

International Association for Learning Alternatives (IALA)

A Case for Supporting the International Association for Learning Alternatives

The Need

The numbers are dramatic. 67 percent of high school youth are “disconnected” from their studies according to *Selling Students Short: Classroom Bargains and Academic Reform in the American High School*. Many have documented the boredom and dislike for school of elementary and secondary students. About half of the minority students in large urban schools fail to graduate. Students enrolled in alternative programs, in the State of Minnesota, have grown from 4,000 in 1988 to 175,000 in 2003. What’s wrong with this picture? Clearly, one size doesn’t fit all.

There need to be choices of schools as a matter of public policy so that all schools are alternatives. Parents and students need to exercise choice in education just as they now have choices of groceries, religion and automobiles. A democracy provides freedom of choice.

Clearly, mainstream education is not successful in educating a large portion of students. Mandates for higher standards and testing have not stemmed the tide of students leaving traditional, mainstream schools. In addition, colleges and universities voice concern for the number of students, entering post-secondary education, not prepared for college level courses. Employers complain that graduates do not have the skills needed for entry-level jobs.

American schools are struggling to meet the needs of an ever increasing population of students from other cultures, non-English languages, poverty, and drug and alcohol abuse. These most vulnerable students are often the first to drop out of school. In many states, small alternative programs have been created to re-enroll dropouts and failing students. Choice doesn’t end with struggling students. There must be choices for all.

There are storefront schools, schools within schools, charter schools, private-contracted schools, alternative learning schools, on-line schools, Waldorf schools, magnet schools, etc. all attempting meet the growing need of providing alternatives. Mostly, these alternative schools work in isolation from each other, without the peer interaction that provides new ideas, technical assistance or basic moral to help them improve and flourish.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION for LEARNING ALTERNATIVES

(IALA)

Educational choice activists have formed the International Association of Learning Alternative (IALA) as a 501 c 3 nonprofit organization, with a mission, bylaws, and board of directors. The mission is, ***To lead, promote and support learning alternatives and choice options.*** The board of directors has representation from 11 states, including California, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington. The current Chair is Wayne Jennings of Minnesota.

IALA plans to establish and staff an office to support a diverse, dedicated collection of programs and educators. At the state and national level, it will help organize state and regional organizations to bring people together who are otherwise isolated from one another. It will promote a *STARS* component for students at state, regional and national levels. It will help state organizations with legislative issues and provide spokespeople for the alternative movement and strong voice to those calling for school reform.

Activities and tasks of the IALA office intends the following:

- Establish a databank and directory of member programs by type and descriptions.
- Establish a bank of readily available powerful learning experiences and best practices.
- Provide coordination of an exciting annual national conference.
- Provide advice, training and technical assistance to local programs and state and regional organizations.
- Maintain a web site at www.learningalternatives.net
- Act as a clearinghouse for information, questions, public relations, articles, research, model legislation, successful proposals and links to other useful sites.
- Publish an online newsletter.
- Create a national speaker's bank.
- Create a bank of job openings and information on those seeking positions.
- Establish a national *STARS* organization for students and assist states and regions in creating their own student organizations. *STARS* stands for Success, Teamwork, Achievement, Recognition & Self-Esteem.