

Research Brief

Alternative Programs

Question: What are some alternative programs to keep students in high school?

Summary of Findings:

Keeping high school students in school and helping them gain competence and confidence in skills so that they can be successful in the world of work and/or college is an enormous challenge. The results of one study clearly demonstrated a direct correlation between one's self-esteem and academic competence. The more competent one feels, the better the chances are that the student will successfully complete high school (*The relation of age, gender, ethnicity, and risk behaviors to self-esteem among students in nonmainstream schools*). Another piece of research found that African-American high school students are least likely to be on track for high school completion while Asians are most likely to be on track (*F's in 9th grade lead to dropouts*). The research is also clear that the ninth grade year is particularly crucial in determining if the student will graduate or drop out. In order to keep students in school where they feel it is valuable and they feel respected, it is imperative that schools offer the "...three R's: rigor, relevance, and relationships" (*High schools nationwide paring down*).

There is no one program that will provide all of the answers to keep students in school. Programs need to be designed to meet the needs of a given school population and tied into the available resources.

Some commonalities for any school program include:

- Selecting staff who want to work with the particular population and are qualified to do so
- Having staff who work with the students be well-versed in the developmental stages of the given student population and prepare instruction that is appropriate for the students
- Recognizing and implementing an instructional program where one size does not fit all

- Educating the stakeholders about the needs of the students and ways in which the program(s) will meet those needs
- Soliciting support from the community, parents, staff, and students for the program(s)
- Designing programs that will meet the specific needs of a given population based on the question of what is in the best interests of the students
- Utilizing resources from the district, community, school and grants
- Providing on-going staff development and support for staff so they can continue to provide a high quality program for the students
- Evaluating regularly, the outcomes of the students' learning through numerous venues such as projects, presentations, and standardized tests, then utilizing data to inform the instructional program
- Providing meaningful feedback regularly to students to help guide them in their academic growth

Some alternative structures being used include:

- Having weekly meetings with students and staff where suggestions are made about the content to be taught and methods that can be used to help students learn it
- Grading students on a credit/no credit system, where 80% mastery equals a pass
- Placing each student on a personalized education plan
- Guiding each student in designing his or her own academic program
- Having students and staff go on a backpacking or camping trip for several days to a week to develop strong and trusting relationships as well as relationship and survival skills
- Providing courses that are thematic and/or interdisciplinary. Each level has a theme that follows through the trimester, semester, and/or year (i.e. Systems in a democratic society; Origins of major cultures; Maturing of Americans; Issues and problems of modern society)
- Making work experiences available in the community as part of the instructional program and is programmed into the weekly schedule
- Including an Advisor-Advisee or mentoring programs with a ratio of no more than 1-18
- Having students design with an advisor/teacher a contract for a particular unit of study

- Providing an array of core courses as well as those that stimulate interest such as: history, language arts, mathematics, science, organic gardening, physical education for life, art, foreign languages, desktop publishing, peer mediation, photography, video production, web design, audio recording, and internships
- Having a Choice School, where in the evenings, students can either take a class for the first time or take a course to make up a poor grade
- Establishing programs where students can graduate in 3-5 years depending on the courses they take and how quickly they successfully master them
- Allowing and encouraging students to take courses at the local college for college credit

Online Resources:

- Alternative education in PVUSD
A brief description of several different alternative programs in AZ is provided in this article.
<http://www.pvupc.org/Alt%20Ed.html>
- Alternative school strives to build on small successes
This is a concise description of an alternative program for 8th graders who can continue in it through high school if so desired.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4191/is_20051220/ai_n15974284/print
- Cheney Alternative School to offer core classes
A short description of an alternative school in Spokane, WA is provided in this piece.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4186/is_20050526/ai_n14645577/print
- Certified urban educators seen less likely to be put in 9th grade classrooms
This article presents the results of a study about the types of certification teachers have who work with 9th grade students in one district.

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/04/20/32transition.h24.html?querystring=9th%20grade>

- F's in ninth grade lead to dropouts
Results of studies that indicate the fewer F's a 9th grader gets, the more likely he/she will graduate is presented in this piece.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4155/is_20050617/ai_n14691345
- High schools nationwide paring down
Some issues that need to be considered when examining the small schools movement are outlined in this article.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/06/16/40small.h23.html?print=1>
- Isolating 9th graders: Separate schools ease academic and social transition for high-school bound students
This article provides different purposes for separate 9th grade programs and describes some research done in this area.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JSD/is_59_3/ai_83698551/print
- Murray District's alternative school in for changes
This brief description of an alternative school in Salt Lake City, Utah, deals with adding support for the 7th grade students.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4188/is_20051212/ai_n15917179/print
- One last chance
This is a descriptive article about a non-profit alternative program in Birmingham, Alabama.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/07/14/42birmingham.h23.html?querystring=Alternative%20Schools>
- Pathways to high school success
An explanation of Rochester, New York's 3-5 year graduation program is provided in this article.

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2000/08/02/43janey.h19.html?print=1>

- Physical education in an alternative school setting: an exercise in creativity
The importance of offering physical education classes in alternative school settings is explained in this piece.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LJP/is_3_21/ai_94771948/print
- Study probes enrollment 'bulge' in 9th grade
Reasons for a 9th grade bulge nationwide are put forth in this article.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/01/28/20bulge.h23.html?querystring=9th%20grade>
- The relation of age, gender, ethnicity, and risk behaviors to self-esteem among students in nonmainstream schools
An extensive report of the results of research conducted about the self-esteem of students in nonmainstream schools is provided in this piece.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2248/is_155_39/ai_n9488734/print
- To stem dropouts, urban districts switch strategies
A few different school structures for secondary students are presented in this article.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/08/11/44courses.h23.html?querystring=9th%20grade>
- What are small schools?
A succinct definition of the components of small schools is presented on this home page for the Small Schools Project.
<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/index.asp?siteloc=whysmall§ion=whatss>

Schools

- Alternative High School, Calgary, Canada
<http://www.cbe.ab.ca/schools/view.asp?id=133>

- Central High School, Iowa
<http://www.central.dubuque.k12.ia.us/programdescription.htm>
- Nova Alternative School, WA
<http://www.novaproj.org/about/>
- Polaris High School, AZ
<http://epage.pvusd.k12.az.us/siteweb/schoolPages/polarisHigh.htm>

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By: Dr. Karen Walker Lebanon Valley College

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