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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides the design and findings of probably the first methodical investigation of the essential characteristics of alternative programs that effectively meet the diverse, ever changing needs of children with disabilities for whom traditional school settings do not work. Field experts and members of the study's Expert Panel assisted with identifying alternative programs recognized as exemplary in terms of their effectiveness in working with at-risk students. In addition to expert opinions about exemplary programs, an important selection criterion was the availability of data on program effectiveness. Using this process, three alternative education systems were selected. Positive outcomes of these programs include improved student attendance rates; student improvement on evaluations of their functioning; high percentages of students reporting that they are motivated to succeed and that their program involvement helped improve their lives; and parental satisfaction with, and involvement in, the programs.

We conducted in-depth case studies of these programs to identify their salient characteristics; characterize their school climate; understand the degree to which they meet quality indicators for at-risk programs; characterize the effectiveness of the programs from the perspective of those involved in the program (administrators, teachers and support staff, students, and parents); and explore the factors that help the programs achieve positive results. Three instruments were used to collect data on the programs: the At-Risk Student Services Assessment (ARSSA), which was used to examine the extent to which evidence-based practices for at-risk students are well implemented; the Effective School Battery (ESB), which used teacher and student surveys to characterize these individuals and the psychosocial climate of the schools; and the School Archival Records Search (SARS), which was used to examine and code information on academic performance and school adjustment from student records. In addition, interviews with program administrators, teachers, students, and parents yielded qualitative data that were then analyzed and coded into themes.

Analysis of other extant data and the qualitative and quantitative data from this study indicate the importance of several components to the implementation and functioning of the alternative programs:

1. Program philosophies emphasize that it is the educational approach rather than the individual student that needs to be changed to accommodate learning differences among at-risk students.
2. Program administrators and staff subscribe to the philosophy that all students can learn. These programs communicate and support high expectations for positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth in all students.
3. Program and school administrators are leaders who support the vision and mission of their programs; effectively support staff; listen to teachers, students, and parents; and genuinely care about their students.
4. Low adult-student ratios in the classroom are considered integral to successful outcomes.
5. Teachers receive specialized training (e.g., behavior and classroom management, alternative learning styles, communication with families) to support their effectiveness in working with students who do not succeed in traditional educational settings.
6. Interactions between students and the staff are non-authoritarian in nature. Positive, trusting, and caring relationships exist between staff, and between students and staff.
7. The opinions and participation of family members in the education of their children is valued, and students' families are treated with respect.

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Further, each of the three programs tended to implement well 11 of the evidence-based practices for at-risk students, as identified in the ARSSA. All three programs were particularly strong in five dimensions of the ARSSA: administrative support, behavior support and supervision, classroom management, school- and work-based learning, and processes for screening and referral.

Based on the study's findings, we can posit that students identified as troubled or troubling tend to flourish in alternative learning environments where they believe that their teachers, staff, and administrators care about and respect them, value their opinion, establish fair rules that they support, are flexible in trying to solve problems, and take a nonauthoritarian approach to teaching (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, in press). These key findings can help build and drive the research agenda for studying alternative education. Although preliminary in nature, the salient characteristics of the studied programs establish an understanding of three programs that are highly effective with at-risk youth. These findings may also be useful to other alternative schools or school districts pursuing or considering program improvement efforts, or to school districts developing new alternative programs. In addition, this study validates a number of characteristics previously cited in the literature as potentially contributing to effective alternative programs.

This report provides background information on the grant including a description of the study, its goals and objectives, modifications approved by the Federal Project Officer, and problems encountered and solutions; the study design including the methodology, sampling strategies used for data collection efforts, and instruments selected for this research; key findings from the literature review, and quantitative and qualitative analyses; and a summary of study-related dissemination activities. The report concludes with a discussion of implications for policy, practice, and research and seven research, development, and technical assistance recommendations.

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## INTRODUCTION

“It is our school and its way of teaching that is alternative, not our students” (as cited in Raywid, 1994, p. 26). As illustrated by this statement from a newsletter of the Central Park East Secondary School, an alternative school in New York, one philosophy guiding alternative education is based on the belief that the traditional system of education is broken and ineffective in meeting the diverse and rapidly changing needs of young people in today’s society (Fizzell & Raywid, 1997). However, there are others who argue that problems tend to lie within students, and view students as “broken” or “different.” This issue is exacerbated by the fact that professional educators have long been unable to identify the reasons why some children and youth fail to thrive in traditional classroom settings. More important, this continuum of attitudes toward the causes of school failure has led to contrasting approaches to working with at-risk youth.

Regardless of one’s perspective, some students will move beyond the tolerance level of classrooms and schools and be referred to school exclusion and (or) alternative schools. According to the literature examining the characteristics of students in alternative programs, many students share several common traits and often are described as “cynical, suffering academic and behavioral adjustment problems in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, lacking educational and/or career goals, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers” (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996, p. 295). While this may indicate to some that these children deviate from the norm, or are “broken,” it does not explain the cause of the brokenness and equally important, how to repair it.

On the other hand are those, such as the late Nicholas Hobbs (1994), who believe that emotional problems in children are a symptom not of individual pathology but of a malfunctioning ecosystem. Followers of Hobbs’ Re-ED philosophy advocate that adults have a responsibility to not only work with a child, but to also change the system in order to facilitate the child’s growth in competence, independence, responsibility, and self-respect. Therefore, when a child fails to learn and grow, the fault lies not just with the child but also with the system and with the adults responsible for it.

Advocates of both the “broken child” and “broken system” philosophies do agree on the need for alternatives to traditional educational settings. However, philosophy dictates the structure and the goals of these alternatives. If the philosophy is that the student needs to be somehow changed, alternative programs seek to reform the student. If the philosophy is that the system needs change, the alternative program provides innovative curriculum and instructional strategies to better meet the needs of these students. This difference in philosophy has led to decades of controversy over what alternative education should look like and who should be sent there.

Even given this divide on the philosophy and mission of alternative programs, the demand for such programs is illustrated by the tremendous growth in the availability of alternative programs in the United States over the past several decades. One estimate puts the number of alternative programs in the United States at about 20,000 (Barr & Parrett, 2001), significantly higher than the estimated 464 programs in 1973 (Steward, 1993). During the 2000-01 school year, 39 percent of public schools districts administered at least one alternative program for at-risk youth, and districts with high minority enrollments and high poverty concentrations were more likely to have such programs (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Students are generally referred to alternative programs if they are at risk of educational failure, as suggested by various risk factors including poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, and suspension (Kleiner, et al., 2002).

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## Overview of Report

This report presents findings of a study conducted to identify the components of systems that effectively meet the diverse, ever changing needs of children with disabilities for whom traditional school settings do not work. A secondary goal of this study was to develop a conceptually clear and empirically grounded definition of alternative schools. Field experts and members of the study's Expert Panel assisted with identifying alternative programs recognized as exemplary in terms of their effectiveness in working with at-risk students. In addition to expert opinions about exemplary programs, an important selection criterion was the availability of data on program effectiveness. Using this process, three alternative education systems were identified and selected. Positive outcomes of these programs include improved student attendance rates; student improvement on evaluations of their functioning; high percentages of students reporting that they are motivated to succeed and that their program involvement helped improve their lives; and parental satisfaction with, and involvement in, the programs.

The report is organized into seven sections:

- Background information on the grant including a description of the study, its goals and objectives as defined in the grant proposal, modifications approved by the Federal Project Officer, and problems encountered and solutions;
- Our approach to carry out this study including the methodology and sampling used for data collection efforts, and the instruments selected for this research;
- Three sections on findings beginning with the literature review, followed by quantitative and then qualitative findings;
- A summary of study-related dissemination activities; and
- A discussion of implications for policy, practice, and research and recommendations.

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## STUDY BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION

Literature and data reveal ambiguity regarding the definition and functions of alternative schools and programs: there is a wide variety of schools that are labeled “alternative.” Little is known about whom alternative programs serve and why, how they function, the degree to which they are responsive to all children’s education needs, and the extent to which children enrolled in these schools benefit from positive experiences and outcomes.

Although alternative schools are not a new phenomena, it has been hard to study these schools in a rigorous manner that specifies the necessary components of effective alternative programs for the variety of students who attend these programs. Although we know about components that make some schools effective (Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, & Hanley, 1998), we are not certain how to match program designs with students that these designs can help (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). Without this information we too often make a bad situation worse by “pushing” students with disabilities or those who do not “fit” in traditional systems out of schools without a diploma or the necessary skills to lead productive, fulfilling lives.

Further, since the 1997 amendments to the IDEA, interim alternative programs (translated alternative programs and schools) became mandated Federal policy for placement of children with disabilities whose behavior is unacceptable in the traditional setting. Because alternative schools are a requirement, we owe it to our children to ensure that these schools effectively serve their student populations. With this endeavor in mind, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) submitted a grant proposal to the Office of Special Education Programs to study the factors that characterize effective alternative education.

The Alternative Schools Project (ASP) was a five-year Directed Research Project granted to AIR in fiscal year 2001. AIR’s research team included Dr. David Osher, Managing Research Scientist at AIR, and Dr. Russ Skiba, Director of the Institute for Child Study at Indiana University, as Co-Principal Investigators; and Dr. Mary Magee Quinn, Principal Research Scientist at AIR, as the Project Director (PD). Mr. Jeffrey Poirier, M.A., Senior Research Analyst, joined the study in 2001 and assumed the duties of Deputy Project Director in 2003. In addition to the research team, the ASP benefited from the guidance of an Expert Panel comprised of researchers and practitioners with a wide range of relevant expertise including alternative schools, school capacity, school discipline, and student outcomes. Members of the panel included:

- George Bear, Professor, University of Delaware
- Judith W. Dogin, Philadelphia Behavioral Health System
- Kevin Dwyer, Special Advisor, National Mental Health Association
- Michael George, Director, Centennial School of Lehigh University
- Nancy George, Program and Training Specialist, Bucks County Department of Education
- Katherine Larson, Expanding Horizons
- Phil Leaf, Professor, Johns Hopkins University
- John Mitchell, Deputy Director, American Federation of Teachers
- Ted Price, Assistant Superintendent, Orange County, CA.
- Carlos Rodriguez, Principal Research Scientist, AIR
- Harilyn Rousso, Executive Director, Disabilities Unlimited Consulting Services
- Robert Rutherford, Professor, Arizona State University
- Jeffrey Sprague, Co-Director, Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior
- Martha Thurlow, Professor, University of Minnesota
- Brenda Townsend, Professor, University of Florida

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- Thomas Valore, Program Director, Positive Education Program
  - Hill Walker, Co-Director, Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior

Through 2005, the Federal Project Officer (FPO) for the ASP was Dr. Kelly Henderson. At the time of her departure from OSEP, Dr. Henderson was replaced by Dr. Anne Smith.

## Goals and Objectives

The purpose of the ASP was (1) to identify the components of systems that effectively meet the diverse, ever changing needs of children with disabilities for whom traditional school settings do not work, and (2) to develop a conceptually clear and empirically grounded definition of alternative schools. In support of these goals, we proposed four objectives for this study:

- **Objective 1:** Analyze extant National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) national and state data, and California and Texas state-wide data;
- **Objective 2:** Establish an Expert Panel to provide ongoing input into the study from a broad research, practice, and policy perspective;
- **Objective 3:** Implement in-depth case studies of alternative schools, “feeder” schools, and “receiver” schools in the San Francisco and Austin school districts; and
- **Objective 4:** Synthesize, communicate, and disseminate study results and lessons learned.

We proposed Objective 1 in an effort to better understand the variation and scope of alternative schools both nationally and within two states (Texas and California) that constitute 18 percent of the U.S. population. However, a separate project funded by OSEP during this competition (Alternative Schools: Policy, Practice and Implications for Students with Disabilities) lead by Dr. Camilla Lehr at the University of Minnesota proposed work similar to this task. In collaboration with the FPO, Dr. Kelly Henderson, AIR decided to delete this work and expand our focus on the third objective.

We accomplished Objective 2 in two important ways. First, we mined the expertise of our senior staff and Expert Panel during the three years of the grant. Second, we added an in-depth literature review, which we used to guide the content of our protocols for the collection of qualitative data collection as part of the next objective.

As part of Objective 3, our intent was to focus on how alternative schools function, their characteristics, the degree to which they meet indicators of quality, and the factors that help them achieve quality. One of the two proposed school districts was unable to participate and the other did not have adequate data available when we began this study. After consulting with the Expert Panel and collaborating with the FPO, Dr. Kelly Henderson, we revised our study design to accomplish this objective by examining the characteristics of three nationally recognized alternative school programs with data supporting their effectiveness. We conducted in-depth case studies of these programs to identify their salient characteristics; examine the characteristics of teachers (and related support staff), students, and school climate; understand the degree to which the programs meet quality indicators for at-risk programs; characterize the effectiveness of the programs from the perspective of those involved in them (administrators, teachers and support staff, students, and parents); and explore the factors that help the programs achieve positive results.

As the study progressed, we identified and pursued timely, relevant, and cost-effective dissemination opportunities. We accomplished Objective 4 through a variety of activities including one journal article,

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presentations at professional conferences, and coordination of a conference strand on alternative education (see Appendices A and B). Conferences were selected in order to not only reach relevant stakeholders but to also expand awareness of the study, findings, and alternative education (and related issues) among professional groups (e.g., education researchers) in other disciplines relevant to this study.

## **Modifications Approved by the FPO**

As previously described, modifications were necessary to more efficiently use grant funds and provide the government with useful information on the characteristics of effective alternative schools. Objectives 1, 3, and 4 were modified during the course of the study. These modifications, which were all made in with the approval of Dr. Kelly Henderson, FPO, are summarized in the following paragraphs.

AIR research staff, the Expert Panel members, and the FPO determined that completing Objective 1 would constitute a duplication of effort between the AIR project and the University of Minnesota project. Therefore, we eliminated Objective 1 and used the funds allocated for this objective to enhance Objectives 3 and 4.

As discussed in the previous section, one of the proposed school districts was unable to participate in the study after this grant was awarded, and the other district did not have adequate data on its effectiveness. In collaboration with the FPO and the Expert Panel, we revised our study design to examine the characteristics of effective alternative education programs (Objective 3). We identified and then studied three nationally recognized alternative school programs with data demonstrating their effectiveness. We revised the study design to conduct in-depth case studies of these three programs to identify their salient characteristics; characterize their school climate; understand the degree to which they meet quality indicators for at-risk programs; characterize the effectiveness of the programs from the perspective of those involved in the program (administrators, teachers and support staff, students, and parents); and explore the factors that help the programs achieve positive results.

As we designed the case studies (Objective 3) we encountered concerns from the alternative programs that conducting research on the “feeder” schools (i.e., schools sending students to the programs) would jeopardize the valuable, collaborative working relationship between the programs and the school districts from which their students come (and the districts that later receive them). It was decided that the benefit of including “feeder” and “receiver” schools was not greater than the potential cost to the programs in terms of damaged district relationships that are integral to their effectiveness. Hence, feeder and receiver schools were excluded from the sample.

AIR research staff and the FPO agreed to expand Objective 4 to include more dissemination activities than were initially proposed.

## **Problems Encountered and Solutions**

A small number of unanticipated challenges emerged during the study. Foremost, during the literature review we found that there was limited extant empirical research on alternative education and effective alternative programs. As a result, we identified themes in the research and literature that were available (primarily practical/anecdotal evidence) and validated these with the Expert Panel. Second, our student samples were limited by various exclusion criteria (discussed further in the next section) that we followed when defining the sampling frame. Although this limits our ability to characterize the three programs, these criteria were selected to maintain a cost-effective approach to the data collection and with legal and

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logistical considerations in mind. Finally, to some degree, securing parental involvement was challenging. We used several strategies to maximize parental involvement. At one program we opted to use a Spanish-speaking parent and Spanish translator, even though we had initially excluded non-English speaking parents. For another program we conducted a phone interview with a parent who was not able to participate in the parent focus group during our site visit.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, we found that information provided by the programs with fewer parents was similar to that provided by parents in the program with more parents participating.

