

## SSO Alternative Schools – Summary of Findings

May 5, 2008

A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

The SSO Goes Alternative Student Leadership team formed a hypothesis that negative assumptions people make about the students who attend alternative and charter school learning alternatives (assumptions like they are “bad kids” who are “stupid” and “need to be hand-held”) are impacting decisions made about their schools and are affecting who attends the schools.

From January - April 2008, the leaders invited students to react to their hypothesis by posting their stories on StudentsSpeakOut.org. The leaders also videoed students attending learning alternatives, graduates, and teachers for their reaction. There are quotes from 21 students in ten schools and six additional people who do not now attend learning alternatives.

The stories revealed some important observations:

- Some students reported that they were encouraged to attend learning alternatives by an adult who thought the environment would be better for them. Most students sensed they were advised to the better place for them. In some cases, students believe that the adults wanted the best for them. In other cases, they thought the adults negatively stereotyped them. Sometimes a parent or friend helped them find the learning alternative. Before they arrived at the learning alternative, the students often had their own negative stereotypes of students who attend learning alternatives. They were ready to see some “bad kids” and wondered if they would fit in. ALC (one type of learning alternative) stands for “Area Learning Center”. But socially, they’re known as “Asshole’s Last Chance.” The students reported that their parents were worried about what the schools might be like, too. But when the students started attending the learning alternatives, they quickly learned that the schools aren’t filled with “bad kids”.
- **Ashley, Spring Lake Park ALC:** Ashley had been moving around a lot due to her parents’ divorce. She got behind on credits, and “was failing all but food and algebra”. She and her stepmom set up a meeting to find out how to get back on track. They were thinking about getting a tutor. “What the lady told her angers me to this day and I am so happy my stepmom filed a complaint with that school. The lady said, ‘Obviously you know that St. Anthony is a hard school. Since we started open enrollment, most of the students that come here go here for the diploma. It would help them to get in a good college knowing that they came from a tough school. But if you really want your child to graduate close to graduation, you should send her to a different district...Irondale.’ Ashley and her family eventually decided on Spring Lake Park ALC, and she will graduate on time.
- **Kari, Riverbend ALC:** “There are many things said about the ALC schools that try to bring down the students and the school itself. For example: ‘Assholes Last Chance’, ALC schools are for druggies and failure kids, ALC schools aren’t real schools, and they’re just an escape from the real world.”
- **Joe, Phoenix Learning Center (alternative) then Blue Sky (charter):** “When I first was in the [traditional] high school all I heard was that Phoenix Learning Center was for potheads’ last chance. All I heard was that those schools were for the ‘bad kids’ or ‘dumb kids.’ 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.”

- **Travis, Osseo ALC:** I totally disagree that students who go to ALCs are stupid. You have to apply to get in, you don't just get sent there. Since it's 'alternative', they think that means we're stupid. Before I got here, I believed what everybody told me. They're all bad kids who used drugs and dropped out and there are lots of pregnant chicks. I thought, 'Am I gonna get my butt kicked or something?' Then I got there and actually it's a tight place. All it is is a smaller school with smaller classes. A smaller community. We all get along. I've only been going there for a little bit and I know EVERYBODY there. I know a good range of the whole school. It's more focused. Like a big family. I like it. Better than a regular high school.
- The students reported that the schools are attended by kids who want to graduate, who seek a positive, respectful environment, who (if they had made poor choices in the past) are working to clean-up their act, and whose circumstances sometimes aren't accommodated well by traditional structures.

Some examples: (a) The ALC bathrooms had working sinks with doors on the stalls and no gang signs on the walls while the traditional school had broken sinks, no doors, and gang signs; (b) Students get behind for any number of reasons, including being seriously ill. They need a way to catch up; (c) Students who have been chemically dependent often see ALCs as a place that will help them get back on track. They're not going there because they're "bad", they're going there because they've made a decision to get better and abandon the behaviors they engaged in while they were attending traditional schools.

