

## ALTERNATIVES AND MARGINAL STUDENTS\*

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### Introduction

This paper is a report of the current state of alternative education, particularly as it pertains to marginal or at risk students. It offers information and analysis regarding what alternative schools are, how effective they are, how they fare in relation to other efforts to deal with the at risk population, and the past and present of the alternative education movement.

But the paper is also, in effect, an argument. It shows that a lot of the most promising proposals for improving the education of at-risk students -- as well as many of the most popular reform recommendations for the education of *all* students -- have drawn on the practice of alternative schools. However, these school improvement efforts import only selected features of that practice -- features which when adopted only individually, or even severally, are divested of their transformational potential. Alternatives can and do yield 'restructured' education -- but only because they restructure along *multiple* lines: organizational and environmental, as well as programmatic.

One type of alternative school is probably today's clearest and most successful exemplar of restructured schools. But unless and until this is acknowledged, the lessons that alternatives have to teach cannot even be perceived, much less learned. Meanwhile, we continue to overlook the ramifications of the model that currently represents our most definitive departure from the programmatic and organizational and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform.

### Background

Alternative schools in this country now date back for more than a quarter of a century. Over the years they have both waxed and waned, and they have undergone periodic evolutions. They have remained a marginal phenomenon so far as the educational system and Establishment are concerned, but they

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have also remained an active concept that continues to affect a number of youngsters directly, and a lot more of them indirectly. Both by design and happenstance, an increasing number of the students most directly affected by alternatives are the disadvantaged youngsters populating urban schools.

The first public alternative schools were launched in the late 1960s, and most had been inspired in one way or another by the ideas and events of that decade: those which enrolled largely white, middle class students, and were found largely in small towns or suburbs -- like the Village School in Great Neck, New York, Murray Road in Newton, Massachusetts, the Wilson Open Campus School in Mankato, Minnesota -- typically showed the influence of the humanistic impulses and liberation theme of the 60s. Those which were located in the South, and in Northern cities, tended to reflect the civil rights emphases of the time and were focused on making available to poor and minority youngsters the educations previously denied them. And there were also alternatives launched with the sociopolitical optimism of the 60s as to the possibility of re-fashioning the world and its institutions and building a new society. (Raywid, 1981)

Many of these first public school alternatives of the late 60s and early 70s owed a great deal to the 'free' schools and the 'freedom' schools which had emerged earlier in the decade within the private sector -- with the 'free' schools that seemed to echo the ideas of Progressive Education or of A. S. Neill -- and the 'freedom' schools launched initially in the South, in the wake of the voter registration drives of the early 60s, aimed at individual and group empowerment. Public alternative schools inspired by such ideals were typically somewhat paler models of the independent alternatives, but such influences were often fairly distinct.

To varying degrees and in diverse ways, these alternative schools represented a critique of the educational system. Irrespective of how discreet a group might be, the very mounting of something called an 'alternative' implied at minimum that some group of kids or some set of ideas were not otherwise receiving appropriate attention in conventional schools. Some alternatives openly saw themselves as the vanguard and model for the education of the future. Others saw themselves as an alternative to bureaucracy and a demonstration of a different, more humane way to organize human activity, without hierarchy, restrictive regulation, or monitoring. (Duke, 1976; Nirenberg, 1977)

As of the early 1970s, a federal Experimental Schools Program seeking ways to refashion entire

school systems, funded three districts in effect to create multiple alternative schools, thereby making options widely available to the families of school children. The program, launched in 1971, sponsored such systems in Minneapolis, in Berkeley, California, and in Eugene, Oregon. Although the Experimental Schools Program was more concerned with establishing models for school change than with enhancing educational effectiveness, a pedagogically-oriented rationale for improving outcomes through such systemwide options appeared with Mario Fantini's *Public Schools of Choice* in 1973. Fantini argued that different youngsters need different kinds of school environments if they are to succeed. A year later, David Tyack's *The One Best System* (1974) lent support to the idea of alternatives and options by underscoring the logically arbitrary nature of the assumption that there is 'one best way' -- or even one feasible way -- to organize and deliver education. Both these books were invoked to urge that alternative schools become the norm, rather than the exception, and that *all* public schools in effect become alternatives to all of the others. The new 'best system' would be marked by diversity and choice, with families selecting the school program and environment they found most compatible.

Several years later another federal program offered yet another sort of stimulus to the alternatives and options idea, and to the notion of options systems. As of 1976, the federal government began funding magnet schools under the authority of the Emergency School Aid Assistance Act. Today, 17 years after the initial federal support -- and due in part to a subsequent federal initiative, the Magnet Schools Assistance Program of 1985 -- the nation has 2652 magnet schools, offering 3222 magnet programs (Steel, Levine, Rossell & Armor, 1993). There have from the start been some important differences between magnet and alternative schools, although some observers initially characterized magnets as simply alternative schools initiated to the purpose of stimulating voluntary racial desegregation -- and many have continued to note that alternatives were the forebears of the magnet genre. Thus, there have been close connections from the start. Moreover, many of the schools calling themselves "alternatives" have been funded as magnet schools.

At the same time that the alternatives idea was finding sponsorship by interests advocating change at the system or district level, a number of people seeking solutions to specific problems and for distinctive populations had begun turning to alternative schools as an answer. Thus, there were initiatives for alternatives in the interests of preventing school vandalism and violence, and

juvenile crime and delinquency, and finally as a means of dropout prevention.

As such a history suggests, there has been ambiguity virtually from the start as to the purpose of alternative schools and their intended audiences. Was it an idea for schools, or for school systems? For all students, or only for populations with special needs? To be available at enrollee choice, or with placements assigned as in other schools? Despite these ambiguities and the emergence of multiple forms, however, two enduring consistencies have from the start characterized most alternative schools: First, they have been designed to respond to a group which for some reason or other appears not to be optimally served by the regular program; and because this is the case, second, they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs, and environments. The first of these traits has often linked alternative schools with unsuccessful students -- with those who by virtue of being "disadvantaged," "marginal," "at risk" or otherwise challenging (such as the alienated or behaviorally disruptive) cannot or will not succeed in the 'regular' program. The second trait has often linked alternatives to innovation and creativity with respect to practice as well as organization. And particular alternative schools have varied according to which of these two traits has loomed largest for them.

The audience question becomes particularly urgent under present demographic conditions. Although some alternatives like Central Park East Secondary School say quite explicitly, "it is our school, and its way of teaching that is alternative, not our students" (Schwarz, 1993), for many, alternatives are schools for some, rather than for all. Yet today, the line dividing 'special needs' students, or 'the educationally disadvantaged' or the 'at risk' or 'marginal' from the rest of the student population has become blurred. Indeed, given the minority majorities that dominate urban public schools, the number of youngsters living at and below poverty levels, and the educational backgrounds of many parents, it would appear that a large majority of the youngsters attending urban schools fall within the 'at risk' category. Using the composite definition of educational disadvantage developed by Levin (1985) -- minority status, poverty, language deficiency, parent educational level -- it would appear that large percentages of the youngsters in most urban schools, certainly a strong majority, are students 'at risk.'

Within its High School Division, New York City has a separate Alternative Schools Office which administers the 30 schools and more than 300 programs officially classified as 'alternative.'

(Additional alternatives operating at the K-8 levels are administered by the City's 32 community school districts.) There is no official definition of 'alternative' for New York City Schools, however, and the only relevant source suggests merely that "most serve students not likely to succeed in high school or who have previously dropped out." (Phillips, 1992: 3) This source -- a description written by the City's Superintendent of Alternative Schools -- also noted that structurally, alternatives are small, many are 'non-graded,' they employ some form of school-based management, many of their teachers teach outside their certified areas in interdisciplinary programs, and most teachers function as student advisors. Programmatically, "all are committed to unique principles and practices of schooling," and most pursue action learning and external learning opportunities. The list reflects the features typically characterizing alternative schools across the nation.

