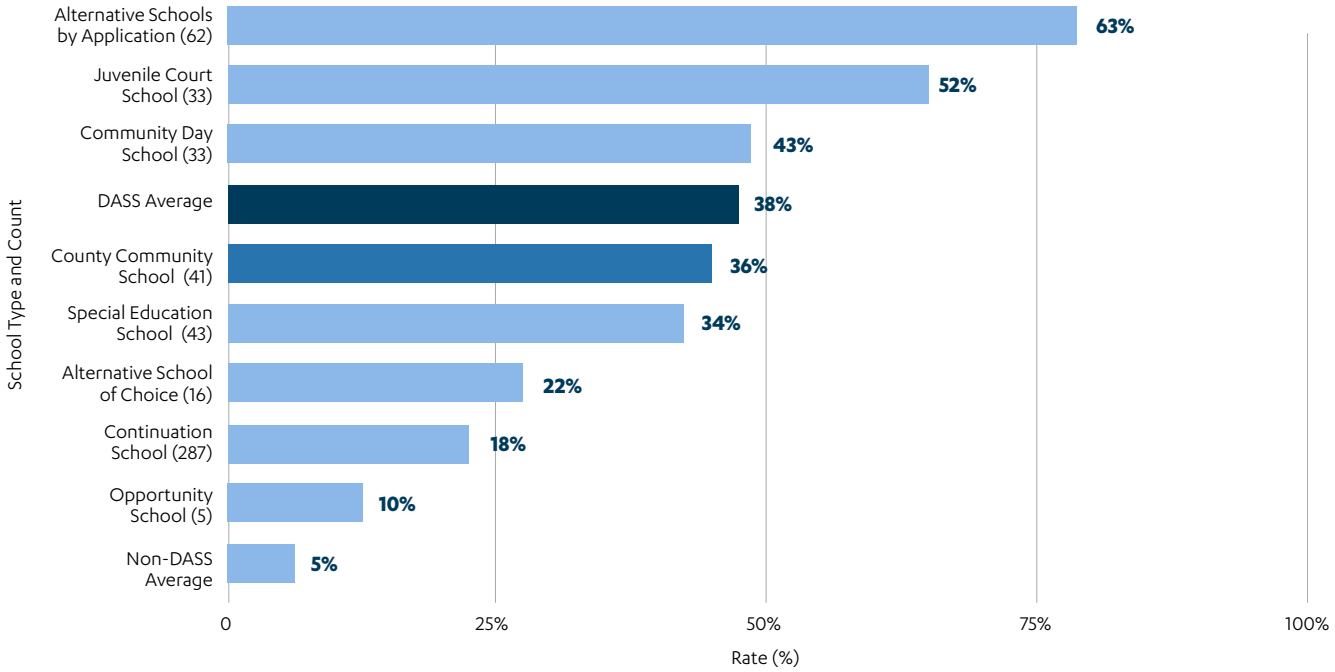
In contrast, juvenile court schools show a graduation rate of 43% and a dropout and non-completer rate of 52%, reflecting the systemic educational disruptions and placement instability faced by students involved in the juvenile justice system. Community day schools and county community schools also serve students facing significant systemic barriers to educational continuity, as reflected in their graduation rates (56% and 62%), and dropout and non-completer rates (39% and 36%), respectively. Special education schools, which serve students with diverse and significant learning needs, report a graduation rate of 12%, reflecting the need for expanded supports and adaptive pathways to graduation for students with disabilities.

Figure 9. *Five-Year Graduation Rates and Five-Year Dropout and Non-Completer Rates by DASS Educational Option Type, 2022–23*



Note. The figures present five-year graduation rates, dropout and non-completer rates across different types of DASS schools. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) using unique County-District-School (CDS) codes. CDS codes were also used to integrate the merged dataset with 2022-23 five-year cohort graduation data (California Department of Education, 2023e). Numbers in parentheses represent the number of schools of each type included in the analysis (total n = 523). Results for school types with fewer than 10 schools should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

Five-Year Dropout and Non-Completer Rate



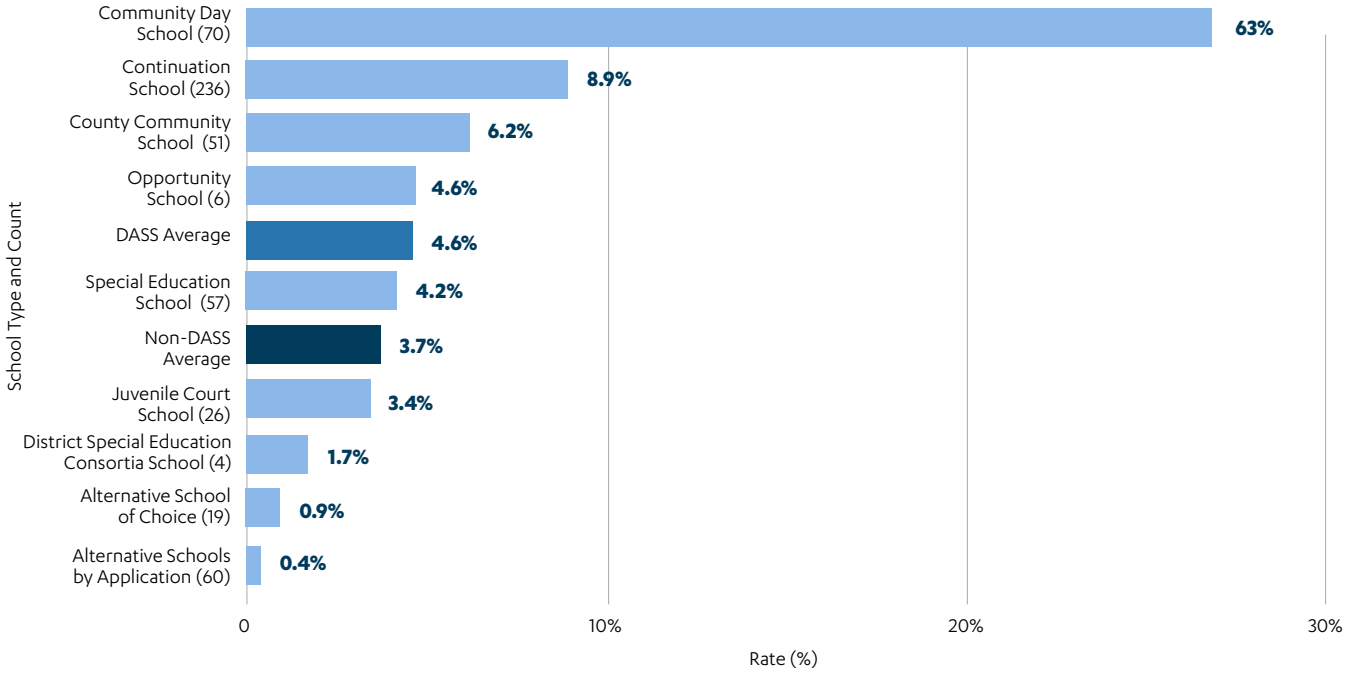
Note. The figures present five-year graduation rates, dropout and non-completer rates across different types of DASS schools. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) using unique County-District-School (CDS) codes. CDS codes were also used to integrate the merged dataset with 2022-23 five-year cohort graduation data (California Department of Education, 2023e). Numbers in parentheses represent the number of schools of each type included in the analysis (total n = 523). Results for school types with fewer than 10 schools should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

