

# **Educational Alternatives for Vulnerable Youth: Student Needs, Program Types, and Research Directions**

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**PREFACE**  
**EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH:**  
**STUDENT NEEDS, PROGRAM TYPES, AND**  
**RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

America's alarming school dropout rate — an estimated 10 percent nationwide and 50 percent in some inner cities — is as vital a problem as any plaguing the public schools... The United States has no real national system of alternative education that offers out-of-school kids a second chance: What we have is a wide array of mostly underfunded programs that serve only a tiny percentage of this population.

— National Center on Education and the Economy (1998)

Public education in the U.S. has undergone a gradual but profound set of changes over the past twenty years. Since the publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education) and *A Nation Prepared* in 1986 (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy), parents, legislatures, and school boards have all been demanding better outcomes from primary and secondary public schools. As a result, K-12 schools across the country have been focusing their efforts on adopting high academic standards, improving accountability, and achieving excellence, while at the same time cracking down on serious violations of school disciplinary codes. The main beneficiaries of these changes have been college-bound youth and others who tend to respond well to the organizational culture of traditional schools (Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

Non-college-bound youth and others who for a variety of reasons have not done well in traditional public schools have largely been left behind by the high academic standards high-stakes assessment movement. The nation, however, cannot afford *not* to educate these children. About one-quarter of all students drop-out of the traditional K-12 educational system before receiving their high school diploma (Kaufman et al., 2000). High school graduation rates have actually declined over the past 10 years, and in a “last best chance” to succeed academically, American children have been turning to alternative education programs in record numbers. These children need and deserve quality education programs for the same reasons that their traditional school counterparts do: they need the knowledge and skills that quality programs provide in order to succeed in the new global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Unfortunately, there is no precise accounting of alternative schools or programs in the United States. Available estimates suggest that there are over 20,000 alternative schools and programs currently in operation, most designed to reach students at risk for school failure (Lange & Sletten, 2002) but these programs clearly fall far short of the need.

One-third of public school districts with alternative schools and programs for at-risk students had at least one school or program that was at capacity and could not enroll new students during the 1999–2000 school year, and 54 percent of these same districts reported that enrollment exceeded capacity within the last 3 years (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Other studies suggest that there are only 200,000 alternative education slots available nationally, and only 5 percent of all out-of-school youth are enrolled in some type of alternative education program (DeJesus, 2000).

Part of the difficulty in developing reliable estimates has to do with a lack of common definitions and standards. Chapter 1 of this document examines the need for alternative education among vulnerable youth by reviewing the numbers and characteristics of youth who disconnect from mainstream developmental pathways in various ways. The second chapter examines the question of “what is an alternative education school or program” and draws on a variety of elements from the literature to suggest the beginnings of a typology that might be used to define and organize the varieties of educational alternatives that currently exist and might be promoted in the future. Finally, Chapter 3 summarizes the findings of a roundtable on directions for future research on alternative education and describes the types of information and studies that are needed to advance the field of alternative education and foster more support for the development of high quality educational alternatives that all children can choose and benefit from.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **VULNERABLE YOUTH: IDENTIFYING THEIR NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS**

Adolescence is a time of transition and change. It is a time when youth work toward educational and vocational goals, take on exciting new responsibilities, and prepare for their transition to adulthood. Most youth move through adolescence experiencing little or no adversity and successfully transition into adult roles and responsibilities. However, this is not the case for all of America's youth. A proportion of America's youth struggle to achieve developmental goals during adolescence and become disconnected from mainstream institutions and systems—including schools. Their day-to-day lives are very different than the more typical American adolescent. These youth are vulnerable to further failures and continued disconnection from society, often resulting in lifelong economic and social hardship.

Alternative schools and programs may be a source of both disconnection from and reconnection to mainstream institutions. Some schools may use alternative education options as ways to remove youth who are disciplinary problems and/or unable to meet standards set by testing environments. On the other hand, some alternative education approaches attempt to meet the needs of disconnected and vulnerable youth and represent one way to reconnect them to society.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the extent to which alternative education schools and programs can meet the needs of the nation's vulnerable youth. The characteristics of youth facing disconnection from society are summarized, as are the risk factors associated with disconnection and the characteristics of students in selected alternative education settings. While there are currently no consistent or comprehensive data on the number of youth who could potentially benefit from alternative education or the number currently being served by alternative education schools and programs, rough estimates (based on existing data) are presented to provide a sense of the magnitude of need.

#### **DISCONNECTED YOUTH**

A portion of America's youth are not connected to society through mainstream public systems and agencies or in meaningful ways that are markers of important developmental transitions throughout adolescence and young adulthood. These youth are not headed on the "typical" path to adult roles and responsibilities. By "atypical" we do not mean youth who merely express their individuality but instead we mean a group of youth who are currently struggling to be successful in their roles as adolescents and who are socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged relative to their peers. These are youth who are not connected to education, employment, or organizations that prepare them for successful adulthood. In defining vulnerable or disconnected youth, researchers variously focus on teenagers alone or teens plus young adults. Similarly, many empirical

studies analyze specific adolescent development issues and risk factors, while most policy studies focus on measurable factors that can be used to understand the extent of disconnection.

The most common factors used to characterize disconnected youth relate to individual education and employment activity. In 2001, 9 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 years were not enrolled in school and were not working (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2002). Black and Hispanic youth were more likely to be disconnected from education and employment than white youth. Fourteen percent of black youth and 13 percent of Hispanic youth were disconnected as compared to 6 percent of white youth. The percent of disconnected youth of all races, however, has been declining throughout the last decades.

Variations in disconnection also occur by state. For example, in 1999 when 8 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 years – or about 1.3 million teenagers - were not attending school and were not working, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska had the lowest proportion of youth not attending school and not working (4 percent — Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Arkansas and Mississippi had relatively higher proportions (12 percent). The District of Columbia had an even higher rate of disconnection, with 15 percent of its youth not connected to employment or education.

Besharov and Gardiner (1999) expanded the definition of disconnection by also considering military service and marital status, broadening the age group of interest, and examining the duration of disconnection. Their definition of disconnection identified disconnected youth who were not enrolled in school, who were not employed, who were not in the military, and who were not married to someone who met at least one of these criteria for 26 weeks or more in a one year period. The researchers found that more than one third of 16 to 23 year olds (representing about 5 million young persons) were disconnected during one calendar year and many go through periods of disconnection. This number captures both relatively advantaged youth, such as those that might have graduated from college and who are not working yet, as well as disadvantaged youth.

The researchers distinguish between short- and long-term disconnection to further clarify the nature of it. Twenty-four percent of males and females experienced short-term disconnection – that is, for one to two years – while 13 percent of males and 14 percent of female's experienced long-term disconnection of three years or more. Short-term disconnected youth did not suffer the serious social and/or economic problems that the long-term disconnected youth did (Besharov & Gardiner, 1999). The long-term disconnected youth were more likely to have dropped out of school, to become a parent before the age of 18, and to spend time in jail than youth who were disconnected for a short term.

Building on this work, Brown and Emig (1999) further studied long-term disconnected youth. The researchers reported the risk factors predicting long-term disconnection included: family poverty and welfare receipt, low parental education, living in single or no parent households, having a child before age 18, dropping out of high school, and

having a combination of any of these risk factors. They found that 77 percent of these young men and 89 percent of these young women had been poor at some point in their childhoods and they were 13 times more likely to be poor in early adulthood compared to their connected peers. Long-term disconnected youth were more likely than their peers to receive welfare and Food Stamps, and to be unemployed. Fifty-seven percent of the women received Aid to Families with Dependent Children and 64 percent had received Food Stamps. The men spent half of their time unemployed and the other half not seeking work (meaning they were out of the labor force). Women spent 75 percent of their time not seeking work. They also were less likely to marry than their peers and these youth remain disconnected into their late twenties.

## **THE WAYS YOUTH DISCONNECT**

Youth often experience economic hardship and developmental difficulties when they disconnect from society and public systems. Disconnection can occur in a number of ways. Wertheimer and colleagues (as seen in Yohalem & Pittman, 2001) identified that 10 percent of youth are vulnerable because they are disconnected in critical ways from key societal institutions or agencies. That is, the disconnected population includes youth leaving public systems, such as foster care, juvenile justice, and welfare; youth who are or have been homeless; youth who are out of school and have not graduated; and youth with an incarcerated parent. Also, youth in families with limited English capability, such as those from immigrant families, may have less access to engage in systems that keep them connected. Issues such as these not only serve as ways youth become disconnected but also contributes to them remaining disconnected. For instance, researchers estimate that at least five percent of youth ages 12 to 17 are homeless each year (Roberston & Toro, 1999). Homelessness may not be the reason some youth disconnected from mainstream systems originally, but it certainly would contribute to them not being able to reconnect easily. To further complicate these issues, services developed to assist such youth in reconnecting to mainstream institutions are not available for all the individuals that need them (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001).

Below, the characteristics related to four areas in which youth disconnect are discussed further. Of particular interest are: school completion and dropping out; teen pregnancy and parenting; involvement in the juvenile justice system; and leaving the foster care system. Disconnection in each of these four areas make youth more vulnerable to an unsuccessful transition to adulthood and to economic hardship.

### *School Completion and Dropping Out*

In 2000, researchers from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 10.9 percent of the 16-24 year old youth and young adults in the United States – or 3.8 million people – were not enrolled in a high school program and had not successfully completed high school (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). These out-of-school youth contribute to high youth unemployment rates (Pennington, 2003). Employers are increasingly demanding higher skills for a number of jobs that disconnected youth could



fill, however, the skills of disconnected youth are inadequate to meet such demands (Lerman, 1999).

Therefore, successfully surviving in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy increasingly requires that individuals not only complete high school but also obtain education beyond high school (Pennington, 2003). The skills the labor force requires to support the current economy are those typically attained in college (Pennington, 2003). Yet, many feel that the American education system is failing to educate a large number of youth through the high school level. Thirty-five percent of eighth grade students in the United States scored below the basic math level in 2000 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). And in 1998, only 31 percent of eighth grade students were considered proficient readers (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001). Fifteen million children are enrolled in public schools that are considered substandard (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001). Many youth are being taught by teachers who lack adequate qualifications. Children attending schools with a high concentration of poverty are more likely than children in schools with low poverty to have under-qualified teachers (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001). The same is true for children in schools with high minority populations. Evidence shows that many youth have low basic functional skills.

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001) identified barriers to education both within and outside of the school system. Within school systems, one barrier to education is the unintended consequences of inflexible school discipline policies, such as zero tolerance. Other barriers to education are related to individual or family characteristics, or neighborhood contexts, such as:

- Poverty
- A poor educational start
- Community stress
- Racial/ethnic/language barriers
- Lack of adult supervision, mentors, and community supports
- Family stress and responsibility
- Learning disabilities and related conditions

The problems of school drop out are increasingly clear, but there appears to be little support for addressing these problems. Ironically, federal dollars targeted toward out-of-school youth continues to decline at the same time there is a strong research base that documents practices that work to best assist youth (Pennington, 2003). Similarly, disconnected and out-of-school youth are reportedly not a priority for the general public (Youth Development and Research Fund, 2002). Voters place most of the blame for teenage failure on their parents, with secondary blame placed with the youth themselves; only a few voters blame such failures on faulty institutions and administrators of such institutions.

To fully understand issues related to disconnection from school and how this may relate to alternative education, it is useful to examine both the rate of completing school and the rate of dropping out of school. The two rates estimate different things — completion

rates estimate school performance and dropout rates estimate student outcomes. By reviewing both sets of numbers, we can begin to understand how many youth successfully finish school and in what context this occurs. In addition, we can also assess the extent to which youth obtain degrees, GED's, and other certificates from contexts different than mainstream school settings and the need for alternative school settings.

### **Completing School**

Estimating the number of youth that successfully finish school is difficult because researchers use different methodological definitions of school completion. According to NCES, in 2000, 86.5 percent of 18 to 24 year old young adults not enrolled in high school had successfully completed it (including attaining high school diplomas or equivalent credentials such as the GED); 91.8 percent of White young adults and 83.7 percent of African American young adults (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001).

