REFEREED ARTICLE

Alternative High School Programming:
Planning for Student Success

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Abstract

Alternative high school programs can be another educational option for students who wish to remain in school but whose needs can not be addressed in regular school classes. There are three elements to a successful program: the students, specific school components, and staff. At-risk indicators help to identify the students. A low student-to-teacher ratio helps to build not only positive personal relationships but also working relationships when inquiry-based learning is used. Technology and hands-on work projects engage students. Extended support staff and outside agencies support students' social-emotional well-being. These combined elements support at-risk students in their journey toward high school graduation.

Alternative high school programs offer at-risk students the opportunity to be successful academically. An alternative school program is "a public . . . secondary school that addresses [the] needs of students that typically can not be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (Franklin et al., 2007, p. 134). Three elements are essential to a successful alternative high school program. An alternative school serves at-risk students. Its environment includes a number of components that support these students' academic growth. The staff of an alternative program believes in building personalized relationships with students and providing both academic and social/emotional support. The correct combination of students, school components, and staff can lead to a successful alternative program.

An alternative program is designed for students who are at risk of dropping out. Indicators of at-risk students include course performance (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement [CCSRI], 2008), attendance (Heppen & Therriault, 2008), at-risk behaviours (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009), and social-emotional difficulties (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Two course performance factors strongly predict which students are most likely to drop out of high school: failure in core courses and the number of credits earned in the first year of high school (CCSRI, 2008). If a student fails more than one core course and earns less than eight out of ten credits, he or she would be considered at risk. Course performance is a strong indicator of whether a student is at risk.

Students whose attendance is significantly low are most at risk. Studies have found that attendance, academic achievement, and graduation are directly correlated (Heppen & Therriault, 2008, p. 2). My experience concurs with this evidence. Students can struggle due to lack of attendance or, conversely, lack of attendance can indicate academic struggle. Academic improvement occurs when students are required to let the teacher know that they are not attending that day, and give the reason why. If a teacher does not hear from a student, then the teacher phones the student. The student is then aware that he or she is expected to be there and is missed. It is a primary goal of an alternative program to increase students' attendance, thereby giving the students a better chance at academic success.

At-risk behaviour can also be an indicator that alternative programming is needed. Students contribute to their academic demise by not adhering to the school discipline policy and by making irresponsible decisions (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Sexual activity, violence, and drug, tobacco, and alcohol use are examples of irresponsible behaviour (Barr & Parrett, 2003). These behaviours can lead to negative consequences such as suspension from school. When a

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student is suspended, an existing attendance problem is exacerbated, weakening the student's sense of self-worth and sense of belonging to the school. At-risk behaviours indicate a possible need for students to be removed from the general education program.

Social-emotional difficulties also contribute to students' decisions to drop out. Students who are experiencing social alienation and a general lack of caring from peers and educators do not feel that they belong to the school (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). These students do not participate in school activities. Moreover, students who have experienced a stressful event such as the death of a parent, family divorce, or bullying find it difficult to concentrate or do schoolwork (Barr & Parrett, 2003). When social-emotional difficulties such as these affect students' self-esteem, attitude toward education, and attendance, they indicate a potential dropout risk.

Many possible indicators can identify at-risk students. Any student can be at risk, but the typical profile of at-risk students is that they come from "low socioeconomic homes, [and/or] live in poverty with a single parent, grandparent or foster parent" (Barr & Parrett, 2003, p. 39). However, poor course performance, a low attendance rate, risky behaviours, and social-emotional difficulties are also prime indicators of at-risk students. It is important to realize that any students, at any time of their educational careers, can exhibit one or more of these indicators. Dropping out of school is more likely to happen if any of these indicators are present in the students' first year of high school (Heppen & Therriault, 2008). The challenge for high schools is to use these indicators to identify at-risk students and to provide them with personal and academic success in an alternative program.

There are a number of integral components in a well-developed alternative high school program. These include low enrolment (Barr & Parrett, 2003), caring educators (Dynarski et al., 2008), and an inquiry-based curriculum that includes technology (Duran, 2002) and work-related topics (Stone & Castellano, 2002). In a larger school setting, students "can become alienated and uninterested to the point where they feel little attachment to school and drop out" (Dynarski et al., 2008, p. 30). Lower enrolment can mean fewer incidents of violence and lower dropout rates (Franklin et al., 2007, p. 134). When an alternative program has a smaller student-to-teacher ratio, it can provide a unique curriculum specifically tailored to the needs of the students (Barr & Parrett, 2003). A smaller student body is more likely to increase student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates, and to provide a more positive school climate (Dynarski et al., 2008). Educators have more opportunities to assist and build relationships with students when the class size is small. They can learn what motivates their students and use that knowledge to provide activities that increase student engagement.

Caring educators build positive relationships with their students. The National Research Council in the United States, after reviewing research on school programs which reduced dropout rates, concluded that the "evidence suggests that student engagement and learning are fostered by a school climate characterized by an ethic of caring and supportive relationships, respect, fairness, and trust" (Dynarski et al., 2008, p. 30). A caring, supportive teacher gives appropriate, meaningful praise to build up students' confidence. He or she gently encourages students to work toward improvement. When the student-teacher relationship is built on respect, fairness, and trust, students are more likely to take risks. They know that even if they fail, the teacher will support and guide them. Personal, supportive attention has a more positive effect on students' achievement and motivation than teacher instructional expertise (Ward et al., 2009). Caring educators provide the support that at-risk students need to be successful.

