

Alternative Schools and Programs

Views from the Inside - The Need for Systemic Review and Reform in Connecticut

Background

In May 2013, Connecticut lawmakers approved legislation to require the state Department of Education to conduct a study of alternative schools and programs offered by local and regional boards of education. The legislation stipulated that a report must be issued to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly no later than February 1, 2014:

Public Act 13-122, Sec. 12. (Effective from passage) (a) The Department of Education shall conduct a study of alternative school programs offered by local and regional boards of education. Such study shall include (1) an examination of alternative school programs, including, but not limited to, (A) enrollment and discharge criteria, including methods to obtain parental consent, (B) enrollment data by gender, race and ethnicity, (C) the curriculum offered, (D) the length of the school day and school year, (E) attendance rates, (F) truancy rates, (G) graduation rates, and (H) student academic performance, (2) an evaluation of each such alternative school program that measures the effectiveness of such alternative school program in meeting the needs of students enrolled in such alternative school program, and (3) a statement on the degree to which each such alternative school program complies with sections 10-15, 10-16 and 10-16b of the general statutes.

It seems reasonable that, at a minimum, the state could access data on how many alternative schools there are in Connecticut; how many students they serve; the demographic characteristics of those students; and where those schools are located. However, this information currently does not exist. The absence of even the most basic data on alternative schools was one of the driving forces behind the Center for Children's Advocacy's prioritization of alternative school reform in 2013.

Over the past twelve months, the Center has conducted a series of interviews and assessments to help make the case for review and reform of alternative schools. **The accounts of students, parents, teachers and administrators who have experienced alternative schools make the case for systems intervention** and will, ideally, help identify specific patterns of inequity that have greatly diminished the educational experiences and future prospects of our alternative school students in Connecticut. The Center intends for this publication to serve as a companion piece to the assessment and report that will be issued by the Department of Education.



Alternative School Reform - State Oversight is Imperative

Lack of State Regulation and Oversight

Alternative schools and education programs have long operated in Connecticut without any state regulation or oversight. These schools essentially exist in a vacuum without any standards. This has allowed for a culture of indifference to develop and fester.

Alternative schools in the state are understaffed, not properly resourced and the subject of neglect from their districts. The lack of oversight and regulation on the state level has allowed these bleak educational environments to endure. **The current state of alternative education is especially damaging to disaffected students who are over-age, under-credit and already stand on the brink of dropout.**

When asked about the school she attends, a 15-year old student at New Horizons School in New Haven stated, “Well, the school isn’t in the best area, and the environment isn’t the best. The building itself is old and smells bad.” When asked what most needed to be changed, outside of the physical plant, she stated that there was a **major need for updated and improved materials**, as the ones currently used are subpar. “They really need to get new books and computers there. The computers are old, and once one computer goes down, they all go down. You would be working and they would just crash. It happened pretty

often.” Books and materials at the program were particularly poor. “The books – oh my God, the books – they were so old, the covers were peeling and falling apart. You would **pick a book up and the pages would just fall out on the floor.**”

A person familiar with another New Haven alternative school, Dixwell New Light, spoke of the second-rate conditions. “As you can see, the **school is the middle of a strip mall.** There is a dry cleaning business and several restaurants on the same strip, and that presents potential safety hazards. The public library is also next door and you have these older, transient individuals walking by. These people come to the door and look in all the time. Despite this not being the best neighborhood, there are no buzzers on the door and no security cameras.”

This individual spoke of how the school was in even worse condition the previous school year, and that improvements came from the staff themselves, not from the district office. “The **building was in complete disrepair** last year with holes in the wall, dingy walls and a need for repairs all over. The repairs and upgrades that have been made were handled by staff, who painted the building and used personal connections to fix things up.” These sentiments were echoed by a person familiar with the New Visions (formerly HALO) alternative program in Hartford, who, in de-



Dixwell New Light, New Haven

Alternative School Reform - State Oversight is Imperative

scribing the educational environment stated “It’s a second class building. What message does that send to kids?”

