

# Addressing the Need for an Alternative Education Networking in Rural School Districts

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## ABSTRACT

Recent legislative efforts have been aimed at increasing the accountability of schools to meet the educational needs and improve outcomes for students. States and districts across the nation have responded differently. One emerging pattern has been the rise in alternative schools which address the educational needs of students unsuccessful in traditional school settings. Although alternative schooling is becoming more common, there is minimal guidance to establish programs and train professionals to teach and lead them. This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) examined current alternative programs in a rural region of Nebraska and then designed a collaborative networking system that could promote the growth and development of alternative programs through shared resources and expertise and meaningful inquiry into current practices. While this article is an obvious outcome of this dissertation research, so too is the still-incipient network of alternative educators who assisted with this inquiry.

## KEYWORDS

*alternative education, collaborative networks, rural*

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Having roots in the experimentalism, idealism, and discontent of the 1960s (Fink, 2000), alternative programs have consistently evolved over the past decades as an approach to address the increasing pressures on secondary schools and the growing demand to meet the needs of students who have not been successful in the traditional school setting (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Rennie Center, 2014; Tissington, 2006; Velasco et al., 2008). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in January 2002 and intended to increase accountability measures and improve academic standards for all students through various forms of testing. As part of NCLB, Congress included graduation rates in our accountability system for the first time (Klemick, 2007). These more stringent accountability measures “may be a contributing factor to the increased number of students placed in alternative education programs” (Tissington, 2006, p. 20). Alternative education programs are designed to meet the same academic standards as a traditional school but offer unique settings and serve to address the barriers of the conventional approach to education (Newton et al., 2022). NCLB precipitated a variety of alternative education programs that were needed to create different avenues for students who were at risk of school failure within the traditional school system (Lehr et al., 2009).

While NCLB was officially replaced by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, schools have continued to seek new and innovative ways to engage students where traditional schools have failed to educate effectively. Although alternative education programs have been steadily on the rise, a review of literature indicates there

is an absence of federal educational policy surrounding the programming of alternative education. State policies vary but many, including Nebraska, focus on defining alternative education settings that are separate from the public school institution, such as juvenile facilities or charter schools. Unlike special education programs, federal policies and often state legislation, do not address alternative education programs that are located within the public school systems (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Lehr et al., 2009; Porowski et al., 2014).

In special education, the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA) outlines guidelines that public schools must meet for children receiving special education services. Recently, in the *Endrew F. vs. Douglas County School District* (2017) case, courts determined that students with disabilities must have an individualized education plan (IEP) that is “reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress in light of the child’s circumstances.” Although somewhat nebulous, there is accountability and guidelines to implementing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students receiving special education services. However, the lack of legislation and inconsistencies around alternative education programs leads states to create their own policies to oversee and examine statewide alternative programs (Almeida et al., 2009; Schlessman & Hurtado, 2012). This leads to discontinuity between districts and amongst states and does not ensure that the students’ needs are being met (Almeida et al, 2009). To better understand the impact of alternative schools at a fuller extent, it is necessary to look more closely at alternative schools and the challenges they face in educating students that have not been successful in traditional school settings (Lehr et al., 2009; Newton, 2022).



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## Challenges in Alternative Education

The lack of guidance from district or state officials leaves alternative schools to face unique challenges in addressing the diverse needs of students (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017). As a leader in an alternative education setting who has a passion for improving our programs, I have witnessed some of the challenges alternative schools face in meeting the needs of students. First, alternative schools in general face their own particular set of circumstances because they are situated within a unique 'gray area' in the field of education. Currently, there are limited endorsements nationwide for alternative education that do not fall under the umbrella of special education. This results in disparities in the type of instructor who teaches students in alternative settings. Through the federal policies such as ESSA and IDEA, our government has increased expectations and awareness regarding highly qualified teachers, including teachers of special education. However, the legislation only minimally outlined the expectations that teachers in alternative programs must possess in relation to content knowledge and teaching skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Currently there is very basic "legislative or policy language stating alternative teachers must be certified or comply with state standards" (Lehr et al., 2009, p. 27) which, again, varies from state to state. This negligence in policy leads to the autonomy of alternative education, but also results in questions about the instructional and staffing needs (Lehr et al., 2009) as well as the educational preparation needed to best serve this population of students.

