Alternative Education in New Jersey High Schools: An Analysis of Policy and Practice

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Introduction

There is no denying it: America has a dropout crisis. According to research, 30 percent of young adults in the United States fail to graduate high school (Steinburg, 2006, p iii). This figure alone seems striking, but there are far more dramatic numbers that describe the lifelong consequences of being a dropout. Dropouts are twice as likely to be unemployed (Steinburg, 2006, p iii). Even the individuals who are lucky enough to obtain employment earn an average of $9,200 less, annually, than high school graduates (Bridgewater, 2006, p. 2). Dropouts are also plagued by limited opportunities for career advancement, and are more likely to have inadequate health care (Steinburg, 2006, p iii). High school dropouts present a serious challenge to our society through costs in social programs; dropouts comprise 52 percent of welfare recipients, 82 percent of the prison population, and 85 percent of juvenile justice cases (Christle, 2007, p. 5). The dropouts from 2007 alone will cost the United States $329 billion in lost wages, forgone tax revenue, and lost productivity over their lifetime (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). There is no doubt that the dropout crisis is one of the most serious challenges our nation faces today.

While New Jersey, my home state, does have one of the highest graduation rates in the country, the Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that there were roughly 19,000 dropouts for 2007-2008 - still a significant number of high school dropouts (Amos, 2008). Individually, that means that 19,000 young adults will have to live their life in a constant struggle with higher chances of

being unemployed, living in poverty, being in poorer health, and becoming incarcerated. That is 19,000 too many individuals that will struggle through life.

As a state, New Jersey will have consequences as well. The state will have to pay higher social services for those individuals while at the same time expecting less tax revenue. To work towards a stable and thriving New Jersey, its citizens will have to be educated and prepared to spark innovation for a sustainable future. Therefore, the state has an interest in consistently researching how education can be improved. The state should be applauded for its good efforts, but let there be no mistake – there is still work to be done.

To combat the dropout crisis, one solution being explored is alternative education learning, which often targets students who are high risk for dropping out of school. According to a 2008 district survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, there are over 10,300 public alternative education schools and programs that exist across the country serving approximately 646,500 students annually. Sixty-four percent of school districts reported having at least one alternative education program or school in the district or by another entity[1] serving at risk students.

Though alternative education programs vary across the country, they typically feature characteristics of smaller teacher to student ratios, one-on-one student-teacher interactions, a supportive learning environment, more emphasis on cognitive, social, and emotional development (i.e. the whole child approach),

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[1] Usually a private provider of alternative education programs that contract with individual schools.

more autonomy than traditional programs, more flexibility in learning plans with greater student decision making power, sometimes utilizing individualized education plans, and are typically housed separately from the traditional student population in a different building or a different classroom (Lange, 2002; Raywid, 1994; Young, 1990).

In the United States, there are no federal regulations on alternative education. States, much like other areas of government, have a great deal of autonomy in educational matters and make decisions within their borders. Thus, there is much variation between states on alternative education practices, regulations, legislation pertaining to alternative education, and evaluations of such programs. Some states, such as Indiana, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, have more stringent rules on what types of programs may exist, what students the programs serve, how they receive funding, and how they are evaluated. Others states have almost no guidelines or regulation.

In New Jersey, a state with few alternative education regulations, there is no state-level data available with regard to alternative programming. It is unknown how many programs exist in New Jersey, and what the various program structures are. Without this information, it is difficult to say what type of program works best, or even if these programs work at all. Many studies of alternative education cite the lack of information as a major barrier to improving dropout prevention programs, and call for more research and data collection to combat this problem (Lange, 2002; Aron, 2003 &2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Payrazli et. al.,

2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002; Catterall, 1986). New Jersey is no exception. Schools in New Jersey that are classified as an alternative school report information to the state, but alternative education programs are another story. While alternative education program data is collected by the New Jersey Department of Education, the information is not differentiated from general education data. This makes it challenging to analyze and assess the effectiveness of alternative education programs.

In this project, I will study alternative education programs seeking to answer several research questions. First, what types of programs exist in New Jersey high schools and what type of students are served? Second, what state policies exist pertaining to alternative education? Third, what are other states' practices and policies with regard to alternative education? The first two questions will create a more complete picture of the state of alternative education in New Jersey high schools. The third question will allow for a comparative analysis to better understand alternative education. With limited data from New Jersey, such a state-by-state comparison can help to illuminate alternative education programs within the state.

As we will discuss, alternative education has become today a major dropout prevention strategy. Yet, the verdict is still out on whether alternative education works. If New Jersey is attempting to improve education within the state, one of the questions that must be asked is: presuming that there are alternative education programs and schools within the state, do those programs

work at keeping kids in school and improving educational attainment? This is the purpose of reviewing state policy as well as a comparative analysis of alternative education in other states. Understanding the nature of such programs that exist in New Jersey will help the state go one step further in answering this key question regarding the success or failure of alternative education.

There is one last question that should be presented regarding educators and policymakers' approach to alternative education before analyzing it in depth. Should alternative education be approached as a moral imperative or an economic imperative? Some may view alternative education as a moral imperative because it gives high risk children access to more specialized education. Others may view alternative education as an economic imperative because it may serve as a dropout prevention strategy, and ultimately, if the program is successful in reducing the dropout rate, economic prosperity is increased. This is an issue that will be revisited at the conclusion of this project. The answer to this question could provide clarity on the role of alternative education in American education today and where its future lies.

Methodology

There were three primary research questions for this project. First, what types of programs exist in New Jersey high schools, and what type of students do they serve? Second, what state policies already exist pertaining to alternative education? Third, what are other states' policies and practices with regard to alternative education?

To investigate the first question, data was collected from a random sample of New Jersey high schools. To find survey participants, a list of high schools was obtained from the New Jersey Department of Education website (2010a). This list came out to a total of 307 schools, including high schools labeled as "other", but excluding any vocational high schools. Schools were selected by an electronic random sample. Each school's main number was called and the purpose of the project was explained along with a request to be transferred to the appropriate office. References typically included special education offices, child study team offices, special services offices, guidance offices, or occasionally, alternative education offices. Once transferred, a contact for the office was obtained, and an introduction letter and electronic copy of the survey was emailed to him or her.

The survey contained four primary sections (excluding an additional section for comments and a space for respondents to request a copy of the completed report). Section one simply asked: do you have an alternative education program? Section two, containing four questions, concentrated on specific information about the program. The first question in section two asked

participants to check off the types of students served by the program. The second question in this section asked participants to check off program characteristics. The third question asked participants to check off entrance criteria for admittance into the alternative program. Finally, the fourth question of the second section asked participants to check off exit criteria that allow a student to leave the alternative program. The third section dealt with student data, which was listed as an optional section. Respondents were asked to provide, if possible, student outcomes. The fourth section asked about data collecting and reporting practices. (For a complete draft of the survey, see Appendix A).

In addition to the survey responses, demographic information was gathered on the schools and districts. Money spent per student was collected from the New Jersey Department of Education's website based on the 2008-2009 academic year (2009b). These numbers were not based on data per school, but instead reflected the amount of money spent per student for each school district. The percentage of students on reduced or free lunch was collected for each individual school through the National Center for Education Statistics databases based on information from the 2007-2008 Common Core of Data. Also collected from the same data source was the school's Title I status, percentage of minority enrollment, and school's locale/urbancity (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). The percentage of minority enrollment was determined by adding together the total number of Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, and Hawaiian Pacific Islander students and dividing it by the total school population.

This method is consistent the 2002 District Survey of Public Alternative Programs and Schools by the National Center for Education Statistics.

It is important to discuss the limitations of the data. The sample size was 22 schools out of 307 high schools, roughly 7 percent of the high schools in New Jersey. An acknowledgement of the limited representativeness of the sample is imperative. Furthermore, the random sample contained schools from 13 of the 21 New Jersey counties with 19 suburban schools, one rural school, one town school, and one urban school. Hence, readers are cautioned to realize the limited generalizablility with this sample; inferences about the general population may be restricted.

For the second question pertaining to state policies related to alternative education, the New Jersey Board of Education Administrative Code was researched and analyzed (New Jersey State Board of Education, 2007). In particular, the following chapters were investigated: Subchapter 9: sections 6A:16-9.1 (Establishment of alternative education programs), 6A:16-9.2 (Program criteria), and 6A:16-9.3 (Student placements). Searches on the New Jersey State Library database and legislative histories on the New Jersey legislature website were also utilized. The New Jersey Department of Education staff was contacted for any additional questions and for the confirmation of information.

Lastly, the third question aimed to investigate the policies and practices of other states for a comparative analysis. A small selection of states was chosen for the analysis: Indiana and Oregon. These states were selected because of their

geographic diversity, the comprehensiveness of their alternative education practices and data collections, and their information which is, for the most part, readily available online and open to the general public. Information was collected from state education websites and reports in order to understand state legislation, practices, and evaluation methods. Two interviews with each state's alternative education specialists, Drew Hinds (Oregon) and Sue Foxx (Indiana) provided additional follow-up information not specified in the resources available online.

Defining Alternative Education

One of the first difficult issues in discussing alternative education is how to define it because of the wide varieties of programs that exist throughout the country. What can be classified as an alternative education program? Broadly, it can be defined as any program that lies outside of traditional K-12 programs (Aron, 2006, p. ix). Defined in this way, alternative education programs can be either for youth who are performing poorly academically or for gifted students[2] that need the extra challenge a traditional classroom cannot provide. Alternative education can take many forms: in the school or in a separate school; isolating the students or integrating them with the traditional student population; strictly academic alternative programs or programs that offer technical training in addition to academics; programs with behavioral modification counseling or without – the list goes on.

One way to define alternative education is to look to different states. How do states define alternative education? Oregon defines alternative education as “a school or separate class group designed to best serve students’ educational needs and interests and assist students in achieving the academic standards of the school district and the state” (Oregon Department of Education, 2009a). Indiana specifies that an alternative education program must "be an educational program for eligible students that instructs the eligible students in a different manner than the manner of instruction available in a traditional school setting" (Indiana

[2] Programs for gifted students provide classes with an extra challenge in them to engage them and keep students from dropping out of school because of boredom.

Department of Education, 2009a). While in New Jersey, alternative education is defined as “a comprehensive educational program delivered in a non-traditional learning environment that is distinct and separate from the existing general or special education program” (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-1.3). It is evident that of the three, New Jersey is perhaps the most specific in the definition of alternative education.

For the purpose of this study, I have chosen the definition put forth by the 2002 Report on Alternative Education Programs and Schools by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2002). I have chosen this definition over the others because it is broad enough to include various program structures, yet is distinct from traditional, vocational, or special education. According to the NCES, an alternative education program is one that: “1.) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular classroom, 2.) provides non-traditional education, 3.) serves as an adjunct to regular school, or 4.) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009a, p. B-1).

One thing that needs to be addressed is the connection and separation between alternative education and special education. This can be a confusing distinction. The first confusing point is that their program structure can look very similar to each other. The important point of departure is this: special education programs exist to serve students with disabilities while alternative education programs exist to serve a diverse range of students in need. Special education programs must comply with federal and state Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA) regulations. Alternative education programs have no such federal regulation, though some states do have specific legislative regulations.

Another part of the process of defining alternative education is describing what types of alternative education exist and what purposes they serve. As was seen, state and federal definitions of alternative education are relatively broad. Differentiating between types of alternative education can be useful because different categories of programs have distinct goals and target varying populations of students.

The most commonly cited types are by Raywid (1994), which divides alternative education into one of three categories. Type I alternatives are schools of choice, often called magnet schools, and tend to focus on a specialty or reflect a theme. Type II schools are called "last chance" schools for disruptive students and focus primarily on behavior modification. Type III schools employ remedial instruction for students that are academically behind other students. Type III schools also often focus on supporting social and emotional growth. Raywid states that alternatives can be distinct, but there can also be mixes of any of the three types (p. 27).

Another way to look at alternative education program types is to see how states categorize programs. Indiana classifies alternative education into four types (Indiana Department of Education, 2009b). The first type puts students for short-term placement in a detention facility to address skills deficits and gives them individualized attention. The second type targets students who have not passed

state tests, are academically failing, or have other academic deficits. This type works on remedial curriculum until the student is ready to transition into a traditional program. The third type is for continually disruptive students that have behavioral or discipline problems. The purpose of these types of programs is to work on modifying behavior and addressing social or emotional issues so that students are eventually able to return to the traditional classroom. The fourth type of alternative programs teach students life skills they will need beyond school. The aim is to serve teenage parents, disengaged students, or students that must work to help support their family (See Appendix C). Oregon also classifies alternative education by different types. The first type serves students with at risk behavior. The second type includes programs that are remediation or credit recovery programs. The third type serves pregnant or parenting students. The fourth type of programs target students who are exceeding standards, while the last type is listed as "other" programs (See Appendix C). New Jersey has no classifications for different types of programs.

To summarize, the broadest definition of alternative education is a program that serves students whose needs cannot be met in a traditional classroom. Some definitions of alternative education go a little further specifying the exclusion of vocational or special education. With these wide definitions, many researchers and state governments have found it helpful to classify alternative education into different types of programs, including those that serve students with academic risk and include remediation, programs that serve non-

traditional students (i.e. pregnant or parenting students, students who work to support their families, etc.), programs that seek to modify disruptive behavior, and programs that serve gifted students.

Though it can be challenging, defining alternative education is important because it helps us understand what type of students are best served by alternative education. With a more complete understanding of the definitions and categories of alternative programs, we now move to understand the historical development of alternative education.

History of Alternative Education

Alternative education has gone through several transformations throughout the years. To truly understand where alternative education came from, we must first understand a little background about education in the United States.

In the late 1950's, some researchers began to argue that education did more to promote the status quo than it did to promote individual growth and personal fulfillment (Young, 1990). Another criticism arose about the question of equity – many argued that public education was not equitable for all. The origins of this argument can be found in the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, and certainly the 1954 Supreme Court decision of Brown v. Board of Education confirmed the movement to demand equity in education. As Timothy Young noted, "the issue of equity or equality was added to the demand for excellence in the national debate on public education" (p. 9). Not only was public education supposed to be free to everyone, but it should provide equal opportunities for all.

In the 1960's, President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty. This declaration led to the passing of various pieces of legislation. In 1965, President Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was to be used as a tool to directly attack the 19 percent poverty rate. The passing of the ESEA was a huge shift in the U.S. government's handling of education. Previously, education was thought to be purely a state matter, but this legislation gave the federal government a more direct hand in educational matters. The ESEA spurred an educational revolution with many innovative strategies on

how to best improve schools. Though some argue that alternative education has existed since the beginning of American education (Young, 1990), alternative education exploded into American education amidst this war on poverty during the 1960's. Often programs were set up because schools at the time were viewed as cold, strict places for children, and they offered children choices in learning (Young, 1990).

These changing views and critiques of public education led to a rise in demand for educational reform. Many of these early reforms reflected the beginnings of educational alternatives. These reforms spilt into various groups. One of the groups was Freedom Schools, led by writer Allen Graubard, who claimed that America should replace public schools with independent free schools. These non-public schools emphasized a revitalization of community control over education and schools (Lange, 2002). Free schools rejected a traditional curriculum, and students were able to pursue their interests in additional to traditional subjects. Though free schools experienced initial popularity, it was short lived (Young, 1995; Lange, 2002). An additional reform was open or informal education spurred by Joseph Featherstone. Open schools, operating as public schools, were based on student individualism – students studied at their own pace, student progress was measured by individual improvement, and students had a certain amount of control over what they studied.

In 1975, Congress signed another important piece of educational legislation, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act. This legislation aimed to address inequalities among hidden disadvantaged groups. Alternative education was seen as a way to help those disadvantaged groups. From the 1960's and into the early1970's, alternative education grew in popularity.

Critiques of alternative education began to emerge in the later 1970's. First, some argued that alternative education programs tended to segregate students (especially students with disabilities) from the traditional student population (Sagor, 1998, p. 72). While many schools felt the need to separate these students from the majority to better serve their needs, critics believed this separation did not provide children with the same access to opportunities. In a society with strong democratic values of equal opportunity, this lowered the appeal of alternative education. Also, after the early wave of alternative education programs, the initial research deemed the programs as having "no or little effect" on educational attainment (Raywid, 1981). However, some argued that these reports were short-term evaluations - an inappropriate method to effectively evaluate the programs. Alternative education programs primarily serve students that need academic remediation or behavior modification. Progress for these types of students would likely take longer than traditional students; thus, short-term evaluations would not show any progress, whereas long-term studies might show the programs' true effects. Others say that alternative education programs had

poor funding, mismanagement, and other organizational problems that led some schools to fall apart.

