

Academy 21

How to set up your own Internal Alternative Provision

The Online Alternative Provision Experts



Department
for Education

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A portrait of Amy Husband, Executive Headteacher, smiling. She has blonde hair and is wearing a blue and white patterned top. The background is a light blue circle on a white page with orange and pink geometric shapes.

Internal alternative provision is not a new concept, but the demands placed on it have evolved.

Suspension rates are rising, budgets are tightening, and many schools, academies, and providers are facing limited access to external placements. As a result, more leaders are building provision in-house to act earlier, support more effectively, and keep pupils connected to school.

At Academy21, we've spent over 13 years working directly with school-based inclusion teams. Our live online teaching model now supports over 1,000 schools, LAs, PRUs, and MATs across England and Wales, and we're proud to be a truly flexible option for many institutions and students who often need timely support. We provide a DfE-accredited, high-quality provision tailored to your routines and delivered by experienced staff, allowing you to focus on what matters most: relationships, behaviour, mentoring, and readiness to return.

Amy Husband, Executive Headteacher

This guide draws on our experience working alongside school leaders and practitioners, as well as leading research on behaviour, motivation, and engagement, including insights and frameworks from Institute for Government, the The Behavioural Insight Team and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). It outlines the principles, systems, and delivery models that make internal AP effective, alongside the hallmarks of practice that support any successful programme, whether you are starting from scratch or refining an existing offer.

We also reference the Tenets of Effective Internal Alternative Provision developed by The Difference, a piece of research we were proud to support. Common threads from our experience and research include the importance of **clear leadership, inclusion being a lens with which to design all school systems, balancing academic with wellbeing provision, and using data and pupil voice to inform continuous improvement.**

7 Best Practices for Effective Internal AP

Internal AP works best when it's built on clear, consistent foundations.

This section outlines the practical steps every leader should take to make their provision purposeful, consistent, and aligned with broader school strategy. Each practice below reflects what we've seen work across hundreds of internal units, from specialist inclusion teams to mainstream academies and external partners.

01 Embed internal AP in your broader inclusion strategy

Build Internal AP into your school's behaviour, safeguarding, and curriculum systems. Start by mapping where AP sits within your existing inclusion framework and how it links to early intervention and SEN support. Framing AP as a core inclusion mechanism, rather than an isolated unit, helps staff, students, and families see its value and encourages a consistent approach to engagement and behaviour.

Speak openly with staff about its value, framing it as a core mechanism for keeping students connected to education. This shift in mindset changes how students, staff, and families engage. Senior leadership should also be involved in regular reviews of AP referrals and outcomes.

02 Designate clear leadership and training pathways

Ownership makes all the difference. The most effective internal APs we've seen have a named lead who champions the provision and shaping its culture, quality, and outcomes. Ideally, this is a senior leader with dedicated time and the authority to influence decisions across the school.

Equally important is **ensuring that staff supporting AP are properly trained in key areas such as trauma-informed practice, relational approaches, behaviour de-escalation, SEMH awareness, and positive reinforcement.** Embedding coaching, peer observation, and reflective discussions into day-to-day practice helps make sure these skills are consistently applied.

Research from The Difference underlines that strong leadership and staff capability are essential for creating AP that meets individual needs while maintaining high standards across the school.

03 Set clear routines and expectations across the day

Predictability means safety, and that's especially true for students whose education experiences have been marked by disruption. Your internal AP should have deliberate routines, including clear start times, smooth transitions, effective feedback loops, and regular staff presence. Students should know what's expected of them, when and why.

Scheduling daily check-ins for each student can be beneficial for reviewing progress and setting goals for the day. You should consider implementing clear supervision plans so that staff know exactly who is responsible for monitoring students at each stage, and ensure these plans are followed consistently.

Finally, link internal AP activities to whole-school systems, such as behaviour points or rewards, so students understand how their engagement and achievements in AP relate to wider school expectations.

The MINDSPACE research from the Institute for Government shows that consistent cues, clear routines, and alignment with wider systems improve engagement and reinforce positive behaviour.



04 Build physical and relational connections into your space

AP settings that feel cut off from school, whether geographically or emotionally, risk creating a sense of exclusion. **Aim to position your space in a location that is both accessible and visible. Keep the design linked to the rest of your school:** use similar displays, colours, and routines. More importantly, maintain a relational connection. This might involve regular visits from subject teachers, shared break times, or reintegration mentors who bridge both settings.

05 Establish induction and referral systems that build buy-in

An effective induction process provides students and staff with clarity on the purpose of AP, the support it offers, and what success may entail.

This begins with a clear referral pathway, ensuring that everyone involved understands why the student has been placed in AP and what the intended outcomes are. Involving families at this early stage helps build trust and ensures consistent messaging both in school and at home.

A structured induction, whether delivered in person or online, can establish a positive tone from the outset. Walk students through the provision's process, introduce them to the staff or support team, and ensure they know where to go for help. Listening to the student's perspective at this stage is just as important as outlining expectations; it creates a sense of ownership and commitment.

