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Survey and Analysis of Alternative Education Programs II

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Executive Summary

This research is a follow up to a similar study published by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania in 2003 in which researchers examined alternative education policies and practices among Pennsylvania school districts. The current study extended the previous research to include information on the perceptions of administrators and teachers on the progress made by alternative schools to meet the federal requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). It also included a financial analysis of the Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) funding process in Pennsylvania.

To complete the study, the researchers surveyed school administrators and teachers to describe and analyze alternative education practices in the state and to report the impact of NCLB on alternative education practices. The researchers used data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education to complete the financial analysis.

According to the study results, administrators and teachers viewed alternative education programs as moderately effective in improving academic performance and school attendance, changing target behaviors, assisting students in the development of academic goals, and reducing dropout, truancy, and disruptive behavior.

And, while both administrators and teachers said that academic performance improves in alternative education programs, neither group indicated that the implementation of NCLB increased mathematics and reading scores in these programs. The most notable impact of NCLB is the increasing pressure from administration on teachers to reach performance goals.

The research also indicated the potential for sizeable economic costs over time of having to support students who do not graduate. For example, other research has indicated there is a tremendous cost involving social services, health care, and the criminal justice system. The documented differences in earning power between students who leave school with a high school diploma and those who do not have a high school diploma is dramatic over time.

The study also emphasized the need for financial support of alternative education programs. Creative school districts, intermediate units and private providers are, by every indication, doing a great deal with very little funding.

The results of this study indicate that administrators and teachers believe that alternative education programs in Pennsylvania are effective and that the programs should continue to focus on the reengagement of disruptive and at-risk students in academics so that they may succeed in school and lead productive lives after leaving school.

Introduction

This research described and analyzed alternative education policies and practices among school districts throughout Pennsylvania. It served as a follow-up to the *Survey and Analysis of Alternative Education Practices* project, which was completed in 2003 and also supported by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

This study extended the previous research to include information on the perceptions of administrators and teachers on the progress made by alternative schools to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The study also included a financial analysis of the Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) funding process in Pennsylvania.

The researchers completed this follow-up research because of the increasing number of alternative education programs, the number of youth served in alternative education programs, renewed discussions related to the impact of dropout rates on Pennsylvania's economy, funding levels in Pennsylvania for alternative education, and a general lack of public knowledge about staffing, program practices, and the structure of alternative education programs.

In Pennsylvania, alternative education funding is provided through one primary source: the Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) program, administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). The state-funded program provides a combination of intense, individualized academic instruction and behavior modification counseling in an alternative setting to assist students to return successfully to the regular classroom.[1]

The program approval and grant funding is provided to any public school (school district, intermediate unit, area vocational-technical school, charter school, special school jointure, or any combination/consortium of public schools) who meet the minimum requirements. All public schools meeting minimum requirements for funding submit an estimate of the number of students to be served during the fiscal year and are awarded funding based on this estimate. The total state allocation is divided on a per student basis across all qualifying applicants.

Programs are provided funding under the Pennsylvania School Code (Act 30 of 1997 Article XIX-C, Disruptive Student Programs). Funding is limited to disruptive students, defined by Act 30 as students who pose a clear threat to the safety and welfare of other students or the school staff, who create an unsafe school environment, or who behave in a manner that materially interferes with the learning of other students or disrupts the overall educational process. Disruptive students exhibit, to a marked degree, any or all of the following conditions:

- Disregard for school authority, including persistent violation of school policy and rules;
- Display or use of controlled substances on school property or during school-affiliated activities;
- Violent or threatening behavior on school property or during school-affiliated activities;
- Possession of a weapon on school property, as defined in 18 Pa.C.S. Section 912 (relating to possession of a weapon on school property);
- Commission of a criminal act on school property or during school-affiliated activities;
- Misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion under school policy; and
- Habitual truancy (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008).

No student who is eligible for special education services in conformity with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Public Law 91-230, 20 U.S.C. Section 1400 et seq.) is considered a disruptive student for the purposes of Act 30, with exceptions as provided for in 22 Pa. Code Section 14.35 (relating to discipline).

During the 2006-2007 academic year, 601 alternative education programs were funded through PDE. This was an increase of 104 programs since the 2002-2003 academic year but a decrease of 40 programs from 2004-2005. From 2002-2003 to 2006-2007, actual funding awards decreased from about $26 million to $15.6 million or 60 percent.

At the time of the research, the most current data on the number of students supported through AEDY funding were from 2004-2005. For that academic year, 27,534 students were served. In 2002-2003 38,901 students were served and in 2003-2004, 40,751 students were served (PDE, 2006). The percentage of students served between 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 decreased by about 33 percent.

[1] When the research was conducted in 2007, the Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth Program received $17.5 million in the 2007-2008 state budget.

At the time of the research, there were 501 school districts in Pennsylvania: 243 were rural and 258 were urban districts[2].

An unduplicated count of school districts, intermediate units and other qualified organizations funded through AEDY yields 365 separate organizations. This number includes 326 school districts, 23 intermediate units, and 16 other qualifying educational organizations (PDE, 2007). Other qualifying organizations included career centers, technology schools and charter schools. In 2006-2007, 215 program awards went to rural school districts, with an average award of $14,381, and 266 program awards went to urban school districts, with an average of $40,336.

Dropout and Graduation Rates

All disruptive youth entering alternative programs in the commonwealth are at-risk for dropout. Pennsylvania reports more than 17,000 dropouts annually. Although dropout and graduation rates are representative of a problem and a scope that goes beyond the current legislation for alternative education programming, the rates are nevertheless indicative of the need for alternatives in educational services. Dropout rates and graduation rates are pertinent to the population served in alternative education programs in Pennsylvania. In fact, Orfield (2006) includes alternative programs as one of only two major program initiatives that are available to respond to the dropout and graduation rate dilemma.

