

Science Safety



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U.S. Department of Justice
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discipline (dys'ə plīn), *n., v., -pline*
1. training to act in accordance with rule
discipline. 2. instruction and exercise



Pepperdine University's National School Safety Center is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education. NSSC's goal is to promote safe schools free of drug traffic and abuse, gangs, weapons, vandalism and bullying; to encourage good discipline, attendance and community support; and to help ensure a quality education for all children.

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About the cover:

Discipline, or more accurately, the lack of, is identified as the root of many of our schools' problems. Only drugs in schools concern the public more. Illustration by Karen Watson.

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With student misbehavior constantly being referenced as a major concern in schools, alternative settings for disruptive youth are a likely solution.

Alternative schools for disruptive youth

While most students who participate in American public education succeed, some muddle through the system with difficulty and others even react violently in the traditional school setting. Whether problems are caused by the student, poor parenting, ineffective schooling or social alienation, the results are the same — high incidences of substance abuse, vandalism, crime and suicide. If schools are to be safe, alternative programs for disruptive youth must be developed, implemented and maintained.

In a special congressional hearing on alternative programs for troubled youth, testimony by education professionals, Justice Department officials, juvenile court judges and directors of alternative schools recommended that alternative programs be significantly expanded to address the problems of dropouts and delinquent youth in both the public and private sectors.

Most experts agree that alternative programs for disruptive and at-risk youth will grow through the 1990s. These programs promise to address a variety of needs for many students. For example, court schools, independent study and community school programs provide at-risk youth with alternatives to the traditional school setting. Such alternative placement often is required for juvenile offenders who pose a threat to the well-being of other students in

regular schools. Students of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, on the other hand, simply may require the individualized attention alternative schools provide. Other alternative schools and programs focus on special education, school survival skills or employment preparation.

Overall, alternative schools have the potential to reduce dropouts, improve student achievement and parental involvement, reinforce class integration, and provide support for students dissatisfied with traditional programs. The future of American education may, in part, depend upon the public school's ability to provide these significant alternative services.

Background

Alternative schools have helped shape the history of education, growing out of emerging social needs created by shifts in values during periods of transition. These shifts, supported by demographic data, are creating renewed interest in alternative education.

But finding and training teachers committed to the potential of alternative education may be a problem. No school of education currently is offering a formal program in alternative schooling, says Dr. Mario Fantini of the University of Massachusetts, considered by some to be the "godfather" of alternative schools for his work with the Ford

Foundation in the '60s. "Until public schools begin to embrace diversification, schools of education are out of sync if they try to develop these alternatives," asserts Fantini in the June 24, 1987, issue of *Education Week*.

Although some educators view alternative schools as a way to eliminate problem students from the regular classroom, these programs more properly serve real student needs. C. Catherine Camp, a consultant for the Office of Research of the California State Assembly, feels there is a need to provide a variety of ways for developing student skills and competence. "The failure represented in dropping out is in large part a failure of the schools to provide an environment which can accommodate students with a variety of needs," Camp notes.

Harold Hodgkinson, in a statement titled "Meeting the Needs of Children and Youth at Risk of School Failure" reproduced in the June 24, 1987, edition of *School Board News*, said:

As students have deviated more and more from the norm, the [educational] system has served them less and less well. We sometimes seem to say to them, "We've provided the system. It's not our fault if you don't succeed." Whether that attitude is right or wrong, the critical mass of at-risk children and youth has grown so large proportionately that we are

in some danger of being toppled by our sense of rightness and righteousness. Instead of blaming the students for not fitting the system, we must design and implement a structure that provides appropriate educational services to those most at risk.

Through the years, various programs have attempted to address the problems of delinquency and dropouts. Often, alternative education is considered anything different from the type of schooling a majority of students' experience. Alternative programs may be classified as campus programs, schools within schools, separate facility schools, community programs, intervention programs and correctional facilities. Daniel Duke in his book *The Retransformation of the School* suggests, "An alternative school simply is a school accessible by choice, not assignment."

