

# **MULCH, HOOPS AND HOMEMADE PIE**

**A Report to the Kentucky State Board of Education  
on  
A5 and A6 Programs in the Commonwealth**

**Respectfully submitted by:  
Kentucky Youth Advocates**



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**Research Question Posed to Alternative Program Students in This Study:  
*Why did you decide to stay at this school?***

**One Answer:**

***Our day is clearing security and then going outside and  
mulching or cleaning a pond. Then in the afternoon, we  
play hoops. And that is my kind of school.  
A class schedule that says, "Mulch and hoops."***

**A Second Answer:**

***Do you like pie? You can get pie anywhere- the corner store,  
a restaurant- and it's fine but the best pie is homemade pie.  
It fills the house with great smells and is served warm out of  
the oven just for you. This school is homemade pie for me.***

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## INTRODUCTION

In January 2005, Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA) released its report, "The Other Lottery", around the child welfare system in the Commonwealth. That study asserted that the child welfare system, particularly in terms of child removal and adoption processes, had neither systemic protocols nor a uniform quality. The report suggested, in essence, that how a particular child welfare case was handled ... or failed to be handled ... was based on chance rather than formalized processes. The elements of chance depended on a range of factors, including the Department of Community Based Service Region, the county, the county office supervisor or the case worker. The random and lottery-like nature of the system was a catalyst for action, ranging from the appointment of a Blue Ribbon Panel to a 10,000 page report by the Independent Inspector General, which included recommendations for felony indictments.

The A5/A6 Alternative Programs of the state reflect the same kind of randomness, the same kind of variability, and the same lack of formalized guarantees for those whom the system should serve. In many ways, this is Kentucky's other "other lottery". There are innumerable examples of stellar A5 /A6 programs throughout the state. These exemplars invariably reflect the commitment of the community, the school system, and the A5/A6 faculty. There are other kinds of positive and emboldening examples where individual educators perform heroic acts, facing seemingly insurmountable odds of inadequate supports and intense daily pressures. Unfortunately, there are other examples within alternative programs where students are trapped in an environment of hostility or are frozen in a climate of low expectations.

Let there be no question: "Mulch and Hoops or Homemade Pie?" asserts that the A5/A6 programs in the Commonwealth are a looming – if not immediate -- crisis for Kentucky's children. Those school systems, specific sites and individual educators in which learning is personalized, rigorous and relationship-based are to be noted and commended.

The kind of randomness described in this report came as no surprise to educators with whom KYA shared its findings on a preliminary basis as an attempt to confirm our perspective. As part of its efforts, KYA met with a variety of role representatives on an individual and group basis. As the project took shape, these educators shared perspectives and helped us frame our inquiry. At the request of KDE officials, KYA shared preliminary findings with key educators throughout the Commonwealth to seek their confirming or disconfirming views. The response's uniformity struck the researchers for it was, in itself, a clarion call to action around alternative programs. Whether it was at a state-wide conference for alternative school educators or in conversations with selected principals and district officials, whether it was with members of local boards of education or the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, KYA heard a resounding concurrence with what we found. A member of KASS' Board of

Directors, one leading district superintendent voiced, “You have spoken a hard truth that needs to be heard.”

**Every alternative program student ... not just the few and the fortunate ... deserve that same kind of caring and achievement-oriented setting. Therefore, this report calls for significant and overarching change within the A5/A6 sector. If every student in Kentucky is to become proficient by 2014, we as a state can afford nothing less.**

KYA wishes to express its appreciation for the accessibility and counsel of senior Kentucky Department of Education officials. Nijel Clayton and Linda Pittenger merit special commendation. The potential of this effort would not have been realized without their authentic partnership of expertise, time, and collaboration. In ways large and small, Ms. Clayton and Ms. Pittenger are the Commonwealth’s advocates for youth in alternative programs.

## **ORGANIZATION OF REPORT**

This report is organized into sections that include:

### **Findings and Recommendations**

This section summarizes the key findings of the report and suggests recommendations for policy and practice action.

### **Voices from Kentucky's Alternative Schools**

This section presents a summation of the comments derived from the focus groups held across the state. It captures the voices of students, teachers and parents around such issues as transition, academic delivery and assessment and culture.

### **Description of the Project**

This section explains the methodology and protocols of the study. It includes data source descriptions and the academic standards to which this report adheres.

### **A Review of the National Perspective**

This section synthesizes a broad review of national research around alternative education. Research-based qualities of successful, critical policy issues and emerging research agendas are included in this section.

## **History/Background:**

From the Staff note for KBE December 2006

Existing Policy. Alternative education programs have been in existence in Kentucky schools for many years. With the rapid growth of these programs in recent years, both the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) have recognized the need for oversight to ensure equitable services are provided to the increasing numbers of students served in these programs. The two types of alternative programs serving the greatest number of students are known as A5 and A6 programs. An A5 program is defined as “a district-operated and district-controlled facility...designed to provide services to at-risk populations with unique needs.” These programs vary in size and type of facility (in-school, separate building). Students usually receive educational services in A5 programs because of behavior-related reasons and/or academic deficiencies.

An A6 program is defined as “a district-operated instructional program in a nondistrict- operated institution or school.” These programs serve youth who are State Agency Children (SAC). These young people are the responsibility of the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), the Department of Community Based Services (DBCS), and the Department for Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services (DMHMR). These departments operate, fund or contract for services from a variety of programs including residential facilities, group homes and day treatment centers. The education of these youth is the responsibility of local education agencies where they reside. The Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children (KECSAC) provides supplemental funds to these school districts to provide an extended educational school year, and a lower teacher-to-student ratio to facilitate the educational needs for these at-risk youth. KECSAC currently has 110 programs operating in 54 school districts. A report from KECSAC will come to the Board in February, along with the testing data for A5 and A6 programs.

The most recent update on alternative education initiatives occurred during the June 2006 KBE meeting where information was presented on a monitoring process involving 40 alternative education programs (A5). The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) contracted with the Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) to provide the monitoring process conducted during the months of January through April 2006. A summary of the findings from this process was provided to KBE members at the June meeting. Several areas of concern emerged from the monitoring process and, as a result, Commissioner Wilhoit sent an email to all superintendents citing the areas of concern and reminding them of their responsibility to provide equitable educational services to students in alternative education programs.

Although the monitoring by KCSS provided a “snapshot” of services provided in alternative programs, KDE and KBE have expressed the need for a more comprehensive study. As a result, KDE contracted with Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA) in August 2006 to begin a yearlong study of all A5 and A6 alternative education programs in Kentucky. At the conclusion of the project, KYA will provide information about the services and facilities in existence including disaggregated information about the numbers and types of students served in these programs. A qualitative analysis of the current state of alternative education in Kentucky will be provided, in addition to recommendations, both short-term and long-term, for improvement of services. As a final component of the study, KYA will review the quality of services provided nationwide in alternative programs, and make suggestions for improvements for Kentucky programs. KYA’s full report will be presented to the KBE in the fall of 2007.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Per the introductory preface, KYA is calling for the adoption of a significant and far-reaching action agenda within the alternative program sector of the Commonwealth's public schools. The frames for recommended action include administrative infrastructure, learning delivery and assessment, and culture. There is a deliberate intention to limit specific recommendations so as to cast an achievable and reasonable action agenda for the Kentucky State Board of Education and the Kentucky Department of Education. Rather than offering a laundry list addressing major issues and minute details, the twelve specific recommendations that follow will create a sea change for alternative students in the Commonwealth both in the immediate and in the long term. The recommendations are built upon both the Kentucky context and national lessons. The recommendations call upon the State Board and State Department for leadership but also embrace the vital role of stakeholders in developing solutions. At one level, some of these recommendations will impact macro-level policy issues. At another level, other recommendations will impact the daily realities for alternative program students, parents and educators.

### **Administrative Infrastructure**

#### Key Finding

There is a lack of state administrative infrastructure to support the A5/A6 programs in areas such as student tracking, program classification, teacher quality, and fiscal equity and adequacy.

#### Discussion

##### Data-Tracking

Senior KDE officials self-identified this finding as a major concern and their view was confirmed by a wide range of educators. KDE acknowledges it is unable to ascertain an accurate enrollment for these programs on a "moment in time" basis or even in the aggregate on an annual basis. For instance, KDE shared that during the 2005-06 school year, three attempts were made to procure accurate enrollment data on specific dates. The response inaccuracies and variability confirmed that school districts were unable to supply this vital data piece to the Department. That inability not only negates essential analysis of enrollment, retention patterns and fiscal efficacy, it precludes more sophisticated – but much needed – data disaggregation around such issues as ethnicity, economic status, disability status and discrete regional pattern analysis.<sup>1</sup>

##### Classification System

Another infrastructure issue concerns the current classification system for alternative programs. In many cases, the alternative program sites and school districts were unaware of their classification. In other cases, the Department was unaware that programs existed. Additionally, other sectors involved in the

alternative programming (e.g. - Justice Cabinet; Department of Community Based Services) cite an inability to assess and track students under their watch due to the broad nature of the current classification system. A consistent theme of national best practices requires that states adopt a rigorous definition of alternative education, accompanied by distinct and defining alternative education “typologies”, or types of programs. Rather than using broad definitions such as is the practice in Kentucky, states cited for exemplary work in this area are specific in classifying programs based on such variables as the who (the population served), the where (the operational setting), and the what (content and objectives).

