

Review and Recommendations

As the DeKalb County School System (DCSS) starts a new era with a new superintendent of schools and some key changes in the executive staff, new initiatives will be adopted and implemented. The primary focus of all school districts throughout the nation is to enhance academic performance while increasing the graduation rate for all students. The population most at risk of not graduating nationally as well as in DCSS is the at risk population. At risk can be defined as students who encounter physical, behavioral and emotional obstacles that they must overcome in order to graduate from high school. The research is clear and states that these students must have some additional assistance to help them overcome these obstacles and graduate from school.

Historically, if not given assistance, this population will become lost in the school system and be exposed to an inferior education in poorly designed alternative schools, lengthy unfair suspensions and eventually drop out of school. In addition, these at risk students are part of the pipeline to local jails and state prisons. It is imperative that the DCSS provide the essential needs for all students who are at risk. Students at risk that drop out of school and who do not graduate contribute to America's economic woes. The cost of student failure is immeasurable because in this formula a myriad of factors must be included such as thousands of stunted lives, and millions of dollars of unknown opportunities.

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.), this paper focuses on those serving school-aged vulnerable youth who have dropped (or have 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 such as: (1) physical and psychological safety; (2) appropriate structure; (3) supportive relationships; (4) opportunities to belong; (5) positive social norms; (6) support for efficacy and mattering; (7) opportunities for skill building; and (8) integration of family, school, and especially community efforts. The best programs also address the specific needs of children from various racial and ethnic groups and those with special needs.

Given their importance in the public education system, states and communities are increasingly turning their attention to alternative education issues, and are wanting much more information than is currently available. 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.

The purpose of this overview is to synthesize 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 clarification 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 *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 factor 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.

Strategic Changes for Public (School) Safety

- Clearly define name and duties of Public Safety

Properly identify the DeKalb County police department as Public School Safety for the purpose of relating school safety officers to DeKalb County School System.

- Reorganize Campus Supervisors

Reassign Campus Supervisors to alternative education for closer supervision and in-services to reduce the number of suspensions in schools.

Develop and implement safe school audits for the purpose of reducing suspensions and hearings.

- Combine Public (School) Safety Department with the Alarm Department and assess efficacy of the department financially and staff production. (What is the cost of an alarm department operating as an individual entity?)

- Analyze operating budget for Public Safety officers and staff.

Strategic Changes Suggested for 2013 School Year for Alternative Education Programs

The 2013 school year should include the following suggested changes to increase the probability of academic success among at-risk students:

- Provide transportation for all alternative education students.
- Combine alternative education facilities to simplify the transportation process.
- Combine alternative education facilities to maximize educational resources.
- Implement equitable consequences throughout the district for violating the Student Rights, Responsibilities and Character Development Handbook .
- Reduce the number of suspensions in the school district.
- Reduce the number of hearings (evidentiary) held yearly.

Strategic Changes for Student Support Services

Assess department staff and duties and all goals should be quantifiable.

Psychological services- *Dr. Gale Thomas*

How many members make up staff in central office and in schools?

Guidance/ Counseling Mentoring- *Dr. Vasanne Tinsley*

Number of staff members in central office and schools

Prevention/ Intervention- *Jennifer Errion- Assistant Director*

Number of staff members in central office and schools

Hospital Homebound Instruction

Homebound Spec-*Antoinette Friday- Assistant Director*

Number of staff members in central office and schools

Social Worker- *Lorenza Alzaga- Assistant Director*

Number of staff members in central office and schools

Student Health Services (Nurses/Clinical Assistant) -

Jennifer Jackson- Allen Assistant. Director- Frances

Patterson- Lead Nurse

Student Support Team/Section 504- *Jennifer Jackson-Allen-*

Assistant Director

Areas of Focus

- Provide Effective Leadership and Resources
- Performance Management
- Increase Support to Schools and Students

How We Will Achieve Strategic Changes

Changing the culture of an organization can be very difficult. It calls for intensive in-services and it may be necessary for extreme measures such as removing staff from departments. Old embedded dysfunctional habits are really hard to give up. All support services should do what they are purported to do. They should meet the needs of the population that they serve. This support should be in the form of outcomes that are measurable.

