Education Policy Brief

Alternative Schools: What's in a Name?

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INTRODUCTION

The first public schools established in America were originally created with the intent to give all children access to an education. An equal education for all meant that a child's parentage and social standing did not, theoretically, dictate his or her future. In order to achieve this endeavor, in 1837 Horace Mann, the Secretary of the newly created Massachusetts State Board of Education, decided that all "common schools" needed to be completely stan-dardized, down to the design and color of the little red schoolhouses (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2004). Today the American public school system has greatly expanded and diverged from the once strictly followed "common school" model to include nontra-ditional options such as alternative, mag-net, charter, virtual, and vocational schools. Amidst so many educational options, a contentious point is whether or not these additional schooling opportuni-ties such as alternative schools better sup-port the egalitarian mission, or if they actually further encourage the stratification of students.

Though the structures of alternative schools vary from one to another, one major purpose is to serve students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Accord-ing to a U.S. Department of Education study on dropout rates, trends show that certain minority students and low-income students are more likely to drop out of school (Laird et al., 2007). For the 2007-08 school year in Indiana, the subgroups with the lowest graduation rates were students who qualify for free/reduced lunch (61%), Black students (59.5%), limited English speakers (58.8%), and special education students (53.2%) (IDOE, 2009a). The topic of who, if anyone, fits the label of "at-risk"

will be thoroughly considered later in the brief as well as the role of alternative schools for this particular population of students.

Alternative schools and programs often offer students the ability to learn in a smaller classroom, as class size is one char-acteristic often regulated by states; for example, guidelines in Indiana specify that the maximum student:teacher ratio in alter-native classrooms is 15:1 (IDOE, 2008a). Consequently, students may be able to cre-ate more meaningful relationships with fel-low students and teachers.

Operating with some autonomy outside of traditional education, alternative schools and programs have the freedom to try out new educational methods and simulta-neously conduct credible research which can be shared within the educational com-munity. For example, one national high school reform effort implements alternative high school structures such as smaller learn-ing communities in traditional schools. Smaller learning communities break stu-dents up into subgroups and operate within the traditional school in order to help keep students from falling behind as classes become more rigorous (Zapf, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2006). This effort has been shown to decrease drop-out rates (Maxwell & Rubin, 2002). However, due to lack of school personnel and funding, not all suc-cessful methods used in alternative schools, such as a small student to teacher ratio, can be readily implemented in a traditional school setting.

There are issues and questions regarding alternative schools for both those who commend and those who critique it. In a time of heightened focus on student vio-lence and zero tolerance, many students are being sent to alternative schools as a conse-

quence for incidences some view as minor violation of rules. Other students, often students with a low socioeconomic background, report being encouraged to drop out of school by teachers and/or administration (Steptoe, 2003). For these students, called "pushouts," an alternative education may be the only path to graduation. Other issues pertain to the stereotypes associated with alternative schools. Students worry that they will be stigmatized by attending an alternative school; others are nervous about the students they will encounter. Critics of alternative schools voice concerns about the effectiveness of alternative schools, citing low graduation rates and noncompetitive standardized test scores. They similarly worry about students' ability to perform well in college after having graduated from an alternative school. These concerns are legitimate, but some students and parents perceive that the benefits outweigh possible risks.

Today, alternative schools may look different from their predecessors, but they exist because of the same philosophy: one size does not fit all.

Generalizing advantages and disadvantages is difficult because alternative schools and programs differ widely in theoretical structure and purpose. For example, one alternative school may focus on cultivating students' leadership skills through adventure training in the Colorado Mountains, while another, such as the Juvenile Justice Center in South Bend, Indiana, may consist mainly of expelled students from neighboring traditional schools. Alternative programs may be located within the traditional school or maintained by outside management at another location. Public opinion of alternative schools varies as well. Some think positively of alternative schools, as small specialized or innovative schools, whereas others compare alternative schools to rehabilitation centers which work to "fix" stu-

dents so that they may return to traditional schools.

We chose to examine this issue in order to shed light on alternative schooling which has gone from being the primary option outside of traditional schooling to one of many. This brief will describe the origins of alternative schools, different structures of alternative schools and programs, and student achievement, particularly in Indiana. Furthermore, this brief addresses how stereotypes affect alternative schools and their students as well as whether alternative schools support and/or segregate specific groups of students. Finally, recommendations are offered concerning the future of alternative education for educators and policymakers to consider.

HISTORY OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

The first widely implemented public schools were called "common schools." While our founding fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson, strove to create equal education for all, it was not until Horace Mann established these schools that the idea was brought to limited fruition in mid-1800s Massachusetts. Though these "common schools" were intended to be open to students of all religions, students read from the King James version of the Bible and learned Protestant catechisms ("School: The story of American public education," 2001). This was problematic for the large population of Irish Catholic Americans who argued that their children were being indoctrinated with Protestant values and taught to look down on or even despise their Catholic heritage. When the government refused to set aside public funds for Catholic students, Archbishop John Hughes of New York helped create a national system of Catholic schools, which is referred to as the first major alternative school system ("School: The story of American public education," 2001). Alternative schools therefore began as non-traditional schools which fulfilled the specific needs of a group of students. Today, alternative schools may look different from their predecessors, but they exist because of the same philosophy: one size does not fit all.

