



NEWSLETTER

Meeting Students' Needs

IN A NATION WHERE MORE THAN 2,857 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL EVERY DAY (CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND, 2014), THE ESTABLISHMENT OF, AND ENROLLMENT IN, ALTERNATIVE (OR NONTRADITIONAL) SCHOOLS IS ONE OF THE SOLUTIONS TO OUR DROPOUT CRISIS. THE HALLMARKS OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION—SMALLER CLASS SIZES, INDIVIDUALIZED ATTENTION, CAREER-FOCUSED/SELF-PACED COURSEWORK, AND CLASSES TAUGHT BY INSTRUCTORS CERTIFIED IN THEIR SUBJECT AREAS—HAVE NOT ONLY SERVED THE PURPOSE OF DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY, BUT ARE ALSO IMPACTING THE DELIVERY OF INSTRUCTION AT “TRADITIONAL” HIGH SCHOOLS.



Contributors to our Alternative Education issue represent different perspectives on the topic, and are a few among many who exemplify what works best and why. Further, our contributors share strategies and approaches that are not only research-based, but can be replicated in other schools and districts as well.

In this issue, our Program Profiles spotlight two Massachusetts-based alternative schools—COFFEE (the Cooperative Federation for Educational Experiences) in Oxford, and the Peabody Learning Academy in Peabody. Located just 90 minutes and 80 miles apart, both institutions are committed to providing the best in alternative education, including rigorous individualized curriculum, community service and career-skills components, and behavior and social skills education. In many cases, alternative school students must work more diligently and be even more committed to completing their high school education.

As Seith Bedard, Director of the Peabody Learning Academy states: “Students [in alternative schools] work harder in many ways...and that is not often recognized. [These] students...in many cases are years behind where they should be academically. Students at our Academy work on a credit recovery program that allows [them] to

recover up to two years of academics in just one year. The program is not easy.”

What alternative school students are looking for—and find—in pursuit of their education is a critically important sense of school belonging, confidence that the knowledge acquired—and required of them—has “real life” application upon graduation, and that their learning environment is student-centered and caring.

Family mobility can be particularly challenging. Bedard points out that immigrant students often enroll, then return to their native countries for several months, returning to school again in June. They are then counted as “dropouts,” even though they were enrolled for less than 45 days of the academic year.

In addition to mobility, Robert L. Eichorn, Principal of New Directions Alternative Education Center; and John Murray, Founder and CEO of AdvancePath Academics, discuss other societal and demographic challenges that impact dropout and increase the need for vital wrap-around services to provide additional support for students in both alternative and traditional school environments. These services involve mental health and drug counseling, and support for pregnant and parenting teens.

Kevin Wells of COFFEE writes that his staff includes counselors and social workers trained to intervene on behalf of youth pursuing their education in the face of PTSD, depression, learning disabilities, and other disorders.

Our contributors are among the cadre of educators across the nation who open the school doors each day to welcome their students, to teach and counsel them, and to meet them where their needs are. Alternative educators battle against dropout every day in every way they can—from lobbying their communities and leaders for funding and in-kind support, to providing students with money for food or transportation to school, to afterschool tutoring and mentoring, or meeting with a parent to help cushion news a student cannot bear to deliver alone.

We are grateful to have educators like these in our schools—and as contributors to this *Newsletter*—and to them we say *onward*.

Reference

Children's Defense Fund. (2014). *Each day in America*. Research Library. Retrieved from www.childrendefense.org/library/each-day-in-america.html

—Mark R. Cheatham
Editor

2014 Crystal Star Winners

The National Dropout Prevention Network's Crystal Star Awards of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention identify and bring national recognition to outstanding individuals who have made significant contributions to the advancement of our mission to reduce school dropout and increase graduation rates nationwide. This year, NDPN presented awards to a stellar slate of recipients who have brought national attention to the issue of dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery at the national, state, and local levels.

In particular, the interventions of these leaders and their abiding commitment to education have served to help keep youth in school through graduation, and in several instances, have provided schools and districts throughout the country with effective research-based strategies that can be replicated and implemented on behalf of the students they teach. We are pleased to present this year's Crystal Star Awards of Excellence winners.



