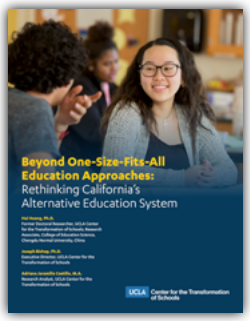
Beyond One-Size-Fits-All: Rethinking Alternative Education

Lessons from California and implications for alternative education nationwide



Alternative education schools provide critical pathways for students whose needs are often not met in traditional school settings. New research from the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools examines California's alternative education system, which serves more than 150,000 students, and identifies significant differences in student populations, educational experiences, and outcomes across alternative school types. **How can states and school systems design funding, accountability, staffing, instruction, and student supports around the distinct missions and needs of alternative education?**



What California's Experience Tells Us

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

UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools · April 2026

Hui Huang, Ph.D., Joseph Bishop, Ph.D., Adriana Jaramillo Castillo, M.A.

1. **Alternative schools serve students with complex and intersecting needs.** In California, alternative schools serve disproportionately high concentrations of students experiencing educational instability and systemic barriers, including students experiencing homelessness, foster youth, students with disabilities, English Learners, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Black, Latine, and Indigenous students are also overrepresented.
2. **Alternative education is not a single model.** Schools serving credit-deficient students, justice-involved youth, highly mobile students, students seeking flexible schedules, and other populations can have fundamentally different missions and needs. California data show substantial variation in student characteristics and outcomes across alternative school types.
3. **Traditional measures do not always capture the work of alternative schools.** California alternative schools experience higher rates of absenteeism, suspension, and dropout and lower rates of stability, graduation, and academic performance than traditional schools. The report argues that these patterns should be understood in the context of whom schools serve and calls for accountability measures designed for alternative education.
4. **Student mobility and educational instability matter.** The report identifies school stability as a central issue and recommends targeted strategies to reduce mobility and improve continuity for students.

transformschools.ucla.edu
ctschools@ucla.edu

UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

Five Priorities for Alternative Education



1. Fund alternative education differently. Develop a specialized funding category for alternative schools that better reflects the populations they serve and the resources required to meet their needs.

2. Invest in a specialized educator workforce. Build and sustain a workforce with the preparation, expertise, and support needed to succeed in alternative education settings.

3. Prioritize educational stability. Reduce student mobility and provide targeted technical assistance for alternative schools, i.e. through California's Statewide System of Support.

4. Measure what matters. Establish meaningful measures and accountability systems specifically designed for alternative education rather than relying solely on measures developed for traditional schools.



5. Differentiate instruction and supports. Expand access to high-quality instruction aligned with school type, grade level, student needs, and staffing capacity.

transformschools.ucla.edu
ctschools@ucla.edu

UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

Funding Alternative Education: Federal, State & Local Opportunities

Schools do not need to rely on a single funding stream to strengthen alternative education. Alternative schools can braid core, categorical, federal, community-school, learning-recovery, and college-and-career resources around the distinct needs of their students.*

Funding Stream	Potential Alternative Education Uses	Availability / Considerations
State & Local K–12 Funding	Core staffing, smaller or differentiated learning environments, counseling, reengagement, academic intervention, and other student supports	Varies by state. States and districts should examine whether their funding formulas adequately recognize the costs and student needs associated with alternative education.
Title I, Part A	Academic intervention, tutoring, credit recovery, additional instructional capacity, family engagement, and supports for students in high-poverty schools	Federal / Nationwide. Eligibility and allowable uses depend on the LEA and school's Title I status and program design.
Title I, Part D — Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk Youth	Educational continuity, dropout prevention, transition/reentry services, academic supports, and pathways to further education or employment	Federal / Nationwide. Particularly relevant to justice-involved youth. The program supports state and local programs serving neglected, delinquent, and at-risk youth, including transitions from correctional settings. (U.S. Department of Education)
IDEA / Special Education	Specialized instruction, related services, behavioral supports, transition planning, and services for eligible students with disabilities	Federal + State. Particularly relevant where alternative schools serve significant numbers of students with disabilities; funds are restricted to eligible special-education purposes.
Title III — English Learners	Supplemental language instruction and services supporting English Learners	Federal / Nationwide. Potentially relevant to alternative settings serving eligible multilingual learners.
Title IV, Part A — Student Support & Academic Enrichment	Safe and healthy schools, student engagement, well-rounded education, technology, school climate, and student well-being	Federal / Nationwide. Funds generally flow through state and local education agencies.
Community Schools Funding	Integrated academic, health, mental health, social-service, family, and community supports	Federal + State/Local. The federal Full-Service Community Schools program supports integrated academic, social, and health services, while some states make additional investments. (U.S. Department of Education)
College & Career / CTE Funding	CTE, industry credentials, work-based learning, career exploration, dual enrollment, and transitions to postsecondary education and employment	Federal + State. Perkins V and state-specific career-pathway programs can provide opportunities depending on eligibility and local implementation.
State Categorical & Innovation Funding	Learning recovery, extended learning, mental health, attendance, reengagement, community partnerships, and other targeted strategies	Varies substantially by state. Alternative education leaders should identify state grants and categorical programs that align with their student populations rather than looking only for programs explicitly labeled "alternative education."

*Eligibility and allowable uses vary by program, and many funds flow to LEAs rather than directly to individual alternative schools.

California Spotlight: Investing in Whole-Child Supports

California has invested **more than $4 billion** through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) to establish, expand, and sustain community schools. These investments illustrate how alternative schools can potentially leverage broader state initiatives—not explicitly designed as "alternative education funding"—to provide integrated academic, health, mental health, family, and community supports.

California also provides: LCFF funding, specific alternative-education funding for county offices of education, Learning Recovery Emergency Block Grant resources, Golden State Pathways funding, K–12 Strong Workforce funding, and other categorical programs.



transformschools.ucla.edu
ctschools@ucla.edu

UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools