
Alternative Education in CT

An invitation to district and program leaders
September 2026



Your contributions
will inform a
statewide picture of
how alternative
education is designed,
staffed, funded, and
delivered in
Connecticut

We are asking for two introductions, and
20-60 minutes from the people who run
your alternative education programs

What we're asking of you:

- 1 An introduction to your alternative education coordinator and program administrators
 - We will ask them to complete a 20-minute survey, and an optional 45-minute interview
 - Survey link: [here](#)
- 2 An introduction to peer superintendents, or to forward this information to fellow superintendents / a superintendents' distribution list

This research builds on Connecticut's *Unspoken Crisis*

Context for the research

In 2023, Dalio Education published *Unspoken Crisis*, the first study to link Connecticut state agency data across education and employment to follow one population over nine years.

It found that 119,000 young people in Connecticut were disconnected or at risk of disconnection from school and work.

Since then, Dalio Education has carried out research on topics which disproportionately impact this population. Alternative education is the next of those deep dives.

Connecticut has 98 alternative education settings serving roughly 2,200–2,500 students. This work aims to understand the experiences of these students.

The team



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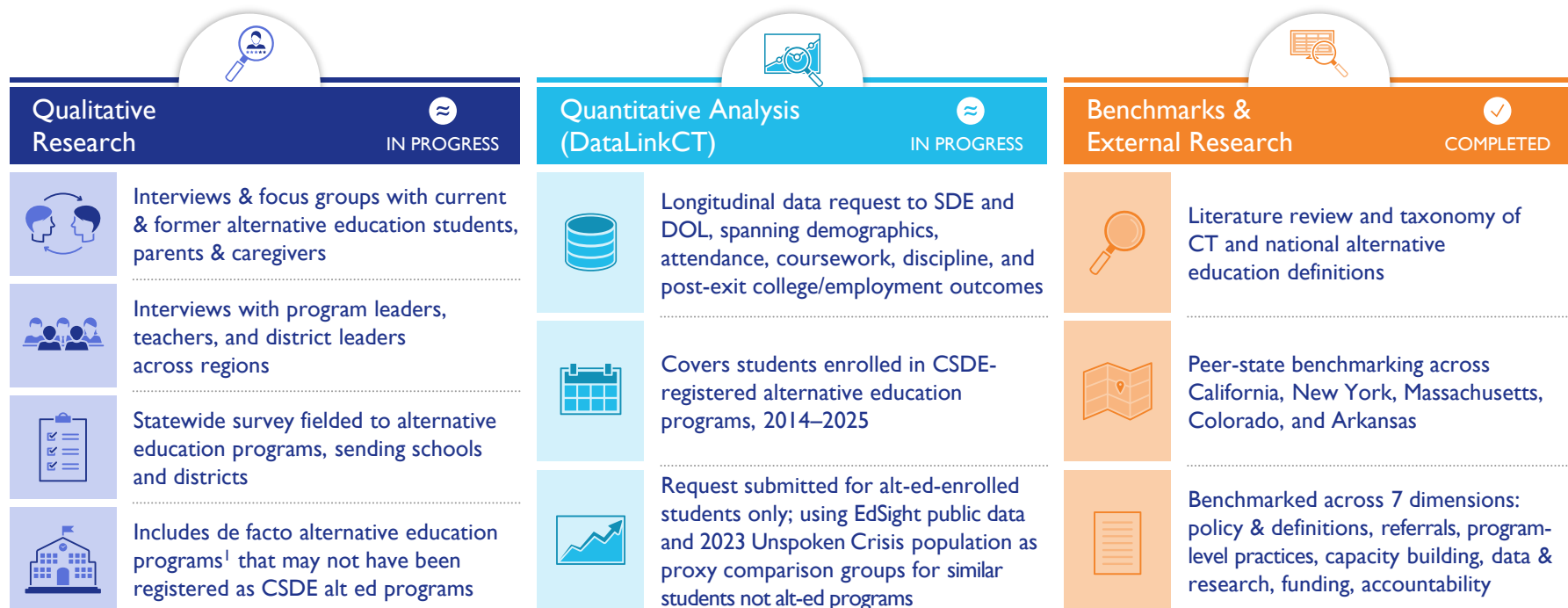
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Three-pronged approach to learn about alternative education in Connecticut

