2   Alternative schooling in the USA

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This chapter outlines a broad concept of alternative education, why it is needed and how it may be understood. The chapter:

- provides an overview of the need for alternative schooling in the USA;
- describes what is meant by the term 'alternative schools' and review several proposed typologies of such schools; and
- examines the characteristics of high-quality programmes and the outcomes that alternative schools should be able to demonstrate.

Like many other countries, the USA has a long history of alternative schooling and education system reform. These efforts have taken on a sense of urgency for at least the past quarter century. We have gone from being 'a nation at risk', the title of high-profile 1983 publication sounding alarms about the quality of the nation's schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), to being in the midst of what some are calling a 'quiet crisis' in education (Smith, 2004). This crisis includes a major dropout problem and a lesser known but equally important 'skills gap'.

In response, states and school districts across the country have been pushing for higher academic standards, more rigorous graduation requirements and greater accountability. In the USA, education is primarily the responsibility of state and local governments, but through the legislative process the federal government supports state activities. At the federal level, legislation known as the No Child Left Behind Act has attempted to strengthen the nation's schools through a system of state standards, new tests and a national accountability system, including a targeted effort to help low-performing schools and students. One unfortunate consequence of this movement towards greater accountability, high-stakes testing and new zero-tolerance disciplinary policies is that some low-performing students

are not just dropping out of schools but may be getting pushed out.

This 'quiet crisis' has clear implications for the nation as a whole. Ninety per cent of the fastest growing jobs in the knowledge economy require some post-secondary education (US Government Accountability Office, 2007), but as the US Chamber of Commerce, representing more than 3 million businesses across the country, observes:

> Despite decades of reform efforts and many trillions of dollars in public investment, US schools are not equipping our children with the skills and knowledge they – and the nation – so badly need. It has been nearly a quarter century since the seminal report *A Nation at Risk* was issued in 1983. Since that time, a knowledge-based economy has emerged, the Internet has reshaped commerce and communication, exemplars of creative commerce like Microsoft, eBay, and Southwest Airlines have revolutionized the way we live, and the global economy has undergone wrenching change. Throughout that period, education spending has steadily increased and rafts of well-intentioned school reforms have come and gone. But student achievement has remained stagnant, and our K–12 schools have stayed remarkably unchanged – preserving, as if in amber, the routines, culture, and operations of an obsolete 1930s manufacturing plant. (http://www.uschamber.com/icw/reportcard/default#overview)

Estimates drawing on unpublished data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, show that in 2003 there were 1.1 million youth aged 16 to 19 who did not have a high school diploma (or an alternative credential known as the General Educational Development test, or GED) and were not enrolled in school; another 2.4 million youth age 20 to 24 were in the same situation for a grand total of 3.5 million youth (Barton, 2005).

While the failure of 'traditional' schools for many young people is clear, the 'alternatives' we have in place are too few and most are of unknown quality. There is no precise accounting of the number or types of alternative schools or programmes in the USA. Available estimates suggest that there are over 20,000 alternative schools and programmes currently in operation, most designed to reach students at risk of school failure, not those who are out of school (Lange and Sletten, 2002). The number of full-time, federally funded education, employment and national service programmes available to teenaged high school dropouts is estimated at 100,000 (based on an estimated total of 300,000 opportunities for the 2.4 million low-income 16- to 24-year-olds who left school without a diploma or received a diploma but could not find a job) (Barton, 2005). Whatever the exact numbers, when it comes to alternative education for vulnerable youth, demand is far outpacing supply.

High-quality, alternative pathways to educational and vocational success are needed for children and youth of all ages. In thinking about alternative education,

it is important to remember that young people do not disconnect from traditional developmental pathways (or high schools for that matter) because of the failure of any one system. Likewise, *reconnecting* youth requires collaboration and coordination among multiple youth-serving systems. In addition to school and youth employment and training programmes, these systems include child protection and juvenile justice, and a variety of health and social welfare agencies (such as mental health and substance abuse treatment programmes, crisis intervention centres, and runaway and homeless youth shelters). Finally, one should acknowledge that communities, neighbourhoods, families, adult mentors and peers can also have a major influence on the developmental trajectories of children and youth.

What do we mean by 'alternative education'?

The term 'alternative education' in its broadest sense covers all educational activities that fall outside the *traditional* K–12 school system (including home schooling, GED preparation programmes, special programmes for gifted children, charter schools). However, the term is often used to describe programmes serving vulnerable youth who are either at risk of dropping out or are no longer in traditional schools. Ironically, because they are often associated with students who were unsuccessful in the past, many alternative schools are thought to be of much poorer quality than the traditional K–12 school system, and yet because they are challenged to motivate and educate disengaged students many alternative education programmes are known for their innovation and creativity.

The Common Core of Data, the US Department of Education's primary database on public elementary and secondary education, defines an alternative education school as 'a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot 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' (US NCES, 2002: 14, table 2).