Additionally, educators in alternative programs are faced with the challenge of having few other professionals in the field to turn to for advice or guidance. Previous literature (e.g., Flower et al., 2011; Deeds & DePaoli, 2017; Rennie Center, 2014) regarding alternative programs identifies research-supported practices that can be identified in well-run programs. However, despite the research on promising practices, it is still unclear to what extent these practices are consistently being implemented. Without opportunities for professional development or networking amongst colleagues, these practices appear to be isolated and inconsistent.

Educators in rural alternative schools face additional challenges in meeting the needs of their students. Alternative programs in these areas are scarcer and often have only one or two people per district assigned to the programs. In rural areas, the number of students alternative programs serve are often not enough to substantiate a separate campus for alternative schooling (Government Accountability Office, 2019, para. 23) with like-educators in which to collaborate. The geographic isolation, small size, and limited resources available all impact the opportunities for educators to access professional development specific to unique contexts (Battelle for Kids, 2016). These factors amplify the isolation of alternative education teachers in rural areas.

Additionally, knowledge or availability of community partners and outside resources, such as social service networks, are lacking in rural areas (Alliance for Excellent Education, (2010). As a leader of an alternative program, gaining access to additional resources proved to be a challenge which furthermore substantiated my sense that there needs to be more attention to alternative education, particularly in rural areas. But my dissertation was not a traditional dissertation that can just document a problem and be done. I had a stake not just in substantiating the challenge I faced, but also in doing something about it.

## Purpose of the Study

A gap in research regarding the predominance and effectiveness of alternative education programs provides the context for this study. In my research, I located 15 school districts and one Educational Service Unit (ESU) that serve students in an alternative setting in rural areas. Using surveys and interviews, I identified ways in which these schools implement strategies and access resources to provide at-risk students with an opportunity to engage in an alternate form of learning. This stage of the research sought to determine ways in which alternative programs do things differently than traditional schools to promote the success of students at-risk for dropping out. Through this investigation, I identified the areas of strength and opportunities for growth that would allow us to focus our efforts on improving the educational experiences for students in alternative education.

With this data, I demonstrated both an interest and a need to then create a regional networking system for sharing ideas, strategies, and practices with the goal of collaboration, improvement, and promotion of our alternative programs. I describe why educators talking with other similarly situated educators in a network can be a key mechanism for assuring the professionalism and nimbleness of our efforts. Honest assessment and reflection into the role of alternative education and the outcomes for the students we serve are necessary to maximize the efforts of programs that are aimed at some of our most vulnerable youth.

## Problem of Practice Questions

The problem of practice questions for this study identify alternative education programs, evaluate the implementation of research-supported practices and establish a collaborative network for alternative education teachers and administrators.

1. How do professionals working in alternative education describe their programs?
2. How do professionals working in alternative education describe professional development opportunities specific to their context?
3. In what ways are alternative education programs in rural districts implementing and generating research-supported practices?
4. How can I organize a localized networking system for the collaboration of teachers and teacher leaders within alternative education aimed at improving the educational outcomes of students in these programs?

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In education, "one of the great values of the job, its diversity of experience, is also one of the biggest challenges" (Brock & Goodman, 2013, p. 1). For many students, there seems to be a mismatch between their lives and the educational system in which they are mandated to attend. The frequent incongruity between the school and the student may be viewed as a result of the structure of the schools. "Schools as currently organized are much better calibrated to serve privileged groups than groups placed on the margin" (Deschenes et al., 2001, p. 527). More optimistically, for the students who do not fit into this traditional model of schools, alternative programs can provide a diverse array of options that



expand beyond academics to address the barriers of traditional schooling (Newton et al., 2022).

To reach a vast number of students who have become disconnected from schools, alternative programs must consider “changing the current structures and philosophy of existing schools” (Brock & Goodman, 2013, p. 5). Alternative schools and programs must seek ways to become fundamentally different from the foundation of traditional education with the goal of increasing academic performance, reducing dropout rates, and improving postsecondary outcomes. There is a need to “develop teachers and administrators who are knowledgeable, courageous, and motivated to challenge the old paradigms so that we can create models for success” (Brock & Goodman, 2013, p. 5). These changes in education are necessary and critical to a large number of at-risk youths whose futures may depend on our educational systems.