Using a different methodology to address the extent to which high schools graduate students, Greene and Winters (2002) report somewhat lower rates of high school completion. According to Greene and Winters, 69 percent of the public school class of 2000 graduated: 79 percent of Asian students, 76 percent of White students, 57 percent of Native American students, 55 percent of African American students, 53 percent of Hispanic students. Unlike Kaufman and colleagues, Greene and Winters focus only on official high school graduation, and do not count attainment of a GED or other alternative credentials as high school completion. The authors do not include any type of credential except high school diplomas because the purpose of calculating high school completion rates is to evaluate schools not individual students. Counting youth that receive alternative credentials inflates overall percentages of high school completers and does not allow one to tease out how many youth *do not* receive diplomas in traditional high school settings. Obtaining some alternative credential or GED is surely beneficial to individuals, but particular high schools did not graduate these individuals. That is, Kaufman and colleagues document the number of individuals, ages 18 to 24, who have obtained high school credentials by whatever means by the year 2000. In contrast, Greene and Winters document the percent of youth that actually graduate with diplomas from public high schools in the year 2000.

Different stories can be told depending on which methodology is used. For example, States rank differently on overall school completion rates depending on the definition used. If States report their school completion rates using the Kaufman et al. methodology the rates are higher whereas with the Greene and Winters methodology their percent of high school graduates is lower. States that rank among those with higher completion rates with the Kaufman et al. definition drop in the rankings when using the Greene and Winters methodology.

Greene (2001) further examined high school completion rates by state and district using data from 1998. He created the same measure of graduation across location so that rates could be compared. The measure captures the percent of high school diplomas awarded in 1998 in comparison to the number of youth enrolled in 8<sup>th</sup> grade in a given school

district. The extent to which graduation rates vary within a single state becomes apparent when rates are looked at this way. For instance, Maryland's state graduation rate is 75 percent, but the rates are 54 percent in Baltimore City Public School System, 71 percent in Anne Arundel County Public Schools, 79 percent in Prince Georges County School District, and 85 percent in Montgomery County Public Schools. Michigan's state graduate rate is 75 percent, but the rates are 57 percent in Detroit City School District and 91 percent in Ann Arbor Public Schools. Ohio's state graduation rate is 77 percent, but the rates are 28 percent in Cleveland City School District and 45 Percent in Columbus City School District.

Balfanz and Legters (2001) also found that the number of youth that start high school and complete it varies from city to city (Balfanz & Legters, 2001). They measured high school completion by estimating a school's promotion power — or the percent of youth who are in school in 12<sup>th</sup> grade as compared to those that were in school in 9<sup>th</sup> grade three years earlier. They found that in the largest 35 central cities in the United States, 40 to 50 percent had a promoting power of 50 percent or less. In other words, in almost half the schools in urban areas the number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders was half or less than the number of students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade three years earlier. Schools falling into this category were disproportionately serving minority students.

### **Dropping Out**

In fact, according to the 2000 Census, about 11 percent of 16-19 year olds were not enrolled in school and did not have a high school diploma or GED. The percentage of high school dropouts has remained relatively stable since 1987. Asian/Pacific Islander youth had the lowest dropout rates (3.8 percent), followed by Whites (6.9 percent), African American youth (13.1 percent), and Hispanics (27.8 percent). Almost half of the Hispanic youth born outside of the United States drop out of high school. Furthermore, about five percent of all students who enter high school each year drop out within a year. Five out of every 100 youth enrolled in high school in October 1999 left school before October 2000 without successfully completing the program (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). Dropout rates vary by state (NCES, accessed April 3, 2003). In 2000, Iowa, North Dakota, and Wisconsin had the lowest dropout rates (2.5 percent, 2.7 percent, and 2.6 percent, respectively) and Louisiana had the highest dropout rate (9.2 percent).

High school dropouts experience considerable economic and social problems. More specifically, high school dropouts are 72 percent more likely to be unemployed and earn 27 percent less than those who graduate (US Department of Labor, 2003). Young adults living in families in the lowest 20 percent of the income distribution are six times more likely than their peers living in families in the highest 20 percent to have dropped out of school (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). High school dropouts are more likely to smoke cigarettes regularly, drink alcohol regularly, and use illegal drugs than their peers in grades 11 and 12 (IYD, 2002). Eighty-two percent of adult prison inmates are high school dropouts (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001) and, in 1993, 17 percent of youth under 18 entering adult prisons had not completed grade school (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997).

## School Suspension and Expulsion

Some youth who leave school early do not do so voluntarily, but instead are forced to leave school. Increasingly, difficult and disruptive students are being permanently expelled from schools. Sometimes these youth continue their education in alternative settings and sometimes they do not.

A disconnection between research and policy exists (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2001) regarding school suspensions and expulsion. Although there has been a decrease in juvenile violence in the 1990s, there also has been a simultaneous sharp increase in harsh discipline policies. In part this inverse pattern results from the *Gun Free Schools Act of 1994* which requires school districts to expel students for at least a year for bringing a firearm to school (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Zero tolerance policies have expanded as have policies regarding expulsion; increasingly districts expel students not just for carrying firearms, but also for violations such as other acts of violence and drug related infractions. As a result there has been a national explosion of suspensions and expulsions since the *Gun Free Schools Act* was passed (Dohrn, 2001) and African American and Latino students are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White counterparts (Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2001).

In a study of school districts that have alternative school settings for youth with discipline problems, about half listed the following *sole reasons* as sufficient for transferring students out of regular school programming: possession, distribution, or use of drugs or alcohol; physical attacks or fights; chronic truancy; continual academic failure; possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm; possession of a firearm; and disruptive verbal behavior (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). About a quarter of districts listed teen pregnancy and/or parenthood and mental health issues as *sole reasons* for transferring youth out of regular programming. Districts with high minority student enrollment and high poverty concentration were more likely than those with low minority enrollment and low to moderate poverty concentrations to transfer students from regular programming solely for possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm, alcohol or drug issues, physical fights, and disruptive verbal behavior. About three-quarters of the districts allowed all students the opportunity to return to regular school, a quarter allowed some but not all students the opportunity, and one percent did not allow students transferred from regular programming back in. Important reasons for determining whether or not youth return to regular programming include improved student behavior and attitudes and student motivation to return. Less important reasons were improved grades and student readiness based on standardized assessment scores.

While many youth expelled from traditional settings may be referred to alternative school settings, not all districts have such processes in place, meaning that students expelled due to policies such as zero tolerance do not always have alternative schools options available (Johnson, 2001). For example, during 1998-99, only 44 percent were referred to alternative school placements (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002).

Some experts note that focusing on difficult or disruptive students ignores real problems in the educational system (Gregg, 1998). Class size, teacher training, and school leadership and organization are real challenges facing the system and by focusing on the child, these issues can be ignored. Fine and Smith (2001) report that zero tolerance strategies have not been effective because many people have been expelled from school when they do not deserve to be, the rules make school environments less creative, the policies are disproportionately imposed by race, and by easily fixing school issues by getting rid of difficult youth, the United States is filling its prisons. There is concern that focusing on problem students may create problems of equity by segregating poor, disabled, and minority students in alternative programs (Gregg, 1998). They caution that alternative schools should not become “dumping grounds” for problem students and if the goals of alternative schools are punitive in nature, the system may adopt ineffective strategies to improve learning and behavior and may threaten system equity. There should be clarity about the purpose of the school and how it is supposed to improve outcomes.

### *Teen Pregnancy and Parenting*

Teen pregnancy and parenting is another way youth can become disconnected from society and mainstream institutions. Current statistics show the rates of teen pregnancies and births have dropped throughout the last decade, although the proportion of teens that are parents in the United States is high relative to other developed countries. In 2001, approximately 5 percent of youth reported having been pregnant or having gotten someone pregnant according to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (Grunbaum et al., 2002). In 1999, there were 29 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 17 years (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002).

As previously noted, some schools do not allow students who are pregnant or parents to remain enrolled. Regardless of whether these policies are prevalent or not, many teen parents do not finish their education (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002), although pregnancy is not necessarily the reason for their non-completion. About four in ten teen parents have finished high school, and about half of teen parents left school prior to becoming pregnant. Teens who have children are more likely than their counterparts to be poor and/or to end up using the welfare system. Their children are more likely to suffer from neglect, be high school dropouts themselves, and go to prison. The combination of teenage childbearing and dropping out of high school has particularly negative long-term consequences.

### *Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System*

Youth also become disconnected from society and mainstream public institutions when they become involved in the criminal justice system. In 2000, 2.4 million youth under the age of 18 were arrested, accounting for 17 percent of all arrests (Snyder, 2002). Every day, juvenile courts around the United States handle 4,800 delinquency cases (delinquency offenses are those for which adults could be prosecuted in a criminal court –

Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). A number of individual youth have more than one delinquency case per year, meaning that although juvenile courts saw 1.8 million cases in 1996 only 1.2 million youth were represented in those cases.

A number of research studies have shown minorities are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and are treated more harshly by the system (Males & Macallair, 2000). Minority youth are more likely to be arrested than white youth and receive more severe dispositions than white youth with comparable charges. Males and Macallair (2000) found that in the state of California, minority youth are overrepresented in arrests, transfers to adult courts, sentencing, and imprisonment. Minority overrepresentation increases the further into the system. For example, minority youth are 2.7 times more likely than white youth to be arrested for a violent felony, they are 3.1 times more likely to be transferred to adult court and sentenced, and they are 8.3 times more likely to be sentenced to imprisonment by an adult court.

Many youth are detained in various justice system settings. According to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, a one-day count of all juvenile offenders in both public and private facilities found that approximately 109,000 juvenile offenders were held in residential placement (OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2002). Again, minority youth are more likely to be detained than White youth (Males & Macallair, 2000; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999; Yohalem & Pittman, 2001).

According to Department of Justice Statistics (OJJDP Profile), about 100,000 youth between the ages of 8 and 24 are in juvenile residential facilities in a given year, with the average age between 16 and 17. Facilities must continue to provide educational instruction to juvenile residents under age 18, and perhaps 80,000 16 to 18 year olds attend education programs in this setting each year.

Youth who are detained in justice facilities are already disadvantaged relative to their peers. Many incarcerated juveniles are marginally literate or illiterate and have only limited basic math skills. More than one third of such youth have reading skills below the fourth grade level. Seventeen percent of those sentenced to adult prisons have not completed grade school. At the end of their term most teens are released back to their communities and if their educational lag has not been addressed they remain unskilled and undereducated (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001).

### *Leaving the Foster Care System*

Although most youth are in foster care for a set period of time and then cycle out of the system, some youth remain until they age out because they have become young adults (typically age 18 – Wertheimer, 2002). Leaving the foster care system by aging out represents yet another way youth can disconnect from systems that can support their development.

In 1999, nearly 20,000 foster children aged out of the system and became legally independent (nearly 33 percent of the children that left the system that year –

Wertheimer, 2002). African American children disproportionately age out of the foster care system whereas White children are underrepresented among such youth. Youth age out of foster care for a number of reasons. A large proportion of the youth who age out of foster care entered the system during adolescence. Foster children ages 14 and over rarely live in foster or pre-adoptive homes but instead are more likely to live in group homes, institutions and, in some cases, supervised independent living settings. The chances that adolescents in foster care will be adopted decreases as age increases.

Research shows that children who age out of foster care face many barriers to productive adulthood (Wertheimer, 2002). In 1988, 38 percent of those that aged out of foster care were emotionally disturbed, 50 percent used illegal drugs, and 25 percent were involved with the legal system. Only 48 percent of the youth had graduated from high school. Two years after leaving foster care only 38 percent of youth had stayed employed and only 48 percent had ever held full-time jobs.

### **THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

As the previous sections indicate, there is much evidence that adolescents and youth who are disconnected from mainstream institutions and opportunities are likely suffer significant, often long-term, negative effects as they enter adulthood. Many of these youth may reconnect to education and/or identify ways they can be productive and creative if given the opportunity to do so through alternative education strategies and settings. Such schools and programs are intended to serve this population and there are a variety of program models operating around the country.

There are no consistent estimates of the number of youth in alternative education programs or schools. However, while data are generally not available about alternative education programs outside the regular K-12 system, there are survey data on youth enrolled in alternative education in or through public, private, and Catholic K-12 schools.

