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Transforming your COVID response school into a

SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE
LEARNING PROGRAM

With all the upheaval schools experienced in the wake of COVID-19, there's no going back to education as usual.

Districts across the country are left wondering how best to honor the needs of their students and communities in the 2021-22 school year. Even for schools who have reopened for in-class sessions at 100% capacity, lingering questions remain:

· Will we lose families to online learning and homeschooling alternatives?
· How can we create continued success for students who are thriving in an online environment?
· How can we ease the transition for students (and teachers) who've become accustomed to a hybrid model?

Dr. Kate Baehr, principal of the Bellingham Family Partnership, acknowledges the mixed blessing of COVID: "Many families are now discovering that not every child learns their best in a 9-to-3 classroom… and not all learning happens in books and buildings."

This perception shift has created a window for educators, students, and families to reimagine what education can look like. Students who were not being served or challenged by an institutional education now have a taste of just how flexible and personalized learning can be. With leadership from trained and certificated teachers, families are understanding how to take what they love — from nature hikes to Lego building to reading together — and "align educational goals to those activities," Baehr says.

This toolkit provides information from a range of alternative learning programs, who have been operating for anywhere from one year to 25, helping other districts:

"We're trying to reimagine what this could be. The stigma has been we're just a Band-Aid… but we could be so much more."

JENNIFER DEVEREAUX

DISCERN THE NEEDS

Gather current data and stakeholder feedback for an accurate picture of the demand for alternative schooling in your district.

ALIGN THE SCHOOL FORMAT

Understand the goals and challenges of the three main types of alternative learning to find the one that fits your students and community.
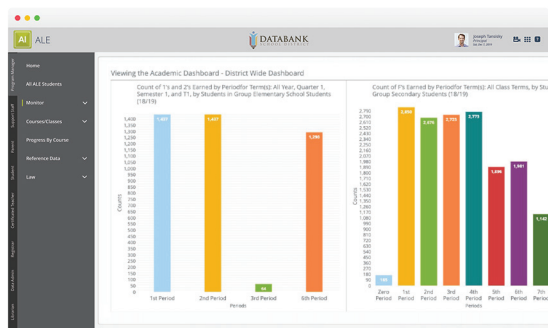
GATHER CRITICAL SUPPORT

Discover the must-have tools, roles, and resources that will help ensure a long life for your alternative school or program.
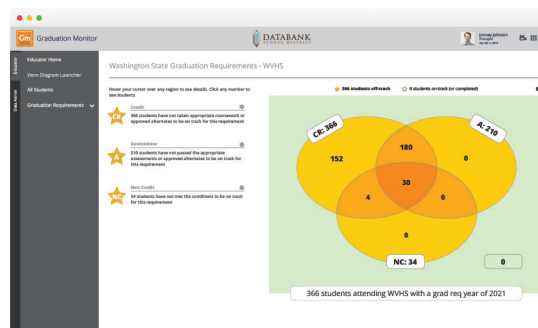
Discern the needs

DIG INTO CURRENT DATA

Your Student Information System offers a wealth of data that can help direct and refine your vision for an in-district alternative school.


Dashboards can indicate demographic commonalities of students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school.

Graduation Monitor software reveals the students who are missing key coursework or have failed to pass assessments required for graduation.
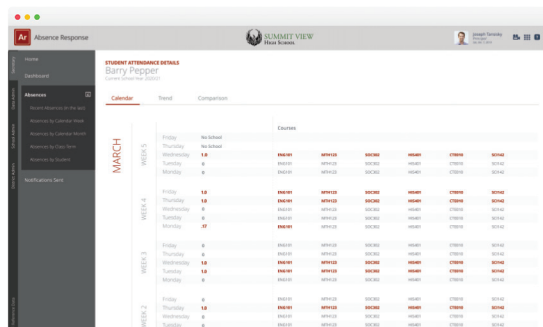
You may notice older students opting out of afternoon coursework to go to jobs using your Absence Response system.
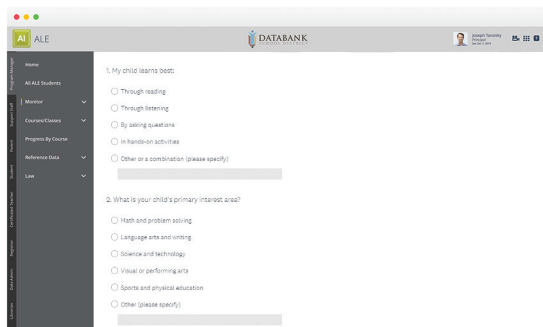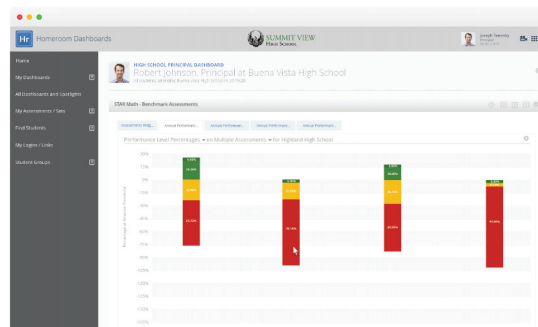

