DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 475 UD 035 894

AUTHOR	Reimer, Mary S.; Cash, Terry
TITLE	Alternative Schools: Best Practices for Development and Evaluation. Effective Strategies for School Improvement. Alternative Schooling.
INSTITUTION	National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson, SC.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	50p.; Developed and published with support from Communities in Schools of South Carolina.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, College of Health, Education and Human Development, Clemson University, 209 Martin Street, Clemson, SC 29631-1555. Tel: 864-656-2599; e-mail: ndpc@clemson.edu; Web site: http://www.dropoutprevention.org.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Charter Schools; *Diversity (Student); Dropout Prevention; Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Magnet Schools; *Nontraditional Education; *Program Evaluation; Public Education; School Choice
IDENTIFIERS	Schools Within a School Plan (Elementary Educ); Schools Without Walls; Second Chance Programs

ABSTRACT

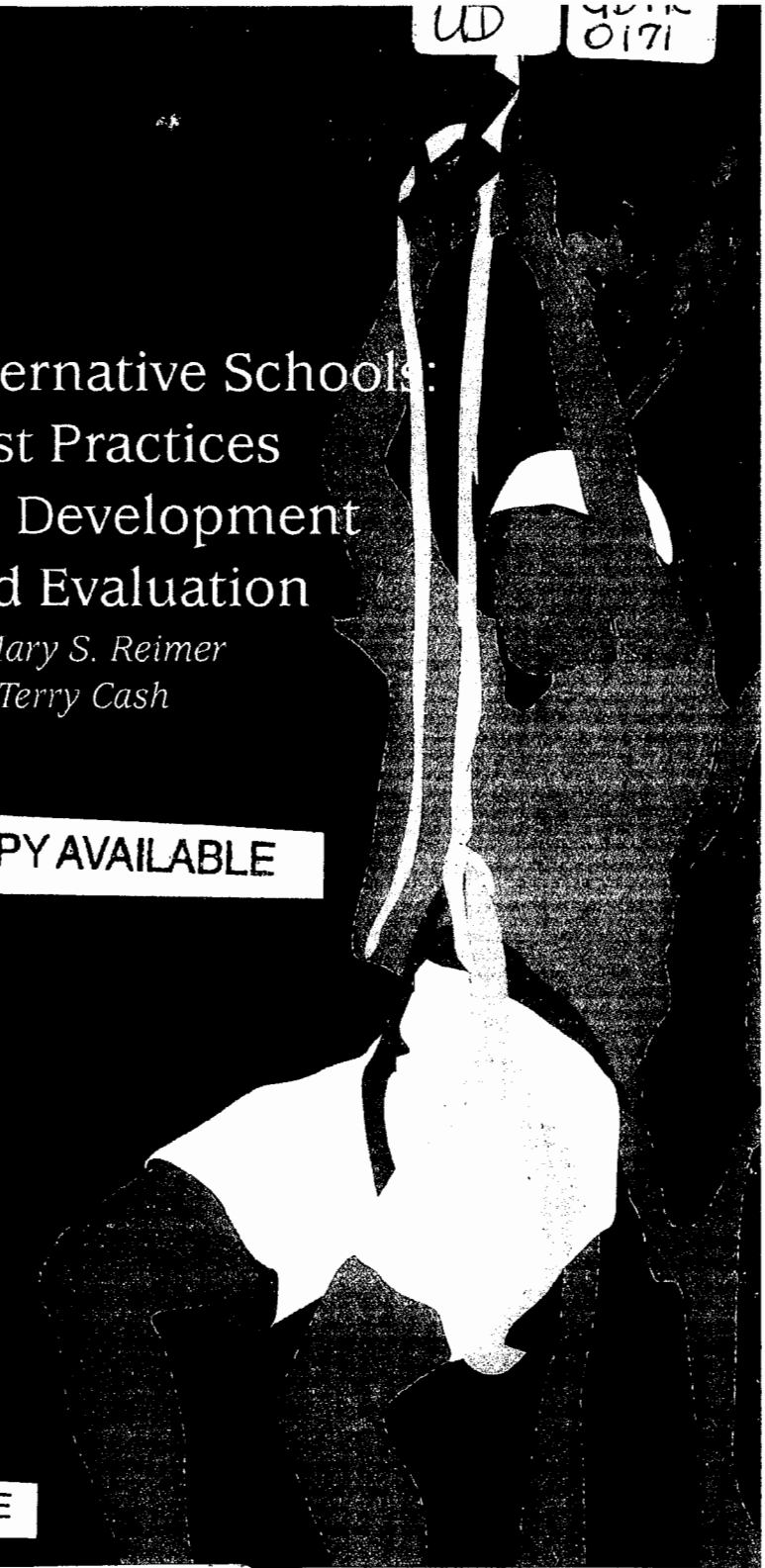
This book asserts that alternative programs remain a practical management strategy for educating diverse student learners, offering specific ideas for program implementation, accountability for student learning, and quality service provision. The information serves as an overview of important factors to consider for those seeking new approaches to education of all children in alternative learning environments. It also serves as an outline of quality indicators for those already involved in managing education via alternative schools. The book addresses where alternative schools fit into school improvement initiatives and how public education can manage the many alternatives needed to serve diverse students. Chapters include: "Need for Alternative Schools"; "Types of Alternative Schools" (e.g., magnet schools and charter schools); "Delivery Models" (e.g., behavior intervention and the academic model); "Needs and Issues" (e.g., funding, accountability, and community relations); "Best Practices"; "Establishing an Alternative Program"; "Alternative School Evaluation"; "Analyzing and Using Evaluation Data"; and "Some Evaluation Pitfalls." Alternative education resources are included. (Contains 27 references.) (SM)

Effective Strategies for School Improvement

Alternative Schooling

Alternative Schools: Best Practices for Development and Evaluation

by Mary S. Reimer and Terry Cash



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Fifteen Effective Strategies for School Improvement and Dropout Prevention

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center has conducted and analyzed research, sponsored extensive workshops, and collaborated with a variety of practitioners to further the mission of reducing America's dropout rate by meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations.

Students report a variety of reasons for dropping out of school; therefore, the solutions are multidimensional. The Center has identified 15 effective strategies that have the most positive impact on the high school graduation rate. These strategies, although appearing to be independent, actually work well together and frequently overlap. They can be implemented as stand-alone programs (e.g., mentoring or family involvement projects), but when school districts develop a program improvement plan that encompasses most or all of these strategies, positive outcomes will result. These strategies have been successful in all school levels from pre-K-12 and in rural, suburban, or urban centers.

