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Program Evaluation of Alternative Schools in North Carolina: A Companion Dissertation

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A Program Evaluation of Two Alternative Schools in North and South Carolina

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the program evaluation was to evaluate two alternative programs in a North

Carolina and South Carolina public school district to determine if they are effective in delivering

constructive interventions that modify student behavior once students have left the programs

and have returned to their regular learning environments. This mixed-method evaluation

consisted of an experimental-comparison design approach that included interviews with

program participants, focus groups, and comparison of the number of out-of-school suspensions

that participants received after completing the alternative school programs in both school

districts.

Keywords: Code of Student Conduct, out-of-school suspension, alternative education,

recidivism, success, traditional education setting, alternative education setting, four-year

graduation cohort rate, long-term suspension, PDMT, BMTs, job-alike, test group, matched

pairs control group

INTRODUCTION

The North Carolina (NC) State Department of Education (2006) defined alternative

learning programs as services for students at risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior

problems, and/or dropping out of school. These services were designed to better meet the

needs of students who have not been successful in traditional school settings. Alternative

learning programs within NC public school districts serve students at any level who are

suspended and/or expelled, at risk of participation in juvenile crime, have dropped out and

desire to return to school, have a history of truancy, are returning from juvenile settings or

psychiatric hospitals, and whose learning styles are better served in an alternative setting. The

South Carolina (SC) Department of Education referenced in this evaluation's companion

evaluation provides similar support for its students. The SC General Assembly passed the

Education Accountability Act of 1998, which encouraged school boards throughout the state to

establish alternative programs that provide services for students who, for academic or

behavioral reasons, were not benefiting from the traditional education program (Education

Accountability Act, 1998).

Alternative programs were developed in one southeastern NC district to maintain school

safety and preserve a least disruptive learning environment within the traditional education

setting (Barnes, 2009). Although there are several alternative programs in this district, the state

recognizes three alternative schools that have been issued a state code for state accountability

measures and graduation data compilation purposes. This NC district categorizes infractions

via a tiered system of consequences. Within each tier, the school-level administrator has the

discretion to impose appropriate consequences to address the infraction. Provided an infraction

falls within multiple tiers, it is also within the discretion of the school-level administrator to

determine the tier assignment for the infraction from short- or long-term suspension to expulsion

(Character Education Handbook and Guide, 2012). Barnes (2009) also noted in her evaluation

that "close scrutiny of the data indicates that not all children have an equal probability of being

involved with violence . . . minorities, specifically Latinos and African-American children, show a

markedly higher likelihood of being involved with violence" (p. 2). Ensminger and Slusarcick

(1992) found in a cohort evaluation of 1,242 African-American children that aggressive behavior

in early school years led to grade-level retention and lack of grade promotion (Eller, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

Alternative school programs in North Carolina (NC) public school districts have been

designed to provide interventions that increase student achievement and decrease recidivism.

The investigator has worked in a position of administrative oversight in the alternative school

and secondary school settings and has collaborated with feeder schools within his respective

district. As a result of direct involvement with these alternative and regular education school

settings, one might legitimately question why there exists a disproportionate number of ninth-

grade African-American males and females who are assigned to alternative settings within

these school districts: How effective are alternative programs in developing appropriate

behaviors for students so they can return to their traditional school settings?

Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of this program evaluation was to gauge the effectiveness of alternative

school settings in increasing student success and decreasing recidivism. As an extension to Dr.

Lisa Barnes's program evaluation of a large urban NC district in 2009, the investigators in this

companion dissertation reviewed alternative programs in two southeastern public school

districts in NC and SC of similar size and demographics. The specific focus of this program

evaluation was on ninth-grade African-American male and female subgroups. In direct

alignment with its predecessor evaluation, our evaluation consisted of an experimental-

comparison design approach that included conducting interviews and surveys with alternative

program participants, completing focus groups, and a comparison of control groups for

alternative program participants in both states. Although both NC and SC programs were

evaluated, the focus of this paper is on the NC case. See Mills (2013) for a complete report of

SC findings.

