Alternative Schools

Findings From a National Survey of the States

Research Report 2

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Alternative Schools

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Abstract

The number of students enrolled in alternative settings for youth at risk of school failure has increased significantly in recent years. Students with disabilities, primarily students with emotional/behavioral disabilities and learning disabilities, are included in the population of students who are being educated in these settings. A survey was designed to gather current information about alternative schools and programs across the nation. The survey was distributed to key contacts at state departments of education who were knowledgeable about alternative education. Questions asked about state level definitions, enrollment criteria, school characteristics, students served, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and outcomes. In addition, the survey included questions about special education and the extent to which students with disabilities were enrolled. Results are provided and the report concludes with a discussion of key issues to further examine.

Introduction

The majority of our nation's children are educated in traditional public schools. Yet many alternatives to traditional public schooling exist and are serving a significant number of students. Some of the available educational learning alternatives include charter schools, magnet programs, distance learning programs, and private schools. These educational options have emerged for many reasons, and in general, advocates argue that a variety of educational models are essential to meeting the needs of all students (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990; Young, 1990). Alternative schools and programs comprise one educational option that is often designated as a setting for students who are not succeeding in traditional schools.

The number of alternative schools serving students at risk of school failure has grown significantly over the past decade. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported 3,850 public alternative schools in the United States during the 1997-1998 academic year (Hoffman, 2001; as cited in Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Current estimates suggest that number has grown to nearly 11,000 public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students (Kleiner, et al., 2002). Similarly, there has been a significant increase in the legislation on alternative schools across the nation. In 1998, a report indicated 22 states had some form of legislation on alternative schools (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). At least 48 states had legislation on alternative schools in 2002 (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003).

Given the recent increase in the growth of alternative schools, information must be gathered to provide a national overview of these settings and the impact they are having on the students served. Policymakers, educators, researchers, and the general public need a better understanding of the role alternative programs are playing in the educational arena today. Review of state level

documents suggests there is considerable variability in alternative schools and programs throughout the United States. A number of key questions to address are highlighted below.

How are Today's Alternative Schools Defined and What are Key Characteristics?

In addition to recent changes in the number of students being served in alternative schools, the nature of alternative education is also evolving. Review of legislation suggests that more and more alternative schools are serving students who have been disruptive in their previous school, or are being used for students who have been suspended or expelled (Lehr, et al., 2003). This is very different from the original purpose of alternative schools as they emerged in the 1960s. Initially, alternative schools were created in response to a belief that the public education system was not serving all students in a fair and equitable manner. Those who established alternative schools founded them on the premise that students require different avenues for learning, and that alternatives were necessary to reach the vast array of students in American education. Common characteristics of alternative schools identified in a review of the literature included small size, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, a supportive environment, student-centered curriculum, flexibility in structure, and opportunities for students to engage in decision-making (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Do these characteristics accurately describe today's alternative schools across the nation?

The Common Core of Data, the U.S. Department of Education's primary database on public elementary and secondary education, defines an alternative education school as "a public elementary/secondary school that: 1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, 2) provides nontraditional education, 3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or 4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 55). Mary Anne Raywid (1994) has defined three types of alternative programs to describe those that existed by the 1990s. In brief, Type I programs stress innovative curriculum and are attended by choice; Type II represents schools with a remedial emphasis where students are placed as a final step before expulsion; and Type III programs also stress remedial work, but attend to the social, emotional, and academic needs of students. According to Raywid, alternative schools could be one of these three types or could be a combination of the three. Do these descriptions continue to be representative of their presence in 2004?

Who Attends Alternative Schools?

The explosion of alternative options for students has continued in recent years. Alternative schools and programs have become recognized largely for their mission to educate students who are most at risk of failing in the regular public education system. Results from the Minnesota Student Survey conducted in 1996 indicated students attending alternative schools had a higher number of risk factors present in their lives as compared to a randomly-selected sample (matched for age and gender) from traditional public schools (Fulkerson, Harrison, & Beebe, 1997). For example, students attending alternative schools reported higher rates of substance abuse, suicide attempts, sexual activity, and pregnancy. In addition, they were more likely to have been physically or sexually abused, or witnessed abuse within their families. Do alternative schools in other states typically serve students who have been placed at risk? Are the services provided within these settings meeting the needs of this at-risk population?

Estimates, based on data from one of the only national surveys of alternative schools, suggest about 12% of all students in alternative schools and programs for at-risk students are special education students with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) (Kleiner, et al., 2002). This percentage is not significantly different from the overall percentage of students with IEPs enrolled in all public schools during the 2000-2001 school years. Results from the survey indicated the percentage of special education students varied widely between districts, ranging from 3% to 20%. State-level research conducted in Minnesota found that students with emotional/behavioral disabilities were attending alternative programs in much higher proportions than traditional public schools (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). We know students with disabilities are attending alternative schools, but to what extent are they being served and what are critical issues in relation to their education in this setting?

Who Works in Alternative Schools? What Instructional Programs are Provided?

Alternative schools appear to be serving students with multiple needs who are not successful in traditional schools. In order to serve the population well, dedicated and well-trained staff are essential. In addition, a desire to work with students at risk as well as a belief in their ability to be successful appears critical. Who are the educators working in alternative schools and does their training equip them with skills to meet the challenge of working with vulnerable youth? To what extent are counselors, school psychologists or special educators available to meet student needs? Are teachers assigned to alternative schools or do they choose to teach in these settings?

A review of legislation on alternative schools suggests they offer educational programs that typically include one or more of the following: an emphasis on individual instruction, a focus on basic academic skills, social services or counseling, and/or community- or work-based learning (Lehr, et al., 2003). Legislation that addresses curriculum and instruction was available in 33 states. Results from the legislation review match other findings that suggest many alternative schools provide curriculum that leads to a regular diploma, remedial instruction, crisis/behavioral counseling, and career counseling (Kleiner, et al., 2002). Questions remain about the extent to which these schools incorporate state standards and diploma options.