National
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The Honorable Elaine L. Chao, 24th and former U.S. Secretary of Labor 2001-2009—Recipient of Crystal Star Award of Excellence for Lifetime Achievement and National Impact



Governor Steven L. Beshear and First Lady Jane Beshear, Commonwealth of Kentucky—Recipients of the Crystal Star Award of Excellence for Distinguished Leadership Service



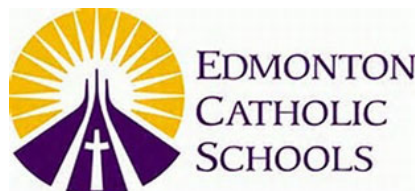
Seith Bedard, Director of the Peabody Learning Academy, Peabody, MA—Recipient of Individual Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention



Kelly Tonsmeire, Director of the Alaska Staff Development Network, Douglas, AK—Recipient of Individual Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention



Program Recipient—Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention, Mountain Educational Charter High School, Cleveland, GA



Program Recipient—Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention, Edmonton Catholic Schools, Alberta, Canada

Network Notes

Dr. Sandy Addis Appointed Interim Executive

■ Dr. Sandy Addis has been named Interim Executive Director of the National Dropout Prevention Center by George J. Petersen, founding dean of the Eugene T. Moore School of Education at Clemson University. Dr. Addis succeeds Dr. Elizabeth Reynolds, who stepped down at the end of 2014. Dr. Addis has been a member of the Board of NDPC/N as Associate Director in 2013. He has more than four decades of experience in public education, having been a teacher (K12 and postsecondary), counselor, coach, alternative school principal, system-level administrator, and director of a regional educational service agency. Dr. Addis has designed



and administered a variety of dropout prevention initiatives that include out-of-school programs, counseling, service-learning, and educator training and professional development.

Governor and Mrs. Richard W. Riley Award Presented to Dr. Lawrence R. Allen

■ Dr. Lawrence R. Allen, Professor and Dean Emeritus of the College of Health, Education, and Human Development (HEHD) at Clemson University, received the Governor and Mrs. Richard W. Riley Award of Excellence in Dropout Prevention, given annually by the National Dropout Prevention Center.

Currently a Professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, Dr. Allen served



as Dean of HEHD for 11 years until he stepped down in 2014. Dr. Allen was selected for the Governor and Mrs. Richard W. Riley Award of Excellence in Dropout Prevention in recognition of his efforts, nationally and internationally, to include the family and the greater community as stakeholders and foot-soldiers in the campaign to eliminate dropout. The award was presented at the organization's 2015 At-Risk Youth National FORUM in Myrtle Beach, SC.

Solutions to the Dropout Crisis

■ The second Tuesday of each month, link to www.dropoutprevention.org/ webcast at 3:30 PM ET for a free, hour-long professional development video webcast. On April 14, Joshua Cramer, Director of Family Engagement for the National Center for Families Learning, will be our guest.

Mark Your Calendars!

Check out our Web site at www.dropoutprevention.org for more information.



A Vision for Exemplary Practices

by Robert L. Eichorn

Nontraditional and alternative schools serve students who require or thrive in environments other than traditional educational settings. These learners may face challenges in school, home, and community, and as a result, may have difficulties fully accessing services in traditional settings. Innovative 21st Century approaches to teaching and learning found in nontraditional and alternative education provide students with opportunities to meet graduation requirements, engage in college and career readiness, and participate as productive members of their communities.

For decades, nontraditional and alternative schools have increased student achievement, changed the lives of at-risk students, and fostered a sense of community for all stakeholders. When adopted and implemented with fidelity, these schools can transform their districts (Raywid, 1994). While local education agencies (LEAs) have been at the forefront of alternative school creation and program improvement, individual states are having an increased role with oversight and program support. The Wisconsin Department of Education (n.d.) notes that alternatives must be developed because large or traditional school environments do not meet the needs of all students, particularly the at-risk, vulnerable, or disengaged.

