

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AN ANALYSIS OF TRAINING AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT NEEDS FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATORS IN MAINE

July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2003 Project

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The final report, *An Analysis of Training and Staff Development Needs for Current and Future Alternative Educators in Maine*, was prepared by staff from the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, College of Education and Human Development, The University of Maine: William E. Davis, Ph.D., Director and Roxanne M. Lee, Administrative Assistant. The Institute is sponsored and funded by the *Division of Special Services*, Maine Department of Education, and the *College of Education and Human Development*, The University of Maine. The study was conducted as part of the Institute's activities related to its contract with the Maine Department of Education for the July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2003 project period, and submitted to this agency as part of the Institute's "Final Report."

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR CURRENT STUDY

During July 1, 2001 – June 30, 2002, the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, College of Education and Human Development, The University of Maine conducted a study that was designed to provide Maine Department of Education (MDOE) personnel with a more in-depth analysis of the current status of alternative education programs in Maine, especially as they are perceived to serve as effective educational service delivery options for two groups of students: (1) students considered to be “at risk” for dropping out of school, and (2) students with disabilities – particularly those identified with emotional/behavioral disabilities (difficulties). The need for this study was based upon findings generated from previous studies conducted by the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk for the Division of Special Services, Maine Department of Education: (1) *Current Status of Alternative Education Programs in Maine: Impact Upon Policies and Practices for Students with Disabilities and Students Considered To Be “At Risk,”* conducted between July 1, 2000 and June 30, 2001; and (2) *Alternative Education Programs in Maine: A Further Investigation of Their Impact Upon Serving Students Considered To Be “At Risk” and Students with Disabilities,* conducted between July 1, 2001 and June 20, 2002.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This study had six major objectives:

- 1) To obtain and analyze basic personal, professional, and program-related information provided by study participants (e.g., specific title, gender, years of teaching experience, level of educational attainment, geographic location and specific type of program, number of students served, number of current students with identified special education disabilities and “504 plans” etc.);
- 2) To assess the perceptions of alternative educators in Maine relative to which skills, competencies, and knowledge are most important to be an effective teacher of “at risk students;”
- 3) To assess the perceptions of alternative educators in Maine relative to which factors or conditions that currently constitute the most significant barriers or obstacles to the successful operation of their programs;

- 4) To assess the perceptions and recommendations of alternative educators in Maine involving several selected contemporary issues and concerns related educational reform policies, the status of today's students, the need for alternative education programs, and teacher preparation issues;
- 5) To assess the perceptions of alternative educators in Maine involving the adequacy of their previous professional training, the specific skills and competencies that they feel would be most helpful to them at the present, along with the vehicles and formats considered to be the most effective for the delivery of this training; and
- 6) To assess the perceptions of alternative educators in Maine involving the need for the development of increased graduate level training opportunities in the areas of "at risk students" and "alternatives in education" as well their level of willingness to both participate and to design such programs.

SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY, SELECTED RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The instrument employed in the study was a comprehensive 16-page, 154 item questionnaire, *Alternative Educators Survey (AES)*. An effort was made to reach as many alternative educators in Maine as possible for participation in the study. The *AES* was sent to all alternative educators in Maine who were listed in the most current database available (n = 312). The final study sample consisted of 138 respondents (n = 138), which represented 44 percent of the total number of those who were sent questionnaires.

Following are some of the major findings of the study: Perceived to be the most important skill required to be an effective teacher of "at risk students" is *knowledge of various student learning styles* (93.5 percent of *AES* respondents considered this skill to be either *Very Important* or *Extremely/Most Important*). The ability to deal effectively with students' behavioral issues also is viewed as being extremely important. The second most critical skill needed was *classroom behavior management skills* (89.1%), followed closely by *skill in defusing "volatile student behaviors – individual and group* (88.3%). Other skills and competencies considered to be very important are the *ability to communicate effectively with colleagues* (87.0%), *relational teaching* (86.5%), *strategies for adapting the regular school curriculum to the needs and levels of individual students enrolled in alternative education programs* (85.4%), and *knowledge of, and skills in, employing a variety of methods for teaching written language* (84.8%).

