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**ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION:**

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**A CONTINUED EXAMINATION OF HOW STATES ARE  
ADDRESSING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN THEIR  
SCHOOLS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In an attempt to understand the current preparation level of Arkansas for the Leave No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, the current project conducts a preliminary literature and web search to record what other states have done and are doing to prepare for NCLB. A brief synopsis of the history of alternative policies is also included. Results indicate that of the twelve states examined, most states are following a similar pattern with regard to preparing for their “at risk” students and passing similar alternative education policies. Three common characteristics found across the states: defining what alternative education is and who it provides for, legislation providing for each state’s plan, and finally a discussion of the various funding methods.*

**INTRODUCTION**

While decisions are being made to address “alternative needs” students, the information on alternative education is lacking. Empirical studies questioning how each state is handling the alternative dilemma are lacking, and even studies challenging how each state is addressing alternative education seems to be missing, however, with the recent “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) federal legislation, states are quickly amending their previously disparate alternative policies. With states struggling to put alternative measures in place attempting to address the exploding “at-risk” populations, the research on these populations has not been able to keep up.

The few studies that have been done offer a variety of information gathered from different fields, but with policy makers continually redefining and readdressing what their alternative policies will be, new studies must continue to fill the void and backfill the changing data. From the information in the extant literature and the information gained from this study, relative comparisons can be made to understand what alternative education is and how it is publicly defined, the various successes of alternative education, and what existing program coordinators and policymakers would recommend for future alternative education programs.

**HISTORY OF ALTERNATIVE POLICIES**

Education has been a focus of societies throughout history. The idea of a free or public education for all students took effect after much turmoil in America, with many various groups fighting a variety of issues to make sure they were part of the American educational system and included in the definition of “all persons.” Requesting and requiring new teaching methods, teaching styles, and curriculum development, another group of students began fighting for these educational privileges in the 1960s—they would be deemed “alternative” education students (Miller, 1995).

Alternative education has worked as an expansion to any existing system and is ground in the same theory that backs any public education system – all children should be given the opportunity to learn. Like many states, Arkansas explicitly states this idea in the state constitution by requiring the state to provide a “general, suitable, and efficient” public education system to all student age persons without exception to race, gender, or need (Article 14, Section 1).

Throughout the beginning of alternative programs, they were often considered a “last resort” mechanism for students by providing opportunities for students who were not excelling within the typical classroom environment (Wang & Reynolds, 1995). The program ideas were formulating, but educators seemed unsure of what would be beneficial environments for students. Part of this problem centered on no clear method of definition of what was meant by “alternative” (e.g. behaviorally, physically, and/or academically challenged students). The federal government got involved in 1973 when only 464 identifiable alternative programs existed, which increased to almost 5,000 schools by 1975 due in large part to a Presidential Commission on School Finance that called for more money dedicated to form alternative schools (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998).

Alternative schools now “sought to change student attitudes about schooling, reinforce basic literacy skills, reduce incidences of truancy, and remove disruptive or non-compliant students from regular classrooms” (Vermont, 2000). With funding set in place to establish programs and states needing to maintain and develop these programs, uniformity for alternative programs went in different directions and each state began adopting measures to fit what its officials thought necessary. By 1987 over fifteen states including 35% of all U.S. school districts had adopted alternative school/program legislation to address the needs of behaviorally disruptive students, juvenile offenders, English Second Language (ESL) students, and students at-risk of dropping out of school (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998).

With more states continuing to write and adopt alternative education legislation and the federal government calling for greater results from these programs, an examination of the current system needs to be completed. Several studies have addressed the alternative programs in specific states, but few studies have attempted to account for the differences and similarities between programs. Perhaps the best example in the extant literature of such a study is Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) study that investigated all 50 states programs. With 38 states responding, their study is the most expansive uncovered during my investigation, however, with more guidelines and policies being passed each year, a systematic review of state policies comparing alternative programs must be done periodically. This

study attempts to fulfill, at least in part, that void. By examining the current state information, this study attempted to uncover and address definitional and funding issues encountered by states and highlight successes and recommendations provided for other alternative program legislation.

## **METHODS**

Beginning with a list of the 50 states, the researchers investigated through web searching the 50 state Department of Education sites. With 50 being too cumbersome for the present investigation, a convenience sampling system based on an alphabetical listing of the states was used. From the existing list of the 50 states consisting of four columns, the last three states mentioned in each column were selected (Arizona, California, Colorado, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maine, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin), providing for a twelve state cross sectional view of the United States. In addition, searches through an academic database for articles on Alternative Education and Alternative Education Programs in the selected states began. From the Department of Education web sites, the researchers would locate the “search” tab and type in “alternative education,” “alternative education programs,” and “at-risk student programs.” Looking through the available links and folders, relevant information was selected and printed. Relevant information included information that addressed establishing, funding, and/or policies for alternative education. Combining this research with the information obtained from the extant literature, the following analysis attempts to provide an adequate sketch of the current United States alternative education system.