Students who are behind grade level on assessments may need individualized pacing and more time to absorb the material.

The enrollments for your COVID-response school may also provide valuable insight. The Wenatchee Internet Academy started the 2020-21 school year with about 300 students, then ballooned to a peak enrollment of 560. As of mid-spring, with state restrictions easing and many students returning to in-person education, the academy had only fallen to 520 — suggesting that many students and families are seeing the appeal of alternative learning.
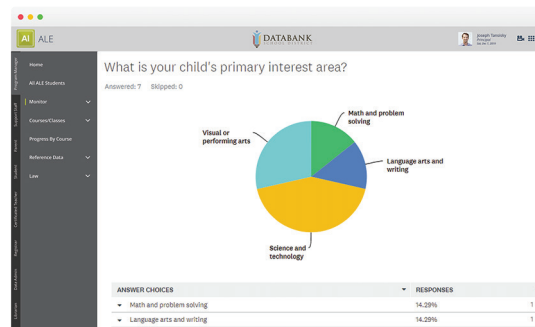
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GAUGE INTEREST

Create and send a brief parent survey to attendees or prospective families in your district. Feedback from these stakeholders may indicate a strong desire for a STEAM school, AVID school, or other magnet specialty... or it may point you to a broader mission to answer the needs of your interested families.

Solicit information about student and parent interests and preferences.

Map the survey results to share with district administration.

CONNECT WITH ALE SCHOOLS NEAR YOU

Olympic Peninsula Academy Principal Vince Riccobene's primary piece of advice? "Don't do it alone." The innovative educators behind other alternative learning programs are an invaluable source of ideas, inspiration, and advice — and normally more than willing to share their experiences with colleagues in other districts.

Riccobene attends meetings of regional educators, such as the Washington Association for Learning Alternatives (WALA), to connect with other ALE programs. Resources are also available through groups like the National Alternative Education Association (www.the-naea.org).

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Align the school format

Because there are so many ways to distinguish your school from a traditional brick-and-mortar one, it can be daunting to define what school will look like and how instruction will be delivered, even after you've done the work of identifying student needs.

Using some of our longtime SchoolData.net clients as mini case studies, we'll explore the three main styles of alternative learning programs, so you can choose what makes sense for your students and families.

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PARENT PARTNERSHIPS

Parent-partnership schools assume that the student is receiving the bulk of their instruction at home. However, many of these schools will offer some onsite class opportunities, staffed by certificated teachers or contracted vendors who are specialists in a specific field of study.

At Olympic Peninsula Academy, this looks like "two days of core instruction (math, science, language arts, and so on), then two days of enrichment courses," which have spanned everything from guitar lessons to courses on interpreting the Dow Jones Industrial Average, says Vince Riccobene. "The fifth day is an at-home day to complete the rest of your core work" in the system that has evolved over Olympic's 20+ years.

In the case of Edmonds Heights K-12 School, Tammy Jacobsen reports, "all of our credits are portfolio-based," with students demonstrating proficiency through a portfolio of work rather than just exams, and "all of our K-8 coursework is integrated into a single class and individualized on a per-student basis."

When students do attend class onsite, Jacobsen says, the sessions tend to be "very experiential… covering things that would be more of a challenge to do independently at home for a family." For example, one Edmonds Heights teacher offers a Magic School Bus course, teaching hands-on science curriculum that's reminiscent of the popular children's series.

To Jacobsen, the parent partnership resembles a "college campus for K-12." If students have downtime between, say, a 9 am class and 1 pm class, they can choose to go home to do independent work or they can make use of the Edmonds Heights library and computer labs.

Teachers help to translate input from the students and parents into personalized student learning plans and assist with curriculum selection as needed.

