Educational Lifelines for At-Risk Students: Two Programs with Promising Outcomes

Lynn M. Hemmer
Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

And

Patricia E. Uribe
Texas A&M International University

Abstract

This descriptive study examined two types of alternative education settings: The early college high school (ECHS) and the academic alternative school of choice (AASC). Separately, these school designs have received much attention, but never have they been examined in the same context of how alternative schools respond to shifting at-risk student identifiers. The researchers used a conceptual framework of equity that was inspired by opportunity and access reasoning (Espinoza, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010) to examine the design and organizational elements that support the educational needs of at-risk students. The findings suggest that while the two types of schools serve at-risk students, their populations are in fact more different than similar and as such require different school designs. Equity for the at-risk student enrolled in an ECHS is a matter of access and opportunity that affords previously marginalized students the benefit of position. For the student enrolled in AASC, the concept of equity involves first applying interventions in order to prepare the high-risk student for a high school diploma. It is suggested that future analytical and quasi-experimental studies examine outcomes of efficacy and adequacy of both schools.

Keywords: alternative schools, at-risk students, early college high schools, dropouts

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Lynn Hemmer, Ph.D., Department of Educational Leadership and Curriculum & Instruction, Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, 6300 Ocean Dr. FC 224, Corpus Christi, Texas 78412

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A student at risk of dropping out of school is not exclusively a contemporary event, and the number of dropouts is not being reduced over time; in fact, it grows larger each year (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). One recent estimate suggests a student in the United States drops out of high school every 9 seconds (Hupfeld, 2010). Studies suggest as well that these students are likely members of ethnic minority groups, who experience acute academic failure and often live in poverty (Egamba & Crawford, 2003; Griffin, 2002; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). To compound the issue, nearly half of the nation’s African-American students and nearly 40% of Latino students attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm (Uribe, 2010). Even if students do stay in school and graduate, the K-12 system is not providing the knowledge necessary to prepare students for college, with only 32% of all high school graduates being college ready (Greene & Forster, 2003). Therefore, it is essential for policymakers and educators to consider the needs of these students, especially when formulating and designing school settings.

Among a diverse group of educational stakeholders, two types of alternative educational settings are gaining momentum as viable options to ensure at-risk students are afforded equal access and opportunity to earn a high school diploma: Early college high school (ECHS) and academic alternative school of choice (AASC). Interestingly, these two types of schools, which appear to serve a similar type of student (those at-risk) provide different approaches in school design compared to traditional high schools. By school design, we mean the organizational structures, such as school and classroom sizes; personalized instructional practices; defined relationships and connectedness among students and with their teachers, a rigorous curriculum; and the related dynamics of schooling (e.g. professional autonomy) that have a significant influence upon the members, specifically for the students enrolled (Klem & Connell, 2004; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010; Steinberg & Allen, 2002). An analysis of relevant elements contained within these organizational structures can provide valuable insight into the nature of the education of at-risk students. Separately, these two school designs have received much attention, but never have they been examined in the context of how these alternative school structures respond to shifting at-risk dynamics.

To examine this, we focused on these two structural designs using a conceptual framework of equity inspired by opportunity and access reasoning (Espinoza, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010). This article explores how the design and functional elements within these two types of schools support the educational needs of at-risk students. First, we discuss what it means to be at-risk and then provide an overview of alternative schools in general, before focusing on ECHS and AASC schools specifically. Next, a conceptual framework of equal access and opportunity is defined that allowed us to discuss the most salient elements of the two school designs in context of students served. In light of recent policy initiatives targeting the educational successes of at-risk students, this article provides suggestions for research to evaluate the impact of school reforms, including the establishment of ECHS and AASC efforts, to improve at-risk student outcomes.
Background

It is well recognized that a student who drops out of school, profoundly handicaps the student his or herself, and puts the nation at risk (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). Students who leave school prematurely are more likely than high school graduates to become dependent on welfare and other government programs, engage in criminal activities, and experience health problems (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). As a result of the substantial negative impact on both America’s economy and on the individual dropout, the desire to keep students in school until graduation has commanded the attention of many educational stakeholders.