Garth Minto, a 19-year old recent graduate of the Bassick High School Twilight program in Bridgeport said that at his school any guidance about courses is minimal. He adds, “A lot of kids just go on Google” for answers to tests. When asked how the teachers respond to kids Googling test responses, he stated that, “They don’t sweat it because really, they don’t care. They just want kids to get out.”

Some alternative school students aren’t even being taught by certified teachers. A person familiar with Hartford’s New Visions program said, “The school has **only one certified teacher in the entire building**, the special education teacher. All of the other instructors are tutors, most of whom aren’t even certified teachers. At Dixwell New Light in New Haven, core classes are at times taught by faculty who are only part time. As one interviewee stated, “The Math and English teachers are the only full time teachers. The other classes are taught by part time staff.”

The lack of definition for alternative schools in Connecticut impedes school districts in implementing programs that effectively meets student needs. **There must be more thoughtful policy and guidance from the State on what alternative schools are and the roles these schools need to play in meeting the needs of students.**

As Susan Kaufman, Executive Director of Innovation in Education states, “**Alternative Education Programs must clearly define what it is that students should know and be able to do as a result of their participation in the program, and implement programming that is consistent with achieving the stated outcomes.** For example, if we say that we want students to be good problem solvers, we should provide opportunities to practice that skill when behavioral difficulties arise rather than implementing obedience focused discipline policies through which no social and behavioral intervention is provided.”

It is this sad state of affairs in alternative schools and education programs that makes it **absolutely essential that the state begin to provide structure and oversight for these programs.**



New Horizons, Hartford

Alternative School Reform - Truancy Interventions are Critical

Must Reduce Truancy

Truancy in the mainstream public school system is often a reason that a student is referred to an alternative school. And yet, there is little emphasis on reducing truancy within the alternative schools. Compounding this problem, the bleak state of alternative education in Connecticut can further diminish a students' desire to attend and finish high school.

Several students in the Enlightenment program in Waterbury described how they came to be assigned to an alternative school. Their pathways to an alternative school are typical. Two came into the program due to an expulsion from their public school. The others came into the program due to chronic truancy. One youth stated that she began missing school repeatedly during and after her pregnancy. Another said that her truancy began after she kept getting into fights at her public school. She stated that she hated constantly being in conflict, and she began skipping school to avoid it.

Many students in alternative schools have issues that contribute to truancy, but without state oversight, schools aren't accountable – or given the necessary resources – to work on solving attendance problems. Despite having access to a truancy officer, persons familiar with both New Horizons and Dixwell New Light in New Haven expressed a need for more help from the district in planning interventions for truant youth. Persons familiar with both programs also acknowledged that simply placing truant youth in alternative school programs is not the answer, as simply moving a youth from one setting to another without any additional, targeted interventions to ensure that they attend school is a recipe for failure.

Brandon Ramos has been receiving special education services since he was in the 1st grade. At 18 years old, he currently has only 20 credit hours (225 are required to graduate from high school in Bridgeport). His attendance at the Twilight evening alternative program currently is sporadic. He states that initially he went to the program and did well, but due to familial issues he started missing classes, prompting Twilight to issue a letter encouraging him to sign out and quit

the program. The letter cites his age, saying that as an 18 year old, he needs to leave school and pursue other options. At this point, he has not signed out, and wants to fight the decision so that he can finish school and attain his high school diploma.

Of the few alternative schools that track and offer any data, attendance is low. For example, less than half of enrolled students report to school on a daily basis for two programs in Bridgeport:

Average Daily Attendance

Bassick High School Twilight Program
45.9% (45 of 98 enrolled students).

Harding High School Twilight Program
49.1% (55 of 112 enrolled students).

Despite the knowledge that students are truant for a variety of reasons, including unmet special needs or difficulties in the community or at home, many alternative schools and programs lack the framework for interventions to reach and assist these students. Often districts fail to allocate social workers or other sources of student support to alternative schools and programs, despite these schools typically having the neediest students in the school system.