Rationale of the Evaluation

In accordance with Barnes's (2009) evaluation, we chose a management-oriented

program evaluation model as we, too, were in management positions in our districts. According

to Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen (2004), this approach allows administrators an opportunity to

evaluate a program before the program has run its course. We also chose appropriate parts of

Stufflebeam's CIPP (Context-Input-Process-Product) Model (Stufflebeam, McKee, & McKee,

2003). This model included core concepts such as an evaluation of a program's contexts, inputs, processes, and products. The purpose of the program's context was to identify the population, assess needs, and diagnose problems. Inputs referred to resources, time, budgets, and potential barriers to the program. The process evaluation sought to predict design effects, while the researcher described and judged outcomes during the product evaluation. Finally, this model provided a simple approach that assisted the evaluators in identifying and addressing specific questions regarding the program (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004; Stufflebeam et al., 2003).

METHODS

Each staff member received a written survey with questions geared toward identical common themes as the focus questionnaire. Surveys and focus group questionnaires were distributed to all staff members in the NC and SC public school districts. The following statements were used to solicit responses from staff, teachers, and administrators:

1. Students who attended this alternative program demonstrate better decision-making skills.

2. Students who attended this alternative program demonstrate more effective problem solving skills.

3. Students who attended the alternative program demonstrate a positive attitude toward school.

4. Students who attended the alternative program demonstrate respect towards their peers.

5. Students who attended the alternative program demonstrate respect towards adults and staff members.

6. Students who attended the alternative program demonstrate a higher time on task.

7. Students who attended the alternative program report to school regularly.

8. Students who attended the alternative program demonstrate an improvement in their

grades on assignments.

These eight statements were designed to solicit responses in one of five perceptions – strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, and strongly agree. Percentages of responses for each question were tallied for analysis, and the evaluators assigned common themes to groups of the questions as mentioned earlier. Then the survey was distributed by the researchers to all staff, teachers, and administrators of the alternative programs in the southeastern NC and SC public school districts. Also in alignment with Barnes's (2009) methodology, respondents provided envelopes that were returned to the researchers' work addresses. Tallies were made by hand in order to determine the number of responses in each of the five choices.

The researchers also conducted personal interviews with the staff members and directors of alternative programs in both districts. Primary data sources in this evaluation were the responses from personal interviews via survey and questionnaire results coupled with ninth-grade African-American male and female student assignments and recidivism data collected over a 2-year period from 2010-2012. In a concerted effort to further maintain the integrity of the evaluation, the names of staff members, directors, and program coordinators were not used in NC or SC. This evaluation examined the benefits and limitations of these two alternative programs based upon staff, teacher, and administrators' perceptions and analysis of suspension data as recorded in each state's database (Barnes, 2009). Table 1 shows the evaluation plan that was used for this program evaluation.

Table 1

Evaluation Plan for Program Evaluation of Alternative Programs in NC and SC

Evaluation Questions	Information Required	Information Source	Method of collecting information	Analysis procedures	Interpretation procedures and criteria
What practices are contributing to students' success in the alternative program?	Feedback on effect and strategies used in the alternative program	Staff, teachers, and administrators	Surveys, interviews, focus groups	Frequency distributions for surveys, qualitative analysis for interviews and focus groups	At least 5 strategies with positive effects can be identified
Is the alternative program following its design as planned?	Feedback on effect and strategies used in the alternative program	Staff, teachers, and administrators	Surveys, interviews, focus groups	Frequency distributions for surveys, qualitative analysis for interviews and focus groups	At least 5 strategies with positive effects can be identified
What is the effect of the alternative program on the recidivism rate?	Percentage of students being referred back to the alternative program after returning to their home school	District and school data systems	Review district and school records	Compare recidivism rates to similar programs in other districts	Recidivism rate is the same or better than average rate from programs in other districts

Focus group responses were obtained after the written surveys were completed. There were two separate focus group interviews conducted and arranged by both researchers in NC and SC. According to Krueger (1994), focus groups are a means for researchers to discover preferences for new or existing products and are particularly effective in providing information about why people think or feel the way they do. Each of the groups included teachers, teacher assistants, behavior specialists, administrators, and other support staff of the alternative programs. One outcome of this program evaluation was to develop a professional development module to train district leaders and staff on practices that were proven in the alternative setting and should be implemented in the traditional education setting. These practices or interventions should work to decrease the recidivism rate of African-American males and females who are not

being successful in the ninth grade due to negative behaviors and other relevant factors (e.g., attendance, academic achievement, and dropout rate). Investigators maintained consistency between questions in these sessions and research questions by soliciting comments regarding dissemination procedures, processes that occurred following dissemination, and examples of shared decisions that may have occurred within both NC and SC alternative programs (Barnes, 2009).

