

EVALUATION OF THE OKLAHOMA ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Abstract

Oklahoma has created a nationally-recognized statewide model for statewide alternative education. This has been accomplished through long-term, careful planning and implementation strategies based upon sound research. Oklahoma's alternative education programs undergo annual evaluation by a third-party evaluation contractor. The Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center (OTAC), the current contractor, has been cited by two federal education laboratories as one of the few institutions conducting ". . . well-designed, large-scale research on alternative learning environments."

As early as 1982, the Oklahoma State Department of Education began to pilot programs to address the growing concern for the number of high school students leaving Oklahoma schools without a diploma. A small grant program was initiated in 1983. By 1989, the amount of funding, as well as the number of grant programs, had increased. However, in 1994 eight Urban Academies were provided with long-term, stable funding. Additionally, 19 smaller academies were added and a five-year plan was developed to provide stable funding for programs available to students in all Oklahoma schools.

Based on criteria specified by the Oklahoma State Board of Education, \$2 million in grants were awarded to counties with a high number of dropouts and a high number of referrals to the juvenile justice system. In 1995, an additional \$1.65 million was added to continue the eight pilot programs and to increase the number of sites to include nineteen rural models for alternative education. This support by the state legislature continued to increase to an unprecedented \$19.7 million until a state funding crisis in FY2001 when funds for alternative education programs, as well as for the funding for general education, were reduced 25 percent. All but 76 of Oklahoma's 544 school districts have been incorporated into the statewide alternative program. Those unfunded were all K-8 or elementary districts.

In this paper, the authors review the Oklahoma Alternative Education Program and present evaluations of two specific programs.

Background

The term "at risk" has become synonymous, at least in the educational community, with those students whose present or predictable status (economic, social-cultural, academic, and/or health) indicates that they may fail to successfully complete their secondary education and acquire basic life skills necessary for higher education and/or employment. While students had been quitting school since the earliest days of public education, several variables had made the situation appear more urgent than in years past. Citizens with less than a high school education once had no trouble finding jobs—even good paying ones—in a society geared toward heavy industry. Yet, as the job market became increasingly more competitive and technologically complex, the young and poorly skilled began finding it difficult, if not impossible, to find adequate employment and were at a disadvantage that could not be easily overcome.

When a student drops out of school, both the dropout and society incur costs. These costs have been estimated in terms of lost lifetime income, income assistance, lost tax earnings, higher health costs, and higher probability of unemployment, crime, and incarceration. For individual students, dropping out means lower wages—dropouts earn on average \$9,245 less per year than high school graduates (Employment Policy

Foundation, 2002). For the country, a high dropout rate means lost earnings and unrealized tax revenue—over \$200 billion for each year’s class of dropouts (Catterall, 1985). Although these numbers are alarming, the social costs of dropping out may be even higher. On average, 75 percent of America’s prison population consists of high school dropouts (Harlow, 2003).

Identifying the students at risk and the risks to which they are exposed challenge not only educators but government and business leaders, also. Newspaper columnists and media broadcasters describe the plight of our nation’s young people. In corporate boardrooms, senate chambers, and state houses “children at risk” are discussed as statistical abstractions, despite of the inevitability that the current condition of at-risk children substantially imperils this nation.

However, the events at Columbine High School in Colorado, April 20, 1999, added an immediate sense of urgency, and a more poignant definition to the term “at-risk.” In the *Tulsa World*, May 5, 1999, noted columnist William Raspberry cited two distinct categories of lessons that we as parents, educators and a nation should have recognized from the events that impacted Littleton. The first he called “obvious and largely useless” and the second “subtle, far too easy to forget and immensely important.”

Raspberry directed the reader’s attention to the killers’ fascination with violence-packed video games and the Internet, their cliquish behavior and, of course, their distinctive black trench coats. These he referred to as the obvious signals. Then, Raspberry turned the reader’s attention to the second and much more subtle category. The columnist contended that the boys exhibited a sense of themselves as “outcasts.” This attribute alerted those of us who deal with troubled youth to a new level of consequence for the at-risk student as well as for their potential victims. No dollar amount can be attributed to the Columbine tragedy.

In Raspberry’s article, he contended that the events of Columbine reminded us that the sad fact is that,

. . . there are people who, for too many of us and often themselves, don’t matter. There are people in our schools, in our streets, in our offices, who know that they don’t matter to the rest of us, who exist, if at all, as objects of ridicule, and derision (*Tulsa World*, May 5, 1999, editorial by William Raspberry).

Raspberry concluded that all of us probably had spent some small portion of our lives “not mattering,” but that most of us had found refuge in places (e.g., home, workplace, church, or social group) where we mattered a great deal.

But some of us have no such refuge apart from our fellow non-matterers. And of that sad group, some will make sure they matter in the time-tested way of mattering . . . through violence.

The hardest point to absorb is the need to start paying attention to those who see themselves as “outcasts,” not just because it may prevent violence but because there simply should not be humans who don’t matter (*Tulsa World*, May 5, 1999).

