

**Alternative Education Pathways Guide**

***Designed to provide guidance and support to improve and/or create alternative education programs and schools***

**Table of Contents**

Introduction ….......................................................................................................................................... 3

General Information About Alternative Education …............................................................................... 4

Alternative Education Structures: Program or School ................................................................ 4

Student Profile …......................................................................................................................... 4

Models of Alternative Education ….......................................................................................................... 5

Design Elements …...................................................................................................................... 5

Common Elements ….................................................................................................................. 6

Entrance and Exit Processes …................................................................................................................. 6

Entrance Process …..................................................................................................................... 7

Exit Process …............................................................................................................................. 7

My Career and Academic Plan (MyCap) ….............................................................................................. 7

Students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) ….................................................................... 8

Student Learning Time …........................................................................................................................ 9

Curriculum and Instruction …................................................................................................................ 10

Academics …............................................................................................................................. 10

Instruction …............................................................................................................................. 10

Social Emotional Learning …..................................................................................................... 11

Contextual Learning ….............................................................................................................. 11

Career Development Education (CDE) …............................................................................................... 12

Climate and Culture …........................................................................................................................... 13

Teacher Qualifications …....................................................................................................................... 13

Conclusion …......................................................................................................................................... 14

**Introduction**

This Guide provides districts and schools guidance and a common language for the creation, implementation, and operation of alternative education programs and schools. Alternative education provides both a different pathway to high school graduation and access to post-secondary options for many students that are not having success in their current educational setting. Alternatives to the traditional school model have become imperative in meeting the needs of students who have risk factors that affect their learning (Barr & Parrett, 2001). Students who are deemed at-risk may include those who are pregnant and/or parenting, truant, suspended or expelled, returned dropouts, court involved, who experience trauma or those who are not meeting local promotional requirements.

The Guide intends to provide districts/schools guidance as they design an equitable alternative pathway of choice for students who may struggle in traditional settings. An alternative education pathway is designed to provide a smaller environment, more personalized learning, and responsive staff that can meet the needs of students who may be struggling not only in school but in their life circumstances as well. The alternative education pathway can be a pathway to success for students who might otherwise give up on their education.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) believes that all students can succeed and that alternative education pathways are an important option for some students to do so. When creating, designing, and implementing an alternative education school or program, DESE will act as a partner that is ready to assist districts/schools throughout the process. Alternative education is a powerful and positive opportunity for students who are not having success in traditional school settings to choose to experience success in an environment that recognizes differences. It is a place where teaching and learning are student-centered, where school success is measured by both academic and social/emotional performance, and where school staff and students build strong, positive bonds that allow staff to support yet challenge the learner to reach his/her/their full potential. Alternative education, whether in the school building or another location, offers students an education that meets the same academic rigor, standards, and expectations of all students in the district while attending to the learning styles of each individual.

Alternative education is an approach to learning that may operate as a program or as a self-contained school. This Guide will use alternative education to refer to both programs and self-contained schools. Further, for the purposes of this Guide, alternative education does not include private schools, homeschooling, General Educational Development (GED) services, school choice, high school equivalency programs, or gifted and talented programs. Alternative education in this Guide also does not include programs exclusively serving students receiving special education services or career and technical education programs and services. Alternative Education may serve some students with disabilities but is not designed exclusively for students with disabilities.

Every district/school that undertakes the creation of alternative education options will do so based on the best interest of their students, school, and community all the while taking into account the individual needs and assets of the population to be served. Additionally, every district/school has the flexibility to design alternative education paths using the resources available to that given district/school. The following pages provide guidance and best practices pertinent to establishing alternative education options.

**General Information About Alternative Education**

High quality alternative education pathways provide options for students who, for a variety of reasons, are not benefiting from the traditional school structure. Alternative education provides an educational environment that helps to prevent students from dropping out of school (or brings back students who had previously dropped out). Flexibility, intensive behavioral supports, social and emotional supports, individualized instruction and remediation, and flexibility in schedules are some of the ways alternative education pathways help students meet state and local graduation requirements.

