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TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS: A COMPILATION OF ELEMENTS FROM THE LITERATURE

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I. Introduction

Public education in the U.S. has undergone a gradual but profound set of changes over the past twenty years. Since the publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education) and *A Nation Prepared* in 1986 (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy), parents, legislatures, and school boards have all been demanding better outcomes from primary and secondary public schools. As a result, K-12 schools across the country have been focusing their efforts on adopting high academic standards, improving accountability, and achieving excellence, while at the same time cracking down on serious violations of school disciplinary codes. The main beneficiaries of these changes have been college-bound youth and others who tend to respond well to the organizational culture of traditional schools (Leone and Drakeford 1999).

Non-college-bound youth and others who for a variety of reasons have not done well in traditional public schools have largely been left behind by the high academic standards high-stakes assessment movement. The nation, however, cannot afford *not* to educate these children. About one-quarter of all students drop-out of the traditional K-12 educational system before receiving their high school diploma (Kaufman et al. 2000). High school graduation rates have actually declined over the past 10 years, and in a "last best chance" to succeed academically, American children have been turning to alternative education programs in record numbers. These children need and deserve quality education programs for the same reasons that their traditional school counterparts do: they need the knowledge and skills that quality programs provide in order to succeed in the new global economy of the 21st century.

Although the term "alternative education" covers all educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 school system (including home schooling, GED preparation programs, special programs for gifted children, charter schools, etc), this paper focuses on those serving school-aged vulnerable youth who have dropped (or been pushed) out of traditional schools. Ironically, many of these programs are associated with unsuccessful students and are thought to be dumping grounds for "problem" youth, and yet because they represent a departure from

the standard approach to schooling, many alternative education programs of them are known for their innovation and creativity. High quality alternative education programs are generally known for their adherence to youth development principles (Smith and Thomases 2001, NGA Center for Best Practices 2001) such as: (1) physical and psychological safety (e.g., safe facilities, safe ways to handle conflicts between youth, etc.); (2) appropriate structure (limit setting, clear rules, predictable structure to how program functions, etc.); (3) supportive relationships (warmth, closeness etc., with adults and peers); (4) opportunities to belong (meaningful inclusion); (5) positive social norms (expectations of behaviors, etc.); (6) support for efficacy and mattering (empowering youth, challenging environment, chances for leadership, etc.); (7) opportunities for skill building (e.g., learning about social, communication skills, etc., as well as media literacy, good habits of the mind, etc.); and (8) integration of family, school, and especially community efforts (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2001). The best programs also address the specific needs of children from various racial and ethnic groups and those with special needs (including students with learning or other disabilities that have not yet been identified).

Given their importance in the public education system, states and communities are increasingly turning their attention to alternative education issues, and are wanting much more information than is currently available (National Association of State Boards of Education 1996, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [undated]). Even with a general focus on programs serving disconnected and vulnerable youth, most current discussions of "alternative education" quickly turn to the question of "exactly who (or what) are we talking about?" Are we including children in regular K-12 public schools who participate in some type of special programming because they are delinquent, or pregnant, or at risk of dropping out? What about children who are being schooled in juvenile justice facilities or emergency homeless shelters? How about youth for whom the regular public schools simply do not seem to work? Basic questions such as these arise when discussing "alternative education" because there is no commonly-accepted, or commonly-understood, definition of what constitutes "alternative education." In part this reflects the newness of the field (at least as an area that is attracting widespread and mainstream interest), the variety of environments and contexts in which alternative education programming has evolved, and the

many sub-groups of vulnerable youth who might benefit from some type of alternative education, broadly defined.

This purpose of this paper is to synthesize existing knowledge, definitions, and themes about alternative education programs, based on a review of literature and reports.[1] It is intended that this knowledge can serve as a starting point for establishing common terminologies to characterize the various kinds of alternative education programs, and to develop a basic *typology* — that is a classification of the various kinds of alternative education based on certain common characteristics. Ideally, it would be useful to have a single definitive definition of alternative education that is broad and flexible enough to support a variety of purposes (such as conducting needs assessments, educating policymakers, projecting staffing needs, tracking expenditures, etc.) *and* specific enough to be useful for any one of these purposes. Whether such a definition will ever be developed is unclear, but a typology could be extremely helpful in establishing common terminology and for understanding the different kinds of alternative education.

Such a typology could also contribute to the body of knowledge about effective and high qualilty alternative education. Vulnerable youth who are disconnected (or disconnecting) from mainstream schools need and deserve to have high-quality alternative education, as do all youth. By including in a typology factors associated with quality and effectiveness, policy makers, practioners, and funders may be better able to help promote the expansion of high-quality approaches and improve or eliminate low-quality approaches.

Interestingly, many of the very first alternative education programs in this country defined themselves in opposition to the existing educational system. These included schools in the *Free School Movement*, schools that promoted progressive ideals by emphasizing individual child-centered achievement and fulfillment, and *Freedom Schools* that were designed to offer high quality educational opportunities to children who were being poorly served by existing public schools, namely minority students (Lange and Sletten 2002). Many of these schools

[1] A companion paper addresses the need for alternative education for at-risk youth, J. Zweig and L. Aron, "Vulnerable Youth: Identifying their Need for Alternative Schools," April 2003.

did not survive over time, and this has resulted in a shift in the types of alternative education options available to students: many alternative schools today are more likely to be viewed by public education systems as disciplinary and/or remedial in nature.

Yet, as alternative education programs have evolved and matured, they have provided lessons not only about how to re-connect with disenfranchised youth, but also how regular schools can avoid disconnection in the first place. Indeed as Raywid has pointed out, "many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered" (1994, p.26). The primary focus of this review are those programs designed to serve vulnerable children and youth who have either dropped or been pushed out of traditional schools, or are at risk of doing so. The fact that regular school systems often still consider alternative schools as disciplinary even as some alternative education approaches have been incorporated into some regular schools is important to bear in mind as future policy and practice decisions about expanding high-quality options for disconnected youth are made.

Thus, the main goal of this compilation is to document what is known, and lay the groundwork for developing a more comprehensive and useful framework, or typology, for understanding the many types of alternative education programs that exist and may need to be developed. It is important to take stock of what we know, assessing what we know clearly and realistically, and advance this knowledge to forge effective policies for the future.
The review is also intended to contribute to developing a future research agenda around alternative education. Such an agenda can help better direct public and private investments in alternative education, ensure that the research is of use to policymakers and/or practitioners, and help advocates and other youth-serving professionals think more strategically about how they can best support vulnerable youth.

This review begins by considering how alternative education has been defined and described in this literature, including examples of legal definitions from state law, as well as more

general operational definitions. Then some of the many dimensions along which alternative education models/programs have been developed are examined (e.g., *who* is served through the programs, *where* are they located, *what* is their focus or content, *how* are they administered). Next, some of the preliminary "typologies" that have been developed to date are examined. The review concludes by presenting some of the many "lists" of characteristics shared by promising alternative education programs, noting how similar the various lists of desirable features are. Future studies designed to evaluate the effectiveness of alternative education programs would do well to use these common features as a starting point for identifying qualities associated with program effectiveness.

II. Alternative Education Programs Defined

The literature on alternative education programs includes a number of historical, legalistic, and operational definitions. For example:

- Morley (1991) draws on a number of writers to define alternative education in terms of socialization and public good —"Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon a belief that there are many 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 at least...[a] general high school... level. To accomplish this requires that we provide a variety of structures and environments such that each person can find one that is sufficiently comfortable to facilitate progress" (p. 8). http://www.realschool.org/masterswebsite/alternativeeducationreview.html

- Statutorily, an alternative education program is defined under s. 115.28 (7) (e), Wis. Stats. as "an instructional program, approved by the school board, that utilizes successful alternative or adaptive school structures and teaching techniques and that is incorporated into existing, traditional classrooms or regularly scheduled curricular programs or that is offered in place of regularly scheduled curricular programs. Alternative education does not include a private school or a home-based private educational program." (State of Wisconsin 2001, p. 2)

- There are some definitions that delineate alternative education further to reflect particular purposes, particularly in relation to regular schools. For example, the Iowa Association of Alternative Education's (IAAE) Constitution and Bylaws, Article II states:

> "Definitions:
>
> Alternative Education: the study or practice of implementing alternative schools or programs. Public alternative education serves to ensure that every young person may find a path to the educational goals of the community. Alternative schools and programs focus on what they can offer the student, not on what problems the student has had in the past. Alternative education is a vital component of the total educational system.
>
> Alternative School: an established environment apart from the regular school. With policies and rules, educational objectives, staff and resources designed to accommodate student needs, an alternative school provides a comprehensive education consistent with the goals established by the school district. Students attend via choice.
>
> Alternative Program: an established class or environment within or apart from the regular school. An alternative program is designed to accommodate specific student educational needs such as work-related training, reading, mathematics, science, communication, social skills, physical skills, employability skills, study skills, or life skills.
>
> Regular School: an established environment designed to provide a comprehensive education to the general populace to which assignment of students is made more on the basis of geographical location than unique education need."

Interestingly, while regular schools are primarily based on geography, the types of programs, curricula, and schools within the traditional K-12 system have also grown in recent years. Defining what constitutes "regular" schooling has grown more complex, so it should come as no surprise that defining alternative education is a challenge. One description of how alternative education is provided incorporates multiple perspectives about how to define the concept — "Three avenues for presenting alternative education can be identified across school systems:

- Alternative schools - both public and private
- Alternative programs for students using varying approaches for students to pursue common goals with the same school.
- Teaching strategies, beliefs and support services that facilitate growth in academic, personal/social and career development initiatives" (http://www.realschool.org/masterswebsite/alternativeeducationreview.html)

Often states and communities have statutory requirements governing the (minimum and/or maximum) numbers of students an alternative education program or school can have, the

type of curriculum that can be used, who can teach the program, the length of the school day, attendance policies, participation in state-wide student achievement tests, and other similar issues. In practice, alternative education programs and schools are defined and designed along a variety of often overlapping dimensions including *who* is served, *where* it operates, *what* the program offers, and *how* it is structured or administered (including who operates it and how it is funded). Each of these dimensions is discussed further below. Recognizing that there may not yet be a common definition for the distinction between program and school, and acknowledging that alternative education may ideally be considered a "perspective" important in any school, the term alternative education program is generally used in the remainder of this paper.