Despite some setbacks, the school choice and alternative education movement persisted. Many believed that the old totalitarian system of schools with no choice was a failure – instead, families need choices in education, which is reflective of our democratic society (Raywid, 1981). According to Raywid, alternative schools and programs grew from about 100 in the 1970's to an estimated 10,000 by 1981.

By the 1980's, alternative schools and programs became less experimental and more defined and narrow in focus (Lange 2002). Their focus, however, was to serve disruptive students and students who were failing through remedial instruction (Raywid, 1981; Young, 1990). "By 1987, over 15 states had passed legislation to increase alternative education options, and alternative education programs were serving a variety of students, including violent or chronically disruptive youth, students at risk of dropout, low achieving students, and students from varied socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds" (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003, p. 16).

The 1990's brought school violence incidents that further influenced the growth of alternative education. The Thurston High School shooting (which killed two students) and the Columbine High School shooting (which killed 12 students and teachers and injured 23 others) further pushed the understanding that at risk students, especially those students who may present a danger to other students,

might need to be educated in separate classrooms or separate schools with specialized curriculums to meet their needs. One report by Lehr, Lanners, and Lange suggests that these incidents helped lead "to a growth in state-level organization and legislation/policy on alternative schools" (p. 16).

The Gun Free Schools Act that was passed in 1994 required any school receiving federal education funds to expel any student that brings in a firearm to school for at least one year. The legislation specified that it is up to the Local Education Agencies whether allow the kids to be served under an alternative school or program. Due to this law, 2,695 students were expelled in the 2006-2007 school year. Twenty-nine percent of those students expelled were referred to alternative placement in their districts (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009b).

By today's standards, most agree that many alternative education programs seek to serve students who are at risk for academic failure and school dropout (Raywid, 1994; Young, 1990). "However, at this point in its evolution, most agree that alternative schools are defined by the tendency to serve students who are at-risk for school failure within the traditional educational system" (Lehr, Lanners &, Lange, 2003, p. 1). Alternative education has continued to grow in both the number of programs as well as policy supports for expansion. We will now examine alternative education's continued growth into the 2000's.

Alternative Education Today

In examining the history of alternative education, it is clear that it has shifted from an educational experiment to a major school dropout prevention strategy. This leads to the next question: how prevalent is alternative education today? Unfortunately, national data on alternative education programs and schools is extremely limited. However, there are several nation-wide studies that give us a slightly better perspective on how prevalent alternative education is today, its specific purposes, and the issues and challenges it currently faces.

Alternative Education Prevalence. Though there is little national data on alternative education, studies do indicate that alternative education programs and schools have continued to grow in number. According to information from the Common Core of Data by the National Center for Education Statistics, there were "2,606 public alternative schools in 1993-1994, compared to 3,850 public alternative schools in 1997-98" (Lehr, Lenners, & Lange, 2003, p. 2). One of the most comprehensive national studies was done in 2002 by the National Center for Education Statistics, which surveyed school districts around the country about alternative education, including alternative programs within school districts in addition to alternative schools. According to the 2002 survey, there were 10,900 programs and schools across the country for students at risk for school dropout serving 613,000 students (Klinger, et al, 2002).

The 2002 survey showed that alternative education programs were most likely to exist in areas with higher minority enrollments. Districts that had a 5 percent or less minority enrollment were the least likely to have alternative education programs or schools (26%), whereas the schools with the highest percentage of minority populations had the highest percentage of alternative education programs (62%). Likewise, districts with higher poverty concentration rates of over 20 percent were more likely to have alternative education (45%) than districts with 10 percent or less of poverty concentration (31%). Urban schools were the most likely to have alternative education programs or schools (66%), followed by suburban (41%) and rural schools (35%). Southern states were most likely to have alternative education programs at 80 percent, followed by Western states (44%), Northeastern states (31%), and finally, Central states (28%).

Percent minority enrollment[1]	
5 percent or less	26
6 to 20 percent	43
21 to 50 percent	51
More than 50 percent	62
Poverty concentration[2]	
10 percent or less	31
11 to 20 percent	43
More than 20 percent	45
Metropolitan status	
Urban	66
Suburban	41
Rural	35
Region	
Northeast	31
Southeast	80
Central	28
West	44

(NCES, 2002)

In the 2002 report, the most common reasons for entrance into an alternative education program or school were possession, distribution, or use of alcohol or drugs (52%), physical attacks or flights (52%), chronic truancy (51%), possession of a weapon (50%), and risk of academic failure (50%). The most

common reasons for exit from an alternative education program or school were improved attitudes or behaviors (82%), student motivation to return (81%), approval of alternative education staff (67%), and improved grades (52%). The common services provided by alternative education programs or schools were curricula for a regular high school diploma (91%), academic counseling (87%), smaller class size (85%), and remedial instruction (84%). Least common services included preparation for the GED (41%), peer mediation (37%), extended school day/year (29%), security personnel on site (26%), and evening or weekend classes (25%).

Thus, it appears that nation-wide, alternative education most commonly serves students with delinquent behaviors, but also serves students who are academically at risk. Likewise, it seems to be a national trend that students most commonly leave alternative education when they improve those delinquent behaviors. Services offered through alternative education seem to be mostly geared, however, to serving students who are academically at risk.

One question the survey asked districts was what percentage of their alternative education population was considered special education. The report found that districts responded that 12 percent of alternative education students are considered special education students. This highlights the fact that in some schools, there can be great overlap in alternative and special education. Though some schools may have separate plans and programs for alternative education

students and special education students, some schools certainly use alternative education to serve both at risk and special education populations.

One of the study's major findings was that within a given school year 21 to 58 percent of school districts responded that they could not keep up with the demands of alternative education in terms of new enrollment. In other words, many school districts were unable to enroll new students who are eligible for alternative education services because they did not have available capacity. Over eighty percent of these schools reported having a continuous waiting list.

It is clear that alternative education has continued to grow, despite mixed results on the effectiveness of such programs. The information collected by the NCES can be particularly useful when comparing it to data that is collected by individual states to analyze national trends as opposed to trends within particular segments of the United States.

Federal Policy and Oversight. There is no federal regulation when it comes to alternative education. Limited data makes it difficult to keep track of how common alternative education is throughout the country at any given time. "Few national level measures are available with respect to features of enrollment in public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002, p. iii). There is no federal legislation requiring alternative education[3] and there is no federal agency responsible for alternative education as a whole.

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[3] With the exception of IDEA laws, which relate to special education and are out of the scope of this project.

As one paper by the American Youth Policy Forum cites, this has created detrimental fragmentation when it comes to alternative education. “As a result of the lack of an overall organized approach to serving at-risk youth, several Federal agencies have taken responsibility for dealing with certain youth who participate in alternative education (e.g., youth involved in the juvenile justice system or foster youth), but no agency’s mission is designed to focus on all youth involved in alternative education” (Martin & Brand, 2006, p. 3). This disconnect among federal agencies has resulted in limited growth in long term support for at risk youth populations.

Recognizing this lack of integration between federal agencies, the Bush Administration created a task force to investigate this issue in 2003. The task force’s findings were that over 117 different programs across 15 different federal departments dealt with various programs for at risk students, many of them involving alternative education. According to their report, there was little coordination among the departments, and while some programs were successful at helping youth, overall federal programs to help at risk youth were so fragmented that it limited success (Martin & Brand, 2006).

Other National Alternative Education Studies. Though other studies and data collections by the National Center for Education Statistics have included alternative education, the information is very limited. In the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, there was a question simply worded as, “yes/no, the student participated in alternative education.” The question revealed

no information as to the structure or scope of the program. These national education data collections do little to help us better understand alternative education today.

One national study has been the Alternative Schools Research Project, a three-year research plan housed at the University of Minnesota and funded by the U.S. Department of Education. This was divided into four studies.[4] The first was an examination of alternative schools nationwide, specifically focusing on how they served students with disabilities. The second study focused on in-state practices and conducted five case studies to find more information about how states develop alternative programs for students with disabilities. The third study highlighted a series of visits to alternative schools and programs in five states to gather data from students both with and without disabilities, parents, educators, and school administrators. Lastly, the fourth report was a synthesis of all data collected and offered recommendations to guide future policies and practices.

In the first report, they found that 94 percent of respondents, which in this study were state education officials, said that their state had some type of policy that addressed at least one of the following issues in alternative education: legislation pertaining to alternative education, alternative education enrollment criteria, state definition of alternative education, funding, curriculum, staffing, and students with disabilities (language which stipulates how alternative education is

[4] Though the project overall seemed to have a focus on alternative education and its impact on students with disabilities, it was not limited to special education and has wider implications for alternative education as a whole. Though my definition of alternative education does not include special education, I felt it imperative to include these studies in my project.

supposed to specifically serve special education students). The high number of states that have at least one of those areas specified in state legislation is perhaps in lieu of federal oversight. Additionally, the study reported that the number of schools with some type of legislation pertaining to alternative education (a total of 48 states) had increased from previous numbers reported in 1998 (22 states out of the 38 that responded (Lehr, Lanners, Lange, 2003). This indicates a growing recognition for the need to have a better understanding of alternative education progress.

Within the states that responded as having entrance criteria established (88 percent of respondents), some common themes were: students who are disruptive in traditional classrooms, students who have at least one “at-risk” characteristic, students who have been academically unsuccessful and would benefit from a non-traditional environment, and students who have been suspended or expulsed from a traditional school or program. Of the states that responded as having a state definition of alternative education, many included having separate classrooms for alternative education and serving students who are high risk for dropout. About a third of states responded as having language in policy or legislation that specified how alternative education should work with students with disabilities. This begins to shape our understanding of what types of policies exist in states which relate to alternative education.

In the third study where they interviewed state education directors, two common themes about state alternative education practices were: first, the

governance of alternative education occurred primarily at the local level, and second, students were primarily placed in alternative education programs or schools (rather than attending voluntarily). Although many state education directors agreed that alternative education was important for serving at-risk students, most noted that there is little known about the success of these programs and very little accountability. Major issues of concern for state education agencies pertaining to alternative education included: lack of funding for alternative education, staffing and the need for dual certification for alternative education teachers, need for better accountability measures and avenues to keep track of student outcomes within alternative education programs and schools, limited legislation and state policy, and technical assistance to support the growth for educational alternatives. However, the most frequently cited concern was "monitoring and compliance. Respondents spoke about the need for increased monitoring to ensure the provision of a quality education in these settings. Areas specifically mentioned included measuring and tracking student enrollment and demographic information and progress and outcomes" (Lehr & Lange, 2003, p. 6). This is a major finding because states are recognizing the need the monitor and record alternative education data.

In their second report, they conducted a school level survey to find information about patterns across states with regard to alternative education program characteristics and the types of students they serve. Their findings were comparable to the findings in the NCES district survey, but limited to alternative

education *schools* leaving out alternative programs within schools. Alternative schools were more likely to exist in urban settings (40 percent of urban schools had educational alternatives), followed by suburban (37 %), and rural (25 %) areas. The schools tended to serve students with behavioral problems (88 %), attendance problems (88%), students suspended or expulsed from school (67%), students with learning difficulties, excluding disabilities (61%), students dealing with external stressors (pregnancy, homelessness (55%), students with social or emotional problems (52%), students who have been referred from court system (36%), students with an identifiable disability (12 %), and students classified as English language learners (6%). These measures are also considered as entrance criteria into alternative schools.

Additionally, this survey asked respondents to report what information is annually collected, which include: graduation rates (70%), dropout rates (67%), attendance (67%), results of state mandated tests (63%), rates of reenrollment into traditional schools (52%), number of GED certificates awarded (48%), academic performance, such as grades (44 %), credit accumulation (41%), risk behaviors, such as pregnancy (37%), post secondary enrollment (33%), post school outcomes, such as employment (28%), and healthy behaviors, such as abstinence from drug use (15%).

This four-part project highlighted several points[5]. First, many states have some types of policies pertaining to alternative education, though policy

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[5] The fourth study was excluded from discussion because it was primarily a summary of past findings.

comprehensiveness may vary state to state. Second, programs tend to serve students at risk for dropout as well as delinquent students. Third, governance of alternative education programs occurred mostly at the local level. Fourth, there are common concerns on the state level about alternative education, including lack of funding, staffing, better accountability measures, and improved ability to track student outcomes.

Alternative High School Initiative. Additionally, there was a project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to expand the number of successful alternative high schools. Originally titled the Alternative High School Initiative, it has recently become known as the Association of High School Innovation. Begun in 2003, it was created to respond to the stagnant national graduation rates by providing quality high school alternatives for students whose needs are not met within traditional high schools. The organization "is a national network of youth development organizations operating nearly 300 schools and programs in over 30 states and 170 cities nationwide" and seeks to create pathways and expand "options to future success for all youth" (Association of High School Innovation, 2010a).

There are a variety of goals that AHSI seeks to accomplish. First, they seek to expand the number of high quality pathways to graduation and college success. Second, they aim to determine what characteristics must exist in order to provide a sustainable environment for schools and programs. They also seek to "engage with community-wide partners, municipal leaders, higher education

institutions, school districts, State Education Agencies, and others...” to maximize potential to engage and educate all youth. Their fourth goal is to create a community to foster communication among all participating institutions in order to better improve tools, strategies, and curriculum. Lastly, they aim to “promote evidence-based practices and accountability for student success by improving the use of data, research, and evaluation to assess longitudinal student outcomes, improve school and program results, and otherwise measure progress toward consistently delivering high quality programs and services” (Association for High School Innovation, 2010b).

Partnering organizations that serve alternative high schools include: Big Picture Learning, Communities in Schools, Diploma Plus, Alternative High School Initiative, National League of Cities, StreetSchool Newark, EdVisions Schools, Gateway to College, and Youth Build, USA. There are distinguishing features that the programs or schools must have in order to be considered part of the national network. These features include authentic learning[6], teaching and performance assessment, a personalized school culture, shared leadership and responsibility, supportive partnerships in and around the community where the school is located, and a future focus on college.

AHSI has conducted annual performance reviews with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as a strategy to evaluate student outcomes and act as an accountability mechanism. AHSI convenes twice a year for professional

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[6] Authentic learning is a type of experiential learning. The approach teaches kids in such a way that they could apply their lessons to “real world” situations.

development among the partnering organizations. AHSI also writes various policy briefs to address policy solutions for nation-wide, large scale success of alternative high schools. One of its defining features is AHSI establishes partnerships between schools and local organizations to provide an array of services to students, including mentoring, tutoring, and service learning placement. Additionally, they have developed tools and informational services to help educate wider audiences about developing successful school alternatives.

Over the years, AHSI has worked on establishing what they deem as necessarily policy conditions for the large scale success of alternative high schools. This includes conditions that work on the quality of education, such as increased college access and rigorous, reasonable academic standards and assessments. It also includes conditions which aim towards equality in education, such as need-based, adequacy approach to funding[7], strong accountability practices[8], and expanded options for parents and students[9]. Lastly, the approach suggests reaching out to non-education groups, including coordination with city and other public agencies and community organizations.

One of AHSI's projects is to do a large scale data collection to track the progress of their schools within the network. They are currently in the process and do not have a report yet available. However, one of their founding and largest partnering organizations, Big Picture Learning, has reported impressive results

[7] Based on a per student formula, which recognizes that more funding is needed for alternative approaches for education.
[8] This also includes with measures for dealing with programs that are not adequately producing student outcomes.
[9] This is consistent with the theory that helping parents will in turn help students.

within their alternative schools. Located in some of the troubled neighborhoods in Detroit, San Diego, and Los Angeles, their graduation rate is 92 percent, compared to 52 percent of other local schools within each district. Their college acceptance rate is 95 percent, compared to 45 percent of other local schools.

Perhaps one of AHSI's most unique features is their comprehensive approach to education. They approach alternative education as not only academically rigorous, but also about building real life skills. They seek out partnerships to help bring those skills into the classroom. Unlike many programs where students are placed into educational alternatives, students voluntarily attend these alternative schools. Considering the impressive outcomes, this comprehensive approach to alternative education could grow to become more popular in coming years.