Early Interventions

- Family Involvement
- Early Childhood Education
- Reading/Writing Programs

Basic Core Strategies

- Mentoring/Tutoring
- Service-Learning
- Alternative Schooling
- Out-of-School Experiences

Making the Most of Instruction

- Professional Development
- Learning Styles/Multiple Intelligences
- Instructional Technologies
- Individualized Instruction

Making the Most of the Wider School Community

- Systemic Renewal
- Community Collaboration
- Career Education/Workforce Readiness
- Violence Prevention/Conflict Resolution

A Message From the Series Editor

Once every so often, students or colleagues express themselves so clearly and succinctly that you just have to smile and thank them for sharing their work. That is the case with this effort by Mary Reimer and Terry Cash. I am pleased to be able to put my stamp of approval on their work. This volume fits nicely into the Alternative Schooling strategy of the National Dropout Center/Network's 15 Effective Strategies for School Improvement and Dropout Prevention. Listed on the opposite page are all 15 strategies that have been found to enhance student achievement and produce a better graduation rate. These strategies are being successfully used in rural, suburban, and urban centers throughout the United States from pre-K though the 12th grade.

The monographs in this series are intended to focus on thoughtful and insightful works on topics of current interest and importance to educators and other readers. Larger groups, such as undergraduate or graduate education classes or even an entire school's faculty, might be seeking professional development or current research information on a particular topic; these publications are excellent resources, and I personally use them in my graduate courses.

We can credit Mary Anne Raywid for being one of the first writers to focus educators' attention on alternative schooling issues and scheduling practices in the late 1960s and 1970s. But credit authors like Reimer and Cash for attempting to make sense of the why's and how's of alternative schooling at the beginning of the 21st Century. This volume does an admirable job, in short order, of identifying the main characteristics and issues of alternative schools, how to establish a solid program with best practices at the forefront, as well as dealing with evaluation issues. As a practical means for understanding and thinking through alternative issues, this volume will become a resource for many in the occupation.

For a current list of available titles in this series, as well as other publications from the NDPC/N, please contact:

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—Robert C. Morris, Ph.D., Series Editor

Professor of Education, State University of West Georgia

Foreword

Public education in the United States is the cornerstone of learning for the bulk of our diverse population. Learning alternatives were created even before public education was born and have continued to be developed to address the specific needs and desires of our people. The pulse of research and management in education in the United States continues to recognize and encourage the implementation of many alternatives to assist individuals to become as productive as possible.

The work of Mary Reimer and Terry Cash captures the essence of continuing efforts to have more than one way to become educated. We are fortunate to have these authors help everyone to identify the most recent developments in creating increased quality opportunities to maximize learning. The authors recognize alternative schools in particular and the contributions of many who believe that all children can learn and can make positive contributions to our society and local communities. This work is critical to helping those who study the management of education to consider options and alternatives as a pathway to a strong future.

This book provides a message that alternative programs remain a practical management strategy for educating our diverse student learner population. Specific ideas are offered for program implementation, accountability for student learning, and quality service provisions. The information serves as an overview of important factors to consider for those seeking new approaches to education of all children in alternative learning environments. It also serves as an outline of quality indicators for those already involved in managing education via alternative schools. The book surfaces information regarding two important questions for the future of public education: Where do alternative schools fit into school improvement initiatives? and How can public education manage the many alternatives needed to serve our diverse learners? In this publication, professional educators and others can find positive baseline information supporting alternative schools as a means to truly leave no child behind.

Raymond Morley, Ed.D., Iowa Department of Education
Board Member of the International Association of Learning Alternatives and Iowa Alternative Education Association

Introduction

"Education is a painful, continual, and difficult work to be done, by kindness, by warning, by precept, and by praise, but above all– by example."

—John Ruskin

Alternative education is not really a new concept on the American scene. As early as colonial America, education was conducted in a variety of ways by the wealthy or by religious groups. State legislators have been supporting a wide range of schools for more than a century. Although they may not be considered alternative schools by some, almost every state now has a theme-based governor's school for the arts, math, or science, and magnet schools are very common.

Dewey can be considered to be the father of the modern alternative school movement. He recognized the importance of individualized and experiential education because all children do not have the same learning styles or skills. He encouraged educators to move from the "school as factory" approach to education to a more progressive school philosophy that looked at students as individuals.

The ferment of the 1960s in America produced a large number of alternative schools, founded for political or social reasons. These schools served mainly white, middle- and upper-class children. Raywid (1994) reported that by 1981 there were approximately 10,000 public alternative schools serving three million students.

Koetke (1999) describes how these early educational experiments and experiences led to the two basic systems we have today. The two strands consist of educational opportunities "outside the system" and those "inside the system." Among the types of alternative school opportunities outside the system are the elite and costly private schools, religious schools, and home schools. The alternative schools described by Koetke as inside the system are those that generally serve a special population, such as students with unique learning interests or disabilities, teenage parents, potential dropouts, violent individuals, or court-adjudicated youths and those in juvenile detention systems. These types of alternative settings attempt to keep students in school to earn their high school diploma or GED. Most of the alternative schools today focus on serving at-risk youth.

Alternative education can be defined in many ways, but Morley (1991) provides a broad definition. He states,

"Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur" (p. 8).

An important factor in alternative education is that all personnel recognize that all children do not learn in the same way, so varied instructional methods and an innovative curriculum are necessary. A supportive school climate is vital to success, and this is achieved by teachers, parents, students, and community members demonstrating positive attitudes (Bucci & Reitzammer, 1992).

The purpose of this publication is to present an overview of alternative education, elements of successful alternative schools, and best practices for development and evaluation. It is important that educators and society as a whole recognize the importance of providing options for students who learn in different ways. If we believe that *all* children can learn, we have the obligation to discover how we can help them to learn.

Alternative schooling is one of the 15 Effective Strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center for school improvement and dropout prevention. Alternative schooling provides the opportunity for students who are not successful in the traditional classroom to succeed and complete their education. If these options did not exist, many more students would drop out and would not become productive members of society.

—Mary S. Reimer, Ph.D., and Terry Cash, Ph.D.

