

A Framework for Learning Alternatives Environments in Iowa

Preface

This framework identifies the essential components necessary for establishing and maintaining quality learning alternatives environments. It is intended to be consistent with the philosophy of local control practiced in Iowa and guidance allowing maximum community involvement in planning. The framework is to assist with the development and improvement of learning alternatives. The following definitions, based on Chapter 12, Iowa Administrative Code, help interpret the difference between schools and programs.

"School alternatives" reflect environments which individually offer choices within the district/s. The school alternatives have policies and rules, educational objectives, staff and resources necessary to accommodate student needs. They provide a comprehensive education consistent with the goals and content standards established by the district or by districts participating in a consortium. Students attend via choice.

"Program alternatives" define an established class or environment within a school designed to accommodate specific student educational needs such as work related training, reading, mathematics, science, communication, social and emotional development, physical skills, and employability, study, or life skills.

PERSPECTIVE

Beliefs brought forward by educators in learning alternatives over hundreds of years have been recognized and embraced by present day educators as "Alternative Education". Alternative education represents a perspective within education, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many diverse ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur. Further, it recognizes that all people can be educated and that it is in society's interest to ensure that all are educated to be a fully participating citizen in our democratic society. To accomplish this requires that we provide a variety of choices of educational philosophies and methodologies so that each person can find one that is sufficiently personalized to facilitate progress.

Alternative education recognizes that everyone does not learn in the same way and should not have to be taught in the same way. It accepts that all schools (Elementary, Middle, and High School) do not have to be alike with the same learning environments and that parents and children are capable of making decisions about what and how they learn. Consequently, it incorporates variety and choice within school systems to ensure that every young person may find a path to the educational goals of the community.

The recognition of individuality in learning within the management of learning constitutes the foundation for establishment of learning alternatives environments. Learning alternatives environments are represented by: (a) alternative schools, both public and private; (b) alternative programs for students to pursue common goals through varying approaches within the same schools; and (c) a set of teaching strategies, beliefs, and support services that facilitate growth in academic, personal/social and career development initiatives. The following beliefs apply.

- All individuals can and do learn.
- The initiation and dynamics of the learning process continually vary between and within individuals.
- Environmental factors and individual traits dramatically affect the process.
- The individuality of learning naturally demands varied methods and timelines to manage learning and varied environments to accommodate all individuals at all stages of development.
- Diverse support systems are needed to assure equity and equal opportunity.

The Framework

(Essential Components of Alternative Learning Environments)

1) PURPOSE

The purpose of the learning alternative reflects the needs of the students, families, community/ies, and district/s served. This requires that the learning alternative has a written statement of philosophy, mission, and goals. Staff, students, parents/guardians, and community agree to and abide by the written philosophy, mission, and goals.

2) STUDENT FOCUS

a) THE STUDENT AS THE CENTER OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The paradigm of the learning alternative environment considers the student first. The needs of the individual relative to personal, social, emotional, behavioral, essential learnings, and career and talent development are carefully considered and the appropriate provisions for meeting individual needs are developed.

The focus of learning is on establishing student success and responsibility for personal learning within all systems of school management (instruction, discipline, staff development, guidance, extra-curricular activities, evaluation, and assessment). Personalized planning guides the management of learning to help establish personal responsibility and ensure student success. Student and parent/guardian choice is a guiding principle for participation.

b) UNIQUE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

The education process is geared to meet the unique needs of the student. The program and its expectations for students are clearly defined enabling students and families to make appropriate and informed choices. Individuals assume responsibility for attending school, engaging in learning activities, and cooperating to maintain a positive learning environment. Students and parents/guardians choose to participate as an option to fulfill the defined educational goals. Personalized education plans direct learning and graduation and include, but are not limited to, minimum requirements to meet student needs as allowed by Iowa Code. Personalized plans may include options for extended learning beyond the typical ages of secondary level students. Health, personal fitness, personal and social development, service learning, and career activities including post-secondary planning are included to assist student success, transition into the community, and community enhancement.