Too many of our nation’s children must feel as if they do not matter. According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2004), each day in America,

- five (5) children commit suicide;
- one hundred eighty-two (182) children are arrested for violent crimes;
- three hundred sixty-six (366) children are arrested for drug abuse;
- two thousand, five hundred thirty-nine (2,539) high school students drop out;
- four thousand, four hundred forty (4,440) children are arrested;
- seventeen thousand, seventy-two (17,072) public school students are suspended.

A growing body of research confirms the benefits of building a sense of community in schools. Educators have been trained with the knowledge that students have basic psychological needs—for emotional and physical safety; for close, supportive relationships—a sense of “connectedness” (Resnick et al., 1997) or “belongingness” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995); for autonomy, or a say in what happens to us; and for a sense of competence—a belief that we are capable people and able to learn. These fundamental needs shape human motivation.

However, many of the public schools in our nation offer little sense of such connection to students who may lack the academic, school/social, home/social, or personal/social skills necessary to successfully progress through the rigors of the school setting. In *A Place Called School*, Goodlad (1984) identified characteristics of the nation’s middle and high schools that may contribute to the students’ lack of connection to the school environment. Goodlad identified,

- large schools and classes that allow students to feel disassociated with the goals and activities of the school;
- abuse of tracking, which impacts not only student achievement, but also self-esteem, misconduct, and the likelihood of dropping out;
- misuse of standardized tests, which can come from overreliance on scores or misinterpretation of results, which can misleadingly label students as academic problems;
- higher requirements without remediation or support for low achieving students, which puts students who are already experiencing academic difficulty further behind;
- emphasis on seat-time versus competency, which focuses students on performing certain activities, rather than on achieving certain results; and
- lack of support for minorities.

Educators may have forgotten that, as human beings, we bond with the people and institutions that help us satisfy our needs (Watson, Battistich, and Soloman, 1997). This makes the creation of caring, inclusive, participatory communities for our students especially important. When a school meets students’ psychological needs, students become increasingly committed to the school’s norms, values, and goals. And by enlisting students in maintaining that sense of community, the school provides opportunities for students to learn skills and develop habits that will benefit them throughout their lives.

The evidence includes the predictable likelihood that many of the educators’ needs may also be met by the development of a strong sense of community. Students in such schools are more likely to be academically motivated (Soloman, Battistich, Watson, Schraps, and Lewis, 2000); to act ethically and altruistically (Schaps, Battistich, and Soloman, 1997); to develop social and emotional competencies (Soloman et al., 2000); and to avoid a number of problem behaviors, including drug use and violence (Resnick et al., 1997)

The Oklahoma Experience

As early as 1982, the Oklahoma State Department of Education began to pilot programs to address the growing concern for the number of high school students leaving Oklahoma schools without a diploma. A small grant program was initiated in 1983, and continued with additional funds through the early 1990s.

During the 1994 session, the Oklahoma Legislature’s concern for all students’ achievement of high standards met with its awareness of the need to reform the juvenile justice system. House Bill 2640, the Oklahoma Juvenile Justice Reform Act, created a wide-ranging piece of legislation that supported prevention strategies to decrease juvenile criminal behaviors. Among the prevention strategies was the establishment of eight pilot alternative academies to serve students in grades 6-12. These eight Urban Academies were provided with

long-term, stable funding. Additionally, 19 smaller academies were added and a five-year plan was developed to provide stable funding for programs available to students in all Oklahoma schools.

Based on criteria specified by the State Board of Education, \$2 million in grants were awarded to counties with a high number of dropouts and a high number of referrals to the juvenile justice system. In 1995, an additional \$1.65 million was added to continue the eight pilot programs and to increase the number of sites to include nineteen rural models for alternative education. This support by the state legislature continued to increase to an unprecedented \$19.7 million until a state funding crisis in FY2001 when funds for alternative education programs, as well as for the funding for general education, were reduced 25 percent. All but 76 of Oklahoma's 544 school districts have been incorporated into the statewide alternative program. Those unfunded were all K-8 or elementary districts.

Oklahoma has created a nationally-recognized statewide model for statewide alternative education. This has been accomplished through long-term, careful planning and implementation strategies based upon sound research. Oklahoma's alternative education programs undergo annual evaluation by a third-party evaluation contractor. The Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center (OTAC), the current contractor, has been cited by two federal education laboratories as one of the few institutions conducting ". . . well-designed, large-scale research on alternative learning environments."

The scheduled evaluation is based on four independent sources of information: student surveys, observational data collected during site visits, student focus groups, and pre- and post-data on student outcomes. At the end of each school year, the programs are rated against the criteria established in Oklahoma law.