Need for Alternative Schools

Every student should have the opportunity to learn and to achieve a quality of life they desire based on their educational efforts and achievements. In addition, society should promote opportunity for all through education in order to reach its own goals of a better quality of life for the entire community. If these statements are accepted as educational goals, then alternative schooling is a requirement in every community, not an option. Alternative schooling opportunities are needed to accommodate the educational needs of students because the traditional school system, and particularly the traditional high school, can no longer serve their needs and their families' life-styles common today. Many educators are revisiting Dewey's educational philosophy in developing educational programs. It has even been suggested that society might want to consider allowing students to drop out and then provide alternative schools for them to complete their GED (Dynarski, 1999).

Alternative schooling does meet the diverse student and family needs and the social behaviors required for youth in today's world. Students in alternative learning programs are twice as likely to have parents who have less than a high school education; are more likely to live in single parent families; are more economically disadvantaged; and have repeated a grade, been suspended, or dropped out (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001, p. x).

Alternative education also offers school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide an equal access to education for all students. The two most critical questions that must then be answered are: What kind of alternative education should be designed and offered in our public schools? How can the alternative programs best meet the learning needs of students and be effectively integrated into the regular school system?

Types of Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are not new to the educational community. It was not unusual in the 1950s and 1960s for school districts to have an alternative school. However, the schools in that era were established to serve students who had already dropped out of the regular school. These schools had little effect on the dropout rate and were closed as district budgets began to shrink in the 1970s.

Within the last 15 years there has been a rebirth of alternative schools that focus on the needs of students who are at risk of dropping out. The schools have as their purpose to keep students in school by paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and the academic requirements for a high school diploma. Many educators realize that dropout prevention efforts must begin earlier than high school and now offer alternative school programs at the middle school level. A few districts even offer alternative programs at the elementary level. All of these programs are focused on providing students with the opportunity to succeed in school and graduate.

Magnet schools, designed to focus on specific subject areas such as math and science, the arts, or communication, have been in existence for decades. Magnet schools are usually found in larger or urban school districts. Some of the oldest and best known magnet school models are found in the New York City Public School System. There are more than 200 magnet schools ranging from the performing arts, career and technical education, global studies, science and math, environmental science, to middle college. Another innovative model is Key Elementary School, in the Indianapolis Public School System, where the curriculum emphasis is built around the Theory of Multiple Intelligences developed by Howard Gardner (Bolanos, 1994). Other excellent models for magnet schools are the high schools, often residential, supported by each state. These are usually known as the Governor's School for the Arts, the Governor's School for Math and Science, or whatever the special subject area is in each state.

Present alternative schools are usually one facet of a school district's comprehensive program to serve all students. Students attending these schools are usually

underachieving, deficient in credits to graduate, or retained more than once (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Some students are placed in these programs by the court system. Other alternative schools focus on a school-to-work curriculum, or are designed to meet the needs of teenage parents and provide day-care and parenting programs.

Charter schools are a growing movement in the alternative education field. More than 30 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation allowing charter schools to exist (Schargel & Smink, 2001). The most recent review of charter schools by the U.S. Department of Education (2002) found that there were 1,010 charter schools operating in the school year 1999-2000 in 27 states and the District of Columbia. There are 266,721 students currently served by the states with operating charter schools. According to *The State of Charter Schools*, the most common reasons given for establishing charter schools were to realize an alternative vision of schooling and to gain autonomy from district and state regulations (Berman, Nelson, Perry, Silverman, Solomon, & Kamprath, 1999).

Researchers have identified numerous models of alternative schools that have been developed to serve local needs and are operating with varied degrees of success. Hefner-Packer (1991) has identified five models:

- The Alternative Classroom is a self-contained classroom within a traditional school that offers varied programs in a different environment.
- The School-Within-a-School is also housed within a traditional school but has semiautonomous or specialized educational programs.
- The Separate Alternative School is separated from the regular school and has different academic and social behavior programs.
- The Continuation School meets the needs of students no longer attending traditional schools. These may be street academies for job-related training or parenting centers.

- ◇ The Magnet School is a self-contained program offering an intensified curriculum in one or more subject areas such as science or the arts.

Chalker's (1996) four common settings for alternative education are quite similar to Hefner-Packer's:

- ◇ Separate Alternative School is a self-contained, isolated structure. These schools are increasingly providing services to chronically disruptive students and students involved in the criminal justice system.
- ◇ School-Within-a School has strong ties to the parent school. Students usually attend the program for part of the day and still have access to regular school resources.
- ◇ Continuation School is usually an evening or summer program that serves students who are no longer enrolled in school or need additional coursework. The purpose of these schools is to provide opportunities for students to obtain their high school diploma or GED certificate. These programs often have an additional goal of preparing students for work.
- ◇ Alternative Classroom Settings are self-contained classrooms in a traditional school. These classrooms vary from the traditional classroom in their instructional methods and structure.

Raywid (1994) provides another descriptive listing of popular alternative schools:

- ◇ Schools of Choice offer different specialized learning opportunities for students, usually in a magnet school.
- ◇ Last-Chance Schools are designed to provide continued education options for disruptive students.
- ◇ Remedial Schools focus on the student's need for academic remediation or social rehabilitation.

Since 1988, the National Dropout Prevention Center has maintained a database of successful dropout prevention programs. The Model Programs Database contains descriptions of a wide variety of current alternative schools located throughout the country. A selected review of these programs by Schargel and Smink (2001) found a large variety of

organizational structures. Brief descriptions of these types follow:

- School-Within-a-School is established for students needing a separate location within the traditional school. They are usually housed in a separate wing with different staff, for academic or social behavior programs.
- Schools Without Walls are designed for students requiring educational and training programs. Services are delivered from various locations within the community and usually offer flexible student schedules.
- Residential Schools are for special case students, usually placed by the courts or the family, with special counseling and educational programs offered.
- Separate Alternative Learning Centers feature a special curriculum such as parenting skills or unique job skills. They are in a separate location from the traditional school, many times located in business environments, churches, or remodeled retail centers with excellent transportation services.
- College-Based Alternative Schools use a college facility but are intended for students needing high school credits and are operated by public school staff. The college setting enhances the student's self-esteem and offers other services that benefit the student's growth.
- Summer Schools are either remedial for academic credits or enhance a student's special interests—perhaps in science, computers, etc.
- Magnet Schools focus on selected curriculum areas with specialized teachers and with student attendance usually by choice.
- Second-Chance Schools are for students who are judged to be troubled and placed in the school by the courts or the school district as a last chance before being expelled or incarcerated.
- Charter Schools are autonomous educational entities operating under a contract negotiated between the state agency and the local school sponsors. (pp. 115-116)