The National Association for Alternative Education. Founded in 2002, "NAEA is a volunteer organization dedicated to information sharing and professional development, best practice, public policy and advocacy for alternative learning and teaching" (National Association for Alternative Education, 2010). Its members consist of alternative education practitioners, state education agency officials, alternative education program and school directors, state alternative education associations, researchers, and advocates.

Shortly after President Obama's election, the NAEA created a memo that called for federal policies to help expand and nurture alternative education within the United States. One of their suggestions stressed the need to create an inter-

agency task force specifically for alternative education. This task force would be able to research and assess challenges and opportunities within alternative education and recommend policy action. Additionally, the memo suggested the creation of a federal level position for alternative education (such as a Director of Alternative Education). "This infrastructure should provide support and oversight to alternative education providers, local and state education agencies, and supply general information to the public at large" (National Association for Alternative Education, 2009). Lastly, understanding that many educational alternatives are in need of better financial support, they also made a recommendation to create a national funding stream to help develop alternative education nation-wide.

Their recommendation to create a federal level position for alternative education is an interesting proposal. Considering the critiques previously mentioned about the lack of interagency coordination in regard to at risk youth education, creating a position aimed at bridging the many various programs within the federal government would better serve at risk youth. Additionally, it is well documented that there is little information about alternative education at large. If a position were created to help monitor data, this would greatly add to our knowledge base about the effectiveness of alternative programs.

These studies and initiatives give us a better understanding of the state of alternative education today. It is clear there is a consensus on several different matters between researchers, advocates, and state education officials. First, it is recognized that alternative education today is a method aimed at serving students

that are not succeeding in traditional schools and classrooms. Alternative education provides an opportunity to serve these students' needs and may indeed serve as a dropout prevention strategy. Secondly, everyone agrees that there is a shortage of information on alternative education. More research, data collecting, and analysis is needed to determine alternative education's success, the challenges alternative education faces, and the possible opportunities it may provide. Third, alternative education has experienced continual growth. Having a national picture of alternative education will now help us delve into a more in depth look at policy and practice in three states: New Jersey, Indiana, and Oregon. Before turning to these three states, we must first review some background on what can be learned from past assessments of alternative education and how evaluations on alternative education should be conducted.

Evaluations of Alternative Education Programs

Introduction. At an alternative school in Western Massachusetts, a 15 year old young man named Johnny[10] contemplated his upcoming college applications. As surprising as it sounds that a young man of that age would be applying to college, even more astonishing was the fact that just three years ago, he was miserable in school, plagued by emotional and behavioral problems, and had trouble socializing in school saying he "just didn't fit in". Coming to the alternative school "saved [his] education."

Despite the fact that Johnny's story had a happy ending, alternative education is not necessarily the silver bullet to solving all problems within education. There is little data available on alternative education and research has shown mixed conclusions on its success. With over 10,000 alternative programs that exist today, the fact that conclusions on alternative education is mixed is extremely troubling. Yet the education world should not give up on alternative education before giving it a fair assessment. Considering the major problems of national education today (i.e. the high dropout rate, students that are unable to compete in a globalized world, etc.), alternative education could certainly be part of a multifaceted solution to raising U.S. standards in education.

It is important to look at past research to see what can be learned through former mistakes in evaluating alternative education. If we are able to understand

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[10] Name has been changed.

these mistakes, this will allow researchers to move forward with a clearer understanding of how to better evaluate programs.

Defining Success. The first step in evaluating alternative education is to clarify the research questions that can be addressed through examining such programs. The most common and perhaps compelling research question is: are alternative education programs and schools successful? Before answering that question, success must be defined, which can be approached in several different ways. As alternative education researcher Camille Lehr notes, there are some issues that vary across the states make evaluating alternative education especially challenging, including: “which programs affect positive outcomes for students? How is effectiveness of the successfulness of programs defined? What indicators should be used to measure effectiveness?” (Lehr, 2005, slide 15). Making these decisions, however, can be a challenging process.

General educational studies characterize success in several different ways. Many researchers look at a program’s success by examining quantitative measures, including standardized test scores, grade point averages, academic gains from year to year, and grade promotion versus grade retention. Some educators and researchers also used these measures to evaluate educational alternatives. Students that make greater academic gains while placed in an alternative education program compared to academic gains (or losses in some cases) at their previous school can be considered successful. Schools that, on average, have students who make academic gains in educational alternatives can

be considered successful programs or alternative schools. The other means of examining success is through looking at completion rates versus dropout rates. If an alternative education program has a low dropout rate, it can be considered a successful program. It is important to realize that this is a difficult measure to examine unless placed within context, such as compared to nearby schools without alternative education programs, or compared to students who are high risk for dropout that do not enter an alternative education program.

The unique nature of alternative education programs, which serve at risk students, allow it to be evaluated by non-traditional measures. Outcomes of alternative education programs can also be determined by looking at the improvements or setbacks in risk. At risk indicators in addition to academic failure or risk of academic failure can include truancy, disruptive behavior in the classroom, or delinquent behavior (such as substance abuse). If alternative education programs reduce risky behavior, they might be deemed as successful, either with or without academic gains.

Another way of looking at success in alternative education is to see how attitudes or perceptions about school have changed. Much research shows that students who are at high risk for dropout have negative attitudes towards school or perceive their teachers, counselors, or administrators as not caring about their individual success (Bridgewater, DiTulio, & Morison, 2006). Likewise, students might be at higher risk for dropping out of school if they do not feel like they belong. Measuring a sense of school membership is another way to evaluate the

success of an alternative education program. Looking at the changes in these attitudes and perceptions may be indicators of a successful educational alternative.

The last way to evaluate alternative education programs is to assess how the program is serving student populations who are in need of specialized help. One example of this is a school population with a high teen pregnancy rate. A school may have a specialized alternative program serving this particular student population of teenage parents - such as day care facilities to help care for small children while students are in school - allowing the young mothers or fathers to complete their education. This is an example of how a program successfully serves a population in need. Another example may be offering alternative hours for students who must work part or full time in order to help support their families. These needs assessment ways of examining success are typically related to whether or not students drop out of school. If student needs are not being met, students may be more likely to leave school. In the example of teenage mothers, without daycare, the teenage mother might have to drop out of school in order to care for her child.

It is simple to recognize that in order to drive policy, you need data driven information, such as the quantitative measures of academic data. However, we need to question whether we are doing an injustice to at risk youth if we solely rely on numbers. Education research, in general, tends to focus on one type of evaluation at a time. A new approach may be to tackle *all* four measures of

success: quantitative information, modifications in in risk behavior, change in attitudes towards school or education, and whether the program or school is serving the student population's needs.

Now that four measures of success have been defined, the different methods of evaluation must be discussed. While there are many different techniques to analyzing alternative education success, no method is perfect. As with most research, there are many limitations within the different ways to evaluate educational programs. As we will see, each method of analyzing an alternative program has its own set of drawbacks and limits.

Quantitative-Based Evaluations. There are several problems that arise when using quantitative information to examine alternative education. First, sometimes data is gathered on a short term basis, such as several months. Analyzing this data may not give any significant results because of the special nature of alternative education students. The students served by alternative education programs and schools are typically at risk populations, a very challenging population to teach. They might have social or emotional issues in addition to needing remedial academic instruction. The very fact that these populations are so challenging may mean that change does not occur in these students in a short time period; improvement instead might be seen over a longer duration, such as a year or several years. Studying students in the short term will likely show inconclusive results.

Some studies have recognized this and utilized what little longitudinal data is available. However, there is a problem here as well. The longitudinal data that is available today does not differentiate between different types of alternative education programs. For example, in one quantitative study by Catterall & Stern (1989), the researchers used vocational education as one indicator of alternative education and another variable for other alternative education types. There was no room for allowing for different types of programs. The lack of differentiation of program types can complicate the results. Different types of programs may affect students in different ways, and varying types of programs that work in one region may not work at all in another region of a state. Thus, grouping different types of alternative education programs together may mask the success or failure of different programs. For instance, suppose a state is studying four different types of alternative programs (such as Indiana does), yet they are evaluated all together in one group. If one program is successful, but the others are not, the results may come back that alternative education in general is unsuccessful. Thus, in quantitative research of alternative education, it is imperative to distinguish between different types of alternative programs.

Another problem is when studies research student progress in alternative education programs within a particular state without indicators for varying regions, such as a county or city. This can be a problem because different regions may have different types of student populations. Research should break down results either by district or by a description of the student population. If a

researcher is studying the effects of one alternative program for two school districts, one with a low dropout risk population and one with a high dropout risk population, he or she will get very different results about the success of the program. Other examples are regions that may have high Latino student populations, which may need alternative programs that offer more English as a Second Language instruction. If a researcher is studying the effects of one alternative program for two districts, he or she with a very high Latino population and one without, you may get different results on the success of the program because of the different student populations. These two student populations may have very different needs; thus the same program may not have the same effect on both districts. When a researcher presents research with no differentiation between the risk levels or region, he or she will get inconclusive results. Regression analyses may help with this problem, but there should be variables that account for different regions, such as school district, or by student population descriptions, such as level of dropout risk or type of risk.

Using standardized test scores as an indicator of program success is a controversial issue. Many argue that standardized tests alone do not truly reflect student achievement. Some students do not test well and may perform better in a classroom, and thus have higher achievement than a test may reflect. An entire classroom of students may do well on a test because a teacher has focused on teaching class in a way that better prepares them for a test, while other teachers may focus on a broader curriculum resulting in less stellar student test scores.

Also, when a program is geared towards at risk students, there is a high likelihood that they may be academically struggling. Comparing their scores to traditional, non-alternative education students does not really measure the comparison adequately.

One way that some schools work around the issue of using standardized testing as a means to evaluate student outcomes is to instead use individual student progress (Indiana Department of Education, 2009b). Upon entering an alternative program, a student may be assigned individual goals to meet within a specific timeframe. If many students meet their individual goals, this could be a sign of program success. Likewise, if nearly all of the students are consistently *not* meeting their individual goals, this could question the program's effectiveness.

Another problem with quantitative research is that surveying students can be challenging when the conditions are not carefully controlled. One study by Duggar & Duggar (1998) explored this problem. Their research showed varying results, with one group (fall entrance) making no improvement and the second group (spring entrance) showing significant outcomes. The authors admit that motivation might have been a factor of these mixed results. While the fall group of students mentioned they would not try hard on the evaluative tests because they already knew they had passed classes, the spring group was offered a reward of a pizza party for good performance. The authors note that research shows that alternative education students, or high risk students, tend to be more extrinsically

motivated than intrinsically motivated. Thus, survey research on alternative education may be especially prone to differences in student responses based on different motivational factors. This type of problem may be difficult to find within studies, but can add substantially to a bank of mixed research results.

When the number of studies on alternative education rose in the 1970's, there was a huge gap in findings. One report by Duke and Muzui (1978) sought to explain the range of answers by evaluating these reports on alternative education completed up until the 1970's. They stated that the following problems often exist when evaluating alternative education: "1.) lack of a control group or comparison group, 2) poor record keeping, 3) no randomized sample of students, teachers, and parents, 4) failure to report data on program dropouts, 5) lack of pre- and posttest comparison, 6) lack of follow-up on dropouts and early graduates of programs" (Young, 1990, p. 37).

Perhaps the two most difficult issues to overcome are the lack of a control group or comparison group and no randomized sample of students, teachers, and parents. These two issues are difficult ones, not only in alternative education, but in educational research in general. One of the biggest concerns within both of these topics is a question of ethics. If you truly believe a program will help students, is it ethical to exclude some students, while randomly including others? There is no easy answer to this question. However, if the alternative education program being researched does not have mandatory placement, researchers can compare the students within the school that are part of the program with the

students not enrolled in the program, if they are of comparable academic status and demographic. This, however, represents its own issues because of a self selection problem.[11] Perhaps a better way to overcome this would be to compare programs on a school-to-school basis. If there is one school with a particular type of program which is being analyzed, compare it to another school of comparable size, student population demographic, and location.

Thus, there are many things to consider when doing a quantitative analysis of an alternative education program. First, the quantitative analysis should be ideally done in the long term instead of the short term. Data should represent students who have been in alternative education for at least a year, but also include students who have been in the program for more than a year. The data should be able to differentiate between different types of programs as well as location or indicate a special population. Studies of alternative education should ideally be a randomized sample and include a comparison group. Lastly, when doing an analysis, there should be clear pre-alternative education data to compare with the post-alternative education data.

Qualitative-Based Evaluations. There is also qualitative analysis in examining alternative education success. Specifically, how do students feel about their experience in an alternative placement? As my example in the introduction shows, and as many qualitative studies demonstrate, students report many positive attitudes in alternative education. Specifically, many studies show that students

[11] Since students and parents are choosing to participate in the program, it is not truly a randomized sample.

report a more positive outlook on their education and in education in general after attending an alternative education program. One study done in 1981 by Smith, Gregory, and Pugh showed that alternative education students reported significantly higher levels of “social, esteem, and self-actualization needs” when compared to students in traditional schools (Young, 1990, p. 40).

The problem with this type of analysis is that success of alternative education programs is problematic without quantifying success in terms of changes in academic gains or dropout rates. Does it matter if attitudes towards school are changed, if students perform worse academically or drop out of school? This type of research relies on the assumption that improving student attitudes and reducing risk behavior will help dropout rates. However, the research on whether alternative education actually improves academic performance or reduces dropout rates has been inconclusive overall. Therefore, the assumption on which this qualitative research relies is not supported and presents a problem to this type of research.

Perhaps a possible explanation of the gap is that students may show improvements in attitudes towards school and better overall behavior, but may lose those gains upon returning to the traditional school. Many alternative programs return students to their traditional school after several months to several years in the program. There is a possible backslide in student performance once students return to their home school. This is an important area of alternative education yet to be studied in depth.

Comprehensive Evaluations. Of the many studies that have been conducted on alternative education, some are quantitative based while others, specifically more recent studies, are qualitative based. Both methods, quantitative and qualitative, of studying alternative education have their own challenges and problems. It is important to understand all of the issues underlying each method of evaluation so researchers are able to understand the problems that may stand in the way of successfully evaluating alternative education.

Ideally, truly evaluating alternative education will require all of these measures of success using all of the techniques mentioned. Fortunately, there is an example of this comprehensive approach to assessing the impact of alternative education: annual evaluations of alternative education programs completed by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). The Indiana Department of Education completes a yearly comprehensive data collection and analysis specifically focusing on their alternative education programs and schools.

A Case Study: Indiana. The IDOE collects data annually. While the data does not reflect students that have been reintegrated into a traditional classroom, the Department does breakdown the information in ways that it can be analyzed by program differentiation. In the state, they have four classifications of programs. They analyze all of the results (including entrance criteria into the program, grade level, and progress) by program type. They also break down the data by location as well. Though it is not reflected in their annual report, the IDOE, in conjunction with Indiana University's Center for Evaluation and

Education Policy, completes profiles of all alternative education programs. In each profile, program goals and the school's progress on those goals are recorded and displayed, information which is available to the general public. Student outcomes are broken into different measures, such as earned high school diploma, earned GED, achieved all goals in individual service plan (ISP), made progress on ISP goals, made no progress on ISP goals, dropped out, or expelled. The IDOE classify these measures into positive and negative outcomes and analyze each program type by the aggregate outcomes.

The IDOE, with the help from Indiana University, also conducts student, teacher, and administrator surveys. This helps collect information on changes in student attitudes towards school as well as finding out if the students' needs are being met through the program. These survey results are also broken down and analyzed according to program type (Clement, Chamberlin, & Foxx, 2009). This creates a comprehensive evaluation and allows researchers to complete a broad report of accountability within alternative education programs.

However, there are two important things that the Indiana case study does not include. First, they do not track data long-term, or in other words, they do not currently track data on students after they return to a traditional program. This is something that will hopefully be progressed in the future. Secondly, the IDOE does not conduct an analysis which includes a comparison group. This could be another opportunity in future research for the state.

Discussion and Conclusion. Within virtually all research utilized, there was one point of agreement: there is a need for more and better research within the field of alternative education. Some cited specific issues of limited longitudinal data and recommended more comprehensive longitudinal data collections. Others said there is more need for research in general.

It is clear from reviewing research that more work is needed. There is a gap in research regarding which types of programs work best for various goals, but particularly for preventing high school dropout. Instead of lumping alternative education into one large category, it is imperative that research differentiate between different types of alternative programs and schools. The varieties of program types serve different types of students and will have different goals. In determining whether these programs and schools are successful, it is important to understand their respective goals. If a program's goal is to prevent school dropout, its assessment of success will be approached in a different way than a program which is preparing young mothers for a life beyond school.

