



# Buffalo Public Schools

*Putting children and families first to ensure high academic achievement for all*

## INFORMATION CAPSULE

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Ruzanna Topchyan, Ph.D

### ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

#### AT A GLANCE

Alternative education programs—broadly defined as educational activities that fall outside the traditional K–12 curriculum—frequently serve students who are at risk of school failure. States define alternative education differently. Research suggests that the definition of alternative education should include the target population, setting (for example, within a school or in a standalone school), services, and structure (for example, during or outside of school hours). It seems that there is certain variety in the design and focus of alternative education programs across the nation. A study conducted by Porowski, O’Conner and Luo (2014) identified that in 35 states, alternative education serves primarily students with behavioral problems. Twenty-one states offer alternative education services in regular academic instruction, fourteen states offer it as counseling, 13 states offer it as social/life skills, 12 states offer it as job readiness and 11 states offer it as behavioral services (e.g. anger management, conflict resolution). Additionally, 18 states reported alternative education programs to be held in separate schools while 12 states indicated that alternative programs may be held within a regular school. As it can be seen from the information above, alternative education can be designed both as a separate school and as a program component. The purpose of this brief is to report some research conducted on alternative education programs specifically focusing on the what works and what does not work.

#### Introduction

At the federal level, an alternative school is defined as “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education” (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010, p. C-1). Alternative education programs or alternative schools are designed to provide all students, especially those with challenging behaviors, low motivation, poor attendance, failing grades, or those afraid to even walk into the school building, with an engaging and enriching educational experience.

The concept of “alternative education” suggests that for learning to occur, formal or traditional education is not the only mode of instruction. As Morley (1991, p. 8) noted “there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur”. Over the past half century, alternative education programs have emerged in response to the inability of mainstream schools to meet the needs of all students. Atkins (2008) noted that “alternative schools generally serve a variety of students with an agreed-on characteristic—the students are at risk” (p. 345). Alternative programs have been attempting to connect and engage at-risk students within small educational learning communities. A wide array of purposes that have been driving the alternative programs included dropout prevention, remedial education, therapeutic restoration, holistic development and short-term interventions. Additionally, a variety of educational services emerged to cater the needs of alternative educational customers (Hlady, 2013).

### **Types of Alternative Programs**

A number of researchers tried to create typologies for alternative education programs. Two of them are presented below. Raywid (1994, p. 26–31) suggested a three-type typology of alternative programs based on program goals:

Type I - schools offering full time, multiyear education options to all kinds of students (i.e. needing more individualized instruction, seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas). These programs diverge from standard school organization and practices and are staffed with especially caring, professional staff. Class size is small and a personalized, whole-student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling. Models range from schools within schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums.

Type II - schools whose distinguishing characteristic is discipline, which aims to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Students typically do not choose to attend but are sent to the school for specified time periods or until behavior requirements are met. Since placement is short-term, the curriculum is limited to a few basic, required courses or is entirely supplied by the *home school* as a list of assignments. Familiar models include last-chance schools and in-school suspension.

Type III - programs provide short-term but therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create academic and behavioral barriers to learning. Although Type III programs target specific populations—offering counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation—students can choose not to participate.

Roderick of the University of Chicago (cited in Aron, 2006) suggested a four-group typology with a heavy focus on students’ *educational needs*. Rather than focusing on a student’s demographic characteristic (or ‘risk factor’) or even a program characteristic, this typology focuses on the educational problems or challenges students face. Based on this, several distinct groups have been identified:

- Group 1 - Students who have fallen ‘off track’ because they have gotten into trouble and need short-term systems of recovery to route them back into high schools. The goal of getting them back into regular high schools is both appropriate and realistic for this group.

