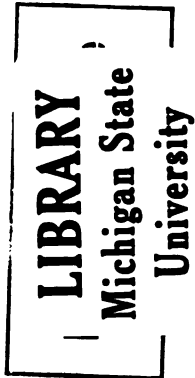This is to certify that the
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WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE ABOUT ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS?
A COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS
TO TRADITIONAL AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS

By

John L. Cook

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ABSTRACT

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE ABOUT ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS? A COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS TO TRADITIONAL AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS

By

John L. Cook

My purpose in this study was to describe and explain how alternative high schools in Michigan compared with traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum, organization, and pedagogy. I first examined the literature dealing with the curriculum, organization, and pedagogy of traditional high schools. This literature served as the basis for contrasting alternative high schools with traditional high schools. Specific areas for comparison included the nature of teaching, processes for curriculum development, organizational processes, indicators of student success, student-teacher relationships, and student-to-student relationships.

Four alternative high schools in Michigan were included in this study. By interviewing students and staff, observing classes, and studying the schools' materials, I attempted to determine the differences between the four alternative high schools and traditional high schools. Forty-one individuals (an administrator, staff members, and students at each school) were interviewed. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Using the techniques of theoretical sampling outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), I collected, coded, and analyzed the data to reach conclusions concerning differences between alternative high schools and traditional high schools.

The data indicated that each of the four alternative high schools included in this study followed the same basic logic of accommodation characteristic of traditional high schools. However, these alternative high schools took that logic to new lengths to promote the success of their students. These alternative high schools went as far as possible, within limits, to keep students coming and to interest them, if not in academic learning, then in the behaviors necessary to complete the required credits and earn an approved diploma. Therefore, for the schools included in this study, the answer to the question "What is alternative about alternative schools?" is that alternative high schools are less an alternative to traditional high schools than they are a more flexible and permissive extension of the logic and actions that govern the organization, pedagogy, and curriculum of traditional high schools.

There are many different types of alternative high schools. Studies focusing on different types of schools from those included in this study could make a significant contribution to the discourse concerning the nature and effectiveness of alternative schools. Furthermore, studies concentrating on students who are unsuccessful in alternative high schools could provide yet another perspective on these institutions.

The assistance, support, and patience of two
people made this volume possible.
I dedicate this work to them:
my wife, Beth, and my friend, Philip Cusick.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction and Purpose of the Study

Many educators believe alternative high schools provide a viable choice for

students. They view such schools as distinctly different from and more innovative than

traditional high schools. But do these alternative schools truly provide different options

for students? Or, in key areas related to schooling, curriculum, and teaching, are they

basically the same as traditional secondary schools? In this study, I explored that issue.

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain how alternative high schools in

Michigan compare with traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum, organization,

and pedagogy.

A Michigan Department of Education (1998) Administrative Guidebook broadly

defined "alternative education" as programs operated as a subdivision of the regular K-12

school system, "designed for students who can be better served in an alternative delivery

system" (p. C-5). Geik and Walsh (1999) indicated that alternative high schools were

designed for "preventing at-risk adolescents (or recovering them) from dropping out of

the K-12 system and completing the requirements for a high school diploma" (p. 2).

Who enrolls in alternative high schools? A website from one alternative high school,

Foley Alternative High School in Foley, Minnesota, provided a comprehensive

"eligibility list." Eligible students for that high school, the web site stated, included

individuals

- performing substantially below average on a local achievement test
- at least one year behind in satisfactorily completing a course of work
- pregnant or a parent
- assessed as chemically dependent

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- who have been physically or sexually abused
- who have experienced mental health problems
- who have been homeless sometime in the last six months
- with limited English proficiency or speaking English as a second language
- referred by a school district for enrollment in an eligible nontraditional program
- excluded or expelled (Available: www.stcloud.k12.mm.us)

Many alternative high schools also allow individuals who have already dropped out of school to return and complete high school graduation requirements. Some alternative high schools are "schools of choice," and students are enrolled based solely on parental choice.

Although the number of alternative high schools throughout the United States is growing, these places still do not seem like "real schools" to many people. Raywid (1998) concluded that alternative educational programs were "somewhat marginal to the educational mainstream and a fringe rather than a fully accepted member of the educational establishment. As a result, even after decades, and even when providing accepted leadership for others, they have never achieved institutional legitimacy" (p. 12). The present study offered an opportunity to contribute to the conversation about what is generally known about alternative high schools and whether or not these schools are, in fact, part of the educational mainstream.

Conceptual Framework

If I was to understand whether or how alternative high schools differed from mainstream secondary institutions, I first needed to understand the traditional high school as the basis for comparison. A large body of literature has dealt with the nature and development of the traditional high school. This literature provided considerable insight into what happens in traditional high schools and analyzed the evolution of this institution during the last century. I looked to the literature dealing with the nature and

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development of traditional high schools to understand the differences between traditional and alternative high schools. I identified concepts related to the curricula, organization, and pedagogy of traditional high schools and used these concepts as a framework to analyze similar aspects of alternative high schools.

First, I examined the literature dealing with the curricula of traditional high schools. I considered the history of the American high school during the last century and found an almost constant debate concerning the intellectual content of high school curricula in the United States: Should high schools emphasize academically rigorous courses, or, instead, should priority be given to practical course work that interests students? Educators' solution to these contrasting points of view illustrate an important pattern influencing the development of secondary education in this country. Faced with difficult choices between contrasting approaches, educators have made room for both. The curriculum was expanded dramatically, and the result was diversification. The American high school became a buffet of educational choices (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). There were courses that were demanding, and some that were not. For some students, the path through high school was academically challenging. Other students "got by" in classes that provided passing grades for minimal effort.

This pattern has special significance when considered in relation to alternative high schools. Where and how do "new" alternative high schools fit into the conversation regarding the intellectual content of secondary schools? Are alternative education high schools one more example in a long, familiar pattern of repeatedly expanding what is taught in American high schools in order to ensure students' success? These are the questions that were considered in this study.

Second, I examined what the literature has said about the organization of traditional high schools. Again, my purpose was to devise a framework that could be used to compare alternative high schools to traditional American high schools. I considered three areas related to the organization of traditional high schools: the bureaucracy of these institutions, the role of teachers, and informal things that students do (with particular attention to the way students interact with their instructors). I found that many scholars have agreed about the nature of the bureaucracy in traditional high schools. These schools, they noted, are designed primarily to provide direct, uncomplicated ways to maintain control and promote orderliness (Sizer, 1984). Subject areas are divided into classes; students are batched together in groups and assigned to classes. The school day is divided into periods, and the clock regulates students' and teachers' lives inside a high school (Cusick, 1973). The layout and design of the school are designed to promote efficient education of batches of students, in an economical manner. Many "do's and don'ts" regulate the behaviors of both students and teachers. There are all sorts of rules for all sorts of things: smoking, drinking soda, being tardy, walking through the halls during class times, swearing, and skipping school. The traditional American high school, the literature reviewed for this study revealed, is clearly a well-regulated institution (Cuban, 1984). Students do not come and go as they please. To survive in traditional high schools, students—and teachers—have to behave within the limitations established by a complex bureaucracy.

When considering what the literature said about the organization of traditional high schools, I also examined the role of teachers and the interactions of students. I found that the conventional American high school is a place where teachers often operate in isolation. Teachers often do not have the time or inclination to collaborate on a

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schoolwide curriculum with a unified sense of purpose (Cusick, 1973). And these are also places where students and teachers do not seem to interact all that much. Instead, students spend a lot of time waiting and watching, and talking with other students.

This was the mirror I held up to alternative high schools. I asked, Do alternative high schools reflect the same organizational characteristics as traditional high schools? Do alternative high schools have a complex, well-defined bureaucracy with lists of do's and don'ts? Do teachers in alternative high schools indicate that they operate in isolation? Do students say that they have meaningful interactions with their instructors? These were some of the questions addressed in this analysis of the organizational characteristics of alternative high schools.

My examination of the literature dealing with traditional American high schools concluded with a look at pedagogy. This analysis was considered within the context of the theoretical orientation of epistemology—the study of human knowledge. For more than 25 centuries, philosophers have debated questions related to "knowing." What can we know? I explored the historical evolution of epistemology and then considered the connection between philosophical approaches to knowledge and the way teachers approach teaching. If knowledge is a priori (that is to say, not based on experience), the teacher would be considered an expert who explains what he or she knows to be true: Read this. Memorize this. Learn this. On the other hand, if humans construct knowledge (using either reason or the experiences of the senses), then the teacher is a guide developing the students' intellect.

The literature noted that, in traditional American high schools, there is creative teaching that encourages students to use reason and experimentation to learn and discover. However, there is more "telling." This epistemological approach is an obvious

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and pervasive feature of the current traditional high school. The literature indicated that traditional high school teachers often view knowledge as something that is known, something that can be revealed to others. They are the holders of knowledge, and it is their task to share that knowledge with their students. What about alternative high schools? Is it the same in these places? Do alternative high school teachers see teaching as "telling"? These were matters examined in this study.

Initial Exploratory Questions

The initial exploratory questions for this study flowed from the purpose for this inquiry, as well as from what I learned from the literature about the development and nature of traditional American high schools. Three primary exploratory questions formed the framework that I used in assessing ways alternative high schools compare with what the literature said about traditional high schools. These three questions are as follows:

1. What is alternative about the curriculum of alternative high schools? Specific, additional questions addressed teacher collaboration, elective classes, curriculum development, curriculum implementation, and who had responsibility for selecting the curriculum materials used by students.

2. What is alternative about the organization and structure of alternative high schools? Specific, additional questions dealt with the bureaucracy, the role of the teacher, interactions between students and teachers, interactions between teachers, rules that governed the behavior of both students and teachers, and the extent to which instructional activity at alternative high schools was student centered.

3. What is alternative about the pedagogy of alternative high schools? Specific, additional questions focused on the epistemological approach of alternative high school

teachers, individualized instructional programs, student assessments, and the content

required of students to complete requirements for a class.

Methodology

The primary data-collection method selected for this study was the interview.

Secondary methods of inquiry included a limited amount of observation on my part and

collection of selected cultural products and artifacts. The interview is a qualitative,

ethnographic approach well suited to addressing the complex issues associated with this

inquiry. Seidman (1998) noted that the behaviors of individuals becomes meaningful and

understandable for the researcher when placed in the context of their lives and the world

around them. The exploratory questions for this study included many issues related to

complex perceptions held by individuals. It was necessary to use an approach that

allowed me to probe for broader, deeper understandings; therefore, a qualitative approach

made good sense.

In conducting this study, I used the process of theoretical sampling. Glaser and

Strauss (1967) described this technique:

> Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory
> whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes this data and decides
> what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as
> it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory,
> whether substantive or formal. (p. 105)

With theoretical sampling, early decisions made by the researcher are based on general

perspective. Then, as data are collected, the process becomes more challenging, and

more a matter of insight and intuition. Creswell (1994) noted that "data analysis requires

that the researcher be comfortable with developing categories and making comparisons

and contrasts. It also requires that the researcher be open to possibilities and see contrary

or alternative explanations for the findings" (p. 153). With theoretical sampling, the

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anticipation is that patterns will appear, additional data will confirm early suppositions, categories will come together, and a theory will emerge.

The first interviews conducted for this study were guided by the initial exploratory questions. Before the interviews, I met with each school's administrator to explain the nature of this study. We looked for potential respondents with at least one full year of experience in that particular alternative high school. I informed respondents about the nature and purposes of the study, and obtained a consent form from all subjects whom I interviewed. The names of all respondents and all schools included in this research were kept confidential. All interviews were tape-recorded. The tapes were transcribed and the resulting protocols typed, read, and reread. Most interviews lasted approximately one to one and one-half hours.

The study was limited to alternative high schools with an enrollment of at least 40 students. The limitation of an enrollment of at least 40 students was established to ensure that the alternative program being studied was a separate school and not a program with a single classroom, supervised by one professional. There were no other limitations to the scope of the study.

Data for this study were collected from four alternative high schools. These schools were selected, in part, because it was possible to gain access to them. (My recent experiences as a school administrator in Michigan provided the opportunity for access to several alternative high school programs.) Another factor in the selection of schools was geographical location. My goal was to select alternative high schools from different regions of the state.

Forty-one individuals were interviewed. At each site, interviews were conducted with an administrator, teachers, and students. The administrators were interviewed

individually. Teachers were interviewed individually or in groups of two or three.

Students were interviewed individually or in small groups. At one school, students were

interviewed first in a group setting; then students from that group were interviewed again

individually or in pairs.

Cultural products and artifacts also informed this research. Cultural products and

artifacts help reveal the nature of a complex situation. Geertz (1983) indicated that such

products and artifacts are physical manifestations of culture; indeed, they are part of the

culture itself. Examples of products and artifacts considered in this study included:

- Records summarizing student attendance
- Student handbooks
- Tests and assessment instruments
- School policy statements
- Student progress reports
- Information presented to students upon admission to the school
- Information for students and parents indicating course offerings
- Class lists and schedules
- Descriptions of the physical setting

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addressed a component of the secondary

educational system that is growing in scope and importance. Educators throughout

America have turned to alternative programs for a number of reasons: to prevent students

from dropping out, to reduce delinquency, to help problem students, to provide an

innovative education, and to promote change in traditional high schools. In Michigan,

the number of alternative high schools more than tripled in two decades. In 1978, there

were 99 alternative high schools (Gray, 1978). By 1998, there were 369 alternative high

schools in Michigan. These 369 schools had an enrollment of 23,200 full-time-

equivalent students—5% of all Michigan secondary school pupils (Geik & Walsh, 1999).

However, despite their growing popularity, there is considerable mystery surrounding alternative schools. Relatively little research has been conducted concerning the nature and effectiveness of high school alternative education programs. Geik and Walsh (1999) observed, "There remains an array of questions regarding the relationship between program effectiveness and program resources, components, structures, and philosophies" (p. 5). This study, therefore, is significant because it addressed a part of the educational enterprise that is growing in scope and importance. Moreover, because relatively few research studies have dealt with this topic, an opportunity existed to add new information to the conversation about this aspect of secondary education.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

A large body of literature concerns the nature and development of the traditional high school. This literature provides considerable insight into what happens in the traditional high school and analyzes the evolution of this institution during the last century. I looked to this material to provide the foundation for comparing alternative high schools to mainstream secondary institutions. In this chapter, I summarize key points made by several scholars concerning the curriculum, organization, and pedagogy of traditional American high schools. I begin by examining the curriculum of traditional high schools from a historical perspective. The development of education in America during the 20th century is considered within the context of a nearly constant debate concerning the intellectual content of high school curricula in the United States. Should these schools emphasize academically rigorous courses, or, instead, should priority be given to practical course work that interests students? Educators' solution to these contrasting points of view illustrates an important pattern influencing the development of secondary education in this country. Faced with difficult choices between contrasting approaches, educators made room for both. The curriculum was expanded dramatically.

Second, I examine the organization of the traditional high school. I begin by looking at the bureaucracy of the traditional American high school and consider key questions: How do educators allocate and arrange time during the school day? How are content and students organized? What are the rules that govern the behavior of both teachers and students? What is the effect of the need to keep order? I next consider the

isolation of teachers in the classroom and the autonomy of teachers to make decisions that chart the course of both their classroom activities and the curriculum of the entire school. Finally, the informal things students do that influence the organization and structure of traditional high schools are analyzed, with particular attention to the way students interact with their instructors.

I conclude the discussion about "the way things are" in traditional high schools with a look at pedagogy in these places. Literature related to pedagogy is considered within the context of a specific theoretical orientation—the study of human knowledge, epistemology. A number of questions are considered: What is epistemology? What is the history of epistemology, and how did it develop as a philosophy? What do teachers in traditional high schools assume about knowing and learning, and how does that seem to influence their pedagogical approach to instruction?

In summary, the purpose of this study was to describe and explain how alternative high schools in Michigan compared with traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum, organization, and pedagogy. I reviewed the literature to learn about the nature and historical development of traditional high schools, examining the curriculum of those schools from a historical perspective, considering characteristics of their organizational structure, and exploring the pedagogical approach of traditional high school teachers. The review of literature was used as a basis for comparison when considering what is happening in alternative high schools. In other words, if alternative schools are indeed *alternative,* they will be alternative to these things.

The Curriculum of Traditional High Schools: A Historical Perspective

Many threads run through the history of American education in the 20th century. One of the most persistent is the debate concerning the primary focus of high schools:

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Should these institutions provide intellectually serious programs and establish rigorous academic requirements? Or, instead, should high schools provide practical courses that interest students—programs that, because they are less demanding, greatly enhance students' chances for success in their high school studies? In this section, the development of the curriculum of American high schools during the 20th century is considered within the context of this crucial and nearly constant debate. What happened to the American high school curriculum between the 1890s and the present day is defined and documented. The goal was to spell out some basic characteristics of the development of curriculum in traditional high schools. Then I use such conclusions as a template—as a guide—when I examine patterns of curriculum development in alternative high schools.

The discussion concerning the nature of American high school curriculum began in earnest in 1893 with a report issued by a group of scholars called the Committee of Ten. The Committee of Ten was composed largely of college presidents and was chaired by Harvard President Charles W. Eliot. At a time when only about 8% of the eligible youth group was enrolled in high school, the committee concluded that every American high school student should have a rigorous academic education and proposed what amounted to a national high school curriculum. Core courses, they said, should include traditional studies like Latin, Greek, and mathematics, as well as modern subjects such as English, foreign languages, natural history, physical science, geography, history, civil government, and political economy. (Including these modern subjects, by the way, angered the traditionalists, who were devoted to the established classical curriculum.) Standards should be high; the emphasis should be placed on mental discipline. Every subject should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil. The Committee of Ten disapproved of high school students selecting courses such as

bookkeeping or stenography. The best preparation for life, they said, was preparation for higher education.

A few years following the report of the Committee of Ten, G. Stanley Hall presented a decidedly different point of view. According to Hall, most high school students had little interest in the classics and other such academic programs. Because most students were not going on to college, it would be much better to focus on the needs and interests of the majority—those planning to join the work force immediately after high school. Hall argued for a high school curriculum that would prepare students for life and not cause them to become disenchanted by difficulty or aridity (Powell et al., 1985).

It seems that Hall's position eventually triumphed when, in 1918, the Commission on Reorganization of Secondary Education published *Cardinal Principles of Education*. Five years earlier, the National Education Association had established the commission. The seven major objectives of education identified in *Cardinal Principles* were intended to do much more than prepare students for higher education. Included in these principles were (a) health, (b) command of fundamental processes, (c) worthy home membership, (d) vocation, (e) citizenship, (f) worthy use of leisure time, and (g) ethical character. The commission urged that homemaking be considered of equal value to other schoolwork. Clearly, the emphasis was not on rigorous academic course work. In fact, Ravitch (1983) noted, "So little did the commission think of traditional, school-bound knowledge that the original draft of the report failed to include a command of fundamental processes (its only reference to intellectual development) as a main objective" (p. 48).