Weekly contact with the certificated teacher — a requirement per Washington state law — is accomplished virtually or in-person, and monthly progress reports are issued. This gives families the advantage of knowing each month how their child is performing in the eyes of the teacher. "It's not just waiting for quarterly report cards," says Sue Enquist of Saratoga School in the Stanwood-Camano School District. Parents have the information they need to "give the student tools to get them going if they aren't meeting the progress expectations."

A parent partnership school offers families ultimate flexibility. "If families are going on vacation," says Enquist, students can "take their books with them and they're still doing school or other things that support their learning plan."

Families who were already homeschooling, Enquist adds, love having more tools, such as MAP testing and free curriculum choices. For those whose kids struggled at brick-and-mortar schools, the partnership allows for personalized pacing, whether taking the time to review difficult concepts or jumping ahead.

Because parents are the primary instructors, Enquist notes, one of the biggest challenges for her school is empowering and equipping families. "You can feel like you've given them the tools, but they may not be communicating that they're struggling" to deliver the curriculum or to hold their child accountable for the required learning.

Jacobsen echoes, "I think as a society we train our parents that they can't educate their kids. It was a surprise to us how many people had thought about trying a program like this, but there's a fear factor there." She now employs onboarding sessions over 4–6 weeks to help parents overcome the fear and the mistaken belief "that you have to know everything in order to do this. You don't — you just have to facilitate it."

WHO IS A PARENT PARTNERSHIP DESIGNED FOR?

Engaged students and families. "I have seen so many success stories over the years," Jacobsen says. "I've had kids that are enrolling because they're coming from a horrible situation and they have some emotional concerns. I have kids for whom the pressures of trying to do an IB program is just too much, but they're super excelled. And then your typical student… they all can find success here if they choose. They just have to buy into the program." The parent partnership model presents more of a challenge for "a student who has to be told every little bit." Still, she argues, with commitment, "they can do it."

The screen-sensitive. Enquist's enrollments more than doubled as a result of COVID, accommodating families who didn't relish their child's education being delivered exclusively over Zoom or Google Meet. With supplemental COVID funding, the school purchased curriculum that's "aligned to state standards, but it's also aligned so that a family can have a book and a workbook and a teacher's guide." The independence of home-based instruction has many students "thriving. We have a lot of people that are planning on coming back and this is the first time they have been the parent-teacher."

HOW CAN YOU FUTURE-PROOF YOUR PARENT PARTNERSHIP?

Customize within limits. Your parent partnership will stay relevant if you are listening to enrolled and prospective families about what they want in their schooling, from the supplemental offerings that they value to the preferred ratio of in-person workshops to at-home studies. Jacobsen has seen the Edmonds Heights program evolve continually over the last 24 years, just "depending on the enrollment, the community, the parents and families who are here… It's a balance of constantly making minor adjustments," without sacrificing consistency by trying to be everything to everyone.

Emphasize community. The customization above becomes easier when you deliberately build relationships with families in the school. For Jacobsen, the relational foundation is laid during the onboarding process, which Edmonds Heights calls LINC, or Learning in Non-Traditional Communities. In a series of two-hour weekly sessions, "we walk families through their reporting requirements and what it looks like to be a family here. We also spend time talking about how they can educate creatively… how you can take the learning that you're doing and go out in the world and apply that. It doesn't have to look like a student with a book at a table."

"If you want your kids to learn the piano, and you don't know how to play the piano, what do you do? You go find someone to teach your kid to play the piano. This is the same. If you don't know how to teach calculus, you can find someone who can. As a parent, you just make sure it happens, then you're there to support and encourage and do the cheerleading."

TAMMY JACOBSEN

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SITE-BASED ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Alternative schools tend to have daily attendance requirements like a traditional school, but differ in their flexible pacing, flexible scheduling, and smaller class sizes. At Lincoln Hill High School and Lincoln Academy in the Stanwood-Camano School District, student-teacher interactions take the form of weekly in-person meetings when teachers deliver materials and instruction to their small class groups. "As students have issues, they can contact the teachers throughout the week," says Cindy Cutforth, but "there's a lot that is discussed" in the weekly touch-base, where students get "some really good, one-on-one time with staff members."

Students who need subject-specific coursework are matched with highly qualified, certificated teachers at Lincoln Academy (grades 6-8). Lincoln Hill High School syncs its class schedule with the traditional high school next door, making it easier for students to pursue electives that are too specialized for the smaller staff at Lincoln Hill.

