STUDIES OF SCHOOLING

SCHOOLS OF CHOICE: THEIR CURRENT NATURE AND PROSPECTS

by Mary Anne Raywid

A study of alternative schools in North America — the most extensive survey ever undertaken of such programs — finds that this movement is enjoying steady and continued growth. Alternatives now represent "the acceptance and the institutionalization of diversity," says Ms. Raywid.

I have recently received several calls from reporters planning articles on the ill health or demise of alternative schools. Yet according to the evidence, alternative schools are far from moribund. In fact, schools of choice seem to have gained considerable ground since their beginnings in the late Sixties. Not only does the movement appear to be alive and well, but support and impetus for new schools are coming from diverse and sometimes quite unexpected directions.

The Project on Alternatives in Education (PAE) has recently completed a national survey of alternative or optional schools and programs. This article will present some highlights of that study, as well as explore the relationship of the idea of alternative schooling to current conceptions of high school reform.

Rumors of the demise of alternative schools are generated by today's "tightening-up" orientation: the idea that what we need in education is to raise standards and expectations, increase requirements, narrow our goals, and install more demanding curricula. The perceived connection between enhanced quality and increased uniformity is an important dimension of the "tightening-up" approach. For some reason we associate improved educational quality with *sameness*. The result is that periods of attention to "excellence" are also likely to be periods of reduced diversity. Curriculum takes center stage, and the spotlight is on "general education" or "common learning" — that content which is to be required of *all* students.

MARY ANNE RAYWID (Long Island New York Chapter) is a professor of foundations of education at Hofstra University, Hempstead, N.Y. She also serves as an editorial consultant to the Phi Delta Kappan. *The survey described in this article was supported in part by a grant from the National Institute of Education; the opinions and interpretations reported herein are solely those of the author.*

Obviously this focus on common content and standards is quite different from the approach to improving education through diversity and options. Whereas the alternatives idea holds that the key to educational effectiveness lies in providing different kinds of schools to serve different kinds of youngsters and families, the "excellence" agenda consists of redesigning a single best system for everybody.

Further contrasts also stem from this one. As noted, reform periods focusing on "tightening up" are likely to select curriculum as the key ingredient, with content and standards as the points of emphasis. In many, curriculum just isn't seen to play that critical a part in education. This is not to say that alternatives don't take educational content seriously; they are often extremely intent about it. But academic content is likely to be seen as only one of the several curricula a school espouses — and probably not what seems most important about it to those whose days are spent there. Curriculum often holds center stage in public discussions of education, as is the case today. But in actually *doing* education, things other than content may consistently loom much larger for students and teachers. (This may explain why what even the best students remember 10 years after high school usually has little to do with the academic curriculum.)

What looms largest for those in schools (and extensively influences their behavior and accomplishment) has to do with what it feels like to spend time there — how one is treated; how one is made to feel about oneself and one's efforts, successes, and prospects. These matters relate to school climate, which receives a lot of attention in alternative schools. A growing body of evidence finds climate critically important to academic productivity — to the performance and achievement of youngsters. But such indirect influences seem to get short shrift in a "tightening-up" phase of educational reform. Yet the situation may prove analogous to that of the world of work, in which a narrow focus on productivity can be *counter*productive. Analysts have argued that the edge in productivity that Japanese industry holds over its U.S. competitors is tied to Japanese concern with worker welfare and consumer confidence.[1] Whether or not this analogy holds, a great deal of the current effort to upgrade schools focuses rather exclusively on specific inputs (curriculum) and outputs (test scores).

Alternative schools present a striking contrast to this productivity-first orientation. They tend to broaden the view of the school's mission rather than to narrow it, and they incline to a broad approach to educational improvement. Are they being swamped by the rising tide of the "tightening-up" mentality? Many of those newspaper reporters who call me seem to assume so. But the evidence quite clearly suggests otherwise. The number of alternative schools continues to grow steadily — probably stimulated by the sizable array of interests that find alternatives responsive to their own problems.