During the post-World War II era in the 1960s, some Americans became fed up with what they felt was a technocratic or mechanistic system of public education. These young educators, parents, and students disagreed with the traditional style of management and assessment of children, and in response created independent or "free" schools over the next two decades. These schools did not receive state funding and therefore were free from having to conform to state regulations; they were able to implement different structures, philosophies, and approaches to education, including a child-centered approach which focuses on the needs of students. Many ignored the constraints of a typical curriculum, chose previously untaught textbooks, did not implement strict rules on student behavior, and abolished the concept of grades (Miller, 2002). The overall desire was to make learning relevant and unrestrictive. The free school movement began to fade in 1972, but it had a lasting impact: it created a contemporary alternative approach to education where there were few before.

Alternative education advocate John Loflin contends that one of the main reasons alternative schools came about was because of a certain group of students whose needs were not being met (Loflin, 2007). Loflin refers to the Black Independent School Movement in which Black parents questioned whether or not traditional schools were working in the best interest of their children. A 1972 edition of TIME Magazine stated that Black parents felt that city public schools placed their students in a perpetual cycle of failure and disorder from which they could not escape ("Education: Alternative schools: Melting pot to mosaic," 1972). Out of this frustration, some parents opened private alternative schools, such as free schools, which prompted public schools to create alternative programs. Similar to today's programs, these could be implemented within or outside of traditional school grounds. Parents of Black students, as well as parents of other minority students, wanted more emphasis placed on their respective cultures. However, minority students were not the only students to utilize alternative schools and programs ("Education: Alternative schools: Melting pot to mosaic," 1972). White middle class students sought such programs in order to rebel against tra-

dition, which may have been a result of their parents being fed up with the mainstream educational practices of the past. Such reasons for the emergence of early alternative schools are cited by professor of education Richard Neuman in Phi Delta Kappan, a professional journal for educators (Boss, 1998).

The picture of alternative schools in the 1970s was as diverse as it is now. However, some creators of alternative schools had a specific student population such as Black or Hispanic students in mind. Schools that accept only students of a certain race came dangerously close to voluntary segregation, which has been illegal since the 1976 court case, Runyon v. McCrary. Other schools had focused on specialty areas such as the arts and technical education ("Education: Alternative schools: Melting pot to mosaic," 1972).

Alternative schools and programs were not as popular in the 1980s when newly published reports such as the 1983 Nation At-Risk report declared a decline in American students' achievement and called for increased attention to core subjects such as math, science, and language arts (Urban & Wagoner, 2008). Furthermore, as the Cold War escalated, many Americans were worried about international competition. Loflin contends these events led to a decline in the number of alternative schools and programs (Loflin, 2007).

Before the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, some alternative schools and programs were able to hire uncertified teachers (Chalker, 2007). However, once this act was passed, national alternative education standards changed in order to match those required in traditional public schools, including requiring certified teachers to meet the federal definition of "highly qualified." According to Chris Chalker, director of the Simon Youth Foundation, these changes put alternative education on par with traditional schools. Chalker views this change as a way of legitimizing alternative programs and the achievements that students make. He says, "They [teachers in alternative programs] have to meet standards with at-risk students. No one can say, 'You're easier, you have no testing, the kids get credit for nothing, etc.'" As a consequence, alternative schools and programs are able to be judged more critically.

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION?

The U.S. Department of Education describes an alternative 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" (USDOE, 2007b). As noted previously, alternative education has many connotations. Likely, there is no universal definition because there is no single federal agency primarily responsible for alternative education (Brand & Martin, 2006). Advocates of alternative education believe that to be considered truly alternative, schools must be substantially different from the traditional. However, not all alternative schools diverge more than they are touted; an alternative school's mission statement could be exactly the same as that of a traditional school.

> *"They [teachers in alternative programs] have to meet standards with at-risk students. No one can say that 'you're easier, you have no testing, the kids get credit for nothing,' etc."*

Many alternative schools and programs are constructed to fulfill individual students' needs and aim to help those students who do not thrive in a traditional classroom. The programs often serve a diverse population of students, including some whose families' social, academic, and political values differ from those of the mainstream (Raywid, 1994). These schools are often very flexible; some even allow students in unusual or extraordinary circumstances to attend only half of the school day so that they can work or care for their children and still receive an education. Some teachers

appreciate the lack of bureaucracy with which they have to deal as compared to the traditional system and may find the students refreshing, challenging, or both (Education: Alternative schools: Melting pot to mosaic, 1972).

The philosophy and structure of one alternative school can greatly differ from the next. Ideally, alternative schools and programs are specifically tailored to support the students they are serving. Researcher Mary Ann Raywid found that alternative schools and programs could be divided into three distinct types: the first she labeled "restructured schools," which use progressive educational ideas. The second type, "disciplinary programs," are often labeled "soft-cell jails," and are for students who have committed violent acts or displayed disruptive behavior. Raywid found that these programs give students individual attention designed to curb negative behaviors. The third type is a "problem-solving school," which is specifically designed for at-risk students. Raywid found that educators in this group generally view their students in an optimistic manner and provide emotional and social support. These schools can be considered therapeutic, with an approach similar to a rehabilitation center. The different types of alternative schools lead to the myriad of beliefs about their quality (Raywid, 1994).