The classification within Kentucky programs at the moment is so broad it lacks usefulness and utility. For instance, some schools as part of this study were established as a voluntary choice for students. They operate with the intent of students spending all four years at that site and generally feature an unconventional approach to learning, characterized by high degrees of individualization, an emphasis on learning beyond the school walls and a zealous focus on post-secondary options. In contrast, discipline was the distinguishing element of other schools that were part of this study. Students did not choose to attend but were assigned for specified time durations, ranging from a multi-year basis to a matter of days. Due to placement parameters, the curriculum goals are limited and may emanate from the alternative site or from the student’s home school. Yet these opposing settings bear the same A5 classification under the current alternative program structure. That same overextension is seen in the A6 programs, in which that classification’s multi-faceted orientations are also homogenized under one overreaching and nondescriptive label.

#### Teacher Quality

Another element of this infrastructure lack is in teacher quality. Because of the inability to track all A5/A6 sites, total data is inaccessible, but the available data suggests a disproportionate level of teachers in the alternative programs as failing to meet the “highly qualified” standards. There is no question that some of this condition emanates from individual district personnel policies. However, unlike many states cited for their exemplary work, Kentucky lacks professional credentials or pathways to professional proficiency in the alternative program sector. This is a complex aspect of the administrative infrastructure equation. Certification requirements that are too rigid or restrictive will have an adverse impact on the difficult realities of staffing alternative programs. However, there are a number of options available to increase teacher quality in alternative programs without adversely impacting faculty availability.

#### Financial Structures

A fourth element of administrative infrastructure that calls for review is in the financial arena. There are abundant questions from school districts and legislators around the current funding structures that support alternative programs. Is the current distribution system value-added to or a dilution of

resources? Are there adequate guarantees within the current flexible allocation streams to ensure attention to alternative programs? What are the differentials in per pupil or per program expenditure between A1 and A5/A6 sites? Can categorical streams which are currently untapped be reconfigured to support alternative programming? Are there additional and innovative funding streams available from other state government sectors, the federal government, and community partnerships? KYA did not find a consensus around answers to the financial challenges within alternative programming. We did hear a consensus that there were available immediate and pragmatic opportunities to enhance efficiency, ensure fairness and create “venture” support from nontraditional sources.

A particular aspect of Kentucky’s fiscal mechanisms that draws attention is around facilities. Many alternative students attend state-of-the-art facilities. Others come to facilities that were closed due to inadequacy for regular students but now house students already vulnerable and lacking supports.

### Recommendations

1. *The Kentucky Department of Education should establish a tracking data base for students enrolled in alternative programs. As well as creating the capacity to determine enrollment and attendance, the tracking system should address the analytical needs for demographic disaggregation. It would seem that the new unique student identification system could be a vehicle to meet this recommendation. If using the soon to be adopted data system is feasible, alternative programs should be included in the early stages of implementation. A comprehensive tracking system for alternative programs should be in effect by the 2007-08 school year.*
2. *The Kentucky Board of Education should review and revise the current classification system to meet national standards and the needs of cross-sector partners involved in alternative programming. It should be noted that re-classification will present additional decisions for the Board. For instance, if a category is established that is typically classified as Type I nationally (e.g. - student enrollment is by choice; typical enrollment pattern is for the full high school experience; the curriculum tends to be innovative and unconventional), does that site assume responsibilities currently associated with A1 schools, including school-based council and accountability index? Or does that site continue to operate outside the typical KERA-assigned school functions? The new classification system should be in effect by the 2007-08 school year.*
3. *The Kentucky Department of Education, working with essential partner groups such as the Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB), institutions of higher education, teacher constituency bases (e.g. KEA) and practitioners should initiate a process to address the issue of teacher*

*quality.* KYA purposefully is not advancing specific recommendations around this area though it would suggest that there are national lessons to be learned. Instead, we are advocating for immediate attention to this issue through a broad-based engagement process with key stakeholders. This carries with it a long-term resolution as issues of certification and teacher supply cannot be addressed in the short-term. Conversely, KYA would assert that this group can take initial steps to improve issues of teacher quality to impact immediate conditions.

4. *Kentucky Youth Advocates in collaboration with the Kentucky Department of Education will appoint a Blue Ribbon styled panel to analyze and to then craft recommendations around fiscal practices and funding structures to address adequacy, accountability, equity and innovation within alternative programs.* Special attention needs to be paid to sustainability and capital project components of the funding structure. KYA will bring recommendations to KDE and subsequently to the State Board.

## **Learning Delivery and Assessment**

### Key Finding

*If every student in alternative programming is to reach proficiency by 2014, significant changes in locus and scope of accountability are required.*

Reconfigured and systemic support process and new KDE standards are imperative to ensure the rigorous and aligned curriculum and attention to assessment standards required for students to achieve proficiency.

### Discussion

The issue is not unique to Kentucky. Observers of the alternative program landscape cite learning delivery and assessment as the elements that have the widest quality variability. And while Kentucky is not unique, the “other lottery” aspect of alternative schools is especially vivid in this area. To some extent, this divergence is directly tied to other issues noted. For instance, the curriculum at a school where students attend by choice with the intent to complete their high school years at that site resonates with differences in purpose, scope, depth and outcomes as compared to another alternative program to which disruptive students are suspended for six weeks to then return to their home school. A site serving therapeutic needs will have a different orientation and delivery system than one serving the critically ill or “last chance” juveniles entangled in the court system. A site serving early adolescents about to become parents will and should have a different academic focus than a school serving students who need support systems of recovery to get back on track.

While many differences in programming are understandable and even desirable due to the nature of the students being served, there are other differences that lead to many students being underserved. Authorities offer no equivocation in

this aspect of alternative programs. As Kraemer and Ruzzi assert, “The best alternative programs have always searched for ways to make learning relevant and applicable to life outside of school. The conditions in which they operate require flexibility and openness to innovation and new approaches. In the end, the pledge to reach all students with high standards will rise or fall on the performance of alternative school programs that serve a quarter or more of those who must be educated in America.”<sup>2</sup>

Aron analyzed results of successful alternative programs from ten landmark research studies and in every case, the findings affirmed the need for high academic standards and expectations, a clear focus on academic learning, personalized pedagogical approaches, and attention to results.<sup>3</sup> Those standards exemplify many alternative programs in the Commonwealth but those exemplars represent an alarming minority. Instead, all phases of the field research revealed a lack of attention to academics and results. There was a genuine disengagement bordering on disdain from the state and national accountability systems. There was little evidence to suggest attention to or knowledge of individual student achievement.

Associative factors contribute to this climate, including the locus of accountability, the already noted issue of teacher quality and, in some cases, inadequate fiscal structures. However, this is a critical issue to address through processes of both support and stricture.

### Recommendations

1. *Based on significant qualitative evidence, KDE should renew its monitoring and enforcement of the six-hour instructional day for alternative programs.* The evidence is glaring that many alternative programs have little regard for six-hour instructional requirements. While KDE has made previous efforts in this regard, the authors question their impact. That emphasis should be generated as the 2007-08 school year begins.
2. *Along with embracing CATS as one metric for accountability, KDE with support from KYA should develop data-driven accountability measures explicitly designed for alternative programs as a resource to alternative programs.* While it is essential that CATS scores for alternative school students be applied to their home schools, other evaluation/assessment measures must be developed based upon the unique environments of alternative programs. To that end, KDE should establish a double helix accountability system for alternative programs. There is a distinct lack of accountability felt by alternative programs and that philosophical gap must be closed. The second leg of the assessment may vary contingent upon re-classifications of alternative programs. For instance, alternative schools in which students come and go within short time frames may need a pre- and post-testing process to measure what the student

