



Alternative Learning Environments

Alternative learning environments are programs to support students with barriers that keep them from succeeding in traditional educational environments.

The goals and structure of alternative learning environments (ALEs) have changed over time and even today vary among states. Still, most ALEs across the nation currently try to address the needs of children who do not thrive in the normal classroom environment.

ALE Policy in Arkansas

Arkansas’s current alternative learning environment funding and structure are part of the reforms enacted by the General Assembly in response to the 2002 Lake View decision in which the Arkansas Supreme Court declared the state’s education system to be inadequate and inequitable.

As a result, ALE legislation called for each school district in Arkansas to make an alternative learning environment available to their students.

They can do so by offering a program within the district, in a consortia in partnership with other districts, through a consortia offered by another entity such as one of the state’s educational cooperatives or through a partnership with an institution of higher education or a technical school.

Nearly 10 percent of Arkansas’s school districts reported having no ALE students in recent years.

ALE Students

ALE students are recommended to the program if they qualify for two of the 12 conditions included in the Arkansas Department of Education’s rules on ALE, such as homelessness, pregnancy, exhibiting disruptive behavior as well as a persistent lack of attaining academic proficiency in math or literacy. A student cannot be placed in ALE for poor academic performance alone.

Students are admitted to ALE upon the recommendation of a district Placement Team, which can include the student and student’s parents along with school district personnel.

The Placement Team also develops an ALE plan for each student with performance and behavior goals, as well as a plan for transitioning back to the traditional educational environment.

Students do not necessarily spend the full school day or school year in ALE. For funding purposes, ALE students are counted as full-time equivalent (FTE) students. The formula considers the number of hours each day and the number of days each school year that the student spends in ALE. The count of ALE FTE students statewide is about half of the count of individual students.

ALE Funding

ALE funds are categorical funding, supplementing the per-student amount of foundation funding provided for each student.

ALE funds are distributed to districts each year based on the number of ALE FTE students the district had the previous school year.

ALE funding alone historically has not covered all of the expenses associated with ALE students. The amount of ALE funds per ALE FTE student for the current school year

is \$4,640, set by Act 743 of 2017, or \$26.4 million in total appropriations. Districts spend the majority of their ALE funds on salaries and benefits.

Increase in Districts in ALE Consortia

A recent trend in Arkansas regarding ALE is an increased number of districts participating in ALE consortia.

One particular consortium – the one operated by the Arch Ford Education Service Cooperative (ESC) – has experienced significant growth over the past several years.

Arch Ford ESC offers two types of programs – a more traditional ALE program for students in K-12 and another for high school students that utilizes varying amounts of online learning and partners with the Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) program to focus on jobs for its students.

The ALE students in districts that participate in Arch Ford’s ALE program tend to spend about the same amount of time in ALEs each year as other ALE students but tend to be less likely to return to the regular classroom as other ALE students, according to an analysis of 2015-16 data.

In addition, the Arch Ford participating district students tend to drop out of school at rates similar to all other ALE students.

ALE Outcomes

ALE students tend to score lower on the ACT Aspire than non-ALE students and to drop out at higher rates than non-ALE students.

In addition, in 2015-16, about a quarter of ALE students statewide returned to the traditional educational environment.