NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER

A division of SPN Successful Practices Network

Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement ©

A Practice Guide

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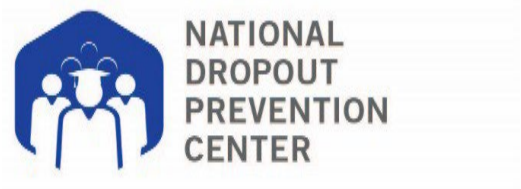

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Introduction

by Dr. Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, Successful Practices Network, and Ray McNulty, Senior Fellow, Successful Practices Network

In many school districts, and in some states, alternative schools are ground zero for dropout prevention and efforts to meet the needs of at-risk students. Alternative schools serve disproportionately high numbers of students with multiple risk factors, students of color, students of poverty, and trauma-impacted students (Gordon, 2017; Kim & Taylor, 2010; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Alternative schools typically have lower graduation rates, are often expensive and challenging to operate, and rank lower on accountability measures than other schools (Fresques, Shaw, Vogell, & Pierce, 2017; Sliwka, 2008).
Improving student achievement in these settings is of increasing importance as districts are now accountable for closing achievement gaps among underperforming subgroups that often populate alternative schools.

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center has studied, analyzed, and consulted with hundreds of alternative schools of varying types and has reached three conclusions.

- Some but not all alternative schools produce surprisingly high levels of academic gains, behavioral improvement, and graduation outcomes for even the most at-risk students.
- There are strategies, approaches, and solutions that, if implemented properly, will significantly improve the effectiveness of existing alternative schools.
- When districts improve effectiveness and outcomes of alternative schools, system accountability ratings improve.

In ***Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement***, the National Dropout Prevention Center offers a workable practice guide that school, district, and state leaders can use to analyze, modify, and improve their alternative schools, both to better serve their most at-risk students and to significantly improve graduation outcomes.

Dr. Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman
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Alternative schools and programs exist in almost every school district in the United States. Small school districts sometimes share alternative schools; many districts operate their own alternative school; and large urban districts often operate multiple alternative schools. These schools and programs typically serve our most at- risk youth, often have lower academic success rates and lower graduation rates than other schools, and are often the most difficult schools to manage, lead, and staff.

The terms *alternative school* and *alternative program* are often used interchangeably, though there are technical differences. Alternative school in some contexts refers to a physically separate facility or campus while alternative program refers to an alternative setting housed within a traditional school facility (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). States and/or local school systems often have the option to designate alternative units as *schools* or *programs,* depending on whether student measures such as enrollment, attendance, academic progress, graduation rates, and other metrics are quantified and reported separately from or within the metrics of traditional schools (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014). These varying definitions likely account for the wide swings in the nationally reported numbers of alternative schools and alternative school students in recent years.

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A 2018 study using a strict definition of alternative school placed the number of alternative schools in America at just over 5,000 (Momentum, 2018). The National Dropout Prevention Center estimates that an additional 5,000 alternative programs exist outside this count, which places the total number of alternative schools and programs at around 10,000. According to a 2017 Grad Nation report, 6% of the nation's high schools were designated as alternative schools (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland,

Atwell, & Pierce, 2017).

While an important understanding, the distinction between alternative schools and programs is not significant for the purpose of improving effectiveness and student outcomes. Whether identified as a school or a program, these units have facilities, budgets, staff, policies, climate, student services, and instructional delivery methods. In recent years alternative units that function as virtual, charter, contracted, or private operations outside the local school system have sprung up in some states.

Further, alternative units vary widely in location, purpose, programing, and approach to serving students. Most important, whether a school or a program, whether virtual or face-to-face, the effectiveness of alternative units varies widely in terms of behavioral gains, academic achievement, graduation outcomes, and return on investment (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017). For these reasons, strategies for improvement are equally applicable to all types of alternative units, whether school or program, and the term *alternative school* will be used in this practice guide as referring to the broader category of all K- 12 alternative units.

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The National Center for Education Statistics defines an alternative school as a public elementary or secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). The Encyclopedia of Children's Health website defines an alternative school as an educational setting designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that are not adequately addressed in a traditional school environment ("Alternative School," n.d., para.1).

Many of the nation's alternative schools were established in the 1970s (Lange & Sletten, 2002). They currently exist in a wide variety of forms and models ranging from disciplinary boot-camp models to self-paced individualized instructional models to therapeutic behavioral modification programs to virtual credit recovery models (Raywid, 1994). Among 5,104 alternative education campuses that were identified in 2018 using a relatively strict federal definition, 79% were operated by traditional public-school districts and 21% were operated as some type of public or private charter school. Half served high school students only and half served a mix of students from multiple school levels. Many alternative schools are operated, staffed, and managed as the other schools within districts are while some are outsourced to and operated by private sector vendors in partnership with local school districts (Momentum, 2018).