In spite of this emphasis on practical and vocational education, specialized vocational training schools did not become as popular in America as in European countries. Some vocational schools were created in cities, but for the most part

Americans responded to the demand for a more practical curriculum with a practice destined to be repeated often in the years ahead. Faced with competing demands between an intellectually serious curriculum and practical course work geared to students' interests, a solution evolved that was particularly American. It was decided to do it all. Both were included in the curriculum. As a result, most high schools added courses in vocational classes such as stenography, agriculture, and mechanical arts and revised the older, more traditional classes to make them "fit" the new ideas (Clark, Klein, & Burks, 1964). In *The Shopping Mall High School*, Cohen (1985) provided insight into why educators chose to add—and not subtract—programs:

> Mass enrollment and unselective admissions meant that schools had to do what students and their families wanted. These were not selective private schools that could admit the students they wished, to fit the institution's taste for academic work or for students' manners; rather they were public schools that had to take what they got, and work with it. . . . The high schools were doing what comes naturally in a popular democracy: paying attention to their constituents. (p. 239)

It seems clear that for many, if not most, Americans, providing intellectually challenging course work was not as important as creating schools where students had plenty of choices. They wanted schools where students were happy, successful, and felt "at home."

Early in the 1900s another movement was taking root that stood in opposition to the "strictly academic" approach of Elliot and the Committee of Ten. This approach, scientific in orientation, came to be called the progressive movement. It was, at least initially, based largely on the ideas of philosopher John Dewey. Dewey (1899) maintained that the responsibility of schools was to educate the whole child. "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children" (p. 19). Progressivism was a pragmatic approach. Education was, progressivists maintained, a part of living, and subject matter was only a means to an end.

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What was important was not the subject material to be learned, but the learner and learning. The intention was a curriculum that focused on students' lives. Franklin Bobbit added to this theme with the introduction of a new branch of educational science called curriculum making. In *The Curriculum*, published in 1918, Bobbit identified 821 objectives to be used in constructing a school's curriculum, all based on life activities connected with things such as language, health, leisure, parenting, and vocational pursuits (Ravitch, 1983).

These initiatives to make school relevant to the lives of students had an impact. By the mid-1930s, most high schools had eased their academic demands and given considerable attention to vocational training. Of course, this trend was also influenced by rapidly growing enrollments. High school enrollments doubled during each of the first three decades of the 20th century. By the mid-1930s, about half of the eligible age group attended secondary schools (Boyer, 1983). Grant (1988) reported that educators "desperately wanted their new students to get by" and devised approaches to promote success:

> In 1933, a federal survey of high school grading practices revealed that most high schools made "strenuous efforts" to avoid failing students. Performance standards were low, and half the schools reported that even when students failed they were still promoted. The practice of social promotion had been invented, although it had not been given a name yet, and course offerings were watered down as student choices expanded. (p. 211)

In the 1940s, the mission to de-emphasize rigorous academic education and, instead, embrace a more "student-centered" approach took another turn, this time under the name of "Education for Life Adjustment." In 1947, the federal Office of Education established the Commission on Life Adjustment for Youth, with Charles Prosser as its chief spokesperson. According to Prosser's calculations, only about 40% of high school seniors went on either to college or into skilled trades. That meant 60% of the students

left school without being prepared for much of anything. Better, Prosser said, that these pupils learn something connected to the real demands of living. So advocates of Education for Life Adjustment proposed lessons dealing with practical things like choosing a mate, shopping, home repair, friendship, and recreation. In effect, the Life Adjustment advocates seemed to be saying, the problem was the students, and not the school and its curriculum. In *The Last Little Citadel,* Hampel (1986) noted,

> In one sense, high schools had to belittle their students in order to elevate themselves. . . . Previous reformers had also espoused child-centered schooling premised on low estimates of the students' appetite and ability for academic work, but no one before had stated the case so frankly and merrily, and thus so foolishly. (pp. 46-47)

The Life Adjustment movement never did seem to make much of an impact, and by the mid-1950s it had disappeared as a formal movement (Hampel, 1986). Life Adjustment had been an easy mark for critics. In the early 1950s, books like Bestor's (1953) *Educational Wastelands* ridiculed the movement. Bestor, a professor of history at the University of Illinois, asked whether the American people had lost their common sense and native wit "so that now they have to be taught in school to blow their noses and button their pants" (p. 64).

That was just the beginning of the criticism. The progressive, child-centered education that provided "something for everyone" began to come under fire from educators, citizens, and scholars. Negative response to the "watering down" of the American high school grew louder and louder during the early and mid-1950s. After all, the dilution was easy to document. For example, a total of 83.3% of high school students studied a foreign language in 1910, compared with 20.6% in 1955 (Ravitch, 1983, p. 68). Latin is of particular interest. In 1910, 49% of high school students were enrolled in Latin classes; by 1949, students taking Latin classes had dropped to 8%, and to 1% by

1982. In the area of mathematics, 57% of high school students were enrolled in algebra in 1910, compared to 29.5% in 1982. In 1910, 31% took geometry, compared to 11% in 1983. By contrast, in 1910 only 11% of high school students enrolled in business education courses. That number increased to 59% by 1949. There were no physical education courses in 1910, but, in 1949, 69% of high school students were enrolled in these programs, and, in 1982, 59% were taking physical education classes (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 1999, pp. 91-93).

Besides Bestor, other vociferous critics emerged: Clifton Fadiman, Admiral Hyman Rickover, and Rudolph Flesch. Hollingshead's (1949) *Elmtown's Youth* provided first-hand documentation that academic demands on students were minimal. Then came an explosion, both literally and figuratively. On October 4, 1957, Russia successfully launched Sputnik. The reaction was loud and immediate. Russian schools, many reasoned, had obviously done what American schools had failed to do: They had prepared scientists capable of taking people into space (a conclusion, by the way, that ignored German rocket scientists spirited into the Soviet Union at the end of World War II).

Critics condemned America's ineffective "new education" and urged a return to traditional subjects and rigorous academic training. In 1958, the Rockefeller brothers funded the report *Pursuit of Excellence,* an urgent call to add rigor to education. Then Harvard President James B. Conant wrote *The American High School Today.* Published in 1959, the book became an immediate best seller. Conant proposed a blueprint for the improvement of American education. His plan addressed the old debate framed by Elliot and Hall half a century before: Should American high schools emphasize academic or

practical course work? The response proposed by Conant was familiar: We should, in effect, do it all. Grant (1988) wrote:

> Conant's widely influential report was an attempt at compromising these two positions. . . . He championed the comprehensive high school with a variety of offerings but opposed rigidly tracking students into precollege or vocational curriculum. He favored ability grouping, however, so that students would be challenged at an appropriate level. (p. 214)

Conant became the champion of the comprehensive high school. His goal was to promise a design that would provide a general, required education for all future citizens. In addition, there would be appropriate course work for those not continuing their education beyond high school, as well as challenging academic course work for students who did plan to attend a college or university.

America responded. Curriculum innovation and "excellence" became the goals during the late 1950s and 1960s. Educational leaders emphasized educating the talented, individualizing education, increasing expectations, and providing rigorous academic instruction. Calculus was moved from the collegiate level to the senior year of high school. Subjects normally taught in high school were moved to the elementary school level (Clark et al., 1964). A national survey of changes in high school curriculum confirmed that there were significant increases in students enrolling in academically rigorous courses. High school pupils in advanced mathematics, physics, and chemistry courses increased by almost 2,000% (Grant, 1988, p. 215).

The 1950s and 1960s (and the early 1970s) brought other significant changes to American schools. These were years of dramatic growth in student enrollment and school programs. Hampel (1986) noted that "coping with growth was the foremost achievement of those years" (p. 137). Nationally, student enrollment grew by about 20% between 1949 and 1961. In 1949, 36,000 students were enrolled in high school remedial

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classes in English and reading; that number increased to 276,000 by the early 1960s

(Grant, 1988, p. 215). In the decade of the 1960s, the number of teachers rose from

575,000 to about 1 million (Grant, 1988, p. 150). Schools and schooling were further

influenced by the civil rights revolution that took place during this period. In 1954, the

United States Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education,* outlawed the practice of

"separate but equal" schools, a decision that had a profound, although not immediate,

effect on American schools. During the 1960s, there was also a significant rise in the

number and aggressiveness of teacher unions across America. During the 10-year period

from 1955 to 1965, there were only 35 teacher strikes. In the 1968-69 school year alone,

there were 131 strikes (Hampel, 1986, p. 97). Aggressive unionism redefined the terms

and conditions of teachers' employment.

Then came the 1970s. During this decade, there was a liberal backlash to the

strident demands for "excellence" and higher standards. There was concern for the

disadvantaged. Egalitarian reforms were introduced. Emphasis was placed on

humanizing and creating curriculum relevant to the lives of students. Hampel (1986)

noted:

> In 1965, high school principals ranked "development of positive self-concept and
> good human relations" seventh of eight educational goals; by 1977, that same
> objective was second of ten. The new prominence of feelings and emotions went
> hand in hand with the heightened responsiveness to the rights of the
> disenfranchised. There was less regimentation and more choice, both academic
> and personal. Getting a hall pass became easier. (pp. 137-138)

Students and teachers seemed considerably more open about drugs and sex during the

mid- and late 1970s, and both students and teachers gained due process rights. In 1979,

the Supreme Court (in *Tinker v. Des Moines)* upheld the right of students to wear black

armbands protesting the Vietnam War. The Warren Court ruled that neither "students nor

teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech and expression at the schoolhouse gate."

Eventually, however, it became obvious to educators that the American people were alarmed by what they perceived to be the excesses of the 1970s. During the 1970s and into the 1980s, Gallup polls indicated that American schools (especially high schools) were deteriorating. In poll after poll during the 1970s and 1980s, "lack of discipline" was consistently ranked as the top problem of American schools. Private school enrollments grew. Citizens voted "no" more frequently on school finance issues. "If the sixties and the seventies were in some respect an analogue for the thirties and forties, the eighties became an echo of the fifties with a renewal of calls for excellence, for quality, and for equality" (Grant, 1988, p. 216).

Four major reports were issued in 1983 that sounded the alarm. The report receiving the most attention came from the Commission on Educational Excellence appointed by President Ronald Reagan, entitled *A Nation at Risk*. The report warned that America's preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technology was being overtaken by competitors (principally Japan). As a result of "the mediocre educational performance that exists today," the Commission concluded, our nation is at risk. The other reports completed in 1983 included *America's Competitive Challenge* from the Business-Higher Education Task Force, *Action for Excellence* from the Education Commission of the States, and the Twentieth Century Fund's *Making the Grade.*

The debate concerning the nature and purpose of the American high school curriculum continues to the present day. Contrasting points of view are still evident. There are those who favor a more practical education, on one hand, and those promoting "quality" and a rigorous academic experience on the other. We have seen that, faced

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with difficult choices between these two disparate, strongly held approaches, American educators often make room for both. The curriculum is expanded. The result is the diversified high school. The American high school today is a buffet of educational choices. If students plan to continue their education at a postsecondary institution, they often enroll in high school courses that are demanding. The opposite is also true. Some course work at the high school level seems undemanding. The goal seems to be student success, with minimal effort on the part of that student. This discussion has special significance when considered in relation to alternative high schools.

Because the purpose of this study was to describe and explain how alternative high schools in Michigan compared with traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum, organization, and pedagogy, it is fitting to ask where and how "new" alternative high schools fit into the conversation regarding the intellectual content of secondary schools. Are alternative education high schools one more example in a long, familiar pattern—the pattern of again and again expanding and diluting what was taught in American high schools in order to ensure student success? Or, instead, do alternative high schools finally legitimatize an educational process that puts students' needs and interests ahead of intellectual requirements unrelated to "real life"? In other words, are alternative schools—like traditional high schools—highly diversified and willing (in response to popular demand) to design programs and courses that encourage student success? Or do these second-chance institutions have a more focused curriculum approach designed to meet specific objectives? (And, if that is the case, are those objectives defined or undefined?)

The Organization of Traditional High Schools

Suppose for a moment that you are a high school student. Midway through four years of study, your family moves. You begin your junior year in a new school. What do you find? Are the structure and organization of this new high school significantly different from your previous school? Will the school day and calendar be similar? Will the classrooms look the same? What courses will be offered, and how will grades and credits be computed? And what about what goes on in the classroom? Will teachers face the same challenges in your new school that they confronted in your old high school? It is probably, in fact, almost certain, that you will recognize much of what you see in your new high school. Traditional American high schools are more alike than they are different. Of course, many of these similarities are superficial: the gym with its basketball backboards and bleachers, long rows of lockers, cafeterias filled with rows of tables, handbooks listing rules distributed at the start of the school year, the assistant principal's base of operations in "the office" (a destination students will usually avoid, if possible). However, many other things common to the organization and structure of traditional high schools are far from superficial. Instead, these relationships, strategies, and patterns of behavior are deeply embedded in the fabric of the traditional American high school. Some of these complex organizational characteristics have evolved over decades and are deeply rooted in a uniquely American experience. Others, equally powerful, are relatively new and sometimes surprise educators with their impact.

Many of the organizational attributes of traditional high schools have been studied extensively by scholars. I have drawn from this literature to describe and explain key organizational characteristics of the traditional American high school. Again, my purpose was to devise a framework that can be used to compare second-chance

alternative high schools to traditional, or mainstream, American high schools. I begin by looking at how students and teachers in traditional high schools spend their time. How do educators allocate and arrange time during the school day? How are students organized? How is school space arranged? What rules govern the behavior of both teachers and students? I also consider the isolation of teachers in the classroom and the autonomy of teachers to make decisions that chart the course of both their own classroom activities and the curriculum of the entire school. Finally, I examine informal things that students do that influence the organization and structure of traditional high schools, with particular attention to the way students interact with their instructors.

The Traditional High School: Batches, Bits, and Slices

Consider for a moment that a typical traditional high school is like a small town, only "within walls." Small towns are complex places, with all sorts of organizational requirements and challenges. As one would expect, the same is true for high schools. We will find that high schools have developed highly structured strategies to deal with such requirements and challenges. And throughout this discussion there is a common threat: compartmentalization. The American high school is a conglomerate of batches, bits, and slices. This discussion of the organization of traditional high schools first examines how the curriculum is sliced into discrete subjects and, in turn, how those subjects are compartmentalized into classes. I consider the power of "the clock" and outline how time is allocated during the school day. Next, the arrangement of school space to promote orderliness is reviewed. Finally, I consider some of the "do's and don'ts" that saturate the environment and discuss the critical need for educators to maintain order in the American high school.

At the very heart of the organization of the traditional American high school are "subjects" and "classes." As noted earlier, the general public understands this very well. Students "take subjects." Teachers "teach subjects." The subjects include things like English, mathematics, social studies, physical education, foreign language, wood shop, computer programming, creative writing, and much more. Students enroll in these classes in "batches," with about 25 students in each group. Teachers, in turn, are often grouped into "departments," depending on the subject matter they teach. Usually there are 6 to 10 departments in a high school, each with a department chairperson who gets a small monetary stipend and a little additional noninstructional time to handle the requirements of the position.

Students are required to complete a certain number of classes to earn a high school diploma. It is common for each semester (or half-year long) class to earn one half of a "credit," with about 18 credits needed to complete the graduation requirements of a three-year high school and about 24 credits necessary to earn a diploma in a four-year high school. Students are also required to take a certain number of classes from each of several subject areas. For example, high school students usually are required to complete at least four credits (eight semester-long classes) of English, one credit of physical education, three credits of mathematics, three credits of social science, and so on. There is often, then, a sequence to classes within a department; a student completes Algebra 1 before becoming eligible for Algebra 2.

In general, students are grouped by age, especially for required classes. Most advanced classes (like French 3) will include mostly older students. Beginning classes (like Spanish 1) will be made up predominantly of freshmen and sophomores. The job of the teacher, many would say, is to "cover" the subject-area content for a particular class.

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In turn, students are tested to see whether they mastered the material covered by the teacher. Based primarily in students' success on such assessments, teachers give students numerical grades for each class. These grades are compiled into a composite score, called the grade point average (GPA). This GPA is then used to determine the student's rank among all members of an entire class (i.e., within the 9th, 10th, 11th, or 12th grade).

The clock regulates the length of class periods. Clocks seem to be everywhere in high schools, and for good reason. The ebb and flow of the school day is regulated down to the minute. Sizer (1984) wrote, "The school schedule is a series of units of time: the clock is king" (p. 79). The day is divided into periods, usually six or seven, lasting from 40 to 60 minutes each. Each period equals one class and earns one half credit. More and more, high schools throughout America are grouping some of these periods together into "blocks," which allow more time for classes like science labs and hands-on vocational courses. (In such cases, these blocks might not meet every day; or perhaps they will be earning more than the traditional one half credit.)

The student's day seems to have the feel of a workday in a highly structured industry. Sizer (1984) saw the high school as the workplace of young people:

> School is to be like a job: you start in the morning and end in the afternoon, five days a week. You don't get much of a lunch hour, so you go home early, unless you are an athlete or are involved in some special school or extracurricular activity. School is conceived of as the children's workplace, and it takes young people off parents' hands and out of the labor market during prime-time work hours. (p. 79)

Each period or block is separated by short "passing time" periods, usually about five minutes long. Bells (or sometimes tones) sound to announce the end of a class period. Students empty into hallways and head for their next class. The bell--or, more commonly now, a tone--sounds again and the next class begins. Cusick (1973) reflected that few people regard this fragmentation as anything out of the ordinary:

No one finds this odd. Since the school is divided into rectangular rooms and the curriculum into clearly delineated fragments, it is only logical that the day should be similarly divided to create an integrated whole. In sum, the building, the organizational structure, and the day are all carefully structured to facilitate the process of the teacher passing on his particular specialty to batches of students. (p. 17)

Finally, just as minutes and periods become days, days join to make a school year. A school year also looks much the same from school to school across America. The school year begins in late August or early September and continues until about mid-June. There are vacation breaks sometime in December and sometime in the early spring. The total days of student instruction usually number somewhere between 180 and 190. Teachers usually work about 5 or 10 additional days. It is traditional for both teachers and students to "get the summer off." During the summer months, however, activities usually continue at the high school. Many high schools offer summer school classes in June and July. Athletic practices begin in August, and throughout the summer months, classes are offered in the one high school subject area that consistently has 100% of its students highly motivated: drivers education.

In the physical setting of the school, like the organization of time and subject matter, one again finds compartmentalization. Students and teachers come together in rectangular rooms. Like the compartments of an egg carton, the rooms face each other along long, locker-lined hallways. At the end of one of these hallways is the office area. Here are found the workplaces of a principal, one or two assistant principals, secretaries, guidance counselors, and other support staff. At another location in the building, there is a media center filled with books, magazines, and computers, and an entire wing of the building is devoted to a large gymnasium and locker rooms. There is a cafeteria where students come together for lunch. Students often use this same area as a place to meet friends and do homework before and after school. There are larger classrooms for art and

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music programs. Some schools also have vocational classrooms, for classes like wood shop, metals, and graphics.