- accomplished during his/her stay. The re-classification of programs could also result in certain alternative sites being assigned their own CATS index. The addendum for accountability should be in place for the 2008-09 school year.
3. *KDE can offer a significant resource to school districts through the development of a curriculum review process to ensure an explicit curriculum for every alternative site or program.* In many cases, alternative schools have developed a site-based curriculum that meets or exceeds appropriate standards. However, an articulated curriculum is frequently nonexistent. A KDE-developed approval process could be a valuable tool for local school superintendents to ensure that every alternative student is afforded quality curricular opportunities. The approval process tool should be tied to the completion of the default curriculum idea proposed in #4.
  4. *KDE can offer local districts a valuable tool through the development of a “default” curriculum as an option for alternative schools and programs.* The process described in #3 will reveal that many schools need an immediate alternative to current practices. KDE has an opportunity to offer needed support to alternative programs through the development of a “default” curriculum that meets high standards of rigor and accountability for schools lacking an internally developed curriculum. The default curriculum model ideally should be available for the 2008-09 school year. Minimally, it must be in place by the following year.
  5. *Given the extensive concerns and obstacles around teacher certification and teacher quality standards, KYA in collaboration with KDE will develop specific professional development initiatives to support “out of field” alternative program teachers with a focus on the academic knowledge base.* As a supplement to the content-based emphasis, alternative program support should include other strands, such as building classroom and school cultures, teacher-based action research ventures and collegial support opportunities. This recommendation’s initial stage of implementation could begin as early as the second semester of the 2007-08 school year. That timeframe would be a significant asset for programs in planning the 2008-09 school year.
  6. *KYA in collaboration with KDE will begin a process of expanding auxiliary learning programs to support alternative students.* One of the more distinguishing factors separating Kentucky’s alternative programs and national exemplars are auxiliary learning options. In national promising practices, innovative and systemic approaches are used to support student learning. These range from interdisciplinary case work approaches to community-based programming options. In Kentucky’s alternative schools, the pattern of student academic programming is much

more aligned to the conventional programming options seem more limited than even in traditional A1 settings. KDE should assess national models around such areas as vocational/technical, integrated arts and performance-based curriculum models for their applicability to the state's alternative programs. Contingent upon KYA/KDE findings and funding options, pilot efforts could begin as early as 2008-09.

## **Culture**

### Key Finding

Many alternative school students are in a school culture characterized by neither relationships nor rigor nor relevance, which are standards for which the State Board of Education advocates for all secondary students.

### Discussion

If there was an "a priori" hypothesis of this study, it would have been that alternative programs had nearly uniformly strong and healthy climates and cultures. That hypothesis would have represented the general sentiment of the key informant interviews and other stakeholder groups. Earlier discussions at the State Board level suggested that premise as well. This study certainly did encounter many alternative sites that met national exemplar standards around culture and climate. Those cultures reflect many of the qualities referenced in seminal national studies, including:

- a shared sense of community
- mutual trust
- parental involvement
- links to community organizations
- a clean, inviting and well maintained physical plant
- primacy placed on student voice
- authentic opportunities for students as respected and active contributors
- expansive interagency support services.

However, there were other patterns of culture that emerged as well. In some instances, students frankly celebrated their school's culture, but that acceptance was based on low expectations and nearly nonexistent academic demands. In other alternative sites, the climate was one of repression and fear. As referenced in the "Voices" section, this element of the alternative programs was the most diverse and conflicted of all analytical frames.

### Recommendations

Unlike the preceding sections, the most important role for KDE in tackling this theme has little to do with directives or commissioned panels. KDE must practice the art of influence. It must spotlight success stories, disseminate

lessons learned and access support tools for alternative sites that require capacity-building in this area. There are, however, some specific opportunities for KDE to support schools in creating cultures of success:

1. *KYA in collaboration with KDE will develop articulated tool kits around elements of alternative site culture.* As part of this study's review of national practices, several states regarded as leaders in the field featured explicit tool kits around elements of culture. As an example, the "Voices" section speaks to the belief of students and educators that alternative programs can be immeasurably strengthened with the addition of extracurricular activities but adds a discouraging note that alternative sites lack models for implementation. KDE can seize that issue and a host of others and apply its leadership to craft opportunities, ideas and supports to make a difference for alternative students.

Other states have followed this course. For instance, the Texas Department of Education offers more than a dozen "Recommended Parameters and Best Practices" publications around culture climate issues. These are not imposed or mandated, but rather serve as teaching tools for alternative educators. Whether around transition or community partnerships, alternative program discipline codes or parent training, these guides offer practical and pragmatic counsel for schools in building a culture that is both nurturing and expectant. Parallel documents are featured in other states (e.g.-Pennsylvania and Wisconsin) as well.

2. *KDE with support from KYA should assume the leadership point around reconfiguring support service streams and delivery models.* One of the surprises of this study was the consistently traditional support models in Kentucky's alternative sites. National exemplars feature formalized cross-sector and interagency student service teams, unconventional use of dropout funding, realigned guidance and counseling services, and post-secondary transitional emphases to create a range of support mechanisms for alternative students. In contrast, the majority of alternative sites reflect a reliance on the traditional school guidance counselor model. If there is a single recommendation in this study that can be implemented in a rapid-fire and high leverage fashion, it is this one. Traditional supports simply do not work for nontraditional students in nontraditional settings. This recommendation is not about more resources; it is about realigning existing resources to create new options and new opportunities.

## **VOICES FROM KENTUCKY'S ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS**

One of the distinguishing characteristics from a national perspective of the Kentucky State Board of Education is its innovative reliance on voices from the

field as it pursues ongoing reform within the Commonwealth's public schools. For instance, student voices were instrumental in shaping the initial secondary refocusing efforts as part of Project Vanguard. Along with the State Board, the Kentucky Association of School Boards, the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, and the White House Summit on the Senior Year were entities that listened to and learned from these student voices.

As KYA undertook this effort to help the State Board better understand the landscape of alternative programs in Kentucky, a cornerstone component was voices from the schoolhouses across the Commonwealth. Educators, parents and students were all part of the mosaic that shapes the following portrait of alternative programs from those touched by the opportunities and challenges of alternative education. The following section captures the tenor and the messages the authors heard from every corner of the Commonwealth.

### **Transition**

The transition from one school to another is never an easy process for students. Whether it is a student whose family moves from one community to another or the more routinized movement from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school, successful transitions are characterized by clearly established communication protocols.

In many cases, those standards are practiced in alternative programs in Kentucky, ensuring that students and parents are well-oriented and the receiving school is ready to immediately impact the student in a positive way.

For instance, some schools set entrance expectations on sending schools. In several cases, prior notification is required. Examples cited within the schools involved in this study ranged from seventy-two hours to three weeks. Other schools require planning documents, such as special education data, transcripts and graduation plans. Another school requires a collaboratively developed discipline plan, involving the sending school and family.

Other alternative programs assume the responsibility for transition alone. *"Realistically, we can beg for weeks and still be left holding the bag. So we finally figured out that if there was going to be transition, it was our baby. Unfair? Yes. Other options? No."* Teachers at alternative programs, for instance, frequently reference a lack of information as students begin their alternative program experiences with such observations as:

*It is a horror story because it takes weeks and sometimes months to track down educational records, especially if they are in special education. Tracking down IEPs and documentation of testing is the biggest problem we have.*

*Records? I just can't get my hands on them.*

There are exceptions. For instance, one alternative school official mentions:

*Sending schools take the sending seriously. Even in an emergency placement, we know that the kid's records will be faxed or even driven over. The other schools take the idea of cooperation seriously.*

That is the exception to the rule and therefore, a number of alternative programs turn to internal strategies to ensure a positive beginning for students. Some deal with academics. A number of sites referenced the use of diagnostic instrumentation, including the Scholastic Reading Inventory and TAPE testing.

Other alternative placements referenced the use of computerized instructional coaching systems, which *"gives us detailed information about every student before he is ever placed in anyone's classroom. That may mean the first couple of days are overly intense but in the long run, it saves us – and the students – time."* Another teacher cites such diagnostic efforts as a way to *"send the message that we want to hit the ground running."* Two sites referenced an emphasis upon establishing learning profiles for entering students. A teacher observes:

*These kids have experienced failure after failure because they don't fit into the boxes. The learning profile gives us a clue about how to reach them, how to make them successful from the get go.*

Many alternative programs also address the noncognitive side of admission. Several sites require admission conferences. These may involve the parents, admitting faculty members and other auxiliary staff. Others simply provide an interface between the student and a representative of the admitting site. The sending school faculty is authentically engaged in the intake process in less than 20% of the sites. Alternative personnel cite the inability to coordinate with sending schools, the pressures associated with making students wait for admission until schedules are coordinated, and – most profoundly – a sense that *"sending schools see us as an escape hatch. When they send us the kid, they are washing their hands of ownership."* Other sites use supplemental diagnostic and planning documents to give a focus on the noncognitive needs of students. Several programs use career inventories, the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) Work Adjustment Inventory, and associated diagnostic tools.