"We meet students where they are," says Cutforth, "and sometimes they're not in good places — literally and emotionally." She notes that ALE programs have the luxury of being able to see the whole child, and that "for some students, we are the most consistent thing" in their lives. Knowing this, the staff is uniquely positioned to address the external forces that can affect both the students' social-emotional well-being and their ability to be "in charge of their own learning."

As ALE programs in Washington state, Cutforth notes, her schools "have more reporting, more accountability than just a typical brick-and-mortar school." A nationwide push to increase graduation rates means alternative schools sometimes attract more scrutiny when looking at completion percentages alone. Those statistics, however, fail to capture the fact that alternative schools retain students that districts risk losing altogether. The increased reporting data then becomes additional validation for your school, demonstrating that students who risked slipping through the cracks in traditional school are now seeing success. From Cutforth's own experience, it's clear that the format does "help keep students enrolled who otherwise would not have remained enrolled."

WHO IS AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL DESIGNED FOR?

Students who need a different schedule or environment. According to Cutforth, alternative schools can serve any student who has struggled in the typical school setting, including students who are more comfortable in a smaller setting, students with anxiety, or students who are falling behind. "And we have some students who simply have jobs, and so a typical schedule doesn't work for them."

Students who need more personal attention. "We have the unique honor to be able to really know our students," says Cutforth, "and this is true for virtually every staff member the students connect with." Beyond the contact, the instruction too can be personalized so "the educational experience is specific to the student. You're not teaching to the high end or the low end" but to individual needs.

HOW CAN YOU FUTURE-PROOF YOUR ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL?

Target a range of students. Alternative schools face the challenge of overcoming historic stereotypes that they serve only the students who struggle with substance abuse or severe behavior issues. Work with key personnel in your district to identify a different subset of student needs and then spread the word. Lincoln Academy, for example, was founded to serve middle schoolers who were not passing core courses, which statistically correlates to a high likelihood of dropping out. "We try to quickly get them back on track," says Cutforth, so they can return to a traditional school or graduate successfully from the alternative high school.

Consider shorter modules. Cutforth has found that offering eight short sessions instead of the semesters used elsewhere in the district "allows the student coming in midstream to start earning credit immediately." Each session for high school students is 0.125 credits, so if "circumstances arise that they have to leave or enter midstream, they don't lose a whole 0.5. They may not capture a whole 0.5, but they often do earn credit at a much more rapid pace."

ONLINE AND VIRTUAL LEARNING SCHOOLS

Online-only or virtual learning schools deliver all instruction remotely. Educators can employ any mix of synchronous video instruction, 1:1 check-ins and mentoring via email or chat, and asynchronous access to content via a learning management system (LMS). Because the format doesn't require synchronous instruction, there's vast flexibility in how curriculum is delivered.

Dungeness Virtual School in Sequim School District uses the Ingenuity and OdysseyWare learning management systems to deliver content, and students log in at any time of day to complete their coursework. Teachers can communicate with students through those platforms or connect via a video call or email conversation.

Jennifer Devereaux took a different approach. When tasked with creating the Wenatchee Internet Academy to answer the needs of families who did not want their students to return to in-person learning, she chose to align the morning class sessions to start at the same time as the district's brick-and-mortar schools. Then, when changes to COVID capacity regulations or parents' work hours would send some students back to the traditional classroom, "it's not super disruptive to a family's schedule."

For K-8, the Wenatchee Internet Academy delivers instruction synchronously in a morning Zoom session, then the afternoons are left unstructured for teacher office hours, small-group learning, or asynchronous learning provided by music, art, PE, and library specialists via lessons uploaded to Canvas. High schoolers access curriculum via the Apex LMS to accommodate the wide range of courses high schoolers need, supplemented by an in-district facilitator. This "mentor teacher" has scheduled Zoom meetings with each student group to provide more personal help and fulfill the state-required weekly check-in.

For Devereaux, one of the beauties of the format is that "we've communicated with parents more often and in depth in this model." Instead of relying on students to recount the events and assignments each day, parents "can see in Canvas what they need to do, see their to-do list, and get reminders from teachers." Parents, even if they work outside the home, can take a more active role in their child's education.

Vince Riccobene, who doubles as principal of the Dungeness Virtual School, notes that other families appreciate the scaffolds that are in place. Using the content delivered through the OdysseyWare platform, Riccobene says, students "can take the content and speed it up or slow it down, change the reading levels, highlight to find words," or have a teacher come alongside for additional support. "The access points for kids to be successful are incredible."