## **RESULTS**

Great variety exists between the twelve states examined. In as much as each state differs in its educational system, each state also differs in its alternative education system. Stemming from the example of Katsiyannis and Williams (1998), I began looking for several key components across the various states and assessing their programs with the existing measurements—definitions, legislation, and funding

(see Appendix A). Also included is a brief assessment of the benefits found in the programs and some complicating factors to be considered before beginning a program.

## Definitions

Eleven of the twelve states (92%) have adopted a state-wide definition of “alternative” (Maine refers to its system as compensatory education) education, increased from Katsiyannis and Williams’ (1998) study where only 52.6% of states had a state-wide definition. Colorado refers to its program as a Center for At-Risk Education (CARE) rather than alternative. Four key similarities exist across each state—location, persons, curriculum, and outcomes. Most states include as part of their definition a location aspect, meaning does the alternative education take place on the school grounds in a separate room of the school building(s) (California), off-site at an educational facility (North Carolina), at community centers and other buildings not explicitly dedicated to education (New York) or a combination of all three of these locations. Another aspect where states seem to be consistent is in defining the persons the services are to address. All states cited that the alternative services were for a variety of persons coinciding with the list of groups identified by Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) including “expelled, suspended, pregnant, homeless, migrant, delinquent, disruptive, dangerous to self or others, in need of remedial education, released from a correctional facility...truant, unmotivated, academically deficient, students with behavior problems, and students with different learning styles and needs” (p. 279). In addition to stating where the education occurs and who can receive it, states also summarize the curriculum philosophy of their programs.

Similar to Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) findings, states continue to offer an individualized, nontraditional curriculum greatly varying in coursework and scheduling. Among the twelve states expressing this format, Washington exemplifies the individualized learning style providing three separate alternative programs to compensate for all of the persons accounted for in its broad definition—“an individualized course of study for a student who is not home-based pursuant to RCW 28A.22.010(4), a private school student pursuant to RCW

29A.225.010(1)(a), or an adult education student” (Washington, 2003). The consistent curriculum components across definitions are individual, student centered, nontraditional, flexible programs with multiple options to account for virtually every person in the program. While state definitions work to establish eligibility for programs, they also include the purposes of the programs. North Carolina defines alternative education as a school or program that serves students at any level, serves suspended or expelled students, serves students whose learning styles are better served in an alternative program or provides individualized programs outside of a standard classroom setting in a caring atmosphere in which students learn the skills necessary to redirect their lives. (North Carolina, 2003).

Stating that the alternative program outcome is to “redirect” student lives is not uncommon. All twelve states include a similar component to that found by Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) that says the desired outcomes for alternative programs are to: enable students to continue in the educational process, remain in school, prevent drop outs, return to normal classroom environments, obtain high school diploma or equivalent, or to continue education. While states do include a location, for whom, curriculum, and outcome aspect in its definition, they do differ in which populations of people can have access to the programs.

For example, New York (State of Practice, 2003) defines its alternative education system as “any nontraditional environment that provides a comprehensive elementary, middle, or secondary curriculum,” Vermont says alternative education is “(a) designed for students at-risk of academic failure that are located both within a middle school or high school setting, or that are off-site, (b) for all students who need alternative options, (c) students eligible for special education and need therapeutic and clinical interventions, as well as academic support” (Vermont, 2000), while Arizona contends that its alternative education system is predominantly for returning adults or those attempting to obtain a GED (Arizona, 2003).

By comparing these three states, the population differences become visible. New York targets any student from elementary to high school, Vermont targets middle and high school students, whereas, Arizona targets high school and returning students. Some states also include home schooled students as

alternative, while states like Wisconsin explicitly state “alternative education program does not include a private school or a home-based private educational program” (Wisconsin, 2003). This lack of definitional clarity continues to problematize the way the federal government and state governments fund alternative education, in addition, the splintered definitions make comparing alternative education programs between states virtually impossible.