Primary to these concerns is understanding how at-risk students are first identified. Often, at-risk students are identified early in their academic careers on the basis of specific state criteria. These are the students who have encountered academic failure. They are those who lack course credits, are recovering dropouts, are supervised by the court system, have severe discipline problems, or have been expelled (Egemma & Crawford, 2003; Griffin, 2002; Suh et al., 2007). In addition, several states now include students whose native language is something other than English, students who are parenting and/or pregnant, students who are neglected/abused children, and students who are homeless in an at-risk category (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). Being at risk also includes those who are part of a specific ethnic group, who are living in poverty, who live in a single-parent home, who have a poorly educated mother, and/or who are living in an impoverished and/or violent neighborhood or community (Lind, 1997; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985; Presseisen, 1988).

Additionally, society has also arbitrarily assigned the term at-risk to any student who is likely to drop out of high school because of low academic achievement, poor school attendance, and/or poor grade retention (Johnson, 1997). Lewis and McCann (2009) conceived being at-risk as vulnerability and underachievement in an academic, social, and personal sense. However, others have argued that in practice, the term at-risk remains unclear and reflects a lack of consensus about its meaning and criteria (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Giulfoyle, 1989). The nature of being considered at-risk extends beyond state indicators and, as such, there is not a school model that is universal to all types of risk, suggesting that alternate schools for such students may be design-dependent on at-risk constructs. Because of these varying constructs, many different organizational approaches are taken to educate the variety of at-risk students (Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990).

Because of variability in who are considered to be at risk, an examination of the type of educational institution created to serve the needs of at-risk students is warranted. While the majority of children in the United States are educated in traditional public schools (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010), a recent movement has tasked stakeholders in the educational process to create effective alternative pathways for at-risk students to earn high school diplomas and move onto postsecondary credentials. In fact, in recent years, an alliance has emerged between federal policymakers, state governors and legislators, urban school superintendents, philanthropists, and the general public to create different school settings designed specifically for these students (Uribe, 2010).
A Different Design of Schooling

In the last decade, 33 states have crafted education policy directly relating to preventing (and/or recovering) students from dropping out of school (Jobs for the Future [JFF], 2009); such policy often includes ECHSs and AASCs. At the state level, policies relating to these two types of schools give local education agencies greater flexibility to create, sustain, or change programs so that at-risk students may experience greater educational achievement in settings other than traditional schools. Not surprisingly, in addition to policy development, the number of these specialized schools and, consequently their enrollment are on the rise across the county (Carver et al., 2010; Uribe, 2010). Alternative schools, in general, offer a different design of schooling from the traditional school settings. Because of the flexibility afforded to districts, alternative school designs are not universal or easily defined (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1999).

Promising Alternative Education Settings

**Early college high school.** Early College High School is the product of the new and radical movement that is designed to raise student achievement for underrepresented groups in higher education, specifically African American and Hispanics (Uribe, 2010). Having first appeared in 2002, and by 2006-2007 it was estimated that these schools served over 16,000 students in 24 states (Ramirez & Gonzalez, 2010). Today, the ECHS Initiative includes 230 schools in 28 states, serving more than 50,000 students (JFF, n.d.). These schools provide college-connected programming that blends high school and college coursework in an academically rigorous and supportive program designed to motivate students to commit to staying in school. Students enrolled in an ECHS can “simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an Associate’s degree or up to two years of credit toward a Bachelor’s degree—tuition free” (JFF, n.d.). The ECHS Initiative, originally funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is coordinated by Jobs for the Future, and is sponsored by 19 other foundations. However, as the number of these schools increase, several challenges remain in that there is no blueprint from which to build an ECHS; hence, the existing ECHSs all vary in design (Uribe, 2010).

**Academic alternative school of choice.** Unlike ECHSs, AASCs have much history and longevity and, in turn, are quite complex. Contemporary AASCs are often defined as dropout prevention/recovery schools. These schools specifically seek to reengage the rising number out-of-school students or reconnect those at risk of dropping out of school by improving their academic achievement and social competence through individualized learning designed to overcome academic, behavioral, and social barriers to school success (Arnold, Watson, Minatra, & Schwartz, 2006; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Swanson, 2008). The AASCs expedite a student’s progress toward performing at grade level and facilitate high school completion. These alternative education settings are now packaged as unique solutions that districts can use to improve the quality of education for at-risk students and help reduce the number of students dropping out (Hoyle & Collier, 2006).
Conceptual Framework

In the context of educational equity principles, desired student outcomes should indicate the same construct regardless of educational settings (Espinoza, 2007). In terms of this study, this is interpreted to mean that outcomes for at-risk students enrolled in any alternative education setting should have the same meaning, as well as the same construct as students not considered at risk of dropping out of school. While equity is complex and often measured in different ways, certain conceptual issues form the foundation of equity studies. McLaughlin (2010) suggested that with current economic goals seeking to create potential employees and to reduce economic dependency, there is much more focus on states to provide equitable opportunities for all students and provide equal access to a public education.

