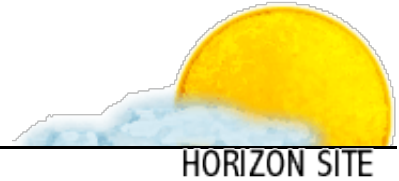


The Future of Secondary Education



Alternative High Schools: Models For the Future?

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Abstract

A little known movement within public school systems, the creation of alternative schools for at-risk students has been in existence for several years. Alternative high schools have grown nationally in both quality and number. These schools for both existing and potential drop-outs rely heavily on forming learning communities where both teacher and learner are empowered. Innovation and flexibility are usual practice in alternative high schools. These schools and other options should be studied and their key elements identified. Today's problem-plagued standard high schools could use new models for their delivery of educational services to today's youth.

They're found in crumbling inner city buildings, in strip malls, in old school buildings and within existing schools. They have optimistic sounding names like Capstone, Crossroads and Learning Enterprise. They have varied financial and educational arrangements. And they are popping up all over the landscape, mainly urban but also suburban and rural. What are they? They are small alternative high schools.

The term alternative education was originally construed as an umbrella term covering a range of options in schooling. Presently its meaning has evolved into an understanding of programming for at-risk youth; those who are likely to not finish high school.

Many states and school districts have come to the realization of the economic loss involved in the drop-out problem and have established separate educational programs for at-risk students.

At-risk students are described as discouraged learners, those who for whatever reason do not achieve in the standard high school program. Poor attendance, habitual truancy, academic lags, and teenage parenthood—these are the causes of what the federal definition specifies as school drop-outs, from 9th to 12th grade. Over 25% of American youth fit that description.

A perception that the standard high school lacks relevance is the usual reason given for dropping out. In fact the curricular offerings of the standardized, bureaucratized high schools do tend to be isolated subject matters taught with an emphasis on rote memory and with a student management system focusing on compliance with authority. This model of a high school dates back to a time when the factory was the major metaphor for organizations. In the present era, more focused on information and technology, even the factories don't follow the factory model. Is it possible that the at-risk students, like the canaries in the mine shaft, are the newest versions of organisms sensitive to an unrecognized danger in the environment?

American economic leaders have identified the characteristics they value in the workplace as oral and written communication skills, problem solving ability, self-management capacity, and a cooperative working style. Obviously the factory model high school so prevalent in the United States does not produce those outcomes.

The National Trend Towards School Options

All over America, parents are opting for something other than the standardized public school offerings, often at great effort or expense. Choices they are making are home schooling, private schools and in some states, charter schools. Public school systems are searching for new possibilities in the service delivery. Independent providers are sometimes contracted for such things as transportation, food and a number of supplies and services. A new option is to contract the entire management of the school-even supervision of teaching and testing-sometimes to a profit making organization, where this is legal.

Home schooling of school age children has expanded during the last several years. In Wisconsin, a 1984 law allowed home schooling with no monitoring simply by registration with the state education agency. Home schooling grew from 2800 to 11,480 (1.3% of the school population) in 1994. Self help groups have sprung up to assist parents who choose to educate their children at home. Both secular and religious organizations provide advice and assistance. High school age youth educated at home generally take the General Equivalency Diploma tests to qualify them for advanced education.

Private schools have always existed in America at all levels of education, but public moneys have never supported them. There are lobby groups quite active now in the more conservative climate in legislative bodies that have renewed efforts to approve of voucher systems for use in private schools.

Wisconsin has initiated such a system in the city of Milwaukee as an experimental measure. The experiment allows for up to 1,500 students of low income families in the inner city to attend nonsectarian private schools with a set fee given to the school. After four years, 800 students remain in these schools. The academic results are unclear because the full data has not been released to independent researchers.

Charter schools are the newest entry in the school options menu. The exact definition of a charter school is unclear as each state has written unique legislation. Usual practice is for an entity to be given a charter by the state agency or local school board, to run a school

at a specified per pupil outlay of moneys. The accountability in attendance and academic measurements is negotiated, but generally the charter school is to have autonomy from the standard bureaucratic structure.

Charter schools have been authorized in a number of states. Minnesota began by approving legislation in 1991 and a number of such schools are in operation. A recent legislative report indicated that some are having problems with financial stability and the ability to maintain the school structure with the few personnel they can afford (Richardson, 1995).

In California, 100 charter schools were allowed. The legislation did not spell out who was to do the teaching in the charter schools and the resultant teaching by noncertified personnel caused the teachers union to object. The academic results are still pending in California. The one known charter revocation was for financial mismanagement and loss of students (Schmidt, 1994).

