

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RESEARCH ON SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

- \*\* Schools of choice have managed to institutionalize diversity within public education: they exist in varying types, as a well established component of school districts across the country.
- \*\* For all types of students, marginal to outstanding, alternative schools seem to produce significant growth and achievement: cognitive, social, and affective.
- \*\* Youngsters clearly achieve better in the classroom environments they prefer -- suggesting that choice leads to accomplishment.
- \*\* Both the attendance and the behavior of students improve in schools of choice.
- \*\* By comparison with other classes, alternative school classrooms are well-ordered and reflect high degrees of task orientation and student involvement with classroom activities. Moreover, this is accomplished with a minimum of teacher control.
- \*\* Alternatives manage to "personalize" the school environment, rendering the school a genuine community of individuals.
- \*\* The two instructional modes most distinctive of alternative schools of various types are independent study and experiential learning.
- \*\* Schools of choice prove highly attractive to all associated with them: staff, students, and parents. All three groups demonstrate unusual satisfaction and approval rates.
- \*\* The success of schools of choice appears associated with their size, their climate or ethos, the fact of choice, and the degree of professional autonomy they offer staff.
- \*\* Schools of choice have been identified as a highly effective response to student apathy, underachievement, truancy, and behavior problems; to staff burnout; to desegregation difficulties; and to the enormous challenge of improving school quality.

Considerable advice is available on starting an alternative program. Here are some suggestions for maintaining one.

KEEPING AFLOAT I: Internal Considerations

- Community-building among those within the program is never done. Renewal remains a continuing need -- among students, among students and staff, and among staff. It needs to be given time and space outside meetings and sessions expected to accomplish specific tasks. Make the time to do things together!
- Psychological ownership of an alternative is pretty well assured for the start-up staff and students. But if later students are to experience the feelings their older brothers and sisters did, they too must feel they are helping to create an education. Designing a new program is not the only route to that all-important psychological ownership; but keeping it going within established programs takes attention and deliberate effort.
- It is the Standard Operating Procedures -- the rules, policies, and expectations -- that are the fuel keeping a conventional school going. But to remain alive, an alternative school must be fueled by attitude or spirit or soul. This means that when the soul goes out of what has worked, it is impossible to continue 'business as usual.' And you can't solve the problem as a conventional school might, by adopting a new policy or practice. But you've got to do something: You're on red alert!
- The leadership styles of alternative school directors often lead them to emphasize relationships in their interactions with others, and to minimize discussion about tasks. Their tendency to deal with 'people' instead of 'business' has many advantages. But one disadvantage is that outsiders and newcomers -- such as interns, student teachers, community volunteers, new students -- may need more structuring and help with task behavior than these leaders tend to provide.
- Acknowledge that even your program is not for everybody. No program is (the fortunate circumstance which allowed alternatives to begin). It's important to learn -- and necessary to keep re-learning -- the particular kinds of students your program serves well.
- Staff meetings in an alternative perform a different function than in a conventional school and assume infinitely greater importance to the success of the program. Make sure sufficient time is set aside for them.
- Don't count on the nittygritty to take care of itself. Granted, the papershuffling (the forms and reports) sometimes seems to outweigh more important matters in some conventional schools. But the paperwork won't see to itself in the alternative school. -- So make and stick to specific plans for attending to the mundane and uninteresting matters. (Lapses on central administration's paperwork requirements can turn district support from strong to zilch.)
- Most successful programs are at some point or other tempted to enlarge. It's flattering and enticing but don't succumb to over-expansion or the lure of empire-building. Smallness is an important part of what you've got going for you. (If there are outside pressures for you to expand, recommend the starting of a new alternative instead. -- You'll be doing everybody a favor.)