To fully understand the need for alternative education and similar program efforts, it is important to know that Pennsylvania is one of a number of states continuing to use an "event" dropout rate and reporting method. The event dropout rate methodology uses the total number of dropouts per school district over a 12-month period divided by enrollments on a single day, October 1 (PDE, 2008). It is a one-day snapshot that fails to account for individual students, student population mobility, and various types of school leavers who do not fit this somewhat narrow view of dropping out. PDE reports a roughly 2 percent dropout rate for 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. Among Local Education Agencies, about 50 percent report an annual dropout rate of less than 1 percent. The result is data that mask what happens to many of the state's students in grades 9 through 12.

Several alternative methods of calculation have been developed and are based on longitudinal data that track students across a period of time (generally 9th through 12th grades) and report the number of graduates with a regular diploma at the end of the 12th grade year (some methods use age rather than grade to collect the data for on-time graduation). Calculations of a graduation rate rather than a dropout rate are believed to give a far more accurate picture of what is happening with students. As stated by Pinkus (2006, p. 1), "graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of whether or not the nation's public school system is doing what it is intended and funded to do: enroll, engage, and educate youth to be productive members of society."

Thirty-nine states have agreed to move to a longitudinal calculation method known as the "adjusted cohort graduation rate" (ACGR), established by the National Governor's Association (NGA). Pennsylvania is among the 39 states agreeing to adopt the method no later than 2011. Under the NGA agreement (2005), states will calculate the graduation rate by dividing the number of on-time graduates in a given year by the number of first-time-entering 9th graders 4 years earlier. The method includes adjustments for transfers in and out of the school system and data systems to track individual students longitudinally. Data will also be adjusted to allow special education students and students with limited English proficiency additional time to graduate.

These graduation rates are significant because they provide a different, more useful, and more accurate picture of what is happening with public school students. Various graduation rate indicators place the national graduation rate somewhere between 66 and 71 percent of youth graduating with a diploma (Barton, 2005). In the absence of the ACGR rate for Pennsylvania, other graduation rates provide estimates. The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR - National Center for Educational Statistics) for Pennsylvania is about 82 percent and the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI-Urban Institute) is 76 percent (Pinkus, 2006).

In what may be the most thorough and comprehensive study of its kind, Rouse (2005) estimates that the personal loss of income by those who dropout is as much as $260,000 over a lifetime. Furthermore, Rouse (2005) asserts that the loss to

[2] Based on the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's definition of rural: a school district is rural when the number of persons per square mile within the school district is less than 274.

the nation's economy created by just one cohort of dropouts is $192 billion. This calculation includes income, income tax, property tax and social security losses. Recent studies in North and South Carolina provide a different perspective on the economic impact. Gottlob (2007a and 2007b) estimated that the annual public cost for each dropout in South Carolina was $3,193, while the public cost for that individual while in school to move him/her toward graduation was $3,228. Similarly, in North Carolina, Gottlob (2007b) placed the annual public cost for each dropout at $4,437 and the in-school public cost at approximately $4,887.

There is limited opportunity to assess the impact of alternative education from an empirical standpoint. However, it is clear that both administrators and teachers view alternative education as a valuable tool in their work with at-risk children. Hosley (2003) found that teachers viewed students as improving in areas of reduction of failure, improved academic performance, improved interest in school and improved career interests as a result of participation in alternative education. Regarding dropout rates, the mean responses for both administrators and teachers suggest that they perceived moderate to high effectiveness of alternative education programs in the areas of reducing tardiness, improving behaviors, reducing disruptive behaviors, reducing suspension and reducing dropout rates.

Violence

Aside from the dropout issue, alternative education is important as an intervention to hold violence in check and to support students in becoming productive citizens. Antisocial behavior, including violent and aggressive behavior, has become a growing nationwide concern during the past 15 years. When behavior becomes a threat or endangerment to others or is simply disruptive to the education process, placement in an alternative school is often the best option for the student and his or her classmates. Such a placement allows intervention aimed at preventing dropout and/or future expulsion. Furthermore, a specialized setting allows more personalized attention where contributing social, peer group, academic and school factors can be addressed.

In Pennsylvania, school safety reports from 2006-2007 indicate 82,267 incidents of misconduct including assault, fighting, indecent assault, threatening a school official or student, theft, bullying, disorderly conduct, possession of a weapon, vandalism, possession and use of a controlled substance, and other offenses (School Safety Annual Report, 2006-2007). Of those incidents, 20,018 required law enforcement intervention. A multiple-year comparison indicates the number of incidents and the number of incidents requiring law enforcement increased during the three-year period between 2004-2005 and 2006-2007. Summary data from a comparison report of incident data between 2004 and 2007 are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: School safety comparison report based on Pennsylvania Safe Schools online reporting. (www.safeschools.state.pa.us, 2008)

Offense	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
Incidents	75,772	72,769	82,267
Incidents involving law enforcement	16,426	19,676	20,018
Assignments to alternative education	7,344	7,117	7,809

Also increasing during the same period was the number of students assigned to alternative education, a placement that serves as many as 40,000 students in any given year. In the one-year period between 2005-2006 and 2006-2007, there was an increase of referrals to alternative education from these incidents of nearly 10 percent (School Safety Report comparison, 2008). Of the 67 Pennsylvania counties, 48 are considered rural[3]. In 2006-2007, rural counties comprised about 14 percent of the total number of incidents, 22 percent of incidents involving law enforcement, and 16 percent of referrals to alternative education resulting from these incidents.

In addition to the misconduct reports, truancy rates of approximately 8 percent represent a habitually truant population of 138,337 children and youth (PDE, 2007). In 2006, the number of assaults on staff in regular education settings increased by 18 percent and the number of threats to a school official/student increased by 46 percent from 2004-2005 to 2005-2006. Some of the increases may be due to the implementation of stricter and more detailed reporting requirements during that time.

