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INTRODUCTION

> "Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur. Further, it recognizes that all people can be educated and that it is in society's interest to ensure that all are educated to at least...[a] general high school... level. To accomplish this requires that we provide a variety of structures and environments such that each person can find one that is sufficiently comfortable to facilitate progress." (Morley, 1991, p. 8)

This Guide has been developed to provide districts and schools guidance and common language for the creation, implementation and operation of alternative programs and schools. Alternatives to the traditional school model have become imperative in meeting the needs of students who have risk factors that affect their learning (Barr & Parrett, 2001). Alternative Education students are typically those students who are failing academically, lack engagement in school and may have a higher probability of dropping out of school.

The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) believes that all students can succeed and that alternative education is an important option for some students to do so. Alternative education is a powerful and positive opportunity for students who are not having success in the traditional school settings to choose to experience success in an environment that recognizes differences. It is a place where teaching and learning is student-centered, where school success may be measured by both academic and social/emotional performance, and where school staff and students build strong positive bonds that allow staff to support yet challenge the learner to reach his/her full potential. Alternative programs, whether in the school building or in another location, offer students an education that meets the same academic rigor, standards, and expectations of all students in the district.

Alternative education is an approach to learning that may operate as a program within a school or as a regionalized school with students from several districts. For the purposes of this Guide, we will use alternative education programs to refer to both program and school settings which occur in the Public School setting.

Every district/school that undertakes the creation of alternative education options will do so based on the best interest of their students, school, and community taking into account the individual needs of the population to be served. The following pages provide guidance and best practices pertinent to establishing alternative education options.

General Information About Alternative Education

Quality alternative education programs provide options for students who, for a variety of reasons, are not finding success from the traditional school structure. These programs provide an educational environment that helps to prevent students from dropping out of school (or brings back students who previously dropped out). Flexibility, intensive behavioral supports, social and emotional supports, individualized instruction and remediation, and flexibility in schedules are some of the ways alternative education programs help students meet state and local graduation requirements.

Alternative Education Structures: Program or School

Alternative education is an initiative within a public school district or educational collaborative established to serve students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting. The decision to establish a program is a local decision that the public school district, with the support of the school committee, should make based on factors, including but not limited to, the number of students to serve, staffing needs, supports available, and funding.

Student Profile

Alternative education programs are designed to respond to those students who are not succeeding in the traditional school environment, who are at-risk of dropping out or who may have already dropped out of the traditional high school. However, the reasons students drop out are many and they may encompass all aspects of students' lives. The four common arenas in which a student may experience challenges that put him/her at-risk for completing high school are:

Student-Related:

- Attendance/truancy
- Behavior/discipline problems
- Mental health needs
- Care for siblings
- Court involved
- Pregnancy/parenting
- Drug abuse
- Poor peer relationships
- Suspension/expulsion
- Friends have dropped out
- Illness/disability
- High Anxiety
- Need for a smaller school setting
- Lack of credit

Family-Related:

- Low socioeconomic status
- Low parental involvement
- Low parental expectations
- Parent language barriers that interfere with home and school communication
- Domestic violence
- Parent/family member addictions

School-Related:

- Conflict between home and school cultures
- Ineffective discipline system
- Lack of adequate counseling
- Negative school climate
- Lack of relevant curriculum
- Lack of credit recovery options
- Lack of appropriate supports for English Language Learners
- High use of suspension/expulsion
- Low expectations

Community-Related:

- Lack of community support services
- Lack of community support for schools
- High incidence of criminal activity
- Lack of school/community linkage
- Lack of public transportation
- High mobility/homelessness

Models of Alternative Education

Across Maine there are a variety of models for alternative education. Districts should evaluate the needs of their at-risk students to decide on the purpose and structure of alternative education programs offered. Some of the criteria that may influence the design of these models include:

> o *Type of students served* - Alternative education programs include those targeted to specific populations (e.g., parenting teens, expelled students, students retained in grade nine), as well as more general enrollment that includes a broader base of students that have risk factors for dropping out of school.

o *Grade level(s) served* - Alternative education programs include those that are focused on a particular grade level (or levels) such as at the middle school and high school grades.
o *Setting* - Alternative education programs may be established within the traditional school during the regular school day; within the traditional school after the regular school day; or in a separate, off-site location as a program connected to the school or as a separate school.
o *Duration/Time Frame* – Alternative education can serve students for varying amounts of time. The district makes the decision on the goal of the program which may be to retain students until graduation or it may be to transition students back to the traditional middle or high school.

Common Elements

The purpose of alternative education is to provide an educational option for students with risk factors that impede their progress in the traditional school environment. Some of the common elements of programs include:

o Deliberate, student-centered focus

o Small class sizes

o Possibility for more 1:1 interaction with staff, mentors, tutors, etc.

o Flexible scheduling

o Intentional social emotional supports

o Increased support services such as social work, counseling, mentoring, tutoring, etc.

o Multiple learning opportunities through teacher-led, online and hybrid courses

o Accessible and Relevant curriculum

o Array of instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual learning styles such as project-based learning, service learning, and contextual learning

o Caring environment that builds and fosters resilience and the power of relationships.