Alternative schools and charter schools are often compared and confused. Unlike alternative schools and programs, charter schools are a more recent addition to educational choice. The first charter school in the nation appeared in Minnesota in 1991, but Indiana did not open one until 2002 (Akey, 2009). Charter schools are defined as "publicly funded schools that are granted autonomy from some state and local regulations in exchange for meeting the terms of each school's charter." State laws typically govern how many charters are allowed, who can apply, and who can authorize charters (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2008). Some charter schools can be considered alternative if they meet certain requirements.

Students are eligible for alternative schools and programs if they are planning on withdrawing from school, have already withdrawn, or will not succeed academically if they continue in traditional schools (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Common

reasons for students to be referred to or placed in an alternative school include poor grades, chronic truancy, disruptive behavior such as fighting and other maladaptive behavior, including drug or alcohol use and/or arrests, that lead to suspension or expulsion. Other reasons include family crisis, prolonged illness, and social or emotional issues. Alternative programs are not special education programs, but special education students may participate. Additionally, students are eligible to enroll if they work to support their families. Alternative programs are potentially better able to accommodate pregnant students as well. Also, some parents and students are drawn to alternative schools because of the flexible schedule and low student-teacher ratio, which may be dictated by the state.

...students who do not feel connected to their schools, do not maintain meaningful relationships with their peers or teachers, or do not feel that the course material is relevant or challenging are at an increased risk of not graduating.

Although pregnancy and mental health reasons are the least likely reasons for transfer, three-quarters of districts collaborate with mental health facilities. More often, students are sent to alternative schools because they have been expelled from their regular school. Schools have a legitimate interest in keeping order and maintaining students' safety, which is why a quarter of alternative schools and programs have security service personnel on school grounds (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Parents and educators are concerned with violence in schools, but many are also concerned with the future of students who leave or are expelled from school. Alternative schools can act as a safety net for these students, keeping them enrolled in school and away from violence.

Since the Guns Free Schools Act of 1994, a national "zero tolerance" policy has been in place, and more students have been referred to alternative schools and programs. The Act requires that each state receiving federal funds must have a state law requiring a year-long expulsion for any student who possesses or brings a firearm to school (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). Currently, all states comply with this law. Some states have logically expanded the scope of the law so that the possession of knives, bombs, grenades, and drugs require expulsion as well.

In 1996 the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) sought congressional legislation appropriating money for alternative settings due to the identification of student discipline as a major problem for teachers, which causes a considerable loss of instructional time (AFT, 1996). The Act remains controversial because some students have been expelled and sent to an alternative setting or juvenile center for minor incidents. For example, in Texas a grade 6 student was sent to an alternative school for writing "I love Alex" on a gymnasium wall. At this school, the punishment for graffiti is equal to the punishment for possession of drugs: students are sent to an alternative school for the remainder of the semester (Associated Press, 2007).

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Since standard characteristics of alternatives schools are difficult to identify, categorizing schools as "alternative" has led to some debate. For instance, Loflin contends that some forms of schooling have been mislabeled as "alternative" since its creation in the 1970s. Those in this camp of thinking believe there are certain qualities a school must possess in order to be truly "alternative," including: voluntary participation on the part of both the students and teachers, distinctiveness from traditional schools, a learning environment that relates to student learning styles, and a comprehensive set of objectives (Loflin, 2003). Otherwise, Loflin says, the schools are alternative in name only: "pseudo-alternatives." He says, "These pseudo-alternatives represent ineffective and often punitive approaches that isolate and segre-

gate students who can be difficult for the mainstream" (Kellmayer, 1998).

Due to the large number of students expelled from traditional schools, critics label alternative schools "dumping grounds." This label may hold back students who would benefit from attending. For example, one student's mother was strongly against her daughter going to an alternative school due to negative stereotypes associated with the school's students, even though her daughter was excited and thought the new school sounded like an environment in which she would thrive. A specific kind of alternative school may be the perfect fit for a student who may be uncomfortable in a traditional school.

Elizabeth McGovern, principal of the School of Academic and Career Development, which began in 1988 as the Stanley Hall Enrichment Center in Evansville, Indiana, suggests changing the title from "alternative" to "nontraditional." She feels this more positive title better represents her school and other similar schools (McGovern, 2007).

WHO AND WHAT IS "AT-RISK"?

When examining alternative schools and programs, it is important to consider the "at-risk" students who make up a large population of students who participate in these programs. "At-risk" is a label given to students who are failing academically and are at an increased risk of dropping out of school. Typically, students who drop out of high school do so after a long period of disengagement that is often associated with frequent transfers between schools, truancy, learning challenges, grade retention, and negative school experiences (IDOE, 2009b). Studies on school dropout rates and trends show that male and female students drop out at a similar rate and that Hispanic and black students are more likely to drop out than Asian and White students (Laird et al, 2007). From October 2006 to October 2007, low-income students (income below $18,400) dropped out at a rate 10 times higher than high-income students (income above $85,500), low-income students of all races and ethnicities dropped out at a rate six times higher than high-income students, and students between the ages of 19 and 24 were much more likely to drop out than stu-

dents who attended school at the typical age (15-18) (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). In Indiana, out of every 100 students in grade 9, 78 will graduate high school; 44 of these will enter college; 32 will still be enrolled in college as sophomores; and 23 will graduate within six years of college enrollment (Plucker, 2009).