It is not surprising then that Hofstra University education professor Mary Anne Raywid refuses to label programs for disruptive students as alternative schools. "There is nothing chosen about them; it's something to which one is sent as a form of punishment," she states in an April 22, 1987, *Education Week* article.

Raywid emphasized that while both alternative schools and programs for disruptive students originated in the 1960s and '70s, true alternative schools provide a less restrictive, more stimulating educational environment than regular public school curricula. Discussing the growth in programs for disruptive youth, she says:

What happened, I think, is that some schools began setting up these programs, instead, on the basis that these are a bunch of troublemakers and we'd like to get them out of here or at least contain them. People began to worry about kids leaving schools and, rather than in-school suspensions, they thought, "Here's a way to retain youngsters and provide a disruptive kid with a better environment than being out on the street."

W.L. McKinney, in a 1978 *Qualitative Evaluation* article, noted that alternative schools did not evolve as a natural outgrowth of their own positive philosophy, but from a reaction to what were viewed as negative features of conventional schools.

Darrell Santschi, in a May 9, 1987, *Riverside (California) Press Enterprise* article titled "Continuation Schools are Havens for Misfits," found two continuation schools in his community to have enthusiastic students, parents and staff; a good reputation; and high expectations of student performance. "One of continuation schools' biggest challenges is battling a poor public image born out of the '60s when these schools were regarded as a dumping ground," Santschi said.

But the debate continues to grow among professionals and parents on the issue of alternative school placement for disruptive students and at-risk youth. Some argue that these schools are little more than youth prisons which encourage class distinction and alienation. Other critics point to a relaxation of standards, short class periods, diversion of resources from regular classes and lack of objective evaluation data as reasons to question continued support for alternative programs.

John Mesinger, writing in *Behavioral Disorders*, found some alternative education programs placed totally different categories and ranges of behaviorally disordered youth in the same setting. Mesinger, in identifying more than a third of incarcerated delinquents as disabled, warned that current stress-inducing trends are likely to increase the number of behaviorally disordered youth.

Criticisms aside, enthusiasts of alternative programs — including many students — emphasize the quality of education and individualized attention practiced in many alternative schools. An energetic and dedicated staff often provides the support necessary to modify poor behavior. As one student of the Alternative Learning Center in

Vancouver, Washington, said, "When you choose to be here, you will work hard...get involved in the school's activities and within the community."

The National Alternative Schools Program and the National School Boards Association indicate that as many as 35 percent of public school districts have some form of alternative school programs. Minneapolis, Minnesota, has enrolled nearly 68 percent of its students in alternative programs, and in Montclair, New Jersey, all students in the district attend alternative schools.

Many forms of private education may be considered "alternative," and a growing market for educational options exists. Industry data indicate that private alternatives are growing at a comparatively faster rate than public programs, especially in preschool, child-care, remedial and juvenile correctional facilities.

According to a 1985 National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention document, "Reports of the National Juvenile Justice Assessment Centers," the number of status-offender youths committed to private facilities rose dramatically after 1974. Since status offenders may not be institutionalized, private sector alternatives are becoming the school of "choice."

Despite this trend in the private sector, public schools are establishing alternatives within local school districts. During the 1960s and '70s, public alternative schools experienced a renaissance by tapping unmet needs in the areas of vocational training, exceptional education and the fine arts. Philadelphia's Parkway Program was the first modern autonomous example of a public alternative school. Other programs, including the Metro School in Chicago and the St. Paul Open School in St. Paul, Minnesota, offer alternative models that form the basis for many successful programs for at-risk youth. Current programs include the Downtown Senior High in San Francisco and the Hope School in Inglewood, California.