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## STUDY DESIGN

The study of alternatives to traditional education is a relatively new field and very little empirical information is available upon which to build a research agenda. Therefore, we conducted a descriptive study to identify the characteristics of alternative programs that are considered effective and to describe those individuals who are involved in those programs. In order to accomplish a rigorous data collection effort, we used a triangulated research design that combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. In this section we describe our approach to the case studies of the three alternative programs. We begin with a description of the three phases comprising the study's design, followed by a discussion of program selection, within-program site selection, sampling of teachers and students, and finally the instruments selected for the mixed-methods design.

Phase I included a critical and integrative review of the accumulated literature to formulate a comprehensive understanding of issues and themes surrounding alternative education and to identify any empirical studies that have been published. This was followed by the identification of study sites and preliminary interviews with program staff at each of the sites. We also conducted a preliminary site visit to one site to gather information central to finalizing the details of our research plan.

Phase II consisted of collection and analysis of quantitative data. Quantitative research methods included observational and survey research. Formal observations were conducted to study the level of implementation of evidence-based practices within each program. Surveys were administered to measure the climate of the programs from the perspectives of the students and teachers who learn and work in these settings. Demographic data were collected to describe the types of students attending these programs. The data were analyzed and informed the development of protocols used in Phase III of the study.

Site visits were used to collect qualitative case study data during Phase III of the study. These data were used to help the research team better understand how these programs are effective from the perspectives of those involved with them. Data collection consisted of interviews and focus groups and included students, parents, teachers and administrators.

Finally, for Phase IV we analyzed and synthesized data collected as part of Phases II and III to produce a journal article and this final report, which will be shared with the three programs and posted on AIR's Center for Collaboration and Practice (CECP) website.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

Prior to beginning the activities of Phases II and III, research staff followed IRB procedures and had all planned activities reviewed by AIR's IRB. We provided information on the intended subjects, data to be collected, recruitment and consent procedures, anticipated risks and benefits, protections for research participants, and plans for maintaining confidentiality. We submitted this information along with all protocols to AIR's IRB, which reviewed and approved these activities.

### **Program Selection**

A variation of purposeful sampling, extreme case sampling (Wiersma, 2000), was used to select three alternative school programs for this study. Field experts and members of the study's Expert Panel assisted with identifying alternative programs that are recognized as exemplary in terms of their effectiveness in

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working with students who require alternative settings. In addition to expert opinions about exemplary programs, an important selection criterion was the availability of data on program effectiveness. Using this process, three alternative education systems were identified and selected. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms (Program A, B, C) are used to refer to these three programs, which are described in greater detail in the following paragraphs. To help protect anonymity, the programs are described below without reference to their pseudonym.

One of the three programs is a single building that serves 84 students who are referred to the school by more than 40 surrounding school districts. All students are served on Individualized Education Programs under IDEA. The program serves students in grades from K to 12, with 24 students at the elementary level and 60 at the middle and high school levels. This program has demonstrated significant growth in many areas during the previous seven years of program improvement, including increased student attendance, improved levels of parent involvement, decreases in student involvement with police, more students meeting goals in their individual education plan, and increased graduation rates.

This program is affiliated with a local university's college of education and is used as a teacher intern site for the college. Teacher interns work for two years as teachers while they complete their masters-level course work. All teachers at this program are constantly involved in staff development around new practices and the experienced teachers serve as mentors to new teachers.

A second alternative program is a non-profit mental health agency chartered by the state and a special education program operating under the auspices of the local education service center whose mission is to help troubled and troubling children and their families build skills to grow and learn successfully. It has been recognized as an outstanding program by the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services and has demonstrated its effectiveness with various outcome data. For example, the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) (Hodges and Wong, 1996) is one instrument used to evaluate student progress. It is used to assess a youth's degree of impairment in day-to-day functioning due to emotional, behavioral, psychological, psychiatric, or substance abuse problems; lower scores indicate a smaller degree of impairment.<sup>2</sup> In fiscal year 2002, 497 students enrolled in a day treatment center were included in an analysis group that compared their initial CAFAS test scores to their most recent scores: students made significant gains, moving from an overall mean of 113.16 to an overall mean of 95.79. In surveys of parents of students involved in the program, families overwhelmingly report satisfaction with their involvement in treatment planning and goal setting; the respect they received from program staff; the extent to which staff encouraged them to change, grow, and take responsibility for their lives; and the overall quality of services provided. In many instances a majority of families indicated high satisfaction.

This program's mission is accomplished through the twelve principals of Re-ED (Hobbs). There are nine day treatment centers that service approximately 750 students, many of whom have been identified as severely emotionally disturbed. These centers were created to provide area school districts with places where their most troubled and troubling K-12 students can receive educational and mental health services. This alternative program also has two early childhood centers and two therapeutic group homes; and provides case management/case coordination services for children already involved in at least two human service systems, as well as diagnostic and assessment services for children at risk of being placed in foster care. The program also offers training, consultation, and support on serving troubled and troubling children to other schools throughout the country.

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<sup>2</sup> The CAFAS is comprised of eight subscales: behavior towards others, community, home, moods/emotions, school/work, self-harming behavior, substance abuse, and thinking.

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In 2004, this program's semi-annual report stated that 750 students had been served in the day treatment centers. The ages of the students were 5 to 18, with 24 percent between the ages of 9 and 11; 31 percent 12 to 14 years old; and 21 percent between 15 to 17 years old. Males represented 83 percent of these students. Relative to student race and ethnicity, 59 percent were African American, 37 percent were white, and 4 percent were of Hispanic ethnicity. About 75 percent of these students were Medicaid eligible and their average length of attendance was 27 months.

The third alternative program is administered by its local county Department of Education Division of Alternative Education and provides programs and services at approximately 140 sites that include alternative education programs, correctional education programs, and an adult correctional education program. The mission of this program is to care for, teach, and inspire all students to discover their potential, develop their character, and maximize their learning so they may become successful contributors to society. In spring 2004, this program received a six-year Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation. This accreditation validates that this program ensures, for the benefit of colleges and universities, that graduating students have mastered a particular body of knowledge, all students are provided with high-quality learning opportunities, and school staff are involved in the continual process of self-improvement. The following is a list of several school-wide areas of strength that were found by the WASC accreditation visiting committees:

- A caring and healthy environment is clearly evident as a result of the staff's focus on addressing student engagement.
- Dynamic community partners developed within regions provide important resources for many students and their families.
- There is a reciprocal relationship with feeder districts that promotes the transition of students to and from county programs.
- Clean, safe, and well-maintained facilities create a healthy environment for learning.

The program provides a wide range of special programs and services such as a college transition program, counseling services, teen parenting programs, transition programs, extended school day tutoring services, a character-based literacy program, career education, service-learning opportunities, and addiction and substance abuse education.

According to a longitudinal study presented in the program's *2003-2004 Annual Education Report*, enrollment and graduation numbers increased significantly between 2000 and 2004. Cumulative student enrollment and graduation data from this period illustrate that while managing a 10.2 percent increase in the number of students served, this program achieved a 68.2 percent increase in the number of graduates. Students provide the program with high marks<sup>3</sup>, with 87 percent of students believing that what they are learning in school will benefit their future, 89 percent feeling hard work is rewarded by the program, and 92 percent feeling motivated to succeed. Results from senior exit surveys administered by the program are also revealing:

- 96% report that they received their high school diploma even though 74% indicate that they entered the program low on academic credit;
- 94% believe that the program has helped them improve their lives;
- 91% of students cite "great teachers" as a positive aspect of attending the program;
- 90% agree or strongly agree that their teacher(s) helped improve their social skills;

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<sup>3</sup> These results include responses from students in a variety of programs in the system, of which day treatment programs (which are the unit of analysis in this study) are one type.

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- 57% say they attended their school within this program more regularly than they did their traditional school;
  - 56% say they enjoyed school more since attending the program; and
  - Students report improved math (29%), reading (35%), and writing (34%) skills while enrolled in the program.

This program serves students in grades K-12 who are referred by school districts, group homes, probation and social service agencies, correctional institutions, and families. The total student enrollment for all programs in 2003-2004 was approximately 8,759. Demographic descriptions for 2003 were: 62 percent male; 47 percent Hispanic, 33 percent Caucasian, 4 percent Asian, 4 percent African American, and 12 percent Other ethnicity; 12 percent were 12 years or younger, 23 percent were 13-15, and 61 percent were 16-19 years old.

## **Within-Program Site Selection**

This study confined itself to students in grades 7-12 in five randomly selected day treatment facilities in each of two multi-site alternative programs and one single-site program. The two multi-site programs are both large, urban systems comprised of many schools. Given the breadth of educational alternatives in these two systems, schools providing day treatment were selected as the units of interest in order to ensure some similarity in the schools studied across the three alternative programs.

At the time of our initial visit to one of the multi-site systems, there were approximately 37 community day schools, which enroll students referred by local school districts and county agencies. Students in these settings are taught with a minimum day or contracted learning schedule and meet with credentialed teachers to develop and implement a student-learning plan while attending a local county school site.<sup>4</sup> An administrator from the system identified 10 schools with enrollments of at least 50 students spread across five regions. One school was randomly selected from each region in order to ensure some representation of the five areas of the county educational system.

The second multi-site system has eight day treatment centers that are designed to serve school-age children and youth who are identified with an emotional disturbance. These centers provide treatment in an integrated educational and mental health environment. Three of these centers serve students with cognitive delays and challenging behaviors; these were excluded from the study. The remaining five centers were selected to participate in the study.

In total, 11 school sites were included in the first phase of site visits, during which the At-Risk Student Services Assessment (Sprague, Nishioka, Yeaton, & Utz, 2002) and Effective School Battery (Gottfredson, 1999) were administered. Archival records of students enrolled at each of these programs were also reviewed using the School Archival Records Search (Walker, Block-Pedego, Todis, & Severson, 1991a).

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<sup>4</sup> Students who attend community schools within this program are required to be in school for a minimum of 240 minutes each school day (i.e., minimum day). Contract learning is also offered within the community schools: these students meet individually with teachers at least one hour per week to turn in completed schoolwork, receive new school assignments, and receive any assistance needed.

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## Sampling of Students and Teachers

A sample size of at least 50 students was desired for each program so that sample sizes would be similar across the programs and because one program had fewer than 60 students enrolled who fit the criteria for inclusion in the sampling frame. The sampling frame for participation in the student survey of the Effective School Battery (ESB) consisted of all students enrolled in the program in grades 7 to 12 with two general exclusions: students who could not speak and read English, and students who were significantly developmentally delayed. In the case of one program, students in contracted learning were also excluded, as were students in the custody of Child and Family Services in another program.

After the sampling frame was established, students at the multi-site programs were randomly selected from the five participating day treatment programs. At one multi-site program, 15 students were randomly selected from the sampling frame of each of the five schools ( $n = 75$ ). Five of these students at each school were identified as replacements in case any of the other ten students were unable to provide consent or were absent the day of the site visits. Per the request of one program, 20 students were selected from the sampling frame of each school ( $n = 100$ ), 10 of which were identified as replacements at each school. At the single-site program, all students in the sampling frame were asked to participate in the study because the entire program was at one site. Across the three programs, the combined sample size was 154, in addition to 75 students designated as replacements.

Informed consent was sought from all selected students. These students were given parent-student consent forms that provided an overview of the background and purpose of the study, described the survey and the degree of anticipated risk associated with participating, and assured confidentiality. Both parents and students were asked to consent to the student's participation. Phone numbers and e-mail addresses of the researchers were included in case the parents or students wanted additional information. The consent form also allowed parents and students to check a box to obtain additional information prior to agreeing to participate. Students who were provided consent forms for the ESB were also asked to consent to a review of their records on the same form.

For the teacher samples, we asked all teachers working with students in grades 7 to 12 in the 11 schools to complete the teacher survey of the ESB. In total, 152 teachers were asked to participate (Program A,  $n = 41$ ; Program B,  $n = 23$ ; Program C,  $n = 88$ ). Informed consent was also sought for teachers. The consent form distributed to teachers provided the same information as in the student consent forms. In addition, teachers were provided with a supplementary description of the study that provided additional information on the study (funding source and research questions). Each teacher was provided the opportunity to decline participation in the study without repercussion. School administrators and teachers assisted with distributing the consent forms and supplementary information to teachers. Envelopes were also provided and teachers were instructed to enclose their completed consent form in the envelope and seal it in order to protect the confidentiality of their decision regarding participation.

Response and participation rates for both teachers and students are provided in Tables 6 and 7 in the section on quantitative findings. Teacher response rates at each program were at least 95 percent; for students the responses rates were 70, 72, and 90 percent across the three programs. It is possible that there is some sampling bias due to the differing characteristics of those students (and teachers) who responded and participated, and those who did not. However, we are unable to characterize either the nature or extent of this bias, and are unable to identify potential implications on the findings.

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## **Instrument Selection**

Three instruments were used to collect data during the first phase of site visits: At-Risk Student Services Assessment (ARSSA), The Effective School Battery (ESB), and School Archival Records Search (SARS). Each of these instruments is described further in the following paragraphs.

### ***School Archival Records Search***

The SARS is designed so that school records can be coded and quantified systematically (Walker, Block-Pedego, Todis, & Severson, 1991a). One of its purposes is to identify students at risk for school dropout. According to its developers:

The normative and psychometric characteristics of the SARS were investigated as part of an ongoing study evaluating the [Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders] system with elementary-age samples of students....Factorial, Discriminant, and concurrent validity were estimated as part of this research....[and] the outcomes of reported validity studies suggest that the SARS can be used efficiently and appropriately for the purposes for which it was designed. The SARS may have broader uses in the context of schooling as a research instrument and it may be applicable for use with a range of student populations (Walker, Block-Pedego, Todis, & Severson, 1991b, pp.53-62).

For those students who consented to having their records reviewed, the SARS was used to collect data on their school history including academic performance and school adjustment. Data were collected on 11 archival variables. These included achievement scores, attendance, demographics, detentions, disciplinary contacts, GPA, in-school referrals, and out-of-school referrals.

Due to time limitations while on site, staff from the three programs were recruited to assist with completing the SARS profiles following the site visits. AIR reimbursed recruits at a rate of \$10 per record. Three-hour sessions were led by AIR at each program to train program staff on completion of the SARS to maximize reliability of the coding. Intercoder reliability, which we assessed once per program, was above the minimum acceptable threshold of 80 percent at each program.

### ***At-Risk Students Services Assessment***

The ARSSA, which was administered at each of the 11 school sites, is used to define the extent to which evidence-based practices for at-risk students in a school program are well implemented (Sprague, Nishioka, Yeaton, Utz). The ARSSA examines 10 program features (see Table 1) that are comprised of 89 criteria and indicators. The program features reflect the research literature on evidence-based supports for students who are at risk of school failure: when fully implemented, these features increase the likelihood of academic success among at-risk students.

The criteria and indicators are used to evaluate the program features, which are categorized as either in place, in progress, or not in place. Programs or schools with high levels of implementation of the criteria and indicators can be characterized as following evidence-based practices for serving at-risk youth. Direct observation and interviews with administrators, staff, and students are data sources for the program assessment. In addition, twelve types of archival data are reviewed:

- Communication and screening tools
- Classroom, intake, outcomes tracking, personnel, and service coordination forms
- Lesson and school improvement plans

- Training and meeting schedules
- School handbook

The ARSSA provides a descriptive, numeric, and graphic summary of the interviews, observations, and archival record reviews. In consultation with our Expert Panel, we identified two consultants from the University of Oregon’s Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, which developed the ARSSA, to participate in program site visits and administer the ARSSA. Both consultants were previously trained and participated in administering the ARSSA in schools. Observations at each school site lasted about four hours but varied based on school size, availability of staff and students, and breadth of archival data.