The ultimate goal of this research was to create a context in which to engage practitioners in collaborative reflection that identify both the successes and challenges of operating these types of programs. Dissertations in Practice (DiPs) are to be more than diagnostic. They are to describe pursued action steps, efforts to attend to identified problems of practice, like a lack of clarity regarding how alternative programs could or should be structured and how ideas about how to operate could be shared. Linking professionals from the same education discipline provides a space in which educators can reflect upon challenges, share ideas and resources, and develop solutions to improve our practices (Battelle for Kids, 2016; Parsley, 2017). As teachers develop ownership, they become more involved in the planning of professional development opportunities that are based upon the individualized needs of their students and programs within their profession (Longworth, 2006). This type of empowerment can lead teachers to become agents of educational change, calling “on their abilities to solve the problems and challenges they face” (Voogt et al., 2015, p. 262).

With minimal educational policy and legislation regarding alternative education, I would argue there is a need to implement a bottom-up reform approach (Honig, 2004) to create a collaborative vision for alternative programs. In this approach, “schools become key decision makers” (Honig, 2004, p. 528) and lead the charge in implementing effective communication efforts which embrace the future and progress of these programs. Together, the key players in alternative education become the front-line policy makers that unite to further identify research-supported practices and policies that support individuals, families, schools, and communities. Professional development and networking are the keys to collaboration and understanding the needs of our students. Once we understand what is best, we will be better equipped to provide services for at-risk students.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study used an ethnographically informed educational design research approach that used components of ethnography to develop insights and create practical solutions in a real-world context. The benefit of ethnography is the rich detail of context it provides through data. Ethnography represents the perspectives of educators from within their own unique contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Through this research, practitioners were able to share their personal insights into the alternative programs they serve and the challenges

and successes they face. As Erickson (1984) states, ethnography “provides an inquiry process by which we can ask open-ended questions that will result in new insights about schooling in American society” (p.65). However, this isn’t the end of the road for educational practitioners. Scholarly practitioners, like me, want to utilize research results to take actionable steps toward change (Mehan, 2008). By adding design research, the researcher fostered a partnership with the practitioners and allowed them to collaboratively engage in the development of new understanding (Voogt et. al, 2015). Through the formation of a networking system, I created a forum for teachers and teacher leaders of alternative education to work together to improve the educational outcomes for the students within these programs.

### Exploration of Needs

When I began this exploration into alternative education programs, I felt I needed more understanding of what other alternative programs existed and what these programs were doing to serve their students. Preliminary research began investigating the types of alternative programs across the state and what those programs aimed to provide. In the summer of 2018, I began reaching out to schools to identify which ones had a need for alternative programming for students in need of credit recovery.

It was also during this time that I contacted the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) to understand what involvement they had with alternative education. Through a conversation with one of the representatives in the Office of Accountability, Accreditation and Program Approval<sup>1</sup>, I found that the NDE had little information to share about alternative programs that do not fall within the jurisdiction of Rule 17 or Rule 18, which provide only limited information on programs for students that have been expelled or interim schools (Nebraska Department of Education, 1997). Alternative programs outside of these are only held to the same standards as the high schools in which they are embedded, but not identified separately.

From my informal interviews and email correspondences with principals, teachers, and representatives from the NDE, the pertinence of my problem of practice was confirmed; there was a growing need for alternative education programs but little guidance on practices that were effective. The schools I approached were describing similar dilemmas. There is a need to reach at-risk youth in alternative settings and improve their educational outcomes. These preliminary efforts became the foundation for the development of my research study.

### Data Sources and Data Collection

In the southeastern region of Nebraska where the research was conducted, there were three ESUs who served a total of 40 schools. Within this region, I reached out to schools to identify which ones

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<sup>1</sup> This information was gathered in my preliminary investigation into alternative programs and information was given to me as a teacher from an NDE representative and I do not wish to name this individual for privacy and anonymity.

had alternative programs, looking solely for programs located in rural areas and that served secondary students within their public school system that were deemed at-risk for not completing their high school education. I found that 15 school districts and one ESU had established alternative education programs. Targeting ESU directors, administrators, and teachers of these alternative education programs resulted in a total of 42 potential participants.

## Surveys

Surveys were created and then distributed online to the 42 potential participants, using Qualtrics software with an invitation to participate. Survey data was collected from 17 participants for a 40% response rate. However, two participants did not complete the survey in its entirety and one respondent indicated their position within the school system was not directly related to alternative education. Responses from the remaining 14 participants became my study's first major data source.