### Definitional Problems

So what is alternative education? The literature contains a dozen or more attempts to define it -- or to identify its key characteristics, or to name the elements important to its success. (Deal, 1975; Doob, 1977; Duke, 1978; Fenstermacher, 1975; Fizzell, 1985; Foley, 1982; Morley, 1991; Paskal & Miller, 1975; Raywid, 1988; Smith, Barr & Burke, 1976; Sweeny, 1988; Wehlage, 1983; Wehlage, Rutter & Turnbaugh, 1987; Weinberg, 1975) In the absence of a standard definition, what will be offered here in lieu of proposing one more new one are some properties enumerated in definitional attempts to date; an identification of some boundaries; and a description of three distinct types of alternative schools.

Most descriptions emphasize smallness, personalization, interpersonal relationships, and a primary focus on students as human beings. Organizationally, most characterizations call attention to flexibility, autonomy, the frequency of extended and diffuse staff roles, and to the alternative as a distinct administrative unit with its own separate identity and mission. Many analysts also note innovative and non-traditional curricular organization, instructional strategies, and governance patterns as traits. Differences in the several definitions are generally less a matter of disagreement than of emphasis. Some conceptions make a specifically oriented school culture most central (e.g., Sweeney, 1988), others lay more stress on a particular school climate instead (e.g., Morley, 1991), while other definitions bear an organizational and structural focus (e.g., Raywid, 1988). The three 'advice sheets' appended to this report summarize the literature's attempts to identify the key characteristics

of alternative schools and the features and qualities associated with their success. (These sheets, prepared for practitioner use, are part of a series disseminated by Hofstra University's Center for the Study of Educational Alternatives, and each attempts to reflect the relevant research in the recommendations it makes.)

The absence of a definition makes necessary the specification of boundaries distinguishing alternative schools from some other programs and arrangements. First, an alternative school differs from a magnet school in that magnets are defined in terms of a desegregation purpose. (Steel, Levine, Rossell & Armor, 1993) The two also differ very importantly in that alternative schools are typically home-grown arrangements developed by their immediate staff, and they operate at least to some extent independently. Magnets, on the other hand, are typically centrally inspired and remain centrally coordinated. Accordingly, alternatives may show substantially more organizational departure and innovation than magnets. Nevertheless it should be noted that a great many alternative schools have been classified as magnets (for grant purposes) and some magnet schools -- e.g., some but not all career academies -- have been characterized as alternatives. (Wehlage et al., 1989)

An alternative school may be a school-within-a-school or a mini-school (the former being part of a larger school, the latter constituting a separate school in its own right, even if housed within a building with another school or schools); but an alternative school differs from a house plan. A house plan is an administrative arrangement intended to downscale a large school by dividing it into units. It assigns students and teachers to separate units, but these units are not differentiated as to mission and there may be few if any programmatic differences from house to house. Mission and program distinctiveness are, by contrast, typical features of alternative schools.

An alternative school differs in several ways from a 'track' to which a student is assigned: first, by virtue of the assignment, since alternative schools are usually a student option (with one important exception to be discussed below) and hence, because students are free to move in and out of an alternative school, should they so desire, while they lack such freedom with respect to a track placement; and second, tracks may incidentally group students into the same classes but in a tracking arrangement there is ordinarily no intent nor provision for making an entity out of the group thus assembled.

Alternative schools -- or at least one type thereof -- are likely to differ from programs explicitly

targeted as dropout prevention, or programs for at risk students, in seeking a range of students and deliberate heterogeneity as to ability and school motivation.

### Alternative School Types

Not surprisingly, given their history and the diverse purposes to which they have been espoused, alternative schools represent programs of very different sorts. There are three distinct ideal types, with individual schools approximating these to varying degrees.

Type I alternatives are the ideological progeny of the early 60s programs. They intend to make school engaging, challenging, and fulfilling to all involved. Their efforts to make it so have yielded innovations and creative programs and arrangements, a number of which are now being widely urged as general school improvement measures for all schools. These schools virtually always reflect organizational and administrative departures from the traditional, as well as programmatic innovations, and they may be our clearest extant examples of schools that have been "restructured." (Hawley, 1991)

Type I alternatives are schools of choice and they are usually extremely popular. Perhaps the best known examples are East Harlem's District 4 schools, and the Central Park East schools to which the Spanish Harlem district gave rise. It is Type I alternatives that are sometimes programmatically similar to magnet schools and which constitute some or all of the options in at least some choice systems (e.g. in Manhattan's District 4, and in Cambridge and Lowell, Massachusetts). They are likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy or both.

Type II alternative schools pose strong contrast: instead of popular programs that attract students to choose them, these are programs to which students are 'sentenced' -- usually as a last chance prior to expulsion. Variants include in-school suspension programs, 'cool-out' rooms, and longer term placements for the behaviorally disruptive. But one of the distinctive characteristics of the Type II program is that it is assumed to be temporary and promises 'time off for good behavior.' As the phrase recommends, Type II alternative schools have been likened to 'soft jails,' and they have nothing to do with options and choice. Under the title of "alternative schools," such programs are most likely to be found in the South, with Florida and Texas having established substantial numbers of them. (Bureau of Compensatory Education, 1980)

Typically, behavioral modification in one form or another is the Type II program's focus, and there is no attempt to modify curriculum or pedagogy. In fact, in-school suspension programs often make a deliberate effort to have students perform the work of the regular classes from which they have been removed. The assignments are likely to be a lot more solitary, however, designed strictly for individual completion (since student collaboration could impede order, and the supervising 'teacher' is not in a position to provide much help since s/he is typically responsible for students coming from multiple classes and grade levels, with different assignments). Type II alternatives where students remain for a longer time may instead offer an academic curriculum that is 'basics' oriented with an emphasis on factual knowledge and elementary skills to be acquired.

Type III programs are based on different premises, rendering them non-punitive and more positive and compassionate as to orientation. They are designed for students presumed to need some sort of extra help, remediation, or rehabilitation -- usually either academic or social/emotional or both. If the appropriate metaphor for Type II alternatives is jail, the metaphor for Type III programs is therapy -- with the assumption that after sufficient treatment, successful students will be equipped to return to the mainstream and continue in the regular program. Predictably, then, Type III alternatives often focus on remedial work with high-structure tasks. They frequently also attempt to generate the conditions that will stimulate social and emotional growth -- a matter often seen as calling for a focus on the school as itself a community. (Foley & Crull, 1984; Wehlage et al., 1989)

Alternative schools are usually identifiable as one or another of these three types, although since the three represent ideal types, particular programs can appear something of a mix. A compassionate staff, for example, may give a Type II program overtones of Type III, despite official purposes. Or a committed Type III staff may undertake at least a bit of the sort of programmatic innovation that distinguishes a Type I alternative. But even so, the genre goes far in determining an alternative school's silhouette and a number of its most central features.

First, whether an alternative school is Type I, Type II, or Type III determines the program's *raison d'être* and hence the expectations that govern it and the criteria by which it will be evaluated. (Type I: To what extent are students challenged and satisfied, and what innovations have been created? -- *versus*, Type II: To what extent has unacceptable behavior been reduced, and what are the recidivism rates? --

versus, Type III: To what extent have achievement and attendance been improved, and how many succeed when returned to the mainstream program?)