Evidence-Based Standards

Research conducted by the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) has identified 15 exemplary practices for creating, implementing, and sustaining high-quality nontraditional and alternative schools. *Exemplary Practices 2.0: Standards of Quality and Program Evaluation 2014* (NAEA, n.d.) provides educational leaders and practitioners with a standards-based approach to program evaluation; identifies essential characteristics; and notes the importance of wraparound services, including school counseling, social work, and technology; all of which contribute to successful schools and programs.

According to the NAEA, when incorporated into alternative school design, the 15 exemplary practices assure that high-quality educational services are delivered with fidelity, academic standards and benchmarks are adhered to consistently, and student achievement is the foundation for program evaluation. Exemplary practices include a school formulated vision and mission; experienced leadership; stakeholder ownership of climate and culture; ongoing professional development; rigorous and relevant traditional, digital, and blended curriculum; consistent and authentic student assessment; multiyear transition planning; parents and community stakeholders as essential partners; and strategic collaboration with community agencies led by professional school counselors and social workers, essential in developing nontraditional education plans for all students. Each component involves specific benchmarks and indicators schools can use to plan, reflect, and evaluate program performance.

Examples of Efficacy of Practices

LEAs as well as state departments of education have adopted the exemplary practices as part of their rubrics for program monitoring and evaluations. In Virginia, Prince William County Public Schools alternative high school, New Directions (<http://newdirections.schools.pwcs.edu>), embraced the 15 practices, increased enrollment by 300 % and raised graduation rates by 19 %, with the last four years at a 90 % or better graduation rate. Consequently, the district's on-time graduation rate increased to 91 % in 2014 (Prince William County Public Schools, 2014). The Tennessee Department of Education (2015) adopted the *NAEA Exemplary Practices* and created a Governor's Advisory Council for Alternative Education. The council reviews issues, appraises plans, assesses curricula, and evaluates rules of governance as each relates to nontraditional and alternative schools. This systemic approach at local and state levels serves to provide common structure to ensure



Eichorn and students at New Directions
(Photo by Pete Marovich)

students and those who serve them are provided with the human, capital, and technical resources to create and maintain exemplary schools. *Exemplary Practices 2.0* (NAEA, n.d.) informs school districts, divisions, communities, and stakeholders on the critical “look fors” that should be evident in nontraditional or alternative schools and the school communities that support them.

Technical Assistance and Educational Support

A variety of mechanisms can provide support and technical assistance for alternative and nontraditional educators. The NAEA holds annual professional development conferences which provide continuing education units to attendees and help create and support state alternative education associations. Organization leaders visit and provide programmatic feedback to existing and developing schools throughout the United States. Since 1978, The Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center has served school districts with an emphasis on closing the achievement gap and reducing the dropout rate. State and local education agencies have engaged in partnership with these and parallel organizations to provide professional development opportunities that target program development, student achievement, and educator support through the review of student performance data. Emphasizing the NAEA exemplary practices, colleges and universities offering alternative

education degree and certificate programs include Lock Haven University, University of Wisconsin, and University of West Florida. LEAs should benchmark the standards for alternative and nontraditional education in their state with *Exemplary Practices 2.0* and utilize the aforementioned resources to develop their programs.

Effective benchmarking will lead to the creation of model programs that increase student achievement, are cost effective, and are regionally aligned. While per pupil costs vary by jurisdiction, effective schools and programs can be created using the standard traditional school allocation model. To maintain the recommended 12:1 student:teacher ratio using that allocation, flexible schedules can be implemented along with blended instruction, maximizing enrollment while maintaining small class size. In addition, operating multiple academic shifts on abbreviated schedules takes advantage of per pupil allocation and enrollment opportunities, particularly at the high school level. For example, two 3-hour academic shift sessions with complementary digital learning affords a student the opportunity to earn eight academic credits in a year on a half-day schedule, freeing up time to engage in employment, internship, or other off-campus activities.