Assessments are regular and frequent for continuous feedback to students and to determine success in striving toward goals and expectations. Multiple measures are used and include formal (standardized) measures, informal locally developed measures, student self-evaluation inventories, and class and community-based performance projects. The results of assessment are used to modify curriculum, instruction, methodology, support services, and

management practices to benefit students. Reviews and evaluation are guided by the principle of enhancing the worth and dignity of each student. The measurement of individual growth rather than ranking and comparing to others is practiced to encourage learning and motivate the learner. Standardized measurements stressing comparative standings on a state and national level are offered to those choosing to explore their standings on these instruments.

The education plan is designed to develop self-acceptance, social acceptance, self worth, talents, life fulfilling competencies and essential learnings to contribute to personal achievement and community involvement. Teaching practices include application of learning as a guiding principle to mastery, transfer of learning, and future utilization. Parents/guardians and students are informed of their rights and responsibilities and care is taken to protect privacy when collecting and disseminating information. Discipline is practiced as a means of self-improvement through learning/teaching acceptable behavior and as a positive motivating force for the student.

c) SCHOOL CLIMATE MOTIVATES LEARNING

Students are immersed in a climate that assists them to perceive that 1) they can learn, 2) they belong, 3) their learning style is a personal characteristic that is valid and varied, 4) they are responsible for their own learning and must also respect the right of others to learn, 5) learning is stimulating, 6) emotions are part and parcel to learning, 7) forming family relationships strengthens learning and acceptance of learning, and 8) teaming contributes to personal freedom, independence and security. Methods of teaching accommodate different learning styles. Norms for progress are established to challenge learners, and used to guide personalized plans with the active involvement of students. Students are actively involved in writing their personalized plan. Students, parents/guardians, and the community are continuously informed of the program to encourage and support student progress. Students, staff, parents/guardians, and the community are involved in establishing a sense of security and belonging. School lunch and breakfast programs are provided on site or an easily accessible site to assure health and nutrition, which are prerequisites to learning. Students are eligible and participate in co-curricular activities provided throughout the district, including competitive sports programs, to facilitate social and emotional development and the enhancement of special talents and skills.

3) STAFF FOCUS

(a TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE

The choice of staff to work in learning alternatives environments is regarded as equally important as licensure in selecting staff. Staff directly influence students and reflect and model whether they care. Choice can improve attitudes toward learning, cooperation, and acceptance for the responsibility to learn and can impact learning environments positively. Students work harder and succeed when engaged and challenged in a caring way.

b) STAFF ARE QUALIFIED AND INVOLVED IN SELF IMPROVEMENT

All staff members 1) meet state teaching or administration requirements, 2) are involved in self-assessment and decision making regarding improvement of their competencies, 3) derive self-improvement through needs assessments, and 4) participate in and evaluate staff development experiences. Mentoring is encouraged and practiced between staff members as a matter of building competence and family. Staff licensed in education are augmented by other licensed staff in other community services and by paraprofessionals.

c) ADMINISTRATORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LEARNING ALTERNATIVES ACTIVELY PLAN AND PARTICIPATE IN ESTABLISHING A QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

Staff responsible for the learning alternatives freely develop the learning environment. Community-building activities are implemented to build relationships and trust between staff and students regarding commitment to learning. Staff collaborates and freely participates with other staff in the district/s in all aspects of education.