**Alternative Education Pathways: Program or School**

Alternative education is an initiative within a public school district or educational collaborative established to serve students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting. It may be established as a program within a school, or it may be established as a separate school.

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| Alternative Education ***Programs*** will function within a single school or be a program affiliated with one or more schools or districts. Alternative Education **Programs** must be affiliated with at least one school that has a school code assigned by the Department. Alternative education programs are encouraged to apply for a program code by contacting a [DESE representative.](https://outlook.office.com/mail/deeplink/compose?mailtouri=mailto%3Accte%40mass.gov)   | Alternative Education ***Schools***will operate as independent, self-contained public school that must comply with the Massachusetts laws and regulations that guide the operation of schools in the Commonwealth. It [must be assigned a school code by the Department](http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/data/diradmin/). Alternative Education **Schools** are subject to the same data reporting, submission, and accountability requirements as all schools.  |

A complete list of alternative education schools and programs can be found [here](https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/search/search.aspx?leftNavId=11238).

The decision to establish a school or a program is a local decision that the public school district, with the support of the school committee, should make based on factors, including but not limited to, the number of students to serve, staffing needs, supports available, and funding. More information about Alternative Education in Massachusetts and the differences between programs and schools can be found [here](https://www.doe.mass.edu/alted/about.html?section=definition).

A charter school is a public school that is governed by a board of trustees. As such, it can operate as an alternative education model (i.e., Phoenix Charter School, Lowell Middlesex Charter School), as directed by the approved charter. The mission and vision of the charter should reflect the purpose of the alternative model and the key design elements should reflect the specialized focus of the school. In addition, key academic and nonacademic goals for students should be consistent with the mission and design elements unique to the alternative model. More information about Massachusetts charter schools can be found [here](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/about.html).

**Student Profile**

Alternative education is designed to create opportunities for students who are not being successful in the traditional school environment, who are at risk of dropping out, or who may have already dropped out of the traditional high school. However, the reasons students drop out are many and they may encompass all aspects of students’ lives. The four common arenas in which a student may experience challenges that put him/her/them at-risk of not completing high school are:

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| ***Student-Related:*** - Attendance/truancy- Behavior/discipline problems- Mental health needs- Court involved- Pregnancy/parenting- Drug abuse- Poor peer relationships- Suspension/expulsion- Friends have dropped out- Illness/disability- Poor course performance/low grades | ***Family-Related:*** - Domestic violence/abuse- Homelessness- Family obligation/care for siblings- Involvement with agencies (DCF, Immigration, etc.)- Parent language barriers that interfere with  home & school communication- Parent/family member addictions- Low parental involvement- Low parental expectations- Low socioeconomic status |
| ***School-Related:*** - Conflict between home & school cultures- Ineffective discipline system- Negative school climate - Lack of adequate counseling- Lack of adequate English Learner supports- Lack of relevant curriculum or instruction- Lack of credit recovery options - High use of suspension/expulsion- Low expectations | ***Community-Related:*** - Lack of community support services- Lack of community support for schools- Lack of school/community linkage- Lack of public transportation- High incidence of criminal activity- High mobility/homelessness |

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**Models of Alternative Education Pathways**

The primary goals of alternative education are to create a pathway for students who aren’t having success in their current educational pathway, help get them to and through high school graduation, and get them ready for either post-secondary education or a career. Across the Commonwealth, there are a variety of models that may be considered when developing an alternative education program or school. Districts should evaluate the needs and assets of their students at risk of dropping out to decide on the purpose and structure of alternative education services offered. Additionally, alternative education models are allowed and encouraged to evolve as students' needs change. Some of the components that may influence the design of these alternative education models include:

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| ***District/School Resources:***Including but not limited to the availability of staff, physical space and location, and academic and non-academic supports.  | ***Student Population:***Identifying a population of students with different educational needs who might benefit from options outside the traditional school setting.  | ***Grade Level(s) Served:***Includes those that are focused on a particular grade level (or levels) such as at the middle school and/or high school grade level. |

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**Design Elements**

Schools and districts have flexibility in how alternative pathways are designed. Equity should be the focal point of the design process as the alternative model should receive the same core resources as the traditional school. One of the underlying purposes for creating an alternative choice is to give students who are not succeeding in the traditional school setting another path to graduation. The alternative pathway should be innovative, creative, intentional, and have clear expectations. An alternative design may mimic the traditional school structure with additional supports, or the alternative design may include flexible hours and scheduling, different settings, and varying learning modalities.