Criteria for Oklahoma Alternative Education Programs

In Oklahoma, alternative education programs must comply with 17 criteria. The criteria include:

- clear, measurable objectives,
- appropriate design for students most at risk,
- individual graduation plan for each student,
- small class size (10-15 students per teacher, dependant on situation),
- appropriate structure, curriculum, and interaction,
- intake and screening process,
- faculty selection process,
- collaborative efforts with service agencies,
- courses meet curricular standards,
- individualized instruction,
- counseling and social services,
- fine arts education incorporated,
- student participation in extra-curricular activities, and
- annual evaluation.

Local implementation of the criteria is rated on a five-point scale, from "exemplary" to "noncompliant." Initially, even minimal compliance with the criteria was difficult to achieve. Program quality has increased each year, however, and more than 80 percent of the programs were in compliance with all 17 criteria for the 2002-2003 evaluation. Mere compliance is no longer the focus for technical assistance; the focus has changed to achieving excellence.

Although the need for alternative educational services differs from district to district, there are some indicators which may aid in earlier intervention efforts. According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education, characteristics of these at-risk students may include:

- They are a member of a household or family whose income is at or below the poverty level under criteria used by the U.S. bureau of census; or
- They have not made substantial progress in mastering basic skills that are appropriate for students their age; or
- They have grades that consistently indicate major underachievement; or
- They have been retained in a grade for one or more years; or
- They have been a school dropout or have excessive absences during a school year; or
- They have been determined to be at risk based on assessment by school staff familiar with the students' health, social, or family status as these influences may be impairing the students' success in school. Influences may include but are not limited to, evidence of abuse of the students' use of alcohol or drugs, pregnancy or attempted suicide.

High-risk students tend to exhibit poor school attendance and behavior, lack involvement in activities, express dissatisfaction with school, feel alienated or isolated, come from impoverished families, and are more likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system. These students (and their families) tend to have low educational expectations.

The need for alternative education programming in Oklahoma is based upon a wide range of risk factors, including child poverty and teen pregnancy.

- More than 8,000 Oklahoma students drop out each year.
- More than 48,000 students were suspended from Oklahoma secondary schools last year.
- Oklahoma ranks tenth in child poverty and "leads the nation in worsening [child] poverty."
- Oklahoma has the fifth-highest teen pregnancy rate in the nation.
- Annual needs assessments show that an additional 10,000-20,000 Oklahoma students are in need of alternative education.

In 2001-2002, thirteen thousand, two hundred sixteen (13,216) Oklahoma students were served in alternative education programs funded by the Statewide Alternative Education initiative. The program served high-risk students in grades 6-12. These alternative education programs serve two functions. The programs **prevent** students from dropping out, and **recover** former dropouts. A summary of the characteristics of those students served in the alternative programs indicated:

- Academic deficiency was easily the most frequently reported reason for referral to a Statewide program. This was especially true for high school students.
- Middle school students were most often referred because of behavioral infractions.
- Students were also referred because of truancy, adjustment problems, and their status as former dropouts or pregnant/parenting teens.
- Fifty-three and eight-tenth (53.8) percent of the students were male.
- The percentage of minority students was 42.5 percent, the highest in the program's history.
- The predominant minorities tended to be African American in urban areas and Native American in other parts of Oklahoma.
- African American students were referred for behavioral difficulties far more often than any other group.
- In more than half (61 percent) of all Statewide alternative programs, course credit could be earned by demonstrating competency. A competency-based system encourages students to attend to the quality of their work and build patterns and habits of success.

Program Effectiveness

Nationwide, the prevailing methods of dealing with students who are chronic disciplinary problems are to remove them from school or to place them into programs that offer inferior educational programming that actually hinders the academic achievement of at-risk students.

While these solutions offer short-term relief, they are seldom effective. Research shows that suspended students' behaviors do not improve, the students fall behind in their education, and they are more likely to drop out of school. Research has also shown that at-risk students can benefit from carefully designed and implemented alternative programs. Oklahoma is successfully working to meet the dropout challenge through alternatives to traditional schooling. Oklahoma actively encourages and supports the creation of alternative programs by awarding grants, evaluating programs for effectiveness and reliability, and providing state validation for those that receive high ratings. Although the national research data is not ideal or comprehensive, it suggests that students in alternative education programs do indeed perform well academically. The well-designed large-scaled research project in Oklahoma revealed that students in alternative education programs improved on a variety of academic measures, including grades, attendance, number of courses failed and disciplinary referrals. In addition, the students outperformed similar students not enrolled in an alternative program on these same measures (SEDL, 1995).

In 2001-02, the number (and percentage) of alternative education students who dropped out of school was at an all-time low. The dropout rate in alternative education programs decreased from 13.1 percent (2000-01) to 10.8 percent (2001-02). The graduation rate for seniors served in alternative education programs was at an all-time high. More than two-thirds (71 percent) of the seniors graduated; another 1.2 percent earned GEDs. Oklahoma's dropout rate is the lowest since the legal definition of "dropout" was changed in 1994, even with a substantial improvement in dropout reporting.