There is still a substantial lack of data on alternative education. Many studies of alternative education cite lacking information as a major barrier to properly evaluate educational alternatives and call for more research and data collection to combat this problem (Lange, 2002; Aron, 2003 &2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Payrazli et. al., 2008; NCES, 2002; Catterall & Stern, 1986).[12] Should data collections be conducted by the federal government or by state

[12] Some of these works have been previously included in this project. Other studies mentioned here conducted similar research to others mentioned.

education agencies? As previously noted, it is important to differentiate between types of programs, but in order to do that you need to first define the types of programs. This may be a challenging task on a national basis considering the different needs of diverse states, which will require different types of programs. It may be better if states collect more specific information on alternative schools and programs because they will have a better ability to define the types of programs and schools available in their respective regions.

There is one other key research focus that should be pursued in the future. It is necessary to understand not only what the effects of alternative education are on students after year or two of entering the alternative program, but also the effects of alternative education for students upon reentering a traditional program, after high school graduation, and further into a young adult’s college life or career. If there are gains in alternative programs, are those gains sustained throughout the rest of their education and further in the student’s life? This is a key area because if research finds that the effects are not sustained, this may imply that instead of alternative education focusing on reintegrating students into a traditional classroom, the programs may need to keep kids in school alternatives until graduation. If research finds that the effects of alternative education are not sustained through a student’s college years or early career, the approach of alternative education may need to be seriously reconsidered with an emphasis on sustaining student growth. There is already a recognized need for this information. In a recent district survey by the National Center for Education

Statistics on alternative education programs serving at risk students, several questions regarding long-term data collecting were included.[13]

We can learn from past research to better understand what must be done in current evaluation practices of alternative education. First, before alternative education is evaluated, it is imperative to quantify how program success is defined. Second, both qualitative and quantitative methods of evaluation are key to truly have a broad understanding if alternatives are working. Third, it is important collect information quantitatively that can be differentiated by program type and by region. Fourth, to understand the long-term benefits of alternative education, students should ideally be followed through their educational career to see if the short term benefits of alternative education last.

With a complete look at the historical development of alternative education, an understanding of national trends in alternative education, and a better picture of how evaluations should be conducted, we now turn to a look at alternative education practices in New Jersey.

[13] According the 2008 district survey, thirty-five percent of reporting districts said they track students after they leave alternative education.

Results of Survey

There is certainly not a lack of innovation in the world of education. Every year, educators across the country are introduced to new ideas devised by researchers, policy makers, and educational entrepreneurs. However, the restrictions of limited budgets remind us that not all educational initiatives will be taken up in schools, and only the ones with proven rates of success will spread to schools. Central to the process of improving American education is the proper evaluation of educational programs to ensure this level of program success. If we as researchers, educators, and policymakers ever hope to change the status quo of education, it is necessary to be able to properly evaluate how programs and initiatives are working. Alternative education is no exception to this central understanding.

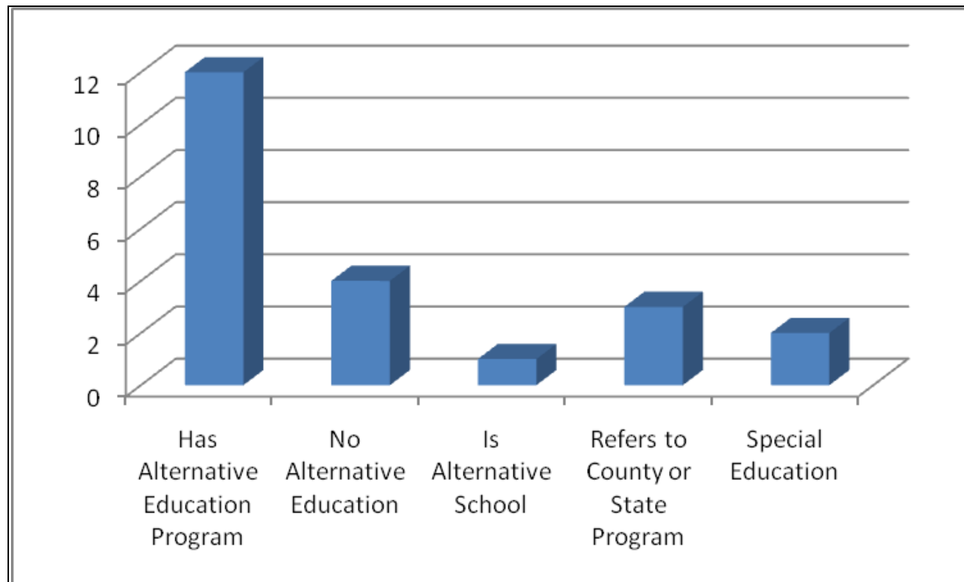
Initially, this survey aimed at collecting information to evaluate the effectiveness of alternative programs in New Jersey high schools along with descriptive data that may be able to guide future research. However, the limited amount of data that proved to be available has narrowed the scope of this survey to be primarily descriptive with several preliminary findings. I will present the data I found, though it is limited in scope.

Definition of Alternative Education. For the purpose of this study, alternative education was defined as a public school that: "1.) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular classroom, 2.) provides non-traditional education, 3.) serves as an adjunct to regular school, or 4.) falls outside

the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009a). This definition was provided to respondents in the preliminary introduction section.

Number of Alternative Education Programs. A total of 21 surveys were received, which represents a 22 percent response rate. One respondent was speaking on behalf of two high schools within one school district, so there are a total of 22 schools included in this analysis. Twelve schools responded as having alternative programs; four schools responded as not having an alternative program; one school was classified as an alternative school; three referred students to out of district or state run alternative programs; and two respondents were reclassified as special education only (See Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1 Alternative Education Summary

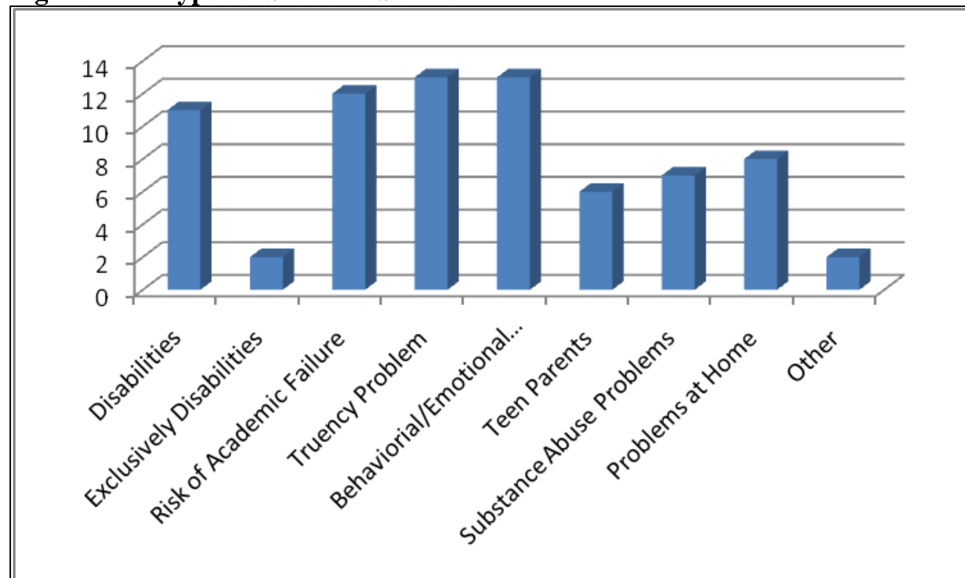


Of the 22 schools that responded, one school was classified as rural, one school was classified as a town school, 19 were classified as suburban schools, and one was classified as an urban school.[14]

Program Specifics. The second section of the survey sought to measure specific information about the alternative program, including the type of students served, program structures and services offered, entrance criteria for admittance into the program, and exit criteria for returning students to the traditional classroom.

The four most common types of students served were students with extreme records of truancy or tardiness (13), students with behavior and/or emotional problems (13), students at risk for academic failure (12), and students with disabilities (11). There was one survey question: "Does your program serve

Figure 7.2 Types of Students Served

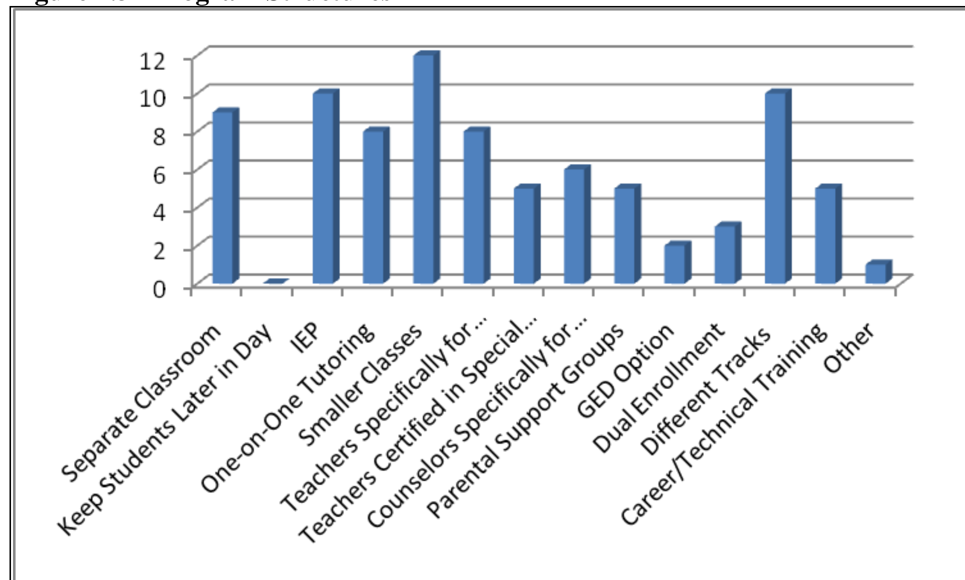


[14] To define school locale/urbanicity, the National Center for Educational Statistics definitions were used.

exclusively students with disabilities?" The purpose of this question was to help distinguish programs that might not be considered alternative education by the definition used by this study, but instead might be classified as special education.[15] The least common types of students served were teenage parents or expecting parents (6), students with substance abuse problems (7), and students with problems at home (8). A comment box was left for other responses, which included students with phobias or anxiety disorders (See Figure 7.2).

The next item surveyed was the types services offered through the program or the ways in which the program was set up (called program structures in this report). The most common program structure was smaller classes (12),

Figure 7.3 Program Structures

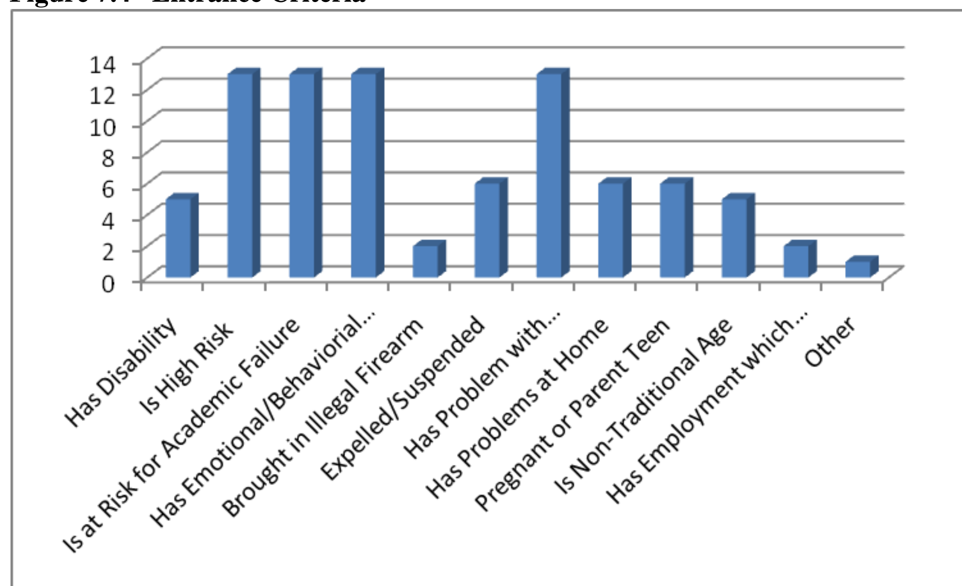


[15] Two schools responded with a response of yes, their program serves exclusively students with disabilities. One school responded that they also served students at risk. To clarify, that respondent was contacted to clarify its answer, to which its answer was that they only served students with disabilities. Therefore, two schools were reclassified as special education and not counted toward alternative education.

individualized education plans, more commonly known as IEP's (10), different tracks or levels depending on students' needs (10), separate classrooms for alternative education students (9), teachers designated specifically for alternative education (8), one-on-one tutoring (8). The next common responses were counselors specifically designated for alternative education students (6), career or technical training (5), teachers specifically certified in alternative/special education (5), and parental support groups (5). The least common structures and services offered were keeping students later in school day (0), offering a GED option (2), and offering dual enrollment with local universities or community colleges (3) (See Figure 7.3).

For entrance criteria into the program/school, all schools with alternative education (13) listed the following: the student is deemed "high risk" for dropping out of school, the student is failing academically or at risk of academic failure, the student has emotional and/or behavioral problems, and the student has a record of

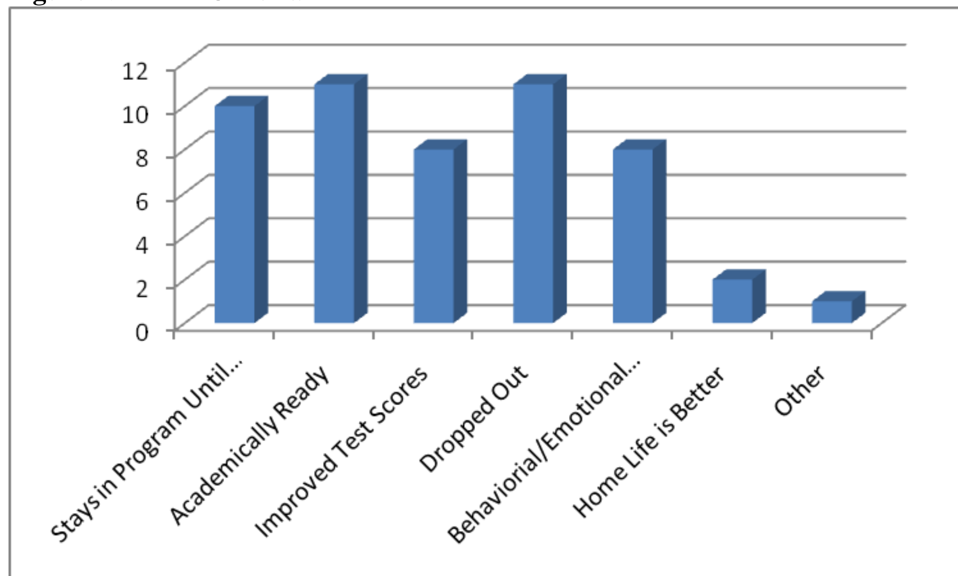
Figure 7.4 Entrance Criteria



extensive truancy or tardiness. The next most common answers were: the student is pregnant or is a teen parent (6), the student was expelled or suspended (6), the student has problems at home (6), the student has a disability (5), and the student is of non-traditional age (5). The least common reasons for program entrance were: the student has employment which interferes with schooling (2) and the student brought an illegal firearm or weapon to school (2) (See Figure 7.4).

Finally, participants were asked about program exit criteria. Respondents were allowed to check all options that applied to their students. The most common reasons students exit the alternative education program are: student is academically ready to move to traditional classroom/program (11), student dropped out (11), student stays in program until graduation (10), student has improved test scores or made academic gains (8), and behavioral and/or emotional

Figure 7.5 Exit Criteria



problems have improved (8). The least common reason was student's home life has improved (2). One school gave an additional response: student requires an out-of-district placement (See Figure 7.5).