For students with disabilities, there are additional issues with regard to programming. For example, when a student who has received special education enrolls in an alternative school, how is their Individual Education Program (IEP) addressed? Very little national research exists documenting the services students with disabilities receive in alternative school settings with regard to provision of direct service, IEP implementation, transition planning, assessment and evaluation, etc. In some cases, according to 1997 IDEA amendments (P.L. 105-17), school personnel have authority to change the placement of a student with a disability to an appropriate alternative education setting (Interim Alternative Education Setting – IAES), typically for a period ranging from one to no more than 45 days, as a disciplinary measure in response to a major infraction of school rules and safety issues (weapons, illegal drugs, or threat of injurious behavior). Subsequently, alternative schools and programs that serve these students are required to work with the originating school to provide special education services in accordance with the student's IEP. The extent to which alternative schools are used as IAES is largely unknown and the lack of information on students with disabilities makes it difficult to draw any conclusions about the specific challenges this may present to the programs and services provided.

What are the Outcomes for Students Who Attend Alternative Schools?

Over the past decade, and more specifically with the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind (P.L. 107-110), the discussion on alternative schools has become more focused on outcomes for students who are educated in these settings. Research suggests students attending alternatives (typically schools of choice) show an increase in self-esteem, positive peer relationships, commitment to school, and school performance (Cox, Davidson, & Bynum, 1995; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Gold & Mann, 1984; May & Copeland, 1998; Smith. Gregory, & Pugh, 1981). Some critics of the existing research studies on alternative programs have highlighted their lack of rigor, generalization, and attention to long-term results (Carruthers et al., 1996; Cox et. al., 1995). Studies of alternative schools using non experimental research designs consistently yielded more positive effects than those that incorporated experimental research designs (Cox, 1999). Anecdotal reports of the effectiveness of alternative schools for individual students are abundant. Alternative school staff and written reports describe students who have had negative school experiences or dropped out, enroll in an alternative school, attend regularly, complete school, and gain the self-confidence and skills necessary to obtain employment or attend postsecondary schools. While the accumulated results from these studies paint a hopeful picture for students who attend alternative programs, generalization to programs across the nation is largely unknown.

Some state departments of education have reports summarizing information about their alternative schools, students served, and outcomes (e.g., North Carolina, Vermont, Oklahoma, Kentucky). Determining the impact of alternative schools on students who attend them is difficult because the population is at risk and measuring academic progress alone may not capture the settings' influence on youth who attend these schools and programs. To what extent are states collecting data on outcomes for those who have attended alternative schools? How is student progress measured against state standards for students with and without disabilities attending alternative schools? How are the new accountability measures that are part of No Child Left Behind affecting alternative schools? What indicators of effectiveness are measured?

Method

Examining the Issues

Students at risk of school failure are attending alternative schools in large numbers across the nation. As alternative education continues to evolve and play a more prominent role in the public education system there is a need for current information about these settings and the students they serve. To obtain an overview of alternative schools nationwide, a survey was designed to collect information about their structure and governance; characteristics and population served; staffing; curriculum and instruction; outcomes; and students with disabilities. The purpose of the survey was to gather state level information that would contribute to our current understanding of alternative schools on a national basis. Key alternative school leaders in each state were identified and asked to provide up-to-date information about alternative schools and the students served, including students with disabilities. Although responses to this survey do not answer all of the questions relevant to alternative schools, the information can be used to begin to inform a national discussion.

Participants

Key contacts at state departments of education who were most knowledgeable about alternative schools were identified using a comprehensive procedure. First, state directors of special education were asked whether an individual was designated to oversee alternative schools and programs in the state. If so, contact information was obtained. This question was part of telephone interviews with state directors of special education across the U.S. conducted earlier in the year as part of the Alternative Schools Research Project (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Second, a search of each state's education department Web site was conducted to identify individuals in charge of alternative schools across the state. Finally, the two lists of state contacts were compared. If a discrepancy existed, the state department of education was contacted by phone or e-mail to verify the individual who would be most knowledgeable about alternative schools and could best complete the survey.

Procedure

Each state contact received an e-mail three days before the survey was sent via mail. The initial e-mail introduced the project team, described the purpose of the project, provided information about the survey, and verified contact information. Several state contacts identified designees to complete the survey on their behalf. Respondents had the option of completing a hard copy of the survey or doing an online version. In total, surveys were received from 39 states, yielding a 78% response rate. Surveys were distributed in June of 2002 and were returned during the summer and early fall of 2002.

Survey Development

Surveys were designed to gather extensive information about each state's alternative schools. Survey questions were developed based on information collected from interviews with state directors of special education, Web-based searches of information on alternative schools and programs in each state, and a review of the literature on alternative schools. Additionally, suggestions were solicited from an advisory committee (primarily composed of researchers and policymakers). The survey was reviewed by and piloted with five individuals knowledgeable about alternative schools including state-level personnel, alternative school educators, and researchers. The survey consisted of the following parts:

- Part I: General Background: Structure and Governance (e.g., formal state-level definitions, enrollment criteria, funding)
- Part II: General Background: School Characteristics and Students Served (e.g., location, number of students in attendance, grade levels, approaches)
- Part III: Staffing (e.g., licensure requirements, student to staff ratio)
- Part IV: Curriculum and Instruction (e.g., incorporation of state standards, curriculum offered)
- Part V: Outcomes (e.g., collection of outcome data, exiting options)
- Part VI: Students with Disabilities (e.g., number of students with disabilities attending alternative schools, primary disability category, use as Interim Alternative Education Settings)
- Part VII: Summary (e.g., important issues, and additional comments)

The survey included a total of 37 questions. Questions were asked in a variety of ways and response formats included yes/no, Likert scale, multiple choice, ranking, and short answer. The definition of an alternative school used by the Common Core of Data (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) was provided. Because some states refer to alternative programs, while others refer to alternative schools, it was explained that the two terms were used interchangeably in the survey. Respondents were also asked to forward any additional information or resources available on alternative schools in their state. Additional materials were received from 12 states.

