

It's the school and the way they teach that's alternative, not the students.
Paul Schwarz Central Park East Secondary School

The premise that the sending school is not the problem is a false one.
Dr. Tom Gregory Indiana University

"...well, that begs the question..."

A response to

**Making a Difference: Alternative Education in Indiana
(A recent statewide report by the IN Dept. of Education)**

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Recommendations: Learning alternatives for everyone all the time (Glines, 2002).

1. Open **enrollment to any student on a voluntary basis in all alternative programs**—this will rid alternatives of their negative image by putting them on par with options and magnets. “In whatever form, segregation is harmful and particularly insidious when based on a status of being in need” (Sagor, 1997).
2. Allow students **to stay and graduate** from the alternative.
3. Keep schools **small**. Create **learning communities of support**.
4. **Emphasize learning**—styles, multiple intelligence(s), brain-based education.
5. Build on each student’s **strengths and interests**.
6. **I.E.Ps for each student**--personalize curriculum and instruction. Allow students to go at their own rate.
7. **Fuse high expectations** for students **with shared decision-making**, allowing students input into school and classroom rules and decisions.
8. Allow **alternative assessment(s)** that provide options for student success as well as traditional testing.
9. Allow **site-based decisions/management**. Give alternatives the freedom charters do to be innovative, flexible, and free of traditional regulations.
10. **Use all the best practices** herein. Do not limit alternative schools to the few “Making a Difference” suggested.

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The recent publication of "Making a Difference: Alternative Education in Indiana" by Indiana State University along with the Indiana Department of Education's Division of Alternative Education and Learning Opportunities is unprecedented. Even before this division's change from its "at-risk" orientation, there has not been a comparable study not only of alternatives themselves, but indirectly, a study of the traditional system. As well, in light of the current evolution of alternative public schools across the nation, this study sets a benchmark for Indiana.

This study is the right study for the right time because it is full of contradictions and begs many, many questions. Consequently, it is heading those of us who want to provide students, families, and teachers with non-traditional options in the right direction.

Incongruity 1. The report is full of contradictions because over the years the original intent of alternatives and innovate schools has been spoiled (Loflin, 2002) and now many schools and programs across the nation are seen as programs for bad kids...and in some cases, for "bad" teachers. The contradiction is: "Making a Difference" attempts to counter this negative image while as the same time it supports and perpetuates it. The study also misrepresents what a "typical alternative student" is.

Incongruity 2. The study is also full of contradictions because as it attempts to prove alternatives are good and necessary due to the inadequacies of the traditional school system, it simultaneously supports these same inadequacies.

Incongruity 3. To the extent that the study substantiates the viability of Indiana alternative programs, to that same extent is an indictment against the traditional system.

Incongruity 4. As well, because many alternative programs are "off campus" or at a separate location in the attempt to help students, the alternative creates a more refined form of differentiation and segregation.

The study also begs many questions:

- If the alternatives programs are as good as the study maintains, and many are, why aren't they open to anyone?
- If the programs are that good, and many are, why can't kids choose to be there?
- If the programs are so good, and many are, why do students have to transition back to the home school; why can't kids they stay and graduate?
- Are transition schools in a dilemma? Since their task is to prepare students to return to the mainstream, do they have to make sure the programs are not too attractive, do not work too well, do not make students like school too much

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or the students will want to stay?...or act up when they return so they can go back to the alternative?

- If the programs are so good, and many are, why is there a stigma?
- If the programs are so good, and many are, why are they not a first choice? Why wait until students are in trouble. Why not make alternative public schools **proactive**, choices as are magnets, or academies?
- If the programs are that good, is this a threat to the traditional system?
- If the alternative was proactive and students chose the alternative from the beginning, would this mean that the regular schools would have to admit their approach does not work for all students?
- And if the traditional schools were seen as not working for all kids, would this mean that part of why some students fail is the traditional school concept itself?
- Are many of the existing alternative programs alternatives **of** the system or alternatives **to** it?
- To what extent are the reasons why alternatives do not challenge the status quo due to the fact most alternatives remain subordinate to the conventional schools, dependent for its students on the mainstream's ever evolving definition of school failure? (Kelly, 1993)
- Did the study limit the best practices to class size, individualization, and a balance between school, work, and life because they knew it would be too controversial to mention the most important ones: choice, open enrollment, and continuousness—students may stay and graduate?
- Is alternative education the "**stepchild**" of the conventional system **or** its **good genius**?

A **review of the historical context** will help understand these assertions.

It is interesting and provocative to consider the history of the alternative school movement for the last 70 years. The term itself was most often used to describe schools that were alternatives to the existing public schools. Be it through curriculum reforms or different infrastructures, alternative schools attempted to compensate for the political and academic limitations inherent in traditional public schools. Through the establishment of schools with missions that were intentionally created to begin to challenge the traditional notions of power, the early 20th century brought with it ideological departures from Horace Mann's view of the common school. In many cases, the impetus seemed to be the creation of a school which could 'serve as a site for the production of alternative and/or oppositional cultural practices.'

I relate this brief history primarily because the term alternative has re-emerged over the past 5-10 years. But, in the late 1990s it does not carry nearly the romanced of innovation it once did. In general, most students now attend alternative schools not because of the school's innovative, creative curriculum approaches, but because they are no longer succeeding in the traditional school system, including magnets (Bauman, p. 258).

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To see this from another angle, read what former Indiana University education professor and alternative education co-founder, Dr. Robert D. Barr says about this very important relationship between the past and present-day educational themes and reiterating what we owe those visionary alternative school educators:

Before alternative schools, our definition of education was narrow. We believed everyone learned in the same way and should be taught in the same way using a common curriculum. We thought all schools should be alike. We thought children and their parents were incapable of making decisions about how and what they learned. We now know they were wrong, that there is no one single best way for all to learn. We also know that though open/alternative education worked for some, it is not necessarily best for all: Not everyone should be in the traditional classroom, but the inverse is also true. Alternative schools helped us understand that different students could best learn in very different ways (Young, 1990, p. vi).