If there is a broad range of protocols around the intake process, a common theme is the lack of any intentionality around the transition back to the student's home school. A consistent theme cited by students is that the uncertainty in assignment breeds anxiety. Many students' observations mirrored the sentiments expressed by three students specifically:

*You can get sent back anytime. I have been here for one day and been here for one semester. And I was here for a worse incident for the one day than the one that got me here for the whole semester.*

*Look! I actually think this place helps me and so do my classmates. And they (the faculty) know it. So they use it as a big threat. Screw up and we're sending you back.*

*I'm new here but it's hard to know what to do. People come and go and come back and nobody seems to have a clue as to when. How long am I here for? Don't ask me.*

Parents consistently reflected the same uncertainty. Two parents reflected the comments of many:

*I just want to know what's up. My kid needed to come here. But now it's like I am out of the picture. How long will she be here? How will you even decide that? What happens next? I don't think those are unreasonable questions but I can't get an answer.*

*It's a black hole. I didn't know he was getting sent until he was here. The school won't tell me what's the plan. I would actually like to help but the black hole keeps me in the dark.*

When talking about transition, students and parents consistently discuss a lack of communication with the schools about the length and/or conditions of the assignment in alternative programs. When the alternative school faculties focus on transition, they consistently reference the need for more articulation in when, why and how a student returns to his home school.

A surprisingly common theme of suspicion was athletics. For example, one teacher said:

*I think that KHSAA plays a big role in a kid being assigned here. We know that \_\_\_\_\_ will become our student once they lose in the district or regional tournament. He knows I know, too. When I saw him out, he joked that the team was so good that they make the Sweet Sixteen and that I may keep seeing him until April.*

In another district, an alternative school administrator observed:

*Nothing ever in writing. Nothing ever spoken. But it is pretty clear that we are a GPA eligibility emergency room. Grade sheets come out on Monday. We get a batch of new kids on Tuesday. If they behave for three days, that means they pass for the week and they play on Friday night.*

A majority of the alternative programs make significant efforts to ensure success upon a student's return. Typical is a site at which a teacher details the exit strategy:

*We have a formal exit conference. We try to work with the home school around strategies that work. For instance, many of our kids need an "emergency out" – someone they can go to when they are ready to "blow". We try to find two people at their home school who will serve that role and connect the kid to them before he or she ever returns.*

And yet consistent concerns are expressed at whether such efforts result in positive impact upon the students. One teacher shares the students' concerns over lack of knowledge about assignment when she states:

*They're here one day and gone the next. You invest in these kids and then – BOOM! They vanish. They never tell us when they are leaving. I walk in and say, "Where is so and so?" And they are just gone.*

Another focuses on academics:

*We actually have some strategies that work. But when they leave here, they go back to whatever they left. In a lot of cases, the genesis of the problem is frustration in the classroom and I think we get a lot of bounceback kids because they simply can't adapt to traditional classrooms. The two home schools essentially say, "It's the kid's problem." Maybe it's their problem.*

An alternative program administrator suggests a straightforward idea:

*We talk and talk and talk about transitions. No one thinks we do it well. But it is about attitude. Want to have a good transition process? Then let every teacher in the county spend a day – just a day – here. That would be the best professional development they could have.*

### **Learning Delivery and Assessment**

A review of national best practices reveals that every analysis of successful alternative programs cites instructional delivery and assessment as a critical element. Outcomes and standards must be clearly defined. High – yet reasonable – expectations must be maintained. Instructional delivery must be as diverse as the students served by alternative programming. Assessment must be tied to accountability but must go beyond the annual styled testing that characterizes CATS; instead, it must provide the school with a dynamic and current evaluation of student progress.

At one alternative program, a teacher asserts:

*NCLB and CATS are the basis of our instruction. As in totally. Core content ... open responses ... integrated portfolio – everything I did at the regular high school is exactly what I do here.*

That is the exception to the rule. For more than 90% of the teachers interviewed, the responses were striking in both their intensity and commonality. One answer exemplifies this flood of reaction around accountability:

*CATS? I don't give a rat about it. It is irrelevant to what we do here. Somebody will have to threaten my job to get my attention on that.*

Even more troubling is an attitude of intention around a lack of focus on academics. A policy maker states:

*I'd be careful about talking academics. Do you want to produce a smarter next generation of criminals? We have too many jailhouse lawyers now.*

Those attitudes of neglect are not uniform. For instance at one alternative program, a teacher talks about pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of engaging her students in active learning. She muses:

*I know my legs are hurting because I never sit down. As opposed to lecture and listen, the teachers here are about interaction. Small groups ... lots of walk around teaching. Instruction here is intensely interactive. Purposefully individualized.*

Another instructor explains her site's Credit Recovery Project, describing it as a success in which:

*These kids come in a hole. We have a 70% rate of catching them up for credits. It is not a give-away. We use multiple teaching techniques. I think our use of technology – DVDs, video clips—and mixed media – text rich materials like periodicals – is better than any place I have been. We are always looking for what is going to work.*

Still another teacher declares:

*We are hands on in what we do. We believe in challenging these kids' creativity. We make our own fossils and conduct archeological digs. We infuse peer learning into activities. We camouflage academics into activities and they are actually working and learning because they are the ones doing it.*

Other sites emphasize differentiated schedules and a highly individualized approach. Illustrative is one alternative program's Renaissance Learning Project. The lead teacher builds the case for such an approach using math as her illustration:

*It is very much objective by objective. The student knows what she got right and what she got wrong. If they miss a problem, they go back and re-work it ... and keep re-working it until it is right. I know exactly where every student is on the continuum of skills. It is about mastery and self-pacing. I make their own learning style their own daily routine. We schedule kids to accomplishment – that means single periods for some and double and triple blocks for others. We are not going to lose kids because of convention.*

Another site teaches literacy through the arts. A teacher suggests:

*If traditional instruction worked, these kids most likely would not be here. Last year we tried drama as the vehicle for teaching reading and writing. We took kids at every instructional level and worked them into a series of little dramas. It's an old bromide but it's true – they learned and didn't know it.*

A companion style comment comes from another site:

*We get them out of here. "School" doesn't work on these kids. So we take them to "Tall Stacks". We go to Omnimax Theater. Our kids are in museums. And it works.*

*We expand instead of restrict the kids' achievement target zone. We pre-test; we post-test. We know assessment here and some regular schools ... dare I say ... could learn from us.*

Unfortunately these exemplary examples of an academic emphasis and a spirit of instructional innovation stand as exceptions, stark examples against a landscape where the more typical standards resonate in student comments like:

*I spend six hours a day at a computer clicking the keyboard until I get the right answer.*

*Well let's just say I got physics credit in two days. It did take three whole days to get my math credit. Unless I got really smart over here, I don't think these packets are like real class credits.*

*I kinda appreciate the place. I get sent here about twice a year for a grading period or so and it saves my GPA.*

*The grading scale here is that you either get an "A" or an "A".*

*This is not a real school. They have these computer classes and you finish a course for a full credit in two or three days.*

*I don't do classes here. I cook. I cook food for adults. I cook food for the other students. I am going into the Army. I hope I become a cook because that is the only thing I am prepared for.*

*The class I take most is lollygag. Do a packet quick on Monday and then lollygag the rest of the week. Do another packet the next Monday and then lollygag the rest of that week. Lollygag can mean sleeping to drawing on my desk to just walking around ... or walking home for that matter.*

*I went from a half credit in two years to thirteen in a semester. I figure I can graduate from college by the end of the semester if I get to stay here.*

*I could learn more at home sitting on my butt.*

*My classes? Let's see. We play pool. We play basketball. We get credit hours.*

*This is a damn babysitting service. This isn't a school. It is where they stash a bunch of kids.*

*The classes here are all about bribes. Pass security. Get here on time. Shut up during morning exercises. And by 10:30, you are in the rec room for the rest of the day.*

*I am a senior. I still plan to go to college. And in what was supposed to be an independent AP American History class, the last test had this question: "In what year did Columbus sail the ocean blue?"*

While the faculty comments are not as explicit, the typical analysis is exemplified by one administrator's comment:

*To be honest, we just don't think about academics. We are trying to get their social and personal lives straightened out and that requires negotiating priorities. CATS, portfolios and all the rest just don't play out here.*

If students reference lack of rigor, teachers reference lack of resources and opportunities as major inhibitors to better academics. There are inspirational and informative exceptions.