Such designs have the same purpose as many of the rules and regulations that govern life within the walls of a high school: to maintain control and promote orderliness. Look at the rules and regulations—the do's and don'ts—in just about any high school's student handbook, and you will find common features. The handbook addresses things like appropriate dress, use of lockers, swearing, skipping class, and being tardy for class. There may be regulations for drinking soda and eating in class. There certainly will be rules dealing with the use of alcohol and drugs, and smoking. However, there are many important and universally understood behaviors and routines common to traditional high schools that are not found in the handbook. This is especially true of classroom behavior. Cuban (1984) noted some common expectations for students:

> Class routines for students raising their hands to answer questions, to speak only when recognized by the teacher, and to speak when no one else is talking—the principle of turn-taking—establishes an orderly framework for instruction when it is delivered to groups. Students asking permission to go to the pencil sharpener or to leave the room reaffirm the teacher's control over student mobility and the imperative of orderliness. (p. 242)

Cuban also considered the alternative. Organizing a classroom so that it is student-centered instead of teacher centered presents challenges. Small-group instruction, increased student expressiveness, and a higher degree of interaction among students all could "generate noise, movement, a muted view of teacher authority, and make a shambles of routines geared to handling batches of students" (p. 243). So, instead, most teachers opt for a teacher-centered classroom approach. For educators, keeping the peace is essential. In *Inside High School,* Cusick (1973) described what the community expected of Mr. Vincent and Mr. Rossi, the principal and vice-principal of

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Horatio Gates High School: "What the community wanted was an orderly, well run, clean school, one that was free of controversy, student unrest, or anything that could be called 'trouble.' As long as the administrators maintained that kind of school, they were secure" (p. 39).

Keeping order in a traditional American high school, however, is no small accomplishment. Among the greatest challenges is the potential for what Powell et al. (1985) termed "educational purposelessness" among students. Go to any high school in America and you will find students who share a basic attitude—a common dislike for school and impatience with rigorous study. They do not want be in school. They would rather be someplace else. So, then, why do they decide to come to school? They come because there is no other place for them to go, because high schools are a convenient place to get needed classes like drivers education, because of extracurricular activities, because this is where their friends are. Not on the list, you might have noticed, is "love of learning" or "learning skills for a job." Students realize that, with just a high school diploma, it will be almost impossible to get one of the "good jobs" in America. The kind of job they will be able to get with a high school diploma generally requires only minimal skills or knowledge. Such realities do not contribute to interested, motivated students.

Sizer (1984) also talked about the realities facing high school teachers when educationally purposeless students fill their classes. He described the teaching of Martha Shiffe, and her students' indifference:

> Shiffe restarted her teaching, working through lists on the blackboard. Phylum chordata. . . . Subphulum gnathostomata. . . . Superclass pisces. . . . Superclass tetrapoda. . . . The students paid her little attention. . . . Even while the names of living things poured out of Shiffe's lecture, no one was taking any notes. She wanted the students to know these names. They did not want to know them and were not going to learn them. Apparently no kind of outside threat—flunking, for example—affected the students. Shiffe did her thing, the students chattered on, even in the presence of a visitor. (p. 157)

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Sizer observed that individual teachers need to get agreement—to negotiate agreement—with each class. "Getting agreement takes persuasiveness, flexibility, trust, and time. Failing to get agreement, and agreement on ends and means that forward serious intellectual activity, however painful, results in an empty school" (p. 160).

A significant challenge facing educators, then, is keeping order in spite of the lack of motivation of many students. But why do we expend so much energy dealing with these students? Why put up with them? It sounds obvious that it would be easier to keep the peace if indifferent students were "weeded out." To answer, we need to point to fundamental American values. Americans value education and the important component of good citizenship. Moreover, education has almost always been seen as "the way up" for a nation of immigrants. In the 1840s, a system of compulsory education was begun to ensure a free education for children who would not otherwise be able to afford such school. Cusick (1983) added:

> The importance of maintaining order and attendance is not simply because state funds may be lost, the community dismayed, bond issues defeated in election, or the bureaucratic processes upset. All of those are important, but beyond all of them, the very legitimacy of the school rests with the obligation to preserve the egalitarian ideal. That means getting all students to come, even those that don't want to, getting them to stay, and attend class regularly, even if they would rather be somewhere else, getting those that are repeatedly disorderly to try again to see if they can complete the required work. (p. 111)

In America, then, schools take them all and then work to keep them all there, regardless of the difficulties connected with this egalitarian ideal.

In summary, the bureaucracies of the American high schools have been designed primarily to provide direct, uncomplicated ways to maintain control and promote orderliness. Subject areas are divided into classes. Students are batched together in groups and assigned to classes. The school day is divided into periods, and the clock regulates the lives of students, and teachers, inside a traditional high school. The layout

and design of the school are designed to promote efficient education of batches of students, in an economical manner. There are many do's and don'ts that regulate the behaviors of both students and teachers. There are all sorts of rules for all sorts of things: smoking, drinking soda, being tardy, walking through the halls during class times, swearing, and skipping school. The traditional American high school is clearly a well-regulated institution. Students do not come and go as they please. To survive in traditional high schools, students, and teachers, must behave within the limitations established by a complex bureaucracy. Is the same true in alternative high schools? Or, instead, are alternative high schools simpler places, places where both teachers and students have fewer regulations and a wider range of acceptable behaviors? Are classrooms more student centered? Or are many of the same organizational characteristics present in an alternative high school classroom as are common in traditional high school classes? In this research project, I considered these questions.

Teachers in Traditional American High Schools: On Their Own

Another key characteristic of the organization of the traditional American high school is the largely autonomous role of teachers in these institutions. Teachers are, in many ways, on their own in the classroom. This could be seen as a sign of respect. The teacher is a professional pursuing a vocation that is largely a solitary effort—one teacher in charge of one group of students. Teachers are trusted "subcontractors" who know what to do to accomplish their mission. Sizer (1984), however, suggested a different conclusion:

> In one sense, high school teachers should feel that they are greatly respected, since they are allowed to teach in remarkable privacy. However, this privacy may be less the result of social respect than of indifference. One can read some parents' minds: Our kids'll learn that history stuff on their own, and it really

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doesn't matter if they don't learn it at all, because they'll never actually use it much. But be nice to our kids. Give them good grades. Many teachers hear this quiet signal, with or without cynicism. Undoubtedly it is there. Thus, the privacy of the classroom is not always the honored badge of the professional but an indication that what happens there is thought to be of relatively little importance. (pp. 183-184)

Moreover, teachers only rarely talk to other teachers about what is happening in their classrooms or engage in spirited discussions about effective approaches to teaching. Powell et al. (1985) pointed out that every teacher, therefore, has to develop his or her own approach to the craft of teaching. This means that experienced teachers often do not help new teachers develop their skills, validate good teaching, or help them improve when their teaching is not good enough. "This is an unfortunate list, one that many teachers regret. For every teacher must solve the problem of how to teach" (p. 308).

Many teachers also are trapped by their heavy teaching schedules. The heavy workloads began in the first half of the 20th century, partly in response to exploding enrollments. In 1910, 915,000 pupils were enrolled in high schools in America. That was only about 10% of those old enough to attend high school. The growth in the numbers of students during the next three decades was remarkable: 2,200,000 by 1920 and 4,399,000 by 1930. In 1940, 6,601,000 young Americans attended high school, about two thirds of those who were old enough to attend. Powell et al. (1985) noted that American high schools "were fast approaching universal coverage. . . . Thousands of high schools had been erected, many more thousands of teachers had been educated and employed, and millions of students had been schooled and graduated—all in four or five decades . . . the accomplishments were impressive" (p. 276).

Lightfoot (1983) also commented on this growth and pointed to significant changes in the nature of America's schools caused by increased numbers:

An average of more than one new high school was built for each day of each year between 1890 and 1918. Not only did the students increase dramatically in numbers but the kinds of students changed profoundly as well. Especially in urban schools, the overwhelming predominance of white Anglo-Saxon middle-class youngsters disappeared. Just as the influx of poor rural families and even more destitute European immigrants had changed the character of urban populations, so too the enforcement of compulsory education and the institution of child-labor laws markedly altered the population of urban schools. By 1909, 58 percent of the students in thirty-seven of the nation's largest cities were of foreign-born parentage. (p. 20)

McNeil (1986), too, saw this period as critical for the development of the current organization of American high schools. "It was during this time, when the school was being directly used as an agency of social control, that our present forms of high school organization were being established" (p. 6). McNeil listed a number of characteristics of high schools that were established in this period, including administrators who function as business managers, curriculum differentiated by track, and an emphasis on "outputs" rather than longer-term learning.

The student population leveled off during the 1940s and then began its significant climb again in the 1950s and 1960s. By 1960, the enrollment of American secondary schools had nearly doubled from 1940 levels, with a total of 8,485,000 students, and by 1970, the total student population was 13,327,000. In 1990, it was 11,336,000 (Murphy et al., 1999).

Another result of this growth was that, by the early 1930s, two thirds of all high school teachers faced five or more classes a day, five days a week. That meant teaching about 150 students each day. Moreover, two out of three teachers had to teach at least two subjects, so they had the added burden of "additional preps." Powell et al. (1985) noted that "these were extraordinary teaching loads, many times the size of those in elementary schools or universities" (p. 272). The result is obvious. There is only so much time. Much of that time must be used to deal with the tasks associated with so

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many students and so many different assignments: learning names, preparing for class presentations, grading papers, and writing tests, as well as the bookkeeping duties that are part of every day, such as taking attendance, completing forms, and keeping a contained classroom area attractive (or at least presentable). Boyer (1983) summarized the problem:

> The combination of the self-contained classroom and a heavy teaching schedule gives teachers few opportunities to share common problems or sustain an intellectual life. One teacher describes it this way: "I don't know how friendly co-workers are, how honest they are. It just seems that in teaching . . . you do your thing in class, and you leave, and you don't talk about it." Another teacher, when asked with whom he discussed his teaching, responded, "My wife." (p. 158)

Given this situation, it seems clear that teachers in traditional American high schools will find it difficult to magically collaborate to develop curriculum for their schools, or even agree to a common, well-articulated purpose for the school. As a result, there is no planned curriculum. Cusick (1983) noted:

> I found that the staff did not process the curriculum through their interactions. Rather each person was allowed, even encouraged, to develop his or her own content and approach to subject matter, and was then allowed to deliver that curriculum to the students in ways that he or she deemed appropriate. . . . What one decided to do or not to do in the classroom seemed to emanate not from consensually based, school-wide norms, but rather from how each individual, following his or her inclinations and predilections, decided to behave. (p. 3)

And where does administrative leadership enter into the portrait of schools without a clearly articulated curriculum or sense of purpose? Again, it is important to realize that the organizational characteristics of traditional American high schools are interrelated. The administrator is keeping order. The administrator is worried about community relations and is the "cheerleader" for the positive things happening at schools, and the teacher who can help her or him do that is praised and appreciated. Cusick (1983) told an interesting story of a superintendent who permitted a biology teacher, who was not all that interested in biology but loved hunting and fishing, to start an "outdoor

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education" class. According to the superintendent, the class was "good for kids," and that was enough. There was no worry here about where the class fit into the overall plan for the school. "From the organizational perspective, it did not matter what was taught or even what was learned as long as there was some 'liking of the kids' on the part of the teachers and some 'interest in something' on the part of the students" (p. 70).

What about alternative high schools? A host of questions emerge: Do alternative high school teachers talk to one another about educational matters? Do they collaborate on schoolwide curriculum? Is there dialogue on the content of courses taught by instructors—and their approaches to teaching? What is the teaching load of each instructor? How does it compare to the class load of regular high school teachers? In this study, I looked at these questions and others as I sought to describe and explain how alternative high schools compare with traditional high schools in the organization of teaching for learning.

Interactions Between Students and Teachers

In this section, the organizational structure of the traditional high school is considered from the perspective of what students do and how they interact with teachers. In the discussions on keeping order and teacher autonomy, it was seen that the challenges facing the teacher are formidable. The teacher must deal with educationally purposeless students who have no motivation to be attentive and engaged in class. The teacher is relatively isolated and often has no well-defined, overall purpose or curriculum for classroom instruction. Moreover, he or she is busy. Most high school teachers have to deal with five or six classes a day, each containing 25 or 30 students. Do such challenges influence student-teacher interactions? Of course they do. Moreover, the pedagogy of the teachers is also influenced by such organizational realities. In this section, we will

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see that much interaction between teachers and students involves giving and getting information; the teacher directs the instruction and gives, and the student (it is hoped) gets.

So the typical teacher in a traditional American high school does not have a great deal of time for interactions with individual students. Workloads prohibit that. However, it is important to recognize from the start of this discussion that there are many positive interactions between teachers and groups of students in the traditional American high school. Such group interactions can be very effective. Lightfoot (1983), for example, talked about intellectual play. The interactions between a teacher and students when they are caught up in the intellectual play are, she noted, impressive:

> Intellectual play is rare but very visible. The pleasure of inspired exchange is obvious to any visitor. . . . Students appear alert, engaged, and responsive. . . . At Kennedy, I saw intellectual play in an early morning Latin class primarily inhabited by Black and Hispanic students. The teacher, an intense and dynamic Italian with a lingering musical accent, made the rehearsal of vocabulary and the lessons of conjugation feel like an adventure. . . . Most students showed intense interest, hands were waving in the air as they clamored to speak, and smiles of satisfaction spread on their faces when the smooth and quick exchanges began to feel like a well-oiled machine. (p. 367)

Much student time, however, is not spent so productively. A large part of students' day is spent as spectators. The students watch and wait. First, there is a homeroom period. Then there are the five-minute periods between classes and a 35- or 40-minute lunch break. Add to that the time spent in each class involved with things like taking attendance, collecting papers, and passing out worksheets, and it is quickly apparent that students' instructional day probably amounts to only about half the time they spend in school. It follows, then, that a substantial part of students' day is not spent with matters related to instruction or with interaction with teachers. Instead, much of

their day is spent in small groups. Cusick (1973) said that, for students, a substantial part of the day consists of conversations in small groups:

> More and more as I continued in the school, I saw that the students' most active and alive moments, and indeed the great majority of their school time, was spent not with teachers and subject-matter affairs, but in their own small-group interactions which they carried on simultaneously with their class work. . . . While the teacher's attention was diverted to some maintenance or procedural detail, or while he was interacting with one to the exclusion of others, there was this breaking up into dyads, tryads, or groups and this activity paralleled the subject-matter interactions. (p. 58)

Student-to-student interactions, then, influence the organizational characteristics of traditional American high schools. These are places where students interact with other students freely and often, even during class time. However, interactions with teachers are, for the most part, limited. Is this also true in alternative high schools? Is there more interaction with teachers in these schools, or, like traditional high schools, do students spend most of their time waiting for something to happen, or watching, or listening? Do students in alternative high schools, like those in traditional high schools, interact primarily with other students? Or do they talk freely with teachers—teachers who are a part of the students' discussions and interactions? Such questions were considered in this study.

Summary

I reviewed the literature to explore three aspects of the organization of the traditional American high school. The resulting portrait presented an image that does not mesh with the idealized image that many citizens have of the all-American high school. Instead, we see a place where teachers and administrators struggle—and make compromises—to keep order. It is a place with a complex bureaucracy designed to maintain control and promote orderliness. In traditional high schools, teachers often

operate in isolation, and they do not seem to have the time or inclination to collaborate on schoolwide curriculum and a unified sense of purpose. We see schools where students and teachers do not seem to interact all that much. Instead, students spend a lot of time waiting and watching, and talking with other students. This is the mirror that was held up to second-chance alternative high schools in this study when considering organizational characteristics of these places.

The Pedagogy of Traditional High Schools

In the traditional American high school, teachers and students often see instruction as a matter of giving and getting the right answers. Teaching becomes "knowledge telling," and effective teaching is seen as didactic, tightly designed with step-by-step rationality (Cohen & Barnes, 1993). Sizer (1984) wrote:

> The pedagogy here is telling. Teachers explain things; they, textbooks, films, and analogous paraphernalia furnish information. If students are interested and orderly (often a tall order for adolescents), many can be taught at once, in lecture theaters. Telling is cost effective, far more so than coaching. That is why it is so popular in schools. (p. 109)

The classroom in the traditional high school is often teacher centered. Teachers control what is taught, when, and under what conditions in their classrooms (Cuban, 1984). Teachers focus on definable skills and facts students can master. Knowledge is broken up into manageable units and presented bit by bit. Standardized tests assess students' mastery of these bits of knowledge. Oakes and Lipton (1990) noted that adults usually do not see children as their own meaning-makers, but instead as sponges who need to sop up knowledge quickly and efficiently. The typical school curriculum, therefore, favors learning about over learning to do. People like this approach, said Oakes and Lipton, because it is tidy:

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Much about this approach is satisfying. It explains learning by means of a tidy cause-and-effect equation. The effects are behaviors, which are, by definition, observable and measurable. This view of learning and treatment of knowledge fits the schools' and society's notion of how to educate large numbers of children efficiently. Aptitude, achievement, and classroom tests produce an abundance of numbers for educators and parents to use in ranking, sorting, and measuring children's learning. In the process they define learning as behaving correctly—getting the right answer. (p. 84)

Cusick (1973) described teacher behaviors that result from their role as experts.

Teachers set up the class interactions so that they are on one side, students on the other.

They then lecture, pass out assignments, question, call on students to answer, and then

criticize and discuss the responses of these students. Usually, there is little room for

students' speculation or reflection. "Occasionally a 'discussion' will take place," Cusick

added, "but these are more often cases of the teacher manipulating students' responses to

illustrate his planned conclusion" (p. 26).

Lightfoot (1983) took readers inside a high school classroom in Highland Park, a

suburb of Chicago, to illustrate this sort of behavior by teachers. With detailed

descriptions of classroom situations, Lightfoot documented the experiences of numerous

teachers, including Ms. Wood, "a short curly-haired woman with a wry wit and an

intense love of literature." A passage describing one of Ms. Wood's class sessions

demonstrates that both teachers and students had "bought into" the importance of

reaching planned conclusions:

> With book in hand, she [Ms. Wood] stands and leans casually against the front of her desk as she thoughtfully and carefully forms her first comments. The class seems to anticipate and enjoy her reflective, ruminative style. . . . The discussion centers on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book the class has been reading and analyzing for the past two weeks. . . . The discussion focuses on attitudes towards slavery as Wood asks students to contrast Stowe with *Frederick Douglass*, an autobiography they have recently read. The class is silent and attentive, so the teacher leaps in and says, "Stowe mitigates—aha! One of your vocabulary words from last week—the horror of slavery, but Douglass' book is too extreme . . . it makes people feel uncomfortable. . . . Some students—all of them girls—are listening and taking notes, others are yawning and clearly bored

by the esoteric distinctions. The interest of all students becomes suddenly charged when Wood says, I'll give you a clue . . . in fact, I'll tell you one of the questions on the next exam. . . . On the basis of your reading of *The Jungle, The Grapes of Wrath, Frederick Douglass,* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which would you rather be, a slave or an English laborer?. . . . Hands are immediately raised and responses come from all corners. As students struggle for "the right answer," they do not seem to totally believe Ms. Wood when she claims there is no correct response. She is looking for a reasoned argument, a thoughtful interpretation, and creative insight. They are trying to come up with what she wants to hear. (pp. 144-145)

McNeil (1986) explained that teachers use the technique of "telling" for good reason. Teachers are rewarded more for their ability to control students than for their ability "really to teach." Lectures and a "telling" approach to teaching are "an accommodation to a complex organization which embodied conflicting goals and gave powerless teachers the responsibility of resolving the conflicts" (p. 211). McNeil talked about experienced teachers who control classroom behavior through pedagogy and treatment of course content. In *Contradictions of Control,* she wrote:

> According to the teachers themselves, the techniques they used to convey course content to their students had to fulfill two goals: they had to give the information about American history and economics; and, at the same time, they had to impose firm limits on the complexity and topicality of class discussions, and on the efficiency of presentation. Most of the teachers resolved this tension by maintaining tight control over course work, eliminating almost all reading assignments or written work. Information related to the course came to students through lectures and teacher-selected films. . . . Students rarely spoke . . . and when they did it was to ask the teacher a question rather than discuss the topic with each other. (p. 166)

Lightfoot (1983) made another important point about teachers who talk and dominate classroom discussions. This pedagogy can be effective. She told first about Mr. Clifford, a "forceful and erudite teacher." She described in detail his lecture on Aristotle and Greek tragedy. Lightfoot concluded:

> The students' queries sound simple, almost pedestrian, against the elaborate language of Clifford. Yet they do not seem disturbed by the dissonance. Perhaps they do not hear it. Mostly they appear to appreciate the way he vigorously seizes their questions and launches into a poetic, embellished response. Despite the fact

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that Clifford's voice dominates and students are in the listening mode most of the time, the class seems to see him as responsive. A willowy girl with sandy hair and a studious gaze offers a paradoxical view. "He talks a lot . . . but he's the best listener." (p. 107)

Lightfoot then described the impressive teacher-led discussion by Ms. Shelley, who proves that not all teachers are pushing students toward predetermined conclusions. This teacher leads a discussion of *Death of a Salesman* that is "energetic and fast-paced." The discussion is argumentative, but not hostile. Writing about the students' involvement in the interchange, Lightfoot said, "The teacher does not direct them towards a tidy conclusion. They are struggling with unanswerable questions, profound dilemmas, and she wants to encourage them in the struggle" (p. 206).