With respect to the “importance of specific skills needed to be an effective teacher” an analysis of study findings revealed that wide variance exists among respondents, suggesting that the specific skills and competencies perceived to be the most important frequently are dependant upon the nature and needs of specific students who are enrolled in local programs as well as the specific purpose and expectations of those particular programs. In general, however, study findings suggest that training in the following broad areas is essential:

- *Knowledge of student learning styles, relational teaching, and counseling;*
- *Behavior management;*
- *Adapting and modifying the regular school curriculum;*
- *Teaching written language and reading; and*
- *Communication skills.*

The factors or conditions that pose as obstacles – either major or extreme - to the success of current alternative education programs in Maine, according to *AES* respondents, are:

- *Time and effort required to align their curriculum to Learning Results expectations (46.4%);*
- *Inadequate financial support (45.6%);*
- *Inadequate or unclear perceptions of program by regular classroom teachers (40.1%);*
- *Inadequate or unclear perceptions of program by students in regular school program (37.4%);*
- *Inadequate or unclear perceptions of program by the general public (35.5%); and*
- *Inadequate or unclear perceptions of program by regular school administrators (33.5%).*

The fact that *AES* respondents consider *unclear perceptions* to be such a critical obstacle to the success of their programs calls attention not only to the importance of this issue but also to the need for the development of strategies to improve upon this situation.

The current “mix of student population” (e.g., *wide range of abilities, learning styles, and needs*) is viewed as another major or extreme obstacle to program success, ranked #7 (32.1%), while *lack of professional preparation and training to deal with emotional/ behavioral needs of some students* also is considered to pose a significant obstacle to program success (#8; 31.7%). Thus, it can be

inferred from these findings that practicing alternative educators clearly recognize the difficulties that their student populations frequently present as well as their own need for training to successfully meet the complex needs of their students, especially those students who possess substantial emotional/behavioral needs.

These findings suggest that (1) substantial concern presently exists among Maine alternative educators regarding the time and effort that is required to successfully align their curricula to the standards and expectations of *Learning Results*. It is clear that most alternative educators are concerned how the comprehensive and complex expectations of the *Learning Results* (as well as the broader, national *No Child Left Behind*) standards will specifically apply to them and to their students; (2) alternative educators are very concerned relative to the future financial stability of their programs. Presently in Maine, most alternative education programs are funded directly out of the local school system's regular operating budget. As budget constraints increase in these difficult economic times, it is understandable why so many alternative education personnel view inadequate financial support as the single most significant obstacle to the success of their program; and (3) alternative educators in Maine currently consider *inadequate* or *unclear perceptions* of their programs as constituting substantial obstacles to the success of their programs. If the purpose and objectives of an alternative education program are not clearly understood or are totally misperceived by regular educators and the general public, it is understandable why this particular program likely would be very vulnerable to budget reductions or even elimination.

As part of this study, alternative educators were requested to provide their perceptions and recommendations regarding several issues and concerns involving current educational reform policies and practices, the status of youth in today's society, the status of alternative education in Maine, and professional development and training needs. Among the major findings in this regard are the following:

- Students today, when compared with students ten years ago, are experiencing more *personal* (79.6% of respondents *generally* or *strongly agree*), *family* (60.4%), and *community/societal* (81.9%) problems and difficulties that are interfering with their learning and adjustment in school.
- The requirements of *Learning Results* and *No Child Left Behind* likely will increase the percentage of Maine students who will drop out of school (65.3% expressed *either general* or *strong agreement*).

- The need for alternative education programs in Maine will increase during the next five years (91.3% agree generally or strongly).
- Alternative education programs should be made available to students in *all* Maine school districts (62.3% agree, generally or strongly, that these programs should be made available at the elementary level; 90.6%, at the middle/junior high level; and 97.8% at the high school level).
- All students enrolled in *undergraduate* teacher preparation programs should be *required* to take at least one course that focuses upon “understanding and teaching of at risk students” or “alternatives in education” (94.2% of study respondents agree either generally or strongly), while all students enrolled in *graduate* level education programs should be *required* to take at least one course that focuses upon “understanding and teaching at risk students (93.5% agree either generally or strongly). Very strong support also exists for university teacher preparation programs to provide formal coursework and practicum experiences for students in the area of “at risk students’ and “alternative education” (89.0%).
- Alternative educators hold mixed views with respect to whether or not the state of Maine should establish a specific certification/endorsement credential for “alternative education teachers.” While one-half of study participants agree, one-fourth disagree, and approximately another one-fourth are uncertain about this issue at the present time.

Results of this study strongly suggest that practicing alternative educators in Maine (1) have had very minimal formal training in the area of “at risk students” and “alternative education” and (2) the adequacy of that training is perceived as being only marginal at best. Over one-half (55.8%) of *AES* respondents have not taken even one course in their area of concentration, and over one-third (37.0%) of those who have had some previous formal coursework assessed the quality of this training to be either *poor* or *very poor*.

