National High School Center
at the American Institutes for Research

Technical Assistance Response on Dropout Prevention

Question:

What considerations should be taken into account when implementing an alternative high school program within the context of NCLB and what are good examples of research-based alternative high school programs that have already been implemented?

Alternative high schools are designed to give high school students with special needs a discrete learning environment that caters to those needs. Often, students placed in alternative high schools are removed from traditional high schools because their special needs disrupt other students' learning or because the regular school is not equipped to meet their needs. This response gives a practical overview of how states are defining and implementing alternative education schools and programs. In addition, it focuses on information that helps place alternative high schools in the context of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

Specifically, the response is divided into discrete sections focusing on some of the principal themes and provisions of NCLB that state and local stakeholders may consider when establishing or altering alternative high school programs. The first section explores how states define alternative education schools and programs, pointing out the nuanced definitions across states. The second section considers how progress toward adequate yearly progress (AYP) is determined for alternative high schools. The third section discusses the specifics of highly qualified teacher (HQT) requirements within the context of alternative high schools. The fourth section offers examples of how states are using online instruction to provide flexibility to both students and teachers within alternative schools. The final section is an overview of resources regarding how alternative schools are funded.

Additionally, the response lists annotated resources that provide information on research-based alternative high school programs and resources that correspond with each of the five sections.

Varying Definitions of Alternative Education Schools and Programs Across States

States are free to construct their own definitions of what alternative education schools and programs look like and whom they serve. As a result, there is a wide range of state definitions for schools and programs and of where these schools and programs fit into the larger education systems. For instance, Massachusetts defines alternative education as "an initiative within a public school district, charter school, or educational collaborative established to serve at-risk students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007). Alternative education in Massachusetts is geared to serve students who are pregnant or parenting, truant, suspended or expelled, returned dropouts, delinquent, or otherwise not meeting other requirements. Alternative education in Massachusetts, therefore, does not include private

schools, home schools, General Educational Development (GED) services, or gifted and talented programs.

West Virginia couches its definition of alternative education programs with even more specificity than does Massachusetts by defining such programs as "a temporary authorized departure from the regular school program designed to provide educational and social development for students whose disruptive behavior places them at risk of not succeeding in the traditional school structures and in adult life without positive interventions" (West Virginia Department of Education, 2000). In this way, West Virginia's purpose for alternative education programs is ensconced in the dual needs of providing a safe and orderly learning environment for all students while continuing to meet the particular educational needs of disruptive students. Though the definitions of alternative education in Massachusetts and West Virginia are based in the context of serving the needs of disruptive students—and by extension those whose education is hurt by such disruption—other states have opted for more expansive definitions.

For instance, Oregon defines its alternative education policy simply as "a school or separate class group designed to best serve students' educational needs and interests and assist students in achieving the academic standards of the school district and the state" (Oregon Department of Education Office of Educational Improvement and Innovation, 2006). While applying to the needs of at-risk student populations like the ones cited above, this definition includes programs for students needing accelerated learning opportunities, including the state's Expanded Option Program (for more information, see the Oregon Department of Education's Web site: http://www.ode.state.or.us/pubs/eii/acceleratedlearningopsprimer.pdf). This program allows students to take academic and technical classes in postsecondary institutions so that they can earn dual credit. This and similar programs within the state are generally geared toward higher achieving students to keep them engaged in school throughout the last year of high school when plans for postsecondary life (such as college acceptance) are already in place.

Alternative Schools and AYP

Depending on the particular structure of the alternative school and its place within the education system more generally, progress toward AYP can either be determined for the school itself or be calculated into the AYP of the original school that refers the student. For the most part, however, alternative schools, like other schools, fall under the purview of NCLB and its accountability requirements. Often, however, students who attend alternative schools cross district lines, as in Minnesota. In such cases, the test scores and statistics count toward the initial school or district of residence. This ensures that schools and districts do not exclude poorly performing students to avoid being held accountable for their level of achievement.

In some instances, the population of tested students in each school may number in the single digits. In cases like this, the U.S. Department of Education may work with states as they develop their accountability plans to identify solutions. For instance, in June 2007, the Department of Education allowed Tennessee to amend its accountability plan to sum student assessment results over 2 to 3 years until each subpopulation has at least 10 tested students. Though this amendment applies to all schools, it is particularly germane to alternative schools considering that they tend to be smaller than their more traditional counterparts.