Data Analysis

Each survey question was analyzed descriptively using SPSS™ (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Percentages, as well as the number of states endorsing responses, are provided when appropriate. Open-ended responses were analyzed qualitatively and similar statements were grouped according to emerging categories. The number of states responding to each question varied considerably. In some cases, respondents indicated the state did not collect the data that was requested. This information was coded and noted in the results.

Results

In total, 39 surveys were received, yielding a 78% response rate. Survey respondents were primarily state-level personnel responsible for working with alternative schools in their states. The titles of individuals who completed the survey varied and included the following examples: Alternative Education Specialist, Administrator for the Educational Options Office, Director of Prevention Initiatives, and Educational Associate of School Climate and Discipline. Results from the survey are organized according to the seven parts of the survey and are presented below.

Part I: General Background: Structure and Governance

To begin, respondents were asked to provide general background information about the alternative schools in their states. Questions asked about how alternative schools were defined, criteria for enrollment, and funding.

Alternative School Definition

Although a general definition of alternative schools or programs was provided on the survey, respondents were asked to provide a formal documented definition describing alternative schools/programs in their state. This question was asked to determine a) whether states have a definition, and b) the extent to which definitions varied. Twenty-one respondents (59%) reported having a formal state definition for alternative schools in their states (n = 36 states reporting). Definitions referred to schools that varied according to their mission (therapeutic, disciplinary, remedial); duration (short term, long term); enrollment (attended by choice, court mandated, school placement); and intended outcomes (graduation, return to regular classroom). Eight examples reflecting the diversity of definitions are listed below. The definitions listed below are the formal documented state definition as provided by state contacts:

- ***State A:*** The department of education shall establish a program component which will provide alternative education and related services for the more severe discipline problems in the public schools. This component will serve primarily secondary school students, including but not limited to: youngsters who have been expelled from regular schools, students who may be subject to expulsion and others who have serious violations of the local school district discipline code.
- ***State B:*** An alternative school is a short term intervention program designed to develop academic and behavioral skills for students who have been removed from the regular school.
- ***State C:*** Alternative secondary programs are those that provide special instruction courses and offer special services to eligible at-risk youth to enable them to earn a high school diploma. Some designated differences must be established between the alternative school programs and the regular school programs. Alternative secondary programs will include course offerings, teacher/pupil ratios and evidence of teaching strategies that are clearly designed to serve at-risk youth as defined in this section. Alternative high school programs conducted during the regular school year will be located on a separate site from the regular high school facility or be scheduled at a time different from regular school hours.
- ***State D:*** Alternative education programs means a school or separate class group designed to assist students to achieve goals of the curriculum in a manner consistent with their learning style or needs.
- ***State E:*** For purposes of these rules, the following definitions shall apply: "Alternative options education programs" means alternative programs or schools as identified in [state code]. "Alternative program" means a class or environment established within the regular educational program and designed to accommodate

specific student educational needs such as, but not limited to, work-related training; reading; mathematics or science skills; communication skills; social skills; employability skills; study skills; or life skills. "Alternative school" means an environment established apart from the regular educational program and that includes policies and rules, and staff, and resources designed to accommodate goals and content standards established by the school district or by the school districts participating in a consortium. Students attend by choice.

- ***State F:*** The Alternative School Program provides an additional opportunity to remain in school for those children who have been suspended or expelled from school, who have been referred to the program due to disciplinary problems by parent, legal guardian or custodian of the child, or who have been referred to the program by dispositive order of a chancellor or youth court judge.
- ***State G:*** Alternative Education Programs provide a combination of intense individual academic instruction and behavior modification counseling in an alternative setting to assist students to return successfully to the regular classroom.

Criteria for Enrollment

Respondents were asked whether students must meet specific state-level criteria in order to attend an alternative school. Sixteen respondents (44%) indicated that students do, in fact, need to meet state specified criteria in order to attend an alternative school in their state (n = 36 states reporting). Examples of criteria included:

- ***State A:*** Dropouts, potential dropouts, drug abusers, physically abused students, discipline problem students, nontraditional students and students needing treatment.
- ***State B:*** A student placed in an alternative education program must meet at least one of the following criteria: (1) The student intends to withdraw or has withdrawn from school before graduation. (2) The student has been identified as a student who; (a) has failed to comply academically, and (b) would benefit from instruction offered in a manner different from the manner of instruction available in a traditional school. (3) The student is a parent or an expectant parent and is unable to regularly attend the traditional school program. (4) The student is employed and the employment: (a) is necessary for the support of the student or the student's immediate family; and (b) interferes with a part of the student's instructional day. (5) The student is a disruptive student.
- ***State C:*** (1) Disregard for school authority, (2) display or use of controlled substance on school property, (3) violent or threatening behavior, (4) possession of a weapon on school property, (5) commission of a criminal act, (6) misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion, (7) habitual truancy, (8) students returning from placements and, (9) on probation, in detention or jail.
- ***State D:*** Suspended or expelled from regular school program.
- ***State E:*** For purposes of this report all answers will be based on the regional alternative education state-funded program. These programs are targeted to students who have been long-term suspended, expelled, highly disruptive, or returning from a juvenile correction center.

Alternative School Funding

Previous interviews conducted by Alternative Schools Research Project staff with state directors of special education suggested funding for alternative schools was of significant concern (Lehr & Lange, 2003). To better understand how most alternative schools are funded, respondents were asked to indicate their primary source of funding. Twenty respondents (71%) indicated alternative schools in their states were primarily funded from state dollars. Seven respondents (25%) indicated

Table 1. Location of Majority of Alternative Schools Statewide (n = 33 states)

Area	Percent	Number of States
Separate buildings	36	12
Within regular school buildings	6	2
Both (within schools and in separate buildings)	58	19

local dollars were the primary source of funding. Only one respondent (4%) indicated the primary source of funding was from grants, and no states reported the federal government as the primary funding source (n = 28 states reporting).

