



Research Report

Alternative Learning Environment 2010 Report

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**Prepared for
The Joint Adequacy Evaluation Oversight Subcommittee of the
House and Senate Interim Committees on Education**

BUREAU OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH

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Description and State Standards

An Alternative Learning Environment (ALE) is a student intervention program in compliance with Ark. Code Ann. §§ 6-18-508 and 6-18-509 and these programs seek to eliminate traditional barriers to student learning.

Act 272 of the Regular Session, 2007, amended the Public School Funding Act of 2003 to increase the categorical funding for each student in an ALE to the amount of \$4,063. The rules of the State Board of Education specify not only which alternative learning environment programs qualify for funding, but also the characteristics of students who qualify for funding because they have been placed in an alternative learning environment program. Student placements in alternative learning environments are funded based on the previous year's number of full-time equivalent students in the program. A student in an alternative learning environment must be in the alternative learning environment program for at least twenty (20) days for the district to be eligible for funding. Current law does not have an adjustment for growth in the number of students in alternative learning environments during a school year.

Ark. Code Ann. § 6-18-508(d)(1)(A) and § 6-18-509(d) require that each school district shall report to the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) on a yearly basis; the race, gender, and other pertinent information regarding students placed in an alternative learning environment. The statutes also require that the district submit, along with its annual report, an assurance statement that it is in compliance with the establishment of an alternative learning environment. The ADE is required to report this information to the Joint Interim Oversight Sub-Committee on Educational Reform.

Funding

There was no increase in the current \$4,063 per student ALE funding in FY2009-10 or FY2010-11. In FY 2008-09 every ALE FTE student generated \$5,825 in foundation funding in addition to the ALE funding for a total of \$9,888 per student. District expenditures for ALE in FY2008-09 totaled \$31,750,663.41, or \$6,247.03 per ALE student. Six school districts had an ALE FTE of 3% or more of 3rd quarter ADM, whereas 34 districts were not funded in 2008-09 because they had no ALE students in 2008-09. The level of fund balances for ALE programs is indicated in the following table.

Table 1. Fund Balances as a Percentage of FY 09 ALE Funding

Fund Balance Percentage of ALE Funding	Number of Districts
No ALE funding	34
0%	110
1%-29.9%	62
30%-49.9%	15
50%-99.9%	13
≥ 100%	11

Purpose of ALE Programs

The fundamental premise underlying ALE is that all students can learn if the right educational environment is provided. A companion premise assumes that all students should have the opportunity to learn and to achieve a quality of life they desire based on their educational efforts and achievements. Alternative education also offers school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide an adequate education for all students, since data do indicate that "at risk" students do not learn well and do not adjust in a traditional classroom (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009).

Students categorized as "at risk" include, but are not limited to, the academically unsuccessful, school dropouts, substance abusers, victims of abuse and neglect, delinquents, homeless, and those with various disabilities (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). They are among those most at risk of poor school performance and attendance, school dropout, entering the correctional system, unemployment, and difficulty in making the transition to adult independence (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). About one-quarter of all students drop out of the traditional K-12 educational system before receiving a high school diploma, and almost 40% of these students have special learning needs and disabilities (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005).

