

What's alternative about Minnesota's alternative-education programs? The schools? Or the students who attend them?

Students speak out about their alternative education experience and how it could be better

May 2008

Alternative-education programs serve an important function in Minnesota K-12 public education, offering flexible, individualized learning environments for 146,000 students. Students are eligible to attend when they are, as defined by Minnesota Statute 124D.68, "at risk" of educational failure. In its handbook for state-approved alternative programs, the Minnesota Department of Education states, "The original mission, as it is now, was to provide viable educational options for students who are experiencing difficulty in the traditional system."

Trouble is, requiring that students be "at risk" in order to attend alternative education programs may place students in the position of having to first fail in traditional schools. This contributes to widespread perceptions that alternative programs are not "legitimate" educational options. In early 2008 on the Citizens League StudentsSpeakOut.org Web site,

students reported that they avoided alternative programs because they believed them to be for "bad" or "stupid" kids. Already facing significant social and academic barriers, they wanted to avoid more problems.

The negative stereotypes of the schools are anything but accurate, students report. Once they begin attending, they are relieved to find social and academic environments where on-time graduation seems to be a real possibility. Yet students indicate that perceived lack of legitimacy often delays entrance into the programs for a variety of reasons, and unnecessarily creates problems, including:

- Students come to see themselves as failures.

Kari from RiverBend Area Learning Center (ALC) in New Ulm, Minn. reports that Area Learning Centers, one type of alternative program, are socially known as "Assholes' Last Chance".

- Students get more off-track in their education than need be.
- Conventional schools struggle with the behavioral and academic problems that result when students try unsuccessfully to make things work, frustrating their ability to serve well the students for whom conventional schools are a good fit.
- Presumably, some students simply never find their way to alternative programs and instead drop out.

Students Speak Out's work with young leaders

In January 2008, the Citizens League selected six leaders from alternative-education programs who decided to address the social stigma surrounding their schools. They abhorred the idea that people think of them as “stupid, bad kids” and wanted the public to understand the schools for what they really are: a valuable means to learning and graduation.

The Citizens League pressed the students to find out if their observations were more widespread. In turn, the leaders gathered stories from 21 students in 10 schools and six additional individuals about their experiences in alternative programs. Based on those stories, students co-created a survey taken by 60 self-selecting students at a student leadership conference run by the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs (MAAP) in April 2008. This report conveys their findings.

Although the survey is small and the stories anecdotal, the students’ work should be taken credibly. First, their self-reports are consistent with findings from the academic literature.¹ Second, they provide us an important glimpse into a world that education leaders must seek to understand. As Parker J. Palmer wrote in “A New Professional: The Aims of Education Revisited” in *Change*, the Carnegie Foundation’s publication, “We must start taking seriously the ‘intelligence’ in emotional intelligence. We must do more than affirm and harness the power of emotions to animate learning and leadership: We must help our students develop the skill of “mining” their emotions for knowledge. By and large, academic culture honors only two kinds of knowing—empirical observation and

¹ John Kovach and William Evans, “Empowering Youth and Alternative Education: Program Components and Evaluation Strategies,” Educational Enterprises, LLC. Paper presented at National Youth-At-Risk Conference in Savannah, Georgia. March 2006. http://www.educationalenterprises.org/LLC/EE_Savannah.pdf

Melissa Storm and Richard Storm, “Evaluation of the Oklahoma Alternative Education Program,” Oklahoma Technical Assistance Program. Date N/A. <http://gwired.gwu.edu/hamfish/merlin/cgi/p/downloadFile/d/16863/n/off/other/1/name/25Stormpdf/>

Winnie Hu, “Profile Rises at School Where Going Against the Grain is a Norm,” New York Times, November 12, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/12/education/12village.html?pagewanted=print>

According to the Minnesota Department of Education, 146,000 students attended alternative programs during the 2004-2005 school year, including roughly 19 percent of the middle and high school population.¹

logical reasoning. But science begins in the hunches, intuitions, and bodily knowing that lie behind testable hypotheses.”

