



## Education Policy Brief

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# ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

**Providing severely disruptive and expelled students with an alternative setting for learning has become an increasingly popular strategy for improving school safety and creating an atmosphere where learning can occur. As a result of the Comprehensive School Discipline Improvement Program, established by Delaware HB 247 in 1993, several alternative education schools have been created for students expelled from regular school or subject to expulsion, and others who have seriously violated local school district discipline code. More recently, a poll conducted by the Delaware Education Research and Development Center found that most Delaware educators and many Delaware citizens favored creating more alternative schools for students with behavior problems.**

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## RESEARCH FINDINGS:

### What Are Alternative Schools?

Alternative schools were initially created to improve the academic performance of students who were not successful in the conventional education system. Through individualized instruction, personal attention, and innovative curriculum, alternative schools attempted to meet the diverse needs of some students.

More recently, districts and states have been turning to alternative schools to keep traditional schools safe and create a place where learning can occur. Historically, these schools have been reserved for students in high school, however, more students at earlier ages are displaying signs that they need alternative placement. As a result, in some areas, children as young as second grade can be enrolled in an alternative program if they have a history of disruptive behavior.

### What Purpose do They Serve?

In general, alternative schools are designed to educate students in a setting that prepares them for adulthood and changes their behavior so that they may return to their traditional school. Other purposes of alternative schools include:

- Preventing students from dropping out;
- Helping students master academic skills;
- Assisting students in the development of career plans;
- Increasing student involvement in the community; and,
- Providing training in job skills.

The purpose of an alternative school, as defined by law or policy, is critical to the implementation, effectiveness, and evaluation of the program. An alternative school designed to increase student involvement in the community would be implemented and evaluated differently than an alternative school designed to assist students in developing career plans. The purpose of the school should be clear and evaluated regularly for its effectiveness.

### What are the Benefits?

Research on the effectiveness of alternative schools indicates that their impact on student behavior and achievement depends on the approach taken by the school. Alternative schools that offer full-time, multi-year educational opportunities to students are more effective than those relying on short-term placements. Alternative schools that creatively modify or adapt the learning environment to meet student needs are more effective than those that offer only basic courses and provide students with assignments from their “home” schools.

When alternative schools change the learning environment and offer students counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation, improvements in student behavior (i.e., student dropout and truancy rates) and achievement are more likely to occur. Attendance rates are also improved in alternative schools when students are engaged in learning. When alternative schools are designed to provide individualized instruction and attention, they tend to improve behavior, attendance, attitude, involvement, and academic performance.

The least effective alternative schools are those that focus on the student as the source of the problem and simply seek to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Unless there are changes to the learning environment that reflect student needs, and other services and forms of support are provided, placement in the alternative school will have little positive impact. This type of alternative placement may actually result in the student falling further behind academically and socially.

In addition, placing disruptive students in alternative schools may inadvertently segregate poor, disabled, and minority students from regular schools. Research indicates that minority and special education students are more likely to be suspended or expelled which could lead to a disproportionate number of these students being sent to alternative schools.

### *What are the Common Characteristics of Effective Alternative Schools?*

A review of the research reveals that effective alternative education programs have the following characteristics:

- A smaller student enrollment with a lower ratio of students to staff;
- Highly trained and committed staff;
- Intensive counseling, advising, tutoring, monitoring, and mentoring of students;
- Engaging instruction that is student-centered, interesting, noncompetitive but challenging;
- A flexible schedule that allows students to work at their own pace;
- An increased role for students in school operations (i.e. setting their daily schedule, helping to formulate rules, and providing opportunities for students to voice their suggestions for school improvements);
- Clear rules that are enforced consistently;
- High standards of behavior, attendance, and performance, in addition to an emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility; and,
- A system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the program.

### **DELAWARE SITUATION:**

In 1993 Delaware House Bill 247 established the Comprehensive School Discipline Improvement Initiative. As part of this initiative, six alternative schools were created to provide alternative educational settings for students who have been or are at risk of being expelled from school.

Each county currently has two alternative schools and funds are provided on a county wide basis with New Castle County receiving 50% of the funds, and Kent and Sussex Counties each receiving 25% of the funds. One district in each county is responsible for the financial and administrative responsibilities of the program. School districts within each county have formed consortiums to provide services for students in the alternative schools program.

In April 1999, an independent evaluation of Delaware's alternative schools was conducted by TJ Connelly & Associates. Information was collected from the alternative school students during the 1997-98 school year. During this year, approximately 724 students were served by the alternative schools program. Of these students, 63% were minority students and 36% were Caucasian. Students from grades 2 through 12 were served but most students were in grades 7-9. The most frequently cited

reason for placement in the alternative setting was conduct or behavior problems (i.e., threatening teachers or others, disrupting the class or school, etc.).

As part of the evaluation, groups of students in the alternative schools were asked to describe the positive and negative elements of the program. Students cited individualized attention and improved relationships with teachers as positive aspects of the program. However, many students indicated that the academic work they received while in the alternative school was not on grade level and they feared “lagging” behind their peers. Students also indicated that the programs were operating with limited resources (i.e., few or no textbooks available from their original school, under-qualified teachers, not enough computers, etc.) and did not provide adequate opportunities for students to provide input into the program.\*

### **RESEARCH SUMMARY:**

Alternative schools have emerged as a popular strategy for dealing with disruptive students. Care must be taken to ensure that the programs maximize the learning potential of these students as opposed to simply separating them out from other students. Alternative schools can be effective if the focus is on changing the learning environment and offering students a variety of services to meet their academic and social needs. Without this focus, placement in an alternative school setting will have little positive impact and may result in students falling further behind their peers.

### **POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:**

- What is the primary purpose of the state’s alternative schools? Are the schools designed to improve learning outcomes or improve behavior?
- Who is intended to benefit from alternative schools?
- Do teachers in alternative schools have the appropriate credentials, skills and training necessary to provide students with a quality education?
- How is the effectiveness of alternative schools evaluated?
- How does the student population of alternative schools compare to that of traditional schools with regard to the percentages of special education students and minority students?
- Do the state’s alternative schools uphold the same state standards as public schools? How is that determined?
- Do Delaware alternative schools effectively provide the range of individualized services necessary to ensure student success?

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\* TJ Connelly & Associates. (April 1999). Comprehensive programs which improve student discipline: Treatment of pupils exhibiting discipline problems and services to pupils which reduce the rate and severity of future discipline problems. Final Report. Contact the Delaware Department of Education for more information.