Alternative Education Responding to Complex Needs

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Alternative Education Responding to Complex Needs

ORONO, Maine – The growth of alternative education programs reflects both an increasing population of students having difficulty learning and adjusting in traditional school settings and the escalating pressure on public schools to meet the diverse academic, social and personal needs of all children, according to a University of Maine study.

Alternative education programs in Maine public schools increased about 25 percent during the past two years and serve approximately 2,225 high school students. The development of such programs appears to be a response, at least in part, to keep these students in school and working toward graduation while addressing their complex problems in a comprehensive way, says William E. Davis, UMaine professor of education and director of the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, which conducted the research.

Specific definition is difficult, but research estimates that more than 20,000 alternative-type programs are currently operating in the nation’s public schools. Maine has approximately 150 alternative education programs that offer credit toward high school graduation. While they vary in type, operation and enrollment, their driving force is similar, according to Davis. All work to provide a different type of instructional format and curriculum, and a more personal, responsive climate. Common elements include a heavy emphasis on individualized instruction, close instructor/student relationships, flexibility in school schedule and relevant hands-on experiential learning.

The research on the status of alternative education programs followed an earlier study investigating the wide variance among Maine school districts in the numbers of students identified within the behavioral impairment or emotional disability special education categories. Special education enrollment in Maine has increased steadily since 1992, with approximately 17.3 percent of all students receiving special education services during the 2001-02 school year. Also Maine serves nearly twice the national average of students identified with emotional disabilities.

“We kept hearing that effective, quality alternative education programs at all levels – K-12 – would reduce the number of students requiring special education, particularly those with emotional or behavioral problems, and would serve as a preventive measure by providing early intervention,” said Davis.

Research suggests three major factors have combined to create the recent interest in alternative education, according to Davis. They include: the current reform movement emphasizing high academic standards, student achievement and accountability; widespread concern about school violence and the desire to make schools safe, including removal of disruptive students; and the increase in students served by special education, with costs perceived by many citizens as unfairly eroding resources for non-disabled students.
Most alternative education programs in Maine include some special education students, but the vast majority of students do not have identified disabilities, according to Davis. Rather they are considered at risk for school failure because of complex needs and situations that often result in feeling alienated, ineffectual and devalued both as learners and human beings. It is not surprising, Davis says, that students consistently identified the two greatest strengths of their alternative education programs as the personal relationship with instructors and the sense of hope and empowerment these programs provide.

Policymakers and educators need to view alternative education as effective vehicles for promoting the learning of all students and lowering the number of real and potential student dropouts, not as a solution to increasing pressure on schools, Davis points out. That perspective calls for understanding the intended purpose, purported advantages and disadvantages, and the major characteristics commonly associated with successful alternative programs, which his research addresses.

The institute’s study collected information on the general status of alternative education from 75 programs representing 65 Maine school districts or units. Thirty were selected from this sample for more in-depth study and analysis. The programs studied have operated for more than six years and serve students in grades 9-12.

The majority of alternative education programs in Maine (56 percent) were characterized as designed to serve students having difficulty learning and adjusting in conventional school settings. Student participation is voluntary in these programs, commonly referred to as innovative or choice programs. Twenty-three percent were characterized as serving students needing remediation or rehabilitation in the academic, social, emotional and/or behavioral areas. Only 1 percent in the sample identified their program as disciplinary or designed exclusively to serve students at risk of suspension or expulsion or who have already been suspended or expelled.

The students were as varied as their programs, but general characteristics fall into three types: unconventional learners who need different overall learning environments; students with minor emotional or behavioral issues; and students with compelling personal, family and/or social issues and problems.

Of the 75 programs, 51 percent were housed off campus, while 48 percent were located on campus. Program site appeared to be primarily a function of space availability. However, directors of off-campus programs saw their location as a major factor in success because their students felt generally rejected by the majority of their classmates and in some cases by teachers in the regular high school.

Ninety percent of the programs indicated that the local school district budget was the major source of funding; for most, it was the sole source. This finding lends support to the prevailing belief that, in recent years, alternative education programs have become more institutionalized and accepted as part of the overall public school educational delivery system in Maine, says Davis.

The greatest needs reported were for more funding and quality space for programs.

Assessing alternative education has always posed a dilemma and is of even greater concern with state and national emphasis on increased uniformity and rigor, according to Davis. However, the majority of the programs advocate strongly for use of multiple measures such as portfolios and projects in addition to required standardized tests.

“We were pleasantly surprised by how many programs appeared to be dealing with the Maine Learning Results with a creative lens for presenting and meeting the standards,” Davis said.
Student outcomes reflect a positive trend. Eighty-one percent of the 281 students who held senior status during the first quarter of the 2000-01 year graduated from the alternative education program with a high school diploma; 9 percent dropped out. Most, if not all, were considered at high risk for dropping out of school, and some had already dropped out on one or more occasions. Of the completers, 23 (10 percent) enrolled in higher education; 27 (12 percent) in technical/vocational programs; 14 joined the military; and 131 obtained full time jobs.

Among recommendations stemming from the research:

- Increased state support to help alternative educators to meet the needs of increasing numbers of students who appear to benefit from participation.
- Collaboration between the state Department of Education, university teacher training programs and the Alternative Education Association of Maine to address personnel needs. No formal alternative education training program currently exists in Maine.
- Clarification of the interrelationship between alternative and adult education. Many adult educators feel increasingly expected to provide programs for adolescents who have dropped out of school, or been expelled, and require a different type of curriculum and instruction.

The Institute for the Study of Students At Risk is sponsored by the Division of Special Services at the Maine Department of Education and the College of Education and Human Development at UMaine. An executive summary of the study, “Alternative Education Programs in Maine: A Further Investigation of Their Impact on Students At Risk and with Disabilities,” is available by calling the institute at (207) 581-2440.

**Released:** February 3, 2003  
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Updated: 05/23/03