At Academy21, students are offered twice-weekly live induction sessions that provide a clear introduction to their new online learning environment, expectations, and available support. All our platforms and tools are intuitive and inclusive by design, but students know who to turn to if they need any clarification.

Importantly, our teachers and wider team truly prioritise making each student feel welcomed. They take time to learn about each student's background, interests, and any previous challenges, creating a safe space where students are comfortable asking for help, sharing concerns, and engaging fully in their learning.

If schools have any questions, our Regional Partnership Managers are always available to support.

Induction List

- ✓ Explain referral reason and intended outcomes
- ✓ Introduce key AP staff and support team
- ✓ Review daily routines, expectations, and transitions
- ✓ Show students how to access resources and the mentor portal
- ✓ Schedule daily check-ins or initial support sessions
- ✓ Discuss links to whole-school systems (behaviour points, rewards)
- ✓ Listen to the student's goals, concerns, and questions

06 Reintegration: planning with purpose

Returning to mainstream lessons should be planned deliberately and with clear intent. From the start, **define the purpose of reintegration and set measurable goals**, such as attendance targets, engagement levels, or behavioural milestones, agreed with the student, their family, and key staff.

When possible, **use a phased approach, allowing students to reintegrate part-time in one or two subjects while supported by a staff member who can bridge the AP and mainstream environments.** Regularly review attendance, subject progress, and engagement data to guide the pace of reintegration, adjusting only in response to evidence.

If online provision forms part of the model, **align timetables with the reintegration plan from day one, gradually reducing hours or adjusting lesson times as progress is made.** Recognise key achievements along the way, using visible praise and rewards to reinforce progress and build the student's confidence in returning to full-time mainstream learning.

07 Measure and monitor quality

Track student progress rigorously using daily data (attendance, engagement, and lesson scores) combined with qualitative feedback such as staff observations and pupil voice. Integrate this information into safeguarding, SEND, and senior leadership reporting to ensure AP remains fully connected to the whole-school system. Avoid allowing AP to operate in isolation.

Ensure leaders regularly review these reports during inclusion meetings, reintegration panels, and designated safeguarding lead briefings. Effective monitoring depends on aligning your vision, values, and systems so that data drives timely interventions and supports continuous improvement.



Research suggests that robust, data-driven referral processes involving multiple professionals is essential. Without such mechanisms, IAP risks becoming a 'costly holding pen' rather than a purposeful intervention.



Types of provision

Internal AP can take many forms, but what matters is that the model aligns with your outcomes.

Whether you're delivering AP in-school, online, or using external providers, your provision should be intentional, sustainable, and adaptable to your cohort's needs. Below are three commonly used models we see across our partner schools and providers:

Model 1:

Students access lessons in the morning (typically English, Maths, and Science), delivered by qualified subject specialists. The afternoon is structured around school-led SEMH provision, including mentoring, PSHE, or practical reflection. This model ensures continuity in learning while allowing you to deliver relationship-based support.

Model 2:

In this more flexible model, students can follow timetabled lessons in core subjects, either in small on-site groups or online via Academy21, with support from staff.

For KS4 students this could be a core subject as well as their favourite humanities subject. For KS2, students attend reading, writing and maths with their online teacher from a dedicated space on-site. Outside these sessions, students join their peers in the mainstream school for activities such as art, PE, or PSHE. This free-flowing model strikes a balance between structured learning, social interaction, and hands-on experiences.

"I was at a critical point where I had students who were really overwhelmed and found the mainstream learning environment incredibly challenging. I didn't feel like there were options outside the school to meet their needs...[now] they can still be taught their core subjects; and face to face contact is maintained, it's been a good way of keeping a child in school, providing them with an education, and being part of a hybrid model." – **J. Gardiner, Ursuline Academy**

Model 3:

Students spend part of the week learning from home (a few days or mornings) and the rest of the time attending school in person. Online lessons maintain academic progress, while in-person days offer SEMH support and peer connection. This model helps students stay engaged both academically and socially.

Checklist – choosing an online provider

If you're planning to use an online partner to support your internal AP, choosing a provider you can trust and adapt to your needs is essential. Here are some key features you should expect your provider to offer:

- ✓ **Adaptive, live teaching:** Live lessons delivered in small groups actively engage students. They also enable teachers to tailor their teaching approach to suit different abilities and learning needs so that every student can participate fully.
- ✓ **Accredited, high-quality provision:** Accreditations guarantee the curriculum meets recognised standards, assessments are valid, and students receive reliable, effective learning.
- ✓ **Clear, consistent reporting:** Regular, detailed, and consistent reporting provides staff and schools with a clear view of attendance, progress, and engagement, helping identify where support is needed.
- ✓ **Flexible, responsive support:** Flexible support is crucial because it allows providers to adapt teaching approaches, offer additional guidance, and respond promptly to student needs as they evolve.
- ✓ **Safeguarding built-in:** Built-in safeguarding protects students through secure access to tools, monitored interactions, and clear procedures for reporting concerns, creating a safe online learning environment.
- ✓ **Expert and caring staff:** Staff should apply trauma-informed and relational practices, recognising each student's needs, fostering trust, and supporting wellbeing as an integral part of learning.