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| ***Options for Setting*** – Can take place within the traditional school during the regular school day OR within the traditional school after the regular school day. Another setting option is in a separate, off-site location as a program connected to the school, or as a separate, standalone school.  | ***Behavioral Supports*** *–* Intentional supports and processes to ensure the safety of all students and to mitigate behaviors that may interrupt the learning environment including supports for the student population adhering to the requirements of [Chapter 222: An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2012/Chapter222). |
| ***Duration/Time Frame*** ***for Students*** –Can be a temporary or permanent placement or both depending on student needs. The district decides on the goal of the pathway which may be to retain students until graduation, or it may be to transition students back to the traditional middle or high school. Districts/schools have autonomy in the entrance and exit processes of alternative education. | ***Academic Credit Accumulation*** – May focus on credit accumulation to target students who are under credited making them unable to graduate. Credit accumulation should be equitable with the traditional school setting, accelerate learning, and use various modalities that work for the students being served. Supports for credit acceleration is key to long-term academic success for some students. |

**Common Elements**

The purpose of alternative education pathways is to provide an educational option for students with risk factors that impede their progress in the traditional school environment. As districts/schools create an alternative education model, several common elements may be considered to ensure the success of the students. Some of the common elements of alternative education include:

* Deliberate, student-centered focus
* Small class sizes
* Opportunity for more 1:1 interaction with staff, mentors, tutors, etc.
* Flexible scheduling
* Intentional social-emotional supports
* Increased support services such as counseling, mentoring, tutoring, etc.
* Multiple learning opportunities through teacher-led, online, and hybrid courses
* Accessible curriculum
* Array of instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual learning styles such as project-based learning, service learning, and contextual learning
* Caring environment that builds and fosters resilience

Entrance and exit processes for alternative education provide students along with their family/caring adult the opportunity to make an informed decision regarding their educational options.

## Entrance and Exit Processes

Students enrolled in a high school alternative education pathway must meet the same state [Competency Determination](http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr30.html?section=03) requirements as all other students in the district which includes passing the grade 10 MCAS exams (ELA, Math, and Science). In addition, students enrolled in alternative education also must meet all local requirements as explicitly described in the student handbook. Alternative education should be a pathway of choice offering a learning opportunity different from the traditional school setting. Therefore, entrance and exit requirements can be created independently by the district/school. Criteria for enrollment are neutral, fair, non-discriminatory, and designed to be accessible to a wide and inclusive pool. Though entrance and exit processes may vary greatly due to district/school autonomy, some general suggestions are included below.

## Entrance Process

The following elements are recommendations for a comprehensive entrance process:

* Students and parents have opportunities for visits and individual meetings with program staff and enrolled students to ensure an appropriate match between student and program
* Enrollment criteria provide an opportunity for students to apply for admission including completing an interview and/or written application to indicate commitment and motivation to attend
* Academic review before enrollment allows for a clear understanding of credits earned and credits needed to meet graduation requirements and determine the length of participation in the pathway
* Culturally and linguistically responsive family and student engagement practices are offered regarding all aspects of decision-making as it relates to the placement
* Due process protections are provided before any involuntary transfer from the traditional school program to the alternative education pathway

**Exit Process**

Not all students will find the placement appropriate for their needs and, despite best efforts, there may be students who will drop out. The following elements are to be considered when determining next steps/future placements for students that are not finding success in the alternative pathway:

* Provide an opportunity for students, parent/guardians, and staff to confer regarding the advisability and logistics of a transfer and transfer options, including a collaborative and supported transition plan
* Identify students at risk of dropping out using data such as attendance, behavior, etc.
* Provide opportunities for students, parents/guardians, and staff to consider options that would allow a student to complete their education i.e., flexible schedule, modified school hours
* Engage student and parents/guardians/family in exit interviews to ensure the student understands the short- and long-term ramifications of leaving school without a diploma