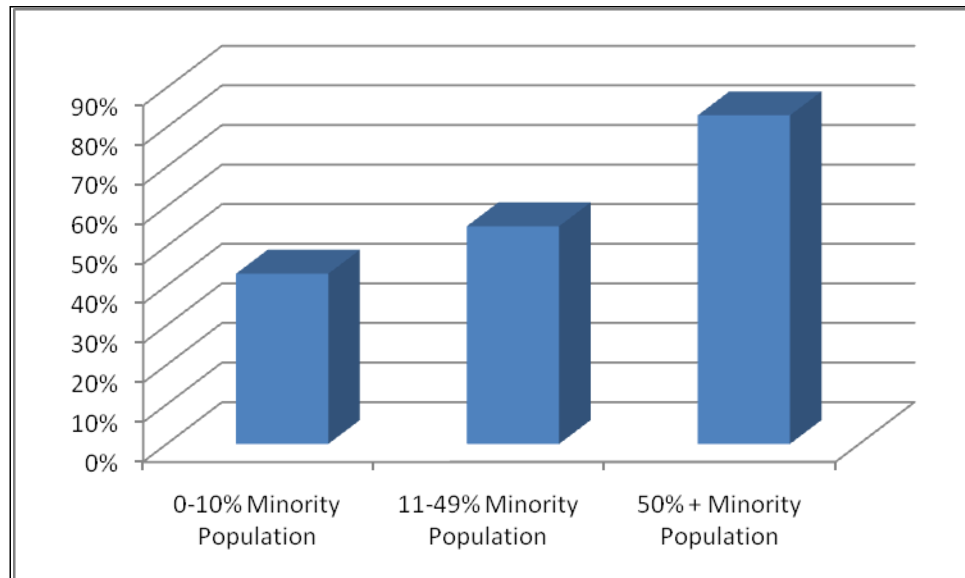
To summarize, alternative education programs seem to mostly serve students who are academically at risk, rather than students who may be at more severe risk due to outside factors, such as a troubled home life or students who are pregnant or parenting.

Demographic Information. The information collected through the survey had limited data. To get a better profile of the schools that had alternative education programs, additional demographic information was collected from the New Jersey Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics. Three primary issues that often come up in educational studies cover how socioeconomic status impacts educational achievement, how schools' funding impacts school performance and student achievement, and the disparity in achievement between whites and African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students. Included in the results are two measures of socioeconomic status: percentage of students on free lunches and percentage of students on reduced lunches. These two measures are perhaps the best indication of a school's poverty level because the information is based on poverty level of the parents. The amount of money spent per student was used as an indication of school funding. This measure is a little more complicated because the amount of money spent per student also includes state aid. It is not a perfect indication of a school's socio-

economic standing because of the state aid. However the aid given to schools does not completely equalize funding, so wealthier school districts could have more resources for alternative education. Finally, demographic information was used to examine race as a factor in whether or not schools have alternative education programs.

Percentage of Minority Enrollment. Percentage of minority student enrollment was analyzed for schools that responded to the survey.[16] Eighty-three percent of schools with greater than 50 percent minority population enrollment had alternative education programs, 55 percent of schools with 11 to 49 percent

Figure 7.6 Percent of Alternative Education Programs and Percent Minority Enrollment

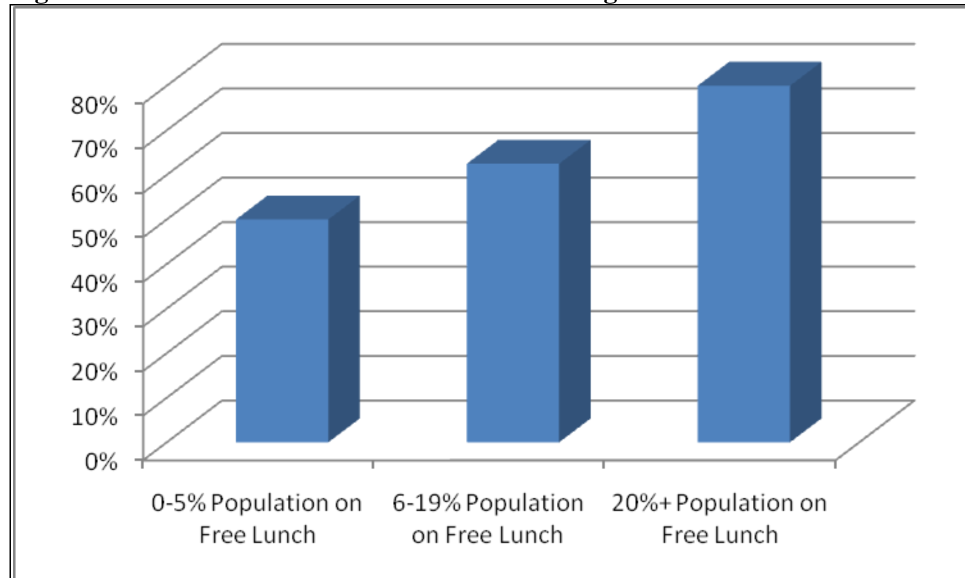


[16] This was measured by the amount of Black, Hispanic, Native America, and Asian/Pacific Islander students, divided by the total student population. This is consistent with method used in the National Center for Education Statistic's 2002 District Survey of Public Alternative Education Programs and Schools.

minorities responded as having alternative education, and 43 percent of schools with up to 10 percent minority enrollment had alternative education programs (See Figure 7.6).

Percentage of Students on Free or Reduced Lunch. The percentage of students on free or reduced lunch was also analyzed for schools.[17] Schools that had up to five percent of their student population on free lunches had alternative education 50 percent of the time, schools with 6 to 19 percent on free lunches had alternative education 62.5 percent of the time, and schools with 20 percent or higher on free lunches had alternative education 80 percent of the time (See Figure 7.7).

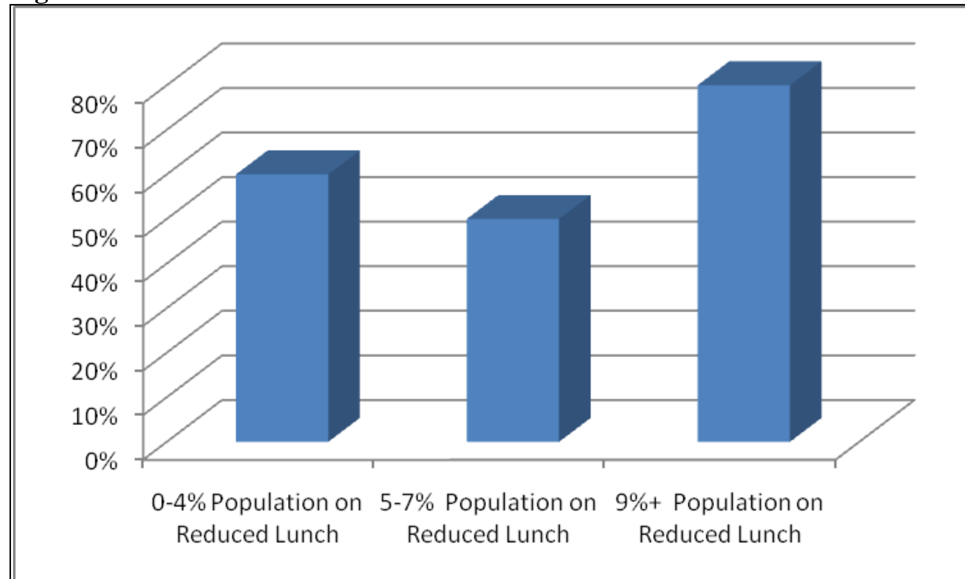
Figure 7.7 Percent of Alternative Education Programs and Free Lunch



[17] Percentage of free of reduced lunch was determined from the number of students on free or reduced lunch divided by the total student population as listed on the National Center for Education Statistics database.

Schools that had over 9 percent of their population on reduced lunch had alternative education 80 percent of the time, schools that had between 5 and 7 percent of their population on reduced lunches had alternative education 50 percent of the time, and schools that have up to 4 percent of their population on reduced lunches had alternative education 60 percent of the time.

Figure 7.8 Percent of Alternative Education and Reduced Lunch



Spending Per Student. The amount of money spent per student was analyzed for schools that had alternative education.[18] Schools that spent up to $11,000 per student annually had alternative education 62.5 percent of the time, schools that spent between $11,001 and $13,000 per student had alternative education 57 percent of the time, while schools that spent more than $13,001 per student annually had alternative education 66.6 percent of the time (See Figure 7.9).

[18] As reported by the New Jersey Department of Education for the 2008-2009 year.

Figure 7.9 Percent of Alternative Education and Money Spent Per Student

The information analyzed indicate that New Jersey alternative education programs are more likely to exist in schools with higher percentages of minority populations and higher percentages of students on free or reduced lunches. With little variation between the levels of spending per student and whether the school has an alternative education program available, there does not seem to be a clear pattern.

Data Collecting and Reporting. Ideally, this survey would have been able to collect information on student outcomes of each alternative education program, which would enable researchers to better understand whether programs are succeeding at keeping kids in school and also allow the state to recognize program weaknesses. However, of the 12 schools that reported having alternative education, only seven schools responded that they collect student outcome information, including some or all of the questions in this section of the survey;

two responded they did not collect information, while three responded that they did not know or did not provide an answer.

There were six questions asked on the survey. The first question asked for the average number of students served by the alternative education program for the last five years. The next several questions asked about student outcomes, including the average number of dropouts from the alternative education program for the last five years, the average number of students who pass academically from the program for the last five years, the average number of students who fail academically from the program for the last five years, and the average number of students who graduate high school from the program for the last five years. The last questions asked for the average number of student reintegrated into traditional classrooms after program for last five years.

The percentage of student population served by alternative education ranged from 73 percent to 5 percent of the student population.[19] Five of the schools provided dropout numbers, which ranged from 0 to 16.7 percent. The percentages of students passing an alternative education program ranged from 33.3 percent to 88.2 percent. The percentages of students failing an alternative education program ranged from 0 percent to 20 percent. The percentages of students graduating directly from an alternative education program ranged from 40 percent to 93 percent. Finally, the percentages of students returning to a traditional classroom or program ranged from 0 to 66.7 percent.

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[19] Total number reported through survey divided by total student population as provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics. Numbers are rounded up to the nearest tenth.

Table 7.1 Ranges of Percentage of Students that Pass, Fail, Graduate, or Return to a Traditional Classroom

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
% of School Population Served by Alternative Education	4%	0.6%	0.8%	2.3%	4.5%	7.1%	73.5%
% Students who Dropout from Program	16%	0%	16.7%	5.8%	NA	13.3%	15%
% of Students who Pass from Program	60%	33.4%	33.3%	88.2%	NA	66.7%	80%
% of Students who Fail from Program	12%	0%	16.7%	7.8%	NA	20%	10%
% Graduate from Program	60%	40%	50%	52.9%	NA	93%	75%
% of Students Returned to Traditional Classroom	80%	0%	66.7%	11.7%	NA	40%	0%

In regards to reporting information, of all of the schools that responded to having alternative education, five reported that they give student outcome information to a higher authority, three responded that they did not report information to a higher authority, and four responded that they did not know. Three schools were specific in explaining to whom they report: one school said they provided data to the superintendent's office and two said they reported to the state. However, understanding the nature of data reporting in New Jersey, this information is not likely reported as alternative education student outcomes, but instead as general education data.[20]

In summary, not all of the schools that have alternative education collect student outcome data. Of the schools that reported information, the alternative education dropout rate seems to be relatively low (the highest reported was 16.7 percent). The rate of failure also seems to be relatively low. However, the passing rate of programs is quite a large spread. There is little information that can be

[20] Unless the school is classified as an alternative school, in which case all of the students are considered alternative education students.

inferred from the student outcome information collected. However, one important point that can be inferred is that not all schools that have alternative education programs do internal (in school or in district) reviews which include student outcome data.

Discussion. While the results of the survey are limited in generalizability, the results do show several points of interest. The readers, however, are still cautioned to realize the limited scope of the sample.

The three most common types of students served by alternative education programs were students with truancy problems, emotional or behavioral problems, and students at risk of academic failure. Similarly, the four most common reasons for alternative education program entrance were: the student is deemed “high risk” for dropping out of school, the student is failing academically or at risk of academic failure, the student has emotional and/or behavioral problems, and the student has record of extensive truancy or tardiness. Between these two questions, we can conclude that alternative education programs in New Jersey high schools primarily serve students that are considered high risk for dropout and not necessarily serve students with at high risk behavior, such as pregnant or parenting teens, students with substance abuse programs, or a history of bringing firearms to school.

These results are similar to Oregon, where most programs exist to address at risk behaviors. However, New Jersey is different than Indiana, where the

majority of alternative education programs exist to serve disengaged students or parenting teens to reengage them in school and teach career and life skills.

One possible explanation for this is the Education Transitional Centers that exist in New Jersey, which serve students who have substance abuse problems, histories of disruptive, dangerous, or violent behaviors, and students that are pregnant. These students are placed into the Centers *only* through a court order. These centers do not serve students who are academically at risk. Therefore, alternative programs that have been developed in schools have possibly developed as a dropout prevention strategy to serve students that are not high risk enough to qualify for the state program, yet still are at risk for school dropout.

Of the schools that reported as having alternative education programs, 11 schools said they also serve students with disabilities and five schools said that was one criterion for entrance into a program. One limitation of this survey is that it does not indicate how many of their alternative education students are also special education students. The 2002 national district survey reported that 12 percent of alternative education students were special education students, while Indiana reported their number at 19.5 percent in 2007-2008.

It is unclear from this information how much overlap there is between alternative education and special education. Are these schools spending money on both special education and alternative education programs? Is there a way to bridge programs together to use resources more efficiently? Is it in fact best to

keep separate programs for alternative and special education students, respectively? The bridge between alternative and special education is rarely discussed in research. This may present an opportunity to explore the connections between alternative and special education within New Jersey to ensure that resources are being used in the most efficient way possible to provide the most opportunities for high risk students, with or without disabilities.

Few schools (five) reported that they offered any parental group practices. This is a missed opportunity. Parents' involvement in children's education has proved to be a significant predictor of educational attainment: the more involved parents are in education, the better students will do in school (Wyrick & Rudasill, 2009; Volkman, 1996). Especially with high risk students, involving the parents in the choices and educational plans of the child is important. Involving parents in alternative education programs can include parental support groups for at risk students, workshops on how parents can become more involved in a child's education, or even involving the parents in the classroom in some way.

Another surprising finding was that few alternative programs offered dual enrollment at community colleges. One report on dropout risk by Bridgewater, DiTulio, and Morison (2006) cited that a common reason for students to dropout was that they were disengaged from school, and many of them are bored in the classroom. New Jersey has 19 good quality community colleges, many of them already working with high schools in some capacity on dual enrollment programs. Oregon is one example that utilizes community colleges – 13 percent of their

programs are located at community colleges. The New Jersey community colleges seem to be untapped resources when it comes to alternative education programs and can provide a great opportunity for schools to diversify alternative education practices.

New Jersey alternative education programs tend to serve schools that have higher minority enrollments and schools that have higher percentages of students on free or reduced lunches. This is consistent with the national survey done in 2002, which showed that as percentages of minority populations and poverty concentrations increased, so did the likelihood of a school having alternative education programs. As has been discussed earlier in this report, alternative education programs have developed over time to serve as a dropout prevention strategy. It is well documented that dropout rates are higher for minority students (around 50 percent dropout rate for African American and Hispanic students) and for students from lower socio-economic status. The findings in this report are consistent both with the 2002 national survey and the idea that alternative education program serve high risk populations.

Interestingly, there was no real connection between school funding per student and the likelihood of a school having alternative education. This is somewhat inconsistent with the findings that alternative education programs were more likely to exist in schools with higher percentages of students on free or reduced lunches. However, New Jersey has a special law that helps explain this inconsistency. New Jersey deems poorer school districts as Abbott Districts,

which receive state aid to help equalize funding in order for students to receive a quality education. Additionally, Title I funds are extra resources that go to schools that have high percentages of students from low-income families.

There is a well documented education achievement gap between minority and white students, both in terms of achievement scores and dropout rates. Narrowing the gap has been a primary focus of educational policymakers over the last ten years. From the survey, we can see that alternative education programs tend to exist in schools with higher percentages of minority populations and higher concentrations of poverty. However, whether alternative education programs help narrow this gap is undetermined. More information and research is needed to determine whether alternative programs in New Jersey help engage students at high risk. If a primary goal in education is to reduce the achievement gap, there needs to be much more work in holding alternative education programs accountable.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics' district survey, urban schools were most likely to have alternative education programs, followed by suburban schools, and finally, rural schools. This report aimed to find if this was also true in New Jersey. Of the 22 New Jersey schools that responded, one school was classified as rural, one school was classified as a town school, 19 were classified as suburban schools, and one was classified as an urban school. Thus, as the sample collected from New Jersey schools had little variability in locality, no

conclusion can be drawn as to whether urban schools were more likely to have alternative education programs than suburban or rural schools.

