

Managing Controversy About Optional and Alternative Programs

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Optional programs, centers of controversy in many school systems, need certain characteristics if they are to be truly "optional"—and if they are, even minimally, to succeed.

"Alternative schools are havens for pampered misfits."

"Alternative programs are a dumping ground for the kids nobody wants!"

"Alternative educational plans are undemocratic in that they segregate pupils and provide experiences not available to all."

"Let's not fragment our efforts. We need to strengthen our present program."

"Options are an attack on our well-established curriculum and values traditional to our community."

"Alternative schools serve too few. We need programs for thousands of children and youth."

"Forget it. Optional programs are too expensive."

THESE and many other comments show clearly the controversial nature of optional alternative educational programs. Yet such programs promise to fulfill unmet educational needs, motivate the passive and often anonymous child and youth, stimulate instructional innovation, revitalize and renew faculty, and reduce community and student dissatisfaction.

It is essential for educators to learn more about options and how to manage the conflict and controversy surrounding these programs so that these exciting concepts can be implemented successfully.

Currently, hundreds of options are in operation or in the planning and development stages in public schools in this country. Among the more publicized are *schools-without-walls* like Parkway in Philadelphia, Metro in Chicago, Community High School in Ann Arbor, and Gateway II in New Orleans where home base is a building in the downtown area and classes are held all over the city in businesses, cultural institutions, and offices. Community resource people run some classes with certificated teachers acting as liaison and "cooperating" instructors.

Schools-within-schools or *satellite schools* or *mini-schools* offer a group of teachers in a particular school or school district an opportunity to develop a program that makes good educational sense to them, uses their professional and personal strengths, and centers on the needs and styles of a group of children or young people. Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California, offers its students the common, conventional program as well as a range of multicultural, open and

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Twelve Characteristics of Effective Optional Programs

1. VOLUNTARY. An essential element in any viable alternative program is the opportunity, the option, of choosing to participate. Students and their parents make this choice, as do teachers. They choose to take part on the basis of their own needs and the style, as well as the emphasis and orientation of the program.

2. STRESS INVOLVEMENT. Students, parents, faculty, community, and administration are involved in planning, operating, and evaluating the program in one way or another.

3. LOCALLY DEVELOPED. Each program is "home grown," reflecting the needs, interests, resources, and facilities in the area or district. Existing programs from other geographic areas often serve as models or sources of ideas, but these are adapted and changed to fit the local situation. Alternative programs also move out into the community to use its resources actively and energetically.

4. REARRANGE RESOURCES. An optional alternative program uses its resources differently from the regular or conventional program. People, facilities, and materials are all combined in new and often creative ways. Most function at or near the same funding level as the regular program, once start-up costs are met.

5. WELL-DEFINED GOALS. Optional alternative programs go through a planning and development process that evokes clearly stated purposes and objectives. Program objectives are specific to the program and also consistent with the comprehensive objectives of the local school district.

6. REPRESENTATIVE ENROLLMENT. Rather than serving only a selected target group of students with special needs, increasingly optional alternative programs seek to attract diverse and representative enrollments.

7. MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE SYSTEM. Consistent with the belief that reform of the present monolithic school system is needed, the alternatives work to build a close relationship with the "parent" school or school system, using its resources, exchanging ideas, communicating successes and failures, and trying to involve

faculty, students, and parents from the "regular" program. Optional programs seek to influence but not replace the existing curriculum since that program, too, represents an alternative.

8. DEPART SIGNIFICANTLY. By definition, an alternative program is a significant departure from the existing program. It often tests out one or more of the following:

- New roles for administrators, teachers, and students
- New patterns of governance, management, and administration
- New student reporting and evaluation methods
- New methods of organization and grouping of pupils for learning, including individualized instruction and independent study
- New and more flexible uses of the school day or year.

9. TEACH BASIC SKILLS. Optional learning programs offer basic subjects, but in personal and responsive ways. They are not just add-on enrichment or elective courses. Attention to skills development and subject matter often occurs within a supportive web of goal setting, building on successes and strengths, supportive peer groups, and multidisciplinary approaches.

10. DEVELOP TALENTS AND INTERESTS. Optional programs help students develop a sense of identity and personal effectiveness. Teachers, too, are called upon to use the full range of personal and professional talents.

11. PERSONALIZE STUDENT LEARNING. Optional programs put people—their interests, needs, and how they learn—at the center of things. Students are the focus for organizing the educational program.

12. MEET REQUIREMENTS. Since the option is the student's basic program, it makes arrangements to meet state and local district requirements for accreditation, attendance, or graduation common in the school district or area.



Learning centers began primarily as subject-area supplements to the high school curriculum.

informal, subject-matter oriented, or ethnic programs, as does Cherry Creek High School in Cherry Creek, Colorado.

Most high schools in New York City have established mini-schools in an attempt to combat the impersonality of large high schools. Small self-contained, self-managing units can more easily match students and teachers in styles and interests. Building on this idea, Quincy II High School in Quincy, Illinois, and John Adams High School in Portland, Oregon, have divided their schools into subschools. Each teacher and each student in these schools select which subschool they wish to work in, learn in, owe allegiance to, and follow the rules of. Both of these schools have subschool directors or facilitators who teach half time and are administrators half time.

At the elementary level, Amerman School in suburban Detroit's Northville offers children and their parents the choice of a conventional elementary program, a British open style program, or an Extended School Year program which runs on a 45/15 plan (9 weeks of school/3 weeks of vacation) all year and emphasizes an individualized approach.

Learning centers vary from the St. Paul Learning Centers designed around problem areas, talents, or interests for all grade levels to those of Lansing and Grand Rapids, Michigan, which began primarily as subject-area

supplements to the high school curriculum.

Another major type of program is the *multi-aged* program where students ranging from kindergarten through high school come together in one school for an open-informal program such as that of the St. Paul Open School or the Brown School in Louisville, Kentucky.

In an effort to describe existing alternative programs and stimulate the establishment of options in the metropolitan Detroit area, a federally financed study examined the characteristics of successful educational alternatives.¹ With the aid of a sizable advisory committee, use of outside consultant help, and extensive visitations of programs nationwide, a list of "essential" and "desirable" elements for optional educational programs was compiled. The list of characteristics on page 15 evolved from this study and will be valuable to educators who are planning options and alternatives. Attention to these guidelines can help administrators anticipate, manage, and reduce program controversy and assure successful implementation.

This list is not all inclusive, but it does offer guidance to those educators, students, and parents who are considering creating an alternative program. Administrators can look to options to help manage conflict in another way. Often problems arise when students aren't benefiting from the present program or when faculty members differ philosophically. Increasingly, parents ask for variety in programs. When schools offer only one program, these issues are difficult to deal with. By working with faculty and parents to develop and maintain program choices, administrators can eliminate many persistent and time-consuming problems.

An essential characteristic of a democracy is that it provides its citizens with choices. Options and alternatives will help establish this characteristic as an essential part of our public schools. Could there be anything controversial about that? □

¹ "A Study of Alternatives to Traditional Public Schools Programs," ESEA Title III planning grant, July 1, 1972, to June 30, 1973. Wayne County Intermediate School District, Detroit, Michigan.

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