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| **School Handbook**The entrance and exit procedures and criteria decided by the district/school need to be explicitly written in each alternative education program or school handbook. The handbook must be provided to parents/guardians/family and students in the language of the home at the time of admittance into the alternative education program or school.  |

## My Career and Academic Plan (MyCap)

The state definition of College, Career, and Civic Readiness identifies three domains that must be addressed for students to be prepared for success – personal/social development, career development education, and academic learning. MyCap is the process that braids these domains and empowers every student, especially the most marginalized students, to create their own path to success after high school.

MyCap is a student-driven, multi-year process, ideally begun in grade 6 but no later than grade 9, that intentionally guides students in the development of an authentic post-secondary plan for success after high school. Through the *process*, each student, with guidance and support from a caring adult in the school and input from parents and other mentors, gains knowledge, skills, and experiences in the personal/social, career development, and academic achievement domains. Beginning with self-discovery activities that help students identify their interests, skills, talents, and passions, the process guides students as they align career interests with personal interests, develop the personal/social skills that will become the workplace skills managers look for, and make the connections between academic learning and future accomplishments. MyCap is a fluid process designed to increase students’ understanding of the connection and relevance of what they do now with their future success and empower them to engage in deeper, more meaningful learning and planning.

MyCap is also an *instrument*, a tool that captures and documents the experiences and learning at each grade level within each domain. The instrument may also act as an ePortfolio capturing artifacts that demonstrate success. The instrument is often an online portal such as MEFA Pathway, MassHire CIS, or Naviance.

Students with IEPs in Massachusetts must begin to receive [secondary transition](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/secondary-transition/default.html) services by the student’s fourteenth birthday, or sooner if appropriate. Transition planning facilitates a student’s movement from school to postsecondary activities based on the student’s needs while also considering the student’s strengths, preferences, and interests. For students with IEPs, beginning MyCap in grade 6 can be an opportunity for early self-discovery and career planning time which may strengthen the transition planning process. [The National Center for Workforce and Disability (NCWD)](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/fact-sheet/individualized-learning-plan) can provide additional information and research to support the use of MyCap for students with IEPs.

The alternative setting is an ideal place to implement MyCap. Small group discussions, caring adults, personalized learning, and the MyCap tool ensures student voice drives the planning process while also providing a safe and supportive environment for student choice.

**Students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)**

Alternative education pathways are not special education placements; they are general education settings. They are not designed solely for students with IEPs and should not be confused with placements designed specifically for students with IEPs, such as substantially separate placements, approved public day programs, collaborative programs, and/or approved private special education schools. However, because alternative education programs are designed to respond to the needs of all students, to include both academic learning and social skills development, and to build on each student’s individual strengths and abilities, they may be responsive to the needs of students with IEPs.

An IEP must address each student’s unique needs, as determined by the IEP Team. If the student is educated in an alternative education setting, the student must receive the services set forth in the IEP. Specially designed instruction and related services must be provided by appropriately licensed personnel.

Since an IEP is based on the student’s individual needs and not on the characteristics of available programming, an IEP should never be developed, amended, or revised solely for the purpose of fitting a student into an alternative education program.

As general education settings, alternative education programs are first and foremost an alternative to the traditional school. The majority of students in alternative education programs do not have disabilities. If the number of students with IEPs rises significantly in an alternative program, districts should re-evaluate the designation of the program to consider a change to a public day program solely for students with IEPs.

Student Learning Time

There are no exceptions in the Student Learning Time regulations for alternative education students to attend less hours than students in traditional programs or schools. All middle and high school level programs and schools, including alternative education programs and schools, must be scheduled for 185 school days and 990 hours of structured learning time.

Structured learning time does not mean “seat time.” Structured learning can happen in a variety of settings and formats. Examples of structured learning time are included below.