The students who attend learning alternatives want to graduate, they report, and sometimes are choosing to attend school despite significant social and academic obstacles: dealing with learning disabilities, living in the projects with parents who are on drugs, divorcing families who move a lot, having parents who are busy with work or other issues (like multiple deaths in the family) and not necessarily helping or paying attention to their teenagers. Some of the students are parenting themselves, or dealing with long-term illnesses, including drug and alcohol addiction.

These obstacles do not always work well with an 8AM – 2PM school schedule, in classrooms where there is little hands-on work and a quick pace, with teachers who do not have time to know their situations personally, in atmospheres where they felt disrespected (by fellow students, by teachers, and by the conditions of the school buildings themselves). At times, students felt "hopeless" and like "failures" when they weren't learning well. This negatively impacted them socially and academically. When confronted with the idea that they might not graduate, they didn't like that idea at all, so they felt they may as well try something different—anything—if it would help them graduate.

Some moved to different traditional high schools as a first option, and found that they started off well, but quickly found themselves in similar circumstances: getting poor grades and/or hanging out with the wrong people. In learning alternatives, they found out that they *could* do well. They were able to make different choices in these different conditions. The conditions frequently mentioned were: teachers had time to help them form a plan to graduate and stick to it; teachers had time to work with them personally; a physical environment that conveyed respect; slower learning paces (learning alternatives offer varied learning paces); and a family-like atmosphere.

Students say they learn the same things that students in other schools do (as required by state standards), but in different ways. The learning methods (including attention from staff, varied paces, flexible scheduling, and more) make the same academics "easier". When the academics became easier, they report, their social lives improved.

Some students refer to traditional high schools as "the high school", often as if their school isn't a high school. Sometimes they think that their high schools are not public.

- **Brian, Osseo ALC:** "My parents made me go to the ALC. And if they didn't I think...well I know I would have dropped out of school. When I first walked into the school it didn't look like a real school. And when I walked around I could see everybody laughing having a good time. Just a lot of cool people just trying to get by. I walked into the bathrooms and was amazed there were doors on every stall. No gang signs everywhere and the sinks worked. I was really grateful to be in a place like Osseo ALC. When I went to this school it made me think

about what kinda of stuff I did in my past. My parents did make the right choice on sending me to the Osseo ALC. Because without the ALC I don't think I would be graduating this year."