In 1981 PAE began shaping a national survey of alternative schools. Actually, the survey is intended to be the first phase of a much broader and more extensive inquiry. PAE grew out of the collective thinking of a group of people who in 1976 wished to lend encouragement to high school reform. The project is patterned on the famous Eight-Year Study, which, during the Thirties, tried to stimulate the reform of secondary education through careful comparison of the college success of youngsters from innovative and from conventional programs. The graduates of the nontraditional programs equaled or outperformed traditional high school graduates in college. Moreover, the further their programs had departed from the norm, the greater their relative advantage.

In early 1982 PAE sought to take a complete census of public alternative secondary schools in the U.S. That hope had to be abandoned because organizational intricacies made it impossible to identify the programs in many districts. There may well be two to four times the 2,500 alternative schools that we were able to identify. Of these 2,500 alternative schools, about 1,200 returned our questionnaires. These constitute a substantial data base for describing the nature and operation of today's schools of choice. And since we also received replies from some Canadian programs, there is even some warrant for talking about alternative schools throughout North America.

One of the most prominent findings is that staff morale is extremely high in alternative schools; 90% of the responding staff members displayed real ownership of their programs.[2] There is evidence that they work hard and that a great deal is expected of them; nevertheless, 90% were willing to take on even more professional activity and obligation, in the form of networking and interaction with staff members from other alternative schools. Students also appear to like alternatives. Attendance rises in 81% of the responding alternative schools; it rises sharply in 38%. One of the major reasons for the attendance change is undoubtedly very different teacher/student relationships. Most responding schools identified the quality of teacher/student interaction as the feature making them most different from other schools in their district.

Alternative schools do not mean added expense. In 62% of them, per-student costs are the same as or less than in other local programs — and this is true despite the fact that alternatives are almost invariably small schools, with 69% enrolling fewer than 200 students. Since student/teacher ratios tend to be low, the lower costs are largely a matter of reduced expenses for plant and equipment. Alternative schools make teachers the central ingredient, emphasizing instructional activities as well as human relationships.

Most alternative schools are located in the cities, but the continued growth of suburban programs may eventually even the proportions. Alternative schools are not segregated, nor do they become "ghetto-ized." And they seem to be here to stay: half of the responding programs have been in existence for at least six years. (That's not exactly venerable, but the figure is important because hearsay often has it that alternatives are unstable, fly-by-night operations.)

A number of factors may contribute to the success of alternative schools. Smallness is certainly one. It's no guarantee, of course; not all small schools are good or successful ones. But smallness seems necessary to developing and maintaining a number of the positive features of alternative schools.

The evidence suggests that choice is a second crucial element. Students in 79% of the responding schools are there by choice. (The percentage would be substantially higher were it not for those southern states that have applied the name "alternatives" to in-school suspension programs.) Surprisingly, even higher percentages of the teachers in alternative schools are there by choice. In 85% of the responding schools, the alternative is a genuine option for its teachers. There are grounds for speculating that choice may be even more important for teachers than for students: increased attendance correlates more strongly with teacher choice than with student choice.

Staff morale is extremely high in alternative schools; 90% of the responding staff members displayed real ownership of their programs. There is evidence that they work hard and that a great deal is expected of them; nevertheless, 90% were willing to take on even more responsibility.

Extended roles, rather than sharp divisions of labor, are a third possible explanation of the success of alternative schools. Since alternatives are small, they typically lack support services; half of them don't even have custodians. Without attributing some kind of magic to trash collecting and sweeping up, one might argue that important gains are to be had from extending areas of individual concern and activity within institutions.[3] The PAE survey found evidence that everyone in an alternative school — students as well as staff — has larger domains of responsibility and discretion than in conventional schools. Teachers relate to their students in more ways than merely teaching them one subject. They also share in some administrative tasks such as parent and community relations. The alternative school director typically spends a lot more time interacting with students than do other administrators — in interacting with students *pleasantly*, since discipline problems diminish sharply in alternative schools.[4]

