

# Research to Practice Brief

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## Programs and Practices for Special Education Students in Alternative Education Settings

By Deanne Unruh, Michael Bullis, Bonnie Todis, Miriam Waintrup, and Trent Atkins

### Introduction

During the past 20 years, there has been an explosion of research, development, and evaluation focusing on the integration of students with disabilities into general education settings. Hundreds of studies and projects have been conducted on ways to foster successful social and academic integration of students with disabilities into the mainstream fabric of the educational system. Noticeably overlooked, however, has been the growing practice of placing students with disabilities—often those students with the most significant behavioral challenges—in alternative schools or programs<sup>1</sup> outside of general education settings.

Because there is no clear picture of how alternative education programs operate, specifically regarding youth with disabilities, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded three grants to develop a framework describing what is happening in alternative education settings. The University of Oregon received an OSEP grant, and the purpose of this brief is to share the findings from the university's descriptive study, *What do they do there? Examination of alternative education schools, programs, and practices for special education students*.

### What We Know

The number of alternative education programs has dramatically increased over the last two decades. Traditionally, alternative programs were located in urban neighborhoods with communities of low socioeconomic status. Now, such programs have expanded into suburban and, to a lesser extent, rural settings (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Additionally, many states have initiated legislation focused on alternative education settings (Lehr, 2004). What is causing this growth of alternative education settings? No single answer has emerged, but many acknowledge

<sup>1</sup> Alternative schools and programs vary in definition and include programs (a) serving at-risk youth, (b) focusing on a unique curriculum or instructional model, or (c) focusing on youth who are talented and gifted. For the purpose of this article, the authors focus on those programs that target youth at risk of school failure. We also should note that the terms *program* and *school*, while often used interchangeably, may carry different meanings. In Oregon, for example, an alternative *school* can grant a diploma or other type of school completion document, while an alternative *program* has no such authority.

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that the traditional school setting might not meet the needs of all youth, and alternative education settings may provide a more appropriate environment for some students. Others suggest that alternative settings allow traditional schools to remove those youth with behavioral problems and/or poor academic achievement and keep those youth occupied.

Despite the growth in the number of alternative educational settings, there is little empirical evidence documenting outcomes for alternative education schools/programs and the students they serve. Recent reviews of the literature reveal a startling lack of inquiry and information on fundamental issues concerning alternative education settings. Recommendations have been made suggesting basic components of alternative schools and/or programs serving youth with disabilities, but little is known about whether these components are actually implemented within alternative education settings, and, if they are, whether youth with disabilities are consequently experiencing improved educational and career outcomes. The following paragraphs briefly list essential components of alternative schools/programs.

### **Curriculum and Instructional Components**

- *Clear focus on academic and functional learning* (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Rutherford & Quinn, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2000);
- *Effective, efficient, and highly structured classroom instruction* (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2000);
- *Functional assessments of academic, social, and career skills* (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2000);
- *Positive behavior supports* (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2000); and
- *Social skills instruction* (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

### **Governance and School-Climate Components**

- *Appropriate staff, resources, training, and procedural protections* (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Rutherford & Quinn, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2000);
- *Transition program procedures designed to assist students to move back into the mainstream school setting or into postsecondary education or job placements in the community* (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999);

- *Comprehensive systems to implement special education services* (Rutherford & Quinn, 1999);
- *Strong level of autonomy and professional decision-making by local staff* (Leone & Drakeford, 1999);
- *Low student-to-teacher ratio* (Tobin & Sprague, 2000); and
- *Sense of community among students and staff* (Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

### **Support-Service Components**

- *Adult mentors at school* (Tobin & Sprague, 2000);
- *Parent involvement* (Tobin & Sprague, 2000); and
- *Linkages to community agencies* (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002).

### **Objectives of the Study**

The University of Oregon's descriptive study, *What do they do there?*, sought to broadly understand the governance, academic and support-service structures, and student characteristics of alternative education settings in relation to services provided for youth with disabilities. The results established a descriptive profile of the number, characteristics, administrative procedures, and instructional practices of alternative schools/programs in the state of Oregon. Three primary research activities were conducted:

1. A statewide survey in which districts were queried regarding whether they had alternative schools/programs, if they used private alternative schools/programs, the number of students served in those schools/programs, and the number of special education students served in those schools/programs;
2. A second survey to all alternative schools/programs focusing on administration, curriculum, services, and student characteristics; and
3. In-depth case studies of a sample of alternative education schools/programs to examine their procedures, processes, and structures in the context of other district schools/programs.

This brief describes key results from each research endeavor.

### **Results of Statewide Survey of School Districts**

In the fall of 2002, all school districts in the state were asked the following questions: Do they operate

public alternative schools/programs? Do they contract with private alternative schools/programs for instructional placements? How many students are placed in alternative schools/programs? How many students in alternative schools/programs have diagnosed disabilities? Key results include the following:

- 78% of districts (152 of 194) responded.
- 73.8% of districts had district-operated secondary alternative education schools/programs.
- 62.8% of districts used privately operated alternative education schools/programs.
- 4.8% of all secondary students were in alternative education schools/programs.
- 32% of alternative education students were identified with a disability.<sup>2</sup>
- Alternative schools/programs were more likely to be present in large districts as opposed to small, often rural, districts.

