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## Alternative Schools and Students With Disabilities: Identifying and Understanding the Issues

By *Camilla Lehr*

### Introduction

Understanding the role of alternative schools in providing educational opportunities for youth with disabilities has become increasingly important over the past few years. Significant numbers of youth with disabilities are not completing school and the extent to which alternative education may offer an option that engages students, provides a more successful school experience, and improves the likelihood of graduation has been largely unexamined. In 2001, the University of Minnesota received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs to conduct research on alternative schools across the country. Special emphasis was given to studying how and the extent to which students with disabilities are being served within these settings. The purpose of this information brief is to share responses of state directors of special education to a telephone interview about major issues regarding students with disabilities and alternative schools in their state. State directors of special education are in a unique position to provide their perspective in light of expertise and experience with state policy, responsibility for oversight, and knowledge of broader issues for students with disabilities. In all, responses were obtained from state directors of special education or their designees in 48 states and the District of Columbia yielding a 96% response rate.

### Background on Alternative Schools

Interest in alternative schools and the students they serve has increased dramatically during recent years. In many states, new legislation focused on alternative schools has been enacted and the numbers of alternative schools and programs are rising. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported 3,850 public alternative schools in the United States during the 1997-1998 academic year. Findings from a recent national survey estimate that there were 10,900 public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students in the United States in 2000-2001 (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Results also indicated that about 12% of all students in alternative schools and programs for at-risk students were special education students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP), and the percentage of special education students varied widely between districts—ranging from 3% to 20% (typically students with learning or emotional/behavioral disabilities). It is clear students with disabilities are attending alternative schools; yet, questions remain about the extent to which and how students with disabilities are being served in these settings.

## Defining Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are generally described as having small enrollments (e.g., 25-75 students), and most educators, researchers, and policy makers agree that alternative schools are designed for students at risk of school failure (Raywid, 1994). Select findings from research conducted by the Alternative Schools Research Project at the University of Minnesota (<http://ici.umn.edu/alternativeschools>) provide current information describing alternative schools across the United States. In brief, alternative schools:

- Are designed to meet a variety of needs including preventing students from dropping out of school, providing another educational option, serving as a disciplinary consequence, or providing academic/behavioral remediation.
- Are primarily designed for high school age students, although many states have schools that are serving younger students.
- Are accessed by students in a variety of ways ranging from student choice (usually with some specified parameters) to mandatory placement.
- Often have criteria for enrollment (e.g., students may be admitted as a result of suspension or expulsion or they must meet some form of at-risk criteria).
- Serve students for varying amounts of time (e.g., short-term placement and transition back to traditional school; long-term commitment through graduation).
- Offer educational programs that typically include one or more of the following; an emphasis on individual instruction, a focus on basic academic skills, social services (e.g., counseling or social skills instruction), and/or community or work-based learning.

## What Do We Know About Alternative Schools and Students with Disabilities?

Although the amount of literature on students with disabilities attending alternative schools is limited, some state-level data have been collected as part of federally funded research conducted by the Enrollment Options Project (1990-1998). In Minnesota, for example, students can choose to attend an alternative program if they meet one or more criteria for at-risk status described in the High School Graduation Incentive Law established in 1987 (e.g., pregnant or parent, chemically dependent, behind in credits, suspended, or expelled). One study of Minnesota's alternative programs found that 19% of enrolled students were reported as having a disability and more than 50% of those students were reported as having an emotional/behavioral disorder by their previous school or their alternative school (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993).

The number of students with disabilities attending alternative schools in Minnesota suggest that these settings may offer a desirable option for many who are trying to successfully complete school. Improving the rate of school completion for students with disabilities is a significant national concern. Statistics show that the rate of dropout for students with disabilities is nearly twice that of general education students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). The characteristics of some alternative schools that facilitate successful school completion for those at risk of dropping out such as extra support/counseling for students, smaller and more personal settings, positive relationships with adults, meaningful educational and transition goals, and emphasis on living and vocational skills (Lange & Sletten, 2002) may also be the elements necessary to keep students with disabilities in school. However, because data may not be routinely collected and/or because some students do not inform staff of their disability status upon entrance into the alternative school, the number of students with disabilities attending as well as the number of students who complete school as a result of attending these settings is uncertain.