A definitive typology of the many types of alternative education schools and programmes that fall within this rather broad definition has yet to be developed and accepted by the field. Many dimensions of interest that could be used to develop a typology of alternative schools and programmes have been identified (Aron and Zweig, 2003). In the early 1990s, Mary Anne Raywid (1994: 26–31) proposed a typology based on a programme's goals as their distinguishing characteristic. Despite being quite old, Raywid's typology is still widely used, in part because it captures such a full continuum of existing programme types:

- 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. […] 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' (ibid.).

- Type II schools' distinguishing 'characteristic is discipline, which aims 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' (ibid.).

- 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 counselling, access to social services, and academic remediation – students can choose not to participate' (ibid.).

The first group includes many of the original alternative education programmes developed for at-risk youth and are often referred to as 'popular innovations' or 'true educational alternatives.' Programmes for high school dropouts (or potential dropouts) sponsored by school districts would fit into this category, along with newer programmes for students unable to pass standardized tests (Krentz et al. 2005). The other two types are more correctional in focus, one being primarily disciplinary ('last chance' or 'soft goal' programmes) and the other therapeutic ('treatment' programmes). Most of these operate separately from regular schools, although they can be sponsored by school districts.

Preliminary research by Raywid and others suggests that the first group of programmes – the true educational alternatives – are the most successful, while alternative discipline programmes are much less likely to lead to substantial student gains. Rigorous evaluation studies are still needed, but anecdotal evidence suggests that outcomes for therapeutic programmes are more mixed, with students often making progress while enrolled but regressing when they return to a more traditional school.

It should also be noted that as more programmes develop a mix of strategies and approaches, often intended to meet multiple needs, the distinctions between Raywid's groupings can blur. So for example, Type I and Type II schools are increasingly likely to offer clinical counselling (a Type III characteristic).

Another promising typology, proposed by Melissa Roderick, puts students' educational needs at front and centre. Rather than focusing on a student's demographic characteristic (or 'risk factor') or even a programme characteristic, this typology focuses on the educational challenges students present (Aron and Zweig, 2003: 28). Roderick has identified several distinct groups:

- Students who have fallen 'off track' because they have got into trouble and need short-term systems of recovery to route them back into high schools. The goal of getting them back into regular high schools is both appropriate and realistic for this group.

- Students who have prematurely transitioned to adulthood either because they are (about to become) parents, or have home situations that do not allow them to attend school regularly (for example, immigrant children taking care of siblings while their parents work, those coming out of the juvenile justice system with many demands on their time).

- Students who have fallen substantially off track educationally, but are older and are returning to obtain the credits they need to transition into community colleges (or other programmes) 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 goal system, or have had a pregnancy and are now ready to complete their secondary schooling. Roderick noted that these students are currently populating most alternative education programmes in large urban areas – they are a very diverse group and tend to be well served by the existing alternative school system.

- The final group consists of students who have fallen 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. They include 17- or 18-year-olds with third and fourth grade reading levels who have never graduated from eighth 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 youth, and most school systems do not have any programmes that can meet their needs.

Roderick argues that by targeting a particular demographic or 'problem' group, such as pregnant/parenting teens, programmes may be setting themselves up for failure if the students in a single programme encompass too much educational diversity. As a group, pregnant/parenting teens may include students who are two credits away from graduation, others who are wards of child welfare agencies and who have multiple problems such as being far over age for grade, and yet others who have significant behavioural problems and may be weaving in and out of the

juvenile justice system. No single school or programme can be expected to handle such a wide array of educational and other needs.

What characterizes high-quality alternative education programmes?

Research on what works and for whom in alternative education is still evolving. There are few scientifically based, rigorous evaluations establishing which programme components lead to various positive outcomes for different subgroups of youth. The newness of the field means that researchers and policy-makers are still examining the characteristics of promising programmes, but lists of these characteristics are starting to converge and point to the variables that should be measured and monitored as more rigorous evaluations are designed and conducted. These characteristics include the following (drawn from a summary reported in Aron, 2006):

- Academic instruction. Successful programmes have a clear focus on academic learning that combines high academic standards with engaging and creative instruction and a culture of high expectations for all students. Learning must be relevant and applicable to life outside school and to future learning and work opportunities. Applied learning is an important component of the academic programme. This is often where employers can play important roles as partners. The curricula address the education and career interests of the students. The curricula are academically rigorous and tied to state standards and accountability systems. The students, staff and parents know and share the learning goals. Students have personalized learning plans and set learning goals based on their individual plans. There are opportunities for youth to catch up and accelerate knowledge and skills. A mixture of instructional approaches is available to help youth achieve academic objectives.

- Instructional staff. Instructors in successful alternative programmes choose to be part of the programme, routinely employ positive discipline techniques and establish rapport with students and peers. They have high expectations of the youth, are certified in their academic content area and are creative in their classrooms. They have a role in governing the school and designing the programme and curriculum.

