

The Paradox of Apparent Decline: A Two-Cohort Causal-Comparative Analysis of Alternative Learning System (ALS) Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Examination Outcomes Before and After the Removal of the Conditional Passer Policy

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ABSTRACT: In 2025, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) examination returned with a new category called conditional passer (50 – 59%) with a remediation pathway after the examination was taken, and in 2026, this category was dropped and the standard was changed to pass/fail. The percentage of successful Schools Division Office (SDO) Makati City seemed to have dropped from 62.91% in 2025 to 49.38% in 2026. This study examined whether the apparent decline was due to a decline in the learner's achievement or because of a measurement artifact of the policy change. The examination records of two cohorts (2025 = 426, 2026 = 403) of students were examined using a quantitative causal-comparative (ex post facto) design prepared through the same familiarization and mock testing strategy. The apparent decrease in the outright pass rate was not found to be significant when assessed by two-proportion z-tests, which found the increase from 40.61% to 49.38% to be significant ($z = 2.54$, $p = .011$, $h = 0.18$); the true decrease only became apparent when 2025 conditional passers were counted as successes. If the band had been maintained, the counterfactual reconstruction showed that about 77 more learners would have been eligible for the band, resulting in 68.39% eligibility, which is above the 2025 benchmark. The supposed drop is

thus a policy construct. Empowerment of the division's two week enhancement program to be moved upstream, as a pre-examination intensive, and the policy changes of the trend reporting system.

Keywords: *Alternative Learning System, Accreditation and Equivalency examination, conditional passers, assessment policy, causal-comparative research*

Introduction

The Philippines' out-of-school youth and adults follow the parallel education path known as the Alternative Learning System (ALS) which culminates in the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) examination for Elementary and Junior High School equivalency (Arzadon & Nato, 2015, Labarrete, 2019). Upon its national resurgence in January 2025, the A&E examination achieved a combined success rate of 62.68-62.91% for 426 test takers, with systematic familiarization and mock testing being employed in SDO Makati City for 70% of them (Casingal & Guino, 2025). One contributing feature of that success was its conditional passer component—follow-up evaluations of the division's Two-Week Learning Enhancement Program found that up to 99% of those who passed conditionally were able to pass the certification exam (Casingal, Corpuz, & Rico, 2025; Casingal, De la Cruz, & Arorong, 2025; Casingal et al., 2026).

In one significant respect, the architecture was modified in the administration of the 2026 A&E; the category of conditional passer was removed and results were based on a binary pass/fail format. SDO Makati City reported 403 test takers and 199 passers in the 2026 results, resulting in a rate of 49.38% of passers, which appeared to be a drop of over thirteen percentage points from the previous year's result which includes conditional passers. This sudden and obvious decline of quality at once and automatically brings questions to the mind of a division office: did the quality of teaching go down? Was there a decrease in learners' ability? Has learning deteriorated in the learning environment? Maybe the preparation strategy just went out the window?

Any two years' headline rates can only be compared in a responsible way if it can be established that they are "commensurable" — a measurement problem must be solved first. Analysing a rate which considers scores of 50-59% as a success with another rate which considers them to be a failure is mixing a policy change with a performance change. This is

a well-researched issue in educational accountability research, as cut scores and reclassification practices can drive changes in trends (Casingal, 2024; Koretz, 2008; Linn, 2000). The ALS phenomenon, however, has not yet been analyzed by the Philippine ALS literature, nor is there an analytical template available that can assist division offices across the country to distinguish between policy and performance effects in their A&E trend data, many of which were witness to the very policy change.

Gap Analysis

A&E performance monitoring should be based on consistent, similar indicators to allow for the identification of performance changes as a result of instruction, student, or context and to appropriately address those changes. Divisions should be able to identify if a preparation strategy is effective, identify the learner segment(s) that is not being well served and redirect the allocation of resources on the basis of good trend evidence. The divide's apparent success rate dropped, however, as the conditional passer band—with a proven certification conversion rate of 89–100% (Casingal, De la Cruz, & Arorong, 2025; Casingal et al., 2026)—was eliminated from the outcome measure, while the outright pass rate rose. The gap between the ideal (accountability data that is commensurable) and the real (data that is confounded by the policy) creates an analytic space in which no existing ALS study models the counterfactual outcomes that a policy would have had if it had not been in place and a practical space since nearly eighty learners who would have been certified by a division enhancement program are no longer receiving a certification bearing institutional response, completion of the enhancement program no longer leads to same-cycle certification.