RESULTS

For purposes of direct alignment with Barnes (2009), evaluation questions in focus group sessions remained consistent with the research questions. This was accomplished by soliciting comments regarding dissemination procedures, processes that may have occurred following dissemination, and examples of shared decisions that may have occurred within the alternative program. Sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis.

As mentioned earlier, the same methodology for the parent study was used in this program evaluation. Barnes (2009) noted,

Responses gathered in surveys and focus group interviews received one of four strength codes – no response, weak response, moderate response, and strong response. Strength codes provided qualifications toward subject matter and were used as a measure of intensity or strength of a belief, conviction, or motivation (Krippendorff, 1980). The following strength codes were used in the analysis process of questionnaires, surveys, and focus groups:

- No response was given if the theme was not addressed.
- Weak response was given if the theme was addressed with a short answer such as a simple yes or no.
- Moderate response was given if the theme was addressed with a specific example of the theme.

- A strong response was given if the theme was addressed elaborately with actual examples of processes that pertain to the theme.

In order to be considered as a valid finding, any revelation had to be present at least in two sources for each unit of evaluation. After the survey tallies were recorded, data triangulation was accomplished by subjecting the data to common theme analysis, either as a perception or as an occurrence. For example, if the survey indicated a strong response that activities had directly occurred as a result of the alternative program, the researcher determined if the same response was exhibited in a questionnaire or focus group dialogue. Frequency tables were created from focus group sessions to record staff perceptions of program implementation and strength of the overall themes. They were primarily used to analyze themes seen in focus group questionnaire interviews. The frequency of the themes determined their strength in the following terms:

- Strong – the theme was mentioned three or more times.

- Moderate – the theme was mentioned two times.

- Weak – the theme was mentioned one time.

- No relation or the theme was not mentioned.

There was consistent, strong agreement among the focus groups that the alternative program is doing well and moving in the right direction. Staff members agreed that although the program was doing well there was a strong need for increased collaboration (e.g., alternative school site visits from the traditional school administrators and counselors) among the alternative education setting and the traditional education settings in this NC southeastern district. Also, administrative and focus group perceptions of the effectiveness of the alternative program were on a solid culture of caring. While administration and staff members alike believed the program was strong and steadily improving student behavior, they believed there was yet room for improvement.

In the NC district, a total of 16 of 27 staff member surveys were dispersed and received by the researcher and the trained observers. The surveys revealed staff perceptions of the alternative program as having a positive effect on student behavior. Staff members agreed that students demonstrated better decision-making skills, more effective problem-solving skills, and respect towards their peers, adults, and staff members, as well as higher time on task behavior. While the surveys also showed strong agreement that students reported to school regularly, there was weak agreement on a positive attitude toward school. There was apparent uncertainty about overall improvement in student grades on assignments as well.

Focus group question: What components do you think are effective and which ones are ineffective? In this program evaluation, staff reported the program's structure and instruction as strengths, while communication between the traditional education setting and alternative education setting was not effective. One weak area of effective program components included the lack of counselors from the home school remaining involved in monitoring the academic and behavioral progress of the student once he or she is assigned to the alternative program.

There were several ineffective components identified by staff members during the focus interviews in the NC district. The weakest area of program implementation reported by the staff was the lack of resources. Another ineffective component of the program identified by the staff was the lack of collaboration between the home school and the alternative education setting. Staff strongly agreed on an additional lack of human resources such as counselors and psychologists. The focus group further reported miscommunication which was directly linked to the lack of collaboration.

The main difficulties with implementing the NC alternative program identified during the focus group interviews were that the students arrived at the program on so many different levels of instruction, the lack of resources (such as books, workbooks, etc.), the misunderstanding of

the purpose of the program to educate students and "not serve as a dumping ground." There

was strong mention also of the frequent return of students after they have successfully

completed the alternative education program and returned to their traditional education setting.

Focus group question: "Should the program be continued? Why or why not?"

According to the alternative education staff members and administrators, the program should be

continued with modifications. These include students not attending more than two times and

having an alternative to the alternative school placement. There was a strong strength code for

the program regarding its need to educate students with extenuating behavioral and academic

circumstances.