So there are exceptions. A great deal of creative teaching is happening in traditional American high schools. However, the dominant pedagogy is "telling." Teachers hold and distribute the knowledge. They are the experts. This view of knowledge as something that can be known, and revealed to others in an orderly way, has deep roots. The historical development of how humans have thought about knowledge, the branch of philosophy called epistemology, is long and complex. For more than 25 centuries, philosophers have debated questions related to "knowing." What can we know? Can we know anything? If we can know, how is it we learn something?

Greeks such as Socrates and Plato were among the first to address these questions from the perspective of a priori truths. Knowledge, they said, can be known independently of reasoning or experience, and such realities are unchanging. For these Greek philosophers, the basis of what we can know is founded on absolute "Forms" or truths. The Greek Aristotle expanded on this point of view. He agreed with the basic premise, but added that time makes a difference. The truth is there, but in an undeveloped form: In time, the acorn can become a tree. Christian philosophers like

Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas agreed with the central theme of Platonian and Aristotelian epistemology, but with a significant difference. The Forms of Plato become connected with knowledge of God, and with truths held in the mind of God. We can have knowledge of God, then, based on certain revealed truths, such as the trinity and incarnation.

Then came the Enlightenment, and with it a revolution in how philosophers regard the theory of knowledge. Many philosophers of the Enlightenment believed that it was no longer possible to rely on absolute truths (the Forms of Plato), truths that are in us and waiting to be revealed. Instead, these philosophers said knowledge is based on either what humans can experience or what they can learn through reasoning. Knowledge that comes from the experiences of the senses is called empiricism. Knowledge that comes from reason is called rationalism. Most historians give Descartes credit for beginning this shift in thinking about knowledge. Descartes started with what we seem to know. In his case, it was "I am a philosopher, I have a body, I am sitting by the fire." Bit by bit he showed that we do not know any of that for sure—it could, for example, all be a dream. He concluded, however, that in the final analysis one can know "I exist." ("I think, therefore I am.") Beginning with that basic element of reason, Descartes took it all the way back to a knowledge of the existence of God. He reasoned. He knew. That is rationalism. Other philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Locke and Berkeley, took a somewhat different point of view. They said we know because of what we experience—what we learn through our senses. That is empiricism. Philosophers like Hume and Kant expanded on this basic premise of empiricism.

My purpose in this study was to describe and explain how alternative high schools in Michigan compared with traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum,

organization, and pedagogy. With that in mind, let us consider the connection between philosophical approaches to knowledge and the way teachers approach teaching. If teachers believe that knowledge is based on "eternal truths" (a priori truths), then their approach toward students will be different than if they believe it is something to be constructed, to be discovered. If knowledge is a priori (that is to say, not based on experience), teachers are experts who explain what they know to be true to another: Read this. Memorize this. Learn this. On the other hand, if humans construct knowledge using either reason or the experiences of the senses, then teachers are guides developing students' intellect. Teachers enable students to make something from nothing. In one case, students are given knowledge; they are told what to think and believe. In the other case, students are taught how to think—or use their senses—so that they themselves can find knowledge.

In traditional American high schools, there is a considerable amount of creative teaching that encourages students to use reason and experimentation to learn and discover. However, there is more "telling." This epistemological approach is an obvious and pervasive feature of the current traditional high school. Teachers see knowledge as something that is known, something that can be revealed to others. They are the holders of knowledge, and it is their task to share that knowledge with their students. However, in this study I asked, What about alternative high schools? Is it the same in these schools? Do alternative high school teachers also see teaching and learning as "telling" and "getting"? Do alternative high school students sit in classrooms listening and taking notes? Do they "wake up" when a teachers says, "This will be on the test"? And what about tests? Are there tests? What material is tested, and how is it tested? Finally, and significantly, do teachers in alternative schools practice what McNeil (1986) called

"defensive teaching?" Do they design strategies for teaching presenting content so they are able to keep control? Or, instead, can these teachers "really teach"? These are all important questions, and each will play a role in helping to describe and explain what, if anything, is alternative about alternative education.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

"A well-written editorial is a good thing—but it's not
what I'm out to do."
John McPhee,
As quoted in Hamilton, 1990, p. 54

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain how alternative high

schools in Michigan compared with traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum,

organization, and pedagogy. In this section, I explain the method and theoretical

framework used in this study and describe the exploratory questions that guided the

research. I also consider sampling strategies, review information related to data

collection, explain the process used for interviewing, and present the preliminary

interview protocol.

Theoretical Framework

The primary method selected for this study was the interview. Other background

or supplemental sources of data included structured observation and examination of

selected cultural products and artifacts. Interviewing is a qualitative, ethnographic

approach well suited to addressing the complex issues associated with this inquiry. The

exploratory questions for this study, presented in Chapter I, address many issues related

to complex perceptions held by individuals. It is necessary to use an approach that

probes for broader, deeper understandings; therefore, a qualitative approach makes good

sense. Qualitative research is concerned with process, rather than cataloging outcomes or

products. Qualitative researchers are interested in how people make sense of their lives

and experiences (Creswell, 1994). The qualitative researcher physically goes to the people involved and collects, absorbs, analyzes, and sorts information—and ultimately derives meaning and understanding from a process that builds theories from countless details that have been absorbed by observing and listening. The ethnographer, then, is more a reporter than an editorial writer. Geertz (1988) noted, "What a proper ethnographer ought properly to be doing is going out to places, coming back with information about how people live there, and making that information available to the professional community in practical form" (p. 1).

The process here is inductive. It is important to remember that the primary instrument for data collection is the researcher herself or himself, and not inventories, instruments, or questionnaires. The researcher filters the data that have been collected and builds abstractions, concepts, and theories from details. Theory emerges. Glaser and Strauss (1967) called this process theoretical sampling:

> Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes this data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal. (p. 105)

In the beginning, the decisions of the researcher are based on general perspective. Then, as data are collected, the process becomes more challenging, and more a matter of insight and intuition. Creswell (1994) noted that "data analysis requires that the researcher be comfortable with developing categories and making comparisons and contrasts. It also requires that the researcher be open to possibilities and see contrary or alternative explanations for the findings" (p. 153). The anticipation—the hope—is that there will be moments of illumination. Patterns will appear, additional data will confirm early suppositions, categories will "come together," and a theory will emerge.

Another challenge for the qualitative researcher is to present the findings in a convincing, authentic manner. Geertz (1988) considered the difficulties facing the ethnographer, both in "being there" and then writing about "being there":

> The capacity to persuade readers . . . that what they are reading is an authentic account by someone personally acquainted with how life proceeds in some place, at some time, among some group, is the basis upon which anything else ethnography seeks to do—analyze, explain, amuse, disconcert, celebrate, edify, excuse, astonish, subvert—finally rests. (pp. 143-144)

The ethnographer as qualitative researcher, then, not only has to have truly "been there," but must also convince us that if we had been there and saw and heard and felt the same things, we would have concluded what he or she concluded.

Final topics that need to be discussed here concern generalizability, reliability, and validity—the indicators that have long been considered as measures of scientific evidence for a scholarly study. Generalizability means that a relationship that holds for one group under certain conditions will probably hold true for other groups under the same conditions. It is usually not the intention of qualitative research to generalize findings, and some scholars point to this as a serious shortcoming of qualitative research. However, other scholars present a different point of view. Generalization of qualitative results is possible when the reader is convinced that (as Geertz noted in the passage quoted above) the qualitative account is authentic, and that reader feels that he or she also has "been there." Such mutually agreed upon conclusions produce generalizability. However, it needs to be emphasized that such generalization comes from the reader and not the researcher. Cusick (1983) concluded, "It is the obligation of the reader to determine if the descriptions presented in the account match his experiences in similar places" (p. 134). If there is a "match," there is a generalizability to be had from one-of-a-

kind studies, but it is not the responsibility of the researcher to argue for such abstracted generalizability.

My goal for this study, then, was to construct this account of what happens in alternative high schools so as to allow a potential for generalizability. That required constructing a narrative rich in detail. I have described circumstances surrounding events, and provided thorough and accurate descriptions of what took place. It was my intention to portray what Weber (1949) termed "the richness of reality" in a convincing manner.

Two other topics that need to be addressed are reliability and validity. Reliability is concerned with the consistency or repeatability of the study. Would another researcher find the same results if he or she used the same methods? Validity answers the question, "Is this explanation plausible?" Or, stated another way, "Did it happen the way I said it did?" Scholars favoring quantitative methods have objected to lack of standardized tests when qualitative methods are used. However, qualitative researchers respond by saying it is the method that produces a measure of reliability. Another researcher using this same method would obtain similar results. In this study, I enhanced reliability and validity by thoroughly explaining the method (to maximize the opportunity for accurate replication), by carefully designing initial protocols for interviews, and by using structured observation, along with analysis of cultural products and artifacts, as supplemental sources of information. I also tape-recorded and transcribed the interviews.

Method also can enhance validity. Cusick (1966) cited the six indices of subjective adequacy stated by Homans. This framework was presented to address the method of participant observation, but it also holds meaning for other forms of qualitative research. These indices are time, place, social circumstances, language, intimacy, and

consensus. If the researcher spends adequate time in a place close to the people he or she studies, validity will be enhanced. The researcher also needs to have an adequate number and variety of encounters within the social structure of the community being studied. The researcher and his or her subjects should also share a common language, and accuracy will increase as the researcher achieves a greater degree of intimacy with the subjects of the research. Finally, Homans noted that consensus promotes and confirms validation. Consensus is a confirmation that the meanings identified by the researcher are "on target" (Cusick, 1966, p. 232). When the researcher carefully considers each of these areas and also provides a narrative rich in detail as described above, it is possible to achieve an acceptable degree of validity.

Initial Exploratory Questions

The initial exploratory questions for this study flowed from the purpose for this inquiry and from what I had learned from the literature about the development and nature of traditional American high schools. These three initial exploratory questions formed the framework used in this assessment of how alternative high schools compare with what I had discovered about traditional high schools. These initial questions were introduced in Chapter I and are described below in more detail. The questions were amplified with several additional probes, some of which were related to what was learned from the literature concerning the nature and development of traditional high schools.

1. **What is alternative about the curriculum of alternative high schools?** The additional questions below address the issues of teacher collaboration for curriculum development, and curriculum implementation.

> Who has the major responsibility for determining what curriculum topics will be covered in alternative high school classes during the year?

Who has the major responsibility for determining basic content materials to be used by students during the year?

Are curriculum guidelines available and used?

Is there oversight? Is the instructional process monitored to ensure that the curriculum is implemented?

What process is used to add an elective class?

2. **What is alternative about the organization and structure of alternative high schools?** The additional questions below deal with the bureaucracy, the role of the teacher, and interactions between students and teachers in alternative high schools.

What are the "do's and don'ts," the rules that govern the behavior of both students and teachers?

What is the class load of alternative education teachers?

Do alternative high school students talk freely with teachers?

To what extent is the instructional activity in an alternative high school student centered?

How is time allocated for tasks?

How is the school space arranged?

Are students organized into discrete groups?

Is content organized into discrete classes?

3. **What is alternative about the pedagogy of alternative high schools?** The additional questions below focus on "teaching as telling" and the epistemological approach of alternative high school teachers.

What portion of the alternative high school teacher's day is spent presenting material that students are expected to learn?

How much time do alternative high school students spend doing group projects, or in other types of instruction that require collaboration with other students?

Do alternative high school students work on individualized instructional programs?

What types of student assessments do alternative high school teachers use?

Do alternative high school teachers have a clear notion of a body of information that students must "get" before completing the requirements for a class?

Do teachers work "by themselves" in alternative high schools?

Do alternative high school teachers talk with other teachers about teaching strategies?

Sampling Strategies

First, it needs to be noted that, because I used theoretical sampling, it was not necessary to use random or stratified sampling. A researcher who generates theory is establishing an instance of the case and makes no claim as to magnitude of scope. The goal of theoretical sampling, or grounded theory, is to identify categories and their properties, and to suggest a theory based on interrelationships. On the other hand, the goal of statistical sampling is generality of scope. Statistical sampling looks for evidence on distributions among categories, based on the premise of generalization that was noted above—that relationships that hold true for one group under certain conditions will probably hold true for other groups under the same conditions. This is a presumption of persistence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 106-107). Stated another way, with statistical sampling the categories being studied are defined from the beginning, and from there it is a matter of determining the distribution of people among these categories to verify magnitude and establish persistence. Theoretical sampling, on the other hand, is more akin to a process of revelation. The researcher discovers categories and generates theory as she or he collects, codes, and analyzes data.

The preliminary plan for this study called for data to be collected from at least four alternative high schools. A minimum of one administrator, two staff members, and three students were to be interviewed at each school. The scope of the study was limited

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to alternative high schools with enrollments of at least 40 students. A Michigan Department of Education (1998) Administrative Guidebook broadly defines "alternative education" as programs operated as a subdivision of the regular K-12 school system "designed for students who can be better served in an alternative delivery system" (p. C-5). Geik and Walsh (1999) indicated that second-chance alternative high schools are designed for "preventing at-risk adolescents (or recovering them) from dropping out of the K-12 system and completing the requirements for a high school diploma" (p. 2). The limitation of an enrollment of at least 40 students was established to ensure that the alternative program being studied was a separate school and not a program with a single class, supervised by just one or two professionals. There were no other limitations to the scope of the study.

Not all four alternative high schools were identified at the beginning of the study. Instead, I began by visiting one school and identified the other three schools to be included while in the process of interviewing teachers at each subsequent site. The initial task, then, was to select the first school to be visited first. This school was selected, in part, because it was possible to gain access. My recent experiences as a school administrator in Michigan, and school administrators' being familiar with my advisor, provided access to several alternative high school programs. Additional sites were selected, in part, based on experiences in the initial school selected for this study.

Coding and analysis of data for one alternative high school took place before and during research at the next site. Enough time was allowed between schools to permit this analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) were clear about the advantages of collecting, coding, and analyzing data simultaneously. They noted that, in the case of conventional statistical sampling, collecting, coding, and analyzing data can be divided into separate

periods of work. "Research aimed at discovering theory, however," they added, "requires that all three procedures go on simultaneously to the fullest extent possible; for this, as we have said, is the underlying operation when generating theory" (p. 113). Glaser and Strauss concluded by noting that it is impossible to engage in theoretical sampling without coding and analyzing at the same time.

Data Collection

The primary method used in this study was the in-depth interview. There are significant advantages to the use of this method. Face-to-face interviews provide more flexibility than other methods. The researcher is able to follow up on responses and to explore relevant issues that arise from the comments of the respondent. The interview is more "personal" than questionnaires and written inventories, and allows the researcher to control the dialogue. Moreover, the interview allows the researcher to watch nonverbal signals from the respondent, which provides an opportunity to assess the validity of the information provided.

However, there are also problems with the use of interviewing as a method of research. Respondents can distort or exaggerate facts, and their memory of events that occurred in the past might not be accurate. Moreover, they are likely to present data from a biased, self-serving point of view. That said, the interviewer can guard against such obstacles in a number of ways. For example, questions can be structured to minimize and discourage distortions. The interviewer can probe using additional questions or restating questions asked previously. More than one person can be asked about the same issue or event. Responses of all respondents can be compared to check for consistency. Finally, respondents can be interviewed in groups, thereby causing each person to serve as a check on the others.

Other background or supplemental sources of data also informed this research,

including structured observation and examination of cultural products and artifacts.

Gordon (1969) noted that various methods provide totally different kinds of information

and can supplement each other. He used the example of a community study to illustrate

the advantages of a multimethod approach:

> Community studies must triangulate information from public records, personal
> documents, newspapers, direct interviews with the focal person, interviews with
> others about the focal person, participant observation and pure observation merely
> to obtain the many types of information needed to cover the complex
> phenomenon we call a community. (p. 40)

Cultural products and artifacts also help reveal the nature of a complex situation.

Geertz (1983) indicated that such products and artifacts are physical manifestations of

culture and, indeed, are part of the culture itself. Products and artifacts collected in this

study included:

- Records summarizing student attendance
- Student handbooks
- Tests and assessment instruments
- School policy statements
- Student progress reports
- Information presented to students upon admission to the school
- Information for students and parents indicating course offerings
- Class lists and schedules
- Descriptions of the physical setting

Structured observation also provided supplemental information for this study.

Structured observation is not as intensive as participant observation; instead, it targets

specific areas to be observed that will inform specific research questions. Merriam

(1988) noted:

> What to observe is somewhat a function of how structured the observer wants to
> be. Just as there is a range of structure in interviewing, there is also a range of
> structure in observation. One can decide ahead of time to concentrate on
> observing certain events, behaviors or persons. . . . Less structured observation
> can be compared to a television camera scanning the area. (pp. 90-91)

One concern with observation is the influence of the researcher's perspective. This perspective, according to Schatzman and Strauss (1973), is the "angle of observation." The researcher observes from the vantage point of his own biases, history, and attitudes and beliefs. Gordon (1969) explained that the research is affected by the "profound fact that empathy enters into not only the way we participate or observe as part of the information-gathering activity, but also into the way we interpret and analyze the information and the application of the results to future situations" (p. 40). A goal, then, is for the researcher to minimize his angle of observation—his perspective—and to the extent possible look at situations from the angle of observation of the participants. For this study, structured observation included sitting in on class sessions, talking with teachers during breaks and lunch periods in teachers' rooms, visiting child care centers and talking with staff, observing and talking with students in hallways before school and between classes, and sitting in "the office" (observing and talking with the secretary and school administrator).