Novelty of the Research

Past studies on ALS have focused on typical administration (Brizuela, 2022), curriculum alignment (Labarrete, 2019), rapid preparation for crisis situations (Casingal & Guino, 2025), and post-examination remediation of conditional passers (Casingal & Corpuz, 2026; Casingal, De la Cruz, & Arorong, 2026; Casingal et al., 2026). To date, no published study (a) has compared two full division cohorts who were taught under the same intervention strategy but measured under different scoring policies, (b) has estimated a cohort's success rate if it had been assessed under a superseded policy, or (c) has systematically adjudicated

between the contributions of teacher, learner, environmental and policy factors as causes of an inter-cohort outcome shift in the context of the ALS. This study tackles all three and offers a replicable analytical framework that is easily transportable to other school divisions and even to the national ALS assessment governance.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to find out if the drop in the A&E success rate of SDO Makati City is truly the result of a dip in learner performance or if it is due to the absence of the conditional passer policy in the 2025 administration. Specifically, it sought to: (1) compare the overall and level specific outright pass rates of 2025 and 2026; (2) compare the 2026 outcome with the 2025 outcome including the conditional passers and quantify the impact of the classification change; (3) estimate the 46 outcome if the conditional passer band had remained; (4) examine differences in performance between the institutional (BJMP) and community-based centres in the 2026 cohort; (5) adjudicate among teacher, learner, environmental, and policy factors as explanations of the inter-cohort shift; (6) make evidence-based recommendations for division-level preparedness strategy and future research.

Related Literature

Assessment Policy Change and the Validity of Performance Trends

Much measurement scholarship has warned that standards-based comparisons over years must be made with the understanding that the rules for certifying the test have not changed. As accountability measures in the United States have developed, scores were found to improve or decline artificially when harmonized (Linn, 2000) and reclassification effects have been as large or larger than genuine achievement gains (Koretz, 2008). In a criterion-referenced system, a moving criterion moves examinees from failure to success or from success to failure, without affecting what they know or can do. This measurement lens, which is hardly discussed in the Philippines when it comes to non-formal education research, is applied to the ALS A&E context with the 2026 conditional passer band removal being a reclassification event. In the Philippines, Casingal (2024) first demonstrated this by illustrating how tools of testing can be revised to affect the competency observed as well as the competency that the test results can “show.” This

discovery directly leads to current problem; as the certification rule changes, the trend information no longer clearly communicates messages of teaching quality or achievement for students.

The Conditional Passer Mechanism and Post-Examination Remediation

During the 2025 A&E cycle, the conditional passer category (50-59% scoring) was a formalized second chance, which earned recognition for learners' partial mastery and allowed them to be certified through focused remediation instead of re-examination (Casingal, De la Cruz, & Arorong, 2025). The productivity of the pathway is evident and consistent in SDO Makati City. Out of 31 conditional passers, 90% of them achieved the 60% certification target in the three learning centers (elementary: $d = 1.45$; junior high school: $d = 1.58$), which is statistically significant with large effect sizes. The percentage of institutions certified was 92% (combined) with a 100% rate for the BJMP Female Dormitory (Casingal, Corpuz, & Rico, 2025), and a detailed assessment of all 95 conditional passers at 23 institutions indicated a near 100% rate of certification (Casingal et al., 2026). The results are relevant to the current study because they indicate that the conditional passer classification was not just a "cosmetic" classification; it was the starting point for a remediation program that was shown to convert near-passers into certified passers. Its removal did not only take away a label, but a working throughput mechanism as well.