Diplomas earned through alternative schools

Most states offer a regular diploma to students graduating from alternative schools. A survey conducted by the University of Minnesota found that 30 out of 34 states offered the option for a regular diploma to students graduating from alternative schools (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004). Other options included a modified diploma, a GED, a certificate of attendance, or some other credential. It should be noted that because the definition of alternative schools and whom those schools serve varies across states, it is difficult to discern what it means if students are not given an option for the regular diploma in alternative schools. It is possible that alternative schools are meant specifically to grant GEDs or are only temporary programs where students learn needed skills in an alternative environment before returning to their traditional school.

Highly qualified teachers in alternative schools

Generally, a teacher in a public alternative high school or high school program must meet NCLB HQT requirements if

- the teacher is the teacher of record who delivers the instruction or evaluates the distance or electronic instructional program;
- the instruction is in any of the NCLB core content areas: English, reading, or language arts; mathematics; science; foreign languages (French, German, Spanish, Russian, Latin, Japanese); social studies (civics and government, economics, history, geography); or arts (visual, music, drama); and
- the students are receiving diploma graduation credits.

In a survey of 35 states conducted by the University of Minnesota, 33 (94%) reported that staff were required to be certified or licensed (see Lehr et al., 2004, above).

Online Instruction

Alternative schools are using online instruction for a variety of reasons and for different segments of the student population. Alternative programs in South Dakota help engage at-risk students in alternative schools through online instruction. The main reason that instructors and students favor online instruction is that it provides a great degree of flexibility for both. Teachers like the flexibility it offers in developing and presenting the curriculum, while students like the ability to engage in the curriculum around their own schedules, which do not always match up with that of the regular school day. Moreover, it gives at-risk students increased time to formulate responses to questions and assignments, without being put on the spot in front of peers. This helps them engage in the curriculum while giving them more flexibility in how they learn.

On the other end of the spectrum, online instruction gives high-achieving students an opportunity to take courses they may not otherwise have access to. Florida is home to the first public online school, called the Florida Virtual School, which offers students across the state the chance to enroll on a course-by-course basis. Students remain enrolled in their own traditional school and receive diplomas from their own district but have access to an extended menu of courses at no additional cost (the courses are available to students outside of Florida for a fee). This framework allows students to

engage in the regular face-to-face instruction at their own high schools while supplementing the standard curricula with an added base of potential courses.

Alternative School Funding

Because alternative programs and high schools are diverse in their offerings, a wide range of potential funding streams support them from various sources. Though some sources are limited in their scope for funding, resulting in support only for very specific programs, others define and view alternative schools and programs in more general terms.

On the federal level, funding may come from various agencies. The Department of Labor has a few funding streams aimed generally at programs that promote job skills and workforce participation. For instance, the Workforce Investment Act (http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/wia/act.cfm) provides funding for programs that offer basic and remedial education, work experience, training, and mentoring programs and is specifically for programs serving children who face the same barriers as many students who are enrolled in alternative schools and programs. The Department of Education offers funding streams that can be used to support alternative schools. Most prominent is NCLB, which along with its Title I funding requires the usual accountability measures. Additionally, the Department of Education's Public Charter Schools (http://www.ed.gov/programs/charter/index.html) program supports the planning, development, and initial implementation of charter schools. Though charter schools are not necessarily alternative schools by definition, they can be founded as alternative schools. The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technology Education Act (http://www.ed.gov/policy/sectech/leg/perkins/index.html) also grants money to programs that offer students career and technical education, which are both potential components within alternative schools and programs. Though these programs are not aimed specifically at state education agencies (SEAs) or local education agencies (LEAs), many allow these agencies to compete for funds. However, because of the specific nature of many of these and other federal funding streams, money from the federal government can usually be used to fund only specific components of an alternative education program or school.

State-level funding of alternative schools varies by state. Tennessee funds its schools through a formula called the Basic Education Program (BEP). The BEP formula uses district enrollment statistics—along with other factors—to determine the level of state funding for districts. To receive this money, local districts must match state funds on the basis of ability to pay and the tax base. The BEP formula currently makes a special allotment of $3.01 for each K–12 student enrolled in the district plus an additional $25.34 for each student in grades 7–12. For the 2004–05 school year, this funding formula raised $8.9 million from the state to fund alternative programs, with an additional $3 million from local districts. However, in 2005 the Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Education Accountability found this budget to be lacking in properly supporting alternative schools, finding that, in general, districts did not provide enough money to support alternative schools in particular.

Generally, state-funded initiatives for alternative high schools require some sort of matching funds from local school boards. For example, Alabama school boards must provide a 25% match on all state funds. Lastly, SEAs and LEAs have the option to apply for grants from foundations and similar sources. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is a top supporter of alternative high schools, providing millions of dollars of investment in alternative programs.