The relative autonomy of alternative schools seems to be a fourth factor that contributes to their success. Somehow alternatives manage to achieve enough independence to let staff members design and carry out their own vision of schooling. This finding is remarkable when one considers that educators at all levels today —

Alternative schools report high levels of control over the decision areas essential to a school's operation, such as program planning and the selection of content and instructional methods. The power that results from this increased autonomy is shared among the staff.

from teachers to superintendents — report feelings of powerlessness. Teachers in conventional schools are hemmed in by administrators, parents, mandated syllabuses, and competency tests; administrators feel trapped by state and federal regulations, court decisions, collective bargaining agreements, and more. But alternative schools pose a striking contrast to such frustrations; they report high levels of control over the decision areas essential to a school's operation, e.g., program planning and the selection of content and instructional methods. Moreover, the power that results from this increased autonomy is shared among the staff. Alternatives don't re-create the central authority patterns that typify most secondary schools. For example, in most of the higher-autonomy schools, teachers play an important part in hiring staff and allocating funds, and administrators appear to function more as sources of influence than of managerial control.[5] It also appears that the greater the school's autonomy, the more prerogatives students enjoy; schools that operate with greater independence more often report students sharing in decision making than do schools with less autonomy.

Alternative schools are constantly being tested and judged. Some might call the continuing evaluations a fifth factor in explaining their success. Certainly the frequent evaluations of alternatives might be seen as yielding a heightened awareness of problems and permitting quicker corrective measures. In contrast to conventional schools, where program evaluations may be infrequent, 85% of the responding alternative schools undergo regular formal evaluation. Alternative school people sometimes resent the continuing need to prove their right to exist, but the frequent evaluations may be the price of the autonomy of alternative schools. Such evaluations may serve as the monitoring mechanism in lieu of the much tighter controls governing more traditional schools. If so, on balance the bargain may be a good one — with the evaluations even bringing separate benefits to the alternative school, along with the welcome autonomy.

A fairly clear picture emerged of the kinds of educational programs offered by alternative schools. As already suggested, these schools tend to regard teacher/student relationships as their most distinctive feature. But instructional methods and activities were a close second, with curriculum a more distant third, and novel teacher roles fourth. Since three of these four areas — all but curriculum — pertain directly to teacher orientation, behavior, and function, it seems that alternative schools make *teachers* the central ingredient in improving education. This is a real point of difference, it seems, between advocates of alternative education and advocates of a number of other current reform proposals. Many such proposals question the teacher's centrality to an improved education. And in some schemes, of course, circumventing teachers and their supposed shortcomings — "teacher proofing" — has been precisely the strategy pursued in the interest of improvement.

More than half of the responding schools (57%) identify their teaching methods as one of their most distinctive features. Independent study was one of the hallmarks of the first public alternative schools, and it continues to be the most frequently identified learning arrangement in today's alternatives. Such study is often a means for individualizing instruction, and it is used by alternative schools to serve at least two purposes: 1) to provide opportunities for action or experiential learning and 2) to supplement curricular options in subject areas with small enrollments. Projects of the first sort often result in fairly nontraditional study and learning; projects of the second sort can result in rather extraordinary academic accomplishment. For instance, an alternative learning program — in Syosset (New York) High School — enables students to take up to two credits in independent study. Students are operating a radio station, designing an art gallery, working with cardiologists, and doing peer tutoring. The program also makes it possible for other students to study advanced Italian, complete a computer software package, or build a computer-controlled robot arm. Bound copies of the papers of students who have pursued more traditional projects are available in the school library. The titles include "The Essence of Probability," "The Concept of Medieval Justice," "The Structure and Performance of Investment Companies," and "Witches and Ghosts in Two Shakespearean Plays."

Earlier investigations of the various types of action learning have identified nine different forms: learning in and from unfamiliar cultures, the great outdoors, service agencies, the professional community, the past, construction and renewal projects, the political arena, the world of work, and on the road.[6] No one of these forms seems generally characteristic of today's alternatives. For instance, 30% of responding schools reported community service to be a significant part of their programs. Only 16% said the same of outdoor education, but 28% reported that extended field trips are important for substantial numbers of students. And in 24%, peer teaching is a prominent feature.

Half of the responding schools report no particular curriculum specialization, which suggests that they offer the college preparatory or general education programs typical of their districts. About one-third specialize in career and vocational education, and 40% emphasize the development of vocational and career skills (among others). A considerable percentage of the alternative schools being started today are inspired by the need to respond to problems involving truancy and dropouts. But alternatives and options also continue to be prominent elements of desegregation programs. Furthermore, in some areas they are being organized for reasons quite similar to those that gave rise to the first alternatives more than a decade ago: youngsters and parents and teachers who simply seek a kind of schooling different from that generally available. Although such purposes do not receive strong support from advocates of the "tightening-up" approach to school improvement, some rather different sorts of efforts — some research and development strategies — seem to recommend diversification and options in the interest of making public education more effective.

There are at least three contemporary sources of this kind of support for alternatives: one is the effective schools approach to discovering what features mark successful schools; a second is the wide attention being paid to private schools — to their alleged superiority and to the value of diversity and choice; and a third is the interest in a developmental orientation for education.

Supportive Research

The effective schools studies lend particular support to the usefulness of alternative schools. These studies have sought to determine the features of schools that yield academic success for "problem" students, as well as for more typically successful ones. Surprisingly to some, effective schools research has

emphasized the importance of considerations tied only indirectly to instruction, e.g., the importance of social cohesion within schools, the experience of support for faculty and of success for students. In fact, perhaps the single dominant theme expressed by the various studies of effective schooling is that success is linked to what is variously called school culture, climate, or ethos. This is described by one recent pair of analysts as "the style and quality of school life, patterns of student and teacher behavior, how students are treated as a group, the management of groups of students within the school, and the care and maintenance of buildings and grounds."[7]

Further testimony to the importance of such factors comes from research comparing public and private schools. James Coleman's claims about the superiority of private schools have further stimulated a growing public interest in them, as well as in comparisons of public and private education. Researchers who try to isolate the differences between the two types of schooling are finding that the contrasts reside in the general climate of a school. In the words of Donald Erickson, who recently concluded a major four-year study comparing public and private schools,

> [R]ecent studies indicate that the most effective schools are distinguished, not by elaborate facilities, extensively trained teachers, small classes, or high levels of financial support, but by outstanding *social climates*.[8]

The concept of climate covers a broad spectrum. Erickson's study broke its meaning down into almost 60 separate factors. Most researchers have been content to associate it more generally with the tone or quality of life in the school — and the behaviors, interaction patterns, and standard operating procedures that contribute to quality of life. As I suggested above, current evidence ties such factors closely to a school's academic effectiveness. These factors are also central to what adults seek and prize in a school.

Gerald Grant has helped to illuminate this dimension of school climate, in the context of a thoughtful look at what parents are seeking when they send their youngsters to private schools:

> [P]rivate school parents are not just fleeing public schools or engaged in white flight. . . . Most seek the ethos or tradition which that school represents. That tradition is usually a way of talking about character. It represents some agreement about which virtues are most worth having. A primary function of private schools is to make visible an otherwise invisible collectivity, to draw together a public that shares similar preferences. The private school is both a symbolic and an actual representation of valued moral and intellectual goods. The fundamental role of leadership in a private school is to bring persons into communication about ways of inculcating and sustaining those values. The leaders of such schools are chosen because they exemplify those values; they are "the best of us," persons capable of symbolizing the tradition and of drawing others into it. . . . The quality and character of the teachers are believed to make a great difference. The community stretches through time and measures individuals against perduring standards. Traditions are a way of pointing to those standards and sensing their weight. The parents choose to enroll their children in that community. . . .[9]

Alternative schools tend to regard teacher/student relationships as their most distinctive feature. But instructional methods and activities were a close second, with curriculum a more distant third. These schools seem to make teachers the central factor in improving education.