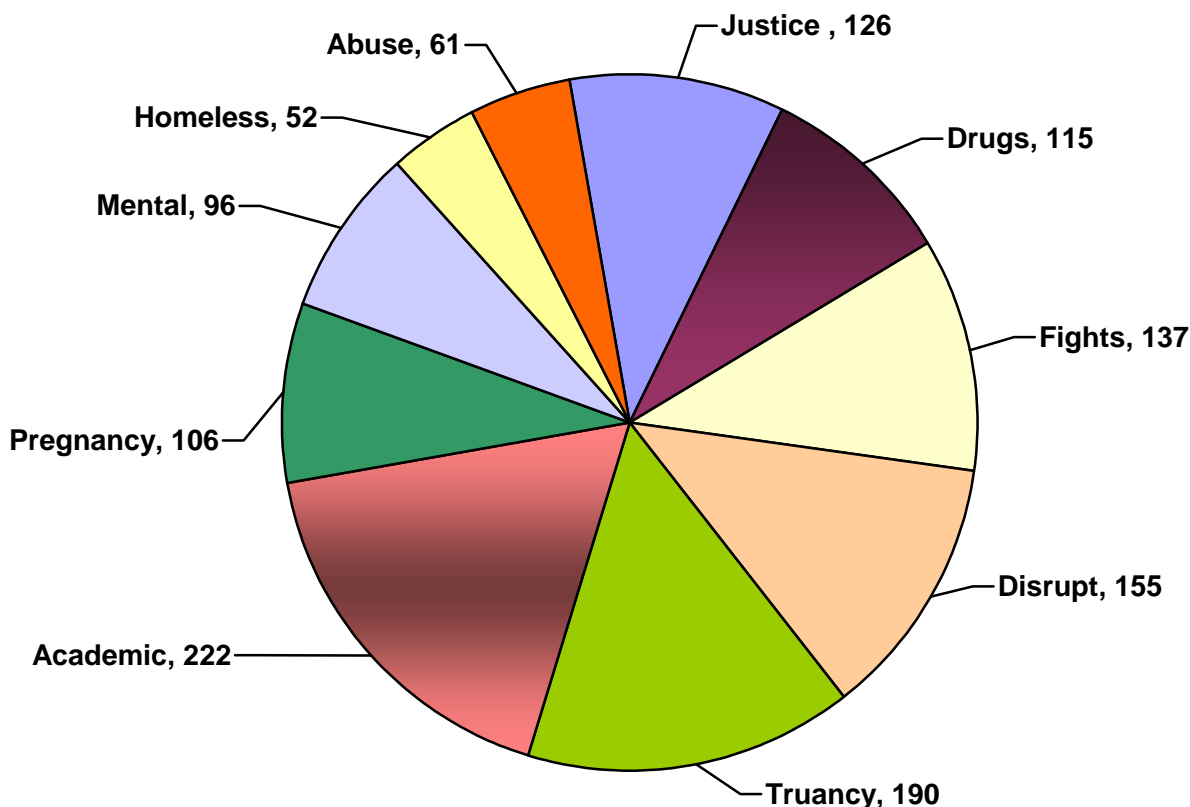
Within the current context of raising achievement and graduation rates, and decreasing the prevalence of remediation (Southern Regional Education Board, 2009), the number of states that have legislation regarding alternative education has risen from 22, or 44%, to 48, or 96%, in the past decade (Lehr et al., 2009).

Overview of Alternative Learning Environments (ALE) in Arkansas

Similar to the national landscape of alternative education, ADE has documented a wide variety of ALE programs and students statewide. Alternative education in Arkansas is based on the premise that all students can learn if they are provided with an environment conducive to their particular learning needs. Therefore, students in Arkansas are placed in ALE programs for a variety of reasons.

