State Opportunity Policy Ratings: How State Policies & Systems Support Opportunity Schools and Students

Background

The Momentum Strategy & Research (Momentum) team has been involved in shaping policy, conducting research and performance evaluations, and working with states, school districts, and schools to select measures and/or develop performance frameworks and/or alternative accountability systems that are well aligned with Opportunity Schools' (also known as alternative education campuses (AEC), alternative schools, second chance schools, or by other names depending on the state) missions, programming, and target student populations for over 20 years.

To inform this work, Momentum developed and annually maintains two key databases using publicly available data from state and federal department of education websites. The first includes the lists of all identified Opportunity Schools and alternative education programs identified by states and the corresponding enrollment and outcome data on graduation rates, state assessment results, attendance measures, and dropout rates. The second includes each state's policies that define Opportunity Schools and alternative education options, the entities that are eligible to operate them, and the students that are meant to be served by them; as well as policies and systems documentation on how the Opportunity Schools are evaluated by the state.

Using our decades of experience working with and on behalf of Opportunity Schools and the policies and systems documentation for all 50 states, Momentum has developed a minimum set of standards for what needs to be in place at the state level for Opportunity Schools to thrive as a recognized and important part of the K-12 public education system.

States can go further to support Opportunity Schools in a number of ways, but these minimum criteria ensure transparency and accountability for all entities that provide "alternative" education to our country's most underserved and, often, invisible youth.

Rating Criteria

The ratings for each of the seven criteria are based on the written word found in statutes, rules, and regulations, as well as information presented on department of education websites and in the guidance and technical documents published on those websites.

The table below highlights the seven minimum criteria for state policies and systems that support Opportunity Schools and the student who enroll in them, and a brief explanation of why meeting the criteria is important

Minimum Criteria to Support Opportunity Schools and Students	Why the Criteria is Important
1. Alternative education is defined in statute, rules, and/or regulations.	By clearly identifying the purpose of alternative education, the entities that are eligible to operate them, the roles and responsibilities of the state, districts, and schools for establishing alternative education status, and the students meant to enroll in them, the state ensures transparency in the implementation of the policy.
2. School are identified as the entities that are eligible to provide alternative education programing.	As schools are evaluated by the state department of education, and programs are not, specifying that alternative education be delivered by schools ensures that all stakeholders are aware of their students' outcomes. Program outcomes are often masked because they are reported as part of the 'sending high school's" or the district's overall results.
3. Charter schools are specifically named as eligible entities to provide alternative education programing.	There should be no limitations on which schools—traditional, charter, state run, or others—that are eligible to operate as an Opportunity School. Given the flexibility afforded charter schools, charters can often provide more innovative solutions to re-engaging and educating students than non-charter schools can.
4. Policy clearly specifies that a statewide alternative accountability system be developed and adopted by the state department of education (or other entity, per state legal context).	This is important for two reasons. First, Opportunity Schools, by design, enroll students with a very different student profiles than traditions schools, and measures to evaluate them need to take that into consideration. Second, having an appropriate accountability system for Opportunity Schools ensures all stakeholders have access to the schools' student outcomes.
5. Policy specifies, or the implemented alternative accountability system includes academic outcomes that align with the missions and intended student populations of Opportunity Schools.	Typically, students enroll in an Opportunity School multiple years behind in reading and math skills, whereby the schools' aggregate achievement on state assessments tend to be far lower than traditional schools. Using measures that help to "level the playing field" for Opportunity Schools ensures that they continue to focus on the highest need students and that their data reflects the schools' successes and challenges in a meaningful way. Examples include weighing academic growth more heavily than academic achievement, combining academic achievement and growth