**Table 1: Program Features Assessed by the ARSSA and Sources of Data**

<b>Program Feature</b>	<b>Types of Data Sources</b>
Administrative support	Evaluation, job descriptions, meeting schedule/available time allotment, trainings
Behavior support and supervision	Attendance, behavior routines/expectations/ outlined, verbalized, and reviewed; teaching strategies
Classroom management	Classroom routines/expectations/consequences outlined, verbalized, and reviewed; physical environment, teaching strategies
Instruction	Assessment process, curriculum, student goals, student scheduling, student-to-staff ratio
Mentoring and adult involvement	Communication plan/tracking, mentor assignments, service coordination plan/tracking
Program outcomes tracking	Attendance rates, criminal/behavioral recidivism, graduation rates, program recidivism, sustained academic improvement, success in return to sending school/full inclusion
School and work-based learning	Curriculum, school-to-work components, transition planning
Screening and referral	Intake forms, intake procedures, screening process, screening tools
Service coordination	Collaboration of key players, communication system and tracking, transition planning, into and out of program
Whole school discipline	School-wide evaluation tool (SET)

The same two coders collected data for the ARSSA on all three site visits. Reliability checks were completed on all measures of data collected during the visit to Program B. Reliability was determined to be 99 percent across the 10 program features. We did not conduct reliability checks during the subsequent visits to Programs A and C for a number of reasons. Foremost, coders were separated during classroom observations for cost efficiency purposes and due to the locations of schools. Second, based on the strong reliability of their assessments at Program B and their background experience with the ARSSA, we were confident that reliability would be similar at the other programs.

### ***The Effective School Battery***

The third instrument, the ESB, was administered to teachers and students at each of the 11 school sites in an effort to characterize students, teachers, and school climate (Gottfredson). The student survey examines 12 scales specific to student characteristics (See Table 2), whereas the teacher survey includes 7 scales to measure teacher characteristics (see Table 3). In addition, both the student and teacher surveys included measures of psychosocial school climate (6 and 9, respectively), which are listed and described in Table 4. The ESB is recommended for students in grades 6-12 and the reading level of the student survey is lower 5th grade.

The ESB was developed through research on school environments conducted at Johns Hopkins University. A number of instruments including those used in the National Institute of Education's Safe School Study (SSS) guided the development of the ESB. The SSS was conducted in the early 1980s and included 14,108 students in a variety of educational settings including urban schools with large minority populations and suburban schools, a Native-American reservation, a community in the Virgin Islands, and three communities in Puerto Rico. The work included middle, junior high, high school and alternative programs. Participating students ranged from 10 years or less (less than 2% of the student sample) to 18 years or older; however, most were 12-15 years of age. The sample included students from various racial/ethnic backgrounds including Asian Americans (1%), Black (44%), Native Americans (2%), Spanish Americans (29%), White (22%), and Other (2.3%). Items were analyzed to ensure they were valid for each ethnic group, age, and gender. Items were included in the ESB based on their performance in the item analyses and research on the dimensions of school climate.

AIR staff led and monitored the administration of the student surveys, which occurred at each school site during the school day. We met with students in locations that were convenient for school staff and that ensured a quiet, private environment for the students to complete the surveys. These locations consisted of classrooms not being used for instruction, libraries, or staff offices. All students were provided a copy of the survey booklet and were offered the opportunity to have AIR staff administer the survey orally. Some students opted to complete the survey independently. Students were given the option to either circle their responses in the survey booklet or fill in their responses on a survey response form. In cases where students used the survey booklet, AIR staff completed the response forms following the survey administration. AIR-completed forms were reviewed for accuracy by a second member of the project team. All forms were then forwarded to Gottfredson Associates, Inc. for optical scanning and reporting.

Each consenting teacher received a copy of the teacher survey during our site visits. We strived to protect the confidentiality of teachers' responses by providing teachers with envelopes in which to seal their completed surveys. In some instances, the sealed surveys were collected while AIR staff was on site. In cases where teachers were unable to complete the surveys while we were on site, we provided pre-paid postage envelopes so they could mail their completed surveys to AIR. In addition, at schools with fewer teachers completing surveys while we were on site, we recruited and benefited from school liaisons. These liaisons followed up with teachers whose surveys were missing, collected completed surveys, and submitted these to AIR.

**Table 2: Student Characteristics**

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Description</b>
Attachment to school	Extent of positive student attitudes toward school
Avoidance of punishment	Experience with negative sanctions
Belief in rules	Belief in the moral validity of conventional social rules
Educational expectation	How far in school student expects to go
Interpersonal competency	Extent of psychological health and adjustment
Involvement	Level of student participation in school activities
Parental education	Parents' educational levels
Positive peer associations	Extent of positive or negative peer influence
Positive self-concept	Level of self-esteem
School effort	Level of effort in school
School rewards	Experience with positive sanctions
Social integration	Extent to which student feels integrated or alienated from school's social order

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**Table 3: Teacher Characteristics**

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Description</b>
Classroom orderliness	Extent to which classroom disruptions interfere with teaching
Interaction with students	Extent of out-of-class interaction with students
Job satisfaction	Extent to which teachers like their jobs
Nonauthoritarian attitudes	Extent of sympathetic attitudes toward students
Personal security	Extent to which teachers feel safe
Professional development	Extent of recent continuing education or in-service learning
Pro-integration attitude	Attitudes toward racially integrated education

**Table 4: Psychosocial School Climate Measures**

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Part of Student Survey?</b>	<b>Part of Teacher Survey?</b>	<b>Description</b>
Clarity of school rules	Yes	No	Extent to which students feel school rules are clear
Fairness of school rules	Yes	No	Extent to which students feel school rules are fair
Involvement of parents and community	No	Yes	Level of parent and community influence and involvement
Morale	No	Yes	Commitment and morale of teachers
Planning and action	Yes	Yes	Extent to which the school engages in problem-solving and is open to change
Resources for instruction	No	Yes	Levels of resources available in the school
Respect for students	Yes	No	Extent to which students feel the school environment degrades them or treats them with dignity
Safety	Yes	Yes	Perceptions of school safety
School race relations	No	Yes	Opinions about school race relations
Smooth administration	No	Yes	Extent to which a school's administration is viewed favorably
Student influence	Yes	Yes	Level of student involvement in school decision making
Use of grades as a sanction	No	Yes	Use of grades as a response to misconduct

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## LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS

Although there is a dearth of rigorous empirical evidence supporting the relevance of particular program characteristics in terms of program effectiveness, various characteristics are frequently cited in the literature on alternative education. Many of these characteristics are in need of empirical study and hence questionable: it is unclear whether these characteristics produce positive outcomes or are generally correlated with positive outcomes. Further, in most instances the characteristics are discussed in a descriptive context without any discussion of their relationship to program or student success. They do still, however, warrant a discussion because of their frequent appearance in the literature. It is noteworthy that these characteristics are often suggested as essential to or important for program success by experts, administrators, or practitioners in the field. They include:

- Small class size and small student body
- Personalized school environment in which students feel included in the decision-making process
- Flexibility
- Effective classroom management
- Choice
- High expectations/belief in the students
- Special teacher training
- Parent involvement
- Collaboration

Most of these characteristics reflect research on the qualities of effective regular educational settings. However, it is our opinion – based on our site visits, and quantitative and qualitative findings – that these characteristics exist with greater intensity and play a more significant role in the effectiveness of the alternative programs we studied. In particular, effective classroom management, flexibility, small class size, and staff collaboration are imbedded in the philosophies of these programs and are integral to their identities and approaches to effectively serving their students.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, four characteristics are less frequently discussed in the literature on alternative education but remain worthy of mention as potentially important characteristics of effective programs. As such they also merit more investigation. These additional four characteristics include:

- Community support
- Targeted to a specific population
- Administrative leadership
- Transition support

A second literature review on interim alternative settings was also conducted. The search used the terms “interim alternative education placement,” “interim alternative education setting,” “IAEP,” “IAES,” “IAP,” and “IAS.” Various databases were used (e.g., PSYCINFO, ERIC, PsychArticles, LEXIS/NEXISon) as well as Internet search engines (e.g., Google, Yahoo) and organization websites (e.g., [www.nasdse.org](http://www.nasdse.org), [www.nasponline.com](http://www.nasponline.com), [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org), [www.ideapolicy.org](http://www.ideapolicy.org)) that were recommended by the Expert Panel. In addition to research, the search produced documents related to opinions, barriers, and policies.

The only information obtained from these websites and databases were explanations of the IDEA amendment that introduced interim alternative education placements, and parents’ handbooks describing the rights of parents and students regarding these placements. Therefore, the literature search showed that there is little existing research or publications about these interim alternative education placements, let alone their effectiveness and characteristics.

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## QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

In this section we summarize key findings of the ARSSA, the ESB, and finally the SARS.

### At-Risk Student Services Assessment

The criteria established by the ARSSA for the evaluation of findings state that any program feature falling in the 80-100 percent range is considered to be well implemented; the 70-79 percent range indicates features that are moderately developed; and the 50-69 percent range would indicate features that need improvement.

Five program features were found to be in the “well implemented” range for each of the three programs:

- Administrative Support (Does administration provide program support via organization, training, and involvement?);
- Behavior Support and Supervision (How does program staff implement behavior support strategies?);
- Classroom Management (What classroom management strategies are utilized in the program?);
- School and Work-based Learning (How does program connect students to career-based opportunities?); and
- Screening and Referral (What process determines student eligibility for the program?).

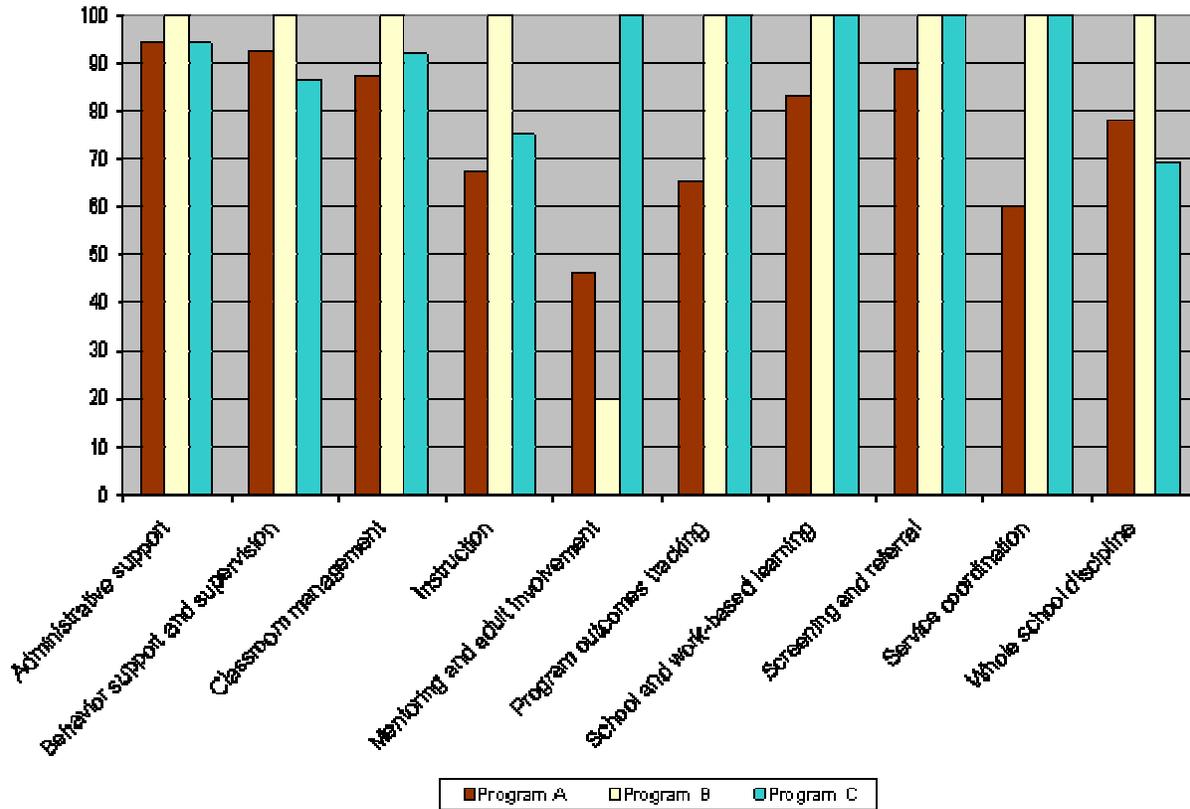
There were no features in which all three programs would be considered to be in the “moderately developed” range. Interestingly, Mentoring and Adult Involvement was the only feature for which any of the programs scored below the “in need of improvement” range.

The ARSSA data from each site were aggregated to yield ratings for each program feature. Table 5 shows the percent of implementation by program and program feature, and includes the mean scores of the three programs; Figure 1 displays this information graphically.

**Table 5: Percent of Implementation of Evidence-Based Program Features, by Program and Across Programs**

<b>Program Feature</b>	<b>Program A</b>	<b>Program B</b>	<b>Program C</b>	<b>Program Mean</b>
Administrative support	94	100	94	96
Behavior support and supervision	92	100	86	93
Classroom management	87	100	92	93
Instruction	67	100	75	81
Mentoring and adult involvement	46	20	100	55
Program outcomes tracking	65	100	100	88
School and work-based learning	83	100	100	94
Screening and referral	89	100	100	96
Service coordination	60	100	100	87
Whole school discipline	78	100	69	82

**Figure 1: Percent of Implementation, by Program and Program Feature**



## The Effective School Battery

Teacher response rates were strong across all three programs while student response rates were strong in one program and good in two programs. A high percentage of teachers at each program consented to complete the ESB survey (Table 6). In fact, 95 percent of teachers consented at Programs A and C and 100 percent of teachers consented at program B. Program B also had a high percentage of students consenting to participate (90%). Programs A and C had 70 and 72 percent of students, respectively, consent to participate in the ESB survey.

**Table 6: Teacher and Student Response Rates**

	Teachers		Students	
	Percent	N	Percent	N
<b>Program A</b>	95%	41	70%	54
<b>Program B</b>	100%	23	90%	46
<b>Program C</b>	95%	84	72%	55

Most teachers and students who consented to completing the ESB survey also participated in the study (Table 7). Among teachers, the participation rates ranged from 88 to 100 percent across programs. Student participation rates were also high, ranging from 91 to 100 percent across programs.

**Table 7: Teacher and Student Participation Rates**

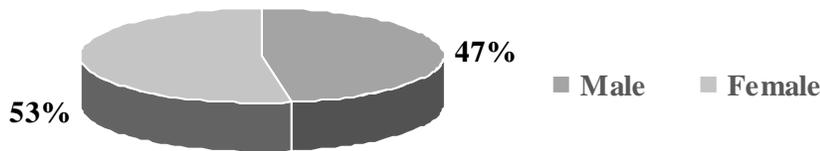
	Teachers		Students	
	Percent	N	Percent	N
<b>Program A</b>	88%	36	91%	49
<b>Program B</b>	100%	23	100%	46
<b>Program C</b>	90%	76	96%	53

Review of the ESB responses yielded various findings, which are presented in the following sections beginning with teacher and student demographics, followed by the psychosocial climate measures and other key findings from the teacher and student surveys.

**Demographics**

Figure 2 shows that slightly more than half of the responding teachers across the three programs were female; these figures are disaggregated by program in Table 8.

**Figure 2: Teacher Gender**



**Table 8: Teacher Gender, by Program**

Gender	Program A	Program B	Program C	Total
Male	18	8	38	64
Female	18	15	38	71
Total	36	23	76	135

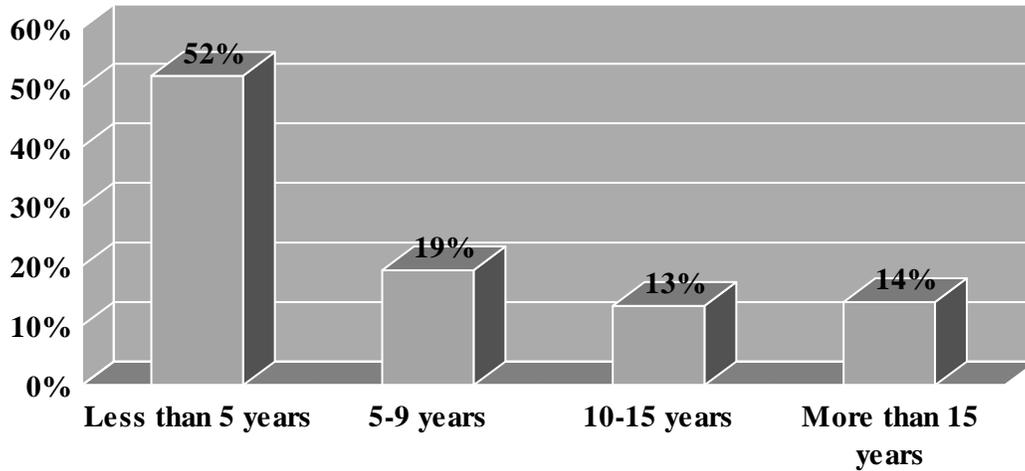
In terms of race/ethnicity, a large majority of teachers responded that they describe themselves as white (76%), followed by black (15%). Small percentages of teachers reported being “other” (6%), Spanish American (3%), and American Indian or Alaskan Native (less than 1%). No teacher reported being Asian-American or Pacific Islander.