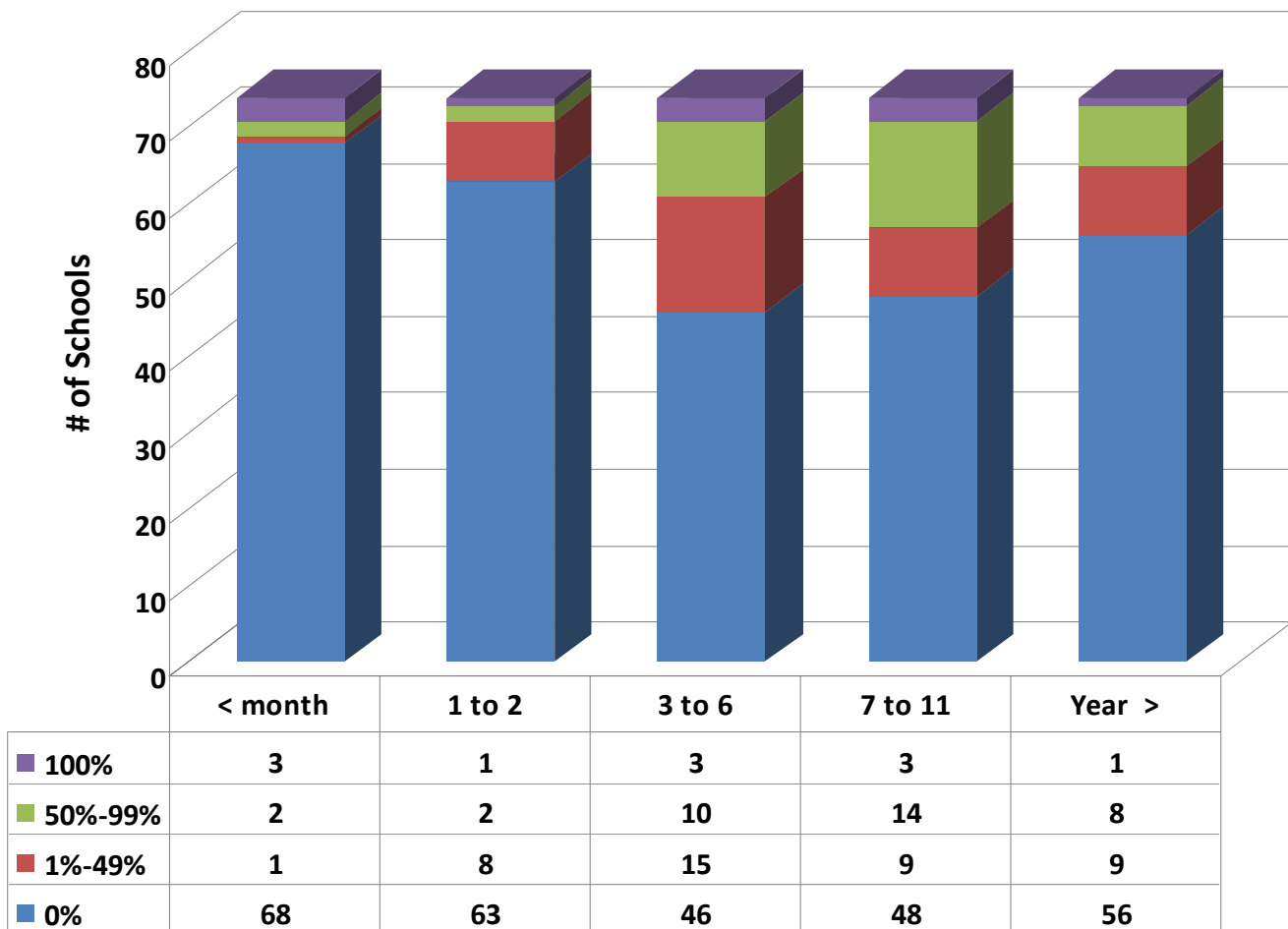
The Bureau of Legislative Research (BLR) survey of all 244 school district superintendents shows that the reasons for referral to ALE programs include truancy (N = 190), fighting (N = 137), alcohol and other drug problems (N = 115), juvenile justice issues (N = 126), homelessness (N = 52), mental health (N = 96), and pregnancy (N = 106). (N signifies the number of districts that indicated a particular problem was a reason for referral to ALE). As the pie chart (Chart 1) below indicates, the most frequent reason reported by Arkansas superintendents for ALE placements is academic deficiencies (N = 222, or 91%), followed by truancy (N = 190, or 78%) and disruptive behavior (N = 155, or 64%). The distribution displayed in the pie chart (Chart 1) closely resembles one found in a national survey of all states (Lehr et al., 2009), and it is congruent with field observations made by the Director of Arkansas Alternative Education.

Chart 1: Reason For ALE Referral



Not only has ADE officials observed a wide variety of reasons for placement in Arkansas ALE programs, they also note considerable variance across school districts in the amount of time students remain in programs. For example, three principals (Chart 2) in the BLR random sample of 74 schools reported that 100% of their ALE students remained in the program for less than a month, whereas eight districts reported that between 50% and 99% of their students stay in an ALE program for a year or more. The configuration of data indicates that the greatest frequency of schools keep students in an ALE program either for three to six months, or seven to eleven months. These figures also are generally in accord with the observations of the ALE Director and advisors.

Chart 2: Length of ALE



The BLR also surveyed all 244 superintendents regarding the percentages of their ALE students in full-time (most classes in ALE), part-time (half or more of classes outside ALE), and brief (brief periods during the day) programs. We see in Chart 3 that 133, or 55% of the 244 districts, reported that 100% of their ALE students were in a full-time ALE program. Forty-eight districts, or 20%, reported that they place students in ALE programs for brief periods during the day for special attention. Nineteen districts, or 7.8%, reported that they did not have ALE students in the 2008-09 school year. The only two responses to a question about why ALE was not offered indicated that there was no need.

