

# Alternative Schools: The State of the Art

Mary Anne Raywid

**Despite a lack of “institutional legitimacy,” alternative schools can serve as models for any school that seeks innovative change.**

Today's alternative schools seem a far cry from those of the '60s, when the genre first surfaced in public education.

Yet, the early alternatives, like today's, represented innovation; small-scale, informal ambiance; and departure from bureaucratic rules and procedures.

Amid all the current talk of school restructuring, alternatives are the clearest example we have of what a restructured school might look like. They represent our most definitive departure from the programmatic, organizational, and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform. Moreover, many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, student and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered. Given such assets and advantages, why have alternative schools not been more widely adopted?

## **Alternatives for Schools or Students?**

History has lent considerable ambiguity to the purpose of alternative schools. Is it an idea for schools, or for school systems? For all students,

or only for special-needs populations? To be available by enrollee choice or by assignment? Despite these ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and consequently 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,” or “at risk” cannot or will not succeed in a regular program. The second trait has often linked alternatives to innovation and creativity in both practice and organization. And alternative schools have varied according to which of these two traits has loomed the largest for them.

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Although some alternatives, like East Harlem's famous Central Park East Secondary School, are explicit in saying “it is our school and its way of teaching that is alternative, not our students” (Schwarz 1993), for many people alternatives are schools for some students, not all. Yet today, particularly in cities, a fine line divides at-risk or special-needs students from the rest. Such terms can now be applied to substantial majorities in all the nation's urban school



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districts. This may be why cities have taken away the lead in innovation from suburban districts. A changing population makes new sorts of schools imperative. It need not, however, call for an education different from what would benefit more traditional school populations as well. More challenging students are just more dependent on a good education. One of the most extensive studies of alternative schools to date concluded that its recommendations pertained equally to schools for youngsters who are and are not at risk. The recommendations would improve *most* schools (Wehlage et al. 1989).

### Types of Alternatives

Some educators scoff at the thought that much of value can be learned from alternative schools. A primary reason is that several fairly distinct types of alternatives exist, and not all are models for emulation. I have identified three pure types, which individual alternative programs approximate to varying degrees.

*Popular Innovations.* Type I alterna-

tives seek to make school challenging and fulfilling for all involved. Their efforts have yielded many innovations, a number of which are now widely recommended as improvement measures for all schools. Type I alternatives virtually always reflect organizational and administrative departures from the traditional, as well as programmatic innovations. These are today's clearest examples of "restructured" schools (Hawley 1991).

Type I alternatives are schools of choice and are usually popular. They sometimes resemble magnet schools and in some locales constitute some or all of the options in choice systems. They are likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy, or both.

*Last-Chance Programs.* Type II alternatives are programs to which students are sentenced—usually as one last chance prior to expulsion. They include in-school suspension programs, cool-out rooms, and longer term placements for the chronically disruptive. They have been likened to

"soft jails," and they have nothing to do with options or choice.

Typically, Type II programs focus on behavior modification, and little attention is paid to modifying curriculum or pedagogy. In fact, some of these programs require students to perform the work of the regular classes from which they have been removed. Others simply focus on the basics, emphasizing rote, skills, and drill.

*Remedial Focus.* Type III alternatives are for students who are presumed to need remediation or rehabilitation—academic, social/emotional, or both. The assumption is that after successful treatment students can return to mainstream programs. Therefore, Type III alternatives often focus on remedial work and on stimulating social and emotional growth—often through emphasizing the school itself as a community (Foley and Crull 1984, Wehlage et al. 1989).

Alternative schools are usually identifiable as one of these three types, but particular programs can be a mix. A compassionate staff, for example, may give a Type II program Type III overtones. Or a committed Type III staff may venture into programmatic innovations that mark a Type I. But even so, the genre determines an alternative school's most formative features. It determines the grounds upon which the school will be evaluated; whether student affiliation is by choice, sentence, or referral; and perhaps most fundamentally, what is assumed about school and students. Both Type II and Type III set out to fix the student on the assumption that the problems lie within the individual. But Type I assumes that difficulties may

be explained by the school-student match—and that by altering a school's program and environment, one can alter student response, performance, and achievement. It is this assumption that calls for responsiveness, hence school creativity.