This cultural change cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the organization. Families and the community should play an active role. They must be involved. This involvement can take many forms, all of which are vital to success. Parents can help with assignments by ensuring that children are rested and ready for school and set high behavioral and academic expectations. Volunteers from neighborhoods, places of

worship, local businesses and the community at large can give time and expertise to help children succeed in school. Positive behavior can be infectious and spread among the staff and students which will lead to an environment in which students thrive.

Provide Effective Leadership and Resources

Measurements

Each department will develop metric goals. The target score for each goal will be set at one hundred percent (100%).

Key Strategies

Clearly define effective leadership and resources.

Tactics:

1. Develop method to measure goal outcomes.
2. Create a system to link support staff with schools so that support staff and school services to students can be measured.
3. Incorporate effectiveness measures into the district data report to provide external and internal data.

4. Use school's performance outcome to evaluate support staff.

Performance Management

Measurements

One hundred percent (100%) of all alternative education and support services staff will meet or exceed expectation by 2014.

Key Strategies:

1. Create and/or enhance performance-management tools.
2. Create an individual growth plan for each employee with specific measurable goals for improving performance.
3. Provide training that will enhance the growth of each staff member.
4. Provide periodic performance feedback with recommendations to staff.

Increasing Student Support Services

Measurements

Enhance support services to schools by achieving all targeted goals at ninety percent (90%) by the end of the 2013 school year.

Key Strategies:

Align intervention strategies and support services with daily instruction.

1. Establish or improve therapeutic services at schools through community partnerships
2. Improve process for integrating students returning from alternative settings into their assigned schools, including providing an individualized plan that will follow the student and address the student's academic, psychological, social and health needs.
3. Expand and improve intervention and coordinated school health teams in all schools.
4. Provide alternative settings or means to earn credits toward graduation and provide transportation.
5. Develop or improve short-term suspension (10 days or less).

Ensure that DCSS schools are safe and orderly learning environments.

1. Develop and conduct safe school audits.
2. Initiate quarterly discipline monitoring system in every school to review data and develop a plan to address issues.
3. Provide or improve training for school administrators and school resource officers to develop a collaborative cohesive team for managing campus security.
4. Reassign campus security supervisors to an associate superintendent to enhance training and develop a safe schools audit process.

Improve district attendance rate.

1. Develop or improve truancy court initiative.
2. Develop or improve Parent Institute (P.I.) to communicate the importance of attending school and other issues relative to suspension.

Expand partnerships with community agencies to focus on elementary, middle and high school feeder patterns, so that students going to the most challenged high schools can get their essential needs met to graduate from school.

Conclusion

It is clear that 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). 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*

Recommendations for Reducing Disproportionate Exclusionary Practices

Clearly, school districts must reexamine the use of exclusionary discipline policies and consider alternative disciplinary practices if disproportionality is to be reduced. Alternative practices that have proven effective largely focus on primary, secondary, and tertiary (of the third order) levels of prevention (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2001; Rutherford, Quinn, Leone, Garfinkle, & Nelson, 2002). Primary prevention strategies are generally considered to be for all students in a school; secondary prevention strategies are for those students in need of additional support, and tertiary prevention programs are for the few students in a school with the most challenging behaviors, as part of school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) models (Sugai & Horner, 2002). These prevention methods as outlined by Rutherford et al. (2002) are:

Primary Prevention should focus on direct teaching of rules and positive behaviors, evaluation of the school environment to identify and prevent problems prior to occurrence, appropriate responses to inappropriate behaviors, and re-teaching of appropriate behaviors through behavior support teams.

Secondary Prevention strategies should focus on primary strategies as well as developing behavior intervention plans for students who are experiencing behavioral difficulties, school-wide awareness and support of students' behavioral goals, and multi-systemic support within the school.

Tertiary Prevention strategies should include primary and secondary prevention strategies as well as an ecological/wraparound approach to intervention services, and the availability of a continuum of alternative environments.