Chart 3: Type of ALE

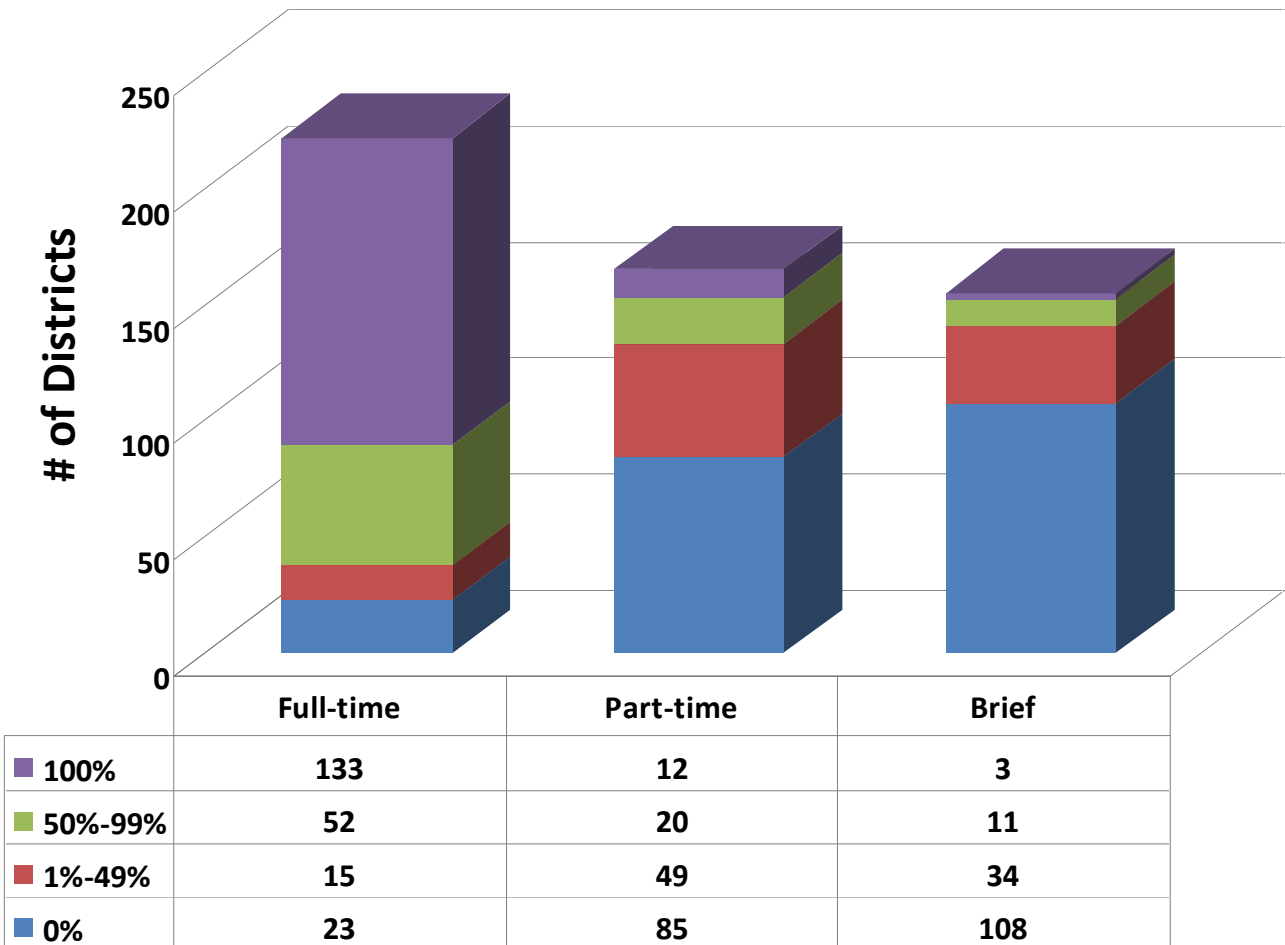
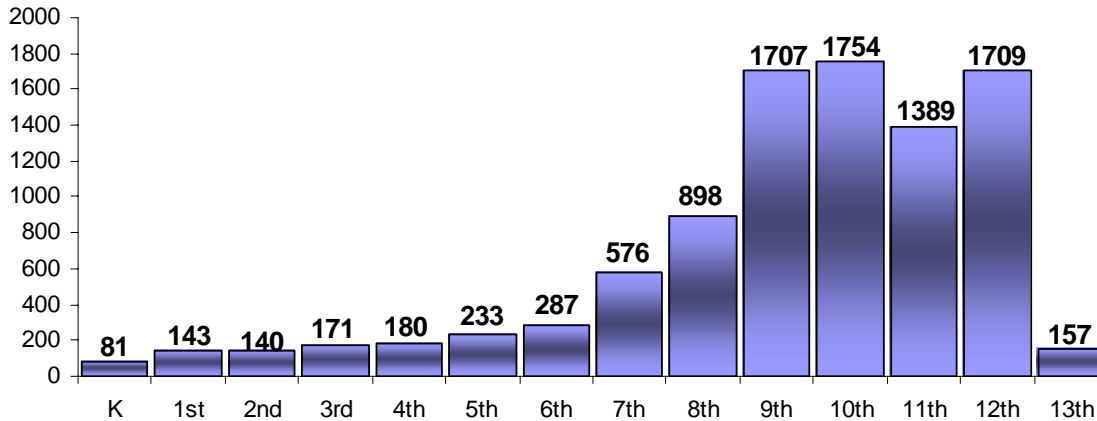