Second, whether the program is Type I, II, or III will also determine whether student affiliation is by choice or assignment. Type I alternatives are options, or programs of choice. Type II are not. Type III often reflect some combination of referral with student right to reject the recommendation, but not to initiate it. It seems increasingly clear that the choice feature is associated with positive results (Crain, Heebner & Si, 1992; Larson & Allen, 1988; Musumeci & Szczykowski, 1991), which lends it strategic importance in probable student success. Choice also is thought particularly advantageous with marginal students -- both by virtue of their previous negative school experiences and by virtue of the conviction of many that they can exercise little influence over what befalls them. (Butler-Por, 1987)

Third, and perhaps most far-reaching, Type I alternatives make the assumption that by changing a school's program and environment, one can alter the behavior, performance, and achievement of those associated with it. Thus, improving educational effectiveness is a matter of changing *schools*. Both Type II and Type III alternatives assume, by contrast, that a lack of educational success is a matter of some deficiency on the part of the student -- be it characterological, emotional, intellectual, racial, socio-economic or something else. Thus, it is the *student* and not the school which must be changed. The result of this assumption regarding the specific problem to be solved in relation to youngsters not well served by the regular program, is that Type II and Type III alternatives sustain the service delivery mission orientation associated with bureaucracy, while Type I alternatives tend to replace such an orientation with a commitment to responsiveness -- i.e., to providing the essentials for facilitating the success of their charges.

It might be thought that Type II alternatives are not really alternatives at all in the sense under consideration and are simply irrelevant to the challenge of making a positive difference for students at risk. They are not totally so, however, in that a strange ambiguity often seems to mark school efforts to deal with education-resistant students. The school's response frequently appears some combination of punishment and support. For instance, in at least some areas the infractions that send students to the Type II in-school suspension programs called "alternatives" include truancy. Thus, the punitive response is explicitly invoked as a means of encouraging attendance and preventing dropping out. (The success potential of such a strategy is

contingent, of course, upon strong student motivation -- which is just what seems to be missing. But the irony may be lost in the face of our ambivalence toward these youngsters.) We often tend toward ambivalence with respect to students who fail to respond positively to our efforts. We want to help as well as punish the most defiant, and we may harbor serious misgivings even about those to whom we can respond with compassion. Even in Type III programs, as well as in Type II, arrangements often suggest negative judgments about students and reflect what some identify as "blaming the victim."

Florida is a good example of how the ambivalence surfaces at the policy level. An evaluation of that State's alternative education programs insisted that these programs were intended to serve "disinterested" and "unsuccessful" students, not simply the "disruptive." (Office of Planning and Budgeting, 1981) But legislation proposed in Florida named "intervention centers" and "in-school suspension programs" as two types of educational alternatives, along with "other alternatives to suspension or expulsion." (Bureau of Compensatory Education, 1980: 143) At the same time, the committee recommending such arrangements insisted that the programs must be "positive, not punitive." (Bureau of Compensatory Education, 1980: 18) And a national survey of alternatives for disruptive youth concluded,

Alternative [school] climate should reflect the philosophy that it's better and easier in the normal, comprehensive school environment, which encourages students to want to return to the regular school setting as soon as possible. (Garrison, 1987: 22)

Thus, both in what we do and in what we say, there seem to be a number of contradictions and mixed signals.

#### The Research Record

We turn now to the track record of alternative schools -- how well they work and how successful they are. We will look only very briefly at Types II and III and then move to focus on Type I, since this is the variety to which the clear positive findings accrue. Subsequently, we shall review briefly the findings regarding several of the core features associated with alternatives.

The record of Type II schools suggests that often they may serve no purpose beyond ridding conventional classrooms of the youngsters most likely to interrupt them. As we shall see, the attributes that make for positive effects are not highly

correlated with those of the programs to which students are sent for poor behavior. The programs targeting 'problem students' which report benefits tend to fashion themselves more as therapeutic than as penal settings -- associating them with Type III rather than Type II alternatives. (Gold & Mann, 1984)

According to a study done by Florida's Office of the Governor, there were almost 58,000 assignments of youngsters to in-school suspension programs during the 1979-80 school year. (For those finding such numbers incredible, it should be added that the total does not represent 58,000 students, but instances, and a number of youngsters may have been sent to in-school suspension several times during the year.) Analyses of multiple districts showed no correlation between the existence of such programs and local levels of dropouts, referrals, corporal punishment, suspension, or expulsion. Thus, the programs were evidently making no contribution to resolving the problems Type II programs are launched to solve. (Office of Planning and Budgeting, 1981)

The record of Type III programs is stronger. These alternatives are based on the assumption that students can be helped to succeed in the 'regular' school. They tend to stress personal social/emotional development, re-education, and academic remediation. The environments they provide are typically small, supportive, with positive student-adult relationships, and considerable amounts of individual attention. Student behavior typically improves under such circumstances, with increased attendance and fewer disciplinary incidents. (Gold & Mann, 1984) Academic gains are also attributed to these programs, in terms of credit accumulation and/or knowledge and skills acquired. However, not infrequently, the changes last only so long as the student remains in the alternative school. Only one study located, that of Gold and Mann (1984) reports that as late as a year after returning to the 'regular' school, gains made in the alternative programs appear to persist. Other studies examining the question have found that once returned to the 'regular' school, the problems recur -- be they a matter of disruptive behavior, school estrangement, and/or a lack of academic progress. (Frazer & Baenen, 1988; McCann & Landi, 1986) The conclusion drawn from such studies is typically that the programs have failed to bring about the improvements sought -- rarely, if ever, that the findings document what the students involved can do in a school environment other than that of the standard comprehensive high school. Thus, evidence that might be construed to support the need for such variants is instead often read as testimony to their failure.

### The Type I Record

A different picture emerges from studies of Type I alternative schools. There are numerous stories of dramatic gains and turn-arounds for youngsters who had detested school and now love it, of problem students, some previously classified handicapped, whose problematic behavior disappears in the alternative school setting, and of impressive academic gains. (See Raywid, 1984 and 1989 for reviews of some of this evidence.) There are also stories of alternative schools that are outstandingly effective, marked by extraordinary student accomplishment and high levels of commitment on the part of all constituents, teachers, students, parents. Not all schools, of course, meet with this sort of success, but it is not uncommon for researchers and evaluators to receive testimony to individual transformations that sound like the following statements of and about alternative school students:

Rickie flourished at the Media Academy, in an environment in which teachers were willing to reach out to him as a person. "I learned more this year than any other year of school", he said of his first year at the Academy.... "I had never experienced this before where the teachers are close and encourage me. I was just a C+/B- student, but now I am an A/B student." (Wehlage et al., 1989: 166-167)

I've seen more positive growth in my son in six weeks, than in a year and a half of intensive counseling. SAIL teachers are tuned into the language that Bryan speaks. Our relationship has improved. I used to try to pry things out of him about school, and he'd close up like a clam. Now, we talk all the time. He's constantly telling me about new things he has learned and amazing ways that people relate to him. We both just can't believe it. I no longer have to force him out of bed -- he wouldn't miss a day for the world. (Wood, 1989: 197-198)

It is also not uncommon to discover evidence of school transformation, as distinct from that of individual students. Wehlage, Smith & Lipman (1992) define a transformed or successfully restructured school as one displaying second order change, harmonious student-adult relations, engaging curriculum and instruction, reallocated staff roles and responsibilities, and the use of community resources. They reported the following about six of the 14 alternative schools they had studied earlier:

...teachers have assumed the additional roles of counselor, confidante, and friends, and efforts are made to bond the students to the school, to the teaching staff, and to one another. Course content is more closely tied to the needs of the students in these programs, and efforts are made to make the courses more engaging and relevant. Greater emphasis is placed on hands-on and experiential learning and students are given greater responsibility for their own success. More attention is paid to the individual needs and concerns of students, in and outside of class. Teachers work together to govern the school and make critical decisions about curriculum and school policy.... A climate of innovation and experimentation is common... (Wehlage et al, 1989: 172)

Thus, there is reason to believe that alternatives represent an effective way to transform schools as well as to transform the behavior and performance of individual students. (Hawley, 1991) There is also evidence that they serve to transform entire districts.