A. Who: The Population

Many alternative education programs target specific groups of youth, particularly those considered "at-risk," which is the main focus of this paper. The targeting is generally what makes such programs "alternative," and the circumstances or needs of the targeted group are what drive the curriculum or approach. Examples of such target groups for whom alternative education is often established include:

- women/girls
- pregnant/parenting teens
- suspended/expelled students
- recovered drop-outs
- delinquent teens
- low-achievers, and
- all at-risk[2] youth.

[2] The term "at-risk" encompasses a wide array of youth who either engage in negative or high-risk activities, or who are growing up with disadvantages that "limit the development of their potential, compromise their health, impair their sense of self, and generally restrict their chances for successful lives" (Kids Count 1999). Note that risk factors can come from school- and community-level circumstances, as well as individual- and family-level circumstances. Examples of specific risk factors are poor school attendance, failing grades, family crisis, referred to but did not qualify for special education services, social/emotional/medical issues, free/reduced lunch, below-average performance on assessments, discipline problems, drug and alcohol issues, criminal behavior, poor peer relationships, rated "high" on teacher-generated at-risk profile, retained or considered for retention, and significant deficiencies in credits. For another, more extensive list of circumstances that place students at risk, see Appendix A.

B. Where: Operational Setting

Alternative education programs can be physically (and administratively) located in many different places, and sometimes the location is what makes the program "alternative." Two related operational aspects that describe alternative education programs are first, how the alternative program relates to regular education, and second, where the programming actually occurs.

In relation to regular K-12 schools, alternative education programs may include the following, presented in order of organizational proximity to traditional classrooms in regular K-12 schools:

- resource rooms (separate room/teacher provides additional services like study skills, guidance, anger management, small group/individual instruction)
- pull-out programs (within the day or even after-school, students are pulled out of their "regular" program -- e.g., regular school, juvenile detention center, substance abuse treatment facility -- for special or alternative instruction)
- schools-within-a-school (special-focus program within a school)
- separate self-contained alternative school

The operational setting, or location, where the actual alternative education takes place is somewhat related to the program's connection to a regular school, but there is variation. For example, a school-within-a school may be physically located with a regular K-12 school, or it might be located in a separate building. Separate alternative education programs not under the sponsorship of a school are more likely to be located separately, but some programs have arrangements to operate in school buildings. A few examples of where alternative programs or schools are located, include:

- regular schools during school hours
- school buildings during non-school hours
- community or recreation centers
- former school buildings
- juvenile justice corrections or detention centers
- store-front neighborhood organizations

- public housing projects
- homeless shelters (emergency and transitional)
- medical or mental health facilities
- community college or other post-secondary campuses

C. *What: Content and Objectives*

Alternative education programs also differ from traditional education in *what* types of credentials, services, and programming they provide, and how. Many different types of credentials may be offered, including:

- Regular high school diplomas
- General Educational Development (GED) diplomas, or
- Occupational and skills certification

The content of the programming often varies depending on the type of credential offered (if one is offered) but many of them are focused on relaying to their students basic *skills*. This is because the programs are often short and there is not enough time to cover significant amounts of theory; many students lack basic skills, so that becomes the primary focus of instruction; and specific skills are often what the students want to learn. In addition to basic life skills, many alternative education programs emphasize career development or employment preparation and provide students multiple career pathway options, including:

- Career awareness/choices workshops
- Occupational exploration programs
- Apprenticeships
- Modified work/study programs
- Speakers' bureau
- Work visitations
- Tech-Prep (technical preparation in partnership with a community co llege)

- Vocational/technical training
- School to work programs
- Work experience
- Internships

"What" alternative education programs do or what they offer has been used as a basis for several classifications developed to date. One commonly cited three-level classification is that developed by Dr. Mary Anne Raywid. Raywid's typology has been described (Appalachia Educational Laboratory 1998) as follows:

- **"Type I** schools offer full-time, multiyear, education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas. A full instructional program offers students the credits needed for graduation. Students choose to attend. Other characteristics include divergence from standard school organization and practices (deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, and teacher and student empowerment); an especially caring, professional staff; small size and small classes; and a personalized, whole-student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling. Models range from schools-within-schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums.

- Discipline is the distinguishing characteristic of **Type II** programs, which aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Students typically do not choose to attend, but are sent to the school for specified time periods or until behavior requirements are met. Since placement is short-term, the curriculum is limited to a few basic, required courses or is entirely supplied by the "home school" as a list of assignments. Familiar models include last-chance schools and in-school suspension.

- **Type III** programs provide short-term but therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create academic and behavioral barriers to learning. Although Type III programs target specific populations—offering counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation—students can choose not to participate."