Intensive Familiarization and Mock Testing as Preparation Strategy

In both of the cohorts studied, the preparation strategy employed is based on assessment preparation theory which suggests that systematic exposure to different assessment formats and repeated practice testing leads to not only improved content mastery but also test-taking confidence (Wolcott & Legg, 1998). The ALS 45 Days Challenge framework was tried and tested during the 2025 cycle and despite the time being limited to 45 days after the five-year examination period, combined success rates were 62.68% (Casingal & Guino, 2025). The underlying rationale appears to be correct: intensive, time-limited interventions focused on specific skill deficits result in large effects, intensity is a key factor, and structured practice-testing regimens work with adult learners (Greenberg et al., 2006; Seamon, 2004; Wlodkowski, 2003). If the same strategy is used in every cycle in the 2026

cycle, this allows for the analytical opportunity that this study focuses: inter-cohort outcome differences can be more confidently attributed to factors other than the preparation program.

Learner, Teacher, and Environmental Determinants of A&E Performance

In addition to policy and preparation, the literature on A&E identifies learner, teacher, and environmental determinants of A&E performance. At the learner level, examinees for ALS are mostly working out-of-school youth and adults whose readiness to take the test has been influenced by gaps in their previous schooling, competing work and family demands, and irregular attendance (Albert et al., 2024; Arzadon & Nato, 2015). The competencies and instructional strategies of ALS implementers have been correlated to learner achievement at the teacher-level (Castillo, 2021), while qualitative research with students who have passed the licensure examination has linked the passing to the interaction of the quality of the preparation program and the disposition of the students (Binayao & Dales, 2020) rather than to ability alone. The physical, social context in which review takes place—noise, distraction and structure—has measurable effects at the environmental level on cognitive performance (Gifford et al., 2011) and structured institutional environments have been shown to have positive learning impacts on learners in settings of confinement (Steuter & Smith, 2003). As well as policy, these three sets of factors are the candidate explanations that are adjudicated in this study.

Synthesis

All the literature together forms three premises. Firstly, shifts in certification policy can lead to apparent performance trends and metrics must be harmonised for meaningful inter-year comparison. Second, the conditional passer pathway is an empirically productive pathway that was observed at SDO Makati City and whose elimination is likely to be associated with a decrease in the success rates as reflected in the headline. Third, the preparation strategy for all cohorts was the same, so any differences in outcomes are due to learner, teacher, environmental, or policy factors. This is where this study contributes; no other ALS study had ever been able to include these premises in one analysis of consecutive A&E administrations.

Methodology

Research Design

Study used quantitative causal-comparative (ex post facto) design with the involvement of a counterfactual scenario modeling. Causal-comparative design is used when the groups (examination cohorts) are established beforehand and the researcher wants to find plausible explanations for the difference in the outcome (Stratton, 2019). A cohort of 2025 A&E students was compared to a cohort of 2026 A&E students from a three-category scheme (passer, conditional passer at 50-59%, non-passer) and a two-category pass/fail scheme. The design was a quasi-experiment that examined the certification policy variable, as both cohorts had been prepared using the same division-wide familiarization and mock testing approach, with an understanding that the composition of the cohorts, the deployment of teachers and the instructional contexts were not experimentally controlled. The counterfactual estimation of the 2026 combined success rate was similar to the logic used in reclassification analysis in accountability research (Koretz, 2008; Linn, 2000).

Data Sources and Participants

The study was based on the consolidated division-level frequency data of full official A&E examination records for SDO Makati City for the 2025 and 2026 administrations, broken down by educational level (i.e. elementary and junior high school), and for 2026, learning center type (i.e. BJMP institutional center and community-based center). The 2026 records were also segmented by sex and examination room: four examination rooms in BJMP institutions (47 exam takers) and sixteen examination rooms in the Makati Integrated School testing venue for community based learners (356 exam takers). A total of 426 among 475 registered learners (89.68%; 115 elementary school and 360 junior high school) were examined in 2025, with 173 learners passing the exam and 95 learners passing with condition. There were 532 learners registered for learner-level examinations in 2026 and 403 (75.75%) appeared, with 199 (49.32%) passing. No individuals were identified and all analysis was based on aggregated frequencies. Both administrations were full enumerations to eliminate sampling error within each administration.

