

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are essentially specialized educational environments that place a great deal of emphasis on small classrooms, high teacher-to-student ratios, individualized instruction, noncompetitive performance assessments, and less structured classrooms (Raywid 1983). The purpose of these schools is to provide academic instruction to students expelled or suspended for disruptive behavior or weapons possession, or who are unable to succeed in the mainstream school environment (Ingersoll and Leboeuf 1997).

Theoretical Foundation

Alternative schools originated to help inner city youth stay in school and obtain an education (Coffee and Pestrige 2001). In theory, students assigned to alternative schools feel more comfortable in this environment and are more motivated to attend school. Students attending these schools are believed to have higher self-esteem, more positive attitudes toward school, improved school attendance, higher academic performance, and decreased delinquent behavior (Cox, 1999; Cox, Davison, and Bynum 1995). As a result, many alternative schools are being used to target delinquent youth (Gottfredson 1987; Arno and Strout 1980). These schools serve the dual purpose of reinforcing the message that students are accountable for their crimes and removing disruptive students from the mainstream. In general, alternative schools assess academic and social abilities and skills, assign offenders to programs that allow them to succeed while challenging them to reach higher goals, and provide assistance through small group and individualized instruction and counseling sessions (Ingersoll and Leboeuf 1997). In addition, students and their families may be assessed to determine whether social services such as health care, parenting classes, and other program services are indicated.

While there is a great degree of variation among alternative schools, research demonstrates that the schools that succeed with this population of youth typically have the following elements:

- Strong leadership
- Lower student-to-staff ratio
- Carefully selected personnel
- Early identification of student risk factors and problem behaviors
- Intensive counseling/mentoring
- Prosocial skills training
- Strict behavior requirements
- Curriculum-based on real-life learning
- Emphasis on parental involvement
- Districtwide support of the programs (Coffee and Pestrige 2001)

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Outcome Evidence

Evaluations of early alternative schools generally found that these programs did not produce positive results (Raywid 1983). However, the ineffectiveness of these programs was attributable to weak program implementation (Cox 1999). For instance, many early programs were designed as a form of punishment with little regard for program intervention and a selection process devoid of any specific criteria. Consequently, all types of delinquent offenders, whether appropriate or not, were being sequestered in alternative schools with no resources for improvement. Reviews (Cox 1999; Cox, Davison and Bynum 1995; Duke and Muzio 1978; Hawkins and Wall 1980) of the early evaluations found that these studies were wrought with methodological problems including 1) a lack of a control or a comparison group, 2) failure to randomize when sampling from the student population, 3) a tendency to eliminate data on program dropouts, and 4) a lack of follow-up data on students.

More recent evaluations (Kemple and Snipes 2000; Cox 1999; Cox, Davison, and Bynum 1995) suggest that alternative schools have some positive effects. A meta-analysis of 57 alternative school programs found that alternative schools have a positive effect on school performance, attitudes toward school, and self-esteem but no effect on delinquency (Cox, Davison, and Bynum 1995). The study also found that alternative schools that targeted at-risk youth produced larger effects than other programs and that the more successful programs tend to have a curriculum and structure centered on the needs of the designated population. These effects, however, may be short term. Using an experimental design with a 1-year follow-up of a single alternative school, Cox (1999) found that these positive effects were not observed 1 year later. Consequently, the type of follow-up support given to students in alternative schools may be important in achieving the long-term goals of the program. Finally, a 5-year evaluation of the career academy concept (the OJJDP alternative school model) covering nine schools and 1,900 students found that, compared with their counterparts who did not attend, at-risk students enrolled in career academies were 1) one-third less likely to drop out of school, 2) more likely to attend school, complete academic and vocational courses, and apply to college, and 3) provided with more opportunities to set goals and reach academic and professional objectives (Kemple and Snipes 2000).

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