**Table 9: Teacher Race/Ethnicity, by Program**

Race/Ethnicity	Program A	Program B	Program C	Total
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0	1	1
Asian-American or Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
Black	5	0	15	20
Other	4	0	4	8
Spanish-American	4	0	0	4
White	23	23	56	102
Total	36	23	76	135

About half of the teachers surveyed had fewer than five years of teaching experience as a full-time teacher, while about 27 percent had 10 or more years of experience (Figure 3 and Table 10).

**Figure 3: Teacher Experience as a Full-Time Teacher, as a Percent of Total Teachers**

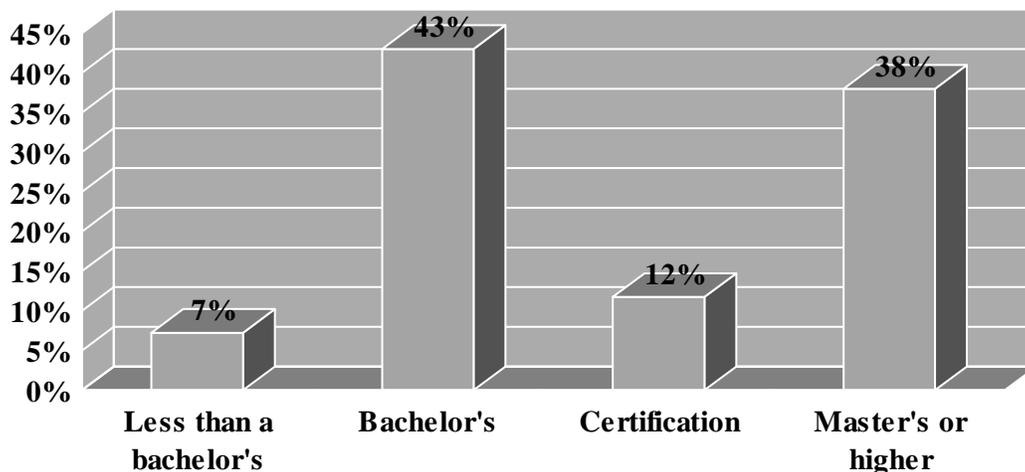


**Table 10: Teacher Experience as a Full-Time Teacher, by Program**

Length of Experience	Program A	Program B	Program C	Total
More than 15 years	8	1	10	19
10-15 years	2	1	15	18
5-9 years	5	5	16	26
Less than 5 years	21	16	33	70
No response	0	0	2	2
Total	36	23	76	135

Relative to reported levels of educational attainment, a majority of reported that they either have a bachelor’s degree (43%) or a master’s degree or higher (38%) (Figure 4 and Table 11).

**Figure 4: Teacher Educational Attainment, as a Percent of Total Teachers**



**Table 11: Teacher Educational Attainment, by Program**

Educational Attainment	Program A	Program B	Program C	Total
Less than a bachelor's degree	1	0	9	10
Bachelor's degree	7	14	37	58
Fifth year certification	13	0	3	16
Master's degree or higher	15	9	27	51
Total	36	23	76	135

Table 12 presents data on the educational level of students' parents, based on student survey responses. Some students were not able to report the educational attainment of their mother and father (30 and 42, respectively). Of those who reported this information, just under half responded that their mother's educational attainment consisted of 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less, some high school, or high school completion. This percentage was higher (about 66%) in the case of students reporting their father's level of educational attainment.

**Table 12: Parental (or Legal Guardian) Educational Attainment, by Program**

Educational Attainment	Program A		Program B		Program C		Total	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
8 <sup>th</sup> grade or less	4	6	1	1	1	1	6	8
Some high school	10	10	2	2	6	8	18	20
Finished high school	9	9	6	9	10	10	25	28
Some college	13	6	7	5	10	7	30	18
Finished college	2	4	7	4	14	3	23	11
Don't know	11	14	22	24	12	24	45	62
Total	49	49	45	45	53	53	147	147

***Findings from the ESB Psychosocial Climate Measures***

The ESB data were ordinal in nature. To be conservative, a non-parametric equivalent to analysis of variance, Kruskal-Wallis, was computed to determine if there were any significant differences on the scales among the three programs. If overall significance was obtained on a scale, a Mann-Whitney U Test was computed as a follow-up analysis to determine which of the groups differed significantly from the other(s). In addition, completed student and teacher surveys were submitted to Gottfredson Associates, Inc., to produce interpretative reports for each school and program. These reports summarized the findings by scale and compared them to the ESB norm group.

*Teacher Survey.* Using the data from the teacher surveys, there were no significant differences among the three programs on 3 of the 9 psychosocial climate scales (race relations, safety, and student influence) and 2 of the 7 teacher characteristics scales (non-authoritarian attitudes and pro-integration attitudes). In comparison to the ESB norm group, teacher responses were very high on one of these scales (non-authoritarian attitudes) and moderately high on two other scales (safety and student influence), which suggests that the school climate of the alternative programs tend to be more positive on these dimensions relative to the norm group.

On 2 of 5 scales with no significant difference (race relations, pro-integrations attitudes), teacher responses were in the average range, suggesting that the programs tend to be similar to the ESB norm group on these dimensions of school climate. In addition, in the area of psychosocial climate, significant differences among the groups were found on six scales: avoidance of use of grades as sanction,  $X^2(2) = 44.63, p < .01$ ; morale,  $X^2(2) = 24.66, p < .01$ ; parent/community involvement,  $X^2(2) = 14.38, p < .01$ ;

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planning and action,  $X^2(2) = 20.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ; resources,  $X^2(2) = 20.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and smooth administration,  $X^2(2) = 19.84$ ,  $p < .01$ . Significant differences were also found on five scales of teacher characteristics [classroom orderliness,  $X^2(2) = 65.83$ ,  $p < .01$ ; interaction with students,  $X^2(2) = 6.87$ ,  $p < .05$ ; job satisfaction,  $X^2(2) = 18.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ; personal security,  $X^2(2) = 57.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and professional development,  $X^2(2) = 41.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ].

*Student survey.* There were no significant differences among the three programs in the measures on 4 of the 6 psychosocial climate scales on the student survey – fairness of rules, planning and action, respect for students, and student influence – as well as 7 of the 12 student characteristic scales (attachment to school, belief in rules, educational expectations, interpersonal competency, positive peer associations, school effort, and social integration). Relative to the ESB norm group, student responses were high or very high on four of these scales (belief in rules, fairness of rules, planning and action, and respect for students), which suggests that the school climate of the alternative programs tend to be more positive on these dimensions relative to the norm group.

On 4 of the other 6 scales with no significant difference (attachment to school, educational expectations, interpersonal competency, and social integration), student responses were average, suggesting that the programs tend to be similar to the ESB norm group on these dimensions of school climate. On the other two scales, the programs tended to be below average when compared to the norm group (positive peer associations, school effort). In addition, significant differences were found on two school climate scales: clarity of rules,  $X^2(2) = 6.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and safety,  $X^2(2) = 13.56$ ,  $p < .01$ . In the area of student characteristics, significant differences were found on five scales: avoidance of punishment,  $X^2(2) = 7.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ; involvement,  $X^2(2) = 10.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ; parental education,  $X^2(2) = 8.2$ ,  $p < .05$ ; positive self concept,  $X^2(2) = 7.76$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and school rewards  $X^2(2) = 18.85$ ,  $p < .01$ .

#### ***Other Key Findings from the Teacher Survey***

- Across the three programs, more than 90 percent of participating teachers indicated they view their colleagues as enthusiastic, as well as innovative and open to change. Between 80 and 90 percent view their colleagues as cohesive. A majority of respondents also reported that their colleagues are appreciated, satisfied, and untraditional.
- More than 80 percent of teachers consider their principals fair, informal, and permissive. A majority also view their principals as firm, open to staff input, progressive, strict, and tough. Just under 90 percent of teachers feel that administrators and teachers collaborate to make their school run more effectively. About 83 percent responded that teachers' ideas are listened to and used in the school.
- Teacher morale tended to be high across the three programs. About 60 percent said they love their job while another 36 percent indicated they like their job. A large majority believe that they like their job more (77%) or as much as (19%) other people in general like their jobs.

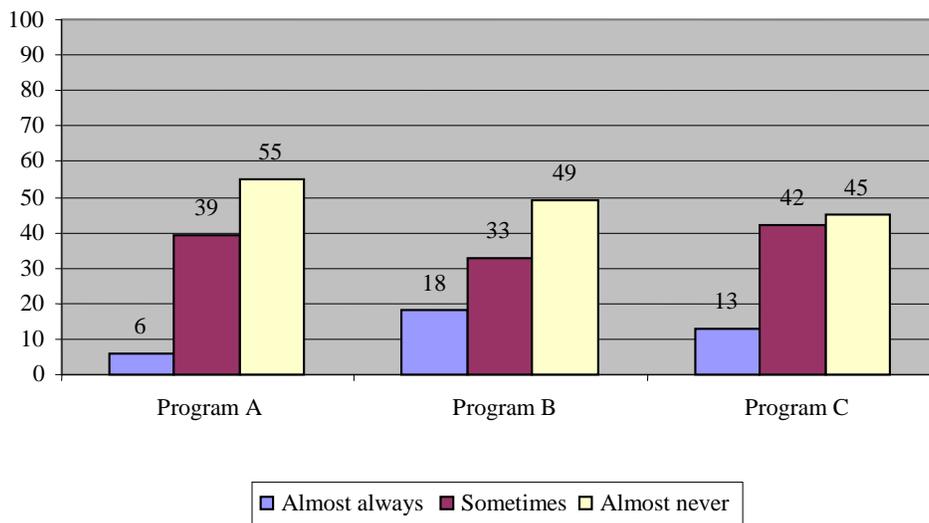
#### ***Other Key Findings from the Student Survey***

- About 72 percent of students indicated that the grade they get in school is very important and another 22 percent felt grades are fairly important. About 46 percent of students stated that what teachers think about them is very important, with 32 percent indicating this is fairly important. Large percentages of students stated that they like their school (65%), classes (70%) principal (72%), and teachers (78%). Only about half feel that the

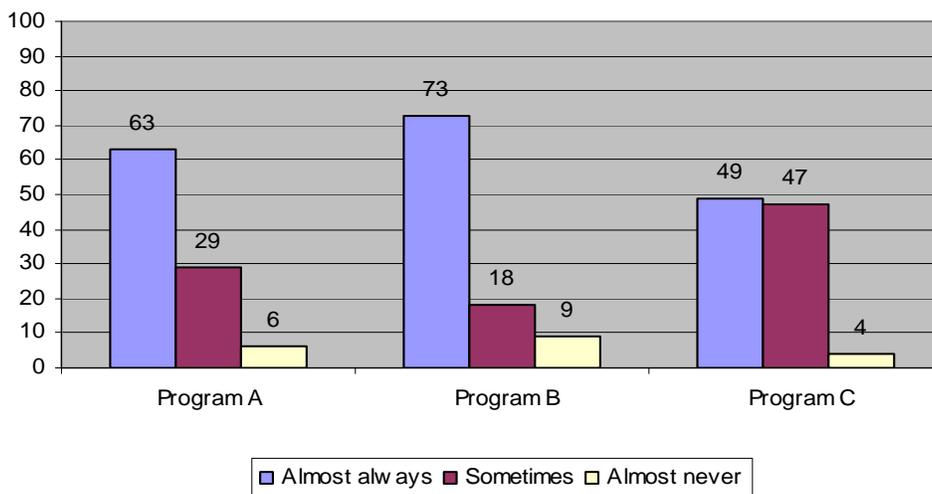
school makes them like to learn while 56 percent disagreed with the statement that they feel like they belong in their school.

- About eight in 10 students have “lots of respect” for their teachers and believe that teachers care about students. The percentage of students stating that teachers almost never do things to “make students feel put down” ranges from 45 to 55 percent by program (Figure 6). In addition, the percentage of students stating that teachers almost always treat students with respect ranged from 49 percent in Program C to 73 percent in Program A (Figure 7).

**Figure 6: Student Responses to the Question, “Teachers Do Things that Make Students Feel Put Down”**

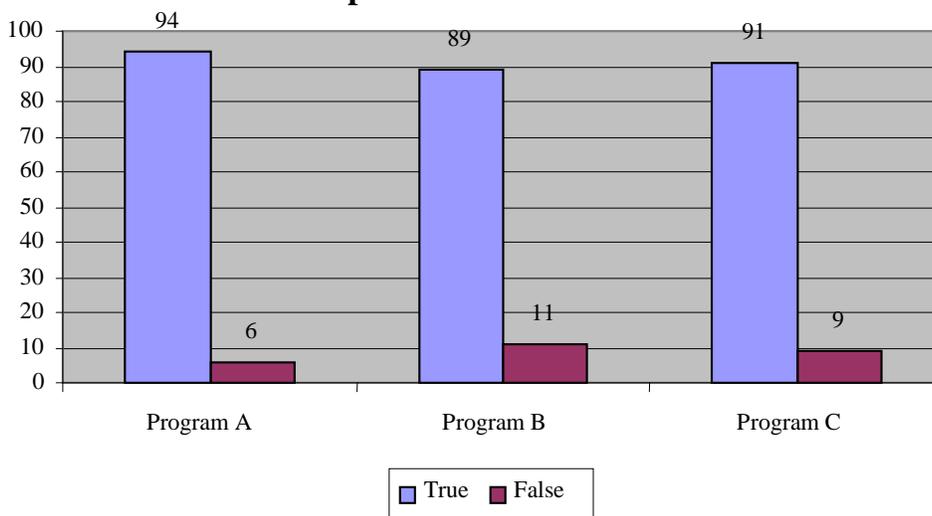


**Figure 7: Student Responses to the Question, “Teachers Treat Students with Respect”**



- Students tended to believe that school rules are clear and fair. In fact, an estimated 40 percent of students stated that school rules are always fair and 42 percent responded that school rules are sometimes fair. A large majority (81%) believe that their principals are fair, although this ranged from 68 to 91 percent by program.
- Across the programs, large majorities of students reported that teachers let students know what is expected of them (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Student Responses to the Question, “Teachers Let Students Know What Is Expected of Them”**



- Other ESB findings worth noting include:
  - About 9 in 10 students are pleased with how they are doing in their alternative program.
  - 4 in 10 expect to complete a two-year college degree.
  - 4 in 10 anticipate completing a four-year college degree.
  - About half of students indicate that teachers often say nice things about their schoolwork; 45 percent report teachers sometimes do.
  - 8 in 10 students agree that someone cares about what happens to them.

In addition, several questions are built into the student ESB survey as a quality control mechanism to test the validity of students’ responses: did students randomly respond to questions or did they think about their responses? Table 13 displays students’ responses to the five questions that comprise the Invalidity index. We find that student responses on the Invalidity indicators align with how we would expect students to respond (e.g., that they like to have fun), which suggests that students responded to the survey in a serious manner.<sup>5</sup> Hence, this provides greater confidence in the findings.

<sup>5</sup> No student surveys were removed from the analyses due to responses to questions that are part of the Invalidity Index.