Oklahoma programs have won the National Dropout Prevention Network's Crystal Star of Excellence award in four of the eight years that it has been awarded. No other state comes close to matching the record of Oklahoma's best programs. Two Oklahoma alternative programs will be recognized during the 2004 Conference in October.

Several teachers in alternative education programs have been selected as the Teacher of the Year within their districts. Several teachers in alternative education programs have completed the requirements for National Board Certification. One teacher received recognition as a "National Educator" by the Milken Foundation. This award financially supports teachers that display high-quality teaching, professional leadership, engagement with families and communities, and a potential for even greater contributions to the healthy development of children.

In addition to such academic indicators, behavioral and emotional measures also reveal encouraging results for students in alternative education programs. Students in alternative schools report higher levels of both satisfaction and confidence that their schools will meet their needs than do students in traditional schools (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh, 1981). Alternative schools also report reduced discipline problems and violence (Butchart, 1986). Finally the effects of alternative education seem to extend beyond the school years. A 1990 survey of dropouts who had returned to school and graduated from an alternative education program in Iowa suggests that alternative school graduates do tend to become productive citizens after graduation (Morley, 1991).

Perhaps the alternative education students say it best. Their most frequent responses to the Technical Assistance's survey question, "What is the best thing about the alternative school?" come back to that sense of connection and belonging. Comments include:

"The teachers care about us."

"The class sizes are smaller."

"You can get the help you need."

"I feel safe here, while I didn't at the other school."

Appendix 1

Muskogee Public Schools
2002-2003

Program Name : Muskogee Alternative Program MAP	Contact Person: Ms. Derryl Venters
Days/Hours of operation: Monday through Friday; 7:50 a.m. - 2:50 p.m.	State Funding: \$255,536.00
Number of students served: 364	Number of available slots: 120
Grades Served: 7-12	Staffing: 1 principal, 1 dean of students, 2 counselors, 13 teachers, support staff

Program Description

The Muskogee Alternative Program continued to maintain a primary focus on providing an alternative form of punishment rather than serving the students in a true alternative learning environment. Although the scope of the MAP program was extended to include self-referrals and a daytime GED-preparatory class, the long-standing reputation of the program as a disciplinary intervention impeded a complete transition to a proactive intervention model. Progress in changing the program was noted in that, this year, only 60 percent of the available slots were designated for those students “sentenced” to MAP through the disciplinary matrix.

MAP provided services as a full-day alternative program as a part of the district’s disciplinary program. Students in grades 7 through 12 were referred to MAP for periods of 20, 40, 50 or 80 days, based on their infraction(s). The primary goal of the program was to provide short-term intervention and return the student to the traditional program. The number of days students attended conformed to the traditional school’s block schedule to facilitate transition.

Implementation of Oklahoma’s 17 Criteria for Alternative Education Programs

The following table summarizes the progress of the program in meeting the seventeen criteria mandated in state law. The ratings are in accordance with the evaluation rubric developed by the Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center.

Table 1. Rating of the Muskogee Alternative Program

Criterion	Implementation Level
Intake and screening	Satisfactory. Despite the use of the program as a disciplinary intervention, the MAP staff have developed an intake process that is rated as a model for Oklahoma alternative academies. If the referral procedures were changed to preclude “sentencing” students to MAP, the intake process would be rated as exemplary.
Collaboration	Exemplary. MAP has an established network of service providers. Representatives from numerous community agencies participate in the weekly intake process and extend valuable resources and support for the program, staff, and students.

Criterion	Implementation Level
Individualized instruction	Minimal compliance. Efforts to individualize the instruction were noted during site visits; however, the student data reporting made it impossible to determine the effectiveness of these efforts. Completed data were unavailable on almost 50 percent of the students. Of those students with complete data, 36 percent passed fewer than four courses per semester. This places most MAP students in jeopardy of failing to complete graduation requirements on schedule. Only 58, or 16 percent, of the students were reported to have completed four or more classes during the semester for which data were reported. Students who were already enrolled in the area career tech were allowed to continue their enrollment while in attendance at MAPS. Sixteen of the 364 students participated in Career Tech classes during the 2002-2003 session.
Counseling and social services	Excellent. MAP has a drug and alcohol counselor as well as an academic counselor on site. Additional services for individuals and family services were made available through collaborative efforts with several area service providers.
Graduation plan	Minimal compliance. The end-of-the-year self-evaluation indicated that each student is counseled each nine weeks on his/her academic progress. Since the majority of the students failed to complete four or more courses during the semester, it would appear that these efforts met with little, if any, success and that students' progress toward graduation requirements should be more closely monitored.
Life skills instruction	Satisfactory.
Self-evaluation	Minimal compliance. Complete and accurate information is integral to the validity of the evaluation. Although the end-of-the-year self evaluation was submitted before the deadline, the data were received two weeks after the deadline, with much of the data inaccurate or incomplete.
Effective instruction	Minimal compliance. Although the individual instructors provided a range of instructional opportunities and employed a variety of strategies to engage students in learning, the academic performance and progress toward graduation goals reflected no significant improvement over the traditional program.
Arts education	Excellent. Art instruction was provided weekly by a certified art instructor.
Certified teachers	Criterion met.
Courses meet curricular standards	Criterion met.
Clear and measurable goals and objectives	Criterion met.
Effective class size and student/teacher ratios	Criterion met.
Faculty selection	Criterion met.
Budget	Criterion met.
Student participation	Minimal compliance. Self-referred students were eligible for participation in activities. Sixty percent of the students were served through disciplinary referrals which excluded participation in extra-curricular, competitive activities.
Designed to serve students in grades 6-12 most at risk of not completing a high school education for a reason other than a disability.	Grades 7 through 12. MAP moved to a renovated facility at the beginning of the school year. The renovated facility was a welcomed change from the former Pershing building, which had housed the academy since its inception in 1989 and had been problematic for much of its tenure. This new building provided a space better suited to a positive learning environment. The principal reported that students responded to the new building in a very positive way. The new location also provided room to expand the course offerings to include hands-on instruction in tech-ed.