The freedom of the online format breaks through the walls of the traditional classroom, offering creative educators nearly limitless possibilities for delivering curriculum. One Wenatchee educator helped her fifth graders earn Junior Ranger badges for several parks in Washington and Oregon because, says Devereaux, "she has taught from these locations and taken kids virtually on all these trips."

There's also freedom for families. Devereaux describes a kindergartener who attended class sessions from a car booster seat while her family traveled to visit grandparents and students who participated in competitive skiing events while staying connected to school. The online format helps students absorb the larger lesson that learning can happen anywhere.

But while learning can happen anywhere, not all environments are conducive for all students. "The home environment is distracting for many kids," Devereaux says. It can be "hard for kids to focus, especially in multi-sibling families where on the other side of the table is the little sister also in class and everybody's talking over the top of each other."

While there is more temptation for online students to flip to YouTube or TikTok during their self-directed study time, Riccobene believes that all types of students can succeed in the online environment. "All the same attributes that make a student successful in a brick-and-mortar setting make them successful in an online setting," he says, including "responsibility, time management, willingness to take notes, engaging with your teacher, going back and rereading text, and just being a self-motivated learner." Since "those are all skills that evolve with kids over time," online-only students may even develop them faster, faced with more frequent teacher check-ins and progress reports, than they would in a classroom with quarterly grades.

"Embrace the journey and serve students where they need to be served. That's what we get to do because we're no longer on the regular track of school — we can be as creative as we need to be."

VINCE RICCOBENE

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WHO IS AN ONLINE SCHOOL DESIGNED FOR?

Students and families who are medically sensitive. With COVID looming, the online school was "just such a welcome relief for families to know that they don't have to worry, is this a day that my kid's going to get exposed?"

Students with social struggles. Riccobene reports that many students are thriving because "they're not distracted by friends (or people who might not be friends) in a classroom of 28 kids. They can find success while working independently."

Students who want to set the pace. The virtual school can accommodate both children who want acceleration and those who need more time with the lessons.

HOW CAN YOU FUTURE-PROOF YOUR ONLINE SCHOOL?

Make creative use of resources. Like Devereaux's fifth-grade teacher, online learning opens up the opportunity to "take students with you" anywhere you can capture video, or let them engage with noteworthy people via a virtual meet-up.

Address students' social-emotional needs. Online educators have to be more deliberate in helping students connect with each other virtually. David Jones of REACH Academy of North Idaho designates time in each instructional session when students can interact in the chat window without distracting from instruction and also plans periodic icebreaker games that give students the chance to share info about their families, pets, or interests.

Create engagement in new ways. Riccobene's team is floating the idea of a virtual café to appeal to middle and high schoolers who thrive on social interactions with their peers. "A virtual or even on-campus get-together for, say, all the 9th grade Algebra kids" could generate enthusiasm and accountability, but regardless of the format, "we need to meet students where they are. We have to figure out fun and engaging ways to create that community."

Gather critical support

Just like the families that you serve, your alternative learning school needs wraparound support in order to survive and thrive beyond COVID.

Following are the must-haves recommended to us by educators and ALE program managers who've been there.

EDUCATORS
Ensure you have dedicated counselors, English-language learning specialists, special education experts, and other specialists assigned to your school (or at least have a dedicated share of their time). Without clear lines of responsibility, the ball for students' needs is all too easily dropped.

STAFF
State requirements for education change continually, and alternative learning is sure to attract even more scrutiny in the coming years. Assign a point person on your staff to follow updates to regulations, so your school doesn't suddenly find itself out of compliance.

ONBOARDING
Help students and families understand what to expect, how to use your technology, and how their student can be successful in this new schooling format.

This full-family training has myriad benefits that make onboarding well worth the time invested — whether it looks like the LINC system developed by Edmonds Heights, or the periodic workshops favored by Bellingham Family Partnership Program, covering topics such as "Making Math Manageable" or "How to Organize Your Day and Week."

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT
Every school has identified technology tools that help them, from Google Sheets to Canvas curriculum to Kahootz quizzes. All of these tools have value in helping communicate to families or process enrollments or deliver curriculum — but few of them are geared toward highly personalized learning plans, and none can keep your school in compliance with ever-changing regulations and requirements.

You need a program management system that is specific to ALE schools, connected to your Student Information System, and continuously updated to reflect current state or federal standards.