Part II: General Background: School Characteristics and Students Served

In order to obtain information about the characteristics of today's alternative schools and the students who are attending these educational settings, respondents were asked a series of questions that focused on enrollment, location, grade levels served, length of enrollment, characteristics of the students, types of schools and approaches. Questions and responses are listed below.

Alternative School/Program Location

Respondents were asked to indicate where the majority of the alternative schools in their states were located. Location has implications for shared resources, degree of autonomy, and shared access. Over half of those who responded indicated alternative schools in their states were located both within regular school buildings and in separate buildings (see Table 1). Respondents were also asked to estimate the percentage of alternative programs located in urban, suburban and rural areas. As reflected by the median percent, alternative schools were most often located in urban and suburban areas (see Table 2). However, the range of percentages for each area (urban, suburban, or rural) varied widely.

Alternative School Enrollment

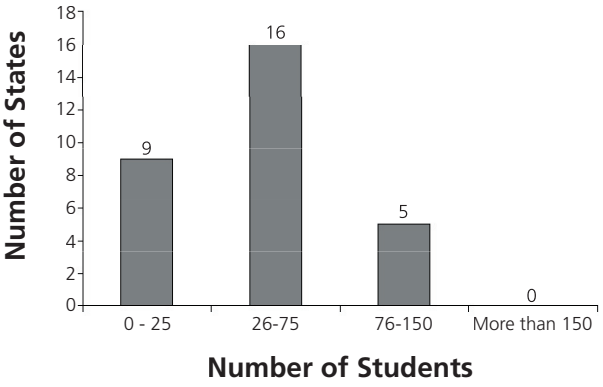
Twenty states responded to the question of how many students attended alternative schools during the 2001-2002 academic year. The total student enrollment (average daily membership enrolled on a part-time or full-time basis) in alternative schools/programs across the country in 2001-2002 was 1,023,260. The average student enrollment per state across the 20 states that reported data was 51,163 students (ranging from 770 to 405,553 students). Alternative school enrollment compared to total school enrollment ranged from about .2% -18% (n = 20 states reporting). The median percentage of students enrolled in alternative schools for the 20 states was 2.17%.

Respondents were asked to identify how enrollment figures have changed over the past five-year

Table 2. Median Percentage of Alternative Schools/Programs by Area (n = 26 states)

Area	Median Percent	Range
Urban core areas (50,000 persons or more)	40	(0%-90%)
Suburban (populations of 10,000-49,000)	37	(2%-80%)
Rural (populations below 10,000)	25	(1%-93%)

Figure 1. Typical Student Enrollment in Alternative Schools (n = 30 states)



period, and 17 states (53%) indicated an increase in student enrollment in alternative schools during that period (n = 32 states reporting).

When asked about typical approximate enrollments in alternative programs during the 2001-2002 school year, 16 states (53%) indicated the typical enrollment of an alternative program in their state was between 26 and 75 students (n = 30 states reporting) (see Figure 1).

Grade Levels Served

Thirty states (94%) reported that alternative schools *primarily* served students in grades 9-12 (n = 32 states reporting). Twenty states (61%) reported that alternative schools served students in elementary grades (including grades 1 – 5) (n = 33 states reporting).

Voluntary and Involuntary Enrollment

More than half of the respondents (58%) indicated alternative schools in their states served students both through voluntary and involuntary enrollment (see Table 3). To determine whether characteristics of alternative schools varied according to whether they were accessed on a voluntary or involuntary basis, respondents were asked to list four characteristics describing alternative programs that were accessed on a voluntary or involuntary basis. Common characteristics that emerged through theme analysis are listed below:

- Common characteristics describing alternative programs that are accessed voluntarily or by choice (n = 22 states reporting):
  - Flexibility (in structure, scheduling, programming)
  - Small size (small class size, overall enrollment, low student to teacher ratio)
  - Parent involvement (parent choice, decision-making, exit)
  - Innovative instruction (creative curriculum, varied teaching approaches, responsiveness to learning style)
  - Individualized programming (self-paced, self-directed, individualized curriculum)
- Common characteristics describing alternative programs where students are placed or enrolled on a mandatory basis (n = 22 states reporting):

Table 3. Student Participation in Alternative Schools (n = 33 states)

Enrollment[a]	Percent	Number of States
Voluntary and involuntary	58	19
Voluntary with parameters	24	8
Involuntary	9	3
Voluntary	0	0
Other	9	3

[a] Enrollment that is voluntary implies enrollment by choice; whereas involuntary enrollment is characterized as a referred placement.

Table 4. Students Attending Alternative Schools (n = 33 states)

Student Risk Factors	Percent	Number of States
Behavior problems not including a documented disability	88	29
History of poor attendance or dropout	88	29
Suspension or expulsion	67	22
Learning difficulties not including a documented disability	61	20
External stressors (e.g., pregnant or parenting, homeless)	55	18
Social or emotional problems	52	17
Referral from court system	36	12
Identified disability or requiring special education service	12	4
Students with limited English proficiency	6	2
Other	9	3

- Focus on behavior change and discipline (behavior management)
- Short-term placement (court-ordered, disciplinary consequence)
- Focus on academic remediation (direct instruction, remedial academic coursework, academic plan)
- Alternative to expulsion
- Provision of counseling or social services (conflict resolution, anger abatement, mental health services, therapeutic)

Who is Being Served

Respondents were asked to select five responses from a list of descriptive risk factors characterizing the students they serve. The greatest percentage of states indicated students served in alternative schools exhibited behavior problems and had a history of poor attendance or dropout (see Table 4).

Describing Alternative Schools

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of statements the general approach that most closely described the alternative schools in their states.