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### Advantages and Disadvantages

As would be expected, the research records of the three types differ considerably. A study of more than a dozen years ago suggested that Type II programs yield few benefits for those sentenced to them. During the 1979–80 school year, Florida schools made roughly 58,000 assignments to in-school suspension programs. Analyses showed that such programs made no difference in dropout or referral rates, corporal punishment, suspension, or expulsion (Office of Planning and Budgeting 1981). The Type II programs contributed nothing toward resolving the problems they were launched to solve.

In contrast, student behavior often improves in the supportive environments of Type III schools, as does student attendance and credits accumulated (Gold and Mann 1984). But these programs have two major disadvantages. They are costly, because they usually represent low student-teacher ratios; and they are often only temporarily successful. When students return to their regular schools, the problems of disruptive behavior, truancy, or a lack of effort recur (Frazer and Baenen 1988, McCann and Landi 1986). The typical conclusion is that the program has failed to fix the students. Rarely is it concluded that the environment makes the difference and is what enables these students to succeed.

The record of Type I alternatives is quite different. They are less costly than Type III programs because they often operate with the same student-adult ratio as other local schools (Raywid 1982). Moreover, their successes are both more pronounced and more long lasting. Students who had never engaged with school, or rarely succeeded at it, are sometimes transformed as to attitude, behavior, and accomplishment. Type I schools give rise to reports like these:

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....(Wehlage et al. 1989).

I've seen more positive growth in my son in six weeks than in a year and a half of intensive counseling.... 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).

It is not just individual transformations that occur in Type I alternatives: schools are transformed as well:

The Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland, Oregon, is a 19-year-old alternative school that is still growing—by 25 percent in the last three years. The dropout rate is 2 percent, while that of the district is 30

percent. The school has the highest per capita scholarship rate in the city (Harris 1987).

Over 90 percent of ... [the students in the Central Park East Secondary School in Manhattan] ... graduate in either four or five years, compared to the City's rate of 55 percent. Of these, almost all (95 percent) go directly on to college. Very few of

those who start college drop out ... (Schwarz 1993).

### How Alternatives Transform Systems

There is also evidence that when adopted as a model, alternative schools can transform school districts. The leading example is the oft-cited District 4 in Spanish Harlem. The story is now a familiar one of how alternative schools revolutionized education in an inner-city district previously marked by failure. The heavily minority and high poverty area has been described by many chroniclers who report impressive evidence of enhanced schools and accomplishments (Domanico 1989, Elmore 1988, Fliegel 1993, Harrington and Cookson 1992, Kutner and Salganik 1986, Raywid 1990, Rogers and Chung 1983). Less often pinpointed, however, are the features that marked these successful alternative programs:

1. They were small.
2. Both the program and organization were designed by those who were going to operate them.
3. They took their character, theme, or emphasis from the strengths and interests of the teachers who conceived them.
4. Their teachers all chose the program, with subsequent teachers selected with the input of present staff.
5. Their students and families chose the program.

6. A teacher-director administered each program.

7. Their small size denied them much auxiliary or specialized staff, such as librarians, counselors, or deans.

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

9. The superintendent sustained the autonomy and protected the integrity of the mini-schools.

10. All of the programs were relatively free from district interference, and the administration also buffered them from demands of central school officials.

11. The continuity in leadership has been considerable. For example, John Falco, who oversees the Spanish Harlem program today, was the director of one of the district's original alternative schools.

### Accounting for Success

Altogether, three sets of factors appear to account for the success of alternative schools. Wehlage and his colleagues (1989) have identified two, and I have added a third. First, these schools generate and sustain community within them. Second, they make learning engaging. And third, they provide the school organization and structure needed to sustain the first two.

Extensive testimony supports the importance of making alternative schools membership institutions—places with which students want to be affiliated—and this is perhaps one of their strongest accomplishments (Bryk and Driscoll 1988, Raywid 1993, Wehlage et al. 1989). Membership is what makes students speak of alternative schools as caring places and liken their school to family. A national survey of a decade ago found that alternative schools identify teacher-

student interaction as their greatest departure from conventional schools (Raywid 1982). Considerable attention typically goes to cultivating a strong sense of connection among students, and between students and teachers.