Funding

Historically, funding streams for alternative programs come from state or federal grants. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia provides grants to regional alternative programs for staffing purposes, allowing multiple districts to refer students for educational services. Federal grants such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers provide traditional schools the opportunity to staff afterschool tutorial and “school-within-a-school” programs to support the needs of disenfranchised and at-risk youth. This opportunity, funded through the Elementary and Secondary Education of 1965 (ESEA) and amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is designed to assist students in meeting or exceeding local or state standards in core

content subject areas. While such grants can provide valuable resources to a traditional or alternative school, it should be noted that a consistent local funding stream is critical to the success and long term viability of any alternative school or program.

Creating and sustaining high-performing alternative schools can be accomplished when LEAs focus on outcomes-based approaches throughout the developmental process. Emphasis should be on front-end planning with a shared vision supported by the superintendent and school board. In particular, resources should be aligned based on the performance data of the target student population. In addition to achievement data, program surveys should be distributed to stakeholders with an emphasis on community, economic, and logistical needs of the families and students served by the alternative school. Not all students start at the same place with cognitive development, social awareness, or economic status. By using an equity-based model, educational leaders and professionals purposefully adjust human and capital resources to serve the most at-risk students (Larson & Barton, 2013). The most economically needy, emotionally starved, and academically challenged students deserve the best teachers and resources.

A Cautionary Tale

Consider this cautionary tale that plays out in many school districts: An alternative program is created for the most at-risk students in a school district in a less than adequate facility. Staffing is minimal and not skilled in working with the challenges associated with alternative students. The program is underfunded and resources are not equitable to those found in traditional schools. The result: The school typically exists two to three years, has poor academic achievement results and a high turnover rate for staff, and subsequently closes due to performance and funding challenges. A year later, a new school or program is opened due to need; however, the same process is followed and the same result occurs. Alternatively, engaging stakeholders

and providing equitable resources at the onset or during transformation will change the ending of this cautionary tale, creating opportunities for students and changing the landscape for the entire school district.

—Robert L. Eichorn, Principal
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Resources

National Alternative Education Association, <http://the-naea.org/NAEA/>

Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center, <http://www.otac.info/>

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Program Profiles

The Peabody Learning Academy

by *Seith Bedard*

The Peabody Learning Academy (PLA) is a small program that is home to 30 at-risk students and offered by Peabody Veterans Memorial High School (PVMHS). Located 20 miles north of Boston, PLA partners with the Simon Youth Foundation as one of 23 national academies focused on preventing school dropout. Now in its fifth year, PLA is one of the nation's most successful alternative education programs.

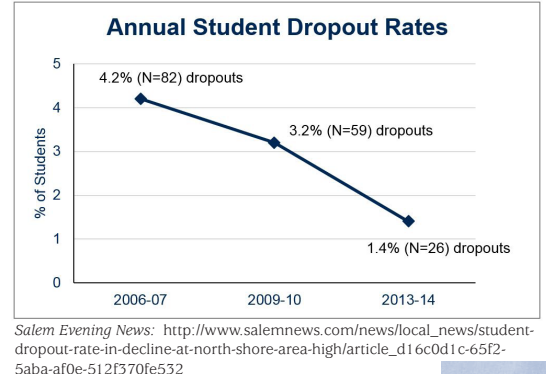
The Academy focuses on credit recovery, college placement upon graduation, and individualized attention to students. Academics are delivered asynchronously through the web-based Gradpoint program, supported by personalized instruction by certified instructors who monitor to ensure mastery of learning. School days are Monday - Friday, 7 AM - 2 PM. Academy students are also subject to a strict code of conduct requiring each student and parent to sign a contract promising to uphold guiding principles focused on discipline, dedication, work ethic, and good character.

Rigorous academic requirements are supplemented by students spending one day each month participating in community service projects such

as reading and donating books to elementary school children throughout the district; working with Habitat for Humanity to build and renovate local houses; serving over 1,500 Thanksgiving meals to homeless citizens through the Greater Boston Food Bank; and participating in the American Red Cross's "Holiday Mail for Heroes" event, sending more than 1,000 greeting cards and letters to U.S. troops overseas.

