Alternative Schooling Strategy Brief

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Alternative schools are not recent additions to American public schools. In fact, they have been an educational option since at least the 1960s (Raywid, 1994; Romshek, 2007). Although alternative schools have been around for more than fifty years, there has been a significant increase in interest recently (Lehr, 2004). The number of alternative schools serving at-risk students has grown, and the legislation on alternative schools throughout the United States has increased as well (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004). In the most recent national study on public alternative schools and programs, the National Center for Educational Statistics found that during the 2000-2001 school year there were approximately 10,900 public alternative schools serving approximately 612,900 students who were at risk (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). There is little data regarding the growth of these programs during the ten years since that report, but it appears likely that the growth has been substantial.

Tier 3 Intervention
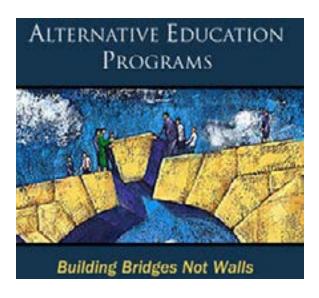
What is Alternative Schooling?

An alternative school is a non-traditional setting that provides for students' needs which cannot be met in a traditional setting (Lange & Sletten, 2002). It is a school which is an addition to the traditional public schools, and provides an education that is distinct from traditional schooling, special education, or vocational schooling (Lehr & Lange, 2003a). Alternative schools do not generally include private schools, but could include charter schools which are run by public entities where available. Generally alternative schools are run by public school systems.

However, definitions of alternative schools/programs do vary widely. According to Kochhar-Bryant and Lacey (2005), research becomes problematic because of "a lack of conceptual standardization and a standard definition" (p. 111). Each state has its unique definition of alternative schooling (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004). However, there is a steady characteristic found in alternative schools: they were created to meet the needs of students who would be best served outside of the traditional school setting. Because of this, alternative schools may look different from traditional schools, and from each other in their "organization, programs, and environment" (Raywid, 1994, p. 26). Despite the wide range of definitions of alternative schooling, most alternative schools are defined by small size, low teacher-student ratios, supportive and student-centered instruction, and creating long–term plans for students (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2008; Washburn-Moses, 2011). Many of these schools emphasize remedial education and primarily serve students who have experienced severe behavioral problems in traditional public school settings (Washburn-Moses, 2011).

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Types of Alternative Schooling

To further the confusion, alternative schooling is a term used to describe many different educational placements. Any setting outside of a conventional public school could be considered an alternative school setting: charter schools, gifted programs, magnet schools, vocational schools, GED programs (Romshek, 2007), private schools, faith-based schools, home schools (Reimer & Cash, 2003), schools without walls, residential schools, college-based alternative schools, schools-within-a-school (Schargel & Smink, 2001), and store front schools (Epp & Epp, 2001). Still others describe alternative schooling as more of a perspective than a program or a place (Morley, 1991).

Raywid (1994) distinguished between three types of alternative schools. Type I alternative schools have an adapted curriculum and teaching strategies. The students choose to attend. These may be schools intended to prevent dropout by providing extra supports to students who are behind in gaining credits or struggling academically in school, who are at risk of dropping out of school, and who choose this type of school. Type II alternative schools, also sometimes called "last-chance" or discipline alternative schools, are settings where students are placed (without choice) as a last chance before expulsion. These are schools created for students who were suspended long term, or who would otherwise be expelled from their regular school. These may include special education and general education students. Lastly, Type III schools focus on the behavioral needs of the student as well as the "social, emotional, and academic needs of the students." (Raywid, 1994, p. 27). Type III schools serve students with emotional or behavioral problems, and mental health needs where their behavior may make continuing in general education classes difficult. These schools can serve as a "day treatment" setting similar to what might be found in a psychiatric hospital day treatment program, although the relative emphasis on therapy or treatment, and the approach to "treatment" may vary. Often these schools serve students in special education who have behavioral needs which are not met in the typical school environment. These types of schools have become common in larger school districts to offer behavioral intervention not available or possible in the home school. They are sometimes also run by intermediate units or private agencies for contracting public school systems.