Students who are beginning to struggle or have been consistently struggling in school need to be identified immediately because the consequences for allowing students to slip through the cracks are devastating. Dropping out of high school is directly related to numerous negative outcomes. According to a 1997 Juvenile Justice Bulletin, "research has demonstrated that youth who are not in school and not in the labor force are at high risk of delinquency and crime." Students who do not graduate are more likely to participate in risky behaviors, which might contribute to injuries and violence. Risky behavior includes dropping out, criminal activity, and substance abuse. Society pays a high price for school failure; these behaviors place students at-risk for mortality and morbidity. In the United States, 72% of all deaths among youth and young adults aged 10-24 years result from four causes: motor-vehicle crashes (30%), homicide (15%), other unintentional injuries (15%), and suicide (12%) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). High school dropouts over the age of 25 reported being in worse health than students who did not drop out (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009).

Identifying and providing extra academic help for students is important because reading skills are vital to success in school and in life. By examining only a few factors in students as early as grade 3, schools can predict with 80% accuracy the students who will later drop out of school (Boss, 1998). The relationship between succeeding in school and succeeding in life is clearly illustrated by the more than 80% of prison inmates who are high school dropouts. "In 1993, one-fourth of youth entering adult prisons had completed grade 10; only 2% had completed high school or had a GED" (as cited in Boss, 1998). Barr and Parrett (2001) states that "A 50% functional illiteracy rate in the nation's prisons underlines a direct and unmistakable link between poor reading skills at an early age and subsequent failures leading to a huge and tragic social cost."

Therefore, the ability to read is particularly important. After identifying students who need further help in reading, measures should be taken to improve students' skills immediately in view of the fact that the previous connections to academic failure and incarceration make literacy crucial to success. Students who only participate in alternative programs for a couple of hours within the traditional school could use that time to focus on essential skills like reading. This intensive tutoring could make a meaningful difference in students' academic careers since academic achievement and good reading skills can act as factors to sufficiently combat negative elements in a student's life.

Not only is there a connection between dropping out of school and future incarceration, but there is a link to adult poverty as well. According to the Census Bureau, in 2005 the average income for a person ages 18-65 that had not completed high school was about $34,000; whereas for those who had completed high school or earned a GED, the average income was nearly $40,000 more (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). Teen parents who have two or more children can expect to remain on welfare for a decade, and dropouts are more likely to be unemployed (Boss, 1998). Utilizing alternative schools, then, can make a huge difference in students' lives and ultimately affect society entirely.

Students who are struggling at school may be experiencing hardships outside of school such as abuse, neglect, lack of English skills, and poor nutrition. The earlier that students are identified as struggling in school, the sooner they can begin an alternative program if that is what the parents and educators deem most helpful. An alternative environment may be better able to support these students' needs. Once help is provided, students may then be able to overcome negative aspects of their lives, such as poverty or the presence of drug or alcohol abuse in the family. Students would likely be able to create better emotional connections with peers and teachers in an alternative setting. A close bond with a school teacher may make the difference between a student excelling or falling behind (Horting, 2000). Educators cannot change a student's home circumstances, but they can help students prepare for the future while in school.

Making students feel that the course material is relevant and challenging and creating meaningful relationships with peers or teachers are factors instrumental in keeping students in school (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Alternative schools and programs are in place to support all of these students.

Interventions are available, yet it takes time to identify students and implement the interventions. According to Barr and Parrett (2001), struggling students frequently come from low-income areas where change is even less likely to be implemented. First, teachers and administrators must be motivated to implement interventions for individual struggling students or introduce overall change in the system. Gary Chigo, of the Chicago Board of Education stated in a 2000 article:

> "The faculties of our schools have asked for there to be a mechanism to rid the classroom of perpetually troubled children so that they have a fair chance of teaching and the children who are not causing trouble have a fair chance of learning. And finally, the students themselves that have caused problems for some time need to get out of that setting in many cases and get the more individualized attention that can be provided in these alternative schools" (Brackett, 2000).

Across the nation, 88% of teachers agree with Chigo that achievement would improve if troubled students were simply removed from school. Educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind may be further edging struggling students out of traditional schools. In this view, alternative schools and programs are not non-traditional schools which help students learn in ways which better suit their needs, but a convenient place to send disruptive students.

Policy Perspective

AS SOCIETY CHANGES, SO MUST SCHOOLS

Elizabeth McGovern

Due to significant internal and external stressors some students are unable to successfully progress through the traditional school setting. Often students are confronted with a combination of stressors and problems. Nationally, the scope of this problem is dramatic with anywhere from 25%-30% of students labeled as possible dropouts and in some areas this number climbs even higher as the population experiences times of economic stress. The following are many of the primary stressors that students are confronted with: 1) loss of family member/grief; 2) illness of family member; 3) divorce/impact of stepparent on family dynamic; 4) family member abusing alcohol and drugs; 5) physical, mental, sexual abuse in the home; 6) poverty; 7) pregnancy/student has children; 8) student working full time; 9) student emancipated or homeless; 10) clinically/emotionally disturbed (some require placement at more restrictive setting); 11) auto-immune disorder/other health-related issues; 12) personality disorder; 13) depression, mood disorders, depression, mood disorders; 14) attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]; 15) attention-deficit disorder [ADD]; 16) substance abuse; 17) phobias; and 18) eating disorders.

