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A Rural Alternative School and Its Effectiveness for Preventing Dropouts

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This article describes a successful alternative school located in northwest Wyoming. Students who attend this school need an atmosphere that is accepting of their differences and allow them to express themselves without fear of ridicule or punishment. These children are looking for a safe, secure place to complete their education, a place where their unique differences are respected. Bear Lodge is one such alternative high school. Students at Bear Lodge share their perspective and provide a living testimony as to the importance of alternative schools in allowing students to meet with academic success and social acceptance. Bear Lodge allows its students to work at their own pace in a caring and non-coercive environment. Here students attend school regularly, follow a standards-based curriculum, form close relationships with their peers and teachers, and know that the staff believe they can be successful in and out of school.

Today, there are more than 3.8 million young adults who are either not enrolled in a high school program or have not completed high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). It is estimated that more than half the students who drop out leave by tenth grade, 20% by eighth grade, and 3% by the fourth grade. Those who drop out make up almost half the heads of households on welfare and nearly half the prison population (Schwartz, 2000).

Woods (1995) cited the strongest overall predictor for dropping out of school is poverty. Associated issues of lower socioeconomic status, single parent households, stressful or unstable home life and limited education of parents/guardians negatively impacts students' successful school completion. Personal factors related to dropping out of school include substance abuse, pregnancy, and legal problems. He reports students working more than 14 hours per week increase their risk for dropping out of school; this risk accelerates as the number of hours increase. The strongest school-related predictor for dropping out of school is poor academic performance. Woods (1995) suggests students who repeat one grade are twice as likely to drop out; students who repeat more than one grade are four times as likely to drop out. Additional school-related factors such as truancy, absenteeism, tardiness, suspension, and behavioral difficulties also effect successful school completion.

The Need for Alternative Schools

There are no easy solutions to the school dropout problem (Gould, 2002). Alternative schools offer at-risk students the opportunity to enroll in a learning environment that is personal and meaningful to each student. Leone and Drakeford (1999) stated "The most promising [alternative] schools have a clear focus on academic learning that combines high academic standards with engaging and creative instruction" (p.2). Schweikert-Cattin and Taylor (2000) believe the purpose of a school is to make an individual's strengths productive and their weaknesses irrelevant.

Alternative schools have historically represented a departure from traditional school curriculum, school environments, and have served a population of students that have not been successful in a traditional setting (Raywid, 1994). Shelly, Cannaday, and Weddle (1997) stated, "We are losing too many young people from our schools. They are convinced they don't, or can't fit in. The system of education is irrelevant to their lives. We need a change in the way schools do business so students can see learning as meaningful and important" (p.95). Latham (1999) suggested school discipline plans are often ineffective because they focus on punishment for inappropriate behavior. Consequently, this creates a coercive environment from which students want to escape or become counter-coercive. In becoming counter-coercive, students are expelled for inappropriate or violent behavior; this is reinforcing for them as they escape coercive environments. Others choose to escape altogether by dropping out. Students cannot be expected to learn and produce quality work in an unfriendly, adversarial environment (Schweikert-Cattin and Taylor, 2000). Linton (2000) found that students in traditional educational settings who often want to be suspended to avoid coercive environments. Alternative schools offer options that are supportive rather than punitive promoting educational success versus academic failure.

Linton (2000) described alternative schools as being for students who are either discipline problems or students who need personalized and highly structured academic programs. Meeting these needs in the traditional high school is becoming more difficult all the time and is desperately needed in many rural areas. Successfully implemented alternative schools provide options for students who are at-risk for dropping out. Linton (2000) stated that the basic principles followed by alternative schools are that not all children have the same goals nor the same ways of learning. Most alternative schools attempt to establish a less formal relationship between students and teachers.

Professionals involved in alternative education, and who have been unable to change the traditional school system, see alternative education as the last opportunity for children who have been disenfranchised from traditional school

systems. Research conclusively demonstrates that alternative schools are making a difference for hundreds of students at risk of dropping out (Linton, 2000; Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Hurley 2000). Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1997) identified the following characteristics for a successful alternative school:

- a clear mission statement
- smaller enrollment than mainstream schools
- lower student/teacher ratio than mainstream schools,
- more informal, personal student/teacher relationship,
- committed school staff,
- clearly stated rules enforced fairly and consistently,
- high standards for behavior, attendance, and performance
- emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility,
- an integrated curriculum that makes connections to the world of work
- student voice in school operations, and
- a flexible schedule which allows students to work at their own pace

Bear Lodge High School

Bear Lodge High School is a state accredited alternative school located in a sparsely populated 3,000 square mile school district of northeastern Wyoming. Bear Lodge serves the needs of high school students from three separate community high schools within the district, serving a total of 650 students in grades 9 - 12. In 1988 the school district became concerned with the number of students who were either leaving school because of their lack of academic achievement or being asked to leave for non-compliance or behavioral issues. Bear Lodge High School was created to provide a flexible and relevant curriculum for students experiencing behavioral problems in the regular education setting. Bear Lodge High School began with four students in 1991 and since that time has enrolled 211 students. Students experiencing attendance difficulties, behavioral problems, and academic failure voluntarily enroll as an option to dropping out of school. All students must remain enrolled for a minimum of one semester prior to re-enrollment in any other school in the district. The district provides transportation for all students, which minimizes attendance and off-campus issues.