Analytical Procedures

All rates were recalculated directly from raw frequencies; this was done to obtain an internal consistency. Three comparison frames have been built. This is a policy-invariant comparison in which the 2025 outright pass rate (excluding conditional passers) is compared with the 2026 pass rate in frame A (harmonized outright standard). The comparison that presents an apparent decline is between the success rate (2025 combined success rate, which incorporates conditional passers) with the pass rate (2026). This comparison is shown in Frame B (headline standard). In the frame (counterfactual reconstruction), the number of 2026 non-outright-passers is multiplied by the conditional passer share of the 2025 non-outright-passers ($95/253 = 37.55\%$) to estimate the number of 2026 examinees that would have fallen in the 50–59% band had the 50% band been retained, and the number of 2026 examinees in the 50% band is recomputed accordingly. Two-proportion z-tests (equivalently, chi-square tests of independence without continuity correction) were used to test inter-cohort and within-cohort proportional differences at $\alpha = .05$; rate differences with 95% confidence intervals were reported; and Cohen's h was calculated as the effect size for proportional differences and interpreted against conventional benchmarks (small = 0.20, medium = 0.50; Cohen, 1988). The statistical findings for the factor adjudication for Objective 5 were triangulated with documentation of characteristics of the two administrations (constant intervention strategy, policy change, cohort composition, and center-type patterns) and with the implementation evidence published by the division.

Ethical Considerations

This study is a secondary analysis of the aggregated institutional records that were created as a routine part of normal examination administration. There was no collection, access or reporting of personally identifiable information, and frequencies are at the division or center-type level. This analysis was done with the consent and under the official mandate of the researcher in the Curriculum Implementation Division of SDO Makati City where the research guidelines of the division were adhered to and in accordance with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 on the processing of aggregated, de-identified data for policy research. The 2026 dataset includes information on learning centers by type, and not by rank identity, to avoid institutional stigmatization.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the Two Cohorts

A summary of the two administrations is shown in Table 1. The two cohorts were equally-sized (426 test takers in 2025 and 403 in 2026) and were almost the same in terms of educational level, with a majority of students from the junior high school level (77.93% and 78.41% respectively). They were both prepared following the division's familiarization and mock testing method, and the main difference in administrations is the certification system. Registration volume in 2026 (532 learners) exceeded that of 2025 (475) by 12.00%, but the participation rate declined significantly from 89.68% to 75.75% ($z = -5.79$, $p < .001$, $h = -0.38$), with participation lowest in institutional settings (47 of 82, or 57.32%) relative to community-based settings (356 of 450, or 79.11%), and lower at the elementary level (87 of 121, or 71.90%) than at the junior high school level (316 of 411, or 76.89%). The data on the registration rate by level in 2025 show that this reduction was across both elementary and junior high school levels (elementary: 81.74% to 71.90%; junior high school: 92.22% to 76.89%).

Table 1: Profile of the 2025 and 2026 A&E Cohorts, SDO Makati City

Characteristic	2025 Cohort	2026 Cohort	Remarks
Registered learners	475	532	+12.00% volume change
Test takers	426	403	-5.4% volume change
Participation rate	89.68%	75.75%	-13.93 pp decline
Elementary takers	94 (22.07%)	87 (21.59%)	Comparable share
Junior HS takers	332 (77.93%)	316 (78.41%)	Comparable share
Preparation strategy	Familiarization + mock testing	Familiarization + mock testing	Held constant
Certification scheme	Pass / Conditional (50–59%) / Fail	Pass / Fail only	Policy change
Two-Week Learning Enhancement Program (TWLEP)	Post-exam; certification-bearing for conditional passers	Pre- and post-exam; non-certification-bearing	Certification pathway removed

Note. All 2025 figures recomputed from raw frequencies in official division records; recomputed totals (outright 40.61%; combined 62.91%) supersede summary-row percentages in the source tabulation. 2026 registration recovered from learner-level rosters.

Descriptive Results by Administration

Table 2: 2025 A&E Examination Results by Educational Level

Level	Registered	Takers	Passers	Conditional	Outright %	Combined % (w/ CP)
Elementary	115	94	32	15	34.04%	50.00%
Junior HS	360	332	141	80	42.47%	66.57%
Total	475	426	173	95	40.61%	62.91%

Table 3: 2026 A&E Examination Results by Educational Level and Center Type

Level / Center Type	Male	Female	Takers	Passers	Pass Rate
Elementary – BJMP	17	3	20	12	60.00%
Elementary – Community-based	39	28	67	28	41.79%
Elementary subtotal	56	31	87	40	45.98%
Junior HS – BJMP	19	8	27	13	48.15%
Junior HS – Community-based	164	125	289	146	50.52%
Junior HS subtotal	183	133	316	159	50.32%
Grand total	239	164	403	199	49.38%

By sex, the 2026 cohort comprised 239 male (59.31%) and 164 female (40.69%) test takers. Although both community-based facilities and institutional facilities had a higher proportion of male individuals, the proportion was significantly higher in institutional facilities (36 of 47, or 76.60%) compared to community-based facilities (203 of 356, or 57.02%). Sex disaggregation data were not reported in the consolidated 2025 records, and so inter-cohort comparisons for sex were not possible.