Behavior

Often due to the student's unstable home environment and or the student's mental and physical condition these students' become more susceptible to peer pressure and "street influences." Hence, the student's problems begin to compound. A student will often leave home and turn to the street. The following is a compilation of student problems that greatly influence academic outcomes daily in school:

Peer Pressure and Street Influence

1) using drugs, 2) selling drugs, 3) gang involvement, 4) sex, 5) bullying, 6) fighting, 7) low grades, 8) academic failure, 9) dropouts, and 10) theft.

Schools and Legal Issues

1) underage dropouts, 2) court-ordered attendance, 3) suspension, 4) expulsion, 5) probation, and 6) incarceration.
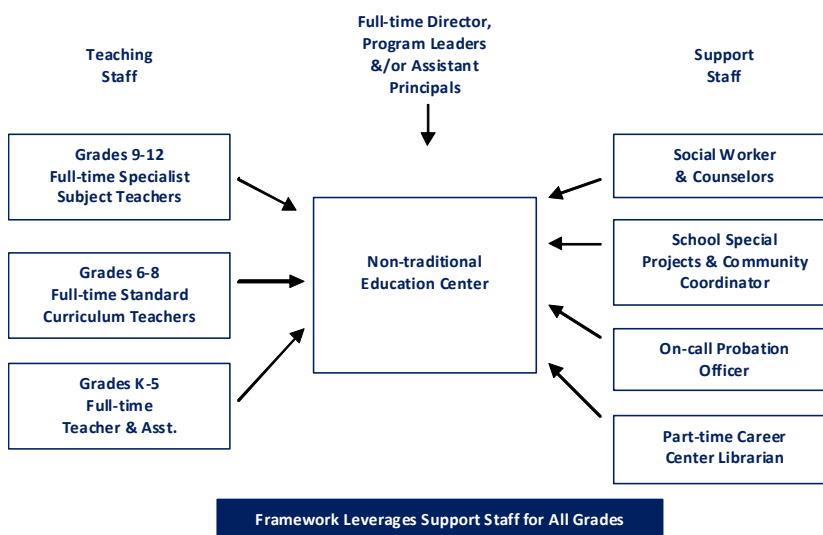
The natural consequence of not confronting at-risk students results in an ever-increasing drop-out rate, further reliance on state support, increasing crime, and more prisons. In fact, study after study indicates that the cost to community for an uneducated population is high. The other issue is that every student deserves a quality education and it is the responsibility of educators to see the changes in society and evolve accordingly to meet the needs of students.

The question arises: what is the best hope for these students? The following provides the reader with some suggestions for nontraditional models: 1) provide education options for the non-traditional student; 2) create safe learning environment for all students; 3) create unique learning environments accessible to a range of non-traditional students; 4) leverage teachers, experts, and training in existing model to maximize budget and resources for non-traditional students; 5) reduce the dropout rate; 6) place students at forefront of high quality non-traditional education; 7) rely on application and interview to identify specific needs in the students' Student Service Plan; 8) offer self-paced mastery forum to allow students to complete their education and progress to either career tech centers or 2-year and 4-year colleges; 9) grant credit recovery options to allow students the opportunity to return to their home schools; 11) offer thematic "school within a school"; 12) incorporate satellite programs that provide students with access to their interests; and 13) hands-on learning approach (art, science, music).

Below is a proposed model for an all inclusive alternative school. We have found success in separating programs based on need. If the students fall under the social/emotional range they do better at a less restrictive, leadership building program. Therefore, the tier approach of less restrictive to more restrictive is a possible model the district is looking at for 2010 when all alternative programs will be housed under in one facility. The following is one such possible structure:

Staffing Framework for Non-traditional Education Center

Full-time Director, Program Leaders &/or Assistant Principals

Teaching Staff
- Grades 9-12 Full-time Specialist Subject Teachers
- Grades 6-8 Full-time Standard Curriculum Teachers
- Grades K-5 Full-time Teacher & Asst.

Non-traditional Education Center

Support Staff
- Social Worker & Counselors
- School Special Projects & Community Coordinator
- On-call Probation Officer
- Part-time Career Center Librarian

Framework Leverages Support Staff for All Grades

Elizabeth McGovern is principal of the School of Academic and Career Development in Evansville, Indiana.

Policy Perspective

STATE REPORT

Sue Foxx

Alternative education programs are authorized by Indiana Code 20-30-8. These programs operate through school districts or charter schools and are designed to serve students in grades 6-12 who, for a variety of reasons, have not been successful in the traditional educational setting. All students served by alternative education are considered highly at risk of not graduating. Most alternative education programs in Indiana operate as programs of a traditional middle or high school; however, there are a few that operate as stand-alone schools. In 2008-09, there were 200 alternative education programs serving 22,577 students in 67 counties and 189 school districts and charter schools.