In regard to perceived current training needs, respondents ranked as their #1 need *knowledge of various student learning styles*, with 55.8 percent viewing this as either a *major* or *most important/critical* need. Ranked second is *strategies for adapting the regular school curriculum to the needs and levels of individual students enrolled in their alternative education programs* (55.5%). *Strategies for defusing “volatile student behaviors – individual and group* is ranked #3 (50.7%), followed by *classroom behavior management skills* and *increased knowledge of, and skills in, employing a variety of methods for teaching written language* (each tied for #4 ranking – 50,5%). Ranked #5 in terms of importance is *student social skills training* (49.6%).

These findings appear to strongly suggest that alternative educators in Maine currently view their most important training needs as lying in two major areas: (1) the need to develop a better understanding of individual student learning styles, along with developing strategies for more effectively adapting the regular school curriculum to their students' needs; and (2) effectively dealing with student behavioral and social skills issues.

Results of the study yield convincing evidence that alternative educators in Maine hold high interest in participating in relevant training opportunities at both the pre-service and in-service levels. Two-thirds (66.9%) of *AES* respondents expressed either *high* or *very high* interest in participating in relevant in-service training activities and experiences. Considered to be the major factor which would likely determine whether or not they actually would participate is the *specific time-frame* during which the training is offered – with 69.3 percent viewing this factor as being either major or most important. Ranked #2 in terms of importance is the *location* of the training (54.1%), followed closely by the *ability to apply credits toward a college or university program* (54.0%) and the *ability to receive CEUs* (50.8%).

As to the vehicle perceived to be the most effective for delivering in-service training, respondents ranked *formal three-credit courses offered regionally by university personnel and that can be applied toward university degree programs* as their first preference (60.4% considering this to be either a *very effective* or the *most effective* vehicle). Ranked #2 is *full-day (six-hour) regional workshops or training sessions offering CEUs or recertification credits and held during the school year* (56.2%), followed by #3 in terms of preference, *2-5 hours long regional workshops or training sessions* (49.6%). *Regional workshops held on weekends* were viewed as the *least effective* vehicle, with only 13.2 percent (13.2%) of the respondents considering this to be an effective format.

Study findings further support the need for the development and implementation of graduate training opportunities for alternative educators in Maine. Approximately two-thirds (67.9%) of study participants considered the *need to develop a graduate level individualized program that focuses on "at risk students" an "alternatives in education"* to be either *very* or *extremely important*, with another 22.1 percent considering this need to be *moderately important*. Study participants also revealed a high level of interest in *personally participating* in this type of program, should it be implemented and made easily accessible, with 71.5 percent of all *AES*

respondents indicating that they have either *moderate, high, or very high interest*. Finally, study findings suggest that alternative educators are interested in participating in the *development and design* of this type of graduate program, 60.1 percent expressing either *moderate, high, or very high* levels of interest.

Recommendations

Based upon an analysis of the major findings obtained in this study, the following recommendations are offered. It is suggested that the study's findings have implications for representatives from several groups and constituencies in Maine who are interested in improving the overall quality of education for *all* Maine students. In particular, it is suggested that the findings of this study are especially important to, and have implications for, the Maine Department of Education, faculty and administrators involved in personnel preparation programs throughout Maine, members of local school boards, and teachers and administrators in all SAUs throughout Maine.

- Major efforts are needed to improve the quality of training for both practicing and aspiring alternative education teachers in Maine. Presently, no formal undergraduate or graduate personnel preparation programs in the areas of “at-risk students” and “alternatives in education” are offered by institutions of higher education in Maine. The results of this study yield strong evidence that the vast majority of individuals who presently are teaching in alternative education environments have had very minimal, if any, formal training to prepare them to work with their students. Further, for those individuals who have had some formal coursework in these areas, their perceptions relative to the adequacy of this training generally are poor.

In an effort to respond to this situation, it is recommended that administrators and faculty members who are involved in personnel preparation programs at Maine colleges and universities initiate immediate efforts to address this need. In this regard, several options are suggested. Specific courses could be developed and offered that focus primarily on the needs of “at risk students” and which stress the importance of “relational education.” An introductory course in “alternative education” -- or preferably “alternatives in education” -- could be made available as part of all undergraduate and graduate programs. This course could provide students with the opportunity to develop basic skills in such areas as “adapting the regular curriculum to meet the needs of varied student learning styles” and “alternative student assessment.”

In addition, formal concentrations in “alternatives in education” could be developed and implemented as part of existing personnel preparation programs. This would allow students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels to

acquire advanced knowledge and skills related to “effectively meeting the complex needs of students in today’s society.”

