

# ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION AND PRACTICE

## WHAT DOES AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE LOOK LIKE?

### A SHORT-TERM PROGRAM

*Susan was identified as having emotional and behavioral problems when she was in the third grade. After three years of academic and behavior problems, it was clear that Susan was not making educational gains. Her parents decided to find another school for Susan. They investigated a charter school in their community. The school was similar to a military school and offered a curriculum that Susan's parents thought was appropriate for her and could address her specific Individualized Education Plan (IEP) needs.*

*Susan attended the charter school for seventh grade. During that year, her behavior began to improve, and she began to do better with her schoolwork. Because she wanted to be around her friends, Susan and her parents decided she would return to her home school for eighth grade. Susan has continued to do well. She and her parents hope that she will be able to remain at her home school until she graduates from high school.*

### A LONG-TERM PROGRAM

*As a student in middle school, Mike had difficulty with his schoolwork. He often had bouts of extreme rage and seemed unable to control himself or get along well with his classmates. A team of counselors identified him as having emotional and behavior problems. The school district in which he lived had a program for students with emotional and behavior problems but kept the students in the same classroom for most of the day. Mike's parents did not like the idea of Mike spending most of his school time with other students with emotional and behavioral problems, so they began to look at other options.*

*In his junior year of high school, Mike attended a local vocational school that employed special educators to assist students with their learning needs. Mike really took to the idea of spending part of his school day in the classroom and the other part of the day working on small engines in the shop. In addition to his vocational training, Mike attended sessions in*

*which he learned to control his anger and improve his social skills. After two years, Mike graduated from the vocational program and has made a successful transition into his adult life.*

## WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL?

An alternative school is any school that offers alternative learning experiences beyond those provided by traditional schools. Because alternative schools function differently, it is difficult to give one definition. The philosophy and structure of alternative programs vary from one school district to another.

Alternative schools, like traditional school environments, offer educational opportunities. Choosing an alternative school, therefore, should be based on personal need and preference. Alternative education is available to all students at no additional cost.

Alternative educational programs were introduced in the 1960s in an attempt to reach students who had been unsuccessful in traditional school settings. In 1973, there were 464 alternative schools in various states; by 1975, there were 5,000 such schools nationwide. Alternative schools have increased in popularity and in number and continue to serve a wider range of students with varying needs.

Alternative schools offer short-term or long-term programs. An alternative school with a short-term program may be designed to help students improve their behavior or academic skills and then return to their home school, an option that may be more suitable for elementary or middle school students. When students return to their home school, it is important for them to receive assistance from a transition specialist in order to readjust and maintain the improvements.

Long-term programs may be more appropriate for high school students. Although they take students away from their peers in their home school, long-term programs are more effective. Students are taught employment-related skills and still graduate from the program with a diploma from the school district.

## EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

Students with emotional and behavior problems are thought to be at high risk for failure in many areas of life. Many of these students do not do well in school

and eventually drop out. They have difficulty forming and keeping friendships or just getting along with classmates and authority figures. These problems may continue to affect their quality of life long after school, thus making it difficult for them to get or keep jobs.

Most students with emotional and behavioral problems have difficulty with schoolwork. They often work at least a grade level below current grade placement in most academic areas. Solutions to improve the academic skills of students with emotional and behavior problems must be specially designed to suit each student's area of need and to assist him or her in becoming an independent learner. Along with individualized behavior and academic programs, researchers also suggest using schoolwide discipline programs to control problem behaviors and create a safe and positive learning environment.

Students with emotional and behavior problems are often described as being aggressive, disruptive, difficult to get along with, extremely shy and quiet, or unwilling to participate or socialize. One possible way to handle problem behaviors is through social skills training. Through such training, the student learns and develops the personal practice of appropriate ways to get along with other individuals so that she or he can function in daily social situations.

Looking beyond high school, studies have shown that many students with emotional and behavior problems who have poor social skills have difficulty getting and keeping jobs. Without good social skills training, many youth with emotional and behavior problems have difficulty learning the skills they need to function in the workplace or the community. They also have lost jobs or have had problems with the law.

Alternative schools may emphasize social skills training and instruction. Social skills instruction includes methods of problem solving for everyday or unexpected issues that may develop between people and conflict resolution and anger management.

Vocational skills development is also a key component in the transition from school to work, self-sufficiency, and life in general. Through vocational training, students learn to identify and apply for jobs they want, complete job application forms, and write résumés or cover letters that go along with job applications. Some alternative schools help students gain internships and job-shadowing experiences.

Alternative programs have functions similar to those of special education programs, such as remedial reading, behavior management, and counseling, for example. A 1997 North Carolina Educational Law Project reported that minority and special education students are more likely to be expelled. Because of this, many of these students may be placed in alternative education programs. Duke, Griesdorn and Kraft, in their 1998 study of 32 alternative schools in Virginia, reported that although all programs offered a standard curriculum, only 10 percent offered courses in transition or life skills.

Researchers in this area warn against using alternative programs as dumping grounds for students who are at risk. Researchers also suggest that alternative programs that return students to their home schools should employ transition specialists to help the students readjust to their home school settings.

## **TYPES OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS**

Alternative programs differ greatly in facilities, philosophy, curriculum, and the age groups they serve. For example, some schools offer a vocational program to help students make career choices. Others allow students to design their own programs of study. Some programs allow students to attend school part of the day and work part-time. Many school districts have developed alternative schools to serve students who have not been successful in the traditional school setting.

Charter schools, another type of alternative program, are developed by people in the community but are supervised by the school district. Charter schools are funded differently than alternative schools are, and laws governing them vary from state to state. Some charter schools are developed specifically to serve students with emotional and behavior problems.

Large school districts may have several alternative and charter schools available to students; small districts may have only one such school, if at all. Districts with several options for alternative education may offer students help in choosing an appropriate program. Not all alternative programs are suitable to meet the specific needs of students with emotional and behavior problems.

## **EFFECTIVE SCHOOL COMPONENTS FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS**

Researchers consider six components essential for alternative schools that serve students on individualized education plans (IEP):

- (1) **Functional behavior assessment** – The identification of problem areas that affect the student’s educational achievement and social and emotional adjustment
- (2) **Functional curriculum** – A carefully prepared program aimed at helping the student achieve individual academic, behavioral, social, and vocational needs
- (3) **Effective and efficient instruction** – Clear and personalized goals that focus on high levels of academic involvement and student effort
- (4) **Transition assistance** – Help for the student to adjust and readjust to the alternative setting or to return to the home school; preparation of the student for independent living
- (5) **Comprehensive system** – Wraparound services for the education, treatment, and supervision of a student with disabilities
- (6) **Appropriate staff** – Qualified and trained staff, including certified special educators to serve students with emotional or behavior problems; provisions for parent involvement in student evaluation and decision processes; connections to community resources

Finding an alternative program with all these components may be difficult. The practices above are considered essential for students with emotional and behavior problems. Some alternative programs may be unstructured and may offer students a lot more freedom to make decisions about their education. The choice of an appropriate alternative program needs to be made on an individual basis with input from the student, parents or guardians, and school and community professionals. Most important, an alternative school should offer students an improved opportunity to develop and fulfill their educational and behavioral goals.

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