

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN MAINE: A FURTHER INVESTIGATION OF THEIR IMPACT UPON SERVING STUDENTS CONSIDERED TO BE “AT RISK” AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

**July 1, 2001 – June 30, 2002 Project**

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### ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN MAINE: A FURTHER INVESTIGATION OF THEIR IMPACT UPON SERVING STUDENTS CONSIDERED TO BE “AT RISK” AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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) *Behavioral Impairment in Maine Public Schools - Phases II and III,* conducted between July 1, 1998 and June 30, 2000.

#### OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This study had four major objectives:

- (1) To conduct an expanded, comprehensive review and analysis of the national literature databases involving alternative education and “at risk” students – with a particular emphasis on the relationship between alternative education and special education.
- (2) To conduct a quantitative study of 30 selected alternative education programs currently operating in Maine that serve students in grades 9 through 12 and which have been in operation for more than 6 years. This component of the overall project was designed to provide the following information: (a) program size; (b) type of curriculum used; (c) types of student assessment employed; (d) funding sources; (e) staffing profiles; (f) current perceived major program needs; (g) student outcome data (e.g., graduation rates, dropout rates, post-secondary education and employment status, etc.); and (h) status of students with disabilities.
- (3) To conduct a qualitative study involving on-site visits to 6 programs (selected from the study sample of 30) that were judged to represent a diverse cross-

section relative to how alternative education programming services are delivered throughout Maine. This component of the overall project was designed to provide more in-depth, follow-up information relative to such factors as: (a) program climate; (b) major student characteristics; (c) students' perceptions of level of satisfaction with current program; (d) students' perceptions involving their previous educational environments; (e) staff perceptions related to program strengths and weaknesses; (f) curriculum design and implementation; and (g) an identification of the major qualities and characteristics of the program that appeared to produce the most positive student outcomes.

- (4) To provide policymakers, administrators, and practitioners in Maine with important information and related recommendations involving alternative education – especially its relationship to special education. This information is designed to assist these individuals in their efforts to improve the quality of the overall educational service delivery system for Maine students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were utilized as part of this investigation. The primary quantitative measure employed in the study was an analysis of the responses to two survey instruments (Alternative Education Programs Survey-Form A and Alternative Education Programs Survey-Form B (Student Outcomes)) completed by alternative education program contact persons (e.g., program director, head teacher, teacher) representing 26 Maine SAU's. The study sample (n=30) was selected from an available data set that the Institute staff had compiled for last year's study. This data set consisted of 39 alternative education programs in Maine that: (1) serve students in grades 9 through 12, and (2) had been in operation for more than 6 years.

The qualitative measures employed in this study consisted of an analysis of semi-structured on-site interviews and observations of a sub-sample of 6 alternative education programs. The selection of the programs for further analysis was made in an effort to represent the diversity of alternative education programs throughout Maine SAUs. The programs considered for the selection differed on the following dimensions: (1) type of curriculum used (an alternative education curriculum or the regular high school curriculum for the majority of students); (2) goal of the program; (3) function of the program; (4) location of program – on-campus or off-campus; (5) program time schedule; (6) size of student body; and (7) size of program staff.

## SELECTED RESULTS

Among the major findings of this study were the following:

☐ Interest in the development of alternative education programs in Maine appears to be increasing at a fairly rapid rate. Due to definitional problems, as well as problems involving accurate data reporting and collection, it is very difficult to determine the precise number of alternative education programs that currently exist in Maine. However, based upon the best available data, it is estimated that approximately 150 alternative education programs presently are operating in Maine – programs that are part of Maine SAUs or which receive a substantial portion of their funding from Maine SAUs. It is estimated that these programs serve approximately 2,225 students who are enrolled in these programs on either a full or part-time basis. Even less reliable data are available relative to the actual number of alternative education programs that were operating in Maine in 2000. Thus, it is extremely difficult to determine the specific rate of increase in the number of these programs during the past two years. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that there has been an approximate 25% increase in the number of alternative education programs in Maine during the past two years. It is important to note that these numbers and percentages include *only* those alternative education programs that are identified as “separate, distinct programs that offer students credit toward graduation.” These are schools and programs that have an “established alternative education identity.” They do *not* include the large numbers of “splinter programs” and “student options” that frequently are viewed by educators as extensions of the general curriculum (e.g., mentoring programs, after-school programs, summer enrichment offerings, etc.). Clearly, if these types of programs and student options were to be included in our numbers, the overall estimates involving the numbers of alternative education programs currently operating in Maine would be substantially higher.

