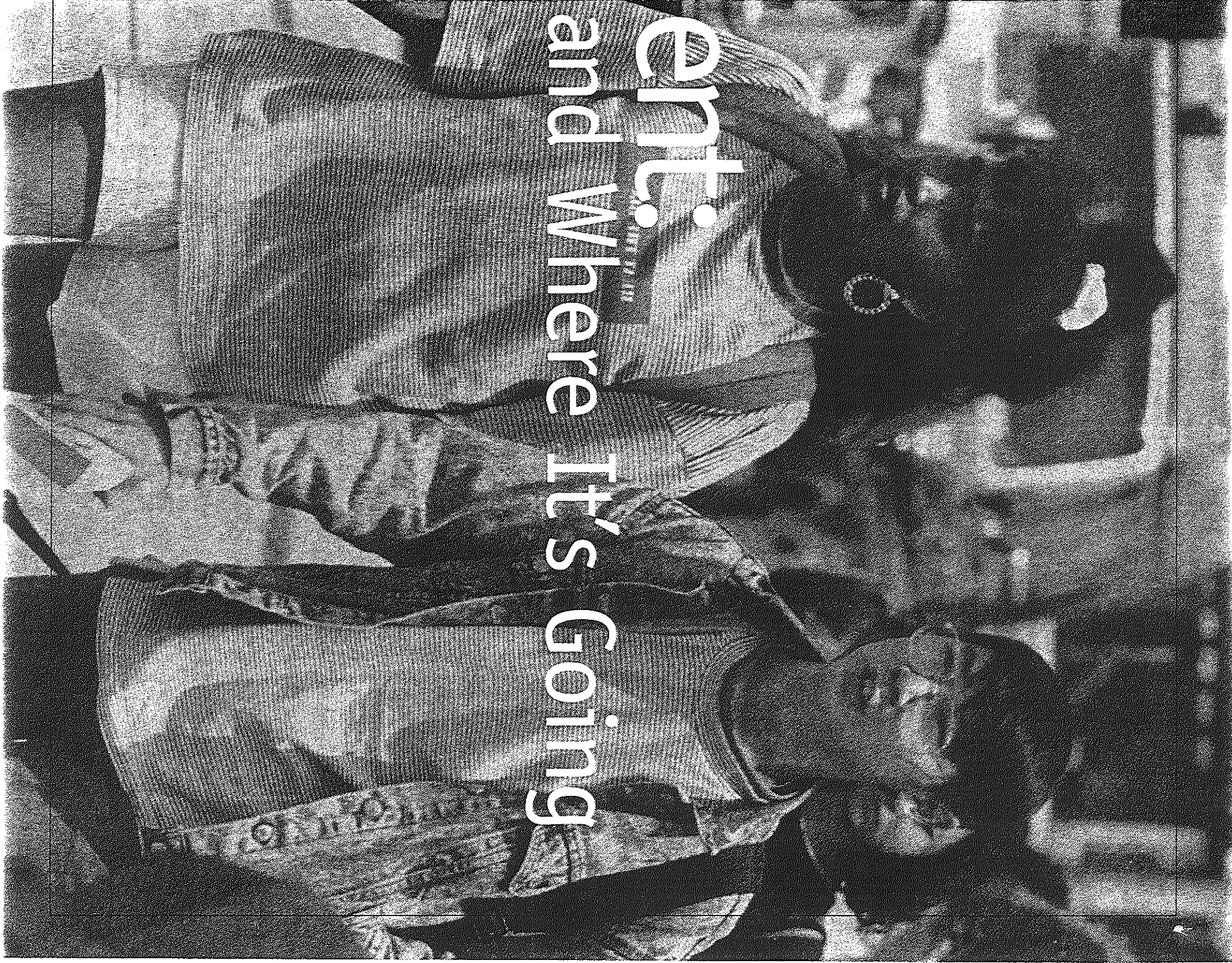


# The Journey of the Alternative Schools Movement Where It's Been

The founders of the first schools established as alternatives to the mainstream probably had no idea what they were starting. But as these schools continue to succeed and their legitimacy grows, their entry from the fringe prompts a need to clearly articulate what alternative schools hope to do and where they are headed.

By Mary Anne Raywid

art.  
and where it's going



**A**LTERNATIVE SCHOOLS HAVE FROM their inception stood for very different things. They have been launched to fulfill disparate purposes and designed to function quite differently from one another. They've functioned almost as an empty glass to be filled with any sort of liquid—or even used for something other than a glass. Doubtless such adaptability has contributed to their durability. But it may also be such flexibility that leaves them somewhat marginal to the educational mainstream and a “fringe” rather than a fully accepted member of the educational establishment. As a result, even after decades, and even when providing accepted leadership for others, they have never achieved full institutional legitimacy.