Frame A: The Harmonized Comparison — Outright Passing Improved

When assessed on the sole criterion that was defined in the same way both years – attainment at the passing standard – performance did not decline, but markedly improved. The division’s outright pass rate rose from 40.61% in 2025 to 49.38% in 2026, a gain of 8.77 percentage points ($z = 2.54$, $p = .011$, $h = 0.18$, 95% CI of the difference [2.02, 15.52]). The increase was statistically significant for junior high school learners from

42.47% to 50.32% ($z = 2.00$, $p = .045$). The absolute increase was much greater for the elementary learners (34.04% to 45.98% +11.93 points), but was not significant due to the smaller learner subgroup ($z = 1.64$, $p = .101$) and, effect size, was higher than the junior high school gain ($h = 0.24$). The harmonized comparison is given in Table 4.

Table 4: Frame A — Outright Pass Rate Comparison (Policy-Invariant Metric)

Group	2025 Outright	2026 Pass	Δ (pp)	z	p	h
Elementary	34.04% (32/94)	45.98% (40/87)	+11.93	1.64	.101	0.24
Junior HS	42.47% (141/332)	50.32% (159/316)	+7.85	2.00	.045*	0.16
Overall	40.61% (173/426)	49.38% (199/403)	+8.77	2.54	.011*	0.18

Note. Two-proportion z -tests, two-tailed; * $p < .05$. h = Cohen's effect size for proportions.

This is indeed a substantial result on the substantive level. It suggests that the second time around of the familiarisation and mock testing strategy led to a higher likelihood of success at the first sitting for the learners in the division than for the 2025 group. A number of factors could have contributed: 2026 assessment data was informed by a year of assessment experience for teachers; review materials and mock instruments were developed on the basis of actual 2025 assessment experience; and the division's published analyses of least-mastered competencies 2025 (Casingal & Guino, 2025; Casingal et al., 2026) were included in 2026 review priorities. The second cycle had the advantages of accumulated calibration which the first cycle in crisis mode didn't have when it came to assessment preparation.

Frame B: The Headline Comparison — An Artifact of Reclassification

The apparent drop is only seen in Frame B, where the 2026 pass rate is compared with the conditional-passer-inclusive rate from 2025. On this basis, the division's success rate fell from 62.91% to 49.38%, a difference of -13.53 percentage points that is highly significant statistically ($z = -3.93$, $p < .001$, $h = -0.27$, 95% CI [-20.23, -6.83]) and concentrated almost entirely in the junior high school group (66.57% to 50.32%, $z = -4.20$, $p < .001$); the elementary difference was small and non-significant (50.00% to 45.98%, $z = -0.54$, $p = .588$). This frame is included in Table 5.

Table 5: Frame B — Combined Success Rate Comparison (Policy-Confounded Metric)

Group	2025 Combined	2026 Pass	Δ (pp)	z	p	h
Elementary	50.00% (47/94)	45.98% (40/87)	-4.02	-0.54	.588	-0.08
Junior HS	66.57% (221/332)	50.32% (159/316)	-16.25	-4.20	<.001**	-0.33
Overall	62.91% (268/426)	49.38% (199/403)	-13.53	-3.93	<.001**	-0.27

Note. 2025 combined = passers + conditional passers. **p < .001.