Based upon the aforementioned data analysis, there were 42 ninth graders from all

ethnic subgroups (matched pairs control group) who attended the alternative program in the

2010-2011 school year. The investigator selected all ethnic subgroups as the control group of

students who were assigned to the alternative program in the same school year. Of the

matched pairs control group of ninth graders in this district, 29 of them were African Americans

–11 females and 18 males (test group). Thirteen of these ninth graders were Multiracial (M),

Hispanic (H), and White (W) – one M female, one M male, five H males, one W female, and five

W males. The total number for the group of ninth graders in the NC district was 3,147. The

matched pairs control group closely resembled the test group as they were alike based upon

age, gender, and ethnic minority status. Of all of these ninth graders who attended the

alternative program, there were no repeat offenders. In addition, data further compared the

assignments of non-African-American ninth graders (control group) to African-American ninth

graders (test group) to alternative programs.

The above findings showed that the total number of all non-African-American ninth graders was significantly lower than the total number of African-American ninth graders who were assigned to the NC southeastern district's alternative program in 2010-2011. Interestingly enough, the number of males in all ethnic subgroups outweighed the number of females assigned to the alternative education setting. However, multiracial students were identical in the numbers of males and females assigned.

In the 2011-2012 school year, there were 30 ninth graders from all ethnic subgroups who attended the alternative program in the NC district. The test group included 23 African Americans – nine females and 14 males. The matched pairs control group included seven ninth graders – one M male, two H males, and four W males. In comparison to the previous 2010-2011 school year only, there were no W or M females assigned to the alternative education setting. The total number for the group of ninth graders in the NC district was 2,949. Also, the overall number of students who were assigned to the alternative education program decreased for all ethnic groups. Once again, there were no repeat offenders. The above findings also reflected a decrease in the assignment of African-American and other ethnic subgroups in the ninth grade in 2011-2012. However, the number of African-American students was disproportionately higher than other ethnic subgroups. This meant 77% of all ninth graders who were assigned to the alternative education setting were African American in 2011-2012. In 2010-2011, the percentage for African-American students who were assigned to the alternative program in the ninth grade was lower at 69% accounting for an 8% increase in the number of African-American males and females assigned in 2011-2012.

Triangulation of the Quantitative and Qualitative Data

In an effort not to compromise Barnes's (2009) methodology, the investigator also

triangulated the findings of this evaluation by comparing the summary data from interviews and

focus groups to the analysis of alternative education setting – student assignment data from the

NC southeastern district's discipline database. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003),

triangulation involves the seeking or corroboration of data through various means and assists in

controlling biases. This triangulation provides support for the investigator's conclusions of this

evaluation as the two measures mentioned earlier corroborate each other (Fitzpatrick et al.,

2004). The following data points show the number of ninth graders in the NC school district who

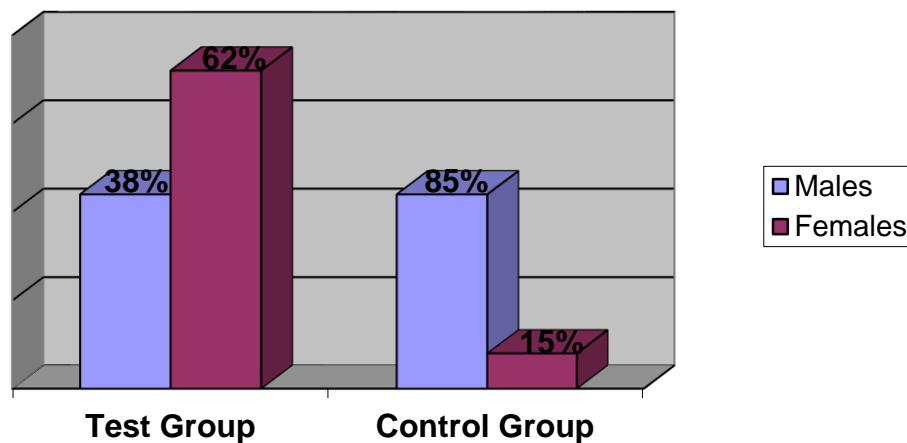attended the alternative education programs by gender and ethnicity.

Figure 1. Total Number of Alternative Education Assignments by Gender in 2010-2011.