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**Table 13: Student Responses to Questions in the Invalidity Index**

<b>Invalidity Index Item</b>	<b>True</b>	<b>False</b>
Never disliked anyone	16%	83%
Easy to get along with nasty people	19%	78%
Read several whole books every day	10%	90%
I like to have fun	96%	3%
I sometimes get angry	91%	9%

## **School Archival Records Search**

Students who consented to having their records reviewed in the sites we visited were typically male (ranging from 77 to 91 percent, on average) but their ethnicity varied markedly by program. In one program the students were predominantly white (76.7 percent), while in another they were mostly black<sup>6</sup> (64 percent) and in the third they were primarily Hispanic (64 percent). Of the total combined sample of students across the three programs, about 46 percent were white, with the remainder of students split about evenly between black and Hispanic race/ethnicity. Only one program had students who were of Asian ethnicity, but these students comprised only 4 percent of that program’s sample.

In terms of student disabilities, in two of the programs 100 percent of the students whose records were reviewed had been diagnosed with a disability. In the third program, student records revealed that about 13 percent of these students had documented disabilities. The vast majority of those students with disabilities (84%) were identified as having an emotional or behavioral disability.

The mean number of different elementary schools previously attended by students was about 3 in one program and 2.3 in another; data were not available for the third program. The mean number of different middle schools previously attended ranged from about one in two of the programs to almost two middle schools in the third program. The mean number of different high schools previously attended by students ranged from 1.4 in one program to about two in the other programs.

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<sup>6</sup> We use the term “black” rather than “African American” to keep the language consistent with that used in the student survey.

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## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Analysis of the quantitative research enabled researchers to better characterize the programs and their participants. The purpose of the qualitative portion of the study was to describe, from the perspective of the key participants in the alternative programs (i.e., students, teachers, administrators, and parents), the culture of the programs and to begin to identify possible components of this culture that are integral to how these programs operate and why they might be effective.

To accomplish this, results from the literature review and the quantitative analysis were used to identify characteristics for further inquiry. Using this information, protocols were developed for student, teacher, and administrator interviews and parent focus groups. The protocols were reviewed by a team of four researchers and revised before being sent to the Institutional Review Board for approval.

### Procedures

Five students and five teachers were selected randomly from the groups who participated in the quantitative phase of the study. Students who were no longer enrolled in the program and teachers who were no longer employed by the programs were excluded from the sampling frame for this portion of the study. In addition, groups of students and teachers were randomly selected as replacements in the event those originally selected did not consent to participating. Some students and teachers were not available when the research team visited the sites. In addition, five parents of students who participated in the quantitative phase of the program were randomly selected to participate in either an interview or a focus group (depending on their preference).<sup>7</sup> The numbers of participating teachers, students, and parents by program are provided in Table 14.

**Table 14: Number of Interview or Focus Group Participants, by Type and Program**

	Teachers	Students	Parents
<b>Program A</b>	4	4	2
<b>Program B</b>	3	5	5
<b>Program C</b>	5	5	3

Administrator interviews for the qualitative phase of the study were limited to those who were in these positions at the time of the quantitative data collection activities, and who were still in their administrative positions at the time of our qualitative data collection activities. This yielded two administrators at one of the multi-site programs and five administrators at the other. We also interviewed the only lead administrator at the single-site program.

Researchers visited each site to collect data (three researchers at each of the multi-site programs and one researcher at the single-site program). Researchers recorded field notes during the interviews and focus groups; if participants consented, discussions were also recorded using an audio tape. We reviewed these tapes following the site visits to supplement written notes and maximize the likelihood of an accurate, thorough transcription of the interviews and focus groups. After the qualitative data were coded, audio tapes were destroyed as promised in the consent and assent agreements.

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<sup>7</sup> In some cases students were represented by both parents. Parent interviews were held in all three programs and focus groups were held in two programs.

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## Analysis

Researchers used topological analysis in which all data from the interviews and focus groups were divided into categories, or themes. These themes were originally devised using the theoretical framework resulting from the literature review and the quantitative research results. During the initial coding additional themes emerged. We used QSR N6 software to sort and code data, resulting in 16 themes and, in some cases, sub-themes.

In this section we describe the various findings across these themes, beginning with positive student growth and improved performance, followed by administrative leadership, unique teacher characteristics, positive student-teacher relationships, separating behavior from students, student choice, classroom management and discipline, staff collaboration, flexibility, high expectations of students, adult-student ratio, teacher training, transition support, parental involvement, community support, and finally, cultural competence. Significantly, each of these themes emerged during the interviews and (or) focus groups at the three alternative programs. With few exceptions the summaries and quotes are representative of our findings across the three programs.

### *Positive Student Growth and Improved Performance*

Interviews and focus groups provided rich data on the perspectives and experiences of those involved in the alternative programs. A particularly salient theme in the data was program impact on the academic, behavioral, and personal growth of students. In this first section we present key findings on this prominent theme.

*Changes in Morale and Attitudes Toward School.* Parents and students alike stated that they observed positive changes in attitudes toward school and morale. As one student shared, “[my] experiences at this school will affect the rest of my life – [school name] changed the way I think about school.” A parent also stated, “each day there is something positive – he *can’t* miss school. When he missed his bus, he called his Grandma to take him to school.” When asked about changes as a result of the alternative program one parent commented, “she’s always been an extremely bright kid and so learning wasn’t a real problem, but she actually wants it more now.” Finally, one parent shared that her son’s

Morale was low when he came to [program name], but the teachers encouraged him to finish. When he recovered his lost credits he preferred to stay at [program name]. At [this program] he doesn’t just have a teacher, he has a friend.

*Changes in Performance.* Students and parents shared very positive opinions about improvements in student achievement and attendance since placement in the alternative programs. One parent stated, “my child is getting a better education. Making As and Bs vs. Fs. For the first time, he does homework.” Another parent remarked, “this alternative school has proved other schools wrong – my son is reading now when other schools said he wouldn’t be able to read.” Students also commented about improvements in their grades in the alternative programs compared to those in the public schools that they were enrolled in previously. One student said, “yes [my grades] have gone up.... I will probably get better grades when I go to college and get a better job, and marry somebody intelligent.”

However, one student felt he was not being challenged enough and not enough classroom time spent on academics in the alternative program. He explained that in his regular school he received “Bs” and “Cs”, but in the alternative program “straight As.” When further questioned he remarked that “whenever kids are having problems and [staff] have to restrain ‘em, then we’re off academics.” He stated that he was

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concerned because he knew he would “go back to public school next year and be stupid, not know anything in ninth grade.”

When asked about attendance, students consistently responded that they were more likely to attend classes at their alternative program than they were at their previous school(s). One student commented, “I used to ditch school but now care about school and about graduating.” He went on to add,

Yes, no more ditching school, [I] will go home and read books. [I am] more organized than before, school is important now. [My] grades have improved. I enjoy school now. I get along better with others.”

Another student shared, “I attend more, [whereas] before I was suspended almost every day.”

Teachers credited this improvement in school attendance to increased student success, excitement about learning, and students’ sense of belonging within the alternative programs. One teacher explained, “we have kids come here who start coming to school even though they never wanted to before – or kids that are suddenly excited about learning because now it makes sense because we are moving slower for them or we are giving it to them in chunks and they don’t feel like as much of an outsider because they fit in more.” Another commented about the importance of belonging and school bonding: “it’s not our school, it’s their school [and] they take ownership in it. So, attendance is going to increase, their interest increase[s], their grades increase.”

Parents explained that initially they viewed placement in the alternative programs as a punishment or “dumping ground” for their children, but their opinions changed after the initial few weeks of their children’s enrollment in the alternative programs. In fact, one teacher shared an experience with a parent who initially came to the program in tears because someone at the sending school told her that the alternative school would manacle (confine) her son to a chair. The teacher went on to say that this student

Was with me for two years, graduated a year early, went to [a nationally recognized culinary school]...I ran into him at the grocery store just this weekend. I saw him and his mom. She gives me a big hug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! He’s such a success...! He’s graduating in a month...” I forget where she said he’s going to go next. You know, she was just thrilled. And she was in here crying at first.

*Changes in Future Goals.* Students also remarked that as a result of the alternative programs, they had either formed or made changes to their future plans. Students talked about their new desire to graduate from high school and reflected on the contrast between their educational and career goals in the public school and these goals after enrolling in the alternative programs. One student said that he “wasn’t planning to go to college before” but is now, and the alternative school was “a great decision.” He then explained that he is considering joining the Peace Corps, which he had discussed with his teachers. Another student stated that she was planning on enrolling in college courses, but because of the opportunities available through the alternative program she was able to work at a hospital where, “you work for 120 hours and they see if they like you; this helps you to get a career fast.” Because of this experience the student now wants to become a pediatrician. A third student said that the alternative program provides experiences and opportunities that his previous public school could not: “I’m going to be a heavy equipment operator and get CDO so I can work on a job site. If I was back at my [old] school I would not have been able to do that.” Finally, another student stated,

I feel like I have an opportunity to plan for the future. I ask my teachers for advice for my coursework. They tell me what I should focus on and do. I’d like to help children.

In the words of one parent, “my child now has a future.”

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## *Administrative Leadership*

The significance of administrative leadership relative to program effectiveness was another notable theme in the qualitative data and characteristic of the programs. Administrative leadership emerged in a number of ways, including the importance of listening, caring, and putting students first. Each informant recognized and articulated the value of these qualities and their roles in program and student success. In the following paragraphs we describe each of these sub-themes in more detail.

*Listening.* Listening emerged as a key attribute of the program administrators. Administrators stated that an important part of their roles is listening to the teachers, students, and parents. As one administrator explained, “you have to communicate. You have to listen and you have to be able to communicate with a variety of different personalities.” Another administrator said that listening is instrumental to building caring relationships with parents: “sometimes it takes three or four times. Listening, I mean that’s pretty much it, following through, answering phone calls, being there, being available, being a sounding board, letting ‘em vent sometimes.” Listening is also key to developing relationships with the students.

So I try to make it comfortable for them to just to dialogue, to share what’s going on. Normally the kids have a lot of stuff going on. They have dynamic issues going on at home and they’re all different, so if Grandma’s sick and they need to be there, then let me know and we’ll get around that. It’s not going to be truant, truant, truant and then you’re out.

In addition, it is important for teachers to know the administrator is listening, “I listen to them. I realize that they... it’s a tough job and I feel if they’re coming to me with an issue, it’s important to them.”

Both parents and teachers said that they feel the administrators listen when they have problems and try to solve the problem rather than just make a decision. A parent was impressed that the administrator listened: “in public school the principal always takes the side of the teachers, [but] in [this program] the principal listens and tries to solve problems.” One teacher stated that the teachers:

Come back [to teach each year] because of [the administrator]. He is a leader that mirrors a good atmosphere. Students like it too, his calm demeanor. He is always processing, there to help you. Even kids feel that way.

Having the administrator physically available seemed to be important to people. Many spoke of an open-door policy, including one administrator who said that “open door, face-to-face conversations seem to work best...treat people like you want to be treated, don’t hide behind closed doors, everybody knows they can come talk to me.” A teacher also said that the administrator “definitely has an open door policy and is approachable...this is very important.”

*A caring attitude.* “Good leadership is helping people achieve their agenda. The secret is to ask them what their agenda is [because] leaders take the time to discover what that is and provide resources.” These words of one program administrator reflect sentiments that were commonly shared across the three programs. Administrators all expressed genuine care for their staff and the students who attend their schools. One administrator spoke about a student who had just left his office:

I am here for him. I praise him, I care about him. I want him to do well. I constantly encourage him to constantly do well.

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Another administrator stated that:

Every time I come across a kid or a parent, I give them my phone number [and tell them that] anytime you need anything, you call me. If you need to modify your schedule, if there's some circumstances at home that we need to know about, transportation, you know, we'll address that. We'll get around it.

Students seemed to appreciate the relationships they have with program administrators. When asked about how the administrator helps him be successful, one student shared that the administrator "will always help even if he is busy – he worries about students and checks on students in classrooms; other principals don't do this because they are just in their office." Other students discussed their relationships with their program administrators: "[he] gives me good advice. He makes me laugh" One student thought the administrator's sense of humor was important:

Most [administrators] are serious and you won't be able to have a conversation with them. He comes up to you and talks to you and jokes around with you. He is nice, not mean, you can have fun with him.

Teachers also feel this caring attitude. One teacher mentioned that her administrator "is a mentor and a friend. He is personable." They also commented that administrators cared about the students and showed that care in their day-to-day interactions with students:

He is a master. He really is. I mean from day one I've been amazed by how good he is with the kids, how calm he is, how he always directs students to making their own decisions, being responsible for themselves, coming up with their own solutions. You know with students he's just a master, in a conference with students and parents.

*Putting Students First.* Administrators all seemed to recognize that they, their staff, and the schools are there for the students. One administrator commented, "you need to keep focus on the kids. Focus on the kids with every decision you make with regards to students, teachers, administrators, everything." Another administrator said that he hopes people "would say I am somebody that understands the needs of kids." Another administrator thought his job was different than it would be if he were an administrator of a traditional school because the program "need[s] to be different" and cater to the needs of students and their parents.

*Other Administrator Qualities.* Several other leadership qualities emerged as important for administrators in alternative programs. Many teachers commented about the support that they feel they are given by their administrators. They said that administrators push them to develop professionally so they can be the best teachers they could be – and the administrators provide the training opportunities they need to accomplish this.

Many administrators and teachers commented on the necessity of administrators having experience in alternative programs before becoming administrators in them. One administrator commented that a good alternative program administrator "would have come up through this system" and that "if they come from outside, I hope they would look at the data, use evaluative skills, use observation skills, and conduct FBA on the organization." The administrator's role in fostering a common philosophy that ties each classroom together and provides goals was also identified as an important component to effective alternative programs. One administrator put it nicely: it is important that administrators provide "a philosophical foundation to what we do, which I think is important with this kind of work, with this kind of population, to always have a ground, an anchor to look back on."

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### *Unique Teacher Characteristics*

Informants agreed that teachers in these alternative programs were “different” than teachers in traditional settings. Some students referred to them as “friends” who they could “talk comfortably with” and “who are willing to listen.” Students also used words like: caring, awesome, fun, calm, friendly, and kind. They described their teachers as people who did not “take a joke too seriously,” “would not discriminate you,” and who are “kind of cool.” One student said the teachers at his school “really do care.” He went on to say that “they don’t stand and yell at you. They don’t curse at you and don’t blame you for things you didn’t do.” Another said:

The teachers here make this school special. They are here for us, they are cool and nice. At the other school they are just doing their job because they want the money.”

Parents also commented on the uniqueness of the teachers in the alternative programs. One parent said the teachers are “like another parent” who “never seems to be having a bad day” and who “love what they are doing.” During one parent focus group, many agreed with one parent’s statement that the teachers in the alternative school seem more dedicated than the teachers in the traditional settings where their children were previously placed. One parent commented:

Do you know what the teachers do differently? They get the kids...motivated. They’re just good at motivating.

The teachers affirmed that they and their colleagues are not like teachers in traditional settings. In fact, one teacher said that “teachers here are not the ideal teachers that universities would like to think they produce.” When asked to explain, she said, “there is more progressive teaching here, teachers here are all knowledgeable of the most current teaching methods, but here we constantly create and adapt to the needs of the position – more maverick kind of teachers here.” Teachers think they have to be “able to manage behavior, foresee that there are issues that may arise and can prevent situations from happening.” They also see themselves as “open-minded and flexible.” They feel that they must be “very positive, believe they can make a difference, believe they can change kids. Because, when you lose that, you’ve lost everything.” Another teacher said that:

I think the kids get the message here fairly quickly that “we like you – we may not like what you’re doing right now, but we like you as a person” and I think if a teacher’s able to transmit that they have the relationship part beat.

Administrators had much to say about the characteristics they seek in teachers for their programs. They felt the teachers need tolerance, humor, and passion, and they have to want to be there and be the type of person who doesn’t mind the unexpected, because “there are no usual days except unusual days.” Other administrators said teachers must be positive, encouraging, impart hope, and truly see parents as a partner in the teaching endeavor. These teachers make the “process of learning fun, enjoyable, and engaging.” They are “not willing to accept limits of children, but [are] willing to push the kid to the highest degree possible.” They also must be “extremely organized, creative, and flexible – and a thick skin is important to have” because “the demands on the staff are extraordinary and most people in our society probably wouldn’t be able to do it, so they have to have just a sort of inherent trait toward liking kids and these kinds of kids.” One administrator said that teachers in alternative programs:

Have a little bit more swagger to ‘em, not defiant, but definitely a strong will in their belief in their positions – and they definitely are advocates for the kids, but they just somehow view things in a different way.

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### *Positive Student-Teacher Relationships*

A personal connection between the students and their teachers was another characteristic deemed important for success in all three programs. An administrator stated that “the uniqueness of our program is that the teachers get to know the kids personally.” One administrator went further to describe ideal student-teacher connections:

The ideal is when almost every one of the teachers at this site knows by name every kid, even though if it’s not [their] student. You can see it and there’s like a familiarity...[and then from the perspective of the students] it’s not just some other teacher...[so their attitude is that] “I’m supposed to be responsible and I’m supposed to be respectful to them.”

A genuine interest in students and their future was thought to be the basis for this connection. An administrator said, “kids generally see their teachers as really interested in them, as really liking them... having positive regard and unconditional acceptance...that the teachers really are looking out for their goodwill.” Another administrator said that “the crux of the effective teacher is the ability to establish relationships.” Teachers’ comments reflect agreement with this: “rapport is also a big thing, teachers have to be personable. If you don’t connect with kids, they don’t listen.” Another teacher explained her relationship with students: “I think of my classroom as sort of an extended family...I definitely promote that attitude among my students and I promote it with my [students’] parents and I look at myself as like a second mother in many ways to them.”

Students also commented that their relationships with teachers in the alternative programs were different than those they had experienced in the past: “this school is different because here the teachers get along with you. You can be more like friends with teachers here.” Another student said:

It is better here [because] I get more respect and help. Teachers here are more focused. They take the time to know more about me so they can make a good education plan.

Another student said, “teachers talk to you and ask how you have been.” When asked if he would change anything about his school, another student said, “keep it the same. It’s pretty nice. Keep the teachers here and they help you learn your life and how the past life and the future life might be and I think it’s pretty cool.” Another student discussed the reciprocal necessity of respect:

[It] certainly helps if you respect [the teachers] first. I, I know that some things I’ve done was not very respectful, because I always thought, “why should I give my respect to you when you have never respected me?” I mean, I know I’m a kid and some people don’t believe a kid should disrespect an adult after an adult has disrespected a kid. I don’t think that’s fair and it’s not...but when you sense their respect, but when you sense they’re respecting you, they show respect, compassion and they’ll [help you to] self-discipline....They’ll trust you and they’ll be fair.

Parents also commented on the uniqueness of the relationships at the alternative schools:

The old school did not encourage enough. Kids were just supposed to sit and vegetate. They didn’t care about his education. There was a lack of communication. They are more patient here, they care.

Another parent commented, “when my son was in an accident, they worked hard to help him finish the school year. They constantly called to see if they could do anything. Their care and concern is genuine.” Another parent said, “They have treated my son fairly and kindly, and want to see him succeed.” One parent was poignant in describing the student-teacher relationship:

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I think they work hard to make these kids feel like they're somebody instead of like in public school where they were just all over them all the time...here they're making them feel like you are a person, 'You are somebody, you are worth something,' and I think this makes them want to learn and want to work harder.

Finally, a teacher discussed the magnitude of the impact of building good rapport with their students: "we carry a heavy burden as teachers – we have a lot of control over kids' lives by laying a foundation for when they are going back to public school, whether they are going to be successful as adults, whether they are going to go to college or jail or be dead as adults."

### ***Separating Behavior from Students: Students as Individuals***

Many teachers and parents commented that teachers are able to separate student behavior from the individual. A teacher said:

You can't go and sweat every battle. You know a kid is probably gonna use a little bit of foul language once in a while, but is that reason enough to bounce him out of here or her out of here everyday? You address it...they acknowledge that OK, yeah, I see that I did something wrong and then you move on.

Two groups of parents also commented that "teachers look at students as individuals, not down on them." Another parent commented that the teachers "identify the child's problem...while at the public schools they consider them to be behavioral problem children and the only goal they have is to get them out instead of working with your child through the meltdown or the problem." Two administrators also shared that a good alternative education teacher "treats kids with a lot of dignity and respect" and that their students are seen more as a symptom of the issues and emotional disturbance that they have, rather than as "this kid...is really trying to hurt me or create this adversarial relationship." Finally, a teacher commented:

I tell my students this is not personal, it is professional. So, I don't take it to heart. We both have good and bad days. It is the behavior we are trying to change and not you as a person.

The philosophy that allows a separation between a student and the behavior seems to impact the way these programs approach their missions. The general feeling was that students are not "problem individuals" but instead are individuals who have a great number of problems. This philosophical approach leads to the practical approach of solving and preventing problems rather than "fixing" students. The missions of these programs are to help students see that they have some control over their problems, rather than their challenges controlling them. This gives students a sense that they are in control rather than being completely dependent on the teachers and other professionals to solve problems.

### ***Student Choice***

We also asked questions about the extent to which students have input in their education and the alternative programs. Some students said they did not have a choice as to whether to come to the alternative programs; however, in one program the students were required to apply to the school before attending it. A parent commented, "[my son] had to apply to come to this school – it made him feel important." Another parent from that particular school added, "they think it is a big deal that they had to apply for this school and being accepted was a big deal for him. It made him a part of the process. The acceptance letter came to him." One student made an interesting observation about choice:

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I was placed here. Technically every person chooses where to go. Because of the way I acted I chose this 'path' but not this actual school....Some kids need to come and some should because it is a nice environment.

An administrator at one of the programs (that does not require applications for admission) made an interesting comment about student choice: "it's called forced choice. It's an old, old trick in SED. You know, I think that way it kind of empowers the kids."

For the most part, informants felt it is important for students to have choice about their personal education even if they do not feel they have a lot of choice about where they go to school. In at least one program, this choice takes the form of leadership opportunities, which allow students to have input on how their classrooms and schools are run. An administrator commented that "in most rooms, the kids are given leadership opportunities to lead group meetings, to do certain jobs...to make them feel like they're contributing to what's going on here." Teachers agreed that having input into how the class is run helps motivate students: "[we spend] a lot of time trying to determine what students like to do – wherever possible we try to get student input on classroom activities because if they have more choice they are more likely to buy into it, [which] is more motivating."

### ***Classroom Management and Discipline***

We asked teachers, administrators, and students to describe the classroom management in their school. Students seemed to appreciate well-managed classrooms. They felt it is important and supports student learning. One student said good classroom management was important to "get a better education." Teachers tended to say that classroom atmosphere has an important role in managing student behavior. She said,

The atmosphere, like you look out here right now, everybody's quiet, everybody's calm, everybody's doing their thing and a new student comes into my classroom and that atmosphere has an effect on them and you could bring the worst behavior kid at the regular high school into my classroom, they would calm down and do the deal. Because...you look around the room and everybody's doing that and you start doing that too.

Other teachers mirrored this belief that a calm and peaceful atmosphere is paramount to good classroom management:

You can walk into any of our classrooms at any time and you will find students learning. You won't find students playing around or goofing off or not working...you won't find chaos. You'll find calmness. That's the other thing I think we all strive [for], or at least I do. This should be a peaceful place. For my students, their lives are very unpeaceful and this is all about peace here, calm, [and] quiet.

Teachers indicated that they believe creating these types of environments is their professional responsibility. One teacher stated that she believes she has not been as effective as she could be if behavior problems occur in her classroom. Another teacher shared that clear expectations and effective teaching played a major role in classroom management. He stated, "effective classroom management... is if that kid understands what he should and should not do and is making positive choices not to do the unthinkable or the thing that [he] shouldn't do, because that means that there is effective teaching happening and that kid is understanding that he has a choice and he's choosing to operate or to behave in this way."

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Respect was also mentioned by many of those interviewed as a key component to effectively managing an atmosphere where students could learn. One administrator said, “I would like to describe [classroom management approach] as being respectful of the child.” She went on to add, “we have to always be asking ourselves when we come up with a new intervention or something, does it respect the dignity of that child and would we want our own child treated that way?” Another administrator described classroom climate as “supportive and open, warm, inviting...[where] interactions between the staff and the students [are] respectful” and as a place where “the staff are willing to listen to the kids.” She described one aspect of this respect for students as active listening: “we get ourselves into trouble when we start lecturing the kids without listening to what they have to say.” In addition, a student described how problems are handled in his classroom: teachers will “go to the two students that are having trouble and ask them ‘What’s the problem?’ They have them shake hands and...respect each other.”

In one of the programs, physical restraints are used to suppress students who are extremely non-compliant. While some of the students interviewed mentioned disdain of restraints, one student was most articulate:

So the teachers, they will ask, nicely at first, to remove yourself from the room or calm down in the room. And if that does not work, they must use physical force...but I don’t think physically removing a child should...I mean, it is not great. I mean, you might have to use force to take them out of the room, but when they take them out of the room, they end up usually restraining them.

He described how it felt to be physically restrained: it “seems like they have millions of teachers on top of you.” He went on to say that if he were a teacher he “wouldn’t restrain a student, ‘cause all that does is make a kid more upset.” In fact, he felt restraints “worsen the problem by making the student more upset than they are. And that leads up to school property damage, physical damage and emotional damage.” When asked what he thought when other students disrupt a class and restraints are used, he replied,

I’m thinking there’s something wrong with these students. I mean these teachers are nice to you and stuff and you gonna treat them that mean? And then, I guess if it was the teacher making it worse, you would be thinking, what’s up with that? What are you doing? You should be working on this problem, you should be calming this student down.

In one of the programs that had eliminated the use of restraints, parents noted that they were pleased with this decision. During the focus group at that school the parents agreed that the “hands off policy is really good.”

Each program has policies that reflect the belief that simply punishing inappropriate behavior or rewarding appropriate behavior was inadequate. It was clear that teaching the skills that promote social competence, or the behaviors that should be used in different settings, is very important. One student commented, “they taught me a lot when I was in school so I would know what to do and what not to do in a situation...[now I can] do all the right things instead of the wrong [things].”

### ***Staff Collaboration***

Without exception, every teacher and administrator shared a story of collaborative working relationships with their colleagues. Teachers described collaborations beyond typical sharing of lesson plans, behavior management techniques, and team teaching. These collaborations included both teachers and administrators. When asked if he collaborated with other teachers, one teacher said, “every period, every day.” When asked if there was collaboration between administrators and teachers he replied, “every day – very informal but also formal, there is an open door policy throughout the whole school.” Another teacher shared that:

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[Collaboration] is critical to school success. I do not come into school every day believing I have all of the answers, and if you come with that attitude you will hit a wall of failure every day. You have to be very flexible and willing to modify what is successful one day [so you can foster] success the next day.

Many staff echoed the importance of both formal and informal collaboration, and explained that they informally collaborate during their planning periods as well as before and after school. Most teachers explained that they can observe in other classrooms and learn new techniques for managing behavior and teaching effectively, and can always turn to their colleagues for support and guidance. Many of the teachers discussed formal collaboration opportunities. For example, in one program, “all teachers get together on Wednesdays to discuss classroom management.” Many of the teachers mentioned formalized partnerships between teachers:

In this school we have partners, which I think is a great idea for any school. We regularly come together to discuss issues/ask questions; when either of us are out of school then the other will keep an eye on problematic students while the substitute teacher is here. We also share student papers to see if we are on the same wavelength in terms of grading and so forth.

Another teacher summarized the importance of collaboration for teacher effectiveness: we are family here and really do support each other and have a support network with colleagues and staff in high positions – we communicate, talk, and discuss what works in different classrooms. This kind of support makes this job very bearable when it [is] overwhelming.”

### *Flexibility*

Parents, students, teachers, and administrators all agreed on the importance of flexibility in alternative programs. Parents felt that staff at the alternative programs are flexible in the demands placed on their children. One parent gave the example of staff understanding her son’s challenges: “if he can’t pay attention, [the teachers] understand.” Another parent felt flexibility in academic requirements was important to her son’s success: “[the teachers] individualize what [the students] need. If it doesn’t work, [there is] no problem trying something else.” Students also commented that it is important that programs provide this flexibility and individualization.

However, both administrators and teachers mentioned that there is a time for conformity to procedures and policies. They felt conformity provided predictability, something they agreed most of the students in their programs thrive on. However, they were quick to point out that staff has to be willing and able to be flexible if the situation calls for it. One administrator commented,

We don’t have...a student code of discipline...because we see that this kind of recipe approach to managing problems really doesn’t work, that these problems or events or the behaviors that kids engage in that create problems for themselves, you know each of these events have some unique features to it that we can’t just dismiss by having just this code of conduct that says ‘well you got into a fight so therefore since you were fighting, you got X number of days’.

Teachers and administrators commented that the degree of flexibility in their programs would not be feasible in public school settings due to their higher adult-student ratios. In fact, teachers in the programs commented that being flexible is vital to their effectiveness:

[Flexibility] is essential to school success. Someone rigid would not make it here because you have to adapt at any time for any behavior that may be coming your way. Because this is high

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stress you have to be able to adapt to situations so that you can go home at the end of the day without losing your mind.”

Administrators agreed:

It’s just all flexibility. I think that that is essential that no two days are alike...and I think that you just, you have to be flexible. I think the staff and the kids, all of us, have to be flexible.”

### ***High Expectations of Students***

Each of the programs believes that students should be held accountable for their academic and social behaviors, and provide, as one administrator described, “constant support and high standards.” The students agreed that these programs taught them that they should “do the best they can do.” Parents also felt that the programs held their children accountable. One parent said her son’s school expected him “to work at the level he needs to be at and not just to let him slide by. They encourage him to move up and challenge [himself].” She went on to share differences between the expectations of the public school and the alternative program: “the public school expected him to be the worst criminal in the world, since pre-school!” Another parent also commented on the differences between the public school where her son attended previously and the alternative program: if he did not want to do his work “they would just say fine, he doesn’t want to do it. No big deal. Just sit there and be quiet. Don’t disturb [anybody].” Parents credited their children’s success to high expectations. One mother commented about the importance of communicating high expectations: “Oh, this is very, very important. Without it he would not have been successful.”

Parents and students commented that having high standards and knowing exactly what is expected is important to success. One student stated, “we only have five rules for the classroom – that is good ’cause regular schools probably [have] more rules than that.” One characteristic common to all of the programs was the importance of proactively managing behavior through high expectations and direct instruction. While there was some disagreement about academic challenge, administrators and teachers stated that getting the students interested in education was a primary goal of the programs. One administrator said,

One of the saddest things I see when kids are just like ‘yeah, whatever’. You know, super smart but just passive in their involvement and there’s so many different things you can do once the light bulb goes on and they are like ‘holy cow, this is cool, I can literally in this school, in this state, in this country, do whatever I want to do’. I mean you work at it, there’s resources, there’s people that want to help you, there’s grants and financial aid available.

Another administrator discussed the importance of encouraging students to have high expectations for themselves and discussed how they may have different expectations for different students, but that:

Doesn’t mean that we don’t want them to squeeze every bit of talent they can out of them. It’s just at a different pace and individualized, you know...that goes back to the relationship thing. You gotta know what your kids are capable of and you gotta push ‘em and they’re probably capable of more than they think they are.

One teacher commented about how her high expectations soon were mirrored by her students because:

They know I’m not gonna accept anything but the best that they can do. So even if they’ve never had that before, it’s just amazing how the kids respond to that. They don’t want to disappoint me and just like it worked in kindergarten, it works with high schoolers too, if you do it right.

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However, some of the students did not think the academic standards were high enough. One student complained that although he had been in the program for a year, his reading had not improved. A parent was concerned about another program's reliance on seat work. Another student reported that he did not think he had enough homework. He said, "it makes my dad mad that I only have a little bit of homework and my sister, in fourth grade, comes home with an hour and a half's worth of homework. I come in with two minutes worth of homework." One program administrator confided that improved academics are a future goal of the program and that new reading programs are currently being implemented to improve student performance.

### ***Adult-Student Ratio***

Class size is less than 20 students per classroom in each of the programs. However, one program had a ratio of 3 staff per 10 students. This was viewed as important to student success because of students' intense needs. An administrator made the point that "alternative schools are for meeting needs of kids ...[who] need more resources." It was also thought that smaller class size enabled teachers to build the relationships with students that are considered so important: "we have been able to work anywhere between the ratio of 15 to 18 [students] per [adult]...that is the reason we have success in this school. We have developed relationships where public educators [cannot]." Another administrator said, "when [classrooms] get too big, you don't have that familiarity and a lot of problems happen then." Another administrator explained that "because so much is dependent on relationship[s], if class size gets too large [then] the relationship potential is diminished."

Parents expressed that the number of students in the classes was "perfect, everybody gets the attention they need." A parent from a different program said,

They have the time to work with his disorder, work with him on how to control himself.... [Time] to help teach him his emotions, you know, how he needs to handle himself when he feels himself getting worked up or angry or whatever. No way is that going to happen in a public school....There's no way and they're flexible with his emotions and his anger and his meltdowns or whatever. They work with him through that.

Students agreed: "classes are smaller than usual. [This is a] better learning experience [because the teachers] can focus on you because there are not that many of you." Another student said that "having that smaller class, like the one we have here, helps a lot because it shows, if you can work with a small group, you can work with a medium, then a large, then a extra-large."

In the program that had classes of 10 students with 3 adults, all interviewees commented that this was an optimal situation. An administrator in one of these schools commented, "the dynamics of the behavior issues are a factor – if our classes were larger or smaller I don't think we'd be as successful; I don't know why 3 staff for 10 students is the right ratio but it seems the most effective; we need to have a good ratio to effectively teach, model, and individualize the curriculum; we need to teach students behavioral strategies." A student took a mathematical approach to describing the importance of small class size, "well, the thing is, with ten kids and three staff you get, out of a hundred percent, you get thirty-two percent of each staff's time a day. In public school, with one staff and let's say thirty kids, you get two percent of the staff's time the whole day."

In one program both a parent and student complained about the physical size of the classroom. The parent said, "it is crowded. The classroom is too small" and the student shared that "class sizes are OK but sometimes it gets too squished here – [we] need larger classrooms so that more students can come here."

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## ***Teacher Training***

As indicated by the informants, teachers in alternative programs require unique skills beyond those required of regular classroom teachers. Teachers shared a variety of training opportunities provided by their programs. These included in-service trainings on topics such as writing good lesson plans, providing effective instruction, and applying effective strategies for working with students with special needs. In explaining the importance of effective teacher training, one teacher noted the need for different teaching methods for teaching the population in their program: “there is a reason this population of kids didn’t succeed in the regular school... teachers need to apply different techniques.” At one of the programs, new teachers are given a mentor for two years and are trained to work with at-risk as well as traditional populations at multiple levels. A teacher in this program commented that the alternative program “effectively mixes teachers with less and more experience, which enables newer teachers to learn from others, and which reminds the more experienced teachers why they entered this field.”

One program offers teachers about eight days of in-service before the school year starts and in-services for a half day every Wednesday so “teachers can gain experience and become more qualified.” Another program offers trainings every three weeks during the first semester, which “keeps [teachers] aware of the skills and statistically sound ideologies that are out there, and how [teachers] can pair new approaches with what [they] are already doing to improve” the quality of their teaching with their new cohort of students. Another teacher commented that the options for training were varied: “within the program, there are in-services, in-house trainings and seminars, guest speakers to address issues staff are concerned about; [administrators] allow time for staff to leave early and do coursework at local universities.” He also stated that in the past a university professor had come and taught teachers in their school building. He felt as did others, that the alternative program “made it easy for teachers to improve themselves.” One teacher thought this training made him more capable to handle difficult situations. He said, “[it] kind of catches these kids off guard when the teachers are trained so much that they don’t even have to think about it.”

One administrator discussed teacher training at length. He said,

We have a pretty extensive training and in-service program that we do that ranges all the way from classroom management to instructional programming. Then of course there’s our TCI program, which looks at the whole question of the whole person, how to work with a person from an emotional perspective in terms of de-escalation, how to do relationship development and, of course, there’s a section there about how to deal with people who are out of control as well. We have a ...training program that deals with clients’ rights, that deals with first aid, and CPR. I think our training apparatus takes on or reflects our philosophical approach of dealing with the whole person, there just isn’t much that we leave out in terms of preparation and again our teachers are hybrid teachers. They’re both educators and mental health people.”

He went on to make a point of how important well-trained staff are to a program: “it’s the people, it’s not, you know the building. I mean it’s always nice if you have a playground and it’s nice if you have large rooms...but it just comes down to the people.” Other teachers also commented that a staff that is well-trained in the philosophy of the program is essential.

## ***Transition Support***

Transition from the alternative program back to the home school or to the community is something that should be supported. Each program, however, viewed and supported transition differently. In one program, transition was not a major focus because the primary responsibility for transition back into the home school fell on that school. One teacher explained, “in the case of students who return to traditional

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school, teachers help write a behavior essay and recommendations, but the students and parents make the appointment with school district for the student to get reinstated.” When asked about available transition supports, another teacher in the same program stated, “not for graduates unless individual teachers collaborate with students to apply to junior colleges. In general there is not a transition program, though.”

Transition, or reintegration as one program calls it, is much more planned in the other two programs. Staff at both of these programs discussed the importance of gradual reintegration back into the home school. “We don’t just drop [students] back in the public school the day after [transition]. We build class by class by class ‘til we think the public school agrees, and we agree, that that kid is ready to be back full time. Some kids may go four months part time, so it just depends.”

In one program, each student is assigned a case manager who works with the student and the receiving-school staff to facilitate a successful transition. In addition to ensuring the student has the skills necessary to be successful in the home school, case managers work with the public school teacher(s) to share with them “effective ways of working with this particular child...the child’s learning style and what the kid responds well to and what he doesn’t respond well to.” Parents are also included to smooth the reintegration process. One teacher explained that some parents have bad memories of traditional schools and are afraid that their child will not be successful.

Parents commented on the reintegration process: “they prepared [our daughter] and they’re following through, especially the caseworker [who] will visit the school and talk to the teachers...I’d say the follow-through is excellent.” Another parent discussed her family’s experience with reintegration:

My son was reintegrated, not too long ago and it didn’t work out too well. For one, I don’t know if it was...too much peer pressure when he got to the public schools. For one, the school that they sent him to, he shouldn’t have been at, and I told the case manager upfront that I didn’t feel comfortable with sending my son to his home school, but at the time she told me that that was the school he had to go to and she couldn’t do anything about it.

She explained that the combination of peer pressure and freedom was not a good mix for her son: “when the bell rings, they [have] a lot more freedom in public schools, you know, switching classes, you know what I’m saying, and they would meet in the hallways, he would see his friends...he was cutting classes.” She shared that her son did not want his friends to see him going to those “slow classes” so he chose not to go.

One program offers a separate school for 16-year-old students who are likely to graduate from the alternative program. As explained by an administrator, this other school emphasizes transitioning to adulthood and job placement, and learning tangible skills students will use in everyday life (e.g., opening a checking account).

### ***Parental Involvement***

Administrators and teachers across the three programs stressed the value of a strong, collaborative relationship between parents and the schools. When asked about relationships with parents, one administrator said, “positive parent involvement is a critical component.” Another said, “It is critical to success, 100 percent absolutely. The parent and school must work together or the game’s over, point and match.” A student said, “it helps you get in a bigger relationship with your parents, to show them how you do it in school and show your teachers what you do at home, to know what you can make different and what you can make the same.”

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The home-school collaboration was also important to the teachers. One teacher explained:

We try to make parents understand that we are not here to fix their children. We are only one part of the solution and we need their input, critique, insight, and what goes on in the home is vital to allowing us to understand what is important to their kids and...in reshaping and remolding their behaviors.

Another teacher said, “we have meetings for staff to sit with parents to discuss how behavior at home compares to that at school. We discuss strategies that we teach here and how they can modify these strategies for the home; and we try to teach parents the modifications in a very simplistic way that are successful (e.g., children cues...stop and think,); help parents to model and role play so that students begin to generalize behavior in both home and school setting.”

It was clear that to be successful at building relationships, there has to be, as one teacher put it, genuine “concern for kids and parents” and that this concern has to extend beyond the teaching of academics. One teacher expressed what many others echoed, “this cannot be just a job.” Many of the teachers and administrators stressed the importance of finding common ground with the parents. One teacher commented that “I now realize the parents have the same wants and desires that I want for my kids.”

Parents of children and youth with emotional and behavioral challenges often state that professionals see them as either a part of, or worse, the cause of their child’s problem (Osher, & Hunt, 2002). This attitude was not expressed by any of the parents, students, or administrators. However, it was reflected in the words of one teacher who expressed concern that the program might be enabling parents by doing too much: “sometimes we enable parents too much by doing way too much for them – if we are doing everything for the parent and trying to teach the kid, then how are we ever going to break the cycle?” This same teacher went on to express blame of parents:

The parents are the problem. I have Spanish-speaking kids for the most part whose families are for the most part passive and they’ve come from a place where they’re happy their kids are not starving and they’re happy that their kids are going to school at all. But they don’t have high expectations of their children for the most part aside from just this general idea that education is a good thing....[Spanish-speaking students] come from a culture where the teacher...is held up very high. So and because I speak the language I can usually get support from the parents and I have an advantage, because I just call the parents and chew ‘em out when their kid doesn’t come and I do it in front of the whole class and so I’ve had kids tell me, ‘I just have to see you do that once and I know I don’t want that to happen to me. I don’t want you to call my parent chewing her out’, so that works. But parents I know in some of the other classrooms are the biggest obstacle because they’ve enabled their children this whole time. They’re the reason, they’re the one at fault. They haven’t raised their kids right and they’ve made excuses for their children and they continue to make excuses for their children and they never hold their kids accountable. Well they never hold themselves accountable. So you know there’s just too many bad parents out there. I know it sounds blunt and bad and all that, but it’s just the truth.

A second teacher said that “a major reason kids end up here is because of a lack of parent involvement – gang involvement is one of the biggest issues we deal with here...many of our kids live on gang streets.”

The interviews revealed the importance of open communication in building relationships with parents. One parent described this nicely: “communication is the main thing. It builds confidence between parents and teachers.” This communication is highly encouraged in each of the programs and is mandated in two of the programs. In one program, teachers are required to call and talk with at least 10 parents each day so that each parent is contacted at least weekly. In addition, two of the programs require daily

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communication through notes sent between school and home. Parents from these programs expressed the value of these communications: “on the point sheets, teachers always write something on the back. Students get extra points if parents write too—it keeps the communication going.” Administrators and teachers across the programs stressed that building relationships with parents and parental involvement in their child’s education requires effort and support. As an administrator of one of the programs explained, “we in-service our staff on strategies for working with parents. There are 10 to 15 ways we have for this, daily point cards, weekly calls, open house, talent show, honor roll, resource library, and the parent survey.” Teachers in this program mentioned that because these strategies have been in place, they are “bringing parents back into the school.” Parents shared that “everyone loves the open house, the raffle, and the dinner.” A student from another program also expressed the importance of activities to involve families: “we have the carnivals and the family fun nights and my parents come, they help out volunteering and yeah, it’s pretty cool.”

One program assigns case managers to each family. “Case managers work with families on a daily basis; at the beginning of the year we send information with school phone numbers to parents in case they have questions; classrooms have e-mails for parents to send questions; our main [goal is to be] supportive of families.” This program also has family meetings that are held every other week. One of the teachers commented that in her school about seven families attended these meetings regularly. Parents “sit in a circle and discuss a relevant topic, then [the meeting is] open for parents to raise concerns.”

It was also stressed that communication should not be reserved to only report problems. One administrator said,

I try to express to my teachers that it makes everybody’s job easier in good times and bad times if you create a relationship with the family...call up and lob a phone call and say ‘you know what, he’s done awesome...you know he was a half hour late every day for the last month and now he’s been on time’, you know the good and bad – and as a teacher I made a point to really know those parents because when there are issues it’s a lot easier, it’s more familiar, it’s more casual and they know that it’s not just somebody sitting across the desk, an administrator, and now you’re in trouble again. They’re willing to listen and we understand things are going on.

Parents commented that they liked it when the school contacted them about positive things. One parent said, “the teachers always find positive feedback about my son to share.” In addition, some parents and teachers acknowledged limitations to parental school involvement. A teacher said, “involvement varies often due to family issues...job requirements, number of children at home.” A parent said,

Yeah...they invite me. You know, it’s just I’m a working mom and can’t always go when I want to or like I want to, but I try to go to things as much as I possibly can. By me working during the day – my husband and I work – so it’s real hard, but I try to be there when I can.

An administrator said that parental involvement “depends on the parent and the kid and the situation. Some of our parents are mentally ill themselves.”

Some parents were glad to have very frequent communications with the school: “anything that happens at school, I am notified right away, even if something is done about it at school.” In the words of a parent from another program:

[We are] very much involved. I mean they don’t do anything without calling and asking us first. I mean they’re very, very good. [For example, they say] ‘we’re thinking about this, what are your feelings? What do you think we should do?’ You know...it’s very good. I have no complaints whatsoever.

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Other parents expressed that as long as things were going well at school, they felt they did not need to be that involved: “they did [make frequent calls] at first...there is no trouble now, so I don’t have to come in and talk.” Another parent thought her involvement distracted her son, “he does so much better when I’m not there. I mean I have gone and done things and he’s been fine when I’m there, but not always. And that’s good enough for me. I don’t feel like I’m left out in the cold or anything like that. They’re excellent, excellent at calling if something’s up.” The key to relationship building seems to hinge on respecting and accommodating the parents’ needs. One parent said, “I have always felt involved since the first day. You are as involved as you want to be. They welcome involvement.” A student said, “my mother doesn’t agree with everything but she is involved in her own way.” Another student said he did not like it when his mother was very involved in the school. He thought her involvement was too “personal.”

In addition, the words of one administrator explain why parents are critical to program effectiveness:

They’re decision makers and they know their kids better than we do. What we try to do is establish a collaborative sort of a model with them where we do consultation, and we try to establish those relationships that allow us to get a glimpse into home life and home functioning and then we try to offer insight into what’s been effective in terms of how to set up and structure homes; but we always, always respect the integrity of their homes and of their role as parents in decision makers in their children’s lives, and that comes first and foremost for us.

### ***Community Support***

Community support greatly varied among the programs. Administrators in one program discussed being good neighbors, but keeping a low profile: “my philosophy and theory is that the people who need to know where we’re at know.” A teacher in that program expressed a need for more social marketing of the school:

We need to do more to bring the community in to see what we do and I think that’s one thing we don’t do enough of. I’ve voiced that a little bit. We need to have the mayor in here. We need to invite educators and the district to come observe our program. We need to get the city council in here. We need to get the newspaper in here...writing articles about our kids....we need to get out there more. We tend to be insular.

An administrator of another program mentioned a comprehensive social marketing campaign to elicit community support. He mentioned inviting community organizations to school functions, involving the community in fundraising activities, and even a positive piece about the program on the local cable channel. One unexpected finding is that every program mentioned positive relationships with the local police and probation officers. Some discussed the need to build these relationships proactively, before police need to be called to the programs.

### ***Cultural Competence***

Several parents mentioned that race relations were better at the alternative school than in the public schools. One Hispanic parent made a particularly poignant point:

You know, the public school said that a report said that Hispanic parents don’t encourage their children to stay in school. This is not true! It is the teachers who encourage our kids to drop out. The last straw in public school [for me] was when a teacher approached a group of students and said ‘You are a bunch of good for nothings and should go back to Mexico, you can not learn.’ Hispanic kids leave school not because they want to, but because they are not getting what they

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need. If it weren't for [school] a lot of Hispanic kids would leave school and be in the streets. I am lucky we found out about [this school]. If not, my son would have been one of those statistics.

An administrator agreed that cultural competence was critical to being an effective teacher. She said, "an effective teacher is one that understands the culture, and the background of the kids that they're serving." However, one teacher pointed out that while they are given cultural competency training, it might be more beneficial if it were less generalized to racism and prejudice because they "need a better understanding of where these kids are coming from, including culture, language, and the ideology of this generation. He added, "in addition, have more staff training to discuss some of the issues in the classroom that seem to be disruptive but are cultural issues so they are not really defiant and oppositional, but instead it is cultural behavior and we would become more empathetic and more knowledgeable of the cultural variables which would address some of the reactionary characteristics of staff."