2d. Suspension Rates

Suspension rates are relatively consistent across most types of alternative schools, with a few notable exceptions. Community day schools report the highest suspension rate at 26.9%, reflecting the systemic disciplinary exclusion and behavioral support needs faced by students enrolled through referrals tied to prior disciplinary actions and unmet socio-emotional needs. Continuation schools also report a relatively elevated suspension rate of 8.9%, highlighting the need for continued engagement strategies and trauma-responsive supports for students experiencing educational and socio-emotional instability.

In contrast, alternative schools of choice (0.9%) and alternative schools by application (0.4%) report the lowest suspension rates, suggesting a reduced reliance on suspension as a disciplinary tool in these environments. Other school types, including county community schools (6.2%), opportunity schools (4.6%), and special education schools (4.2%), exhibit moderate suspension rates, highlighting variation in disciplinary approaches and student needs across different alternative education settings.

Figure 10. *Suspension Rate by DASS Educational Option Type, 2022–23*



Note. The figure displays suspension rates across different types of DASS schools. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS data (California Department of Education, 2023b) using unique County-District-School (CDS) codes. CDS codes were also used to integrate the merged dataset with 2022-23 suspension data (California Department of Education, 2023g). Numbers in parentheses represent the number of schools of each type included in the analysis (total n = 529). Results for school types with fewer than 10 schools should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

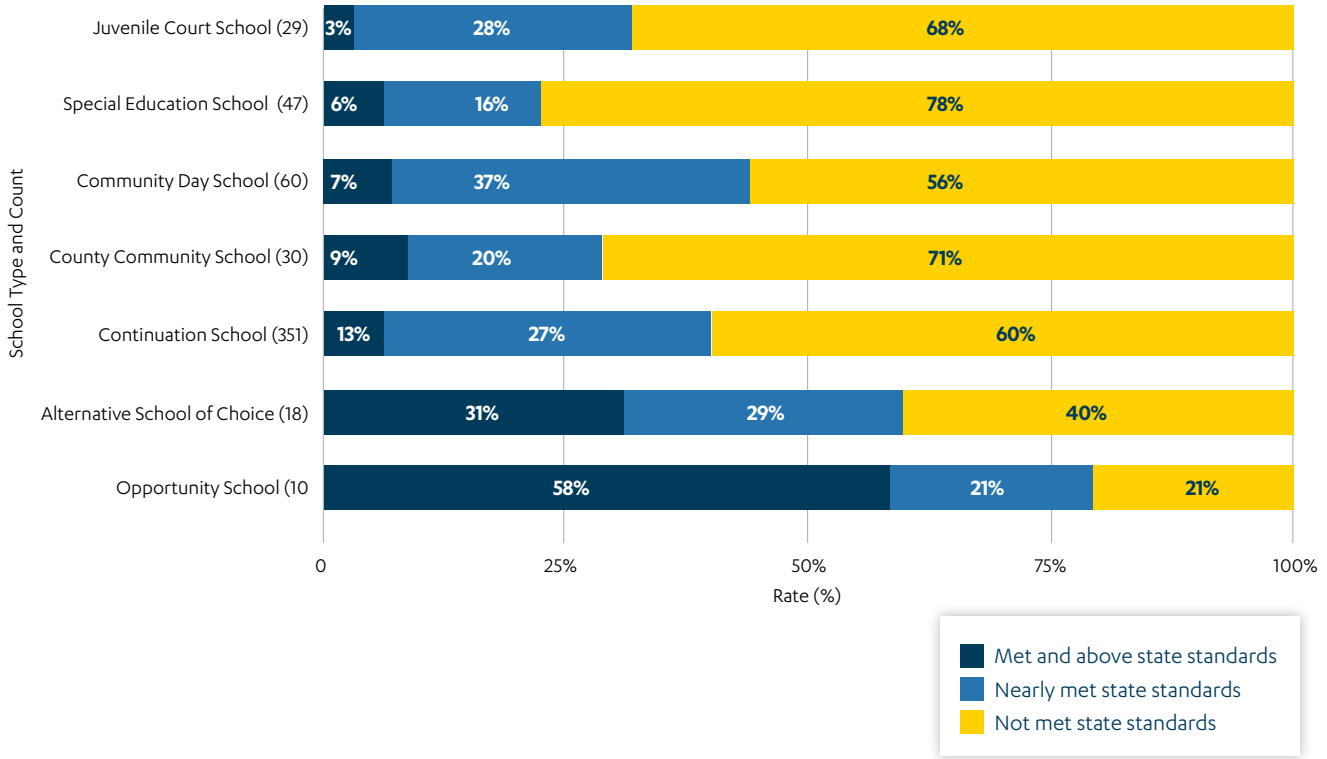
2e. Snapshot of Student Academic Achievement in ELA

ELA performance across different types of alternative schools shows variation that reflects differences in student experiences and program structures. As noted in the state comparison, these figures represent achievement snapshots while students are enrolled, not measures of school performance.

Among the different school types, opportunity schools report the highest ELA proficiency rates, with 58% of tested students meeting or exceeding standards and 21% not meeting them. Alternative schools of choice also perform comparatively higher than other types, with 31% meeting or exceeding standards and 40% not meeting standards. These outcomes may reflect smaller school sizes, more intensive support structures, and enrollment patterns that include students with more consistent prior academic experiences.

In contrast, juvenile court schools, county community schools, community day schools, and special education schools show substantially lower proficiency rates, ranging from 3% to 9% of students meeting standards. These patterns reflect the significant systemic barriers faced by students enrolled in these settings, including educational disruptions, placement instability, and disproportionate assignment of students with greater academic and social-emotional needs.

Figure 11. *Student Academic Achievement in English Language Arts (ELA) by DASS Educational Option Type, 2022–23*



Note. The figure presents English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency rates across different types of DASS schools, based on the proportions of students scoring at each achievement level: not met, nearly met, and met and above. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS enrollment and program data (California Department of Education, 2023b), and then integrating the merged dataset with the 2022–23 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) Research File (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2023). Numbers in parentheses represent the number of schools of each type included in the analysis (total n = 545). Results should be interpreted with caution, given differences in grade spans, enrollment duration, and the relatively small numbers of students tested in some settings.