The idea of translating equity as opportunity and access appears to have been embraced by educational policymakers. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated that all students shall be afforded equal protection to receive an equitable education. By contrast, Hossain and Zeityn (2010) suggested that equitable access to education is more than just equal opportunities. They, and Jordan (2010) place equity discourse as essential in whether the distribution of desired learning outcomes occurs across race, ethnicity, and social classes. Within this equity framework, much is left to human agency to ensure equity (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007). However, educational structures may likely contribute inequities (Yerrick & Beatty-Adler, 2011). Therefore, this study explores how alternative schools structures ensure equity.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive method that made use of the literature of alternative education in general and ECHS and AASC specifically. Descriptive evaluations are undertaken to understand the characteristics of organizations that follow certain common practices. The use of description provides a basis for data acquisition, analysis and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Because inquiry in general entails descriptions, and all description entails interpretation, Sandelowski (2000) suggested that at a minimum, the “facts” about a particular phenomenon, which in this case are two alternative school settings, should be known. The goal of this descriptive study was to provide a profile or to describe relevant aspects of the two alternative school settings in context of the populations they serve and framed by equity concerns. We sought to develop a descriptive framework of these educational settings within which future analytical and quasi-experimental studies could be generated.

Over a 15-month period, from fall 2010 to spring 2012, a systematic review and meta-analysis was conducted to examine, integrate, and analyze research related to organizational structures and school design functions of the two alternative educational settings designed to serve at-risk student populations. With this study, we sought to cast the widest net in beginning our analysis (Glass, 1976). As such, we included major policy documents reflecting key legislative policies regarding alternative education and primary texts that guide alternative education implementation. A review of literature augmented web-based policy documents and provided additional information about organizational structures of alternative schools and best practices used in meeting the needs of their students.
All data included in the review were coded using an instrument that specified the data to be extracted from each eligible document. The coding instrument consisted of two main sections: First, the organizational characteristics of school design, and secondly, the characteristics of students served. Also included in the coding process were items related to bibliographic information, study design, context, nature, and implementation of intervention strategies. All data extracted from the review of policy and literature was entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Each author separately reviewed the data, coding for relevant characteristics. A cross-check analysis was conducted to ensure the reliability of the coding.

The goal was to identify the full range of program structures and instructional domains that constitute best practices. Alternative schools in general, typically involve an often-complex kind of organizational design that is not easily discerned until student needs are identified. To facilitate reporting, results were broken down into one main theme: program structures associated with alternative school design. Aligned with the program structure and further discussed in detail are several subthemes. These include autonomy, students served, school location and learning environment, school personnel selection, school mission and student recruitment. In most cases, ECHSs and AASCs are presented individually in order to highlight their uniqueness. However, in certain subthemes, the schools shared similar characteristics that allowed for a combined presentation.

**Program Structures**

**Autonomy**

Much has been written of the important link between autonomy and effective schools, educators, and students. In theory, when site-based decision-making committees are given the opportunity to make important decisions relating to budget, curriculum, and hiring and training of teachers, these schools are best able to direct resources and take actions on students’ behalf (Dillon, 2011). In addition, schools that utilize a democratic, distributed leadership as opposed to just following rules and regulations can increase organizational capacity, as well as student and staff engagement (Fusarelli, Kowalski, & Petersen, 2011; Woods, 2005). While both ECHSs and AASCs operate within a larger bureaucracy of school district rules and regulations (ECHSs must also adhere to requirements established by their university/college partners), both types of schools are afforded a considerable amount of autonomy. School-based authority over governance, access to school and data, and organizational parameters are but a few of the programmatic structures that are left to the discretion of the schools. In both cases, a distributed school leadership is valued as a means to promote capacity building within the schools.

Understandably, both types of schools must abide by state and district rules and regulations, especially procedures that track attendance, dropout rates, course completion, testing, and accountability. However, in an effort to make these schools more open, participatory, and inclusive, school leaders often engage in shared governance using a distributed leadership style that includes teachers, students, and parents in the decision-making process to continually improve the school in an effort to respond to student needs. Because of an AASC’s distinctiveness, there is considerable autonomy, less bureaucratic focus, and more site-based
control (Alternative Education Committee [AEC], 2005; Loflin, 2003). There is a shared commitment in the AASC to foster leadership skills and self-esteem in all members.