Surveys used multiple choice and open-ended questions to collect information on the participant, programming in alternative schools, and perceptions of the participant in relation to the requirements of teaching in an alternative setting and access to professional development. Surveys also included a section on the implementation of some noted research-supported practices in alternative education asking respondents to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements as they related to their alternative program. The final section of the survey asked the participants if they were willing to be contacted in the future for participation in an interview and for their interest as a potential participant in the networking system.

## Interviews

Following the surveys, individuals that responded stating that they would be willing to be contacted for further clarification of their answers were approached to give consent to interview. Of the fourteen survey respondents, nine people indicated they would agree to an interview and were sent a consent invitation to participate. Four individuals subsequently confirmed an interview. The four interviews conducted represented 28.5% of my survey respondents used in this research and a total of 9.1% of the total number of potential participants. The participants were two teachers and two administrators. None of the four were part of my own alternative education program, so their insights broadened my sense of what was happening regionally.

Interviews were conducted using Zoom and by phone (in one case). I chose to use semi-structured interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) that consisted of a list of 20 open-ended questions which encouraged the participants to elaborate on their survey responses and give further clarification on the roles of alternative programs within public schools. The first set of interview questions sought information on the participants' educational background. Some of these introductory questions also helped me establish if there were themes in specific degrees, endorsements, or certifications teachers in alternative education held. Following the introductory questions, the structure was based on the problem of practice questions, identifying types of alternative programs, perspectives on the implementation of research-supported practices, and interest in future networking. At the end of the interview, an audio file was created on my password protected laptop.

## Data Analysis

After this two-phase data collection, I completed a descriptive report of the survey data. Because the purpose of these ethnographic methods was identifying overarching patterns and themes to inform design, limited statistical analyses (modes, means) were conducted. The response data were organized by sections, collecting all survey questions and responses related to the research sections. I went through the data to "analyze smaller chunks of data" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150) and determined patterns in teacher/administrator demographics, program descriptors, access to professional development, and perspectives of the implementation of research-supported practices.

Using the audio-recordings I transcribed the interviews. While transcribing, I completed some pre-coding, taking notes on "thoughts, hunches, emotions, connections" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 131) that would be beneficial to the creation of a networking system. Following the transcription of the interviews, I compiled the interview data by problem of practice question in a document. I printed a hard copy of this document and coded, by hand, with a highlighting marker, and began reviewing all responses for segments that addressed each question. Color-coding was used to highlight words or phrases that were repeated or ideas that stood out specifically to identify emergent themes or topics for each problem of practice questions.

After coding the interview data, I combined the data from both the surveys and interviews for triangulation, "testing one source of data against the other, looking for patterns of thought and behavior" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 205). Interview data were compared to the survey questions in which they coincided. I examined survey data and coded interview transcripts for each component of the survey and took notes to present descriptive and interpretive data to present participants' understanding of the context in which they educate students. Analysis of this first phase of the project was then used to inform the design of a networking system for alternative education teachers and leaders in rural communities.

## FINDINGS

This section presents a brief overview of the results of this study. It attempts to provide a comparative analysis of both the survey and interview data. The data show how interview participants were similar to or different from the survey respondents or represent when interviewee information was not available to support the survey data.

## Program Descriptors

### Who is Served

Survey data indicated that districts ranged from serving between eight to 40 students in their alternative education programs. Five of the 14 total participants indicated their programs were unable to enroll students during the last year because of lack of resources. Programs were serving several students in alternative education and providing new opportunities for students to engage in school. However, with the limited number of spaces available for students in the alternative programs, schools were still restricting the number of students that could be served, and potentially denying access to students who may benefit from these services.

To identify who the alternative programs were serving, the survey data requested participants identify various subsets of





students their programs were designed to serve. Table 1 shows the subsets of students being served in alternative education programs in the region of study. Most notably, participants indicated they served a variety of students, but nearly all served students with discipline or behavioral issues (n=13), students with attendance issues (n=12), and students in need of credit recovery (n=12).

Table 1. Subsets of Students Targeted

Table with 3 columns: Student category, Survey (n=14), Interview (n=4). Rows include attendance issues, credit recovery, discipline issues, staff recommendations, and re-entering after expulsion.

What is Provided

Table 2 shows the results of the survey in regard to the mode of instruction used in alternative programs. Survey respondents reported that online instruction was the most commonly used mode of instruction (n=7). Four districts reported they taught instruction-in person and three with blended learning (e.g., online with an in-person facilitator).