* **Directed** **Study**: requires students to be engaged in activities directly related to their program of studies and a teacher must be available to assist students. A directed study may occur in places such as a classroom, computer lab, or resource room. Traditional (non-directed) study halls are not considered “directed study.”
* **Independent Study**: a program that has the same rigorous course of study and standards as a core subject. It is contained within the regularly scheduled student school year, under the direction of a teacher, assigned a grade and credit, individually designed, and is not to be assigned to large groups of students merely to satisfy the annual hourly requirement. Any district/school using independent study as part of structured learning time needs to have guidelines that clearly explain the process by which hours spent by students in independent study will be verified.
* **Service Learning**: a teaching and learning methodology through which students engage in a rigorous cross-curricular study by identifying, researching, proposing, and implementing solutions to real needs and problems in their school or community.
* **Learning Time Without a Teacher**: if a learning activity in which the student is engaged is 1) consistent with the curriculum for the study of a core subject or other subject approved by the school committee or 2) part of a program designed by a teacher, then it may be considered structured learning time. An example might be credit recovery programs in school, out-of-school, and in the summer.
* **Assemblies**: the content of the assemblies must be evaluated in determining whether the time spent is considered structured learning time. If schools schedule non-academic activities such as sports rallies, class pictures, etc., additional structured learning time needs to be scheduled into the year to accommodate those activities.
* **Travel Time**: if travel is a part of the student’s schedule (such as field trips, service-learning related activities, dual enrollment, travel to a work site, etc.) then the school district may consider such travel as included in the student’s schedule. However, travel to sporting events, and the event itself, would not be considered structured learning time.
* **Work**-**based Learning**: students engaged in a meaningful work experience that is connected to a school’s career development education may count the hours worked towards structured learning time.

According to state regulations, districts may apply for a [student learning time waiver](http://www.doe.mass.edu/redesign/sltwaiver.html) for innovative programs that meet the needs of students enrolled in the program but do not meet the minimum days and/or hours required to be scheduled to meet learning time regulations. Parents must be informed whenever a program or school in which their child is enrolled seeks such a waiver.

State regulations also state that schools must make a full program of studies available to all students. However, there may be special circumstances where a school may agree to permit an individual student to attend on a part-time basis. Part-time students should be made aware that by not participating in the full school program they may be jeopardizing their ability to meet graduation requirements.

## Curriculum and Instruction

The curricula offered in alternative education pathways must be academically rigorous, accessible to all students, and aligned to state standards and accountability systems. Curriculum and instruction should use [culturally and linguistically sustaining practices](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/culturally-responsive/default.html) to reflect the backgrounds of the student population and is, therefore, understandable and meaningful to the students. Remember that the goal of the alternative education pathway is to help students get to and through graduation with a realistic postsecondary plan. While the academic program is standards-based, it should not be standardized. Rather, it should be personalized for each student and instruction should be offered in a variety of learning modalities based on the student’s strengths and needs. To ensure a continual drive to success, the delivery must be data-driven and include real-time feedback available for students and teachers.

**Academics**

Successful alternative education services have a clear focus on academic learning combined with engaging, creative instruction and a culture of high expectations for all students. Learning opportunities must provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the achievement levels of the [MCAS.](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/results-supplement.html) Academics in alternative education should be equal in rigor to traditional high schools. Students enrolled in alternative education pathways should be moving toward graduation and gaining the skills necessary for post-secondary success.

Alternative pathways may choose to deliver the core content through a traditional curriculum with students earning credits each semester or quarter like the traditional school, or it can be delivered through a competency-based curriculum where students progress via mastery of the learning standards. Some alternative education models may use a blended format where assessments can place students with prior knowledge in next level courses. Alternative education pathways may consider having credit accumulation and acceleration available for students via credit recovery programs or online course completion opportunities. Small class sizes and low student-teacher ratios allow for a more rapid response when a student begins to show signs of failing. Interventions, accommodations, varied learning, and instructional strategies can be personalized to keep students engaged and progressing toward completion.