### *Summary of Qualitative Findings*

As with most qualitative data analysis, once data are organized and sorted into the established categories, the portrayal of a complex whole phenomenon begins to emerge (LeCompe & Preissle, 1993). In this section on the qualitative findings of the study, we presented themes identified during our review of interview and focus group data collected from administrators, teachers, students, and parents. It is clear that there are many important dimensions that characterize the three alternative education programs and are considered, from the perspective of the participants, integral to how these programs function and why they are effective. The significance of administrative leadership, collaboration, teacher training, and other themes may not be surprising – but it is important to understand how they "play out" in the programs, and their role in program identity.

In addition to the aforementioned themes, other themes related to program areas needing improvement, from the perspectives of participants, also emerged. These are presented here, beginning with location, then lack of resources, and finally suggested program improvements (we solicited this information from informants). It is important to recognize that although these programs are not perfect, they still manage to be highly effective with the challenging student populations they serve.

*Location.* Parents in all three programs expressed concern about the distance between their homes, places of work, and schools. For some students, this distance results in long bus rides to and from school, and makes it difficult for parents to attend school meetings. One parent identified this as the only thing she would change about her son's placement.

In one of the programs, many of the schools were in strip malls. The teachers in this program said they would change this if they could. One teacher thought it would be better if the school were in "a setting [or] location that is more private and withdrawn from public view." Another teacher in that program thought it would be better if the "buildings look like a school to normalize the environment, so kids feel like it is a regular school."

*Lack of Resources.* In two of the programs, both parents and teachers noted a lack of resources as a concern. One parent was concerned that "there are no text books, no real physical education, and no hardcore education. [Written materials are] black and white; there is no color so it is not interesting. The copies are of poor quality." Similarly, a teacher in that program stated that if he could make changes, he would "ensure there are enough materials for students."

*Suggested Program Improvements.* We asked each informant to identify anything they would change about their programs to make them more effective. Responses varied, but it was surprising how many

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students and parents said that they would “not make any changes to this school.” However some did suggest changes.

One parent would like to see “more structured classes” because she felt there is too much independent work. The students were mostly interested in changes to the physical structures: “I would make it more clean, new paint on the outside and inside” and “get better desks” because the desks were “all cracked up.” Surprisingly, two students commented that they want either longer school days or fewer breaks during the day: “if I could change one thing about this school, I would have more hours in the school day because I just go home and watch TV. If the school day were longer, I would add more history, because I like it, math, and physical education like [in the] district; as well as activities after school.” The student who wanted fewer breaks explained:

See the whole reason people, kids get off task is ‘cause they have a break. We have a break in class. They don’t want to stop the break. So they take it further. They don’t stop it. They won’t stop the break. So that’s how problems happen. Maybe we should have a little less breaks.

When asked if they wanted to return to their regular public school, students shared mixed responses. Many felt they concentrated better and did better in the alternative setting. Some students also reported that they feel safer in the alternative programs: “I feel more safe here than at the other school because there are teachers everywhere and there is more security here. At my old school it was big and there were a lot of fights that teachers didn’t know about because the school was so big.” Some students missed their friends and the extracurricular activities that were offered in their home school: the “alternative education program is good for getting credits, but the regular high school has good experiences, like the prom and school dances” and “the regular high school is nice because you get to see your friends.”

Lastly, one teacher discussed her frustration with the lack of evidence-based practices in alternative education and called for more research. She said, “whatever the new thing that comes down the pipe, they want to change directions. Well, why don’t we just figure out what really works, kind of like what you’re doing, and let’s go there and let’s stay there long enough to find out whether it’s effective.”

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## DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

An important objective of this study was to disseminate key findings from our research on the three alternative programs. Importantly, we strived to provide information to the field in a timely manner, in particular to practitioners and researchers. We shared not only updates on the activities completed under this grant, but also preliminary findings including the literature review, summaries of school archival data, analyses of teacher and student responses to the ESB, and program ratings on the ARSSA.

During the grant period, key project staff led 10 presentations at 9 conferences and meetings (see Appendix A for a complete listing) including the:

- American Education Research Association (2005),
- Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (2006),
- Council for Exceptional Children (2003, 2005),
- International Child and Adolescent Conference (2004), and
- OSEP Project Directors' Meeting (2002-2005).

A highlight of our dissemination activities was an alternative schools conference strand coordinated by the PD and Deputy PD. This strand was part of the International Child and Adolescent Conference in 2004, with presenters from three programs that were part of our study, including school administrators and teachers. Other researchers studying alternative education were also invited to participate by presenting a session during the strand. A complete list of the 11 conference sessions that comprised this strand is included in Appendix B.

Project staff also wrote and submitted an article on the school climate findings. This article was submitted to Heldref's Publication's newly released *Journal on Alternative Schooling*, which the PD and Deputy PD had a role in founding. Further, a copy of the approved final grant performance report will be posted on AIR's Center for Effective Collaboration (CECP) website, which is located at <http://cecp.air.org/> and receives 60,000 views per month. The CECP website received a five-star rating ('excellent') from the Tufts University Child & Family WebGuide.

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

This is perhaps the first methodical investigation of the essential characteristics of effective alternative programs. Analysis of extant data and the qualitative and quantitative data from this study indicate the importance of several components to the implementation and functioning of effective alternative schooling:

1. Program philosophies emphasize that it is the educational approach rather than the individual student that needs to be changed to accommodate learning differences among at-risk students.
2. Program administrators and staff subscribe to the philosophy that all students can learn. These programs communicate and support high expectations for positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth in all students.
3. Program and school administrators are leaders who support the vision and mission of their programs; effectively support staff; listen to teachers, students, and parents; and genuinely care about their students.
4. Low adult-student ratios in the classroom are considered integral to successful outcomes.
5. Teachers receive specialized training (e.g., behavior and classroom management, alternative learning styles, communication with families) to support their effectiveness in working with students who do not succeed in traditional educational settings.
6. Interactions between students and the staff are non-authoritarian in nature. Positive, trusting, and caring relationships exist between staff, and between students and staff.
7. The opinions and participation of family members in the education of their children is valued, and students' families are treated with respect.

Further, each of the three programs tended to have many of the 11 evidence-based practices for at-risk students, as identified in the ARSSA, well implemented. All three programs were particularly strong in five dimensions of the ARSSA: administrative support, behavior support and supervision, classroom management, school- and work-based learning, and processes for screening and referral.

Based on these findings, we can posit that students identified as troubled or troubling tend to flourish in alternative learning environments where they believe that their teachers, staff, and administrators care about and respect them, value their opinion, establish fair rules that they support, are flexible in trying to solve problems, and take a nonauthoritarian approach to teaching (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, in press). These and the other aforementioned key findings can help build and drive the research agenda for studying alternative education. Although preliminary in nature, these salient characteristics establish an understanding of three education programs that are effective in working with at-risk youth. These findings may also be useful to other alternative schools or school districts pursuing or considering program improvement efforts, or to school districts developing new alternative programs. In addition, this study validates a number of characteristics previously cited in the literature as potentially contributing to effective alternative programs.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary goal of this study was to gather and analyze data from alternative programs deemed effective (as measured by student outcome data). After analyzing the data, we have the following research, development, and technical assistance recommendations.

1. Further study of alternative programs and alternative schools is needed. These studies should include:
  - The use of longitudinal research to determine the long-term outcomes for students placed in alternative programs.
  - The use of randomly assigned control or comparison groups to determine the effects of the various types of alternative schools (e.g., change the student, change the school, or change the system) on the social, emotional, behavioral, academic, and vocational development of students.
  - Analyses to examine the relative impact of individual program characteristic on the overall outcomes of the students enrolled there.
  - Multiple regression analysis to examine how effectively students with different types of disabilities are served by alternative programs.
2. Development of a tool to aid in identifying the optimal alternative school placement based on individual student educational needs and the philosophy and programmatic components of alternative programs.
3. Facilitation of an ongoing, professional dialogue between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and family members regarding the optimal characteristics of alternative programs.
4. Facilitation of an annual conference or symposium to bring together researchers, practitioners, families, and youth to discuss effective practices in serving youth with disabilities and other at-risk youth in alternative education settings. The primary goal of such a meeting would be to further develop a research agenda and build a body of empirical research on effective alternative education.
5. Inclusion of youth and families in research and publications related to alternative schools so that this work is youth- and family-guided.
6. Development of a guide to effective alternative school practices for dissemination to various stakeholder audiences (e.g., policy makers, and practitioners and administrators of alternative schools and programs).
7. Development of a user-friendly guide for parents to build their capacity as advocates for their children, by building their understanding of effective versus ineffective approaches to educating at-risk and troubled youth.

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## APPENDIX A: PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

### PUBLICATIONS IN PEER-REVIEWED JOURNALS

Quinn, M. M., Poirier, J. M., Faller, S. E., Gable, R., & Tonelson, S. (in press). An examination of school climate in effective alternative programs. *Journal on Alternative Schooling*. Washington, DC: Heldref Publications.

### ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS CONFERENCE STRAND

Quinn, M. M., & Poirier, J.M. (2004). *Strand Leaders: Alternative schools*. International Child & Adolescent Conference XII, Minneapolis, MN.

### PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

Quinn, M. M., & Poirier, J. (2006). *General session: The national investigation of current alternative school programs*. Alternative Schooling: Changing Perspectives and Emerging Best Practices for Children and Youth with Challenging Behaviors, Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders International Forum, Norfolk, VA.

Faller, S. E., Quinn, M. M., & Poirier, J. (2005). *A study of effective alternative education*. Poster Session presented at the Research Project Directors' Conference, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Washington, DC.

Poirier, J., Quinn, M. M., George, M., & Faller, B. (2005). *Nontraditional education: Evidence-based components of effective alternative programs*. Presented at the Council for Exceptional Children Convention and Expo, Baltimore, MD.

Quinn, M. M., & Poirier, J. (2005). *A comparative evaluation of alternative education settings*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Montreal, Canada.

Bain, I., Quinn, M. M., & Poirier, J. (2004). *Identifying essential components of effective alternative programs*. Poster Session presented at the Research Project Directors' Conference, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Washington, DC.

Price, T., Weaver, K., Poirier, J., & Quinn, M. (2004). *Supporting alternative education: Equity, collaboration, and funding*. Presented at the International Child and Adolescent Conference XII, The Behavioral Institute for Children and Adolescents, Minneapolis, MN.

Quinn, M. M., Poirier, J., & O'Cummings, M. (2004). *A comparative analysis of effective alternative education*. Paper presented at the International Child and Adolescent Conference XII, The Behavioral Institute for Children and Adolescents, Minneapolis, MN.

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Bain, I., Quinn, M. M., & Poirier, J. (2003). *What we know and what is left to learn about effective alternative programs for students with disabilities*. Poster Session presented at the Research Project Directors' Conference, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Washington, DC.

Quinn, M. M., Poirier, J., Howell, K. W. (2003). *Effective alternative education: What do we know?* Presented at the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) 2003 Annual Convention and Expo, Seattle, WA.

Quinn, M. M., Poirier, J., & Mushlin, S. (2002). *Alternatives to traditional education: A cost-benefit analysis*. Poster Session Presented at the Research Project Directors' Conference, U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, Arlington, VA.

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## **APPENDIX B: ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS STRAND SESSIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CHILD & ADOLESCENT CONFERENCE XII**

### **1. ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

This session presented the unique characteristics of administrative leadership that are essential in effective alternative schools. Topics discussed included the characteristics of effective administrators; challenges that administrators must overcome; and strategies that empower and involve staff, students, and parents and that encourage them to take ownership in the program.

**Presenters:** Centennial: Michael George, Christine M.D. Piripavel; Orange County Department of Education: Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS): Ted Price, Kelly Weaver; Positive Education Program: Tom Valore, Matthew Joyce

### **2. SUPPORTING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: EQUITY, COLLABORATION, AND FUNDING**

Alternative programs face challenges that require atypical support systems. This presentation discussed: how alternative schools increase educational equity; how to facilitate collaboration between the alternative school and the district, and between the alternative school and community organizations; the special funding issues unique to alternative schools; and potential sources of additional funding.

**Presenters:** Orange County Department of Education: Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS): Ted Price, Kelly Weaver; American Institutes for Research: Jeffrey Poirier, Mary Quinn

### **3. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

This session described how staff in alternative settings can foster effective and active parental involvement in their school. Presenters discussed initiating contact with parents; supporting parents; involving parents in school events, flexibility relative to parents' schedules; and parental empowerment in terms of the alternative program, curriculum, and instruction.

**Presenters:** Centennial School: Nancy George, Christine M.D. Piripavel; Orange County Department of Education: Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS): Janice Histon, Bob Manley; PACER Center, Lili Garfinkel; Positive Education Program: Tom Valore, Matthew Joyce

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#### **4. IMPLEMENTATION OF FUNCTIONAL CURRICULUM WITHIN ALTERNATIVE SETTINGS**

An essential element of effective alternative programs is an individualized functional curriculum. This presentation described how functional curriculum is determined; the logistics necessary to make a functional curriculum work; and the unique challenges of a functional curriculum such as high-stakes testing, course credits, and graduation.

**Presenters:** Orange County Department of Education: Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS): Janice Histon, Bob Manley

#### **5. TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON SUPPORTS THAT ENHANCE EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS**

In this session, presenters described the supports that effective alternative programs provide to their teachers. These include issues related to staffing, professional development activities, and administrative leadership.

**Presenters:** Centennial School: Christine M.D. Piripavel, Julie Fogt; Orange County Department of Education: Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS): Janice Histon, Bob Manley; Positive Education Program: Tom Valore, Matthew Joyce

#### **6. AN ACCESS TO OPTIONS: ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN ORANGE COUNTY**

ACCESS provides educational options for students referred by local school districts, probation, and social services. Its exemplary programs and powerful learning, teaching, and support strategies help students succeed. Staff inspire all students to discover their potential, develop their character, and maximize their learning so they may become successful contributors to society. This session described ACCESS and answered related questions.

**Presenters:** Orange County Department of Education: Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS): Dr. Ted Price, Assistant Superintendent, Kelly Weaver, Manager of Educational Programs

#### **7. PREVENTING PROBLEM BEHAVIORS IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

In this session, presenters shared a gradation of positive strategies for establishing safe, civil learning environments in alternative school settings; and shared five years of data to show how the consistent use of these strategies has eliminated the need for seclusionary time-out and decreased the use of physical restraint in the school.

**Presenters:** Centennial School: Michael George, Julie Fogt

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## **8. RECLAIMING TROUBLED AND TROUBLING CHILDREN THROUGH THE RE-ED APPROACH**

Positive Education Program (PEP) is a Re-ED program in Cleveland, Ohio that provides integrated education and mental health services to children and youth with emotional/behavioral disorders. This presentation explored the premises, characteristics, and strategies that provide the foundation for building resilience and reclaiming troubled and troubling children and youth.

**Presenters:** Positive Education Program: Tom Valore, Matthew Joyce

## **9. ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS ACROSS THE NATION: STUDENT VOICES**

Results from interviews and surveys conducted with over 300 students with and without disabilities attending 22 randomly selected alternative schools in six states were presented. Information gathered from legislative reviews and state-level surveys contextualized descriptions of who is currently being served. Practices and procedures that enhance student engagement and successful student outcomes were also highlighted in this session.

**Presenter:** University of Minnesota: Cammy Lehr

## **10. THE TEAM APPROACH: SCHOOL AND RESIDENTIAL STAFF WORKING TOGETHER TO PROMOTE THE WHOLE CHILD**

This workshop/lecture addressed strategies for successful school and residential staff cohesiveness that promote a positive beneficial program for each child/youth.

**Presenter:** Minnesota Independent School District 196: Carrie Wilson-Smith

## **11. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

This session introduced attendees to the strand on alternative education. An overview of the strand was provided as well as the impetus for the alternative schools strand, the ASP grant. Presenters discussed preliminary findings from phase I of data collection and the study's phase II plans.

**Presenters:** American Institutes for Research: Mary Quinn, Jeffrey Poirier, Mindee O'Cummings