Table 2. Mode of Instruction

Table with 3 columns: Mode of instruction, Survey (n=14), Interview (n=4). Rows include In Person, Online, and Blended learning.

Access to Professional Development

As part of the larger design project, the survey and interviews probed respondents for their experiences relative to access to professional development opportunities related to alternative programs. Survey data shown in Table 3 indicates less than half of the districts had specific requirements for teaching in an alternative school beyond the regular teacher requirements.

Table 3. Specific Requirements for Teaching in Alternative Program

Table with 3 columns: Response, Survey (n=14), Interview (n=4). Rows include Yes, No, and Unsure.

Another question in the category of professional development asked respondents to indicate any types of professional development opportunities they participated in the previous year. Table 4 shows the results of this portion of the survey and indicates participants most frequently attended workshops, conferences or trainings as an attendee (n=6) followed by peer observation of other teachers in their district (n=4) or participating in a mentoring program within their district (n=4).

Table 4. Participation in Professional Development the Previous School Year

Table with 3 columns: Activity, Survey (n=14), Interview (n=4). Rows include University courses, visits, research, mentoring, peer observation, collaborative networks, and workshops.

Implementation of Research-Supported Practices

Through the use of a survey and interviews, I sought to explore what respondents did within their alternative programs in relation to the best practices outlined by the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA). This section of the survey was adapted from the NAEA's Exemplary Practices 2.0 (National Alternative Education Association, 2014) list and shortened to keep the survey to a reasonable length.



Participants indicated two main areas for strengths: Climate and Culture, and Policies and Procedures. Eleven out of the fourteen participants strongly agreed they had lists and procedures for conducting emergency drills in place in their programs. Also, nine of the fourteen participants noted they strongly agreed they have established a thorough written code of conduct and comprehensive student discipline plan outlining rules and behavioral expectations, appropriate interventions, and consequences for infractions. Through interviews, I learned some of the programs established their rules and behavioral expectations through contracts and felt that their programs overall had a positive atmosphere.

The top three areas for growth that participants identified were in the following categories: School Social Work, Collaboration, and Program Evaluation. The survey and interview data indicated that programs were recognizing the impact they were making but documenting particular student outcomes (graduation rates, credits earned, attendance, disciplinary data, and dropout statistics) was an area of need. Data also noted an absence of school social work programs and a need to foster collaboration with community partners. Most of the collaboration efforts noted in interviews were with employment-type agencies that assist in post-secondary employment support and representatives from the criminal justice system, including trackers, probation officers, and school resource offices.

**Table 4. Implementation of Research-Supported Practices**

Educational Practice	Mean Score
Vision and Mission	3.81
Leadership	4.03
Climate and Culture	4.28
Staffing and Professional Development	3.85
Curriculum and Instruction	3.84
Student Assessment	3.98
Transition Planning and Support	3.78
Parent/Guardian Involvement	4.18
Collaboration	3.47
Program Evaluation	3.57
School Counseling	3.73
School Social Work	3.46
Policies and Procedures	4.32
Nontraditional Education Plan	3.87

## DISCUSSION

The following section will discuss the key findings from the surveys and interviews conducted. This data will be used as a source of reflection within the context of an established, localized networking group to address the challenges we face as well as celebrate the successes. The findings will be addressed as they pertain to the problem of practice questions I was seeking to address.

### Participants' Descriptions of Programs

Survey and interview participants identified a wide range of descriptions for the alternative programs in which they work. But one

thing remains consistent and that is these programs are serving students who have been academically unsuccessful in traditional school settings and there needs to be "flexibility to develop practices that meet students' needs" (Rennie Center, 2014, p. 6). Alternative programs need to provide personalized options for students based on his or her individual needs.

It was identified that alternative programs target three main populations: students with behavioral concerns, students with attendance issues, and students in need of credit recovery. When thinking about the students these alternative programs served, I think it is important for programs to revisit their purpose. Lehr (2009) questions whether districts have an underlying intent of utilizing the alternative schools to assist in behavior management in the traditional school setting versus truly meeting the needs of the students they serve. It is important to make these distinct clarifications so that alternative programs have a clear purpose and are not just being used as a 'catch-all' for students that are struggling without positive intentions to best meet their needs.