Taking into account this same historical context, many of the reasons why students are in Indiana alternatives have nothing to do with alternative education.

Alternatives are about at-risk schools, not at-risk kids. Alternatives are not about how to behave, but how to learn. Over the years the image of alternatives has been spoiled. Once a catalyst for change, the very system they sought to influence has redefined them and limited their original purpose and scope. Alternative schools dealing with students who have issues and problems with drug/alcohol, behavior, dysfunctional families, and other social/emotional are not alternative, but more analogous to **day-treatment centers or reform schools**. Others are "**pseudo-alternatives**."

Despite the thousands of alternative programs throughout the United States, a **significant percentage of 'alternative' schools is alternative in name only**. These pseudo-alternatives represent ineffective and often punitive approaches that isolate and segregate from the mainstream students who can be difficult (Kellmayer, 1998, p. 29).

Alternative education has never been about discipline and behavior. It is about different ways to learn, to teach, to assess, and school climate. Coincidentally, for Hoosiers, in the early 1970s, **Indiana University became the first school of higher education to identify and study a growing number of and small highly innovative public school options**. It initiated and conducted the first 12 of the current 32 national alternative education conferences. The Indiana Department of Education published this excerpt by Indiana University professor Robert D. Barr, in *Alternatives in Indiana* (1977) titled, "**What Is An Alternative School?**" This benchmark definition notes,

In spite of the confusion and turmoil, there seems to be strong agreement on some criteria for defining alternative schools (regardless what you choose to call them):

- Voluntary Participation** No student or teacher is arbitrarily assigned.
- Distinctiveness** Each alternative is different from the conventional school.
- Non-exclusiveness** The school is open to all students or voluntary basis.
- Comprehensive Set of Objectives**
- Learning Environment That Relates to Student Learning Styles**

If any school or program does not have the above characteristics, **it is simply not an alternative** (p. 1).

Raywid (1994) categorizes so-called alternatives into "...three pure types, which individual alternatives approximate to varying degrees."

Popular Innovations. **Type I** alternatives seek to make schools challenging and fulfilling. They are **schools of choice** and usually popular. Their organizational and administrative structures are non-traditional. Like magnets, they reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy. Many innovations are now recommended as improvement measures for all schools—thus they are the clearest examples of restructured schools.

Last-Chance Programs. **Type II** are programs **where students are sentenced**—usually prior to expulsion. Having either short-term placements (in-school suspension) or longer term for the chronically disruptive, they are likened to "**soft jails**" and have nothing to do with choice. **Focusing on behavior modification, little attention is paid to (an) innovative school climate, learning and assessment strategies.**

Remedial Focus. **Type III** are programs for students who are presumed to be in need of remediation or rehabilitation—academic, social/emotional or both. The assumption is that after successful treatment students can return to the mainstream.

The type of school determines how it is evaluated: whether student affiliation is by choice, sentence or referral; and perhaps most fundamentally, what is assumed about the students. Both **Type II/III** assume the problem lies with in the individual. **Type I assumes that the difficulties may be explained by the student school match—and that by altering the school's program and climate, one can alter student response performance and achievement** (p. 27-28).

In light of the growing number of school districts, over the past 15 years, that have created alternative program(s)/school(s) due not only to the need to remove the "chronically disruptive" (Albert, 1996; Schneider, 1999), and keep suspended students in "school," notwithstanding the increasing funding available (Albert, 1997), it is important for district and alternative school administrators/staff to have a perspective to compare/contrast with other programs. The Pseudo-Alternative

School Checklist (Loflin, 2003) may provide the opportunity to see where school options fall on the genuine vs. pseudo-alternative scale and thus encourage an evaluation of the quality, potential, or effectiveness of “alternative” programs.

Incongruity 1. “Making a Difference” attempts to counter this negative image while as the same time it supports and perpetuates it. As well, the study confuses what is meant by the category, “a typical alternative student.”

Issue One: Defining who attends: **Creating the perception and then resisting it at the same time.**

A review of the reasons the “Making a Difference” study presents concerning why students are in alternatives, not by choice, but mainly involuntarily will beg many questions. Some of the reasons stated in the study, as noted, are “interrelated, complex, and varied.” They are listed here in no particular order or category.

- | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------------|
| --poverty | --frequent moves | --disruptive |
| --lack of good role models | --failing academically | --drugs/alcohol |
| --learning disabilities | --expectant or pregnant | --feel forgotten |
| --angry | --don't care | --school itself |
| --dysfunctional family environment | --required to by court | --homeless |
| --feel uncomfortable in regular school | --feel betrayed by adults | --need employment |
| --emotional problems | --lives not pleasant or easy | --hate school |
| --school not designed or prepared to teach trouble makers | --withdrawn/intends to withdraw | --student's own personality |
| --square kids and round holes | --can't handle social or academic pressures of traditional school | --neglect |
| --troubled and frightened | --last chance due to expulsion | --believe they are losers |
| --dropped out | --abuse | |

The study notes that disruption and failing academically are the 2 main reasons for students being in alternatives. In the historical context previously reviewed, most students in Indiana’s alternatives are not there by choice due to a “school’s innovative, creative curriculum.” Those failing academically may. In programs for students who are chronically disruptive or where students are transitioned back—**Type II/III**--there is no incentive for a non-traditional curriculum (learning styles/multiple intelligences, IEPs, alternative assessment, shared-decision making) because discipline and behavior are the issues. As well, since the students will return to the mainstream, why approach learning differently? Back in their home school, they will be taught and tested the same as everyone else is in the “one size fits all” traditional system.