Alternative School Reform - Truancy Interventions are Critical

Jessica Rivera, the parent of a 17-year old student who attended the New Horizons School in New Haven, stated that her son felt discouraged by teachers in the program to the point that he did not want to attend school. When he had trouble in school, Ms. Rivera said, "They would just sit him in the office or in the lobby by himself. No counseling, school work, nothing." She added, "He was never referred to the school social worker for counseling or help. The only time I ever heard from the social worker was when a PPT was being scheduled. I didn't even know who she was."

At the Bridgeport Twilight Program, the reported extent of truancy follow up is that an administrator calls the home when a student is absent. One parent of a student who attended the HALO Program in Hartford said, "HALO is an alternative school that doesn't provide any services that fulfill the children's needs for the reasons that they are in there. Kids have no counseling tied to the reasons that they are there. There is no therapy."

In contrast, the Enlightenment Program in Waterbury has shown that **having sufficient social support staff to plan student activities and provide support allows them to be able to re-engage truant and disengaged students.** One student stated "It's more fun. Like at regular school you MIGHT get one field trip a year, if that. At Enlightenment, we get field trips all the time, plus a lot of other activities. We get to go and see colleges. We got to go to Yale. I never thought I would see a place like that. I also liked the [trip] where we went to Mystic. It makes it more fun to come to school." Another student mentioned, "We get to do rock climbing basketball, gym, we have the workout machines they have at the real gyms. We get to take cooking classes. We got to make a garden. We put down the mulch stuff and planted flowers."

The inclusion of these types of **interventions can make the difference in whether a student invests and attends school or not - and consequently, whether that student graduates from high school or falls victim to drop out.** Yet without state oversight and resources, the critical truancy management that supports academic success is often missing at alternative schools.



Alternative School Reform - Defined School Day and Year is Vital

Hours of Instruction are Key

In Connecticut, state law requires public schools to provide at least 180 days of actual school sessions for kindergarten through grade 12. Public schools must also provide a minimum of 900 hours of actual school work per year for a full-day kindergarten program through grade 12 and districts may count no more than seven hours per day towards these minimums (CGS § 10-16).

The difference in length of school day is one of the starkest examples of how alternative school students do not receive an equal education in Connecticut.

Of her 15-year old son, who had been sent to the New Visions (formerly HALO) program in Hartford, one mother said, “He was getting the bare minimum. He was in school from 11-2. And 30 minutes of that, from 11-11:30, was lunch.”

She also spoke about how her son’s dramatic switch to only a couple hours of schooling impacted the family. “I always dropped him off at school and picked him up. This worked well within my schedule when he had a full school day. Now only being in school for so little time, he has too much time alone with nothing to do.” A 17-year old 10th grade student in the New Visions (formerly HALO) alternative education program in Hartford was placed in the program after being expelled from his public high school. When asked what his initial impressions of the alternative program were, he stated “I was like, are you serious? **I go from a real school to this?** I didn’t like it, and it made me not want to go.” This student states that he went **from a full school day to only 2½ hours of schooling.**

Without state mandated regulations for alternative schools, length of school day varies widely. The chart below shows several Connecticut alternative high school programs, contrasted with their public school counterparts:

	School Hours per Day	Difference in Hours per Day
Hartford Hartford Public High School New Visions Alternative School	7 hours, 10 minutes 3 hours	4 hours less per day
Bridgeport Bassick, Central and Harding High Schools Twilight Alternative Program	6 hours, 45 minutes 4 hours	3 hours less per day
New Haven Hillhouse High School Dixwell New Light Alternative School	6 hours, 35 minutes 4 hours, 5 minutes	2.5 hours less per day

Parental Consent is Necessary

It is reasonable to expect that the enrollment process for any student being transferred from the traditional public school setting into an alternative school would feature informed parental consent. Yet, the Center for Children's Advocacy found that the **parental consent process was inconsistent** and poorly managed.

Rafael is a 16-year old student currently between 10th and 11th grade with 95 of the required 226 credit hours needed for graduation. He was in the Twilight program at Bassick High School but recently returned to the credit recovery program in regular public school program at Bassick. Rafael and his mother described how poorly school officials dealt with issues of parental consent and involvement, **"They said they would send a consent form home, but they never did. They just put him in the program."** The school has been non-responsive to Rafael's mother's attempts to get information. "I call and leave messages trying to find out what's going on with my son, but they never call me back." His mother states that no progress reports on her son's work were ever sent home while he was at Twilight.

