

A Culture of Hope: Fostering Success in Alternative Day School Settings

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Two veteran educators explain how alternative day school programs can be the beginning, rather than the end, of hope for troubled students. The key to successful intervention, they say, is optimism and four essential strategies.

Public day school placement is often the final step in a long, frustrating, and unsuccessful series of educational interventions for troubled youth. It represents the failed efforts of support team members—teachers, counselors, administrators, special educators, and parents—to help a child succeed in less-restrictive educational settings. For students, alternative day school symbolizes one more failure in a list already discouragingly long. It is no surprise that by the time they are placed in an alternative day program, many students have grown to hate school and have given up any hope for success.

The sense of hopelessness that affects students can affect teachers as well. Alternative day school teachers often come to believe that they are working with the “worst of the worst,” and fully expect to see students who are angry, aggressive, and out of control, and who have given up on school. Teachers may doubt their chances of success with these students when so many others have failed before them. When the methods and techniques they use on a daily basis fail to produce positive results, these teachers can become frustrated and demoralized (George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995). When teachers feel demoralized and overwhelmed, their sense of efficacy is diminished (Rosenholtz, 1989).

Although it is tempting simply to urge teachers to look on the bright side, and to exhort students to make a fresh start, urgings and exhortations do not create a successful intervention. Success requires a comprehensive and well-designed program. Although individual teachers and students must have hope to reach their goals, the school program creates the climate and conditions that provide participants with hope (Hargreaves & Fullen, 1998). If teachers and students are to succeed, they must have a supportive structure within which to achieve success (Grosenick, George, George, & Lewis, 1991).

We believe that creating successful alternative day school programs begins with creating a culture for success: a culture of hope. As Curwin (1992) suggests, hope must become a school value. Here we offer ways to build such a culture into programs with four essential strategies:

1. Understanding and strengthening the power of our beliefs
2. Rekindling hope through parent support
3. Building student skills (taking baby steps to success)
4. Preparing for successful transitions

Understanding and Strengthening the Power of Our Beliefs

What we believe about students is tied directly to how we treat them. This is true in all school settings, but is perhaps most noticeable in alternative settings, where our beliefs and assumptions surrounding the notion of emotional disturbance will determine the goals we choose for students, the interventions we devise for them, and our overall perceptions of them as learners and social individuals.

When teachers believe they can make a real difference in their students' lives, they do (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Conversely, if teachers believe children cannot succeed, then success is unlikely. As Hargreaves and Fullen (1998) explain, “hope, optimism, and self-belief among teachers are the vital wellsprings of successful learning and positive educational change. Without them, classrooms are likely to become barren wastelands of boredom and routine” (p. 1). This is certainly true with respect to alternative day school programs for students with longstanding behavioral difficulties. In programs without hope, education is focused on managing and controlling the behavior of students, rather than on teaching students new, adaptive skills (Nichols, 1992; Steinberg, 1991). The methods become more intrusive as the setting becomes more restrictive—use of seclusionary time-out and physical restraint can become common. As Knitzer, Steinberg, and Fleisch (1990) indicate, a “curriculum of control” too often replaces a curriculum that should be designed to teach students to manage their emotions and excel academically.

In our own work with students in alternative settings, we have developed programs based on hope. These programs eschew

punishment in favor of a positive and future-oriented approach. It is important, as Guetzloe (1996) points out, that we offer students hope that we can teach them. It is also important that we teach them to hope. We have found that our positive expectations of students seem to engender similarly positive expectations in the students themselves. We have also found parental involvement to be crucial.

Rekindling Hope Through Parent Support

Not only have many students lost hope by the time they enter an alternative school program, but so too have their parents. It is a rare occurrence to find happy, enthusiastic parents at an intake meeting. Normally, by the time parents are invited to a meeting for alternative day school placement, they have grown suspicious and mistrustful of school officials. They are surrounded by a placement team that has the clear and singular agenda of removing the child from the traditional school setting. The team has come well prepared and armed with documentation to make their case. Parents brace themselves for a barrage of negative information about their child. Materials usually include a litany of the child's misdeeds and testimony

demonstrating that everything tried in the past has not worked. Generally, the parents sit quietly, resigned to this familiar recitation of their child's failures. Sometimes they join in, adding to the horrific list of their child's past transgressions. Sometimes they seem to feel obligated to look fierce and stern in front of the authorities—to show that they too disapprove of the child's misbehavior.