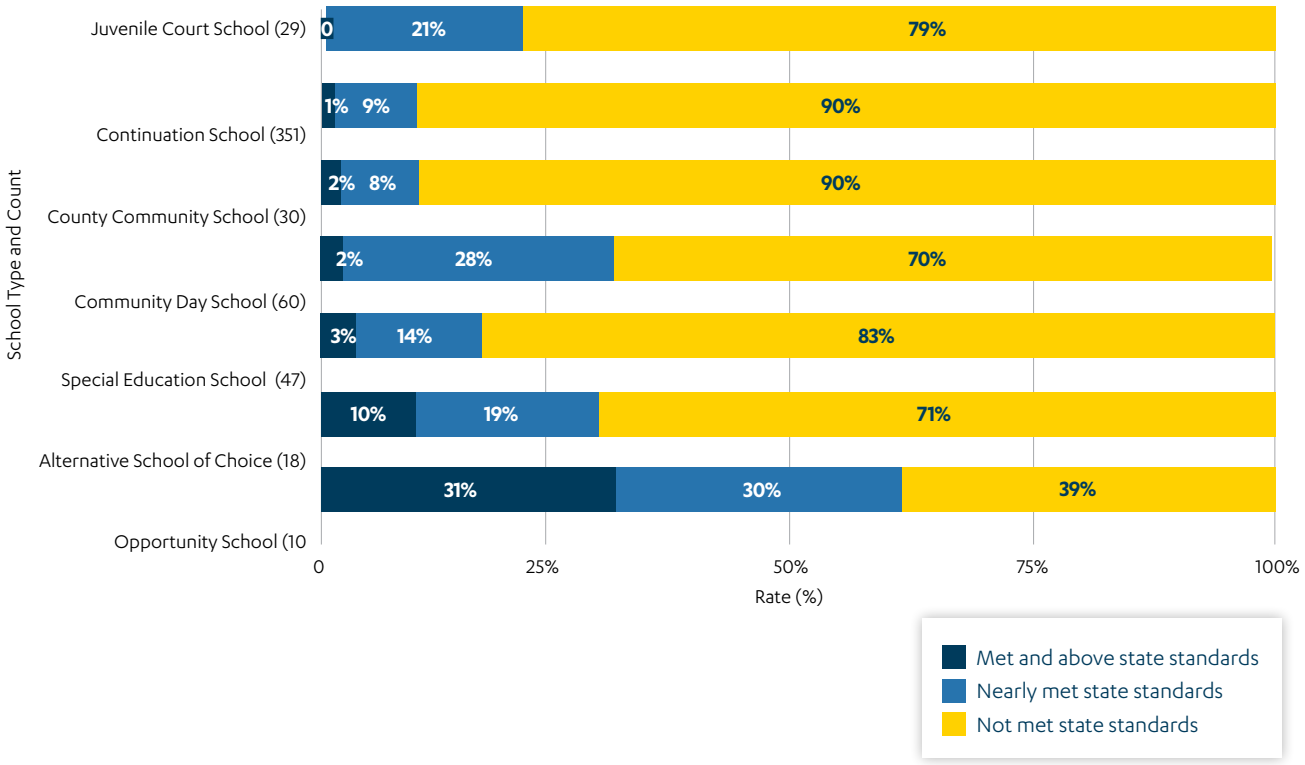
2f. Snapshot of Student Academic Achievement in Math

Math performance varies across school types but remains low overall, with most alternative settings reporting very limited proficiency. Juvenile court schools, continuation schools, county community schools, and community day schools report the lowest rates of students meeting standards, reflecting both deep systemic inequities in access to math instruction and the high language demands of the CAASPP math exam.

Alternative schools of choice (10%) and opportunity schools (31%) show relatively stronger performance compared to other types, though still well below non-DASS averages. These differences highlight how program design, enrollment patterns, and student preparedness shape achievement snapshots.

Notably, opportunity schools have the lowest non-proficiency rate among alternative schools, at 39%. This suggests that targeted interventions in certain settings may contribute to improved outcomes. However, across nearly all school types, the consistently low math scores indicate both the need for greater instructional support and the importance of alternative measures of progress, such as reading comprehension and writing skills, which are not systematically tracked in statewide assessments.

Figure 12. *Student Academic Achievement in Math by DASS Educational Option Type, 2022–23*



Note. The figure presents Math proficiency rates across different types of DASS schools, based on the proportions of students scoring at each achievement level: not met, nearly met, and met and above. Data were compiled by merging the 2022–23 DASS school list (California Department of Education, 2023a) with CALPADS enrollment and program data (California Department of Education, 2023b), and then integrating the merged dataset with the 2022–23 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) Research File (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2023). Numbers in parentheses represent the number of schools of each type included in the analysis (total n = 545). Results should be interpreted with caution, given differences in grade spans, enrollment duration, and the relatively small numbers of students tested in some settings.

Table 5. *Educational and School Climate Patterns Across DASS School Types, 2022–2023*

Educational Option Type	Pattern
Alternative Schools of Choice	Alternative schools of choice demonstrate strong academic performance in ELA and math, high graduation rates, and low suspension and absenteeism rates. These outcomes reflect the benefits of focused learning environments, student-centered practices, and customized supports that foster sustained engagement and attendance.
Opportunity Schools	Opportunity schools achieve the highest academic performance in ELA and math, as well as the highest graduation rates and lowest dropout and non-completer rates. Their success reflects intensive academic supports, personalized interventions, and structural conditions that allow for smaller, targeted learning communities.
Community Day Schools	Community day schools support students often impacted by exclusionary disciplinary systems. While suspension rates remain high and academic outcomes lower, these schools play a critical role in re-engaging students who have faced substantial barriers to educational continuity.
County Community Schools	County community schools enroll a high proportion of students experiencing homelessness, justice system involvement, or foster care placements. These structural factors contribute to patterns of lower stability, higher absenteeism, and educational disruption. County community schools focus on stabilizing students' academic and socio-emotional needs while addressing systemic inequities.
Juvenile Court Schools	Juvenile court schools serve students navigating the juvenile justice system, who often experience short-term placements, trauma, and disrupted schooling. While academic proficiency and graduation rates are low, these schools provide essential educational access within highly controlled environments shaped by external legal and institutional systems.
Continuation Schools	Continuation Schools specialize in credit recovery for students managing competing obligations such as employment or family care. Their half-day design often enables students to balance school and work, though inflexible schedules in some programs can contribute to high absenteeism. These schools achieve moderate graduation rates despite systemic barriers related to economic pressures, housing instability, and prior disengagement from traditional school pathways.