## **Legislation**

All twelve states investigated have legislation governing their programs compared to only 65.8% found by Katsiyannis and Williams (1998). From the developed programs and policies surrounding them, each have been developed and adapted to address the specific students to be served. In Washington, in accordance with WAC 392-121-182, 13,830 students are enrolled in 136 alternative education programs connected with 97 school districts across the state. A Three Model Program has been designed to encompass the “alternative program:” Model 1 is for at-risk students expected to need long term assistance, Model 2 is also for at-risk students and operates very similarly except it is generally for short-term students, and Model 3 is for parent-directed education (home schooling). At-risk and credit deficient students make up the bulk of Model 1 and 2 students (96% / 68% and 88% / 61% respectively), while Model 3 consists of 91% of parent-partnered students.

Similarly, Wisconsin’s Statute 115.28(7) provides for a resource program, SWAS program, and a “pullout” program. The resource programs are generally for students who need specific help (i.e. study skills, guidance, anger management, small group work, or individualized instruction), the SWAS programs are behavior based programs where students need to be removed from the general student body, and the “pullout” programs are for at-risk students. Students are enrolled in the programs after a referral form is designed, completed, and submitted regarding the student and a team meets to discuss the student’s needs, and an interview is set up with the student and his/her parent(s). A different type of legislation is North Carolina’s HB168 and SB 1099 that took effect in July 1999.

North Carolina established guidelines for school districts wanting to implement an alternative education program rather than state level directives. According to HB 168 and SB 1099, each local school board must establish at least one alternative education program or school, provide specific guidelines for student selection or placement into the programs to the state, provide documented records for placing the student into the new education system, contact the student’s parent(s), and provide specific measures directed at keeping at-risk students in the normal classroom. The variety of specific legal language in the legislation surrounding alternative programs does not discount that each state, while it might vary from its neighbors in means, attempts to accomplish the same goal—assist students in obtaining their education. A subcategory of the legislation governing each state is the funding dedicated to providing the assistance to students.

## **Funding**

In the research found by Katsiyannis and Williams (1998), 89.5% of the states used local funding as a primary source, 65.8% used matching federal funds, and 60.5% primarily used state funds. Federal sources of money included the Safe and Drug-Free Schools, Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act, Improving America’s Schools Act, Goals 2000, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA), and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). In my search, the most used method seemed to be primarily using local money and using state and federal money as available to fill in spending gaps. Half of the states investigated used a combination of federal, state, and local money. Vermont’s programs serve as an example of a state primarily using local funding.

In Vermont spending varies from \$6,000 to \$26,000 per student. The majority of programs reported having adequate funding. The predominant source of funding is combination of local general operating funds and state reimbursement funds. Special Education programs submit yearly plans to the State Board of Education, while At-risk programs are mostly supported by local budgets (Vermont, 2003). In Washington, each principal or director is responsible for calculating the number of FT students and submitting the subsequent paperwork for funding, which is approximately \$44 million a year of state

funds (calculated at \$3,600 per full-time student). Further exemplifying the differences found between states is the comparison of North Carolina and Wisconsin. North Carolina specifically states that “no funds will be allotted on a competitive grant basis,” while Act 9 of 1999 in Wisconsin created a competitive grant system to fund the state’s alternative education programs.

#### Program Benefits and Barriers

With regard to the variety in methods used, each state surveyed by Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) and investigated in this study claimed to have numerous advantages and meeting the previously discussed outcome variables often. The most commonly found benefit is a method to keep at-risk students involved in school. With a flexible schedule and a means to continue educating students in or released from correctional facilities, each state can expect increases in educational attainment (e.g. percent of residents with a high school degree or equivalent). Other benefits include increasing student productivity, increasing overall school safety, decreasing school violence, increasing parental involvement in school, and providing a greater community atmosphere for all students. By increasing the education to students, employment opportunities also increase whether through specific vocational training or through allowing students more ways to obtain diplomas (Zachmeier, 1987). Benefits also found associated with the programs were increased basic skills, increased competencies, increased personal and vocational skills, and increased communication, coping, and self-control skills (New York, 2003; North Carolina, 2003; Vermont, 2003)

Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) found that 95% of their respondents included inadequate funding as a program barrier. This lack of funding continues to echo in my investigation, with all but one state mentioning it as a problem. Other barriers included community, school, and professional attitudes against students and staff, a general lack of understanding for the efforts by the public, definitional problems about who should be included in the programs, a lack of facilities to house students who should be involved in the programs, and a need for interagency support (e.g. better cooperation and communication between the Juvenile Justice system and the state Education system).

## DISCUSSION

The lack of definitional, population, legislation, funding, and evaluation consistency guiding alternative education made comparing the states more complex. With each state having a different definition of what an alternative program is and different rules and regulations governing the program, effectively evaluating each state to determine which program produces the greatest benefits based on outcome measures is difficult. The goal of this work was to uncover the current status of the United States alternative education system, but a unified system does not exist. While each state seems to believe helping students is most effectively done through keeping them enrolled in school, each state focuses on different populations to assist. Collectively assessing the states, the argument can be made that the issue of alternative education is extremely complex and each state must decide who they will focus on to assist through their programs and work to accomplish the specific desired outcomes for those involved.