#### *Alternative Schools – Who is Being Reached?*

Heeding the cautions raised about not creating dumping grounds for problem youth, it is clear that mainstream education and public systems are not adequately meeting the needs of all high-risk youth, and the difficulties vulnerable youth have in regular schools may exacerbate their disconnections. Many alternative schools settings attempt to reach youth who are outside the regular education system, whether they left the mainstream by choice or through punishment strategies. High quality alternative environments can support the positive development of truant, suspended or expelled students, students being reintegrated from the juvenile justice system, and dropouts (Ingersoll & Leboeuf, 1997). The nature of such settings (e.g., small class sizes, personalized attention, support services) create environments in which these youth may be more comfortable and may mean that youth pursue their education further as a result (see Exhibit 1 for an example of how alternative schools assist youth in Iowa).

**EXHIBIT 1**  
**ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS TO ASSIST DROPOUTS IN IOWA**

According to Iowa state code, school districts are required to provide dropouts with alternative programming to assist them in completing a high school education. As a result, 98 alternative schools have been developed to do just this in 75 counties and across 294 school districts. Sixty-three districts collaborate with community colleges to enhance high school education with career planning, vocational training, work placement, and post secondary education planning.

The Iowa Association of Alternative Education reports about two-thirds of those that graduate from the alternative school setting are employed, 37 percent go on to some type of post secondary training, 3 to 4 percent are college students, and 3 to 4 percent are in the military. The unemployment rate for these graduates is not different than the rate for graduates of traditional high schools. Further, approximately 24 percent of the alternative school graduates are involved in voting processes and volunteer organizations as compared to 14 percent of their same age peer group in Iowa.

Source: Iowa Association of Alternative Education, 2002

Some alternative education programs are operated by or through regular schools or school districts. Although they are rapidly growing in number throughout the United States, the total number of operating alternative schools is unclear (Clearinghouse on Education Management, accessed 2003). There is no comprehensive inventory of these schools and no complete count of the number and types of youth attending them (National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices, 2001). However, the District Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs supported by NCES is an important, though limited source of data. The Survey documents the number and types of alternative schools and programs for vulnerable youth available through the public school system (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Although the survey leaves out alternative schools in private and/or nonprofit settings, it represents the first survey ever of its kind.

*Number of Alternative Schools through School Districts*

Conducted in 2001, the Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs includes a nationally representative sample of 1,534 public school districts. Students in alternative schools and programs reported in this survey were generally there because they were at risk of failing, as defined by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or other factors known to be indicators of leaving school early.

Thirty-nine percent of public school districts had at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students in grades 1 through 12 representing 10,900 such programs during the 2000-01 school year (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Of those districts reporting at-risk programming, such programs were offered to secondary level students in



88 to 92 percent of the districts, to middle school level students in 46 to 67 percent of the districts, and to elementary level students in 10 to 21 percent of the districts. Urban school districts, districts with high minority student populations, and districts with high poverty rates were more likely than other districts to have such programs. Over half of these programs were delivered in separate facilities than in the regular school buildings and 4 percent were in juvenile detention centers, 3 percent were in community centers, and 1 percent were charter schools.

Despite the number of school districts with such programs, survey results indicate that there does not seem to be enough alternative school and programming slots for the number of youth who require them (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Fifty-four percent of school districts with such programming reported demand exceeded their capacity for services within the last three years and thirty-three percent were unable to enroll new students into the alternative educational options during the 1999-2000 school year. Most districts resolved this short fall by developing waiting lists for their programs.

### *The Student Population in Alternative Schools*

Students attending alternative school settings (whether through school districts or not) have a number of characteristics that distinguish them from those in the mainstream education system. Typical populations of students in alternatives schools are: dropouts, students with disabilities, and students participating in health risk behaviors (Lange & Sletten, 2002). About 200,000 students in public schools in grades 9-12 (about 1.3 percent of all students in those grades) were enrolled in such programs in October 2000 (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Of these, about 12 percent were special education students. About 80,000 additional at-risk teens were in alternative education through private and Catholic schools (Grunbaum, et al, 1999).

More youth attending alternative schools participate in health risk behaviors than youth in mainstream education settings. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) implements the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS), a biennial survey conducted on odd years to assess the extent to which youth take health related risks. The YRBS is a nationally representative sample of American students attending mainstream educational settings. In 1998, the CDC included a special YRBS, interviewing a nationally representative sample of youth attending alternative high schools in the United States (Grunbaum et al., 1999). The sample included public, private, and Catholic schools reporting having alternative education and at least one of grades 9-12. The schools sampled also were not operating as a “school within a school,” and reported serving youth at risk for dropping out of regular high school. In total, 8,919 students participated in the study in 115 schools. Five schools served pregnant teenagers, 13 schools served adjudicated students, 17 schools served students with emotional or behavioral problems, and 80 served multiple types of students.

The results of the 1998 YRBS of alternative schools are compared here to the results of the 1997 YRBS of mainstream educational settings<sup>1</sup> (Kann et al., 1998), highlighting the relative severity of vulnerability and risk reported by students in alternative education:

- Approximately 33 percent of alternative school students reported that they had carried a weapon at least once during the 30 days before the survey, compared to 18 percent of students from mainstream settings.
- About 15 percent of students in alternative schools carried guns while only 6 percent did so in mainstream settings.
- Approximately 60 percent of students in alternative schools reported being in at least one physical fight during the year before the survey compared to approximately 37 percent of students in mainstream settings.
- Approximately 11 percent of alternative school students reported they had missed at least one day of school during the 30 days before the survey because they felt unsafe at school or traveling to or from school, compared to only 4 percent of students in mainstream settings.
- Approximately 16 percent of alternative school students and 7 percent of mainstream students had been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the year before the survey.
- Approximately 25 percent of alternative school students and 21 percent of mainstream students had suicide ideation during the year before the survey.
- About 16 percent of alternative school students and 8 percent of mainstream students reported that they had attempted suicide one or more times the year before the survey.
- In alternative school settings, approximately 64 percent of the students had smoked cigarettes on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and approximately 45 percent of students had done so on 20 or more days of the past 30 days. In contrast, approximately 36 percent of the students in mainstream settings had smoked cigarettes on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and only 17 percent of students had done so on 20 or more days of the past 30 days.
- Approximately 65 percent of the alternative school students reported having had at least one drink of alcohol on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and approximately 50 percent of students had drunk 5 or more drinks in a row on one or more days. Approximately 51 percent of the mainstream students had at least one drink of alcohol on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and approximately 33 percent of students had drunk 5 or more drinks in a row on one or more days.
- Approximately, 53 percent of alternative school students reported using marijuana one or more times during the 30 days before the survey and 26 percent of mainstream students did the same.
- Approximately 15 percent of alternative school students and 3 percent of mainstream students reported using some form of cocaine one or more times during the 30 days before survey.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1997 YRBS included a total of 16,262 students from 151 schools.

- Approximately 88 percent of alternative school students and 48 percent of mainstream students reported having had sexual intercourse during their lifetime.
- Twenty-two percent of alternative school students had sexual intercourse before age 13 and 50 percent had sexual intercourse with four or more partners. In contrast, 7 percent of mainstream students had sexual intercourse before age 13 and 16 percent had sexual intercourse with four or more partners.<sup>2</sup>
- Thirty percent of alternative school students and 7 percent of mainstream students reported they had been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant.

The above data highlight the vulnerability of youth who attend alternative schools. These youth encounter problems with violence, substance use, and risky sexual behavior as well as pregnancy. The issues they face should not be ignored by the systems serving them.

### *Alternative Schools as Service Providers*

Recognizing the special needs of the student population in alternative schools for at-risk and vulnerable youth, many schools become service providers or facilitate services provided outside the school setting. Having youth enrolled in the alternative setting creates a genuine opportunity to reach out to the youth and address needs whether they are related to family environments, educational problems, or health issues.

The points at which youth disconnect from typical developmental pathways and the problems they encounter with health risk behaviors represent points of service and collaboration for alternative schools and programs interviewed in the NCES Survey of Public Alternative School Programs (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Although not all such programs participated in collaborations to address the needs of their students:

- 84 percent collaborate with the juvenile justice system,
- 75 percent collaborate with mental health agencies,
- 70 percent collaborate with law enforcement,
- 69 percent collaborate with child protective services,
- 65 percent collaborate with health and human services agencies or hospitals,
- 59 percent collaborate with substance abuse treatment agencies,
- 47 percent collaborate with crisis intervention centers,
- 46 percent collaborate with family planning/child care/child placement agencies, and
- 40 percent collaborate with job placement agencies.

Importantly, 72 percent of public alternative schools and programs reported collaborating with five or more other community agencies in providing services to their students.

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<sup>2</sup> Youth who have sex before age 14 are much more likely than youth who initiate sexual intercourse later in adolescence to have done so involuntarily (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). As a result, a large number of youth attending alternative schools may have experienced sexual victimization.

While not all students in public alternative schools are offered connections to services that could help them, many schools try to provide such assistance. If alternative school settings are sincerely attempting to meet the needs of the student population, then connections to service providers seem critical to assist youth in overcoming their barriers to education.

### *Extent of Need*

Thus, disconnected—at risk, vulnerable—youth are a primary target group for alternative education schools and programs. There is a general sense in the youth development community that there is a great need for alternative education for 16 to 24 year old vulnerable youth, and that currently much of the need is not being met. While there are no precise estimates of the need, very rough calculations using Census and other available data confirm that the scope of the problem is indeed large, particularly for those 16 to 24 year olds who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma or GED.

There are no consistent estimates of the number of disconnected youth, mainly because various analysts and experts focus on different dimensions of the issue and population—by age group, school enrollment, economic status, or developmental stages, for example. To help provide an idea of the potential scale of the problem among 16 to 24 year olds, rough calculations were made, extrapolating from existing relevant data and research.<sup>3</sup> In general, based on literature and research, the percentage of youth that might be considered high risk, disconnected or vulnerable, ranges from a low estimate of about 13 percent to a high estimate of perhaps 30 percent. This suggests 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds may be disconnected, split about evenly between 16 to 19 year olds and 20 to 24 year olds.

Presumably, all these vulnerable youth might benefit from special interventions or services, either in regular high schools or alternative schools and programs. Based on literature and reports, it appears, though, that only a small share of these vulnerable youth are receiving alternative education, and that services for the older group of vulnerable youth is particularly limited (see Exhibit 2).

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<sup>3</sup> These calculations were made using a number of assumptions and extrapolating from available data: **(A) 16 to 19 year olds**—perhaps 2-5 million 16 to 19 year olds (13-30% of all 16 to 19 year olds) are “vulnerable” (e.g., 13% of 17 year olds are functionally illiterate and 30% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders are below basic math/reading levels [NAEP]); about 280,000 high school students (1.3% of all students grade 9-12) are in alternative education in public, private and Catholic schools (ALT-YRBS 1998 and NCES Survey 2002-2004); fewer than 1 million 16 to 19 year olds are in non-school alternative education (51,000 in Job Corps; 80,000 in juvenile residential facilities; and perhaps 50,000 [assumes 1.3% of all out-of school 16 to 19 year olds] may be in community based organization or other programs). **(B) 20 to 24 year olds**—2.5 million 20 to 24 year olds (13% of all 20 to 24 year olds) are not in school and lack a high school diploma or GED (Census); fewer than 100,000 are in alternative education (45,000 in Job Corps, and perhaps 30,000 [assumes 1.3% of all 20 to 24 year olds not in school and lacking a high school diploma or GED] in community based organization or other programs).