This figure depicts the number of ninth graders assigned to alternative education sites by
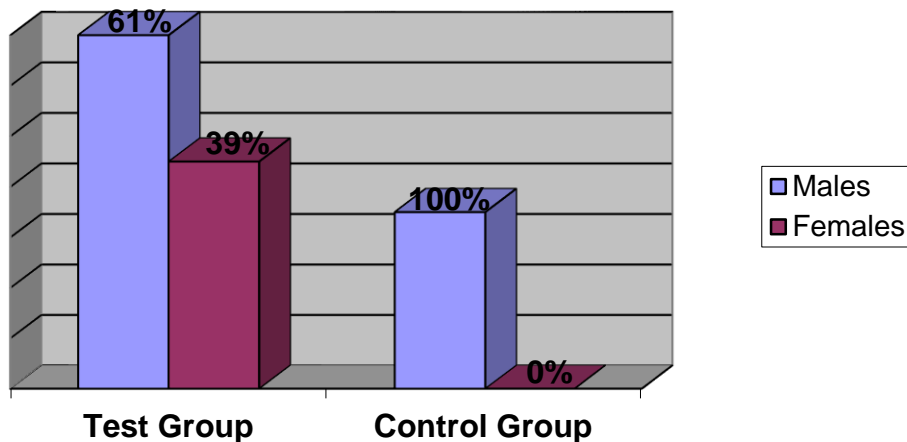
gender in 2010-2011.

Figure 2. Total Number of Alternative Education Assignments by Gender in 2011-2012.

This figure indicates by gender the number of ninth graders who were assigned to alternative education sites during 2011-2012.
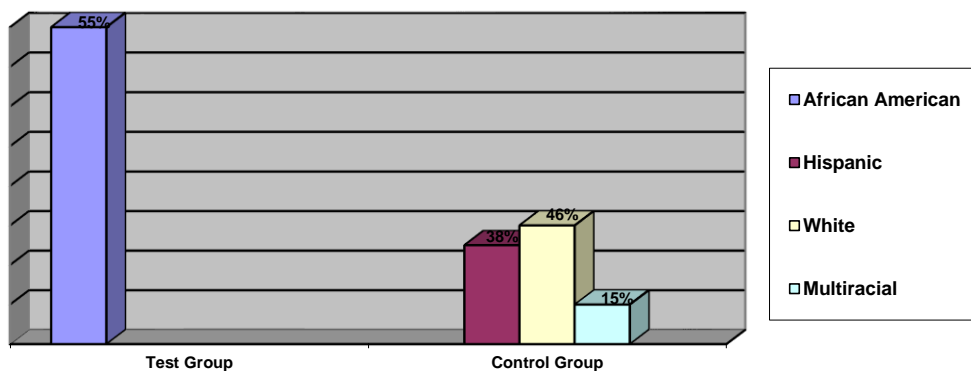

Figure 3. Total Number of Alternative Education Assignments by Ethnicity (N = 3147) in 2010-2011.

This figure depicts the number of alternative education assignments in 2010-2011 based on ethnicity for all ninth graders in the NC school district.
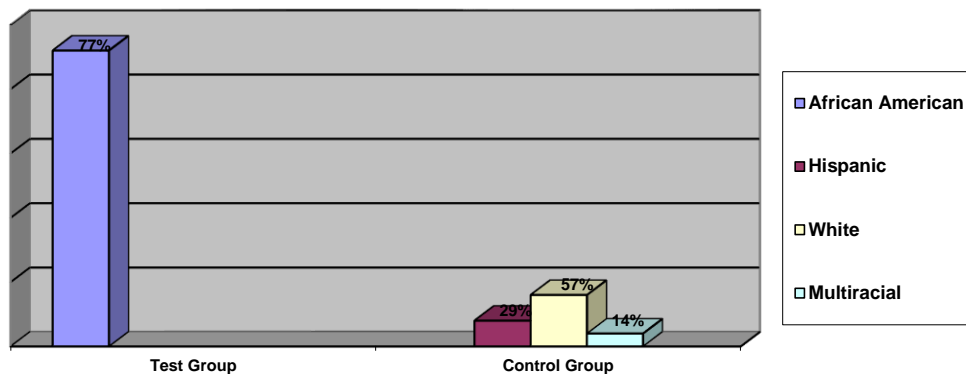
Figure 4. Total Number of Alternative Education Assignments by Ethnicity (N = 2949) in 2011-2012.

This figure depicts by ethnicity the number of ninth graders in the NC school district who received alternative education assignments in 2011-2012.

The total number of ninth graders in the NC school district during 2010-2011 by gender was 3,147 out of which 54% were males and 46% were females. In 2011-2012, there were 53% males and 47% females assigned to the alternative education setting out of 2,949 ninth graders.

