



## Publications

The National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice

# 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