Emphasis and energy also go into making curriculum compelling, challenging, and inviting. In the "SWS" (Schools-Within-Schools) program at Wheatley School on Long Island, for instance, recent classes have included such titles as "Literary Dogs," which features 11 short stories about dogs; "Constitutional Quarrels"; and "Male and Female Perspective and Aesthetic in Two American Novels." History is organized as courses on individuals (Stalin), on incidents (Watergate), or by decades (The Twenties).

In other Type I alternatives, the creativity focuses on the instructional mode, and particularly on ways to provide experiential learning. The City-As-School programs now established all over the nation were among the first alternative school attempts to make school learning accessible in

ways other than primarily through books. "Challenge" programs, where learning is documented through design and completion of distinct passages, represent another form of experience-focused learning featured in some alternatives (Gregory and Smith 1987, Williams 1993). And an attempt to combine academics with work-related effort and tangible products is yet another thrust.

Finally, the structures of an alternative school combine to sustain the membership orientation and the attraction of learning. Staff roles are broadened to include new responsibilities, crucial educational decisions are made within the school, schedules are changed, the school's social order becomes dependent on norms rather than on rules, and far more collaborative effort occurs among both students and staff than in other schools.

Comparison of these several sets of characteristics with what reformers are currently seeking for all schools underscores the extent to which Type I alternatives have functioned as a

### A Network of Alternative Educators

Looking for a way to connect with others involved in alternative education? The International Affiliation of Alternative School Associations and Personnel assists states and independent members in developing associations, alternative schools, programs, and services; provides a structure for establishing consensus on issues of interest to alternative educators; and serves as an advocate for alternative education.

No membership dues are required; the affiliation exists solely through volunteerism. Each statewide association assumes responsibility for at least one task that will contribute to the common goals of the affiliation and identifies at least one board member

to communicate regularly with other associations. Members promote student and teacher exchanges among states, share information about state and federal legislation, and establish contacts with national information centers. In addition, a state association of alternative educators assumes sponsorship of the annual conference.

*Patterns*, a yearly directory of state organization leaders, national offices, and network contacts, is available for \$6, from *Patterns*, 7608 Royal Palm Way, Boca Raton, FL 33432.

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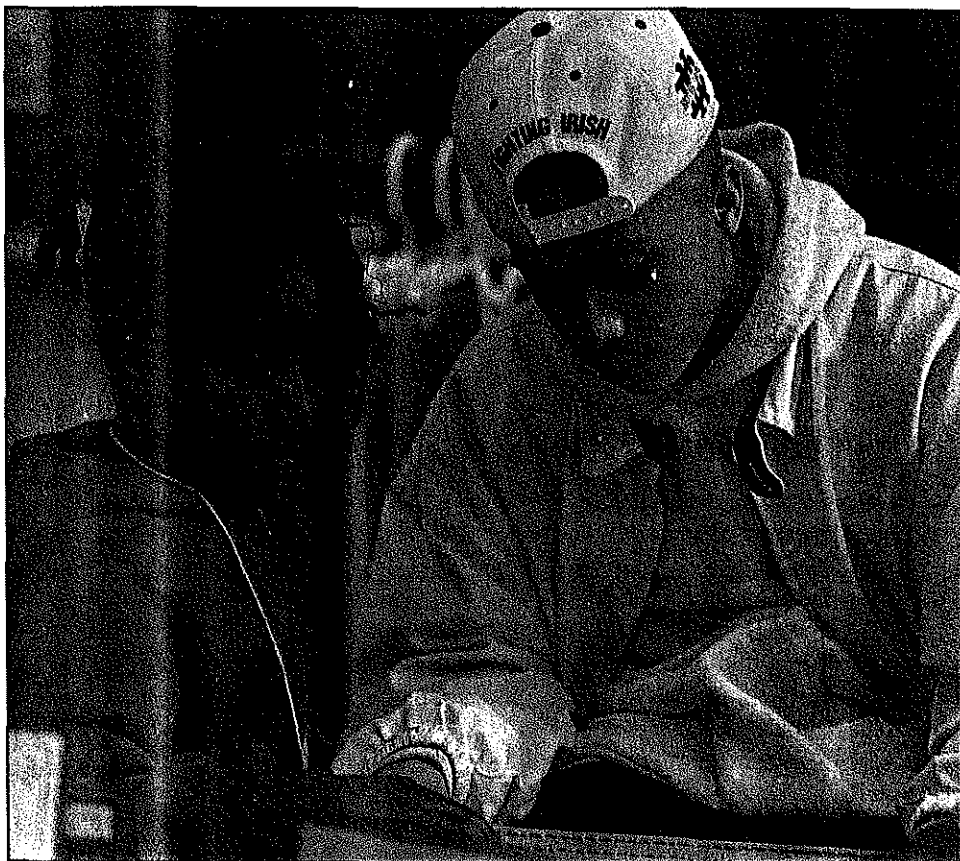
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vanguard. They have been a source of ideas for strategies and direction and have exerted considerable influence on a number of developments. For instance, alternatives directly influenced the charters into which Philadelphia's high schools are being divided (Fine 1993). All of New York City's new, small high schools are designed to capture some of the organizational features of alternative schools, and a number of them have fashioned themselves quite explicitly as alternatives (Henderson and Raywid 1994).