### Historical Overview

The first schools to be known as “alternatives” emerged in the 1960s, initially in the private sector and eventually in the public. They began to appear across the nation in all sorts of communities, but more often in urban and suburban locales than in rural. The urban alternatives were aimed largely at making school work for populations that were not succeeding there—minority youngsters and the poor. The early suburban alternatives, on the other hand, became innovative programs seeking to invent and pursue new ways to educate. Both types continue to thrive. Part of the reason is that many of the early alternatives appeared so successful that alternative schools were adopted to serve all sorts of purposes, including as an answer to juvenile crime and delinquency, a means of preventing school vandalism and violence, a means of dropout prevention, a means of desegregation, as well as a means of heightening school effectiveness.

Each purpose, of course, shaped the alternative school in a different way, and supplied the criteria by which it was to be judged—especially when external funding was involved, and it often was. For instance, if the purpose was reducing delinquency, then recidivism rates were typically the measure of success. If helping problem youngsters was the purpose, then successful school completion and job placement were

often the measure. For the alternatives whose purpose was to provide an innovative, engaging education, the criteria more typically involved attitudes toward schooling—as evident in current behavior and effort, and in post-high school aspirations. If the purpose was to change school systems, as alternative or optional schools were funded to do in the '70s, then the measure of success was the extent of system change that occurred.

By the mid-'70s, a substantial number of alternative schools dotted the educational landscape across the country, but they hardly appeared a single species, even those serving essentially similar populations. In fact, many of them have taken pride in their uniqueness. They have appeared from the start, however, to be divisible into three different types according to what it is they are trying to change: the student, the school, or the educational system.

### Changing the Student

In the public's eye—as well as that of many educators—the point of alternative schools is changing the student and his/her performance. This intent gives rise to alternative schools that are “last chance” opportunities to which youngsters are in effect sentenced as the only alternative to expulsion. Many are openly punitive, while others are known instead as “highly structured.” But not all alternatives that set out to change the student are punitive in orientation. Some fashion themselves as therapeutic communities instead, and they are oriented toward providing intensive academic remediation or socio-emotional support, or both.

These two “change-the-student” orientations, though differing in climate and approach from each other, share one important trait: Both are seen as ideally temporary assignments. Students who succeed or “shape up” in such alternative schools are permitted to return to the mainstream. Not all do, and some of these schools are understood to be permanent placements. Nevertheless, the ideal is to “beef 'em up and send 'em back.” Not surprisingly, such schools are low status places to outsiders—who are surprised when students prefer them to the mainstream school and seek to remain at

## Alternatives Across the Sea

Alternative education is truly a worldwide movement. Some of the most interesting innovations are not in the United States but are in other countries. For example, Moscow's School for Self-Determination, an inner-city public school with 1,400 students, honors students' constitutional right to leave any class without explanation. For students not interested in cer-

tain classes, there are other places to which they may go. Students use the facilities virtually 24 hours a day. It isn't unusual for drama classes to continue to midnight and beyond. After the teachers have made their presentations and proposals, the students interview their potential teachers and choose the ones they want the following year.

The school's founder and principal, Alexander Tubelsky, expressed grave concern regarding the standards movement

that he heard about while on a tour of schools in the United States. He fears that international imposition of these standards could cripple educational innovation.

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the alternative. In-school suspension programs and "cooling out" rooms are examples of the first or punitive variety. Perhaps the bulk of the nation's dropout prevention programs are illustrative of the therapeutically-oriented programs.

### **Changing the School**

Alternative schools that focus on changing the school, and the experience it provides for those within it, are quite different in type from those seeking to modify the behavior of students. They are often highly innovative schools with novel curricular and instructional approaches and atypically positive school climates. Probably Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in East Harlem is the nation's most famous example of this type of alternative school. (It is officially classified an alternative school.) As CPESS's former co-director Paul Schwarz has put it, "It's not our students who are different, it's our school." To a considerable extent CPESS and other alternative schools of this type have *reinvented* school, making it a very different experience from conventional school for its teachers as well as for its students. They have a nontraditional curriculum (based on Sizer's "less is more" principle); a heavily inquiry-oriented instructional approach; a novel evaluation system (featuring exhibitions and portfolios on a distinctive list of topics); and a different school organization (with a teacher director presiding over an empowered faculty of generalists that does not include the usual array of special area teachers and administrators).

Experience indicates very different success rates for the alternative schools focusing on changing students and those concentrating on changing schools. The punitively oriented programs rarely prove effective in altering student behavior. (A classic study in Florida showed that despite 58,000 "sentences" to in-school suspension programs statewide, during one memorable academic year, there were no improvements.)