[3] Based on the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's definition of rural: a county is rural when the number of persons per square mile within the county is less than 274.

Nonetheless, the amount of disruption in schools creates unique challenges for educators who share a concern for those being disrupted and those who are acting out. Alternative education placement, as outlined in what is commonly known as Act 30 of 1997, subsequently lead to amendments to the Public School Code.

The Impact of No Child Left Behind

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provisions, which address the need for highly qualified teachers, have called into question the feasibility of providing alternative education services under the current program structure. Hosley (2003) documented that, in Pennsylvania, urban programs had between 2.56 full-time equivalent teachers on site in alternative programs, and rural programs had, on average, 2.26 full-time equivalent teachers.

The discrepancy between the number of on-site teachers and the number of subjects to be taught creates a challenging problem for school districts as they attempt to meet the highly qualified provisions of NCLB. Those provisions state that teachers must be certified in any and all content areas in which they teach. This makes sense given the focus of NCLB in meeting academic standards. However, in alternative education, the primary goal is often to re-engage students into the learning process and to focus on student interests, relevance of curriculum, and importance of educational pursuits rather than any specific content areas.

Relevant Research

Only two significant research studies have been conducted on alternative education in Pennsylvania. In a study supported by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, Hosley (2003) provided an examination and analysis of alternative education practices in Pennsylvania. The research compared administrator and teacher perceptions of alternative education programming, analyzed rural and urban differences and examined core components of alternative programming. The results served to provide a baseline for understanding program practices and organization of alternative education in Pennsylvania.

More recently, Ager et.al. (2006) conducted an evaluation for PDE. Recommendations included a need for stronger collaboration between program providers and local school districts, increased staff training, and improvements in reporting and program development and implementation. The report also produced some results related to student outcomes.

Research Goals

The goals of this research were to:

• describe and analyze alternative education practices in Pennsylvania;
• report on the impact of NCLB on alternative education programs in the state and make recommendations;
• analyze and compare data from PDE evaluations with findings from this study; and
• provide a financial analysis of alternative education programs in the state.

Methodology

The researchers conducted surveys of school administrators and teachers and completed a financial analysis of alternative education funding.

The school administrator and teacher surveys were initially developed in 2001. Fifteen experts in the field of alternative education helped develop the questionnaires. In 2007, the researchers revised the surveys by eliminating items that had not proved useful in the 2003 study and adding items related to NCLB.

Using program funding lists provided by PDE, the researchers arrived at an unduplicated count of 367 school districts and intermediate units that received funding under the AEDY program. Surveys were mailed to each of these school districts and/or intermediate units.

Administrators first received the survey in June 2007 and teachers received the survey in October 2007.

For the financial analysis, the researchers were looking to understand how alternative education programs are funded, including how PDE funds alternative programs, and how funding allocations through the legislature and PDE influence service and educational outcomes.

To complete the analysis, the researchers: conducted an overview of the funding history, criteria, and per program or per student cost in Pennsylvania; included questions in the administrator survey to find out the number of students served, the sources of funding, the amount of funding from each source and other pertinent information; and conducted a review of AEDY funding based on PDE data and interviews with staff.

The researchers also compared the findings of the

AEDY study conducted by Ager et al. (2006) and the findings of the 2003 study by Hosley et al.

Results

Of the 367 surveys mailed, 141 administrator surveys were returned for a return rate of 38 percent. There were 180 respondents to the teacher survey, which was also mailed to 367 school districts/intermediate units. There were no stated limits on the number of teachers who could respond to the survey within any program. The researchers included three surveys in each packet mailed to the program/school address. The 180 respondents represented 119 programs, for a response rate of 32 percent.

Administrators who returned the survey included superintendents, principals, assistant principals, directors, and others, such as deans of students and student personnel services directors. Forty-three percent of respondents were rural administrators, 50 percent were urban administrators and 7 percent served both rural and urban populations.

Teacher respondents had been teaching for a mean of 10.47 years. The mean for teaching in an alternative setting was 5.02 years. Among teacher respondents, 52 percent had a bachelor's degree, 47 percent had a Master's degree and 1 percent had a doctorate. Teachers identified their general areas of professional specialization, which may have included more than one area, as follows: secondary education (60 percent), alternative education (38 percent), special education (33 percent), elementary education (28 percent), counseling and/or guidance counseling (18 percent), criminal justice (10 percent), social work (7 percent), early childhood education (3 percent) and other (23 percent). Rural teachers comprised 35 percent of the sample, urban teachers comprised 59 percent, and those serving both rural and urban populations comprised 6 percent. Teachers serving both rural and urban populations were from intermediate unit programs.

Profile of Programs Represented by Survey Respondents

To better understand the programs represented by the survey respondents, the researchers asked administrators to provide program information. On average, programs served 71 students during the 2005-2006 school year. As reported by administrator respondents to the survey, the average ethnic distribution was: white, 67 percent; black or African American, 24 percent; Hispanic or Latino, 7 percent; Native American or Native Alaskan, 1 percent; Asian, .3 percent; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, .2 percent; and more than one race reported, .3 percent. Program participation by gender was 70 percent male and 30 percent female. On average across programs, the percentage of students with an Individualized Education Plan was 28 percent.

Among the goals of alternative education is the return of students to the regular classroom. Administrators provided data for 4,197 alternative education students on the item of disposition. Respondents most frequently cited continuation in the program/remained in the program as the disposition between school/academic years. This was consistent for rural (47 percent), urban (50 percent), and mixed/intermediate unit (56 percent) respondents. Return to the regular classroom or school was the second most cited disposition and accounted for about 31 percent of overall responses. Again, there was consistency across rural (32 percent), urban (30 percent), and mixed/intermediate unit (31 percent) respondents (See Table 2).

