

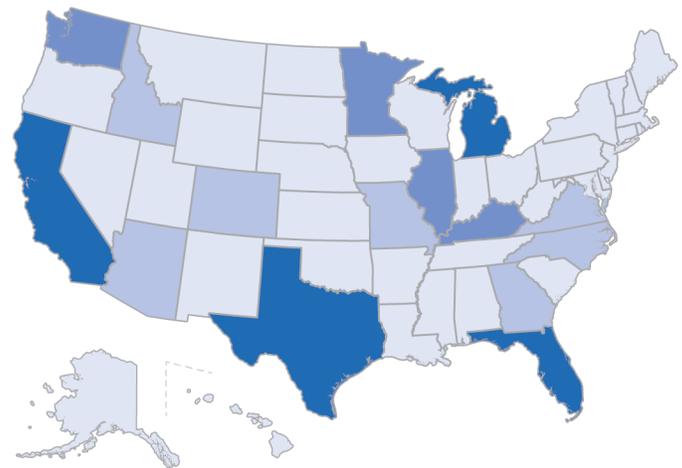
Why This Matters

States use their accountability systems to identify low-performing schools, which can receive added support and are expected to improve.

Alternative schools serve students whose needs are not met in a regular school. They often serve at-risk students who are struggling academically or behaviorally.

Given this unique population, we looked at how states hold alternative schools accountable.

Distribution of Alternative K-12 Public Schools



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data from 2015-16; National Atlas of the United States (base map). | GAO-20-310

Key Takeaways

Our review of 15 selected state accountability systems—used to assess all types of schools—found that all 15 include at least one indicator that research organizations and relevant studies considered useful in capturing alternative school achievement. For example:

- **Eleven of the fifteen states use college and career readiness indicators.** These indicators may capture achievements (e.g., industry-recognized certifications, internships) that prepare high school students for a career rather than higher education. Alternative schools commonly have a career focus.
- **Ten of the fifteen states use extended-year graduation rates.** Students at alternative schools may be behind on credits or face trauma and other challenges that can hinder learning. We found that alternative high schools have substantially lower 4-year graduation rates. So, some states’ practice of measuring graduation rates past the standard 4 years may capture additional alternative school performance.

We also found a few states that, as part of their accountability system, adopted approaches to differentiate alternative schools when identifying them for support and improvement. For example, when identifying the lowest performing 5 percent of schools, Idaho groups alternative schools separately from nonalternative ones.

How GAO Did This Study

We analyzed the Department of Education’s most recent alternative school data; reviewed federal laws and accountability systems from 15 states with the most alternative schools; and interviewed federal and selected state, school district, and school officials in three states.