

Why are Alternatives Successful?



Courtesy of Mary Leue

by Mary Anne Raywid

Wherein lies the alternative in alternatives? 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 just ought to be called by another name. These are defining characteristics and in my judgment there are four. The second set of characteristics identify the requisites of success for an alternative school. There are three characteristics of this sort which seem to prove predictive of which alternatives will succeed and which will not. There are many other traits also to be found in some combination in most alternative schools, but I shall limit this just to defining characteristics and success essentials.

The defining characteristics are as follows:

1. An alternative school is one in which all affiliated, students and staff, are there by choice.
2. An alternative school 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. An alternative school is one with its own distinctive mission which provides its special identity and sets it off from other schools.

4. An alternative 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.

Each of these traits is logically necessary for a school to be an alternative, and each distinguishes an alternative from something quite different. For instance, the choice feature is what distinguishes an alternative school or program from one that is punitive or from one established for special groups presumed deficient or handicapped in some way. Nobody chooses such programs. The 'mission' requirement is necessary if the alternative is going to be anything but just a new school; it must have a distinct vision of something else it wants to be—e.g., a place marked by a special climate or atmosphere, or a special theme, or a particular instructional approach. Without this feature no one has real choice, because there can be no genuine options to choose among. The requirement that the school be a separate administrative unit is what makes the difference between an alternative and a course elective or a set of electives. This is necessary to sustaining a separate mission and a separate point of identification for those involved. It is what enables the alternative to become a community.

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

The research suggests that if any of these three important features is missing, the alternative school is handicapped and its chances for success are substantially weakened. The reason is that these three conditions are responsible for—give rise to—so 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 smallness permits flexibility and continuing responsiveness.

A concern with the *individual* and not just the *student* or role occupant is what makes young people say alternatives teachers "really care," as opposed to other teachers who they think do not. Such broader educational 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 is affecting 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 the rest of the world has caught up and 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 suc-

ceed. 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.

I know that there are a number of other features which many find essential to alternative education—e.g., student freedom and decisionmaking, action learning or learning within and directly from the community, or a no failure policy. None of these is incom-

patible, 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 success and accomplishments, these are the sorts of programs to which the success has attached.

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