- Professional development. Successful alternative education programmes provide instructors with ongoing professional development activities that help them maintain an academic focus, enhance teaching strategies and develop alternative instructional methods. Staff development involves teacher input, work with colleagues and opportunities to visit and observe teaching in other settings.

- Size. Many alternative education programmes are small with a low teacher/student ratio and have small classes that encourage caring relationships between youth and adults.

- Facility. Effective alternative learning programmes are in clean and well-maintained buildings (not necessarily a traditional school building) that are attractive and inviting and that foster emotional well-being, a sense of pride, and safety. In some instances, the programmes are located away from other high schools in 'neutral' territory. Most are close to public transportation.

- Relationships/building a sense of community. Successful alternative education programmes link to a wide variety of community organizations (cultural, social service, educational, and so on) and the business community to provide assistance and opportunities for participants. Through partnerships with the business community, alternative education providers are able to provide their students with job shadowing and internship opportunities, guest speakers and company tours, and receive valuable input into their curriculum and project development. Connections with community organizations can provide health care, mental health services, cultural and recreational opportunities for youth in their schools.

- Leadership, governance, administration and oversight. Many studies highlight the need for administrative and bureaucratic autonomy and operational flexibility. Administrators, teachers, support services staff, students, and parents should be involved in the different aspects of the programme. This autonomy builds trust and loyalty among the staff. A successful alternative education programme has a strong, engaged, continuous, and competent leadership, preferably with a teacher/director administering the programme.

- Student supports. Successful alternative education programmes support their students through flexible individualized programmeming with high expectations and clear rules of behaviour. They provide opportunities for youth to participate and have a voice in school matters. Structure, curricula and supportive services are designed with both the educational and social needs of the student in mind. Many schools do daily follow-up with all students who are absent or tardy and develop reward systems to promote attendance and academic achievement. Programmes are both highly structured and extremely flexible. Rules for the school, which the students help create, are few, simple and consistently enforced. There are processes in place that assist students in transitioning from school to work and from high school to post-high school training.

- Other contributing factors include clearly identified goals; the integration of research into practice in areas such as assessment, curriculum and teacher training; the integration of special education services and English Language Learning (ELL); and stable and diverse funding.

An interesting aspect of this list is how universal and appealing it is. These are qualities that would seem to benefit *any* educational programme, not just 'alternative' ones. This supports the idea that while current approaches to alternative education may be defined by and understood as being 'different' from mainstream educational options, one future vision is that communities have an array of high-quality educational options that all share many of these desirable characteristics.

What should alternative education programmes accomplish?

Currently there are few rigorous studies that examine the effectiveness of alternative education programmes in terms of student outcomes. Much more research is needed in this area, especially given that performance measures used by mainstream schools may not be appropriate for some alternative schools or programmes.

Work has advanced on what types of outcome measures *should* be targeted and monitored. Alternative education programmes are first and foremost *educational* programmes, so they need to focus on preparing students academically while also meeting the additional needs of their students. Evaluations of the programmes should include a variety of educational and other outcomes for participants.

Aron and Zweig (2003) have already noted the importance of developing accountability systems as well as better data collection and analysis that would support such systems. Part of the challenge involves figuring out 'how to introduce high academic standards in alternative education systems without sacrificing the elements that make alternative programmes successful, and without compromising the integrity of the high standards' (NGA Center for Best Practices, 2001: 1). Recommendations designed to strengthen the adoption of high standards by alternative education programmes include:

- improving 'early warning systems' to identify lower-performing students;

- collecting and analysing student-level data;

- developing enhanced GED programmes;

- developing data-driven accountability measures for alternative education programmes;

- strengthening links between traditional and non-traditional education systems;

- investing resources to support the transition to high academic standards and beyond; and

• supporting longer-term alternative education programmes.

Along with high standards should come adequate and reliable funding. Adopting a single high standard, even a voluntary standard, would help the field identify and promote those high-quality alternatives that deserve more support and replication across communities, and eliminate those low-performing ones that are not serving young people well. It would also go a long way towards increasing the legitimacy of alterative offerings, demonstrating the feasibility (and desirability) of offering multiple high-quality options and even integrating the traditional and mainstream ends of the educational continuum. Ironically, these two ends are not so far apart. As Raywid observed in 1994 and which is still true today:

> Amid all the current talk of school restructuring, alternatives are the clearest example we have of what a restructured school might look like. They represent our most definitive departure from the programmematic, organizational and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform. Moreover, 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: 26)

Discussion questions

1. What can and should local communities do to develop a portfolio of high-quality schooling options that best matches the educational needs of young people? How might these portfolios differ from one community to another, or in one community over time?
2. What can and should be done at the local, regional and national levels to raise the profile of alterative schools and the widespread need for such schools? What can traditional schools learn from high-quality alternative schools and vice versa?
3. Can we dispense with the labels 'traditional' and 'alternative' when it comes to schools? What exactly are these terms meant to reflect, and are there other, better, terms that capture what we usually mean when we talk about a traditional or alternative school?

Further reading

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