The median budget for programs among respondents was $125,509. The median grant funding from the commonwealth among respondents was $15,000. The cost per student as provided under state funding for AEDY was just over $29 per week per student (PDE, 2007)[4]. On average, the programs

Table 2. Administrator responses on student disposition by category and by rural, urban and mixed/intermediate unit (IU) program. ***Responses represent dispositions for 4,197 students in alternative education placement in Pennsylvania.***

Disposition category	Rural %	Urban %	Mixed/IU %	Total %
Returned to regular classroom or school	32	30	31	31
Returned to school but readmitted to alternative programs during the same year	5	8	3	6
Did not return to school and left the program	14	17	7	14
Remained in the program	47	50	56	50

[4] When the research was conducted in 2007, the Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth Program received $17.5 million in the 2007-2008 state budget.

were served by one full-time equivalent administrator, six full-time equivalent teachers, two special education teachers, a part-time equivalent psychologist and two counselors or social workers.

Organization and Structure of Alternative Education

The administrator survey provided insight into several important characteristics related to the organization and structure of alternative education programs.

Who provides programs? Among school district respondents, 55 percent provided alternative education services directly (61 percent of urban respondents and 51 percent of rural respondents provided services directly through the school district). About 23 percent of districts chose to contract for all alternative education services (26 percent rural and 20 percent urban) and 10 percent chose to provide education services while contracting out for other alternative education support services. About 12 percent of respondents identified other combinations of service provisions. Among this last group, the combinations of direct and contract services were quite varied.

Where does programming occur? Among the 135 respondents, 42 percent indicated that the location of alternative programs was separate from the regular classrooms, typically in another building. About 38 percent of rural respondents, 43 percent of urban respondents, and 55 percent of mixed/intermediate unit respondents indicated this separation. Thirty-six percent of respondents used self-contained classrooms that were physically within the same building as regular classrooms. The rural/urban split on this item was 45 percent of rural and 34 percent of urban (mixed/intermediate unit was 0 percent). About 5 percent of respondents said programs occurred at a combination of sites including the regular classroom, and 16 percent delivered programs using other arrangements. Administrators indicated that facilities for alternative education are adequate in size and quality to meet the needs of students (60 percent) and/or that the facilities are equal to those of the regular education classroom (30 percent).

Who has primary responsibility for administration of the programs? About 55 percent of respondents indicated that the principal had primary responsibility for alternative education. About 35 percent of respondents said other administrators, such as a director or assistant principal, were responsible for alternative education programs and about 10 percent indicated that other arrangements were made for program administration.

Table 3. School administrator with primary responsibility for administration of alternative education programs.

Primary responsibility	Total % (N=152)	Rural % (N=66)	Urban % (N=77)	Mixed/IU % (N=9)
Principal devoting 100% time to alternative ed.	13	6	16	33
Principal with combined duties	42	50	40	0
Administrator, not a principal, assigned 100% to alternative ed.	13	12	13	22
Administrator, not a principal, with combined duties	22	24	20	33
Other	10	8	12	11

Among 152 responses to the question of program administration, 66 were from rural, 77 were from urban, and nine were from mixed/intermediate unit respondents (See Table 3). There were few differences between rural and urban programs.

How long do students participate in programming? Alternative education programming was available to students for at least the 180-day school year as indicated by 92 percent of respondents. Among these programs, 78 percent provided programming for the 180-day period, 11 percent provided an additional summer component and 3 percent provided programming 12 months per year. There were minimal rural/urban differences as noted in Table 4.

Forty-one percent of administrators indicated that students participated more than 18 weeks but less than one school year. An additional 23 percent noted that participation was for a full year or more and 22 percent indicated that the length of participation ranged from nine weeks to 18 weeks. Table 5 identifies rural, urban and mixed/intermediate unit differences. There was a difference between rural and urban administrators who indicated that students often stay in programs for a full school year or longer: 19 percent of rural respondents said the average length of participation was one year or longer, while 28 percent of urban respondents specified this as the average length of participation.

According to administrators, 90 percent of

Table 4. Alternative education services provided in relationship to the 180-day school year.

Service period	Total %	Rural %	Urban %	Mixed/IU %
Less than a school year	5	7	1	22
180-day school year	78	88	76	33
180-days + summer	11	3	14	33
12 months	3	0	4	11
Other	3	2	4	0

programs provided services from Monday through Friday during the day, while 10 percent offered more non-traditional programming hours and days. More than 80 percent of administrators responded that students in their programs participated from between one-half and one-full-day of programming (3.6 to 7 hours per day) (81 percent rural administrators and 82 percent urban administrators).

Students served. Twenty-seven percent of administrator respondents said there was an increase of between 11 percent and 25 percent in the number of students served in the past five years. Forty-three percent said that enrollment in alternative programs increased up to 10 percent in the past five years.

Free and reduced lunch eligibility was used in this study to provide some indication of the socio-economic status of participants in alternative education. There were 138 respondents to this item, including 60 rural, 70 urban, and eight mixed/intermediate unit. About 20 percent of administrators said that more than 80 percent of students attending alternative programs were eligible for free and reduced lunch, and 36 percent indicated eligibility of between 41 percent and 80 percent of students.

Table 5. Average length of participation in alternative education programming.