The Interview Process

Interviews were conducted with an administrator, staff members, and students at each alternative high school. The administrator was interviewed individually. Teachers were interviewed individually or in groups of two or three. Students were interviewed individually, in groups of two or three, and in focus groups with more than three (usually five or six) students. The lengths of interviews varied. Most were approximately an hour long.

All interviews were tape-recorded. The tapes were transcribed and the resulting protocols typed, read, and reread. Briggs (1986) noted that tape recording is important

and outlined the advantages of this technique, including the ability to revisit the recordings as the researcher's skills and understanding increase:

> [Tape recordings] can be reviewed from time to time, transcribed closely, and can be presented to one's consultants for comment. Tape recordings are also interpretively open-ended, like any text in the native language. As the researcher's social-cultural and linguistic competence grows, new dimensions become apparent. New theoretical understandings can similarly be applied to the original recordings to see if they can resolve persistent problems. (p. 99)

Interviews were conducted in the alternative high school building. Before starting any interviews, I met with an appropriate school administrator to explain the nature of the study. I sought teachers to interview who had at least one full year (or nearly one full year) of teaching experience in that particular alternative high school. I looked for students to interview who had attended the alternative high school for at least one semester. I informed respondents about the nature and purpose of the study, and I obtained consent forms from all administrators, teachers, and students above the age of majority. I obtained a consent form from parents or guardians of minor students. The consent form explained that the respondents were under no obligation to participate and could, if they chose, withdraw from the study at any time for any reason whatsoever. I explained that anonymity was guaranteed to the extent possible and that the names of all respondents (and all schools) would be kept anonymous.

Initial questions for the interviews are included in the following section. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, this protocol was designed to guide the initial interview, with the expectation that other topics might be addressed as they arose. These initial interview questions were refined and expanded throughout the process of interviewing, as responses from participants suggested additional probes. Structured observations conducted at each site also generated questions for the interviews.

<u>Initial Interview Protocol</u>

The initial interview protocol called for each interviewee to be assigned a pseudonym. The date and time of the interview were noted. I greeted the participant and began the interview with questions related to the participant's relationship with the alternative high school.

Questions related to the subject's association with the school:

a. How long have you worked/been a student at this school?

b. Talk a bit about your work/school experience before coming to this school.

In the remainder of the first interview, the following questions were used as guides for the discussion:

Questions related to curriculum:

1-A   What texts are used?

2-A   Does the teacher follow the text closely?

3-A   Who decides what content the teacher will teach?

4-A   What "outside" pressure influences what the teacher decides to teach?

5-A   Do teachers meet to plan the content of instruction in this school?

6-A   Do students have a say in what content will be taught?

7-A   When a new student enrolls, what educational choices does he or she have at this school?

8-A   Is a student able to get extra instructional help if he or she needs it—say, in reading, writing, or mathematics?

9-A   Would you describe the educational emphasis of this school as "academic" or "practical?"

10-A   If a teacher wanted to see a new elective class added, or substituted for another elective, how would he or she go about making that happen?

Questions related to organization:

1-B   How many students are in a class?

2-B   When choices are possible, what criteria are used to decide which students go in which classes?

3-B   How are classroom space and furniture arranged?

4-B   When do students get to talk during class time?

5-B   How do you get students to talk?

6-B   Do you talk much with teachers?

7-B   What does the organization of the school day look like? (For example, is the day divided into "periods" or "blocks" of time?)

8-B   What does the report card look like?

9-B   What standardized tests are given?

10-B   To what extent do teachers talk with other teachers about students—and what is happening in their classrooms?

Questions related to pedagogy:

1-C   How much of a teacher's day is spent presenting material a student is "supposed to learn"?

2-C   Think about a typical day. What proportion of the day does the teacher spend:
a. standing and explaining?
b. sitting with students having a discussion?
c. walking around talking with students?
(Which does he/she do the most? Which the least?)

3-C   How much time do students spend in class doing group projects, instead of working on their own on things like worksheets and reports?

4-C   Does the teacher have a clear notion of a body of information that a student "must get" before completing the requirements for a class?

5-C   How many students participate in for-credit individualized classes—classes custom designed for just that one student?

6-C   How often do students have quizzes and tests?

7-C   What "outside" pressures influence how the teacher decides to teach?

Summary

This research project relied on interviews as the primary method of data collection. Other sources of data that informed this research included structured observation and examination of cultural products and artifacts. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with an administrator, teachers, and students at four alternative high schools. Most interviews were approximately 60 minutes long. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. An initial interview protocol guided the first interviews. This protocol was expanded and refined as subjects' responses shaped the focus of the research.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

In this chapter, I present and analyze the data collected to describe and explain how alternative high schools in Michigan compare to traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum, organization, and pedagogy. Persons interviewed for this research project were very willing to give their perceptions of both traditional and alternative high schools. Their responses were almost always incisive and candid. When students had previously attended traditional high schools, they shared, often in rich detail, their experiences at and opinions about those schools. The students also gave detailed descriptions of what it was like to attend alternative high schools.

Common sets of beliefs emerged from the data. In this chapter, after first presenting research procedures and describing the setting for the study, I present and analyze these areas of common beliefs. Some of the beliefs were directly related to the previously stated research questions for this study. With other beliefs, the connection to the original focus of the study (that is to say, the curriculum, organization, and pedagogy of alternative high schools) was not so direct and obvious. The study was expanded to include these areas because the data provide significant insight concerning the ways that alternative high schools in Michigan differ from traditional high schools.

The first common set of beliefs outlined in this chapter deals with perceptions of traditional high schools. Students generally viewed traditional high schools as cold, impersonal, judgmental, and status-conscious places. At traditional high schools, teachers lecture from the front of the classroom and do not willingly provide help to students. Administrators and teachers, although generally not as critical of traditional

high schools as students were, nonetheless confirmed many of the students' impressions, especially those dealing with the judgmental nature of these schools.

The second common set of beliefs described here deals with students', teachers', and administrators' general attitudes toward student relationships and behaviors at alternative high schools. Alternative high schools generally were viewed as accepting, family-like, and nonjudgmental.

A third set of beliefs deals with the perceptions of students and staff members about student-teacher relationships at alternative high schools, and a fourth collection of common beliefs concerns the relationships among teachers and what it means to be an "alternative ed. type" teacher. Both students and staff indicated that there is a more personal and productive relationship between students and teachers at alternative high schools, and there was general consensus among teachers that a special sort of teaching style is required at an alternative high school. New teachers need to learn the norms necessary to become "alternative ed. type" teachers.

A fifth set of beliefs explored in this chapter deals with institutional demands and student success at alternative high schools. Most of those interviewed for this study shared a common view of the primary objective of alternative high schools and the means to accomplish this objective. The mission of alternative high schools, they agreed, is to "get them through." Alternative high schools enable students who would not otherwise graduate from high school to get their diplomas. And what do students have to do to "get through?" Students need to master certain fundamental institutional requirements—specific, well-articulated requirements dealing with things like attendance, earning credits, independent studies, and basic behavioral standards. These requirements varied

from school to school, but everyone seemed to know what the requirements were for their school.

At alternative high schools, then, students succeed by mastering institutional demands that have been reduced to a set of "bottom-line" requirements. These requirements concentrate on the forms of schooling and not academic achievement. Moreover, staffs shape these requirements to maximize opportunities for success by students. The same is true for curricula, which is the topic for the sixth and final set of beliefs outlined in this chapter. The data indicated that the curriculum of alternative high schools is creatively designed with an eye toward maximizing opportunities for student success. The data further revealed that "flexibility and freedom" were common traits of curriculum in the alternative high schools included in this study.

To summarize, this chapter is divided into eight sections. In the first section, the research procedures for this study are reviewed. The setting for the project is described in the second section, and the four alternative high schools included in the study are introduced. The third portion of this chapter includes data regarding perceptions of traditional high schools held by the alternative high school students and staff members interviewed for this study. The next three sections present data related to perceptions of students and staff members related to alternative high schools. The fourth section outlines general perceptions about student relationships and behaviors at alternative high schools. The fifth section deals with student-teacher relationships at alternative high schools, and the sixth considers the nature of teaching in these schools. The seventh section of this chapter contains data related to perceptions of student success in alternative high schools and examines institutional demands necessary to achieve such success. In this section I also outline key organizational and institutional characteristics

of alternative high schools. Finally, the chapter concludes with a presentation of data related to the curriculum of these institutions.

Research Procedure

Interviews were conducted with 41 individuals in four alternative high schools. The distribution, by category, of those interviewed is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of persons interviewed, by category.

Category	Number
Administrators	5
Teachers or counselors	10
Students	25
Secretaries	1
Total persons interviewed	41

The interviews spanned a 14-month period, beginning in April 2001 and continuing through May 2002. As discussed in Chapter III, one of the first tasks for this study was to select the four research sites. A number of considerations influenced the selection process. First, I wanted to visit sites where I was unknown. As a former school administrator, I had been indirectly connected with several alternative high schools in districts throughout Michigan. None of these schools were considered as research sites for this study. Second, I wanted to select alternative high schools that were of similar size (based on student enrollment) but located in different sizes of communities and in different regions of the state. I believed such diversity would add interest and depth to the study. I wondered whether I would discover commonalities among the alternative high schools visited, despite obvious differences in locations and types of communities.

Finally, site selection was influenced by practical considerations. In the case of each research site selected, the district's superintendent or high school principal was well

known to my advisor, a close friend, or myself. Such familiarity opened doors. Further, these administrators often introduced me (either personally or by prior conversation) to the administrator of the alternative high school. These introductions, it seemed to me, increased the level of my acceptance. I was often introduced by the alternative high school administrator as "the guy from Michigan State University doing research on alternative high schools who knows Jim" (or whoever was the superintendent or high school principal).

Once the site had been selected, I worked out a schedule for visits with the school's administrator. I visited the first and second sites more frequently than the third and fourth sites. I visited the first site five times, the second site four times. The third and fourth sites I visited two times and three times, respectively. As the study progressed, it became clear that fewer visits of longer duration made more efficient use of time (especially considering that travel to these sites took longer. In the case of the third site, travel time was approximately five hours one way; in the case of the fourth site, it was approximately three hours one way).

Initially, interviewing for this study was guided and informed by three research questions:

1. What is alternative about the curriculum of alternative high schools?

2. What is alternative about the organization and structure of alternative high schools?

3. What is alternative about the pedagogy of alternative high schools?

During the course of the investigation, tentative conclusions were reached concerning these research questions. Data gathered in the interviews also suggested new questions concerning specific differences between alternative and traditional high

schools. For example, when students discussed previous experiences in traditional high schools and their current situations in alternative high schools, commonalities emerged. I began hearing similar things from a number of different students and staff members. For example, they discussed things like attendance issues, creative ways to earn credits, smoking, and relationships in alternative high schools. Such common responses, along with the tentative conclusions reached concerning the research questions, shaped and guided the remaining interviews and observations. Therefore, both specific points of inquiry and the focus of this research evolved as the project progressed.

The Setting

For purposes of confidentiality, the names of schools, school districts, and communities included in this study are pseudonyms. The names of administrators, teachers, and students also are pseudonyms. The names and selected basic characteristics related to the four alternative high schools researched in this study are shown in Table 2.

Mapleton Alternative High School

Mapleton Alternative High School has an enrollment of approximately 90 students. The school is located in a single-story brick building located on a narrow country road. The building, which at one time was a small elementary school, sits alone at the top of a small hill on a site of approximately three to four acres. No other buildings or homes are near the school. Inside, a hallway runs through the center of the building, with double exit doors at each end of the corridor. On one side of the hallway are three classrooms; one is the childcare center for Mapleton (as the school is commonly called). On the other side of the hallway there are two classrooms (one of which doubles as a teachers' room), offices for the principal and secretary, restrooms, and a storage area that

Table 2. Characteristics of communities and school districts.

Characteristic	Alternative High School			
	Mapleton Alternative High School	New Century Academy	Northshore Alternative High School	Westerby High School
School district	Apple Valley School District	Eastwood Public Schools	Northshore Area Schools	Blue Harbor Schools
Community	Hanes, Michigan	Eastwood, Michigan	Cedar Bay, Michigan	Blue Harbor, Michigan
Type(s) of community	Rural/small city/suburban	Urban fringe	Small city/ rural	Small city/ rural
Population	13,500	32,000	22,500	36,500
Per pupil foundation grant (2001/02)	$6,300	$6,700	$6,300	$6,931
Total student enrollment of district (2001/02)	3,000	4,300	3,100	6,200
Percentage economically disadvantaged[a]	26%	13%	37%	16%
Median house-hold income[b]	$47,275	$42,992	$31,683	$53,793

Source: Census of Population and Housing (2000).

[a]Source: Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services, 2001, www.ses.standardand poors.com. (percentage of student enrollment receiving free and reduced-price lunches. State average = 45.2%).

[b]Source: Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services, 2001.

also serves as the serving area for student lunches. At the end of the hallway, there are juice and Coca-Cola vending machines. About half way down the hallway, another large vending machine stands against the wall. This machine dispenses candy, gum, and chips. (The candy machine, students told me, is temperamental. Between class periods, students crowd around it, spending considerable time thumping it, talking to it, and complaining bitterly when it fails to deliver.)

Mapleton is located in the Apple Valley School District, about five miles from the town of Haynes. It is an older, well-established community with a number of new businesses (such as fast-food restaurants) on the fringe of town. In the area surrounding the community there are farms (many of them fruit farms) and a growing number of new subdivisions. It is about a 20-minute drive to the large city near Haynes, and many people choose to live in the Apple Valley School District and make the commute. As a result, the school district has been growing steadily, and the district's character is now part rural, part small town, and part suburban. Ninety-six percent of the students of Apple Valley Schools are white, with 3% Hispanic, 1% black, and 1% Native American and Asian/Pacific Islander. A number of the schools in the Apple Valley School District are newly constructed or recently remodeled. The district's facilities include an 850-student high school, an 850-student middle school (for grades 5 through 8), and two elementary schools. None of the buildings are located near Mapleton.

New Century Academy

The setting for Eastwood Public Schools' New Century Academy is much different. Positioned between two busy, four-lane streets in the Detroit metropolitan area, New Century Academy is located in the district's Churchill Adult and Community Education Center. The alternative high school has an enrollment of approximately 125

students. The stylish one-story building housing the school is set back from the street on a large, pleasant, park-like site. Eastwood is an older Detroit urban-fringe community. Many of the homes and businesses in Eastwood Public Schools appear to have been constructed in the 1940s and 1950s. Much of the architecture has a one-story, no-nonsense look. Drive off one of the traffic-filled four-lane arteries, and you find rows of relatively small, solidly built brick homes, most looking very much alike. (Built in the 1950s and 1960s, these homes must have once held a sea of young baby-boomers.) That said, there is also new construction under way in Eastwood, and there are a number of newly remodeled buildings and shopping areas. Eastwood does *not* appear to be experiencing urban decline. Rather, it has the look of a generally unpretentious and stable community.

The Churchill Adult and Community Education Center building is clean and well maintained. Classrooms and offices are clustered about an all-purpose room and courtyard. There often seems to be something happening in the all-purpose room. The room is used for basketball and other activities, and small groups of students often sit on the floor and talk. (The most unique use of this space I observed was a Junior R.O.T.C. drilling team marching briskly back and forth across the space, an instructor shouting commands and instructions.) There are four classroom "pods," each containing four classroom areas. The hallways are wide, and artful use of wood and glass throughout the building adds a touch of class. The building, far from being new, reflects the open-classroom designs common in the 1960s. However, there is not a make-do, second-use feel to this facility. The building fits its function. It looks like it was designed to be a community education center.

The Churchill Adult and Community Education Center also houses an extensive after-school education and enrichment program. Besides the 125 students attending New Century Academy's daytime alternative high school classes, approximately 376 16- to 19-year-olds attend evening high school completion classes. Another 700 people, aged 20 or older, attend evening high school completion classes. Enrichment and latch-key childcare programs for Eastwood Public Schools also are located in the Churchill Adult and Community Education Center, as is an English as Second Language program with an enrollment of approximately 180 students from more than 30 countries.

Eastwood Public Schools has an enrollment of approximately 6,220 students. Of these students, 90.8% are white, 4.3% are Hispanic, 1.9% are Native American, 1.6% are black, and 1.4% are Asian/Pacific Islander. Districts of similar geographic size and similar enrollment surround it. The district contains a 1,000-student high school building for grades 10 through 12, a 700-student school for students in grades 8 and 9, a building housing 700 students in grades 6 and 7, and five elementary schools.

Northshore Alternative High School

Northshore Alternative High School has an enrollment of approximately 115 students and is located in the business district of Cedar Bay, a city with a population of about 15,000 located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The historic three-story building that houses the school has a distinctive red stone and red brick façade. Located in the middle of a block-long expanse of storefronts, the building was a "downtown" bank for many years. There is no doubt that this is a converted business structure. The large, ornately trimmed windows at the front of the building are now boarded over with grooved cedar siding (painted gray, so at first glance these spaces still look like

windows). A yellow sign with blue lettering hangs above the entry and reads "Northshore Alternative Education Center."

The downtown setting causes some difficulties for the staff. Parking is difficult to find, so some staff members and students park on the street in front of the school. There are no parking meters on the street, but there is a three-hour parking limit. Parking attendants regularly go down the street marking tires with yellow chalk, and if a car has not been moved in three hours, a ticket goes on the windshield. Many staff and students seemed to have internal clocks set to three-hour intervals, and they were frequently seen heading for the door saying, "I gotta move my car."

There is a well-worn but comfortable look to the facilities of Northshore Alternative High School. When you enter through the front door, the principal's office is located to the left; the secretary's office is straight ahead. Both small rooms are crammed with desks, telephones, filing cabinets, chairs, and supplies. Next to the secretary's office is an "options room," which provides a space for students to complete independent studies or stay during suspensions from their regular classes. A hallway to the right winds around to the back of the building, providing access to several classrooms and a small cafeteria. A small room behind the secretary's office contains a coffee maker and serves as a small teachers' room. There is a table in this room, and it was here that interviewing took place for this study. A combination staff restroom and storage area is located behind the teachers' room.

This is the last year that Northshore Alternative High School will be located in this building. Facilities and programs are being realigned in the district, and the school will be moved to a former elementary school (currently the district's administrative and Board of Education offices).

Northshore Public Schools includes a high school with an enrollment of approximately 900 students, a 600-student middle school for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, and five elementary schools. The total student enrollment of the district is approximately 3,100 students. The racial/ethnic composition of the district includes 71% white, 27.8% Native American, with the remaining 1.2% black, Hispanic, and Asian/ Pacific Islander. The racial/ethnic composition of Northshore Alternative High School, as reported in Standard and Poor's 2001 School Evaluation Services, is 56.8% Native American, 37.8% white, 3.6 Hispanic, and 1.8% Asian/Pacific Islander.