- Group 2 - Students who have prematurely transitioned to adulthood either because they are/are about to become parents or have home situations that do not allow them to attend school regularly (e.g., immigrant children taking care of siblings while their parents work, those coming out of the juvenile justice system with many demands on their time, etc.).
- Group 3 - Students who have fallen substantially off track educationally but are older and are returning to obtain the credits they need to transition into community colleges (or other programs) very rapidly. For instance, older individuals who are just a few credits away from graduation (many of whom dropped out at age 16 or 17), or are transitioning out of the jail system, or have had a pregnancy and are now ready to complete their secondary schooling.
- Group 4 - Students who have fallen substantially behind educationally— they have significant problems, very low reading-levels, and are often way over age for grade. Many of them have been retained repeatedly and a number of them have come out of special education. They include 17- or 18-year-olds with third and fourth grade reading levels who have never graduated from 8th grade (or who have gone to high school for a few years but have never actually accumulated any credits).

Rodderick argues that by targeting a particular demographic or ‘problem’ group, such as pregnant/parenting teens, programs may be setting themselves up for failure if the students encompass too much educational diversity. As a group, pregnant/parenting teens may include students who are two credits away from graduation, others who are wards of child welfare agencies and who have multiple problems such as being far over age for grade, and yet others who have significant behavioral problems and may be weaving in and out of the juvenile justice system. No single school or program can be expected to handle such a wide array of educational and other needs.

### **Empirical Research on Alternative Education Programs**

A number of studies looked at what works and does not work in alternative programs. Mills, McGregor, Baroutsis, Te Riele and Hayes (2016) conducted a multi-sited ethnography of alternative schools to identify the ways in which three alternative education sites in Australia support socially just education for their students and how injustice is addressed within these schools. The researchers argue for the need to consider the importance of *affective* and *contributive* aspects of justice in schools. Researchers have contended that a socially just education for students attends to Fraser’s (2009) dimensions of social justice in respect of economic, cultural and political inequities, but then drawing upon the work of Lynch (2012) who also argued that these dimensions are enhanced by the inclusion of affective and contributive forms of justice, which pay attention to inequities in relational care and individual potential for meaningful participation. The results of the study suggested that the teacher participants expressed a strong commitment to the social and emotional well-being of their students. Affective justice (in the forms of significant support structures and respectful, caring relationships) was of primary concern to them. Many of the students interviewed indicated that its absence in their former school(s) had been a key factor in their departure from the mainstream sector. This concern with affective justice was thus critical to the success of such schools. Researchers suggested that if it exists in isolation from other necessary elements, care is insufficient for ensuring the provision of socially just schooling. The quality of curriculum and pedagogy were also considered important. Researchers argued that the quality of curricular choices and pedagogical approaches made available to young people in alternative education sites is fundamental to the achievement of contributive justice, and hence social justice. Maillet (2017) identified six powerful practices as

essential pieces to the academic and behavioral success of the students that alternative education programs can afford. The six practices that were suggested are as follows:

1. *provide active, creative instruction* – i.e. introducing students to new concepts and providing them an opportunity to make decisions for themselves and choose from available resources.
2. *integrate service-learning opportunities into all aspects of the program* - i.e. engaging students in activities that address community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development.
3. *accelerate student learning* – hold a belief that every student can learn and achieve at higher levels.
4. *build time into the schedule to connect with kids* – i.e. develop trusting and positive relationships with students, acknowledge them as people by learning about their interests, personalities, and values.
5. *have a plan B (and C) for every student every day* – i.e. creating of calming techniques (e.g. reflection room, punching bag) to help students to refocus or release negative energy.
6. *utilize college students and community members* – i.e. connecting with local colleges and community organizations to build a team that can support school initiatives.

Plows, Bottrell and Te Riele (2015) conducted a study with marginalized young people in alternative education settings—referred to as flexible learning programs (FLPs)—which were thought to provide a powerful ‘counterspace’ to damaging experiences of mainstream schooling. Interviews were conducted with staff, students, and graduates from two FLPs. The results of the study suggested that students valued a diverse range of academic, social, and personal outcomes that support a more expansive vision of education and monitor student success. The researchers also noted that the FLPs were both a counter-space and a space that connected back to the mainstream, optimally understood as third space, a hybrid place, bringing together the conventional and the alternative to create a valued and valuable education for marginalized young people.