"For a variety of reasons, many alternative schools serve disproportionately high numbers of students of color, students of poverty, students with disabilities, and males."

Alternative schools serve a wide range of students with varying risk factors and exist to achieve a wide variety of purposes and outcomes. A study by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) concluded that students in alternative programs are often there because of academic or emotional challenges, including poor attendance, suspension, expulsion, family stress, emotional difficulties, learning disabilities, poor grades, disruptive classroom behavior or pregnancy (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014). In a recent study of trauma's impact on behavior and learning (Gailer, Addis, & Dunlap, 2018), the National Dropout Prevention Center concluded that the majority of alternative school students are significantly and negatively impacted by childhood traumas. For a variety of reasons, many alternative schools serve disproportionately high numbers of students of color, students of poverty, students with disabilities, and males. While the mission of alternative schools is ideally to better meet the needs of these most at-risk students, a common assumption is that alternative schools exist as an alternate placement for problematic

and disruptive students so that they may be removed from traditional schools and not disrupt or detract from the learning of others (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Vogell & Fresques, 2017).

It is no surprise that alternative schools require more human and financial resources than traditional schools, cost more to operate on a per pupil basis, present more challenges to manage, and have lower levels of student achievement and lower graduation rates. It is also no surprise that alternative schools have problems with image, both in the community and within the school system, are harder to appropriately staff, and often give rise to a variety of challenges, difficulties, and accountability problems for school leaders. While there are alternative schools that are well resourced, have excellent facilities, and are staffed with highly skilled and specialized educators, there are also alternative schools that receive only left-over resources, are housed in the worst of facilities, and are staffed by educators who were unable to succeed or to find employment in traditional schools.

"If districts can improve the student outcomes of their alternative schools by making those schools more efficient and effective, they are likely to achieve significantly higher system- wide graduation rates and system accountability ratings."

Alternative schools account for a small but high-impact percentage of the student population in most traditional public-school systems and typically represent the highest concentration of students least likely to graduate. Alternative schools typically have the lowest accountability ratings among the schools of their host district and often represent a significant expense relative to the number of students served and the number of graduates produced. If districts can improve the student outcomes of their alternative schools by making those schools more efficient and effective, they are likely to achieve significantly higher system-wide

graduation rates and system accountability ratings.

How can alternative schools be improved?

While many alternative schools across the nation struggle with, and sometimes even accept, dismally low graduation rates, some have managed to achieve high levels of effectiveness and significantly improved student outcomes. In 2012, McClarin Success Academy High School, a relatively large alternative school in Fulton County (Atlanta), Georgia, reported a four-year graduation rate of 19% but was able to increase that rate to 75% by 2017 (*K-12 Public Schools Report Card*, 2012; 2017). If some alternative schools such as McClarin Success Academy are able to become more effective and increase graduation outcomes while others work hard, struggle, and are not able to achieve similar gains, what is the difference and what strategies and approaches can be identified and shared to make all alternative schools more effective? More specifically, what areas of operation and practice should school leaders consider as they undertake to improve alternative schools?

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From years of research, experience, and practice, the National Dropout Prevention Center has created ***Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement***, a guide for leaders and policy makers to assess and improve the graduation outcomes of alternative schools. A number of resources and findings were utilized by National Dropout Prevention Center (NFPC) to develop this practice guide. Since 1986, NDPC has analyzed and assessed the effectiveness of over 100 alternative schools and has worked directly with system leaders to improve those schools. NDOC's alternative experience has included free standing schools, in-house programs, virtual programs, charter schools, and private schools. NFPC has partnered with the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) in a variety of initiatives, regularly utilizes the NAEA's

Exemplary Practices in Alternative Education: Indicators of Quality Programming in its work with alternative schools, and considered the NAEA's Exemplary Practices in development of this guidance. Because the impact of trauma is common among alternative students, NDPC also utilized ***Trauma-Skilled Schools™*** research and findings to develop this guidance. Additionally, Dr. Bill Daggett's proven ***Rigor, Relevance, and Resilience Learning Model ™*** for higher levels of achievement and career readiness is adapted and incorporated into this guidance for improving alternative schools.

Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement identifies five Improvement Domains, each with subsets of Focus Areas that should be considered by school leaders and policy makers desiring to improve existing or to design new alternative schools. Guiding Questions are provided for each Improvement Domain that may be used by alternative educators, school leaders, and policy makers to assess effectiveness of alternative schools, to identify areas for improvement, and to guide improvement action steps. Additionally, ***Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement*** has been field tested by NDPC consultants and project teams as a framework to assess effectiveness of alternative schools and as an outline for assessment reports that NDPC provides to client school systems to improve their alternative schools. Most importantly, this process has produced measurable improvements in a variety of alternative schools across the nation. Explanation of each Improvement Domain is provided below.

Domain One - Governance, Practices, and Policies

- SPN/NDPC recommends that the first step in designing an effective alternative school or enhancing the effectiveness of an existing school is to consider the governance, practices, and policies relevant to the school. We find that alternatives formed or reformed in haste with insufficient research, planning, and design are much less likely to succeed.
- The entire school system should understand and take ownership of the alternative school, supporting its success.

- The purpose and mission of the alternative school (discipline, credit recovery, therapy, or dropout recovery) should be clear, and the population and operation of the school should be consistent with the stated mission and purpose.
- Policies addressing student intake and admission should provide for the earliest possible referral and admission before negative circumstances, such as behavioral decline or accumulated credit deficiency, become severe. SPN/NDPC finds that early-stage referral and admission increase the likelihood of student adjustment and success.
- It is essential that intake and orientation practices be positive and thorough to increase the likelihood of student and parent buy-in to the program's success. SPN/NDPC finds that positive intake practices with a clear understanding of individual success criteria make for better student outcomes than authoritarian and threatening intake and orientation.
- The criteria for individual success must be understood and achievable. SPN/NDPC finds that the most effective alternative schools give students the option of longer-term enrollment at the alternative school or returning to the home school with a good record of attendance, behavior, and learning. We also find that alternative schools that mandate a fixed term of enrollment are less successful.
- Policy and practice should provide for a carefully planned and supervised transition of individual students back to the home school. We find that abrupt and poorly planned return to the traditional school without staff coordination and follow-up makes for high levels of student recidivism.
- Governance should provide for periodic review, evaluation, and refinement of the alternative school. We find that alternative programs that are minimally evaluated are also minimally successful.

Domain Two - Culture and Climate

- SPN/NDPC finds that alternative schools with a positive culture and climate of care and high expectations are much more successful than those with a negative, authoritarian, and threatening culture and climate. Positive climate and culture offer at-risk students a fresh start as they enter a new school. The desired positive climate and culture are best fostered

by deliberate staff behaviors to maintain positive connections with students and to professionally attend to their unique individual needs.

- SPN/NDPC finds that both academic and personal success of students is significantly improved when the school staff understands and works to build student resilience. Resilience is essential for higher levels of learning, as indicated by resilience being critical within Dr. Bill Daggett's Rigor, Relevance, and Resilience Learning Model ™
- SPN/NDPC finds that most alternative students have trauma-induced resilience deficiencies and that resilience is best created by staff efforts to build connections, belonging, achievement, autonomy, and fulfillment.

Domain Three - Instruction and Effective Practices

- Successful alternative schools guard against the tendency to deliver less challenging instruction with traditional delivery methods. SPN/NDPC finds that alternative students achieve best when instruction is rigorous and relevant, as explained in the Rigor, Relevance, and Resilience Learning Model ™. This type of instruction teaches students to apply basic knowledge in unpredictable situations and to enjoy working in teams.
- SPN/NDPC recommends that alternative students use the most current technology to learn and to apply current and next-generation technologies such as learning with virtual reality and mastering Artificial Intelligence.
- SPN/NDPC finds that effective alternative schools allow students to accelerate the pace of learning, mastery, and credit recovery, while the less effective schools maintain traditional seat time requirements and traditional pacing to earn credits, which prevents students from regaining age-appropriate grade placement.
- SPN/NDPC recommends that all alternative students be served by a trained and well-supervised mentor and/or tutor. Meta-analysis conducted by NDPC (Chappel-Moots, 2015) finds mentoring and tutoring to be among the highest impact dropout prevention strategies.
- Because of logistical and behavioral challenges, many alternative schools do not allow students to enroll in CTE courses. SPN/NDPC recommends that all alternative students

participate in CTE courses because CTE enrollment is the single highest impact dropout prevention strategy, as it is meaningful and engaging. (Chappel-Moots, 2015)

- Also, because of discipline and logistical challenges, many homeschools are reluctant to allow alternative students to participate in sports and extracurricular activities. SPN/NDPC finds, however, that the most successful alternative schools find ways to allow and promote homeschool sports and extracurricular participation.