As summarized in **Table 5**, alternative schools that emphasize voluntary enrollment and focused, personalized interventions, such as alternative schools of choice and opportunity schools, demonstrate stronger educational outcomes. These outcomes likely reflect the benefits of structured academic supports, smaller student populations, and learning environments that are better aligned with student aspirations and needs.

In contrast, schools serving students facing significant systemic barriers, such as juvenile court schools and community day schools, encounter greater challenges across multiple educational indicators. These schools support students experiencing instability, legal involvement, disciplinary exclusion, and broader socio-economic vulnerabilities, factors which are largely shaped by external structural inequities rather than student deficits.

Continuation schools and county community schools occupy an intermediate position. They work to balance the needs of credit-deficient and highly mobile student populations while providing structured support systems aimed at re-engagement and recovery. Although they face elevated absenteeism and moderate academic outcomes, these schools also serve critical roles in reconnecting students to educational pathways.

Together, these patterns highlight the diverse missions and student populations of California's alternative schools. They underscore the need for differentiated policies, targeted resource allocations, and equity-centered accountability frameworks that recognize the systemic contexts shaping student experiences and outcomes.

3. Students from historically marginalized communities, including highly mobile youth, racial minority students, English Learners, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities, experience systemic barriers that significantly impact their educational outcomes in alternative schools.

Students from historically marginalized communities, including highly mobile youth (students experiencing homelessness, foster youth, and migrant students), racial minority students (Black, Latine, and Indigenous students), English Learners, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities, face disproportionately greater educational obstacles compared to other student groups within DASS schools. These patterns reflect the cumulative impact of systemic barriers on educational experiences and underscore the urgent need for targeted supports and structural interventions.

Figure 13 illustrates how patterns of chronic absenteeism, school instability, graduation, dropouts and non-completion, and disciplinary actions vary across student groups. Importantly, these groups are not mutually exclusive and students may belong to multiple categories simultaneously (e.g., a student may be both experiencing homelessness and identify as Black). These disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted supports, restorative practices, and cross-sector collaboration to address root causes and advance educational justice.

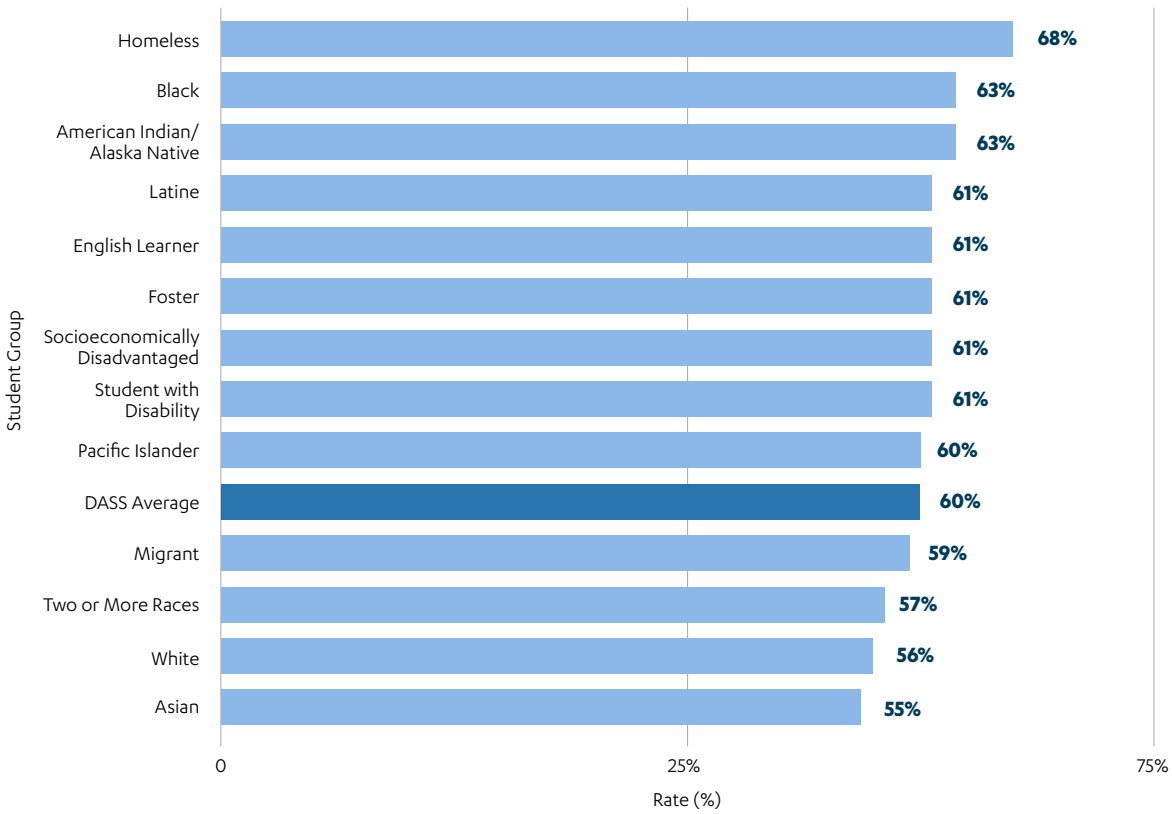
3a. Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is a persistent challenge in alternative education settings, with systemic barriers contributing to an average absenteeism rate of 60% across DASS schools. Marginalized student groups are disproportionately affected:

- Students experiencing homelessness exhibit the highest absenteeism rate at 68%.
- Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students report absenteeism rates of 63%.
- Latine students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, foster youth, and English learners have absenteeism rates of 61%.

Rather than signaling disengagement or individual failure, these patterns reflect broader challenges such as housing instability, lack of access to healthcare, and unmet socio-emotional needs, which disrupt consistent school attendance.

Figure 13. *Educational Outcome Disparities Among Different Student Groups in California DASS Schools, 2022–23*



Note. Figures in this section present chronic absenteeism, school stability, five-year graduation, dropout/non-completion, and suspension rates for student groups in California DASS schools (2022–23). Student groups include race/ethnicity, English Learners, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and highly mobile youth. Student group categories are not mutually exclusive. Data source: California Department of Education (2023c, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g). Educational outcome and school climate data, including chronic absenteeism (California Department of Education, 2023c), school stability (California Department of Education, 2023f), five-year cohort graduation rates, five-year dropout and non-completer rates (California Department of Education, 2023e), and suspension rates (California Department of Education, 2023g), were aggregated by subgroup to evaluate disparities within DASS schools.