Alternative-Education Programs: A Minnesota Success Story

Minnesota was an early adapter of alternative education programs, developing one of the first in the nation in 1968, Wilson Open Campus School in Mankato. The sheer number of Minnesota students who opt for alternative programs at some point in

their middle or high school careers gives testimony to the important needs these schools must fulfill. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, 146,000 students attended alternative programs during the 2004-2005 school year, including roughly 19 percent of the middle and high school population.²

In the Students Speak Out survey, almost 79 percent of the respondents said they were doing better academically at their alternative programs, and 62.5 percent said they were doing better socially. Seventy-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that they are learning more. **One hundred percent of the students surveyed said the programs are helping them to attain their educational goals.** Story after story, students said the schools weren't academically easier and they consistently pointed out that students must meet Minnesota's standards for graduation.

Nicole, 31 years old, Shoreview ALC graduate: "It was tougher for me to go through mainstream high school. At Shoreview ALC, I was very successful. I could work at my own pace. I didn't feel pressure. I could take my time; do my work. I could ask teachers questions privately. It wasn't like a hard core classroom setting. Instead of failing the normal high school, I was actually getting A's and B's. I graduated from college. I am a marketing coordinator in the promotional products industry, which means we source products from all over the world for large, major corporations to promote their brand. I am also a part-time DJ on a local radio station and I do promotions for them as well. I am successful."

Molly, RiverBend ALC in New Ulm: "(Going to the ALC after trying to make things work in my traditional school) was the best decision I have ever made. Now I actually pass classes. People don't realize that students have different types of learning and 'alternative' is a different way to learn and a great way to learn. At my old school I would fall behind because I didn't understand the work or didn't know how to do things. At times the teachers would go too fast and I would be totally lost. Now at the ALC if I don't understand anything the teachers work with me and help me out by getting me caught up."

² The MN Dept of Education reports that as of October 2006, 69,501 high school students (grades 9-12) and 7,502 middle school students (grades 6-8) received more than targeted services. In 2006-2007, there were 409,989 students total attending Minnesota Secondary Schools (grades 7-12).

Widespread negative stereotypes

Despite their accomplishments, students attending alternative education programs face persistent and widespread stereotypes. When asked why they didn't enroll in alternative programs sooner, 28 percent of the students surveyed indicated they thought the schools were for "bad kids" and "stupid kids", or had other negative perceptions about the schools. Students describe their own perceptions and fears:

Joe, Phoenix Learning Center in Buffalo: "I was thinking to myself that this is going to be a place where there will be fights everyday and hard-ass teachers...(but) right when I stepped in it was entirely different. All of the teachers treated me with respect and there were no students that I didn't get along with."

David, Osseo ALC in Brooklyn Park: "I had doubts about going to an ALC. I never wanted to go. I didn't think it was the place for me. But I really like it there. I thought it was for a bunch of...people that didn't care about school anymore and they just went there because it was easier. It's totally the opposite."

Students also worry that the success of alternative programs is dismissed. People assume that if "bad" or "stupid" kids who didn't succeed in traditional schools are graduating from the schools, then the schools must be "easier".

Travis, Osseo ALC: "Since it's 'alternative', they think that means we're stupid. There's a state law that says (all students must learn the same thing in high school.) It's not like we can't understand, it's just how we learn. It's given in ways we can understand. It actually sticks in your head. You're not just reading, getting it done, and handing it in. You're actually taking something with you. It's not like it's any easier. It's just different."

Three unnecessary problems

The persistent stereotypes of alternative education programs and the students who attend them create unnecessary problems. The first consequence is that students come to believe that they are the problem; that they are "alternative" from the norm because they don't fit in.

Ashley, Spring Lake Park ALC: "No kid likes to be told they are lower than someone else. That makes kids wanna live up to something. Make themselves seem better than the person who lowered them. And if you completely eliminate that then there is no problem."

Research suggests that "stereotype threat" may be impacting learning. Joshua Aronson, Associate Professor of Psychology at New York University, writes about the impact of "stereotype

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threat” on students: “Numerous studies show how stereotype threat depresses the standardized test performance of black, Latino, and female college students. These same studies showed how changing the testing situation (even subtly) so as to reduce stereotype threat, can dramatically improve standardized test scores and motivation... We have found that we can do a lot to boost both achievement and the enjoyment of school by understanding and attending to these psychological processes.”

Second, the students suggested that these stereotypes delayed their entrance into alternative programs, and blocked their path to educational success. About 83 percent of those surveyed said they would be better off now had they attended an alternative education program sooner.