- **Molly, RiverBend ALC:** "The first half of high school I was failing my classes and I never really tried until the counselor at my school talked to me about my grades. I decided that I was going to try and pass classes. I did all my work and studied for tests but I still wasn't passing the classes. I began to lose hope and gave up. The following year I went to the high school thinking a fresh start but during the middle of the semester I was failing so I decided to go to ALC. It 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 (New Ulm Senior High) 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."
- **Joe, Phoenix Learning Center (alternative) then Blue Sky (charter):** "The first day 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 with me respect and there were no students in there that I didn't get along with. It's been the same ever since."
- **Kari, RiverBend ALC:** "When I first started high school as a 9th grader, I was attending Mankato West Sr. High. For the most part, I hated school. I spent most of the time skipping, getting high or coming to school high just to deal with being there, sleeping in class, or making a fool out of myself. During 9th grade, I gained a half credit towards graduation. I failed every class, so I just quit going all around. I skipped all of my finals except Studio Arts, which was the class that I gained the half credit in. After the rough start to high school I thought I'd be able to make a change after starting at a new school. 10th grade year, I was starting at New Ulm Sr. High. It was a new school, new people, and a new environment. The year started out okay until I started getting further and further behind in work. Soon, I didn't care about the work. I'd go to class just to get the credit for being there and then did absolutely nothing while in class. Yet again, it was just like Mankato. The counselors and the teachers seemed to not care at all whether you passed or not. They had no hope for anyone. I started considering the ALC after taking a look at my credits. I knew there was no way I'd graduate at a public school. I enrolled for the ALC in January of 2006 and started by March. There I knew they cared. The teachers were willing to sit down and actually give you the help you asked for and/or needed. The principal was willing to work with you to figure out a plan of graduation. All in all, I started at the ALC due to short credits. I have now been going to this school for almost 2 ½ years. ALC has helped me so much and gave me the encouragement that I needed. I would never trade the ALC to go back to a public school."
- **Shane, Osseo ALC:** "Some people don't even have time for the 'traditional way' of schooling, so they 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."
- **Brittany, Austin ALC:** "I have been in ALC since 7th 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. I have lived with my mom since I was about one year old. My dad and my mom had gotten divorced by that time. So I never really got to know my dad. He never cared to try to know me so when I got older I didn't turn to him for anything. When 6th grade came every 5th grader is nervous for that first year of change. I liked school. At first I made new friends but at the end of my 6th grade year I didn't care again. So my teacher had a meeting with my mom and the teacher suggested ERP for me, which is an ALC in middle school here."
- **Hillary, stepmother of Ashley (who attends Spring Lake Park ALC):** "[Spring Lake Park ALC] has had a positive influence on Ashley's life. It's helped her with her self esteem. It's let her meet a lot of friends. It's helped her learn that she *can* succeed in school. And helped her with responsibility. She gets her homework done and everything, where at a mainstream school she wasn't doing any of that. It's not necessarily true that alternative schools are for bad kids. I mean, you do need to do your research. But the major part of that is you have to pay attention to who your kids are hanging out with and trust them. If they're gonna follow other kids and do bad things that the other kids are doing...you have to do your research. I don't think all learning alternatives are for bad kids, but I can see how for other parents that would be a concern. But it depends on your child. I trust Ashley. I know what she doesn't do. And me and her dad watch her friends and see who she is hanging out with. I think kids and parents need to come to the decision together about whether the alternative school is the right place for their child, but, yes [all students (not just those 'at risk') should have the opportunity to go]."
- **Abby, RiverBend ALC:** "I have never had good grades. I have a learning disorder. It's called 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 7th and 8th 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 7th, 8th and 9th 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." Abby's mom sensed that Abby's spirits were down, and found RiverBend ALC through a friend. "It was all set except for one BIG problem," Abby writes. "My parents are divorced so they argue a lot. My mom thought it was a great idea that I would go there. But my dad, not so much. A guy he works with told him that the ALC was only for bad kids. I can't believe that's what people think. My mom finally talked my dad into letting me go. I am starting my 2nd quarter here at RiverBend ALC and I like it here a lot. I'm just so happy when I look at my grades and I don't see D's and F's. I now see A's, B's. It feels so good. For the first time in my life I have better grades than my two sisters. I just really wanted to thank the ALC for helping me more than any other school has. I'm not failing anymore."