**EXHIBIT 2**  
**ROUGH ESTIMATES OF THE NUMBER OF VULNERABLE YOUTH**  
**IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

	<b>16-19 year olds at risk</b>	<b>20-24 year olds at risk</b>
Total estimated number of at risk youth	2 to 5 million (100%)	2 to 5 million (100%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estimated number of at-risk youth in alternative programs through public, private, Catholic regular schools</li> </ul>	280,000 (6-14% of all at-risk youth)	0 (0% of all at-risk youth)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estimated number of at-risk youth in education at Job Corps centers</li> </ul>	51,000 (3-9% of all at-risk youth)	45,000 (2-9% of all at-risk youth)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estimated number of at-risk youth in education at Juvenile Justice residential facilities</li> </ul>	80,000 (2-4% of all at-risk youth)	0 (0% of all at-risk youth)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estimated number of at-risk youth in other alternative education (e.g., CBOs, treatment facilities, etc.)</li> </ul>	50,000 (approximate) (1-3% of all at-risk youth)	50,000 (approximate) (1-3% of all at-risk youth)
Total approximate number of at risk youth in alternative education (% of all at-risk)	~500,000 (10-25% of all at-risk youth)	~100,000 (2-5% of all at-risk youth)

This suggests that of the approximately 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds who might be considered “high-risk” (e.g., basic skills deficient, high school dropouts, out of school and not employed) fewer than 1 million (or 10 to 20 percent) are currently in alternative education programs or schools.

## CONCLUSION

Many youth are disconnected from mainstream agencies and typical developmental pathways leaving them vulnerable to economic and social hardship. These youth are at risk of not completing high school and/or being limited in the extent to which they can fulfill adult roles and responsibilities.

Some alternative school settings may be one way vulnerable youth become disconnected from mainstream agencies. These settings may be used as ways to divert problematic youth from mainstream schools and programs. However, other alternative school settings may be a way for youth to *reconnect* to their education to improve their chances of successful transition to adulthood. Although no comprehensive inventory of both public and private alternative school settings exists, these programs have been on the rise. It is clear that despite increases in such programming, the vast majority of youth in need of alternative approaches to education are not currently being reached.

Because alternative schools are a relatively new approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable youth, a number of questions remain about how they affect the system, the scope of their reach, and their utility in assisting youth who are at risk. Important issues to consider include:

- This review has shown there is no comprehensive inventory of alternative approaches for vulnerable youth. Outstanding questions include: How many alternative schools and programs are there in the country, including both public and private schools, and nonprofit community-based organizations? What is the extent of need relative to the number of options available to youth?
- It is critical to review the extent to which alternative school settings represent barriers or opportunities to educational success. To what extent are youth who are expelled from mainstream settings allowed to re-enroll in regular school? How many expelled youth do not have alternative schools as options? Are alternative approaches effective at reconnecting youth to mainstream systems and agencies and should this be the goal for such settings?
- Some experts and observers in the field believe that the movement toward high stakes testing, similar to zero-tolerance policies regarding behavior, contributes to vulnerable youth being pushed out of mainstream schools. Does high stakes testing in schools affect the number of youth being transferred out of mainstream settings, the number of youth graduating from school, and/or the number of youth dropping out of school? If so, how does this affect schools and vulnerable youth? What are the unintended consequences and benefits of high stakes testing for high-risk youth?

The reviews in the previous sections of this chapter confirm the severity of the problem. Many youth development experts believe that students who leave the education system early as a result of choice or punishment become disconnected from society, losing much more than their diploma and a chance for economic productivity (Fred Newman of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools as seen in Boss, 1998). It is important to keep these children in school as the cost of such problems, to society and to the youth themselves, is high. Youth without adequate skills will lack the ability to successfully transition to independent adulthood and to maintain secure employment. They advocate that as a society we must recognize that school failure translates into life failure (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001).

While much is known about youth developmental stages and risk factors that hinder positive development, less is known about how many alternative education programs and schools currently exist, how many students attend the programs and schools, how alternative education schools, programs, and strategies are addressing the educational and developmental needs of youth, or how effective they are in terms of improving youth outcomes. Filling these research gaps would help identify appropriate policies and strategies to meet this great societal need.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS: A COMPILATION OF ELEMENTS FROM THE LITERATURE**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Although the term “alternative education” covers all educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 school system (including home schooling, GED preparation programs, special programs for gifted children, charter schools, etc), the focus here is on those serving school-aged vulnerable youth who have dropped (or been pushed) out of traditional schools. Ironically, many of these programs are associated with unsuccessful students and are thought to be dumping grounds for “problem” youth, and yet because they represent a departure from the standard approach to schooling, many alternative education programs are known for their innovation and creativity. High quality alternative education programs are generally known for their adherence to youth development principles (Smith & Thomases, 2001; NGA Center for Best Practices, 2001) such as: (1) physical and psychological safety (e.g., safe facilities, safe ways to handle conflicts between youth, etc.); (2) appropriate structure (limit setting, clear rules, predictable structure to how program functions, etc.); (3) supportive relationships (warmth, closeness etc., with adults and peers); (4) opportunities to belong (meaningful inclusion); (5) positive social norms (expectations of behaviors, etc.); (6) support for efficacy and mattering (empowering youth, challenging environment, chances for leadership, etc.); (7) opportunities for skill building (e.g., learning about social, communication skills, etc., as well as media literacy, good habits of the mind, etc.); and (8) integration of family, school, and especially community efforts (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001). The best programs also address the specific needs of children from various racial and ethnic groups and those with special needs (including students with learning or other disabilities that have not yet been identified).

Given their importance in the public education system, states and communities are increasingly turning their attention to alternative education issues, and want much more information than is currently available (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1996; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, undated). Even with a general focus on programs serving disconnected and vulnerable youth, most current discussions of “alternative education” quickly turn to the question of “exactly who (or what) are we talking about?” Are we including children in regular K-12 public schools who participate in some type of special programming because they are delinquent, or pregnant, or at risk of dropping out? What about children who are being schooled in juvenile justice facilities or emergency homeless shelters? How about youth for whom the regular public schools simply do not seem to work? Basic questions such as these arise when discussing “alternative education” because there is no commonly-accepted, or commonly-understood, definition of what constitutes “alternative education.” In part this reflects the newness of the field (at least as an area that is attracting widespread and mainstream interest), the variety of environments and contexts in which alternative

education programming has evolved, and the many sub-groups of vulnerable youth who might benefit from some type of alternative education, broadly defined.

This chapter synthesizes existing knowledge, definitions, and themes about alternative education programs, based on a review of literature and reports. It is intended that this knowledge can serve as a starting point for establishing common terminologies to characterize the various kinds of alternative education programs, and to develop a basic *typology* — that is a classification of the various kinds of alternative education based on certain common characteristics. Ideally, it would be useful to have a single definitive definition of alternative education that is broad and flexible enough to support a variety of purposes (such as conducting needs assessments, educating policymakers, projecting staffing needs, tracking expenditures, etc.) *and* specific enough to be useful for any one of these purposes. Whether such a definition will ever be developed is unclear, but a typology could be extremely helpful in establishing common terminology and for understanding the different kinds of alternative education.

Such a typology could also contribute to the body of knowledge about effective and high quality alternative education. Vulnerable youth who are disconnected (or disconnecting) from mainstream schools need and deserve to have high-quality alternative education, as do all youth. By including in a typology factors associated with quality and effectiveness, policy makers, practitioners, and funders may be better able to help promote the expansion of high-quality approaches and improve or eliminate low-quality approaches.

Interestingly, many of the very first alternative education programs in this country defined themselves in opposition to the existing educational system. These included schools in the *Free School Movement*, schools that promoted progressive ideals by emphasizing individual child-centered achievement and fulfillment, and *Freedom Schools* that were designed to offer high quality educational opportunities to children who were being poorly served by existing public schools, namely minority students (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Many of these schools did not survive over time, and this has resulted in a shift in the types of alternative education options available to students: many alternative schools today are more likely to be viewed by public education systems as disciplinary and/or remedial in nature.

Yet, as alternative education programs have evolved and matured, they have provided lessons not only about how to re-connect with disenfranchised youth, but also how regular schools can avoid disconnection in the first place. Indeed as Raywid has pointed out, “many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered” (1994, p.26). The primary focus of this review are those programs designed to serve vulnerable children and youth who have either dropped or been pushed out of traditional schools, or are at risk of doing so. The fact that regular school systems often still consider alternative schools as disciplinary even as some alternative education approaches have been incorporated into some regular



schools is important to bear in mind as future policy and practice decisions about expanding high-quality options for disconnected youth are made.

Thus, the main goal of this compilation is to document what is known, and lay the groundwork for developing a more comprehensive and useful framework, or typology, for understanding the many types of alternative education programs that exist and may need to be developed. It is important to take stock of what we know, assessing what we know clearly and realistically, and advance this knowledge to forge effective policies for the future.

This review begins by considering how alternative education has been defined and described in this literature, including examples of legal definitions from state law, as well as more general operational definitions. Then some of the many dimensions along which alternative education models/programs have been developed are examined (e.g., *who* is served through the programs, *where* are they located, *what* is their focus or content, *how* are they administered). Next, some of the preliminary “typologies” that have been developed to date are examined. The review concludes by presenting some of the many “lists” of characteristics shared by promising alternative education programs, noting how similar the various lists of desirable features are. Future studies designed to evaluate the effectiveness of alternative education programs would do well to use these common features as a starting point for identifying qualities associated with program effectiveness.

## **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS DEFINED**

The literature on alternative education programs includes a number of historical, legalistic, and operational definitions. For example:

- Morley (1991) draws on a number of writers to define alternative education in terms of socialization and public good —“Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon a belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur. Further, it recognizes that all people can be educated and that it is in society's interest to ensure that all are educated to at least...[a] general high school... level. To accomplish this requires that we provide a variety of structures and environments such that each person can find one that is sufficiently comfortable to facilitate progress" (p. 8).  
<http://www.realschool.org/masterswebsite/alternativeeducationreview.html>
- Statutorily, an alternative education program is defined under s. 115.28 (7) (e), Wis. Stats. as “an instructional program, approved by the school board, that utilizes successful alternative or adaptive school structures and teaching techniques and that is incorporated into existing, traditional classrooms or regularly scheduled curricular programs or that is offered in place of regularly scheduled curricular programs. Alternative education does not include a private school or a home-based private educational program.” (State of Wisconsin 2001, p. 2)

- There are some definitions that delineate alternative education further to reflect particular purposes, particularly in relation to regular schools. For example, the Iowa Association of Alternative Education's (IAAE) Constitution and Bylaws, Article II states:
  - Alternative Education: the study or practice of implementing alternative schools or programs. Public alternative education serves to ensure that every young person may find a path to the educational goals of the community. Alternative schools and programs focus on what they can offer the student, not on what problems the student has had in the past. Alternative education is a vital component of the total educational system.
  - Alternative School: an established environment apart from the regular school. With policies and rules, educational objectives, staff and resources designed to accommodate student needs, an alternative school provides a comprehensive education consistent with the goals established by the school district. Students attend via choice.
  - Alternative Program: an established class or environment within or apart from the regular school. An alternative program is designed to accommodate specific student educational needs such as work-related training, reading, mathematics, science, communication, social skills, physical skills, employability skills, study skills, or life skills.
  - Regular School: an established environment designed to provide a comprehensive education to the general populace to which assignment of students is made more on the basis of geographical location than unique education need."

Interestingly, while regular schools are primarily based on geography, the types of programs, curricula, and schools within the traditional K-12 system have also grown in recent years. Defining what constitutes "regular" schooling has grown more complex, so it should come as no surprise that defining alternative education is a challenge. One description of how alternative education is provided incorporates multiple perspectives about how to define the concept — "Three avenues for presenting alternative education can be identified across school systems:

- Alternative schools - both public and private
  - Alternative programs for students using varying approaches for students to pursue common goals with the same school
  - Teaching strategies, beliefs and support services that facilitate growth in academic, personal/social and career development initiatives"
- (<http://www.realschool.org/masterswebsite/alternativeeducationreview.html>)

Often states and communities have statutory requirements governing the (minimum and/or maximum) numbers of students an alternative education program or school can have, the type of curriculum that can be used, who can teach the program, the length of the school day, attendance policies, participation in state-wide student achievement tests, and other similar issues. In practice, alternative education programs and schools are defined and designed along a variety of often overlapping dimensions including *who* is

served, *where* it operates, *what* the program offers, and *how* it is structured or administered (including who operates it and how it is funded). Each of these dimensions is discussed further below. Recognizing that there may not yet be a common definition for the distinction between program and school, and acknowledging that alternative education may ideally be considered a “perspective” important in any school, the term alternative education program is generally used in the remainder of this chapter.