Raywid's first group of programs, thus, includes many of the original types of alternative education for at-risk youth established in the U.S., and these are often referred to as "popular

innovations" or "true educational alternatives." Programs for high school dropouts or potential dropouts and sponsored by school districts, for example, would fit into this category, as would programs for students unable to pass standardized tests (a new trend within the alternative education field).

The other two types of alternative education developed by Raywid are more correctional in focus, with one being primarily disciplinary ("last chance" or "soft jail" programs) the other, therapeutic ("treatment" programs). Most, but not, all current programs that fall into these two categories operate separately from regular schools, although some are sponsored by a school district.

Raywid finds the first group of programs (the true educational alternatives) to be the most successful, while alternative discipline programs are much less likely to lead to substantial student gains. The outcomes for the last group of therapeutic programs are more mixed with students often making progress while enrolled, but regressing when they return to a traditional school. It may be that therapeutic programs have limited long-term impact on academic gains because they are often short-term. Their effectiveness might be better if youth receive high-quality therapeutic programs well-suited to meet individual needs, while they also receive educational instruction, and they remain in the program for a relatively long period of time (e.g., two years or more).

Interestingly, many experts see the distinctions between some of these types beginning to blur as more alternative education programs are using a mix of strategies and/or addressing multiple objectives. Type I and Type II schools, for example, are increasingly likely to offer clinical counseling, a Type III characteristic. A more recent three-level classification, also advanced by Raywid, therefore, combines Types II and II into a single group whose focus is on "changing the student." A second grouping is focused on "changing the school" and is analogous to the first type described above, and a newly-defined third group is focused on "changing the educational system" more broadly. This last group has been described as follows:

> "According to Raywid (1999), 'early efforts at using alternatives as a means of introducing systemwide change' (in Minneapolis, Tacoma, and Berkeley) have generated numerous options and some positive signs of success. Seeing small schools and innovative alternatives as sharing the same characteristics, she says "the small schools and schools-within-schools movement occurring in the nation's cities today is actually a test of whether small alternatives can survive in large systems" and can adapt those systems to support such innovation." (Hadderman undated).

Another classification described by the Wisconsin Department of Instruction is similarly based on what an alternative education program does, and categorizes programs based on their focus on students' behavior, interest, or functional level:

> "An alternative education program is often defined by the program's characteristics, such as programs that focus on behavior, interest, or functional level. Behavioral programming might be designed for students who need a structured setting to focus on more appropriate school behaviors to facilitate their learning and the learning of others. Programs designed around student interest might include an environmental program or vocational academies. Functional-level programs might include high school completion, academic, or skill remediation" (State of Wisconsin 2001, p. 2).

A final promising typology is one that centers on students' *educational needs*. Rather than focusing on a student's demographic characteristics or programmatic category, this typology focuses on the educational problems or challenges students present.[3] These include programs for:

- Students who have fallen "off track" simply because they have gotten into trouble (because adolescents tend to be adolescents) and need (short-term) systems of recovery to get them back into high schools. The goal of getting them back into regular high schools is appropriate and realistic for this group.
- Students who are prematurely transitioning to adulthood either because they are (about to become) parents, or have home situations that do not allow them to attend school regularly (e.g., immigrant children taking care of siblings while their parents work, those coming out of the juvenile justice system with many demands on their time, etc.).

[3] This typology was suggested by Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago at a daylong roundtable on alternative education sponsored by the C.S. Mott Foundation and held at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. on April 16, 2003.

- Students who are substantially off track educationally, but are older and are returning to obtain the credits they need to transition into community colleges (or other programs) very rapidly. These include, for example, older individuals who are just a few credits away from graduation (many of whom dropped out at age 16 or 17), or are transitioning out of the jail system, or have had a pregnancy and are now ready to complete their secondary schooling. (This is the group that is currently populating most alternative education programs in large urban areas—they are very diverse and tend to be well served by the alternative school system.)

- Finally, there is a group of students who are substantially behind educationally—they have significant problems, very low reading levels, and are often way over age for grade. Many of these children have been retained repeatedly and a number of them have come out of special education services. They include 17- or 18-year-olds with third and fourth grade reading levels who have never graduated from 8th grade (or who have gone to high school for a few years but have never actually accumulated any credits). This is a very large group of kids, and most school systems do not have any programs that can serve meet their needs.

With this typology in mind, it is clear that programs targeted at particular demographic group, such as pregnant and parenting teens, could be serving kids with a wide variety of educational needs: those who are two credits away from graduation; those who are wards of child welfare agencies and who have multiple problems such as being far over age for grade, and with only a third and fourth-grade education levels; others who are pregnant and parenting but also involved in the juvenile justice system; and yet others with significant behavioral problems. So a single school or program is being expected to handle too much *educational* diversity (one that regular school are unable to handle well), and this may be setting the programs (and their students) up for educational failure.

How: Administration and Funding

In addition to "who," "where," and "what," some of the literature on alternative education describes "how" alternative education programs are administered or funded. The administrative dimension is somewhat related to other features of alternative education, but considering it separately helps clarify another aspect of what makes alternative education programs "alternative."