Delivery Models

Just as there are many types and settings for alternative schools, there are a variety of delivery models. The schools may use one or more of these models depending on the students that they serve. Chalker (1996) has identified the following models:

- School Transition prepares students for return to their regular school or for graduation. This model also assists disaffected youth in transitioning from elementary to middle school and middle to high school.
- Behavioral Intervention is helpful in teaching students that survival skills are needed for academic success.
- The Academic Model is based on the belief that student behavior problems are rooted in learning difficulties that lead to the student's frustration with learning. As students become more successful academically, their behavior improves.
- The Therapeutic Model focuses on assisting students in developing problem-solving skills and appropriate classroom behavior. Wilderness camps often use this model.
- The Punitive Model uses punishment to deter or eliminate misbehavior and is found in boot camps. Proponents of this model believe that students deliberately cause trouble and misbehave.
- Academic Intervention uses a variety of instructional methods to respond to those students most in need of support. Various ways to restructure the school to meet the diverse educational needs of disaffected youth are considered. Individualized instruction, instructional technology, and remedial or pullout programs are some of the methods used to respond to learners' needs. A positive instructional environment is the hallmark of this model.

- Vocational Intervention focuses on making school meaningful to students and preparing them for the workforce. Part-time employment, entrepreneurial school-based programs, and support groups are some of the strategies used. External organizations and the business community often supply support for these programs.
- School Continuation serves those students with economic, family, or personal problems that interfere with their schooling. An example of this model is a school-based day-care center for teenage mothers who want to obtain their high school diplomas.
- Dropout Prevention models use some or all of the 15 Effective Strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center. The strategies are family involvement, early childhood education, reading/writing programs, mentoring/tutoring, service-learning, alternative schooling, out-of-school experiences, professional development, learning styles/multiple intelligences, instructional technologies, individualized instruction, systemic renewal, community collaboration, career education/workforce readiness, and violence prevention/conflict resolution.
- School Community Partnership programs feature collaboration with the larger community. The resources of businesses, universities, and social agencies are used to resolve problems related to home environment and health. Community members may also play an important role as mentors to students. (pp. 15-19)

The programs and models designed to meet the needs of disaffected youth are as diverse as the students themselves.

Needs and Issues

There are a variety of needs and issues that require consideration in alternative education (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000; 2001).

- Funding is an issue for all schools, but especially alternative schools. One of the biggest expenses is transportation. Alternative schools are often not centrally located in the school district, which increases transportation costs. The per student costs for alternative education are higher because of the lower teacher/student ratio. This sometimes leads to resentment by school district and community members.
- Accountability has become more accepted in recent years, overcoming the anti-evaluation attitudes common in the 1960s and 1970s. Many programs still do a poor job of tracking and evaluating student progress. Students often get lost as they are shuffled between the traditional school and the alternative school.
- Community relations are important because community members often do not understand the purpose of alternative schools. There needs to be a system of advocacy from the school district superintendent to the school board members on down. Community support is vital to workforce readiness programs and service-learning projects. Many students in alternative schools are concrete learners who need real-life experiences.
- Good communication between alternative and regular schools is vital for the student to be successful. Communication must be two-way, not just from the alternative school to the traditional school, or vice versa. It is important to provide a transitioning bridge for personnel in the receiving schools so that the progress of the students can be tracked.
- One size does not fit all, and there should be a variety of alternatives available. Some students need academic assistance, others have behavior problems, and some are English as a Second Language students. A variety of programs often exist within the same building.

- Course offerings are frequently limited to the basic academic subjects of math, English, and science. The teaching staff is usually small so it is difficult to offer a broader range of courses beyond the basics. Some schools use part-time teachers for enrichment courses.
- Alternative programs are often located in substandard buildings. It is rare for a new building to be constructed for an alternative school. The buildings are usually not centrally located in the district so students often have long bus rides of several hours to get to school.
- Program-specific professional development for teachers is an important issue. Most teachers in alternative schools report that their formal education did not prepare them to deal with students from at-risk situations (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000, p. xxiii). Professional development activities must be different from those for regular teachers. Classroom management techniques, diversity training, and alternative instructional methods are some of the areas that are most often requested.

The relationship between the parent school and the alternative school is important. Kellmayer (1995) suggests that the following areas often cause conflict and need to be considered:

- Credit awarding based on proficiency rather than the standard practice of seat time (Carnegie Unit) can cause conflict between the alternative school and the parent school. How credits will be awarded should be worked out in advance of the alternative school's opening.
- Attendance policies should be flexible to meet the needs of the students. Many of these students are working or have family responsibilities that preclude them from attending school during the normal school day.
- Participation in extracurricular regular school activities should be considered on an individual basis.
- Discipline is the responsibility of the school principal. Many troubled students have difficulty following traditional school rules so it is important for the principal to have the flexibility to choose the most appropriate course of action for them.

Best Practices

The basic characteristics of alternative schools that are successful with students who do not prosper in traditional schools are derived from the research. It seems nearly impossible to boil down those educational practices; however, there does appear to be a consistent profile of characteristics common to the most successful schools. Schargel and Smink (2001) found that a successful alternative school has the following educational characteristics:

- ◇ maximum teacher/ student ratio of 1:10
- ◇ small student base not exceeding 250 students
- ◇ clearly stated mission and discipline code
- ◇ caring faculty with continual staff development
- ◇ school staff having high expectations for student achievement
- ◇ learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style
- ◇ flexible school schedule with community involvement and support
- ◇ total commitment to have each student be a success (p. 117)

A number of other researchers in the field have identified similar characteristics of successful alternative education programs (Buchart, 1986; Kadel, 1994; Kellmayer, 1995; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000; Raywid, 1994).

The state of North Carolina (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001) did a longitudinal, in-depth evaluation of their alternative education programs spanning more than five years. Their findings are similar to those of other researchers.