Table 5. Describing Alternative Schools (n = 33 states)

Description	Percent	Number of States
An educational setting designed to prevent students from dropping out of school	52	17
Short-term placement for remediation and transition back to resident school	42	14
Designed to provide students another educational option	39	13
Intended to serve as a consequence for students (suspended/expelled)	36	12
A combination of at least two of the descriptions	58	19

Table 6. Typical Duration of Student Enrollment in Alternative Schools (n = 31 states)

Length of Time	Percent	Number of States
Through graduation	10	3
More than 1 academic year	19	6
7 months - 1 academic year	32	10
1 - 6 months	29	9
Varies	10	3

Just over half of the states described alternative schools as educational settings designed to prevent students from dropping out of school (see Table 5). Over a third of the states indicated alternative schools in their states served as a consequence for students as a disciplinary response. Nearly 60% of the responding states indicated the approach of alternative schools can be described in multiple ways.

Length of Enrollment

The reported duration of student enrollment in alternative schools varied from short-term (6 months or less) to long-term (more than one academic year or through graduation) (see Table 6).

Part III: Staffing

Alternative schools have operated relatively autonomously in the past. Questions have been raised about who teaches the students in these settings and recent federal legislation (NCLB) has increased attention on staffing public education settings with highly qualified teachers. The survey asked several questions related to staffing.

Staff Certification/License Requirements

Respondents were asked whether their states require staff to be certified/licensed in order to teach at an alternative school. Thirty-three states (94%) reported staff were required to be certified/licensed (n = 35 states reporting).

Table 7. Number of States Indicating Staffing Percentages in Alternative Schools (n = 36 states)

Staff	Percentage of Time on Site		
	<25%	25-75%	>75%
Licensed regular education teachers	0	1	24
Licensed special education teachers	4	9	8
Support personnel (e.g., secretaries)	8	7	8
Paraprofessionals	7	8	8
Educators not licensed (e.g., on waiver)	9	4	1
Mental health counselors	14	6	1
Career counselors	14	5	1
Social workers	14	7	0
School psychologists	17	4	0

Table 8. Curriculum Typically Available at Alternative Schools (n = 34 states)

Types of Instruction	Percent	Number of States
Academic basics (reading, writing and math)	97	33
Interpersonal skills (e.g., conflict resolution)	94	32
Content areas (e.g., science, history)	91	31
Life skills (e.g., parenting, time management)	88	30
Remedial instruction	85	29
Computer-based instruction (e.g., Nova Net)	77	26
Career/vocational	74	25
Physical education, health, music or art	59	20
Independent study	56	19
Other (e.g., experiential, problem-based)	15	5

Student-Staff Ratio

Seventeen respondents (52%) reported a typical student-to-staff ratio of 1-10 students to 1 staff member in alternative schools (n = 33 states reporting).

Staff Time On-Site

Respondents were asked to select the percentage of time staff members were typically on-site at alternative programs in the state. Only licensed regular education teachers were consistently on-site more than 75% of the time. The majority of respondents indicated mental health counselors, career counselors, social workers, and school psychologists were on site less than 25% of the time. Table 7 lists the extent to which various staff were typically on site in responding states.

Part IV: Curriculum and Instruction

Information about the curriculum and instruction offered to students who attend alternative schools is critical. Several questions addressed this area.

State Standards and Curricula

When asked whether students attending alternative schools work towards a set of common state standards, 34 of 36 responding states answered in the affirmative. Further, 15 respondents (47%) indicated that the state standards and curriculum were well integrated, similar to traditional schools, and 14 respondents (44%) reported that the incorporation of state standards and curriculum was emerging (programs are working on it) (n = 32 states reporting).

Types of Instruction

In identifying the kinds of instruction typically available at alternative schools in their states, over 90% of the states that responded indicated curriculum included instruction in academic basics, interpersonal skills, and content areas. About half of the states indicated they typically offered independent study in their alternative schools (see Table 8).

Exit Documents

Respondents were asked to indicate what kind of exit document students receive when they graduate from an alternative school in their state. Although nearly 90% of the states indicated

Table 9. Exit Documents Students Typically Receive When They Graduate (n = 34 states)

Exit Document	Percent	Number of States
Diploma (same as regular high school)	88	30
Modified diploma	12	4
General Education Development (GED) Certificate	15	5
Certificate of attendance	6	2
Other	24	8

students received a diploma upon graduation that is the same as the one students would obtain from a regular high school, some states indicated students received a modified diploma, GED, certificate of attendance or other exit document (see Table 9).

Part V: Outcomes

What are the outcomes for students who attend alternative schools? This question is perhaps the most important to answer in light of the large numbers of students who are attending alternative schools. Several questions were included on the survey that asked about information and data collection with regard to outcomes for students attending alternative schools.

Documentation of Outcomes

Nineteen states (53%) reported having a system in place for collecting data and documenting outcomes for students attending alternative schools (n = 36 states reporting).

Type of State-Level Data Collected

Respondents were asked about types of data collected for students attending alternative programs. Of the 27 states that responded, over half collected information on graduation rates, dropout rates, attendance, state-level test results, and rates of re-enrollment (see Table 10).