Zolkoski, Bullock, and Gable (2016) conducted an interpretive and descriptive qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. They sought to explore factors of resilience in individuals who graduated from alternative education settings. Three themes emerged from the coded data:

*Caring teachers* – Students reported that for them it was extremely important that teachers cared for them, that they believed in them, were supportive, and wanted them to succeed. Moreover, the participants’ ideal teacher was one who was helpful, understanding, patient, and showed students that he/she cares.

*Positive discipline procedures* – students reported about their alternative school utilizing positive discipline systems through the use of point systems or step systems. Research supports positive behavior management techniques as an effective practice to reduce inappropriate behaviors, in turn increasing the percentage of students engaged in assigned activities (e.g. Nelson, Sprague, Jolivette, Smith, and Tobin, 2009).

*Small student-to-teacher ratio* – Being in an environment with a small student-to-teacher ratio and having the ability to make accommodations to meet the goals of students were other important

elements of alternative education programs for participants. Students felt that their needs were better met by having more one-on-one interactions with their teachers.

Slaten, Irby, Tate and Rivera (2015) conducted a study to examine predominately African - American urban alternative schools' unique approach to reaching students' social and emotional learning needs. The researchers interviewed 15 staff members at the school, ranging from teachers to mental health professionals to community educators, to obtain a thorough understanding of the unique approaches to SEL within urban alternative education. The findings of the study suggested four overarching domains or themes:

**Domain 1 – Pedagogy:** (a) *Social-emotional learning* – investing efforts to bring attention to the social and emotional needs of the youth to help them learn how to cope effectively and process experiences throughout their lives; (b) *Personalized Learning* – in order to individualize learning, online systems were mentioned to allow student and staff flexibility, and (c) *Cultural relevance to youth* –focusing on what is current and relevant to youth in urban communities in order to engage them, (d) *Social/political content* - focusing on raising students' awareness of ways society may be placing them in a one-down position, with impact on their ability to overcome social, emotional, or academic barriers that stem from poverty, racism, and oppression and integrating culture and racial identity into discussions at the school (specifically what it means to be African-American or Black).

**Domain 2 – Relationships:** (a) *being vulnerable with students* (i.e. self-disclosure, sharing their own struggles and triumphs and relating those to the students' experiences), (b) encouraging students - encouraging students and recognizing their strengths, (c) *knowing students outside of school* - attempting to understand youth in school through their contextual experiences outside of school fosters a strong bond between students and staff, (d) *relational needs as pre-requisite to learning* - relating to students prior to being able to help them learn.

**Domain 3 - Community-Based Model:** (a) opportunity for emotional healing through communication with community, (b) using community as a resource, and (c) professional development (i.e. receiving training and other professional development from members of the surrounding community.)

**Domain 4 - School Environment:** (a) *climate or respect* (i.e. school being a community in which students and staff members were respected and students felt they could communicate candidly with staff), (b) emotional intelligence (i.e. staff awareness of the need for emotional healing for youth), (c) school vision and leadership (i.e. a vision and atmosphere that were conducive to engaging marginalized youth).

## **Towards Evaluation of Alternative Programs**

Hinds (2013) suggested an *Alternative High School Program Evaluation Toolkit* developed to support school leaders and evaluation teams made up of internal and external stakeholders as they facilitate the program evaluation process. The features of the Toolkit address the need for alternative school evaluation to be practical, useful, fair and accurate. The *Evaluation Toolkit* includes training materials, protocols, an evaluation planning worksheet and an evaluation planning matrix that supports the team in conducting the evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

Alternative educational programs emerged to help educators troubleshoot in education. Research conducted in different states suggests that there are different models of alternative education programs. A number of alternative program typologies have been suggested. Additionally, research

was conducted to identify what makes alternative programs successful. The take away from the discussion above is that the school districts should identify their needs in alternative education so that the alternative education model is carefully designed and implemented. There are also toolkits developed for evaluating alternative education programs that can also be used.

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