Length of Student Participation	Total % (N=134)	Rural % (N=58)	Urban % (N=68)	Mixed/IU % (N=8)
1 day - 10 days	3	3	3	0
11 days - 30 days	2	3	2	0
31 days - 9 weeks	8	14	4	0
9 weeks -18 weeks	22	21	27	0
18 weeks - < 1 school year	41	40	37	88
1 school year or more	23	19	28	13

Teacher-student ratio: A focus of alternative education programs is to provide individualized attention for students to support their attempts to improve academically. For this reason, the teacher-student ratio is a critical concern. Among administrator respondents, 35 percent indicated that their programs operated with a 1:6 teacher-student ratio; 17 percent identified a 1:8 ratio; 29 percent had a 1:10 ratio; and approximately 7 percent had a 1:12 ratio or higher.

Impact of Alternative Education on Student Outcomes

Using a five-point scale, where 1 was ineffective and 5 was effective, administrators and teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of alternative programs for selected student outcomes. Among the areas receiving the highest ratings from administrators and teachers were improving school attendance, improving academic performance, and changing behaviors that were targeted for change. Other moderately effective student outcomes included the development of academic goals, increased interest in academics and education, and the development of career and/or post-secondary interests and goals. One area that was perceived to be somewhat effective and included considerably more response variation among both teachers and administrators was improved interest in school activities (See Table 6 on Page 12).

Teachers and administrators from urban and rural districts indicated little variation in their perception of student outcomes for alternative education (See Table 7 on Page 12).

The most important alternative education outcomes are often found in what negative factors can be eliminated or reduced. Survey respondents agreed that alternative education programming is most effective in reducing suspension and expulsion, dropout rates, and disruptive behavior. Other areas of moderate effectiveness included the reduction of tardiness and truancy, and academic failure. In general, administrators had more positive perceptions than teachers in terms of these areas for reduction.

Rural teacher and administrator perceptions of alternative program effectiveness in

Table 6. Alternative education student outcomes. (Note: mean scores are based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being ineffective and 5 being effective.)

Student Outcomes	Administrators (N=140) Mean	Teachers (N=18) Mean
Increased interest in academics/education	3.61	3.55
Improved academic performance	3.94	4.04
Improved school attendance	4.01	4.08
Improved interest in school activities	3.01	3.19
Target behaviors changed	3.83	3.83
Development of academic goals	3.69	3.76
Development of career and/or post secondary interests and goals	3.48	3.62

Table 7. Rural/urban differences in administrator and teacher perceptions of student outcomes.

Outcomes	Administrators		Teachers	
	Rural Mean (N=59)	Urban Mean (N=67)	Rural Mean (N=60)	Urban Mean (N=103)
Increased interest in academics/education	3.67	3.75	3.68	3.56
Improved academic performance	3.61	4.1	4.19	3.99
Improved school attendance	4.43	4.11	4.16	3.92
Improved interest in school activities	3.15	3.26	3.23	3.3
Target behaviors changed	4.1	3.97	3.94	3.82
Development of academic goals	4.00	3.75	3.80	3.79
Development of career and/or postsecondary interests and goals	3.61	3.65	3.69	3.69

reducing factors such as those analyzed in this survey resulted in slightly higher ratings than their urban counterparts. Again, however, the differences were not statistically significant.

Program Focus: Importance of Selected Program Goals and Components

The research results indicate that teachers and administrators perceived the most important program goals to be: positive change in behavior; improving school attendance; improving decision making skills; improving social skills; and improving academic performance. Most important among program components were: behavior change programming; academic programming; life skills and/or social skills; disciplinary programming; and therapeutic programming. The data suggest congruence between activities and goals of program efforts. The data further suggest programming aligned with the intent of Pennsylvania's guiding legislation and regulations. Moreover, the research found no significant difference between the perceptions of administrators and teachers as far as the importance of these components are concerned.

The research also found no noticeable differences between rural and urban responses related to the importance of selected alternative education goals.

What Administrators and Teachers Say About the Alternative Education Curriculum

Administrators and teachers had somewhat different perceptions about the curriculum focus in alternative education. Teachers were more likely to indicate a focus on behavior change, a focus on therapeutic change and a focus on academic change than their administrative colleagues (See Table 8). Brief definitions of the three areas of curriculum focus are provided below.

Behavior change - Generally speaking, students come to alternative education settings in part or wholly due to dysfunctional and disruptive behaviors. To varying degrees, programs focus on changing these behaviors to reduce risk and increase chances for success in a school setting.

Therapeutic change - Change and growth as a result of a counseling or counseling-like relationship aimed at resolution of or improvement in any number of problem areas including but not limited to dysfunctional thinking and acting, social skills restoration, mental health challenges or other emotional or mental disorders.

Academic change - Many alternative education students experience difficulties with academic performance and related issues, including but not limited to truancy, lack of basic academic skills, academic credit deficits, and a history of academic failure. Academic changes aimed at improving academic performance and achievement are viewed as critical to alternative education student success and graduation from high school.

Table 8. Administrator and teacher perceptions regarding the focus of curriculum in alternative education programs. (Totals do not equal 100% due to multiple responses.)

Curriculum Focus	Administrators % (N=141)	Teachers % (N=180)
Focuses upon behavior change	43	62
Focuses upon therapeutic change	18	30
Focuses upon academic change	42	67
Balances academic, behavior and therapeutic change equally	46	42
Is individualized for each student	52	59
Other	0	3

Table 9. Percentage of administrators and teachers citing the following types of curriculum content in their programs. (Totals do not equal 100% due to multiple responses.)

Curriculum Content	Administrators (%) (N=141)	Teachers (%) (N=180)
Vocational education	34	32
College preparation academic program	45	41
Remediation of skills and knowledge	78	84
Alternative curriculum not otherwise available to regular education students	43	61
The same curriculum that is available in the regular classroom	79	79
Other	10	16

In other areas, about 52 percent of administrators and 59 percent of teachers said curriculum is individualized in their alternative education programs. An attempt on the part of programs to balance academic, behavioral, and therapeutic change was indicated by numerous administrator (46 percent) and teacher (42 percent) respondents.

