

What is Alternative About Your Alternative? **Raymond Morley**

Just over one year ago your director of education, while speaking to an alternative education administrators meeting, said “All kids deserve a diploma and there are no excuses for not having one.” “I look to your group to find ways to educate all.” She also said, “We can not move quietly with the legislature.” “Let the legislature know that we need to create learning environments to help all kids do better.” And she also said, “Schools are a reflection of our communities. Parents are thinking all schooling is the same without thought that schools need to be an organization of innovation and change and not the same.”

So you have been asked to lead the way to helping all kids find a pathway to the education goals of the community. By the way, these are the words that are printed on the IAAE membership brochure. IAAE seeks to find a pathway for all students.

Alternative schools and programs remain one of the very few education innovations that have continued over the last forty years. While other innovations have come and gone, alternative schools have remained. Success story after success story continues to be the legacy of alternative schools. NCES stated that in the nineties graduation rates went up, but when alternative school data is taken out of the picture, graduation rates went down. In Iowa, as alternative schools have expanded, graduation rates have risen and dropout rates have declined. Alternative schools have helped increase graduation rates. Why?

What is alternative about your alternative? If you do not have a ready answer you should. Because public education is fast becoming a system of options and not one school. The new recommendations from high school reform research are embracing the concepts born and supported within the growth of alternatives across the world over the past 100 years. Research in many areas supports the whole concept of alternatives/options and not “One size fits all.”

So can we answer the question what is alternative about your alternative and can you do it so your community can understand the value? If you can, you will continue to find a support for your pathway to the education goals of the community.

I have found that not everyone can readily tell me what is alternative about his or her alternative. The students who succeed within them can always find an answer and parents who experience the joy of seeing their children succeed can also find an answer. Communities across Iowa need to hear the answers so we can do what the director of education has charged you to do---she said “we cannot move quietly with our legislators”. “We cannot let parents think that one school is good for all.” Alternatives are a sign of success, not failure. Providing alternatives indicates that your community understands research and the need to provide learning alternatives for all. It is a sign of strong leadership and excellence in education.

So what is alternative about your alternative? What makes alternatives successful when other traditional schools are not successful with a given student?

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

Have you dubbed your school alternative because the term is something you can hang your hat on? If you cannot explain the differences between your school and others in the community with regard to helping students learn, then you may well have dubbed a name. Your success with students will be minimized accordingly.

Quality alternative schools have fundamental assumptions about learning.

*Autonomy (a separate setting apart from the traditional environment) is everything. Motivation research teaches us to escape negative environments and experience positive environments to build stamina and change ourselves for the good. Alternative schools must be autonomous to achieve maximum success.

Students who have failed in a school environment do not thrive in the same environment in a different program. They seldom maximize their potential by staying in the same environment. Some will not stay there at all. Would You?

* Personal advisory systems are implemented in alternative schools for constant encouragement of learning. Small size of the school and small teacher/pupil ratios guarantee personal attention and encouragement. Everyone assumes a counselor role and teaching role.

Traditional schools are large and do not guarantee personal advisory access on a day to day basis with personal attention and encouragement. Counselors are used for scheduling and discipline and personal planning is minimized VS maximized. Large size prevents day-to-day access to personal attention which is needed by many.

*In order to succeed we have to deal with the whole child-Physical, mental, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, career, intellectual. Accommodations are made in the management of a student's program to allow support services from agencies and organizations outside of school to be exercised as needed. The student comes first...then curriculum. Motivation to learn comes from the individual-Once started, it blossoms.

If curriculum comes first motivation can be lost quickly. Traditional school is about guarantees—a promise of the acquisition of basic skills in reading, math, writing, etc.—curriculum is the guiding principle. The student must adopt and conform and learn the curriculum designed for all. Accommodations for support services from outside of school can seldom be made without great difficulty and to the extent necessary to achieve school success.

* The timeline to learn is flexible in an alternative school. All learners vary in timeline and readiness to learn. Readiness is strongly influenced by biological factors as well as environmental. Expectations vary in the number of courses a student should take. The students progress based on individual commitment.