- It is hard for many alternatives to remain alternative. Over the years, the tendency is to revert to conventional practice. So keeping afloat as an alternative -- as distinct from just keeping afloat -- is a lifelong problem. Face it, and plan to deal with it for the entire life of your program.
- Burnout is likely to be a different problem in the alternative school from the alienation and response to stress it often represents in the conventional school. You need to be prepared to deal with it in the redistribution of expectations and tasks, and with the awareness that 'sabbaticals' may be a survival essential.
- Many have felt that even in an alternative, a designated leader with responsibility for the program is essential. Where there is such a leader it is important to work at developing other, informal leadership -- or the whole program may collapse with the leader's departure.
- There needs to be a time and place for all to air their unfulfilled expectations and disappointments with the program. The alternative's entire community needs to examine what's wrong with the system -- together, and regularly.
- Newcomers all have to learn what it is to be a student or an intern or a volunteer in an alternative, and direct discussion can help a great deal. Coming to understand the expectations of a new situation is important to alleviating anxieties about it. Coming to see the differences between open role definitions, and those carefully specified in the conventional school, is really coming to understand what alternatives are about. Time given to helping this happen is well spent.
- One of the strengths of alternatives is the absence of the bureaucracy's sharp differentiation of roles and functions. But one of the ensuing problems is the time and energy drain on everybody when all must be involved in every decision. It really isn't necessary that everyone decide everything -- and efforts to have them do so are likely to lead first to interminable meetings, and then to very unpopular meetings.
- Even the greatest alternatives go stale. (If you doubt it, there are some ten-year-old films and program descriptions you ought to see!) This means that even the best programs -- perhaps especially the best -- need continuous re-thinking and re-designing.
- Granted, flexibility and responsiveness to each situation mark one of the alternative's major strengths. But fortunately, flexibility does not require that every single case be dealt with differently from every other. Policies to guide types of decisions can reduce the task to more manageable proportions. It is not the very existence of policies that blocks flexibility, but the nature of the policies adopted, and the way they are applied.
- Flexibility is important but it cannot be unlimited. If the integrity of staff and program are to be maintained, there must be a set of non-negotiables. It shouldn't be a long list, but if the program stands for anything, there is a bottom line.
- A clear orientation statement or 'philosophy' -- and the objectives it recommends -- seem as important to maintaining an alternative as to starting one. Otherwise, you are without criteria for deciding between activities and projects to add and those to forego -- and for selecting evaluation procedures.

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KEEPING AFLOAT II: External Affairs

- Living with less role differentiation means that in many alternatives all staff (and perhaps students too) may need to become involved in public relations, often in dealing with the community, the board, and the administration. Few of us know instinctively how to carry it off well. Most of us need, and all can profit from, some related pointers.
- It is important for alternatives to preserve some of their uniquenesses within the district, but to end others as soon as possible. A unique place in the district's TO, or table of organization, is likely to mean autonomy, exemption from red tape, and flexibility. On the other hand, larger per pupil expenditures than other programs means much greater vulnerability -- which just may not be worth the extra funds.
- Apparently many alternatives folks aren't really committed to alternatives, but only to their alternative. Knocking anybody else's way can in the long run undermine the freedom to pursue one's own.
- The greatest problems with colleagues outside the alternative don't come at first, when your program is new and untried. They develop as the alternative can claim some success, and conventional school faculty see that success as a criticism of their own practice. Among other things, this means that at the very point when an alternative has justified itself and has most to be proud of, it must also begin thinking about being non-threatening. (This becomes especially hard to bring off when the documentation of success has so often called for competitive comparison with regular schools.)
- Usual sniping levels from colleagues in conventional programs are likely to increase considerably if alternatives staff strike a critical pose, tearing down other programs and presenting theirs as the only decent or sensible one. It takes thought and care in presentations to avoid such a stance.
- An "anti-" stance vis-a-vis conventional schools is frequent for those new to alternative education. But as long ago pointed out, to continue to define one's own practice as the opposite of someone else's is to remain under the permanent domination of what you have rejected.
- Provided it remains within bounds, opposition from others is not entirely a bad thing. It contributes to cohesion -- and perhaps we prize more highly what we feel to be in jeopardy than what we take for granted.
- It is important to maintain political ties with your district's union or teacher association. Otherwise, polarization is a real -- and dangerous -- possibility.
- People judge your program in relation to their expectations for it. Make sure you know what district officials, parents, and community expect from it. Then be sure to document and have ready the evidence of your success in relation to these several agendas. Recognize, too, that such expectations change, and keeping current is important.