- **Sarah, Phoenix Learning Center:** "My current place of residence is Montrose which is about 20 minutes away from the school. One of the main reasons I decided to enroll at Phoenix was because of the smaller class sizes. I came into the program hoping that the smaller class sizes would help fill in the missing holes that I had in my education. Another reason I decided to come to Phoenix was because if I continued on the path I was headed down while at the high school I wouldn't have been able to graduate. But here at Phoenix I will be able to graduate on time."
- **Tyler, Phoenix Learning Center:** "The reason I came to this school is that I was sick with mono and failed all the classes I was in at the high school. They moved me here to catch up."
- **Laura, Phoenix Learning Center:** "The reason why I am attending an alternative program is because I got pregnant and had a baby. I can have a baby [while attending] there and not fail. I was failing classes in the high school. The best thing about mainstream high schools....there is no best thing. The worst thing is everything. I hate the teachers there."
- **Carolyn, adult who dropped out of high school:** "I am a drop-out...at the time (1984) it was the best thing that I had ever done for myself. I knew by junior high that I would never graduate. The clock was ticking and I was waiting until I could finally be done with school. When the clock struck "16" I was done. I took the GED. For the first time I felt at peace with life. That seems silly doesn't it? If you think about the time a child spends in school, from the age of 5, I had already spent 11 years within an institution that was slowly draining the life out of me. Not many people would allow so many years to pass in a job that they hated or in a relationship that was disastrous. So when I dropped out the peace I felt was unmistakable. I felt like the world would teach me more than I had ever learned in the classroom. Indeed it did! Would I do this today? Probably not. Today there are options!"
- **Nuny, High School for the Recording Arts:** "Why is every little girl's dream to become princess? No matter what color, no matter rich or poor, that seems to be every little girl's dream. I know it was mine when I was about 5 or 6 I used to always imagine I was the princess of the Ida B. Wells (that's the name of the projects in Chicago that I grew up in). I use to stand between the orange poles (that's where my throne was at) and imagine my prince charming was coming to take me away from my hell hole of a house. See my father was a well known drug dealer when I was born and by the time I was 5 we had lost everything due to his full blown crack addiction. It had got so bad that me and my sister had to move in with my grandma while my mama spent her nights looking for him in the crack houses he use to own right on the rock block. When he wasn't on the rock block he was stealing our TVs, VCRs, etc. to provide for his problems. So when my mama said no he would try to fight her for telling him he couldn't have what he bought. After my 8th birthday my father died of an overdose and I never really knew him so it didn't bother me but my older sister took it really bad. She was two years older than me and really loved my father. As I got older I stop playing princess but I still always looked for my prince charming. I soon stopped goin' to school cuz I thought I was too smart and that the teachers couldn't tell me nothing. You are probably wondering why. Basically I found my prince. His name was Prince D. Wooden but every one called him prince. He was, well, the king of the Ida B. Wells projects but everything wasn't happily ever after. Me looking for a daddy and prince ended in up hurting me more than ever." Nuny now attends High School for the Recording Arts, and plans to graduate."
- **Daine, Phoenix Learning Center:** I absolutely hate mainstream high schools. You feel like a sheep there. I needed to get caught up on my grades, and Phoenix seemed like the best spot. It's open here. There is a lot of drama that goes on, but it's easy to just ignore.
- **Seth, 18 year old with GED:** Some people do well in mainstream schools because they work all the time to get through high school and they put in a little effort because they have time to do that. They don't have all the responsibilities we do home-wise. They have more of a stable home-life. People who actually have a lot of responsibilities and don't have that much time to do home work, they obviously suffer because most of the grades are according to the home work. My friends who go to ALCs have all the same academic requirements as any other student in any other school, but they have a lot more organized system to do it. And it's a lot friendlier. There's more one on one time because there's not so many classes and so many students. It's not easier.
- **Nicole, 31 years old. Shoreview ALC graduate:** I loved Shoreview ALC. 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. I was very successful. 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 do their Web site, all the promotions, I write proposals for the local businesses and partner with them to do events. I am successful.
- **Ashley, Spring Lake Park ALC:** "The school work is so much easier and not as difficult and there is practically no pressure on you to get everything in. There is pressure to do your missing stuff, but it not like there's a lot of stuff to be missing."
- **Anonymous adult male:** I grew up in Western Massachusetts in another generation. I attended an awful school. My home wasn't the best. I left school in late September and I never went back. Nobody ever called until the end of May. I wasn't old enough to drop out. I chose foolish things. They started a program called the 7-66 program. I was the first student. It was for independent learning. So I went back and learning with a Waste Treatment plant. I was interested in environmental things, and I studied those. I went home and had to write about my work and what I learned there. I didn't get any credit for the entire year I had off, but I did go on to graduate in the 7-66 program.
- **Shelly, teacher at Phoenix Learning Center (in her 10<sup>th</sup> year at the school):** I like alternative schools better than traditional schools. I like the options...and the freedom to teach more what the student needs with the smaller classes. Teachers have more opportunities to teach what they think best fits the students. The kids are

the best thing about teaching in any school. The worst thing is the bureaucracy. The people who try to limit what we do, and try to put legislation on things they know nothing about. They make our job more difficult than it needs to be.