The state of Michigan is reworking its charter law, as it was declared unconstitutional. A judge so ruled, at the request of a coalition that included the teachers union, the American Civil Liberties Union, separation between church and state groups and individuals. The issues involved included the teaching by noncertified personnel, separation of church and state and lack of oversight by a public body. Drawing much of the criticism was the chartering of Noah Webster Academy, which was an already existing home schooling computer network with a Christian emphasis.

Wisconsin has a tightly drafted charter school law that allowed for 10 charter schools. Only four are now in existence, all of them conversions from within school systems (not outside groups). All of these use certified teachers who are employees of the school district as is required by the present law. There is lobbying by groups to open up the charter school law allowing much more latitude.

The completely independent for-profit corporations such as the Edison Project and Education Alternatives, Inc., have made very few inroads in the management of schools, and the results on their success or absence of success will not be available for some time.

Alternative High Schools

Alternative high schools for at-risk students have some commonalities with some of the other school options, particularly charter schools. The location of an alternative high school may be within the existing high school (school-within-the-school) or at an off site location. The remote location schools, if they are run by a joint venture, do look like charter schools. School districts may run their own alternative schools or they may contract out the management of the school.

Schooling for at-risk high schoolers has been in existence for some time in the state of New York. Raywid (1994) has analyzed the situation there. New York is a state that has an uncommonly high drop-out rate. Alternative high schools were able to stem some of the problem. When looking at the schools that were successful, she found a consistency in characteristics of the schools. They were small, designed by the people that taught in

them, had some elements of choice for both the students and the staff. They were exempted from the standard bureaucratic procedures, and most importantly, they developed a sense of community in the school.

The principal Wisconsin urban center is Milwaukee. The drop-out rate there was higher than elsewhere in the state. In response to the state mandates for at-risk programming, Milwaukee developed a number of alternative schools. A division of the Milwaukee Public Schools, housed in an old multistoried grade school building works with parents and contracts with community-based organizations to run alternative high schools.

Some of the Milwaukee alternative schools have been in existence in some form since the 1970s. However, the majority of the community-based joint venture schools were founded in the 1980s. Seven date from 1990, with four having been created for the 1994/95 school year. In all there are 31 alternative secondary schools including six which are for adjudicated youth. As in New York, teachers in Milwaukee state that the success comes from the characteristics defined by Raywid, particularly the forming of community.

One of the alternative high schools is located in the traditionally Hispanic neighborhood known as Milwaukee's South Side. An existing community educational and social services center contracted with Milwaukee Public Schools in 1982 and has continuously served limited English speaking and other students in an alternative high school that has a focus on Hispanic culture and language as well as the usual high school skills.

A brand new alternative school is located on a former campus of a small college, now home to American Indian institutions. The Spotted Eagle High School is jointly run by The American Indian Council, several local American Indian Organizations, some colleges, and Milwaukee Public Schools. Emphasis is on ethnic heritage and community.

Milwaukee Public Schools through its Division of Alternative Programs contracts with a number of different community-based organizations to run the partnership schools. Sometimes the teachers are employees of the school system, sometimes of the community-based organization. Conformity with state attendance and safety laws is required, and the reporting mechanisms are negotiated. Funds and oversight are provided by Milwaukee Public Schools. Philosophy and delivery of instructions services are decided by the operational partner.

Another option for Milwaukee at-risk students is a regional alternative high school operated by the area Cooperative Education Service Agency (CESA#1). This agency, one of twelve in the state, is a non-profit agency providing materials, services, in-service education and other assistance to schools in its service district. CESA#1 has been in the alternative high school business only a few years.

Presently CESA#1 operates four alternative high schools, educating about 240 students. The first two schools to emerge were in Milwaukee County, the last two in an adjoining county. The program model used is of individualized instruction using computer software. Each cohort consists of 20 students who attend a half day of school. Participating school districts negotiate a contract and pay a per pupil fee. The students work on achieving measurable competencies. The home school district awards the credits and diplomas. In this model, the teachers are employees of the CESA and students are drawn from a

number of school districts.

In rural areas of the state, other CESAs are creating regional alternative high schools as well. The school district in which one of the suburban CESA schools is located runs its own school-within-a-school alternative programs in the high schools. These schools have been in existence for five years. Only seniors are in the program designed to meet the needs of those who cannot achieve the number of credits for graduation. This one-year program requires an interview with student and parent(s) and acceptance by the teaching staff for entry. The size of the group is in the low 20s. Instruction is presented to the whole class, with individualized attention given. Many guest speakers and field trips bring the greater community to the students. Students express pride in belonging to the school.