Although there is little current data, it is hypothesized that much of the growth in the number of alternative schools may have been in the Type II "discipline" alternative schools over the past 15 years. This has been stimulated by several factors. These include the movement towards zero tolerance policies as a result of highly publicized incidents of school violence resulting in involuntary transfer of students for disciplinary purposes to alternative schools. Another explanation is the No Child Left Behind law which emphasized high stakes testing and concern for student behavior resulting in students being removed from the classroom, and in so doing these students may not need to be included in the NCLB accountability (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Also, the case law and Amendments to IDEA required continuing education for students with disabilities who are suspended long term or expelled. This prompted many schools to establish these types of alternative programs. The quick growth of these types of alternative school programs without proven

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effectiveness have led to criticism that these programs in some places have simply become "warehouses" for students with behavior problems, and have contributed to the likelihood that these students will become engaged in the juvenile justice system (Kim et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2012;). Nevertheless, these schools may also prevent "drop out" or "push out" for these students and continue education towards graduation (Reimer & Cash, 2003; Romshek, 2007). See the *Strategy Brief* on *Discipline Recovery* and the *Project Brief* on *Project RENEW*.

Types of students. Alternative schools are a potential placement for students who are at risk. Being at risk is characterized by poor academic performance, attendance, and behavior (Romshek, 2007). Students may attend an alternative school as a disciplinary consequence due to suspension, expulsion (Lehr, 2004), truancy, substance abuse, disruptive behavior, fighting, arrest, or pregnancy (Becker, 2010). In addition, they may attend due to academic problems, or mental health needs (Becker, 2010).

Relationships to public schools. Almost 60% of alternative schools are not located in traditional public schools, but in separate buildings (Kleiner et al., 2002). Large urban districts are more likely to have alternative schools, as well as districts with a large population of minority students or students in poverty. Districts located in the southeast region of the United States are also more likely than other regions to have alternative schools (Kleiner et al., 2002).

Numbers of Students Attending. Estimates from 2000-2001 claim that the number of public alternative schools and programs for students who are at-risk fall somewhere between 10,900 and 20,000 (Lehr, 2004; Lehr & Lange, 2003b). Two studies in 2000 estimated that 1.3% of students in the public schools were receiving their education at an alternative school (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). The range of estimates reveal the lack of reliable data on the numbers of students involved in alternative schools, as well as the types of alternatives schools that are available (Cash, 2004).

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Choice to attend. Some students can attend an alternative school by choice, however many attend due to a mandatory placement. "Students may be pushed out of traditional schools in a subtle or overt manner" (Lehr, 2004, p. 3). Results of a survey conducted by Lehr et al. (2004), show that many students receive mandatory placements in these schools because of their troubling behaviors. Instead of receiving a suspension or expulsion, they are sent to an alternative school. The decision to place a student with disabilities in an alternative school should be made by the IEP team (Washburn-Moses, 2011).

Length of stay. The students' length of stay varies. It may be a temporary placement or may last until graduation (Lehr, 2004). Long-term stays have become available for students "with or without disabilities who have a history of failure and are at risk of dropping out" (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005).

Grades or ages served. Most alternative schools are intended for high school students, however some states allow younger students as well (Lehr, 2004). According to Kleiner et al. (2002), 88-92% of school districts offer alternative schools for high school students, 46-67% of districts offer alternative schools for middle school students, and 10-21% of districts offer them for elementary school students.

Typical goals. The educational goal of alternative schools is to assist students in becoming as productive and independent as possible upon entering the community, or re-entering a traditional school (Morley, 1991). This is promoted through small enrollments, individualized instruction to focus on the academic basics (Lehr, 2004), self-paced curriculum, and an emphasis on individual accomplishments. When classrooms have a relaxed structure, it allows the teacher to have more flexibility to work with students individually (Cox, Davidson, & Bynum, 1995).