Students Served

**Early college high school.** ECHSs serve grades 9 through 12 and enroll approximately 100 to 125 students per grade level. By all accounts, the ECHS seeks to recruit students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, including low-income students, students of color, first-generation college goers, and English language learners (Uribe, 2010). Students are drawn to the program because they can earn an Associate's Degree or up to two years of college credit thus saving approximately $20,000. In addition, schools are typically smaller than a comprehensive high school and provide more of an individualized learning environment.

Each ECHS is a public school and participates in the school assignment process of its district’s application process (JFF, 2007). According to the ECHS Initiative (2010), 70% of ECHS students are students of color, and 59% of students enrolled are eligible for free or reduced lunches. The same ECHS Initiative revealed that 32 out of the 200 ECHSs across the country serve students who previously dropped out of high school or were at risk of dropping out. Until recently, the specialized programs, or predecessors of ECHSs, aimed to enroll affluent, overachieving students as a way to keep them challenged and give them a head start on college work. However, the goal is quite different now--ECHSs target students who are considered at-risk and whose parents do not have college degrees. For many, ECHSs are opening the door to higher education and better-paying careers.

There have been some misconceptions associated with ECHS students regarding target population. The most common misconception is that recruiters seek out the high achieving students who do well in accelerated classrooms or students who are identified as gifted and talented. Early college high schools, in order to be designated by the state, must adhere to design principles that clearly state that the ECHS must target and enroll a majority of students who are at risk of dropping out of school (economically disadvantaged, English language learners, at risk, and first-generation college-goers). While some gifted students may fall under these categories, the majority does not. In addition, many schools use a lottery system for selecting students once they have been pre-screened and have met the eligibility requirement.

**Academic alternative school of choice.** Typically, students who attend AASCs are readily identified in an at-risk category according to state criteria. Students attending AASCs have traditionally been unsuccessful in regular public schools (Beken, et al., 2010). They enroll in AASCs because of poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, and any other factor associated with early departure from high school (Paglin & Fager, 1997). To date, several studies about at-risk student characteristics have certainly augmented the literature, yet these formal risk factors tell only a part of the story. To illustrate the challenges faced by these students, Ruiz de Velasco et al.’s (2008) study of continuation schools in California found that compared to students in traditional schools, AASC students are more likely to (a) have higher mobility; (b) to have been in foster care or living with a relative other than a parent; (c) are dependent on alcohol and other substance use; and (d) who have experienced violence and victimization. Because of the turbulence in their lives, students are more vulnerable and
susceptible to dropping out of school. For many, the AASC provides an avenue for these students to remain in school.

**School Location and Learning Environments**

**Early college high school.** The ECHSs are typically located on a college or university campus or are a small learning community within a larger high school that is located near a college/university. Successful ECHS provide a personalized learning environment and a program of study using strategies and activities that foster a distinct college-going culture and enable students to build knowledge and skills for college success. Job for the Future (JFF) (2007) referred to this type of environment as a “power of place” in that ECHSs “draw on the college environment and experience to build students’ identity as college goers.” In some states, such as Texas, the course of study enables participating students to receive a high school diploma and either an associate’s degree or 60 semester hours toward a baccalaureate degree (Texas Education Agency, 2011). An academic plan for each student is developed and outlines how students will progress toward this goal. In addition, the program demonstrates a commitment to substantial parental and community involvement in strategies and activities designed to encourage high school completion and success. The ECHS must be a full-day program in which all academic instruction and support services (academic, social, and emotional) are delivered to students. As previously stated, the ECHS must target and enroll a majority of students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

**Academic alternative school of choice.** AASCs are typically located in many different places, and sometimes the location itself is considered alternative, e.g., shopping malls and portable buildings. AASCs have a culture, climate, and pedagogical focus distinct from traditional schools and concentrate on youth development principles (Smith & Thomases, 2001). The AASCs provide supportive relationships, modeling positive social norms, and providing opportunities for skill building, among other things (Aron, 2006). Class configurations loop or are multi-aged, allowing for learning environments designed around “student interests [that] might include an environmental program or vocational academies [. . .] whereas functional-level programs might include high school completion, academic or skill remediation” (State of Wisconsin, 2001, p. 2). Some AASCs maintain hours and schedules that are nontraditional compared to regular schools, have open admission and exit policies, and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students.