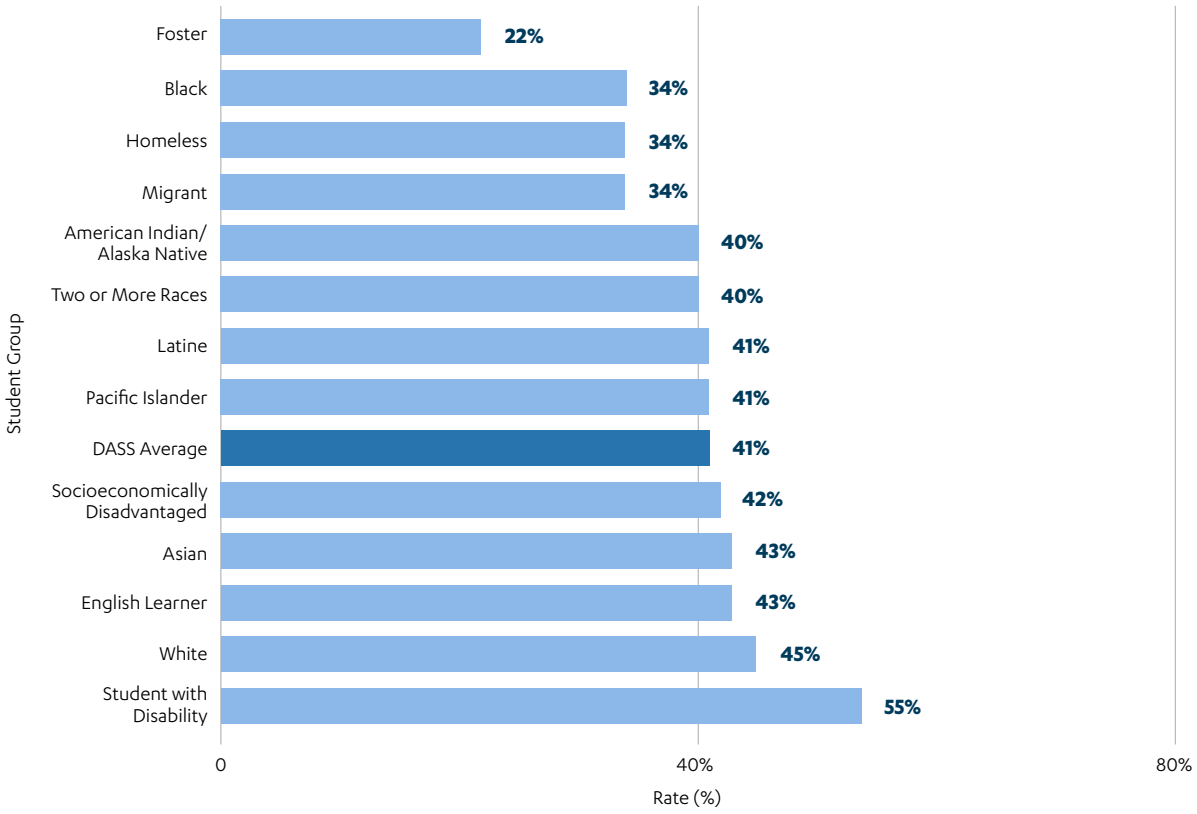
3b. School Stability

School mobility remains another key structural barrier to educational continuity. Among DASS students, the already low average stability rate of 41% masks even deeper inequities:

- Foster youth experience the lowest stability rate at 22%.
- Black students, students experiencing homelessness, and migrant students report rates of 34%.

These figures underscore how systemic factors, including frequent changes in foster placements, eviction, and migratory labor, disrupt educational stability for vulnerable student populations.

Figure 13. *Educational Outcome Disparities Among Historically Marginalized Student Groups in California DASS Schools, 2022–23*



3c. Five-Year Graduation Rates and Five-Year Dropout and Non-Completer Rates

Graduation outcomes reflect the cumulative effects of educational inequities:

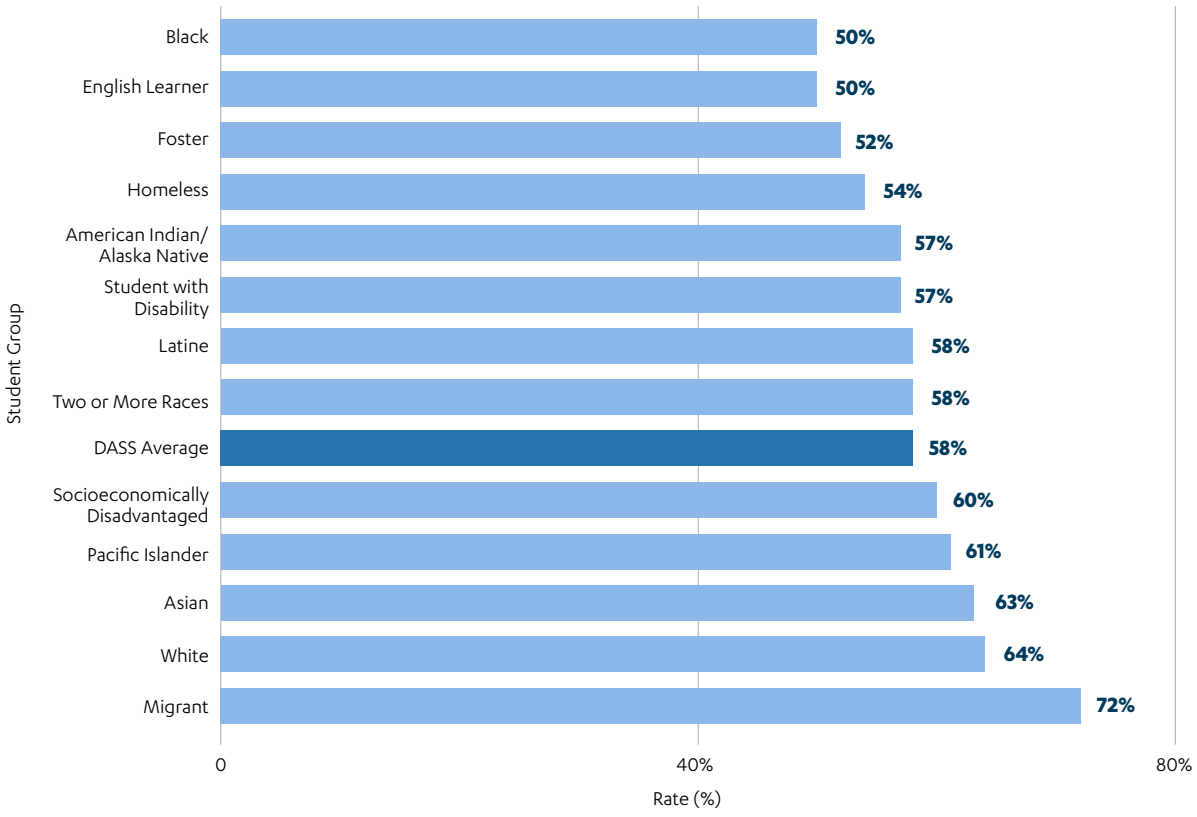
- Black students and English learners have the lowest five-year graduation rate at 50%.
- Foster youth (52%), students experiencing homelessness (54%), Indigenous students and students with disabilities (57%) also graduate at lower rates compared to the DASS average of 58%.