Students with Disabilities in

Alternative Schools

The relationship between students with disabilities and alternative schooling is very important because a significant number of students with special needs are at-risk for dropping out of school (Lehr et al., 2004). In fact, they are among the most likely to drop out (Lehr & Lange, 2003a), with a dropout rate twice as high as a student without special needs (Lehr, 2004).

Alternative schools have shifted from simply educating youth who are at-risk or have dropped out to educating students with special needs with behavioral issues that require a nontraditional setting (Quinn, Rutherford, & Osher, 1999). Alternative schools aim to address individualized needs for students, thus it makes sense that an increasing number of students with disabilities are assigned to them (Cash, 2004). Students with disabilities who have been expelled or suspended for disciplinary reasons may be enrolling in alternative schools because of the protections they have through Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to continue to receive services in accord with their IEP (IDEA; Lehr, 2004). According to Cash (2004), alternative schools are also used as an Interim Alternative Educational Setting for students with disabilities who have been

suspended or expelled. However it is unknown to what degree this is happening (Lehr & Lange, 2003a).

Minimal research. There is minimal state-level (Lehr et al., 2004) and national research stating the degree to which students with disabilities are participating in alternative education (Lehr, 2004). Although the data is sparse, Lehr estimates that 12% of students in alternative schools are students in special education with active IEPs (Lehr et al., 2008). States say that between 19-60% of students in their alternative schools have disabilities. The majority of those students are perceived to have learning

disabilities, emotional/behavior disorders (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lehr, 2004), and other health impairments such as Attention Deficit Disorders (Lehr et al., 2004; Lehr et al., 2008).

Dismissal From special education. When students with disabilities enroll in alternative schools, their special education labels may or may not be continued. Their Individual Education Plan (IEP) may be examined and used, revised, or discontinued (Lehr & Lange, 2003a). Dismissing students from special education should depend on the individual circumstances and needs of each student; requiring students or parents to be dismissed from special education in order to participate in a public school run alternative programs would clearly violate

federal law. The motivation for schools in doing so may have to do with a lack of appropriately trained special education staff at the alternative setting, as well as the desire to avoid the other requirements of providing special education services. As a result, no records of these types of "requirements" are typically kept making it impossible to judge the extent of this practice. In their survey, Washburn-Moses (2011) reported that 82% of the sample indicated that their alternative school enrolled students with disabilities, but only 60% endorsed that their alternative school employed licensed special education teachers, suggesting that some students in alternative settings may not have access to appropriate services from qualified professionals.

Some believe that students in special education can have their needs met in an alternative setting, where the student-teacher ratio is small, and they could receive individualized instruction (Lehr, 2004). However, some educators want students with special needs to receive their education in traditional schools, truly inclusive settings, where they already have special education supports integrated through Individual Education Programs (IEPs). They claim that students without disabilities need alternative schools more because they may not have the support they need in traditional placements (Lehr & Lange, 2003a).

Questions about alternative schools and students with disabilities remain unanswered. Are these placements considered the least restrictive environment (LRE) for each student? How are the policies, processes, and procedures in alternative schools serving students with disabilities? Are alternative schools able to provide suitable assistance that matches each student's disabilities (Cash, 2004)? Lehr et al. (2008) also highlights three main concerns surrounding students with disabilities in alternative school settings: a) licensure of staff to work with students with disabilities in alternative schools, b) quality of services for students with disabilities, and c) appropriate transition services for students with disabilities into and out of alternative schools.

What Do We Know About Alternative Schooling?

Some alternative schools have had success in creating an environment that is more advantageous for students than a traditional school (Cash, 2004). According to Kochhar-Byrant & Lacey (2005), there is a growing body of research and anecdotal reports showing that students who could not succeed in traditional schools can succeed in the small, personalized environment of an alternative school. Cash (2004) claims that a significant amount of local and state outcome data suggests that alternative schools make a difference in the lives of students who have previously struggled in traditional schools.

Given the great variation in the purposes, locations, programming, clientele, and intended outcomes of alternative schools, research to address the general or overall value of these programs has been difficult and has not occurred. In our search, no comprehensive or con-

"All students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day in the same way."