By limiting the students who attend alternative schools and programs to those students “...who are facing their adult lives unable to read, underemployed or unemployable, in need of public support, dependent on alcohol or drugs, or falling into our criminal justice system” or who are “...on the verge of being expelled, or dropping out of school” (Lucas, Steiger, & Gamble, 2003) the citizens of Indiana

actually limit the potential of alternatives to help **all** students. To the extent that these programs also limit enrollment, according to the study, to those who are failing academically, chronically disruptive, withdrawn or intending to withdraw--to that same extent they are viewed in a negative light as places for bad kids. This creates a stigma, and the branding backfires (Kelly, 1993). It further weakens the disadvantaged students by labeling them as unfit people (Sagor, 1997).

Even students who attend alternatives by choice, tend to view themselves as less than others, lacking something that would make them normal—or they'd be in a "normal" school. By relieving the home school of students who defied academic/social norms, these alternatives for the maladjusted or different become **"a more refined type of differentiation."**

As long as the cost of admission to an 'alternative program' is declaring yourself 'unfit,' then attending an alternative program will put a scarlet letter on all who enroll.

If admission to a program is based on a handicap, the program becomes to be seen as the 'handicap' program. If admission is based on aptitude, it is called the 'gifted' program. Thus, if the program is designed for those who 'don't fit in,' it is seen as a special program for 'those kids.'

In whatever form, segregation is harmful and particularly insidious when based on a status of being in need (Sagor, 1997).

Thus the continued negative labeling of alternatives due to limiting those who attend so as to manifest at the levels of the community, the school system, and individual students at the alternative, is so grounded in the 'routines of daily life,' it may actually interfere with the student's attempts to stay engaged in school and consequently questions the very claims of the school system's rationale for the alternative (Kelly, 1993).

This would appear that by limiting who attends, a district alternative program is shooting itself in the foot! No, says educators and researcher Kelly. **By maintaining the reputation that alternatives are for bad or troubled kids only, schools can use them as district-wide disciplinary threat in order to "marshal students into conformity" at the regular school** (Kelly, 1993).

A study survey found that "...school board members, legislators, and the public associate alternatives with students who have behavioral problems, are disruptive, or are failing..." The study claims this perception is false. But, **it is reality**. Very few Indiana alternatives are open to any student—as is **not** the case in some states. If all Indiana alternatives were open to any student, they would not have the perception problem the study found. Since by definition most Indiana alternatives cannot be open to all students and so limit who attend, they can't, at the same time, be without that perception. Indiana can't have it both ways!

This part of the study confuses everyone and avoids the real issue—an issue substantiated by best practices: the simple practice of **open enrollment**. In order to gain sympathy and rationalize the present underdeveloped stage of most state alternatives, when compared to other states and the 30-year history of alternative public schools, the study makes most Indiana alternatives seem misunderstood. This is quite a spin.

This begs the question: In light of best practices, would opening alternatives up to any student remove the stigma, thus helping all concerned?

Another issue brought out in the study was **the individual student's personality**. Although this was never explained, the insinuation is: particular students have natures, temperaments, or dispositions that prevent them from being successful in school. It is then implied that a particular alternative program will enable this student to be successful academically and be graduated. For the sake of argument, consider this point of view.

As suggested by Bowers (1987) 'successful socialization leaves the child with the increased capacity to perform behaviorally in a manner congruent with the expectations of others.' Particularly in places like the Jackson School, a school focused on the issues of discipline and behavior modification, the students' failures in their home school is attributed to individual character flaws rather than larger more broad-based systems of exclusion through which most of these children must traverse (Bauman, 1998, p. 259).

Although the list of why students are in Indiana's alternatives reflect genuine individual situations and/or problems, to what extent are students in alternatives due to society and schools? Educator Kelly posits that the **traditional school's norms** (reflecting society's) **actually create "misfits."**

The majority of alternative schools have a negative image because of the 'types' of students who attend them. However, Kelly asks the question: Is who gets defined as deviant and for what reasons a matter of political and economic power? In the social matrix that attempts to define deviant, do some groups have the advantage due to age, gender, class, or race? Kelly argues that schools actually create nonconformity by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and then applying the rules, labeling those who break them as 'outsiders' (p. 69). She proves her idea by pointing out the fact that most of the students who are in alternatives have violated white, middle-class gender norms created according to the traditional school system's standards of behavior and social/academic success (Kelly, 1993). It is no coincidence that in major urban school districts, black youth are expelled more often and for longer than their white counterparts (Solida, 2000) and /or sent to alternatives (Loflin, 2002).

Indeed, as the "Making a Difference" study states, there is no "typical" alternative education student--**but this is because no typical students are allowed to go to alternatives.** By limiting the definition of typical to within the untypical group, the citizens of Indiana have once again bamboozled themselves. The study limits what typical is and can be and then defines what typical is—as though it had not previously limited its definition. As well, the alternative education population can't be diverse (for example, as a result of open enrollment) as the study notes because it's limited by definition to a limited group, thus non-diverse. The study says "diverse," but in reality it is so limited by its own definitions, **it is not.** The statement about alternative schools having a diverse population would be true if anyone could attend. Diversity within a small sample does not imply general diversity.

This is nothing but the wolf of **tracking** wrapped in sheep's clothing. Again in attempting to remove the stereotype of alternatives students as deficient, when compared to the norm, the study continues to say that compared to most students, those who attend alternatives are not typical; thus unwittingly fulfilling the stereotype. Consequently, in reality, this stereotypical alternative student **is** the typical alternative student. If alternatives were open to all kids, then the statement, "...there is no typical alternative student.." would be true. Since Indiana has very, very few alternatives where students enroll completely voluntarily, this statement on diversity does not apply to most schools in the study.

Why all the confusion? Public relations...spinning. It sounds good and makes alternatives appear as though they are on the ball...

