

Alternative Education: A Way of Restructuring Education/Local Review Process

by

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What will education in Iowa look like ten years from today? Will it be a delivery system or a system of management as well? Will it be a system of management emphasizing many alternatives and support systems?

In communities all over Iowa districts are creating alternative schools as well as programs and support services linked with multiple community service agencies, community colleges and universities. Furthermore districts are utilizing other education delivery systems including Internet and other technology such as the ICN. Open enrollment and home schooling are being increasingly utilized. The expansion of our timeline for education being preK through 14 vs K-12 is also in the works. Education is beginning earlier and expanding forward to include more years for career preparation if needed for productive participation in the community upon legal termination from public school. Post secondary options, transition programs, 2 by 2 programs, etc., allow Iowa students the opportunity to enrich their high school education by linking with post secondary education delivery systems. The pattern seems clear, but public education has not officially adopted the inevitable future as a goal. The goal being that public education will become a system of management for many alternatives and options allowing all of our children to achieve the maximum from their formal education experience. If this goal were to be accepted, alternative education would officially be recognized as an approach to combat the complex problems challenging education. At a time when public schools are being challenged to change, alternative education offers the means to positive change. Given the past developments in Iowa, alternative education will continue to be born despite the lack of an identified goal to accomplish it.

Alternative education, if adopted, would mean that public education in Iowa would become a management system for an array of public and private programs and services managed to meet the needs of families and students. Schools would also be the delivery system for some education programs. All schools would not be expected to be alike within and between districts. Each student's program and support assistance would not be alike. Each student may attend a number of different schools and be involved in a number of different support assistance services to achieve their personalized competencies/goals. Teachers would be expected to teach differently and students would be assigned and choose teachers closely aligned with their learning styles and interests. Students would not be graduating at the same time/age.

This reality exists for some students now. More will be shaped as the general public influences the future of Iowa.

Alternative schools in Iowa have been able to demonstrate significant gains with students that the conventional schools have been incapable of educating and have demonstrated that different learning environments can be created to accommodate different learning styles and interests. Alternative schools have grown in number and respect because they have continued to demonstrate effectiveness and provide students and parents with choice. Parents seek them out for their children and children give high praise for their experiences. In short, alternative education works.

Alternative schools offer hope to the institution of public education by providing hope through choice, communities of support, positive results, and an ongoing effort to innovate, improve, and disseminate their success (increased achievement of students, innovation zones for innovative practices, etc.). The success of alternative schools requires constant vigilance regarding the needs of each and every student. Positive identity with school requires addressing the human needs of students as well as curriculum--the student first and curriculum thereafter. Students choose to participate and staff choose to participate; small size guarantees personal attention; parent and student participation culminates in ownership and

support; opportunities to catch up and accelerate learning remain important opportunities; the use of students as resources are planned; relevant curriculum to enhance basic skills through interdisciplinary and thematic content, out of school learning, and technology are emphasized; emphasis on healthy lives, service to community and productivity upon leaving school remain a focus. It is this type of schooling that alternative schools work to achieve.

Some of the best practices alternative schools have to offer have been incorporated into a checklist designed to guide the development of education programs. The checklist is borrowed, in part, from the manuscript of a publication to be disseminated this coming spring authored by Dr. Robert Barr and published through the National Education Service. Additional items were added to include Iowa -based standards. The checklist is provided here for all alternative schools to use as a tool for evaluation and planning.

Alternative Schools Research-Based Evaluation Criteria

Student Access:

1. Do students choose to participate in the school?
2. Are there established criteria for admitting students to the school?
3. Does the school use the criteria in admitting students?
4. Do students and parents participate in a school orientation program prior to attending the school?
5. Does the school provide information/orientation for administrators, counselors, and other conventional school staff
6. Do conventional school administrators and counselors exercise good judgment in school referrals and admissions?
7. Are students ever turned down for admissions?
8. Are students ever assigned to the school?
9. Do students and parents sign a contract prior to admission to the school?
10. If a student leaves the school is there a plan for re-admission?

Caring and Demanding Staff:

1. Have the principal and the teachers chosen to work in the school?
2. Do the principal and teachers have specific background and training to prepare them to work effectively with the student population?
3. Are the teachers free to transfer to another school if they are is satisfied?
4. Are non-certified teachers used in special school programs?
5. Are there criteria for recruiting teachers to the school? Are parents, students, and teachers involved in recruiting/interviewing potential teachers?
6. Do teachers appear to care for students and hold high expectations for all students?

Personal/Social Skills Development

1. Do students consistently review themselves on personal/social skills considered important in the work world and community?
2. Are personal portfolios developed facilitating self-reflection?