Student Outcomes

The Muskogee Alternative Program (MAP) enrolled 363 students in grades 7-12. Students who were in the program for three weeks or less were generally not included in the analyses.

During the 2002-03 academic year, students in the MAP program dropped out of school at a rate that was lower than the state average (9.9 percent to 10.8 percent). MAP students were also suspended less often (0.80 percent to 0.84 percent).

The Muskogee program was atypical in a number of areas, most of which related to its primary designation as an alternative punishment rather than an alternative learning program:

- The graduation rate for seniors was very low.
- Enrollment was high for African Americans and low for Native Americans, compared to district numbers.
- Only 6.3 percent of students were referred for academic deficiencies.
- Eighty-three and eight tenths (83.8) percent were referred for the various behavioral categories.
- The average time in the program was less than one semester. Research on alternative education programs in Oklahoma suggests that the short intervention period is related to the students' lack of academic improvement.
- Data was provided for 1/3 or less of the students on important variables (e.g., the number of courses in which students were enrolled and completed).

The large majority of the students (87 percent) participated in the program for one year or less. Nearly 13 percent (12.67) participated for two years, and one student had been participating in the program for five years.

In the 2002-03 academic year, students participated in the program on average for more than 13 weeks. About half of the students participated for 9.4 weeks or more and about half participated for less than 9.4 weeks. During their participation, students received 25 counseling sessions on average, with about half of the participants receiving 17 counseling sessions or more during the time they were participating in the program. For each week of the program, students received about three counseling sessions on average, with about half of the participants receiving about two counseling sessions and about half of the participants receiving less than two each week.

The following table lists students' averages before and after their participation in the program. Students who dropped out, were suspended or moved were usually not included in these statistical analyses. More than ½ of the students were missing some of the data which was essential for evaluation of the program's effectiveness.

Table 2. Pre- and post-program measures of academic and behavioral change for MAP participants

Pre-post Comparisons			
Variable	Mean	n	Statistical Significance
GPA (pre)	1.29	238	* Students entered the program with a low grade point, and exited with a lower one. Few, if any, Oklahoma alternative education programs have lower post-program GPAs.
GPA (post)	1.06		
Courses attempted (pre)	3.63	121	* The typical student was only enrolled in four courses per semester.
Courses attempted (post)	4.37		
Courses completed (pre)	2.63	122	* Students completed only half as many courses as needed to stay on track for graduation.
Courses completed (post)	3.12		
Proportion passed (pre)	0.73	85	No Significant Difference.

Pre-post Comparisons			
Variable	Mean	<i>n</i>	Statistical Significance
Proportion passed (post)	0.73		
Courses failed (pre)	0.98	121	No Significant Difference.
Courses failed (post)	1.22		
Days absent (pre)	4.05	287	^a Days absent were low at enrollment and were reduced by half while in the program.
Days absent (post)	1.98		
In-school suspensions (pre)		2	Number of students too small for statistical computation.
In-school suspensions (post)			
Days suspended (pre)		2	Number of students too small for statistical computation.
Days suspended (post)			
Reading score (pre)	76.72	183	^a The 183 students for whom pre/post data were reported made small but reliable gains in reading achievement.
Reading score (post)	80.39		
Math score (pre)	63.42	182	^a The 182 students for whom pre/post data were reported made small but reliable gains in reading achievement.
Math score (post)	67.54		

^a $p < 0.05$. Changes noted in italics are statistically significant. A significant difference is determined by the use of specific statistical techniques which take into account the number of students who made a particular change, as well as the direction and size of the change. The purpose of statistical significance tests is to determine whether changes in students are reliable—if we should count on similar results with other students.

Student Surveys

OTAC staff administered student surveys in the spring of 2003. These surveys asked students to report changes they had noted in their own behavior and any significant differences between their alternative program and the traditional school. One of the questions asked students to rate their alternative program on a scale from one (“horrible”) to ten (“perfect”). The other nine items asked open-ended questions. Responses from 87 students attending the Muskogee alternative program were collected. These 87 students were not a random sample of the 363 who were enrolled at some point during the year, and their responses may not be representative of all MAP students.