4) MANAGEMENT & SUPPORT FOCUS

a) COMMUNITY-WIDE SERVICE AND DECISION MAKING IS ACTIVELY TAUGHT AND IMPLEMENTED

The staff has established processes to gain the advice of community members in decision-making for developing and improving the school or programs. Students are valued and are involved as part of the decision-making for school

improvement. The private and public employment sectors are involved in establishing transition initiatives to assist students to enter and succeed in career development and employment. Public and private community service agencies and organizations are engaged in collaborative planning and service delivery to establish full-service capacity to address individual and family needs.

b) ORGANIZATION, ADMINISTRATION, CONTROL, AND DECISION MAKING

The learning alternative and curriculum are developed collaboratively with the central administration of the school district/s. School enrollments do not exceed 250 for any time frame within a day and are matched with a consistent and stable staff allowing time for the establishment of significant helping relationships. Adequate staff/teacher-pupil ratios (approximately 1/12 computed using total teacher and student enrollments not including student services staff) are provided for maximum success in reaching goals. The school day and year are tailored to fit student needs and goals. Meaningful records/reports are developed to reflect goals, programs, staff, and school. Student records and progress are maintained and reported in meaningful and easily interpreted transcripts. The schools and programs meet all state requirements and regulations unless exemptions have been granted. A policy exists for student enrollment. Credits and progress achieved are clearly defined in writing, are measurable, and are based on sound criteria for judgement consistent with statements of purpose. Credits and progress achieved are clearly communicated to and understood by students and parents/guardians and community/ies membership/s.

c) LEARNING RESOURCES ARE APPROPRIATE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE STUDENTS

Learning resources within the district/s (curriculum coordinators, pupil personnel service, technology coordinators, staff development personnel, consultants, etc.) are coordinated with learning alternatives environments to maximize learning opportunities. Moreover, community resources (communication systems, libraries, etc.) are coordinated with learning alternatives environments to maximize learning opportunities. Collaboration with intermediate agency staff, post-secondary institutions, and other service providers helps ensure that resources not available in the district can be found. Transportation, childcare, and other student/family needs are addressed to achieve goals within personalized plans. Options exist to transfer students between the learning environments available inside and outside the district to complete personalized education plans and for the opportunity to maximize skills necessary to enter career fields and/or competitive work.

d) ACCOUNTABILITY

There is an organized plan to collect and analyze data to determine needs, assess student performance, and guide the school's/program's progress toward student success. The data collection and evaluation plan includes diverse assessments including standardized measures. Assessments are utilized to guide academic, career development (preparation for employment), and personal/social/emotional growth. Standardized assessments are conducted to provide information on student performance consistent with district-wide assessments. There is a plan for distribution of evaluation reports to assure community-wide awareness.

e) FINANCIAL STABILITY

The school district/s provides an adequate budget to administer the school/program with high quality and fulfill all standards including instruction, facility, discipline, staff development, curriculum and materials development, technology, guidance, assessment, and evaluation. Budgetary procedures follow district/s plans and meet state and federal guidelines.

f) ADEQUATE FACILITIES TO PROMOTE LEARNING

The facilities are structured to meet the needs of students, families, staffs, and community/ies. Adequate space is available for group learning, allowing cooperative learning groups to function appropriately and to accommodate individual learning areas for independent study without significant intrusion. Water, ventilation, and air conditioning systems are available to accommodate year-round learning and learning labs established for experimentation and application of principles of learning. The facilities meet fire and safety regulations. The facilities are accessible and accommodate disabled students, staff, and community members. Private entrances, counseling areas and meeting rooms are planned and provided to protect confidentiality and respect the individuality of families and children, accommodate multiple community services, and facilitate collaborative services. Policies exist to monitor entry and exit of students, staff, and community members to ensure safe and adequate learning and service delivery environments.

SUMMARY

This framework represents a research and experienced-based synopsis of basic principles to develop and improve learning alternatives within Iowa. It serves to focus on a critical question to guide education i.e., What is the purpose of education? The answer should be responsible citizens, effective workers, and lifelong learners. It also offers insight into how individuals learn best identifying

modern principles and brain-compatible strategies for managing learning. Most importantly, it offers a consideration of learning alternatives as a means to maximize learning for all individuals in our communities.

The content of this framework was established through broad input from educators involved in diverse alternative learning environments at various levels across Iowa and the United States. It has been formally recognized by the Iowa Association of Alternative Education and reviewed and edited by all major education organizations within Iowa.