

# Alaska Alternative Schools Coalition - Impact Report

Executive Summary March 2025



## Connection to the Behavioral Health Roadmap

*The Behavioral Health Roadmap calls for the DBH to “Build collaborative partnerships with the DEED to support coordination and clearly identify roles and responsibilities of supporting youth behavioral health in schools.” - Page 62*

## DOH Arcs of Effort

The Department of Health (DOH) Arcs of Effort are supported by the partnership between the Division of Behavioral Health and the Department of Education and Early Development, specifically, Strengthening the Behavioral Health System and Suicide and Overdose Prevention.

AASC provides support in schools to the most at-risk youth across Alaska, aligning with the goals of the Behavioral Health Roadmap (Action Item #3 – Mental Health in Schools) and the Strengthening the System II, Alaska’s Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Program Plan (Area of Focus 1 – Early Childhood and Youth). Evaluation and outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of this grant program serving youth in their school environments.

This project also supports measures laid out in the Healthy Alaskans 2030 and includes substance misuse prevention classes. This partnership has been in effect since 2010, first as prevention grantees and then as direct grantees through an RSA.

*Highlight: Homer Flex offered 30 separate recreational activities and 30 school-wide community trainings on trauma-engaged responses to support students’ behavioral health.*

## Alternative School Student Profile

Alaska’s Alternative Schools (defined as those serving high-risk students) provide a spectrum of critical educational and health-enhancing services to Alaska’s most vulnerable youth. These 11

schools primarily serve youth who have been unable to achieve academic success in traditional school environments for reasons as diverse as homelessness, poverty, untreated mental health issues (depression, social anxiety), teen parenting, substance misuse, and unaddressed health needs. **In 2023-2024, nearly 1,200 students were enrolled in just the 11 schools strictly designated as alternative.**

## Risk Factors

The 2023 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) surveyed both alternative and traditional high schools. A comparison of results on students’ likelihood of experiencing risk factors is in **Table 1** below.

**Table 1. Risk Factors for Alternative School Students Compared to Traditional School Students.**

Risk Factor	Alternative Schools	Traditional Schools
Anxiety in the past year	46.7%	34.5%
Depression in the past year	61.6%	43.2%
Current Marijuana Use	43.9%	17.8%
Made Suicide Plan	27.8%	20.5%
Current Alcohol Use	32.9%	16.9%
Experienced Homelessness	24.6%	10.6%
Forced Sexual Intercourse	27.5%	10.3%

Fortunately, alternative schools are uniquely designed to focus on students with behavioral health needs. *Protective factors*, such as connectedness, help mitigate the impact of risk factors and are addressed later in this report.

Measures related to experiences before alternative school students entered high school also show increased likelihood of experiencing risk factors. The measures below are closely linked to early trauma and stress experienced by students.

**Table 2. Early Risk Factors for Alternative School Students and Traditional School Students.**

Risk Factor before Age 13	Alternative Schools	Traditional Schools
Sexual Intercourse	7.9%	3.8%
Used Alcohol	22.5%	15.2%
Used Marijuana	19.7%	8.0%
Used Tobacco	17.3%	7.7%

### Addressing Risk Factors

The Alaska Alternative School Coalition (AASC) has prioritized mental health and substance misuse as key areas of focus. AASC has increased focus around providing students with coping strategies and resilience techniques, with the intended outcome of decreasing depression, anxiety, and substance misuse.

Alaska still has some of the highest rates of suicide in the nation, with YRBS results indicating that adolescents die by suicide at a rate almost 17% higher than Alaskan adults. In 2019, 19.7% of Alaskan youth attempted suicide in the last year, 38.1% felt sad or hopeless, and less than half felt strong social support.

*Highlight:* Revilla Middle School offered at-risk students **36 opportunities to meet with social workers in small groups**, along with **144 weekly workout and healthy snack preparation** guidance sessions to address their holistic needs.

There is one promising **YRBS** measure for alternative school students, however: namely, that **in alternative schools, the rate of suicide attempts has remained steady since 2015 despite rising depression rates**. Unfortunately, this does not hold for traditional schools, where suicide attempts have increased from 11% to 19% during that same period of time. Given their near universal focus on suicide prevention and coping skills in alternative schools, this may be an important data point for all schools in Alaska to consider.