When asked about the specific orientation of the curriculum, administrators had similar views regarding the content of curriculum available to students, though teachers were much more likely to indicate the availability of remediation of skills and knowledge (administrators, 78 percent and teachers, 84 percent) and an alternative curriculum not otherwise available to regular education students (administrators, 43 percent and teachers, 61 percent). Notably, 79 percent of both administrator and teacher respondents said the same curriculum that is available in the regular classroom is available in the alternative classroom (See Table 9).

Assessment most often occurs prior to entry into the alternative program and is identified in referral documents. However, it also often occurs after entrance into the program and is a formal component of the program. Most often, assessment is the responsibility of a professional team or the alternative education teacher. In some cases, it is the responsibility of the lead alternative education administrator (See Table 10).

Family involvement is often discussed as an ideal among both regular and alternative education professionals. The findings of this study revealed that in the large majority of programs, frequent meetings with families (on a monthly or more frequent basis) were not the norm as only 15 percent of administrator respondents indicated that such meetings occur in their program. Teachers (27 percent) were more likely to indicate that these frequent meetings occur. The more common manner of engaging families is to work with families on an as-needed basis (administrators, 62 percent and teachers, 82 percent) or provide parents with periodic reports/telephone calls on student progress (administrators, 61 percent and teachers, 86 percent) (See Table 11 on Page 14).

Teachers provided interesting insight into the similarities and differences between alternative education curriculum and regular education curriculum. Among teacher respondents, about 83 percent

Table 10. Assessment of student needs. (Totals do not equal 100% due to multiple responses.)

Nature and Responsibility of Assessment of Student Needs	Administrators % (N=141)	Teachers % (N=180)
There is no formal assessment of student needs	4	10
Occurs prior to program entry and is identified in referral documents	59	62
Occurs after program entry and is a component of the program	32	46
Is the responsibility of the lead alternative education administrator	17	28
Is the responsibility of the alternative education teacher	28	47
Is the responsibility of the guidance office	11	22
Is the responsibility of a professional team	33	41
Other	0	8

Table 11. Frequency and types of family involvement as perceived by administrators and teachers. (Totals do not equal 100% due to multiple responses.)

Family involvement	Administrators % (N=141)	Teachers % (N=180)
Works with families on an as-needed basis (family request, to provide information about programs, to contact regarding problems in the classroom, etc.)	62	82
The program holds monthly or more frequent meetings with family members	15	27
The program holds a minimum of one meeting that includes family members each academic year	31	46
The program provides counseling support to family members	19	29
Family programming is not a component of alternative education programming	7	7
Life and/or social skills curriculum	0	41
Periodic reports/ telephone calls to parents on student progress	61	86
Other	9	11

Table 12. Rural/urban perceptions of similarities and differences between alternative education curriculum and regular education classroom curriculum. (Totals do not equal 100% due to multiple responses.)

Similarities and differences	Rural % (N=60)	Urban % (N=102)
Minimal differences between regular education and alternative education curriculum	30	27
Curriculum is adapted individually in alternative Education	60	55
Age and grade differences in the alternative education classroom make it necessary to implement varied curriculum within the same classroom	70	58
There is more latitude in the alternative education classrooms to change, adapt or create curriculum	75	64
Alternative education has the same or more curriculum resources available as the regular education classroom	33	30
Alternative education has fewer curriculum resources available than the regular education classroom	40	43
There is more emphasis on social skills training in the alternative education classroom	68	57
There is more emphasis on discussing or working on personal issues in the alternative education classroom	61	53
There is more emphasis on discipline in the alternative education classroom	60	51
Students in alternative education have curriculum options available that are not ordinarily available in regular education	26	20
Students in alternative education are excluded from participation in some parts of the curriculum that are ordinarily available to regular education students	40	37
Every alternative education student participates in transition programming	25	22
The teacher-to-student ratio is smaller in the alternative education classroom	86	78
In general, students seem to maintain current academic levels or make academic gains after participation in alternative education	76	66
In general, students seem to lose ground academically after participation in alternative education	10	5
Entry and exit academic levels are assessed in the alternative education program	25	21

said that the teacher/student ratio is smaller in the alternative education classroom, 72 percent said that students tend to maintain current academic levels or make gains after participation in alternative education, and 70 percent said there is more latitude in the alternative classroom. More than one-half of all teacher respondents suggested that: curriculum is adapted individually in alternative education; age and grade differences make it necessary to implement varied curriculum within the same classroom; and more emphasis is placed on social skills training, personal issues and discipline. About 29 percent said that there are minimal differences between regular and alternative education.

In regard to rural versus urban programs, the biggest differences in curriculum between regular and alternative education were in four areas:

- Age and grade differences in alternative education make it necessary to implement varied curriculum within the same classroom;
- There is more latitude in the alternative education classroom to change, adapt, or create curriculum;
- There is more emphasis on social skills training in alternative education; and,
- Students seem to maintain current academic levels or make academic gains often after participating in alternative education (See Table 12).

Professional Development

Teacher preparation, availability of professional development opportunities and the need for graduate level training in issues related to alternative education are critical issues in a growing and challenging field for education professionals. Administrators and teachers rate teacher level of preparation for alternative settings similarly, with both groups indicating that most teachers have received average preparation for their role in an alternative setting. Nonethe-

Table 13. Perceptions on level of preparation for teachers and other professionals working in alternative education settings.

Respondent	Types of Responses (%)				
Category	Unprepared	Somewhat Under-Prepared	Average Preparation	Above Average Preparation	Highly Prepared
Administrators (N=140)	4	22	49	18	7
Teachers (N=179)	7	25	44	16	8

less, nearly one-third of teachers indicated that teachers working in alternative settings are unprepared or somewhat underprepared for this type of work (See Table 13).