According to this report, successful alternative education schools have the following characteristics:

- strong sense of purpose and mission
- caring and committed staff
- dynamic leadership
- collegiality with faculty and students
- family-like atmosphere of respect
- low teacher/student ratio allowing more individual attention
- hands-on/experiential learning
- individualized and personalized learning
- emotional, physical, and academic needs of students addressed
- flexibility
- focus on academic standards
- creative strategies for course offerings
- significant parent involvement
- strong community connections (p. xi-xix)

A synthesis of the previous research resulted in the following elements characteristic of a successful alternative school:

- strong mission and sense of purpose
- high expectations for student achievement
- low teacher/student ratio allowing individual attention with total enrollment not exceeding 250 students
- individualized learning programs to meet the needs of the students
- varied instructional strategies with an emphasis on active learning
- high academic standards
- holistic services to meet the emotional, physical, and academic needs of students
- strong community involvement

- ◇ caring and committed staff
- ◇ flexible schedule

The National Dropout Prevention Center has combined these essential elements and the needs identified in the North Carolina studies (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000; 2001) into 10 categories:

- ◇ Accountability Measures
- ◇ Administrative Structure and Policies
- ◇ Curriculum and Instruction
- ◇ Faculty and Staff
- ◇ Facilities and Grounds
- ◇ School Leadership
- ◇ Student Support Services
- ◇ Learning Community
- ◇ Program Funding
- ◇ School Climate

These 10 categories are the basis for an alternative school evaluation tool developed by the National Dropout Prevention Center. This tool is described later in this publication.

Establishing an Alternative Program

There is a significant difference between understanding what the research says are the essential components of an effective alternative school/program and the actual establishment of an alternative school/program. From conception to completion, several important steps must be considered and implemented to ensure program success.

1. Establishing a Planning Team or Task Force

Starting a school for students most at risk of school failure requires serious thought and commitment on the part of those selected to define it and bring about its implementation. It is not a task for those unwilling to make a significant contribution of their personal time and energy. Conventional wisdom and experience suggest that a team of 6 to15 people is the optimum number to serve on a planning committee or task force (Chalker, 1996). Numbers beyond 15 become cumbersome to work with and may become splintered as time goes on. Conversely, a subgroup or powerful leader who wants to push through his/her own vision and agenda may sway a small group. Every effort should be made to ensure broad-based community support on the planning team. It is wise to start the planning process at least one year ahead of the start-up date for the opening of the school (Kellmayer, 1995).

2. Determining a Philosophical Construct and Mission for the School

Once the planning team has been selected and a leadership structure is in place, the next step is for the team to reach consensus on a philosophy from which to develop a model for the school. This step is absolutely essential to the successful implementation of any model (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000). Because alternative education includes a variety of approaches and concepts, several decisions need to be made regarding the establishment of the program.

- Will the school be child centered, with a therapeutic approach, or follow a strict disciplinary model?
- Will the school be a short-term intervention or allow students to stay until graduation?
- Will learning be self-directed or guided?
- Will the curriculum be all encompassing or simply address the basic core studies?

An agreed-upon philosophical foundation helps to guide the development of all policies and procedures for the school, including entrance and exit procedures. If the planning team members do not have a strong background or understanding of issues pertaining to differing alternative school models, it is helpful to review the current research and make site visits to a variety of programs. This will not only help the team have a greater understanding of successful programs, but will also help to guide their thinking toward what will work in relation to the overall educational philosophy of the school district.

3. Program Design and Operation

Here are a few of the questions that need to be answered in terms of program development (Chalker, 1996).

- How will the school be funded?
- Where will it be located?
- How large should it be?
- Who will be served?
- What leadership qualities are to be considered in the selection of a principal or program director?
- Who will it be?
- Will transportation be provided to students?
- How will the school be staffed?
- Will incentives be offered to staff members?

It is suggested that the building principal or program director should be hired and in place at this point, with the planning committee remaining as an advisory board. The nuts and bolts questions of program design and operation are usually best decided by the building principal, with significant input from key district office personnel. This is also the time that policies and procedures governing the daily operation of the school should be developed and placed into operation via the district's chain of command.

4. Selecting Staff Members

Staff members should not be randomly assigned to the alternative school. The building principal should carefully recruit and select the staff, with appropriate stakeholder input, based on the mission of the school and the prospective candidate's passion and commitment to work with disaffected youth (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000). Students can overcome bad teaching but they may never recover from a bad teacher who fails to project a true sense of caring and concern.

5. Designing the Curriculum

Issues such as the desired student/teacher ratio, the integration of technology, the development of career skills, the integration of social services, the incorporation of service-learning, planning time for teachers to include opportunities for collaboration, and specific course offerings should be decided as a group process by the entire faculty. This time should be used to develop a sense of "family" and to ensure that everyone understands his/her specific role, yet recognizing that every staff member is expected to be an informal counselor and support person to students (Kellmayer, 1995).

6. Getting the Word Out/Building Community Support

Soon after the staff is in place, efforts should be made to begin letting the general public know about the school and its mission. Include information about the school and staff members in official correspondence sent out by the school district. Invite representatives from the local media to an open house, introducing staff members and providing tours of the facility (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Start very early in your quest to build community support through speaking engagements at local service organizations, churches, and clubs. Write personal letters to public safety officials and local community and business leaders explaining the mission of the school and how it will help the community as well as individual students. In addition, make courtesy calls to local CEOs, seeking their support and collaboration to include a career development component within the curriculum. It is also a good idea to include parents in any efforts to spread the word about the school. This may help to dispel notions that the school is for the "bad" kids, but rather it is designed as another intervention for those who may not respond well to the regular school program. It is important to develop a positive image of the school so that the parents of those assigned to the school believe that the school will help their child and is not designed to be punitive.

7. Enrolling and Exiting Students

No matter how students are assigned to the school, either by choice or by involuntary placement, it is imperative that every effort be made to make students feel welcome and to assure them they are getting a fresh start on their education. A structured entrance procedure should be developed that includes a comprehensive testing and orientation process. Specific entry times need to be established so that the orientation process will not become trite and mundane. Involve parents or guardians in the

orientation process as much as possible. Individualized academic and behavioral plans that include measurable goals and objectives should be developed for each student. This is a great way for counselors to begin the process of developing a personal relationship with students. It is also a good idea to start seeking a good match for a one-to-one mentor for the student. While a student is being served, the student's home school must be kept informed of his/her progress through some type of formal communications link. This will help to prevent teachers and administrators from the home school from feeling like "he/she is your problem now—call me when he/she is ready to come back" (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000).

Exit procedures for students that are fair, clear, and simple to understand are a must for programs that return students to their regular school. The process for exiting students must also be structured and organized. Once students have left the program, it is highly advisable to continue monitoring and supporting them as they adjust into the mainstream (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000). We know students are very vulnerable upon their reentry into their former school. Sometimes this is due to teachers or administrators who continue to harbor negative attitudes toward the student, or it may be for a myriad of other reasons that include reconnecting with peers who negatively influence them or adjusting to the transition from a rigid monitoring system to a system with more independence. Although it is time consuming and labor intensive, it is also a good idea to continue to track all students who exit the program so that accountability statistics can be recorded regarding program effectiveness.