Another similarity I found was the use of online curriculum. The data from this survey closely matched a nationwide survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (2018) which stated that credit recovery programs were most commonly provided online followed by a blended model and then in-person. Online programs offer flexibility in serving students because students can access the instruction from various locations and at various times throughout the day (Dessoff, 2009). It offers programs a chance to work around the personal needs of students which may include parenting, employment, or medical issues (Franco & Patel, 2011). It also allows students to work at their own pace and may help overcome some of the attendance challenges as students will not fall behind their peers.

There are, however, some concerns with online programs. Some students have difficulty because of their limited skills such as language skills, reading skills or computer usage skills or they may lack the ability to self-monitor their learning (Franco & Patel, 2011; Oliver et al, 2009). It has been noted there are lower completion rates for students in online programs (Clements et al., 2015).

With students needing to meet different graduation requirements, online programs address the need for teachers to teach a variety of content areas throughout the school day. In various research studies (e.g., Brown & Addison, 2012; Foley & Pang, 2006) teachers most frequently indicated their background was in general education, usually a specific subject matter at the secondary level. If teachers are not qualified to teach the content subject matter of all these various courses, online programs also offer availability to rigorous content in areas the teacher does not have the background expertise. Although online programs offer some flexibility in programming, it will be important for alternative teachers and leaders to continue to weigh the pros and cons of the options for instructional delivery and continue to reflectively evaluate the effectiveness they hold in meeting the needs of their students.

### Professional Development Opportunities

Survey and interview participants were asked questions pertaining to the professional development opportunities they have had both prior to teaching and during their recent teaching career. The first set of questions investigated the specific requirements teachers of alternative programs must have. The second set of questions then sought to identify opportunities for professional



development that teachers have utilized in the previous year of teaching.

### Requirements of Teaching in Alternative Education

Through the surveys, I learned that less than half of the districts in my research area indicated they have specific requirements for teaching in the alternative school beyond the regular teacher requirements. This information was not unforeseen as I reported earlier the lack of endorsements nationwide for serving students in an alternative education setting. There becomes a problem in alternative education when considering the provisions of NCLB which requires teachers to be highly qualified. As defined by the Department of Education, “to be deemed highly qualified, teachers must have: 1) a bachelor’s degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p.10). Alternative programs have been under some scrutiny for not meeting the standards of highly qualified teachers set forth by NCLB because of this exact issue (Lehr et al., 2009).

I would argue that this definition results in a narrow vision of what makes ‘good teaching’ and fails to account for the “professional knowledge and understanding teachers derive from their local experiences and relationships with students” (Cochron-Smith & Lyle, 2009, p .81). It also fails to acknowledge the complexity that exists within our educational environments. This is an area I foresee continuing to be challenged and addressed through further legislation.

### Opportunities for Professional Development

Survey and interview participants noted a lack of professional development opportunities specific to alternative education. Through the survey, respondents noted they participated in a variety of other professional development opportunities but not in high numbers. Attending workshops, conferences, or training was the highest recorded response, but less than half of the respondents stated they had participated in this type of professional development. The next two most common types of professional development were peer observation of teachers within their district and participating in a mentoring program within their district. From the interviews, I learned that professional development within the schools is geared toward the entire high school staff and not specific to alternative education. Although these types of professional development are great ways to learn new instructional strategies, it may not specifically address the challenges teachers in alternative programs face. Three teachers stated they have made visits to other alternative sites which I think would be more beneficial.

One of my challenges has been trying to identify the location of other programs resulting in limited options for seeking professional guidance and advice from other practitioners. A study conducted by Education Northwest indicated significant positive effects of uniting teachers from similar disciplines for collaboration across rural districts (Parsley, 2017). Teacher involvement in collaborative design is increasingly being viewed as a form of professional development as they can engage in meaningful, reflective practice with peers (Parsley, 2017; Voogt, 2015). I believe creating a networking group will bring these people together and provide more opportunity to access professional development, particularly in learning from each other and visiting other alternative education programs.

### Implementation of Research-Supported Practices

When reflecting on the survey and interview data regarding the implementation of research-supported practices, I noticed both strengths and opportunities for growth. I believe alternative programs have a relative strength in addressing what I view as the “here and now.” Schools have established safe and caring alternative programs in environments that support student learning. These programs are finding ways to incorporate a positive atmosphere for behavioral management and student discipline that is encouraging for students and families. Policies and procedures for alternative schools have been developed and implemented to ensure the safety of students and assist in maintaining a code of conduct. These alternative programs remain focused on helping students and there is promising evidence “emerging that efforts to redesign alternative education contributes to rising graduation rates” (Almeida et al., 2009, p. 2).