Table 10. Number of States Indicating Collection of Data by Type (n = 27 states)

Type of Data	Percent	Number of States
Graduation rates	70	19
Dropout rates	67	18
Attendance	67	18
Results of state-mandated tests	63	17
Rates of re-enrollment in traditional school	52	14
Number of GED certificates	48	13
Academic performance (e.g., grades)	44	12
Credit accumulation	41	11
Risk behaviors (e.g., pregnancy, suspensions)	37	10
Post secondary school enrollment	33	9
Post school outcomes (e.g., employment rate)	26	7
Healthy behaviors (e.g., abstinence from drug use)	15	4

Table 11. Number of States Indicating Various Outcomes for "Many" or "Almost All" Students (n = 25 states)

Outcome	Percent	Number of States
Many or almost all of the students return to a traditional education setting after attending the alternative program	64	16
Many or almost all students graduate from alternative schools	43	10
Many or almost all students attend, exit and return to alternative programs more than once	16	4
Many or almost all students drop out of alternative schools	0	0

Typical Outcomes

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which four scenarios occur for students attending alternative schools in their states. The four scenarios were: (a) many or almost all of the students return to a traditional education setting after attending the alternative program, (b) many or almost all students graduate from alternative schools, (c) many or almost all students attend, exit and return to alternative programs more than once, and (d) many or almost all students drop out of alternative schools. Sixteen states (64%) indicated many or almost all of the students who attend alternative schools returned to the traditional education setting. Table 11 shows the percentage and number of states indicating the scenario occurs for "many" or "almost all" of the students in the alternative school.

Part VI: Students with Disabilities

The extent to which students with disabilities attend alternative schools and the services they receive are not well known. Part VI of the survey focused on gathering state-level information about students with disabilities attending alternative schools. Significantly fewer states provided responses to the following questions (as compared to responses on other sections of the survey).

Data on Number of Students with Disabilities

Respondents were asked to what extent data are collected at the state level on the number of students with disabilities attending alternative schools. Eighteen respondents (53%) indicated that state-level data was collected on the number of students with disabilities attending alternative schools (n = 34 states reporting).

Students with IEPs

Respondents reported that, on average, about 12% of the students attending alternative schools were students with active Individual Education Plans (IEPs) during the 2001-2002 school year. The percentage ranged from 1-25% (12 states reporting). Nine states (33%) indicated the number of students with disabilities who attended alternative schools had remained stable over the past five years; five states (19%) indicated that this number has increased over the past five years; and thirteen states (48%) reported that they did not know if this number has changed over the past five years (n = 27 states reporting).

Primary Disability Category

The survey posed the question, "What is the primary disability category for most students with disabilities served in alternative programs?" States reported that students with an IEP were most

Table 12. Use of Alternative Schools as Interim Alternative Educational Placements (IAES) (n = 25 states)

Used as an IAES	Percent	Number of States
Often/almost always	8	2
Sometimes	32	8
Rarely	40	10
Not at all	20	5

often students with emotional/behavior disorders, learning disabilities, and other health impairments (27 states responded).

Alternative Programs as IAESs

Respondents were asked to what extent alternative programs are used as IDEA-required Interim Alternative Educational Settings (IAES). Nearly 40% of the states indicated alternative schools were sometimes/often/almost always used as IAESs (see Table 12; n = 25 states reporting).

Length of Enrollment

The length of time students with disabilities typically remain enrolled in an alternative school varied from less than one month to more than one academic year or through graduation (n = 25 states reporting). Seventeen states (68%) indicated students with disabilities attended alternative schools for more than seven months (long-term duration) (see Figure 2).

IEPs/Special Education Services

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which the following scenarios were likely to occur when students enroll in alternative schools: (a) student's IEP is modified to reflect what services are needed and what can be provided, (b) students with disabilities are discouraged from attending alternative programs, (c) student's special education services are terminated, (d) student's special education are suspended until the student returns to the resident school, and (e) the alternative program usually has no knowledge of whether students who are enrolling received special education services at their previous school. The majority of states indicated that students' IEPs were modified to reflect the services that were needed and could be provided. However, other scenarios occurred as well. Table 13 shows the percent and number of states indicating the scenario was likely or often likely to occur.

Special Education Issues of Concern

When presented with a number of special education issues and asked to indicate the level of state concern, issues of most concern included a lack of qualified staff (21 states); unclear or inadequate procedures with regard to exit (20 states); and provision of appropriate services (23 states) (see Table 14).

Figure 2. Typical Duration of Enrollment for Students with Disabilities (n = 25 states)

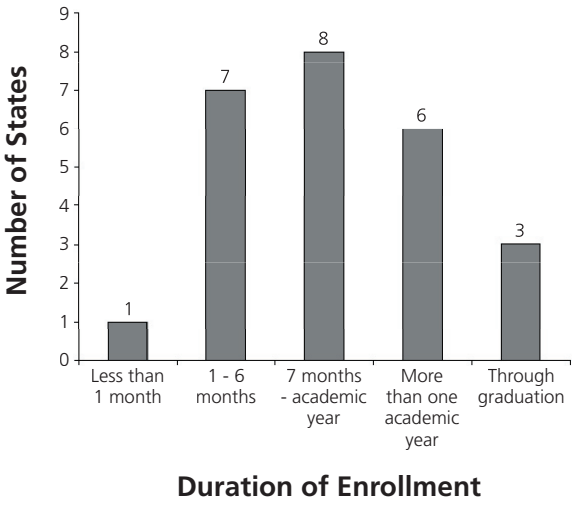


Table 13. Percent and Number of States Indicating the Following Scenarios are Likely or Often Likely to Occur When Students with Disabilities Enroll in Alternative Schools

Scenario	Percent	Number of States (Number of States responding)
Student's IEP is modified to reflect what services are needed and what can be provided	65	19 (29)
Students with disabilities are discouraged from attending alternative programs	38	11 (29)
Student's special education services are terminated	17	5 (29)
Student's special education services are suspended until the student returns to the resident school	13	5 (28)
The alternative program usually has no knowledge of whether students who are enrolling received special education services at their previous school	11	3 (27)

When further asked to identify the three most important special education issues alternative schools will face in the next two to three years, responses revealed three main themes (n = 25 states):

- Availability, quality, and licensure of staff to work with students with disabilities in alternative schools;
- Provisions and quality of services in place for students with disabilities; and
- Ensuring procedures and services are in place to facilitate success for students transitioning into and out of alternative and traditional schools.