At the same time, marginalized groups experience elevated dropout and non-completer rates:

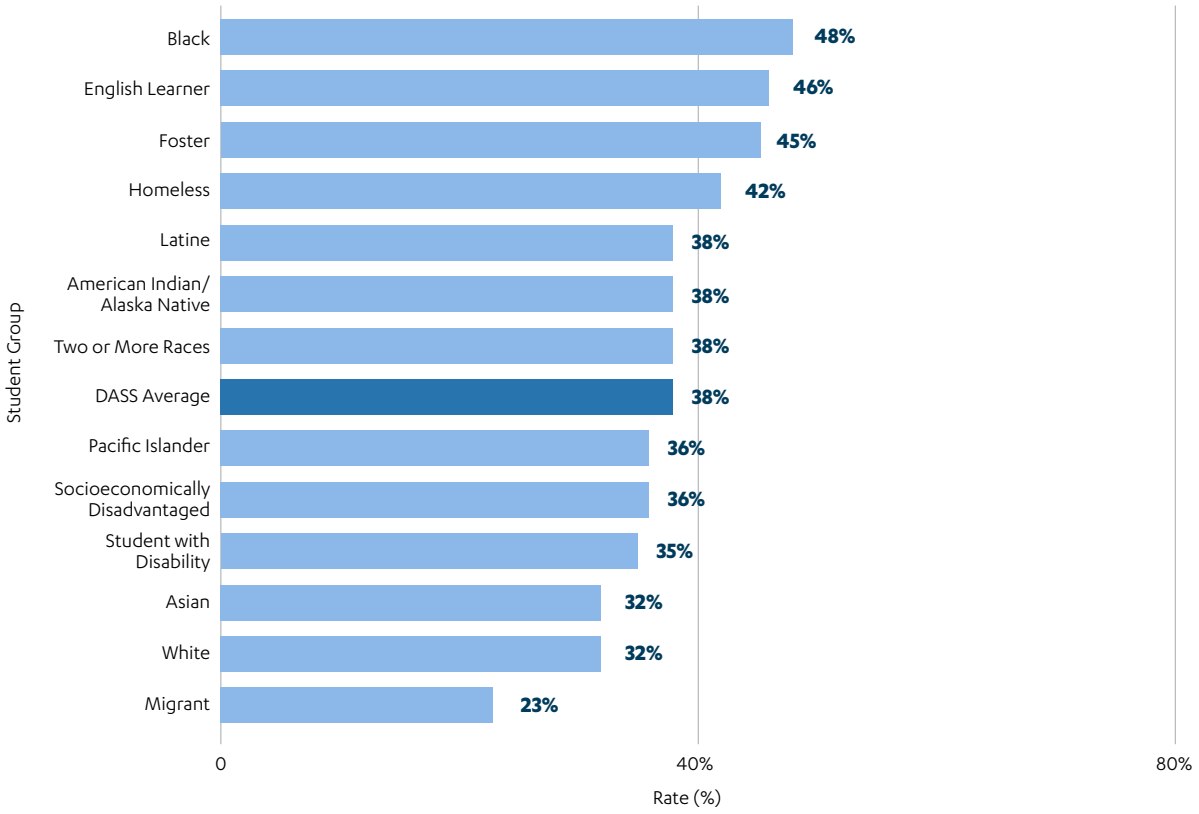
- Black students have the highest dropout and non-completer rates at 48%.
- English learners (46%), foster youth (45%), and students experiencing homelessness (42%) also face high dropout and non-completer rates.

These trends are not the result of individual disengagement alone but are shaped by structural racism, under-resourced schools, inconsistent access to academic supports, and broader social vulnerabilities.

Figure 13. *Educational Outcome Disparities Among Historically Marginalized Student Groups in California DASS Schools, 2022–23*



Five-Year Dropout and Non-Completer Rate by Student Group



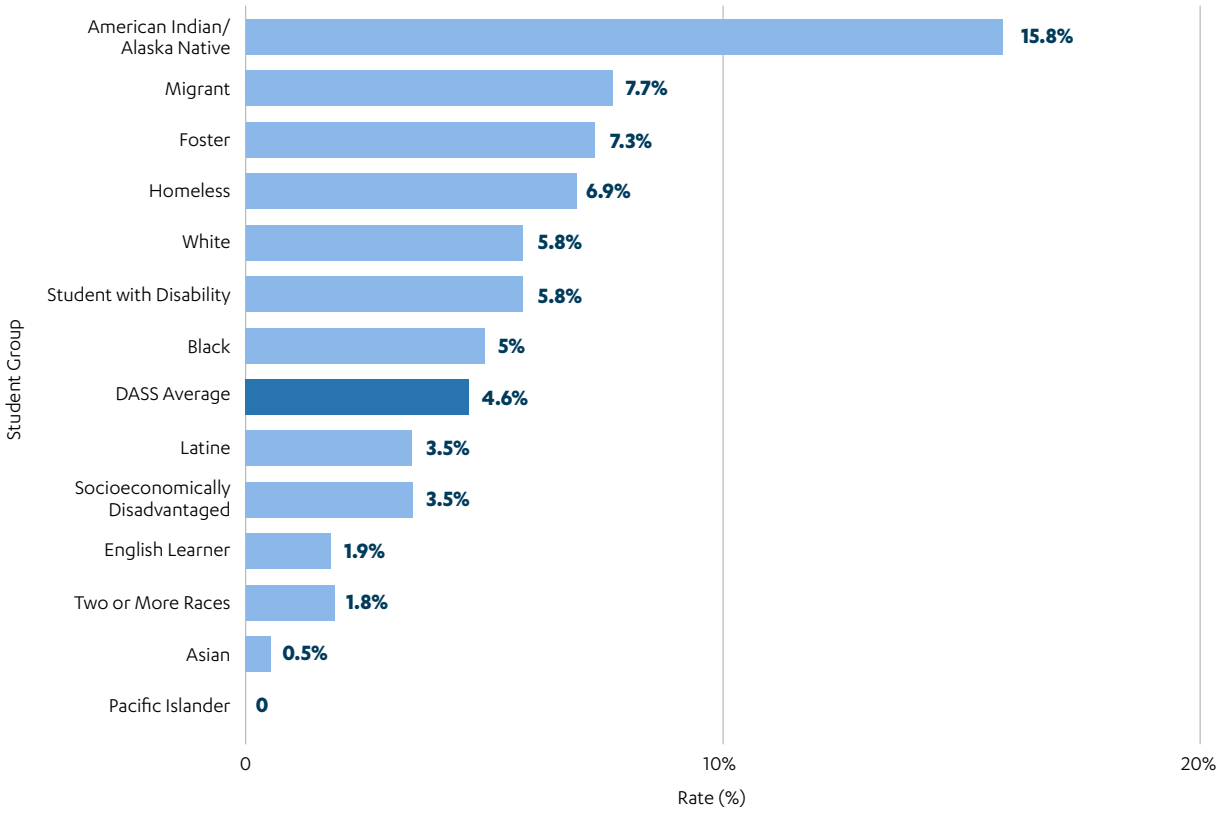
3d. Suspension Rates

Disciplinary outcomes further illustrate how structural inequities translate into punitive educational experiences:

- Indigenous students experience the highest suspension rate at 15.8%.
- Highly mobile youth, including migrant students (7.7%), foster students (7.3%), students experiencing homelessness (6.9%), are disproportionately suspended.
- White students (5.8%), students with disabilities (5.8%), and Black students (5%) also experience elevated rates.

Rather than addressing root causes of student behavior through supportive interventions, exclusionary discipline practices perpetuate disengagement and deepen educational inequities for historically underserved groups.

Figure 13. *Educational Outcome Disparities Among Historically Marginalized Student Groups in California DASS Schools, 2022–23*



Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that disparities across DASS student groups are not isolated or incidental, but are deeply embedded within broader structural inequities. One striking example is the population of highly mobile youth, which includes nearly 1.9 million school-aged children in the United States — among them, students experiencing homelessness, foster youth, migrant youth, and youth involved in the juvenile legal system (Cazares-Minero et al., 2025). These students are disproportionately enrolled in under-resourced, racially segregated, and economically unstable schools, where access to consistent instruction and wraparound supports is often limited. Their educational experiences are shaped by the compounded effects of systemic inequities across education, housing, healthcare, and social services. Importantly, these student identities are not exclusive. Many young people simultaneously navigate multiple marginalized statuses: For example, a student may be both a racial minority and experiencing homelessness and living with a disability. Such intersectionality compounds barriers and intensifies vulnerability. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond reactive, school-based interventions toward coordinated, cross-system reforms that prioritize housing stability, consistent student identification, culturally responsive supports, and data systems that can track and respond to the complex needs of these youth (Bishop et al., 2020; Bishop & Willis, 2025; Rivera, 2022).

DATA LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Several limitations must be considered to appropriately contextualize the findings and inform their interpretation:

Administrative data constraints

The analysis relies exclusively on publicly available, school-level administrative datasets, rather than student-level records. This aggregation across all grade levels can obscure critical variations within and across student groups, limiting the ability to conduct more precise and targeted analyses. Furthermore, administrative data are subject to reporting inconsistencies, missing information, and variation in local data collection practices, which may affect the completeness and accuracy of key indicators, particularly for smaller student subgroups.

Another important limitation is that administrative datasets do not consistently capture student age distributions within alternative schools. Certain DASS schools enroll students well beyond traditional high school age, in some cases up to their late twenties or older. Without disaggregated age data, analyses risk overlooking how age variation shapes accountability measures, program design, and student outcomes in these settings.

Coverage gaps further constrain the analysis. While the DASS school list identifies 968 alternative schools statewide, only between 468 and 663 schools are matched with available educational outcome datasets. This substantial gap limits the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the findings.

Limited scope of educational indicators

While these indicators are valuable for understanding broad patterns of student progress, they do not account for many of the dimensions most relevant to alternative education contexts. For example, measures of student engagement, sense of belonging, social-emotional development, and progress in reading and writing skills are not systematically collected or reported at the state level, despite being central to re-engagement and long-term success for students in alternative settings. Similarly, factors such as teacher effectiveness, instructional quality, access to wraparound supports, and school climate, which are often highlighted by educators as critical to student outcomes, are absent from the available data. The lack of these indicators narrows the scope of the analysis and limits its ability to fully represent the educational experiences, challenges, and needs of students in alternative schools.

Lack of longitudinal and temporal insights

The datasets reflect static snapshots of educational outcomes and do not incorporate longitudinal trends or temporal changes. This limitation hinders the ability to assess the impact of policy shifts, program interventions, or demographic changes over time.

Small group sizes and volatility

Some student subgroups and school types have relatively small sample sizes. As a result, their outcome rates may fluctuate significantly year to year, and caution is warranted when interpreting these patterns.

Student mobility and data matching challenges

High rates of student mobility among DASS-enrolled youth, particularly Highly Mobile Youth, complicate longitudinal tracking and may contribute to underreporting or misclassification of student outcomes such as graduation rates and school stability.

Strengthening the quality, scope, and accessibility of data on alternative schools is essential for advancing equity and informing effective policy and practice. Equally important is the task of identifying which assessments and indicators are most appropriate for measuring the dimensions of learning and engagement that matter most in alternative education contexts. Future improvements should prioritize expanding the coverage of educational outcome data to include all DASS schools, enabling more representative analyses.

Increased access to longitudinal, student-level data, while protecting student privacy, would allow for deeper insights into educational trajectories and the impact of interventions over time. Incorporating broader indicators of school climate, student engagement, access to support services, and intersectional identities would provide a more holistic understanding of student experiences. Additionally, establishing common data reporting standards across districts and alternative schools would enhance consistency, comparability, and the ability to identify and address structural inequities with greater precision. These ideas could be built into new ways of thinking about reporting and accountability for DASS schools, which are expanded upon in the next section of the paper.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the pressing challenges facing California's alternative education landscape, particularly juvenile court schools, community day schools, and county community schools, this paper offers five key policy recommendations. These recommendations are informed by the authors' findings and by feedback received from educators who participated in a session on preliminary findings around this paper at a national conference for youth at promise. These recommendations are designed to address systemic inequities, support educators, and better align state resources with the unique needs of students in alternative settings.

Recommendation 1: Develop a Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) Category for Alternative Schools

Develop a Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) category specifically for alternative schools that reflects the intensity of students' needs and structural barriers, particularly in juvenile court schools, community day schools, and county community schools. The current formula does not match the complexity of student needs. Schools serving higher proportions of foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, and students with disabilities require additional funding matched with common strategies for wraparound services, counseling, transportation, and academic support.

Recommendation 2: Build and Sustain a Specialized Educator Workforce for Alternative Schools

California urgently needs a comprehensive state strategy for recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining highly qualified educators in alternative school settings. These schools serve students who have been underserved in traditional environments, many of whom arrive with significant gaps in core academic areas such as English Language Arts and math. It is therefore essential that alternative education schools are staffed with credentialed teachers in these subjects, as well as educators with specialized expertise in working with students who require accelerated credit recovery, individualized learning, and intensive support.