To date the unchallenged model of district-wide alternatives is Manhattan's Community School District 4 in East or Spanish Harlem. With its 95% minority population, and its high poverty levels (80% of the students are on free or reduced cost lunches), and its history of school failure, virtually all of this district's school population qualifies as disadvantaged and at risk. As of 1973 the District -- the one scoring worst throughout the City on a number of academic indicators -- began encouraging the development of programs they came to identify as "alternative concept schools." These were schools launched by groups of interested teachers, and without a detailed blueprint guiding their development. As testified by their many chroniclers, (Domanico, 1989; Elmore, n.d.; Fliegel, 1993; Harrington & Cookson, 19\_\_\_; Kutner & Salganik, 1986; Rogers & Chung, 1983), the programs shared these features:

1. They were small.
2. They were designed, both programmatically and organizationally by those who were going to operate them.
3. They took their character -- or theme or 'focus' -- from the particular strengths and interests of the teachers who conceived them.

4. Their teachers all chose the program -- with the plan that subsequent teachers would be selected with the input of present staff.

5. Their students and their families chose the program.

6. Each program was administered by a teacher-director.

7. Their small size denied them much auxiliary, specialized staff (e.g., librarians, counselors, deans)

8. All of the early programs were housed as mini-schools in buildings dominated by much larger programs.

9. The superintendent acted so as to sustain the autonomy and protect the integrity of the mini-schools within each of their buildings.

10. All of the programs enjoyed considerable autonomy from district interference, and the administration functioned also to buffer them from demands of citywide school officials.

These programs grew one at a time, as small groups of teachers stepped forward with a proposal. In 1974, three opened. In the next three years, there were six more, and in the following three, an additional six. By 1983 there were 21 such programs, primarily at the junior high school level but some elementary as well. At that point the District opened all junior high schools to choice and ended neighborhood assignments.

The "alternative concept" programs were invited and then supported by an enterprising, reform-minded young superintendent hoping to turn things around. He deliberately cultivated innovation and risk-taking among those within the District, and due both to the loose coupling of the City system and the neglect sometimes accorded causes presumed hopeless, District 4 remained largely ignored for a number of years.

Meanwhile, the program's development was fostered by continuity in leadership. When Tony Alvarado, the initiating superintendent, left in 1983 to become New York City Schools Chancellor, he was succeeded by Carlos Medina who had been his assistant. Sy Fliegel, who had been Director of the Alternative Schools, continued to perform that function. When Medina named Fliegel the Deputy Superintendent, John Falco, who had founded one of the original alternative schools, became and still serves as Alternative Schools Director. The

continuity has remained largely unbroken, save for a brief period when an unsympathetic administrator served as Interim Superintendent.

Student achievement has risen strikingly. In 1974 only 15% of District 4 students were reading above grade level. As of 1988, 62% were. (Fliegel, 1993) As of 1983, 49% of the District's students were scoring above grade level in math. (Domanico, 1989) There are also indications that District 4 is successfully fostering English acquisition, since it reports fewer students in programs for the limited English proficient than do any of the other nine districts in the City where 50% or more of the students are Latino. (Domanico, 1989) Still another indicator is the record of District youngsters accepted by selective high schools. Fewer than 9% of the City's students are admitted to these schools, yet in 1987, 22% of District 4's eighth-grade graduates entered such high schools, and in 1990, 20% did so. (Fliegel, 1993)

District 4 operates two high schools. Both far surpass City averages as to graduation rates. At the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, more than half the students earn Regents diplomas. Of the 245 students graduating in 1988, 241 went on to higher education. (Fliegel, 1993) The figures for Central Park East Secondary School appear equally impressive. A recent study shows that 80% of the ninth grade entrants graduate from the school, with most of the departers having moved out of the City. The dropout rate is 5%. Moreover, 95% of CPESS graduates go directly to college and most manage to complete it -- at four-year, residential institutions. (Schwarz, 1993)

#### Factors Associated with Success

The theory evolved by Wehlage and colleagues (1989) offers a good framework for examining the record of Type I alternatives. They concluded that to succeed with at risk youngsters, schools must be "communities of support" in two senses: they must be carefully sustained as communities with which youngsters want to be affiliated -- i.e., places successfully evoking bonding of students to the school; and they must be places where students are genuinely educationally engaged -- i.e., where they are attentively involved with school and classroom activities.

This suggests two facets or dimensions of an effective alternative school: its attention to sustaining community and its attention to instructional program. Organizational context and conditions provide yet a third category of analysis useful in examining the programs and nature of current alternative schools.

But before beginning our examination it should be noted that many indications recommend these concerns not only for at risk youngsters or urban schools, but for *all* youngsters and schools. As Wehlage et al (1989:5) put it,

[W]e believe that what is good for at-risk students is usually good for other students as well; given this, we view the implications of our research as pertinent to the improvement of most schools."

First, with respect to organizational conditions and features, there appears virtually unanimous agreement that alternative schools must be small. (Gregory & Smith, 1987; Sweeney, 1988; Wehlage et al, 1989). And of course this agreement among alternative school researchers has obtained far wider support, with small schools or the downscaling of large ones now being widely and generally recommended for all students. (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Oxley & McCabe, 1990) There is extensive agreement among alternative school researchers that alternatives must be cohesive units with their own separate space, programs, and students and staff. Human relationships within the school are the critical component. Strong emphasis is placed on the relationships between students and adults in the school and most particularly between students and teachers. (Foley & Crull, 1984; Gold & Mann, 1984; Raywid, 1982) This gives rise to the need for extended role definitions for teachers, rendering their functions broader, less specialized, and more diffuse than in most schools, to enable them to interact more extensively with students and in multiple capacities, friend, confidante, mentor, advisor. (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988) This in turn calls for structures that generate and sustain such relationships, and probably most alternatives large enough to need them have devised small advisories and 'family' groups in the interests of doing so. The capacity to sustain such relationships and to respond to individuals is also contingent upon organizational flexibility and keeping formalization to a minimum. Alternative schools tend strongly toward social control through norms in preference to rules and regulations. (Raywid, 1990)

Choice is viewed pivotal by many, for several reasons. First it facilitates the assembling of a group sharing some educationally-related concern, thus enabling the school's mission to find support. (Hill, Foster & Gendler, 1990) Second, it is thought to facilitate strong affiliation and heighten the sense of membership. (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Erickson, 1982) Third, a continuing emphasis on choice -- not only in gaining entrance, but within the program -- is

held to maximize motivation and commitment, as well as to teach responsibility. (Kaczynski, 1989; Trickett, 1991). Finally, the choice feature is thought important to avoiding the stigmatizing of alternatives.