Towards a Typology of Alternative Education Programs

Alternative education programs are sponsored or administered by a variety of entities including:

- non-profit and community-based organizations (CBOs)
- state or local education agencies
- charter schools
- adult education divisions or agencies
- juvenile justice agencies
- K-12 public or private schools
- health or mental health institutions
- federally-funded programs and contractors (e.g., for Job Corps)
- private for-profit companies

In addition to serving different types of students ("who") in different locations (where), many alternative education programs have different policies and administrative procedures than those typically found in regular K-12 schools. For example, some maintain hours and schedules that are non-traditional in the context of regular schools, have open admission and exit policies, and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the student. Alternative education programs often also have strong connections to the world of work (NGA Center for Best Practices 2001), which can mean policies and administration that are more similar to those in the workplace (e.g., work teams, supervisors, time cards, or scheduling academic instruction in conjunction with work or apprenticeships). As in regular education settings, alternative programs also vary tremendously in their academic standards, structure and accountability mechanisms, basic goals and objectives, parent and community involvement, disciplinary policies, and crisis intervention procedures (National Association of State Boards of Education 1996).

No specific literature was located that relates specifically to administrative accountability in alternative education. There are, though, special issues to consider in this area, mainly

because accountability and outcome measures used in mainstream schools are not always appropriate for alternative education. For example, using graduation from high school or completion of a degree is not relevant for an alternative education program that is mainly transitional in nature (e.g., aims to transition students back into regular schools or out of a special program such as juvenile detention or a treatment center). Alternative education accountability measures should include shorter-term measures and measures that track continuous "added value" or recognize that some youth may cycle in and out of a program before experiencing steady progress. Other performance outcomes might include measures of student motivation, learning to learn, and ability to master content. Presumably, program administrators and agencies sponsoring alternative education programs do have some type of internal management information, and it can be expected that as the field continues to develop, more reports and documents will be produced on this topic.

Not surprisingly, funding structures among alternative education programs are also highly variable:

> "Most alternative education programs' budgets are based on a variety of unreliable funding sources, such as grants, charitable contributions, and fees for service. Some alternative education programs may also receive state and local education funds—although these funds are often less than the per-pupil funding that traditional schools receive." (NGA Center 2001)

No published reports were found that itemized the costs of programs or the distribution of funds used for particular programs. But here, again, this information undoubtedly exists at the program or agency level, even though no specific studies or literature were found. Questions of interest include: Are the actual costs of educating our most vulnerable youth different than those for other children? How does the multiplicity of funding sources affect the integrity of alternative education programs—does it allow a more flexible use of the funding since restrictions linked to one source may not apply to another, or does it undermine the program by creating fiscal uncertainty and administrative complexity?

This section summarized a few key issues identified in a review of literature about alternative education. Various definitions of alternative education were identified, including distinctions among alternative education schools, programs, and perspectives (for example, towards

differentiated alternative education within a regular school). The review also was used to describe alternative education along four dimensions: (1) "who" programs target, (2) "what" content is included, (3) "where" the programs operate, and (4) "how" programs are administered and funded. A clearer understanding of the many dimensions of alternative education efforts can help in the development of a typology even if the typology does not map onto any one of these dimensions perfectly. These dimensions are important to understand because developing a variety of high-quality alternative education options — options that meet the needs of all youth who are not being well served by traditional public schools — will necessarily include programs and schools that serve children with different needs/characteristics ("who"), are located in different places ("where"), provide different types of certificates, diplomas, and programming ("what"), and are structured, administered, and funded in different ways according to the best needs and interests of students and the community ("how"). Whether a single typology can support the many applications for which it might be used (program development, fundraising, research and evaluation, etc.) is still unclear.

III. Potentially Promising Program Features

There is little rigorous evaluation research documenting the effectiveness of alternative education programs, meaning studies that can link specific program characteristics with specific student outcomes. As with other fields of inquiry in their early stages, much of the literature on alternative education presents features or characteristics thought to be essential to the success of alternative education efforts. In many reports there are lists of important characteristics or "best practices." As Lange and Sletten (2002) note, "whether these points of best practice are, indeed, 'practice' for most existing alternatives is a matter yet to be thoroughly documented. However, the lists do provide a glimpse of elements many researchers and advocates see as important descriptors of effective alternative schools."

Therefore, this section simply presents some of the many "lists" found in the literature, in part because they represent a succinct summary of what some observers and practitioners

believe are the keys to successful alternative education efforts, which may be useful in the future when considering formal evaluation strategies.

There is a high level of overlap among the lists (even for programs of different types), suggesting that there is some degree of consensus about critical features of high quality alternative education. It is also important to note, however, that the lists include many factors that are considered critical to effective education and schools, in general. One challenge will be to distinguish those that are unique to alternative education and those that apply to all education.