As the demands upon students and teachers in Maine schools increase as they strive to meet the standards of *Learning Results* and *No Child Left Behind*, it is suggested that personnel preparation programs, especially at the undergraduate level, need to ensure that prospective teachers receive training in the areas of “relational teaching” and in the development of “alternative instruction and alternative curriculum delivery.” This training should be perceived of as applying not only to those individuals who may be aspiring to teach in alternative education programs per se, but rather to *all* aspiring teachers.

In an effort to partially address the pre-service training needs cited above, during the past year, the College of Education and Human Development, The University of Maine, has been in the process of developing several program strategies at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Included among these strategies have been the development of formal coursework (still in process), the exploration of increased student practica opportunities, plans for incorporating “relational education” and “alternatives in education” within the undergraduate teacher preparation program etc. Program development in these areas has been done in collaboration with the Maine Department of Education and the Alternative Education Association of Maine. It is suggested that the results of this joint planning effort may be helpful to others who are interested in developing programs in Maine with respect to “alternatives in education.”

- Alternative educators responding to the *AES* instrument employed in this study were very clear with respect to what they perceive to be their most current critical training needs -- the specific knowledge, skills, and competencies that they feel are most important in order for them to work most effectively with their students. Based upon these findings, it is recommended that those who are responsible for providing staff development and in-service training programs for practicing alternative education teachers in Maine make a concerted effort to *specifically* address the following topics and issues in their training:
 - ❖ A better understanding of *individual student learning styles* – strategies for more effectively identifying these styles along with specific strategies that can be employed to most effectively match instruction with individual student needs.
 - ❖ Strategies and skills for most effectively and most appropriately adapting the regular school curriculum to the needs and levels of individual students.
 - ❖ Strategies and skills in the area of behavior management – involving both individual students and the entire classroom. It is suggested that this training include skill development in the area of “defusing volatile student behaviors” and “providing positive behavioral supports.”

- ❖ Effective individual student counseling skills.
- ❖ Effective strategies involved in teaching written language and social skills.

The above skills, competencies, and knowledge bases were viewed by participants in the study as representing their most important current training needs. In the development of comprehensive and effective in-service training programs, however, providers of training need to ensure that their training is tailored as much as possible to the specific needs of those individuals attending particular sessions. For example, in the *AES* study, *skill in the development of effective individual student personal learning plans* was not considered by most respondents to be one of their most important current training needs. However, some respondents ranked this as a critical need – for them personally. Thus, it is important that the training needs of these individual educators not be ignored. It is recommended that in-service training activities be as “localized” and as “individual-specific” as possible.

- Results of the study provide solid evidence that alternative educators themselves have a strong interest in the development, design, and implementation (including serving as instructional personnel) of both pre-service and in-service personnel preparation programs. Maine is fortunate to have many experienced alternative educators who have developed excellent reputations as “effective teachers.” It is recommended that these individuals be contacted and invited to actively participate in the development, design, and actual delivery of personnel preparation programs at both the pre-service and in-service levels. In this regard, it is recommended that members of the Maine State Department of Education, the University of Maine, and the Alternative Education Association of Maine continue to collaborate closely to ensure that the training and the programs that are developed will be as comprehensive and as high quality as possible. Toward reaching this objective, it is further recommended that the constituencies and membership represented in these past and present collaborative training efforts be expanded to ensure as broader professional and geographical representation as possible.
- The section of the *AES* study which involved the ascertainment of respondent perceptions regarding the factors and conditions considered to constitute the *most significant current obstacles* to the successful operation of their programs revealed some interesting findings – findings which are suggested to require attention and action.

First, viewed as the *most significant obstacle* is the *time and effort required to align curriculum to Learning Results expectations*. Clearly, as suggested by this finding, alternative educators are very concerned with respect to how they and their students will be able to specifically and effectively meet the expectations

required in *Learning Results*. Certainly, they are not alone in this regard as it could be argued that *all* Maine teachers have similar concerns. However, based upon our research involving “the status of alternative education in Maine” conducted at the Institute during the past two years, it was found that Maine alternative educators, as a group, strongly support the need for high student standards and expectations as well as the need for utilizing valid and reliable measures to assess student progress toward meeting established student outcomes, including academic outcomes.