Part VII: Summary

When respondents were asked to identify the three most important issues facing alternative schools in the next two to three years, thematic analysis of their answers yielded three main themes (n = 29 states reporting):

- Lack of funding (61%). Responses reflected concerns with continued funding, funding that was not adequate to sustain appropriate levels of service and programs, and the impact of budget cuts on alternative programs.
- Quality and quantity of staff (44%). Responses reflected concerns about finding well-trained staff, certification issues with regard to teaching across subject areas, and staff development.
- Accountability and standards-based reform movement (28%). Responses reflected concerns about implementing state standards and the accountability system, meeting academic state standards, and appropriate measures to document success.

Issues mentioned less frequently, but worth noting, were tied to programming (serving elementary students, traditional vs. innovative programs), curriculum, increased growth, facilities, and transition/re-entry procedures.

Table 14. Percent of States Indicating Degree of Concern for Each Special Education Issue

Scenario	Not a Concern		Somewhat Concerning		Critical Concern	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
Lack of qualified staff servicing students with disabilities in alternative programs due to training or availability (n = 28 states)	25	(7)	21	(6)	54	(15)
Unclear or inadequate procedures with regard to exit from the alternative program, transition, and follow up (n = 28 states)	29	(8)	25	(7)	46	(13)
Provision of appropriate services for students with disabilities attending alternative programs (n = 28 states)	18	(5)	39	(11)	43	(12)
Less rigorous standards and lower expectations for students attending alternative schools (n = 29 states)	45	(13)	17	(5)	38	(11)
Overrepresentation of students with disabilities attending alternative programs (n = 28 states)	36	(10)	36	(10)	29	(8)
Lack of compliance with IDEA requirements due to lack of awareness, resources, or intentional acts (n = 27 states)	37	(10)	48	(13)	15	(4)

Discussion

Responses from this survey provide a snapshot of alternative schools from across the nation. Some of the information gathered confirms perceptions of alternative schools that have been previously described in the research literature. For example, most states indicated the typical enrollment was small (about 25-75 students) with low student-to-teacher ratios, the majority of schools serve students at the secondary level, and these programs most often serve students at risk of school failure who have a history of poor attendance and/or behavioral or academic needs. The survey results also provide new databased information about today's alternative schools and raise questions about additional issues to examine and address. Some of these issues are synthesized and highlighted below.

State-Level Definitions Reflect Considerable Diversity and Variability

Definitions reflected differences in mission, duration, enrollment, and intended outcomes. An alternative school may, and probably does, mean different things to different people. In some ways, this ambiguity is nothing new. A commonly accepted definition has historically been elusive. However, the recent increase in numbers of students attending these settings necessitates a clear

understanding of what policymakers, researchers, and educators, are talking about when the term *alternative schools* is used. Characteristics that have been used historically in the literature to describe alternative schools may not accurately portray many of today's alternative schools. Conversations about alternative schools that lead to policy and practice must take into consideration dimensions that reflect the variety of alternative schools in operation today.

Number of Students Served is Significant and Trends Suggest Continued Growth

The number of students served in alternative schools as determined by the survey is higher than other national estimates. This survey asked each state respondent for the total student enrollment (average daily membership including students enrolled on a part-time or full-time basis) in alternative programs during the 2001-2002 school year. When summed across the 20 states that provided data, this number came to more than one million students. States reported this information according to their definition of alternative schools. A review of state-level definitions suggests that this number did not include students attending charter schools. This number may have included students who received service through supplemental programs that are funded under alternative programs (e.g., targeted services for students at risk). In contrast, the estimated number of students in alternative education reported by the National Center for Education Statistics report was about 613,000 for the 2000-2001 school year, or about 1.3% of public school students (Kleiner, Porch & Farris, 2002). The NCES survey arrived at this estimate by extrapolating data gathered through a survey of a sample of districts across the country. The differences between these figures may be reconciled through further analysis of similarities and differences in methods used to gather data, definitions and information sources. In any case, alternative schools are serving a significant portion of our nation's students – many of whom are considered at risk.

Many Students Attend Alternative Schools via Placement Rather than Choice

In the past, many alternative schools were attended through student choice (Young, 1990). Additionally, educators and researchers have suggested that the most effective alternative programs are schools of choice (McKean, 2000; Raywid, 1994). Findings from this survey suggest that many of today's alternative schools are settings where students are placed as an alternative to suspension or expulsion, or as a consequence in response to disruptive behavior. This is consistent with a review of state legislation that indicated enrollment in alternative schools occurred as a result or consequence of expulsion or suspension in many states (Lehr, et al., 2003). This finding raises important questions. What is the intended outcome for students who are placed in alternative schools? What are the actual outcomes for students in these settings? State legislation and policy seems to be shaping many of these settings, and in many states, numbers are growing. This growth is due to multiple factors which may include reaction to zero tolerance policies, promotion of policies associated with safe schools, increased numbers of large high schools with high enrollment, more challenging student population, and increased attention to system accountability associated with federal policy. In order to effectively serve students at risk who are attending these settings, characteristics that are empirically linked with successful outcomes must be identified.

The Population Served Points to the Need for Qualified Staff and Quality Instruction

Most respondents indicated that alternative schools serve students who have behavior problems, a history of poor attendance or dropout, or learning difficulties. States that had documented criteria for enrollment suggested many of these students are struggling with challenges that may include physical abuse, drug use, pregnancy or parenting, or criminal involvement. In order to address the multiple needs of these students and promote healthy physical, social, and emotional development, appropriate staffing is necessary. Responses from this survey indicated that nearly all states require teachers in their alternative schools to be certified or licensed to teach. Due to their small size, teachers in alternative schools often teach more than one subject. No Child Left Behind requires teachers to be licensed in the subject area they are teaching. This law creates challenges for alternative schools, and solutions will require flexibility and creativity to maintain staffing. Some states have established criteria that teachers must meet in order to teach in alternative schools. Legislation in West Virginia specifies that teachers in alternative schools should have a professional teaching certificate, ability to effect positive behavior in disruptive students, effective leadership and/or mentoring skills in working with youth, successful experience in providing education to troubled or disruptive youth, specialized training or experience in nontraditional programs, and specialized training in behavior management skills (West Virginia Board of Education Legislative Rule, Title 126-20-6.1.9). To attract qualified teachers to work with students who have been placed at risk, Oklahoma requires alternative education teachers to be paid 5% above the scale established by the district where they are teaching (Oklahoma Statute Section 70-1210.565).