Students in alternative education have experienced multiple interventions prior to enrollment in the alternative education program. As a result when students are enrolled in an alternative education program, an Individual Service Plan is generated. It identifies goals, programming, and services the student will need to be successful. In order to address the individual needs of students, alternative education programs employ a variety of strategies to re-engage disengaged learners. Some utilize computer-based and self-paced instruction, while others implement project-based learning, service learning, or link students to vocational education, internships, jobs, or career development opportunities. Many alternative education programs implement services for students, such as anger management or life skills curricula, mentoring, and services for pregnant and parenting students, including childcare. Low student-teacher ratios and small school environments promote relationships that communicate an expectation of student success.

Alternative education programs in Indiana participate in administrator, teacher, and student surveys in order to identify best practices and areas for improvement. Programs also establish goals and report on student eligibility and outcomes. This accountability has helped programs identify both areas for improvement and components that contribute to success. Students in alternative education programs must meet the same academic standards and graduation requirements as students in traditional schools, which has also increased the credibility of these programs.

Funding for alternative education in Indiana began in 1997 and has continued to the present. Unfortunately, it has seldom been funded to the level envisioned in the legislation. While it may not be possible to fully fund alternative education given the current economic climate, it will be important to look at program effectiveness and consider an increase when conditions allow.

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(the following is continued from Elizabeth McGovern's Policy Perspective on previous page)

This writer does not think this model [*see previous page*] will work as readily for some students who do not have actual overt behavior problems and many of our schools are developing "Schools within a School" to meet the needs of our students without leaving their traditional high school.

We have had great success at the School of Academic and Career Development. Last year's graduation rate was 97%. We find that our juniors and seniors are scoring high scores in math in areas of Computation, Geometry, Data Analysis and Probability upon retaking the Graduation Qualifying Examination (GQE).

We also see that self-paced mastery works very well for juniors and seniors. In addition, we note that in English, students are scoring well in Reading Vocabulary, Reading Comprehension, and very high in Writing Applications, as well as Literature Response and Analysis. The model allows students to read and write across the curriculum every day. We are quite sure this benefits students in this area. The numbers in this area for retests show significantly above the district area on retested students. We also note that freshman and sophomores need a more hands on approach with project-based learning. We are just starting to work in this area

and do not have numbers to note success but we are showing 4%-8% annual increases in the percent passing the GQE. This is because students read and write everything, every day — whether using computers or pen, it gets done and pays off. Quite frankly a small school environment where student are taught leadership skills through community action and a school where classes are exciting and a staff is welcoming cannot go wrong. Until society finds ways to solve the problems that often beset families, a nontraditional approach for some students will be necessary.

EXAMPLES OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

According to the first national study of public alternative schools and programs conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in the 2000-01 school year, 39% of public school districts had alternative schools and programs serving approximately 613,000 at-risk students (or about 1.3% of all students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools) in approximately 10,900 alternative schools and programs nationwide (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002).

Each state funds and administers alternative schools and programs differently. They use differing methods of assessment, and some focus on different subject matter than a traditional school. Some schools use portfolios and value personal growth; other schools focus on a student's culture and ethnic heritage and less on the behavior of students. Schools like the latter are prominent in Hispanic, Native American, and African American neighborhoods. Some states require alternative education to be offered when students begin to fail at school, such as Arkansas' Pygmalion Commission on Nontraditional Education. The use of "Pygmalion" in the title evokes thoughts of George Bernard Shaw's play in order to allude to the transformative capability of alternative schools.

A unique program, the Simon Youth Foundation (SYF), manages 25 Education Resource Centers (ERC) in 12 states, including six in Indiana. The program uses unused mall space to create alternative programs and also gives scholarships to postsecondary students (SYF, 2009). The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) found overwhelmingly positive results confirming the effectiveness of SYF's model for alternative education (Plucker et al, 2005). This program was named as one of the top 50 Alternative Education Programs in the United States in 2001 by the National Youth Employment Coalition. Furthermore, for the 2008-09 school year their ERCs boasted a 93% graduation rate (SYF, 2009). Chris Chalker, director of Educational Services

for SYF, believes that the programs created by SYF help students as well as many student mall employees learn and gain self-esteem. In addition, the mall is a trendy place, which has a positive connotation for young adults. Chalker says many students think it is "cool" to go to school in the mall (Chalker, 2007).

Another example of an alternative program is the Learning Center in Pennsylvania, which recently moved from a separate building into a renovated part of the traditional high school nearby. The program consists of 50 at-risk students with social, emotional, and behavioral issues. The school day for students at the Learning Center begins later and ends earlier than the high school. One student likes that the program is still separate in most ways from the high school because she feels anxious amongst so many people, while another student enjoys being able to see more of his friends who do not attend the program (Garrett, 2009). Administrators state that the program balances academics with bi-weekly support meetings, counseling, and service learning. They want to make students feel welcome and believe that small touches make a difference.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN INDIANA

In Indiana, in order for a program to qualify as "alternative," it must provide instruction in a non-traditional manner, serve students in grades 6-12, and operate for at least two hours continuously (IC 20-30-8-5). Alternative schools and programs must have clearly stated missions and discipline codes as well as a flexible school schedule. The student's teacher, principal, and parent(s) jointly decide whether or not an alternative program would benefit a student. Alternative education as designed by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) is a caring yet academically rigorous learning environment. The teaching staff should hold high expectations for students and receive continual professional development opportunities. Indiana's policy describes an alternative education as not at all second-rate, but whose focus expands beyond the academic to consider the needs of the whole child—social, emotional, and physical—including support for

special needs. Alternative schools and programs are to provide support and services to the student and the immediate family in order to help the student succeed. Alternative education should include the parents and the community in the endeavor.