## Results of the Statewide Survey of Alternative Education Schools/Programs

In the 2002-03 school year, all identified alternative education schools/programs in Oregon were surveyed. The survey queried alternative settings on the following topics: (a) program structure, (b) curriculum and instruction, (c) types of support services, and (d) student characteristics. Key findings of the survey are summarized below.

### Program Structure

- 56% of alternative education settings are located in the community rather than on a high school campus. Of this number, 43% of district programs are located off-campus compared with 88% of privately operating alternative education settings.
- Average expenditure per student was \$6,277 per year.
- Average number of teachers in alternative educa-

<sup>2</sup> Oregon maintains an 11% cap for special education students, so roughly 11% of the student population will be identified as having a special education disability. There is, then, a clear over-representation of special education students in alternative education in the state (about three times that found in the general student population).

tion programs/schools was 4.4 teachers with 3.5 “certified” teachers on average.

- 24% of district programs and 5% of privately operated schools/programs provided instruction to a class size of 16 or more students.<sup>3</sup>
- 48% of privately operated schools/programs and 23% of district programs had a class size ranging from two to five students.
- 34% of district schools/programs and 20% of privately operated schools/programs provided one-to-one student-to-teacher instruction.

### Curriculum

- Core academic coursework (e.g., math, science, language arts) was provided by almost all alternative schools/programs.
- 80% of schools/programs provided work experience as part of their curriculum.
- Approximately 35% provided foreign language instruction.
- Slightly more than half of schools/programs offered (a) General Education Development (GED) instruction, (b) teen parenting instruction, and/or (c) service-learning options.

### Support Services

- Approximately 75% of alternative schools/programs offered social skills training and/or individual or group counseling.
- More than 67% of the responding schools/programs reported that they worked closely with their local juvenile probation/parole office.
- Approximately 67% of the programs/schools provided (a) alcohol and drug education, (b) transition services, and/or (c) mentoring/advocates.
- 59% of programs stated that they had a close working relationship with mental health services, and 51% reported a close working relationship with alcohol and drug treatment services.

<sup>3</sup> Class size categories are organized around Oregon statutes for collecting average daily membership based on amount of time and instruction with the numbers of students per category. The categories include: (a) large group instruction as 16 or more students per class; (b) intermediate group instruction as 6 to 15 students per class; (c) small group instruction as 2 to 5 students per class; and (d) one-to-one instruction.

- Employment-related services were accessed less frequently: 41% of schools/programs connected with Workforce Investment Act services, and 20% worked directly with vocational rehabilitation.

## Students

- Approximately 86% of schools/programs reported serving youth with disabilities.
- The average number of students enrolled in a school year was 120.
- The average enrollment at any point in time was 89 students.
- The average duration of enrollment for students was seven months.
- 30% of schools/programs reported special education students being placed in their programs because of an interim expulsion placement.
- 80% of schools/programs served youth involved in the juvenile justice system.
- 70% of schools/programs served teen parents as part of their total population.
- 82% of schools/programs served students who were former dropouts and did not attend school immediately prior to enrollment in the setting.

## Case Studies of Selected Public and Private Alternative Schools/Programs

The first two surveys provided baseline information on general characteristics of alternative schools/programs used by districts and specific characteristics of individual schools/programs. The next step was to augment these results with detailed qualitative case studies of public and private alternative schools/programs throughout Oregon to gain an understanding of the ways in which these schools/programs operate and instruct students. Our sample was *not* representative and probably reflected schools/programs that are among the best in the state. However, studying these schools/programs provides a better understanding of how alternative schools/programs should be operated and allows us to make recommendations for practice based on these findings. To date, eight school districts have been studied, six with multiple schools/programs, representing all geographic regions in Oregon. More than 300 interviews were conducted with district and alternative education administrators,

counselors, teachers, aides, support staff, staff from community agencies who work with the alternative schools/programs, family members, and students. At this point a preliminary analysis of these sites has been completed, and several broad themes have been identified (see Table 1, next page). Quotes are included to support each theme and to demonstrate its importance to the alternative education effort.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

Findings from this study are descriptive and focus solely on alternative education settings in one state, but they provide important information about the structure of settings and types of students served within alternative education. Many of the attributes of exemplary educational practices identified in the initial case-study analysis are aligned with the essential components of alternative education settings for youth with disabilities, including:

- Curriculum and instructional components;
- Governance and school-climate components; and
- Support-service components.

It still remains unclear to what extent these practices are uniformly employed and whether positive outcomes are achieved for youth with disabilities in alternative schools/programs.