The statement, "...there is no typical alternative student.." is supposed to make the alternatives look good. By noting, "Contrary to the stereotypes..." the study intends to remove the stigma. It does not. Indiana alternative schools are stigmatized--and it's by their own mandate! They choose to limit who may be a student in programs, thus perpetuating the very stereotype they wish to remove.

What is ironic, although alternative schools now have the image of a place for "misfits," "druggies," "losers," and kids with orange hair, the historical truth is alternative education was and continues to be a pioneer. The Indiana study quoted many alternative educators. One noted, "Here, I am able to teach these students in ways the need to be taught." Another one just came out and said it, **"Alternative education is true education at its best."** They are not alone. What many consider the stepchild of the conventional system is the Cinderella.

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Lange and Sletten (2002) note it was almost a decade ago when Raywid, in Educational Leadership, described public alternative schools of choice as 'cutting edge':

Amid all the current talk of school restructuring, (Type I) **alternatives are the**

clearest example we have of what a restructured school might look like. They represent our most definitive departure from the problematic, organizational and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform. Moreover, many of the reforms pursued by traditional schools—downsizing the high schools, pursuing a focus or theme, student and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternatives schools pioneered (p 7).

We can also add such ideas as:

- shared decision making with students/democratic schools
- personalization/individualization/self-paced studies/independent studies
- service learning/internships
- alternative/flexible scheduling
- teaching styles (MAEO,1995)
- the multiple intelligences concept came out of learning styles. The “there no one best way to learn” (Barr & Parrett, 1995) assertion revolutionized all educational orientations

Over the past years, many Educational Leadership themes were inspired by alternative education: “How Children Learn,” March 1997; “Teaching for Multiple Intelligences,” September 1997; “How the Brain Learns,” November 1998; “Personalized Learning,” September 1999; “How to Differentiate Instruction,” September 2000; “Understanding Learning Differences,” November 2001; “Class Size School Size,” February 2002; and, Customizing Our Schools,” April 2002. The upcoming March 2003, “Creating Caring Schools,” remind me of your interview, “On Schools Where Students Want To Be: A Conversation with Deborah Meier,” September 1994. Finally the proposed 2003-2004 themes of “Building Classroom Relationships,” “Teaching All Students,” and “Schools as Learning Communities,” reflect the original spirit of alternative educators over 30 years ago.

Incongruity 2. The study is also full of contradictions because as it attempts to prove alternatives are good and necessary due to the inadequacies of the traditional school system, it simultaneously supports these same inadequacies. One of the most important implications of the “Making a Difference” study is its indirect critique of the traditional system. In very few instances are public reports from within the public schools system critical of the same system of which they are a part. **That’s why “Making a Difference” is so crucial.** In the statement about who attends alternatives and the reasons why, the study’s authors assert:

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“The list of reason is long, but these students have something in common: **they are failing in the system and the system is failing them**” (Lucas, Steiger, & Gamble. 2003).

Here the study continues to contradict itself as it tries to take on the “**broken kid vs. broken system**” debate. In doing so it exposes the inconsistencies in both the state’s alternative policy and the study’s criticism of the school system as a whole.

Consequently, how we view the problem determines the kind of solution.

1. View the failure to thrive as evidence of a systematic problem and to go about fixing the system—**create Type I alternatives.**
2. View the failure to thrive as a clinical, community, family, and/or learning disorder and send the student to an alternative to be fixed and refurbished for re-assimilation (Sagor, 1997)—**create Type II/III alternatives.**

To the extent that the study blames systematic failure within the conventional, it supports its alternative options—as a counter measure. But this is where the inconsistencies and the dilemma arise. The tragic scenario goes like this: If a student does not fit well in this basic traditional mold, the main response of the systems is, “What’s wrong with this student?”

This may be followed by an attempt to induce conformity through rules and then threat of coercion. If problems continue, the student is sent to the district’s alternative. Even if the program works and the student returns to the regular school, “**Such programs may postpone more far reaching restructuring of the regular school** since rebellious or failing students are successfully segregated and labeled deviant” (Kelly, 1993).

In that the report’s main purpose was to shine the light of observation and research on Indiana’s alternative programs, because of the relationship with the traditional, it is equally a study of that system. If alternatives are different from traditional, and if the alternative system works for kids who failed in the traditional, it implies the traditional system is part of the problem and is flawed. At the same time school systems and society created alternatives, it admitted its failures. It almost an inverse proportion--**to the extent that alternatives work, and the study says they do, this study implicates the traditional system as deficient.** “Making a Difference” is a blade that cuts both ways.

Although created to uphold the traditional school system’s standards and authority, it is ironic that last chance or second chance programs ‘expose the underbelly of the school system’s public relations claims about American schools. The very existence of these ‘alternatives’ show that the system failed in its promise to accommodate all students. This is why districts and school boards have rationalized and define second

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chance alternatives as a ‘remedy for individual rather than institutional failings.’

Since both the school and the students are stigmatized, this exposes the true status and ranking nature of tracking, grouping, and labeling in the

American schools and so belies their promise of an equal educational opportunity that would result 'by providing fairly for the common good and individual attainment.'

This study (Last Chance High) joins a growing body of work showing that this schooling style (Type II/III) is at best naïve and at worst a pernicious prescription and very like to perpetuate social, economic, political, and gender inequalities (Kelly, 1993, p. xi-xiii).

Is Kelly correct?

In many districts, they merely warehouse (Type II/III alternatives) mostly male students and in urban areas, mostly African-American males. In IPS, New Beginnings Alternative High School has 210 students; 75% are black (Indianapolis Public Schools, 2003). Is this the same in other urban areas?