Among the schools, there was a wide variety of data collecting and reporting practices on alternative education. Of the 13 schools that reported as having alternative education, only seven schools responded that they collect student outcome information, including some or all of the questions mentioned in this section of the survey; two responded they did not collect information, while three responded that they did not know or did not provide an answer. Some schools collected information and reported it to superintendent's office, while others responded that they did no such data collection.

The disparity between schools on data collecting is a major cause for concern because programs' effectiveness cannot be evaluated without student outcome information. There should be mechanisms in place to annually and systematically collect this information on student outcomes in alternative education programs.

Of the schools that reported data, there are few conclusions that can be drawn from the information because of the limited sample and information. One recommendation for future research is to ask schools to specify the student outcomes listed by year, rather than the average over five years. This distinction will show if there are any changing patterns over time, rather than grouping the years together.

From the schools that responded to the survey, four schools reported as not having alternative education programs. One of these schools indicated that the reason it did not have an alternative program was because of a lack of funding. This presents a central question: are schools that lack funds (both annual funding and aid) at a disadvantage for serving students who are high risk of dropout? Unfortunately, the data collected was not enough to fully answer this question, but could be an opportunity for future research.

Though the information collected from this survey was not ideal, it does answer a very key question: do alternative education programs exist in New Jersey? Answering questions about alternative education policy would be obsolete without answering this imperative question first. Alternative programs do exist in New Jersey high schools, and we now have a better understanding of what types of students they tend to serve. Now, we turn to a more in depth analysis of New Jersey policy.

New Jersey Policy and Legislation

Introduction. New Jersey is home to 2,619 schools serving 1.3 million students hosting 111,500 teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008b). In the 2006-2007 school year, the total public education expenditures were $22.5 billion, more than twice other states' average of $9.3 billion.

In defining alternative education in New Jersey, the New Jersey Administrative Code defines it as "a comprehensive educational program delivered in a non-traditional learning environment that is distinct and separate from the existing general or special education program" (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-1.3). It is unknown exactly how many alternative education programs exist in New Jersey today, because the state does not track the number of alternative programs within schools.

Policies and Legislation. There are no current policies requiring schools to offer alternative education options in New Jersey[21], but there are policies detailing the structures of the program should a school chose to have one. The New Jersey Administrative Code Subchapter 9, 6A:16-9.1 specifies that if school districts choose to have an alternative program, they must go through an approval process through the Commissioner of Education. Legislation also specifies several program requirements that the district must follow should they establish a program, including 1) a maximum student-teacher ratio of 12:1 for high school programs, 2) a maximum student-teacher ratio of 10:1 for middle school

[21] Except for students who have been suspended or expelled for bringing a firearm to school.

programs, 3) an individualized program plan (IPP) for each student enrolled in an alternative program, 4) an individualized education program (IEP) for students with disabilities (in accordance with N.J.A.C. 6A:14), 5) appropriately certified staff, 6) comprehensive support services to address students' health, social, and emotional development, 7) case management teams who are able to monitor and evaluate student progress and coordinate services, 8) services for students' transitions should they return to a traditional classroom, and 9) students must be enrolled no less than two complete marking periods (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-9.2). The legislation leaves the decision about what types of students are referred to alternative education programs up to the individual school districts, though schools must consult students' parents in the decision to refer a student to an alternative program. However, the legislation requires mandatory alternative education programs for students who have been removed from school for bringing a firearm to school. Should placement not be available, home instruction or out of school placement is required until a placement into an alternative program becomes available (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-9.3).

Data Collections. The last official report by the New Jersey Department of Education on alternative education was in 1981. This paper outlined rules and regulations (which, like today, do not require schools to have alternative programs, but offer guidelines should they want to establish one), gave a state perspective on alternative education, and contains a directory of alternative programs offered within the state. New Jersey Department of Education has not

since collected and published directories of educational alternatives. The report contained a list of 35 alternative schools of various models, including alternative schools (independent institutions), alternative schools within schools (programs within schools), accelerated programs for gifted students, remedial programs for academically struggling students, adult high schools, programs for disruptive students with behavioral modification, and programs for pregnant or parenting teens. In New Jersey today, there is no separate data collection for alternative education students, but instead these students are reported within the general education data that is annually collected by the state.[22]

Transitional Education Centers. New Jersey does have an alternative state-wide program in 18 counties which are called Transitional Education Centers for students that are considered *extremely* at risk students. [23]

Monitored by the New Jersey Department of Children and Family Services, these centers are essentially considered alternative schools and offer many services associated with educational alternatives, including individual learning plans, career training or post-secondary education counseling, peer mediation, and social and emotional counseling. Students are placed in these centers through court ordered mandates. After a certain time period and if there is adequate progress, students are able to return to their home schools. However,

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[22] My research was unable to find out why this is the case. This may be a pertinent question for future research.
[23] The Transitional Education Center's website states: "The mission of the TEC program is to provide a comprehensive educational program which provides the at risk adolescent with the skills needed to create a positive life for themselves in order to promote their successful reintegration into future school, work and/or community endeavors".

many also graduate at the center, though their diploma is considered to be one from their home school.

Though some may consider these programs as alternative education programs which serve at risk students, there are many limitations with these programs. First, they are only open to students with certain types of risk. The Transitional Education Center website clarifies the notion of the "at risk student":

> "A child can be 'at risk' for any of a number of reasons including: homelessness, migrant status, lead poisoning, racism, disabilities, substance abuse, poverty, divorce, teenage parents, limited English proficiency, abuse and neglect, etc."

Any student simply not succeeding in a traditional classroom or a student who is academically at risk does *not* have an opportunity to attend one of these centers.

Second, some critics of alternative education argue that placing students in a separate school is a way of segregating students, and is in actuality a violation of the Brown v. Board of Education decision that separate but equal is inherently unequal. Sagor (1999) argues that placing at risk youth in a separate facility can be a way of removing the "problem" children away from common sight. Due to the fact that children are placed in these centers through the court system, they are being separated into groups of other "problem children". Though these institutions have their place[24], it is yet undetermined to what extent isolating children from a traditional population may help or harm a students' progress.

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[24] Violent or dangerous students are typically thought of as needing to be separated from the general student population in order to protect the safety of other students. Being placed in a specialized institution with a much smaller teacher-student ratio, some may argue, is a better way of helping these students.

Discussion. There are certainly gaps in New Jersey policy for alternative education. Unlike some states, there are no state-wide funding opportunities that schools can utilize for alternative programming. And unlike other states, there is no legislative mandate for schools to have alternative programs for students who may not be succeeding in a traditional classroom. This can limit the availability of options for students who are high risk for dropout. It also could promote a systemic inequality: wealthier school districts may be able to afford more elaborate alternative programs to help kids succeed and stay in school, while poorer school districts may have no alternative education and could have to refer kids to neighboring alternative education programs. Urban schools may have an easier time sending students to neighboring alternative programs, while this may be much more challenging for rural schools where the nearest alternative program may be in the next county.

Second, there is no systematic data collection of alternative programming. While the New Jersey Department of Education monitors alternative *schools* and collects annual information from those institutions (as they do with every school in New Jersey), alternative programs *within* schools are blended with general education that is reported to the state. Without accurate and consistent data specific to alternative education programs, there is no way to track the progress and practices of alternative programming within the state. This brings forth key questions that remain unanswerable. Are these programs producing results for students? Are there some alternative education programs which seem to be

working better than others for New Jersey students? These questions, and others, are impossible to answer without first having data to analyze.

It also means that schools in New Jersey, as well as the state as a whole, are missing out on a huge opportunity. If data collecting were a regular practice, the researcher could see which programs are producing the best results, which programs work best for different student populations, and which programs may need additional resources and modification. Schools may be able to learn from other schools' practices, or even to a certain extent share resources.

There certainly seems to be a gap. New Jersey requires schools that have alternative education programs to follow certain guidelines, yet there is no data collection on these particular programs to ensure accountability. Could policy be improved to create and ensure better accountability? As we will see, other states have implemented multiple types of legislation and policy in relation to alternative education, which could increase the evaluative process and improve alternative education practices.

Other States' Policies and Legislation

There is a great variety in policies and legislation pertaining to alternative education. While federal laws on special education, such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), are expansive, there are no federal regulations regarding alternative education. Instead, policies and regulations on alternative education are left to the individual states to decide. Some states have very little policy and regulation (such as Alaska), while other states have much more extensive laws. In this chapter, policies and practices will be analyzed for two states, Indiana and Oregon, in order to see how other states are handling the many issues surrounding alternative education.

Oregon Introduction. Oregon defines alternative education "as a school or separate class group designed to best serve students' educational needs and interests and assist students in achieving the academic standards of the school district and the state" (ORS 336.615). Students are placed in alternative education programs given the following criteria: 1) the student has not met academic standards, 2) the student has a chronic truancy problem, 3) the student has been or is in the process of being expelled, 4) the student has demonstrated severe disciplinary problems, 5) the student is pregnant or parenting, 6) the student is 16 or 17 years old and his or her parents have applied for an exception from compulsory attendance, 7) the student is emancipated or in the process of being emancipated, or 8) the student is eligible based on other criteria outlines by the individual school district (Oregon Department of Education, 2009a). As of April

2009, alternative schools and programs in Oregon served 21,561 students, which represented a 43.6 increase from the previous year. In 2008, alternatives served 15,018 students, which represented a 20.6 percent from the 2006-2007 school year. In the 2008-2009 school year, there were 484 programs, a 5.7 percent increase from the previous year. There were 458 programs in the 2007-2008 school year, which represented a 7.8 decrease from the previous school year.

Policies and Legislation. Oregon does not require all schools to have an alternative education program, but states that "if a student has not met or has exceeded all of the academic content standards, the school district shall make additional services or alternative educational or public school options available to the student" (ORS 329-485, 6). Additionally, each school is required to notify parents of educational alternatives that are available (ORS 336.645). Thus, all schools have an option available for students who require non-traditional classroom instruction. If a student is struggling and needs some type of remediation or extra help, the student either goes into the school's alternative program, or he or she is sent to a neighboring school district or a private program with an appropriate alternative.

One option that schools have is to contract with a private alternative program to serve their students needing a non-traditional classroom. In order to receive public funds, these private alternatives must go through an extensive review process to ensure they are meeting state requirements (ORS 336-631). Each program and school must be approved by the state through submitting an

application. Statutes set these requirements, which are different for public programs. Each application must state the alternative's mission and goals and the state ensures the school building is up to code (for health and safety standards). It is up to the school districts to decide how to place kids (Hinds, D., personal communication, February, 2010). In other words, it is the school's decision whether to use an in-district program, a neighboring district's program, or to contract with a private program.

Data Collecting and Evaluation. In Oregon, there is no data collected from alternative education programs on the student level, such as student performance or growth. School districts are required to collect data for each student in public and private educational alternatives, which is included in annual district reporting (OAR 581-022-1350(9)). However, the student level information is not collected as specifically alternative education data. In other words, if a student drops out from an alternative program within a school, the student will be reported as a dropout, but not necessarily indicated as an alternative education dropout. If a school is classified as an alternative school, the school is subject to reporting information (such as dropout rates, etc.).

Oregon collects annual district-level program information from the alternative programs to keep records on the various programs available around the state. They classify alternatives into five types: 1) programs that serve students with at risk behavior, 2) remediation or credit recovery programs, 3) programs serving pregnant or parenting students, 4) programs that serve students who are

exceeding standards, and 5) additional programs listed as other. Additionally, the state collects the type of operation the program or school is classified as a: 1) program operated under resident district, 2) program operated under other district, 3) private program, 4) community college program, 4) educational service district (ESD), 5) other, and 6) terminated program. The state also collects the grade levels and most current student enrollment. With this information, it is possible for parents to see at a glance what types of alternatives are available for their child.

Additionally, the Oregon Department of Education has a document on its website which reviews exemplary programs within the state. This was created during a tour of alternative programs during the 2005-2006 school year and points out aspects of programs they have found to be particularly successful, including mandatory attendance, mandatory classes in cultural awareness and speech, options for high achieving students, GED options for students, credit recovery programs for students who are academically behind, and support services for drug, alcohol, or family issues. Other examples of these aspects include: individual advisors for each student to make individualized learning plans and transcripts, a focus on creating a positive and nurturing environment for students, leadership skills and mentoring built into curriculum, and required community service.

To annually examine alternative programs, it is left up to the individual school districts to collect information and evaluate it (OAR 336.655). While there

is guidance from the Oregon Department of Education, most methods of evaluation are left to the discretion of the districts. For private alternative programs, the evaluation consists of budgetary reviews and a list of expenditures associated with the program and “a review to ensure that the private alternative education program enhances the ability of the district and its students to achieve district and state standards” (ORS 336.655, 2). While school districts are required to conduct at least annual evaluations of alternative education programs, they do not submit this evaluation to the state unless called for an investigation. Investigations are often followed up by visits and review by representatives from the Oregon Department of Education. If the problem continues, the Department may suspend or revoke private alternative program registration and has been known to take punitive measures, such as asking schools to repay state school funds (Hinds, D., personal communication, February, 2010).

Funding. Within the state of Oregon, funding is double weighted for special education students and one and a half weighted funding for English Language Learners. Thus, if a district funds $5,000 per student, a special education student would receive $10,000 and an English Language Learner would receive $7,500. There is no extra weighting specifically for alternative education students; however, it is well known that there is often a population of special education students within alternative programs (a NCES report cited a national average of 12 percent of special education students within each program), so it is

likely that this could in part go to educational alternatives if they are also serving students with disabilities.

Indiana Introduction. Indiana defines alternative education as “an educational program for eligible students that instructs the eligible students in a different manner than the manner of instruction available in a traditional school setting” (IC 20-30-8-6.1). Students are eligible for alternative education if they fall into one of the following categories: 1) the student intends to withdraw or has withdrawn, 2) student failed to comply academically, 3) student is parent or expecting parent, 4) student has required employment which interferes with schooling, and 5) student is disruptive in the classroom (IC 20-30-8-10). In 2008-09, there were 200 alternative education programs serving 22,577 students in 67 counties and 189 school districts and charter schools (Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009).

Policy and Legislation. There is no legislation that requires Indiana schools to have alternative education programs. However, should a school want to begin an alternative education program and desire funding for that program, the school must receive approval through an application process. The school corporation applies by submitting the following information to the Indiana Department of Education: 1.) the number of students that the school anticipates will participate in the program, 2.) a description of the alternative program, including a proposed curriculum, 3.) the manner in which the program differs from traditional programs, 4.) a method for disciplinary procedures that will be

tried prior to admitting a student into an alternative education program, 5.) any other information required by the department (IC 20-30-8-8). This application must be reviewed and approved by the IDOE. After approval and acceptance of the grant, if the school does not comply with alternative education legislative rules and rules governing the state board of education, the funds may be revoked before the one year term is over. Schools reapply for approval and the grant every year.

A student's placement into an alternative education program is administered by the school. By law, the school must write up an individual service plan for each student, which includes: "1) Educational goals appropriate for the student, 2) Behavioral goals appropriate for the student, 3) An alternative education program that is appropriate for the student, 4) Services required by the student and the student's immediate family to meet the educational goals and behavioral goals specified in the individual service plan" (IC 20-30-8-11). Students are able to appeal the assignment through a process that goes through the school, if they feel they have been inappropriately assigned to an alternative program (IC 20-30-8-12).

Data Collecting and Evaluation. The Indiana Department of Education annually collects information from alternative education programs and schools. Submitted online by schools alongside of their annual report data, this information includes alternative education enrollment data, student eligibility data, number of students in each type of program, and each student's outcome. Student outcomes

include the number of students who: 1) earned a high school diploma, 2) earned a GED, 3) attained all goals within the individual service plan (ISP), 4) made progress toward goals in ISP, 5) had no progress in ISP, but stayed in program, 6) dropped out, or 7) were expelled. The data is collected in such a way that it can be analyzed from various angles, including outcomes for each program type, outcomes within various demographic measures (gender, race, free/reduced lunch), and outcomes with different types of students (as defined by their eligibility category).