### Making a Difference

**DBH Question:** *Is the funding making a difference? And if so, what is that difference?*

**Answer: Yes.** Alternative schools provide Alaska’s most vulnerable students with critical educational and health-enhancing services, for an estimated cost of **only \$300 per student, per year**. Because they are uniquely designed to focus on students with behavioral health needs, alternative schools provide students with coping strategies and resilience techniques in order to reduce relational poverty, and to decrease depression, anxiety, and substance misuse. When they attend alternative schools, Alaska’s most vulnerable students are with staff who genuinely care about them. **This is one of the most important protective factors a vulnerable student can experience.**

### Alternative Schools as Leaders in Developing Behavioral Health Supports

Since 2008, alternative schools have been instrumental spaces for developing expertise in handling child and youth mental health challenges. Since then, it has become increasingly clear that supports used in alternative

schools are applicable in all schools; and further, that alternative schools can function as **leaders in developing behavioral health supports for all schools.**

## Graduation Rates

**DBH Question:** *How many students have completed their high school diploma requirements during their time in the program?*

**Answer:** **2,059 students** graduated (effectively completing their high school diploma requirements) in alternative schools between 2018 and 2024. It can be assumed that a very large percentage of these students would not have graduated without supportive alternative settings designed for them.

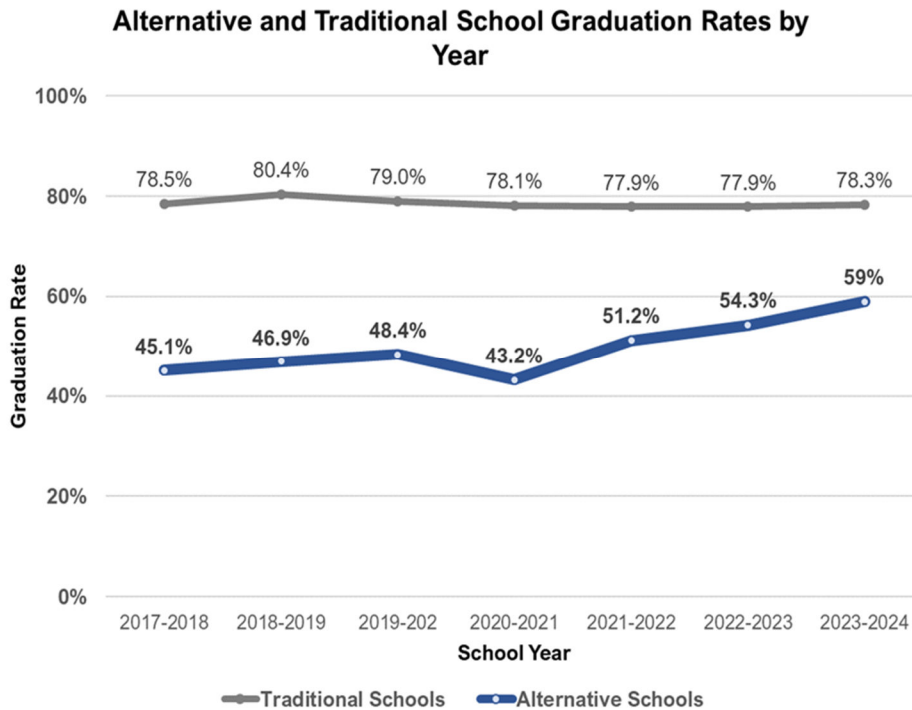
## Improvement in Graduation Rates

*“The majority of these students (graduates) have stated that they would have dropped out if it wasn’t for [Pacific High School] PHS and the programming offered here...Furthermore, the majority of our graduates continue to live in Sitka and have become invaluable members of the community. Many work in the trades, banks, real estate, commercial fishing, and beyond, leading meaningful lives.” - Pacific High School*

**DBH Question:** *Has there been an improvement in graduation rates over the last five years?*

**Answer:** As shown in **Chart 1** below, graduation rates have improved nearly every year from 2018-2024 despite many students entering alternative schools significantly credit deficient.

**Chart 1. Alternative and All Schools' Four-Year Graduation Rates by School Year**



- Benny Benson reported a **17.6% increase** in 4-year graduation rates and a **7.8% increase** in 5-year graduation rates from 2016 to 2024.
- Yaakoosge Daakahidi High School reported consistently graduating **over 80%** of all eligible students, though the principal estimates that the graduation rate may even be closer to 90% this year.
- S.A.V.E. High School reported a **13.1% increase** in 5-year graduation rates from 2020 to 2024.
- Homer Flex reported a **17% increase** in graduation rates from 2020 to 2024.
- Burchell High School reported a **20% increase** in graduation rates from 2020 to 2024.

## Measuring Success

**DBH Question:** *What outcome measures are being used and reported in order to track progress?*

**Answer:** Outcome measures vary by school district, but common measures used to track progress and positive outcomes include **academic growth**, graduation rates, credit attainment, increased feelings of **connectedness**, and increased experience of **protective factors** in school settings.

## Academic Success

Burchell High School in the Mat-Su Borough School District measures academic growth. They recently reported the following results, based on student Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) scores, in **Table 4** below. Student MAP scores in Math, Reading, and Language **all showed consistent improvement** from 2022 to 2025.