☐ Substantial variance exists among alternative education programs in Maine. They differ in terms of philosophy, type of curriculum, size, location, types of students served, and sources of financial support. *Alternative education* means many different things to different people. Among the various types of *alternative education programs* presently operating in Maine are the following: independent or private schools; programs located within regular school buildings; programs located on-campus but separate from the regular school building; off-campus programs with a “close connection” to the regular school program (students take some of their classes

within the regular high school and participate in the regular high school graduation); and off-campus programs with no discernable “real connection” to the regular school program (students take all of their classes at the alternative school, and, in some cases, even have a separate graduation). In addition, some Maine school personnel identify programs and activities such as summer school, career awareness programs, after-school programs, service learning programs, community service programs, and student learning centers as their “alternative education programs.”

It is clear that not only do the types of alternative education programs vary substantially but also do the perceptions involving the precise definition of *alternative education*. However, the primary driving force for the development of these programs appears to be the effort to provide a different type of instructional format, curriculum, and a more personal and responsive school climate to help students remain in school and to graduate.

☐ Most alternative education programs in Maine during the 2000-2001 school year (56%) were characterized as Type I programs. These programs are designed to serve students having difficulty learning and adjusting in conventional school settings. They are commonly referred to as *innovative* programs or *choice* programs in which student participation is *voluntary*. Twenty-three percent (23%) of the programs were characterized as Type III programs – designed to serve students needing remediation or rehabilitation within the academic, social, emotional, and/or behavioral domains. Only 1% of the respondents in the study sample identified their program as a Type II program – designed *exclusively* to serve students who are at risk of suspension or expulsion (or who have already been suspended or expelled). These programs often are referred to as “Last Chance” or “Disciplinary” programs with students being *assigned* to them. Thus, it appears that Maine has resisted the growing national trend to develop alternative education programs that are designed to be exclusionary, punitive interventions for “disruptive students.”

☐ There is “no typical student” who is enrolled in alternative education programs in Maine. However, the *essential characteristics* of students who are represented in most alternative education programs in Maine might best be viewed as falling into three general types:

(1) *Unconventional learners* who require different overall learning environments. These are the students who vary widely in intellectual ability (many of them are extremely intelligent and/or very creative) and who often find it difficult, if not impossible, to learn and adjust within conventional school settings. They require a more flexible curriculum

and a more flexible school day. They often possess unique learning styles that are difficult to accommodate in large classes. Many of these students, for a wide variety of personal, emotional, and social reasons, do not feel “connected” to their larger peer group, or in some cases, even to a much smaller “peer cluster group.” Many of these students are “self-paced learners” who, although clearly capable of learning, find it extremely difficult to conform to the conventional school structure and curriculum.