Westerby High School

Like Northshore Alternative High School, Westerby High School in Blue Harbor, Michigan, will soon be moving to a larger, more modern building. At the time of this research, Westerby (as it is commonly called by students and staff) was located a block from a major highway in a single-story former elementary school constructed primarily of cement blocks. Located in an older residential area, the school has a fenced playground extending from the side of the building, and a portable classroom building sits behind the school. Inside, the building is clean and functional. Near the front entry, the building has offices for the principal, secretary, and adult education coordinator. Because the parking lot is located at the rear of the building, students and staff infrequently use the front entrance. Instead, they use the door at the back of the school, which is closer to the parking lot. Inside the building, four classrooms surround an open area that serves as a cafeteria and a congregating place for students. Another classroom is located near the offices at the front of the building. One classroom houses a childcare center, which connects to the outside playground.

Like Eastwood Public Schools' Churchill Center for Adult and Community Education, Westerby High School has a large evening adult education program. In addition to the 90 students attending alternative high school classes during "regular school hours," approximately 400 students participate in Westerby's evening high school completion program. The school is also a general education degree (GED) testing site.

The community of Blue Harbor, with a population of approximately 12,000, is a picturesque Lake Michigan harbor town. It is currently a prosperous community, with an economy based on manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism. Local industrial firms manufacture automobile components and office furniture, and work with plastics and metal roll forming. A number of parks and tourist attractions are located within the community or in the surrounding area. Within the city, there is a lighted musical water fountain, elaborate children's parks, and a 2.5-mile-long boardwalk lined with upscale shops and restaurants.

The school district, called Blue Harbor Schools, has an enrollment of approximately 6,000 students. There is one 9-12 high school containing approximately 1,700 students and two 6-8 middle schools, one with approximately 500 students and the other with approximately 700 students. Blue Harbor Schools also has five K-5 elementary schools. With regard to race/ethnicity, the district is 93.6% white, 3.2% Hispanic, 1.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, .9% black, and .9% Native American.

Perceptions of Traditional High Schools

Some educators see alternative high schools as places where students are "fixed" so that they can then return to the district's traditional high school. They see alternative high schools as places students go when they do not succeed at a regular high school. The goal of the alternative high school, they maintain, should be "rescue and return."

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The most important measure of success for an alternative high school, then, would be the rate of repatriation. However, nearly all of the students and staff interviewed for this study held a decidedly different point of view. Alternative high school students do not want to go back to traditional high schools. Alternative high school staff members do not want to see their students go back to traditional high schools, and, for the most part, alternative high school teachers indicated they would not want to transfer to a traditional high school. When asked whether anyone goes back to the traditional high school, New Century Academy principal Dorothy White responded, "In my recollection we had one person, and then he didn't make it. He went back only so he could play hockey."

For the most part, teachers and administrators were careful not to openly judge traditional high schools too harshly. However, they still communicated negative impressions of traditional high schools when they talked about the positive aspects of alternative high schools. For example, when I asked Bill Chandler, the dedicated and professional principal of Mapleton Alternative High School, whether he consciously tried to make Mapleton Alternative High School different from a traditional high school, he replied with obvious certainty: "Very, very much so! A very conscious effort! As it is in most alternative high schools."

Donald Ward, a teacher in his second year at Mapleton Alternative High School, explained his reservations about moving to a traditional high school:

> People always ask, "Are you ever going to go to a regular high school? At this point, I don't know if I really care to. I think it would be different in the fact—how do I say it—I think everything would be different. I don't think I would have the relationship I have with the students to the extent we have here, at least not with all of them. Also, I think the material would have to be taught differently. The requirements might be a little higher, for the amount of material, not the level of material. So there wouldn't be as much freedom as there is here.

New Century Academy instructor Caroline Lorenz noted that many students attending alternative high school had gone unnoticed at traditional high schools, but at alternative high schools they are both notice and helped.

> A lot of the kids are nice; a lot of the kids don't even have behavior problems. They just fell through the cracks. They are the kids that sit at the back of the classroom [in a traditional high school] and maybe didn't cause a big disruption; they just didn't stand out in any way. For teachers that have 150 kids a day, somebody that is sitting at the back of the class, is not disruptive, but doesn't get their work done and isn't going to pass—they are not necessarily considered a behavior issue. . . . So some of those kids that we get have, for the past 9 or 10 years, sat at the back of the class and not done anything but sat back and watched. And here they don't get away with that as much. We know their names, we know their parents, we know their situation.

Most other alternative high school teachers and administrators interviewed for this study would agree that traditional high schools have serious shortcomings when it comes to dealing with the "alternative high school type of student." These staff members, however, seemed careful in their criticism of "sister schools." Yet when faced with criticism of their own schools, they responded. Westerby High School principal Hal Hoskins talked about "reversing the tables":

> Alternative ed. takes it on the chin quite a bit, but, hey, you know I could reverse the tables and say, "I've got a kid here who's passed, he's a junior, he's earned so many credits by your accountability system there, and he can't do this, this, and this."

"So a lot of times the finger is pointed at us," Hoskins concluded, "but I could say, 'Hey, this last year he earned five credits in a regular high school but yet he can't identify a noun.'"

A Weird Way to Learn

Alternative high school students were more outspoken in their criticism of traditional high schools. These students indicted traditional high schools in a number of areas. Sam, a student at Mapleton Alternative High School, talked about the

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unimaginative teaching style of traditional high school instructors. Sam indicated he had attended Apple Valley Schools until he was suspended for "messing around and goofing around" in his eighth-grade year. He went to live with his father and attended Carlton High School (a 1,300-student 9-12 school located in a nearby wealthy suburb) until the end of the first semester of his ninth-grade year. Noting that the move to Carlton "was too hard a change for me," he returned to Haynes and finished the year at Apple Valley High School. Then in October of the following year he came to Mapleton. Sam explained that he did not get along with one of the traditional high school teachers and "that teacher got me sent here." Sam's opinion of teaching at Apple Valley High School was concise: "From all the experience I had there, [traditional high school teachers] stand up in front of the room and give the lesson the whole hour. That's all it was. Writing on the blackboard. Notes. All that was from the front of the room." I asked, "Was it any different at Carlton High School?" Sam responded,

> Carlton High . . . that's . . . I don't know. . . . They stand up in front of the room there, but their teaching is totally different as far as their study ways. They did a lot of labs and stuff like that. But where at high school it's more textbook and here [at Mapleton] it's more just class activities and stuff like that.

Max, another student attending Mapleton Alternative High School, agreed with Sam on the nature of instruction (at least in history classes) in traditional high schools. Max, who was in his second year at Mapleton, had attended Apple Valley High School for two years before coming to the alternative high school.

> History class at the high school is basically a teacher standing up in front of the classroom lecturing, talking straight from the book with pages of notes. They wouldn't leave the blackboard. They would sit up at the blackboard; if they had to read something to you, they would; but they would never leave the front of that room.

Carissa, a 15-year-old student at Northshore who had been attending the alternative high school for three years, viewed her experience at traditional high school as

stressful. "Like at the high school I was stressed out all the time so I couldn't really do anything." When asked what was so stressful, she responded, "A lot of work, it was just too much. Just way too much."

Naomi, another 18-year-old in her third year at Northshore Alternative High School, also indicated that traditional high school was "a lot harder." A Native American who had attended tribal school in Minnesota the previous year, Naomi pointed to "weird" instructional practices of teachers as one reason schoolwork was difficult. These teaching practices puzzled her.

> In all my classes [at Northshore High School], the teachers come in and most of the time they don't even read, or read the chapter. They just tell us, "Here is the assignment and do it." Sometimes they'll just give us work to keep us busy for a whole period. It's not like we're really learning anything; it's just like definitions or something like that. You know, write down the definition. Go back to the chapter, find the definition and write it down again. It's kinda, I don't know, a weird way to learn.

I inquired, "Was it clear what they wanted you to learn?"

> Not entirely. Sometimes I think, most kids, they only learn about the things they want to know about. Like me, I could go through all my classes and not learn a damn thing, ya know? Even if I do the work, I can just go through the whole thing and come out and be like, ya know, "What the heck was that all about?"

Students also indicated it could be difficult to get assistance from traditional high school teachers. Teachers seemed preoccupied with other tasks and were difficult to approach when a student did not understand an assignment. Sometimes traditional high school teachers made students "feel stupid." Home schooled, Douglas only had attended drivers' education classes at a traditional high school. He admitted that, before coming to Eastwood Public Schools' New Century Academy, he had never learned to read. When he arrived at New Century, he was reading at the second-grade level. After just a semester at New Century, testing indicated his reading level to be "between 6.9 and 9.9."

However, his experience in Eastwood High School's driver training program was not so positive.

> I went to drivers training, and the teacher made everybody in that class feel so low. He would point people out and say, "Didn't you learn anything?" and just yell at you, and it's, like, how can teachers do this? I mean, people would say, "Yeah, my one teacher at the other school would send me to the office every day." These teachers here [at New Century Academy] won't yell at you. They might yell at you if you're cussing, but they won't sit there and degrade you like that.

Melissa, a student at Mapleton Alternative High School, talked about the difficulty of getting help in a traditional high school setting when a student has a reading problem. Melissa did not attend Apple Valley High School; rather, she went to Gardner High School, a newly constructed school located between Apple Valley Schools and the city. Gardner High is located in a rapidly growing district. The high school is large, with 2,200 students attending grades 9 through 12. A shy person, Melissa remembered that when she first came to Mapleton, "I don't think I talked for the first week I was here." She had spent her ninth-grade year and two weeks of her tenth-grade year at Gardner High School. According to Melissa, Gardner was "way too big." She added, "They only honor the people who are not so smart and the ones who are smart. If you're in the middle and need help, you don't get it." Asked whether she found that discouraging, Melissa responded:

> Yeah, 'cause I'm not a very good reader. I can't comprehend things very well. To be in an English class with reading all this information and then you have to do all this work and I don't even remember what we read. It was very discouraging to get bad grades and not have anyone to help you. I talked to my mom and dad, and they went up there several times, and they just said they couldn't really help us out very much. I was stressed out and sick all the time. I missed a lot of school.

Pam, a student at Mapleton, was interviewed with her younger sister, Sherri. Pam was in her second year at Mapleton. Her younger sister was in her third year. Pam's

experiences with teachers at Apple Valley High School were also generally not positive. "At the high school, [teachers] just say 'figure it out' or 'ask somebody else,'" she explained. "They're always in a big hurry and a big rush to get things done." Pam was specific about the teaching style of her math teacher at Apple Valley High School:

> At the high school with math class, my math teacher she would put a big overhead up and read to you what you had to do, give you one or two examples, and tell you to go find somebody else to go do your work. Then she'd sit up at the front of the room and work on all this stuff. Somebody would ask her for help and she would say, "Ask one of the other students or something. I'm busy right now." . . . The teachers at the high school don't really explain things very well.

Daniel, who was interviewed as part of a small group of students at Westerby High School, indicated he first attended Blue Harbor High School and then "a couple of months into my sophomore year I kinda quit and I just came here." He talked about what happened when assignments were not completed in traditional high schools:

Daniel:	Teachers at the high school, they . . . I don't think they care enough if you get it done. They don't care.
Question:	So if you didn't get an assignment done at the high school, what? Do they hound you?
Daniel:	At the high school?
Response:	Yes, at the high school.
Daniel:	Well, they hound you in a bad way, kinda. They're a lot tougher, but . . . they never really get into you because it is just for a second. It's not like a . . . it's not like they help you.
Question:	They want you to get your assignment in, but then eventually if you don't, then what happens?
Daniel:	They don't pay attention.
Question:	You just get your failing grade and away you go?
Daniel:	Uh-huh.

Students, then, saw traditional high schools as places where instruction is teacher centered. Teachers talk "at" students from the front of the classroom, and they give assignments to keep students busy while they work at their desks. Teachers in traditional high schools do not help you if you are having problems with academic assignments—or lack basic skills. They just let you fail.

Small Groups at Traditional High Schools

Students attending alternative high schools also viewed traditional high schools as judgmental places, where students are labeled and classified. Students at all four alternative high schools in this study held common opinions concerning the existence and impact of groups in traditional high schools. Students became animated when they talked about the groups at traditional high schools, and the different "looks" associated with these groups. They explained that what you wear, how you look, who you hang with, whether you play sports or do drama or sing in the choir—all these things "put you in a box." Moreover, alternative high school students who were interviewed explained that many traditional high school students spend a lot of time working on "the look" of their particular group.

Allison, a Westerby High School student who had attended Blue Harbor High School for her freshman year and part of her sophomore year, explained that students at the high school dressed "for the look of who they hang out with." She added, "Like, everybody at the high school gets up early in the morning, gets dressed up for school, you know, and gets their hair perfect." Naomi, from Northshore Alternative High School, was precise in her descriptions of groups of girls at the traditional high school in Cedar Bay:

There's the preps, and they're the girls who like to dress really nice. Kinda like, most of them don't swear but some of them do. And then there are the schoolgirls, and they're just kinda quiet, do all their work in every class, go home right after school and don't really hang out much. Then there's the punks. Most of them—I guess there are some that don't—drink and do stuff like that. They just dress weird, like either tight clothes or really tight pants, or really baggy clothes and baggy pants. And the fish-net clothing, and different-colored hair, weird haircuts. Piercing sometimes.

Carissa, also a student at Northshore, agreed that there were a lot of well-defined groups at Northshore High School. "They're really 'clique-ie' over there. . . . There's major hicks over there . . . there's the preps, the cheerleaders." Toni, a 15-year-old in her second year at Northshore Alternative High School, added to the list of groups at the high school. "There is the drama club people, and the band people. They all stick together. The art people. Then there are the hockey players and the puck bunnies." (And what, I asked, were puck bunnies? She paused and gave me a so-where-have-you-been look, then said, "Girls that chase hockey players!") She continued, "Then there's the . . . I live on a reservation and they call us the Res Rats, or anything they can think of. Then there is the stoners and a field of different cliques."

Mapleton Alternative High School students also talked about groups at traditional high school. During an interview session involving several students, opinions came quickly and with certainty. "In high school, it really matters what group you're in and who you're with," Melissa noted. Max, another Mapleton student, agreed: "At the high school you are classified into a group." He added, "I was classified." Ron, a Mapleton student who had attended Apple Valley High School for only a short time after junior high school, chimed in:

It's not really good for a person's self-esteem. When I was there at high school, a lot of people looked down on me. . . . I was automatically put into a group that I didn't even know what was going on. People are very judgmental before they even know you at the high school.

At New Century Academy in Eastwood, a student named Heather expressed a similar point of view. In her second year at New Century, Heather previously had attended nearby Burnington High School. Heather planned to graduate from New Century Academy after one more year of attending classes. She was supposed to have earned her high school diploma from Burnington during the current school year but acknowledged that she would not have graduated if she had stayed there. "Regular high schools, I would say, have cliques and everything, and that's, like, really unfair," she said. Heather explained that, at New Century, "all the gothic people are still hanging out with the regular people, but in the high school it's like the gothics . . . and then you've got the preps and you've got the gangs." (Again, I needed a definition. "What are gothics? "It's like people who have black hair, black makeup, and black clothes," she responded.) Heather compared Burnington High School to New Century Academy:

> That's basically like stereotyping over there and not over here at all. I mean, it is a little bit to a certain extent, but not like it is in a high school. You still have, like stereotypes . . . but they kind of combine. Not like a high school where people want to [pause]—I'm trying to put it in your terms.

"No," I said, "put it in your own terms." She went on, the words rushing out in a tone filled with intensity and conviction:

> Well, over here you don't have that many people trying to start shit with you. You don't have that many people talking behind your back. . . . [At the high school] they needed something to talk about. They always need something to talk about. They talk about you. That's why I left, because I got tired of being the news every week. I didn't want to put up with it. I just wanted to get through school and start my own life.

In summary, students who were interviewed generally did not express positive views of the traditional high schools they had attended before coming to their current alternative high schools. This was not surprising. After all, these were the schools where, for a variety of reasons, they had not been successful. Many students were still

angry about what had happened to them in traditional high schools, and they were not reluctant to share that anger. Clearly, their anger influenced their perceptions.

That said, some alternative high school students still grudgingly acknowledged that traditional high school "works" for some students. In a group interview of students at Westerby High School, "learning" finally was included as one objective for a traditional high school:

Question: So what's the goal in a traditional high school?

Allison: To look good.

Peter: To be popular.

Allison: Yeah, and try to get the cutest boyfriend, or whatever, girlfriend. It's just stupid.

Peter: Hang out with the right group.

Patrick: And some to learn.

Allison: And, yeah, some people at the high school do go there to learn.

However, despite such occasional admissions, it is significant that the primary perceptions alternative high school students held concerning traditional high schools were negative. In traditional high schools, students and teachers are judgmental. Students are classified and labeled. They are assigned to groups by teachers and other students. Teachers do not provide help when a student does not understand. Teachers give up on you quickly. They "let you fail." These negative perceptions formed the backdrop for the next section of this study, which considers the perceptions of both students and teachers toward alternative high schools.

Perceptions of Student Relationships and Behaviors at Alternative High Schools

Alternative high school students and teachers who were interviewed viewed their schools as more accepting, friendlier places than traditional high schools. They debunked commonly held stereotypes of alternative high schools and talked about the "family feel" of these places. Naomi, at Northshore Alternative High School, also explained why the alternative high school was a better "fit" for her:

> I came down here because high school was a lot harder; there were more judgmental people. A lot more bullshit that I just don't need. Come down here, it's easy. There is nice people, nice teachers, I'm friends with just about everybody here. . . . It's just like we are all friends, instead of having 12 different groups here and there. Everybody is pretty much friends, and it makes the environment a lot easier to just be here and want to come here.

Karri Shaw, a student at an alternative high school more than 300 miles away, would agree with Naomi. Karri had attended several high schools before enrolling at Eastwood's New Century Academy and was in her first year at the alternative high school. She explained that her dream was "to become really famous. I want my name to be out there," she said, "I really do." Karri's mother was 17 years old when Karri was born. Karri explained that her mother was "going to school right now and she ha[d] five kids and she [was] only 33. Karri's father was "an alcoholic living in hotels and going from job to job." During her interview, Karri was emphatic about the "accepting" attitude of teachers and students at New Century Academy:

> I felt very welcome because everybody was the same as me. Everybody had troubles like me, everybody is learning like me. It's not like, "Oh, she's retarded, and she just came here." It's not like that. Everybody was, like, "Yeah, I have the same problems so I'm cool with you and I'll be friends with you." Teachers, too, not only the students. But the teachers and advisors, they are all nice. They don't put you down.

Sam, at Mapleton Alternative High School, explained that his friends attending Apple Valley High School had the wrong idea about the alternative high school. Like

most students and teachers from the other alternative high schools included in this study, Sam indicated that students (and teachers) attending the traditional high school did not understand the advantages and true value of alternative high schools:

> [My friends from the regular high school] razz on me all the time about how Englishville is a convict school and how everybody here is a gangster or else freaks. I explain to them every day that it's not even like that here. It just seems like one basic general group of kids here. It's kind of cool. It's almost like a family. You go to a small school and everybody is here every day, and everybody gets to know each other. I don't know too many people here that got problems with anybody here. If they do, they don't make it a conflict. They just keep going on.

Allison, from Westerby High School, commented that students are "more relaxed" at alternative high schools. When new students come from the high school, they do not understand how the alternative high school operates. They start minor fights and do not realize that (in Allison's words) "we just don't do that here." Allison added, "But after they are here for awhile, they finally realize what is goin' on, and that it is laid back and nobody cares about how you look, what you do."