"Now what?"

The parents choose to enroll their children in that community. Their hopes pertain to the kind of people their youngsters will become; their immediate expectations pertain to the kind of community the school is. If Grant is correct, it is not a curriculum or set of instructional methods that prompts parents to choose a school; it is something closely akin to school climate that dominates the choice.

Now there is no reason, of course, why the sort of choice Grant associates with private schools must be restricted to them. It is entirely possible to offer choices among quite different kinds of school climates within a single public school district. Indeed, a number of districts have done so. They have deliberately diversified their schools, making it possible for parents to choose different kinds of communities in which to enroll their youngsters. Fred Hechinger has written recently of one such district, in Jefferson County, Colorado.[10] There one can choose among open schools, fundamental schools, and others, as well as neighborhood schools. Hechinger concludes that this district "leaves no doubt that public education gains in strength and in public support by providing new options."

Such matters are no longer suppositions or hypotheses. The Erickson study compared the climates of private schools with those of two kinds of public schools: regular (or "mainstream") schools and alternative schools. Erickson found private schools superior to public schools on most of his dimensions of climate. But he found that alternative schools differed markedly from other public schools. In fact, he went so far as to identify the alternatives as the "privatization" of the public schools. They have managed to achieve a number of the advantages of private

Alternative schools are by no means the lonely anachronisms that some have thought. They are not just holdovers of the Seventies struggling to survive in the very different Eighties. The movement is enjoying steady and continuing growth, together with a considerable expansion of its original purposes.

education, he said, having discovered how to create the same kind of social climate that distinguishes private schools — albeit to a somewhat lesser extent. He explained the superiority of the climate of private schools over that of most public schools as follows:

> [T]he causative agent was . . . that kind of cohesive community or "fellowship" that exists when people are held together by mutual commitment to common purposes and to each other, by a sense of doing something special, and by consensus about the goals to be achieved, and by congruence of values between home and school.[11]

Erickson concluded, "We see no compelling reason why greater homogeneity of purposes cannot be achieved in many public schools, for open enrollment and other strategies may be used to sort clients into like-minded groups attending schools of various types. . . ."[12] In other words, the social climate advantages of private schools can be introduced into public schools by offering alternatives. Thus the provision of options seems an excellent way of pursuing academic benefits for students and the satisfaction and commitment of all participants that researchers have associated with effective schools and with private schools. Such a conclusion has extensive implications at a time when some are urging support for private schools as essential to diversity and choice — and others are insisting that public support be restricted to public schools.

One other group of researchers offers considerable support for alternative schools: those scholars who are examining the mission of the school from the perspective of human development. This group holds that schools should be as much concerned with the development of youngsters as with the inculcation of the cultural heritage. The influence of developmentalists on education has been strong. (Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Erik Erikson have been leading contributors.) Developmentalists have explained the relative success of elementary schools by noting the close tie between those schools and the developmental needs of young children — a far closer tie than is generally found between high schools and the developmental needs of adolescents. At the elementary level, the school tends to recognize and respond to the diverse maturational needs of the very young. Yet many feel that school ought to address only the cognitive needs of adolescents, despite the fact that we presume adolescence to be a critical period of continuing growth (not an adult stage) — and one of the most difficult ones at that.

John Mergendoller has identified four main dimensions of adolescent growth.[13] Certainly adolescence is a period of major development of the intellect. But it is equally, he claimed, a period of major development in identity — of one's character, personality, values, and aspirations; of one's connectedness and relatedness to other human beings; and of one's autonomy and sense of personal responsibility. Developmentalists are likely to examine and assess the school in terms of the contribution it makes (or the obstacles it poses) to growth in all four areas. On such measures, alternative schools score highly. In fact, there is direct evidence that alternatives respond more successfully to a wide range of human needs than do typical high schools.[14] And inquiries into such problems as student alienation suggest that alternative schools often succeed with students who have psychically, if not physically, dropped out. One recent study yielded six guidelines for reducing student alienation: "voluntary choice, clear and consistent goals, small size, participation, extended and cooperative roles, and integrated work."[15] The list bears a striking resemblance to the attributes stressed by the investigators of school climate — *and* to a number of the features of alternative schools, as disclosed by the PAE survey.