The most frequent reason given for attending the alternative program was “getting into trouble.” Other responses included a lack of required credits, poor attendance, being suspended, and personal choice. Students wrote about metal detectors, counseling, and a smaller learning environment as major differences from the traditional school. 16 percent of the students reported no difference at all. Half reported that they got along well with their teachers and classmates. Some students felt that the personalized assistance and explanations provided by the teachers were a strength of the program; 29 percent indicated the teachers didn’t help at all.

More than half (66 percent) of the respondents participated in counseling on a regular basis. Of those, 53 percent felt the sessions were helpful. Only half believed that they would have success if transferred back to the traditional school. The students were also equally divided on the issue of alternative education students being treated fairly.

On a scale of one to ten, the high school students at the Muskogee alternative program gave their program a median rating of 6.3. In comparison to other alternative programs in Oklahoma, this rating was low. The students cited better lunches, new teachers, more freedom and activities, and a change in the cafeteria staff as specific needs for program improvement. 60 percent of the students answered the question, “Is there anything else that we should know about your alternative program?” Those who responded tended to be concerned about the dress code, and the negative attitude of those who serve them lunch.

Recommendations

Although the Muskogee Alternative Program has remained an alternative form of punishment rather than a true alternative learning environment, the move to the new location was seen as a much needed and long overdue gesture of support for both the efforts of the alternative education staff and for the students that they serve. The new facility elicited a sense of pride and validity from both the staff and the students. Unfortunately, the support of the administration appears to have been short lived. Some of the changes that would have been indicated include:

- reducing the number of students who can be served at any one time (slots) from 120 to 60
- changing from a full-day program to an evening program, four days per week
- eliminating all but core curriculum offerings
- closing the newly renovated facility
- moving from the current new facility to space at the high school and middle school

It was reported that the equipment was removed from the building and that program services were to have been notably reduced for the coming year. However, public concern prompted the board of education to reconsider changing the program. MAPS was reopened the week prior to the beginning of the 2003-04 term. Ms. Kim Fleak, former school counselor for MAPS, was designated as the new principal.

OTAC's recommendations for improving the program are as follows:

- Ensure all existing resources, materials and equipment be maintained for the population served.
- Intake and Screening: Research indicates that programs are far more likely to be successful when students participate voluntarily in the intervention. Re-evaluation of the district's approach to alternative education services is recommended. If the program returned to its original mission statement, it would be aligned with research-based practices.
- Individualized Instruction: A variety of instructional approaches should be implemented to engage the students in genuine learning. The progress of each student should be monitored throughout the school year to ensure that students are progressing toward graduation.
- Graduation Plan: (see Individualized Instruction)
- Self-Evaluation: Incomplete data. The validity of the evaluation is contingent upon the quality of the data submitted for analysis. The submission of accurate, complete, and timely information continues to be a problem. If the program does not collect and report complete and accurate data, it will be difficult for OTAC to recommend its continued funding as an effective intervention for at-risk students.
- Student Participation: Self-referred students were eligible for participation in activities. The majority of the population were excluded from participation in activities because they were serving suspensions.

Muskogee's program is unique in its high proportion of suspended students; these high proportions result in some ambiguity about the program's compliance status. OTAC will consult with the Oklahoma State Department of Education regarding the program's compliance with this criterion and work with district administrators to help ensure that the district remains eligible for continued funding.

Appendix 2

Union Public Schools
2002-2003

Program name: Union Alternative Academy	Contact person: Richard Storm
Days/Hours of operation: M-F, 8:25 a.m.-2:30 p.m.	State funding: \$216,930
Number of students served: 171	Number of available slots: 112
Grades served: 9-12	Staffing: 1 full time principal, 1 full time counselor, 7 full time teachers, and 6 part time counselors

Program Description

Union public schools has provided alternative education to the district students since 1996. From the program’s inception, to this school year, 395 students have completed credits to graduate. The principal planned for the school’s success long before its inception and was given one goal by the superintendent; “plan it in Union style,” and he did. The program won the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence Award during the 2002-03 school year as a premiere school for students in alternative education in the state of Oklahoma.

Careful selection of the staff and the flexibility and autonomy to create effective programs through some trial and error, allowed for the program to create some of the best practices in our state. Union Alternative School offered a variety and choices for students to realize their educational goals in a student centered environment that was designed to meet their needs.

This academy’s design was much more like a gifted education school offering a wide range of technology applications, well rounded art opportunities, seminars, mini courses are offered in a variety of areas such as forensic education, physical education, health and wellness seminars which all center around the core subjects. Career education was comprehensive covering interviews to on-going support and evaluation of work-site jobs. Counseling was also designed to be student centered and relevant to the individual needs.