We take a different approach in our own work. We have found that effective intake meetings create hope. It is best to begin with the premise that parents of students with emotional disabilities want to help, for in fact nearly all of them do. Like any other parents, however, they would like to hear something positive about their child. Intake meetings provide an opportunity to plant the seeds of hope for the future.

Charles, for example, came to us with a history of disrupted schooling and gang involvement. Our school was his last stop on the way to his plan of dropping out altogether. His father, a burly man with thickly tattooed arms, was an intimidating presence himself. But we took our usual tack in the first meeting,



Art by Karl Becker, age 16
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sitting down with father and son and explaining that we knew Charles had had significant difficulties in the past, but that we wanted to know about what he had done well, what his interests were, and his strengths. What, we asked, were his hopes for the future?

Parents at this point usually breathe a sigh of relief, grateful we are not going to make them revisit the child's history of failure, and Charles' father was no exception. Like all parents, parents of troubled youngsters want what is best for their children. Their goals have come to look almost unattainable by the time the children come to alternative day school, but they long for permission to hope again. In our meeting, Charles' father admitted that he himself had made mistakes, and that he did not want his son to make the same mistakes he had made. This was a revelation to Charles, who had always heard his father's anger, but never his concern. Charles' father wanted Charles to graduate from high school, something he himself had failed to do. Like other parents we work with, he wanted his child to have a good life, better maybe than his own. Also, again like so many other parents we work with, Charles' father wanted to help.

STRATEGIES FOR AN EFFECTIVE INTAKE MEETING

- Meet with the student and parent(s) together.
- Seek to understand the student's strengths and interests.
- De-emphasize past problems.
- Focus on the future.
- Develop a plan jointly, discussing reasonable expectations and goals.

Research has shown that when parents are involved and invested in their child's education, there is a greater likelihood of school success (Epstein, 1995). When parents support the work of the school staff, the job of education becomes immeasurably easier. Students progress more quickly. Our strategy is to enlist parents as participants in planning for their child's future.

Every procedure that is used in the program, along with the rationale for its use, is explained to the parents and the child. Implicit promises are made. To the parents we promise that their child will learn new skills—in reading, math, and writing, as well as in problem solving and learning to build positive relationships. We ask them to commit to working with

us on behalf of their child. To the students we promise that if they attend school daily, participate in class, and work to achieve their personal goals, they *will* be successful in this school.

In our experience, not only are parents grateful to be included in their children's educational planning, but the children also benefit from attending these meetings with their parents. They may never before have heard their parents expressing this kind of concern about their future. We always point that out to students—how much it means that a parent is so concerned. "You may hear yelling," we told Charles, "but what he's really saying is 'I care.'"

More than anything else, more than expectations, passionate engagement or standards, teaching is about hope.

—Hargreaves & Fullen, 1998, p. 57

In setting up such programs, we keep in mind that professionalism, genuine caring and concern for the welfare of the families and children, as well as hope for the child's future, should characterize all parent contacts. In effective programs, teachers communicate frequently with parents. We need to attend carefully to how we converse with parents. When we talk with parents about their child, even when the contact is about discipline, we talk about what we are doing to assist the child. We should not focus on the child's misbehavior, but on the plan that is in place to help the child learn new behaviors. The plan developed mutually by the parents and school staff becomes the focus of our discussions.

Building Student Skills (Taking Baby Steps to Success)

Generally speaking, alternative day schools prepare students for their eventual return to the general education environment. Consequently, the curriculum in day school programs should be designed to build competence in the skills a child requires to thrive in general education. The more closely aligned the curriculum is with the skills and subject matter a student needs to succeed in the new setting, the greater likelihood that the child will be successful there. In addition to academic skills, students must be taught to communicate their feelings and resolve problems with polite words, to use an anger management strategy independently and on demand, and to make good judgments in social situations. Without command of the requisite social skills, a child risks failure.

In programs driven by hope for the future, the student's path to success is clearly delineated. Students are actively engaged in the learning process and are offered a relevant and engaging curriculum. We teach students that when they attend school regularly, identify and agree on goals that they want to achieve (both academic and social), and put in a concerted effort to reach those goals, they will make progress. We help them understand which behaviors led to their difficulties in general education and identify new ways of resolving those problems. We tell students that the path to success is not always easy, and that it may take some time to get there, but that every day they work toward achieving their goals, they are taking "baby steps" to success.