**School Personnel Selection**

**Early college high school.** Another vital component to the success of ECHSs is selection of school personnel. Hiring guidelines have been developed to ensure that a highly qualified teaching staff is selected. Highly qualified teachers are selected to participate in the program if they demonstrate the ability to provide accelerated instruction to students in at-risk populations. Teachers are provided with comprehensive and robust professional development that supports the goals and mission of ECHSs. Teachers should hold a master’s degree and go through vigorous training surrounding the three R’s: rigor, relationships, and relevance. Staffing of nonteaching positions is also crucial to the success of the program. Typically, a campus will have a campus administrator, counselor, and nurse on the administrative side. Office staff
consists of a registrar, secretary, and school custodian. Early college high schools traditionally hire anywhere from five to eight teachers the first year, adding teaching staff every year thereafter for the next 3 years, reaching a total of 12-16 teachers after 4 years when the program is considered to be established.

**Academic alternative school of choice.** In AACSs the relationships between staff, faculty, and students are highly personal and authentic and are thought to lead to the development and implementation of a student-centered learning environment. Because of the specialized nature of these schools, staff, faculty, and school administrators are at an AASC voluntarily, and understand, share, and support the school’s philosophy and values (AEC, 2005). Personnel should recognize and be prepared to address issues that hinder learning or feeling part of the community, including social skills development, mental health issues, poverty, and abuse (AEC, 2005). In 2005, the AEC suggested that AASC teachers take the time to understand the intellectual, developmental, emotional, cultural, and social characteristics that make each learner unique; thereby optimizing each child’s learning potential and success.

**School Mission**

**Early college high school.** The mission of the ECHS Initiative (2008) is to provide traditionally underserved students (on campuses with high percentages of at-risk, economically disadvantaged students and first-time college-goers) an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and 60 credit hours toward an associate’s degree and/or a baccalaureate degree in an academically supportive environment, at no cost to the student. These ECHSs provide opportunities for the students to succeed and help create a seamless transition between high school and college. Beyond increasing postsecondary success rates of underserved youth, ECHSs are also used to raise the high school graduation rates (ECHS Initiative, 2008).

**Academic alternative school of choice.** An alternative school of choice has a coherent focus, philosophy of education, and core values about meeting the intellectual, social, emotional, and developmental needs of each child. Because alternative schools of choice have their own history and their own identity, they each have their own mission, making them essentially unique (AEC, 2005). Across the nation, these schools have missions that go beyond academic achievement and include the development of the whole child. As an example, alternative schools in California are expected to maximize opportunities for students to develop positive values of self-reliance, initiative, kindness, spontaneity, resourcefulness, courage, creativity, responsibility, and joy (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.).

**Student Recruitment and Selection**

**Early college high school.** Students are recruited from various middle schools through an application process and selected through a lottery system, interview process, and/or scoring rubric. However, the selection of students is aligned with the ECHS’s mission to serve those who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Therefore, low-income students, students of color, first-generation college-goers, and English language learners are encouraged to apply.
**Academic alternative school of choice.** Academic alternative schools of choice offer non-exclusive admissions policies. The demand of alternative education often exceeds the availability; most district-supported AASCs have historically maintained long waiting lists (AEC, 2005; Caver et al., 2010). Demographics include a heterogeneously mixed population. Alternative schools have traditionally been safe havens for disenfranchised youth as well as those who have a marginal position in society. Many AASCs target specific groups of students, particularly those considered at risk of dropping out of school. Because the schools’ missions are dependent on risk circumstances, pregnant/parenting teens, suspended/expelled students, recovered dropouts, and low achievers are often the target groups served by the AASCs (Aron, 2006; Wells, 1990).

**Discussion of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to gather information about the core principles of two types of alternative schools, ECHSs and AASCs, and to apply an equity principle conceptual framework as a method of evaluating how an alternative school’s organizational structure is used when responding to the educational needs of at-risk students. As the federal government gears up to spend unprecedented amounts of money to strengthen the U.S. education system, one key objective will be to increase the number of at-risk young people who complete at least 1 year of college. Early college high schools are thriving and inspiring a broader strategy for increasing college success for at-risk, low-income students. However, at district-supported AASCs, serious concerns remain. Even though there is a legislative push for districts to develop and implement AASCs, issues remain in practice because students with high-risk backgrounds often “attend schools with fewer credentialed teachers, fewer resources and in less well-maintained facilities” (Baker & Linn, 2004, p. 48).