Traditional schools set a maximum schedule for all kids with course loads established by a timetable for graduation. The practice is that all students come equally prepared, with the same timetable for learning, and same resources for learning. Research identifies the fact that this model will not work for all students.

* Choice research is embraced in alternative schools. When given choices, students and parents get more involved and committed to school. Choices include: attending the school, timeline for school, course load, adjustments in school for other needed community-based services for accommodating needs, accommodations to pay fees, etc.

Traditional schools restrict choice. You do attend the neighborhood school whether acceptable or not. You follow the same timetable for all. You take a maximum course load. The parents and students do make-ups for missed school for accessing community-based services.

*Numerous teaching strategies are practiced constantly in alternative schools to accommodate different learning styles. Variety in practices within any given day are recognized as needed such as field trips, simulations, peer teaching, group study, and discussion, demonstration, community service, including many more.

Students in traditional high schools identify the number one concern of traditional programs is that teachers do not teach in the way the students can learn. One technique is commonly used—lecture.

*Students assume responsibility for their education in alternative schools. It is recognized that if students are given responsibility they will learn to be responsible. With responsibility comes commitment to learn. Accommodations are made to help students accept responsibility for their education. They can choose to attend or not with personal consequences, they can assume full schedules or not with personal consequences, they can accelerate their education to postsecondary options or not with personal consequences, etc. A basic practice is that students are encouraged to continue learning with them as the decision maker. They control success via exercising or neglecting opportunities.

Traditional schools punish students for not attending, not completing homework, not achieving passing grades, etc. Students learn to work the system, achieve less and get by, and learn to blame others for what happens. Research in Iowa identifies fifty policies and practices in traditional schools that contribute to student failure VS success. (See www.iaae.net)

*Student governance includes all students in alternative schools. Family meetings are held for decision-making on curriculum, extra-curricular activities, interschool visitations, behavior policy, consequences, etc. The establishment of family and joint decision-making establishes ownership for all and commitment to monitor behavior. Students monitor their own environment to assist staff. Student governance leads to self- control and monitoring and learning the democratic process.

Students in traditional schools elect a student council and leave the decision-making up to the staff and student council. Most are never involved with environmental decisions, curriculum decisions, extra-curricular decisions, behavior control decisions, etc.

*Personal contracts and goal setting are practiced constantly in alternative schools to establish the ability to set goals, develop plans to accomplish the goals, and create the resources necessary to support the plans. This learning is essential for success in all aspects of life.

Schedules are set for students in traditional schools without any necessary link to relevancy in the community. Students follow the schedules without much involvement in looking ahead.

*The talents of each child are what are valued in an alternative school. Different learners have different intelligences needing some adjustments in the learning process, what is learned and how learning is demonstrated. The different talents are all valued because it takes different talents to make community work. It also takes different knowledge coming together versus all the same. Everybody is recognized as having talent and is perceived as being able to learn.

Talents are often overlooked in traditional programs for need to address academics and maintain a schedule for that purpose. Students feel personally neglected because of the lack of recognition for the strengths they do have. The schedule must be met.

*Schools initiated and sustained by concerned members of the public are usually more viable and sustainable than those developed by independent educators. Community engagement strengthens alternative schools just as it does traditional schools.

Be assured about the fact that the traditional program does serve most of our children well in helping them to succeed through education. There are students who fail within the traditional school and do their best to escape the environment of failure just as you and I would try to escape any environment not contributing to our success. An alternative school provides an option for those for whom the traditional school does not work and must be considered as an extension/part of the high school of the community--separate, but equal in importance and mission.

The statements above are meant to help you identify what might be alternative about your alternative. Your school board and community needs to know the information to understand why an alternative school is a move toward excellence in education VS a sign of failure. Help them by describing your alternative compared to the traditional high school. As well, the professional staff in the district can benefit by knowing the facts. Your document can help create support through dialogue and collaboration. Be sure to utilize your source of information and direct others to use the same through www.iaae.net