- **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.
- **Eric, RiverBend ALC:** I have been attending this school since third quarter of last year. Since I came here I've succeeded. I'm in a lot of different things. 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. I'm just another kid here. I don't stand out as much. We're all a family. Big family presence. Peg [my teacher]—I mean, she's like a mother. And everyone's there anytime you need it. I've been overcoming a drug addiction. I am in treatment and in the Drug Corps Program I've had a few slips. And no one shunned me on that. It's just a road block that I had to get over and I had the help here at school to do that. And for that I thank them.
- **Kelsey, Senior at Jennings Community Learning Center:** "This year was my first year in an alternative learning program. I came from a traditional school in the suburbs, with the typical seven class periods, each classroom with desks in a row and a white-board at the front. I spent 12 years in this school system. I was never miserable or anything, but since 9<sup>th</sup> grade I was anxious to graduate, because I felt like school was holding me back from life. We spent hours studying US government, but never went to the state capitol; we spent hours studying for world religion tests but we never took a trip to a synagogue, church, or temple.

My final decision to look for an alternative program was made when I got home from a trip to Nepal in the fall. I felt like the world was too big, and there was too much to be done for me to be wasting 8 hours everyday learning things that I would forget the second I turned my test in. So, I started looking around and ended up at Jennings in September. I feel like I have learned more at Jennings this year than I did all 4 years at Armstrong. I have spent days investing in projects that interest me, and I have also learned abstract things from my classmates that I never would have known if I stayed in the traditional setting.

Jennings is project based, and also has an emphasis on field trips. The environment of the school teaches students to be well rounded citizens, not just good test takers. The school day is much less mundane, and staff understand when students need to just take a break and play a game of spades. The staff at Jennings are extremely passionate about students, even the ones that aren't star quarterbacks or that don't have a 4.0 GPA. Students are not expected to fit a mold, instead, there is room to create your own mold and staff will go along with it. If a kid is behind on credits, or is taking two weeks to do a project that would normally take one, it is not assumed that the student is stupid; it is assumed that they are different: which is a good thing."

- Some students reported that the first time they felt respected (at school, and sometimes in their lives) was in the family-like atmosphere at their learning-alternative. In the previous section and in this section, some students described how family members died, or were not there for them after-school (physically or emotionally). Some parents were respectful and involved, but the students felt disrespected/not cared about at their traditional school, which impacted their ability or willingness/motivation to learn.
  - **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. If you've never gone to or visited an ALC you're missing out. At traditional schools, the teachers didn't care whether you were there or not, all they cared about was piling more and more work on you. They were inconsiderate and didn't care about what each individual student was going through like the ALC does."
  - **Kelsey, Senior at Jennings Community Learning Center:** "[One] thing that is different at Jennings is the voice students have. Each week we have all-school meetings to discuss the climate of the school, and students are never cut off, even if they are complaining. It is understood at Jennings that how a student spends the majority of their day should be in their hands, because when that happens, students can thrive and begin to enjoy learning."
  - **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. In my school there is no social standard and that's one key thing. No kid likes to be told they are lower than someone else. That makes kids wanna live up to something. Make themselves seem better then the person who lowered them. And if you completely eliminate that then there is no problem."
  - **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'm not mad at them for that. It made me stronger in the end. 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. And I didn't know what I should do at the time. So when I 'graduated' out of 6th grade I started to smoke and drink and started doing things that I am not really proud of to this day. But there wasn't that much I could do about it in the first place. 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 started to do more hardcore drugs. I did those for about 2 years. I was in my 9th 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."