The IDOE suggests that an alternative school should offer non-traditional components such as career preparation, life skills and character education, counseling, anger/behavior management, parenting programs, and character education, in addition to innovative instructional strategies. The program should be self-paced, mastery based, project based, and specific to students' learning styles (IDOE, 2008b). Assignments are more project-based than traditional school settings. According to Indiana policy, alternative education is not a short-term punishment inflicted upon students, which research shows does not have lasting effects.

The number of alternative schools and programs may be growing nationally due to the increasing number of students who are removed from traditional schools; however, the number of alternative schools and programs in Indiana is steadily decreasing (IDOE).

Similar to the categories identified by Raywid, the IDOE describes alternative education as having alternative classrooms, school-within-a-school programs, separate alternative schools, and second or last-chance schools. The programs are designed to meet the diverse needs of students and are responsible for addressing Indiana Academic Standards and laws.

The number of alternative schools and programs in Indiana is steadily decreasing. The number of alternative schools and pro-

grams operating in the state decreased from 291 programs in the 2000-01 school year to 240 in 2005, 200 in 2008, down to 195 programs operating currently (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). In 2003-04 31,955 students participated in alternative education programs. The numbers have dropped over the years from 30,254 students in 2004-05, to 29,295 students in 2005-06, 28,078 in 2006-07, 23,607 students in 2007-08, to the current number of 22,577 students. These numbers do not include charter schools. Student participation may be decreasing because of actions at the school level such as intervention programs like graduation coaches, credit recovery, or Response to Intervention (S. Foxx, personnel communication, December 7, 2009).

Though the number of schools and programs may be decreasing, the number of diplomas generated through alternative education programs has been increasing over the past three years, from 2,321 to 3,050, while the number of students dropping out of these programs has declined from 1,462 to 507. It should be noted that most students enrolled in an alternative school or program in Indiana receive their diploma from a traditional high school as very few alternative education schools offer their own diploma (S. Foxx, personal communication, December 21, 2009). Expulsions from alternative education programs have dropped from 608 to 507.

Rather than create alternative schools, the state is focusing on building more support for at-risk students within traditional schools. In April 2009, the School Dropout Prevention Act (Public Law 65-2009) was passed (Emmert, 2009) which would possibly use alternative education funding to provide money for school corporation programs that identify students who are at-risk of dropping out of school according to specific criteria and provide interventions for these students (Zaring, 2009). This could mean a further erosion of alternative education programs.

As previously mentioned, there are multiple reasons a student could be sent to an alternative school or program. For the 2008-09 school year in Indiana, over half of the students were eligible for alternative education because they had failed to comply academically. The second largest basis for student eligibility was disruption. A total of 9% students made plans to withdraw or were withdrawn, 5% were parents or expectant parents, and 1% were employed by necessity (S. Foxx, personal communication, December 3, 2009). Most of the students enter alternative schools or programs in high school, while a very small percentage (2%) enrolled in grade 8 (S. Foxx, personal communication, December 3, 2009). Student demographics for alternative schools for the 2007-08 school year consisted of 55% White students, 34% black students, 7% Hispanic students, and 4% multiracial students (CEEP, 2008). In the 2008-09 school year, there were slightly more male students (57%) than female students (43%). A little less than one-third of students made adequate progress, 22% attained Individual Service Plan goals, 17% transferred, 14% earned a high school diploma, and 2% earned a GED. Additionally, 11% of students made no progress, 4% dropped out, and 2% were expelled.
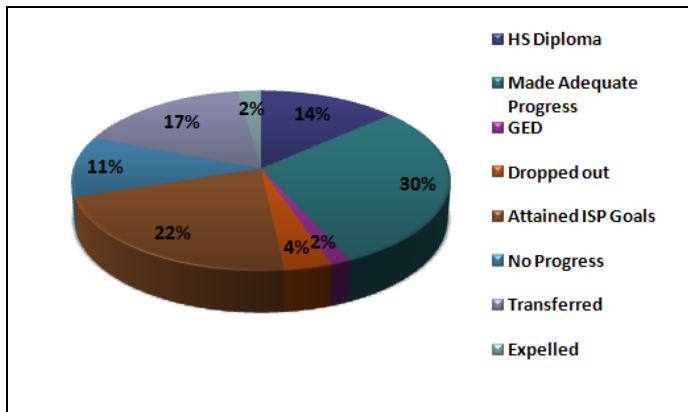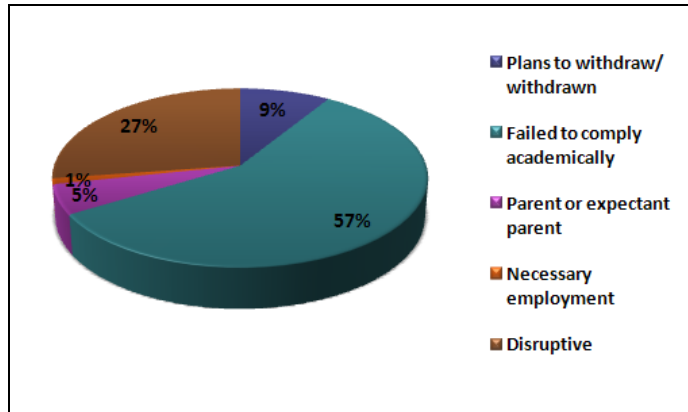
Figure 1. Outcome