Resources

(these include National High School Center and other resources)

Research-Based Alternative Education Programs Resources

Aron, L. Y. (2003). *Towards a typology of alternative education programs: A compilation of elements from the literature*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved October 2007 from the Urban Institute Web site: http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410829.

Catterall, J. S., & Stern, D. (1986). The effects of alternative school programs on high school completion and labor market outcomes. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *8*(1), 77–86.

This research probed two questions regarding participation in alternative high school programs: Does participation reduce the likelihood of students dropping out? Does participation lead to enhanced experiences in the labor market after students leave school? Using the California subsample of the 1980 and 1982 *High School and Beyond* surveys (involving nearly 3,000 sophomores and 3,000 seniors), the authors scrutinized vocational education and participation in other alternatives. Findings regarding the dropout-preventing effects of these programs were mixed: The assessment varied across different procedures used to control for prior propensity to dropout. Findings for labor market effects were more definite. Participants in vocational and other alternative programs had generally higher employment rates and, for some, higher wages. Suggested extensions of this work are offered. (Adapted from author description.)

DeBlois, R., & Place, P. (2007). Alternatives for struggling learners. *Principal Leadership*, *7*(8), 38–42.

This article discusses two alternative schools that have adapted to be a better fit for at-risk students than a comprehensive middle or high school might be. It is easy to suggest that an increase in the dropout rate is merely a natural result of the recent preoccupation with test scores. Whatever truth there may be to this, educators must still struggle to engage all students in serious learning and provide the mechanisms and supports that keep struggling students in school. Although mainstream schools can employ numerous strategies to help the most marginalized youth, the experience of two schools in New England suggests that small, nontraditional learning communities might be best suited to meet all the needs of these students. This article discusses the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program (UCAP) in Providence, Rhode Island, and the Academy of Learning and Technology (ALT) in Nashua, New Hampshire, which are examples of effective alternative schools. Both schools have the same mission—to intervene in the lives of at-risk students in an attempt to foster their future success—and both schools have adopted many similar features in an attempt to engage challenging students. (Author description) [*National High School Center NOTE*: This is a descriptive piece, not an evaluation of the programs' effectiveness.]

Finnan, C., & Chasin, G. (2007). Accelerating the learning of low-achieving students: The transformation of a dropout. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *88*(8), 625–629.

Anthony, a young African American man with a smile that exudes warmth and enthusiasm, chose a path taken by far too many of his peers: he became a high school dropout. He started down this path long before he entered his urban high school in Wisconsin in 1997. Throughout his years in school, he had never been pushed to excel, and no one had taken the time to build on his potential. Anthony quickly adopted the attitude that school was a boring waste of time. He saw

himself as an academic failure, and his middle school, judging by the academic record that he had created, agreed. By 1999, Anthony had officially dropped out of school. However, when Anthony dropped out, a counselor at his high school told him that he might want to think about a program offered by Affiliated Alternatives, an alternative school affiliated with Accelerated Schools plus, the national school reform model. Affiliated Alternatives brings together four alternative programs for students who are at risk of failure or have already dropped out: (1) Alternative Education Resource Options; (2) Cluster Program; (3) School-Age Parent Program; and (4) Work and Learn Center. Anthony was eligible for the Work and Learn Center, an alternative program designed for students who are close to completing high school but can benefit from the linking of school and work experiences. In this article, the authors explain how Anthony, with the help of Affiliated Alternatives, has been able to succeed against all odds. (Author description) [*National High School Center NOTE*: This is a descriptive piece, not an evaluation of the program's effectiveness.]

Franklin, C., Streeter, C. L., Kim, J. S., & Tripodi, S. J. (2007). The effectiveness of a solution-focused, public alternative school for dropout prevention and retrieval. *Children & Schools*, *29*(30), 133–144.

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a solution-focused, alternative school (SFAS) in preventing students from dropping out of high school. A quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest group design was used with 85 students to examine differences in credits earned, attendance, and graduation rates. Follow-up data on students in the experimental group were also obtained to track their postsecondary education decisions. Results showed that students in the experimental group earned significantly more credits over time than students from the comparison group. More than half of the experimental group had entered a postgraduate education program after graduating from the SFAS. Conversely, students in the comparison group had higher attendance and graduation rates, but this outcome was found to be related to the differences in the two programs' attendance and graduation policies. The SFAS appears to show promise as an intervention for reducing dropout rates for at-risk adolescents and enabling them to earn high school credits and graduate from high school over time. (Adapted from author description.)