The idea of unifying a definition for what alternative education would make funding the programs from a federal level more appropriate, but as they are now, each state must determine how to apply for and use federal funding, which is why programs are typically funded at the local level. By increasing student graduation and GED rates, states are increasing the overall education of the state; therefore, the state can legitimately expect decreases in unemployment, number of incarcerations and crimes, public assistance need, and any other measure correlated with high school drop outs. In attempting to better the state and address the growing number of drop out, at-risk, and special needs students, states should expect to see larger outcomes from these programs. States continuing to fight to recover the drop out students and initiate alternative education programs must look to other states that specifically resemble the programs they want to establish, as each program seems to vary sometimes with little similarity and sometimes with great similarity.

Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) gave several recommendations for alternative programs and those recommendations remain true to what needs to be done in order to secure an effective alternative education system. In an effort to relate the above material to how alternative plans should be

implemented and highlight the gross disparities between each program, the following seven recommendations are offered.

*First, a broad definition of who should be included must be developed and adopted.* Not only for the students to be included, but also for the teachers and anyone else involved (e.g. community members, counselors, etc.). The method of selecting students must be centralized, will the program target at-risk students, behaviorally problematic students, academically challenged students, and / or delinquent students?

*Second, agreements need to be explicitly made between parents, community members, Justice Departments, Police departments, and schools.* Collaborative efforts by all individuals involved in the students' lives are required for the success of the student and the program.

*Third, training and development must be put in place for teachers and administrators associated with the programs.* In addition to the disparities in defining, policymaking, and funding for the different states, each state requires different duties from teachers and administrators. Some programs run more like an after school tutoring program, whereas, some run more closely to an special education classroom. Specific teacher certification programs must be allowed for and part of the funding associated with the programs, otherwise the teachers are little more than monitors.

*Fourth, a consistent finding across all programs was flexibility and individualized learning.* Special needs, at-risk, and returning students all rejected the traditional classroom system, either by choice or need, and must be given opportunities to excel in new ways. This idea rings true especially for states like Arkansas that face Court rulings that will require state educational changes to facilitate learning to all students (*Lake View v Huckabee*, 2002).

*Fifth, the program must work to be as inclusive as possible.* Schools, districts, and states must attempt to account for as much of the need as possible when establishing policies, setting up funding, and cementing the requirements for programs. Alternative education is continuing to take shape from the 1972 Presidential call for greater service to special needs students and this response must be all encompassing.

*Sixth, specific entry and exit criteria must be established for the programs.* Students, parents, teachers, and administrators must be aware of the how students will be sent to, enrolled in, recommended for, or volunteer for the alternative programs. In addition, all involved must know the protocol for leaving the program.

*Seventh, a systematic evaluation of the program must be established.* Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) found that only 31% of the programs had an evaluation process, either by annual report or periodic visits from an external evaluator, while only half of my sample used state assessed evaluations.

The lack of evaluation in the states is most likely related the timeliness of alternative programs. With states only recently beginning to incorporate adequate measures, most likely as a result of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, evaluations have not been done because programs are new and policymakers, administrators, and the other individuals involved are still working out the system problems. In order to assure program effectiveness, however, impact evaluations must be put in place and ritually conducted. Otherwise, systematic research comparing the various state programs will continue to yield fruitless results as to which program is working best for which populations.

## FUTURE WORK

With the diversity in alternative education and the "No Child Left Behind" legislation recently set in motion by the federal government, states must look to one another to begin determining what the best alternative education system is rather than simply attempting to put in any measure to address at-risk students. Almost 40 years have passed since the alternative education call originated, yet several states are only now beginning to hear the echo amplified through other states. The federal government and the judicial system, in many instances, has finally stepped in and voiced the call that all students must be given every opportunity.

In this search, several states may have an "alternative" program or policy, but refer to it as an at-risk student program (Colorado) or compensatory (Maine) rather than alternative. This highlights the difficulty in a

nation-wide assessment of alternative programs when states vary in the accepted definition of “alternative” and if their respective programs are even referred to as alternative. This work was also highly dependent on the website information provided by each state, which varied greatly. The intent of this work, however, was to pave the way for more research while

photographing the current status of the nation in its preparedness level to handle alternative students. With social programs, education, and the economy among other issues shaping the fate for politicians, employers and employees, students, and families, America must address the needs of today’s students who will address tomorrow’s agenda.

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