This study's major result is the comparison of the policy-invariant and policy-confounded metrics in Frames A and B. It seems that a division which improved almost nine percentage points on its absolute pass rate has fallen back more than thirteen on the headline count. The Frame B decrease is real, but not interpreted as a loss in knowledge as is commonly supposed. The Frame B decrease is not interpreted as a loss in knowledge as is often assumed, but is instead the throughput of the deleted conditional passer pathway. Twenty-two.30% of the test takers in 2025 scored in the 50-59% range, and almost all of them (89-100%) were able to be converted to certification through the Two-Week Learning Enhancement Program (Casingal, et al., 2025; 2026). In 2026 learners in the same level of mastery were deemed failures; the division has now put in place a pre- and post-examination enhancement program, but this would no longer result in same-cycle certification. The metric was changed, and the change in the metric was passed on to the comparison.

Frame C: Counterfactual Reconstruction — What 2026 Would Have Shown Under 2025 Rules

The 2026 non-outright-passer pool (204 learners) was multiplied by the 2025 conditional passer share of non-outright-passers (95 of 253 or 37.55%) to quantify the policy effect directly, assuming, based on Frame A evidence of similar or greater score distribution, that a similar relative proportion of non-passers in the 2026 pool scored in the 50–59% band. This gives a 2026 estimate of 199 "would-be" conditional passers, and a total success rate of $(199+77)/403 = 68.39\%$, about 5.5 percentage points higher than the 2025 benchmark of 62.91%. The reconstruction is shown in Table 6. When the number of non-passers is assumed to be 30% to 45% of the total population, the projections for the combined rate in 2026 range from 64.57% to 72.16%, which is higher than the combined rate in 2025 for all the ranges.

Table 6: Frame C — Counterfactual 2026 Outcomes Under Retained Conditional Passer Policy

Scenario	Est. Conditional Passers	Projected Combined Rate
Conservative (30% of non-passers in 50–59% band)	61	64.57%
Base case (2025 empirical share, 37.55%)	77	68.39%
Upper bound (45% of non-passers)	92	72.16%
Actual 2025 combined rate (benchmark)	95	62.91%

Note. Estimates assume a 2026 non-passer score distribution at least comparable to 2025; item-level 2026 score data would permit exact reconstruction and should be obtained where available.

The counterfactual result completely changes the nature of the division. If nothing changes with the certification process, the 2026 group was predicted to do the division's best combined performance since the exams were restarted. It also points to a clear and tangible consequence of the policy change: if the base case scenario is assumed, approximately 77 learners in the 2026 cohort were deemed to be partially mastered, but would have been directed to a remediation pathway with a close to guaranteed certification outcome, instead of a failing grade. The learners are not abstract, but are the most recoverable part of the division's learners, and the most important of the learners to whom the recommendations developed below apply.

Learning Environment Patterns Within the 2026 Cohort

There was no significant difference between the centers that were institutional (BJMP) and centers that were community-based (53.19% vs 48.88%, $z = -0.56$, $p = .578$) across the total 2026 cohort. At the elementary level, the absolute difference in favor of the BJMP learners was large, but not statistically significant (+18.21 points) with a small-to-medium effect size ($h = 0.37$); at the junior high school level, there was no difference between the groups (48.15% vs. 50.52%, $p = .814$). The consistency of the environment in the institution is in line with the division's previous comparative finding that the consistent, structured environment of an institution is conducive to consistent outcomes, particularly for learners who require structure (Casingal, Corpuz, & Rico, 2025; Steurer & Smith,

2003). Substantively, there is no evidence of deterioration in any setting type which explains the cohort level results: both major setting categories achieved absolute outright results in 2025 that were better than their 2026 results.

Adjudicating the Candidate Factors: Policy, Teacher, Learner, Environment

Having considered the four families of factors, and examined the evidence of the three comparison frames, it is now possible to consider the fifth objective of the study, explaining the apparent decline.

The policy factor is the dominant and demonstrated explanation. The entire 13.53-percentage-point apparent decline can be explained by the movement of the 50-59% band from success to failure. The trend changes to a significant improvement when the reclassification is neutralized (Frame A) and it projects to above the 2025 benchmark when the reclassification is modeled out (Frame C). If there's a drop left after accounting for this, then there's some other factors to explain. The headline comparison from 2025-2026 is a classic example of how construct irrelevant variance due to a change in the scoring rules has affected comparisons (Koretz, 2008; Linn, 2000).