"The support has been almost immediate. That is brand-new in our experience... and welcome!"

CINDY CUTFORTH

"The data entry used to be so labor-intensive. Literally, I was manually putting in all of the information that was already in Skyward. I don't know how I could have done it this year if we hadn't switched to School Data."
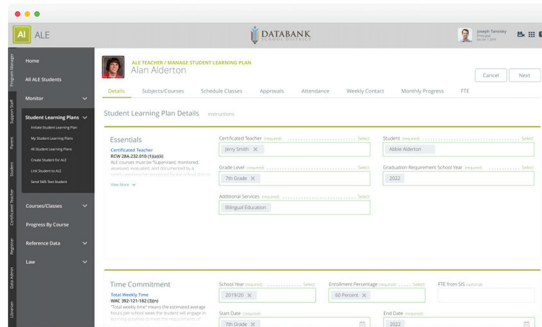
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Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) application

The Alternative Learning Experience application from SchoolData.net helps schools stay in compliance while consolidating all the data educators need to personalize and appropriately pace students' learning.
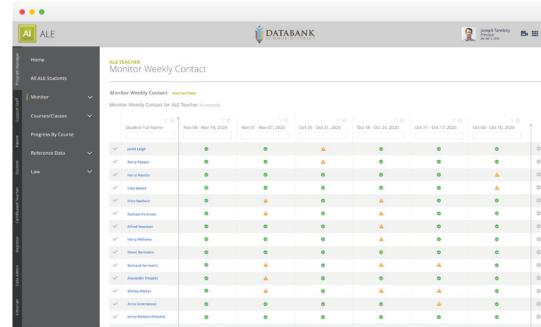
By integrating the ALE application with the Student Information System, educators can access their students' profiles with the click of a button — and skip the problematic double entry for students who transfer from elsewhere in the district.

The application also outputs all the reports required for compliance, so educators can focus on supporting students in their personalized learning plans.

Student details, including grades and graduation requirements, auto-populate from the SIS to create learning plans fast. Role-based permissions protect students' privacy and keep their data secure.

Educators and administrators can see high-level status indicators on all the students in their purview, clicking on any name to dive into the student's learning plan details and progress.

All the student's courses appear, as well as their FTE status in the ALE program. You can also view the student's courses from the previous year and coming year (once scheduled).

Students and parents log into the app to view available classes and register. The process can be customized to your program, with registrations randomized or taken first-come, first-served.

"I don't necessarily have to look at individual student reports, I can look at reports on a much greater scale and be sure that we're meeting all of our compliance."

VINCE RICCOBENE

Feedback from students and parents can be logged here for the educator's reference in rating students' monthly progress, and weekly contact can be recorded with a single click.

Because every ALE program is unique, progress reporting is configurable to suit each school's progress rating determinations and academic standards.

For Vince Riccobene, there's no sense in mourning the loss of school as it was prior to 2020. Since then, "we've learned so much about flexibility and service to students and families. We have to meet folks where they are and tailor programs," whatever the school format. His schools are working to understand, for each student, "what do you need? If you need one class here or a couple classes or whatever it is, let's make it work and be as responsive as we possibly can."

In your district, you've already answered the call of your students and families to keep learning going while accommodating general medical concerns. Now is the time to listen with fresh ears to what your students and families have discovered about their specific educational needs, understanding when, where, and how they are learning their best.

Fortunately, a creative re-imagining of your school doesn't require reinventing the wheel. To stay focused on the big picture of personalized education — and avoid being overwhelmed by details — you will require a few allies:

1. **Look to the model** of alternative learning programs like the ones cited above, who can serve as critical resources when launching a new school format.
2. **Listen to your students and parents** to elicit their strengths, needs, and goals. Then you'll be poised to, in Riccobene's words, "paint a picture of the possibilities" for them to achieve those goals with individualized learning plans.
3. **Lean on experienced partners** who will help you lay the groundwork for change and provide flexible tools that can grow and evolve with your program.

Let SchoolData.net work together with you to break out of old educational molds and craft a personalized system that serves your students as the individuals they are.

"We didn't know COVID was going to happen the year we were changing programs to the ALE application. Having the team there to answer questions and be so responsive... I can't express what a burden-lifter that has been, for me personally and for our school."

TAMMY JACOBSEN

TO REQUEST A DEMONSTRATION OF THE ALE APPLICATION, CONTACT US AT
509.688.9536 or learnmore@schooldata.net.