Success also seems to be accompanied by teacher design of programs -- the devising of both curricular and instructional patterns -- as well as by teacher participation in setting school policy. (Duke, 1976; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sweeney, 1983) These functions create greater mutual interdependence among teachers and thus occasion more collaborative interaction. (Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching, 1993) This helps assure a sense of staff ownership and collective responsibility. (Rosenholtz, 1989) Relatedly, there is often a flattened hierarchy and a downplaying of status differences. A democratic or empowerment or shared decision-making theme is likely to characterize staff relationships within the school and often to include students as well. (Trickett, 1991)

Finally, there is direct testimony to the role of an alternative school's organizational features in determining student response. A study comparing 12 alternatives confirmed the extent to which student perceptions of, and reactions to, an alternative's environment were related to its organizational characteristics. (Stevens, 1985) Not surprisingly, then, alternatives are cited as prime illustrations of restructured schools. (Wehlage, Smith, Lipman, 1992) A longitudinal study of professional community within schools sponsored by the national Center on School Organization and Restructuring of Schools is finding its clearest and most positive case in a New York City alternative school. (Raywid, 1993) And a study done by Stanford's Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching concluded that a Michigan alternative school came closer to exhibiting the characteristics of professional community than did any of the other 15 schools involved in their national study: Teachers have a greater influence on policy than at any other site, teacher collaboration time is more extensive than at any other site, they have high marks for their principal's leadership, and their job satisfaction is among the highest encountered. (Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching, 1993)

There is extensive testimony to the idea that alternative schools must be 'membership' institutions, or places with which students want to affiliate. This is perhaps one of their strongest accomplishments. Bryk & Driscoll demonstrated the importance of a strong communal orientation to commitment, effort, accomplishment, and satisfaction for both teachers and students. (1988) And it has been claimed by Wehlage and his colleagues (1989), as well as others

(Anderson, 1983; Gold & Mann, 1984) that the bonding of youngsters to school and staff is of particular importance for at risk students.

A national survey of more than a decade ago found alternative schools to identify the personal relationships the school fostered as their most distinctive feature. (Raywid, 1982) These they reported as more critical than curriculum or instructional strategies in defining their schools. It appears that a great deal of effort in alternative schools goes to creating and sustaining close ties. In many, an advisory system assures that every student is known well to at least one adult. (Wehlage et al, 1989) It occurs through forming a close-knit group to which students belong throughout their stay in the school. These groups meet often (daily in some schools) and may pursue out-of-school activities together as well as in-school discussions. In different alternatives these groups variously consider school issues and problems, school- and home-related personal problems, pursue self-knowledge activities, and extend support to one another.

Virtually all alternatives emphasize student-teacher relationships. Some, but not all, also stress student-to-student relationships which the "community" or "family" metaphors often used would call for. It seems reasonable to speculate that in a school where both kinds of relationships are stressed, the emphasis on the school as community would be stronger and its effects more powerful and pronounced. To date there appears no explicit evidence to this effect, however.

There is, though, considerable evidence that alternative schools take pains to personalize the arrangements and practices that mark them. This is the case for everything from longtime teacher assignments to students' daily classwork. Assignments are often tailored to individuals as a means of sparking response. To cite one imaginative instance, one alternative school turned a dreaded annual library research project into something much more palatable by having it start with the selection of a front page story from *The New York Times* on the day the individual was born. (Raywid, 1993)

Several other alternative school features mark the way in which alternatives are personalized. Virtually all address holistic aims, with a continuing concern with emotional and social development as well as with academic. (Sweeney, 1988) This means both that students must be known and treated as individuals, and that staff must remain aware of the directions in which their students' lives are moving. This calls for a sustained concern with meeting the needs of students -- and both teachers and students

testify to the continuing presence of such a concern. Students acknowledge it in reporting that alternative teachers "care." Studies comparing the extent to which students feel their needs are met in alternative and comprehensive high schools find that even the lowest scoring alternative schools are in closer sync with what youngsters and their teachers think they need than are the highest scoring comprehensive high schools. (Gregory & Smith, 1987)

The alternative school commitment to respond to the preferences of individuals, both students and teachers, constitutes a kind of empowerment for all. In some alternatives this is manifested in the machinery of democracy, either in group meetings offering all direct voice or in representative bodies. In other alternatives, the strength of individuals is manifested only informally in the influence that strongly felt concerns exert over decisions quite apart from formal enfranchisement. People feel that their concerns will be taken into consideration by the decisionmakers, whether or not they are part of that group.

The alternative school record is not as consistent with respect to the sort of academic student engagement which Wehlage and colleagues expect of the effective alternative school. Perhaps this is the clearest manifestation of the effects of the difference between Type I and Type III programs -- with the former assuming that what is needed is new *schools*, and the latter striving to improve *students*. Thus, Type I alternatives are typically marked by considerable instructional creativity while Type III more typically emphasize the basics -- or, in other words, skill practice and memorization tasks without much by way of engaging fare. This is why in some alternative schools, staff seem to focus very heavily on individual problems, and on the re-socialization needed by so many students -- to the relative exclusion of the kind of knowledge or skills or work habits that might prepare them for postsecondary education. (Smith, 1988)

For instance, Trickett (1991), who wrote a history of 14 years in the life of a New Haven alternative school launched in 1970, barely mentions academic work and engagement. With respect to academics, Gold & Mann (1984) emphasize the importance of students experiencing success, but they have very little to say about the sorts of instructional programs conducive to it and there is scant mention of the academic work they saw students doing. Yet the record we have explored shows a number of alternative schools whose students are highly accomplished academically, and for whom authentic academic engagement is a major emphasis. Central Park East Secondary School is certainly such a

school. And the Urban Academy -- another of New York's alternative schools and, like CPESS, an affiliate of Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools -- sees its mission as making students an active part of an intellectual community. The school, whose focus is an inquiry approach to learning, manages to problematize much of the content with which its students are asked to deal, and extensive student engagement is observable there. (Raywid, 1993)

A lot of emphasis and energy in Type I alternatives often goes to making curriculum compelling and challenging, and with trying to invite students into learning. In the "SWS" program at The Wheatley School on Long Island, for instance, recent classes have included such titles as "Literary Dogs" (featuring 11 short stories about dogs), "The German Question," "Male versus Female Perspective and Aesthetic in Two American Novels," and "Constitutional Quarrels." Last year the district's superintendent taught a course on multiple interpretations of the Cinderella Myth. U.S. History is often organized in this alternative school as separate courses on individuals (e.g., "Stalin"), on incidents (e.g., "Watergate and Nixon"), or by decades (e.g., a course on "The 1920s" which includes sociological and cultural fare, as well as economic and political history). The school's emphasis on writing is such that during last Spring's final seven-week module, the 65 students enrolled wrote more than 700 papers. The topics of some included a comparison of Norman Podhoretz and James Baldwin on racism, and Bruno Bettelheim and Hannah Ahrendt on victimization.

In other Type I alternatives, the creativity has focused instead on experiential learning. The City-As-School programs which have now been established all over the nation were among the first alternative school attempts to render school learning accessible otherwise than primarily through books. "Challenge" programs, where learning is pursued and documented through student design and completion of distinct "passages," represent another form of the sort of experience-focused learning featured in some alternatives. (Gregory & Smith, 1987; Williams, 1993) And the instructional orientation seeking to combine academics with work-related effort yielding a tangible product is yet another. The Media Academy in Oakland, California is often cited in this connection. There, students "major" in print and electronic journalism and they regularly produce two newspapers, one for the school and one for the local community. (Wehlage et al., 1989) Service learning has also long been associated with alternative schools and they have developed a number of extremely creative such efforts. One of the earliest was the Consumer Action Service developed at the St. Paul

Open School. It had students taking on the cases of disgruntled consumers and providing assistance in obtaining what they were entitled to. The youngsters successfully resolved 70% of the cases they took on. (Nathan, 1983) Students at the Jefferson County Open School in Colorado make an annual two-week trip to the Navajo Reservation to plant fruit trees. This year two groups also went to assist in flood relief in Missouri. (*Colorado Options in Education*, 1993)

Phi Delta Kappa has recently published a collection of program descriptions of alternative schools with curricula that depart from the traditional. (Williams, 1993) Twenty-one alternative schools are described in detail and their descriptions include reports of programs and activities focusing primarily on experiential learning. The director of one of the schools represented in the collection has herself recently published a book examining the thinking of children and adolescents and discussing how informed and cultivated patterns of thought can help them expand their capacity to understand and deal with the world. (Barickman, 1992) It is an insightful example of classroom teacher research, offering perspectives and suggestions for application to classrooms for all kinds of students.