- Be mindful also of what your community fears and condemns -- be it drugs, 'sensitivity training,' or something else. Then prepare a response in advance to the charge that you are violating these taboos. It is the best way to avoid having to deal with crises -- by defusing each before it can become one.
- Encouraging the development of other and new alternatives is probably less a matter of helping the competition than of cultivating the conditions most conducive to your own program's survival.
- Build 'power ties' for your program with influential people -- local business and civic leaders and government officials, county and state education leaders, even national figures if you can. Student involvement in such relationships is as educationally desirable as it is politically helpful -- given an educational goal of membership and effective participation in the larger community.
- If an alternative's appeal to students and teachers lies at least partly in the power it lets them feel, the same is true for parents. They, too, should have a stake in the alternative -- and that may be harder to accomplish than in the case of students and staff. Since parents are not a part of the everyday life of the alternative, special structures and provisions are necessary to enabling them to experience psychological ownership of the program.
- Maintain up-to-date documentation of your program's success -- and stay ready and willing to produce this evidence, in attractive and comprehensible form, to any audience you can capture of whatever size. Study given to how to document your success -- and how to tell your story with attractive visuals -- is well worth the effort.
- Develop and maintain positive press connections, and don't try to sidestep or freeze out an unfriendly paper: a favorable article in a hostile paper can be the best PR going!
- Alternatives have accomplished such good things for and with the people associated with them that they have been put to work tackling pervasive social problems. Alternatives have often helped with such social problems as desegregation. But try to avoid expectations that your program can fully resolve such difficulties. Otherwise, your educationally successful alternative can sink for its failure to solve the wider community's social problems.
- A maxim from a change expert may help you to assess your chances at any point: 'The relationship between the School Board and the Superintendent as it relates to educational change will tell more about the future of your alternative than your own relationship to either of these parties.'
- Pick your "issues of principle" carefully. While there must be things we will go to the wall about, we jeopardize ourselves needlessly by extending that list. As a good friend to alternatives put it, "I have seen alternative schools precipitate crisis and jeopardize their existence by insisting on calling something a certain name offensive to a particular community. Everyone has to decide for themselves where the boundary of nomenclature ends and that of principle begins. But I think it rather foolish to jeopardize legitimate educational ventures in the defense of nomenclature. Sometimes it is even worse in the sense that we become so fooled by our own nomenclature that we even believe it."

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DESIGNING ALTERNATIVES FOR SUCCESS

Evidence to date suggests that each of the following features plays an important part in the success of an alternative school or program. The more of them associated with a program, the better its chances for sustaining success.

- ° There is a fair degree of freedom from standard district operating procedures.
- ° Staff choose to be there, rather than being assigned.
- ° Students choose to be there, rather than being assigned.
- ° Existing staff have a strong voice in selecting new staff and students.
- ° The alternative represents a genuine, continuing educational option for its students, rather than a beef-em-up-and-send-em-back operation.
- ° The program is designed by those who will operate it — its staff — and the staff are also in a position to modify it as conditions warrant.
- ° The program begins small — with perhaps fewer than 100 students — and a doubled enrollment remains the limit.
- ° The requisites of coherence and group identification are met: a separate space, and a substantial part of the school day spent together by the alternative's students and staff.
- ° The alternative school exerts high levels of control over the various features of its program.
- ° High levels of teacher autonomy are reflected.
- ° The most secure programs cost no more than standard programs in the district, in terms of per pupil expenses.
- ° The alternative begins with a two- or three- year commitment — with an evaluation planned to occur toward the end of that period.

## HOW TO KILL THE NEW ALTERNATIVE FROM THE START

Each of the following features reduces the likelihood of success of a new alternative. The more of them found in a program, the more remote its chances for yielding the benefits associated with alternative education.