Legend: HS Diploma, Made Adequate Progress, GED, Dropped out, Attained ISP Goals, No Progress, Transferred, Expelled. Values shown: 2%, 14%, 17%, 11%, 22%, 4%, 2%, 30%

Figure 2. Student Eligibility

Legend: Plans to withdraw/withdrawn, Failed to comply academically, Parent or expectant parent, Necessary employment, Disruptive. Values shown: 9%, 27%, 1%, 5%, 57%

Figure 3. Percentage of Students by Grade

Legend: 8th Grade, 9th Grade, 10th Grade, 11th Grade, 12th Grade. Values shown: 2%, 9%, 12%, 18%, 16%
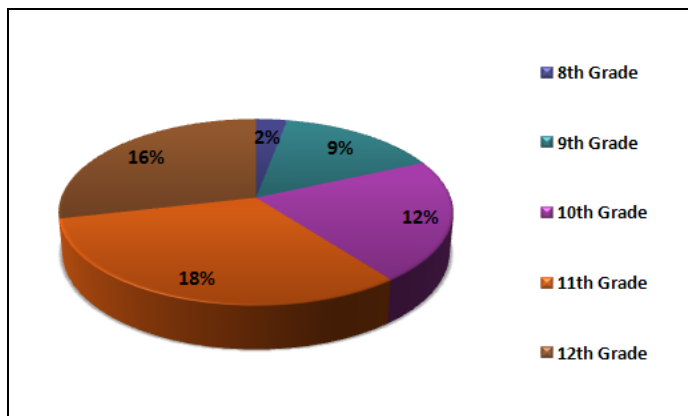
Figure 4. Percentage of Students by Gender

Legend: Male, Female. Values shown: 43%, 57%
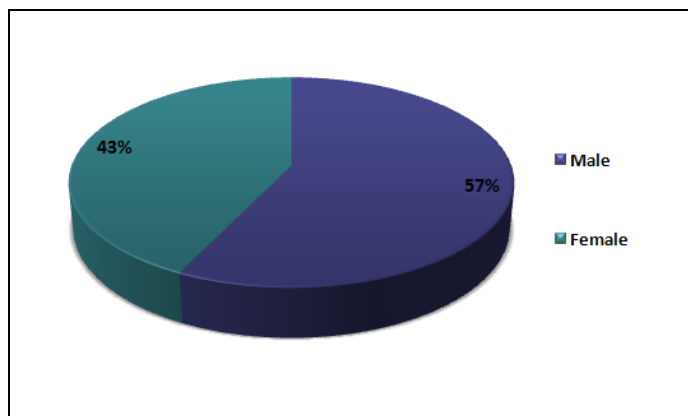
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

There is very little hard data currently to suggest the success or failure of alternative schools in the U.S., and there has been a decrease in comprehensive data on alternative schools since the turn of the century. Alternative schools overall do not keep adequate records of student retention rates, graduation rates, and academic achievement. Granted, this is no easy task to undertake. Students are placed in and out of alternative schools and programs so often that much of individual student data is incomplete. Furthermore, graduation rates may not give an accurate representation since some students graduate after the traditional four years.

Recommendations

Research needs to be done on the current outlook of alternative schools, which can then be compared to past data. Trends in alternative students' achievement, graduation rates, and retention rates should be determined. Alternative education administrators must be held accountable for student achievement outcomes and the reporting of outcomes. In addition, research should be done which determines the effectiveness of programs which implement a shortened school day.

Conclusion

Negative stereotypes are detrimental to students. A recognized quote by Robert Bierstedt depicts how students feel they are perceived by others has a very profound effect: "I am not who I think I am. I am not who you think I am. I am who I think you think I am." Calling students "at-risk" may place students in more jeopardy than any other factors that may be harming them. Commonly, those who receive this abstract title of "at-risk" are students from disadvantaged groups who have academic and/or social problems (Croninger & Lee, 2001). However, students with learning disabilities, nontraditional learning styles, or damaging life experiences could be labeled at-risk as well. This label perpetuates a stereotypically negative view of these students rather than considering students on an individual basis. If schools label these students "at-risk," then educators potentially have negative expectations for students before they walk in the door. Students recognize how others view them and perceive when teachers truly have no expectations for them.

Recommendations

Rather than describing students as "at-risk," the schools should be considered at-risk of failing the students (Sanders, 2000). Students may be individually sent to be "fixed," but the problem could be with the discipline system within the school or the failure of the school to make its mission relevant to students. Schools that successfully implement schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports and Response to Intervention programs likely can catch struggling students earlier, resulting in fewer placements in alternative education settings and more resources for those needing intensive services. Furthermore, if all these students are sent elsewhere then there continues to be no motivation to make any changes in traditional schools. However, individual students and schools may be mismatched. In this case, students should be aware of alternative education as an option.

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Alternative Education Program Profile
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http://www.urban.org/publications/411283.html

Alternative Education Resource Organization
http://www.educationrevolution.org/

The International Association for Learning Alternatives
http://learningalternatives.net/

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