### No Piecemeal Adoption

Some dropout prevention efforts have incorporated alternative school features. The story of one such initiative may provide one of the most valuable lessons alternative schools can teach. Several years ago, the Annie Casey Foundation launched a project intended to enhance the life chances of at-risk youth. The project was large-scale, involving high schools in four cities and a cost of \$40 million. The sponsors explicitly sought transformative change, both in instruction and in school organization, and many of the specifics they recommended were fairly standard alternative school arrangements. A number of these features were, in fact, adopted by the schools involved. Yet after three years an evaluation team could find no evidence that restructuring had begun or was even "on the horizon" (Wehlage et al. 1991).

The changes had been adopted as supplements or add-ons to existing arrangements, instead of as replacements. In effect, no negatives were eliminated, and the positives were added only for some. Change was minimalized and peripheralized because staff remained unconvinced that more fundamental modification was necessary. They continued to



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believe that the problems lay with the students and not with the school, and that the challenge was thus to fix the students.

Many of the arrangements and practices adopted as assets failed outside the alternative setting. Why? Because of the need for systemic change. Successful school transformation is likely to prove contingent on system-wide support—which probably calls, in turn, for district and perhaps state transformation. And real change in any one aspect of a school necessitates substantial change in other aspects. A good alternative school represents a carefully built community, an engaging instructional program, and a synchronized set of organizational arrangements. Such schools have substantial advantages—but these advantages will probably evade piecemeal adopters.

Now, such a conclusion is not entirely novel. Why hasn't it given rise to a strong movement toward alternative schools? The answer seems to lie in a situation Wehlage and

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colleagues point out: despite their virtues, alternatives have continued to lack "institutional legitimacy" (1989). Even districts that are pleased to have one or two alternatives remain cool to the prospect of multiplying them or converting the district entirely. And researchers who find alternatives head and shoulders above other schools in comparative studies do not seem to use these findings to recommend alternatives.

Several explanations appear plausible. Alternative schools have an image problem—arising partly from the conflating of three quite different types into a single inaccurate composite, and partly from the "school for losers" bias likely to persist as long as there remains a

single standardized program, plus one or two others to accommodate "deviants." As this suggests, alternative schools pose some fundamental challenges to the way we organize and coordinate education. They call for diversity in preference to common standards and uniformity. They challenge coordination, control arrangements, and what has been the conservative approach to school improvement—the "Effective Schools" movement. This approach has sought reform through tightening and intensifying bureaucracy, while alternative schools pose an organizational alternative to bureaucracy (Boyan 1988, Clark et al. 1984, Duke 1976).

It remains to be seen whether the state of the art reflected in today's alternative schools will be applied to meeting educational challenges. Alternative schools in the public sector are alive and well and are likely to remain so. Whether or not they gain the legitimacy their successes warrant remains a question. ■

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