3. Are students' personal issues addressed consistently in school improvement initiatives?
4. Does staff consider the total hierarchy of human needs in addressing school practices?
5. Are students involved in the governance of the school?
6. Are students considered important in the governance of the school?
7. Do evaluation strategies include self-reflection and self-review?
8. Are evaluation results primarily used for individual development/self improvement?
9. Do students evaluate the staff?
10. Is time set aside for student-teacher joint planning/dialogue?
11. Are cooperative learning, team learning, etc., stressed in all personal plans for students?
12. Have the staff and students jointly established specific personal/social skills worth working toward within the instruction and discipline systems?

Curriculum:

1. Is the school curriculum designed to meet the needs of the students?
2. Does the school provide for individualized learning?
3. Does the school provide for competency based learning?
4. Does the school utilize learning contracts?
5. Does the school emphasize the development of self-esteem?
6. Does the school provide a way to "catch up" if the students are far behind in graduation credit?
7. Does the school use multiple options for completing schooling (i.e. GED, Job Corps, etc.)
8. Does the school use learning incentives to motivate students?
9. If the students lack basic skills, does the school have a program to address this need?
10. Does the school provide one-to-one tutoring?
11. Does the school have a peer mentor program?
12. Does the school compliment academic study with vocational, technical and career study?
13. Does the school involve students in community internships?
14. Does the school involve students in community service activities?
15. Does the school carefully assess student learning and academic development?
16. Does the school conduct follow-up evaluation of graduates and dropouts?
17. Does the school utilize technology as a significant part of teaching/learning process?
18. Do students utilize computers in their learning?
19. Do students graduate with computer and technology competencies?
20. Does the school have alternative scheduling options-weekends, summers, evenings, part day, part week, etc.?

School Organization/Structure/Size

1. May students attend the school full and/or part time?
2. Does the school have an evening program or is there an evening program available to the students?
3. Does the school provide an extended day schedule?
4. Does the school have a summer program or is a summer program available to the students?

5. Does the school have a partnership with a local business or Industry?
6. Does the school have partners who volunteer in the school?
7. Does the school serve less than 500 students, less than 250 students, less than 150 students?
8. Do the teachers and students seem to form a positive learning community?
9. Is the school accredited by the state department of education and/or national association?

Evaluation and Monitoring/Reporting Procedures

1. Does the school utilize:
 - a. Follow-up surveys of students (career, post-graduation training, social success)
 - b. Standardized testing (academics, personal/social, career/vocational)
 - c. Staff performance appraisals
 - d. Student progress reports
 - e. Informal testing
 - d. Local formal tests/standardized locally
 - e. Student self-evaluation (academic, personal social, career/vocational)
 - f. Applied projects
 - g. Contracts for performance
 - h. Portfolios
 - I.. Report cards
 - J. Checklists
 - k. Letters to parents
 - l. Conferences with parents
 - m. Personalized planning
 - n. Needs assessments
 - o. Parent Questionnaires
 - p. Employer surveys
 - q. Staff surveys
 - r. Community surveys

Social Services

1. Does the school complement academic studies with other types of social service programs:
 - Drug and Alcohol Prevention Programs
 - Parenting Programs
 - Childcare Programs
 - Counseling Program

Self-Esteem Building Activities

2. Does the school assist students with accessing social services (food, food stamps, housing, transportation, etc.)?
3. Does the school assist students with health s/mental health service?
4. Does the school utilize some type of youth services council or community committee to coordinate access to community social services?
5. Does the school provide childcare?
6. Does the school provide health services for infants?
7. Does the school provide teen-parent programs?

8. Does the school provide parenting classes for the parents of the students?

Career/Vocational/Technical

1. Does the school have a formal program of career awareness and exploration?
2. Does the school participate in a career fair, college fair?
3. Is the school involved in a 2 + 2 or Tech Prep Program?
4. Is the school involved in a partnership with a local JTPA or a business round table?
5. Does the school have vocational and technical internships, apprenticeships?
6. Can students attend local community colleges part time while in high school?
7. Can students access a Job Corps Training Center?
8. Can the students receive college credit for courses taken in high school
9. Does the school have a school-to-work program/plan?
10. Does the school have a work experience program that utilizes the cooperative method of work placement and training?
11. Do students naturally develop personalized career portfolios before graduation?

References

Barr, R. & Parrett, W. (1997). *How to Create Alternative, Magnet, and Charter Schools That Work*. National Education Service, P.O. Box 8, Bloomington, Indiana 47402, (812-336-7700).

Iowa Association of Alternative Education. (1995). *Sharing Student Success: Evaluation Practices Used in Alternative Schools in Iowa*. Dr. Clemmye Jackson, Ames Community School District, 120 South Kellogg, Ames, Iowa 50010, (515-239-3809).

Note

Dr. Ray Morley is a consultant working out of the Iowa Department of Education. This article represents a personal point of view and does not represent an official position of that Department.