Further exploration is needed to understand if the structure, instructional design, and climate of alternative education settings improve outcomes for youth with disabilities. Moreover, due to the breadth of instruction and services provided by alternative education settings, it is clear that multiple measures of student success are needed. Next steps include documenting outcomes for alternative education settings by identifying common programmatic goals critical for the population (e.g., improved attendance, social skills, employment readiness) and assessing whether or not addressing these program goals increases graduation rates and improves postschool outcomes (e.g., education, employment, and independent living) of students at risk of school failure.

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**Table 1. Broad Themes of Characteristics of Alternative Education Settings**

<p><b>THEME: Student-to-staff connections.</b> The small student-to-staff ratio allows for the development of student-to-staff mentoring relationships.</p> <p><b>Alternative education teacher:</b> <i>I believe kids need to be connected. I believe someone needs to say hello to them every day, ask them how they're doing, and have that connection. That's what will keep them in school . . . that they feel like they're a part of something, and when they're struggling and having a bad day there's still an adult who clearly cares about even asking how they're doing.</i></p> <p><b>Alternative education student:</b> <i>Something about the atmosphere, it keeps you motivated, it really does. Every other school I've been to nobody really cares. But here, they talk to you every day saying, "You can do it," and "You've got to pull through," and "If you need help with you work, we'll help you." It seems like they just really care more than most other schools. It's really motivating when you're around stuff like that.</i></p>
<p><b>THEME: Flexible curriculum and instruction.</b> The academic setting is diverse and often accommodates the multiple levels of current student achievement. The instructional model is complementary to many Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives.</p> <p><b>Alternative education teacher:</b> Traditional high school instructor to alternative education instructor: <i>How do you guys teach language arts over there?</i> Alternative education person's response: <i>We teach it the same ways you guys do. We start with the same benchmarks and curriculum goals defined by the high school. We teach Shakespeare just like you guys teach Shakespeare. What makes it alternative is how we deliver the curriculum and assess it.</i></p> <p><b>Special education teacher in an alternative education program:</b> <i>Simply by being here [in an alternative education program] and being in a smaller environment and with the six-week cycle and the way the curriculum is delivered meets—I would probably say—about 96% of the academic IEP goals. There hasn't been an IEP that I've come across since I've been here that I just look at and say academically this isn't going to work for this kid. It's usually, like, well . . . we are already doing this.</i></p> <p><b>Alternative education teacher:</b> <i>On a good day, 50% of what I teach is academics, the rest is all behavioral and life strategies—surviving and coping skills—because most of the kids coming in here have been damaged in some way, and they need to know that they can get beyond that.</i></p>
<p><b>THEME: Diverse goals of alternative education settings.</b> Alternative education settings identify that they have goals beyond just ensuring student academic progress (e.g., behavioral and social skills, life skills, successful adult skills).</p> <p><b>Alternative education teacher:</b> <i>What my question always is, "What are we preparing these kids for?" I hope when they leave me they feel somewhat more empowered in their lives . . . they have a sense of urgency and maybe a little bit of hope.</i></p> <p><b>Educational assistant in an alternative education program:</b> <i>[Alternative education settings] gives kids who would probably drop out a place to be that's healthy and a forward-thinking place for them that helps them develop their skills. It also gives them a program that I hope develops healthy skills that they can use at home or encourage their lifestyle. I mostly think it helps kids not drop out. It's a ticket to graduate.</i></p> <p><b>Alternative education program administrator:</b> . . . <i>[T]his place also has an element that transcends data because there's no clear way to identify in a numerical sense some of the population that we serve . . . it's hard to follow the trail of a student who's been living on a street and returns to the system as opposed to one who has just dropped out of the system recently. Anytime you can take students who have been out of the system for a period of time and transition them back into a school system, there's value in that, both social value and economic value.</i></p>
<p><b>THEME: Stigma of student population.</b> Attending alternative educational settings carries a stigma; many hold the view that only "bad" kids or potential dropouts attend. Special education students may face dual stigmatization for being both a youth with disability and for attending an alternative educational school/program, although within the alternative education setting, this stigma often is reversed.</p> <p><b>School district administrator:</b> <i>There's always biases that you have to overcome, and one is that if a student went to alternative ed that meant that they were bad and they couldn't come to anything on campus . . . [Our alternative education administrator] can't really describe an average alternative ed kid because there are all kinds, all walks. I mean kids are here for a multitude of reasons.</i></p> <p><b>Alternative education student:</b> <i>There are people outside of this school that like, "Oh you go to [name of alternative school]? Oh, man, you must be horrible. What did you do to go there?" And I go, "I didn't do anything." And everybody assumes that everybody here is bad. But they're not. It's just that everybody has little problems to work out.</i></p>

## Resources

### *Alternative Schools: Research on Policy, Practice and Implications for Youth*

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota

This project gathered and synthesized information about the policies and practices of alternative schools across the nation, especially in relation to students with disabilities. It is one of three studies focused on alternative schools and students with disabilities funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

<http://ici.umn.edu/alternativeschools/>

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