One alternative program administrator remembers:

*The district made a commitment to SmartBoards. Everyone was going to get them. And we got them first. That said it all.*

A teacher in another district celebrates:

*The superintendent said, "We want laptops in kids' hands." And the first hands into which they were put were our kids. I can't even explain what that means.*

However, a consistent theme was inadequate materials to support learning. A teacher, asked about the adequacy of materials, walks to a bookshelf and opens the title page on her social studies book. The copyright reads "1960". She says, "According to this book, the kids learn that the president is Dwight D. Eisenhower." And the materials equation of adequacy and equity for alternative students sparked an avalanche of comment:

*We call our technology the Green Acres Plan. Do you remember on that show where only one conversation could be on the telephone line at once? That is our internet. If I try to log on as principal to get messages, I have to find which kid or teacher is on another computer and ask them to get off so I can log on.*

*I simply want the same curricular and supplemental supplies that any other student should be provided within a free public education setting.*

*How do I teach these girls when I don't have a single textbook and no curriculum?*

*We are told Safe Schools funding won't allow field trips and those kinds of experiences are exactly what these kids need.*

*Every school gets a field trip and cultural arts budget except this one. Someone somewhere has decided that what is necessary for the rest is not needed by my kids.*

*At a meeting, the superintendent publicly said, "You are not a legitimate school. And you are not going to be afforded the resources of the \_\_\_\_\_ County Schools."*

*There is one group of students who receive no field trip allocation. There is one group of student for whom the district does not buy caps and gowns. The Board wrote us and put in writing that, "You re not part of this system."*

*Just once I would like to have a computer that was not a discard from the high school.*

*My budget is what my pocketbook can afford. The big order here is, "Don't ask."*

*We have no books. We have no paper. We have no pencils. Nothing. We are not funded by the state they tell us.*

*Let me be blunt. I am on a crusade and it has me in trouble with the superintendent and central office. My crusade is really radical. I don't like that I*

*am teaching high school and have three condemned 7<sup>th</sup> grade books as my total curricular support base.*

*I am so old I remember when opaque projectors were new. It's pretty damn sad when they are still considered new technology at this place.*

*Here's what I love. The district says, "The student was assigned a book at the beginning of the year. Get it from the sending school." The sending school says, "We had 127 books at the beginning of the year. We have to have 127 books at the end of the year. What if that student steals the book?" First, I am willing to assume responsibility for the book. Secondly, I am going to take a personal risk and assume that most of our kids won't want to steal a math book so if one vanishes, I will come up with the \$44.95. But we can't get past that mentality.*

The lack of resources is about more than material things. Lack of programming options, lack of connections to colleagues and lack of access to professional development were frequently mentioned. Illustrative is one teacher who asserts:

*We are excluded from everything. If the school was to blow up, you wouldn't know it. The only time the central office ever communicated with us was when they forgot to notify us about portfolio deadlines and we missed it. Then they beat our doors down.*

Another says,

*The reality is that the kids we serve would be inspired by quality vocational training. Kids want to work on the river. They want to be welders. They see carpentry as a career. They could have life success and stay motivated with that kind of program. But we are denied access to the chances that every kid in every school in five counties has.*

Some of the perceived lacks in access are not as broad as, for instance, vocational training. A teacher complains:

*When the state department ever comes around, it always talks about how technology can improve learning. Virtual this and virtual that. That is pretty much what we hear when we go to our national conference, too. But the superintendent has decided that our kids are too dangerous for internet access. So on one hand, we are told a best kind of practice for these specific kinds of kids. And then on the other hand, we are told that practice is off limits.*

Another thread that ran through adults and student comments were around teacher quality.

The AP student referenced earlier opined further about Columbus and the ocean blue:

*And why should that surprise me. The teacher is a kindergarten teacher. That little rhyme may be good for AP kindergarteners but not for me.*

A parent observes:

*I have been around this county and I know which teachers get sent here. Instead of making this a place where they place teachers known for their understanding, they put people here who they can't get rid of."*

At another site, a parent complains:

*We had been asking for an assistant principal. By numbers, we deserved one but the answer was always, "No funds." Then we read in the paper about an assistant principal attacking someone out in the community ... as in a big old fight. Well, guess what. We now have an assistant principal. Want to guess who it is?*

An administrator says,

*I wish I could think about NCLB and CATS. However, when I don't have a single faculty member certified in the field in which they are teaching, it is a long haul.*

Another administrator notes:

*I have dedicated teachers. But everyone teaches at least four content areas and that pretty much means that 50-75% of the time, they have to work just to learn the next chapter.*

A third administrator says:

*I would beg, borrow or steal for a certified math teacher for just one period a day. We have kids who could go places in math but we don't have anyone here to get them there. We try. We try hard. But we are not math people.*

A teacher, herself caught in that multiple content situations, makes a self assessment:

*In my content classes, I think about techniques and engaging these kids. In the other areas, I have to admit that I rely on student control rather than teaching processes. The way we are staffed means that the kids get only the best of me half a day.*

Still another teacher says:

*Here is my world. I am teaching in an area about which I have not a clue. I have not a single instructional resource. So every night I say to myself, "OK, you can pull something out of your head." And then I go to typing up worksheets and then I feel guilty that is all I can give my kids.*

Many teachers spoke about potential ideas for addressing certification issues. One teacher laments the lack of opportunity stating:

*I would like to make alternative education my career path. But when I look at graduate options, there are none. I wish a university would take this work seriously. I wish there was some kind of alternative education certification. Not a lot of people would want it, but for those of us who do, it would be a career builder.*

At a different site, a teacher calls for just that kind of opportunity:

*I say certify alternative program teachers. This is my third year in alternative programming. I am going to make it my career. But there is no systemic training or academic programming for me. I have to get a Masters. I wish they had a niche for folks like me.*

Another teacher at yet another site remembers an incident at a district-wide event:

*There was this central office big shot walking around. She literally says, "Oh, you're an alternative school teacher? What did you do to get there?" Well, I am proud of where I am. I have a degree and have taught honors classes at regular schools. But I love this place; I love these kids. But her question explains a lot of district decisions about this place.*

One area of learning delivery and assessment is so uniform as to be striking – exceptional child education (ECE). In every conversation in which the issue arose – be that with educator, parent or even students – a consensus emerged that alternative placements deliver the technical aspects of ECE. Parents referenced admission and release committees at these programs in which:

*As a parent, it was the first one I have ever been to where I knew what they meant.*

Another parent references a simple intervention:

*What I know is that gum calms down and focuses my son. At his old school, he kept getting in-school suspension for not paying attention. I would tell him to slip a piece of gum in his mouth and he would get in school suspension for chewing gum. He essentially got sent here because he spent ninety seven days in the in school suspension room for these two offenses. And here? They give him gum.*

*And I don't hear anything about that being a problem. It is a travesty that the other school was so rigid but I am glad people here understand his simple need for a motor reminder to pay attention.*

Educators cite the federally mandated Individual Education Plan (IEP) for ECE students as an asset. For instance, one administrator says:

*The fact we have to do it actually makes us have a roadmap for the ECE students. We have tried to adopt it for every student. While it is cumbersome – and as a regular school assistant principal – I used to hate all the meetings and IEPs, at this setting it keeps us accountable.*

### **Culture**

Like the preceding section, culture is referenced in every analysis of successful alternative programs. Phrases like “student-centered”, “a sense of community” and “compelling connections” permeate the research base of the climate in alternative schools that work. Therefore, the divergence of responses to culture based inquiries is both confusing and troublesome. What is the balance between student contentment and a lack of rigorous expectations? Can programs that, in fact, are differentiating learning and incorporating climate as a focus overcome the historical problems that these students bring with them?

There is an invariable correlation between the sites with an academic focus and those where students describe a climate that makes a positive difference. For instance at these rare places, the students talk incessantly about relationships:

*Relationships count here.*

*Even the teachers I can't stand sit down with me. Everybody here actually listens.*

*I say, “Yes, maam” and “Yes, sir” and mean it because they treat me like I am somebody of respect myself.*

*Dignity and respect are the top things here. They teach you about yourself. They teach you about getting better. For instance, I have anger problems and they showed me “water” words to calm down and “fire” words that can trigger things. At first, you think it is an act or even stupid. But people change here. They really do.*

*They are always talking PMA – Positive Mental Attitude. It gets in your head in a good way.*

*This school preaches The Three P's: Prepared, Prompt, Participate.*

*They know us and know how to keep us out of jams. Like they are big on mediation. We learn mediation skills. They believe we can actually learn and use those ideas.*

*This is the first place where people believed in me. They keep saying, "You can graduate. You can graduate." That is the exact opposite of what I had told at my high school.*

*The teachers just don't give up on you here.*

*They have counselors and counselors who know their stuff and even like kids. You can even see specialists in things like addictions. It is a serious way of reaching out to us kids.*

*I was always, always told I was a bad kid. Apparently, people here believe something different.*

*The principal here has a simple rule and it is why he is awesome. If any kid needs him, we can pull him out of anything he is doing. A meeting. Talking with a teacher. Doing work at his desk. If we need him, he is ours.*

*I like the support groups they have. All of us have pitiful records but some of us want to get better at life. That is hard and the support groups make a difference.*