Sixty-five percent (65%) of the students have been male and thirty-five percent female. Ninety-five percent of the students were Caucasian, five percent were American Indian, Asian American, Black American, or Hispanic/Latino. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the students reside in single parent homes, thirty-eight percent (38%) live in two-parent families and ten percent (10%) have been raised by relatives, foster families, or have been emancipated. Five percent (5%) of the students' family backgrounds are unknown. Fifty-four percent (54%) qualify for the Free and Reduced Meals program. Twenty-nine students were enrolled in Bear Lodge during the 2001-02 school year. Six of these students were seniors and all successfully graduated in May.

Bear Lodge Academic Achievement

During the 2001-02 academic school year students, grades 9-12, took the Star Reading Program test (N=26) and the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) (N=24). Of the students taking the TABE, 54% scored at or above grade level in mathematics and 8 % scored within one year or below their expected grade level. Seventeen percent of students tested scored at or above grade level in reading and 29% scored within one year or less of their grade level. On the Star Reading test, 27% of the students achieved at or above grade level with 19% scoring within one year of their targeted grade level. Although there was some variance in scores between the two reading tests in the range of students who scored at or above grade level and those who were within a year of anticipated grade level, overall the percentages were the same.

Bear Lodge Standards for Behavior

Linton (2000) stated for a discipline program to be successful, it needs to be highly structured. Students at Bear Lodge High School earn privileges by progressing through a four-level "Phase System" (see Table 1).

This Phase System supports the National Regional Educational Laboratory's (NREL, 1997) contention that it is necessary for clearly stated rules to be enforced fairly and consistently. For students to flourish there must be a sense of trust within the school community; students must feel their teachers believe in them (Schweikert-Cattin and Taylor, 2000). The quality and caring attitude of teachers, school personnel, and office staff enhance the academic achievement and personal well-being of students at Bear Lodge. Bear Lodge High School student surveys (administered 2002) overwhelmingly demonstrated their belief that their teachers and staff believed they could and would succeed. Sixty-three percent (63%) of the students (N=23) felt their teachers believed they would be successful. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the students also felt their instructors cared about them as a person and sixty-three percent (63%) felt the teaching staff treated them with respect.

Table 1.

Bear Lodge Discipline Program

	Criteria	Privileges
Phase 1 – **(Initial Phase)** 5 days	Compliance Appropriate hygiene Maintain appropriate language and behavior Abide by school district's tobacco policy Be on time and prepared for all classes and activities Appropriate cafeteria behavior	Follow regular class schedule
Phase 2 10 days	Good Sportsmanship Ask permission to use others' belongings Respond appropriately to requests and instructions Appropriate participation Remain on task Cope with teasing/harassment	Early release from cafeteria Open campus on Friday
Phase 3 10 days	Respect property and possessions Be "In Area" (be where you are expected to be) Listen without interrupting Appropriate productivity	Three days open campus Run errands Participation on fieldtrips (unless the student is a new enrollee)
Phase 4 10 days	Takes Initiative Appropriate problem solving Appropriate productivity	Five days open campus Work privileges
Off Phase	Meets ALL phase criteria consistently Appropriate productivity	Walkman privileges Open campus Run errands Opportunities to negotiate special privileges with staff
Major Infractions	Verbal Abuse Possession of weapons Vandalism Chemical Abuse Physical Aggression to self, staff or others Sexual Contact Stealing Unexcused Absences Sexual Harassment	Any infraction constitutes an immediate team meeting. Possibility of dropping to Phase 1/Day 1 of the Phase System

Student Satisfaction

The students attending Bear Lodge High School cited a wide range of issues as the reasons they wanted, or needed, to attend an alternative high school. Based upon essay assignments and surveys, students shared their thoughts and feelings about their school experiences. Several students addressed concerns they had with instructors in their regular high schools. Descriptive comments from students' essays deepen our understanding of these students' needs. All names attributed to students are pseudonyms. Brad stated, "I was always getting into trouble with the teacher and having problems with other students, and I would have got kicked out anyway" (Student Essay, 2002). students felt the environment was hostile and that teachers were out to get them. Some felt they were not given the necessary time or assistance needed to do well in their classes. Randy said, "I

think that all schools should let you work at your own pace. I think that more people would like school" (Student Essay, 2002). Tyson wrote, "this was my last chance, it was Bear Lodge or the reformatory school" (Student Survey, 2002). Because of personal incidences at their regular high school, some students felt unable to cope with their peers without conflict or other troubled responses.