Data are kept on students' level of risk based on what they call an "at-risk index". With information from their "at-risk index", schools are able to identify students who are at high risk of dropping out and target them with interventions to keep them engaged and on track for graduation. Schools also report suspended and expelled students and the state monitors the numbers to see if alternative education programming is preventing students from dropping out of school.

The Indiana Department of Education maintains an extensive partnership with the Center for Evaluation and Educational Policy at the University of Indiana. The Center annually collects qualitative data from administrators, teachers, and students in alternative education programs. This information is collected and analyzed along with the IDOE's quantitative data. The Center also maintains program profiles for each school, which includes information about the program operation type (school within school, vocational career center, etc.), program type, the type of students being targeted, the program's goals, and

current progress on those goals. These profiles and site visits are linked into the Indiana Department of Education's website, so they are visible to the public.

At the end of the year, all of this information is compiled (quantitative data, qualitative data, and site visit information) and each alternative program or school is evaluated by the Department and given a rating of meeting or exceeding standards. State goals pertaining to alternative education are evaluated using this data and every year (beginning in the 2006-2007 year) a summary report of alternative education is written with progress on yearly goals. New goals for alternative education are set every year.

Funding. Schools are eligible to receive special funds for full-time students placed in alternative education programs (IC 20-20-33-4). To receive funds, the student must be classified into at least one of the categories outlined in the eligibility requirements. The maximum amount a school may receive is $750 per student if the school can match one third of that amount (IC 20-20-33-5; IC 20-20-33-6). However, though this legislation has been in place for years, it is rare that schools receive that maximum amount from the state. Schools more typically receive around $550 or $600 per student (Foxx, S., personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Discussion. There are some similarities and differences in the ways that Oregon and Indiana approach alternative education. These two states' policies demonstrate two distinct ways to approach growth in alternative education: creating mandates or creating incentives. Oregon has taken the approach of a

mandate: it requires all school districts to either have an alternative program within the district for eligible students, have a coordinated plan with a neighboring school district, or contract with a private alternative. Indiana, on the other hand, has created an incentive to encourage alternative education growth by offering additional funding for alternative education students.

The consequences of both the mandate and incentive approaches must be considered. Creating funding incentives can be a costly endeavor. When states are financially struggling, it may be politically difficult to pass such a policy which will add to the state's budget with somewhat unknown results. Additionally, if a funding option is created, there should be solid regulations in place to ensure that schools will not abuse this by classifying as many students as possible as alternative education students in order to get the additional funds. However, on the other hand, a lack of alternative education funding may be a *disincentive* for schools to serve alternative students. Additionally, creating a mandate with no funding can be a dangerous move. As the nation saw with No Child Left Behind, mandates without financial support may back a school into a corner with no options. If a school is already struggling with paying its teachers and providing supplies to the classroom, having to also provide alternative education programs in some form may force a school to make cuts in other vital areas or create a very poor quality educational alternative.

This mandate versus incentive issue is instructive not only for the state level, but also for the federal level as well. If national attention shifts to increased

interest in providing educational alternatives, should the U.S. Department of Education handle that by issuing a mandate or by creating an incentive? Answering that question is out of the scope of this project, but must be an important question in future research.

The practice of Oregon having to notify parents is an important policy. This is also modeled in federal legislation of NCLB, where parents must be notified if their children are eligible for supplemental education services (additional tutoring) under Title I. This policy can be helpful and practical in making sure that parents know their options should their child not be succeeding or happy in a traditional classroom. Not knowing these options may hinder a parent from seeking out educational alternatives and may prevent a child from receiving the type of education he or she needs. However, if a parent is presented with options from the beginning, this helps boost the likelihood that the parents and child will go to an appropriate alternative program or school. This policy paired with Oregon's mandate for educational alternatives could indeed partly account for Oregon's rapid growth in the number of students in alternative education.

While Indiana and Oregon are similar in that they both evaluate alternative programs and schools, one major difference between Indiana and Oregon is the way they handle those evaluations. Indiana, on one hand, has schools submit student outcome information directly to the Indiana Department of Education. Teaming up with Indiana University to do surveys and interviews to annually

collect qualitative data from the teachers, parents, and students allows IDOE to comprehensively review and evaluate each district's alternative programs and schools. Oregon, on the other hand, leaves the evaluation to the individual districts. The Oregon Department of Education collects basic information, such as enrollment and demographics, and has the districts submit their own evaluations to the state. Oregon's view on this matter is to give freedom as well as the responsibility to the individual school districts. The approach is that the school districts know their schools and students best and that the state should not dictate to them how exactly to run and evaluate their programs and schools. Though this approach may be supported in great numbers of politicians and individuals who believe that education should be a decentralized system (run by the districts), not everyone agrees. In a study by Wang & Edwards (2009), they note that since the Oregon evaluations are not systematically organized, they are not an effective strategy for assessing alternative programs. It should be questioned whether schools will truly objectively evaluate their program, or just give a "meeting standards" statement to fulfill the annual requirements of self evaluation outlined in legislation.

One of the issues this brings up (also discussed in the Evaluation Chapter) is that not everyone agrees on how best to evaluate alternative education programs. Should it be based solely on student outcomes? If so, how is that information tracked? Should it also be based on student experience and

contentment with the program? Before deciding which method of evaluation is superior, those important questions must be answered.

Completing a comprehensive data collection on alternative education is valuable in many different ways. First, alternative education programs are costly. Though we know that alternative education is important to many students, many officials (from state legislatures to education boards) may want to know raw numbers: are these programs helping students achieve more and stay in school? Thus, collecting information on student outcomes is a vital part of keeping alternative education programs accountable.

In addition to student outcome data, having annual qualitative data is ideal. After all, kids are not just a statistic; they are individuals with different needs, wants, and ambitions. Getting their views on the programs is an additional benefit to doing a comprehensive data collection. Furthermore, if both teacher and student surveys are collected, it can be a way to better ensure that what teachers and administrators think is working is also what students think is working. If a teacher says a certain approach works great for students, but students think negatively of that approach, it can serve as an additional accountability measure.

Having an extensive data collection is not only an opportunity to keep schools accountable for their alternative programs but it is also an opportunity to help the state determine which schools might need more help (including financial resources, technical assistance, or program development help). Having this information available to the public also allows schools to share the best practices

with each other and may sometimes allow them to share resources and information.

Finally, having a pool of readily available information about student outcomes may create future opportunities for the development of alternative education support. For example, a state legislature may be unwilling to financially support alternative education growth and development without knowing the results of such programs. By collecting data, state education departments and schools will be able to show: a) that these programs are not meeting standards and need additional resources and help in order to better serve their students, or b) that alternative education programs are successful at keeping kids in school and helping them gain lifelong skills that will help them become more productive, happy, and successful citizens of that state and of the United States.

Studying the policies and practices of other states allows for a critical review of what might work in alternative education policy. Taking the good policies from other states and improving those that need work is a way to learn how policy can be shaped to better support and improve accountability for alternative education schools and programs.

Policy Analysis

This paper has presented three states' policies pertaining to alternative education. It is clear that each of these states has a very different approach to alternative education, which is evident by the varying policies the states have in place. Of the three, New Jersey has the most narrow policies (few in number and limited in scope). This presents an opportunity: what can New Jersey (and other states with limited policy) learn from other states with more extensive policies? This analysis will focus on two main areas of policies. The first are infrastructure policies, which detail how alternative education programs are supported by policy and can include policies which aim to increase the availability of alternative programs in a greater number of schools. The second area is how policy supports data gathering and evaluations of alternative education programs.

Table 10.1 - Infrastructure Policies

Criterion	New Jersey	Oregon	Indiana
Description of Current Policies	Schools required to provide alternative program for students who have been suspended for bringing a firearm to school.	Schools required to provide one of three options for alternative education students: a) have alternative program in district; b) send students to neighboring district; c) partner with private provider.	Schools offered funding formula for alternative education students, which schools are allowed to apply to alternative education programs.
Effectiveness of Program Availability	Not very effective. Mandate only requires schools to establish program for small percentage of students.	Very effective. Mandate requires schools to provide alternative education program options for all students.	Undetermined. Funding incentive might help encourage schools to provide program, but it is unclear if it pushes more schools to offer a program.
Equity of School's Ability to Provide Program	Not equitable. Schools have no incentive to provide alternative program. Schools may not have enough resources to provide programs.	Not equitable. Rural schools are at disadvantage because of fewer options to partner with neighboring schools.	Very equitable. All schools have equal opportunity for funding.

Table 10.2 - Data Collection/Evaluations of Alternative Education

Criterion	New Jersey	Oregon	Indiana
Description of Current Policies	No data collected. No evaluations conducted.	Data collected for demographic information. No state level data collected on student outcomes. Evaluations conducted by school district.	Demographic and student outcome data collected by the state. Evaluations and analysis conducted by state annually. Partnership with university allows for qualitative data collection
Effectiveness of Evaluations	Not effective. No evaluations conducted of alternative education programs means the state has no understanding of the progress of such programs.	Not very effective. Evaluation process varies by school district. Districts may not be using same standards to evaluate program. Information stays with school district, unless program is under investigation.	Very effective. Flexibility in data collection allows for analysis of programs based on demographic criteria, program type, student population (or risk indicator). Broad data collection allows for comprehensive evaluation.
Efficiency of Data Collections	NA	Undetermined. Data collection is low cost, but information is limited.	Very efficient. Partnering with universities to aid the data collection process allows the process to be of reasonable cost. Information gained is of great value.
Equity in Administrative Burden	NA	Evaluation process requires only school and district participation (except when under investigation, which then requires state participation).	Evaluation process requires both school and state participation.
Administrative Feasibility	NA	Very feasible. Since school districts are responsible for evaluations, there is no cost to the state education agency.	Feasible. Collecting additional student outcome data along with general education data is not very costly. Partnership with university allow for more comprehensive data collection.

New Jersey requires schools to provide alternative education options for students who have been suspended for bringing a firearm to school; however, the legislation specifies that home-instruction is acceptable if an alternative program is not available. Oregon requires schools to have at least one option for students who require alternative education services: a) provide an alternative education program within the district, b) partner with a neighboring district and send alternative education students to their program, or c) partner with a private provider. Indiana instead takes an incentive approach and offers a funding formula for students who are deemed alternative education students. These funds can be used to help support the alternative education program.

New Jersey's policy is not effective for program availability on the school level, because the policy only asks schools to provide alternative education for a select group of students. Oregon's policy is very effective in program availability because by law all students will have access to alternative education. The effectiveness of program availability with Indiana's policy is undetermined. It is logical that if schools are given additional resources for alternative education, they will offer programs to help more students, but it is unclear how well the policy works. It is difficult to determine if the funding formula is enough of an incentive for schools to offer alternative education programs where they might have otherwise not have.

In terms of equity of schools' ability to provide an alternative education program, New Jersey's policy is not equitable because it offers no incentives for

schools to provide alternative education programs. Schools are then required to rely on their own resources to provide alternative education, which varies depending on the school. Oregon's policy is not equitable because it places rural schools at a disadvantage. By law, schools are allowed to send students to a neighboring school district. This was likely added to the law in order to help ease the financial burden for schools that do not have the resources to provide a program in their district. In urban areas, these schools are closer together and have an easier time complying with the policy. However, rural schools are father apart, making complying with this policy more of a challenge. Also, rural schools may have less funding making offering alternative education options at the school or contracting with a private program more difficult. Indiana's policy seems to be very equitable – all schools have an equal chance to obtain the funding formula and offer alternative education.

Turning now to data collecting and evaluation policies, New Jersey has no specific policies in these areas. Data is instead aggregated with general education data in a way that makes alternative education students' outcomes indiscernible from general education students. No evaluations are conducted. Oregon collects demographic data, but not student outcome data. They instead ask schools to do a self evaluation of their alternative education program. Finally, Indiana collects comprehensive data, which includes demographic information, student outcome data, and qualitative data. The state analyzes this data every year to determine if their yearly goals have been met.

Not collecting data on student outcomes is not effective because the state has no idea how alternative education programs are working. Oregon's policy of district evaluation is not very effective because there are no standards in how programs should be evaluated, and the information is not collected by the state.[25] While it is in the best interest of the district to take a comprehensive look at the program, they may not do an effective job of evaluating the program because they are just merely following the policy of conducting an evaluation. With no standards in how evaluations are conducted, each district might set their own standards. Not enough information is collected at the state level to do any analysis of the progress of alternative education state-wide. Indiana's policy is very effective. A comprehensive evaluation and data collection process allows the state to analyze the progress of alternative education in the state. A mixed data collection allows for a comprehensive look. In other words, the state is not simply looking at numbers, but looking more for a more complete picture.

In terms of equity of administrative burden, Oregon's policy places the burden of data collecting and evaluating alternative education programs on the school districts, whereas Indiana's policy places the burden both on the individual school and the state. Oregon requires schools to report demographic information to the state and requires districts to conduct an annual evaluation. Indiana, however, requires schools to report extensive information, but the Indiana Department of Education conducts the evaluation.

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[25] Unless the program is under investigation by the state. If the alternative education program is under investigation, the school district is required to submit their evaluation to the Oregon Department of Education.

Oregon's policy is very administratively feasible. It requires very little coordination at the state level since it is only collecting demographic information, which is collected by the Oregon Department of Education anyway. Indiana's policy is still fairly administratively feasible. Collecting data is not challenging to implement. The state already collects student outcome information, so it is just a matter of schools reporting a little more information. Student and teacher surveys and site visits are more difficult to coordinate administratively, but partnering with universities and utilizing graduate students, who need research experience, reduces the administrative burden on the state.

One question that could be considered is why do alternative education policies vary so much from state to state? The answer may be found using a policy analysis method presented in Schneider and Ingram's piece, *Policy Design for Democracy*, particularly their chapter entitled, "The Social Constructions of Target Populations". Schneider and Ingram discuss how policy benefits or burdens are assigned to certain segments of the population based on whether the group is seen as positive or negative and whether the group has political power. If the group has political power and is seen as deserving of benefits, such as the middle class or senior citizens, then the group is labeled as advantaged. If the group has political power but is not seen as deserving of benefits, such as the very wealthy or CEO's, they are called contenders. If the group does not have political power but is seen as deserving of benefits, such as mothers or children, then the group is labeled as dependents. Finally, if the group does not have political power

and is not seen as deserving of benefits, such as criminals, they are labeled as deviants.

Therefore, it could be that Indiana and Oregon, two states which have more supportive policies to expand alternative education, socially construct alternative education students as dependents. On the other hand, New Jersey, a state that has less supportive policies when compared to Indiana and Oregon, could be constructing alternative education students as deviants. Though an in-depth look at this idea is out of the scope of this project, an initial look does show support for this claim. By law, New Jersey requires alternative education programs for students who have been suspended for bringing a firearm to school. These individuals are clearly seen as deviants. On the other hand, Oregon includes a wide range of types of students in their definition of alternative education, including students who need remediation *and* gifted students. Thus, the social construction of alternative education students can be seen in a more positive light. Instead of understanding alternative education students as only serving deviants, the state might see the programs as serving dependents. Analyzing this in more depth could be an interesting area to explore in future research. It could also be very useful if a state determines it wants to expand supportive policies for alternative education, but needs to better understand the political dynamics of how to get such a policy passed by the state legislature or State Board of Education.

To summarize, there is a wide variety among states' alternative education policies. New Jersey's approach is not effective in increasing alternative

education program availability and is not equitable in terms of the schools' ability to provide an educational alternative because it offers schools no incentives and requires a mandate for only one type of students. Oregon's mandate approach is very effective in increasing program availability, but it is not very equitable on the school's ability to provide alternative education because it places rural schools at a disadvantage. Indiana's incentive approach has an undetermined effect on the ability to increase program availability, but is very equitable in giving schools an equal opportunity to obtain funding for alternative education. New Jersey has no policies for evaluation or data collecting, which is not effective because the state does not know the effects of such programs. Oregon's policy is not very effective because the evaluation process is run by the districts, and its efficiency is undetermined. The policies' administrative burden is not very equitable because it relies only on the schools and districts, yet it is very administratively feasible because evaluations are conducted by the district, which is of little cost to the state. Indiana's approach is very effective because of the comprehensive evaluations and is very efficient because the process is of minimal cost to the state with a high gain in information. The policies have a very equitable administrative burden, which is placed both on schools and on the state, and is administratively feasible with the help of university partnerships.

With this policy analysis complete, New Jersey's next steps should be considered. Oregon and Indiana have passed policies, though different in

structure, that support the growth of alternative education in their respective states.