Unfortunately, states indicated that many support staff including mental health counselors, career counselors, social workers and school psychologists were typically on-site less than 25% of the time. Studies suggest the positive effects of counseling provided in alternative settings include increases in self-regulation, positive self-esteem, attendance, grade point average, locus of control, and conflict management (Aeby, Thyer & Aeby, 1999; Cox, 1999; Nichols & Steffy, 1997; Nichols & Utesch, 1998; Williams, 2002). Information on instruction that is offered in alternative schools suggests that some of these needs may be met through course content that focuses on building interpersonal skills or life skills. Informal conversations with alternative school educators indicate a need and desire for more staff who can help to address emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of the students with whom they work. Increased resources require increased funds, and adequate funding may be at issue. More information about instructional and staffing needs in relation to meeting student needs is necessary to inform best practice.

State-Level Information on Student Outcomes is Limited

Only 19 of 36 states indicated the state department of education had a system in place documenting outcomes for students who attend alternative schools. Because of this, it is difficult to know how students benefit from attending these settings from a state-level perspective. Some of the collected information included information on graduation rates, attendance, results from state-mandated tests and rates of re-enrollment in traditional schools. Only seven states indicated data was collected on post-school outcomes. When students do graduate from alternative schools, it appears that they receive standard diplomas similar to the traditional high school (in most states).

Collecting data on outcomes for students and disaggregating it by alternative school settings is critical if we are to understand how students who are most at risk of school failure are faring. Oftentimes, results for students attending alternative schools are compared with results for students attending traditional schools. It is important to view these results in context as alternative schools generally serve students with multiple risk factors who have not succeeded in traditional settings. Data that accurately reflect the progress that students make while attending alternative schools is critical. The increased numbers of students who are attending these educational programs calls for increased accountability to ensure the programs are not being used as a dumping ground for unwanted students. Additionally, it is in the best interest of alternative schools that are doing a good job to document outcomes for their students to secure funding and enhance their reputations. Progress indicators in areas beyond academic performance may be necessary in order to capture the impact of alternative schools on student outcomes.

State-Level Information on Students with Disabilities in Alternative Schools is Limited

Although the estimated percentage of students with disabilities attending alternative schools was similar to that obtained by a national survey conducted for NCES (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002) only 12 states actually provided data on our survey. Oftentimes, respondents indicated this information was not available at all or in an easily accessible form, or that it was collected at the local level. Without this information, we can say very little about the extent to which students with disabilities are attending alternative schools on a national level. In addition, we can say very little to address concerns and questions that have been raised about overrepresentation, and conversely, exclusion.

Understanding the role alternative schools play in the education of students with disabilities is especially critical because students with disabilities comprise a large portion of the population of students at risk of dropping out. The dropout rate for the school year 1998-1999 reported by the Office of Special Education Programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) was 51% for students with emotional/behavioral disorders followed by students with learning disabilities (27%). The characteristics of alternative schools that address the needs of dropouts such as positive relationships with adults, meaningful educational and transition goals, counseling, and emphasis on living and vocational skills (Benz, Linstrom, & Yarnoss, 2000; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Lange, 1998; Marder, 1992) may also provide the elements necessary to keep students with disabilities in school. Respondents indicated that the most pressing special education issues alternative schools confronted included availability, quality, and licensure of staff; provisions and quality of services in place for students with disabilities; and procedures for transitioning students in and out of alternative schools. Transition issues become even more important when considering the use of alternative schools as short-term placements (e.g., in response to suspension), and the higher rates of changing schools for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities (Osher, Morrison, & Bailey, 2003). Increasing the amount of, as well as the accuracy of, data collected for students with disabilities attending these settings is needed.

Limitations

The survey findings provide a good beginning from which additional information about alternative schools and the students attending them can be generated and viewed. Although the survey collected important information that increases

our knowledge of alternative schools on a national level, several limitations must be noted. For example, data was not obtained from every state. A response rate greater than 70% allows generalization with caution – more complete information would have been useful. Requesting the state definition of alternative schools was purposeful, as it provided information about the extent to which a definition existed as well as the content. However, because a standard definition was not used (beyond that established by the Common Core of Data to provide a general indication of what was meant by "alternative school") consistency across settings may be questionable. Review of the definitions suggests states did not include charter schools in the definition of alternative schools. Also, the terms "program" and "school" were used interchangeably. In some states, programs and schools are very different. For example, in Iowa, a school is described as a "stand alone" setting, while a "program" is offered within an existing school. In Minnesota, alternative programs can be considered targeted services, alternative learning programs, or alternative learning centers. In Texas, alternative programs include Alternative Education Programs (AEP), Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP) and Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs (JJAEP). The combination of structures and words used to describe the alternative schools and programs is complex. Lastly, responses may have been influenced by social desirability and the inclination to provide answers that seemed most appropriate in light of state and/or federal regulations.

Summary

The information gathered from this survey can be used to inform further study of alternative schools within states. The next major task of the Alternative Schools Research Project will focus on conducting several state-level case studies that reflect the diversity of alternative schools across various dimensions including mission, enrollment procedures, curriculum focus, structure, and targeted population. It is critical to determine the extent to which findings from the survey match practices that are occurring in alternative school sites across the nation. Within each selected state, site visits at several alternative schools will also be conducted. Information will be gathered directly from educators, students with and without disabilities, and parents. A study of this kind at multiple levels provides the first step toward comprehending the nature of these programs that are serving some of the most disenfranchised students in the nation.

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