The teacher factor, on the available evidence, operated in the positive direction. This year, using the same familiarization and mock testing procedure, the same group of ALS teachers yielded a much higher absolute pass rate, but not significantly more than the first year. In this year, with the same familiarization and mock testing procedure as the first year, but the same group of ALS teachers, a much higher absolute pass rate was achieved, but not significantly higher than the first year. This is consistent with an implementation maturation effect: the 2025 cycle was planned under crisis conditions and teachers had never used the formats before so they could not have gained assessment literacy, developed the instruments, nor had competency-gap intelligence that could be gained from the published analyses of the 2025 cycle. While aggregated data can't rule out fidelity differences within a cohort, like the 14.29% to 100% range of center success rates in 2025, the elementary differences between BJMP centers and community-based centers (+18 points) in 2026 indicate that differences may be present at some centers, but not others, supporting fidelity auditing at the center level rather than the cohort level.

The learner factor is plausible only as a secondary, unverifiable modifier. The 2026 cohort had 5.4% fewer test takers and was virtually the same level composition. Hare two mechanisms are worthy of note. The first is that the 2025 cohort took in five years' worth of waiting examinees, many of whom were probably long-prepared candidates, while the 2026 cohort came from a single-year's pipeline. Second, the 2025 remediation program qualified 95 near passers, taking the highest non-passers out of the next year's pool. The performance in both mechanisms should have been depressed in 2026, but performance went up, further strengthening the inference that performance was really improved in the instructional processes. The picture complicates, however, because the recovered registration data reveals that there was a rise in registration (to 532) and a drop in participation (to 75.75%) in 2026. Of the 129 students who took the examination, there is little consistency across level and setting in terms of the increase, which may be due to (self) selection in some cases. Another limitation is that there are no demographic and educational-history measures at the registrant level.

The environmental factor shows continuity, not deterioration. Both institutional and community-based rates were above the 2025 outright level and there was no difference between the two types of setting in 2026 overall. The ongoing elementary advantage of the structured BJMP environment does not signal any decline in any environment but rather, a reinforcement of the previous comparative study by the BJMP (Casingal, Corpuz, & Rico, 2025) which advocated transferring institutional features into the community-based elementary school (protected study time, distraction control, tight scheduling).

In summary, the apparent decrease appears to be a policy artefact, the underlying performance trend is positive, the true improvement is attributable to teacher and environmental factors, and the effects attributable to the composition of the learners are not entirely ruled out, but run in the opposite direction to explaining the apparent decrease. The analysis reveals not a decline in learner performance, but a stranded caseload – a predicted 77 near passing learners who were no longer on a remediation pathway leading to a certificate in 2026, despite the persisting operation of the enhancement programme before and after 2026 testing.

Limitations

There are four limitations that bound the interpretations of these findings. First, the analysis is based on frequencies aggregated across all 2026, and the "counterfactual" band estimate is a model, rather than a count, of frequencies. Second, the reported fall-off in participation from 89.68% to 75.75% (recovered from learner level rosters) suggests that there may have been differential self-selection into examination taking, which the outcome data alone does not preclude. Third, the causal-comparative design does not allow for inference of causation; the factor adjudication is an inference to the best explanation that is limited to the features documented in the two administrations. Fourth, there were a few minor internal inconsistencies in the summary rows of the source tabulations (for example, an overall outright rate of 38.26% compared to one based on the row frequencies of 40.61%). The rates used throughout this study are based on frequencies because the two summary-row rates (38.26% and 42.47% respectively) were computed as unweighted averages of the two level rates, rather than from pooled frequencies. Reconciliation of the official records is recommended to be done by archiving the affected tabulations.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that the overall performance in A&E examination in SDO Makati City really suffered during the 2025 to 2026 administration as the statistics indicated (from 62.91% to 49.38%) or if the decline was a result of the removal of the conditional passer policy. The facts are clear on the big issue. Overall, the division showed a higher percent on attainment at each educational level, and at both the institutional and community-based settings, on the only measure defined identically across the two years, which was by an outright attainment of the 60% standard, from 40.61% to 49.38% ($p = .011$). The headline drop is only seen in the policy-confounded comparison and is fully accounted for by the reclassification of the 50-59% band. In the counterfactual reconstruction, the combined success rate of the 2026 cohort would have been around 68%, the best since the examination started. The preparation strategy did not lose its effectiveness, on the contrary, it was matured its second cycle.