Land and Sletton (2002) summarize the essential characteristics of effective alternative education as follows:

- "clearly identified goals to inform both evaluation and enrollment (Gregg, 1999);
- wholehearted implementation without a piecemeal approach to structuring programs (Raywid, 1993);
- autonomy (Gregg, 1999);
- student-centered atmosphere (Frymier, 1987);
- integration of research and practice in areas such as assessment, curriculum, teacher competencies, and integration of special education services (Geurin & Denti, 1999);
- training and support for teachers who work with at-risk populations with or without disabilities (Ashcroft, 1999; Krovetz, 1999); and
- links to multiple agencies, an element that may become increasingly important as alternatives are required to serve students with special education needs (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Leone & Drakeford, 1999)."

Based on "a growing body of research pointing to the characteristics shared by successful alternative education programs and schools," the National Association of State Boards of Education (1996) reports that "the success of these programs has been measured in terms of improved grades, school attendance, and graduation rates; decreases in disruptive and/or

violent behaviors and suspensions; and an improved sense of direction and self among participating students." The characteristics they identify include:

- "High Academic Standards/Expectations — Researchers have consistently found that successful programs/schools set clear and high education standards and expectations for their students. The curriculum in these programs is not diluted or "watered down." Furthermore, the curricula is often expanded to enhance the educational and vocational interests of the students.

- High Standards for Interpersonal/Social Interactions — Successful alternative education programs/schools have well defined standards of behaviors. And in addition to having strict and clear expectations that are consistently applied to everyone, successful alternative programs/schools rely on interventions and an expanded curricula that foster the development of interpersonal and social skills. Most address issues such as family life, peer pressure, and conflict resolution.

- Student-Centered Education and Intervention Plans — Successful programs/schools have their structure, curricula, and support services designed with both the educational and social needs of the students in mind. Therefore, it is imperative that alternative programs/schools provide the assessment and support services needed to clearly identify and address the cognitive, emotional, health and socio-economic factors affecting the education and development of participating students.

- Teacher/Student Ratio — Research findings also indicate that low teacher/student ratios are important to the success of alternative education efforts. Ranging from 8-25 students per teacher, successful efforts have an average ratio of 1-16.

- Site-Based Management/Flexibility — While having clear and strong accountability measurements and systems, successful alternative programs and schools are often free from centralized management. Administrators, teachers, support services staff, students, and parents are involved in the different aspects of the programs/schools that they participate in. This work is done through issue/task specific committees or what could be described as "quality circles."

- Parent and Community Involvement — Parent and community involvement is critical for the success of alternative programs/schools. All of the programs and schools identified in various research projects noted that the parents of prospective students must agree to participate in clearly defined ways beyond parent-teacher meetings. Some require that parents volunteer some of their time to the program/school, others that they participate in family life seminars.

- A Program versus a School — Many successful alternative education efforts are designed specifically as either programs or schools. Programs are intended for students who may need short term interventions to get through a particular problem or situation that is having a negative impact on their education. They are designed with

the goal of helping the student get back in the "regular" school setting as soon the presenting problem or situation is addressed and corrected. On the other hand, schools are designed for students that for one reason or another are better off obtaining an education outside the traditional school setting. Often, these schools include students who must work to help support themselves and their families, or students who need specialized services and interventions but who can meet high education standards.

- Location — In some instances the location of the alternative education program or school has proven critical to its success. Programs are often set within a traditional school. At times they are located within a community school or agency. On the other hand, most alternative schools have their own facilities, share a facility with a larger school, or are located within community colleges or a university campus. Regardless of the location, successful programs and schools provide healthy physical environments that foster education, emotional well-being, a sense of pride, and safety."

Leone and Drakeford (1999) describe Schorr's (1997) summary of "an emerging consensus about what elements are needed for alternative programs to be successful" as follows:

- "Clear Focus on Academic Learning — The most promising schools have a clear focus on academic learning that combines high academic standards with engaging and creative instruction.

- Ambitious Professional Development — Successful schools provide teachers with stimulating, ongoing professional development activities that help teachers to maintain an academic focus, enhance teaching strategies, and develop alternative instructional methods. Properly designed staff development involves teacher input, work with colleagues, and opportunities to visit and observe teaching in other settings. When given opportunities to examine differences between instructional aspirations and actual practice, teachers will achieve what they aspire to do, provided that they have adequate staff development and support.

- Strong Level of Autonomy and Professional Decision-Making — Partly in response to sluggish and inefficient bureaucracies, reformers in education and social services believe that effective service delivery requires decision making at the service delivery level (Schorr 1997; Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). Decisions about staffing, leadership, budgets, scheduling, curriculum, and pedagogy need to be made by teaching and support staff who have direct contact with students. Effective schools provide autonomy that builds trust and loyalty among staff. Further, giving staff a voice in decision making promotes creativity and instructional excellence (Collins and Tamarkin 1990).

- Sense of Community — Research suggests that schools that focus on the creation and maintenance of intentional communities are more likely to succeed than bureaucratically organized schools (Schorr 1997). Within effective school communities, students and staff share expectations for learning, and students are encouraged to take a variety of courses and activities that enable them to pursue their interests and aspirations."

