



Alternative Strategies for Success: The Real Meaning of Alternative Education

“Donnell,” a fifth grader, was expelled from his elementary school in November 2000 after bringing a weapon to school. His parents had been incarcerated until September 2000, and he had lived with several different family members. According to his IEP (Individualized Education Plan), Donnell was reading on a .5 grade level. He had been identified as learning disabled in October 2000. According to the principal at his school, Donnell was unmotivated and angry. Following the expulsion, Donnell entered the Upton Alternative Elementary School in the Baltimore City Public School System. Both of his parents brought him in to the school. They, clearly, were worried about their son’s lack of success in school. Donnell was unenthusiastic about coming to school and added little to the discussion. In June, Donnell walked across the stage in his fifth grade graduation. His reading level was nearly 4th grade. He felt ready for middle school. And...he swam in the Chesapeake Bay.

Jerome, a fourth grader, was expelled from his school for bringing a weapon. He explained that he brought the weapon because his friends told him to bring it. Jerome came to the Upton Alternative Elementary School in January. Despite his taller than average height and large physique, Jerome was easily intimidated. He was a slow reader with little confidence, but on par with his grade level. He was not identified as disabled, but clearly he suffered from some anxiety and sub-clinical depression. In April, Jerome returned to his home school. He had become a leader among his peers and a role model in dealing with frustrating experiences. He had renewed confidence. The other students, according to his principal, could see the change.

Jacob, a second grader, was expelled from school for bringing a baseball bat to school in order “to hurt people.” He said that he was tired of being picked on and was going to take care of it. He was placed in the Upton Alternative Elementary School in February. Jacob had severe articulation and language problems. He recognized few letters and did not know any letter sounds. As soon as an academic task was placed before him, Jacob cried or

lashed out. If his teacher showed any attention to another student, Jacob ran from the room and threw himself on the floor, screaming. By June, Jacob was reading at a primer level. He was able to participate in some cooperative learning, and socially, he fit in with the group. During a community conference about a fight that took place as the students arrived at school, Jacob said, “This [fight] is affecting me because I am missing my reading time.”

What were the elements of the Upton Alternative Elementary School that allowed these children, identified as having the most severe behavioral problems in their respective schools, to flourish both academically and socially? Could these children’s needs have been met within the regular school program?

Alternative Education entered the law as part of the revised special education law, IDEA ‘97. Many school systems responded to a perceived increase in school violence and drug possession with the adoption of “zero tolerance” policies. These policies result in significant increases in suspension and expulsion in an attempt to protect the safety of all students and to maintain an environment conducive to learning. However, the expulsion policies are in direct opposition to the concept of free and appropriate public education, also guaranteed in IDEA. The provision of the *Interim Alternative Educational Setting (IAES)* grants schools the right to treat students with disabilities the same as students without disabilities with respect to their removal from a school without parent permission (Bear, Quinn, & Burkholder, 2001). This right is restricted to the possession of weapons, sale or solicitation of a controlled substance, and the threat of serious harm to themselves or others.

IAESs are designed to be temporary placements for disabled students. Students are expected, within approximately 45 calendar days, to return to their previous school placement or a new “more appropriate” placement. They are not designed to meet the long-term educational or emotional needs of the students. Some alternative placements are designed only to house disabled students who have been expelled (because of

zero-tolerance policies or their own dangerous behavior) until they can, legally, be returned to their home schools. However, some programs set goals to change the direction of the student's approach to school, to increase the student's tolerance for frustration, or to develop coping strategies designed to help the student avoid the issues that brought the student to the alternative setting prior to returning them to comprehensive schools. Forty-five days may be inadequate for these purposes. In some cases, longer placements are possible, such as when the student's behavior is deemed not to be a manifestation of his or her disability. In this case, a hearing officer authorizes another 45-day placement. Another instance is when the IEP Team changes the placement to an alternative school.

Although the identified reasons for removing a student from school are always behavioral, the underlying reasons for the behavior can be varied. Some students have identified emotional disabilities, some have conduct problems, and still others are academically frustrated. The intervention strategies for the students must be in line with the functions of the behavior (Batsche & Knoff, 1995). Curriculum-based assessment, functional behavioral assessment, and observation provide the dynamic data that generates hypotheses from which strategic interventions are best derived.

There are many factors related to students' acting out behavior in school. Some of these factors are correlational; that is, they increase the student's risk for problems. These include poverty, lack of parental supervision, parental substance use and abuse, and exposure to violence. However, although these factors are associated with higher incidences of poor school performance and acting out behavior, they are not causative. Students with similar backgrounds are also successful in many schools. Additionally, these factors are inaccessible to the teacher, school psychologist, or school counselor who are trying to help the student. The causative factor for many of these students is academic frustration, something that is within the teacher's ability to intervene. Some of the frustration is perceived rather than real. However, in practice, perceived self-efficacy concerning academic success is critical to achievement (Schultz, 2000).

Academic success has many underpinnings, including background knowledge, curriculum/student matching, instruction, family support, community involvement, and student factors (learning styles, ability, processing deficits, etc.). Students spend the majority of their waking hours in the classroom. Frustration can stem

from their inability to complete the required tasks, their perception that they are incapable of completing the task, their difficulty in sustaining attention, and, perhaps most of all, their inability to escape. Adults have a variety of coping strategies when they are frustrated. In several workshops, when asked to describe what they do when a task becomes frustrating for them, teachers quickly responded that they walk away, curse, get a snack, take a drink, or just give up for a few days. Any of these strategies could result in suspension or other disciplinary action if used in a classroom setting by a student. In fact, students have virtually no ability to escape frustration that is not provided by a teacher.