	into a single measure, giving bonus points for students who are meeting or exceeding standard, and/or including locally administered, nationally normed assessments of ELA and math as evidence of academic skill attainment and growth.
6. Policy specifies, or the implemented alternative accountability system includes, an expanded definition of high school completion, such as including extended cohort year graduation rates, industry approved certifications, pathway completion, and/or receiving a GED.	In addition to being behind in math and reading skill, Opportunity Schools serving high school students tend to enroll students who are already behind their high school cohort with respect to credit accumulation. Extending the timeline for graduation for these students gives Opportunity Schools the time to give students the content knowledge needed to be truly prepared for post-secondary life. Expanding what it means to complete high school beyond a diploma also motivates some students to re-engage in their education because they will leave with a certificate that matters more to them and puts them ahead when finding work after completing high school.
7. Policy specifies, or the implemented alternative accountability system includes, an expanded definition of post-secondary readiness to include military and workforce readiness, in addition to college and career readiness.	Many states have begun to incorporate workforce and/or military readiness into their traditional high school frameworks because they recognize that all options should be equally valued. Many Opportunity Schools offer programing in career and technical education because it attracts prior dropouts and students who did not find their traditional high school's programming relevant. Acknowledging industry certification and military enlistment as valid post-secondary options gives appropriate credit to the Opportunity Schools and sends the message to all students that their post-secondary choice is valued.

Scores and Ratings

Here we summarize the details on scoring for each criterion of the State Opportunity Policy Ratings rubric, and how the overall state rating is assigned.

Minimum Criteria to Support Opportunity Schools and Students	Possible Scores/Ratings
1. Alternative education is defined in statute, rules, and/or regulations.	1 = Yes 0 = No
2. School are identified as the entities that are eligible to provide alternative education programing.	2= Schools only 1.5= Charter schools only 1= Both schools and programs 0 = Programs only
3. Charter schools are specifically named as eligible entities to provide alternative education programing.	1 = Yes 0.5 = Partial[a] 0 = No
4. Policy clearly specifies that a statewide alternative accountability system be developed and adopted by the state department of education (or applicable entity, per state legal context).	1 = Yes 0.5 = Partial[b] 0 = No
5. Policy specifies, or the implemented alternative accountability system includes, academic outcomes that align with the missions and intended student populations of Opportunity Schools.	2 = Yes, more than one 1 = Yes 0 = No
6. Policy specifies, or the implemented alternative accountability system includes, an expanded definition of high school completion, such as extended cohort year graduation rates, industry approved certifications, CTE pathway completion, and/or receiving a GED.	2 = Yes, more than one 1 = Yes 0 = No
7. Policy specifies, or the implemented alternative accountability system includes, an expanded definition of post-secondary readiness to include military and workforce readiness, in addition to college and career readiness.	2 = Yes, more than one 1 = Yes 0 = No

a. A partial rating occurs when charter schools are not specified as eligible in the alternative accountability policies, but alternative charter schools are specified in the charter school policies or guidance documentation.
b. A partial rating occurs when an alternative accountability system is specified for only a sub-set of Opportunity Schools, or when the state does not have an alternative accountability system, but their traditional accountability system includes measures, metrics, or indicators that are well suited for Opportunity Schools.

The scores for each criterion are summed up to reach a total score, which ranges from zero (0) to 11. States that have no alternative education policy automatically receive a zero (0) across all seven criteria. States that have alternative education policy, but do not have policy calling for the development of an

alternative accountability system (whether or not the state identifies schools as the entities that are eligible to provide alternative education programing) automatically receive a zero for the remainder of the accountability system criteria, unless their traditional accountability system includes measures, metrics, or indicators that are well suited for Opportunity Schools (see North Dakota as an example).

The final rating for each state is assigned based on the total score ranges, as provided in the table below.

Total Score Range	State Opportunity Policy Rating
0 – 1.5	Far Below Minimum Opportunity Policy Standards
2 – 3.5	Below Minimum Opportunity Policy Standards
4 – 5.5	Approaching Minimum Opportunity Policy Standards
6 – 8.5	Meets Minimum Opportunity Policy Standards
9 – 11	Exceeds Minimum Opportunity Policy Standards

These criteria will continue to be vetted by the field and updated, as needed. Please feel free to provide your feedback by sending an email to info@momentum-sr.org, and add "State Opportunity Policy Rating" to the subject line.