Although many Indiana alternatives were created by districts to support their authority, the orientation/policies of alternative education the study uses as a way to compensate for the political and academic limitations the study claims are inherent in traditional public schools, **actually perpetuate these very limitations.**

The danger of any case study of alternatives like the Jackson School is that it fosters a belief that it is the children who must be fixed **while the education systems remains essentially intact.**

Jackson does not see its student as living in a social vacuum. Instead they readily acknowledge that the school is part of a greater socio-economic system that hinders the success of certain groups. Thus the school realizes that part of their job must be to help students to negotiate a world of complex power dynamics. Unfortunately many large urban schools avoid the politics of poverty, race and power forcing their young to find their own answers to many enormous social questions. And sometimes they get in trouble for some of the answers they find. One can only hope that the home school will look to the alternative schools for guidance, rather than denying the wisdom they have acquired about groups of children who seem 'unreachable' (Bauman, 1998, p. 267).

It is important to examine within the greater social context, the function of these schools in the unequal social formation of a large section of society. Instead of directly challenging traditional structures of the public schools, **the existence of these programs allows legislatures, policy makers, and many educators to avoid the necessity of making any major reforms to the institutions of schooling.** The result is that policy makers are able to attribute academic failure to characteristics of students and foster sympathy for the home school's decision to remove these disruptive voices (p. 259).

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Insightfully, Kelly (1993) also notes that the creation of remedial, last chance or transition **alternatives act as a "salve" for the conscience of school administrators and board members.** Or, in terms of educational-political psychology, districts are projecting their own school's inadequacies onto the

students they send to alternatives so that they do not have to face the fact that school climate (large schools, depersonalization, de-individualization, inflexibility, fragmented curriculum, compliance to authority, low expectations by teachers, "one size fits all" over diversity) may be just as important in determining school success as an individual student's behavior, economic level, race, gender, or academic level (Barr & Parrett, 1995).

As long as it is the student who needs to change, the home school does not have to. As long as it is the student who needs "fixed," (Raywid, 1994) the school will not have to restructure. As long as the districts have alternatives to "beef up and send back" students, the school administrators will not have to face the contradictions and complications of these programs. Thus, school districts and policy makers can continue to feel good about tactics other educators conclude, "...may be a misguided policy alternative..." (King, et. al., 1998).

Incongruity 3. To the extent that the study substantiates the viability of Indiana alternative programs, to that same extent it is an indictment against the traditional system.

The "**What is an Alternative Instructional Environment**" section of the study lists the following characteristics and comments:

- Focus on individual goals and positive results
- Most student would have dropped out of it weren't for the opportunity to participate in the alternative.
- What programs share is the passion and devotion the teachers and administrators, the extraordinary focus on the worth and potential of each student and the commitment and resolution of so many of the students to succeed
- Alternative education is true education at its best
- Small classes,
- Individualized courses of study
- Individualized class schedules
- Personalized attention to each student's needs and abilities
- Dedicated teachers
- Supportive environments that are so caring no behavior problems occur; students no longer feel disenfranchised or frustrated by a system that doesn't work for them
- Learn to be responsible for their own success
- "Here, I am able to teach students in ways I knew they needed to be taught."
- An environment that truly cares
- Shortened school days
- More compact periods
- Self-paced competency-based instruction
- Student-driven curriculum
- Open hours
- Access to a variety of multi-media instructional tools based on the learning styles and

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- preferences
- Service learning and volunteering
- Involvement in community academic competitive events
- Meets individual needs and insure success for it high school graduates
- Emphasize building trust and responsibility through instructional strategies that include relevant, individualized, cooperative, self-paced, computer-assisted learning.

Intentional attempt to help students build social skills such as leadership, decision-making, communication, and confident management.
Professionalism and commitment to continued improvement
Twelve week, tri semester
Technology driven classes
Teacher-facilitated instruction
Strategic collaboration with community partners
An exceptionally supportive environment
Internships
Meeting the needs of diverse learners
Work with individual students to evaluate strengths and areas of weakness
Help them experience a sense of accomplishment
Academic courses combine teacher-facilitate instruction with self-paced, computer assisted learning
Link school, work and life
Teachers who want to be there
Non-traditional instruction

Indeed, these mostly non-traditional approaches to curriculum, to teaching, to learning, and cases of alternative assessment work for students who fail, for what ever reason, in the traditional system that is offered them. But **what is important is what this study and the above characteristics imply about the traditional system.**

For example the study notes that alternative schools' administrative staff "create an environment that truly cares," have passionate and dedicated teachers, "professionalism and a commitment to continued improvement," have "teachers who want to be there" and "help them (students) experience a sense of accomplishment" in an exceptionally supportive environment" that is "...so caring, no behavior problems occur." Do not traditional schools have these characteristics? **The implication is no.**

Indiana alternatives, according to the study, "meet the needs of diverse learners," through a "focus on individual goals and positive results." They have student driven curriculum with personalized attention to each student's needs/abilities-- individualized self-paced, competency-based courses of study and class schedules with access to a variety of multi-media instructional tools based on learning styles and preferences, work with students to evaluate strengths and weaknesses, technology driven classes, teacher-facilitated instruction, all with "the extraordinary focus on the worth and potential of each student and the commitment and resolution to the success of each student." Do not the traditional schools have these instructional approach and attributes? The implications of the study are no, **they do not.**

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Add to this: small learning environments with low student-teacher ratios, internships, service learning and volunteering, linking school/work/life, more compact periods, open school hours, a shortened school day, and other non-tradition approaches to school climate and you have a picture much different from the traditional school and classroom.

What does a Traditional Instructional Environment look like in comparison?

To put this discussion of what alternatives indirectly say are disadvantages or weakness of the traditional schools, consider that during the 1990s, the dialogue about what alternatives education was, what alternative schools should look like and who should attend them was extended from the 70s. Contrary to the appeal of educators critical of the conventional public schools, the number of remedial alternative programs increased. This was also a resurgence of the criticism of the traditional.

The traditional schooling style is not only not meeting the needs of our students, but is turning off a great majority of them.