Eighty-five percent of administrators indicated a need for professional development activities for administrators, teachers and others in alternative education. Both administrators (88 percent) and teachers (79 percent) agreed there is a need for a Master's program in alternative education, and 78 percent of teachers expressed interest in an online Master's program in alternative education.

The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Alternative Education

Respondents used a 1 through 5 scale (with 1 being not at all and 5 being very much) to identify what they viewed as the impact of NCLB on several variables in alternative education. According to the research, NCLB's impact on alternative education programs is detected mainly in two areas – increased pressure from the administration to reach performance goals and the impact of NCLB on instructional strategies. To a lesser extent, there were some changes in program review, evaluation and assessment, program administration, and improved alternative education services. Little impact was perceived by administrators and teachers in three areas – significant change in staffing patterns, increased math and reading scores, and positive impact of NCLB highly qualified provisions (See Table 14).

Table 14. Administrator and teacher perceptions of NCLB on alternative education programs.

NCLB impact	Administrators Mean	Teachers Mean
Impact of NCLB upon instructional strategies	3.35	3.30
Increased pressure from administration to reach performance goals	3.70	3.41
Improved alternative education services	2.71	2.38
Change in program review, evaluation, and assessment	2.83	2.77
Change in program administration	2.70	2.56
Significant change in staffing patterns	2.59	2.19
Increased math and reading scores	2.39	2.36
Positive impact of NCLB "Highly Qualified Provisions"	2.34	2.44

There were no significant rural and urban differences among respondents on items related to the impact of NCLB on alternative education.

Study Comparisons

Two previous studies provided a basis with which to compare some results of the current study. Ager, et.al., (2006), under contract with PDE, conducted an evaluation of alternative education services for disruptive youth. The study used multiple methodologies and data from PDE's database of alternative education program reports to answer research questions related to the components of alternative programs in the state.

Hosley (2003) completed research on alternative education practices based on administrator and teacher surveys. The research examined many of the same variables related to organizational structure and practice as described in this report.

In reviewing the three studies, the researchers found some similarities when looking at school related variables, academic variables and counseling/treatment variables. While the scope and methods of all three studies make comparison somewhat difficult, the review indicated that:

- Alternative schools are somewhat effective in improving attendance;
- Teachers and administrators view alternative education as moderately effective in improving academic performance;
- Alternative education programs are viewed as moderately effective in developing academic goals; and
- Alternative education programs are effective in changing target behaviors.

Ager et al. (2006) reported that 84 percent of students participate in counseling. In the current study, teachers were asked to indicate the program curriculum focus. Respondents indicated a therapeutic change focus of 30 percent and a behavior change focus of 67 percent.

Among respondents in the Ager, et al. study, 100 percent indicated that curriculum was individualized. This is a considerable difference from the 2003 Hosley study and the current study, in which 67 percent and 58 percent, respectively, indicated that curriculum is adapted individually.

Similarities and differences between the 2003 and 2007 surveys of alternative education practices

There are few differences between the results of the study conducted in 2003 and the current study. Administrators and teachers perceive alternative programs to be, at a minimum, moderately effective in all major areas including:

- Increased interest in academics/education;
- Improved academic performance;
- Improved school attendance;
- Change in target behaviors;
- Development of academic goals;
- Reduction of suspension/expulsion;
- Reduction of tardiness and truancy;
- Reduction of disruptive behavior;
- Reduction of academic failure; and
- Reduction of dropout rates.

In both surveys, respondents affirmed the importance of program goals including, but not limited to:

- Improving academic performance;
- Improving school attendance;
- Promoting positive changes in behavior;
- Exploring interests;
- Supporting a positive change in attitude toward school;
- Improving social skills;
- Improving self esteem;
- Developing academic goals; and
- Improving decision making skills.

Respondents are not as confident in the effectiveness of alternative education in the areas of career and/or post-secondary interests/goals, and increased interest in school activities.

An area of considerable change between the 2003 study and the current study is in curriculum focus. Respondents were asked to check all that apply in describing their program foci from among the following options:

- Focuses on behavior change;
- Focuses on therapeutic change;
- Is individualized for each student;
- Focuses on academic change; and
- Balances academic, behavior and therapeutic change equally.

In every category the percentage of administrator and teacher responses was nearly double or higher in the current study, perhaps indicating an understanding of the importance for curriculum in each of the areas.

Other notable comparisons between the current study and the 2003 study included the following.

- Respondents were more likely to indicate that family involvement occurs on an as-needed basis than they indicated in the past.
- The percentage of respondents who indicated that student assessment occurs prior to program entry and the assessment is identified in the referral documents was nearly double in the current study.
- In the current study, far fewer teachers indicated that students in alternative education are excluded from participation in some parts of the curriculum that are ordinarily available to regular education students (52 percent in 2003 study vs. 39 percent in current study).
- A slightly lower percentage of teachers in the current study indicated that all students participate in transition programming.
- Fewer teachers indicated that entry and exit academic levels are assessed in the alternative education program (39 percent in 2003 and 26 percent in the current study).
- Administrators assessed teacher preparation for alternative settings much the same in both studies. In 2003, 26 percent said teachers were unprepared or somewhat underprepared (same as current study), 49 percent said teachers came with average preparation (same as current study), and 21 percent said teachers were above average or highly prepared (25 percent in current study).
- In 2003, 82 percent of administrators indicated a need for a Master’s level program in alternative education versus 88 percent in the current study.

The researchers noted how similar the perceptions of rural and urban teachers and administrators were in this study, particularly along variables such as the importance of certain program goals and the effectiveness of alternative education programs.

The highest ratings for effectiveness were received in reducing dropout rates, reducing suspension and expulsion, and reducing academic failure. Rural and urban administrators and teachers viewed alternative education as effective in improving school attendance, improving academic performance, developing academic goals, and changing target behaviors. These findings are aligned with the findings of the 2003 study.