At a remote site in the same city is an alternative high school that goes only to the eleventh grade. Its numbers are also in the low 20s. Here the delivery of fairly traditional school subject matter is with small groups of about eight students. Field trips are planned for enrichment and recreation. An original goal of reintroducing the students to the standard high school has rarely been realized. Instead these students often go to another alternative setting after completing the eleventh grade.

All of the alternative high schools vary in location, environment, delivery of educational services, personnel arrangements, and philosophy. All displayed a sense of community and acceptance as well as flexibility. It is clear that their numbers are growing.

The Expanded Alternative High School

Although the great majority of the 10 alternative schools studied were for at-risk students, some few also provided services for other types of students. One school-within-a-school alternative program in a recent award winning high school also served gifted students, students having problems with a class, or others with specific needs. The students could be part-time or full-time, with the latter usually being the at-risk students. Many video-generated courses that had been created by the staff provided individualized courses. Courses were created for such interests as art history or foreign language. Small group classes also took place. Admission was at any time of the year that the student requested. Students moved in and out of the alternative school all day long. The physical environment was warm with some upholstered furniture and other homey touches. An analysis of how many students had used the alternative school yielded about one-third of the student body number. In addition this school has a separate drop-in study center that provides assistance in language arts, study skills, and mathematics, which is popular with students. Combined with the usual exceptional education resource rooms, it is estimated that about 40%-50% of the school was using alternative education.

In another urban center an off-site alternative high school has existed for a number of years that educates at-risk and gifted students. The program is competency-based, with portfolios and demonstrations required and personal growth valued. Both the evaluation methods and the choice of subject matter (e.g., ethics, mass media, human relations) are completely different from the local high school.

Both of the expanded alternative schools attracted their students and accepted them on a

contractual basis. The methods and evaluation were innovative. They truly offered an alternative.

Alternative High Schools and the Future of the High School

A number of years ago futurists Toffler (1970, 1980) and Naisbitt (1982) predicted the break-up of the standardized, bureaucratized, factory model school system. They indicated that if the changes did not come from within the school systems, they would surely come from outside of them. They also said that the information and technological age in which we live would require of its citizens creativity and diversity, not the sameness underlying the operation of the standard school system.

The changes from outside the school systems that have and are occurring are home schooling, private school expansion, for-profit schools and charter schools. The innovation that has come from within the school system is that of the alternative high school both for at-risk and other students.

Interestingly the focus of the private groups has not been on the high school, the place where most of the problems occur. Those groups have tended to focus on the younger student. However, it is in the elementary and middle schools that the public school system has been the most successful. It is the high school which has had the problems not only of drop-outs and relevance but also safety and management. The private sector has been reluctant to take on these difficult problems.

Responding to the great need of large groups of disenchanted youth, alternative school systems have been able to be innovative; they had to be. And in their problem-solving, they avoided some of the drawbacks that have occurred with the private innovations.

As their relationships with the school systems are secure, alternative schools have avoided the financial instability of some charter schools that opted for greater autonomy. The school system has ownership in these schools, a situation that provides oversight to the operation of the school as well as public moneys. The lack of public oversight is an issue being addressed in Michigan as they are redrafting their charter school legislation.

Perhaps the most serious of the legal challenges non-traditional schools have regards the use of non-licensed teachers. Some charter schools use only licensed teachers. Some others and the for-profit schools do not always use certified personnel. Although there is no valid research proving success or lack of success by individuals not prepared in teacher training institutions, our school children's education and the preparation of the next generation is too important to condone experimenting with non-professionals to deliver educational services. Not only teacher unions but also parents are objecting to this move, which is obviously designed to cut costs, not to improve education.

There are similarities in the private educational innovations and the alternative schools. It is, however, the alternative high school that has been able to balance the important components needed for stability, professionalism, oversight where public moneys are involved and the autonomy needed to be innovative. Both private innovators and existing standard schools would do well to examine the alternative high schools.

Today's large problem-plagued high schools should look at the successful alternative high schools for a model for better meeting the needs of today's youth. The learning community formed in those schools is key. Common-bond learning communities can be the central idea around which can be developed the complex balance of environment and forces needed to really meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's emerging generations.

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HISTORY	PROJECTS	TECHNOLOGY SOURCE	COURSES	CONFERENCES	ON-RAMP
SEARCH					FEEDBACK

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