Chart 4 indicates the number of ALE students in each grade level in Arkansas public schools. According to the ADE Director of ALE, "Grade 13 represents students who are 16-17 years old who are attending Adult Education....this comes under ACT 1514 of 2001" (Lamb, 2010). A general rise in the number of ALE students correspond to increases in grade level, with more pronounced upsurges in 7th and 9th grades.

Chart 4: Number of ALE Students by Grade Level in Arkansas



Finally, Table 2 summarizes measures of ALE student FTEs and funding for school years 2008-09 and 2009-10. Measures of central tendency (mean and median) indicate increased use of ALE, and the large standard (or average) deviation shows districts vary a lot in use of ALE. The mean is the arithmetic average and the median is the midpoint in the distribution of amounts. For example, the average FTE this year is 24.06 and the midpoint is 11.06 FTEs. This difference between these measures of central tendency indicates a large difference in FTEs, as seen in the standard (or average) deviation.

Table 2. Summary Statistics of ALE Programs in Arkansas

	2008-09 FTE	2008-09 Funding	2009-10 FTE	2009-10 Funding
Mean	20.26	\$82,325.67	24.06	\$84,137.74
Median	8.60	\$34,942.00	11.06	\$41,503.50
Std. Deviation	54.81	\$222,685.70	53.85	\$205,727.90
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.21	0.00
Maximum	752.34	\$3,056,757.00	672.87	\$2,733,871.00

Current Issues with ALE in Arkansas

Ark. Code Ann. 6-18-508 states that every school district shall establish an ALE program, which may be a cooperative program with one or more other districts. Ten percent of the superintendents reported having a contract with their Educational Cooperative to provide ALE for elementary students, whereas 17% and 25%, respectively, have such contracts for middle and high school students. Onsite interviews with principals in the random sample of 74 schools as well as responses to the district survey indicated that a few schools that do not have ALE students. Some of these principals indicated that they do not believe in separating students for

any reason. They reported using instructional aides and student service staff to address any unique needs of "hard-to-reach" students. No one indicated that they simply did not want to fund a program for these students. These principals believe that students who are commonly referred to ALE programs can be taught in the regular classroom.

However, researchers and practitioners alike argue that certain "at risk" students are able to adapt and perform more satisfactorily in an alternative learning setting (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007). Evidence, discussed in the next section, indicates that these students need smaller classes, more individualized and specialized instruction, and additional services that are integrated into their academic expectations (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr & Lange, 2003).

At least four issues concerning ALE practices have been identified in the BLR surveys and interviews with teachers, district administrators, and ADE officials. First, no sanctions are imposed on districts that do not provide ALE programs, despite evidence that "at risk" students do benefit academically and behaviorally from an alternative learning environment (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Van Acker, 2007; Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007). Furthermore, no independent verification is conducted to ensure districts actually offer the programs listed on annual assurance forms.