The general sense around alternative sites is that parents are uninvolved. In some cases, the parents themselves talk about making that choice. In others, parents complain about a closed door attitude from the school. In still other sites, both parents and educators agree that the logistics of jurisdiction or distance preclude involvement. However, there are notable and commendable exceptions. For instance, one school hosted a student/parent/teacher tea. A teacher reflects:

*We got the parents in with a tea ... a real formal event. And then we as teachers took shifts, rotating around with the parents. The other teachers quietly would get a parent and move off and have an intense conference. It was a social and that sent a signal. But we got lots of mileage in building a link with moms and dads.*

Another teacher at a different site describes a "commitment to openness." She says:

*We want parents to have the freedom to walk into this place and classrooms whenever they want. There is a lot of suspicion out there about here and while it is a continuing process, we are about open doors.*

That same percolates through another site. The administrator says:

*We err on accessibility. If a parent walks in, they are my immediate priority. No appointment is needed ... just come in. We try to get them in for lunches with the kids. We will go outside of this building to meet them. They are told from Day One, "You are always welcome here."*

Still another site's administrator observes:

*The parents have a strong sense of distrust when they come in here. We open doors to dismiss assumptions. If they sit in the classrooms, if they walk the halls, if they hear what the children are saying, if they can pull the course sheets and see what we're doing, then regardless of what their kid may tell them, they know what is going on.*

A student caught the importance of the connection when he remembers:

*They make a big deal about Open House here. We want your parents here. We want you to wear a shirt and tie and be their guide that night. We all dressed up and the school took pictures and mailed them home. And at the end of the night, they brought out this spread of hot wings for us all to eat. We celebrated being here as a big family.*

Another student catches the school's commitment to going beyond expectation when he says:

*As students here, we lose out on a lot of high school. I was a starting end and a starting forward and now I don't start anything because there is nothing to start on. That is not this school's fault. They work hard on giving us something to hang onto. We just had our own prom, which was very nice. And they are going to have a World Culture Day with all kinds of food and dances for us at the end of the year.*

Parents celebrate those places where home and school connections are viable.

One parent remembers:

*The phone rang at 11:00 PM and at first I was mad because it was the school. But then I realized how hard they were trying to connect with me.*

A parent at a different location says:

*When I call and ask for an appointment, they deliver a table full of teachers and counselors and all such. They bring people in from the central office. And you know that everyone at that table is there just for you and your child.*

A third parent at yet another site observes:

*They care about when we as parents are hurting. It doesn't have to be a real big deal for them to care. And I know that reaches over to the kids here.*

That same theme of caring is heard in another parent's comment:

*I caught a teacher sitting there crying with a student. They are here for you and you're my son. Believing in the teachers makes the biggest difference in giving my child a chance, a hope.*

Yet another parent suggests:

*The greatest thing they do here is when anyone at this school sees my kid in public or at work, they make an effort to talk to him. That sends a lot of messages to my boy.*

When the educators talk about culture, they reference articulated support systems. They describe incentive programs, targeting at risk populations. But most reference the simple routines and rhythms of the school day as a way of expressing care:

*We eat with the kids. Sounds simple but that is a way to guarantee access and connection.*

*When the morning bus comes in, we look every student in the eye. We shake every student's hand. We call every student by name. It means everything when they step off that bus to start the day right.*

There are exceptions, and they loom as serious concerns for the alternative program students impacted.

Some student comments focus on adult attitudes that are described in punitive and threatening terms. For instance, a girl comments:

*They dangle you by a string. You mess up here just once and you are finished in school they say.*

Another says:

*During your admit conference, they say, "We can suspend you from here for a look on your face. We can get you arrested for the way you stand. You walk in every day wondering if an adult is going to decide to get you that day.*

At another site, a student asserts:

*Yes, I have problems. I wouldn't want to be here if I were the teachers . But the body searches here are nothing but power trip shake downs.*

Expressing a sense of hopelessness, another student says:

*I have walked in here and been told, "You don't have a prayer today. We are focusing on you." And sure enough, I am in trouble before the day is out.*

Two of the most profound examples of a punitive culture are two separate settings, settled in widely divergent communities. In the first setting, the students consistently talked about "The Box". A student describes it as:

*An isolation cell. You don't get any work. You are just assigned in there to be alone, to be isolated. They give you your lunch in there. You maybe get out for two restroom breaks. Otherwise, the school day is you and four walls. If they catch you sleeping in The Box, you get another day. Have you tried to sit for six hours with nothing to do and not to sleep?*

The other extreme example is a setting where certain students must wear certain shirts for the offense that led to their placement. These students are not allowed to talk with each other or an adult. As one student observes:

*OK. So these blue shirts say, "I am a criminal" though I have never been arrested. And then I have to go all day every day and we can't talk to a single other human being. I don't see how they can do that.*

For a student in a different setting, the cultural problem is lack of expectations:

*There are kids here who want an education. The teachers here tell you every way they can that they and this school aren't about education. They remind us that we are here because we made this mistake and that one. And we all have messed up but do they have to give up on us? Why are they even here?*

Echoing that same theme, another student remembers:

*The first day I was here I meet this teacher and he teaches me everything. His first comment to me was, "I don't get paid less if you don't do your work. I don't get paid more if you do your work. He writes 'A' and 'F' on a paper and says, 'It doesn't matter to me.'"*

Still another student provides an anecdotal backdrop to the expectations equation:

*You get the picture of what they expect when they tell you that you can have a dip cup for chewing here but you can only empty it between classes.*

At a school in which the air is filled with vulgarities, a parent complains:

*I can't figure it out. If you are an adult and cuss like that, you will be fired. And yet they are teaching these kids that cussing and verbal abuse is accepted because it is hard to get them in line.*

Whether real or perceived, another cultural issue that permeates the students' discussions is race. A student complains:

*Racism is everywhere in this place. Certain kinds here are seen as kids who made a mistake. Kids of color are seen as criminals waiting to happen.*

An immigrant student expresses feeling trapped as she says:

*Coming into the country means lots of family problems. That is why I was sent here, because I had missed a lot of school. But I had to miss because of serious stuff. And now I am here and they say, "You have missed too much for us to go over step by step and since you are here, your language problem is not our problem."*

A student at a regional center says,

*This is a very racist area. When they take us on a field trip to Wal-mart, they announce over the speaker that, "The students from \_\_\_\_\_ are here." I am here for job training but the community looks at our color and treats us like we are murderers. That is so embarrassing.*

At another site that emphasizes job training, a student says:

*This is the third cycle I have been here. And every time, every white kid gets taken for a job before any of us (immigrant) get an interview.*

There is a small but distinct echo around safety. Students observe:

*This is a scary place. I don't think the adults know what some of these kids do outside of school.*

*This is the least place safe in my life. And most people think I am tough but here I walk in fear.*

*There is a place here called "the hole". It is their version of solitary confinement. I work hard at getting tossed into there because it is the safest place going. I am there with just me and that is a relief.*

A remarkably resonant theme was around extracurriculars.

One girl's comment summarized the sentiment:

*I was in the color guard. I was on the academic team. And yes, I did mess up. But does that one mistake mean that everything is sucked out of my world. Isn't there a way I could do something along those lines here?*

It's not just students who think that way. More than one teacher and administrator shared the comments of a program director:

*This is my dream – that this place would have sports teams. That this place would have support for clubs. Hey, the movies get it – we don't. Those are the exact kinds of things that build spirit, self-esteem, and a sense of camaraderie. These kids have energy. Why can't we focus it on something positive? Maybe it is the universal language of music or maybe it is letting these kids go for their dream of being a sports star. Does one mistake ... does even a longer record of screw-ups ... mean you never get a chance to experience what makes high school high school?*

## Promising Practices

As referenced in the report's preface, there are several Kentucky and national schools with promising practices that contribute to student success. These programs – and the professionals who make them a reality on a daily basis – deserve to be highlighted, both for commendation and replication. The following exemplars are neither offered as a comprehensive list nor as a source of a formularized silver bullet solution.

What can be clearly stated is that each of these places has built a culture that emphasizes relationships along with rigor and relevance. In these schools, students are exposed to high academic standards, and an aligned curriculum. Teachers request to come to these schools and the number of highly qualified teachers is high while teacher turnover is low. There are systems in place for intake that include academic testing, an opportunity to learn the rules and many include Discovery, a national program. Communication with sending schools and families is seen as a priority both during intake and when students leave the programs to return to a home school or for graduation. Promising practices that focus on student success is the key.

### **Warren County Detention Center**

Four teachers provide a curriculum for grades 6-12 that works on basic skills and keeps students moving along with high school credits. The head teacher believes these students cannot be allowed to do nothing and learn helplessness. Differentiated instruction is the key. They have to be taught skills to reach independence. Classes are small and students come and go but learning is not sacrificed.