### *Who: The Population*

Many alternative education programs target specific groups of youth, particularly those considered “at-risk,” which is the main focus here. The targeting is generally what makes such programs “alternative,” and the circumstances or needs of the targeted group are what drive the curriculum or approach. Examples of such target groups for whom alternative education is often established include:

- women/girls
- pregnant/parenting teens
- suspended/expelled students
- recovered drop-outs
- delinquent teens
- low-achievers, and
- all at-risk<sup>4</sup> youth.

### *Where: Operational Setting*

Alternative education programs can be physically (and administratively) located in many different places, and sometimes the location is what makes the program “alternative.” Two related operational aspects that describe alternative education programs are first, how the alternative program relates to regular education, and second, where the programming actually occurs.

In relation to regular K-12 schools, alternative education programs may include the following, presented in order of organizational proximity to traditional classrooms in regular K-12 schools:

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<sup>4</sup> The term “at-risk” encompasses a wide array of youth who either engage in negative or high-risk activities, or who are growing up with disadvantages that “limit the development of their potential, compromise their health, impair their sense of self, and generally restrict their chances for successful lives” (Kids Count, 1999). Note that risk factors can come from school- and community-level circumstances, as well as individual- and family-level circumstances. Examples of specific risk factors are poor school attendance, failing grades, family crisis, referred to but did not qualify for special education services, social/emotional/medical issues, free/reduced lunch, below-average performance on assessments, discipline problems, drug and alcohol issues, criminal behavior, poor peer relationships, rated “high” on teacher-generated at-risk profile, retained or considered for retention, and significant deficiencies in credits. For another, more extensive list of circumstances that place students at risk, see Appendix A.

- resource rooms (separate room/teacher provides additional services like study skills, guidance, anger management, small group/individual instruction)
- pull-out programs (within the day or even after-school, students are pulled out of their “regular” program -- e.g., regular school, juvenile detention center, substance abuse treatment facility -- for special or alternative instruction)
- schools-within-a-school (special-focus program within a school)
- separate self-contained alternative school

The operational setting, or location, where the actual alternative education takes place is somewhat related to the program’s connection to a regular school, but there is variation. For example, a school-within-a school may be physically located with a regular K-12 school, or it might be located in a separate building. Separate alternative education programs not under the sponsorship of a school are more likely to be located separately, but some programs have arrangements to operate in school buildings. A few examples of where alternative programs or schools are located, include:

- regular schools during school hours
- school buildings during non-school hours
- community or recreation centers
- former school buildings
- juvenile justice corrections or detention centers
- store-front neighborhood organizations
- public housing projects
- homeless shelters (emergency and transitional)
- medical or mental health facilities
- community college or other post-secondary campuses

### *What: Content and Objectives*

Alternative education programs also differ from traditional education in *what* types of credentials, services, and programming they provide, and how. Many different types of credentials may be offered, including:

- Regular high school diplomas
- General Educational Development (GED) diplomas, or
- Occupational and skills certification

The content of the programming often varies depending on the type of credential offered (if one is offered) but many of them are focused on relaying to their students basic *skills*. This is because the programs are often short and there is not enough time to cover significant amounts of theory; many students lack basic skills, so that becomes the primary focus of instruction; and specific skills are often what the students want to learn. In addition to basic life skills, many alternative education programs emphasize career development or employment preparation and provide students multiple career pathway options, including:

- Career awareness/choices workshops
- Occupational exploration programs
- Apprenticeships
- Modified work/study programs
- Speakers' bureau
- Work visitations
- Tech-Prep (technical preparation in partnership with a community college)
- Vocational/technical training
- School to work programs
- Work experience
- Internships

“What” alternative education programs do or what they offer has been used as a basis for several classifications developed to date. One commonly cited three-level classification is that developed by Dr. Mary Anne Raywid. Raywid’s typology has been described (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1998) as follows:

- **“Type I** schools offer full-time, multiyear, education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas. A full instructional program offers students the credits needed for graduation. Students choose to attend. Other characteristics include divergence from standard school organization and practices (deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, and teacher and student empowerment); an especially caring, professional staff; small size and small classes; and a personalized, whole-student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling. Models range from schools-within-schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums.
- Discipline is the distinguishing characteristic of **Type II** programs, which aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Students typically do not choose to attend, but are sent to the school for specified time periods or until behavior requirements are met. Since placement is short-term, the curriculum is limited to a few basic, required courses or is entirely supplied by the “home school” as a list of assignments. Familiar models include last-chance schools and in-school suspension.
- **Type III** programs provide short-term but therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create academic and behavioral barriers to learning. Although Type III programs target specific populations—offering counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation—students can choose not to participate.”

Raywid's first group of programs, thus, includes many of the original types of alternative education for at-risk youth established in the U.S., and these are often referred to as "popular innovations" or "true educational alternatives." Programs for high school dropouts or potential dropouts and sponsored by school districts, for example, would fit into this category, as would programs for students unable to pass standardized tests (a new trend within the alternative education field).

The other two types of alternative education developed by Raywid are more correctional in focus, with one being primarily disciplinary ("last chance" or "soft jail" programs) the other, therapeutic ("treatment" programs). Most, but not all, current programs that fall into these two categories operate separately from regular schools, although some are sponsored by a school district.

Raywid finds the first group of programs (the true educational alternatives) to be the most successful, while alternative discipline programs are much less likely to lead to substantial student gains. The outcomes for the last group of therapeutic programs are more mixed with students often making progress while enrolled, but regressing when they return to a traditional school. It may be that therapeutic programs have limited long-term impact on academic gains because they are often short-term. Their effectiveness might be better if youth receive high-quality therapeutic programs well-suited to meet individual needs, while they also receive educational instruction, and they remain in the program for a relatively long period of time (e.g., two years or more).

Interestingly, many experts see the distinctions between some of these types beginning to blur as more alternative education programs are using a mix of strategies and/or addressing multiple objectives. Type I and Type II schools, for example, are increasingly likely to offer clinical counseling, a Type III characteristic. A more recent three-level classification, also advanced by Raywid, therefore, combines Types II and III into a single group whose focus is on "changing the student." A second grouping is focused on "changing the school" and is analogous to the first type described above, and a newly-defined third group is focused on "changing the educational system" more broadly. This last group has been described as follows:

"According to Raywid (1999), 'early efforts at using alternatives as a means of introducing systemwide change' (in Minneapolis, Tacoma, and Berkeley) have generated numerous options and some positive signs of success. Seeing small schools and innovative alternatives as sharing the same characteristics, she says 'the small schools and schools-within-schools movement occurring in the nation's cities today is actually a test of whether small alternatives can survive in large systems' and can adapt those systems to support such innovation." (Hadderman undated).

Another classification described by the Wisconsin Department of Instruction is similarly based on what an alternative education program does, and categorizes programs based on their focus on students' behavior, interest, or functional level:

“An alternative education program is often defined by the program’s characteristics, such as programs that focus on behavior, interest, or functional level. Behavioral programming might be designed for students who need a structured setting to focus on more appropriate school behaviors to facilitate their learning and the learning of others. Programs designed around student interest might include an environmental program or vocational academies. Functional-level programs might include high school completion, academic, or skill remediation” (State of Wisconsin 2001, p. 2).

A final promising typology is one that centers on students’ *educational needs*. Rather than focusing on a student’s demographic characteristics or programmatic category, this typology focuses on the educational problems or challenges students present.<sup>5</sup> These include programs for:

- Students who have fallen “off track” simply because they have gotten into trouble (because adolescents tend to be adolescents) and need (short-term) systems of recovery to get them back into high schools. The goal of getting them back into regular high schools is appropriate and realistic for this group.
- Students who are prematurely transitioning to adulthood either because they are (about to become) parents, or have home situations that do not allow them to attend school regularly (e.g., immigrant children taking care of siblings while their parents work, those coming out of the juvenile justice system with many demands on their time, etc.).
- Students who are substantially off track educationally, but are older and are returning to obtain the credits they need to transition into community colleges (or other programs) very rapidly. These include, for example, older individuals who are just a few credits away from graduation (many of whom dropped out at age 16 or 17), or are transitioning out of the jail system, or have had a pregnancy and are now ready to complete their secondary schooling. (This is the group that is currently populating most alternative education programs in large urban areas—they are very diverse and tend to be well served by the alternative school system.)
- Finally, there is a group of students who are substantially behind educationally—they have significant problems, very low reading levels, and are often way over age for grade. Many of these children have been retained repeatedly and a number of them have come out of special education services. They include 17- or 18-year-olds with third and fourth grade reading levels who have never graduated from 8th grade (or who have gone to high school for a few years but have never actually accumulated any credits). This is a very large group of kids, and most school systems do not have any programs that can serve meet their needs.

With this typology in mind, it is clear that programs targeted at particular demographic group, such as pregnant and parenting teens, could be serving kids with a wide variety of educational needs: those who are two credits away from graduation; those who are wards

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<sup>5</sup> This typology was suggested by Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago at a daylong roundtable on alternative education sponsored by the C.S. Mott Foundation and held at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. on May 13, 2003.

of child welfare agencies and who have multiple problems such as being far over age for grade, and with only third and fourth-grade education levels; others who are pregnant and parenting but also involved in the juvenile justice system; and yet others with significant behavioral problems. So a single school or program is being expected to handle too much *educational* diversity (one that regular schools are unable to handle well), and this may be setting the programs (and their students) up for educational failure.

### *How: Administration and Funding*

In addition to “who,” “where,” and “what,” some of the literature on alternative education describes “how” alternative education programs are administered or funded. The administrative dimension is somewhat related to other features of alternative education, but considering it separately helps clarify another aspect of what makes alternative education programs “alternative.”

Alternative education programs are sponsored or administered by a variety of entities including:

- non-profit and community-based organizations (CBOs)
- state or local education agencies
- charter schools
- adult education divisions or agencies
- juvenile justice agencies
- K-12 public or private schools
- health or mental health institutions
- federally-funded programs and contractors (e.g., for Job Corps)
- private for-profit companies

In addition to serving different types of students (“who”) in different locations (where), many alternative education programs have different policies and administrative procedures than those typically found in regular K-12 schools. For example, some maintain hours and schedules that are non-traditional in the context of regular schools, have open admission and exit policies, and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the student. Alternative education programs often also have strong connections to the world of work (NGA Center for Best Practices, 2001), which can mean policies and administration that are more similar to those in the workplace (e.g., work teams, supervisors, time cards, or scheduling academic instruction in conjunction with work or apprenticeships). As in regular education settings, alternative programs also vary tremendously in their academic standards, structure and accountability mechanisms, basic goals and objectives, parent and community involvement, disciplinary policies, and crisis intervention procedures (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1996).

No specific literature was located that relates specifically to administrative accountability in alternative education. There are, though, special issues to consider in this area, mainly because accountability and outcome measures used in mainstream schools are not always



appropriate for alternative education. For example, using graduation from high school or completion of a degree is not relevant for an alternative education program that is mainly transitional in nature (e.g., aims to transition students back into regular schools or out of a special program such as juvenile detention or a treatment center). Alternative education accountability measures should include shorter-term measures and measures that track continuous “added value” or recognize that some youth may cycle in and out of a program before experiencing steady progress. Other performance outcomes might include measures of student motivation, learning to learn, and ability to master content. Presumably, program administrators and agencies sponsoring alternative education programs do have some type of internal management information, and it can be expected that as the field continues to develop, more reports and documents will be produced on this topic.

Not surprisingly, funding structures among alternative education programs are also highly variable:

“Most alternative education programs’ budgets are based on a variety of unreliable funding sources, such as grants, charitable contributions, and fees for service. Some alternative education programs may also receive state and local education funds—although these funds are often less than the per-pupil funding that traditional schools receive.” (NGA Center, 2001)

No published reports were found that itemized the costs of programs or the distribution of funds used for particular programs. But here, again, this information undoubtedly exists at the program or agency level, even though no specific studies or literature were found. Questions of interest include: Are the actual costs of educating our most vulnerable youth different than those for other children? How does the multiplicity of funding sources affect the integrity of alternative education programs—does it allow a more flexible use of the funding since restrictions linked to one source may not apply to another, or does it undermine the program by creating fiscal uncertainty and administrative complexity?