In the SC companion evaluation,

> Data provided presents the demographics of the SC alternative program having more than 50% of the high school population being ninth-grade students. The demographics go on to share that the alternative population in general represents more than 85% of the student population being African-American males and females. The past 3 years of data produced the SC school district serving 1,000 students during that particular period of time. Each of those years produced a ninth-grade population that exceeded more than half of the high school students assigned to the program. The racial demographics also remained to be more than 85% African American during the past 3 years. (Mills, 2013, p. 67)

Limitations

There are several factors in the design of this evaluation that may affect its external validity. The ability to generalize the results from this evaluation to other alternative schools is limited due to small population and sample size as previously mentioned. Also, the fact that the researcher is an administrator in this district could have also affected information given in the surveys and focus interviews. It should be noted, however, that the researcher employed the use of proxies to conduct the interviews to avoid bias as much as possible. Furthermore, the time in which surveys and focus group questionnaires were conducted could have directly impacted the internal validity of this program evaluation. During the time of data gathering, administrators, teachers, and support staff within this NC southeastern district were undergoing a major transition that included a merger of the long-term suspension 180-day assignment with the 35-day assignment to the alternative education program. This transition included a move of some administrators, teachers, and support staff and termination of others involved in the daily facilitation of the existing 35-day alternative education program in the NC southeastern district.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on these findings, the companion investigators have concluded that the NC and SC alternative education programs were effective in decreasing recidivism for African-American males and females in the ninth grade and increasing student success when they returned to their traditional education settings.

According to the SC investigator,

The overall consensus from the focus groups in this SC school district convey that the alternative program was in fact well needed and doing well. There were obvious improvements suggested to make this alternative program even more productive and effective for its intended purpose. The open dialogue gave participants an opportunity to express their individual concerns and ideas while listening to others to better evolve to a

general consensus among the group. (Mills, 2013, p. 66)

Specific to the NC evaluation, the total number of students who attended the alternative program in 2009-2010 was 24. Of the 24 students, 15 were African American – four females and 11 males. There also were no repeat offenders during this school year. This point of interest in data analysis coupled with the perceptions of staff members that students returned to their program too frequently suggested that recidivism was higher in Grades 10, 11, and 12 for this NC southeastern district during the school years considered. Thus, all of these findings further validated the investigator's conclusion that the alternative education program of evaluation was going well and was indeed decreasing recidivism and increasing success of ninth-grade African-American males and females.

Research Questions

The proposed research questions in this program evaluation were answered directly after all data were gathered. This included qualitative data from surveys, focus group questionnaires, and interviews as well as quantitative data from disciplinary statistics from the NC southeastern district's database.

Research Question 1: What practices are contributing to students' success in the alternative program? Data analysis in this program evaluation showed that academic and behavioral interventions involving the use of alternative education counselors and case managers were significant contributions to the success of the program. Students who came to the program with academic deficiencies were counseled by a student counselor and dean of students who reviewed their transcripts for progress monitoring purposes and to ensure that students were on track to graduate with their 4-year graduation cohort. According to the American Counseling Association (2007), school counselors provide counseling programs that help students resolve emotional, social, or behavioral problems to help them develop a clearer focus or sense of direction. Students who were deficient had an opportunity to not only take

courses during the traditional education day, but they were also able to extend their academic achievement and progress by attending night school. Staff members consistently communicated a strong culture of caring for students coupled with the alternative education community's collaboration among parents, specialists, civil service groups, and staff. According to the NC Department of Public Instruction (2000), every alternative school must have a safe, orderly, caring school environment conducive to learning for all with collaboration among all stakeholders in the areas of mission statement, goals, objectives, belief systems, rules, routines, achievement, and high expectations. The school and program accountability clearly define classroom instruction, student behavior, and academic management in order to develop strong positive relationships that nurture success. Additionally, the prevalence of smaller class sizes staffed with highly qualified, licensed teachers and professionally trained support staff (e.g., BMTs, administrators, security personnel) gave students an opportunity to receive the much needed individualized attention that they were given while matriculating through the alternative education program. According to Great Schools (2013), class size is one factor to consider when evaluating a school's effectiveness. It is not small class size alone that ensures a good education; but quality of the teaching, school leadership, size of the school, the amount of parent involvement, and other factors are also important to consider.