**Table 3. Burchell Alternative High School Recent MAP Scores (Student Percentiles)**

	Spring 2022	Spring 2023	Spring 2024	Winter 24-25
<b>Math</b>	27%	30%	42%	56%
<b>Reading</b>	34%	39%	41%	50%
<b>Language</b>	33%	35%	41%	45%

## Connectedness and Protective Factors

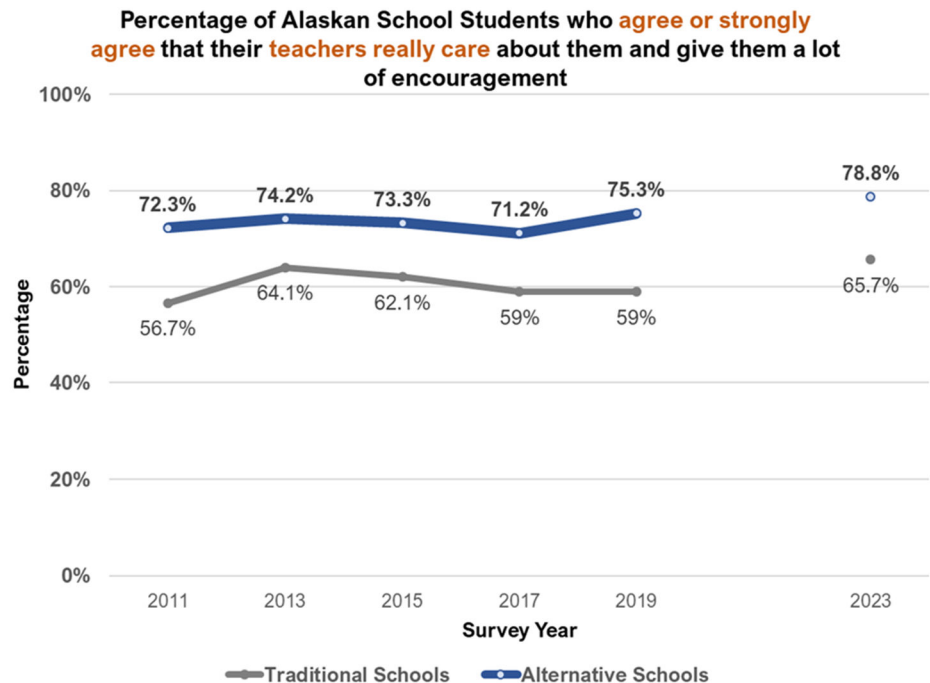
*“The school would not exist without [this grant]. Funds are used to create a special family environment that allows students that are unable to function in larger schools to thrive. Without these funds our ability to build strong relationships with our students would be severely compromised.” – Kenai Alternative High School Principal*

Alternative schools’ support for at-risk students can be measured through academic progress along with connectedness and resilience factors, and students’ feelings of being cared for by teachers.

Students in alternative schools report feeling more cared for by their teachers than students at traditional schools. This is especially important for struggling students, since YRBS data shows that **feeling their teachers care is a key protective factor against various risks.**

**Chart 2**, taken from the Alaska YRBS, highlights these results.

**Chart 3. Teachers Care Protective Factor.**



3. \*The 2023 answer order was slightly modified.

## Returning to Traditional Schools

**DBH Question:** *How many students returned to their community schools after participating in alternative school programs?*

**Answer:** **Very few students return to community schools after enrolling in alternative schools.**

Returning students to traditional school settings is not the goal of Alaska's alternative schools. Rather, the goal of alternative education is to successfully graduate students and facilitate their successful transitions to postsecondary educational options or careers.

Alternative schools serve students who have significant difficulties achieving academic success in traditional school settings. As a result, very few students return to traditional schooling after experiencing alternative school environments specifically designed to support their success.

### Highlights:

Over 3 sessions, 212 students at Burchell High School were celebrated for **attendance and academic achievement** (some more than once!)

Pacific High School offered 20 opportunities for students to meet with **local partners and employers.**

## Making a Difference: Testimonials

Below are additional quotes collected from principals and staff at alternative schools regarding the impact of this grant.

**“One of the great uses of the money is helping us promote and facilitate our community coaching program. Once a week for 9 weeks a semester, we pair at-risk juniors and seniors with inspiring professionals who mentor them to achieve their goals and dreams with practical advice and guidance.”**

- Burchell High School

**“Yes - we are able to get more engagement from students who otherwise would surely fall through the cracks without the food, fun, organized activities, training, and so much more that the grants provide!”**

- Yaakoosge Daakahidi High School

**“Our students are more engaged in the community we've created, which increases their attendance and credit completion. Our graduation rate has improved over the last 2 years, in large part because of the way we've used the alternative grant for student connectedness.”**

- Revilla Middle and High School

**“YES! The funding allows us to provide elective credit opportunities for our students. It also includes funding for staff and contracted services to provide those opportunities!”**

- Benny Benson Alternative High School