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Alternative Learning Environments in Arkansas

Sarah C. McKenzie
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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AN OPTION FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

One intervention that has been shown to be successful in helping students who have not done well in traditional school settings is alternative learning environments (ALE), or alternative schools (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education (2002) defines an alternative school as “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories for regular, special education or vocational education.”

While ALEs have been available in the American public school system for over four decades, there is considerable variation in the definitions of these programs across the country (Lehr & Lange, 2003). The most recent national survey of ALEs found that 10,900 such schools served 612,000 students across the country—approximately 1.3% of all students (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). In general, students who attend ALEs are still enrolled in the public school system but attend classes separately from traditional students.

In many cases, alternative schools have been developed by states in response to students’ use of violence, drugs, and weapons on school campuses (U. S. Department of Education, 1996). Students are generally referred to these programs if they are at risk of poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar issues associated with dropping out of school (Paglin & Fager, 1997; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). In many school districts across the country, students are placed in ALEs as an alternative to, or following, a suspension or expulsion. However, in some states, students may choose to attend an ALE, which often requires approval from a school district board or a counselor referral (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

While ALEs are typically thought of as serving at-risk students, some have also been developed to serve students with high aptitudes for disciplines such as science, math, or the arts or to provide vocational training. Some ALEs simply employ non-traditional methods of teaching (e.g., Montessori schools).

According to a recent review of research by Dynarski and Gleason (1999), four instructional methods are most commonly used by ALEs including: 1) teaching in smaller classes; 2) teaching at a faster pace; 3) using challenging curricula in thematic or interdisciplinary units; and 4) using curricula that allows students to work alone at their own pace.

ALES IN ARKANSAS

Alternative education programs have been an important part of Arkansas’ education system for many years. In fact, some of the state’s ALEs have been around for almost a decade. These student intervention programs must be in compliance with Arkansas Code Ann. §§ 6-18-508 and 6-18-509, which seeks to eliminate traditional barriers to student education. As mandated by the Arkansas Department of Education:

- Every district in Arkansas, either on its own or in partnership with other districts, must create an ALE.
- Each district with an ALE must assess participating students either before or upon entry into the program.
- Every ALE must provide participants with non-punitive intervention strategies that address both behavioral and educational needs.
- ALEs in the state will receive an additional \$3,250 for each student who attended the ALE during the previous academic year.

Data from the Arkansas Department of Education’s most recent report on ALEs are based upon information collected from ALEs across the state during 2003-04. During that year, there were 10,318 full time students attending ALEs in 229 of the state’s 308 districts. Not surprisingly, there were almost two times as many males as females attending ALEs. Almost 55% of those students were white, close to 35% were African-American, 4% were Hispanic, and the remainder were either Asian, Native American, or “other.” Some preliminary data have been provided to OEP from the ADE regarding ALE information from the 2004-05 academic year and according to this information, approximately 1.5% of students in Arkansas were enrolled in ALEs during the 2004-05 school year.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON ALES

In 2002, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) published findings from a survey of public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students in the U. S., with responses from over 1,500 districts (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). The survey only included those ALEs which were geared towards students at-risk of academic failure and administered by districts where students spent at least 50% of their instructional time in ALEs. Results from the survey indicated that 39% of the nation's districts offered some sort of alternative school or program for at-risk students, with districts having large minority and high-poverty enrollments being more likely to have such a program. Almost 60% of these schools and programs were housed in a separate building away from the home campus. On average, 12% of the students attending alternative programs were special education students with Individualized Education Program (IEPs), compared to 13% of students in traditional public schools during 2000-01. Over 50% of those programs surveyed reported that they were unable to serve students due to capacity issues at some point within the previous three years. In most situations (83%) where schools had met capacity, students were then put on a waiting list.

Once a student enters an ALE, the length of the student's stay is left to the district's discretion. According to the 2002 NCES study (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002), almost three-quarters of the nation's alternative programs have some policy aimed at having all students return to their home campus. Only 1% of programs do not allow students to leave the alternative program once admitted. For those schools that encourage re-admittance into the student's home campus, improved behavior and attitude, as well as student motivation to return, were the characteristics associated with the student's return.

Simply providing an alternative learning environment will not ensure that students attending will have academic success. According to a review of the research by Lehr and Lange (2003), there are some characteristics unique to ALEs that facilitate successful school completion for students at-risk of dropping out. These characteristics include extra support/counseling for students, smaller and more personal settings, positive relationships with supportive adults, meaningful educational and transition goals, and an emphasis on living and vocational skills (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Lange, 1998; Marder, 1992, as cited in Lehr & Lange, 2003).

The results of a survey of ALEs conducted by Lehr & Lange (2003) indicated that ALEs were more successful in lowering dropout rates when they hired teachers

specifically to teach in the alternative programs, rather than simply transferring existing teachers into such programs. It is also beneficial for ALEs to have a curriculum geared toward a regular high school diploma (not simply a GED), academic counseling, remedial instruction, crisis/behavioral intervention, and career counseling. Lastly, it is beneficial for ALEs to collaborate with the juvenile justice system, community mental health agencies, child protective services, and parks and recreation departments (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002; Lehr & Lange, 2003).

CHALLENGES FACED BY ALES

Operating an alternative school does not come without challenges. A survey of 49 state directors of special education programs overseeing alternative schools across the country indicated three common issues that such programs face (Lehr & Lange, 2003). First, funding for alternative programs in many states is not sufficient for providing quality facilities and instructional resources. Respondents to this survey reported that when educational funding is slim, alternative programs are often the first to be cut. The second issue that alternative programs often face is staffing. Since alternative schools often have low enrollments, few teachers are hired to staff programs. This results in the need for teachers that are certified to teach more than one subject as well as being certified in both regular and special education. Both situations make staffing alternative schools difficult. Lastly, many survey respondents indicated that alternative schools need to be held more accountable for improving student outcomes. Other cited obstacles that alternative programs faced are inadequate facilities, difficulties with student transportation to and from the program, and concerns about whether alternative programs are viewed as relieving traditional schools from having to make systemic changes in order to serve all students effectively (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

CONCLUSION

ALEs have become an important component in many public school districts across the country looking for ways to effectively serve at-risk students. However, little empirical data is available, at least at a national level, about exactly how successful these programs have been at lowering dropout rates (Barton, 2005). More rigorous research must be conducted in order to better understand how such interventions can be most effective.

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