

youthwork INFORMATION BRIEF

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Alternative Education

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So just exactly what is alternative education? You have to provide alternative education – called *alternative secondary school services* in the legislation – as one of the ten elements of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), but where do you start finding out exactly what it means? Searching the Web and reading reports only add to the confusion. About the only thing that folks agree on is that it is something other than traditional K-12 public education. Over and above that, there are as many definitions for alternative education as there are agencies that provide or study it. But what is a useful definition for youth workforce development professionals? A place to begin is by understanding some of the many meanings of alternative education.

When discussing alternative education, be sure that you find out what others mean when they use the term and they know what you mean.

Who Is Served by Alternative Education Programs?

Many alternative programs target specific youth, including but not limited to:

- Suspended or expelled students, truants, or students with behavior problems who need short-term programs to re-enter high school
- Students entering adulthood prematurely and who cannot attend school regularly because of pregnancy, parenthood, or adverse home situations
- Older students who need credits to go on to postsecondary education
- Low achievers, failing students, students with educational deficits or learning difficulties, or students over age for their educational level
- Dropouts or recovered dropouts
- Students with medical, family, or alcohol/drug abuse problems
- Gifted and talented students
- Migrant, homeless, or runaway youth

What Makes a Program Alternative?

A program is alternative if it's different from the usual, traditional education provided in a comprehensive high school. An alternative program might be offered in a different location; it might use a different delivery system or educational model; or it might have a specialized curriculum.

An alternative program might be different in only one way, like a botany class conducted in very traditional style at a nature center. Other programs incorporate several non-traditional aspects – a career academy in its own building using contextual teaching and learning with a focus on careers in agriculture, horticulture, and natural resources; Job Corps centers; or YouthBuild programs.

An alternative program can be only one small element of a youth's secondary education, like the botany class at the nature center. Or it might be a complete, comprehensive program providing the youth's entire secondary education and a high school diploma, like a joint vocational school or career center. Alternative programs may be part of a comprehensive high school; they might be a separate school; or they might not be part of a school at all.

Examples of Alternative Features

Different Locations

- Vocational schools, charter schools, magnet schools, career academies
- Work-based learning – internships, apprenticeships, work experience, work-study, field-based education
- Special programs in regular schools
- Museums, planetarium, nature centers
- Community day schools
- Community colleges
- Neighborhood organizations
- Home schooling
- Outdoor education
- Juvenile justice facilities
- Homeless shelters

Different Delivery Systems

- Online education
- Distance education

Different Educational Models

- Montessori method
- Waldorf school
- Coalition of Essential Schools
- High Schools That Work
- School-to-Work/School-to-Career
- Service learning
- Self-directed learning, independent study
- Lifelong education

Specialized Curricula

- General Educational Development Tests (GED) preparation
- Conflict resolution, anger management
- Tech prep, career-technical education
- Leadership education
- Therapeutic adventure experiences
- Visual and performing arts

Common Threads in Alternative Education

Some common threads run through alternative programs, no matter what their location, model, delivery system or curriculum. Alternative programs often have a characteristic approach to teaching and learning, environment, and support. While not all programs share all of these common threads, most alternative education programs incorporate one or more.

Examples of Common Threads

Approaches to Teaching and Learning

- Experiential education
- Integrated curriculum, hands-on or contextual learning
- Individualized programming
- Active learner engagement, focused on whole student, based on youth development principles
- Accommodates different learning styles
- Holistic education, integrates family, school, and community
- Authentic assessment

Examples of Common Threads (continued)

Environment

- Voluntary attendance
- Safe environment
- Flexible with high student expectations
- Supportive relationships, opportunity to belong, positive social norms, not punitive
- Small learning environments, schools, classes
- More creative, innovative, autonomous

Support

- Teachers also act as counselors, advisors, and mentors
- Comprehensive guidance and counseling
- Support from parents and community
- Developmental supports

A Definition for WIA Youth

In 1998, the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) defined alternative education as “a specialized, structured curriculum offered inside or outside of the public school system which may provide work/study and/or GED preparation”. ETA and the U.S. Department of Education now cooperate to ensure that WIA-funded programs provide a rigorous, high-quality education that adheres to state standards and implements requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Alternative education programs provided by local WIA systems will share many of the characteristics of alternative education programs in general. Because local programs respond to local needs, no two programs will look alike. However, the outcomes of WIA-funded alternative education programs should be consistent. They must be linked to WIA performance: measurable gains in literacy and math skills; completion of a high school diploma or its equivalent; and successful transition to employment or postsecondary education or training.

While alternative education can mean different things to different people and different programs may look nothing alike, all alternative education programs meet youth’s needs that are not being met by the traditional education system. WIA-funded programs, in particular, should focus on using alternative methods and structures to achieve a common set of outcomes: helping youth make a successful transition to adulthood through work and education.

WIA-funded alternative education programs should:

- Lead to a high school diploma or GED
- Provide academically rigorous preparation for work and postsecondary education
- Assist with the transition to work and postsecondary education
- Be related to the specific career and educational goals of the individual youth
- Address the individual youth’s specific barriers to work and education

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