At Upton Elementary Alternative School, all of these factors were considered at the inception. An Alternative Elementary Task Force met in December 1999. The task force was comprised of administrators of elementary schools, teachers, school psychologists, social workers, counselors, the coordinator of safe and drug-free schools, and the chief of school police. Brainstorming, examination of the literature, and discussions with other school systems that maintained elementary alternative schools led to the submission of a grant proposal to the state board of education. The grant was approved; however, at \$75,000, it only funded one teaching position and some supplies. Alliance with the Home and Hospital School (Upton), which had been responsible for home-schooling suspended and expelled students, resulted in the transfer of two additional teachers. Books and other academic materials were redeemed from schools that had been taken over by a private company. Rewards, snacks, and other materials were purchased with money from the grant.

Students were assigned to the Upton Alternative Elementary School following one of two events: a second or third long-term suspension or an expulsion. The suspensions were generally for fighting with other students. The expulsions were for bringing weapons (knives, guns, box cutters) to school. Of the 20 students served at Upton during the 2000–2001 academic year, 18 brought weapons to school. The students were between the ages of 7 and 11, and all but one were boys. The one girl did not remain in the program because of severe emotional and behavioral problems that required significant special education intervention. Fifteen of the students had IEPs labeling them as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed. In only one case was the behavior leading to the suspension considered a manifestation of the disability. The suspension services and the head of home and hospital teaching decided whether the student was appropriate for the program.

When the students arrived at Upton, they completed curriculum-based reading and math assessments. The students were then placed in instructional-level groups with teachers who were best suited for those particular students. In addition to receiving instructions geared to meet the students' needs academically, behavioral plans were developed, thus setting standards for individual and group behavior. Students earned points for beginning tasks, following directions, using socially acceptable language, and interacting appropriately with others. In addition, each student had an individual goal developed in collaboration between the teacher and the student. These goals included such behaviors as "leaving street behavior on the street," "asking for help," and "minding your own business." The most important thing that each teacher did in the first few weeks was to determine what behavior each student used to escape frustration and what each student's frustration looked like. In some cases, the student simply shut down, sat quietly, and did nothing. In other instances of frustration, students picked up their chairs and threw them across the room. Still others ripped up the work they had begun.

When students became frustrated, they were encouraged to leave the task and take a "time-out," ask for help, or express how they felt, as long as they did not hurt others. Additionally, tasks were broken into smaller segments so teachers could maintain the attention of the students. If students wanted to sit on the floor or move their desk into another room, they were encouraged to find the strategy that best allowed them to cope with their frustration and move beyond it. **Students began to believe that they could be successful. The more they believed in their ability, the more they learned.**

The increase in self-efficacy demonstrated by the students was the result of several interventions. First, students were assessed so that their instructional level could be determined. The instructional level provides optimal learning conditions within the classroom. It is built on prior knowledge; allows for high rates of on-task activity, task completion, and comprehension; represents a fluid and dynamic concept which changes as performance changes; and insures systematic measurement of the student's performance. Secondly, background knowledge was enhanced through field trips, discussion, and books that were read to the students. Prior knowledge can account for more variation in reading performance than either IQ or measured reading achievement (Johnson & Pearson, 1993). Finally, students were allowed to find their own approaches to the material.

Sometimes it was better for them to listen to stories that were being read by others in order to understand information within the passage, and sometimes it better for them to do the reading themselves.

Parents and guardians played an important role in changing students' attitudes about school. The parents of the students sent to Upton were accustomed to being contacted by the school only when their children were in trouble. When the students first came to Upton, parents were wary and asked questions concerning suspension and other incidents. They voiced concern about telephone calls to their jobs and having to take time away from work to come to school. There were times when parents were asked to come to school to remove their children or to meet with teachers regarding disruptive behavior. However, most calls and notes home involved comments about progress. One student had a tantrum because he did not earn a reward that another classmate was given. He walked out of class and ran outside kicking and screaming. The teacher had to restrain the student so that he did not get hurt or run away. The school police were notified, as were the parents. Finally, the student calmed down and was able to return to the classroom. He completed the task on which he had been working prior to the incident and was able to play a game for the last fifteen minutes of the day. A call was made to his father to report on how positive it was that the student had been able to recover and to encourage the father to praise his son. The father said that he was stunned that the follow-up call had been made at all and that his son had been given the opportunity to return to class.

The parents were also invited to a luncheon to hear their students read a series of inspiring passages and to sing a as a choir. The students were very excited as the time approached for the parents to arrive. They had rehearsed every day for three weeks. Initially, some of the students refused to participate. Were they being oppositional? No, these students had never participated in an activity of this type. Some of them were afraid that they would make mistakes or be embarrassed. Rather than push the students, or threaten them with bad grades or other reprisals, the teachers simply told the students that practicing was going to help them with their skills. There was no requirement that they "perform." When the parents arrived, every student participated, with smiles that the parents had never seen in school before. Parents cried and said that they had never come to school for any other reason other than the "inappropriate behavior" of their children.

The experience at Upton Alternative Elementary School could have been replicated in other settings. The key ingredients were (1) dynamic assessment of the students prior to beginning either academic or behavioral interventions, (2) flexible and patient educators who were more interested in the process of learning than in a particular structure, and (3) empathy for parents and students and the baggage that interferes, for many of them, with the freedom to grow. Success will be determined after these students are truly successful in the mainstream.

References

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