High School Reform Strategy Toolkit (http://www.highschooltoolkit.com/toolkit.htm)

The High School Reform Strategy Toolkit was designed by the Urban Institute with a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. One of the specific areas it reviews is the research literature on advisories. Dr. Nettie Legters (Johns Hopkins University) and Dr. Becky Smerdon (Academy for Educational Development, then of the Urban Institute) were awarded the grant to conduct a field scan for extant tools that could be used to inform and study high school reform implementation. When they discovered that these tools were limited in existence and scope, they, together with Research Associate Kristine Early, began to compile, analyze, and synthesize existing literature on reform strategies to create their own tool. This Web site represents 1 year of their work. The result is a set of modules designed to provide common definitions, essential components, research summaries, and implementation indicators for 25 established and emerging high school reform strategies. (Adapted from Toolkit Web site description.)

U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *High school redirection: What Works Clearinghouse intervention report.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education

Sciences. Retrieved October 2007 from the ERIC Web site: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/29/ e5/3c.pdf.

High School Redirection is an alternative high school program for youth considered at risk of dropping out. The program emphasizes basic skills development (with a particular focus on reading skills) and offers limited extracurricular activities. The schools operate in economically disadvantaged areas and serve students who have dropped out in the past, who are teen parents, who have poor test scores, or who are over-age for their grade. To foster a sense of community, the schools are small and teachers are encouraged to act as mentors as well as instructors. Two studies of High School Redirection met the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) evidence standards and one study met the WWC evidence standards with reservations. The three randomized controlled trials included more than 1,600 students in Stockton, California; Wichita, Kansas; and Cincinnati, Ohio. High School Redirection was found to have mixed effects on staying in school, potentially positive effects on progressing in school, and no discernible effects on completing school. The Wichita and Cincinnati studies met the WWC evidence standards and the Stockton study met the WWC evidence standards with reservations. [This publication was produced by the What Works Clearinghouse. The following study is reviewed in this intervention report: Dynarski, M., & Wood, R. (1997). *Helping high-risk youth: Results from the Alternative Schools Demonstration Program*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.] (Adapted from author description.)

U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *Middle college high school: What Works Clearinghouse intervention report.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved October 2007 from the ERIC Web site: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/29/e3/c2.pdf.

Middle College High Schools are alternative high schools located on college campuses that aim to help at-risk students complete high school and encourage them to attend college. The schools offer a project-centered, interdisciplinary curriculum, with an emphasis on team teaching, individualized attention, and development of critical thinking skills. Students are also offered support services, including specialized counseling, peer support, and career experience opportunities. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) reviewed six studies of the effectiveness of Middle College High Schools. Only one study of Middle College High Schools met the WWC evidence standards. This randomized controlled trial included 394 students in the Seattle Public Schools who were assigned to an intervention group that was offered admission to the alternative high school or to a control group that was not. Control group students were free to participate in other regular and alternative high schools operated by the school district and in General Educational Development (GED) programs.

Most control group students participated in one of these other education options. Findings presented in this report were drawn from a follow-up survey administered about 2 years after random assignment. A Middle College High School was found to have no discernible effects on staying in school or completing school. [This publication was produced by the What Works Clearinghouse. The following study is reviewed in this intervention report: Dynarski, M., Gleason, P., Rangarajan, A., & Wood, R. (1998). *Impacts of dropout prevention programs: Final report. A research report from the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program evaluation*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.] (Adapted from author description.)

Definition for Alternative Education Resources

Ahearn, E. (2004). *Alternative schools and students with disabilities: Current status and emerging issues.* Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the NASDSE Web site: http://www.nasdse.org/publications/alternative_schools.pdf.

Georgia Department of Education. (n.d.). 164-4-8.12 Alternative Education Programs. Atlanta: Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the Georgia Department of Education Web site: http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/_documents/doe/legalservices/160-4-8-.12.pdf.

Massachusetts Department of Education. (2007). *Alternative education*. Malden: Massachusetts Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the Massachusetts Department of Education Web site: http://www.doe.mass.edu/alted/about.html?section=definition.

Oregon Department of Education, Office of Educational Improvement and Innovation. (2006). Accelerated learning opportunities: Oregon programs foster postsecondary prospects. *Accelerated Learning Opportunities: Enhancing Post-Secondary and Professional Educational Opportunities, 2*(2). Retrieved November 2007 from the Oregon Department of Education Web site: http://www.ode.state.or.us/pubs/eii/acceleratedlearningopsprimer.pdf.