—William G. Spady

trolled studies of the overall value of alternative schools were found. Instead research on alternative programs tends to be specific evaluative research of programs, along with anecdotal or qualitative research descriptions of outcomes for specific students.

Positive findings. A majority of students who attend alternative schools enjoy it (Cox et al., 1995) and have positive experiences in that environment (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Results of a 2011 study (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011) indicate that traditional schools are lacking the personal relationships with teachers, school wide focus on maturity and responsibility, understanding about social issues, and positive peer relationships that alternative schools often provide, at least when students choose the alternative school. In addition, discipline problems and delinquent behaviors tend to be reduced in alternative schools (Cash, 2004; Cox et al., 1995; Kochhar-Byrant & Lacey, 2005; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Students in alternative schools have reported higher rates of educational achievement, self-esteem (Cox et al., 1995), earned credits (Cash, 2004; Raywid, 1994), social competence, self-actualization (Cash, 2004), attendance, and good attitudes toward education (Cash, 2004; Cox et al., 1995).

Negative findings. Some research is not favorable about alternative schooling. According to Raywid (1994), a study in 1981 showed that "last chance alternative schools" fail to resolve the issues they were intended to resolve. Another researcher notes that alternative schools do not alter delinquent behavior. The positive aspects of alternative schools are not effective enough to change students' behavior (Cox et al., 1995). Minimal change was found on standardized test scores over the school year (Lange & Sletten, 2002) and mixed results have been reported regarding academic success (Cash, 2004). Washburn-Moses (2011) claims that students with disabilities being served in alternative schools may still not be receiving appropriate services, particularly students who have criminal law violations. In particular, alternative schools with a high percentage of students with disabilities were more likely to

place students in those settings due to criminal offenses (e.g., drugs, alcohol, or weapon possession). These schools also had higher levels of staff security on site. Concern has been raised over the segregation of delinquent students in alternative settings away from typical peers. High concentrations of delinquent students in alternative schools may also aid in perpetuating group attitudes that support delinquent behavior and threaten overall perceptions of school safety. School discipline procedures including related alternative schools have come under heavy criticism for exacerbating issues which result in these students becoming involved in the Juvenile Justice System – the so called "School to Prison Pipeline" (Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2010).

The only thing alternative about many alternative schools is the name (Romshek, 2007). If these schools provide more of the same (i.e., ineffective approaches) things as traditional public schools, they're really not fulfilling their intended purpose (Epp & Epp, 2001). Alternative schools have received a bad name (Raywid, 1994) due to ineffective programming and being perceived as a place where bad kids and misfits can be discarded (McGee, 2001; Romshek, 2007).

Long term impact. The successes of alternative schools may only be temporary successes. When students return to traditional public schools, the problems they may have had before may recur, argues Raywid (1994). Many studies show the short-term results of alternative schools, but the long-term results are not discussed (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Much of the information about alternative schools comes from anecdotes, and not hard data (Schargel & Smink, 2001). In addition, those who are evalu-

ating schools may be connected with the school and may not give an impartial evaluation (Lange & Sletten, 2002). In order for alternative schools to have a legitimate place within education, more research is necessary (Cash, 2004), specifically research that relies on more than stories and hypotheses (McGee, 2001).

Summary. In summary there is little overall research support for the value of alternative schools, even though there is a fair amount of anecdotal support for their value in serving some students who would not be successful in more traditional settings. The wide range of goals, curriculum, and programming details also makes overall evaluation very difficult. Individual programs may have very positive evaluation results, but often it is not clear if or how these specific programs could be adapted for use elsewhere. If schools implement alternative settings, they should be prepared to document and evaluate the outcomes of their alternative schools in order to demonstrate their value.

Making Alternative Schooling Work-Implementation

Most experts agree that if alternative schools are employed, they should provide students with individualized attention (Lehr, 2004) in a small school with small classes and a low student-teacher ratio (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lehr, 2004; Romshek, 2007). The alternative school must have independence from the traditional public schools (Romshek, 2007), and an all-encompassing structure that meets the students "social, academic, psychological, and career-related needs" (Kerka, 2003, p. 9). These programs must be long-term (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005) and have a set mission statement (Schargel & Smink, 2001) and structured rules and norms with continual monitoring (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). In addition, programs focused on a specific target population will be more likely to produce positive results (Cox et al., 1995).