Alternative Learning Experiences

Structured learning time does not mean "seat time." Structured learning can happen in a variety of settings and formats. Examples of structured learning time include:

o **Directed Study**: requires students to be engaged in activities directly related to their program of studies and a teacher must be available to assist students. A directed study may

occur in places such as a classroom, computer lab, or resource room. Traditional (non-directed) study halls are not considered "directed study."

o **Independent Study**: a program that has the same rigorous course of study and standards as a core subject. It is contained within the regularly scheduled student school year, under the direction of a teacher, is assigned a grade and credit, is individually designed and is not to be assigned to large groups of students merely for the purpose of satisfying the annual hourly requirement. Any school/district using independent study as part of structured learning time needs to have guidelines that clearly explain the process by which the work of students in independent study will be verified.

o **Service Learning**: a teaching and learning methodology, through which students engage in rigorous cross-curricular study by identifying, researching, proposing and implementing solutions to real needs and problems in their school or community.

o **Learning Time Without a Teacher**: if a learning activity in which the student is engaged is: 1) consistent with the curriculum for study of a core subject or other subject approved by the school committee; 2) part of a program designed by a teacher then it may be considered structured learning time. An example might be credit recovery programs in-school, out-of-school and in the summer.

o **Work-based Learning**: students engaged in a meaningful work experience that is connected to a school's career development education may count the hours worked towards structured learning time.

Students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

Alternative education programs or schools are not special education placements; they are general education settings. They are not designed solely for students with IEPs and should not be confused with placements designed specifically for students with IEPs, such as substantially separate placements, approved public day programs, collaborative programs, and/or approved private special education schools. However, because alternative education programs are designed to respond to the needs of all students, to include both academic learning and social skills development, and to build on each student's individual strengths and abilities, they may be responsive to the needs of students with IEPs.

An IEP must address each student's unique needs, as determined by the IEP Team. If the student is educated in an alternative education setting, the student must receive the services set forth in the IEP. Specially designed instruction and related services must be provided by appropriately licensed personnel.

Since an IEP is based on the student's individual needs and not on the characteristics of available programming, an IEP should never be developed, amended, or revised solely for the purpose of fitting a student into an alternative education program.

As general education settings, alternative education programs are first and foremost an alternative to the traditional school. The majority of students in alternative education programs do not have disabilities. If the number of students with IEPs rises significantly in an alternative program, districts should re-evaluate the designation of the program to consider a change to a public day program solely for students with IEPs.

Entrance and Exit Processes

Entrance Process

The following elements are recommendations for a comprehensive entrance process:

> o The alternative education program has a transparent and defined purpose including a description of the types of students who may benefit most from the environment;
> o Students and parents have opportunities for visits and individual meetings with program staff and enrolled students to ensure an appropriate match between student and program;
> o There are clear and objective criteria for admission consistent with stated program guidelines that are provided to students and their parents;
> o Enrollment criteria provide an opportunity for students to apply for admission which may include completing an interview and/or written application to indicate commitment and motivation to attend
> o Criteria for enrollment are neutral, fair, non-discriminatory and are designed to be accessible to a wide and inclusive pool;
> o Regular data review and analysis remove barriers which result in unequal rates of assignment/transfer to alternative education – including unequal rates of placement for students based on race, national origin, income, disability or limited English proficiency;
> o If involuntary transfer from the traditional school program to the alternative education program occurs, (not recommended) due process protections are provided prior to any change in programming.

Exit Process

Alternative education programs adopt clear and explicit criteria and procedural framework to address the Exit Process. The Exit Process may occur in one of three ways:

> o Student chooses to voluntarily return to the traditional school

> o Student is asked to return to the traditional school because the alternative education program is no longer considered beneficial to the student.

> o Student is planning on Dropping out of school entirely.

No matter what the reasoning for the exit from the Alternative Program the following steps should be taken:

- o An opportunity for students, parent/guardians, and staff to confer regarding the advisability and logistics of the exit reasons, including a collaborative and supported transition plan if the exit plan is accepted.

- o Identifying and assigning the next school/life placement.

- o Exit interviews to ensure there is a clear understanding of reasons for the change of program and the short and long term ramifications of the transition.

Curriculum and Instruction

The curricula offered in alternative education programs must be academically rigorous, accessible to all students, and aligned to state and local standards and accountability systems. The curriculum must be culturally relevant to reflect the backgrounds of the student population and is, therefore, understandable and meaningful to the students. While the academic program is standards-based, it should not be standardized. Rather, it should be personalized for each student and instruction should be offered in a variety of learning modalities based on students' individual strengths and needs. To ensure a continual drive to success, the delivery must be data-driven and real-time feedback available for students and teachers.