Brandon, the 18-year old special education student, was sent to Bridgeport's Twilight program at Central High School through a process that was confusing to his mother and could have been more productive had the school contacted his English-speaking father. During a Planning and Placement Team meeting at Central High School, Brandon states that they spoke to his mother but the school personnel used large and difficult words in describing things that his mother did not understand; the school personnel made no attempt to break things down in more understandable terms. Brandon said, **"They didn't explain it right, and my mother really didn't understand what they were talking about."** They also did not offer an interpreter to help his mother, a non-native speaker, grasp the concepts they were discussing. Brandon also notes that his father, who lives in New York, is very involved in his life and very interested in his education. His father was not notified by the school of the meeting. "That would have made a difference if my father was there, because he speaks better English

and would have asked more questions about what was going down."

Another 16-year old student described his difficulty with placement into the New Horizons school in New Haven. Although he successfully graduated from middle school at DOMUS academy – and, with his mother, had articulated his desire to attend Riverside Academy – the student was instead **placed into New Horizons with no parental input.** The young man was not suspended or expelled prior to his entry. "They just put him where they wanted him to be. They didn't tell me or ask me nothing," his mother stated. **When asked if she had an opportunity to tour and visit the school prior to her son's entry, she responded "No".**

Lack of parental consent has manifested in youth entering programs that may not be a good fit, or where staff does not have an adequate grasp of a youth's issues in order to adequately meet the student "where they are." At the New Visions alternative school program in Hartford, a 17 year old student stated that his placement did not meet his needs. "I was so bored there. They were supposed to be sending me my school work from my public school but it didn't happen so I would just sit there. I wasn't learning anything. I got fed up and for a while I didn't go. I mean, why, just to be there?" This student admitted that he learned that **staff at the school had virtually none of his academic or behavioral records from his past school placements.**

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Alternative School Reform - Parental Consent Must be Required

Dr. Andrea Spencer, Dean of Pace University School of Education, after assessing Bridgeport's alternative school programs, spoke of the lack of a thoughtful intake process and meaningful parental consent:

“There is a lack of well-defined entry criteria, although there was a general consensus that students were seriously over age in grade, had accumulated far too few credits to complete high school graduation credits in a timely way [and] had consistent skills deficits in literacy and numeracy. There is no indication that an analysis of characteristics and needs of students who become engaged in the program vs. students who are registered, but never attend, was done.

While parents are reportedly given an orientation to the program, and receive quarterly progress reports, there is evidence that informed consent procedures do not adequately take into account the communication challenges of non-English speaking parents.”

A more thoughtful intake **process that involves parents providing consent and giving alternative school staff essential background information would truly benefit students in these settings.**



Alternative School Reform - Standard Curriculum is Crucial

Defined, Creative and Consistent Curriculum Needed

Alternative School classes are not the same as in regular public schools. "It's different at night school," said Rafael, the Bridgeport student at Twilight. "Geometry was not was not the same, like some of it didn't make sense. It wasn't broken down and explained like in regular school." He explained the classroom experience like this, "Being there [at Twilight] made it hard...You're just sitting in front of a computer with no breaks...you just sit in front of the computer the entire time."

Brandon, the Twilight student from Bridgeport, described the classroom instruction by saying "It's all on the computer." Brandon stated that the **major difference between public school and alternative school is that the teachers do nothing to help students with their work.** "You want them to help you or to explain something, and they won't explain. They just give you the answer. I don't want them giving me the answer; I want it explained so I can learn it. But they don't. They don't break it down. I mean, you get the answer but you have no idea how they got there."

Some of the alternative school programs report using the core curriculum for instruction, while others (including Bassick and Harding Twilight programs in Bridgeport) rely upon an online instruction program called APEX.