The data also reaffirmed the importance of academic, therapeutic, behavior change and disciplinary programming.

In both studies, rural program respondents noted more often than urban program respondents that age and grade differences in the alternative education classroom make it necessary to implement varied curriculum within the same classroom.

In the current study, rural respondents noted that students maintained current academic achievement levels or made increases of 10 percent more often than their urban counterparts. This represents a change of about 20 percent from the last survey when urban teachers indicated increases of 10 percent in maintaining or increasing academic levels after alternative education more often than rural teachers. And, although this study noted marked differences between the regular and alternative education classroom with regard to social skills training and more latitude to adapt curriculum in alternative education, in 2003, these differences were limited.

Financial Analysis

The Funding History of AEDY

Between 2000 and 2005, the need for alternative education services for disruptive youth programs clearly rose while funding declined. In 2000-2001, funding levels were at $25 million for AEDY programs. They increased to a high of $26.2 million in 2001-2002 and 2002-2003. In 2003-2004, funding was cut about 21 percent to $20.6 million, and it remained at this level in 2004-2005.

From 2000-2001 to 2003-2004, the actual number of students served increased 83 percent. From 2003-2004 to 2004-2005, the number of students served declined 32 percent (See Table 15).

Other Results of the Financial Analysis

An analysis of 2006-2007 AEDY funding awards revealed that:

- 43 percent of awards went to rural school districts and 57 percent went to urban school districts;
- Rural school districts received a total of $3.2 million in awards, or 21 percent of the total appropriation provided to school districts, and urban school districts received $12.2 million in awards, or 79 percent of the total appropriation provided to school districts;
- 505 of the 599 awards were less than $50,000;
- 64 awards were between $50,000 and $100,000;
- 30 awards of more than $100,000 were allocated, including a $2.6 million award to the School District of Philadelphia and a $337,554 award to the Pittsburgh School District;
- 5 percent of the awards comprised more than 38 percent of the total AEYD appropriation; and
- All of the awards for more than $100,000 went to urban school districts or intermediate units.

Rural and Urban Comparisons

The funding comparison for rural and urban programs was revealing. Rural programs in 2006-2007 received a total funding award of $3.2 million, while urban programs received $12.2 million. The average funding for the 215 rural programs in this study was $15,214: for the 266 urban programs, the average funding award was nearly triple that amount at $43,563.

The primary difference between rural and urban programs was the number of students served and the resulting funding levels. Funding is provided on a per-student basis, as it has been since the program's inception. This means that areas with more students qualifying for services receive more money. For small programs and rural areas, it may

Table 15. AEDY funding and students served. (Numbers are not adjusted for inflation.)

Year	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
Appropriation (in millions)	$25.0	$26.2	$26.2	$20.6	$20.6
Amount awarded	$24.75	$25.86	$26.2	$20.6	$20.6
Students served (#)	22,225	23,522	38,901	40,741	27,534
Funding per student/ per week	$55.30	$51.12	$46.25	$28.45	$29.89

be financially difficult to justify participation in AEDY funding at the current levels (approximately $1,100 per student per year). Separation from the regular school or classroom often requires additional administrative and teacher staffing. Without financial support from the local district, it is likely that alternative programming may be at risk when potential program enrollments are low.

Conclusions

Alternative education programming in Pennsylvania is provided under restrictive funding designated for disruptive youth. The funding amounts to a small supplemental grant supporting school districts and other qualified applicants in their attempts to serve disruptive youth in an alternative education setting. Urban school districts receive just under 80 percent of the total appropriation awarded to school districts; an award which follows students on a per-child basis. Rural school districts are often left to devise creative methods to make alternative education services a worthwhile endeavor for their region.

The history of the legislation points to the idea of removing students from the classroom for the benefit of those in regular education to continue their studies in an uninterrupted fashion. The supplemental funding accomplishes this goal while directing programs that receive funding to provide individualized attention and counseling services.

Recent focus on alternative education and issues of dropout show there are economic and other advantages to keeping disruptive and at-risk students in school, offering a quality education in a separate setting, and creating alternative education practices that benefit students. To make this happen, administrators, teachers, counselors and others have committed considerable time and effort in the design, organization and implementation of these programs.

According to the results of this research, current alternative education programs are viewed as moderately effective in reducing dropout, improving academic performance, reducing truancy, reducing disruptive behavior, improving school attendance, changing target behaviors, and assisting students in the development of academic goals. There is every indication in this study that many teachers and administrators in alternative education dedicate their professional lives to making a quality education possible for these students. Nearly one-half of administrators and teachers said their programs strive to provide a balance between behavioral, therapeutic, and academic components.

While both administrators and teachers suggest that academic performance improves in alternative education programs, in this study, neither group indicated that the implementation of NCLB increased math and reading scores. The most notable impact of NCLB is the increasing pressure from administration to reach performance goals. Individualization of academic programming, finding ways to better transition students from alternative schools to regular schools, providing intensive counseling services, teaching important life and social skills, and balancing the demands of NCLB with the issues of serving a challenging population are realities that have been shown in this study.

Both administrators and teachers perceive alternative education as having positive impacts on student academic performance and other factors that influence the reduction of dropout. The economic costs of supporting students who do not graduate may be large over time in terms of social services, health care, and the criminal justice system. The documented differences in earning power between students who leave school with a high school diploma and those who do not are dramatic over time.

The results of this study show that administrators and teachers believe that alternative education programs in Pennsylvania are effective. The results also indicate that the focus of these programs should not be to simply remove at-risk individuals from regular educational settings so that other students may benefit. Instead, the focus should remain on the painstaking work of reengaging disruptive and other at-risk students who are failing in our school systems to succeed both in school and in life beyond high school.

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