

## Alternative Schools: What Makes Them Alternative?

By Mary Anne Raywid

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**W**HEREIN lies the alternative in alternative schools? That's easy: It resides in the enthusiasm of the people involved—in their investment and engagement in school—and in their commitment to each other.

The *harder* questions involve how we get there. I would name two sets of characteristics. The first identifies an alternative and distinguishes it from something else which ought to be called by another name. The second set of characteristics identifies the requisites of success for an alternative school.

The defining characteristics are as follows:

1. An alternative school is one in which all affiliated—students and staff—are there by choice.

2. It stands as an alternative to a regular school program. It is not a program one elects as a supplement to a regular program or a regular school day, nor is it a training program one enters in lieu of pursuing an education.

3. It has its own distinctive mission which provides its special identity and sets it off from other schools.

4. It is a separate administrative unit (either a separate school or a separate school-within-a-school or

mini-school) with its own students and staff whose primary assignment is to the alternative.

The necessary conditions of success of alternative schools are these:

1. They must be small enough to permit personalization of the school experience. This probably means a maximum size of several hundred for an alternative school or school-within-a-school.

2. An alternative must have broad aims, making its concern the full development of each youngster—character and intellect, personal and social development, as well as academic achievement. It is concerned with the person, not just with the person's academic accomplishments.

3. An alternative school must provide its teachers with enough freedom from standard rules and procedures to enable them to frame and carry out their own vision of schooling. This means that the school must be freer of external controls than are most, and that this power, thus shifted to the school, be diffused

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among classroom teachers rather than concentrated totally in the principal's office.

These conditions are responsible for many of the other positive features we associate with alternatives. For instance, smallness makes each participant a genuine contributor to the program—it makes each one *count*. Moreover, it makes it possible to avoid an extensive structure of formal rules, and, thus, permits flex-

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ibility and continuing responsiveness.

A concern with the *individual* and not just the *student* is what makes young people say alternative school teachers "really care." Such broader aims also assign teachers responsibility for the full development of their charges—encouraging the teacher's awareness and response to the full range of what affects the youngster. This puts teachers in a much better position not only to make learning humane, but also to determine what priorities can best be addressed at a particular moment.

Alternative schools were among the first in the last decade or two to

demonstrate the importance of school and teacher autonomy. Now this kind of change is being urged for all schools. There is great concern today with boosting teacher efficacy—i.e., with enabling teachers to succeed at their mission. It is now being realized that we have so shackled them that they cannot succeed. Greater autonomy not only contributes to teacher success; it is also responsible for the heightened morale and sense of professionalism of teachers, and for their unusual commitment and dedication.

**Supplementary Ideas**

There are a number of other features which many find essential to alternative education—e.g., student freedom and decision making, action learning or learning within and directly from the community, or a no-failure policy. None of these is incompatible, of course, with the three success essentials I have listed. But I have seen what appear to be successful alternatives that do not pursue these supplementary ideas. On the other hand, I have never seen a successful alternative that is without smallness, broad aims, and substantial autonomy.

The reply to someone who objects that these defining characteristics are not accepted by all, or that they are arbitrary, is that, yes, we are surely free to define words as we choose. But if one is interested in alternative education by virtue of its successes and accomplishments, these are the sorts of programs to which success has attached. □