Second, ADE Rules governing the distribution of Student Special Needs Funding (Arkansas Department of Education, 2007) allow funding for students who are placed sporadically (or episodically) in an ALE program. The rule stipulates that students must attend 20 days in ALE to be counted in funding, but nothing is said about these days being consecutive. ALE officials in Arkansas estimate that about 10% of districts use ALEs as brief "time-out" programs for students who are disruptive in the classroom. No evidence is available that this practice has any benefit other than to temporarily remove a disturbance problem for the teacher. While removing students who disrupt the education of other students in a class may be beneficial, questions arise about whether ALE funding should be used for this purpose, especially since the intervention has only temporary effects, and, for many students, functions as a long-term "in school suspension." Removing students does not address the problems that led to the ALE placement, or meet the needs of the students removed.

Another major issue is the preparation of teachers for ALE. Although the ADE provides state-of-the-art workshops and training for Arkansas teachers, the multiplicity of interrelated problems presented by most ALE students means teachers need courses that specialize in areas such as disabilities, emotional disorders, delinquency, and substance misuse. In the most recent legislative review, 29 states had legislative or policy language on staffing in ALE programs. Sixteen states have legislation that ALE teachers must be certified or comply with state standards (Lehr et al., 2009). In Arkansas, there is no legislative or policy on staffing, but ADE officials and several principals in onsite interviews report additional training in classroom management, social skills improvement, and conflict de-escalation is needed. Arkansas teacher preparation programs through the state's universities generally require a basic course of classroom management only. However, to adequately teach alternative education, teachers need much deeper exposure to broad curricula, multiple social skills methodology, character education, career exploration, and conflict de-escalation, as well as identification of individual learning needs. An endorsement or opportunity for alternative education certification continues to be discussed and pursued through the Pygmalion Commission, the Association of Alternative Education Association, and the Arkansas Department of Education.

A final problem that looms larger in rural settings because of smaller size and fewer students is limited money for technology, supplies, and facility upgrades. These financial limitations seem to result from the districts' failure to use both per student foundational and ALE funding for these programs. This problem seems to have arisen, at least in part, out of the fact that "start-up" funds were never available for ALE programs.

Definition of ALE and Effectiveness Research

There is considerable variance in how ALE programs are defined and implemented in school districts in Arkansas and across the country (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006; Lehr et al., 2009; Lehr & Lange, 2003). This diversity is due in part to the piecemeal and disjointed evolution process of these programs (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1999). ALEs were mostly created in isolation to meet locally defined needs, without systematic efforts made to achieve uniformity or to link the program to a larger service delivery network (Raywid, 1998, 1999)

During the 1960s, alternative education schools emerged in the private sector and, ultimately, in predominantly urban and suburban public schools (Raywid 1999). According to Raywid (1999), urban programs tried to help struggling minority and poor youngsters succeed in school. Early suburban initiatives "became innovative programs seeking to invent and pursue new ways to educate." For example, "open education" was part of a progressive alternative schools movement that began in the late 1960s, peaked in the early 1970s, and was gradually overshadowed by the back-to-basics movement in the late 1970s (Clark, 2000; Dunn 2000).

Existing ALE programs reflect the accepted educational philosophy that different models and practices are required to meet the varying needs of students referred to an ALE (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1999). These programs range from carefully structured, well-regulated environments embedded within a district's school system as a continuum of options, to small, unstructured "time-out" rooms for the most disruptive students. These variances in programming reflect the lack of conceptual and practice standardization. As the list of problems that identify students needing an ALE grows, statements of purpose or rationale for many ALE programs have been extended to include more students. National data indicate 12% of students are in ALE programs (Lehr et al., 2009). The most prevalent use of ALE is for students labeled "at risk," including being at risk for chronic academic failure, dropping out of school, delinquency, abuse, neglect, running away, truancy, substance abuse, homelessness, and behavioral and mental health problems (Lehr et al., 2009).