Thus, Type I alternatives reflect considerable intellectual focus, variety, and innovative accomplishment. Their impacts can be linked to this emphasis on genuinely engaging students in their work, to the significance attached to the school as a community of 'members,' and to the organizational arrangements necessary to sustain these two thrusts.

#### The Lessons of Two Failed Ventures

At this point, having looked at the components and considerations associated with success, it may be instructive to turn to two quite extensive and elaborate ventures that did not succeed, even though they sought to introduce some of the features and practices of alternative schools. These are the dropout prevention initiative in New York City and the New Futures project conducted in four cities. As these projects suggest, one advantage of alternative schools over other strategies appears to lie in their capacity to provide a systemic or total environment approach to dropout prevention. A second, associated, advantage lies in the relative capacity of alternatives to successfully introduce transformative change in schools.

Between 1984 and 1990 there were two extensive dropout prevention programs operating in New York City, one State-sponsored and one City-sponsored. Together, the two involved 36 high

schools, 98 middle schools, and five elementary schools. The bill for the first four years of the six-year project was approximately \$120 million. (Meyer, 1990) An extensive evaluation conducted by Teachers College of Columbia University concluded that neither of the two programs had accomplished very much since there were few gains in student attendance, retention, or courses passed. (Grannis, 1992) Indeed, some of the students had gone backward in these respects. The City's own evaluation proved no more favorable, concluding flatly "the programs failed to meet their goals," and recommending, among other things, that the projects be extensively redesigned in order to restructure the schools involved. (Meyer, 1990)

Both evaluations specify that the problem lay in the piecemeal borrowings that made the changes introduced no more than supplements to existing programs and arrangements, rather than a thoroughgoing revamping of them. Guidelines and accountability procedures focused on the adoption of discrete measures, rather than on outcomes, and as a result few schools showed evidence of very extensive, fundamental, or far-reaching changes. (Grannis, 1992; Meyer, 1990) The evaluators agreed that "a comprehensive restructuring of students' school experiences" is necessary. Their recommendations noted that houses or alternative schools should be created for all students.

The extended Teachers College study concluded that the lack of success resulted to a considerable extent from the projects' focus on discrete features and services (e.g., counseling, health services, particular academic opportunities such as enrichment electives or remedial courses), as opposed to a comprehensive effort to transform school experience. Thus the services remained as supplements or 'add-on's' to business as usual, rather than as modifications of it. At the middle school level, investigators concluded, the unaltered school environment continued to function as "an overwhelmingly negative factor in the daily life of the schools." Professor Joe Grannis summed up his conclusions this way:

[W]hat the evaluation increasingly called for was a comprehensive restructuring of students' experience in the school... To improve the rate of courses passed ... instructional issues had to be addressed. This could not be accomplished just through remedial instruction ... but also required reform of the core academic program. (1992: 45)

And this was not the only order of change that was recommended. School organization as well as

program must be transformed if school is to change enough to affect the attitudes and achievement levels of marginal students. Strong evidence in further support of this conclusion of the dropout prevention project comes also from a recent study of New York City's Career Magnet Schools, which enroll almost a third of the City's high school students. (Crain, Heebner & Si, 1992) Employing an experimental design, this study looked at the impacts of career magnet schools on weaker students -- those whose academic records were too weak to meet the programs' usual criteria (and who thus gained admission only through a lottery assuring some seats for less successful students).

These students were paired with other, comparable students who lost the lottery and hence were not admitted to the career magnets. The study found that average readers were more successful in the magnet schools than were the average readers who were not admitted and attended comprehensive high schools. They were more successful with respect to credits accumulated, reading gains, and remaining in school. But for our purposes the findings of another set of comparisons may be even more significant. Some of the Career Magnets are separate schools in which *all* the students enrolled are youngsters who have chosen the program. Others, however, are schools-within-schools housed in, but very minimally separated from comprehensive high schools. (Magnet students and non-magnet students are enrolled in the same classes.) The programs which separated their magnet and non-magnet students were substantially more effective than those which did not -- with respect to both dropout prevention and educational accomplishment. (Crain, Heebner & Si, 1992)

The investigators speculate that the explanations are curricular in nature: "those programs which take their career commitment most seriously are the ones who show the strongest educational outcomes." (Crain, Heebner et al, 1992: 32) At least equally plausible, however, is that these findings result from something rather different: these schools-within-schools fell short of altering *the experience* of school very significantly. There were no transformations: school organization was not changed very much and the school environment was only minimally modified. The non-separation of the students enrolled from others who are not means that school culture and climate, and hence student sense of affiliation will have changed very little.

Analysis of another failed effort to transform school for at risk students suggests the reasons why such efforts fail despite major infusions of resources. The Annie Casey Foundation has invested \$40

million over a five-year period in an explicit effort to alter the life chances of at risk youth, an effort known as the "New Futures" project. (Wehlage, Smith & Lipman, 1992) Changing educational practice substantially was one major component of the program, which has been carried out in four cities. And the grantor was explicit in expecting long-term transformations of both an organizational and instructional nature. Yet at the end of the first three years, an evaluation team concluded, "We must report that a school restructuring process likely to lead to improved outcomes for at-risk youth has not yet begun." Nor, they add, are the sorts of change necessary even "on the horizon." (Wehlage, Smith & Lipman, 1991: 18 and 35)

Why? There were at least two explanations, one the consequence of the other. First, even the more 'radical' of the specific changes had been implemented as supplements or add-on's to existing structures and practices, rather than as replacements of them. This meant that what was negative was not eliminated. Poor adult-student relationships and a negative school climate thus continued to prevail, with "highly punitive discipline policies, an over-emphasis on control, and frequent adversarial relations between students and teachers." (Wehlage, Smith & Lipman, 1992: 85) Making the changes as add-on's also meant that the group exposed to them remained small in relation to the total school population. The result was that the school's fundamental definition, the way staff went about their business, and the students' basic experience of school, all remained unchanged.

The second, underlying reason why the restructuring essential to improving the chances for at risk students had not really begun was that staff remained unconvinced it was really necessary. The problem, they continued to assume, lay with the students and not the school. Thus staff continued to identify causes of difficulty as individuals' personal problems, calling, then, for idiosyncratic solutions. "Problems were seen as 'inside' the student and his/her family; prescriptions or plans were designed to 'fix' the student." (Wehlage, Smith & Lipman, 1992: 68)

This is a landmark study on change<sup>2</sup>-- and on how even the most radical or potentially restructuring of arrangements can be rendered innocuous and minimally disturbing of business as usual. It is strong testimony to the crucial role of school culture and the way it informs and can co-opt structures with demonstrable records of vast change potential. This suggests that to try to change structure without changing culture is likely to prove futile.

The study is also a testament to the importance of school climate -- or general tone or feel of a school to its students. Despite new and costly efforts to improve things for the youngsters involved, adult-student relationships remained largely adversarial and the hoped-for consequences of the efforts never materialized.

The study is also powerful evidence regarding several things that concern us most directly with respect to effective programs for the marginal student. First is that the conservative, change-resistant response to how to improve is to add on more discrete services -- more forms of support and remediation -- as dispensed by more specialists. Second is that success demands a *systemic* change in the sense of total school transformation, not just the alteration or supplementing of parts of it, nor of arrangements for *some* students. Schools are multi-faceted enterprises. To change a school requires addressing all of its essential component elements, not just one or two. This is what alternative schools do and this is a substantial part of their virtue as a response to what at risk students need.