If New Jersey state legislators decided to pursue policies that would expand alternative education in the state, it must be recognized that it will not likely be politically feasible without first demonstrating the effect of alternative education programs. Thus, a first step should be to implement policies to conduct a more extensive data collection of alternative education programs within the state. This will give an understanding of the effect of alternative education in the state. If programs are shown to be ineffective, there may be opportunity to implement policies to improve the quality of alternative education programs. Additionally, it could also be that other dropout prevention strategies should be utilized. If programs are shown to be effective, this will present an opportunity to pass state legislation to support the growth of alternative education.

Any state considering pursuing policies to support the growth of alternative education should consider a few things. Framing is very important to implement infrastructure policies to support growth of alternative education. Alternative education would have to be framed to highlight that the programs serve a variety of types of students, not just deviant students.

A challenge is whether implementing supportive policies would be determining if it is economically feasible. Many states right now, including New Jersey, are struggling with budget gaps. New Jersey has a $10.7 billion budget gap and Governor Chris Christie has proposed cutting education funding by

almost $1 billion (Brean, 2010). Therefore, it would be difficult to pass any expansive policies during such a difficult political and economic climate. However, these challenging times will not last forever. As the economy improves, and as state budgets are relieved from the stress of closing gaps, this will present a better opportunity to pursue expansive alternative education policies.

Therefore, New Jersey's next steps should be to conduct better data collections of alternative education programs. This information is vital to better understand the state of alternative education programs in New Jersey. The information that is gained by better data collections can be used to direct alternative education policy in future years.

Conclusion

This report has come full circle. In the introduction, the issue of the dropout crisis and the need for more dropout prevention strategies was reviewed. The definition of alternative education, the historical development of alternative education, and the national state of alternative education were topics explored. New Jersey policies and practices on alternative education were analyzed alongside those in Indiana and Oregon. Let's review the research questions outlined in the introduction.

The first research question was: what types of programs exist in New Jersey high schools and what type of students are served? From the survey administered, it was concluded that alternative education programs tend to serve students who are at academic risk, rather than students who are at risk due to external sources, such as pregnancy or problems at home. Alternative education programs also tend to exist in schools with higher percentages of minority populations and higher concentrations of poverty.

The second research question was: what state policies exist pertaining to alternative education? In New Jersey, state legislation exists to define alternative education and to specify what kind of program structures alternative education programs should have if a school chooses to have an alternative program. State policy leaves determining what types of students are served by the program up to the individual school districts, although state policy requires all schools to provide some alternative instruction to students who have been removed from school for

bringing a firearm to school. There is no separate data collection on alternative education programs and no annual evaluations of alternative education.

Finally, the last research question was: what are other states' practices and policies with regard to alternative education? Oregon defines alternative education by state policy as well as defines what types of students are served by alternative programming. The state requires schools to have one of three options for students who require non-traditional classroom instruction: a) schools may have an alternative program in district, b) schools may send its students to neighboring school districts, or c) schools may partner with a private provider to secure a suitable alternative program for students in need. Though demographic information is annually collected, no student outcome information is collected by the state. Policy requires that school districts conduct their own annual evaluations of alternative education programs.

Indiana also defines alternative education and what type of students are served by alternative education through state policy. There is no requirement for schools to provide alternative education. However, schools are offered a formula incentive for alternative education students, which may be used for the development of alternative education programs. Comprehensive data collections are conducted annually, which include demographic information, student outcome information, and surveys collected from administrators, teachers, and students to learn more about their experiences and perceptions of the programs. State alternative education goals are analyzed and assessed annually.

Understanding definitions of alternative education, the history of alternative education, the state of alternative education today, and current policies and practices in New Jersey, Oregon, and Indiana, it is now left to discuss what must happen next.

It is clear from this report and from past research that more research is needed, but more importantly, better quality data is imperative. Of course, the ideal solution to this problem would be to create a federal education ID system, where each student upon entering the educational system would be assigned an ID number, which could be used to track the student's educational progress throughout the years (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009, p. 82). This ID could also be used to track a students' progress through different programs, including educational alternatives. However, such a comprehensive system may be many years away from happening because of the cost associated with setting up the infrastructure as well as developing reliable technology to handle such large amounts of information. Until that type of system is available, it is then up to individual states to make progress on this matter.

It is evident is that more information is needed to be able to answer the very important question: are alternative education programs working to help students in New Jersey? Unfortunately, the information available is not enough to answer to this comprehensive question. Better data is needed in order to understand whether alternative education programs in New Jersey are serving students' needs and whether the programs are successful.

One policy suggestion is a systematic data collection on alternative education programs done by the state. The New Jersey Department of Education does collect general education and special education data, but this information does not differentiate student outcomes for alternative education programs. The New Jersey Department of Education should collect information from alternative programs alongside of their annual data collection. Some states already do this quite successfully, such as Indiana. Empowered with information, these states are able to annually assess the progress of alternative education programs, evaluate their place in state education, and set yearly state goals.

What would this information look like? This would be very similar to the survey used to collect data for this project. New Jersey may also follow the practices of other states, as in Indiana or Oregon. This information would include: how many students are served by the programs, what type of students are served, demographic backgrounds of students served, types of programs available, how many students pass, fail, dropout, graduate, and are reintegrated back into a traditional classroom. This data can also include how many students make progress in individualized education plans.

One of the reasons that Indiana is able to successfully collect a wide variety of data is their partnership with the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University. This is something that New Jersey may consider when developing strategies on how to best conduct data collections. In New Jersey, there are 31 public universities and colleges and 32 private colleges.

Among the 31 public institutions are: Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, The College of New Jersey, Kean University, Rowan University – all of which have schools of education. Rutgers, in particular, has two educational centers: the Center for Improved Student Achievement and the Center for Effective School Practices. This represents a huge opportunity for partnership, as it offers a large number of graduate students willing to help with data collecting and organizing in exchange for the opportunity to learn.

Before concluding, there is one final question to consider. Should we approach education, and thus alternative education, as a moral imperative or an economic imperative? After all, there are many stories of students who claim that alternative education "saved their life". These stories may range from students who have gone from failing high school to graduating college to students who may have eventually dropped out, but whose alternative education experience kept them in school long enough to stay off the streets and remain safe. Does this then make alternative education a moral imperative?

Or instead should we consider alternative education as an economic imperative? If in fact, alternative education proves to be a successful dropout prevention strategy, there is much to be gained economically from investing in good quality alternative education programs. If these programs are used successfully, they may help raise graduation rates, lower social services costs (which are typically higher for high schools dropouts), and make more productive citizens, leaders, business owners, and workers.

Morally, we may know that alternative education programs need to exist. It is clear that not all children will succeed in a traditional classroom. It would be wrong not to attempt to create opportunities for students who are adverse to traditional schools, providing an education more catered to their individual needs. However, if we want policymakers and educators to invest in high quality educational alternatives, we will need to begin documenting success or weaknesses as the first step in this process. Therefore, regardless of whether it is approached from a moral imperative or an economic one, better data collecting is what is truly imperative. If alternative education is a moral imperative, then better information will help improve programs to better serve students' needs. If alternative education is an economic imperative, then better data is needed to help understand if alternative education is working, and if not, what could be done to improve it.

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Appendix A - Survey for New Jersey High Schools

Instructions:
Three options for completing the survey are: a.) complete survey online; b.) complete survey as word document and email electronic copy to: malis20c@mtholyoke.edu; or c.) mail the completed survey to: Casey Maliszewski, 2097 Blanchard Campus Center, Mount Holyoke College, 50 College St. South Hadley, MA 01075.

Study Introduction:
This survey will collect data on alternative education programs in New Jersey high schools. The purpose of this survey is to collect information on: how many schools have alternative education programs that target students at risk for dropping out of high school, what types of alternative education programs are available, information on program entry and exit criteria and, if available, information regarding student outcomes in programs.

Definition of Alternative Education: A public school that: "1.) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular classroom, 2.) provides non-traditional education, 3.) serves as an adjunct to regular school, or 4.) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Consent Information: The following guidelines are provided to ensure your confidentiality and obtain your consent to participant in this project:

A. Your participation is voluntary.

B. You may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time. You will not be penalized in any way if you decide not to participate.

C. All of the information from this study will be treated as strictly confidential. No names will be associated with the data in any way. If you provide your address in order to receive a report of this research upon its completion, that information will not be used to identify you in the data. The data will be accessible only to the researcher.

D. The results of this study will be made part of a final research report and may be used in papers submitted for publication or presented at professional conferences, but under no circumstances will your name or other identifying characteristics be included.

***Required**

***Consent**
I have read the guidelines above, and I agree to sign my consent to participate in this survey.

***Name of Signer:**
***Date:**
***Position Held:**
***School:**
***School Location (City):**

For all questions, please place "X" next to answer/answers.

Section I – Alternative Education

1. **Does your school have an alternative education program?**
   Yes.
   No.
   We refer alternative education students to a separate school or state program.
   We are classified as an alternative school.
   I'm not sure.

Section II – Program Specifics:

1. **Does your program serve (check all that apply):**
   Students with disabilities?
   Exclusively students with disabilities?
   Students at risk for academic failure?
   Students with records of extreme tardiness or truancy?
   Students that have behavioral problems?
   Teenage parents or expecting parents?
   Students that have a substance abuse problem?
   Students with problems at home?
   Other:

2. **Does your program (check all that apply):**
   Place students in a separate classroom?
   Keep students in same classroom, but keeps the students later in the day for additional programming or tutoring?
   Utilize individualized education plans (IEP)?
   Offer one on one tutoring?
   Offer smaller classes with smaller teacher to student ratios?

Have teacher specifically utilized for teaching alternative or special education?
Have teachers specifically certified to teach alternative or special education?
Have counselors to work only with alternative or special education students?
Offer parental support or training meetings for parents of students?
Offer an option for students to obtain GED instead of high school diploma?
Offer a dual enrollment program with local college or community college?
Have different levels or tracks depending on students' needs?
Offer career or technical training?
Other:

3. **Reasons for students to enter program (check all that apply):**
Student has a disability.
Student is deemed "high-risk" for dropping out.
Student is academically failing or at risk for academic failure.
Student has behavioral or emotional problems (i.e. consistently disrupting classroom or getting into fights, etc.).
Student brought a firearm or illegal substance into school.
Student was expelled or suspended.
Student has a record of extensive tardiness or truancy.
Student has problems at home.
Student is pregnant or teenage parent.
Student is considered non-traditional (past typical age for grade).
Student is employed and employment interferes with normal schooling schedule.
Other:______________________

4. **Reasons for students to exit program (check all that apply):**
Student stays in specialized program until graduation
Student is academically ready for traditional program/classroom.
Student has improved test scores or made academic gains.
Student has dropped out of school.
Student's behavior or emotional problems have improved.
Student's conditions at home have improved.
Other:______________________

Section III – Student Data

You may answer the following questions if the information is available. If this information is available online, please provide the link here:

Please review questions 1-6 in Section III. Does your school collect this information?

Yes, our school collects that information.
Our school does not collect that information. (If so, skip to Section IV).
Our school does not have access to that information. (If so, skip to Section IV).
Our school is not willing to share that information. (If so, skip to Section IV).
I do not know. (If so, skip to Section IV).

1. **Average number of students served by alternative education program for last five years**

   ____

2. **Average number of dropouts from alternative education program for last five years.**

   ____

3. **Average number of students that pass academically from alternative education program for last five years.**

   ____

4. **Average number of students that fail academically from alternative education program for last five years.**

   ____

5. **Average number of students that graduate high school from alternative education program for last five years.**

   ____

6. **Average number of student reintegrated into traditional classrooms after program for last five years.**

   ____

Section IV – Reporting Data

1. Does your school reporting data?
   Yes.
   No.
   I do not know.

2. If yes, to whom do you report data?
   ____

3. If yes, is this information available to the public?
   Yes.
   No.
   I do not know.

Section V – Comments

Do you have any additional comments?

Section VI – Follow-up
Would you like a copy of this report upon completion? If yes, please provide your email below.

Thank you for your time!

Appendix B- Methodological Details

Definition

Definition of Alternative Education

An alternative education program or school was defined as one that : “1.) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular classroom, 2.) provides non-traditional education, 3.) serves as an adjunct to regular school, or 4.) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009a).

Demographic Information

Locale/Urbancity.

Whether a school was classified as an urban, suburban, or rural school was determined through looking up each school on the National Center for Education Statistics’ website, under public school search. Data was based on 2007-2008 Common Core of Data.

Minority Enrollment.

Percentage of minority enrollment was determined through information from the National Center for Education Statistics’ website. Each school’s number of minority students (African America, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American were added together) and divided by the total student enrollment. Data was based on 2007-2008 Common Core of Data.

Free or Reduced Lunch.

Percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch was based directly from the National Center for Education Statistics’ website. Data was based on 2007-2008 Common Core of Data.

Spending Per Student.

Money spent per student was based on information from the New Jersey Department of Education’s website. Data was based on the 2008-2009 school year.

Student Outcome Data

Students Served.

This was drawn from the number of students served as indicated by the survey administered to New Jersey high schools divided by the total school population as indicated on the National Center for Education Statistics website.

Student that Dropout, Pass, Fail, Graduate, or Return to Traditional School.

This was drawn from the number of student in each area as indicated by the survey administered to New Jersey high schools.

Appendix C – Types of Alternative Education in States

Indiana Department of Education - Types of Programs

Type of Program	% of Total
1. A short-term placement at a Detention Center. The program keeps students involved in educational program that addresses skill deficits and individualizes instruction so they continue to progress academically and do not lose credits.	4% (8)
2. To bring students who have not passed necessary state tests, who have failing grades, or who are in need of credits back to the level of their peers. School personnel employ a variety of strategies to assess, remediate, and accelerate learning for these students, with the goal of transitioning the students to the traditional classroom setting when they have reached appropriate academic levels.	32% (66)
3. To deal with students who have had behavioral/discipline issues ("disruptive students"). The purpose is to remove these students from the traditional classroom and modify their behavior so that they can return and be successful. These programs may operate as an alternative to expulsion and generally include behavioral interventions and addres social/emotional development, with the goal of transitioning students back to the traditional classroom setting when they have appropriately modified their behavior.	24% (50)
4. To prepare students for life after school by helping them finish their academic studies and teaching them to be productive members of the community. Programming seeks to reengage disengaged students, prepare pregnant or parenting students, and assist students who must work to support themselves or their families by linking the academic programming with career and service learning opportunities	40% (84)

Source: Indiana Department of Education, 2008

Oregon Department of Education – Types of Services Offered

Types of Program Services Statewide	Number of Services Provided 2006-2007*	Number of Services Provided 2007-2008*	Number of Services Provided 2008-2009
Students with At-Risk Behaviors	358	329	335
Remediation, Credit Recovery, or GED	243	244	274
Pregnant or Parenting Students	105	86	99
Students Advanced Beyond Standards	58	55	74
Other Programs	45	37	31
Total Number of Services	809	751	813

Source: ODE Alternative Education Data Collection, 2008-2009

Appendix D - State Legislation Summary

Indiana

Indiana Code
IC 20-30-8:
    Alternative program for certain students.
IC 20-20-33:
    Alternative education program grants.

Websites: http://www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code/title20/ar30/ch8.html
http://www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code/title20/ar20/ch33.pdf

New Jersey

New Jersey Administrative Code
N.J.A.C. 6A:16-9.1:
    Establishment of alternative education programs.
N.J.A.C. 6A:16-9.2:
    Program criteria.
N.J.A.C. 6A:16-9.3:
    Student placements.

Website: http://www.state.nj.us/education/code/current/title6a/chap16.pdf

Oregon

Oregon Revised Statutes and Oregon Administrative Rules
ORS 329-485:
    Statewide assessment system: types of assessments; subjects; additional services or alternative educational options. (Information on alternative programs for students who have not met or who have exceeded all academic content standards.)
ORS 336.615-655:
    Alternative Education Programs. (Basic information regarding Alternative Programs.)
ORS 336.645:
    State Administration of Education: Notification of availability of program rules; regarding school district notification to parents and students of the availability of alternative education programs, the law regarding alternative education programs and the procedures for requesting district school boards to establish alternative education programs.

ORS 336-631:

Private alternative programs; requirements; applicability of laws; placement of students.

OAR 581-022-1350:

Alternative education programs.

Website: http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=732