Academy students spend approximately 100 hours per academic year participating in local community service. Through these leadership roles in the community, students gain a sense of pride and ownership for their actions as members of the community and as students.

The PLA difference is generating results. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recently released data (<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>) citing PVMHS and its 1,800-member student body as having one of the lowest dropout rates in Massachusetts. Data shows that since the Academy's launch, the dropout rate at PVMHS has decreased dramatically from 4.2 % (82 students



annually) in 2006-07 to 1.4 % today (26 students annually).

Even more impressive is that 63 % of Academy graduates attend post-secondary school with a 70 % college retention rate. Of the 37 % who do not attend postsecondary school, 10 % join the armed forces (we proudly have a Marine as well as an Army Ranger as PLA alums), and the majority of others find full-time employment.

Lastly and most proudly, the Academy has had a 100 % graduation rate each of its four years and expects to continue that streak this year.

—*Seith Bedard, Director*
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COFFEE

by *Kevin Wells*

The Cooperative Federation for Educational Experiences—COFFEE—is located in Oxford, MA (about 50 miles east of Springfield) and has been serving alternative public school students in greater central Massachusetts since 1979.

One of the largest contributors to student success is a curriculum that provides a half day of rigorous academic classes and a half day of vocational, hands-on training. COFFEE serves students from grades 7-12 representing many local districts. Our overall goal is to assist students in accessing the curriculum, modifying behavioral issues, and developing appropriate social skills to allow them to return to their sending districts. For students completing their

senior year at COFFEE, diplomas are issued from their sending schools.

COFFEE's student body profile includes 70 % on IEPs and 30 % who do not live with a biological parent. The most significant change since our inception, however, has been the dramatic increase in students with mental health issues. Student diagnoses include ADHD (68 %), specific learning disabilities (40 %), depression (32 %), oppositional defiant disorder (28 %), and PTSD (28 %).



COFFEE students in a vocational class work at restoring small engines.

(Continued on page 7)

Hope and Opportunity Need Not Be Costly

by John Murray

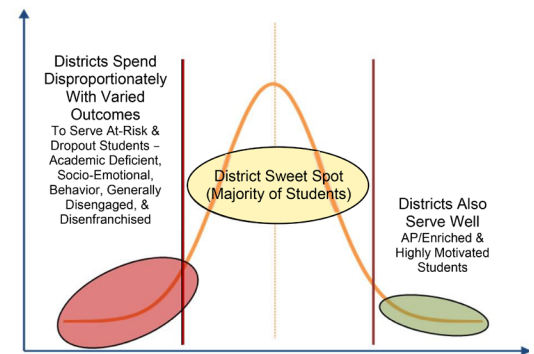
Blended learning gives me a better opportunity of success in school, and keeps me focused on my goal of graduation. I love to come here every day and get my work done. When I go home, I feel ten times smarter. I love telling my mother what new things I learned about in biology or health, and she is fascinated by and proud of it.

Jordan—Maryland AdvancePath Academy Student

I'm making a difference with these students every day. Every day! This is why I became a teacher.

Craig—Maryland AdvancePath Academy Teacher

Teachers and students who feel like this are the foundation of *Highly Effective Team Teaching and Team Learning*.



Many students are challenged, with credit deficiencies (6 months or less behind), long-term academically deficiencies (1.5 to 2+ years behind), socio-emotional challenges, or other priorities (ailing parents, children, or work). Or, they're otherwise disengaged or disenfranchised from school. They are bright, creative, and capable—but simply not suited to a traditional school setting. *You know these students personally!*

All students are capable of learning under the right circumstances and if they are offered appropriate opportunities. But, what are these circumstances and opportunities?

The District Dilemma

How do you serve all students without spending disproportionately on any significant number of them? As evidenced by the chart above, most districts adequately serve most of their students, including those at the higher end of the spectrum. But, for those children who are struggling, districts often spend more per FTE and struggle to get the desired results. Why?

District programs often use existing teaching methods but deploy more staff, thereby costing more per pupil

but not necessarily producing better outcomes. Others simply use technology instead of staff and get the *same results*.