Epp and Epp (2001) suggest offering whatever supports students need to stay in school. These may include a flexible structure (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005), school schedule, work pace (Epp & Epp, 2001; Lehr, 2004), or attendance policy (Epp & Epp, 2001). Other suggestions include keeping schools open year round and giving students credit for their learning from previous classes and experiences (Epp & Epp, 2001).

Staff. School leadership is key when determining whether or not an alternative school will succeed or fail (Cash, 2004). Teachers who are kind, yet strict are powerful contributors to successful alternative schools (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). The staff members must be given support (Lehr, 2004; Romshek, 2007), development opportunities, and flexibility in their roles (Romshek, 2007) and teaching techniques (Epp & Epp, 2001).

Teaching in alternative schools can be very difficult, so staff (and students) shouldn't be placed in alternative schools, but choose the placement (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Romshek, 2007). Therefore, staff members of alternative schools should not be incompetent or inexperienced (Cash, 2004). A better fit would be veteran teachers who choose to work with students in an alternative setting (Cash, 2004). Clearly if an alternative school serves students with disabilities, appropriately trained special education teachers should be part of the staff.

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Personalized education. Curriculum for students in alternative schools should be holistic (Kerka, 2003), multicultural (Cash, 2004; Kerka, 2003), and student-focused (Romshek, 2007). Education must be individualized (Romshek, 2007), engaging (Raywid, 1994), and meaningful, providing students with practical living and job-related skills (Lehr, 2004). Students in alternative schools may also benefit from community service involvement, leadership opportunities, social skill classes (Kerka, 2003), and the use of technology (Romshek, 2007).

A significant educational goal should be to increase the students' success (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Teachers must have high expectations (Kerka, 2003) for students, while providing them with excellent instruction based on current best practices (Romshek, 2007). Teachers must track student progress and be accountable for their growth (Lehr & Lange, 2003a).

Behavior. Alternative schools must have a clearly stated discipline code (Schargel & Smith, 2001) coupled with a set of norms for acceptable behaviors (Epp & Epp, 2001). If students are enrolled in part because of behavior issues, the program should provide support for appropriate behavior and treatment for behavioral needs. Students should be frequently praised and given reinforcement for positive behavior (Romshek, 2007). Teachers must have structured classrooms (Romshek, 2007) where they expect students to behave (Kerka, 2003). Individualized behavior plans should be anchored in Functional Behavior Analyses (Romshek, 2007).

Relationships and community. Successful alternative schools are reported to have a sense of community (Kerka, 2003; Romshek, 2007). Students need role models (Epp & Epp, 2001), mentors, involved parents (Romshek, 2007), and a caring group of peers (Kerka, 2003). According to Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey (2005), one of the things that help students the most is a "warm, accepting relationship with one or more adults" (p. 112). In order to succeed in an alternative school, students need strong relationships with warm, educated adults (Kerka, 2003).

Finally, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) provide advice to those working with at-risk students from students who are in an alternative school. The students provided suggestions related to six topics:

1. Teacher-student relationships. Provide personal attention to students.
2. Home-school connection. Inquire about students' out of school lives.
3. School climate. Seek to improve peer culture and schoolwide cohesion among students.
4. Flexible rules and consequences. Institute reasonable rules and expectations and seek student input and explanation for violations.
5. Offer education and support services. Provide in-school support services or referrals on mental health or social issues.
6. Strengths-based approach. Focus on student strengths.

Conclusion

Although there is little overall research on alternative schooling due in part to the widely disparate types of alternative school programs, there is program evaluation and anecdotal support for their effectiveness for some students. These programs are commonplace, and must be considered a part of the effort to keep students, particularly students with behavioral needs in school. There is anecdotal evidence that these programs can be beneficial to students who would otherwise not participate and complete a school program.

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