One issue that students felt resentment toward was the reputation they perceived others as having of their high school. According to Colleen, "The only thing I do not like about coming to this school is the stereotypes put upon the people that go here. Many of us are very smart, smarter perhaps than a lot of kids in public schools, but we are treated as if we are stupid" (Student Essay, 2002). Even some of their own classmates had misconceptions. Jane commented, "I don't fit in because I've never done anything wrong or illegal in my life." However, she also said, "I think

it is good that students have the option to come to Bear Lodge because it gives them as much time as needed to catch up on their work and credits" (Student Essay, 2002). Raywid (1999) confirmed this type of negative stereotype when he suggested that alternative schools are low-status places to outsiders who are surprised when students choose to remain in them rather than returning to the mainstream high school.

Students cited multiple reasons for their preference in attending Bear Lodge High School. Of the 20 students who responded, 9 talked about being able to work at their own pace. Anne stated, "I think the best thing about this school is that they give you a lot of help on your work and they let you work at your own pace…they keep at you to pass" (Student Essay, 2002). Seven felt it was important to have an option other than the regular high school. According to Tyler, "Not everyone goes to school here because they are flunking a class, some are coming here because they are having problems at their other school such as they don't get along with other students, or they don't get along with some of the teachers" (Student Essay, 2002). Two students said if it hadn't been for Bear Lodge they would probably drop out. Kim stated, "It is the greatest that we are able to have alternative schools because I know at least I would end up being a high school dropout if there wasn't a school like this for me." (Student Essay, 2002). Six students chose to attend Bear Lodge because they could no longer deal with the students and teachers at their regular high school. Anthony wrote, "The teachers here are much nicer and the teachers there are mean. I didn't like them and they didn't like me" (Student Essay, 2002). Two students felt Bear Lodge offered them a safer environment. Colleen stated, "I came here because a large part of my problem came from the kids at the school I went to before coming here. I needed some place safe for me to continue…This school has been excellent at making me feel that I am welcome and accepted" (Student Essay, 2002).

Nine students said they were happy to have the opportunity to catch up on their schoolwork and earn credits and have the choice to go back to their regular high school or to graduate from Bear Lodge. Tyler wrote, "This school gave me the chance to pass English so I could graduate. I think it is good to have the opportunity to go to another school to help with whatever needs you have" (Student Essay, 2002). Three students talked about not being judged by other students who attended the school. Connie commented, "My friends told me what a great place this was, and how people treat you so much better than the people you have known and gone to school with forever." Nancy stated, "The good part is that there are a lot kids here that have been through the same stuff I have" (Student Essays, 2002).

Fourteen commented about the teachers being more caring than at the regular high schools. Anthony commented, "The reason I like this school is that I like to be helped by teachers that listen." In addition, Anne added, "I think that this school meets my needs because they help out a lot. They are a lot nicer than a bigger school. It is not always their way or the highway". Jenny said, "I like that I can talk to the teachers about the issues in my life, not just

The Rural Educator - 28

school issues, but also issues at home" (Student Essays, 2002). Additionally, students liked the friendly atmosphere and the opportunity to earn a high school diploma somewhere other than their regular high school. Connie said, "This school keeps a smile on my face" (Student Essay, 2002).

Summary

Asche (1993) noted that high drop out rates are a serious concern for the social and economic well-being of this country. The need to provide an alternative environment in a rural setting for at-risk students is apparent in every aspect of day-to-day teaching. Students with behavioral issues, those falling behind in classroom work and academic credits due to truancy, substance abuse, or lack of family support need a continuum of educational alternatives in rural areas. Since its inception, Bear Lodge has served a total of 211 high school students in this rural Wyoming school district. Of these 211 students 83 % (175) successfully graduated high school. Bear Lodge has demonstrated that alternative high schools in small, rural settings provides an option to dropping out of school. Lack of a high school diploma creates an ill-prepared work force and limits future opportunities for students to properly care for their families.

The economic and social impact of dropping out of high school can be especially profound in a small, rural setting; Bear Lodge has helped to lessen this negative impact. Students at Bear Lodge High School regularly attend school, follow a standards-based curriculum, and learn at their own pace in a safe environment. They have formed close, informal relationships with their peers and teachers, know that the staff believes in their potential to set and achieve academic and career goals, graduate from high school, and become productive members of society. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL, 1997) noted several characteristics of successful alternative high schools. Among them were a smaller student/teacher ratio, committed school staff, high standards for behavior, attendance, and performance, and a flexible schedule which allows students to work at their own pace. NREL also points out the need for a more informal, personal student/teacher relationship. Evidence of this is noted in these student responses; "My year at Bear Lodge is probably the best I have had because the teachers are wonderful and I can work at my own pace. Since coming to Bear Lodge life has been much more pleasant and I actually do all my work". Another stated that "the teachers have been really helpful and I don't know what I would do without them." Finally, another Bear Lodge student noted "I like that I can talk to the teachers about the issues in my life and not just school issues, but issues at home".

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