- ° It is designed by administrators, not its staff.
- ° It is 'imported' from somewhere else and set into operation pretty much intact, as it worked elsewhere.
- ° The program is a referral program to which students are assigned.
- ° The alternative is a 'last chance' program which a student must 'choose' in order to avoid suspension or expulsion.
- ° The program is punitive in orientation.
- ° The alternative is built around a single cluster of new elements -- perhaps a new curriculum or a new set of activities -- but holds all other features of school operation intact and unmodified.
- ° The alternative is treated just as any new department within the school -- or new school within the district -- might be. It is expected to conform to existing regulations, operating procedures, and arrangements.
- ° Staff are assigned to the alternative by administrators outside it -- or by automatic processes such as contract rights.
- ° The alternative is intended for the 'toughest' cases -- and designed to reflect the absolutely minimal departures from traditional school practice necessary to accommodating them.
- ° No one in the district is told very much about the new program -- and guidance counselors are left to remain lukewarm to negative about it.

### ALTERNATIVES FOR 'MARGINAL' STUDENTS

The following components and considerations seem centrally important to successful programs:

- A concerted, continuing effort to generate a strong sense of affiliation on the part of students. Alternatives for marginal students must be, in one writer's terms, "membership schools" which youngsters feel they have joined. Most of the students such programs must attract have rejected the impersonality of the comprehensive high school. Quite a different school climate is essential.
- Academically, the program must be so planned as to permit early and frequent success for students. Many of those involved have experienced repeated school difficulty, and strong doubts about their own capacities must be countered.
- The program must have clear and explicit goals which project its orientation and make plain just what it stands for. Only this way can youngsters knowledgeably choose the alternative, can its standards become public and shared, and can staff have recourse to consistent ready guidance in making daily decisions.
- An experiential learning component serves multiple functions and is centrally important. Some successful programs stress learning from observation, others insist on action learning such as volunteer service or paid work. All agree, however, that some form of experiential learning should have a substantial part in the programs of all students.
- A self-knowledge dimension is important to helping students arrive at fuller understanding of their own beliefs, capacities, and potential. Simultaneously, they need to be helped to shift from a self-centered to a socio-centric perspective, and to experience themselves as responsible members of a group.
- Staff must be willing to undertake remedial work -- but unwilling to make it a permanent compromise, or let students be content with mere remediation. Thus the academic agenda must be developmental as well as substantive. Such expectations and efforts are essential to avoiding tracking. They are also important to maintaining the self-esteem of students, and to avoiding stigma from those outside the program.
- An integrated curriculum drawing from several subject fields should be part of the program of each student. The integrating principle can be issues, themes, or problems; but it should serve to organize and present content otherwise than simply by logical progression through separate and unconnected disciplines. Such an organization helps students to use what they learn. It also helps them to see the all-important connections between the personal, and the world that is public and shared.

Building these components into a program will call for :

- + Regularly scheduled "community-building" activities involving all of those in the program -- in order to weld all into a genuine community.
- + Efforts at adapting material to individual needs -- but along with considerable group work. Cooperative learning -- strategies such as team learning and peer tutoring -- are often particularly effective.
- + Explicit, achievable academic goals. For low achievers, semesters -- even grading periods -- can stretch out as interminable and insurmountable. Broad long-term goals must be broken down into specific, short-range, meetable sub-goals.
- + Sets of short-term goals -- in the form, for example, of individual competencies to be mastered, or "contracts" to be fulfilled, or unit obligations to be met.
- + Detailed experiential learning arrangements -- such as internships, service site development, observations plans -- and a classroom follow-through adding a reflective component.
- + Activities chosen to enhance self-esteem and to build the conviction that one can at least to some extent govern one's own future.
- + A developmental program designed to cultivate abstract thinking ability -- i.e., to foster intellectual growth -- along with personal and social maturation.
- + Activities chosen to cultivate self-direction and individual responsibility.
- + A curriculum "core" of integrated studies jointly designed, chosen, or adapted by alternative school staff.