The enrollment of students with disabilities in alternative schools may be due in part to the protections provided for students with disabilities who have been expelled or suspended for disciplinary reasons set forth in the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under the IDEA, school personnel have the authority to change the placement of a child with a disability to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting (IAES) for not more than 10 school days to the extent such an alternative placement would be applied to children without disabilities and for the same amount of time that a child without a disability would be subject to discipline, but not more than 45 days, if the child carries a weapon to school or to a school function or the child knowingly possesses or uses illegal drugs or sells or solicits the sale of a controlled substance while at school or a school function (20 U.S.C. §1415(k)(1)(A); 34CFR §300.520). A hearing officer may also order a change in the placement of a child with a disability to an appropriate IAES for not more than 45 days if the hearing officer determines that the current placement of such child is substantially likely to result in injury to the child or to others. This determination may be made only after the hearing officer considers the appropriateness of the child's current placement, including the use of supplementary aids and services, and the appropriateness of the IAES, pursuant to the requirements under the IDEA (20 U.S.C. §1415(k)(a)(2); 34 CFR §300.521). The IEP team makes the determination of the IAES, which must enable the child to appropriately progress in the general curriculum and to continue to receive those services and

modifications, including those described in the child's current IEP, that will enable the child to achieve the goals set out in the student's IEP and include services and modifications designed to address the behavior that led to the change in placement in order to prevent that behavior from reoccurring (20 U.S.C. §1415(k)(3); 34 C.F.R. §300.519-529). The extent to which alternative schools are being used as an IAES for students with disabilities across the nation is not clear.

State directors of special education are a valuable source of information from which to gather more information about students with disabilities and alternative schools. Responses to the interview questions are summarized in the next section.

### **Table 1. Major Issues Regarding Students with Disabilities**

#### **Number of Students Served and Disability Category**

- Limited or no data available on the number of students with disabilities being served in alternative schools.
- Perception that primary disability category of students with disabilities attending alternative schools is emotional/behavioral disability.

#### **Enrollment Issues**

- Alternative schools generally viewed as another option available to students with disabilities.\*
- Students may be pushed out of traditional school in a subtle or overt manner.
- IEP may be continued, modified, or may not systematically follow the student from their previous school.

#### **Service Delivery**

- Questions regarding provision or quality of services in place for students with disabilities.
- Questions about quality and availability of staff licensed in special education.
- Questions about degree to which alternative schools are appropriate settings for students with disabilities (resources available to meet student needs, least restrictive environment).

*Note.* Responses are perceptions of 49 state directors of special education or their designees.

\* Themes were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents; those statements with asterisks were mentioned by more than half of the respondents.

## **Interviews with State Directors of Special Education**

*Q: What Are Major Issues for Students with Disabilities in Relation to Alternative Schools?*

Three major issues emerged in response to this question and are described below. A summary of emergent themes is presented in **Table 1**.

#### *Number of students served and disability category.*

Many of the state directors of special education indicated they had very little or no data on the number of students with disabilities being served in alternative schools. Despite this lack of data, the perceived primary disability category for students attending alternative schools was

in the area of severe emotional disturbance (emotional/behavioral disability). Several (< 20%) of the directors also noted anecdotal reports of an increase in the severity and variety of students with disabilities being served within alternative schools. For example, the number of students with Tourette's syndrome, autism, mental health problems, and conduct disorders attending alternative schools appears to be increasing, according to the respondents.

*Enrollment issues.* Respondents expressed concern that students with disabilities may be pushed out of traditional schools and into alternative schools in a subtle or overt manner. One special education director suggested that rather than placing students in a more restrictive setting or costly placement, alternative schools are suggested as another option. Secondary level administrators or staff may urge students to try the alternative school first.

According to interview results, once a student with a disability enrolls in an alternative school, several scenarios may occur. In some alternative schools, procedures may be in place ensuring a review of the IEP and implementation of services at a level similar to what the student received in the past. In other alternative schools, the IEP may be rewritten to reflect more limited special education and related services—oftentimes services are delivered on an indirect basis. If the IEP is rewritten, it may or may not be closely followed. In other cases, parents or students (once they reach the age of majority) may no longer request special

education upon entrance into the alternative school.

State directors suggested that many factors influence the degree to which the IEP is implemented. Some indicated that educators felt student needs could be met through the existing alternative program (rather than through special education) given the smaller student-teacher ratio and more individualized programming. Barriers to appropriate implementation include the availability of certified special education teachers and paraprofessionals and the school's small size, which can limit flexibility and resources. In less than 20% of the cases, state directors mentioned the existence of an adversarial relationship between alternative school educators and special educators. According to respondents, some alternative school educators believe students who receive special education should not be served in alternative schools because they already have funding and a set of supports in place in the regular school setting—whereas students without disabilities who are at risk of school failure depend on the enrollment slots available at the alternative school.