- (2) *Students with “behavioral issues”* who have experienced difficulty conforming to conventional school rules and sanctions. Most often, these are *not* students who have been identified as special education students within the emotional/behavioral domain. Rather, they are students who frequently are described as “oppositional,” as presenting “challenging behaviors,” and who often are viewed as “disciplinary problems.” Many of these students typically have accumulated many school absences and/or have been suspended or expelled from school. Generally, these students are *not* considered to be “hard-core” kids but rather as students who are “disruptive to others.”
- (3) *Students with unique personal, family and/or social issues and problems.* Some of these students live in very dysfunctional or disruptive family situations that impact negatively on their ability to succeed in conventional school environments (e.g., substance abuse, abuse and neglect, violence, family discord, etc.). Some of these students “live on their own.” Other students are struggling with their own personal issues and problems, e.g., substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, mental health problems, etc. that interfere with their ability to function effectively in traditional school environments. For example, a pregnant teenager may feel “shunned” within her regular high school or she may need to miss school on some days because of physical reasons related to her pregnancy. Not all schools are supportive of “absences due to pregnancy complications.” Still other teenagers who have babies or very young children experience major problems due to the lack of availability of a daycare facility or program within their high school. Without the availability of such facilities or programs, a large majority of these students tend to drop out of school.

□ The location of alternative education programs in Maine during 2000-2001 was almost equally divided between on-campus sites (48%) and off-campus sites (51%). The specific location (on-campus or off-campus) of an alternative education program appears to be more a function of “space availability” rather than “philosophical orientation.” Programs generally are located wherever space is determined to be available. However, as a general rule, directors of off-campus programs appear to be especially strong in their conviction that a major factor contributing to the success of their program is its off-campus location. The most common reason offered for this belief was that “most of their students felt generally rejected and alienated by the majority of their classmates (and, in some cases, by some teachers) within the regular high school.”

□ The type of curriculum followed in alternative education programs in Maine varies considerably dependent upon several factors, e.g., the perceived goal and function of the program (innovative or remedial), the characteristics (personal, learning, social, and behavioral) of the students served, the “philosophy of the director,” and, in some cases, the expectations of regular school administrators. Most programs utilize a curriculum that is “essentially different from the traditional high school curriculum.” Other alternative education programs in Maine tend to follow a more conventional high school curriculum, usually with some modifications and adaptations. However, common elements contained in essentially all program curricula are a heavy emphasis on individualized instruction, close instructor-student relationships, flexibility and adaptation, experiential learning, and, in many cases, service learning.

□ Issues involving individual student assessment and overall program assessment currently represent a major concern for most alternative educators in Maine. These issues have become an even greater concern in Maine (as well as throughout the nation) as a result of the current educational reform movement that emphasizes much greater uniformity and rigor in assessing student progress within the academic domain. Wide variance exists among alternative education programs in Maine with respect to how best to respond to the issue of “valid, reliable, and meaningful student assessment.” The majority of programs advocate strongly for the use of *multiple measures* to assess student progress, relying heavily upon alternative assessments and other methods of assessing student progress. Only 57% of the programs in the study sample indicated that they use MEA scores to assess the progress of their students, suggesting that this particular assessment tool is not widely viewed among alternative educators as an especially important or meaningful measure of student progress. However, many alternative educators expressed strong support for utilizing the “guiding principles” of the *Learning Results* as an excellent mechanism for “framing their curriculum” and providing their students with an effective and meaningful overall instructional program.

It is evident that the vast majority of alternative educators in Maine fully support the need for high student standards and high student expectations as well the need for utilizing valid and reliable measures to assess student progress toward meeting established outcomes, most certainly including academic outcomes. However, many alternative education supporters expressed concern that current policies and practices involving the assessment of desired outcomes for their students are too narrowly focused on academic outcomes and that *broader measures of efficacy*

are needed. Many alternative educators expressed the conviction that *in addition to measuring academic outcomes, other outcomes and performance indicators need to be identified and measured*, e.g., attendance, behavior change, self-esteem, etc. Also, many alternative educators expressed the view 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. Given the personal, social, behavioral characteristics of many “alternative education students” most alternative educators suggest that in order to obtain a “true measure of student outcomes” it may be necessary to track outcomes for these students over a longer period of time than is currently being proposed.