Reporting that: 1. students were dissatisfied with teachers and classroom interactions, 2. students described school as boring and unpleasant, 3. the sameness and narrowness in classroom instruction resulted in student passiveness and non-engagement, 4. while the high school did serve the top 25%, the rest were treated as "un-special" (Young, 1990).

Johnston and Wetherwill (1998) concur. They point out the 4 observed characteristics of traditional school:

1. the vehicle for teaching and learning is the total group in a classroom
2. the teacher is the strategic pivotal figure in the group
3. the classroom norms governing the group are mainly based on what maintains this strategic role
4. the emotional tone is 'emotionally flat' or bland

One educator, Roland Barth, pin points the main drawback of the school system quite accurately

But the major factor in students' lives that leads to depression, dropping out, drugs, jail, and suicide appears to be the **school experience**: ability groups, grade retention, college pressures, working alone, denial of strengths and focus on weaknesses, learning that is information-rich and experience poor, and the irrelevant curriculum that students must endure and frequently ignore (De La Rosa, 1998, p. 268).

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In large urban areas around the country, the public schools are failing to fulfill America's promise to **African-American families and youth**. Hamovitch (1999) reminds us that race continues to be "...the most salient factor explaining different patterns of student achievement," due to the issue that "...race acts inside the school to give groups systematically different experiences." Although schools

promised and were the source of success for blacks, in many instances they found schools to be "...a source of self-doubt rather than self-development" (p. 57).

Ogbu (1995) **argues** for African-American youth doing well in schools—due to its assimilation tendencies—was difficult because the youth **interpreted school success with acting white** or speaking white as this was seen **not as education, but as an "imposition on Black people by White people."** Thus the traditional public school system is seen as a place that **competes with, and inverts black culture** (Hamovitch, 1999), and is not complementary to a black student's own cultural identity and feelings of self worth. In *Too much schooling, too little education*, Shujaa (1994), notes schooling implies a tie to the social order/nation-state that seeks to assimilate non-dominant groups/classes. Education involves learning that transmits cultural uniqueness of these groups to the next generation.

Native Americans continue to have these same issues with public schools that see education as assimilation. Remembering government boarding schools where children and youth had to cut their hair, could not speak their language or celebrate their culture, contemporary Natives continue to resist assimilation through controlling their own public schools. (Mondale & Patton, 2001 p. 112).

As seen in this light, some Indiana alternative schools may be seen as another form of oppression and discrimination: "**soft-jails**" (Raywid, 1994) whose negative labeling could be the first steps to future incarceration.

This is why urban compensatory (transition, remedial, second chance) programs that attempt to force African-Americans to deny their own experiences, their own culture and common sense (and to assimilate) are destined to failure (Hamovitch, p. 75).

Even the most reforming or restructuring ideas of the alternative schools presented in the study (which based their programs on flexible or shortened scheduling, simplified curricula, customized learning, small classes and special counseling—thus making alternatives advertised as more caring and innovative than the regular school) are, according to Kelly, **superficial, and largely a parody of the mainstream**. Type II/III alternatives create the "illusion of change." **They perpetuate the status quo since they fail to question the "deep structure of (mainstream) schools."** Within the structure of Type II/III options, deeply held beliefs concerning what is knowledge and learning, what is the purpose of

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education, or what is the relationship among race, class, gender, and the present traditional school system and success in life, **go unchallenged** (Kelly, 1993).

Conclusions:

There is nothing inherently wrong with alternative schools; they are a major way to recognize all youth are individuals with different learning styles, preferences and needs.

The best school systems will offer educational alternatives to all, celebrating diversity rather than homogeneity (Sagor, 1997).

In his commentary, "On the Agenda," High School Magazine Associate Executive Director John Lammel in a special issue asks these questions to the nation's high school staff, "**Why don't we get the message?** Why don't we understand? Why don't those in traditional comprehensive high schools realize that **alternative schools** (that use **all** the best practices) **are already implementing school improvement initiatives** as the primary basis of providing an effective teaching and learning environment? He notes that such standard alternative ideas as smaller schools, personalized learning environments, shared decision making, a respect for the student's learning styles, and community involvement through service learning and social service at the school site are cogent.

He suggests school leaders consider that parents, students, and teachers, and various districts are pursuing **educational alternatives of choice** because they see a program that better meets the needs of students. Lammel call all personnel to be open to continuing to improve their teaching and administrative practices by learning what they can from innovative alternative schools (Lammel, 1998).

We must remove the limits place on alternatives that appear backward and harmful when used to guide schools where power emanates from variety, choice, and close, personal relationships (Gregory, 2002).

We must end the craziness about present alternative policies that makes kids say, "**Yo!, that program sounds cool. How bad do I have to be to go there?**" We must promote options that are appealing and well suited to individual students. This type of program assumes that kids want to come to school and learn, and that they simply need the best environment for doing so (Raywid, 1998).

We must solve this dilemma: What happens when students who did experience an alternative, even in situations where it was disciplinary, like the alternative? They like the small, family-like school/program's atmosphere. They like the

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smaller classes, individualized instruction, and personalized attention received from the staff about their situation. In some cases this leads to students choosing to act-up after returning to their home school so they could return to the alternative (Raywid, 1994). In other cases, students have acted-up before they were to return to the mainstream (Loflin, 2002). Presently, for the staff of these "beef 'em up and send 'em back" (Fizzell & Raywid, 1997) programs, this has

created a dilemma: They can't make the alternative too good, they can't make the kids like school too much or they'll want to stay! Since the districts will have to admit that perhaps a better student/school mix (Gold & Mann, 1984) might work for particular students, this begs the question: **Why not let students stay?** In fact, why not have a nice proactive alternative students can go to, by choice, from the beginning of the year? And, why not add **all** the best practices (Smink, 1997; Barr & Parrett, 1995) of Type I schools to the program to ensure it works for kids.