Teachers and principals often agreed that alternative high schools are places where students find acceptance and are not judged like they had been in traditional high schools. Tony Williams, long-time principal of Northshore Alternative High School, indicated that, although he did see "some grouping," students did not have to join a group to be accepted. The students are not ostracized if they do not join a group, even if they were part of that group before coming to Northshore. "And it is fun to watch the kids come over who are loners, or who are the nerdiest, or whatever," Williams added. "They find acceptance among the people [here] . . . they are included in things."

Why are alternative high schools so accepting? Why are these places less judgmental than traditional high schools? Greg, a Northshore student, thought school enrollment had something to do with it, something he labeled "the bigger factor." Greg

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planned to graduate from Northshore at the end of the school year. He had entered the

school in the eighth grade, and then attended the alternative high school, off and on, for

six years. He admitted that he had "dropped out a couple of times in the past six years"

and then added it was a mistake not to stay in school. "It was dumb," he concluded. At

the time he was interviewed, his situation was unique. He indicated that he was "in jail."

(He had a plastic band around his wrist, and after asking, "Do you want to see my

tether?" he pulled up his pant leg to show me a blue plastic device clamped around his

ankle.) Greg indicated that, after graduating from Northshore, he planned to go on to

community college to become a corrections officer. He responded thoughtfully when

questioned why he thought alternative high schools were more accepting of differences

among students than were traditional high schools.

> Maybe 'cause it is smaller? A lot smaller. And everybody knows each other.
> And as where you would go to a high school where it is huge, you wouldn't know
> everybody, you know what I mean? You don't know what that person's about.
> You don't know what they are like, so it's like kind of hard to accept somebody.
> I mean, it's not but it is. I mean, if you don't know nothing about somebody,
> you're not going to accept them in a way that if you knew somebody you would.

The fact that students are more tolerant and accepting of each other at alternative high

schools may, at least by Greg's assessment, be directly related to the smaller enrollments

of these schools.

Alternative high school teachers did not view most alternative high school

students as misfits or losers. Christina Piper, a science teacher at New Century Academy

who also taught at a large Michigan university, saw students as creative and smart:

> I think that the majority of our New Century Academy students are brilliant
> students. They were just too smart to be in a regular high school. They realize
> this is a crock, and they don't want to do this anymore. They were too creative
> and weren't given an outlet. And I could name dozens of students that are in that
> situation.

Lora Brennan, a former principal of New Century Academy, now worked part time in that school's counseling center. Lora talked about the special attention given to young people at alternative high schools, attention that was needed because of the unique needs of alternative high school students, needs that often are not met in traditional high schools:

> It's not to say—my husband teaches at the high school, and I came from the high school myself—that they don't care. But some people, some kids, some students need a different kind of attention at different times of their lives. That whole track of either you are a cheerleader or the dress-in-black group or the burnout group—you know how high schools are. They are very rigid in those cliques and groups, and our students probably didn't fit in with any of them.

That is not to say that all alternative high school students "fit in" and undergo a magical transition just by walking through the doors of an alternative high school. Jackie, the secretary of Northshore Alternative High School, noted that lack of school success usually was related to students' lack of maturity. "Usually, the first couple of years after getting here, it's almost like fun time for them if they're not mature and they're not older," she explained. "And once they've been here for a couple years, they start realizing, 'Wow, I've been screwing up for a long time and I haven't gotten the credit yet!' That's the big thing." She observed that once the maturity "kicks in," students begin experiencing success.

For some students, maturity was directly related to becoming a parent. Pregnant students—and students with children—were an integral part of the alternative high schools included in this study. Each of the four alternative high schools had a childcare program available for students. At Mapleton, New Century, and Westerby, childcare was available in the school building. The children of students attending classes in these schools—and, in the case of Westerby High School, children of staff members—were cared for "just down the hallway."

For 15-year-old Northshore student Toni Thompson, having a child was only one of the things that had changed her life. "Last year I did 30 days in the county jail," she said. "And I had a school release so I came here. And that was hard . . . I was mad at the time, but it did teach me a big lesson." Toni indicated she had not been in trouble since serving her 30-day sentence. "And I'm not going to be," she added. "I've definitely straightened up a lot." Toni described the challenges of being a parent and also talked about the tendency of some Northshore students to spend their time "getting high":

> It's kind of hard because I'm still a teenager, and it's hard to separate my social life and my parenting from each other. So when I'm at school, it's my social life. And when I am with my son, all my attention goes to him. I can't, you know, act how I do at school. So for a person who doesn't get high, it's kind of annoying for a person to see. I mean, I am not going to lie. I've done it before and I don't say I'm not planning on getting high again. I'm not saying I probably won't go out and drink again. But it's really annoying.

Toni was not the only student to criticize the behavior of fellow alternative high school students. Students interviewed in a small focus group at Westerby High School agreed that about 60% of the students attending that school "want to do good." The other 40% were not highly motivated. They indicated that the students in this group were not engaged. They did not complete assignments. Some fell asleep in class. So, why did they bother to attend? Westerby High School student Peter Allis had a theory: "They have to be in school. Keeps them out of the house so the parents can do their thing."

Naomi from Northshore Alternative High School also talked about the "bad kids" attending that school. She defined a "bad kid" as someone who will "react about things, yell and scream, freak out, and skip class and stuff like that":

> There are a lot of bad kids. Most of them come here because they've gotten kicked out of high school. Or they can't handle high school. And they come here and they can't handle it here. They skip. And then it's the other way around. My boyfriend went to a high school when I first moved here and then he's doing really good. He's getting really good grades and doing his work every day, and then one of his friends came here to the alternative. He's been going here for

awhile and he thinks, "Oh, it's cool down here, you can skip all the time and the work's a lot easier." And my boyfriend came over here.

I asked, "Did he get to decide that?" "Yeah," she replied, "he got to decide that. He skips all his classes and does all his work. . . . It is just, some kids can handle it and some kids can't. I guess it depends on if you want to graduate from high school."

Smoking was a common behavior in all four of the alternative high schools included in this study. According to students and staff members, most students attending alternative high schools smoke. Bill Chandler, principal of Mapleton Alternative High School, indicated that "probably 85% of our students smoke." Chandler noted that, because the only time Mapleton students got to smoke was during their lunch period, his most effective disciplinary weapon was taking away the privilege of leaving campus at lunchtime. "Quite regularly . . . I'll tell them, 'You've got five days of closed lunch for this particular incident.' They'll say, 'Can't you just kick me out for three days? I would much rather be suspended.'"

Douglas, at New Century Academy, indicated that students went out into a nearby park to smoke. "There are only four of us that don't smoke," he added. "Except the pregnant girls. They don't smoke." In the case of Northshore Alternative High School, it was Paul who responded to the question, "So how many out of the whole school smoke?" "There are probably five people that don't smoke in the school," he said. At a small focus-group interview of Westerby High School students, I asked, "So how many are smokers? Give me a percentage." A discussion followed:

Peter:	Seventy.
Patrick:	Eighty.
Daniel:	Ninety-five.
Patrick:	I'd say 90. (Laughter)

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Question:	Was smoking a problem at the traditional high school?
Peter:	You couldn't get off the bus and have a cigarette on the side of the highway, you had to go right to class. There would be a parapro or a cop waiting for you if you even stepped out. We always had this little smoke area in the back of the high school. Every time we went back there, a cop would be right back there following us. You had no choice but to put your cigarettes out or hide 'em.
Question:	Do you think that some of the people are here because of that?
Peter:	Some are. A very low percentage.
Patrick:	Are you asking if most people are here because they are lax on smoking?
Response:	Yes.
Patrick:	No, I don't think that has much to do with it really. . . . I just think it's just . . . the kind of people that usually end up in this school probably start out smoking way too young. That's why we are here.

In summary, students and teachers from all four alternative high schools indicated that students in those schools were more accepting and less judgmental than would typically be the case in a traditional high school. Most of the students in alternative high schools smoked. Furthermore, although estimates of magnitude varied, it generally was acknowledged that a significant proportion of students were "immature" and not highly motivated. These students skipped school, "got high," and did not complete assignments. Students doing well usually were focused on "earning credits so they could graduate." Students not doing well did not share that focus. However, it was often noted that there was hope for these students. (In fact, teachers were especially positive in their assessments of students' potential.) Quite often, many teachers and students noted, an "immature" student changed after a couple of years at the alternative high school; he or she would "come around" and get busy and earn a diploma.

Perceptions of Student-Teacher Relationships

Students, administrators, and teachers who were interviewed often spoke with pride of the positive interactions between students and staff members. They said that, in an alternative high school, students have a more personal relationship with their instructors; there is a positive bond between staff and students that is rare in a traditional high school setting. In an alternative high school, they added, students are more likely to negotiate with instructors and administrators—often in a spirited manner that, in many cases, turns the process into a game between students and staff members.

Bill Chandler, principal of Mapleton Alternative High School, pointed out the importance of having a positive relationship with students:

> I think that the alternative ed. world came around to the realization, perhaps earlier than a lot of K-12 people, that the key to getting a kid to learn is to have a relationship with the kid. Especially when you are dealing with difficult kids. If you do not have a relationship with them, they are not going to respond to you as a teacher. . . . If they don't care about the teacher they are not going to cooperate. And so a lot of effort is put into building a relationship, which is different from friendship—I want to stress that. Usually new people in alternative ed. try to become "buddy-buddy" with the students. And that is not what we are talking about when we are talking about relationships.

Ron Holaday, a teacher in his second year at Mapleton, talked about some of the specific things he did to promote a positive relationship with students. "We do basketball on Wednesday nights; we do a golf league in the springtime. I love that. I really enjoy that part of it." Holaday indicated that this sort of interaction had some practical benefits. "So, now when Ervingham is acting up in class, I say, 'Ervingham, you don't do this on the golf course, you don't act like this other places, why are you acting like that here?'"

Caroline Lorenz, Christina Piper, and Karen Anderson were all teachers at Eastwood Public Schools' New Century Academy. We discussed the interactions between teachers and students:

Question: Do you know what is going on in their life?

Karen: Oh, yeah, sometimes way too much.

Caroline: Yes!

Question: They tell you?

Karen: Yes, and you—a lot of the times because of their lifestyle . . .
              they're working in service, you know. They are working at Red
              Lobster. It got for awhile I was avoiding going into those places.

Christina: Yeah.

Karen: Because they are there, and they want to see you. They do. And if
              you were there and didn't ask if so and so was working, they are
              like, "I was working! Why didn't you come back?" So you have
              to ask. So, sometimes you know a little bit more than you wanted.

Christina: For example, one of the students is a cashier at Target, and if I
              don't wait in her line it's like, "I saw you in Target and you just
              said 'Hi' to me!" And I find it really funny. I have to actually
              search her out.

Caroline: They do seem to expect a lot out of us. And that can be tiring . . .
              but for the most part, I think we are all up to that challenge where
              we will wait the extra 10 minutes in the line at Meijer to make that
              person happy.

At Westerby High School, instructor Kelly Gleason described the unique

interactions she had with students who were mothers. Gleason had a small child and used

the on-site daycare provided by the Blue Harbor Schools, the same daycare her students

used. "At lunch time, we are all in there feeding the kids," she said.

It's an immediate connection to them . . . to somebody else out there that may be
going through some of the things they're going through. I'm not, of course, a
teen, so I don't have that aspect of it, but they—I'll tell you that not a week goes
by where somebody doesn't ask me some advice. And it's not like I'm a pro. I'm
battling through it just like they are. But it's "How did you get your daughter to
do this?" or, you know, "How do you clear up a diaper rash?" It's an immediate
connection for them. It's somebody they can look to. I'm not a peer. I'm not a
teen parent, but it's obvious that I'm going through some of the same things
they're going through.

Students—and their parents—saw the value of closer involvement with staff members. Pam, a student at Mapleton, told the story of coming to alternative high school. At the traditional high school, she had too many absences and did not get along with the teachers. "I already did a couple things that got myself in trouble," she explained, "so then the teachers had it out for me, so every little thing I did I got in trouble for it." However, Pam's mother was not in favor of her coming to Mapleton. Pam kept talking to her about it. "I went back to my mom and said, 'Mom, listen, things are not working out at the high school. Can I please go to Mapleton and try it out there?'" Pam's mother finally agreed. Pam began having success at Mapleton. Now, Pam explained, her mother liked it better than high school because "it's better for us getting more involvement with the teachers and the teachers getting involved with the students." She added, "They care more."

Sam, another Mapleton student, talked about the practice of calling teachers by their first names at that school (a practice, by the way, that was not common across the alternative high schools in this study):

> It's different [from the traditional high school]. One of the ways, I guess the biggest way for me, is being able to call the teachers by their first name. It kind of sets you on an equality level where you kind of get a little more respect because you are calling them by their first name and they are calling you by your first name. It just seems like there's less authority and more "just people" to help you out.

A common interaction between students and teachers in the alternative high schools included in this study involved negotiations in classrooms about schoolwork. Naomi, from Northshore, called it "making deals." "You can make deals with the teachers sometimes," she said. "Like if you have a lot of work missing but you don't have a lot of absences—if you do all your work later, you can make a deal with the teacher to let you keep the credit." The students in a small-group interview at Westerby

High School talked about trying to persuade a teacher to change an assignment at the alternative high school and how the process at Westerby was different than negotiating with teachers at a traditional high school:

Question: Let's say [a teacher] gives you an assignment and you don't like it. What do you do?

Allison: You do it anyway.

Patrick: It depends how much it is worth.

Daniel: If it's a big assignment, I'll still do it. If it's some piddly little thing, I won't.

Question: At what point do you say to the teacher, "Are you sure you want us to do this?"

Allison: (Laughter) We say it all the time.

Peter: And plead with them not to do it. Like today.

Question: What happened today?

Peter: She assigned a bunch of questions.

Patrick: Two pages!

Peter: And then she said we had to draw three pictures, and I can't draw for crap. I hate it every time she assigns us an art project. She wouldn't listen. So we still have to do them.

Question: But you let her know that you didn't think much of that. Would you have done that in a traditional high school?

Peter: Probably not.

Daniel: You would probably put it off. Or you wouldn't say anything.

Peter: You wouldn't be open about it.

Question: You wouldn't be open about it?

Peter: Yeah. You are always waiting for somebody else to say something. You're looking around thinking, "Well, is anybody going to say something?"

Question: In a traditional high school?

Daniel: Yeah.

Question: Whereas here?

Allison: You blurt it out!

Patrick: You don't have to worry about it.

Peter: Yeah.

In summary, the students and teachers who were interviewed at the alternative high schools in this study seemed to value closer, more personal relationships between students and teachers. At some schools, students called teachers by their first names. Teachers and students joined in after-school activities that were not "school connected," like golf leagues and parenting discussions. Teachers and administrators put considerable effort into developing positive, friendly relationships with students. Many students responded by extolling these relationships and, for the most part, by cooperating with the teachers and administrators. Students in these alternative high schools were quick to negotiate with teachers concerning assignments and classroom management. In a traditional high school setting, there might be some reticence to challenge the instructor; however, there appeared to be no such reservations in an alternative high school setting.

Perceptions Concerning Instruction and Pedagogy

Paul, a student at Northshore Alternative High School, summarized his view of the nature of teaching in alternative high schools in one short sentence: "Teaching-wise," he said, "it's pretty much the same as the high school." This point of view was echoed by others; but students, teachers, and administrators interviewed for this study also shared some common beliefs concerning ways teaching at alternative high schools *differed* from that at traditional high schools. At alternative high schools, they reported, students spend

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less time listening and more time doing. At alternative high schools, teachers talk and collaborate more than in traditional high schools. At alternative high schools, new teachers need to learn how to become "alternative ed. type" teachers, and that means teaching differently from teachers in traditional high schools.

Teaching As "Doing Stuff"

I asked Mapleton Alternative High School teacher Ron Holaday whether he lectured much. "I don't really lecture," he responded. "I would say more discussion, but since I'm leading, you know it's me talking the majority of the time." Holaday went on to say that he was working at modifying his lessons and getting organized so that his classes would include more "hands-on and less of me talking." He concluded, "I'd rather have them doing stuff as opposed to me blabbing away." Mapleton's principal, Bill Chandler, indicated that he did not often see teachers lecturing in that school:

> I can't remember the last time I actually heard a standard lecture in class. You will hear teachers giving directions, you know, "Okay, here is what we are going to do." And they might spend the first five minutes of class making sure everyone understands the focus of today. But I don't think we have any classes where the teachers just lecture. Teachers might lead . . . but teachers don't stand up there and lecture.

Carl Jackson, a teacher at Northshore Alternative High School, expressed the point of view that teaching in alternative high schools is easier than at traditional high schools, thanks mostly to a more "relaxed atmosphere." Jackson added, "I find that I rarely get up in front of the students and teach. I get in with them while they're doing reading or doing something." He explained that students seemed to prefer and require that approach. "That's what they like. That's what they are going to do."

New Century Academy principal Dorothy White described how teachers used field trips and activities to keep students coming, to "hook them." She described how

one New Century teacher was lobbying to have an inflatable planetarium brought in to school for an astronomy lesson (even though the cost was $275):

> He's invented this class called Science From A to Z, starting with astronomy. And that is going to be his first class of the semester. He said, "Dorothy, I'm thinking if we can hook them right away, they will stay!" And I said, "You know, that sounds fabulous. We'll find you some sort of a grant for you to do that."

White went on to describe a teacher who, as part of his zoology class, took students to a man-made marsh near Detroit Metro Airport where there were eagles and "wooden walkways over the water areas." She explained that the goal of these activities was to get students excited about learning and, in this way, get them to attend classes. "If they are not doing, and we're not talking reading a book, if they are not doing, manipulating, participating, then it is much more difficult to get them here. . . . Are they going to be excited to come here? That's what we hope!" White concluded that, at alternative high schools, "retention is a huge problem."

Many students also agreed that, at alternative high schools, there is less emphasis on textbooks than at traditional high schools. Furthermore, alternative high school teachers give fewer assignments requiring extensive reading and writing. Students Darcy and Tracie talked about what went on in classes as Mapleton Alternative High School:

> Question: Compared to what happened in the high school, do you write more here or less?
>
> Darcy: A lot less. A lot!
>
> Question: What about reading and textbooks? Do you use textbooks here more or less?
>
> Darcy: Less, but we're not saying we don't use them, because we do. But I would say that they take information out of the textbook and try to make it more interesting so we are not just reading our text-book. Every kid knows that's no fun.
>
> Question: "They" being the teachers?

Darcy:	Yes.
Question:	So, in other words, they take the information and give it to you, instead of telling you to go and read it.
Tracie:	So you don't really know it is coming from the textbook.
Darcy:	Yeah, so it sounds a little more interesting to us.

At these alternative high schools, then, there was general agreement among students, teachers, and administrators that there should be, and was, less emphasis on lecturing and reliance on textbooks. Teaching in alternative high schools, most indicated, was student centered and not teacher centered. There were more discussions. There were more hands-on activities.

Teacher Interactions: Getting Together and Talking

Alternative high school teachers who were interviewed for this study agreed that they spent considerable time talking and networking with other instructors in their schools. Kelly Gleason, a teacher at Westerby High School, explained that teachers in her school had a regular staff meeting every other Monday after school. "But that is about 1% of the time that we get together and talk, I would say," she added. Gleason went on to say that teachers at Westerby talked before school, after school, at lunch, during planning periods, and "just about any other time you can think of, we are discussing students." She paused and then added, "Well, and school policy and procedures, but mostly students."