Thus it seems that alternative schools are by no means the lonely anachronisms that some have thought. They are not just holdovers of the Seventies struggling to survive in the very different Eighties. The PAE survey — the most extensive study ever undertaken of such programs — suggests that the alternative schools movement is enjoying steady and continuing growth, together with a considerable expansion of the purposes that originally prompted the formation of such schools. Alternatives now represent the acceptance and the institutionalization of diversity. Over the last dozen years, as Hechinger said, they have come to be "the centerpiece of the public school system's search for an antidote to rigidity and uniformity."[16] They have also come, during the same period, to be the chosen solutions for a wide array of social problems, including racial segregation, unequal opportunity, youth crime and vandalism, and declining public confidence in education. As this list suggests, the diversity of alternative school advocates has grown along with their numbers. Moreover, the notion of providing schools of choice has gathered considerable direct support from several areas of research. Thus it appears that, in the area of high school reform, the "tightening-up" approach is not the only game in town. It may grab most of the headlines, and it may strike a resonant chord with a large, disenchanted segment of the public. But many of those who are actually working at improving schools would recommend something other than "tightening up"; they would recommend just the sort of diversity that characterizes alternative schools.

1. Robert B. Reich, "The Profession of Management," *New Republic*, 27 June 1981, pp. 27-32.

2. All survey data come from *The Current Status of Schools of Choice in Public Secondary Education* (Hempstead, N.Y.: Project on Alternatives in Education, Hofstra University, 1982).

3. Fred M. Newmann, "Reducing Student Alienation in High Schools: Implications of Theory," *Harvard Educational Review*, November 1981, pp. 553-54.

4. Daniel L. Duke and Cheryl Perry, "Can Alternative Schools Succeed Where Benjamin Spock, Spiro Agnew, and B. F. Skinner Have Failed?," *Adolescence*, Fall 1978, pp. 375-92.

5. *The Current Status*. . . ; and Thomas E. Wolf, Michael Walker, and Robert A. Mackin, *Summary of the NASP Survey, 1974* (Amherst: National Alternative Schools Program, University of Massachusetts, mimeo).

6. Vernon H. Smith and Robert D. Barr, "Where Should Learning Take Place?," in William Van Til, ed., *Issues in Secondary Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 153-77.

7. Stewart C. Purkey and Marshall S. Smith, "Too Soon to Cheer? Synthesis of Research on Effective Schools," *Educational Leadership*, December 1982, p. 65.

8. Donald A. Erickson, "A New Strategy for School Improvement," *Momentum*, December 1981, p. 46.

9. Gerald Grant, "The Character of Education and the Education of Character," *Daedalus*, Summer 1981, pp. 144-45.

10. Fred Hechinger, "About Education: A School System Changes the Mix," *New York Times*, 2 November 1982.

11. Donald A. Erickson et al., *The British Columbia Story: Antecedents and Consequences of Aid to Private Schools* (Los Angeles: Institute for the Study of Private Schools, 1982), Ch. 15, p. 22, and Ch. 16, p. 8.

12. Ibid., Ch. 16, p. 12.

13. John Mergendoller, "To Facilitate or Impede? The Impact of Selected Organizational Features of Secondary Schools on Adolescent Development," in Fred M. Newmann and Christine E. Sleeter, eds., *Adolescent Development and Secondary Schooling* (Madison: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 1982), pp. 77-105.

14. Gerald R. Smith, Thomas B. Gregory, and Richard C. Pugh, "Meeting Student Needs: Evidence for the Superiority of Alternative Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1981, pp. 561-64.

15. Newmann, p. 550.

16. Fred Hechinger, "About Education: Looking Back at a Failure," *New York Times*, 18 May 1982. □