Classes were held in six week blocks with intense time on task in each of the core subjects; afternoons offered the mini courses that were requested by the students. The program also held town meetings where students could make requests for program changes or ask for explanation of the rules. The students selected one student as the spokes person and questions were directed at any staff member. The meetings served as an excellent communication vehicle for both the students and teachers, and often resulted in program changes.

Implementation of Oklahoma’s 17 Criteria for Alternative Education Programs

The following table summarizes the progress of the program in meeting the seventeen criteria mandated in state law. The ratings are in accordance with the evaluation rubric developed by the Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center.

Table 3. Rating for Union Alternative Academy

Criterion	Implementation Level
Intake and screening	Exemplary.
Collaboration	Exemplary.

Criterion	Implementation Level
Individualized instruction	Exemplary. The program had a variety of approaches to learning. Individualized instruction provided for acceleration and or re-teaching. A variety of alternative assessments were used as well as traditional evaluations. It was clear that the teachers worked very hard to provide curriculum and activities that were relevant to the learner and to the real world.
Counseling and social services	Exemplary. The school counselor provided individual and group counseling daily. In addition to the school counselor, six part-time counselors worked in the alternative program one day per week. They held support groups, counseled individuals, and helped with social services. A licensed psychologist also worked with students both individually and in groups as well as made referrals to outside agencies.
Graduation plan	Exemplary. Graduation plans were reviewed by the student and teacher every four weeks.
Life skills instruction	Exemplary. Mini-block classes encouraged students to experience their education by real world activities that connected the curriculum to life. They experienced the realistic connection of the crime with the consequences. Classes continued to mix mystery with science and law. This is the second year that students and teachers were involved in a mock murder mystery. Students studied forensic investigation and trial procedures to solve a staged crime called, "Got A Clue?" Following the staging of the mock murder, school resource officers arrested the "suspect" and students formed prosecution and defense teams. The entire student body became part of the jury pool. Another real life experience was the use of computerized, lifelike babies that simulated taking care of an infant. In addition to classroom activities, the academy students performed 2,925 hours of community service. Life skills instruction was truly infused into all of the curriculum to an extraordinary degree.
Self-evaluation	Exemplary.
Effective instruction	Exemplary. The instruction at the academy was ever changing to meet the individual needs of each student. The work-study component was improved with the addition of career exploration, mock interviews and job shadowing. Classroom instruction was delivered in a variety of ways including computer-assisted instruction, peer tutoring, small group instruction, experiential group projects, independent study, and integrated units. Active learning, varied curriculum, and high expectations were very evident.
Arts education	Exemplary. The program received funds for video equipment and editing that will be used to expand artistic applications for 2003-04. An artist-in-residence provided training in pottery, drumming, acting, and murals.
Certified teachers	Criterion met.
Courses meet curricular standards	Criterion met.
Clear and measurable goals and objectives	Criterion met.
Effective class size and student/teacher ratios	Criterion met.
Faculty selection	Criterion met.
Budget	Criterion met.
Student participation	Criterion met.
Designed to serve students in grades 6-12 most at risk of not completing a high school education for a reason other than a disability.	Criterion met. Grades 9-12

Student Outcomes

The attached Student Demographics page provides information about the characteristics of the program including grade levels, gender, and reason for referral to the program. Students who were in the program for three weeks or less were not included in the statistical analyses. The Union Alternative Academy Program served 171 students in grades 9-12; 44 percent of the students were in the 12th grade. The following tables summarize the performance of the alternative education students in 2002-2003.

During academic year 2002-03, seniors in the Union Alternative Academy graduated at a rate (81.1 percent) higher than the state average (70.8 percent). One student earned a GED. The dropout rate at the Academy was almost 10 times lower than the state average (1.2 percent for the Academy and 10.8 percent for the state). No students at the Academy were suspended.

Almost 19 percent (18.7) of the students were recovered dropouts, who typically have high dropout rates, and 29.3 percent of the students were described as having contact with Oklahoma juvenile justice system personnel.

Among the 171 students in the program, 65.5 percent had participated for one year, 23 percent for two years, 8.8 percent for three years, three students for four years, and one student for five years. In academic year 2002-03, students had participated in the program for about 25 weeks, with about half the students participating for a little more than 23 weeks and about half participating for less than 23 weeks.

During the time the students participated in the program, each student received about 22 counseling sessions on average, with about half the students receiving more counseling and about half of the students receiving less. In a typical week of the program, a participant in the program was usually counseled one time.

The following table lists students' averages before and after their participation in the program. Students who dropped out, were suspended or moved were usually not included in these statistical analyses.