This section summarized a few key issues identified in a review of literature about alternative education. Various definitions of alternative education were identified, including distinctions among alternative education schools, programs, and perspectives (for example, towards differentiated alternative education within a regular school). The review also was used to describe alternative education along four dimensions: (1) “who” programs target, (2) “what” content is included, (3) “where” the programs operate, and (4) “how” programs are administered and funded. A clearer understanding of the many dimensions of alternative education efforts can help in the development of a typology even if the typology does not map onto any one of these dimensions perfectly. These dimensions are important to understand because developing a variety of high-quality alternative education options — options that meet the needs of all youth who are not being well served by traditional public schools — will necessarily include programs and schools that serve children with different needs/characteristics (“who”), are located in different places (“where”), provide different types of certificates, diplomas, and

programming (“what”), and are structured, administered, and funded in different ways according to the best needs and interests of students and the community (“how”). Whether a single typology can support the many applications for which it might be used (program development, fundraising, research and evaluation, etc.) is still unclear.

### **POTENTIALLY PROMISING PROGRAM FEATURES**

There is little rigorous evaluation research documenting the effectiveness of alternative education programs, meaning studies that can link specific program characteristics with specific student outcomes. As with other fields of inquiry in their early stages, much of the literature on alternative education presents features or characteristics thought to be essential to the success of alternative education efforts. In many reports there are lists of important characteristics or “best practices.” As Lange and Sletten (2002) note, “whether these points of best practice are, indeed, ‘practice’ for most existing alternatives is a matter yet to be thoroughly documented. However, the lists do provide a glimpse of elements many researchers and advocates see as important descriptors of effective alternative schools.” Therefore, this section simply presents some of the many “lists” found in the literature, in part because they represent a succinct summary of what some observers and practitioners believe are the keys to successful alternative education efforts, which may be useful in the future when considering formal evaluation strategies.

There is a high level of overlap among the lists (even for programs of different types), suggesting that there is some degree of consensus about critical features of high quality alternative education. It is also important to note, however, that the lists include many factors that are considered critical to effective education and schools, in general. One challenge will be to distinguish those that are unique to alternative education and those that apply to all education.

Land and Sletten (2002) summarize the essential characteristics of effective alternative education as follows:

- “clearly identified goals to inform both evaluation and enrollment (Gregg, 1999);
- wholehearted implementation without a piecemeal approach to structuring programs (Raywid, 1993);
- autonomy (Gregg, 1999);
- student-centered atmosphere (Frymier, 1987);
- integration of research and practice in areas such as assessment, curriculum, teacher competencies, and integration of special education services (Geurin & Denti, 1999);
- training and support for teachers who work with at-risk populations with or without disabilities (Ashcroft, 1999; Krovetz, 1999); and
- links to multiple agencies, an element that may become increasingly important as alternatives are required to serve students with special education needs (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Leone & Drakeford, 1999).”

Based on “a growing body of research pointing to the characteristics shared by successful alternative education programs and schools,” the National Association of State Boards of Education (1996) reports that “the success of these programs has been measured in terms of improved grades, school attendance, and graduation rates; decreases in disruptive and/or violent behaviors and suspensions; and an improved sense of direction and self among participating students.” The characteristics they identify include:

- “High Academic Standards/Expectations — Researchers have consistently found that successful programs/schools set clear and high education standards and expectations for their students. The curriculum in these programs is not diluted or ‘watered down.’ Furthermore, the curricula is often expanded to enhance the educational and vocational interests of the students.
- High Standards for Interpersonal/Social Interactions — Successful alternative education programs/schools have well defined standards of behaviors. And in addition to having strict and clear expectations that are consistently applied to everyone, successful alternative programs/schools rely on interventions and an expanded curricula that foster the development of interpersonal and social skills. Most address issues such as family life, peer pressure, and conflict resolution.
- Student-Centered Education and Intervention Plans — Successful programs/schools have their structure, curricula, and support services designed with both the educational and social needs of the students in mind. Therefore, it is imperative that alternative programs/schools provide the assessment and support services needed to clearly identify and address the cognitive, emotional, health and socio-economic factors affecting the education and development of participating students.
- Teacher/Student Ratio — Research findings also indicate that low teacher/student ratios are important to the success of alternative education efforts. Ranging from 8-25 students per teacher, successful efforts have an average ratio of 1-16.
- Site-Based Management/Flexibility — While having clear and strong accountability measurements and systems, successful alternative programs and schools are often free from centralized management. Administrators, teachers, support services staff, students, and parents are involved in the different aspects of the programs/schools that they participate in. This work is done through issue/task specific committees or what could be described as ‘quality circles.’
- Parent and Community Involvement — Parent and community involvement is critical for the success of alternative programs/schools. All of the programs and schools identified in various research projects noted that the parents of prospective students must agree to participate in clearly defined ways beyond parent-teacher meetings. Some require that parents volunteer some of their time to the program/school, others that they participate in family life seminars.
- A Program versus a School — Many successful alternative education efforts are designed specifically as either programs or schools. Programs are intended for students who may need short term interventions to get through a particular problem or situation that is having a negative impact on their education. They are designed with the goal of helping the student get back in the ‘regular’ school setting as soon the presenting problem or situation is addressed and corrected. On

- the other hand, schools are designed for students that for one reason or another are better off obtaining an education outside the traditional school setting. Often, these schools include students who must work to help support themselves and their families, or students who need specialized services and interventions but who can meet high education standards.
- **Location** — In some instances the location of the alternative education program or school has proven critical to its success. Programs are often set within a traditional school. At times they are located within a community school or agency. On the other hand, most alternative schools have their own facilities, share a facility with a larger school, or are located within community colleges or a university campus. Regardless of the location, successful programs and schools provide healthy physical environments that foster education, emotional well-being, a sense of pride, and safety.”

Leone and Drakeford (1999) describe Schorr’s (1997) summary of “an emerging consensus about what elements are needed for alternative programs to be successful” as follows:

- **“Clear Focus on Academic Learning** — The most promising schools have a clear focus on academic learning that combines high academic standards with engaging and creative instruction.
- **Ambitious Professional Development** — Successful schools provide teachers with stimulating, ongoing professional development activities that help teachers to maintain an academic focus, enhance teaching strategies, and develop alternative instructional methods. Properly designed staff development involves teacher input, work with colleagues, and opportunities to visit and observe teaching in other settings. When given opportunities to examine differences between instructional aspirations and actual practice, teachers will achieve what they aspire to do, provided that they have adequate staff development and support.
- **Strong Level of Autonomy and Professional Decision-Making** — Partly in response to sluggish and inefficient bureaucracies, reformers in education and social services believe that effective service delivery requires decision making at the service delivery level (Schorr 1997; Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). Decisions about staffing, leadership, budgets, scheduling, curriculum, and pedagogy need to be made by teaching and support staff who have direct contact with students. Effective schools provide autonomy that builds trust and loyalty among staff. Further, giving staff a voice in decision making promotes creativity and instructional excellence (Collins and Tamarkin 1990).
- **Sense of Community** — Research suggests that schools that focus on the creation and maintenance of intentional communities are more likely to succeed than bureaucratically organized schools (Schorr 1997). Within effective school communities, students and staff share expectations for learning, and students are encouraged to take a variety of courses and activities that enable them to pursue their interests and aspirations.”

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001) has also developed a list of characteristics of successful education programs in *secure facilities*:

- “Administrators regard education as a vital part of the rehabilitation process.
- Programs help students develop competencies in basic reading, writing and math skills, along with thinking and decision-making skills and character development traits, such as responsibility and honesty.
- Student/teacher ratios reflect the needs of the students.
- Academic achievement is reinforced through incremental incentives.
- Teachers are competent, committed, and trained in current research and teaching methods, rather than relying on old model drill and workbook exercises.
- Instruction involves multiple strategies appropriate to each learner’s interests and needs.
- Youth are assessed for learning disabilities and provided with special education in full compliance with federal law.
- When appropriate, parents, community organizations and volunteers are involved in the academic program.
- Opportunities exist for on-the-job training, work experience and mentorships.
- Partnerships are developed with potential employers.
- Students are scheduled for jobs and further education prior to the reentry into the community.”

In their report, *Alternative Education Programs, Effective Practices Research Brief* (undated), the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction finds that successful alternative schools share the following characteristics:

- “They are small.
- Both program and organization are designed by those who operate them
- Character, theme, or emphasis is developed from the strengths and interests of the teachers who established them.
- Teachers choose to be a part of the program, with subsequent teachers being selected with the input of present staff.
- Students and families select the program.
- A teacher-director administers the programs. A principal is the educational leader.
- They are usually housed as mini-schools or buildings once dominated by larger programs.
- The superintendent sustains the autonomy and protects the integrity of the school.
- All programs are relatively free from district interference, and the administration also buffers them from demands of the central office.
- The continuity in leadership has been considerable.
- Considerable attention goes into cultivating a strong sense of connection among students, and between students and teachers.
- The curriculum must be compelling, challenging and inviting.

- Staff roles are broadened to include new responsibilities. Teachers and school administrators must continue to collaborate to improve the image of alternative education.
- City-As-School (CAS) is an alternative program that combines academic learning with the world of work for high school students, including at-risk Students.”

In yet another study, Tobin and Sprague (2000) examined effective school-based practices for students who have behavior disorders and/or antisocial behavior. They limited their review to programs that (a) could be applicable to students at risk for antisocial behavior and/or failure in traditional classes, (b) were sufficiently practical to be implemented in local public schools, and (c) showed convincing evidence of positive outcomes. Their list of key characteristics is as follows:

- “Low ratio of students to teachers
  - More personal time for each student
  - Better behavioral gains
  - Higher quality of instruction
- Highly structured classroom with behavioral classroom management
  - Level systems provide predictable structure
  - Self-management skills are taught
  - High rates of positive reinforcement
  - High academic gains
  - Students are able to move to less restrictive settings
- Positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management
  - Rewards for acceptable behavior and compliance
  - Directly teach clear classroom rules
  - Begin with rich reinforcement and then ‘fade’ to normal levels when possible (four positives to one negative)
- Adult mentors at school
  - Mentor must use positive reinforcement
  - Mentor takes special interest in child
  - Mentor tracks behavior, attendance, attitude, grades
  - Mentor negotiates alternatives to suspension and expulsion
- Individualized behavioral interventions based on functional behavioral assessment
  - Identify causes of the behavior
  - Identify what is ‘keeping it going’
  - Identify positive behaviors to replace problems
  - Interview and involve the student
  - Use multicomponent interventions
- Social skills instruction
  - Problem solving
  - Conflict resolution
  - Anger management
  - Empathy for others
- High-quality academic instruction
  - Direct instruction plus learning strategies

- Control for difficulty of instruction
  - Small, interactive groups
  - Directed responses and questioning of students
- Involving parents
  - Frequent home-school communication
  - Parent education programs, provided either at school or in the community”

It is intriguing to note how similar many of these lists are, even when very different types of programs or settings are considered. It is also important that many of the features are similar to those considered essential to effective regular K-12 programs and schools. Most of the lists identify high academic standards and expectations as a key feature of successful programs. Other important qualities are small schools and class sizes, and high-quality student-centered programs that actively engage teachers, parents, and other community members. Finally many of them point to the importance of administrative and bureaucratic autonomy for the program or school, so that they can create “intentional communities” often with the requirement that teachers and students be in the program voluntarily. Many of these key qualities will need to be considered further as interest in alternative education programs increases over the coming years, and as evaluation strategies are considered to empirically analyze their effectiveness.

## **CONCLUSION**

For better or worse, the demand for more and better alternative education options is clearly growing across the country. Advancing the field will require progress on multiple fronts, including raising awareness about the need for and benefits of high quality alternative education options, finding ways to fund an adequate number of alternative education programs and schools, and demonstrating and improving on the effectiveness of high quality programs. All of these will require a better understanding of the vast array of alternative education programs that already exist, and a way of classifying these programs so that we can understand which types might be developed and replicated, how many of each high quality type is needed, and whether and how this new “system” of alternative education can best be administered in conjunction with or alongside traditional public schools.