Abby, RiverBend ALC: “I have never had good grades. I have...attention deficit disorder. I was struggling my freshman year. I failed American history and physical science. During the summer I went to summer school for my history class, but I missed an opportunity to make up my science class. That wasn't the first time I had been to summer school either. I had gone the summers after my seventh and eighth grade years along with my freshman year. When I was still at Sibley East, my old school, I was starting to go to an after school science class to make up my credits. But I also had gone to after school classes my seventh, eighth and ninth grade years. I was so sick of staying after school. But there were no other options 'cause my old school didn't put me in a new science class so I would have just kept falling back.”

Brittany, Austin ALC: “I have been in ALC since seventh grade... Before that in like third to fifth grades I started not caring about school. I got what we were learning but I needed help on homework and my mom was always working or didn't help me because she was tired from working all day.”

Brian, Osseo ALC: “When I was still in elementary school my parents never really did help me out with any of my school work and if they did help me out they would make a big deal out of nothing. They would just start yelling and calling me dumb. I never did any homework or any other work in class. There were a lot of deaths going on in my family at the time so I didn't really want to think that much about my education... So (after) 6th grade I started to smoke and drink and started doing things that I am not really proud of to this day...I started to hang out with gangs and started to do a lot of stuff that I really started liking to do to people. I (did) more hardcore drugs...for 2 years. I was in my ninth grade year now and still failing and getting into more fights. My school told me if I would get into one more fight then I would get kicked out of school. I didn't really like that idea. That's when I started to realize that I needed to get my education... Without the ALC I don't think I would be graduating this year.”

Finally, students' most frequently-cited reason for delaying attendance (36 percent) was that they wanted to try and make things work in their traditional schools. They tried, unsuccessfully, to “do better” and freely admit the problems they were creating as a result:

Joe, Phoenix Learning Center : “During my first high school years I was not doing so good, I was failing almost every class every quarter. I was skipping classes and playing video games in the library. I would skip whole days. I would get in fights (not physical) with my teachers. I would get in fights with other students. It was not going good. Then I talked to one of the assistant principals and he asked me how I was

getting along with the teachers and students at the high school and I told him that I only liked one teacher in the entire school and I only had a couple friends. He told me that this was the wrong place for me then and he recommended that I go to Phoenix Learning Center, so I said whatever and I went just because I wanted to get out of the high school.”

Shane, Osseo ALC: “The main (legally authorized) reason I went to an alternative school was ‘truancy’, but the real reason was that I made a big deal and left before I even got kicked out was because I HATED going to a regular high school.”

Eric, RiverBend ALC: “I have been attending this school since third quarter of last year. Since I came here I’ve succeeded...I’ve changed. My past with school was not the greatest. In the (traditional) high school I didn’t get along with others. I had a hard time with teachers. I had no opportunities to work one-on-one with them which was a huge problem. I have ADHD which, I mean, I guess that’s just an excuse, some people might say, but here they actually understand that it is harder to pay attention; to get motivated. And here at the RiverBend ALC people understand that. And that’s what I like.

A fourth potential problem: completion rates

The students’ work focused on gathering information from students attending alternative education programs, so we can only speculate about the impact of alternative programs’ lack of legitimacy on completion rates. However, when the survey asked “Why didn’t you enroll sooner?” of students who reported they would be better off now had they enrolled earlier, 34 percent said they had not heard about the programs. Others reported they were not yet “at risk” enough to attend.

Eric, RiverBend ALC: “I’m just another kid here. I don’t stand out as much.”

Seth, an 18 year old with a GED: “I was behind 16 credits, and my counselors told me I wasn’t failing enough classes to attend an alternative school.”

Eliminating stereotypes by focusing on reasons for success

Students want to succeed; and the alternative education programs they attend help them succeed. The students’ stories support what the research has found to be at the root of alternative education programs’ success:

- *A sense of belonging.* This may be difficult for some students to find in large schools fragmented by peer groups and organized in ways that teachers have difficulty getting to know individual students.

Seth, an 18 year old with a GED: “I was behind 16 credits, and my counselors told me I wasn’t failing enough classes to attend an alternative school.”

- *Relevant, engaging instruction.* One ALC student declared, “It’s like life happens to us earlier (than it does for other people).” Students dealing with parenthood, serious illnesses, learning disabilities, uninvolved parents, death in the family, and/or supporting their families financially may have a greater demand for learning commensurate with their very adult-like experiences and lessons in the outside world.
- *An organization and structure that support the first two factors.* Students appreciate family-like atmospheres that are more emotionally supportive. Students describe a learning environment learning methods as well as flexible paces and schedules that accommodate their significant responsibilities and issues.