We must **use the "Making a Difference" study as a reason to mandate communities to honestly review the rationale for creating alternatives** by openly debating the obligations we have to those students who fall through the cracks. Only then will the public know if the school system is promoting district-wide restructuring or simply creating an off-campus plan to put the at-risk out of sight and out of mind.

In fact when school districts seriously consider who needs alternatives, **they often find that many of their most able and advantaged students would prosper even more in other than traditional settings.** However, it is too much to expect advantaged students to venture into alternatives when doing so is taken as a statement that they are resigning from the mainstream (Sagor, 1997, p. 21).

We must stop saying, "Our students have not been successful in traditional settings," or "Our students have failed to thrive in the conventional classroom." After reading, "Making a Difference," we could just as easily say, "Our students were in conventional schools and classrooms that failed to make them thrive and be successful." Why can't schools be a two-way street?

According to Johnston and Wetherwill (1998), the personalization of small alternative public schools of choice is very important to students who have a marginal status position in society and who are bordering on feelings of alienation and estrangement." They conclude:

Many of these students recognize the importance of learning, but are unwilling to assume the submissive posture in educational institutions which routinely denies them a sense of autonomy and self-worth. The same students frequently thrive when they are in an alternative of choice which grants them personal respect, responsibility, and support. Most would want the same for ourselves or our children (p. 182).

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During the last 20 years, the term "alternative education" has been applied so indiscriminately and to such a wide variety of programs, that its original meaning of innovation has been clouded in confusion..." (Kellmayer, 1998). Part of the misunderstanding comes from the fact that even after decades of success, **alternative public schools of choice remain on the fringe.** Although

alternative education has provided leadership for positive change, **it has yet to receive full institutional legitimacy** (Raywid, 1998).

Final Comments

Alternative programs that use **all** the best practices, especially choice, open enrollment, alternative assessment, and a democratic climate can thus be viewed as a vanguard of change, an example of hope, the crucible of research and developments that will improve education for everyone. **This then will be the legacy of alternative education—that it was the rainbow lens through which citizens viewed their schools to see if America was living up to its promises, especially equal educational opportunity.** Alternative education, because of its emphasis on diversity, has set a benchmark that will be used to judge, challenge, and resolve any interests, biases, or agendas that would keep our children and youth from developing their talents, using their abilities, and reaching their full potential.

Traditional education has brought us this far. Yet, characteristically, it was limited and exclusive because its “definition of education was narrow.” Now American education must be inclusive, American education must embrace diversity. It must respect and nurture variety based on alternative education’s most important contribution to education: **There is no one best way to learn.** It must bring its promised equity to education through democratizing intelligence (Williams, 1998). And it will. **Alternative education is American education.**

We must look at the present proliferation of alternatives where students are sent and then returned to the main stream. This is a serious problem. It is an unnoticed problem. As the stepchild of the traditional system, alternative schools, historically, were neglected and ignored. Yet, on the other end of the spectrum, the history and **very nature of alternatives** as change agents **will cause** school districts and **educators to look honestly, not politically, at their transition alternative programs and the potential for the harm they might do.** This will be difficult. In doing so, they will have to question their system. Bauman (1998) expresses this theme in these thought-provoking remarks:

Ultimately, we need to examine why certain groups do not have the institutional access to acquire the cultural capital necessary to succeed in the existing schools. And why for them, a (alternative) school like the Jackson School, becomes their only ‘choice’ (p. 259).

THE BEST PRACTICES OF AUTHENTIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

CHOICE.

Students and teachers, all must be at an alternative by choice (Korn, 1991; Young, 1990). Options where students are sent/"sentenced" are by their very nature not alternative. For an alternative to work, it must be a place where students want to be (Scherer, 1994). Once students/staff want to be at an alternative, commitment results (Barr & Parrett, 1995).

The next most important practice is:

CONTINUOUSNESS.

Students must not only be able to choose to be at an alternative, but they must have the option to stay. Over the past 10-15 years, school districts/state legislatures have created "pseudo-alternatives" (Kellmayer, 1998). These are alternative in name only and represent ineffective and often punitive approaches that isolate, stigmatize, and segregate from the mainstream students who can be difficult. These programs were created to be a safety valve for the schools, not a true alternative: a safety net for students (Kelly, 1993). Most districts make the mistake of creating programs where students attend for 1 or 2 periods a day, or sometimes for a semester or even a year. These programs by their very intent to quickly correct a problem and transition students back to the home school cannot work. Such programs tend to offer too little too late and cannot overcome the years of negative impact by the home, schools, and society (Barr & Parrett, 1995).

The next (3rd) most important practice is best characterized by the phrase:

THERE IS NO ONE BEST WAY TO LEARN.

Alternative education and learning styles (Dunn & Dunn, 1978) are the same thing. The one size fits all concept of the traditional schooling approach cannot work for each and every student. The idea that we each learn differently (Scherer, 1997) is one of the main contributions of the alternative concept.

Traditional approaches, where large classes of students are given the same lectures, the same assignments out of the same book; given the same review and the same test, assumes all students are the same. Unfortunately, the Type II/III transition schools have no need/reason to respect learning styles, multiple intelligences, and brain-based learning concepts (Guild & Chock-Eng, 1998) or alternative assessments (Combs, 1997) since the goal is to return students to the mainstream. And in most cases, the students are not at these programs because of "learning problems," but behavior: being "chronically disruptive"

(Albert, 1996; Buckman, 1996; Kentucky Board of Education, 1997). Thus, actually, these programs are more aligned with "day-treatment centers" than schools; and, their orientation sees no correlation between behavior and

disaffection due to the traditional schooling experience (De La Rosa, 1998), and its narrow definition (Abbott, 1997; Skromme, 1989; Sternberg, 1997) of school success.