"Teachers demonstrate strong subject knowledge alongside a secure understanding of the technical knowledge and skills needed to operate in an online environment. The positive learning environment they create promotes pupils' confidence, and this has an important impact on the progress they go on to make." – **Ofsted report 2024**

Academy21 provides detailed, easy-to-access monitoring tools to support schools in tracking the progress of their students effectively, as well as sharing it with parents. Our mentor portal is highly intuitive, making it simple to track key metrics. When it comes to the actual data schools can access, we provide daily scores that record attendance and engagement, along with termly reports that summarise achievement, attendance, and participation in a clear format.

CASE STUDY

The Sittingbourne School

The Sittingbourne School, a secondary school in southeast England with over 1,600 students, has long sought ways to support young people who struggle to thrive in a busy, traditional classroom environment. In 2021, the school partnered with Academy21, using our pay-as-you-go model to create a flexible, tailored approach to keeping students engaged while addressing their wellbeing needs.

In September 2024, the school launched its 'Alternative Learning Pathway' for Years 9 to 11, combining online lessons with in-school support. The schedule is simple: students access Academy21's online, adaptive lessons for English, Maths and Science, and attend school in person for additional support and wellbeing checks on the fifth day.

The length of the programme depends on each student's needs. As Matthew Judd, Pastoral Support lead, explains:

"Some students will only use it for perhaps half a term, to give them a break, particularly if they're struggling with mental health."

The results speak for themselves – most students enrolled with Academy21 have reintegrated into their mainstream school successfully.

While there are many inspiring stories to share, Matthew recalls one Year 11 student who had struggled with behaviour and disengagement, and how he transformed after joining Academy21.

"When he first joined us, he really struggled. He could not find his way, did not make any friends, and hated coming to school. Most of his time was spent in isolation because he could not manage his behaviour, but from the moment he signed on to Academy21, he was 100% engaged."

Sittingbourne School's experience highlights the power of flexible, high-quality online provision in supporting both reintegration and mental health. The flexibility and adaptability of Academy21's programmes allow schools to create bespoke solutions, tailoring internal alternative provision to suit the needs of individual students or entire cohorts.

Whether combining online lessons with one day a week in school, adjusting the number of subjects, or scaling support up or down as students progress, schools can mould the programme to fit their own vision of effective provision.



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Matthew Judd
Pastoral Support Lead

CASE STUDY

Haybrook College

While Sittingbourne School demonstrates how flexible online provision can help students gradually reintegrate into mainstream education, Haybrook College shows another approach: using Academy21 to create a fully bespoke internal AP programme for chronically withdrawn students.

Haybrook College in Slough supports students through personalised pathways designed to develop both academic skills and social confidence. One of its alternative provision programmes, Apollo, caters to chronically withdrawn Year 10 and 11 students who struggle to attend mainstream school due to bullying, mental health challenges, or social anxiety.

"Academy21 has been effective at personalising their learning appropriately, whether they are accessing lessons at home or in the college." – Julia Holder, leader of Apollo

The Apollo programme combines online lessons in core GCSE subjects with confidence-building activities such as art, music, cookery, sport, and work experience. Academy21's flexibility allows the school to adapt timetables to suit each student's needs, whether that means changing lesson times for students who start their day later or providing access to recorded lessons for revision.

"Some of our students experience high levels of apathy... the benefits of online provision mean we can adjust the timings of our lessons to accommodate their wellbeing needs." – Julia Holder, leader of Apollo

The impact has been transformative. For example, one student, initially unable to speak or write due to emotional challenges, gradually rebuilt his confidence through Academy21 lessons and Apollo's broader programme. By the end of the year, he achieved solid GCSE results and now works as an IT support coordinator in a school.

Haybrook College's experience shows how Academy21 enables schools to create fully bespoke internal AP programmes. Schools can combine online learning with in-person activities, adjust lesson levels, scale support, and tailor schedules to meet the individual needs of students.



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Julia Holder
Leader of Apollo

Conclusion

Whether you're leading a mainstream school, a specialist setting, or a partner organisation like a sports academy or trust, you already have the most critical resource: insight into your students.

The models and strategies we shared in this guide are drawn directly from years of collaboration with settings like yours, which use Academy21 to bridge subject delivery, strengthen routines, and re-engage learners.

What works in one setting may not always be right for another, but the principles remain the same. Internal AP thrives when it's:

- ✓ Purpose-led
- ✓ Structured with clear routines and expectations
- ✓ Tightly integrated with pastoral and academic priorities
- ✓ Built for reintegration, not isolation

Build an Effective Internal AP

Visit our website to learn more about how we can help you build an effective internal AP to support students.

contact@academy21.co.uk

+44 (0) 800 208 8210

academy21.co.uk