When they began attending their alternative education programs, they were able to stop focusing on themselves as the problem. Instead, they focused on learning and graduating.

Ashley, Spring Lake Park ALC: “There is a more of an ‘everyone knows everyone’ thing going around (at ALCs). And I think the smaller environment is one big thing to that. Cause there are less students so everyone knows who it is if someone wants to start something. And most the kids in my learning alternative are probably there cause they don’t want to deal with so much people’s crap.”

Kari, RiverBend ALC: “ALC schools have a message that no other schools can deliver to their students. ALC schools make you aware that you are welcome; that you can have trust in them, and that you’ll fit in among the other students. They don’t judge you even if you came from the streets. They give you the hope and encouragement to graduate and move on to better things in life.”

Shane, Osseo ALC: “Some people don’t even have time for the ‘traditional way’ of schooling. (In alternative education programs, students) come in on their time and get it done, because teachers and the school are nice enough TO TRY AND HELP YOU FINISH! THEY CARE.”

Elizabeth, White Bear Lake ALC: “I chose to go there because I got pregnant (while attending) my other school and I thought that it would help me with my education. And the other school didn’t let me be there. I bring my baby to day care every morning (it’s at my school) and they take care of her. I get to take her out for lunch. And then I bring her back, and then they help me with my education.”

The students’ experiences raise questions.

As a state, are we really ready to say that nearly one in five high school students, and 146,000 Minnesota students overall, are “at risk of educational failure”?

Based on its work with students attending alternative education programs the Citizens League suggests that one answer to avoiding these problems—and to improving school completion and student achievement in Minnesota—is a simple one with no price tag: integrate alternative education programs fully into Minnesota’s spectrum of educational options by eliminating both the “alternative” moniker and the eligibility criteria. As the key to the success of these schools is their small, community-like

environment that permits adaptive instruction, they might be renamed “Customized Learning Academies”.

Related questions for consideration include:

- Should alternative education programs be legally acknowledged as something students might *want* to attend to *avoid* getting “off track” socially and academically?
- Does the “at-risk” eligibility requirement imply that something must be wrong with students in order for them to want to access something nontraditional?
- Do the eligibility requirements and lack of awareness about the programs create a time delay, especially for those who are not aware of alternative education programs and other schooling options, between when students first know they’re struggling to succeed and when they are attending the schools they value as working well for them?
- If the “at-risk” requirement remains in place, is it important to find ways for students and their families to learn about public schooling options available to them at an earlier time?
- After an adult suggests that a student leave a conventional school, do any students quit school, sensing one type of school doesn’t want them and another type is for “bad kids”?
- What do the negative stereotypes sensed by students in alternative education programs mean for Minnesota at a time when it is working to improve school completion and students’ adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act? What might students achieve if the state were able to diminish stereotypes of their schooling environments?
- Does lack of awareness about alternative education programs, or options for public schooling in general, contribute to the Minnesota’s overall school completion rate? If districts were able to refer students into alternative education programs earlier, would enrollment increase? Would quit-rates decline?

Learning by doing: SSO leaders discover active citizenship

Students Speak Out is as much about students developing an understanding of their role as active citizens as it is about bringing new perspectives to a public problem. In addition to affirming their project findings, SSO leaders from alternative-education programs report:

- Investigating a public problem helped them find *common ground* with other students. Understanding others' experiences helped them to better define their environment, and made their own seem less harrowing.
- Being an involved citizen is not only "fun", but makes one feel "responsible and appreciated".
- Skills from SSO, like public speaking, setting and going for goals, and leadership, are good for the road. Ashley, who once said public speaking was not her forte, gave a speech for 150+ at her graduation. Shane says he's more organized for himself, and his peers take heed of his insights.
- Young people's ideas have a place in determining the *common good*.

Shane Saunders, Osseo Area Learning Center in Brooklyn Park

"Through our Students Speak Out research, I learned that kids are serious about getting done with work and trying to finish school. At the Osseo ALC, most of the kids [I interact with] are mature and show a lot of respect. A lot of them have families to take care of and are busting their backs trying to get done and start their lives. I just learned that [at alternative-education programs] people understand more of who you are and respect you more.