Research Question 2: To what extent is the alternative program following its design as planned? Using the Barnes (2009) evaluation, the investigators in this companion evaluation identified common themes, compiled a frequency distribution of key themes and prioritized a complete summary of issues derived from the interviews. These themes were extracted from qualitative data from focus group interviews with the executive director, principal, support staff, and teachers of the NC southeastern public school district. As mentioned earlier, 16 staff members were surveyed and interviewed by the investigator and trained research assistants. Data showed that the program is following its design as planned but is strained by a

lack of collaboration with students' home school counselors, teachers, and administrators of assigned students.

A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation captured feedback from dropouts as reported by Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006):

> Seventy-one percent of young people surveyed felt that one of the keys to keeping students in school was to have better communication between the parents and the school, and increasing parental or guardian involvement in their child's education. Less than half said their school contacted their parents or themselves when they were absent (47 percent) or when they dropped out (48 percent). Respondents suggested that increased parental involvement could influence very basic things – such as ensuring students came to school every day and attended their classes. (p. v)

Staff members in this program evaluation consistently commented on the failure of the home schools to use the portfolios compiled by the NC alternative staff to share interventions and strategies that worked while students matriculated through the alternative setting. The home schools failed to consistently communicate with staff while students were in the alternative program. This communication between schools was thought to be as important, if not more important, than communication between the alternative school and parents. Staff also agreed in the survey results that students demonstrate better decision-making skills, more effective problem-solving skills, and respect toward their peers, adults, and staff, a higher time on task, increased attendance, and improvement in their grades. Theoretically, this supports the notion of a culture of caring, smaller class sizes, and positive reinforcement that would be beneficial for all staff in traditional education settings as well as alternative education settings. For alternative education staff in this program evaluation, the continued success of these ninth-grade African-

American males and females would be based upon collaboration between the alternative

education and home school staff via transitional support case managers who serve as

educational liaisons when students are reassigned back to their traditional school settings. Dr.

Sigrun K. Ertesvåg (2011) stated,

> Researchers have suggested that teachers generally avoid seeking opportunities to
>
> share or communicate in ways that impose on other teachers. Also, teachers value
>
> autonomy more than the chance to influence others' work (Hargreaves, 2005; Levine &
>
> Marcus, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). A growing body of research suggests that
>
> participation in more collaborative professional communities affect teaching practices
>
> and improves students' learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). A key finding is the
>
> critical role of collaboration and development of a collaborative culture to accomplish in
>
> schools to improve teaching practice and increase student achievement (Waldron &
>
> McLeskey, 2010). (p. 1)

Research Question 3: What is the effect of the alternative program on the

recidivism rate? The data analysis showed a decrease in the number of ninth-grade African-

American students who were assigned to the alternative program from the 2010-2011 to 2011-

2012 school years. There were 29 students assigned in 2010 and 23 students assigned in

2011. This constituted a decrease by six students. In both years considered in this evaluation,

there were no repeat offenders, thus supporting the notion that the NC alternative education

setting is successful in decreasing the recidivism rate and increasing the success rate of

students. While qualitative and quantitative data analyses pointed directly to a nonexistent

recidivism rate for ninth graders in the 2 consecutive school years considered in this program

evaluation, the investigator concluded that there is great concern for the recidivism rate for the

higher grade levels. To that end, focus group and administrative interviews yielded information

about the frequency of students who leave the program and return within a short amount of

time. This suggests that the alternative education setting's recidivism rate is higher for students in Grades 10, 11, and 12 within this NC southern public school district.

Outcome of NC and SC Program Evaluation

While the program evaluation findings showed that the alternative education setting in the NC and SC districts follow the design as planned, it also suggested a strong need for greater collaboration with the home schools to align interventions and practices that proved successful for students while they were in the alternative education setting. These elements were thought to be necessary by the alternative education staff in sustaining student success once they returned to their traditional education settings because students and parents often contacted the alternative education administrators about returning to that setting due to the lack of successful interventions implemented in their traditional education setting. Alternative education staff commented on the frequency of these requests that are denied. The investigators offered the following professional development model for the consideration of executive staff and Board of Education members to improve the overall success of not only African-American students but students of all ethnic subgroups:

1. Offer a year-round professional development series on the implementation of interventions and best practices within the alternative education settings that move students upward on the trajectory of success. These sessions should be led by successful Professional Development Master Teachers (PDMTs) who teach in the alternative settings and consistently achieve targeted outcomes with students.