Domain Four - External Factors

- Community engagement is important for any school, but particularly for alternative schools. SPN/NDPC recommends that leaders of the alternative school, feeder schools, and the system keep the community informed. When business and faith leaders are informed of the purpose, operation, and successes of the school, support is generated. Information is critical to counter the tendency of communities to think of alternative schools as substandard compared to traditional schools. Community engagement strategies like service learning, proven to be a high-impact dropout prevention strategy, can both engage students with instruction and help the community to understand and value the students.
- SPN/NDPC finds that alternative schools with aggressive parent outreach strategies produce more successful students. From the beginning of enrollment, it is important that parents are familiar with and comfortable with the school and that they understand and buy into the goals and benefits (Chappel-Moots, 2015) for their children. It is also important that parents feel welcome inside the school and be encouraged to both visit and contribute to the delivery of instruction and activities.
- Alternative students tend to have greater personal, family, and economic needs than traditional students. SPN/NDPC finds that the most successful alternative schools cultivate and maintain close contact with numerous community, agency, and faith-based service providers and facilitate easy access of these providers to meet the needs of students and families, often on campus. It is worth noting that small and rural alternatives may have difficulty finding and accessing such services, and, in these situations, district personnel must devote additional effort and creativity to assist them.

Domain Five - Resources

- A common cause of alternative school failure is the lack of resource allocation. Alternatives are usually expensive to operate because of low staff-to-student ratios. To offset staff expenses, districts may locate these programs in older and least-maintained buildings with fewer on-site resources like gymnasiums and science labs. Funds for alternative educator staff development may be limited when these staff members need more training than those at other schools. SPN/NDPC finds that adequately funded alternative schools tend to be more effective than those with inadequate resources. It is worth noting that alternatives that keep students enrolled and produce graduates generate significant long-term revenue and savings for districts and communities.
- SPN/NDPC has found that some alternative schools are staffed and even led by some of the district's least qualified, least experienced, and lowest performing educators. This seldom acknowledged but often found phenomenon is generally a recipe for a low-performing alternative school that produces few graduates. To avoid this situation, SPN/NDPC recommends that alternative staff members be carefully selected, considering criteria such as experience with at-risk youth, patience, emotional stability, strong work ethic, instructional creativity, and desire to work in alternative settings.

Guiding Questions of Alternative School Assessment

SPN and NDPC recommend that local leaders and alternative educators use the following assessment instrument to identify and focus strategies to strengthen and improve alternative schools.

Improvement Domain I: Governance, Practices, and Policies					
Item	**Focus Area**	**Guiding Questions**	**Yes**	**No**	**Comments**
1	Referral and Entry	Are referral criteria and processes effective and do they contribute to positive school entry and early-stage success? Does the entry process effectively transmit important information from the feeder school to the alternative school? Is there sufficient information about school function and success			

		criteria communicated effectively to incoming students and families?			
2	Systemic Approach	Is the alternative school understood and "owned" by other elements of the school system?			
3	Philosophy and Mission	Does the philosophy and mission of the alternative school clearly focus on student success and on the desired student outcomes? Are the philosophy and mission of the alternative school evident in the practices and conduct of the alternative program? Is the school's philosophy and mission aligned to the philosophy and mission of the school system but yet appropriately unique to the alternative setting?			
4	Flexibility and Options	Do the school's structure, policies, and practices allow sufficient flexibility and options to accommodate the circumstances and challenges of at-risk students? Are alternative school leaders allowed sufficient autonomy to determine intake practices, programming, and exit practices that maximize effectiveness and desired outcomes?			

5	Policies, Rules, and Practices	Do the policies, rules, and practices that apply to or impact on the alternative school contribute to desired program outcomes? Are there policies, practices, or rules that have unintended consequences for the alternative school or that negatively impact desired student outcomes?			
6	Exit and Completion	Do students have incentives for return to home schools or for program completion that motivate desired behaviors and achievement? Are students who are likely to succeed in the alternative school but unlikely to succeed in the traditional school allowed to continue enrollment to completion?			
7	Exit Transition	Is return to the home or traditional school planned, scripted, and structured to minimize impediments to success and to maximize desired behavioral and academic outcomes?			
8	Program Evaluation	Does the plan for operation and improvement include progress metrics and accountability steps? Is the plan embraced by those responsible for its implementation?			
9	Program Evaluation	Are outcome data and other measures of effectiveness used to monitor and continuously improve the school? Are evaluation findings and program outcomes periodically reported to system decision makers?			
10	Improvement Planning	Is there an actionable plan in place to improve the effectiveness of the alternative school?			