Together, these two sets of studies, the New York City studies and the New Futures evaluation, make powerful recommendations for what must happen to make schools viable for marginal students. The New Futures evaluation suggests that it will not happen until the culture of a school comes to rest on a sincere staff conviction that all youngsters can be educated if the right conditions are supplied them -- and on a moral commitment to doing so. The New York City dropout prevention program studies are not incompatible with these conclusions but investigators there focused elsewhere. They suggested that the adoption of a component here and a component there will not suffice, irrespective of the potential of the adoptions. Accomplishing the job requires a systemic approach in the sense that a school's various systems must be alternative -- programmatic, structural, organizational, the allocation of roles and responsibilities, interaction patterns, etc. -- in order to accomplish more than superficial and peripheral change.

Actually, none of these studies explicitly recommended the widescale adoption of alternative schools. Yet together these two sets of investigations clearly display a major strength of Type I alternative schools: they represent the combining of the necessary components.

### The Alternative Schools Movement and Its Influence

Given the evidence we have examined, then, it might be asked why alternative schools are not more prevalent and what sort of support they enjoy. We turn first to the present status of the alternative education movement and its influence, then to factors that may have constrained its spread.

Today, several indicators would signal a live and healthy alternative schools movement. A number of state conferences and at least two national conferences of alternative schools assemble annually -- one largely representing public alternative schools which, without a formal organization to sustain it, has managed a conference each year for more than 20 years. It usually draws as many as 400 people. The other national group, which consists primarily of private alternatives, is the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools. It also meets annually and it too draws several hundred people.

Alternative education has a voice, in the form of a regular periodical, *Changing Schools*, which has been published for more than 20 years now. There are presently 21 state associations of alternative schools, according to an annual directory titled *Patterns, 1993-1994* (Thrasher, 1993) which is now in its fourth edition. And these state groups have been organized into a confederation titled the International Affiliation of Alternative School Associations and Personnel. A national survey of public and private alternatives is currently under way, and a major publisher will be publishing the alternative school handbook that ensues.

Yet despite such signs of institutionalization, and despite the advantages and accomplishments of alternative schools of the sort cited here, there may today be less of an identifiable alternative school movement than earlier was the case. As suggested throughout, the movement has from the start been divided into at least three types of schools that differ in quite fundamental regards. The Type I population may today be further fragmented among the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools, the Progressive School Association, and those who associate themselves primarily with holistic education or with invitational education.

According to at least one analyst, this is probably good news as well as bad. It may be a bit harder -- though not impossible -- to find the Type I alternatives that seemed to be multiplying so rapidly 20 years ago, with their "accent on freedom, responsibility, and involvement." (Schmerler, 1983) On the other hand, many more youngsters are now

reaping some benefits from their message. Much that these schools have stood for has now either been adopted by, or is widely urged for, the mainstream.

Several contemporary urban reform initiatives quite directly carry the influence of alternative schools and reveal the sorts of ways in which they have come to affect the mainstream. First is New York City's small high schools initiative. Latest counts suggest that 34 such new schools opened in 1993, with an additional 27 set for September 1994. The schools will differ considerably in content and style, but all will be separate, autonomous mini-schools; all will emphasize a particular theme or focus and mission; and all will reflect close ties to some community or other group outside itself. (Berger, 1992) All will also have been chosen by their students and staff.

Among the 34 schools opening this year, six have been sponsored by the Coalition of Essential Schools through its New York City affiliate, the Center for Collaborative Education. Now the Center's membership consists of the directors of 15 of New York's alternative schools. It is this group that has shepherded the design of six of the new high schools and selected their directors. Each of these schools is an alternative school, as will be the case with the six additional ones which the Coalition -- through the Center -- will be launching in 1994. (Henderson & Raywid, 1994)

Two other initiatives also show the imprint of alternatives. In 1987, the New York City Board of Education mandated the division of all ninth grades into 'houses,' in order to provide "the opportunity to personalize the school experience, gaining the advantages of a small school while addressing the academic and social needs of entering high school students." (Oxley & McCabe, 1989: i) A study examining the first-year experience of the plan observed that in many schools it was being extended to all grade levels. The plan, the researchers noted, has "the potential to serve as the centerpiece of needed restructuring at the high school level." (Oxley & McCabe, 1989: 4)

The same researchers, in a second-year study, noted that none of the schools investigated had adopted all the elements necessary for optimum success, which they summarized this way:

well-conceived house plans subdivide schools into physically discrete smaller units creating intimate environments that promote interaction among staff and students. They take advantage of the opportunities provided by the smaller settings and work groups to

create cohesive educational programs reinforced by interdisciplinary teaching; enable staff to offer personal, ongoing support to students and each other; involve staff and students in the decision-making process; and encourage wide participation in extra-curricular activities. (Oxley & McCabe, 1990: v)

As this suggests, the study's recommendations as to "optimal success" requisites would make each house very like an alternative school. The only typical Type I alternative school features omitted are a particular theme or focus, and affiliation by choice. In fact, in the house plan it would appear that neither staff nor student interests need be involved in the determination of assignments. And the decision as to whether to move in the direction of houses is not left to choice either, since the ninth grade organization was mandated citywide, and the extension of that organization to other grades is within the prerogative of principals.

Quite a similar initiative is under way in Philadelphia with the effort to launch "charters" in the city's 22 neighborhood high schools. To date, 15 of these schools have been entirely broken up into charters, or schools-within-schools, with the rest so far containing only one or two of the charters. (Chira, 1993) A total of 94 charters now exist. Each consists of 200-400 students, with 10-12 core teachers and its own student body.

The charter faculty enjoy a common preparation period daily, share responsibility for a cohort of students, and invent curriculum, pedagogies and assessment strategies that reflect a commitment to a common intellectual project. Students travel together to classes, and across their four years in high school. With teachers, counselors and parents they constitute a semi-autonomous community within a building of charters. (Fine, n.d.: 7)

Professor Michelle Fine, a co-designer of the initiative, reports that by no means do all 94 of the charters represent fully transformed schools. Only a few have achieved that, with most in process. But, she notes, "None is worse than the full, anonymous bureaucratic school out of which it was designed." (Fine, n.d.: 23) The effort, she reports, has been informed by the research of Wehlage et. al (1989) on alternative schools, and by Oxley & McCabe (1990).

Yet at the same time that alternatives influences such as these in New York and Philadelphia are visible, the alternative education sponsorship and

context is likely to be downplayed. Educational discussion, as well as research, are currently quite likely to recommend attributes central to alternative schools -- e.g., advisories, service learning, the school-within-a-school or mini school arrangement, choice, focus, personalization, community -- but with bare mention of the alternative school of which these are components or qualities. In consequence, alternative school features and tenets are playing a more extensive role in reform efforts than their lack of prominence would suggest.

A number of features alternatives have pioneered, such as service learning, performance and portfolio assessment, school community-building, are being recommended by reformers who may not even be aware of their alternative school origins. Researchers downplay it. One sort of example is found in *Reducing the Risk* (Wehlage et al., 1989), which began with a national search for schools effective in dropout prevention. Of the 14 exemplary schools they selected for intensive study, all but three are clearly alternative schools. They, in fact, consider all 14 to be alternative schools. (Wehlage, Smith, Lipman, 1992) But nowhere in their study is that elaborated or the genre explored.

As another example, New York's Public Education Association has recommended house plans and schools-within-schools -- and has even made the kinds of recommendations for strengthening house plans that would in effect make them alternatives. (Oxley & McCabe, 1990) Yet they do not seem to have singled out alternative schools as a preferable genre.