Johns Hopkins University professor

Gary Gottfredson, in his paper "Evaluation of Programs for Delinquency Prevention Through Alternative Education," found that in the alternative schools he studied, students and teachers felt safer, teachers were victimized less, attendance improved and teacher commitment increased. Alternative programs for disruptive youth share several characteristics proven successful in a number of schools. These include:

- Assignment by choice from options provided by the school district, human services, probation or the courts.
- Daily attendance and progress reports.
- Continual monitoring, evaluation and formalized passage from one step or program to another.
- Direct supervision of all activities.
- Administrative and community commitment to the program and its financial support.
- Mandatory parent and student counseling.
- Full-day attendance with a rigorous workload and minimal time off.
- High standards and expectations of performance.
- Curricula addressing cultural and individual learning style differences.
- Clear and consistent goals for students and parents.
- Motivated and culturally diverse staff.
- Democratic climate.

The democratic setting found in many of these schools engenders hope and confidence in students who may lack self-esteem. In addition, different learning styles are addressed in a more effective manner within the flexibility of a personalized alternative setting. Reporting in the June 24, 1987, edition of *Education Week*, author William Snider remarked:

Anecdotal evidence on the effectiveness of choice is mounting. Interviews with officials involved in an array of plans produce consistent reports of better attendance rates, fewer discipline problems, lower dropout rates and higher student achievement.

Alternative school and programs will continue despite criticism. Demographic evidence suggests these programs will grow in the future. As American society becomes more pluralistic, alternative education will play a larger role in serving diverse student populations. Perhaps the critical question for educators is not whether alternative schools will flourish, but in what direction traditional forms of education will proceed in the rapidly shifting environment of the late 20th century.

Demographics

America faces significant shifts in population that will alter current social and educational agendas. These shifts have a direct effect on schooling for disruptive and at-risk youth.

The concern that minority children are experiencing increased difficulty in the public schools was addressed by former National Education Association president Mary Hatwood Futrell in a June 27, 1987, article in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Minorities Hurt by New Standards." Futrell, commenting on the quality of minority education, said, "As we have raised standards, minority children have suffered because we don't have adequate support systems in place."

Even so-called "model minority" students were cited by Futrell and an NEA study group as suffering from mismatched expectations. Asian youngsters who have identity problems arising from learning difficulties often belong to gangs, leading to "dropouts, suicide and, in some cases, homicide," reported Robert F. Chase, a Connecticut teacher who headed the Asian study group for the NEA.

Alternative schools, recommended by administrators, teachers or counselors but ultimately chosen by students and parents, may provide the key to preventing the repeated failure of segregated or minority dominated schools. Researcher Denise Gottfredson, assistant professor at the University of Maryland's Institute of Criminal Justice and Criminology, says that a major delinquency preven-

tion study revealed four safe schools needs:

- The need for clear, fair and consistent rule enforcement that promotes a belief in the validity of school rules among delinquency-prone youth.
- The need for teaching methods that promote academic success among low achievers and make these kids come to school more regularly.
- The need for ways to encourage attachments to teachers and other students.
- The need to strengthen schools as organizations by increasing communication, consensus and cohesion.

Alternative schools are the bridge between the present and future. They have the potential of providing immediate solutions while giving regular schools the time they need to develop effective remediation and prevention strategies. This transition function historically has been the purpose of alternative education programs.

Research perspectives

Studies specifically related to alternative education have focused primarily upon their organizational development rather than their effectiveness. Lack of performance data may be due, in part, to the fragile nature of alternative programs. Many programs, especially for at-risk youth, are short-lived. Alternative education seems to be particularly sensitive to the ebb and flow of resources, public opinion and internal stresses. For these reasons, long-term studies of alternative programs are sparse.

In *Expelled to a Friendlier Place: A 1984 Study of Effective Alternative Schools*, authors Martin Gold and David Mann were most interested in the social/psychological aspects of alternative education. Working from a theory that delinquency is the result of a psychological defense against a low self-esteem and that schools are a "significant provoker" of delinquent behavior, they studied alternative schools with the following characteristics:

- A population of delinquent and/or disruptive youth who would otherwise be excluded from school;
- Programs geared toward successful scholastic experiences through individualized curricula, progress grades and a suspension of the conventional teacher-student role;
- Longevity; and,
- Oversubscription, to provide experimental control.