Once a program has been established, it should be monitored for strengths and weaknesses on a regular basis. This requires some formalized system of data collection. The next section provides an overview of effective alternative school evaluation components.

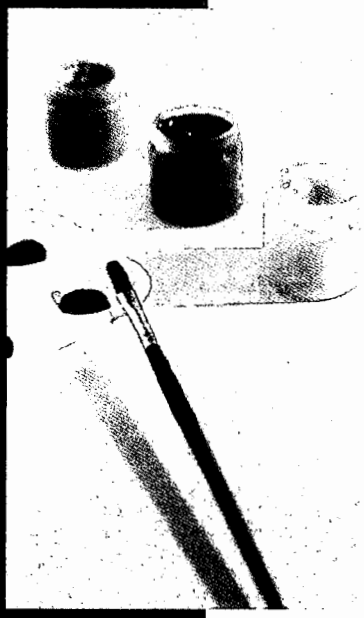
Alternative School Evaluation

One of the needs often cited by alternative educators in the field is an evaluation instrument that adequately and reliably documents the effectiveness of their programs. Due to the varying mission and structure of alternative schools, effectiveness is very difficult to define and measure and is not adequate for evaluation purposes. Effectiveness for one school may indeed be a measure of mediocrity for another. What to measure and how to measure it have been stumbling blocks for program managers responding to those seeking greater accountability for alternative schools.

Furthermore, the research and evaluation of alternative school programs and their effectiveness is somewhat limited. Historically, many schools have not kept accurate records regarding attendance, discipline referrals, academic grades, recidivism rates, school completion rates, etc. Montecel (1999) found that reports of program success are usually based on anecdotes rather than data.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a strong anti-evaluation sentiment in the alternative education community (Kellmayer, 1995). Some teachers and administrators believed that rescuing students from life-threatening social situations such as gang involvement, parental abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide was enough. Over time, however, we have come to realize that although saving students from social problems is important, their academic education must also be a priority.

This is evidenced by the fact that most states are now requiring accountability for all programs, including charter and alternative schools. The Florida Department of Education has developed an evaluation model to measure the effectiveness of local alternative schools and dropout prevention programs. *The Proposed Quality Standards for Dropout Prevention Programs* (Florida Department of Education, 1999) is a self-assessment tool for practitioners. The *Standards* list six major components: program climate, program resources, curriculum and instruction, transition, program planning and evaluation, and leadership. These six areas are measured against essential practices that must be in place for the program components to be effective. The third facet of the evaluation process includes measurable indicators of achievement.



The State of Kentucky has also addressed alternative school accountability through a preliminary investigation conducted by the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Center for School Safety. These offices undertook the task to devise an instrument consisting of research-based standards and indicators to evaluate alternative schools specifically in Kentucky. Subsequently, an evaluation guidebook, *Alternative Education Accountability* (Swarts, 2002), was developed.

There have been only a handful of well-known researchers and leaders in the field of alternative education who have worked to develop instruments, or rubrics, that guide the evaluation of programs that serve children at risk of school failure. Dr. Raymond Morley was one of the first researchers to begin looking at formulating a model to evaluate alternative schools. He developed a checklist of indicators that serves as a framework for establishing and maintaining quality alternative learning environments, as well as an Iowa Rubric for At-Risk Programs that describes required components and quality examples of effectiveness (Morley, 2002).

Jackson (2002) developed a research-based document outlining the characteristics of effective alternative programs. Gregory (2000) looked at alternative school evaluation via four major issues that are addressed through practices regularly employed by alternative schools or their districts. Scriven, a leading authority on evaluation, has developed a *15 Point Key Evaluation Checklist (KEC)* to be used in a comprehensive evaluation of an alternative school (Kellmayer, 1995).

Each of these researchers and practitioners has looked at alternative school evaluation through a different lens, yet all essentially merge around 10 essential elements, or categories, that the National Dropout Prevention Center/ Network (NDPC/N) at Clemson University has identified as the foundation for any program looking to produce positive outcomes for students. While there may be some debate as

to the importance of these essential elements in relation to one another, the research clearly shows these specific categories must be in place and measured for an alternative school program to be considered "successful" or "effective" no matter how success is measured or what the mission of the school may be.

With the exception of the evaluation process in Kentucky, the checklists and rubrics previously cited can be described as a Level One Analysis. Level One is a basic look at an alternative school with regard to its resources, policies, and practices. It is primarily a self-evaluation process that can be used to take a wide-angle look at the effectiveness of the school. Alternatively, third-party evaluators or stakeholders could use it as a preliminary function of a Level Two Analysis. Level Two would be a more in-depth analysis of the school that would include staff and stakeholder interviews and on-site observations resulting in a significantly more detailed report of the findings. A Level Two Analysis is a difficult process requiring specialized skills, so most experts advise hiring a third-party evaluator.

Level One Analysis

The 10 major categories or essential elements of effective practice for alternative schools, developed by the NDPC/N, have subsequently been incorporated into a Level One analysis evaluation instrument. Under each of the 10 categories are best practice indicators that are to be rated as: *Rudimentary* (poor performance); *Developing* (below expected standard); *Proficient* (meets expected standard); *Accomplished* (above expected standard); or *NA* (does not apply). The 10 categories, along with a brief description of each, are below.

1. Accountability Measures

Just as regular schools are being held more accountable for quantitative performance indicators such as test scores, dropout rates, and attendance rates, so are alternative schools. This category reports school success compared to specific benchmarks, from traditional data sets such as academic achievement on standardized tests, student and teacher attendance rates, suspensions, and expulsions, as well as program completion rates and student recidivism rates. It should be noted that because many alternative school students have a myriad of social problems, some would advocate that data regarding affective and health-related issues such as substance abuse, depression, suicide attempts, teen pregnancy, etc. should be included as indicators of school effectiveness (Kellmayer, 1995). However, these are areas that schools have little or no control over; therefore, they should not be held accountable regarding their intervention success or failure.

2. Administrative Structure and Policies

Indicators that look closely at the mission statement, objectives, and purpose of the school, along with the development and enforcement of written policies, are aimed at determining the effectiveness of the administrative support structure and how stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. Written policies pertaining to discipline, attendance, and admission and exit procedures need to be examined for fairness and equity as well as alignment with the program philosophy and goals.