2. Facilitate opportunities for traditional education setting teachers, administrators, counselors, case managers, and other support staff members who participate in this professional development series to peer observe and shadow a fellow alternative education setting staff member (e.g., job-alike) for a day. This will clearly give these peer observers a bird's eye view of interventions and best practices that get results as well as to provide firsthand

experiences with the culture of caring and commitment to teaching and learning that are embraced by the teachers and staff in the alternative education settings. Not only will these observers witness the effectiveness of this program firsthand but they will also understand the reality of the staff's commitment to educate students as a school and not a program as mentioned consistently in the focus group interviews.

3. Include former and current alternative education students and parents as facilitators in the professional development model who have matriculated or are currently moving through the program successfully. They will be able to give personal insight on the effective elements of this program and their needs when returning to individual traditional education settings. This would also address the strong theme of a lack of understanding of the program and its disconnectedness from schools and district specialists. Interests of staff might be piqued by emphasizing the involvement of successful students and parents in an effort to raise the awareness of how this may impact training. Parents will be selected after they have completed a volunteer coordinator form online and have been cleared by the individual districts. Also, staff members will be selected based upon their completion of professional development volunteer forms that have been reviewed and recommended by their immediate educational supervisors.

4. Special emphasis should be placed on the following key factors of alternative programs that are producing successful students (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

   a. Low student-to-teacher ratio to provide more individualized time with students as much as possible

   b. Structured classrooms with behavioral management that provide skill instruction and a high degree of praise

   c. Positive emphasis on behavior management including rewards and recognition for acceptable behavior

d. Adult "school" mentors who take special interest in the student and help guide the

   student in decision-making and problem-solving

e. Individualized behavior plans based on the components of functional behavioral

   assessments

f. Social skills instruction related to problem-solving and anger management

g. High-quality instruction which includes direct instruction for learning strategies and

   active learning

h. Parental involvement with frequent contacts and parent education programs

As mentioned earlier, the small student-teacher ratio allows for an increase in and more

effective student-staff connections, even though researchers do not particularly agree that this

factor significantly improves student achievement. The alternative education settings

consistently incorporate skill instruction and positive reinforcement as a part of their curriculum

and daily practices, which further results in more positive student-teacher relationships and

modeling of appropriate behaviors from one student to another. Furthermore, staff members in

the alternative education settings create a culture of caring through these methods. This

provides an even safer, positive learning environment for students and supports theoretical

concepts outlined in this program evaluation.

5. Intentional focus should be on cultural competency, diversity training, interpersonal

relations, organizational structure, sensitivity, tolerance, and understanding to increase the

success rate of the traditional education setting as well as alternative education setting teachers

in relating to students. This is necessary to address the lack of cultural background and

experience that teachers have regarding students of different ethnic groups. Moreover, it will

address the culture gaps that exist due to lack of knowledge that staff have about the

psychological and social implications of providing relevant, appropriate educational experiences

for students of diverse backgrounds.   Participants could view video clips of prerecorded

alternative education classroom activities. Then, facilitators could discuss with staff during training how to earn respect. Also, participants could role play and respond to scenarios to build the capacity of the group and organization at large.

6. Professional development content should also include Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) training, point system of positive reinforcement, and rewards that are successful in the alternative education setting. CPI methods have proven successful for students who are reassigned to alternative settings and diffuse situations that could be more serious if these methods were not executed. A system of positive reinforcement and rewards works not only in the alternative education setting but the traditional education setting as well. This professional development should raise the awareness that teachers do not provide positive reinforcement and rewards to students in general but specifically to students who display negative behaviors and are frequently assigned to alternative education settings.

7. There should be trainers from different ethnic groups to address the needs of cultural competency and diversity. This will also offer participants specific insight and knowledge on cultural differences and why some student-teacher relationships are not successful due to the lack of positive cultural references, awareness, and experiences.

This PDMT may affect policy in the long run by identifying the effectiveness of alternative education programs and offering training that opens staff members' eyes on the interventions that could also work in traditional education settings. The investigators will report the study and set up training in their districts. Perhaps this will impact educational policy now and in the future. By getting exposure to people and groups who can impact policy, such as may be found at national, state, and regional professional conferences, this evaluation may affect change again within administrators and other policymakers who make decisions in their educational organizations.

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