I also learned that [being an active] citizen is, for one, a lot of fun. I learned that being a part of an organization [the Citizens League Students Speak Out project] felt really good and everyone was cool and cooperated and helped each other out. It makes you feel really good about yourself and makes you feel responsible and appreciated. Also, respected for most part. I really think I do have a voice to be heard. I just got chosen student of the month at school yesterday. I know pretty much every single person at our school, and they all know me, and take what I say to the head. They say I'm insightful. [For the Students Speak Out project] I was on time and exceeded the expectations... I feel more organized for myself."

I learned that [being an active] citizen is, for one, a lot of fun. It makes you feel really good about yourself and makes you feel responsible and appreciated.

Molly Dietz, RiverBend Area Learning Center in New Ulm

"I talk to my classmates about [the issues] and I learned a lot about my peers. While doing this I have got[ten] closer to my peers. I learned some really want to make a difference and learn about StudentsSpeakOut.org and some don't. But I believe everyone loves the ALC. I learned a lot about how alternative schooling fits in with my life and I love coming to school every day. Without the ALC I didn't think I would make it. I do think I could make a difference. I think anyone can make a difference if they just try and put their mind to it."

Ashley Iverson, Spring Lake Park Area Learning Center

"I think Students Speak Out is a great program and I think it (we) did a very good job for getting the message out to kids who don't know about Learning Alternative schools. I have learned so much from meeting legislators who control more things than I ever thought. I learned a lot about myself, too. Hearing other peoples' stories, I realized mine wasn't so bad. But I am also happy that I got the word out about ALCs and how they really do help students.

Students Speak Out has helped me open up and speak out. I never thought I would be able to speak in front of all my teachers and about 150 more.

The teachers in ALCs get to know you personally. You're not just a student that's in one or two classes. No, you're a person they try to make a connection with and push you to try your hardest. I want to go into teaching at an ALC. I have to say, that's probably where students and teachers connect more. I know [becoming a teacher] takes a lot of school, but [I've learned that], no matter what I want to achieve, I can. All I have to do is try my hardest, and I hope to do so.

This year at our ALC graduation and award ceremony, I got up in front of my whole class and gave a speech—something I thought I would never do. But I am happy I did, 'cause it was one of the best things. Before I did terrible in speeches, but this one I was really proud of, and thought I did really well. I have to say I strongly enjoyed Students Speak Out."

Joseph Otten, Phoenix Learning Center in Buffalo; then Blue Sky Online Charter

" After working on this project I have learned that people who want to attend alternative schools should not have to be 'at risk' to enroll and that anyone that wants to go to an alternative school should have the option to do so. Being an engaged citizen I believe that we should be able to do the things that we want to do and not have guide lines set for us to tell us whether or not we can or cannot do them."

About the authors

Kim Farris-Berg, Project Coordinator for Citizens League StudentsSpeakOut.org, and Stacy Becker, Director of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150) prepared this brief. They were guided by the “Students Speak Out Goes Alternative” student leaders who selected the topic, encouraged their peers to tell their stories on the site, and gathered video testimony. They are Molly Dietz, Ashley Iverson, Joe Otten, Shane Saunders. Other student leaders who have influenced this project include: Ilandrea “Nuny” Nichols and Eric Torgusen.

Access stories from alternative school students (both written and video testimony) on StudentsSpeakOut.org, where we have posted a complete summary of quotes from the students’ stories and complete summary of data from an online survey of students attending Minnesota’s alternative-education programs. We will also post a “supervideo”, prepared by Southwest High School Freshman Annie Wood, featuring the students’ video testimony.

About StudentsSpeakOut.org

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150’s purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens’ ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens’ experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it. StudentsSpeakOut.org is a social networking Web site that has been testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We’ve “turned the tables” and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota’s alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest. The Web site was also the host of the “I Am Minnesota’s Future” Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota. In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in workshops to learn how to support them. The workshop designs and recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota’s site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—75 new participants in the first 3 weeks!).

Useful Links

- Students Speak Out – Minnesota: <http://studentspeakout.org>
- Students Speak Out – Milwaukee: <http://milwaukee.studentspeakout.org>
- MN Statute 124D.68:
<https://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/bin/getpub.php?type=s&num=124D.68>
- Minnesota Department of Education. *State Approved Alternative Program Handbook*. (Roseville, MN: Minnesota Department of Education, updated February 2007), 6.
<http://education.state.mn.us/mde/index.html>
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<http://joshua.aronson.socialpsychology.org/>
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<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/change/sub.asp?key=98&subkey=245>