3. Curriculum and Instruction

An effective alternative school is built upon a strong academic program that is creative and flexible and characterized by the following practices and components.

- ◇ Teachers are perceived as caring while providing rigor and high expectations regarding academic performance.
- ◇ Each student has an Individualized Education Plan (not to be confused with an I.E.P. for handicapped students) that includes behavioral objectives as well as academic objectives.
- ◇ Academic and career education components are integrated and contextualized to provide students with a range of problem-solving and employability skills.
- ◇ The coursework is primarily hands-on, meaningful, and engaging to students.
- ◇ Class size is limited to approximately 10 students per teacher, and the teacher has an assigned teaching assistant at least 50% of the day who works directly with students.
- ◇ Computers and appropriate software are readily available in each classroom, and teachers consistently integrate technology into the curriculum.
- ◇ The teaching and learning atmosphere is positive, where teachers are perceived as caring, and the classrooms are places where students feel confident and safe enough to learn.
- ◇ An organized, structured mentoring program is in place that engages students one-on-one with a mentor at least one hour per week.
- ◇ Alternative methods of assessment are used to accommodate the differing learning styles of students and to provide rewards and incentives for academic excellence.
- ◇ There are educational options for students that include extracurricular activities, enrichment activities through service-learning, opportunities for accelerated learning, and work experience/career training opportunities.
- ◇ Distance learning is employed to provide relevant coursework for students needing courses outside the capacity of the school to provide on site.

4. Faculty and Staff

In an alternative school setting, recruiting and selecting the right staff cannot be emphasized too strongly. Staff members with relevant experience and competencies, as well as a deep commitment to work with students at risk, are vital to the success of the program. Teachers should be properly certified for the area(s) they teach, but it should be kept in mind that teachers can often overcome any academic handicaps by exhibiting a deep level of caring and concern for their students. Ongoing professional development is critical, and each teacher should have an individualized professional development plan. Sufficient funds for staff members to regularly attend and make presentations at conferences and workshops should be included in the budget. Access to a comprehensive professional library and payment of professional organization membership dues by the school encourages professional growth of the staff.

5. Facilities and Grounds

We are all well aware of the impact an inviting, clean, and well-maintained facility makes on us whether it is our local supermarket, our church, or the school our children attend. Alternative schools are often hampered in their quest to develop and maintain effectiveness by their location, their physical attributes, and their capacity to provide programs that meet the needs of their students. Every effort should be made to centrally locate the school within the school district in a safe environment, to build or secure a building that is attractive and inviting, to equip it with appropriate technology and equipment so that it is adequate for the services to be provided, and to ensure that it meets local/state fire and hazard codes. Finally, research has provided strong evidence to support the fact that the school size should be limited to no more than 250 students (Morley, 2002; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2000; Schargel & Smink, 2001).

6. School Leadership

Characteristics of successful school leaders include being a good manager of personnel and resources, reacting well in times of crises, being an effective and knowledgeable instructional leader, and possessing strong "political leadership" skills. In other words, he/she must be able to articulate a vision for the school and have the capacity to move the agenda forward through a myriad of obstacles that may include interference from within. This may be an area that sets alternative school leaders apart from their counterparts in "regular" schools. An effective alternative school leader has to be able to fight the "second-class citizen" syndrome to ensure the school is viewed as an important component of the district's mission to serve all children, and more importantly, to secure the resources needed to fulfill the mission of his/her school.

7. Student Support Services

It is well documented that alternative school students typically suffer from innumerable social, emotional, family-related, and economic factors that are closely associated with their poor academic performance and antisocial behavior. These issues very often interfere with or are root causes of poor academic performance and dropping out of school. Effective alternative schools have a broad range of student support services that address citizenship, behavior, and social/health issues. Guidance and counseling are integral components of the curriculum and include effective parenting and child-care components as well as serving as a clearinghouse for family support services.

8. Learning Community

Performance indicators under this category are designed to assess the overall learning community support that includes family involvement, community involvement, student government, and communication issues between

school and parents, school and community, administration and staff, and school and students. Family and community involvement are fundamental to the success of any school, but even more so for alternative schools. Parental involvement in the school and educational process occurs less often in the homes of disaffected youth, and it is a variable that directly discriminates achieving from underachieving students (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992). Assessing strengths and weaknesses in this area will help to inform and guide the goals and objectives of the school. This assessment can foster closer ties with families and indicate the need to develop strategies to garner community support and resources.

9. Program Funding

Without an adequate budget to support program goals and objectives, the alternative school program is doomed to wither into obscurity and provide little or no impact on addressing the needs of those most at risk of school failure. We know that alternative schools cost more to operate, but we also know that there is considerable evidence that alternative schools and programs, when funded sufficiently and organized effectively, can significantly improve students' academic achievement and behavior in school (Cash, 2001; Vandegrift, 1992). In 1997, the National Dropout Prevention Center surveyed alternative school leaders from across the nation (Duttweiler & Smink, 1997). These leaders reported that a secure and stable source of funding was the greatest need in initiating/maintaining effective alternative schools. Indicators of effectiveness include the adequacy of the budget to fully administer the following: the instructional program; an effective discipline program; a comprehensive staff development program; the development and maintenance of technology; a comprehensive student support services program; student incentives; comprehensive student assessment in several domains; and a comprehensive annual evaluation, preferably by a third party.

10. School Climate

The ethos of the school should be assessed for its performance regarding positive relationships between students and teachers; the safety of the environment; the degree of caring and concern on the part of teachers and other staff members; the degree of equity in terms of learning; and the degree to which staff, students, and parents are treated with respect and dignity. The assessment of the school climate is often overlooked when evaluating program effectiveness due to the qualitative nature of the data and the sometimes laborious documentation process. It is important that surveys are consistently administered to stakeholders, with the results carefully analyzed for areas needing improvement. In addition, feedback from student and parent focus groups and informal comments are typically very direct and prove to be helpful in addressing specific areas of concern regarding the climate of the school.

Data gleaned from the use of the Level One Analysis evaluation instrument provides a broad view of an alternative school in the performance of both process and outcome effectiveness measures. The NDPC/N instrument was designed to provide alternative school leaders a concise and efficient way to compare the organization and operation of their school to what the research reveals are best practices in program development and management. It serves as a framework and guide to begin the process of assessing areas of strength and weakness. As with any assessment instrument, the value of the information is in direct proportion to the honesty and integrity of the evaluator. This is particularly true for a self-assessment instrument.