**Instruction**
Teachers use a variety of effective techniques and instructional strategies to teach students with diverse learning needs, interests, skills, and prior knowledge to enable them to meet the state standards set for all students. Qualified and experienced teachers do not rely upon a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Teachers and programs should use [high quality curriculum](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/impd/).

Teachers modify their instruction so that students of diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and language abilities have an equal opportunity to learn through work that is challenging, interesting, and related to the real-world experiences of each student. Their instruction and teaching strategies reflect their awareness of cultural differences as well as those that might have an adverse effect on student learning or behavior. Teachers of EL students are appropriately licensed, knowledgeable about language acquisition, know how to support ELs, and intertwine cultural differences into curriculum and instruction. Teachers working with students with IEPs are aware of the content of the IEP, including accommodations and interventions, and implement the IEP with fidelity by fulfilling all IEP requirements.

[Universal Design for Learning](http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.WYOGrxXyuUl) (UDL) is a model of content delivery that recognizes the individuality of all learners and helps teachers adapt the curriculum to maximize individual success.

Alternative education pathways provide adequate instructional materials and resources for all students to have full and meaningful opportunities to attain the standards set at the state and local levels. Instructional materials and supplies are developmentally appropriate for all students and are accessible to English learners and students with disabilities, which may include a thorough range of assistive technology devices and services.

Students enrolled in alternative education pathways must, as all other public school students, have access to appropriate science laboratory equipment, access to the library, and computer technology. Resources are sufficient to support adequate teacher-student ratios and include positive behavioral specialists and other necessary support services personnel.

## Social Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which students and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Personalized planning (e.g., through MyCap) allows students and staff the opportunity to identify specific personal/social/emotional and other life skills that need support and further development.

It is important for educators to recognize that students as well as themselves walk into the classroom with different lived experiences, challenges, feelings, and obstacles. Each student and teacher also show up with many varying traditions, strengths, interests, and skills. SEL is focused on educating and caring for the well-being of the whole child, which is also critical work in alternative education pathways. Alternative education pathways embed SEL strategies in the classroom and across content learning. Cooperative learning, team building, and other group activities are practiced to exercise the development of personal/social/emotional behaviors important to the success of the community. The program or school should have an established plan to address student or family crises as they arise. Accommodations for cultural differences are made to allow for personal success within the learning environment.

Social emotional learning is also important because it is one of the pillars that helps address students' mental health needs. The return to school following the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated students' mental health issues. Schools across the Commonwealth saw a rise in the need for mental health services and additional social emotional learning. Alternative education programs and schools should be prepared to address student’s mental health needs as they come whether on an individual or societal scale.

## Contextual Learning

Contextual learning takes place when teachers can present material in a way that students can construct meaning based on their own life experiences. Contextual learning engages students in academic work applied to a context related to their lives, communities, or workplaces. Contextual learning can be a driver of college and career readiness for all students.

One of the most valuable teaching skills is the ability to capture students’ interests and passions and help convert them into activities. There are a variety of models and terms to describe contextual learning including project-based learning, service-learning, and work-based learning. Each one provides students with experiential learning opportunities that connect academic learning, problem resolution, and workplace readiness. Skill attainment such as oral and written communication, accepting directions and criticism with a positive attitude, motivation and taking initiative, understanding roles and responsibilities, and respect in the workplace, in the classroom, or on a team project is key to students being college and career ready.

Alternative education pathways offer contextual learning experiences that engage students in ways that will improve attendance, get students back on track, provide credit toward graduation, and prepare students for post-secondary success.

Career Development Education (CDE) consists of well-designed strategies for teaching and learning in the academic, work readiness, and personal/social domains that will enable students to prepare for a successful future in an economically viable career.

**Career Development Education**

Career Development Education (CDE) offers students an opportunity to gain the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to navigate the myriad options available for post-secondary success. In a formal CDE program, students participate in a well-designed sequence of CDE activities that become progressively deeper and more intensive as the students gain skills and maturity. CDE begins with activities designed to help students understand themselves, their attitudes, beliefs, skills, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and goals.