**Service delivery.** The third major issue that surfaced in relation to students with disabilities and alternative schools focused on the delivery of services. Nearly half of the state directors of special education raised questions and concerns about the provision and quality of services for students with disabilities within alternative school settings. Concerns were also raised about the qualifications and availability of staff licensed in special education and whether students had access to the breadth of content curriculum and subject areas available in larger, traditional public schools. About one quarter of the state directors of special education perceived that alternative schools could be beneficial settings for students with disabilities. Many pointed to characteristics of alternative schools that could facilitate a successful school experience including smaller class size, more individual attention, individualized work pace, focus on career planning or vocational education, provision of work-study experiences, provision of counseling, flexible schedule, etc. However, respondents also voiced concern about whether alternative schools met the requirement to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment pursuant to the IDEA.

## Summary and Future Directions

There is very little national research documenting the extent to which and how students with disabilities are being served in alternative schools. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the specific challenges faced by these programs and the appropriateness of this educational option for students with disabilities. The responses from interviews with state directors of special education help to identify important issues for further consideration.

**Future directions.** Based on comments from several state directors, the interviews raised awareness of the need for easily accessible and accurate data on the extent to which students with disabilities are being served in alternative schools. The extent to which states have the capacity to disaggregate enrollment and accountability data for alternative schools by disability status is unclear, thus there are more questions than answers about how students with disabilities fare in alternative schools and programs. State directors of special education voiced many concerns about the special education processes and procedures in place for students with disabilities in alternative school settings. Although essential elements and strategies of effective alternative programs have been recommended (Quinn, Rutherford, & Osher, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2000), the extent to which these practices are implemented in accordance with the requirements of the IDEA is uncertain and documentation of outcomes for students with disabilities is necessary. General recommendations to address some of the issues raised by state directors of special education in relation to alternative schools and students with disabilities are offered below.

- Carefully document and track the number and disability category of students attending alternative schools.
- Determine whether students have received special education and related services in the past before enrollment (by contacting previous school, record review, student or parent report during intake interview, etc.)
- Develop clear procedures and criteria for enrollment to ensure that students are being referred or placed in the alternative school/program for appropriate reasons.
- Meet with staff from the student's previous school to develop a program of services that will best meet the student's needs. Include the parents, guardian or a family member, and the student in this meeting. Establish procedures for obtaining student records and facilitating successful transition between school settings.
- Implement a procedure to determine whether the services that are documented on a student's most recent IEP are appropriate and modify as required. Address transition service needs for students who are age 14 (or younger, if determined appropriate by the IEP team) and older.
- Meet periodically to determine whether services are being provided as documented on the student's IEP. Measure and document student outcomes.
- Ensure qualified special education staff are available to provide services as specified on the IEPs for students with disabilities.



- As a team, meet at least annually to determine whether the alternative school is the most appropriate educational setting (and least restrictive) for the student.
- If an alternative school is being used as an Interim Alternative Educational Setting, make certain continued provision of service occurs and other requirements under the IDEA are met.

Many state directors of special education indicated that they believed alternative schools were desirable and effective in their state. The extent to which these perceptions are similar to those of others, including state-level alternative school specialists, alternative school educators, general and special education teachers, parents, and students requires further study. Additional data-based information about alternative schools and their impact on students with disabilities is critical. Quality alternative schools may be one option that can help to provide educational opportunities and foster successful outcomes for students with and without disabilities who are at risk of school failure.

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## Resources

Alternative Schools Research Project  
<http://ici.umn.edu/alternativeschools/>

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*Author Note.* We would like to thank those who participated in these interviews for their time and the valuable information they provided.

Material for this brief is adapted from the complete report by Lehr, C. A., & Lange, C. M. (2003). Alternative schools and students they serve: Perceptions of state directors of special education. *Policy Research Brief, 14*(1). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living. Available online at <http://ici.umn.edu/products/prb/141/default.html>.

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This report was supported in whole or in part by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, (Cooperative Agreement No. H326J000005). Although the U.S. Department of Education has reviewed this document for consistency with the IDEA, the contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of other organizations imply endorsement by those organizations or the U.S. Government.

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