The Rand study which recommended 'focus' schools (Hill, Foster & Gendler, 1990) did so on grounds of attributes alternatives feature (e.g., choice, focus, size) but did not single alternatives out as types. Ted Sizer is reported to have acknowledged on several occasions -- but never formally -- that his alternative school affiliates are perhaps the most successful in the Coalition of Essential Schools. Yet the advisory committee for a national study of restructuring's impacts on professional community in schools -- the advisory committee of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools -- expressed misgivings that the high school being studied by one team was an alternative school. Ironically, it is the only unmitigated success story among the several schools under study.

#### A Lack of Institutional Legitimacy

Now given the successes, why the low profile? Why don't alternative schools enjoy a more prominent and positive image, and why have they not

been more widely adopted? One analyst of the school reform efforts of several years ago identified alternatives as the "Cinderella" of the era: here was a school type that seemed to have most of the very features and qualities being sought, but that apparently remained 'undiscovered.' (Gregory, 1985) Why? It would appear, as Wehlage and colleagues put it (1989: 199) that even after 25 years, alternatives have not achieved "institutional legitimacy." At least five reasons may be involved in an explanation.

First, alternative education has an image problem. The widespread and frequent failure to distinguish among the three types of alternative schools identified in this paper not only blurs the image of the three into an erroneous composite, but it tars some extraordinarily successful programs with the records of others that are in fact nothing like them. Although this has long been recognized as a problem (Hamer & Ampadu, 1980), it persists. But even the successful Type I alternatives have image problems. They are likely to be seen as fringe or flakey or student-indulgent by virtue of their departures.

Second, although not all alternative school students have been unsuccessful in their prior school(s), a number of them have been. This sort of enrollment bias is probably inescapable so long as there remains a 'regular' program, since those for whom conventional school seems a poor fit will obviously be those most drawn to the alternatives. The result, however, is to attach stigma to alternative schools -- as programs for losers, misfits, misbehavers. And although as we have seen, it is only Type II alternatives that assume a judgmental and negative stance vis a vis their students, negative judgments toward alternatives students and schools are sometimes revealed in the behavior of people outside the program -- in the relevant recommendations of counselors and in the criticism of other teachers of the coddling of indifferent students. As one study of alternative schools put it, their students arrive having been "expelled to a friendlier place." (Gold & Mann, 1984)

According to the conventional wisdom at least, the rest of the population can presumably get along fine in the conventional school. Traditionally, the "loser" stigma has not only attached to unsuccessful students; the teachers who teach such students and the schools that enroll them have also been accorded relatively low status. It is ironic that succeeding with the students posing the most demanding of pedagogical challenges earns a teacher less stature than succeeding with students whose success is assured! But since this is the case (Finley, 1984;

Talbert & Ennis, 1990), alternatives occupy a low status position in the educational hierarchy, making them unlikely candidates for widespread emulation.

Third, as the foregoing analysis has suggested, Type I alternative schools differ extensively from 'regular' schools with respect to their organizational features. The experience with magnet schools would suggest that school systems are none too anxious to sponsor even programmatic divergence and diversity, with many doing so only in the presence or threat of court desegregation orders. Magnet school experience would suggest that organizational variety and diversity are even harder for large systems to tolerate than programmatic departures. Divergence, after all, jeopardizes the most touted advantages of a bureaucracy: common standards, uniformity, fairness and equity. Thus it may be that the organizational departures implicit in the alternative school concept are a reason why education officials often appear to want to keep such programs to an absolute minimum.

Fourth, Type I alternative schools pose a challenge to what has become perhaps the most popular strategy for the organizational improvement of schools, the Effective Schools approach. That approach in effect seeks improvement via the strengthening of bureaucracy and intensified application of its principles (Clark, Lotto & Astuto, 1984; Boyan, 1988): tighter coupling, more assertive leadership, firmer control, more frequent monitoring. By contrast, Type I alternatives typically represent quite a different form of social organization, with less status differentiation, a diminution of experienced control, social in preference to regulatory control, symbolic leadership in preference to managerial, and more individual teacher autonomy and collective responsibility. (Raywid, 1991)

Fifth, people view alternative schools as a threat to or an indictment of 'regular' school practice, and this would tend to generate ambivalence or worse, even with respect to clearly successful practice. But the public as well as education professionals seem strongly ambivalent about alternative schools. Consider the following seeming contradictions: Perhaps the nation's single most celebrated high school and principal are Deborah Meier of Central Park East Secondary School. Yet CPESS is an alternative school, and the country doesn't seem to be clamoring for more alternative schools. Strangely, the film that probably has won more public approbation for schools than any other -- "Why Do These Kids Love School?" -- describes alternative schools. The film has won prizes and showings not accorded other films about school, and it often elicits intensely positive viewer response. (Raywid, 1992)

Yet it deals exclusively with a genre that is not itself the object of wide public appeal.

And at the same time, and despite low status, many educational arrangements and practices pioneered in alternative schools are now being recommended for all schools -- including teacher empowerment, personalization, cross-disciplinary instruction, a theme or focus, mini-schools, alternative assessment, service learning, and advisories or 'family' groups.

### Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether alternative schools will gain the "institutional legitimacy" which will probably be necessary to widespread adoption as such, or whether the more likely prospect is additional borrowings and permutations. The answer may lie in part in the outcomes of the sorts of adaptations now under way in Philadelphia's charters and in the New York house plan arrangement. They represent a number of modifications, when viewed alongside the Type I alternative school.

Neither New York's house plan nor the Philadelphia charters initiative make choice a key feature, although both student and staff choice has played a part in some (but not all) of Philadelphia's charters. None of the New York house plans makes provision for student choice. Nor is focus, nor programmatic distinctiveness viewed necessary for a charter or for a house. Moreover, these initiatives do not pursue the autonomy or degree of separateness that New York's alternative schools or its new miniature high schools represent. It will be instructive to see whether the full separation that the mini-schools insist on proves a factor in the comparative success of the three initiatives, New York's new small high schools, its house plan, and Philadelphia's charters.

A final difference may also prove significant: Both New York's house plan and Philadelphia's charters are mandated arrangements, in which at least some participants are bound to be lukewarm to negative players. New York's mini-schools, by contrast, are staffed only by teachers who have chosen to be there.

Whatever the results may be, both its suburban successes and the current problems plaguing urban education, as well as the demographic changes present and imminent, are likely to keep the alternative school model alive. As an analyst speculated a decade ago:

We may view alternative education as a small movement that has passed its peak... Or we may, if we accept the broadest definition ... see the movement as a growing and ever-more-powerful force in American education. Either way, for the longrange salvation of education in this country, alternative schools -- or at least the philosophies and processes they represent -- will play a crucial role in the future. It is impossible to look at the large secondary schools of our nation ... and not realize the inevitable: schools must be smaller; they must break down the fearsome boundaries that so often exist between students and teachers; curriculum must escape the exclusive bounds of Carnegie units and high school schedules as we almost universally know them; ways must be found to make students -- and teachers -- a part of the decision-making which shapes the school; new skills -- some taught only in the community -- must be transmitted. Alternative schools do all these things well. They, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, will form the basis for future education. This may or may not happen soon; but it will have to happen. (Schmerler, 1983)

We have looked in these pages at some attempts at fashioning 'reasonable facsimilies.' It remains to be seen whether such optimism is justifiable. For now it seems equally plausible that unless we learn how to exploit the transformational potential of alternative schools, we could manage to delay school reform and restructuring indefinitely -- along with success for a growing majority of the nation's students.

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