While the salience and strength of individual school design varied with these two types of schools, the primary goal of their mission is to serve a population of students considered at-risk. Both types of schools are viewed as an alternative approach to completing high school, but their design elements reflect different philosophies. The goal of ECHSs is to provide a smooth transition between high school and college and thus eliminate the divide between the two. The AASCs seek to reengage, prevent, and recover student dropouts long enough for them to receive their high school diploma.

The data suggest that while both schools initially appear to serve a similar population, the evidence suggests that their populations are in fact more different than similar and, as such, they need different school designs. For instance, ECHSs are serving a target population—those who are considered at-risk, but more specifically, minorities who live in poverty and who are underrepresented in higher education. ECHSs attract students who traditionally have not been included in higher education from their schools of residence by providing opportunities for them to acquire college credit while earning their high school diploma.

Students enroll in AASCs as an alternative to dropping out of school. Interestingly, students who attend ECHSs may be identified as at-risk per statutory indicators while students enrolled in AASCs are considered high-risk due to their multiple statutory and/or social risk indicators.
For at-risk students enrolled in ECHSs, the data suggested that equity is a matter of access and opportunity to afford previously marginalized students the benefit of position. For students enrolled in AASCs, the concept of equity involves first applying interventions in order to prepare and ready a high-risk student for a high school diploma. This division between the types of risk circumstances counters the equity discourse that calls for high-level achievement standards that are measurable for all students (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). In this case, high-level achievement standards are dependent on the nature of risk carried by a student.

As evidenced by the data, both types of schools rely on the teachers, administrators, and staff to create a deeply caring school environment that emphasizes personalization, support, caring, cooperation, and, perhaps most significantly for the high-risk student enrolled in an AASC, acceptance. In both of these specialized schools, relationships are built and nurtured in order to be responsive to personalized instructional style differences. For an ECHS, there may be some constraints of instructional innovations considering the partnerships between two education agencies, but on the positive side, there is no limitation to academic rigor. In contrast, students enrolled in an AASC may be exposed to innovative teaching practices and contribute to developing their own holistic assessments, but research shows that much time is spent on developing relationships to the point that the academic rigor is limited (Hemmer, 2011). Many AASCs concentrate on offering core basic courses, credit recovery, or accelerated credit, and at-risk students in these schools typically do not have access to a rigorous curriculum (Kim & Taylor, 2008). This suggests that educational inequities remain.

The findings also suggest hiring practices in the two types of schools are different. Early college high schools have a process in place to ensure that teachers who are hired are most appropriate to ensure academic rigor and have the capacity to develop relationships with students, parents, and colleagues. In addition, once hired, ECHS teachers go through professional development in order to gain the tools necessary to best serve their at-risk population. For the AASC, more often than not, assignment to these schools is either by way of central office decisions or, more likely, a traditional application process. Once hired, these teachers are not afforded any specified professional development to help them service a concentrated at-risk student population.

**Implications for Future Studies**

It is encouraging to see changes in state dual-enrollment policies that allow a wider range of students to benefit from free college courses in high school. At least seven states have instituted dual-enrollment policies that reflect the early college philosophy: Motivate students to become college ready by enabling them to prepare for and take college courses for free. At the national level, the Fast Track to College Act and other bills pending in Congress would provide funding for early colleges and dual-enrollment options that come with intensive academic support. However, we must continue to place district-supported AASCs in a position to invigorate K-12 public education and to promote education reform from within.

Both types of schools are equally important in our educational system. The idea behind alternative schooling was—and still is—to afford all students an equitable education. For some low-income, at-risk students, students of color, and first-generation college-goers, it means
access and opportunity to college-level work. For high-risk students attending AASCs, equity may be defined differently to mean interventions that allow them to remain in school long enough to earn a high school diploma. Given the ambitious, if not different, goals for both types of schools, questions arise as to how best to measure efficacy and adequacy outcomes of these schools. While some states argue that the measures assess change in learning readiness, engagement, and educational goal attainment as well as academic achievement and cognitive growth, the results of this study suggest that a school’s performance should be compared not with that of other schools but rather with its own performance over time. Exploring how these two alternative school settings are held accountable may unmask other contradictions that are embedded in public policy debates on how best to respond to our nation’s at-risk and high-risk students.

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