Gold and Mann found that of the five schools meeting the research criteria, all reported a general decline in problem behaviors over the 14 months of the study. The study revealed that students in different emotional states responded differently to alternative schooling. Consequently, the study concluded that self-esteem attitudes were an important variable in changing disruptive behavior. Additionally, having classes in separate buildings during the school day and a flexible staff seemed to be significant factors of success.

Gold and Mann's conclusions provide an important key to the understanding of what, in their opinion, makes for effective alternative schools. They wrote:

When students in an alternative program develop more confidence in themselves as students, more commitment to their education, and better global attitudes toward school, improvement in their behavior and performance persist for most of them even when they re-enter a conventional program which they do not regard as so flexible.

Some researchers indicate that effective alternative schools will lead to better and safer public schools in the near future. James Piatt, writing in the *Crime Prevention Review*, noted that alternative schools can be effective agents in preventing crime. The National Crime Prevention Institute encourages schools to work with communities in crime-prevention programs. Daniel Duke, author of *Managing Student Behavior Problems*, found that alternative schools can be

effective in altering negative behavior. He wrote:

Additional support for the utilization of alternative schools to combat student behavior problems comes from a national study of disruption in urban secondary schools. The finding is clear — larger schools experience a proportionately greater number of problems. The blue-ribbon National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education urged that "small, flexible, short-term, part-time schools be established and made available to all who are qualified and interested."

Gary Gottfredson described interim assessments of the effects of interventions targeted at specified subpopulations in alternative school projects:

- An alternative school in Compton, California, that places high-risk youth in a small school and takes a personalized approach to education appears to have been remarkably effective in altering delinquency characteristics.
- An in-school peer counseling intervention program in the Chicago public schools has produced positive effects on belief in rules, delinquent behavior and school grades.
- A project in seven Charleston County schools blends a group of approximately 100 high-risk youths into the regular school. This alternative project has increased attendance, promoted attachment to the school, enhanced self-concept, reduced serious delinquent behavior and improved student employment.
- Interim results for a small alternative school in Miami suggests that there is significantly less absenteeism, fewer suspensions, less tardiness and more academic credit earned than in the regular public schools. The Miami project uses a token economy system, academic education and a professional/vocational curriculum.
- Alternative projects in Charleston, South Carolina; Kalamazoo, Michigan; and Puerto Rico succeed as primary prevention mechanisms, while proj-

ects in Plymouth, Michigan, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were less effective.

While research efforts need to be expanded, many programs now operating offer promise without the benefit of a research foundation. These schools represent many possibilities for the future of American alternative education. The educational community has little doubt that alternative schools will continue to develop in response to a growing diversity of experience.

Pressure to increase suspensions and expulsions in some school districts, however, may destroy the potential of alternative schooling. A narrow perception of alternative schools as a "dumping ground for bad kids" limits choice and creates controversy as well. When schools make unilateral decisions without a substantial public relations effort to both inform and involve the larger community, negative responses flourish.

In Los Angeles, for example, school officials recently suggested sending 30 expelled students to classrooms in an administrative office. The idea drew complaints from nearby residents who said they feared that the students would increase crime in their neighborhood. After a meeting, the students were placed in a community day-care center voluntarily staffed by some of the neighborhood adults who had earlier objected to the district proposal. Those adults were no longer part of the problems; they had become part of the solution.

Because the alternative school was part of the neighborhood and not just the school system, responsibility for the students became a community priority. Through their involvement with the students, neighborhood adults actively participated in collective child-rearing and felt safer. By altering perceptions and expectations of what an effective community-based alternative school can be, safer schools and neighborhoods can be achieved. □