Level Two Analysis and Beyond

The available resources may influence a Level Two Analysis evaluation plan more than any other single factor. Some things to consider are:

- Time—Whether you plan to do the evaluation from within or hire an outside consultant, significant planning time will be required from designated staff members. Involving volunteers or parents is a way to spread the workload, but it may require time for preparation or training.
- Money—A comprehensive evaluation requires the allocation of significant financial resources. A general rule of thumb regarding program evaluation costs is from 2%-4% of the total program budget for an in-house evaluation and 5%-8% for an outside, third-party evaluator. In the final analysis, "You get what you pay for."
- Expertise—Few programs or school districts have qualified and experienced program evaluators among their staff. In addition to the time issue noted above, the process of gathering and analyzing data is very complex and could be somewhat overwhelming to those with limited experience or are encumbered with myriad other tasks. The involvement of an outside, third-party evaluator often provides more credibility to the evaluation results.

For those school leaders and program directors seeking a Level Two, in-depth analysis of the operation of their alternative school from an outside evaluator, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network has developed a Program Assessment and Review (PAR) process that has been successfully used in a wide variety of applications and locales throughout the nation to determine at-risk program effectiveness. Moving beyond simple data collection, the purpose of the PAR process is to provide research-based strategies and solutions along with professional assistance. The PAR process involves the analysis of local data, site interviews, and observations, and is managed by local action teams consisting of representatives from the local school and community.

The research base for the PAR process consists of five major themes that guide the review of school data, general observations, interviews, and group sessions conducted during the on-site visits. These themes reflect the school reform literature and the proven policies and practices found in successful schools throughout the nation.

Theme 1

District and School Philosophy, Values, and a Spirit of School Improvement

The district and school staff, business and organization partners, and community stakeholders work collaboratively to support a clear philosophy, mission, goals and set of values.

Theme 2

Leadership, Staff Resources, and Professional Development Opportunities

The school leaders, in collaboration with staff and other community stakeholders, provide direction for increasing student achievement through continuous school improvement, which includes professional development opportunities for all staff.

Theme 3

Curriculum, Instructional Strategies, and Assessment

Curriculum guides, support materials, instructional strategies, and assessment procedures and activities are aligned to support student learning.

Theme 4

School, Family, and Community Support Structure for Learning

The district and school have a comprehensive school and community-based support structure related to student learning for all students and families.

Theme 5

Adequate Facilities, Current Technologies, and Safe and Orderly Environments

School facilities, including the availability and use of the latest learning technologies, are adequate and located on a campus that is safe and managed as a caring and violence-free environment.

Analyzing and Using Evaluation Data

The purpose of data analysis is to create meaning out of the information that has been gathered. It must be organized and presented in a way that helps people understand it and use it for program improvement. Numbers can be interpreted in many different ways and most often need to be placed in context or triangulated with other data sources. For example, an attendance rate for a "regular" school of 90% may not be considered to be very effective, but a 90% attendance rate for an evening alternative school program may be outstanding. Likewise, qualitative data need analysis and interpretation. Analyzing and bringing meaning to those "process" indicators of alternative school effectiveness helps evaluation consumers place activities, methods, and program highlights into proper context relating to program outcome measures.

The communication and dissemination of evaluation results should be used to maximize your investment in the project. There are many ways to get the news out. These may include:

- ◇ a written report
- ◇ a formal presentation to a board of trustees or major funding agent
- ◇ a video or slide presentation
- ◇ media releases
- ◇ posting of the evaluation results on the Internet
- ◇ mailing of the major findings in synopsis form to local constituents
- ◇ presentations at workshops and conferences
- ◇ submission of journal articles about the process and your findings

Some Evaluation Pitfalls

The push for educational accountability has caused alternative schools to also be caught up in the numbers game. It is easy for program managers to measure program success and effectiveness in terms of quantifiable output indicators while ignoring measures of effectiveness that may not be manifested for years. The reporting of a class graduation rate, suspension rate, attendance rate, etc., is but a snapshot of one brief moment in time relating to the operation and effectiveness of the school. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence suggesting that alternative schools have positive results on children at risk, long after they have exited the program. In order to properly evaluate at-risk programs in the context for which they are designed, it is imperative that school leaders and program managers collect longitudinal data to document the positive impact of their school over time.

Evaluation is an integral part of the day-to-day operation of the school. It is not an event focusing on an annual report that more than likely stays on the shelf collecting dust. The results should be a working document that energizes all staff members to seek better ways of developing and implementing strategies for meeting the needs of their students.

Program evaluation that is skewed toward good or bad program elements limits the credibility and usefulness of the findings. There must be a willingness among school leaders and stakeholders to accept areas that are in need of improvement by honestly and openly gathering, analyzing, and reporting a true picture of the school. To do otherwise would serve to jeopardize the ethical and political ramifications that must be considered with any formal evaluation.

Failing to properly train the evaluation staff can have serious negative effects on the outcome of the data collection process. Proper understanding and use of survey instruments and interview protocols builds reliability into the results. It is imperative that everyone is on the same page and has the same understanding about what they did or did not see.

In summary, alternative school evaluation must be considered as much an integral part of the program as the curriculum or specific interventions. Failing to spend the time, energy, and money to properly evaluate is to doom your program to mediocrity or failure.

Conclusion

Barr and Parrett (1997) state, "How an alternative school is started may well be the most critical aspect of the emerging life and chance for success a new program experiences" (p. 107). This book provides guidelines for planning, implementing, and evaluating alternative programs. The essential elements and indicators of effectiveness mentioned previously represent the "best practices" of school administrators and teachers as evidenced by a synthesis of the literature and direct observation by researchers.

Alternative programs can be an effective strategy to keep students engaged in learning when properly funded, organized, and operated. They provide the opportunity for participating students to be successful and graduate from high school. It is easy to throw students out of school, but it is much harder to help them redirect their energy to become successful in school. There will always be a need for alternative education for those students who do not thrive in traditional schools that are too large, have high teacher/student ratios, and are resistant to change. Alternative programs offer individualized instruction, low teacher/student ratios, flexible scheduling, and varied instructional methods to meet the learning needs of their students.

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Acknowledgments

Several individuals have facilitated the writing of this monograph. Our special thanks go to Dr. Jay Smink, Executive Director of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, the staff of the NDPC/N, and Dr. Raymond E. Morley, Consultant, Bureau of Instructional Services Iowa Department of Education. Our appreciation and respect goes to all those who work in alternative education settings.

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