- **Molly, Riverbend ALC:** "Before I started going to ALC I never wanted to go to school because classmates of mine would make fun of me and didn't seem to care how I felt. When I started at the ALC I met the nicest most caring people there. For the first time in my life I wasn't shy to talk to new people. People were friendly and I felt comfortable there. Since I have been going to the ALC I know now how it feels to get respected by my classmates."
  - **Shaine, Phoenix Learning Center:** In alternative schools there is a lot more freedom. They let you do what you need to do without making you do what you need to do. The best thing is the family in it. The worst thing is we have to go home on the weekends. The best thing about mainstream schools was leaving there. The worst thing was the teachers treated you like a child.
  - **Travis, Osseo ALC:** 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.
  - **David, Osseo ALC:** I think it's stupid that people say we're stupid because it's harder for us to work in the regular school. If people had a chance to see what it's like they probably wouldn't think we're stupid anymore. It's smaller, you don't get homework to take home and teachers treat you better. With the smaller classes teachers can get to everybody. When I was back at Osseo [traditional high school] sometimes the teacher didn't get to you until after the bell rings. Then you'd be late to your next class and it just screwed everything up. 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 ghetto people that didn't care about school anymore and they just went there because it was easier. It's totally the opposite. There's all kinds of different people there and I get along with everyone. School-wise it's better than mainstream. I still like Osseo High School [the traditional school I formerly attended] and I'd like to go back and go walk around and see it.
- Some students have left alternative schools for chartered schools. Both said they were "bored" in addition to other reasons.
    - **Javon, Plymouth Youth Center (alternative) then High School for the Recording Arts (charter):** "I just wanted to tell you about my lil' struggle with stayin' in high school. I started off my freshman year at an alternative school and I liked it there when I first started, but after a while I just got bored. I think that the school was trying to be like a regular high school. They were supposed to help you earn credits faster but you don't get them as fast as you suppose to. I stopped going to school for about three months until my cousin told me about High School for the Recording Arts [a charter school]."
    - **Joe, Phoenix Learning Center (alternative) then Blue Sky (charter):** "After two years of Phoenix I am now doing an online school called Blue Sky. I didn't leave because of any bad happening or get kicked out, I left because if I'm at the same place too long-- like a school or something--I lose concentration and I don't do good in school, so I'm in Blue Sky and so far it's working good. Another reason why I left was because that there is a chance that I might have a baby girl and if that's true then I will need a full time job and online is the best for doing that."
  - There are students who purposefully work to become "at risk" so they can attend ALCs, or who wish they could get in but aren't "at risk" enough.
    - **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. The people there are horrible. They clique up and hate on other people, not to add the most annoying thing of all, rumors and talking behind people's backs. The teachers are strict and don't leave their emotions at the door like we're supposed to. And you're just another student, you're not a person."
    - **Seth, 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. It seems like people labeled us as stupid. If you dropped out you're stupid. And it's kind of funky. Coming up here, after getting my diploma, I'm gonna be starting a nurse practitioner program and that's one of the higher end jobs for intelligence as far as knowing what you're doing and having to work with people. If you don't have a high school diploma, and you have a GED, you get looked at differently and people label you as stupid. I applied for a job at a gas station just to make some money, and I was told I couldn't work there just because I had a GED.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

Kim Farris-Berg, Project Coordinator for Citizens League StudentsSpeakOut.org, prepared this quote summary. She was 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 data from an online survey of students attending Minnesota’s alternative-education programs and a written brief asking, “What’s alternative about Minnesota’s Alternative-Education Programs? The schools? Or the students who attend them?”. We will also post a “supervideo”, prepared by Southwest High School Freshman Annie Wood, featuring the students’ video testimony.

## **ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:**

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150<sup>th</sup> 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 project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are 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. 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.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: 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.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota’s site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 80 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding suspensions and expulsions, and other issues affecting students, using the site’s discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students’ willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that’s you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: [info@studentspeakout.org](mailto:info@studentspeakout.org)