Common characteristics of ALE programs include small size, one-on-one interaction between teacher and student, a supportive environment, individualized pacing and curricula, activities designed for success, social and health services, and prudent mandatory parental involvement (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2009). Raywid (1994) created the most widely used typology of ALE programs in an effort to bring some conceptual definition to the field:

- Type I are schools of choice based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students. The focus generally is on teacher/child relationships and learning experiences that generate individualized self-development.
- Type II alternatives are "last chance" schools where students are placed prior to or as a consequence of suspension, expulsion, or contact with the juvenile justice system. The primary emphasis tends to be on behavior modification and remediation.

- Type III programs provide short-term therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create academic or behavioral barriers to learning. These programs typically offer counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation to targeted populations. Type III programs tend to be more voluntary than the other two types.

Raywid (1994) reported that Type I (true educational alternative) programs were the most successful, whereas Type II (alternative discipline) programs were less likely to lead to substantial student gains. Type III (therapeutic alternative) programs displayed mixed outcomes, with students often making progress while enrolled, but regressing when they returned to traditional schools.

In practice, however, most ALE programs in Arkansas and many states are a hybrid of Raywid's types (Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006; Lehr et al., 2009). They are based more on an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that most students need alternative education, discipline, and therapeutic intervention because problems arise from the interaction of individual, interpersonal, familial, and environmental factors. This complexity of problems, in tandem with the wide diversity of programs, has contributed to the paucity of evaluative research on ALE programs (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Experimental research also is very hard to conduct because of aversion to randomly assigning students to ALE programs, and the vast differences in types, durations, components, purposes, participants, and outcomes mean that comparisons are tenuous at best. Moreover, program staff rarely conduct controlled or comparison studies to determine how outcomes are linked to their intervention efforts.

However, major studies of ALE do provide valuable information about effective interventions and positive outcomes. For example, in its widely-cited *Report on Special Populations*, the Minnesota State Department of Education (1991) indicated that both alternative schools and area learning centers were successful in engaging youths who had dropped out of school or were at-risk for dropout. In a study of an alternative school program in the Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky, Munoz (2002) found improved attendance and a general reduction in behavior problems among participating students.

Cox, Davidson, and Bynum (1995) conducted a meta-analysis of research related to the effectiveness of alternative schools and found that ALE programs had a significant positive effect on school performance, attitudes toward school, and self-esteem, but had no effect on delinquency. They found that programs targeting a specific population of at-risk youths produced larger effects than those with open admissions.

Several research projects have demonstrated that the concentration of conduct disorders and delinquents in programs exacerbates these problems due to the strong peer influence during adolescence (e.g., Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2004; Grunbaum et al., 1999). Educators within alternative settings where at-risk youth are concentrated must create programs that counteract propagation of attitudes, values, and beliefs that reinforce these problems.

Best Practices

Survey research and non-experimental studies have established certain guiding principles and practices for ALE programs. An excellent summary of guiding principles and practices has been compiled by the National Alternative Education Association (2009), entitled, *Guiding Principles for Quality Alternative Education Programs*. It can be accessed at: <http://www.the-naea.com/files/1008/File/ExemplaryPracticesinAE.pdf>

Generally, empirically validated prevention and intervention strategies that simultaneously target specific developmental risk factors, such as antisocial behavior and parental abuse, show much greater impact on desired outcomes than a piecemeal approach of individualized interventions. Studies clearly demonstrate that problems of students referred to ALE result from a multiplicity of factors, including individual, familial, peer, school, and community factors (Loeber and Farrington, 2001). Researchers and practitioners find that a well-coordinated intervention plan, implemented in a team effort by ALE teachers, counselors, and community professionals, does lead to desired personal changes and academic achievement because of positive relations with adults and peers, designed successes, and enhanced confidence and self-efficacy (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Needles, Dyanarski, & Corson, 1999; Raywid, 1999; Sinclair et al., 2003).

Succinctly summarized, compelling evidence shows that ALE programs can and do promote attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive changes that lead to higher academic performance (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). However, successful ALE programs are not short-term interventions designed to remedy an immediate classroom disturbance, such as "timeout" periods used to restore order in a class. ALE programs that demonstrate measurable changes in attitudes, behaviors, and achievements are invariably long-term, comprehensive, and involve coordinated interventions that systematically address interrelated psychological, social, and familial needs (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; National Alternative Education Association, 2009). The intervention plan must be clearly conceived and must be comprised of a well designed and seamless coordination of curricula, counseling, and community agency-services. ALE teachers and staff members have to consider teaching, counseling, agency referrals, and follow-up services as components of the intervention process to facilitate student achievement and personal development (National Alternative Education Association, 2009).

