Exploration Supports: Alternative Education Campus & Online School Reviews

Introduction

The Diagnostic Review and Planning process for Alternative Education Campuses (AECs) and Online Schools is ideal for schools that are working to prioritize improvement efforts. The support started in 2018 and has provided support to more than 30 AECs or online schools. The service is meant to help schools reflect on progress, prioritize improvement efforts, and develop implementation plans. The service is designed based on the unique needs and focus of AECs and online schools.

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1. **Self-Assessment and Reflection:** Using AEC or online school specific CDE tools and a staff survey, school leadership teams conduct a self-assessment on current areas of strength and growth.
2. **On-Site Diagnostic Review Site Visit:** A team of 2-3 CDE staff and a current school leader will spend at least one day in-person at the school to conduct a diagnostic review examining the design, ongoing operations, and practices of the school. The review includes school plans and materials, interviews of staff, students and families, and visits to hallways, classrooms and other areas. CDE will provide a formal report that will highlight strengths and include prioritized recommendations.
3. **Follow-up Support and Implementation Planning:** Through 3-6 monthly check-ins, CDE will review the formal report, support prioritization, and assist with development of an implementation and short cycle plan aligned to the Unified Improvement Plan. Many schools also conduct site visits or other collaboration opportunities with other schools.

Framework for Effective Practices. CDE staff have developed a framework for effective practices of AEC and online schools. This framework uses the Vision for Quality Schools and Four Domains framework that CDE uses across school Improvement initiatives. The identified practices were adapted based on research from the National Alternative Education Associations (NAEA) 15 Exemplary Practices, national research on effective high school practices, rubrics from North American Council for Online Learning (iNACOL) (now known as the Aurora Institute) on online and blended learning, and observation of Colorado schools and structures for alternative education and online learning.

Eligibility & Prioritization

Eligibility. Schools that meet the following criteria are eligible to apply:

- Designated Alternative Education Campus (AEC) or online school for the previous and current school years. All types of AECs are eligible including online, blended, charter, and district-run schools; and
- Schools identified for improvement under ESSA as Comprehensive Support (CS), Targeted Support (TS), or Additional Targeted Support (ATS); and/or
- Schools with a state identification School Performance Framework plan type of Priority Improvement, Turnaround, or On Watch

Prioritization. If not all EASI proposals can be funded, proposals that meet grant expectations will be funded in the order of the EASI school-level prioritization list. Schools with the highest number of prioritization points will be funded first. Details on how prioritization points are calculated and the points for each EASI eligible school are available on the EASI Resources and Technical Assistance webpage.

Limitations. AEC and Online Schools Review is a direct CDE support. The number of new schools awarded each grant cycle may be limited due to CDE staff capacity. If not all requests for AEC and Online Schools Review can be supported, prioritization points and service capacity in a single district or region may be considered.

Program Considerations & Fit

Program Considerations. This support is a short-term commitment to planning for and implementing effective practices.

Program Fit. Schools and districts that have been most successful in this support have been willing to reflect on current practice and look for ways to improve. It can be used as a good launching point for improvement efforts and some applicants apply for additional funding to support larger implementation after completion of the Diagnostic Review. Support from a principal supervisor or district liaison helps build long term support of the school's plan. This support should not be done in combination with other Diagnostic Review support.

Sequence of Program Support

The sequence of the work is determined in partnership CDE through the AEC and Online Schools Review support. The sequence of the work will include four components including diagnostic review, improvement planning, stakeholder engagement, and early implementation as illustrated in the diagram below.



Available Funds & Duration

Available Funds. Applicants may request up to the maximum award amount for a school. Awards may be up to $42,000. The recommended fund allocation is $10,000 for the diagnostic review, $10,000 for stakeholder engagement, $2,000 for improvement planning, and $20,000 for early implementation. There is no cost to CDE for this service.

Duration. Program support is designed to support schools or LEAs for a period of 18 months (2026-27 to 2027-28).

Allowable Use of Funds

Funds are intended to support the four components of Exploration Supports. Expenses related to stakeholder engagement, improvement planning, and early implementation must align to the recommendations from the diagnostic review. Allowable use of funds includes costs associated with:

- Review visit or staff time to support the visit (e.g., stipends, substitutes, etc.)
- Stakeholder engagement (e.g. stipends, translation, childcare, etc.)
- Development of an improvement plan (or strategic plan, at the district level)
- Early implementation of the plan activities (e.g., leadership or teacher development, stipends to support job-embedded training or teacher collaboration, etc.).
- Travel to other school sites
- Other expenses to support process (e.g., stipends, substitutes, etc.)