The concept of baby steps is easy for students to grasp. We explain that goals are not reached all at once, but are attained gradually, through effort over time. These students are already in alternative day school, which they may view as their last chance. Often they feel pressured to achieve instant success and need reassurance that they really do have time. We meet with students each morning to go over their short-term goals. If, for example, a student has never turned in homework, we will set a goal of turning in math homework every day for a week. At the end of each school day, we meet again to review the student's progress. We will ask the student what little steps he or she made that day, and the student can see progress occurring in increments. A student who has turned in math homework that day will see him- or herself not as having performed a single insignificant action, but as being on a path toward a larger goal.

TAKING BABY STEPS TO SUCCESS

- Pinpoint earlier difficulties (e.g., inability to turn in homework).
- Set attainable short-term goals (e.g., turn in math homework every day for a week).
- Meet daily in the morning to remind student of goals.
- Meet daily in the afternoon to review progress (e.g., math homework was turned in today).
- Remind students that success is gradual—an accumulation of "baby steps."

Preparing for Successful Transitions

Focusing on the future is essential to success. Envisioning the end result identifies the path to success, and while it may not make the journey any easier, it makes it worthwhile. Our goal should be to encourage students to view themselves as they want to be in the future, not as individuals who have failed in the past.

Travis, 16, describes his experience in our program at the Lane School in Eugene, Oregon:

At my home school my teachers didn't help me solve my problems. They said I was a behavior problem and had to solve it on my own. They just gave me a referral. "Here's another referral, Travis. Go to the office."

What I like about this school is . . . the structure and the one-on-one attention where I can get help when I don't understand something. The teachers help me figure out ways to solve my own problems. They give you help and attention. For example, the teachers here say things like, "How can we solve this problem, Travis?" They really care about me and want me to be safe.

—(Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, & Hanley, 1998, p. 36)

Travis is one of the many who have made successful transitions to the traditional school setting.

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Successful transitions are well-planned transitions. In alternative day schools that are successful in returning students to less-restrictive settings, close attention is given to preparing students, their future teachers, and the support persons who will serve as advocates for them in their new placement (George, Valore, Quinn, & Varisco, 1997). At the initial transition meeting, school staff, parents, and the student are active participants in planning the transition. Important decisions are reached regarding the student's schedule, timelines for beginning transition, and the criteria for determining success at each step in the transition process. Students are allowed to set the pace for their transition. Some choose a very slow pace for transition while others are eager to move quickly into the new setting.

The strategies and supports that are needed for continued success in the new setting must be identified and set in motion (George & George, 1999). This often involves careful selection of teachers and classes that ensure student success, identification of support persons in the new setting, and development of a crisis plan. We teach students how to seek

help from their teachers when confused or frustrated. We take students on visits to the school, sit in on classes with them, get textbooks to familiarize the students with the new curriculum, and begin the transition in small steps. We meet each day with students who are "in transition" to discuss the challenges and successes they experienced. Students help other students develop strategies for coping with change, making new friends, and keeping up with class work. We continue to provide support after the full transition for as long as the student needs it.

Charles, who like Travis made a successful transition, spent an unusually long time in our program—2 years. His transition was very slow and involved his spending a half day in each school until he felt ready to return to his high school full time. We did not hurry him. Charles worked very hard and responded well to the positive approach and to his father's undisguised happiness and serious involvement. To everyone's delight, Charles joined the wrestling team and became a proud high school graduate.

Programs that instill hope have achievable outcomes. Students are able to reach their goals, and when they reach their goals and make the transition back to their traditional schools, other students look and listen. Students begin to realize that if Charles and Travis can return to their schools, others—maybe they themselves—can too. Success breeds success.

Cultivating Hope

Alternative day schools can be places where students learn valuable skills—places to achieve personal success and build hope for the future. In effective day schools, students understand how they came to be placed there and how they can move forward into the future. They can identify the behaviors that caused them difficulties in the past and articulate and practice the behaviors that will serve them well in the future. They talk about the help they receive from staff and about how they are working to improve themselves. They can verbalize an anger management strategy that works for them and evaluate how well they are using it. *They have hope.*

Hope is cultivated. It is nourished by our beliefs. And in school settings it is strengthened by effective strategies that help students accomplish their goals. It is embedded in the working relationships we establish with parents, and in the knowledge that students can and will return to their traditional schools in the future. And, remarkably, it is free. The suggestions we have

made here have no financial costs attached to them. But their payoff is immeasurably large.

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