The major concern expressed by many within the alternative education community, however, was, and continues to be, that due to the specific characteristics and complex needs of many of the students who typically are enrolled in alternative education programs, the *extensive* focus on academic outcomes and the current and proposed assessment tools (e.g., *MEAs*) used to measure student success are too narrow in scope and do not truly assess “real student (or program) outcomes” and that broader measures of efficacy are needed. It has been argued that *in addition to measuring academic outcomes* in order to truly assess meaningful outcomes for students in alternative education programs, *other outcomes need to be identified and measured*, e.g., presence and participation, personal and social adjustment, personal responsibility, behavior change, self-esteem, etc.). Further, many alternative educators argue that the current and proposed system for assessing student outcomes may not be appropriate nor equitable for most of their students because the time frame employed to track student outcomes is too brief.

It is recommended that the Maine Department of Education strongly encourage and support the development and implementation of broader outcomes models to assess the efficacy of alternative education programs and to measure “student success.” Research is needed to identify specific outcomes as well as the identification of specific indicators that will be used to measure progress in all outcome areas. Also, it is recommended that strong consideration be given to allowing greater flexibility relative to the overall time frame within which student and program outcomes are expected to be reached. Finally, it is suggested that the “multiple outcome approach” as a model for assessing individual student and overall program success should be considered for all students in Maine public schools. These suggestions are offered not to diminish or weaken the “high accountability” intent and the goals of *Learning Results* but rather as means of strengthening this policy through the inclusion of a broader array of student and program outcome measures. In essence, these are the very same recommendations that were made in the Institute’s *2002 Final Project Report* which was submitted to the Maine Department of Education. Findings obtained in this year’s study involving alternative educators in Maine are suggested to provide even stronger evidence that these recommendations should be given serious consideration by MDOE personnel.

It is further recommended that the Maine Department of Education attempt to clarify as soon as possible specifically how the “teacher qualifications” requirements of *No Child Left Behind* and *Learning Results* will apply to alternative education teachers in Maine. For example, in many high school alternative education programs in Maine, only one or two teachers represent the “entire teaching staff” and they are required to teach all subject content areas. It is highly unlikely that these teachers would possess expertise in *all* academic subject content areas. Thus, how will these teachers be expected to meet the requirements of the proposed changes in teacher certification? It is suggested that at the present time this issue is producing considerable apprehension and frustration among alternative educators in Maine. Specific clarification and guidance related to this issue from Department of Education personnel would be extremely helpful.

Inadequate financial support is viewed as the second most critical factor which currently is serving as a major obstacle to program success by participants in this study. In these difficult economic times and with “tight local school budgets” it is clearly understandable why so many alternative educators express apprehension with respect to fiscal matters, especially given the reality that alternative education programs (even, in some cases, those which have developed an extremely strong track record for success) often have been the most vulnerable to severe budget cuts or even elimination. This is especially ironic in that while at the same time several existing alternative education programs in Maine have been eliminated in some school districts, there appears to be rapid and widespread interest throughout Maine for the development of *new* alternative education programs, especially at the middle school level. This emerging interest in alternative education appears to be driven, at least in part, by concerns of public school administrators related to difficulties anticipated with respect to some of their current students not being able to successfully meet *Learning Results* and *No Child Left Behind* standards. Thus, it is recommended that efforts need to be made at both the state and local levels (especially local school boards and local public school administrators) to develop not only a better understanding of how quality alternative education programs can improve the educational opportunities for large and growing numbers of their students who might be considered to be “at risk” but also to ensure that these programs receive adequate financial support – on a sustaining basis.

Finally, results of this study strongly suggest that Maine alternative educators view *unclear* or *inadequate perceptions* of their programs by regular classroom teachers, by school administrators, by students within the conventional school environment, and by the general public as posing significant obstacles to the success of their programs. In an effort to help reduce the negative impact of this obstacle, the apparent widespread and substantial misunderstandings involving alternative education programs, it is recommended that a specific action be taken. It is recommended that a briefing paper on the *role of alternative education/*

alternatives in education in Maine schools be developed and distributed to all Maine schools and individual school boards throughout the state. Institute staff offer their commitment to be primarily responsible for the development of this briefing paper. However, in order for this briefing paper to have as much credibility and positive impact as possible, it suggested that its development represent a truly collaborative effort among Institute staff, the Maine Department of Education, and the Alternative Education Association of Maine. It is recommended that this paper be developed during the fall of 2003 with anticipated full distribution to all constituencies by December, 2003.

For a copy of the full report, *An Analysis of Training and Staff Development Needs for Current and Future Alternative Educators in Maine*, please contact Roxanne M. Lee at the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk, The University of Maine, 5766 Shibles Hall, Room 324, Orono, ME 04469-5766, (207) 581.2440, roxanne.lee@umit.maine.edu.

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