11	Prioritization	Within the overall school system context, does system leadership and governance appropriately prioritize and support the alternative school to achieve desired student outcomes?			
Improvement Domain II: Culture and Climate					
Item	**Area**	**Guiding Questions**	**Yes**	**No**	**Comments**
12	Internal Culture and Climate	Is there a positive culture and climate within the alternative school? Are students' perceptions of the school's culture and climate consistent with or different from that of staff and leadership? Does the culture and climate of the alternative school foster student success and contribute to desired student outcomes?			
13	Relationships and Connections	Are all students afforded positive relationships with responsible staff members that foster desired behaviors and academic engagement?			
14	Security	Do students feel physically and emotionally safe and secure in the alternative setting to the extent that they desire to attend, engage, participate, and achieve?			
15	Achievement	Do all students attain a sense of achievement and accomplishment early in program enrollment? Is that sense of achievement and accomplishment maintained throughout enrollment?			
16	Autonomy	Are students given appropriate choices and options within the school environment and within the instructional program that motivate and foster engagement and self- confidence?			
17	Fulfillment/Service Learning	Are students engaged in altruistic activities and service to others that are linked to and that reinforce academic learning and that generate a sense of personal			

		fulfillment?			
18	Student Perception and Motivation	Does the instructional program and school climate generate positive student perceptions and motivation that are sufficient to produce desired behaviors and academic outcomes?			
Improvement Domain III: Instruction and Effective Practices					
Item	**Area**	**Guiding Questions**	**Yes**	**No**	**Comments**
19	Instructional Program	Are the methods of instructional delivery varied and appropriate for the student population served? Do the methods of instructional delivery generate sufficient levels of student engagement and achievement?			
20	Rigor	Is the instruction challenging for students? Are there high expectations for achievement and mastery that are equivalent to those of the traditional schools?			
21	Relevance	Is instruction relevant to the interests of students and to the careers and next levels of instruction that students aspire to?			
22	Technology	Is instructional technology utilized to maximize student engagement and instructional effectiveness?			
23	Remediation and Recovery	Do instructional practices consider and address the academic deficiencies of individual students? Is instruction structured and delivered such that students recover credits and grade levels needed to accelerate progress toward graduation?			

24	Mentoring and Tutoring	Are mentoring opportunities provided to students of the school/program and are they effective to produce desired outcomes? Are students tutored or provided tutor-like services to support academic achievement?			
25	Career and Technical Education	Are alternative students engaged in career and technical education?			
26	Extra-Curricular Options	Are students in the program provided with, or allowed to participate in, extra-curricular activities that are likely to motivate them and positively engage them with school?			
Improvement Domain IV: External Factors					
Item	**Area**	**Guiding Questions**	**Yes**	**No**	**Comments**
27	Community Engagement	Is the alternative school understood, valued, and supported by the community?			
28	Family Engagement	Are families, parents, and guardians of alternative students informed, engaged with, and supportive of the program, the staff, and contributing to student success?			
29	External Supports/Resources	Are services, resources, and supports that are external to the school system such as those from the community and external agencies accessed by the alternative school and effectively provided to best meet student needs?			
Improvement Domain V: Resources					
Item	**Area**	**Guiding Questions**	**Yes**	**No**	**Comments**
30	Internal Supports/Resources	Are supports and resources within the school system but external to the alternative school readily available and provided to best meet student needs?			

31	Staffing	Is the school adequately staffed to achieve desired outcomes? Are staff members carefully selected and assigned to match individual and professional strengths and skills to best meet program and student needs?			
32	Professional Development	Is the ongoing training and support of staff members sufficient and appropriate to foster their success with at-risk and alternative students?			
33	Facilities	Are the physical facilities and equipment of the school adequate, sufficient, and appropriate to allow for the other essential elements of program success to produce desired student outcomes? Are there modifications of facilities and related supports that are possible within existing resources that would likely contribute to improved program outcomes?			

NEXT Steps

The Successful Practices Network (SPN) and the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) encourage use of this document for assessing and improving alternative schools.

SPN and NDPC are available to answer questions regarding use of this guidance. Our staff members are experienced in alternative school design and improvement and stand ready to assist schools and districts on request.

For additional information on how to utilize Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement, contact us by email at ndpc@dropoutprevention.org

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