Research Brief
Alternative Schools

Question: What types of effective strategies are used by Alternative Schools, especially for Alternative Schools   within a School and for struggling students?

Summary of Findings: : Estimates suggest that there are more than 20,000 alternative schools in operation in the United States. The number of alternative schools as well as the number of students educated in these schools has increased significantly over recent years. Oftentimes these schools serve students who are not successful in the traditional school setting, and those who are considered at risk of school failure including students with and without disabilities. Alternative schools have been successful in:

- reducing truancy
- improving attitudes toward school
- accumulating high school credits
- reducing behavior problems

Numerous models of alternative schools have been developed to serve local needs and are operating with varied degrees of success. Hefner-Packer (1991) has studied these models and has described five models of alternative schools:

1) The Alternative Classroom, designed as a self-contained classroom within a traditional school, simply offering varied programs in a different environment;
2) The School-Within-a-School, housed within a traditional school, but having semiautonomous or specialized educational programs;
3) The Separate Alternative School, separated from the regular school and having different academic and social adjustment programs;
4) The Continuation School, developed for students no longer attending traditional schools, such as street academies for job-related training or parenting centers; and
5) The Magnet School, a self-contained program offering an intensified curriculum in one or more subject areas such as math or science.

Previous research suggests that there are several characteristics of successful alternative high schools for students with behavioral problems. These commonalities include the following:

- They usually have small enrollment and small learning environments with a lower ratio of students to staff than in mainstream schools;
- A curriculum often described as "applied," "experiential," "hands-on," or "integrated," that makes connections between the disciplines and between the school and the community or the world of work;
- A school staff having high expectations for student achievement and a total commitment to have each student be a success;

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- A clearly stated mission and discipline code, including clear rules enforced fairly and consistently;
- High standards for behavior, attendance, and performance along with an emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility

- A more informal, personal relationship between teachers and students, and a family atmosphere;
- Consistent and constant counseling and monitoring;
- Student voice in school operations;
- Ongoing data collection, evaluation, and assessment.

Online Resources:

Alternative Schools: Approaches for Students at Risk
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
An electronic booklet about alternative schools. Includes a discussion of the Benefits of alternative schools, the characteristics, challenges, and tips for implementation.
http://www.nwrel.org/request/sept97/

Alternative Schools: Caring for Kids on the Edge
Northwest Education Magazine
In this issue of Northwest Education, we hear from researchers who are excited about the results and innovations coming from alternative programs across the country. We trace where the alternative movement came from, look at the educational philosophies behind today's alternative schools, and show how these small programs are pioneering big changes in education. We also explore some of the complex social issues that have created such demand for these programs. We'll walk you through several classrooms in the Northwest to show you how these programs work. You'll meet the teachers who thrive on working with students others have found too hard to reach.
http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/summer_98/

Alternative Schools: Approaches for Students at Risk. By Request Series.
Paglin, Catherine; Fager, Jennifer
Alternative schools are defined in this report as schools or programs targeting students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school environment. These schools often see their mission as one of dropout prevention. Certain features are usually associated with alternative schools, including a clear mission, a small enrollment, a more personal relationship between students and teachers, clear rules, high standards, and a flexible schedule. A number of challenges to alternative schools is explored, and some specific practical recommendations are offered for implementing an alternative school program. A "sampler" provides profiles of nine alternative schools in the Northwest region, some urban and some rural.
ERIC #: ED431042
http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&_urlType=action&objectId=0900000b80097c47

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Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis.
Lange, Cheryl M.; Sletten, Sandra J.
This report is a review of the alternative education literature, which is scattered across three topic areas--dropout prevention, special education, and at-risk youth. The synthesis is organized into the following sections: the history and context of the alternative school movement; characteristics of specific populations in alternative schools; and the research examining outcomes for students in alternative schools and programs. Alternatives are typically serving students who are at risk for school failure or are disenfranchised from the traditional school system. Findings on student academic outcomes are mixed. The synthesis concludes with implications for policy and practice.
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http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&_urlType=action&objectId=0900000b80070142

The Alternative Schools Project
Welcome to the Web site for the Alternative Schools Research Project. This three-year project is designed to gather and
synthesize information about the policies and practices of alternative schools across the nation especially in relation to students with disabilities. It is one of three studies (focused on alternative schools and students with disabilities) funded in October of 2001, by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.
http://ici.umn.edu/alternativeschools/

> Alternative Schools Project Publications
> http://ici.umn.edu/alternativeschools/publications/default.html

Effective Strategies
The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network
We have identified 15 effective strategies that have the most positive impact on the dropout rate. These strategies have been implemented successfully at all education levels and environments throughout the nation.
http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/effstrat.htm

Alternative Schooling
The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network
Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.
http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/effstrat.htm

> Alternative Schooling Resources
> http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/alt_school/altsch_resource.htm

> Alternative Schooling Model Programs
> http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/alt_school/altsch_modprog.htm

The Alternative Education Resource Organization
The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) is a non-profit organization founded in

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1989 by education expert Jerry Mintz to advance learner-centered approaches to education. AERO is considered by many to be the primary hub of communications and support for educational alternatives around the world.
http://www.educationrevolution.org

Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000-01
In the past two decades, public concern about violence, weapons, and drugs on elementary and secondary school campuses, balanced with concern about sending disruptive and potentially dangerous students "out on the streets," has spawned an increased interest in alternative schools and programs. Yet, little research has so far been conducted on alternative education on a national basis. The 2001 "District Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs," conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) through its Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), is the first national study of public alternative schools and programs to provide data on topics related to the availability of public alternative schools and programs, enrollment, staffing, and services. The focus of the study is on alternative schools and programs that serve students who are at risk of educational failure, as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with early withdrawal from school. The study presents a snapshot of alternative schools and programs for at-risk students during the 2000–01 school year.
http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2002004

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