Academics

Successful programs have a clear focus on academic learning combined with engaging and creative instruction and a culture of high expectations for all students

Alternative programs may choose to deliver the core content through a traditional curriculum with students earning Carnegie units or through a competency-based curriculum where students progress via mastery of the learning standards. Some programs may use a blended format where assessments can place students with prior knowledge in next level courses. Alternative programs have opportunities available for students to recover credit and accelerate learning through credit recovery programs and online course completion opportunities. Small class sizes and low student- teacher ratios allow for a more rapid response when a student begins to show signs of failing. Interventions, accommodations, varied learning and instructional strategies can be personalized to keep students engaged and progressing towards completion.

Instruction

Teachers use a variety of effective techniques and instructional strategies to teach students with diverse learning needs, interests, background skills, and prior knowledge so as to enable them to meet the state

standards set for all students. Qualified and experienced teachers do not rely upon a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

Alternative education programs provide adequate instructional materials and resources for all students to have full and meaningful opportunities to attain the standards set at the state and local levels. Instructional materials and supplies are developmentally appropriate for all students, and accessible to English learners as well as to students with disabilities including through a range of assistive technology services and devices.

Students enrolled in alternative education within a public school or in a separate alternative education school must, as all other public school students, have access to appropriate science laboratory equipment, access to the library, and to computer technology. Resources are sufficient to support adequate teacher-student ratios, positive behavioral specialists and other necessary support services personnel.

Social Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which students and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Personalized planning allows students and staff the opportunity to identify specific personal/social/emotional and other life skills needing support and further development.

The alternative education program should embed SEL strategies in the classroom and across content learning. Cooperative learning, team building and other group activities are practiced to exercise the development of personal/social/emotional behaviors important to the success of the community. The program has an established plan to address student or family crises as they arise. Accommodations for cultural differences are made to allow for personal success within the learning environment.

Authentic Learning

Authentic learning takes place when teachers are able to present material in a way that students are able to construct meaning based on their own life experiences. Authentic learning engages students in academic work applied to a context related to their lives, communities or workplaces. Authentic learning can be a driver of college and career readiness for all students.

One of the most valuable teaching skills is the ability to capture students' interests and passions and help them convert them into activities. There are a variety of models and terms to describe authentic learning including project-based learning, service-learning, and work-based learning. Each one provides students with experiential learning opportunities that connect academic learning, problem resolution and workplace readiness. Skill attainment such as oral and written communication, accepting directions and criticism with a positive attitude, motivation and taking initiative, and understanding roles,

responsibilities, and respect in the workplace, in the classroom or on a team project are key to students being college and career ready.

Alternative education programs should offer authentic learning experiences that engage students in ways that will improve attendance, get students back on-track, provide credit towards graduation, and prepare students for post-secondary success.

TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS

There are no special or additional teacher certification requirements for someone to teach in an alternative program. Alternative program teaching staff must be licensed for the grade levels in which they are teaching, and have demonstrated content knowledge and a core academic subject they teach. However, in Maine a teacher may give instruction and grades outside of their core content area.

Teachers in alternative programs believe that every student can succeed and understand the risk factors and life challenges faced by the students in the program. Teachers have the ability to modify their instruction so that students of diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, language and abilities have an equal opportunity to learn through work that is challenging, interesting and related to the real world. Instructional strategies reflect the teacher's awareness of students' cultural differences, in particular those that might have an adverse effect on student learning or behavior. Through the whole learning process teachers communicate consistent, high expectations for all students.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

Alternative education programs should offer career development opportunities that enhance the students' learning and advances their college and career readiness. It is a local decision on whether these opportunities are for high school credit.

CLIMATE AND CULTURE

An alternative education program provides the environment for learning that is safe and supportive – socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically. The culture of the program is enhanced by mutually positive, respectful, and supportive relationships as well as by the active, attentive and visible presence of caring adults. It is a high quality option for students that is supported and respected by the district administration and community.

A positive school climate fosters student engagement and principles of positive youth development. Principles may include: positive, clear communication of high expectations for learning and behavior; student voice is welcome and expected for all aspects of the program; encouragement of student responsibility for meeting self-identified goals for learning, behavior and personal growth; guidance and actions demonstrate a shared understanding that all youth are valued, contributing members of the learning community rather than problems to be managed; restorative rather than punitive approaches to discipline; and family engagement is encouraged and welcome.

CONCLUSION

Alternative Education is designed to meet the needs of students who are not succeeding in the traditional school setting. With a "whole child" approach, alternative programming meets the educational, social, emotional and intellectual needs of the student while providing a safe and supportive environment in which to learn, plan and succeed. Given the myriad needs of the individual student, programming is personalized and students are empowered to accept responsibility for their own academic success, social and emotional growth and attainment of workplace readiness skills.

Enrollment in an alternative setting is not a punishment but an opportunity to attain academic success and develop a plan for post-secondary success as well. Small student/teacher ratio, a focus on student's strengths, positive student-adult relationships, flexible scheduling, high expectations and relentless support create a safe and supportive learning environment where student voice is welcome and high expectations are met in the pursuit of academic, social emotional and personal skills attainment.