



Is it Really Alternative - or Just a Different Address?

The work of alternative education is to intentionally redesign the system itself, including course design, use of time, feedback, and pathways to credit and graduation.

In my work supporting alternative schools and programs, I've found that too often continuation and alternative settings inherit the same graduation requirements, schedules, grading systems, instructional routines, and pacing that failed students the first time. They are simply in a smaller setting and frequently with even fewer resources. In many cases, rigid credit requirements minimize flexibility for students and instead condemn them to hours of tedious, computer-based credit recovery.

In examining our design principles of [Reimagining Alternative Education](#) and the student-centered systems described in *From Ghosts to Graduates*, one message surfaces:

Alternative education is not defined by placement, program name, or campus type. It is defined by the learning experience we intentionally design for students who have already been marginalized by traditional systems.

If the experience does not fundamentally change how students learn, how time works, how feedback is delivered, how credits are recovered and accrual is accelerated, and how progress is measured, then we have not created an alternative. We have only changed the address.

Research on effective alternative and continuation settings consistently points to the same design conditions that improve engagement, persistence, and credit completion:

- strong relationships and a sense of belonging,
- flexible structures that remove time and pacing as barriers,
- instruction built on clarity and relevance, and
- assessment systems that communicate learning, not compliance.

In other words, success in alternative education is not driven by placement. **It is driven by design.**





CLS Insights

Students who arrive in continuation and alternative programs rarely do so because they lack ability. More often, they arrive after repeated experiences of misalignment between how they learn, what they need, and how traditional schools are structured. When schools intentionally redesign experiences around clear learning intentions, success criteria, relevant tasks, and timely feedback, students are more likely to re-engage and complete meaningful work.

A Reimagined Alternative school asks different leadership questions about their school:

- Is the master schedule designed to recover and accelerate learning?
- Are grading practices removing barriers or reinforcing them?
- Are our graduation and credit systems creating pathways or bottlenecks?
- Are learning intentions and success criteria clear enough for students who have learned to stop trying?
- Are supports proactive, or only triggered after failure?

In *From Ghosts to Graduates*, I describe the shift from reaction to intention. Students become “ghosts” not because they lack potential, but because the system no longer works for them. The work of alternative education is to intentionally redesign the system itself, including course design, use of time, feedback, and pathways to credit and graduation..

This is not about lowering expectations. It is about removing the structural barriers that prevent students from ever reaching them.

Your leadership action step this week:

*Walk your campus and ask this one question in every learning environment, every period, and every support structure: **What is truly alternative about this experience for students?***

If the alternative isn't clear, we still have more work to do.

Because... you are not alternative if you don't provide an alternative. You are just a different location.



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