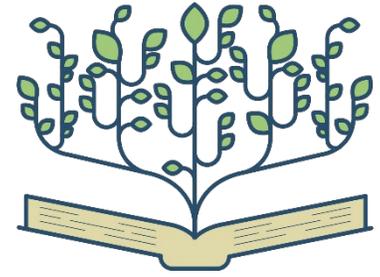


NDTAC Program Spotlight Series



Transitions Learning Center

The term alternative education is often associated with schools that serve as disciplinary placements for students who have acted out in their traditional school settings. However, in the early 2000s, Natrona County School District in Wyoming set out to challenge this perception. Understanding that not every student thrives within a conventional public-school model, the district established **Transitions Learning Center**—a supportive, intentional alternative program designed for students who have fallen behind in credits, are struggling academically, or are at risk of dropping out.

Unlike traditional alternative programs where students are placed as a consequence of behavioral issues, enrollment in Transitions Learning Center is voluntary. It offers students a second chance to realign their academic paths and move closer to graduation. Students attending any of the four high schools in the county who find themselves significantly credit-deficient can be recommended by their school's administration to attend the Learning Center. Upon recommendation, the student meets with the Learning Center team, who conduct a comprehensive credit review and collaborate with the student to create a personalized academic recovery plan. Students then have the choice to attend the Learning Center or remain in their home school. Approximately 90% of students take advantage of the opportunity to attend the Learning Center when given the choice.

The structure of the Learning Center is designed to promote focus and achievement through manageable goals. Students are enrolled in two intensive courses per 20-day cycle. Traditionally, the classes were broken up into two three-hour blocks. Teachers followed the “I do, we do, you do” model of instruction. Teachers would start with direct instruction, move into guided practice, and then provide time for students to apply their learning independently. That structure worked well for several years. However, looking to improve engagement and meet the needs of a newer generation of learners, the program recognized the need to redesign its approach to maintain engagement and better support student success. Now, they break the day into rotating 90-minute instructional blocks. For example, students might start with 90 minutes of reading/language arts instruction, then shift into a 45-minute elective course, followed by lunch, and then return to reading/language arts for another 90-minute session. The day ends with time in a credit recovery lab, allowing students to catch up or accelerate in other subject areas. This redesigned structure allows for better cognitive breaks, keeps content fresh, and gives the program more flexibility to meet students where they are while still preserving the depth and rigor they aim for in each subject.

On the 21st day, a remediation period is provided for students needing additional time to complete coursework. Those who meet course requirements earn a full credit. This accelerated model allows students to progress at a faster pace, gain confidence, and visualize their academic success in real time.

In addition to in-person instruction, students may also complete credit recovery through online coursework in the Center's computer lab, particularly when partial credits are needed or teacher availability is limited. While virtual classes are occasionally necessary, the Center prioritizes face-to-face learning, recognizing the challenges many students face with prolonged online instruction.

Transitions Learning Center is funded in part through Title I, Part D, Subpart 2, which provides funds to a local educational agency (LEA) to provide support services for at-risk youth. This federal funding helps to partially cover staffing costs, including educators, counselors, and administrative personnel so that students receive the individualized support they need. Christopher Dresang, Director of Student Support Services, who oversees the Center, emphasizes that it is not a punitive placement. For disciplinary cases, the LEA operates a separate alternative school other than the Learning Center. Most students enrolled in the Center are those who find the larger

high school environment overwhelming, particularly due to anxiety or social stressors. Others have faced life-altering events, such as teen pregnancy, or have made isolated but poor decisions like bringing a weapon to school, that necessitate a temporary change of environment. These students do not exhibit chronic behavior issues but may need time to regroup before reintegrating into their home schools. To maintain its focus on transition and reintegration, the Natrona County School District recently implemented a one-semester limit for students enrolled in the Center. This ensures that it remains a short-term intervention rather than a long-term alternative.

The proof is in the data when it comes to the Center's success as demonstrated by their high credit completion rate. During the 2023-24 school year, 148 students attempted to earn 336 credits. Of these, they were able to earn 322.5 credits, a 96% completion rate. When asked about the Center's success, Mr. Dresang identified several key factors. First, the structure addresses the challenge many students face with long-term goal-setting and delayed gratification. Breaking coursework into shorter, 20-day increments allows students to experience success more frequently and tangibly. Second, the staff's unwavering belief in both the mission and the students creates a supportive, high-expectation environment. Finally, the district-wide support—from the school board and high school administrators to the teaching staff—demonstrates a unified belief in the Center's impact.

[Transitions Learning Center](#) stands as a powerful example of how rethinking alternative education can change student trajectories and foster hope, growth, and renewed academic purpose.