The survey and interview data suggested there was noticeable room for growth among alternative programs in southeast Nebraska. As I described, many of the strengths in alternative programs seemed to be focusing on the “here and now.” Additionally, I would argue many of the areas for growth were planning for the students’ futures. The top areas of need identified in the surveys as well as some additional areas within other categories show alternative programs must continue to make efforts to support the social and emotional needs of students to help them become successful adults. Many studies are being conducted on the importance of these types of skills in the workplace and some studies suggest soft skills are the number one factor for success in employment and in post-secondary education (Robles, 2012; Schulz, 2008). If we want our students to be successful in whichever path they pursue after high school, we must be purposeful about implementing curriculum and activities that help develop these skills.

The results from the survey also identified a specific need to connect with community agencies and build partnerships for students. Partnerships with local community colleges and local businesses are opportunities to implement necessary and critical resources for alternative schools. Understanding that students in alternative schools are some of our most vulnerable youth (Lehr et al., 2009), connecting students to community supports becomes critical in building success beyond the school walls. In a national study, 84% of alternative programs indicated they collaborated with the juvenile justice system, the highest recognized partnership (Foley & Pang, 2006). Through the interviews in this study, this information was corroborated as alternative programs in this region identified partnering most frequently with individuals such as police officers, probation officers, or trackers. I believe there is a need to identify additional community partners that will help students build positive relationships within the community context.

Another area for growth suggested by the data was the need to evaluate program effectiveness. In the interviews, none of the participants had information available on student outcome data (graduation rates, attendance, disciplinary data, and dropout statistics) and most of them stated they did not believe that information was being collected. It will be important to consider methods in which alternative programs will evaluate effectiveness. The current accountability and outcome measures used in traditional schools do not acknowledge the differences that exist in alternative programs (Newton et al., 2022). Policymakers attempting to improve alternative education must look at how policies align with the expectations of alternative education (Almeida et al., 2009). As the

term 'alternative' implies, these programs are taking different approaches to re-engage students and may also need to consider alternative methods to evaluate these programs.

## Organization of Localized Network System for Collaboration

I believe the need for alternative programs to maintain some autonomy is critical to their success. These programs are serving students who have been academically unsuccessful in traditional school settings and there needs to be flexibility in designing programs that suit individual needs of students (Rennie Center, 2014). Educators and administrators are recognizing alternative programs can offer some valuable options for students. A networking group can be one beneficial way to allow practitioners the opportunity to engage in discussion and build professional relationships to expand and enhance alternative education in rural areas.

Using the survey results and interviews, educators from alternative programs were invited to participate in the described networking committee. There was a total of 10 survey participants stating they would be interested in becoming part of a networking group. To increase the number of attendees, participants in this research study were encouraged to invite others playing a vital role in alternative education. The first date for the Alternative Education Networking session was set for November 7, 2019, and held at one of the ESU buildings included in the research. Since this initial meeting, there have been additional meetings to maintain the network aimed at enhancing practices.

As a networking group, one of our priorities must be to collaboratively define the purpose of alternative education and establish the goals, mission and vision for these programs. Establishing purpose is important for a variety of reasons and lays the framework to make improvements in several categories of research-supported practices. We need to have discussions regarding the philosophy contributing to the foundation of these programs. To reduce the inequities of schools, we must first identify who alternative education is designed for (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Is our philosophy that students are attending these programs because the educational system is not meeting their needs and require a new, innovative way at accessing curriculum and instruction? Or are alternatives being viewed as an option for students that are not meeting the educational expectations of the traditional setting and utilized to displace the child to improve success of the traditional school? (Rennie Center, 2014 p. 16). These are necessary questions to address for the sake of our students. If we truly believe alternative schools are being utilized for the betterment of the students, we must "remedy this mismatch in public education" (Deschenes et al., 2001, p.526) to create educational environments that meet the needs of our most vulnerable youth.

