

High School Reform & Alternative Education
A Memo delivered in 2007 to Alternative Schools
Date: January 5, 2005, Updated November 2008
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This note is being provided to focus alternative educators on school leadership and school improvement as part of the foundation for change to improve high schools. "Quality" is the major issue of current practices in high school—the implication is that the "quality" of our high schools can be improved. The issue of "quality" is the central theme of current reports shared in the last high school summit held in Des Moines on December 14th, 2004. Major reports included:

- A. Foundation for Change: Focusing on Iowa High Schools, Iowa Department of Education, 2004.
- B. Redefinition of High School: A Vision for Iowa, Urban Education Network of Iowa, Inc. 2001.
- C. High Schools that work, **Southern Regional Education Board**,
- D. Breaking Ranks: Strategies for Leading High School Reform, National Association for Secondary Principals, The National Education Alliance, 2004.
- E. The Case for Change, Iowa Learns Council, 2004.

All of the existing recommendations to change high schools can be found in basic beliefs held and practiced by alternative educators worldwide. The basic essence of alternative education is being drafted into new designs for high school represented in the reports above.

Components include:

- Personalized planning - smaller learning units
- Connections with students and adopting to differences - A sense of

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- Distributed leadership - all teachers as leaders
- Flexible use of time and varied scheduling
- Student - centered governance
- Focused belief that all student's can learn
- Comprehensive development of students for academic, personal-social, and career - vocational growth
- Varied timelines for completing an education
- Focus on the future - preparing for life as a contributing citizen - Essential Learnings
- Education for all with equity and equal opportunity
- Collaborative coordination with all community support organizations and services
- Higher education partnerships
- Alternatives/choices/options to accommodate learning styles, life challenges, and varied individual development

National reports and state-level reports indicate positive trends in education with recommendations to further study of education alternatives. The Iowa success stories and national perspectives are identified in the publication entitled "Iowa Success Stories of Alternative Schools and Students" (www.iaae.net). The International Association of Alternative Education (IALA) featured a special review of new efforts in high school reform in March of 2005. Select "High Schools and Alternative Education" on the IAAE site for the complete review. Go to www.learningalternatives.net to access the IALA web site and the IALA store which features "Educational Alternatives for Everyone: A Handbook for Educators, Families and Politicians by Don Glines. This publication was designed to provide influence new school initiatives for the future.

Some school improvement initiatives in Iowa, which have centered on "quality" demonstrating vision and leadership within alternative education with statewide and national implications include:

Morning Sun: School Improvement Planning (a model for alternative

schools and school districts involved in consortiums to serve all children to achieve equity and equal opportunity)--This school improvement plan is based on current high school reform and quality indicators of alternative education and demonstrates shared leadership. This effort has been shared nationally and in administrator meetings within Iowa. The benefits of completing this type of plan are also documented.

Belin-Blank International Center for the Gifted Education and Talent Development, Iowa City - a three-year effort to identify gifted students enrolled in alternative schools within Iowa. The project is the only of its kind in the country with promise for leading the way in changing the perception of communities regarding the value of alternative learning environments for all students with different learning styles and challenges.

Expo High School, Waterloo - a focused effort to improve reading skills of adolescents in an alternative-learning environment. The effort involves the coordination with leadership of curriculum experts of the area education agency to direct the reading curriculum and assessment of student's progress. Staff development has been and continues to be a primary part of the effort to improve the performance of students.

Marshalltown - Developed a long-term shelter home for teens needing a permanent, safe and adequate nighttime residence with constructive parenting. The home (Promise Program at www.promiseprogram.org) coordinates with local public schools and provides a supportive environment and help with education at the home. This center may lead the way to residential education centers in Iowa common in other states. Residential education centers are needed to stabilize the lives of children to improve their success in school. Residential education has a national organization (www.residentialeducation.org).

Many more efforts are underway in Iowa to improve education through options/alternatives. The IAAE conference planned each year features many new and exciting efforts to achieve the

“quality” focus in major education reports. Plan to attend the conference if you can. See information about the annual conference at www.iaae.net.

A new publication from the National Dropout Prevention Center features the role of the school principal in designing schools to serve “All” learners. Learning alternatives are a major part of the suggestions including a primary focus on learners VS curriculum. The suggestions for future schooling remain congruent with the components of alternative education identified above. (Edwards, Steven W. & Edwards, Rebecca. (2007). *The Principal’s Role in Dropout Prevention: Seven Key Principles*, National Dropout Prevention Center.)

In 2008 the International Association of Alternative Education (IALA) joined six other major education organizations in the nation to develop a position statement on revamping NCLB legislation to provide for all learners in the future. The position statement is consistent with other organizations in suggesting alternatives for system renewal. The position statement can be reviewed on the IAAE web site. Select “IALA 2008 Position Paper.”

Many of the existing efforts to revamp high schools and renew school districts include basic principles found in basic beliefs of alternative educators. The activity encourages the participation of alternative educators in existing reforms. Do not hesitate to get involved locally to help maximize the potential of schools to serve “All” learners. You have certainly been welcomed.