



Publications

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Alternative Education: From a "Last Chance" to a Proactive Model

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In the past twenty years, we have seen a gradual transformation of public education in the United States. In particular, for students in K-12 public schools there has been an increasing emphasis on standards, accountability, and excellence. Legislatures, school boards, and parents have all demanded better outcomes from public schools. Simultaneously, there has been rising concern about school safety and discipline (Furlong, Morrison, and Dear 1994; Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 1998).

The impetus for the reform of public education included apprehension about the literacy of high school graduates and their ability to compete in the global economy. In response to a series of reports and task force recommendations (e.g., *A Nation at Risk* [National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983] and *A Nation Prepared* [Carnegie Forum 1986]), the public schools have emphasized excellence in education by raising standards, implementing new graduation requirements, and lowering tolerance for serious violations of school disciplinary codes. The primary beneficiaries of these changes have been college-bound youth and others who respond well to the current structure and purposes of public education. Overlooked in most of the recommendations were non-college-bound youth and students who struggled with traditional school organization and culture (see, e.g., Smith 1988; Wirt. T. Grant Foundation 1988).

In response to higher expectations and standards, many school districts have developed alternative education programs for students whose behaviors disrupt the learning of others and otherwise interfere with the order of the school environment. Often these alternative education settings are punitive responses or "last chance" options for youth.

Rarely are alternative education programs available as a proactive choice to students or parents *before* serious problems develop in middle or high school. For example, at Tall Oaks Vocational High School in Bowie, Maryland, most of the 175 students currently enrolled dropped out or were suspended or expelled from their

home schools before applying to and being admitted to the school. At Muncaster Challenge, an alternative middle school in Rockville, Maryland, all of the students currently attending were expelled from their assigned schools before being admitted to this alternative setting. Although both of these alternative public schools provide intensive, individualized services to youth, failure in traditional middle school and high school programs was a prerequisite for admission. For many students not experiencing success in traditional secondary public schools, limited options exist.

In contrast to alternative education as a "last chance" or a punitive response to behavioral difficulties in the public school, we believe that alternatives can and should be positive, proactive responses to the needs of children and families for whom existing school structures are a bad fit. Alternative education can promote excellence and high expectations within a nontraditional school setting.

From Cultural Transmission to Progressive Problem-Solving Models

U.S. public schools have been dominated by a cultural transmission model of schooling during most of the twentieth century. Schools have seen their primary purpose as transmitting knowledge, skills, and the social and moral rules of the culture (Kohlberg and Mayer 1972). However, structural changes in the life experiences of children and an increasingly diverse school population call for additional choices and options in public education.

During the past twenty years there has been a steady decline in the amount of time parents can give to their school-aged children. In 1989, nearly 70 percent of all children and adolescents in the United States lived either in two-parent families with both parents working or in single parent families (Hernandez 1993). Consequently, the time and supervision available from caring adults for many youth during nonschool hours is limited. In addition to this structural change, the schools have become increasingly diverse. Population projections by the Bureau of the Census indicate that the number of black and Hispanic children in the United States is expected to rise from 26 percent in 1990 to 34 percent in 2010 (Hernandez 1993). That dramatic increase comes at a time when schools are struggling with the over-representation of African American and Hispanic youth in special education and among those suspended or excluded from school (Leone 1997). One alternative to the traditional cultural-transmission model of schooling that may be more appropriate for some students has been referred to as progressive education. Rooted in the ideas of John Dewey, the purpose of education in this model is problem solving (Kohlberg and Mayer 1972). From this perspective, literacy, mathematical skills, and other core knowledge areas all become the basis for problem-solving activities. A progressive education model of schooling with problem solving as a central feature can become a key element of successful alternative education programs.

Elements of Effective Programs

Alternative education needs to become a meaningful alternative to traditional, contemporary public schooling. Successful programs cannot become dumping grounds for students or places for low-performing teachers. Rather, quality alternative education programs should have many of the same high expectations, standards, and outcomes valued in more traditional school settings.

Some consensus exists concerning the elements that are needed to ensure success in alternative programs. Schorr (1997) summarizes these elements as follows:

1. *Clear focus on academic learning.* The most promising schools have a clear focus on academic learning that combines high academic standards with engaging and creative instruction. In her autobiographical account of the development of an alternative elementary school in Chicago, Marva Collins describes how she was able to promote high academic standards for students from the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city (Collins and Tamarkin 1990). Students in her alternative school, Westside Preparatory, were able to perform well above what prevailing popular opinion and studies projected for disadvantaged students. At Westside, instruction was geared to keep students engaged in learning. Teachers were energetic, took few breaks, and taught a challenging curriculum.

2. *Ambitious professional development.* Successful schools provide teachers with stimulating, ongoing professional development activities that help teachers to maintain an academic focus, enhance teaching strategies, and develop alternative instructional methods. Properly designed staff development involves teacher input, work with colleagues, and opportunities to visit and observe teaching in

other settings. When given opportunities to examine differences between instructional aspirations and actual practice, teachers will achieve what they aspire to do, provided that they have adequate staff development and support.

3. *Strong level of autonomy and professional decision-making.* Partly in response to sluggish and inefficient bureaucracies, reformers in education and social services believe that effective service delivery requires decision making at the service delivery level (Schorr 1997; Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). Decisions about staffing, leadership, budgets, scheduling, curriculum, and pedagogy need to be made by teaching and support staff who have direct contact with students. Effective schools provide autonomy that builds trust and loyalty among staff. Further, giving staff a voice in decision making promotes creativity and instructional excellence (Collins and Tamarkin 1990).

4. *Sense of community.* Research suggests that schools that focus on the creation and maintenance of intentional communities are

more likely to succeed than bureaucratically organized schools (Schorr 1997). Within effective school communities, students and staff share expectations for learning, and students are encouraged to take a variety of courses and activities that enable them to pursue their interests and aspirations.

Rethinking Assumptions

The elements identified above provide the foundation for a successful alternative education program. In addition to a progressive education orientation that has problem solving as an organizing framework, alternative education programs need to identify essential elements of the curriculum and how the program links with other agencies and services for youth. For example, some youths and families who may choose alternative education will have social service or mental health needs. Finding ways to give students and parents access to these services and avoid duplication of efforts is important.

Additionally, alternative education programs need to find ways of linking their classrooms and instructional experiences to the community. Within local and regional communities are people, businesses, museums, libraries, and agencies that can provide information and learning experiences for youth. These same resources can also serve as a bridge to postsecondary education or training and employment for students in the alternative school setting.

Alternative education should have a well-defined place within public schools and within communities. Enrollment in alternative education programs should be an option for students who, for whatever reason, experience difficulty with large, and sometimes impersonal, middle schools and high schools. Educators, program developers, teacher trainers, and researchers need to rethink the assumptions we make about alternative education. For too long, professionals have adopted a "deficit" model in examining the needs of children and adolescents who fail in and disrupt traditional school settings. It is time to develop academically rigorous, engaging alternative schools.

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