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001) has also developed a list of characteristics of successful education programs in *secure facilities*:

- "Administrators regard education as a vital part of the rehabilitation process.
- Programs help students develop competencies in basic reading, writing and math skills, along with thinking and decision-making skills and character development traits, such as responsibility and honesty.
- Student/teacher ratios reflect the needs of the students.
- Academic achievement is reinforced through incremental incentives.
- Teachers are competent, committed, and trained in current research and teaching methods, rather than relying on old model drill and workbook exercises.
- Instruction involves multiple strategies appropriate to each learner's interests and needs.
- Youth are assessed for learning disabilities and provided with special education in full compliance with federal law.
- When appropriate, parents, community organizations and volunteers are involved in the academic program.
- Opportunities exist for on-the-job training, work experience and mentorships.
- Partnerships are developed with potential employers.
- Students are scheduled for jobs and further education prior to the reentry into the community."

In their report, *Alternative Education Programs, Effective Practices Research Brief* (undated), the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction finds that successful alternative schools share the following characteristics:

- "They are small.
- Both program and organization are designed by those who operate them
- Character, theme, or emphasis is developed from the strengths and interests of the teachers who established them.
- Teachers choose to be a part of the program, with subsequent teachers being selected with the input of present staff.
- Students and families select the program.
- A teacher-director administers the programs. Principal as educational leader
- They are usually housed as mini-schools or buildings once dominated by larger programs.
- The superintendent sustains the autonomy and protects the integrity of the school.
- All programs are relatively free from district interference, and the administration also buffers them from demands of the central office.
- The continuity in leadership has been considerable.
- Considerable attention goes into cultivating a strong sense of connection among students, and between students and teachers.
- The curriculum must be compelling, challenging and inviting.
- Staff roles are broadened to include new responsibilities. Teachers and school administrators must continue to collaborate to improve the image of alternative education.
- City-As-School (CAS) is an alternative program that combines academic learning with the world of work for high school students, including at-risk Students."

In yet another study, Tobin and Sprague (2000) examined effective school-based practices for students who have behavior disorders and/or antisocial behavior. They limited their review to programs that (a) could be applicable to students at risk for antisocial behavior and/or failure in traditional classes, (b) were sufficiently practical to be implemented in local public schools, and (c) showed convincing evidence of positive outcomes. Their list of key

characteristics is as follows:

- "Low ratio of students to teachers
  - More personal time for each student
  - Better behavioral gains
  - Higher quality of instruction

- Highly structured classroom with behavioral classroom management
  - Level systems provide predictable structure
  - Self-management skills are taught
  - High rates of positive reinforcement
  - High academic gains
  - Students are able to move to less restrictive settings

- Positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management
  - Rewards for acceptable behavior and compliance
  - Directly teach clear classroom rules
  - Begin with rich reinforcement and then "fade" to normal levels when possible (four positives to one negative)

- Adult mentors at school
  - Mentor must use positive reinforcement
  - Mentor takes special interest in child
  - Mentor tracks behavior, attendance, attitude, grades
  - Mentor negotiates alternatives to suspension and expulsion

- Individualized behavioral interventions based on functional behavioral assessment
  - Identify causes of the behavior
  - Identify what is "keeping it going"
  - Identify positive behaviors to replace problems
  - Interview and involve the student
  - Use multicomponent interventions

- Social skills instruction
  - Problem solving
  - Conflict resolution
  - Anger management
  - Empathy for others

- High-quality academic instruction
  - Direct instruction plus learning strategies
  - Control for difficulty of instruction
  - Small, interactive groups
  - Directed responses and questioning of students

- Involving parents

- Frequent home-school communication
- Parent education programs, provided either at school or in the community"

It is intriguing to note how similar many of these lists are, even when very different types of programs or settings are considered. It is also important that many of the features are similar to those considered essential to effective regular K-12 programs and schools. Most of the lists identify high academic standards and expectations as a key feature of successful programs. Other important qualities are small schools and class sizes, and high-quality student-centered programs that actively engage teachers, parents, and other community members. Finally many of them point to the importance of administrative and bureaucratic autonomy for the program or school, so that they can create "intentional communities" often with the requirement that teachers and students be in the program voluntarily. Many of these key qualities will need to be considered further as interest in alternative education programs increases over the coming years, and as evaluation strategies are considered to empirical analyze their effectiveness.

IV. Discussion

For better or worse, the demand for more and better alternative education options is clearly growing across the country. Advancing the field will require progress on multiple fronts, including raising awareness about the need for and benefits of high quality alternative education options, finding ways to fund an adequate number of alternative education programs and schools, and demonstrating and improving on the effectiveness of high quality programs. All of these will require a better understanding of the vast array of alternative education programs that already exist, and a way of classifying these programs so that we can understand which types might be developed and replicated, how many of each high quality type is needed, and whether and how this new "system" of alternative education can best be administered in conjunction with or alongside traditional public schools.

The continuing dialogue about alternative education will benefit from having a common understanding of the various types of programs that exist. The review in this paper suggests a number of dimensions that could be used as a starting point to develop a typology of

programs (see Exhibit 1) to describe the type of program, the operator, instructional content, educational purpose or focus, and funding.