The study contributes to the knowledge in three ways. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first two-cohort comparison in the Philippine ALS literature that is carried out from a

policy perspective. Methodologically, it shows a replicable three-frame framework (harmonised comparison, headline decomposition and counterfactual reconstruction) that any schools division could employ to ensure that trend interpretation remains robust to any alterations to the rules governing the certification of various items. Practically, an estimated 77 near-passing learners completed, or could have completed, the Two-Week Learning Enhancement Program, before and after the 2026 exam, but the completion no longer translates to the same-cycle certification rate of 89-100%. The policy implication is that comparisons to accountability should always be based on changes in the certification categories, or else divisions may confuse success with failure and focus the wrong practices for improvement.

Recommendations

For SDO Makati City

On the basis of the findings, the following actions are recommended for the division:

1. Lift the safety net upstream. The Two-Week Learning Enhancement Program (TWLEP) that has been implemented prior to and after the 2026 examination should be formally introduced as an intensive pre-examination enhancement block geared to the profile of learner that has historically benefitted from an intensive ($d = 1.45 - 1.58$).
2. Embed policy-adjusted trend reporting. All Division Memoranda, Accomplishment Reports and presentations comparing A&E results between years should also include the harmonized outright pass rate with the headline rate and include a note on any change in the rules for certification to ensure that planning and personnel decisions are based on comparable evidence.
3. Develop a near-passer recovery track for the 2026 cohort. The estimated learners in the 50-59% band should be identified from the records and should be targeted to re-enroll and transferred into a structured remediation programme for re-taking the test the next administration, based on evidence that they are likely to achieve 89-100% certification in two weeks following targeted remediation.

4. Close the elementary community-based gap. The 18-point gap in elementary settings between community based and BJMP should be viewed as a gap in implementation fidelity that needs to be addressed at the elementary level, and deliberate movement of institutional design elements (protected review schedules, attendance management, distraction control) should be transferred to the community based elementary setting.
5. Fix the data system. Future cycles can be monitored for participation by having exact (not modeled) counterfactuals and score distributions at the item level, and having consistent registration counts at the division level.

For Regional and National Policy

1. Elevate the finding to policy dialogue. The division should present these data to the Regional Office for sending to the Bureau of Alternative Education to provide evidence for the inclusion of national level pre-examination remediation equivalents for the 50–59% band of the structured conditional passer mechanism, since the mechanism is proven to be effective in converting students.

For Future Researchers

1. To replicate the three-frame approach in other school divisions to see if the artifact pattern can be generalized nationally in which schools have had the same policy change.
2. Reconstruct the 50 – 59 % band exactly using item-level and/or scale-level analysis and model predictors of band membership and test pre-examination enhancement effects using a randomized or regression-discontinuity design around the cutoff of 50 – 59 %
3. Conduct longitudinal follow-up tracer studies with both certified passers and near-passers into further and later education and employment, to identify the downstream socio-economic implications of the policy change for the certified and the not certified.
4. Capture the experiences of teachers and students in relation to the policy transition (including loss of the conditional category) that the present quantitative design was unable to capture, by documenting them through mixed methods investigations.

The Next Bold Step: An ALS Precision Preparedness System

In addition to the specific recommendations listed above, the findings have led to the following single recommendation for the next examination cycle: The division's annual preparation campaign should be replaced by a permanent ALS Precision Preparedness System. This would mean that each registered learner would receive a diagnostic risk score at registration based on the competency-gap evidence they accumulated in the 2025–2026 cycle, weekly mock examination data would feed a live learner-level dashboard, which would classify each learner as secure, borderline (the mock 50–59% band), or at-risk, at-risk and borderline learners would automatically be sent into extended strand-specific remediation, starting at least ninety days before the administration date, with centers operating under a fidelity-certified implementation protocol that would be audited against the features that distinguished the division's 100%-performing centers during the 2025 cycle. The division already has all of the components of this system in a validated state - the diagnostic instruments, the mock series of examinations, the enhancement program, and the analytical base. The 2026 policy change requires them to be integrated into one integrated, anticipatory structure. To pass students who are on the borderline across the line before the date of examination, not after, is not simply to compensate for the loss of the conditional passer policy; it is to make the policy unnecessary.

About the Author

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