☐ Most alternative education programs in Maine rely heavily upon local funding to support their programs. Ninety percent (90%) of the respondents in the study sample indicated that their *major source* of funding came from their own local school district budget – with 70% of them stating that this was their *sole source* of funding. Six percent (6%) of the respondents indicated that student tuition from a sending school district (or districts) was their *sole source* of funding. Another 23% of the respondents reported that they received funding through a combination of sources including, local school district funding, state grants, federal grants, and/or funding through private donations.

☐ Staffing patterns of current alternative education programs in Maine vary widely in terms of composition, size, professional certification, and level of educational attainment. Not surprisingly, those programs that have been in operation the longest, tend to have either a full-time or part-time administrator (37% of the programs in the study sample had either a full-time or part-time director), more certified teachers, more students, and a larger number of educational technicians. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of the programs in the study sample reported having fully certified teachers. Only 19% of the teachers in the study sample held a Teacher of Students with Disability certificate. Of all the professional staff in the study sample, 66% have a bachelor’s degree as their highest level of educational attainment; 27%, a master’s degree; and 7%, a post-master’s degree; while 4% of the support staff have an associate’s degree and 5% have a high school diploma.

Teachers in Maine’s alternative education programs tend to be experienced educators, having had several years of teaching experience within *both* regular and alternative education

programs. Within the total sample of 30 programs, 67 professional staff were identified as having more than 5 years teaching experience in a traditional public school setting. Conversely, only 16 professional staff were identified as having less than 2 years teaching experience in a traditional public school setting. Within the total sample of 30 programs, 56 professional staff were identified as having more than 5 years of alternative education teaching experience. On the other hand, only 24 professional staff were identified as having less than 2 years of alternative education teaching experience.

□ Based upon an analysis of study sample results, students enrolled in alternative education programs in Maine generally obtain positive outcomes. Eighty-one percent (81%) of the students in the study sample graduated from their alternative education program with a high school diploma. Only 9% dropped out of the program. The fact that 81% of the students in the study sample *did graduate with a high school diploma* is suggested to be especially significant given the specific characteristics and profiles of the students involved. Most, if not all, of these students, before entering their alternative education programs, were considered to be at “high risk” for dropping out of school. In fact, some of them had *already dropped out* on one or more occasions.

Eighty-two percent (82%) of the students in the study held a job while attending their alternative education program. Ten percent (10%) of them were parents when they entered the program while another 8% became parents during the school year. Sixty-one percent (61%) of the students were living with their parents while attending the program, while 23% of them lived on their own. Twenty-two percent (22%) of these students had known involvements with a law enforcement agency. These descriptive data serve to illustrate the multiple and complex problems that many of the students in the study sample had to deal with as they participated in their programs. The fact that 81% of these students were able to overcome these barriers (and several students in the sample experienced multiple barriers) and to graduate provides strong testimony not only to their own resilience and motivation but also to the effectiveness of their alternative programs.

Further, of those students who completed the program, 10% enrolled in a post-secondary higher education program; 12% enrolled in a post-secondary technical/vocational program; 6% joined the military; and 56% obtained a full-time job. It is suggested that these findings serve to lend further support to the efficacy of the alternative education programs in which these students were enrolled. Eighty-four percent (84%) of the students in the study sample could be viewed as

having obtained a positive outcome of some type (e.g., acceptance in a post-secondary program, obtaining full-time employment, etc.) immediately subsequent to the completion of their program.

□ Widespread support was evident among regular public school administrators interviewed as part of this study for the existence of alternative education programs within their SAUs. These programs were commonly viewed as effectively meeting the multiple and often complex needs of many students within their school districts who experience difficulty learning and adjusting within their traditional educational programs. Further, alternative education programs were commonly viewed by these administrators as representing an important curriculum and learning option for their students. These programs generally were perceived not as a separate entity but rather as an integral part of their overall educational service delivery system for students within their school district.