Therapeutically oriented alternatives frequently manage to alter behavior and performance while youngsters remain in the program—only to have them revert to their prior difficulties once returned to the conventional school setting. (Depending upon the observer's point of view, such an outcome is variously judged a failure of the alternative school or further confirmation of the need for different school environments if all are to thrive.) The alternatives geared to changing school have a far more positive record. Probably not many can match CPESS's record of graduating 90 percent—and of those, sending 97 percent on to college—but most show positive effects in graduation rates and college enrollments.

### **Changing the Educational System**

Although the early efforts at using alternatives as a means of introducing systemwide change—which occurred in Minneapolis, Tacoma, and Berkeley—generated a number of options and showed positive signs, the real test of such a strategy is under way right now! Although the language and labels have changed, the small schools and schools-within-schools movement occurring in the nation's cities today >>

# Weighing the Issues

Following are the formative policy decisions that shape alternative programs and that are repeatedly reinforced or undermined through daily implementation decisions.

1. For whom is the alternative school intended? Is it for the "losers"—the disruptive students, or the slow ones? Or are alternative schools for any youngster who desires a different sort of education than that which is otherwise locally available?

2. Is the alternative school's primary purpose to educate and otherwise benefit those who attend it? Or is it to benefit teachers and other students by removing the most challenging students from classrooms?

3. Should the alternative school target a particular kind of student? To do so is to follow fairly standard school practice—but it risks the perpetuation of tracking, with all its stratifying effects and the closing off of opportunities to precisely those youngsters most in need of them.

4. How many alternatives are envisioned? Is one enough—or may there eventually be a number of them functioning as options?

5. Do students have to "qualify" for admission to the alternative school—their eligibility being established, e.g., by failing key tests, being truant, failing courses or grades, committing offenses—or are the alternatives open to all on an interest or choice basis?

6. Are teachers—as well as students—assigned to the alternative or do they consist of those who have chosen to be there?

7. Are alternative schools subject to the same academic standards and expectations as are other schools?

8. Are alternative school students subject to the same kinds of indicators for having met academic standards as are students in other schools? Or are teachers able to devise alternative indicators?

9. Is the alternative a separate small school? A satellite of an existing school? A school-within-a-school? Or one of several alternatives comprising a multiplex?

10. Has the alternative school the autonomy to design its own program? Is it free to fashion and sustain its own distinctive school climate?

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(see article page 20) is actually a test of whether small alternatives can survive in large systems, and the extent to which they can adapt those systems to render them supportive of such innovation. The small schools and the innovative alternatives share essentially the same characteristics.

### Issues for Alternative Schools

A number of issues confront those adopting, designing, operating, or overseeing alternative schools today. Formative policy decisions shape such programs and are repeatedly reinforced or undermined through daily implementation decisions. (See sidebar page 13.) However such fundamental issues are decided, they will go far in shaping the alternative school and determining its nature. What's more, these are issues that will recur throughout the life of an alternative school. A change in treatment with respect to any one of these matters may go far in sending an established alternative school in quite a different direction.

Questions 2 and 4 address the purpose of the alternative school. There are those who hold that alternative schools have functioned primarily as support for keeping the current system intact, permitting maintenance of the status quo by simply removing those the school is failing. As used for such a purpose, alternative schools may be a mixed blessing, obscuring urgently needed changes in all schools. The neediest students often prefer alternative schools even when construed as escape valves to permit "keeping the lid on" the comprehensive high school. There is a continuing risk, however, that such programs will become little more than "dumping grounds" and "holding pens" for those difficult to control.

Questions 5 and 6 return to projected populations, emphasizing the extent to which the alternative is seen as a genuine option—a place attractive at least to a group of students and teachers who want to identify themselves with it. Of course, restrictions requiring past failures to qualify for admission are as exclusionary and determinative of a population as restrictions requiring high grades. To date they have also proven similarly predictive of school orientation and expectations.

Questions 8, 9, and 10 all address the dilemma of autonomy vs. accountability. It is a dilemma because unless alternatives have sufficient freedom to do things differently from the comprehensive high school—to organize themselves differently, to offer a different curriculum or at least a differently articulated curriculum, to provide a different school climate—then they are not going to be any more successful with their charges than the comprehensive high school has been. On the other hand, at a time when accountability pressures are strong there is a temptation to reverse the decentralization of authority that autonomy represents.

The way this dilemma is handled plays a large part in shaping the alternative school. The status of a separate school is probably most ensuring of maximal autonomy, and satellite location and status probably come next. Schools-within-

schools have more to negotiate and ought to have more assurances if they are located within a "host school." If located within a multiplex composed of other comparable programs, their status is that of a small school.

Thus, answers to the questions posed go a long way toward shaping the nature of an alternative school and its prospects for success. And subsequent to the alternative's formation, lesser decisions about incoming class composition or staffing or achievement indicators can substantially alter the program's nature and direction. Keep in mind: Alternative schools are highly malleable. They will be what you make them.



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