Budget Recommendations For the application submission, the budget should include each of the components of Exploration Supports- review, stakeholder engagement, improvement planning, and early implementation. General placeholders in the budget are acceptable for stakeholder engagement, improvement planning, and early implementation as specific activities will be determined by the outcome of the diagnostic review.

For example, the draft budget for Holistic Review may include the following budget lines:

- Year 1 (2026-27)- Specific expenses outlined to support diagnostic review visits up to $10,000 and often includes extra staff pay or stipends). Any remaining amount should be requested in the placeholders for other components of Exploration Supports.
- Year 1 (2026-27) Placeholder for stakeholder engagement activities as part of diagnostic review and improvement planning for $10,000.
- Year 1 (2026-27)- Placeholder for improvement planning activities as determined by the outcome of the diagnostic review for $2,000.
- Year 1 (2026-27)- Placeholder for early implementation activities as determined by the outcome of the diagnostic review for $20,000.

Note: If entering indirect costs, the total request amount may not exceed the maximum allowable amount.

Applicants should request the maximum award amount in the Year 1 (2026-27) budget. If awarded Exploration Supports, funds are issued in Year 1 (2026-27) and may carryover into Year 2 (2027-28).

Indirect Costs. Applicants may elect to include indirect costs in the application budget. Indirect cost rates based on the district's restricted indirect cost rate. The total request amount (indirect costs plus other budget lines) may not exceed the maximum allowable amount. There are some exclusions for distorting items that apply, such as the limitation of indirects on the first $50,000 on provider contracted services. Grantees should note that indirect costs are only allowed on federal awards. If the grantee receives a state award, indirect costs must be removed during the post-award revision process. More information regarding indirect cost rates is available on CDE's School Finance webpage at https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/icrc.

Fund Considerations.

- Funds from this opportunity must be used to **supplement and not supplant** any federal, state, and local funds currently being used to provide activities.
- Post-award revisions must be submitted and approved in the online system prior to incurring expenses. Any expenses incurred prior to approval are the responsibility of the LEA. All post-award revisions must be approved by 06/30.
- For federal awards, funds must be obligated by 09/30 and requested by 11/1 of each respective fiscal year.
- For state awards, funds must be obligated by 06/30 of the final year of the grant cycle.
- A school or district may carry funds forward in alignment with funding source restrictions and with CDE approval. At the end of the grant performance period, any non-requested federal funds are reverted and any unspent state funds must be returned to the state.
- CDE may terminate a grant award upon thirty days' notice if it is deemed by CDE that the applicant is not fulfilling the requirements of the funded program as specified in the approved project application, or if the program is generating less than satisfactory results.
- Multi-year or future award year amounts are contingent on allocations of state and federal funds to CDE in each respective fiscal year.

Important Program Dates

Program Dates	Activity
September- December	Meet with the appropriate school and district teams to discuss interest in applying for EASI support and develop an application. If needed, meet with supporting CDE staff.
December	Application due
January	Award notifications
February	Orientation and check-in
February-May	Diagnostic Review site visit and report
May-October	Follow-up Support and Implementation Plan

Evaluation and Reporting

Each grantee of the program must, at a minimum, agree to the following evaluation, reporting, and/or progress monitoring components:

- Incorporate findings into their Unified Improvement Planning Process
- Provide feedback to CDE on the tool and process that are used as part of this service
- Final Expenditure Report (FER) in GAINS each fiscal year by 09/30.

Note: All data collected will protect personally identifiable information (PII) protected and is only reported on an aggregate level for purposes of evaluating the EASI support and/or supporting future program improvements.

Program Assurances

LEA Commitments:

- Ensure the LEA and staff will not discriminate against anyone regarding race, gender, national origin, color, disability, or age.
- LEA will be required to submit Final Expenditure Reports (FER) the end of each fiscal year.
- LEA understands that unobligated funds state funds will be returned to CDE and unobligated federal funds will be rescinded at the conclusion of the grant cycle.
- Funds will be used to supplement and not supplant any federal, state, and local moneys currently being used to provide services and grant dollars will be administered by the appropriate fiscal agent.
- Funded projects will maintain appropriate fiscal and program records and fiscal audits of this program will be conducted by the grantees as a part of their regular audits.
- If any findings of misuse of these funds are discovered, project funds will be returned to CDE.

Related Resources & Information

Colorado Department of Education's EASI Website

www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/easiapplication