

If Alternative Schools Are the Answer . . . What's the Question?

Robert Fizzell and Mary Anne Raywid

Underlying assumptions about students and the purpose of public education determine how alternative programs will be structured. The authors clarify the assumptions on which three categories of current programs are based, as well as present the likely outcomes of each.

Alternative school has come to mean so many different things that it is fast approaching meaning nothing. While alternative schools generally begin with the assumption that not all students are optimally served in a traditional school setting, this is where the agreement ends. It is of little value to argue for a "correct" meaning or to try to define the "True Alternative School." However, we can try to expose the core beliefs about students and schools that give rise to the differences between alternative programs.

Three Types of Alternative Schools

Research indicates that most alternative programs fall into one of three categories: the "Innovative School," the "Reform School," and the "Beef 'em up and Send 'em Back School." While an individual alternative program may not fit any one of these profiles exactly, most programs approximate one of these models to some degree.

Type 1. The Innovative School grew out of the alternative schools movement that began in the 1960s and was linked to utopian social experiments of the time. The idealism that sparked

such programs is seen today in the desire of many Innovative Schools to make schooling simultaneously more humane, responsive, challenging, and compelling for all involved. The Innovative School reflects organizational and administrative departures from traditional schools, as well as programmatic innovations. It is likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy, or both. As this school is freely chosen by students and their families who are attracted to its theme or focus, it draws all types of students.

Type 2. The Reform School is a punitively oriented program to which students are assigned, usually as one last chance prior to expulsion. It may be an in-school suspension program, cool-out room, or longer-term placement for the chronically disruptive. The target population for such a program is those who have failed to meet codified norms for behavior or achievement. Typically, the Reform School focuses on behavior modification rather than on modifying its curriculum or pedagogy. In fact, this type of school often requires students to perform the work of the regular classes from which they have been removed.

These schools are likely to have highly structured, tightly regulated programs that employ firm and aggressive disciplinary policies.

Type 3. The Beef 'em up and Send 'em Back School is designed for students who are referred on the basis of their need for remediation or rehabilitation. This type of school was developed in the interests of dropout prevention and responding to the needs of students judged to be at risk. The young people in attendance are presumed to suffer from some challenge, be it an emotional, behavioral, or academic one, that can be eliminated or alleviated through intensive counseling, unusual support, or remediation. This school often focuses on remedial work and on stimulating social and emotional growth—often through emphasizing the school itself as a community (Foley & Crull, 1984; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Four Assumptions Impacting Alternative Schools

The differences between these three types of schools spring from core beliefs about the nature of young people and the purpose of schools. Two basic questions can elicit these major differences:

The Innovative School

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- To which basic problems are alternative education programs designed to respond?
 - Who is alternative education created to serve?

Alternative programs are structured according to their answers to these questions, and these answers vary fundamentally from one type of program to the next. In particular, four major areas of disagreement characterize the basic contrasts between the three different types of programs identified above.

Broken Kid vs. Broken System:

Most alternative education programs are created to provide an option for students who are deemed unsuccessful in traditional educational settings. The reason for student failure, however, is not always traced to the same cause. The Innovative School is designed to respond to perceived failures within the educational system, which is not adequately meeting the needs of its students. This type of program tends to see traditional programming as limited

in its ability to meet the needs of students who are culturally, socioeconomically, and psychologically diverse. The assumption is that stresses and shortfalls in the educational system itself are the problem. By adapting education to the individual, these alternatives hope to overcome the hurdles created by crowded classrooms, staff burnout, and one-size-fits-all curricula.

The Reform School and the Beef 'em up School are designed to respond to failures within the student, which arise from perceived flaws or defects inherent in the individual. These schools tend to see traditional programming as adequate for those students who are willing to be educated and are "fit" as learners. They assume that students who do not succeed within traditional settings need either *reform* (if they are unwilling to learn—the presumption of Reform Schools) or *rehabilitation* (if they are unable to get along—the presumption of Beef 'em up Schools). Programming is designed to provide the "attitude adjustment" or skills and competencies necessary for success in traditional classrooms. By focusing on student improvement, these alternatives hope to reintegrate their students into mainstream classrooms or redirect them into appropriate roles in life.

Traditional vs. Nontraditional Curriculum:

In this country, we have not, until recently, made an organized effort to define what we mean by an education. By default, the traditional system has achieved some degree of curriculum unity through the textbook industry. But outside of this, there has been a great disagreement about what the curriculum should be.

Some alternative schools, Innovative Schools in particular, offer a curriculum that they believe is superior to that of the traditional school. Others, Reform Schools in particular, seek to offer a curriculum very similar to the traditional school. Particularly in those schools that serve youth who are perceived as "disadvantaged" in some

way, there has been a strong trend toward limiting the curriculum to very basic academics with more emphasis on "practical skills" and "transition to the workplace." Clearly, very different outcomes can be expected from each of these types of schools.

Custodial Role vs. Educational Role:

Years ago, most states decided that all youth between roughly seven and sixteen years of age must be in school. While the common argument for this has been a desire to educate all children, it has been clear all along that we could not force a child to become educated and that, indeed, many youth did not benefit greatly from being in school. In fact, the motivation for compulsory school attendance may have had as much to do with workplace economics as with education: school was recognized as a way to keep kids out of the jobs available for adults and also as child care, permitting parents to work.

These issues emerge today in the alternative school debate over attendance. Some programs believe it is their duty to keep kids in school, while others believe that youth should only come to school if they want an education. Those which see themselves as "preventing truancy" or "reclaiming dropouts" often adjust their

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curriculum to focus more on getting students to school and keeping them there than on developing a high-quality educational program.

Differences in this core belief also play an important part in determining how students will be assigned to alternative programs. The Innovative School focuses on providing options that are appealing and well-suited to individual students. This type of program assumes that kids *want* to come to school and learn, and that they simply need the best environment for doing so. The Reform Schools focus on mandatory placement that fulfills compulsory education requirements for students who have been expelled from traditional classrooms. Beef 'em up Schools tend to balance these views, focusing both on ensuring that kids stay in school in order to meet baseline educational requirements and on making it possible for them to obtain a quality education.

Educational Services vs. Social Services: Finally, alternative programs differ in their perceptions of what services they should provide and how they should be provided. Some alternative programs see themselves primarily as social service agencies deeply involved in social/emotional support, an area that is generally not a primary concern for traditional schools. Others see their role as providing basic support, but with very close links to other agencies that can provide more extensive support.

Furthermore, the assumptions about *why* such social programming is needed drives how schools integrate it into their programs. Schools that aim to respond to a broken system may view social and emotional content as essential to a well-rounded curriculum that takes into account the diverse needs and interests of its students. Schools that aim to respond to broken kids will see social and emotional education as a necessary component in the rehabilitation and treatment of students.

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Conclusion

With such a difference of assumptions among alternative educators, it should come as no surprise that the term *alternative school* has no clear meaning. Their programs differ according to their missions (providing a more "responsive and challenging" education; segregating, containing, and reforming a disruptive population; healing the wounded). They differ as to what aspect of traditional education must be altered for student success (the school's curriculum, instruction, and environment; the student's misbehavior and attitude; the student's psychic and academic health). They differ according to the types of roles they play (educational and challenging; custodial), the curricula they embrace, and the level of social services they provide. While all three groups claim that their version of "alternative school" is the answer, we might well ask in return, "What's the question?"

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