A signature feature of ALE programs is particular emphasis on individual learning styles to guide instructional planning. Classes generally are small with teacher-student ratios that range from 1:10 to 1:15. Curriculum typically places particular emphasis on knowledge and skills that are immediately applicable to citizenship in the community and employment. This emphasis entails a concerted and purposive efforts to establish collaboration between the ALE program and community leaders and potential employers. Strong programs have a well-established linkage among school and community service agencies and employers, involving "hands on" experiences and internships and community projects. Case managers are often identified to facilitate the formulation and coordination of individualized education plans between the school and community.

Positive outcomes (e.g., achievement, behavior) are observed when expectations for achievement and relationships are well defined, rigorous, and closely and continually monitored. To the extent possible, curricula content expectations of ALE students are the same as for the district, although levels and pacing are tailored to meet individualized needs and styles of learning. Extensive extrinsic reward systems are designed to promote attendance, good conduct, and academic achievement.

According to research, caring teachers who are highly motivated, knowledgeable, and skilled are the most important variable in educational successes in ALE programs (Barr and Parrett, 2001). Indeed, teachers are the single most potent influence on expectations and on the culture of learning and conduct. The amount of learning and positive changes is largely determined by the teacher's enthusiasm, expertise and skill (Odden, 2004; Odden, Borman, & Fermanich, 2004). In this regard, a prominent problem identified in the professional literature generally, and in Arkansas in particular, is the lack of comprehensive educational preparation of teachers for ALE programs.

Most ALE students have complex, interrelated problems that require specialized knowledge and skill to identify and address in the classroom setting. Teachers must be able to identify specific problems to make referrals and to plan individualized instruction that is tailored to the problems. Teachers need to understand terminology and concepts used in specialized fields, such as psychology and social work, to be able to meaningfully communicate and coordinate interdisciplinary planning and intervention. The teacher, in fact, is strategically-placed to be the case manager of the intervention plan because of contact time. This coordination requires at least a working knowledge of problems and interdisciplinary practices (White & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006).

In summary, universities and colleges in other states offer curriculum for ALE teachers because teachers need specialized knowledge about problems such as familial abuse, substance misuse, delinquency, and emotional disorders. The problems are interrelated to learning among ALE students and should not continue to be overlooked in preparing teachers for Arkansas ALEs.

Conclusions

Simply requiring ALE programs does not ensure that students will benefit in terms of desired goals. According to narrative summaries of the research (e.g., Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lehr & Lange, 2003), there are identifiable ALE program characteristics associated with positive outcomes, such as increased achievement, behavioral control, and graduation. These characteristics include closer and more supportive interpersonal relations, counseling and other social services, individualized teaching and expectations, and an emphasis on vocational and more general life skills (see review, Lehr & Lange, 2003). The greatest influence in any classroom is the teacher, and evidence shows that teachers in ALE need specific training to work with the multitude of problems presented by students in these programs (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

National surveys (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Lehr et al., 2009) indicate three common problems found in every state, including Arkansas. Generally, ALE programs do not have sufficient funding to provide quality facilities and instructional resources. In Arkansas, this is more of a problem in rural small school districts, in part, because these programs never received "start-up" funds to buy equipment and supplies and build or repair facilities. A more general issue seems to be that foundation funding does not necessarily follow the student to these programs.

Another major problem is staffing. Since ALE programs, especially in rural areas, often have low enrollments, districts do not hire teachers specifically for these programs. This results in the need for teachers who are certified to teach more than one subject and in both regular and special education. The operating assumption that any certified teacher can teach in these programs is not supported by research (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Teachers need to be able to deal professionally with complex and overlapping problems such as disabilities, emotional disorders, and use of substances.

A final problem is that ALE programs often are not held accountable by state accountability systems. The National Alternative Education Association (2009) has made major gains in providing guiding principles for ALE programs in Arkansas and in several other states. However, some Arkansas school districts continue to have no ALE students, or they use ALE programs as brief "timeout" strategies.

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