EXHIBIT 1
POSSIBLE DIMENSIONS OF A TYPOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

General type of alternative education: • Separate school • Separate program • Perspective/strategy with a regular K-12 school
Target Population: • women/girls • pregnant/parenting teens • suspended/expelled students • recovered drop-outs • delinquent teens • low-achievers • all at risk youth
Focus/purpose (and mix): • Academic completion/credential • Career preparation/credential • Disciplinary • Transitional (e.g., out of treatment or detention, or back to K-12)
Operational setting-proximity to K-12: • resource rooms • pull-out programs • schools-within-a-school • separate self-contained alternative school
Operational setting-location of activity: • regular school during school hours • school building during non-school hours • community or recreation center • former school building • juvenile justice corrections or detention center • store-front neighborhood organization • public housing project • homeless shelter (emergency and transitional) • medical or mental health facility • community college or other post-secondary campus
Educational focus • short-term bridge back to schools for students who are off track • students prematurely transitioning to adulthood • accelerated program for students needing a few credits to move on • students who are *very* far behind educationally
Sponsor or administrative entity: • non-profit and community-based organization (CBOs) • state or local education agency • charter school

• adult education division or agency • juvenile justice agency • K-12 public or private school • health or mental health agency or institution • federally-funded program and contractors (e.g., for Job Corps)
Credentials offered: • Regular high school diploma • General Educational Development (GED) diploma • Occupational and skills certification • No credentialing
Funding sources (and mix): • Federal funds • State funds • Local funds • Private funds

It is also clear if high-quality alternative education is to gain widespread public support, it needs to serve its students well while also meeting high accountability standards. There are now growing calls for more resources for both alternative education programs and for better data and analysis about the programs. There is also increasing interest in how to assess what programs are doing and accountability measurement and about "how to introduce high academic standards in alternative education systems without sacrificing the elements that make alternative programs successful, and without compromising the integrity of the high standards" (NGA Center for Best Practices 2001).[4] To bring high standards to alternative education programs, the NGA Center for Best Practices recommends the following:

- "Strengthen links between traditional and nontraditional education systems
- Invest resources to support the transition to high academic standards and beyond
- Improve "early warning systems" to identify lower-performing students
- Support longer-term alternative education programs
- Develop data-driven accountability measures for alternative education programs

[4] Interestingly, Oregon recently passed a state law (Senate Bill 258) that requires districts to evaluate the quality of its alternative schools. Others have noted that alternative education programs in urban areas are especially likely to be left out of the high academic standards movement.

- Develop enhanced GED programs
- Collect data."

Similarly, the National Center on Education and the Economy (1998) recommends a *standards-based* alternative education system that includes the following elements:

- "a single high standard for all students whether in traditional schools or in alternative education programs;
- a funding system that ensures that the country spends at least the same amount on students in alternative education programs as in traditional schools;
- an accountability system for both alternative education programs and traditional schools tied to helping students meet high standards; and
- a counseling and referral system in every community that provides students access to the programs best suited to their needs."

Finally, it will be important to continue to conduct research on the effectiveness of alternative education and to address some issues for which there may be strong opinions. For example:

- Do alternative education schools accelerate learning compared to what students would achieve in a regular school setting?
- Do alternative programs that integrate career development with academic instruction have better educational and economic outcomes than those focused mainly on academics?
- Are alternative education programs that operate totally outside of and separate from regular school districts and public schools more effective than alternative education sponsored by school districts?

Promoting high quality options for vulnerable or disconnected youth who are not succeeding in traditional schools is an important part of a nation's commitment to educating its young people. Requiring that these programs also meet high accountability standards ensures that they receive the resources and attention they need to do their job well. Developing a typology of programs that describes the full array of alternatives may be an important element in encouraging the development of the most effective programs.

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Appendix A

Factors that Place Students At Risk

Many aspects of children's lives affect their ability to learn and succeed in school. Wells (1990) has identified a variety of circumstances that can place students at risk. They include individual-, family-, school-, and community-related factors:

School Related

- Conflict between home/school culture
- Ineffective discipline system
- Lack of adequate counseling
- Negative school climate
- Lack of relevant curriculum
- Passive instructional strategies
- Inappropriate use of technology
- Disregard of student learning styles
- Retentions/suspensions
- Low expectations
- Lack of language instruction

Student Related

- Poor school attitude
- Low ability level
- Attendance/truancy
- Behavior/discipline problems
- Pregnancy
- Drug abuse
- Poor peer relationships
- Nonparticipation
- Friends have dropped out
- Illness/disability
- Low self-esteem/self-efficacy

Community Related

- Lack of community support services or response
- Lack of community support for schools
- High incidences of criminal activities
- Lack of school/community linkages

Family Related

- Low socioeconomic status
- Dysfunctional homelife
- No parental involvement
- Low parental expectations
- Non-English-speaking home
- Ineffective parenting/abuse
- High mobility

Source: S.E. Wells, *At-Risk Youth: Identification, Programs, and Recommendations*, Teacher Idea Press, Englewood, Colorado, 1990.