Inquiry-based learning engages students in their learning. For students to experience "21st century success," inquiry-based learning enables students to learn relevant content and skills ("Buck Institute," 2010, para. 1). This style of learning is educationally sound, as its requirements are the use of social skills, specific outcomes, and assessment as, of, and for learning (Barr & Parrett, 2003). Students can work on projects that interest them, independently or in groups. The students are the gatherers of knowledge; the teachers are the facilitators. Students have the opportunity to "express their learning in their own voice" ("Buck Institute,"

2010, para. 6). This autonomy from the typical teacher-centered style of learning helps to increase students' engagement in the learning process because they are given the choice as to how and what they will learn. At-risk students can see the relevance and application of their learning to life beyond the school setting when learning is project based (Barr & Parrett, 2003). Thus, students' engagement in learning increases when inquiry-based learning fosters real-life, outside-of-school experiences. An inquiry-based curriculum makes learning relevant and meaningful to the students.

Technology is central in students' lives and can be used to deliver a positive, inquiry-based learning experience to at-risk students. Technology plays an integral role in inquiry-based learning (Waxman et al., 2002). Inquiry-based learning that uses technology can restructure learning (Duran, 2002, p. 217). It can connect at-risk students with other students from near and far, building a community of learners within and outside of the school building that is supportive and collaborative. Some additional positive results from technology use include a positive increase in students' self-concept, attitude about learning, and achievement (Ward et al., 2009). Technologies that are central to students' lives are wonderful resources and tools for learning. Technology helps to awaken curiosity, deepen learning, and provide a positive learning experience.

Inquiry-based learning infused with work-related topics can bring relevancy to student learning. Topics should be rigorous and have real-world applications structured around work and careers (Stone & Castellano, 2002). Research has shown that students who have vocational education, which includes work readiness and employment experience, appear to have a better success rate at obtaining and keeping a job (Foley & Pang, 2006). An alternative program can provide job-related workshops on topics such as resume writing, job interview skills, and interpersonal skills. If vocational programs are available, at-risk students in an alternative program should be encouraged and given the opportunity to participate (Foley & Pang, 2006). Work-based learning opportunities increase authentic learning and student engagement.

An alternative program should include a low student-to-teacher ratio, caring educators, and inquiry-based learning infused with technology and work related topics. Such a program can help students to reach goals that are "recognized and valued beyond the school" (Stone & Castellano, 2002, p. 265). These opportunities may include, but are not limited to, mentoring, contextual learning, job-shadowing, and community-centered activities (Sanders et al., 2002). Teachers who are committed to educating at-risk students provide not only academic support and guidance, but opportunities that make learning relevant.

Along with academic support and guidance, an alternative program should include social and emotional support for at-risk students. A school needs to feel like "a surrogate family"; "it is a place where students feel safe, cared for, and challenged" (Barr & Parrett, 2003, p. 184). An alternative program should provide an opportunity for students to deal with their emotional issues. Providing a caring, supportive environment builds at-risk students' sense of belonging and resiliency to dropping out (McMahon, 2007). The alternative program should include staff members who believe in building relationships with students (Dynarski et al., 2008) and community services (Foley & Pang, 2006). These two elements can provide the social and emotional support needed by at-risk students.

The staff of an alternative program should have certain characteristics. It is important that the staff members include a teacher, educational assistant, resource teacher, guidance counsellor, and social worker (Dynarski et al., 2008). The latter two staff members provide the expertise in helping students to deal with their social and emotional issues. All staff members need to value all students (McMahon, 2007), extol an "an all-for-one, one-for-all camaraderie amongst each other, students, [and] parents" (Barr & Parrett, 2003, p. 184), and be willing to develop longer term relationships with students (Dynarski et al., 2008). These staff traits can help students to feel that they belong and are welcomed and valued in the program (Waxman et al., 2002). A positive and supportive atmosphere has been proven to improve students' attitudes

toward learning, thereby improving attendance and academic achievement (Barr & Parrett, 2003). Staff characteristics are the cornerstone to an effective at-risk program.

Community services can also provide valuable services to students who attend alternative schools (Foley & Pang, 2006). Creating a Future is an example of a supportive service that helps students to be successful in school and in the workforce. This agency helps students to identify strengths, develop interpersonal skills, explore job opportunities, compile a resume with cover letter, and hone job interview skills. Developing these skills builds students' social competency, supports resiliency, and provides a sense of purpose for the future (Barr & Parrett, 2003). Students who are struggling with addictions may also benefit from special programming designed to help them overcome and deal with drug and/or alcohol abuse. In this way, outside agencies play a supportive role in the students' lives.

There are many benefits to providing a supportive student environment. Students' risky behaviours and truancy are reduced, and their grades and social skills are improved (Dynarski et al., 2008). If students know that they are supported by the staff, they have a more positive outlook toward school and peers, feel more attached to the school, and are more involved in school life (Waxman et al., 2002). Outside agencies can offer additional job-related and emotional support. An alternative program that offers the appropriate human resources for at-risk students also provides the social-emotional support that at-risk students need.

An alternative program can deliver an education that meets the needs of at-risk students. In order for an alternative program to be successful, its student body must first be carefully identified using at-risk indicators. There should be a low student-to-teacher ratio. Caring educators who use an inquiry-based curriculum infused with technology and work-related topics will engage students and make learning relevant to them. The students' social-emotional well-being should also be considered and addressed through the use of extended support staff and outside agencies. A well-thought-out alternative program can be the second chance that at-risk students need to be successful in school, growing socially and emotionally, and ultimately graduating from high school.

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