Meeting this need requires more than a pipeline of committed teachers. It demands strong school leaders and administrators who can foster healthy, supportive learning environments while ensuring that their teams bring the highest levels of skill, preparation, and dedication. To build such a workforce, the state needs to think about investing in specialized training programs, to offer greater salary and career incentives for educators who choose to work in alternative settings, and to establish clear expectations that credentialed, expert teachers are indispensable to advancing student success.

Recommendation 3: Prioritize School Stability and Reduce Student Mobility with Targeted Technical Assistance (TA) for Alternative Education Schools as Part of the Statewide System of Support (SSOS)

The current SSOS does not call out a strategy for providing targeted assistance for alternative education schools, which often have the greatest concentration of young people who are economically disadvantaged, or impacted by housing insecurity, the child welfare system, or justice system in the state (California Statewide System of Support, 2025). There's an opportunity to assess the needs of alternative school sites by school type, geography, and performance to inform a state TA plan by region.

Recommendation 4: Establish Meaningful Measures and Accountability Systems Unique to Alternative Education Schools

The accountability systems for alternative schools often fall short in capturing the unique contributions and challenges of these institutions. The reliance on standardized metrics and aggregated data masks important variations in student needs and outcomes. In fact, the current accountability systems can make serving high-needs students a liability in alternative settings, and don't reward growth or progress over time. Additionally, the lack of adequate resources and support services limits the ability of alternative schools to meet their students' academic, social, and emotional needs effectively. To address this, accountability frameworks must shift toward incorporating broader and more meaningful indicators, such as positive transition rates (Pyne, 2024), access to support services, and socio-emotional development. As noted earlier, expanding access to longitudinal, student-level data (while maintaining privacy protections) would enable a more accurate understanding of educational trajectories and intervention impacts. Common data reporting standards across districts would further support consistency, comparability, and equity-focused decision-making.

Recommendation 5: Expand Access to High-Quality, Differentiated Instruction that Matches School Type, Grade Level, Student, and Staffing Needs

In many instances, alternative schools or DASS schools are working on their campus or district to determine how to best provide access to rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum, with embedded credit recovery, project-based learning, and pathways to graduation, college, and careers. Looking across DASS schools, not enough schools have a track record of students meeting math and English Language Arts performance targets. There's a critical opportunity to support networks of DASS schools to raise academic achievement and to identify potential systemic barriers that are preventing the foundational needs for a healthy, positive learning environment from being addressed for students and staff (James & Bishop, 2022). In addition to strengthening academic instruction, schools must also integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) supports and promote career readiness through differentiated programming that reflects students' varied grade levels and life contexts. This includes access to vocational training, apprenticeships, work-based learning, and partnerships with local industries, community organizations, or higher education institutions.

CONCLUSION

California's alternative education system plays a vital role in supporting students whose educational journeys have been shaped by systemic instability, exclusion, and under-resourced environments. These students, who often navigate complex intersections of poverty, high mobility, and structural racism, bring determination, adaptability, and unique strengths into learning spaces that too often fail to recognize or nurture them. Alternative schools provide not a last resort, but a renewed pathway for dignity, growth, and re-engagement.

This report identifies significant disparities in academic outcomes, school climate, and learning conditions across alternative education settings. Yet these outcome gaps cannot be understood or addressed without recognizing the systemic conditions that produce them. Housing insecurity, disciplinary pushout, inconsistent support services, and rigid accountability structures are not peripheral issues; they are central forces shaping students' educational experiences and performance.

To move toward equity, California must shift from measuring schools by narrow definitions of success to embracing alternative metrics that reflect the realities of alternative education. Traditional indicators like standardized test scores or four-year graduation rates often obscure the critical progress students make in areas such as credit accumulation, attendance recovery, and socio-emotional development. Effective accountability systems must be responsive to diverse student pathways and serve as tools for continuous improvement, not compliance for its own sake.

Equally important is the need to reduce bureaucratic barriers that consume time and energy in ways that detract from instruction and student support, particularly in non-classroom-based models. Empowering alternative education leaders and teachers requires stable funding, professional development, and working conditions that promote long-term retention and innovation. These workforce investments must be paired with cross-sector strategies to address the root causes of educational disengagement, supporting youth not only in classrooms, but also in housing, health care, and community systems.

California's alternative schools are diverse in purpose and design, including continuation schools, county community schools, community day schools, juvenile court schools, and others. Each reflects specific missions and populations. Recognizing this diversity is essential to building differentiated policies and resource strategies that honor local contexts and avoid one-size-fits-all mandates. Ultimately, creating stronger futures through alternative education means reframing the narrative: valuing student progress over pathologizing student need, holding public education systems accountable rather than blaming individuals, and transforming schools and policies to reflect the full complexity of learning in a structurally unequal society.

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APPENDIX

Definitions of selected educational outcomes and school climate indicators

Chronic Absenteeism Rate

Chronic absenteeism rate represents the percentage of students who were absent for 10 percent or more of the instructional days they were enrolled to attend (California Department of Education, 2025a).

School Stability Rate

School stability rate is defined as the percentage of students enrolled during the academic year (July 1–June 30) who complete a "full year" of learning in the same school (California Department of Education, 2024a). The stability rate reflects the degree to which students remain enrolled in a consistent learning environment, which is often a key factor in their academic and social success.

Suspension Rate

Suspension is a disciplinary action that temporarily removes students from their regular educational setting due to behavioral incidents. It is categorized into two types: in-school suspension, where students remain on campus but are excluded from regular activities, and out-of-school suspension, where students are temporarily removed from the school program. The suspension rate represents the percentage of students who were suspended for an aggregate total of one full day anytime during the school year (California Department of Education, 2024c).

Five-year Graduation Rate and Five-year Dropout and Non-Completer Rate

The five-year cohort graduation rate calculates the proportion of students who graduate within five years with a regular high school diploma, divided by the total adjusted cohort from the preceding year, plus any new transfers who graduate during the five-year period (California Department of Education, 2024b).

In contrast, five-year dropout and non-completer rates represent the percentage of students who fail to graduate, do not otherwise complete high school, or remain enrolled without earning a diploma by the end of the five-year period (California Department of Education, 2024b). Compared to the four-year rate, the five-year rate provides a more comprehensive measure of student success by accounting for those who require additional time to complete their studies.

English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA) and Math Performance

ELA and Math performance, as measured by the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), provides insight into students' proficiency in English language arts/literacy and Math. Both ELA and Math performance are categorized into four levels: Standard Not Met, Standard Nearly Met, Standard Met, and Standard Exceeded (CAASPP, n.d.). For the purposes of this analysis, "Met and Above" represents the percentage of students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards, while "Not Met" reflects those performing below the standard.