The continuing dialogue about alternative education will benefit from having a common understanding of the various types of programs that exist. This review suggests a number of dimensions that could be used as a starting point to develop a typology of programs (see Exhibit 3) to describe the type of program, the operator, instructional content, educational purpose or focus, and funding.

**EXHIBIT 3**  
**POSSIBLE DIMENSIONS OF A TYPOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

<b>General type of alternative education:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate school</li> <li>• Separate program</li> <li>• Perspective/strategy with a regular K-12 school</li> </ul>
<b>Target Population:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• women/girls</li> <li>• pregnant/parenting teens</li> <li>• suspended/expelled students</li> <li>• recovered drop-outs</li> <li>• delinquent teens</li> <li>• low-achievers</li> <li>• all at risk youth</li> </ul>
<b>Focus/purpose (and mix):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic completion/credential</li> <li>• Career preparation/credential</li> <li>• Disciplinary</li> <li>• Transitional (e.g., out of treatment or detention, or back to K-12)</li> </ul>
<b>Operational setting-proximity to K-12:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• resource rooms</li> <li>• pull-out programs</li> <li>• schools-within-a-school</li> <li>• separate self-contained alternative school</li> </ul>
<b>Operational setting-location of activity:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• regular school during school hours</li> <li>• school building during non-school hours</li> <li>• community or recreation center</li> <li>• former school building</li> <li>• juvenile justice corrections or detention center</li> <li>• store-front neighborhood organization</li> <li>• public housing project</li> <li>• homeless shelter (emergency and transitional)</li> <li>• medical or mental health facility</li> <li>• community college or other post-secondary campus</li> </ul>
<b>Educational focus</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• short-term bridge back to schools for students who are off track</li> <li>• students prematurely transitioning to adulthood</li> <li>• accelerated program for students needing a few credits to move on</li> <li>• students who are <i>very</i> far behind educationally</li> </ul>
<b>Sponsor or administrative entity:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• non-profit and community-based organization (CBOs)</li> <li>• state or local education agency</li> <li>• charter school</li> <li>• adult education division or agency</li> <li>• juvenile justice agency</li> <li>• K-12 public or private school</li> <li>• health or mental health agency or institution</li> <li>• federally-funded program and contractors (e.g., for Job Corps)</li> </ul>



<b>Credentials offered:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regular high school diploma</li><li>• General Educational Development (GED) diploma</li><li>• Occupational and skills certification</li><li>• No credentialing</li></ul>
<b>Funding sources (and mix):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Federal funds</li><li>• State funds</li><li>• Local funds</li><li>• Private funds</li></ul>

It is also clear if high-quality alternative education is to gain widespread public support, it needs to serve its students well while also meeting high accountability standards. There are now growing calls for more resources for both alternative education programs and for better data and analysis about the programs. There is also increasing interest in how to assess what programs are doing and accountability measurement and about “how to introduce high academic standards in alternative education systems without sacrificing the elements that make alternative programs successful, and without compromising the integrity of the high standards” (NGA Center for Best Practices 2001).<sup>6</sup> To bring high standards to alternative education programs, the NGA Center for Best Practices recommends the following:

- “Strengthen links between traditional and nontraditional education systems
- Invest resources to support the transition to high academic standards and beyond
- Improve ‘early warning systems’ to identify lower-performing students
- Support longer-term alternative education programs
- Develop data-driven accountability measures for alternative education programs
- Develop enhanced GED programs
- Collect data.”

Similarly, the National Center on Education and the Economy (1998) recommends a *standards-based* alternative education system that includes the following elements:

- “a single high standard for all students whether in traditional schools or in alternative education programs;
- a funding system that ensures that the country spends at least the same amount on students in alternative education programs as in traditional schools;
- an accountability system for both alternative education programs and traditional schools tied to helping students meet high standards; and
- a counseling and referral system in every community that provides students access to the programs best suited to their needs.”

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Oregon recently passed a state law (Senate Bill 258) that requires districts to evaluate the quality of its alternative schools. Others have noted that alternative education programs in urban areas are especially likely to be left out of the high academic standards movement.

Finally, it will be important to continue to conduct research on the effectiveness of alternative education and to address some issues for which there may be strong opinions. For example:

- Do alternative education schools accelerate learning compared to what students would achieve in a regular school setting?
- Do alternative programs that integrate career development with academic instruction have better educational and economic outcomes than those focused mainly on academics?
- Are alternative education programs that operate totally outside of and separate from regular school districts and public schools more effective than alternative education sponsored by school districts?

Promoting high quality options for vulnerable or disconnected youth who are not succeeding in traditional schools is an important part of a nation's commitment to educating its young people. Requiring that these programs also meet high accountability standards ensures that they receive the resources and attention they need to do their job well. Developing a typology of programs that describes the full array of alternatives may be an important element in encouraging the development of the most effective programs.

### **CHAPTER 3**

## **RESEARCH AGENDA ON EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH**

The need for alternative education programs and alternative pathways to educational success is quite clear. The many types and numbers of programs that continue to appear across the country and the increasing demand for such programs—both within and outside mainstream educational settings—only confirms the extent of this need. What is less clear, however, is how we should move forward in helping children who are disconnecting from traditional educational pathways, and what programs and policies should be developed and promoted to successfully educate vulnerable youth of all types. To better understand the “next steps” for the field of alternative education, the Urban Institute convened a daylong roundtable May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2003 in Washington, DC. The roundtable convened experts—including researchers, practitioners, advocates, funders, and policymakers—from the fields of education (both mainstream and alternative), youth development, youth employment, and civil rights, to discuss current issues around alternative education, children and youth in need of alternative education, and future directions for research and program development (a list of roundtable participants can be found in Appendix B).

The roundtable yielded many interesting ideas and perspectives, and the discussions often reflected both the complexity of the problem and the many challenges inherent in helping disconnected youth. One fundamental question that ran throughout the day was the extent to which the nation should focus on (1) expanding and encouraging the development of high-quality alternative education for increasingly large numbers of disconnected youth versus (2) attempting to “fix” the mainstream education system so fewer youth disconnect in the first place (while still developing high quality alternatives for those who do disconnect). This issue was never fully resolved, although there was widespread agreement that we should not develop an alternative system that is “second rate.” Underpinning these discussions were important concerns about protecting the civil rights and other interests of vulnerable children, many of who are from minority racial/ethnic groups and/or have disabilities.

Another basic theme of the roundtable discussions concerned the effectiveness of alternative education (both within and outside mainstream educational settings). While everyone agreed on the need for high quality programs that provide real opportunities for youth, others were concerned that in reality some programs continue and contribute to a disconnection from the mainstream, thereby becoming yet another barrier to the successful transition of vulnerable youth to adulthood. Some roundtable participants felt that alternative education can help youth stay connected to education because the approaches/settings are better suited to meeting their needs and increase their chances of success. Others, however, argued that alternative education systems may actually prevent youth from (re)connecting to mainstream systems, precluding them from following more typical developmental pathways. Much of this discussion was a simple reflection of the

reality of alternative education programs across the country: they range from successful high quality programs committed to meeting students' individual needs to programs that are essentially "dumping grounds" for "problem" youth and where students are sent simply to remove them from traditional schools and where little teaching or learning occurs. These themes led directly to important discussions about the need to better understand the quality of alternative education programming and student outcomes (and how these should be defined and measured), standards and accountability, and how well the educational needs of vulnerable youth align with what existing educational alternatives are able to provide them.

The roundtable discussion yielded many specific ideas about future research and information needs, and the remainder of this document summarizes these. Research on these topics is critical for informing the development of sound policies and programs for vulnerable youth. While there is still a need for basic research, more sophisticated studies are also needed to address more complex issues. These include system-wide mappings within communities that show both needs and resources and how they relate to one another, studies of the many pathways children follow through community systems (and with what outcomes), and analyzing the interaction between mainstream and alternative programs and how they can and do affect each other.

## **RESEARCH ON THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Basic research is still needed on the population of children needing alternative education, the reasons they need alternatives, and the types of programs and schools that are available to meet these needs. This research should address the following questions.

### *Need for Educational Alternatives or Alternative Pathways*

- How many children in the nation and in selected state and communities are disconnecting from mainstream educational systems and why? How many disconnected youth reconnect with mainstream systems and/or alternative education settings and how? Do the ways states and local communities measure dropping out, grade promotion, and graduation include or hide disconnecting youth? What are the sociodemographic, economic, and educational characteristics of (a) children at-risk of disconnecting, (b) children who do disconnect, (c) children who re-connect, and (d) children who do *not* reconnect? Studies addressing these questions should include *all* children, including those involved in the juvenile justice system and those with disabilities.

### *Current Educational Alternatives*

- How many alternative schools and programs are there in specific states/communities and across the country as a whole? Who runs them (public schools, private schools, nonprofit community-based organizations, etc.)? What types of programs are they?

Who do they intend to serve and who do they in fact serve? What educational needs can they fulfill, and how does the profile of programs match the profile of needs at the local community level? What types of accountability and performance measures and continuous improvement methods do they use (if any) and what do these show?

## **SYSTEMS ANALYSIS**

Much of the discussion at the roundtable centered on implementation and systems issues, especially at the community and school level. These included ideas such as documenting the pathways that youth follow in disconnecting and reconnecting; the linkages among agencies, programs, and other community-level institutions; and administrative and management functions that ensure effectiveness. Because the problem of youth disconnecting from mainstream schools is largely a systemic problem—one that results from a mismatch between a group of youth and the educational agencies that are meant to serve them—understanding how youth can successfully remain connected (or reconnect) with educational, employment, and other youth development programs also requires a broad community-wide perspective. It is also important to understand how the traditional and alternative education systems may be influencing one another, and how communities can “manage” their alternative education systems to respond to changes over time in the numbers and educational needs of vulnerable youth. As more high-quality community-based studies become available, it will become easier to generate a national picture of the current state of alternative education and promising strategies for high quality programs that fit the needs of specific communities.

Developing a creative, flexible, and effective alternative education system requires a great deal of time and effort. Initial investments in local community studies should focus on communities that are truly committed to systems reform: if they haven’t already, the community must conduct an objective assessment of its current system, and then modify or create effective interventions for youth who are either dropping out or being pushed out of mainstream schools. An interesting issue is whether mainstream educational agencies or other community-based organizations are primarily responsible for re-enrolling disconnected youth. Mainstream schools are certainly responsible for educating all children, and a major advantage of them re-enrolling disconnected youth is that they may be less likely to disconnect with students in the first place, but in communities where schools continue to push children out or simply let them go, alternatives outside mainstream systems may need to be developed. Below are some of the specific system-level research questions raised during the roundtable.

### *Mapping Local Educational Systems for Needs Analysis*

Local level research can identify how the current educational system is succeeding or failing at educating its youth. While some observations can be made at the national and state level when it comes to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the public education system, assisting vulnerable youth within a given community involves understanding the specific opportunities and barriers they face in that community,

including the general social and economic well-being of the community, and its schools and neighborhoods. Community mappings that compare specific needs against system resources can be an important tool in helping communities develop sound educational policies. Any given community's map is likely to be unique, but many communities share various characteristics, and a typology of maps may emerge as more of them become available.

To that end, researchers and others can map a local community's *system* from the perspective of vulnerable youth by examining the following issues:

- How well is the mainstream educational system functioning? What are the graduation and dropout rates (assuming they are well defined)? What proportion of youth are leaving at grades 9, 10, 11, and 12, etc.?
- What does the entire educational system look like? How many public (both traditional and alternative) and private (both traditional and alternative) schools are there, and how do they all relate to one another? How many alternative options are there within traditional public schools? How do alternative schools/programs differ from traditional ones?
- Are alternative schools/programs getting equitable resources? What is the current funding situation for schools in the community (both mainstream and alternative)? What are the per-student costs and expenditures in various education settings? How are resources identified, sought, and secured? How flexible and reliable are these resources? Do educational supports follow youth through the system or do individual educational programs have fixed funding streams?
- What proportion of youth is vulnerable and disconnecting under various definitions of vulnerability/disconnection?
- What are the specific *educational* needs of disconnected and vulnerable youth (e.g., youths who need a few credits to graduate because their schooling was interrupted by a pregnancy or the need to work to support other family members; youth who are way below grade level for their age and need intensive training on basic skills but with age-appropriate curricula and materials; youth who need an apprenticeship program or other connection to the world of work or the arts to motivate them to continue their schooling and graduate). How many youth are in each of these various educational groupings? How do these numbers vary over time from one year to the next?
- What other types of needs do vulnerable youth have that may need to be addressed alongside their educational needs (e.g., childcare, housing, health, counseling, etc.)? Given the variety of alternatives available in many communities (transitional high schools, alternative programs and schools, community-based organizations and nonprofits with different focuses [e.g., employment, juvenile justice]) it will be important to know what combinations of

approaches work for youth with particular types of life experiences to ensure their educational success.