Solution

The key is to create an effective blend of on-line and off-line instruction, one-to-one and small group learning experiences, resiliency skills building, and use technology and data to leverage the teaching staff—as Baltimore County Public Schools System is doing.

Meeting the needs of these students requires flexibility in teaching, mentoring, and scheduling. It also requires a different environment, a deep understanding of the socio-emotional and other issues that have caused academic progress to stall, Individualized Learning Plans (ILP), and appropriate wraparound services to shore up academic opportunities which can, and should, be rigorous.

Paradigm Shift

A teaching and learning paradigm shift is essential, specifically requiring that students are “met at their time of need” and that they have access to differentiated instruction and multiple pathways to graduation.

However, that is not enough—the teaching staff mustn't be forgotten. The staff must be highly qualified and well-trained but they must also receive focused, high-quality, ongoing professional development.

Many components must be effectively integrated to successfully operate cost-effective and rigorous intervention, dropout recovery, and academic growth programs. The most successful programs include broad-based research.

Cost-Efficacy

Outcomes will be superior—success with 9 out of 10 students, site-based graduation improvement of 10-15% or greater, a reduction in the achievement gap of 25-35%, reduced dropout rates and improved school climate—all within budget.

This is AdvancePath's experience serving over 5,000 students a year across 23 sites in 5 states—*proof that the systemic application of broad-based research works!*

—John Murray, Founder and CEO of Williamsburg, VA, based AdvancePath Academics
jmurray@advancepath.com

COFFEE (Continued from page 6)

To effectively address these needs, COFFEE employs a licensed school adjustment counselor who is also a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, and we have access to a district Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker. COFFEE currently provides more therapeutic services than ever before.

COFFEE's overall approach includes increasing individual growth on standardized tests; having small, structured classes with consistently enforced rules, consequences, and rewards; providing group and individual therapy and a daily behavior modification program; and stressing half-day occupational training as a way to reach

reluctant learners and to help develop marketable skills for each student.

Visit COFFEE at oxps.org; Tweet or follow us @COFFEE_Oxford; or email COFFEE Director Kevin Wells.

—Kevin Wells
Director of COFFEE
kwells@oxps.org



National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

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Viewpoint

The terms “alternative school” and “alternative program” can and often do mean many things. Alternative programs across the education landscape range from individually-paced, student-directed, and technology-based workplace-like learning environments to rigid, discipline-intensive, listen-and-learn classrooms that resemble schools of the 1930s.

As one of the National Dropout Prevention Center’s 15 Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies, alternative schooling is interpreted to mean the delivery of learning through varied methods, at varied times, and/or at locations that may be different from the traditional school offerings and settings. As an effective dropout prevention strategy, alternative education also is assumed to be a different education offering intended to best meet individual student needs toward eventual graduation and college/career readiness.

Alternative schooling affords decision makers such as legislators, school boards, and superintendents the opportunity to focus resources and support at ground zero of dropout prevention, supporting students who are less successful in traditional settings. Alternative educators understand that the students they serve have high probabilities of nongraduation. They understand the challenges faced by at-risk students and they know that community graduation rates and individuals’ futures depend on daily successes or failures. Alternative educators require and deserve a high degree of respect and support. The successes of alternative educators and struggling students, as well as our nation’s graduation rates, depend on adequate levels of funding for alternative programs, flexibility that allows individual student needs to be met, facilities conducive to adult and student engagement, and professional

development that is adequate and appropriate to this unique work.

Alternative education also offers a unique opportunity for school systems to engage in educational innovation and creativity. The very definition of *alternative as different*—to benefit student outcomes—allows creative educators, vendors, and entrepreneurs a laboratory setting in which to explore new areas of dropout prevention innovation. Rather than doubling down on methods, practices, and rules that have not produced success with at-risk students, alternative programs can be places where different looks, climates, interventions, schedules, and practices are tried and tested to achieve different outcomes, both in terms of individual student success and in system graduation rates.

—Sandy Addis
National Dropout Prevention
Center/Network