A genuine alternative school's curriculum/learning/assessment is: individualized, differentiated, self-paced, flexible, customized, personalized—**providing alternatives (a variety of different paths)** to the same goal that best suit/fit the student. If the program does not have a learning environment that relates to student learning styles, it is simply not an alternative (*Alternatives in Indiana*, 1977).

The following (4th) practice is:

SMALL.

The research on small schools, let alone small alternative schools, is outstanding (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000; Barr & Parrett, 1997; Epstein, 1998; Gregory & Smith, 1987; Kellmayer, 1995; Newman, 2000; Raywid, 1998; Scherer, 1994; Scherer, 2002a; and Scherer 2002b). School sizes from 50 to 100 to 200 to 300 to not over 500 students have been mentioned. Small schools create a warm, friendly atmosphere that emphasizes personalization, caring, cooperation, and acceptance. In Indianapolis, Washington Township's North Central High School has 3, 210 students in one very large building (Randall, Hayes, and Qualkinbush, 2003). That's just too big.

To dramatize this, in some instances, students have been known to "act up" after returning to the home school in order to return to the alternative (Raywid, 1994). In some instances students have acted up before they were to return to their regular school—all in order to stay at the alternative (Loflin, 2000). This can be attributed to the "warm, friendly, accepting" atmosphere of small schools. Here students, even though they understand that the alternative is/has a punitive orientation, like the personalized attention they receive through the "flexibility" of small programs (Gold & Mann, 1984).

This creates an interesting dilemma for "transition" schools: they cannot work too well, can't be too attractive, can't get students to do too well, or respect their teachers too much—**or the students will start liking school and want to stay!**

The final (5th) major best practice is:

SHARED-DECISION MAKING.

From their inception in the early 1970's, having students and parents share in the decisions that affected the school was a major characteristic of alternative programs. In many ways this is what made them so different from the traditional public schools. One would assume that the public schools in the United States would be teaching democratic ideals—modeling the ideals our government tries to spread around the world. Of course the adults, through elected school boards, have a say. And there is the PTA.

Yet, many studies on participation suggest although schools say they want parental involvement, they set up barriers to quality shared-decision making (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Khan, 1996). Interestingly, public schools have no reputation for desiring students to help educators share in the decisions that affect these same students. They have student councils, but their power is limited. In light of the U.S. wanting democracy in China or Iran, one would assume automatically that its school system would have its students/future citizens heavily involved in learning how to be free...and responsible by giving students opportunities to be involved with school/classroom decisions at most levels (Gerson, 1997). However, they do not. This forms an environment of adult hypocrisy (Loflin, 1999).

Alternative educators knew from the beginning that this is what students needed to feel a part of a school, let alone a nation. The “Spirit of 76” was in their soul. They assumed that students tend to obey rules they helped create. They also assumed that students would respect an authority they helped put in place. These are common democratic ideals. From the so-called Free School movement (Kozol, 1972) to today's alternative educators, providing students an opportunity to be a part of school/classroom decisions is characteristic (Barr & Parrett, 1995, 1997; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Kellmayer, 1995, 1998; MAEO, 1995; Raywid, 1998; Smink, 1997).

Even mainstream educators are encouraging student participation in school and classroom decisions beyond the traditional (Khon, 1993; Schneider, 1996; Slater, 1994; Zachlod, 1997).

Along with these five proven best practices, can be added:

-OPEN TO ANY STUDENT To be a true alternative, any student may attend. Many students—the bored, alienated, the so-called average, progressive, political, “alternative,” so-called minority, or just “different,” might choose an alternative if provided (Glines, 2002).

-SERVICE LEARNING From the beginning, alternative schools encouraged internships, apprenticeships, and community service. Many schools provided a special day for students to go into the community to explore, learn, volunteer, and help bring change (Barr & Parrett, 1995).

-ALTERNATIVE SCHEDULING AND ATTENDANCE POLICIES Providing the various options to the singularity of the traditional schooling system is another way alternatives were an actual alternative to the status quo's, "Our way or the highway," mentality. Providing the flexibility through giving students class schedules and attendance options to fit their individuality and personal needs, shows kids adults care (MAEO, 1995).

-ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT Various styles of learning imply not only teaching styles, but "testing styles." Providing both teacher and student with a variety of evaluation methods creates more options for student success (Combs, 1997) than the traditional (sorting oriented) objective exam. This benefits both teacher and student. Alternative assessment also brings an equity (Smith, 1997) to grading that is missing from a "one size fits all" (Ohanian) standardized testing scheme.

-CARING AND DEMANDING TEACHERS Of all the components involved in an effective alternative school, teachers make the most difference. The perceptions and expectations of the teacher are the most important factors in determining student success (Barr & Parrett, 1995).

-MODIFYING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION Providing an individualized curriculum and instruction personalizes learning for many students who were underserved by traditional group instruction, who never experienced "hands on" or community learning opportunities (MAEO, 1995).

-A CARING SCHOOL CLIMATE Programs/schools that have a warm, friendly orientation are quite successful. Establishing a family atmosphere that emphasizes personalization, support, caring, cooperation, and acceptance work for students who "fell through the cracks" or were "just a number" in larger, impersonal schools (Elam & Duckenfield, 2000; Gregory & Smith, 1987; Miller, 2000).

-COMPREHENSIVENESS Alternative schools must involve the community and have economic, social/family, and health components—as well as an academic orientation. These programs involve partnerships with business/industry/social agencies. They help all students to obtain the community services they need (Barr & Parrett, 1995).

-CLEAR MISSION AND OBJECTIVES There can be no confusion about the nature of the program/school. The community, school district staff, program/school staff, parent(s)/guardian(s), and students must have a clear understanding of its mission and objectives. This promotes staff and individual student choice/responsibility, and provides a clear way to assess program/school performance (Smink, 1998).

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