West Virginia Department of Education. (2000). *Regulations for alternative education programs for disruptive students (2418)*. Charleston: West Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the West Virginia Department of Education Web site: http://wvde.state.wv.us/policies/p2418.html.

AYP Resources

Arizona Department of Education. (2004). *Rubric for evaluating alternative schools under AZLEARNS.* Phoenix: Arizona Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the Arizona Department of Education Web site: http://www.ade.az.gov/azlearns/boardinfo/SY02-03/08-25-03.pdf.

Briggs, K. (2007). *Decision letter on request to amend Tennessee accountability plan*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the U.S. Department of Education Web Site: http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/letters/actn7.html.

California Department of Education. (2003). *Review of entry requirements for alternative schools participating in the alternative schools accountability model*. Sacramento: California Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the California Department of Education Web site: http://www2.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/greenmay03item14.pdf.

Education Evolving. (2003). *Alternative-education programs: The "quiet giant" in Minnesota public education*. Saint Paul, MN: Education Evolving. Retrieved November 2007 from the Education Evolving Web site: http://www.educationevolving.org/pdf/alternatives.pdf.

Florida Department of Education, Office of the Commissioner. (2004). *Policy brief on grading alternative schools*. Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education, Office of the Commissioner.

Retrieved November 2007 from the Florida Department of Education Web site: http://www.fldoe.org/meetings/2004_11_16/PolicyBrief.pdf.

Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs. (n.d.). *Determining adequate yearly progress with multiple measures of accountability*. Andover: Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs. Retrieved November 2007 from the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs Web site: http://maapmn.org/images/positionpapermultiplemeasures.pdf.

O'Connell, J. (2004). *Title I, Part A, Program Improvement: Requirements for local educational agencies with alternative schools identified for program improvement.* Sacramento: California Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the California Department of Education Web site: http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ti/asamltr121304.asp?print=yes.

Regular Diploma Resources

Lehr, C., Moreau, R., Lange, C., & Lanners, J. (2004). *Alternative schools: Findings from a national survey of the states*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration. Retrieved November 2007 from the Institute on Community Integration Web site: http://ici.umn.edu/alternativeschools/publications/alt_schools_report2.pdf.

Highly Qualified Teachers Resources

Lehr, C., Moreau, R., Lange, C., & Lanners, J. (2004). *Alternative schools: Findings from a national survey of the states*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration. Retrieved November 2007 from the Institute on Community Integration Web site: http://ici.umn.edu/alternativeschools/publications/alt_schools_report2.pdf.

Oregon Department of Education. (2007). *NCLB highly qualified teacher requirements for teachers in Oregon alternative education schools and programs*. Salem: Oregon Department of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the Oregon Department of Education Web site: http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/specialty/alt/alted-hqt-faq_06-22-07.pdf.

Alternative Instruction Resources

American Youth Policy Forum. (2002). *Florida Virtual School: The future of learning?* Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved November 2007 from the American Youth Policy Forum Web site: http://www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2002/fb101802.htm.

Podoll, S., & Randle, D. (2005). Building a virtual high school… click by click. *The Journal*. Retrieved November 6, 2007, from the Journal Web site: http://thejournal.com/Articles/2005/09/01/Building-a-Virtual-High-Schoolclick-by-click.aspx?p=1.

Funding resources

Kochhar-Bryant, C., & Lacey, R. (2004). *New state laws that expand alternative education, 2000–2004.* Washington, DC: The George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development. Retrieved November 2007 from the GWired Web site: http://gwired.gwu.edu/hamfish/merlin-cgi/p/downloadFile/d/16907/n/off/other/1/name/609Newstatelawsthatexpandalternativeeducati.

Martin, N., & Brand, B. (2006). *Federal, state, and local roles supporting alternative education*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved November 2007 from the American Youth Policy Forum Web site: http://www.aypf.org/publications/AlternativeEducation2006.pdf.

Tennessee State Board of Education. (2007). Tennessee Basic Education Program BEP 2.0. Nashville: Tennessee State Board of Education. Retrieved November 2007 from the Tennessee State Board of Education Web site: http://www.state.tn.us/sbe/BEP/BEP%20Booklet%20FY08.pdf.

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (n.d.). State Discretionary Grant Program. Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Retrieved November 2007 from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Web site: http://dpi.state.wi.us/alternativeed/altedgrt.html.

NOTE: Since the original technical assistance response was developed, other more recent resources may be available on our Web site: www.betterhighschools.org.