□ The precise relationship between alternative education and special education is complex and elusive. Wide variance exists among states regarding how alternative education and special education programs are interrelated – if at all. For example, in some states, such as Vermont, special education students, especially those with emotional and behavioral disabilities, receive a large proportion, if not all, of their basic instructional program and related support services within “alternative schools” or “alternative programs.” The overall special education and alternative education service delivery systems for students in Vermont appear to be well integrated. Conversely, in Maine the special education and alternative education systems generally are viewed as being largely separate and distinct from each other. While most alternative education programs in Maine include identified special education students, the vast majority of students enrolled in alternative education programs throughout Maine are *not* students with identified disabilities with IEPs. Rather, they are students considered to be “at risk for school failure.”

It is difficult to determine with any reasonable degree of confidence (based upon our two studies conducted between 2000 and 2002) the specific impact that the presence of an alternative education program in a school district has on its special education childcount numbers. Due to the wide variance among the programs studied, it is difficult to generalize findings and to offer conclusive evidence that the presence of an alternative education program in a particular school district will clearly result in a decrease in that district’s special education childcount figures. Too many factors and conditions exist that serve to confound this issue. However, it does seem

reasonable to conclude, based upon our studies, that the presence of alternative education programs in a local school district does *increase the likelihood* of preventing many students (including those students identified as special education students) from dropping out of school.

□ Subsequent to reviewing and analyzing materials, information, and survey data from multiple and varied alternative education programs throughout the state of Maine during the past two years, as well as having had the opportunity to collect and analyze qualitative assessment data as a result of direct participation in on-site visits to several of these programs, it is suggested that *the most successful programs contain the following essential characteristics and qualities:*

- Have a clearly defined and articulated vision, purpose, and objectives.
- Promote a sense of belonging, caring, respect, and safety for students (academic, physical, emotional, and social).
- Have clear, well-defined instructional and curriculum objectives.
- Promote and maintain high student standards and student accountability as well as *diverse* measures for assessing students' progress toward meeting these standards.
- Are innovative and flexible in organizational structure, program operation, and instructional delivery (e.g., a flexible time schedule is employed; several options exist; whereby students are able to obtain course credits (e.g., credit-by-objective); a variety of instructional strategies are employed depending upon preferred individual student learning style, etc.).
- Have clear, and well-defined student entrance and exit criteria, as well as re-entry criteria for those students who may have been dismissed from the program at some point but who have expressed a desire to return.
- Student participation is *voluntary*.
- Are viewed by students, parents, and *all* staff as a privilege to attend and not as a "dumping ground for undesirables."
- Have a low staff-student ratio and provide for a great deal of individual student attention and individualized instruction.
- Have strong and stable leadership.
- Recruit, employ, and retain qualified and highly trained staff who have "special expertise" in the area of alternative education. It is essential that the staff are committed to an alternative education philosophy and that they volunteer – and

are not assigned -- to teach in the program.

- Have strong school district-wide support and understanding.
- Have a close working relationship with all parts of the overall school system and with other collaborating agencies in the community that serve youth. In particular, it is essential that community mental health, health, and social services are not only made available for students but that these services are meaningfully integrated within the alternative education program per se.
- Actively engage parents, to the maximum extent possible, in the overall program.
- Are adequately funded.
- Effectively utilize available community resources – both fiscal and human. A consistent effort is made to reach out to and involve the community.

However, the two *most critical factors* that appear to contribute to the success of quality alternative programs in Maine are (1) the sense of hope and empowerment that these programs provide to students, and (2) the "personal relationship that exists between student and instructor." Repeatedly throughout the two years of our study, these two factors were consistently identified by students as the "real strength of their programs." In brief, students in these programs felt respected, valued, and empowered to make good decisions and to assume personal responsibility for their overall behaviors.

For a copy of the full report, *Alternative Education Programs in Maine: A Further Investigation of Their Impact Upon Serving Students Considered To Be "At Risk" and Students with Disabilities*, 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.

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