A person familiar with the Twilight program in Bridgeport reports that teachers are unlocking online tests for students even though preceding lessons have not been completed at a satisfactory level – and that students just enter the wording of the test questions in a Google search and immediately find answers. She said that kids who are self starters can do well with an online program, but those who are not will struggle or cut corners – and that there is little to no additional support for students with special needs.

There is no true rationale for why alternative school youth should have any different base curriculum than their public school counterparts. These youth deserve the same attention and dedication from their instructors and administrators as public school students.

Dr. Spencer, in looking at three alternative programs in the state, noted a number of deficits. **"Course selection appears to be hit or miss, as students are provided with a list of high school requirements and given minimal guidance as to which courses are most appropriate in terms of their skill level and interests. There is no evidence of the Student Success Plan required by state law (Public Act No. 11-135 Section 2(j)), which includes academic and career planning, or inclusion of a Capstone project. There is a lack [of] direct guidance support and opportunities for career exploration, which particularly impacts students predominantly from lower-socioeconomic groups.** There is also no opportunity for students to develop 21st century skills (critical thinking, communication, creativity and collaboration as well as information, media and technology skills) since there are no on-line discussion groups, peer tutoring, or hands-on projects. Of particular concern is the lack of lab experiences for participants in science courses."

In looking at curriculum requirements, **competency-based learning should be considered, as it is an important alternative education strategy for students who struggle in the traditional public school settings.** Under this system, students progress upon mastery of a particular subject area, rather than when they complete a classroom time requirement. This method employs explicit learning objectives that are measured through meaningful and useful assessment, rather than through seat time. Competency-based learning is particularly useful for the over-age/under-credit student population, as a significant barrier to these students getting on track is the amount of time they are required to spend in class engaged in credit recovery.

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Alternative School Reform - Standard Curriculum is Crucial

Traditional “seat-time” requirements do not allow youth to acquire credits without taking entire courses, a portion of which they have often already sat through. This method can lead to school disengagement and low achievement levels.

Granting alternative schools and education programs the flexibility to use competency based forms of credit recovery can provide a sense of home to disengaged students. This sentiment was echoed by a number of alternative school principals.

A member of the CT Association of Alternate School Principals (CAASP), said, “Seat time is a killer for the kid who is 17 or 18 and still in the 9th grade. Having to sit there and hear what they have already heard to get a credit discourages them, and it creates a situation where they feel like they don’t have enough time to finish by the time they are 21, and they just give up.”

By combining a minimum standard for course offerings and classroom hours with program flexibility, alternative school youth can be ensured both quality course offerings and flexible pathways for reaching the goal of a high school diploma.



Alternative School Reform - Conclusion

Summary

While this report cites many examples of alternative schools and programs that are failing their students, there are others that are providing academically enriching experiences.

Several students at Enlightenment Academy in Waterbury spoke about how the academic environment and the quality of instruction that they received at the Enlightenment school was superior to that which they received at their public high schools. “The teachers spend way more time with students. There is more time for teachers to get to everyone. Here, any kids need help – the teachers are there for them.”

Another student stated, “At [my old school] I always had to wait for help. And most of the time the teachers never got to me. At Enlightenment, the teachers go to help you quick.”

The students all stated that their parents were kept in the loop by the school. One youth stated, “They send out progress reports. Plus every student has an account that your parents can sign into and see your grades and credits and everything.” Another mentioned a newsletter that is sent home detailing various activities, including cooking classes and field trips to colleges.

While these positive alternative school experiences exist, the lack of state standards and regulations for alternative schools and programs makes it impossible to ensure that this experience is the norm, and not the exception, for alternative school students.

Alternative schools and programs should not operate without the supervision and accountability required of traditional schools, especially as they serve a student population that is at great risk of drop out.

These students are not just slipping through the cracks – they are falling through a giant gap in the state’s responsibility to all students. State oversight and requirements for data on alternative school programs are necessary to begin addressing systemic change in these schools and for these students.

For more information on the stories behind the stories ...

Please contact:

Leon Smith

Director, Alternative Schools Project

Center for Children's Advocacy

Lsmith@kidscounsel.org

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Center for Children's Advocacy
65 Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105
kidscounsel.org
860-570-5327