- How do the numbers of vulnerable youth with different types of *educational* needs correspond to the types of programs that are available? Are existing alternatives structured around the educational alternatives of vulnerable youth or are they structured around other student characteristics that may not make sense from the standpoint of an educator?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that students are accessing appropriate educational services in the community? How do alternative education strategies fit into the current system? What types of specific issues for vulnerable youth do the strategies address? Are there gaps?

As part of the mapping process, youth themselves should contribute their perspectives through focus groups or surveys. Their opinions and experiences with the local educational system are a critical source of information. Data collection efforts could focus on:

- What aspects of local schools or educational settings support (and fail to support) them?
- Why do some vulnerable youth stay in school? How do they differ from those who do not stay? Why do some disconnected youth reconnect with mainstream or alternative education programs? How do they differ from those who do not reconnect?
- Why do youth drop out of school? If it is by choice, how did they come to this choice? Are there aspects of the educational setting/experience that can influence this choice? Are some students *appropriately* disconnecting from poor-quality schools? If leaving school was not a choice, such as expulsion, were there options for continuing education in the community?
- What can be done to improve the educational experience of youth from a systems perspective?
- What educational options do youth *think* they have available to them? What do they perceive to be the advantages/disadvantages of each of these options? How accurate are these perceptions?
- What educational options would youth *like* to have available to them? How should they be set up, who should they serve, and what should they do?

*Alternative Education Settings—Opportunities or Barriers*

In addition to mapping the educational system (and needs) within a local community, it is critical that alternative and mainstream options be examined side by side, both to ensure that the two are more or less equal (or at least moving towards equity) and to foster continuous improvement in both systems. Among the system issues that should be addressed are:

- How do alternative education programs compare to mainstream programs? Can the two systems be considered equal (with respect to quality, accountability, resources)? How do students flow from one system into the other, and what factors dictate these flows? How are consumer choice, continuous improvement, and evidence-based standards built into both systems? How are they promoted? (A process analysis of the variety of educational settings within a particular community would allow researchers to compare the quality and content of instruction, the resources available to each, how youth move in and out of the settings, and other relevant issues.)
- What is the effect of alternative educational settings (especially alternative schools for youth with disciplinary problems, second chance schools, etc.) on the local educational system? When these programs/schools are developed, do more youth get placed in them than was intended? Are low performing or “problem youth” being inappropriately pushed out of mainstream settings into alternative ones? If so, to what extent, and what are the consequences of this? What happens to youth entering/exiting juvenile justice facilities, youth with disabilities? Are students of color being disproportionately pushed out of certain schools/settings? Are the civil rights of vulnerable youth protected throughout the system?
- What happens to youth who are expelled? How many expelled youth do not have alternative schools as options to continue their education? Is the goal to reconnect youth to mainstream settings once disconnected in this way? If so, are alternative approaches effective at reconnecting youth to mainstream settings and agencies? To what extent are youth who are expelled from mainstream settings able to re-enroll in regular school?
- What are the political realities for creating and sustaining a wide base of support for alternative education options in the community? Are certain groups of youth (e.g., drop-outs) favored over others (e.g., expelled students)? Can the needs of children be defined and discussed in a way that ensures widespread support and attention to vulnerable youth (e.g., by focusing on their educational needs rather than the “problems” that lead to their disconnection in the first place)? Can a single well-developed alternative education system serve both vulnerable and disconnected youth as well as high-achieving highly successful students (many of whom can and do benefit from alternative options as well)?



## ANALYSIS OF IMPACT, OUTCOMES, AND EFFECTIVENESS

There is a clear and growing need for reliable evaluation research in the area of alternative education. We need to better understand what strategies work for whom. Successful strategies for teen parents who are close to graduation but need alternative programs offering accelerated classes or nontraditional hours may be very different from the needs of students who are reading very far below grade level for their age. Yet other strategies may be needed for students who rotating in and out of the juvenile justice system.

Some advocates and researchers are calling for more evaluations of *individual programs*, while others argue that *community-wide systems* should be evaluated because multiple levels of a system, not just individual programs, influence youth and their developmental outcomes. Both individual program evaluation and evaluations of systems would contribute greatly to the body of knowledge about what works for vulnerable youth.

Such evaluation endeavors might include:

- Evaluating specific programs and/or community-wide systems of practice to identify those that work most effectively for particular types of youth. Such efforts require rigorous evaluation designs with experimental or quasi-experimental approaches so that researchers can more confidently identify the effects of a given program or program components on youth outcomes. System-level variables must also be taken into account.
- Employing longitudinal designs will allow evaluators to answer such questions as:
  - What are the long-term outcomes into early adulthood associated with particular educational settings or programs?
  - What are the relative gains associated with assisting low-achieving youth to complete another grade? To graduate?
  - How do alternative education settings affect particularly vulnerable youth such as those involved in (or exiting) the juvenile justice system, teen parents, etc.? What are the short and long-term effects for these populations?
- Including cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness components in these studies will also assist educators in understanding the relative cost of various programs, and help convince funders (and the community at large) to support proven cost-effective programs.

### *Outcomes*

Since alternative education programs are first and foremost *educational* programs (or at least should be), evaluations of them should include academic outcomes for participants. Unfortunately, many states and communities have designed their graduation rates so that certain students who leave (or are pushed out) are simply not reflected in the measure (in

addition to not appearing in the numerator, they do not appear in the denominator of the graduation rate, thereby inflating the ratio and making the given school or school system appear even more successful than it is. Great care must be taken to develop consistent and reliable measures that fully account for all students irrespective of whether or not they are mainstream educational institutions. The measures should not be limited to the share graduating, since many students in need of educational alternatives are far from graduating and measures of their educational progress short of graduation are also critical. Thus, with these cautions in mind, appropriate educational outcome measures for educational alternatives can include:

- Graduation rates (or the share of all students receiving a diplomas or some type of credential),
- Improvements over time in math and reading ability, and
- Grade promotion.

Many advocates and researchers are also interested in understanding other important potential outcomes. These include a wide variety of personal, social, and vocational skills that youth may gain by participating in an alternative education school/program:

- School connectedness or engagement
- Participation in civic events, volunteering, community leadership opportunities
- Identity development
- Social and life skill development
- Employment and career skills
- Knowledge about career development
- Experience of emotional and instrumental support from adults

### *Performance Monitoring*

In addition to examining outcomes for youth themselves, providers of alternative education programs will need to monitor their own performance and progress if they are to succeed in educating vulnerable youth. Self-monitoring and continuous improvement efforts can help programs provide quality assurances to the community and also help them adapt the program to the changing needs of its students. The process should include:

- Defining local standards of performance based on outcomes of interest for the student population.
- Designing tools for individual programs or settings to monitor progress toward outcomes of interest.
- Garnering support for implementing the monitoring process.
- Reviewing the results of the process and changing programs and strategies accordingly.

### *Best Practices—Criteria for Best Practices*

With the current literature available and with new evaluation endeavors underway, researchers, along with advocates and policymakers, can begin to develop criteria for defining best practices in the field of alternative education and learning. The Iowa Association of Alternative Education, for example, has developed a comprehensive list of quality indicators based on the Framework for Learning Alternatives Environments in Iowa.<sup>7</sup> It covers many areas and includes multiple indicators in the areas of philosophy, administration, student, parents/guardians, staff, curriculum and instruction, vocational/technical/career, assessment, personal/social/life skills, community and social services, and facilities. Such lists need to be refined and tested, and shared among alternative education providers. Other promising and effective practices are analyzed and profiled by the National Youth Employment Coalition and shared through their website [www.nyec.org](http://www.nyec.org).

Systematically studying and replicating studies on effective approaches for developing educational alternatives within individual programs, schools, and communities would allow people to review programs and settings in the field and develop model interventions for particular types of vulnerable youth. Best practices and model programs could then be catalogued so local policymakers and educators could access this information easily, and consideration should be given to funding and maintaining a national clearinghouse of research on educational alternatives.

### **OTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION NEEDED**

Finally, a variety of other background information and studies are needed to advance the field of alternative education and better serve vulnerable and disconnected youth. These include basic research that can inform policymakers, educators, and advocates about how best to serve vulnerable youth. Such research should address the following questions:

- What is the cost of dropping out in the new economy to youth and society?
- What is the cost of having under-qualified teachers in the classroom to youth and society?

Other questions cover the effects of outside forces on alternative school settings, such as:

- How are various provisions within the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) affecting alternative education, both directly and indirectly via their impact on mainstream schools? What are the intended and unintended consequences of new developments such as high-stakes testing and zero-tolerance disciplinary policies on vulnerable youth? Are more of them being transferred out of mainstream settings?
- And finally, what impact do policies and resource allocation decisions at the federal and state levels have on local alternative education options?

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<sup>7</sup> Accessible on-line at: [http://www.caasp.org/a\\_framework\\_for\\_learning\\_alterna.htm](http://www.caasp.org/a_framework_for_learning_alterna.htm)

## CONCLUSION

A great deal of additional research on alternative education is needed. This research includes very basic descriptive analyses of students in need of educational alternatives, the programs and schools providing these alternatives, as well as more basic work on definitions, typologies, and inventories of approaches/programs. There is clearly a growing recognition for the need for high quality educational alternatives. Mainstream and alternative educational programs have always and will continue to influence each other in fundamental ways. The growth in the types of programming available within mainstream K-12 school systems, and the blurring of the boundaries between the many options within mainstream school systems and the “alternatives” outside this system, testify to the ongoing need for multiple high quality educational options for all students. A great deal of additional work is also needed on assessment and evaluation of the quality of educational alternatives, the outcomes and standards used to measure their quality and effectiveness, and how the educational needs of all youth are “managed” at the systems level (i.e., who is served in which programs and with what results, and equally important, who is *not* served and how do they disconnect or fail to reconnect with the agencies responsible for educating them). More work on the costs and benefits of failing to develop high quality educational alternatives (for youth, employers, and society at large) will also help advocates, parents, and policymakers secure the resources needed to develop a high quality system that meets the needs of all children.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **FACTORS THAT PLACE STUDENTS AT RISK**

Many aspects of children's lives affect their ability to learn and succeed in school. Wells (1990) has identified a variety of circumstances that can place students at risk. They include individual-, family-, school-, and community-related factors:<sup>8</sup>

#### **School Related**

- Conflict between home/school culture
- Ineffective discipline system
- Lack of adequate counseling
- Negative school climate
- Lack of relevant curriculum
- Passive instructional strategies
- Inappropriate use of technology
- Disregard of student learning styles
- Retentions/suspensions
- Low expectations
- Lack of language instruction

#### **Student Related**

- Poor school attitude
- Low ability level
- Attendance/truancy
- Behavior/discipline problems
- Pregnancy
- Drug abuse
- Poor peer relationships
- Nonparticipation
- Friends have dropped out
- Illness/disability
- Low self-esteem/self-efficacy

#### **Community Related**

- Lack of community support services or response
- Lack of community support for schools
- High incidences of criminal activities
- Lack of school/community linkages

#### **Family Related**

- Low socioeconomic status
- Dysfunctional homelife
- No parental involvement
- Low parental expectations
- Non-English-speaking home
- Ineffective parenting/abuse
- High mobility

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Wells, S.E. (1990). *At-Risk Youth: Identification, Programs, and Recommendations*. Teacher Idea Press: Englewood, Colorado.

## **APPENDIX B**

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