Creating a mission and vision allows us to have conversations relative to program service and delivery. If we believe our schools are responsible for reinventing an educational approach, then we must have access to the resources and supports necessary to make that happen. Often districts show no hesitancy in sending students to alternative schools, but do not necessarily provide the appropriate resources to support them (Brown & Addison, 2012). Through networking, we can work collaboratively to become advocates not only for our students but for ourselves as professionals. "We don't

want to exclude alternatives, but include them with purpose" (Rennie Center, 2014, p. 11).

It also becomes important to discuss the purpose, mission and vision of these programs so we can seek appropriate and relevant professional development opportunities specific to our programs. For example, if we determine one of our goals is to help students develop the employability skills necessary for the world of work, then we can seek professional development opportunities to support that specific goal. Or if we determine one of our goals is to "search for ways to make learning relevant and applicable to life outside of school" (Brown & Addison, 2012, p. 8), then what kinds of professional development are out there? We can also determine specific strategies our colleagues are using to support our goals, mission, and vision and use each other for the opportunity to grow.

Developing a specific purpose allows us to seek partnerships within the school and community for support. "Critical educators who work toward social change endorse theories that are *dialectical*" (McLaren, 2003, p. 69). We recognize the issues these students face are the product of a larger social structure and require support beyond the educational institutions. Having this dialectical thinking, allows us to begin to identify partners for change. We need to find a way to implement a more systematic transformation of services, which requires multiple stakeholders to come together to address the multifaceted needs of our students (Newton et al., 2022).

Finally establishing this purpose allows us to think about our expectations for students. What are the outcomes we want for our students and how do our programs support these? Alternative schools must be engaged in promoting positive, social change and having these expectations outlined, our networking group can begin to identify ways to evaluate our programs, improve our shortcomings, and celebrate our successes. I also believe, using our new knowledge, we can become advocates for change on a grander scale.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The findings from this study suggested several areas for future research. First, identifying appropriate methods for evaluating the effectiveness of alternative programs could be valuable in program development. Collecting information on outcome data such as graduation rates, employment rates, enrollment in postsecondary programs, and utilizing community agencies could be instrumental in transforming programs. Compiling accurate data can allow districts to "develop a keen sense of which practices have the greatest potential impact for which students" (Rennie Center, 2014, p. 14). It will help to determine which modes of instruction and components of curriculum are most beneficial in supporting students in school and beyond.

There must also be an effort put forth to identify ways to equip alternative programs with the necessary resources to be successful. The resources should include "adequate staffing, adequate instructional resources for teachers, remediation resources for students, and specialized training for teachers" (Brown & Addison, 2012, p. 19) as well as necessary funding. It will be important to identify options for professional development for teachers in alternative education, as this was a reported need in this research. With the understanding that the state of Nebraska (and most other states) has no college-level programs addressing the needs of





teachers in alternative education, specific professional development opportunities should be available for teachers to build the skills necessary to improve their instructional practices within their programs. Currently, these resources seem to be minimal at best. Research should focus on the benefits of collaboration systems such as the one created in this system and empower others to assist in building their own learning networks.

Research could further focus on collegiate-level programs that strengthen the qualifications and skills necessary to be an effective teacher of alternative programs. Teaching in an alternative program requires teachers to have a knowledge of the general education curriculum, but also have behavior management strategies and positive behavioral supports to enhance their classroom atmosphere. In addition, alternative teachers could benefit from additional training in communication and collaboration with school personnel, community-based professionals, and families.

Finally, future research may focus on the investigation of current laws and policies surrounding alternative programs in other states. This investigation could begin to outline the benefits and constraints these types of policies place upon alternative education programs. The networking group created in this study is one way that practitioners can support change within their own practice; however, continuing to address the larger systems that impact legislation will be important.

## CONCLUSION

Alternative programs have been on the rise and are one way public schools are embracing the vision that the educational institutions must provide an appropriate education for all students. Alternative programs seek to implement innovative methods to teach students who have not been successful with mainstream education and provide them a chance to re-engage with learning. Research has shown effective alternative schools can “engage, retain, and graduate high-risk students” (Franklin et al., 2007). However, schools must make an effort to ensure they are offering a genuine alternative with an allocation of appropriate resources, staffing, and opportunity for professional growth. These programs must remain attached to their purpose and design holistic programs that support these youth through a variety of services. Through a collaborative network, practitioners can engage in meaningful work to establish goals that aim to improve alternative programs at the local, state, and national levels. The work in alternative schools may not be easy but is worth the effort to fight for our students who deserve this opportunity.

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