Table 4. Pre- and post-program measures of academic and behavioral change for Union Alternative Academy participants

Pre-post Comparisons			
Variable	Mean	<i>n</i>	Statistical Significance
GPA (pre)	0.83	163	* Students had a GPA that was barely passing in the traditional school environment. This improved to a C+ average.
GPA (post)	2.76		
Courses attempted (pre)	4.94	163	*
Courses attempted (post)	5.52		
Courses completed (pre)	2.57	163	*
Courses completed (post)	5.18		
Proportion passed (pre)	0.52	133	*
Proportion passed (post)	0.93		
Courses failed (pre)	2.37	163	* Few students failed even one course per semester.
Courses failed (post)	0.34		
Days absent (pre)	25.32	163	* Students were absent less than 1/4 as many courses per semester in the alternative program.
Days absent (post)	5.31		
In-school suspensions (pre)	5.59	163	* There was a dramatic decrease in ISS during the alternative program.
In-school suspensions (post)	0.58		

Pre-post Comparisons			
Variable	Mean	<i>n</i>	Statistical Significance
Days suspended (pre)	1.44	163	^a
Days suspended (post)	0.01		
Reading score (pre)	62.37	131	^a Improvements in post-test scores on standardized tests supported the improvement in GPAs.
Reading score (post)	69.23		
Math score (pre)	57.06	131	^a Students made remarkable improvements in their post-test scores in math, language and composite areas.
Math score (post)	81.46		
Language score (pre)	45.30	131	^a
Language score (post)	67.54		
Composite score (pre)	53.53	131	^a
Composite score (post)	74.44		

^a $p < 0.05$. Changes noted in italics are statistically significant. A significant difference is determined by the use of specific statistical techniques which take into account the number of students who made a particular change, as well as the direction and size of the change. The purpose of statistical significance tests is to determine whether changes in students are reliable— if we should count on similar results with other students.

Students improved in all areas after referral to the alternative academy; most of these improvements were both substantial and meaningful.

Student Surveys

OTAC staff administered student surveys in the spring of 2003. These surveys asked students to report changes they had noted in their own behavior and any significant differences between their alternative program and the traditional school. One of the questions asked students to rate their alternative program on a scale from one (“horrible”) to ten (“perfect”). The other nine items asked open-ended questions. Responses from 95 students attending the Union alternative program were collected.

The most frequent reason given for attending the alternative program was failure/lack of credits. Other reasons included attendance issues, getting into trouble and personal choice. Many students liked the self-paced learning atmosphere and the more relaxed block schedule. 97 percent reported that they got along well with their teachers and classmates. They felt that the teachers would do anything to help them and that the personalized assistance and explanations provided by the teachers were a strength of the program.

Eighty-one percent of the students participated in counseling on a regular basis. Of those, 94 percent indicated the sessions were worthwhile. Almost three quarters (72 percent) thought they would not be able to succeed if transferred back to the traditional school.

Nine-three (93) percent of the respondents thought that alternative education students were treated fairly. On a scale of one to ten, the students in the Union Alternative Academy gave their alternative program a mean rating of 9.4 The students cited more money, additional field trips and improving the intake and screening process as specific needs for program improvement. Sixty-six (66) percent of the students responded to the question, “Is there anything else that we should know about your alternative program?” The majority of students who answered related positive characteristics of the program and praised their teachers.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the program share its ideas with other schools both statewide and nationally. It is also recommended that the program consider applying for the National Dropout Prevention Award. For the last

four years, this program has maintained an exemplary status in every area of their evaluation. The hard work that the principal and staff put into the program is clearly evident. The district is also to be commended for their continued support of this program.

OTAC is very aware of the district commitment, research, and planning that has been done to expand alternative education for the middle school population. The implementation of a middle school program was not done because of this year's budget cuts. It is recommended that the district continue to seek funding to implement this needed expansion.

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Biography

Melissa "Missy" Storm boasts that she "has never found a group of students that she did not enjoy." Her twenty-nine years as an educator includes teaching in elementary school and junior high mathematics, before moving into curriculum design and instructional supervision. When the opportunity to participate in the development of an alternative education program, Project Advantage, was presented in 1988, she felt as if she had found her niche. She soon found her way into what was to become a statewide reform effort for alternative education. Missy serves as the senior field coordinator for the Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center, the evaluative agency responsible for the on-going, on-site assistance to the 274 alternative statewide academies, as well as the yearly data analysis, rating and recommendation to the Oklahoma State Department of Education for the continuation of funding for each of these programs.

Richard Storm is a veteran educator who taught high school English for twenty-three years before being given the challenge of creating an alternative education program for Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1997. Through block scheduling, student contracts, innovative teaching techniques, greater access to counseling services, more individualized courses of study, lower student/teacher ratios, and a more supportive classroom atmosphere, Union Alternative School has become a highly successful program for the prevention and reclamation of dropouts under his leadership. The school is designated by the Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center as being an exemplary program suitable for replication in every area of evaluation. It has also been presented the 2003 Oklahoma Medal for Excellence in Alternative Education from the Oklahoma Excellence Foundation, and it has received this year's Crystal Star Award from the National Dropout Prevention Network as being the top program in the nation for working with students with attention deficit disorder and emotional disabilities. Storm received the 2004 Janis Updike Walker Award from the Oklahoma Alternative Education Association for a lifetime of work and dedication to at-risk youth.