Students are involved in a unit titled Success that culminates with a career day. As 27 students went out individually during the morning to see the judge, or to be released, the career day speakers talked with students as a culmination of a unit on success. Students sat attentively as a librarian, nurse, poet and owner of a motorcycle rehab shop talked about future possibilities.

### **Ramey-Estep**

Ramey-Estep is home to up to 174 troubled youth ages 13-18 on 216 acres in Boyd County. The Ramey-Estep High School operates in collaboration with the treatment program of residential students and independent living students.

The high school provides all classes required for high school graduation and is proud of its ability to graduate students who have previously struggled in school. This staff's belief in these young people's ability to learn and be successful is palpable. The high school classes are small and the atmosphere supports the rights and rules of the residential facility. Using a curriculum that is aligned to the Kentucky Program of Study and Core Content for Assessment, teachers are providing hands-on learning related to real world experiences. There is an effort

to connect with the community and family through a variety of activities. Students are busy reading novels, preparing food in Life Skills class, and viewing a video on woodturning. One class works in the green house to select plants to display at the fair. And a science class displays syrup tapped from trees on the property as part of a science lesson.

While there is a no-nonsense attitude and all students are working hard on a treatment plan, the school is providing an aligned curriculum and a hands-on learning environment. During the day, the principal stops in the lobby to say goodbye to a young man who is going home. He has a child and feels ready to return home and take on the role of Dad. She understands that while this is the right thing to do she wishes she had more time with him. She is clearly hopeful in her goodbye.

### **The Providence School**

When visitors approach The Providence School in Jessamine County, they think they have arrived at a retreat lodge. This inviting welcome extends inside the building where couches, love seats and wooden rocking chairs are situated in offices, the lobby and open hallways. The building, formerly Computrex, a computer company, now has new interior walls and classrooms to accommodate four of the school's six programs: middle and high school Day Program for students at risk, Operation Homestretch for credit recovery on computers, and Night School and the Off Campus Suspension for the entire district. The county's Day Treatment and Teen Parent Programs are in satellite locations. When guests enter a Day Program classroom, a "classroom ambassador" greets them and explains what the class is doing, freeing the teacher to continue the lesson uninterrupted.

The school's culture, based on the Discovery Program, supports academic rigor, school wide literacy, and incredible teamwork between teachers, administrators, students, staff, and the community to juggle all its components. The Providence community partners support a student leadership program that assists them in the transition from school to work, or to a post-secondary placement. Schools such as Asbury College offer students dual credits to ease their transition into college, and on-going partnerships with local businesses help provide opportunities for students to prepare for the workplace.

### **Liberty**

Everyone is at Liberty by choice. Students see this school as a place that "gets" them when their regular high school did not. They fill out an application, are accepted and begin their journey in Discovery.

Discovery is the first nine weeks of every Liberty student's journey. Each day starts with a check-in ritual in circle. Learning the seven principles of behavior and the school's expectations, while practicing skills in anger management, adult communication, problem solving and team building comprise the morning blocks.

The afternoon blocks allow for credit recovery as well as remediation work in reading and math.

Teachers are provided support and attend regular professional development that is focused and job embedded. Topics include analyzing student work, problem based learning, and reading across the curriculum. In most high schools these kids stand out as being different, based on dress, looks, and attitude, but here they fit right in. Classes are designed for their learning preferences.

Expectations are high: Apprentice or better on CATS scores, meeting/exceeding Jefferson County Schools' exit outcomes, completion of a senior project and service learning component and a writing portfolio. Students rise to the challenge at Liberty.

### **Northern Kentucky Learning Academy**

With students from 12 districts Northern Kentucky Learning Academy could easily be isolated from the sending schools. Yet, the connection between the Academy and the home school is strong. As a last chance stop for many young people in lieu of expulsion, there is an expectation that this school will put keep students on track for graduation.

Schools don't send students and then ignore them. The transition is supported with meetings both as students come and as they return. During a student's stay at the academy there is often contact between the two institutions. One high school calls every two weeks to maintain the connection for students. And the principals of the sending schools want to talk with the school every four and half weeks. This assures that credits and course work are appropriate and keeps kids on track for graduation while they are working at the academy.

Students at Northern Kentucky Learning Center are motivated and educated, a combination that holds much promise for students and their families.

### **Beacon Central**

Beacon Central is a school of choice designed to meet the unique needs of its learners. As an alternative for Davies County Public Schools, it houses 125 students ages 16 to 21. It is a non-punitive school helping students graduate with a focus on future success in the world of work. Thus, Beacon has a strong vocational and career component.

From the beginning parents are involved in all aspects of the school. The intake meeting begins with parents and students signing a form agreeing to Beacon Central's guiding principles. These are all expressed as statements that reinforce the notion that each student is there by choice.

Students attend one of three sessions that begin as early as 8:00 a.m. and end at 9:00 p.m. After or before their session, students are working, attending

vocational school, or the local technical college. While attending classes at Beacon all students are earning a high school diploma. The graduation ceremony is a very serious event attended by parents, family, community and staff members watching young people claim their diploma. These students have chosen Beacon Central and have chosen success.

### **Centennial High School Fort Collins, Colorado**

An old brick elementary school now houses over two hundred Centennial High School students from the Poudre School District. Once inside the school, the cozy front lobby displays a clerk behind a front desk greeting students and answering the phone. A student has just called in to say she is running late but is on her way; she has had car trouble on the road. Two more students are buried comfortably in a couch talking casually, greeting other students as they walk past. Respect and accountability undergird the culture at Centennial. The school's expectation is that all students will interact with each other and the school staff as adults.

To prepare them for this expectation, Centennial requires all applicants who are accepted to the school to attend a six-week "boot camp" called Discovery before transitioning into their academics. On one visit, students in this class were learning Transactional Analysis through role-play and practicing adult mode of communication. Students are also held accountable for attending school clean and sober, for being absent no more than three days each hexter, and for mediating their own conflicts. A problem-solving approach to discipline that focuses on choices and consequences instead of punishment, places accountability on students, not the adults, for the outcome. Common statements heard from students and teachers alike are "Use your skills," and "Stay in your adult." By nurturing these adults in training, Centennial helps them "Catch the Vision" of success: a high school diploma. Centennial is a national model for three Kentucky schools and over 120 schools in the U.S.

### **Aurora High School Bloomington, Indiana**

Aurora Alternative High School originated in a house with one teacher and a handful of students, and has grown to a larger building that accommodates approximately 100 students with 11 teachers and staff, with whom students are on a first name basis. A guiding principle in the school's mission is to empower students to take ownership of their own education, as well as participate in the day to day running of the school. Attendance at Aurora is premised on choice and is designed for students who are unsuccessful in the Monroe County Community School Corporation in Bloomington, Indiana. Applications are reviewed by a committee of three students and one teacher during the four intakes each year. Applicants know by the end of the interview whether or not they have been accepted into the school.

Sense of community and student ownership is reinforced in the weekly “family meetings” on Friday afternoons at the end of the school day. At the school wide meeting students and teachers speak about what’s happening at the school, recognize students and staff for their positive accomplishments (including student of the week) and bring issues to the table. A panel of students, facilitated by a teacher, reviews student attendance, academics and behavior. Students ask questions about the teen’s commitment and demand honest answers. When students mess with a teacher, deface school property, or create conflict with another student, they face a backlash from their peers who hold them accountable and defend the integrity of the school and its principles. Students attend challenging, inquiry-driven classes aligned to state standards and designed around themes based on student interest and need. They attend leadership conferences and have opportunities for leadership they did not have at their previous schools. It is clear at Aurora that students own their school.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

This research project is a partnership between the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA). Additionally, KYA partnered with a variety of other entities for input and direction. These included:

- Bellarmine University
- Coalition of Essential Schools/Brown University
- Commissioner's Principal Advisory Council
- Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council
- Community Training and Assistance Center
- Department of Community Based Services
- Justice Cabinet
- Kentucky Association of School Superintendents
- Kentucky Parent and Teacher Association
- Kentucky Center for School Safety
- KDE Alternative School Advisory Committee
- Kentucky Education Association
- Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children
- National Center for the Education and the Economy
- Prichard Committee
- The Schlechty Center
- Various entities within the Kentucky United Way System
- Voices for America's Children (Washington, D.C.).

Key aspects of the project included:

- An analysis of student data and management systems
- A review of state certification provisions; and,
- A review of national literature.