Your input will inform the **Qualitative Research** approach



Your input requested

I. Programs that receive district referrals for alt-ed-profile students but hold no CSDE org code

Qualitative Research: Three methods employed to understand the experiences of those in alternative education, and provide a comparable, statewide view of how alt-ed operates in practice

Interviews and focus groups with current and former alternative education students, parents and caregivers

- **Goal:** Understand the lived experience, referral pathways, and student/family agency within the alt-ed system

Surveys fielded to alt-ed program administrators and educators, sending school administrators, and district coordinators

- **Goal:** Measure variation in program design, practices, referrals, staffing, and cost to serve; identify full range of CT programs, including de facto programs

Interviews with program leaders, teachers, and district leaders

- **Goal:** Probe why alternative education models differ, what drives differences in quality, and what supports or constraints programs face

Focus groups will capture the alternative education experience from multiple perspectives¹

Participants will be compensated with a \$100 digital gift card for their time

Sample students, parents/caregivers, and family advocates across dimensions to better understand the lived experience, referral pathways, and student/family agency within alt-ed

	Current students	Former students	Parents/Caregivers	Family advocates & liaisons ²
Goal of engaging this group	Day-to-day student experience & what enables success ▼	Overall student experience & path to transition out of alt-ed ▼	Family experience with alt-ed placement, decisions, and support ▼	How families navigate the alt-ed system, and differences in information and support ▼
Topics to explore	- How and why did you enter alt-ed? - What's different about being a student here vs. your prior school? - What do you feel helps or gets in the way of succeeding?	- What worked well during your time in alt-ed? - What didn't work? - Where did you exit to? - How prepared did you feel for that next step? - What would you change about the experience?	- How did your student enter an alt-ed program? - What role did you have in decisions about the program? - Did the program meet your students' needs?	- How do families typically experience the referral and placement process? - What information and choices do families have? - How does family understanding of the system differ with and without advocate support?

1. Note that interviews may be used if it is determined that these are more appropriate than focus groups for some individuals/groups 2. Includes family liaisons (community organizations that work with families broadly) and legal advocates (attorneys supporting special education, IEP, etc.). Note: The protocol for focus groups and interviews has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board. Approval information is available upon request

Surveys target distinct angles of alt-ed experience to provide a comparable, state-wide view

Participants will be compensated with a \$50 digital gift card for their time

Surveys target four respondent types to provide a comparable, statewide view of variation in program design, practices, referrals, staffing, and cost to serve, as well as identify full range of CT programs, including de facto programs

	Alt-ed program administrators	Sending school administrators	District-level coordinators	Alt-ed educators
Intent of survey	Understand program model, students served, delivery of key support, & cost to serve	Understand how students enter alt-ed programs & how sending schools stay involved	Understand district oversight, funding, designation, and management of transfers	Understand instruction, student needs, & delivery of individualized plan supports ¹
Sample questions	- Do you have a CSDE org code, and are students reported in PSIS under it? - What share of students are under-credited chronically absent, etc.? - What is the process for IEP reevaluations?	- Who is involved in deciding to refer a student to alt-ed? - Do you receive updates on students while they're enrolled elsewhere? - Is there a defined process for deciding if a student can return?	- How many students district-wide are in designated vs. de facto alt-ed settings? - Why aren't de facto programs formally designated? - Does the calculated per-pupil spend match your understanding?	- For each service your students need, how is it delivered? - How does alt-ed compare to traditional school for your students? - For students with an individualized plan, how are required services set, tracked, and reviewed?

1. IEP or other similar individualized plans (e.g., individualized instructional plan (IIP) or individual learning plan (ILP))

Interviews will probe survey findings and explain differences between programs

Conduct 25–30 follow-up interviews to explain variation in program models and quality, identify key supports and constraints, and define the range of alt-ed archetypes across CT

Goal of these interviews

Program leaders

Explain why programs operate differently and what drives better student outcomes



- What distinguishes your program's model from other alt-ed settings?
- What works well in your program, and why?
- What would enable your program to better serve students?

Teachers/Staff

Understand how differences in program design translate into practice and student experience



- How do practices identified in the survey work day-to-day?
- What challenges do you personally encounter when trying to meet student needs?
- What works particularly well for your students, and why?

District coordinators

Understand how district decisions and constraints shape alt-ed models across programs



- What drives the district's choice of alt-ed models/providers?
- How do funding, staffing, or requirements affect programs?
- What changes would most improve alt-ed programs in your district?

Topics to explore



thank you