Following activities of self-discovery, CDE encompasses three stages of development – Awareness, Exploration, and Immersion. Each stage provides different experiences to help students discover careers of interest, engage in activities that allow for deeper exploration of career options, and ultimately have an experience in a field of interest – work-based learning, internship, etc. While this discovery is going on, students will make the connection between what they do now and future planning to identify courses necessary for their career of interest while exploring post-secondary options, including college and technical education, as required by their job of interest.

Alternative education programs offer career development opportunities that enhance the student’s learning and advance their college and career readiness. It is a local decision on whether these opportunities are for high school credit.

Pathways are how career development education happens for many students. The state has options such as [Innovation Career Pathways](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/innovation-pathways/default.html), [Early College](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/early-college/default.html), [Chapter 74](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/cvte/programs/) (including [After Dark](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/cvte/afterdark/default.html) programs), and [Non-Chapter 74](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/cvte/). Alternative education pathways may offer some of these options. In addition, alternative education programs and schools may work with their MassHire partner to provide students with work-based learning experiences.

**Climate and Culture**
Alternative education settings provide an environment for learning that is safe and supportive – socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. The culture of the program is enhanced by mutually positive, respectful, and supportive relationships as well as by the active, attentive, and visible presence of caring adults. It is a high-quality option for students that is supported and respected by the district administration and community.

Feeling safe - socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically - is a fundamental human need. Feeling safe in schools powerfully promotes student learning and healthy development (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

A positive school climate fosters student engagement and includes the principles of positive youth development such as:

* Positive, clear communication of high expectations for learning and behavior
* Student voice is welcomed and promoted in all aspects of the program or school including in the decision-making process
* Encouragement of student responsibility for meeting self-identified goals for learning, behavior, and personal growth
* Guidance and actions demonstrate a shared understanding that all youth are valued, contributing members of the learning community rather than problems to be managed
* Restorative rather than punitive approaches to discipline
* Family engagement is welcomed and encouraged

The alternative education pathway handbook aligns with other handbooks in the district and includes the alternative education philosophy and purpose, and a description of student expectations – academically, behaviorally, and socially. The handbook also includes criteria for returning to the traditional school if that option has been approved and decided by the district/school. The handbook reflects the requirements of a climate and culture that is safe and supportive for all students.

## Teacher Qualifications

There are no special or additional [teacher licensure requirements](http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr7.html) for someone to teach in an alternative education pathway. Alternative education teaching staff must be licensed for the grade levels in which they are teaching and have demonstrated content knowledge for the core academic subjects they are teaching. In addition, teachers must possess an appropriate license or certification if they are to teach English Learners.

Beyond the licensure regulations that are required by law, teachers in alternative pathways believe that every student can succeed and understand the risk factors and life challenges faced by students in the program. Teachers working in alternative education use an asset-based lens to identify and use students' interests, skills, and strengths when designing and implementing instruction. Teachers may modify their instruction so that students of diverse abilities and ethnic, racial, cultural, and language backgrounds have an equal opportunity to learn through work that is challenging, interesting, and related to the real world. Instructional strategies reflect the teacher’s awareness of students' cultural differences and learning styles. Teachers communicate consistent, high expectations for all students throughout the whole learning process.

## Conclusions

Alternative education pathways are designed to meet the needs of students who are not succeeding in the traditional school setting. With a “whole child” approach, alternative programming meets the educational, social, emotional, and intellectual needs of the student while providing a safe and supportive environment in which to learn, plan, and succeed. Given the myriad needs of the individual student, programming is personalized and students are empowered to accept responsibility for their own academic success, social and emotional growth, and attainment of workplace readiness skills.

Enrollment in an alternative education pathway should not be a punishment, but an opportunity for students to discover their strengths, interests, skills, and talents. In this setting, students can align their personal interests with career interests and better understand the connection between their academic learning and their future plans.

Alternative education is another path toward academic success and the development of a viable postsecondary plan. Small student-to-teacher ratio, a focus on student strengths, positive student-adult relationships, flexible scheduling, high expectations, and relentless supports creates a safe and supportive learning environment where student voice is welcome and high expectations are met in the pursuit of academic success and attainable postsecondary plans.