The cornerstones of the project were qualitative research efforts. Qualitative approaches to research are especially valuable in social policy settings, such as schools, because certain events and phenomenon must be studied in their natural settings and social policy issues cannot be understood unless one understands how they are perceived and interpreted by the people who participated in them.<sup>4</sup> This type of research, also referred to as ethnography, "relies on patterns of interactions and interviews of participants to discover patterns and meanings."<sup>5</sup> The qualitative research efforts ensured a geographic, gender, ethnic, typological microcosm of the A5/A6 Programs in the state. Additionally, all participants were guaranteed anonymity and freedom from other identifying data or source materials. The qualitative aspects of the report included:

Key informant interviews

According to Marshall and Rossman, key informant interviews are “a specialized treatment of interviewing that focuses on a particular type of respondent. These are considered to be influential, the prominent, and the well-informed of the organization or particular community.”<sup>6</sup> Key informants are selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research. Key informant interviews were conducted with some three dozen individuals in the opening round of inquiry with a second follow-up phase including approximately half of the original set.

### Focus Groups

Seventy-five focus groups were conducted. The focus groups included homogeneous groups of students, teachers and parents connected to A5/A6 programs. Additional focus groups were conducted with cross-sector participants, representing two or more of the noted role groups.

In terms of question formats, KYA used an integrated methodology. The questions were both keyed responses and open-ended inquiries. While the specific language used varied in terms of subject sophistication, interview protocol was tailored to meet generally agreed to specifications.<sup>7 8</sup> The essential protocol reflected the premise stated by Marshall and Rossman<sup>9</sup> that exemplary qualitative research interviews “are more like conversations than formal interviews. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant frames and structures the responses.”

Two elements of quality research of this nature are intentional openness to unexpected data and confirmability. Using standards set forth by Marshall and Rossman,<sup>10</sup> those issues were addressed by:

1. utilizing two consistent individuals external to the process to critically question analyses
2. checking and rechecking data and purposefully testing rival hypotheses
3. practicing value-free note taking and then developing two side by side frames.

In many ways, the research that emanated from the focus groups took on a story-like quality. According to Carter,<sup>11</sup> exemplary qualitative research often are marked by this story-like quality which becomes “a way, in other words, of capturing complexity, specificity, and the interconnectedness of the phenomenon with which we deal, and, thus, redressed the deficiencies of the traditional atomistic and positivistic approaches into which (the phenomenon) was decomposed into discrete variables and indicators of effectiveness.”

The use of multiple sources and protocols as referenced means that the initial goal of this effort was met – to produce a report that both captures the complexity, the specificity and interconnectedness of the A5/A6 Programs and

simultaneously reflects the highest standards of qualitative research, including coherence, insight and instrumental utility.<sup>12</sup>

## **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Alternative education programs have burgeoned across the country, often with an emphasis on serving those students at greatest risk for educational failure due to behavioral and emotional concerns. Historically, these programs were often designed to address disruptive and school-avoidant behaviors. With the advent of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) under the aegis of Public Law 107-110, alternative programs have become a critical point of discussion.<sup>13</sup> A common definition of alternative schools accepted by practitioners, administrators, researchers and policy makers does not exist. However, the *Common Core of Data*, the U.S. 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 the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to the regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education."<sup>14</sup> A 2001 estimate is still the most frequently cited reference in terms of validated numbers and by this count, there are about 20,000 alternative programs and schools in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Current research suggests a dramatic rise in the number and types of alternative programs within the past several years across the country.

Observers cite innumerable core reasons for this dramatic rise in alternative programs. For instance, Hughes and Adera comment that the increase is related to "the fact that the school-age population has become increasingly diverse, presenting a broad range of issues that schools have not been effectively able to address. Furthermore, with the renewed push for accountability and the mounting challenges of serving students who exhibit social and emotional problems,"<sup>16</sup> schools see alternative programs as an imperative option.

While educators neither have a firm estimate on the number of programs nationally nor a common definition, there is emerging evidence as to what works. In fact, "there does appear to be consistent profiles of characteristics common to the most successful (alternative) programs."<sup>17</sup> Some researchers focus on successful common elements of a particular phase of alternative programming. For instance, the Alternative Education Center for Disruptive Youth suggests an articulated set of practices around the intake and exit process including formalized protocols that work as part of the initial entry process. Inclusion of cross-sector support (e.g.- health and human services; justice; educators; faith community; family supports), assurance of access to critical student data, student driven goal setting, and gradual transitional processes into the program are illustrative of recommended transition procedures. That same details specific research-based practices for a myriad of other specific aspects of alternative school programming, ranging from writing a discipline contract to engaging local businesses with alternative students.<sup>18</sup>

A number of other researchers paint a broad portrait of what elements make an alternative program successful. The following summaries are illustrative – though not exhaustive -- of benchmark research around the emerging consensus on effective alternative programming.

Leone and Drakeford<sup>19</sup>

- Clear focus on academic learning
- Ambitious professional development
- Strong level of autonomy and professional decision-making
- Sense of community.

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice<sup>20</sup>

- Administration regard education as vital part of the rehabilitation process
- Programs help students develop competencies in reading, writing and math skills, along with critical thinking and character development
- Student/teacher ratios reflect the needs of the students
- Academic achievement is reinforced through incremental incentives
- Teachers are competent, committed and trained in current research and teaching methods, rather than relying on old model drill and workbook/textbook exercises
- Instruction involves multiple strategies appropriate to each learner's interests and needs
- Youth are assessed for learning disabilities and provided with special education in full compliance with federal law
- When appropriate, parents, community organizations and volunteers are involved in the academic program
- Opportunities exist for on the job training, work experiences and mentorships
- Partnerships are developed with potential employers
- Students are scheduled for jobs and further education upon re-entry into the community and regular program

Lange and Sletten<sup>21</sup>

- A low teacher/student ratio and program size
- The availability of one to one interaction between students and staff
- A climate that supports learning
- Autonomy
- A student-centered environment
- Opportunities for relevant experiences that are consistent with students' future goals
- The opportunity for students to develop and to exercise self-control in decision making

- A caring environment that builds and fosters resilience
- A flexible structure that accommodates the student's academic and social/emotional needs
- Training and support for teachers in working with both typically functioning and special needs students
- Integration of research into practice in areas such as assessment, curriculum, teacher competencies, and integration of special education services
- Research and evaluation of the impact of the program on the school population
- Clearly identified enrollment criteria and program goals
- Interagency linkages to ensure a full-service continuum are available for students with special education needs

If the aforementioned illustrations paint a portrait of effective alternative programming at the school level, other observers and advocates advance a broader policy agenda to ensure equality and efficacy for alternative school students. For instance, the National Center on Education and Economy asserts that a standards-based system of alternative education is the best option for state policy makers and would be marked by:

- A single standard for all students whether in traditional or alternative schools
- A funding system that ensures the state spends at least the same amount on students in alternative systems as in traditional schools
- An accountability system for both alternative and traditional education programs tied to helping students meet high standards
- A community-based counseling and referral system that provides students access to programs that best meet their needs, with or without the public school system

To ensure high standards are applied to alternative programs, the National Governors' Association<sup>22</sup> calls for states to:

- Strengthen links between traditional and nontraditional education systems
- Invest resources to support the transition from 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
- Develop enhanced GED programs
- Collect data

Beyond practices and policies, an unanswered research agenda awaits public schools if alternative programs are to meet their potential in serving youth. For instance, Aron<sup>23</sup> calls for researchers and school system leaders to answer the following overarching inquiries:

1. Do alternative education schools accelerate learning compared to what students would learn in a regular school setting?
2. Do alternative programs that integrate career development with academic instruction have better educational and economic outcomes than those focused mainly on academics?
3. Are alternative programs that operate outside of and separate from regular school districts and public schools more effective than alternative programs sponsored by school districts?

Lehr and Lange<sup>24</sup> suggest that policy makers must answer the following relevant questions:

1. Does state legislation or policy focused on alternative schools exist?
2. Is there a definition of alternative schools?
3. What are the procedures for enrollment in alternative schools?
4. If alternative schools are used as IAES, are IDEA requirements being met?
5. What is the availability of quality staff to alternative schools?
6. Are high, yet realistic, expectations maintained for students attending alternative schools?
7. Are desired outcomes for students attending alternative schools identified?
8. Is evidence of effectiveness being examined and then disseminated?

The lists of practices and protocols ... the calls for policy action ... the emerging research agendas of unanswered questions ... each of these is an important building block towards constructing a quality alternative program. And the challenge is clear. Alternative routes to the skills, socialization and credentials that young people will require to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century innovation economy are limited. Yet the systems and structures that support and feed the economy demand better access to alternative education options for students who are substantially behind or disengaged educationally. Developing that access will require strategic thinking about what resources need to be harnessed, how these resources should be invested, and for whom.<sup>25</sup>

If that challenge is met – if that strategic thinking is harnessed – if those resources are adroitly invested ... then alternative programs can meet their potential: *to provide successful school experiences to those youth who are most disenfranchised with traditional school.*<sup>26</sup>

## Endnotes

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