Mapleton Alternative High School teacher Donald Ward indicated that teachers watched, talked to, and learned from other teachers. Ward said that, when he saw his fellow teachers doing creative units, he would think, "I need to kind of get it in gear and move along and do something, too." He also added the perspective of experience in an

alternative high school where teachers did not talk and mix so frequently. Before coming

to Mapleton, he had been a teacher at Garrison Alternative High School in a district

located about 40 miles away.

> [At Garrison] teachers are very isolated. One, we never had the same lunch hour.
> We didn't have a lunch hour meeting, so we didn't have the chance to talk to one
> another. We were all in different portables. You never got a chance to really see
> each other. Here we have our lunch hour together. We're not required, we were
> told we didn't have to be here, but it's kind of an expectation that most lunches
> we would stay here—because that was our time to spread the word about what
> was going on throughout the day and maybe share some ideas.

Ward also discussed collaborative teaching at Westerby. He noted that teachers in the

building "do a lot of time-sharing." He explained that two teachers would often team-

teach a two- or three-week module. "Rich and I just did a whole marking period where

we did a combined [unit]." He added that on certain days their classes would meet

together; on other days, they would do the same project.

At all four alternative high schools, teachers indicated they spent a great deal of

time talking with other instructors about what was happening at the school, and especially

about students. Teachers generally did not feel isolated. Some, but by no means all,

indicated they teamed with teachers to deliver instruction. Teaming seemed especially

prevalent at Mapleton Alternative High School and Westerby High School. During

interviews, the principals at both Mapleton and Westerby extolled the virtues of teaming

and gave examples of effective collaboration at their schools.

Becoming an "Alternative Ed. Type" Teacher

Westerby High School teacher Terry Miller was hired nine months into the 2000-

2001 school year to teach after another teacher resigned. Miller had been teaching at a

charter school in a small city not far from Haynes. I interviewed Miller with another

Westerby teacher, Kelly Gleason, who was in her fourth year at the school. We talked

about the challenges of being a new alternative high school teacher. Gleason was the first to speak. "My first year here was very difficult," she confided. "I'll be the first to admit that I made a lot of mistakes the first year I was here. I approached things in ways I shouldn't have." Gleason had previously taught in a traditional middle school, in a setting she described as "very teacher directed." That school was a place, she explained, "where you're standing up there and if a student isn't doing what you tell them to do, they are misbehaving and should be disciplined by the principal." She said it took awhile to find her "comfort zone" as an alternative high school teacher:

> I think I started off being a lot more strict and traditional-oriented type teacher; and have shifted to more of the "alternative ed. type" teacher. I don't think that is an overnight thing. I don't think that is even an over [the] year thing. I think it takes time to develop that . . . that finesse to get back on your side of the . . . being the authoritative figure.

I asked Miller whether he thought that, having just started teaching in an alternative high school about six months before, he was in the middle of that transition. "I think so," he responded. Miller then went on to describe his strategies for becoming an alternative ed. type teacher: "I think that the idea of an alternative school to me is that we take the time to get to know the kids. . . . And I talk to kids; I get to know them. That's what I think alternative ed. is. It is the atmosphere; and just talking to kids, and individualizing instruction more." Miller also talked about the challenges facing an alternative high school teacher when he or she tries to create an appropriate learning atmosphere.

> I think a lot of the students have an attitude, like, "Why can't I lay on the floor and curl up? I don't feel like working today." . . . And, you know, there is a number of certain things, and you're like, "No, it's still school!" . . . I'm not going to be a jerk about some things, but there is still some things that aren't conducive to a good learning atmosphere. And I feel pretty strongly about some of that. And it is a struggle sometimes to get that idea across to them.

Caroline Lorenz, an English teacher at Eastwood Public Schools' New Century Academy for nearly two years, summarized her first year at that alternative high school in precise, colorful terms: "New Century Academy ate me for lunch during [the] first semester. . . . I was totally unprepared." Lorenz, who also taught English as Second Language (ESL) classes, had previously taught Japanese people learning to speak English. The Japanese, she recalled, were "formal people" who valued education. In contrast, she found alternative high school students unruly and disrespectful of her authority. When asked to describe the types of behaviors she observed at New Century Academy, she responded, "Talking! That was the worst thing for me—the talking and not paying attention. Not doing anything I asked them to do! Just doing their own thing!" She also had difficulty individualizing instruction to fit the wide range of achievement levels within her classes.

> I remember my first semester I was teaching the upper-level grammar class, and there were people that were just so lost, and just could not get what I was trying to explain. And then there were others who were very, very bright. I mean, unbelievably smart. And there was this one girl, Sandy, and she would go, "You're not explaining that right. Why don't you just do it like Ms. Wilson? Why don't you just tell them this and this and then go get that worksheet? And she was telling me this, and so then I'm, like, doubting myself as a teacher all the time. And in some ways she was right. I didn't know how to do it.

I asked Lorenz how she would handle that situation now, after nearly two years of experience. She responded by saying she would listen to Sandy's suggestions and consider them, but she would not take it personally. "I think I would joke with her a little bit more. . . . I think I would be far more quick to disarm the attitude and to demand respect. At that point I didn't demand that, and I didn't get it."

Alternative high school students also talked about the experiences of new teachers. In a group interview at Mapleton, students discussed how first-year teacher Donald Ward had changed during his first year at their school:

Josh:	[Don] was really hard at first, but then he lightened up.
Question:	What does he teach?
Josh:	He teaches experimental ed. He took us to the rope thing. Don was only used to detention centers and other places like that. . . . Once he saw what the other teachers were like, he got better.
Dustin:	Now he jokes around with us and stuff.
Question:	Does he ever talk about it? Why he changed?
Josh:	Well, he was telling us when he first started here what his other school was like, and how he had some really rough kids. And I think after about a week or two of being here and finding out we weren't hellions and we weren't here to raise hell, we were just here to learn and we're just like any other kids, you know, he got lenient.

There was recognition, then, among many teachers and students who were interviewed that new teachers often need to learn how to become effective teachers in alternative high schools. In many cases, students and teachers said, that means being more lenient than would be the case in a traditional high school. Still, they added, it is important to set limits. Furthermore, the relationship between teachers and students is important. Many indicated that success as an alternative ed. teacher is a result of fostering an informal, friendly classroom atmosphere, an atmosphere that includes more "joking" among the teachers and students than is typical in traditional high schools.

Summary

Among the persons interviewed, there were a number of common perceptions about the nature of teaching at alternative high schools. For the most part, administrators, teachers, and students thought instruction in alternative high schools emphasizes "doing" more than in traditional high schools. There is less standing-at-the-front-of-the-room type of lecturing. There is more dialogue between teachers and students, and even when

the teacher "talks a lot," it is mostly to explain and discuss matters with students. Many teachers who were interviewed noted that, at alternative high schools, teachers talk and discuss school matters more than at traditional high schools. Alternative high school teachers did not complain of being "isolated." And, although team-teaching practices varied significantly among the schools included in this study, many teachers still expressed the opinion that such collaboration is valuable, and that it is present to a greater degree in alternative high schools than in traditional high schools. Finally, there was the general impression among many of those interviewed for this study that teaching at an alternative high school is different. When it comes to dealing with students, "alternative ed. type" teaching requires a different approach, a more informal approach that provides a balance between being lenient and setting limits.

All that said, it is appropriate to revisit the comment made at the beginning of this section. You will recall the statement made by Paul, the student from Northshore, about the nature of teaching at that school: "Teaching-wise," he said, "it's pretty much the same as the high school." Paul's comment is a reminder that alternative high school teaching may not, in fact, be all that different from teaching at traditional high schools. Finally, it is important to recognize that, like traditional high school instructors, teachers at alternative high schools have a great deal of freedom when it comes to their style of teaching. Hal Hoskins, principal of Westerby High School, indicated he encouraged teachers to try new things:

> There are a lot of ways that you can teach. Especially math. There are so many different ways! . . . . I told the teachers this: As long as you can demonstrate that teaching and learning is taking place, you will get very little eyebrow raising from me on things you want to try. I don't fear failure. If a lesson happens to fall flat on its face . . . I don't look on that as a bad thing. I give you credit for having the guts to try something new.

Principal Bill Chandler of Mapleton Alternative High School agreed that alternative high school teachers should be allowed to choose their own teaching style. "One of the things that we have found is that the more freedom that we give our individual teachers to follow their own teaching style, the more successful they will be." Chandler described the style of some teachers as "very straight-laced," as compared to another teacher, who, "if you didn't know he was the teacher, you would think he was one of the kids." The result? It is quite possible there will be several different teaching styles within the same school, depending on the inclinations of instructors working at that alternative high school.

Perceptions Related to Student Success and Schooling

Students, teachers, and administrators who were interviewed saw the traditional high school as the place that had failed alternative high school students. They viewed the traditional high school as judgmental, unfeeling, and indifferent to the needs of "the sort of student who winds up in an alternative high school." Staff and students alike acknowledged that a significant proportion of students at alternative high schools are still immature and unmotivated, but they were united in their view that the majority of students attending alternative high schools are likable people and capable students. These are "good kids," alternative high school staff and students said, who have been "screwed up" by the traditional high school's approach to students and learning.

Goals for Alternative High School Students

What does it take for students to be successful while attending alternative high schools? And what goals do alternative high school administrators and teachers have for alternative high school students? Interviews with alternative high school students and

staff revealed that students' success in these schools was largely associated with their behaviors and responses to the forms of schooling. Frequently mentioned were qualities like maturity, a willingness to learn, appropriate behavior, self-esteem, and regular attendance.

When expressing their goals for alternative high school students, teachers and administrators often used two phrases: "keeping them here" and "getting them through." Tony Williams, long-time principal at Northshore Alternative High School, when asked about his goals for alternative high school students, gave a response he labeled "realistic":

> I think the major goal is for them to gain some maturity so that they can go on to have a good life. . . . I cannot think in terms of highest goals and things like that. I am probably more of a realist, but I think that if kids can get through to the point where they are beyond us, where they are regular in their attendance, and they are calm—that is good.

I asked a group of three teachers at New Century Academy about their goals for their alternative high school students. One teacher, Karen Anderson, responded immediately and with feeling, "My goal is to keep as many kids in here as possible because every minute they are here with me, it is an achievement. For them and for me." She went on to explain that having a student who had failed in traditional high school say, "I like it here" was "the most powerful feeling in the world." She added, "We are doing God's work here!

Principal Dorothy White pointed to the "completion rate" as an important goal and accomplishment at New Century Academy. She talked about her response when someone criticized the high dropout rate at that school:

> Art Crane, who was our former director . . . whenever someone would say, "Well, look at the dropouts in [alternative ed.] compared to the high school," he said, "Excuse me, but we got your dropouts and we turned them around—and 60% of your dropouts were successful in our program." So, you know, rather than

saying, "Oh, my gosh, you have a 40% drop rate?" No, we have a 60% completion rate. Where others failed.

And what about academic achievement? Did alternative high school teachers and administrators consider meeting academic standards a primary goal for their students? White went on to explain that, although she considered academics important, some preliminary steps were more important:

> That academic part becomes almost secondary because, unless I can turn that angry young man into someone who is going to be receptive to learn, then nobody is going to be successful. And if we can help to shape them so when they leave here then when an employer gets in their face and is hollering at them, they don't slug them or tell them where they can go. So certainly the academics are way important. But [the goal] is to get them to the spot where they are ready to soak all that up.

Kelly Gleason, an instructor at Westerby, indicated that her goal for alternative high school students was a balance among academics, "lifetime habits" (such as regular attendance), and responsibility. She added, "I don't think any one of those is more important than the others." Kelly described the "three sides" of her goal for students: "I think that one side of it is definitely academic, and they need to learn a certain content material to make it . . . in the world outside the classroom. That's definite." Another side, she added, was attendance. Students need to learn to attend class regularly, and to be on time. Finally, students need to act responsibly--"taking responsibility by saying, 'Okay, well, I screwed up. I need to take the consequences and these are my consequences.'"

Caroline Lorenz, a teacher at New Century Academy, indicated that teaching self-esteem was her primary objective:

> My goal has always been that the students feel better about themselves when they leave my classroom than they did when they entered. That is my goal as a teacher. And in the process, I hope to pass some information on to them, and I hope to give them some reading and writing skills. But I always work from more

of a self-esteem point of view. If you love them first and they feel good about themselves first, then they learn it.

A somewhat different point of view was expressed by Bill Chandler, principal of Mapleton Alternative High School. Chandler noted that the school was in the process of placing great emphasis on academics. He explained that a lot of alternative high schools, including Mapleton, start off being "more treatment oriented than academically oriented." Chandler recognized the importance of "treatment" for alternative high school students, but he indicated that "we have to realize we are dealing with kids who have an awful lot of potential. These are not broken or dumb kids. And so if we don't present a challenging and relevant curriculum, we are doing them a disservice." Chandler concluded that Mapleton was "in a metamorphosis of becoming each year a little more academically oriented than we were the year before." He acknowledged that some alternative high schools have the reputation of being what he called "soft jails"—places where students could do about anything and still succeed. "They build a nice, friendly little warehouse and put the kids there . . . and unfortunately these are the [alternative high schools] that give us all a bad name." Chandler explained that Mapleton was more assertive in ensuring that students were engaged in meaningful learning. "Our approach here is . . . you're here to get an education, not to sit around and stare out the window, so we need you to get to work. And if you are not going to get to work, you might as well go home and stare out the window because that is not what we are about here."

Alternative education students also had their opinions about the goals for alternative high schools—and what it takes to succeed in these places. Greg, the Northshore student who was attending school while serving his time in jail, provided a one-sentence recipe for success at an alternative high school. In response to my question, "What does it take to get your diploma and get out of here?" he replied, "Do your work,

pay attention in class, listen to the teacher, not be a smart ass, not back talk to the teacher, follow the rules, attend class on a regular basis." Absent from this formula for success was mention of academic achievement. In the interview with Greg, I asked him about his academic accomplishments.

Question:	Can you read and do math and all that stuff?
Greg:	I can read pretty good, but my math skills, not good. I mean, I can barely do my times tables. But as far as everything else, I'm good at. . . . It's just, like, numbers, they just don't make sense to me, you know what I mean? Like fractions and decimals and whatever. Numbers just don't make sense to me. You know?
Question:	It just doesn't click?
Greg:	Right, right. . . .
Question:	So do you get help here? As far as with math?
Greg:	No, I actually have got all my credits for math now. I did get through my math. It took longer than most students, probably . . . but I got all my credits for it, so now I ain't gotta take any more math.

Jim, a student at Northshore Alternative High School, saw alternative high schools as places for students who could not "cut it" in traditional high school, and places where students could "graduate quicker." Jim had attended traditional high school for three years and planned to graduate at the end of the school year. He mentioned that he had $4,000 in the bank and intended to attend Grand Valley State University in the fall. In the interview, Jim did not make speeches. He went right to the point. First he talked about the students who attend alternative high schools: "Primarily, it's for all the bad kids, you know? Like all the bad kids, the ones that couldn't cut it in high school. The bad kids usually come here. But there is also kids that come here to graduate quicker." When asked to explain the term "bad kids," Jim explained that they were not really bad.

"They are cool people," he said. "They just made some bad choices." Then he went on to compare student learning at the alternative high school with the traditional high school:

It's pretty much the same, kind of, really. They give you a bit more slack, though [at the alternative high school]. You can goof off a lot more before you get in trouble with it. But they teach the material, if you're there and you're willing to learn. You can get the same education. But, you know, half the people don't.

Mapleton students Darcy and Tracie talked about the requirements for going on field trips. They talked about doing things like going horseback riding, and said you were not allowed to go if you were not passing four out of seven classes. "That's pretty lenient," Tracie concluded. I asked, "So you're telling me it's pretty hard not to pass four out of seven classes?" Darcy replied, "You got to be slacking off pretty bad." Tracy added, "I don't think anybody has never not passed."

In conclusion, when describing what it takes for students to be successful, and to get a diploma, persons interviewed for this study talked about behaviors like meeting attendance requirements, completing assignments, behaving appropriately, and following school rules. Most students, teachers, and administrators who were interviewed talked about student achievement, or at least they spoke of grades and testing. However, there was relatively little mention of specific requirements for academic achievement by students. In contrasts, **everyone** talked about things like attendance requirements and strategies for earning credits.

Measures of Behaviors and Achievement

Some specific indicators of student behaviors and achievement used at alternative high schools include student progress report checklists, data related to retention rates, and student test scores. Student progress reports were designed to provide students and parents with specific information on the student's success, or lack of success, at school.

The topics included on this form illustrated what the alternative high school educators who had designed and used the form identified as indicators of success. The report included a letter grade for the student and attendance statistics, along with a checklist that enabled the teacher to "check off" appropriate comments. The categories listed in the progress report checklist, in the order they appeared on the form, include:

- Excellent attendance
- Too many absences
- Positive and cooperative in class
- Disruptive or discourteous to class
- Exhibits respectful behavior
- Inattentive
- Participates effectively
- Assigned work incomplete
- Uses time wisely
- Poor test scores
- Does not bring material to class
- Capable of performing better work
- Parental conference strongly advised

Among schoolwide indicators of success, most alternative high school administrators and teachers often cited retention rates. All of the alternative high schools in this study monitored and calculated retention rates. Retention rates include the number of students who stay (i.e., the ones who do not drop out) during a quarter, semester, or year. All staff members at an alternative high school usually were well aware of their school's retention rate, especially if that rate was a source of pride. For example, New Century Academy teacher Karen Anderson was proud of that school's retention rate: "This year I think we have about 140 in the New Century Academy, and we have an 85% retention. We just had a staff meeting this week, and we were told we had 85% retention, which I think is astronomical!"

And what about student testing? How much importance do alternative high school administrators and teachers place on schoolwide testing programs, such as the

Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP)? It appears that the schools in this study placed relatively little emphasis on the MEAP. Some teachers and administrators noted that testing programs like the MEAP generally are not applicable to alternative high schools. Teacher Kelly Gleason at Westerby High School described that school's connection with the MEAP and explained why staff there were "less driven by a specific test":

> When you have an alternative ed. population that is in such flux, we don't have a lot of the students taking the MEAP test. And it's not that what's on the MEAP isn't important to teach. I'm not trying to say it that way. But the way that it is presented and the organization of it is a little bit stricter than we need to have here. . . . It's pretty restrictive and regimentative, which is something we don't really need as much of here. We, you know, we do have some more flexibility that way to come up with things that are more unusual.

A testing program that was used at two of the four alternative high schools was the ACT WorkKeys assessment. Westerby High School principal Hal Hoskins described WorkKeys as "a way for employers and for schools to know what is needed." The ACT WorkKeys assessment covers the following topics:

- Applied mathematics
- Applied technology
- Listening
- Locating information
- Observation
- Reading for information
- Teamwork
- Writing

At each level of proficiency, characteristics and skills are established, with specific criteria spelled out for each numerical level. Some tests are paper and pencil with multiple-choice responses; others are videotaped or audiotaped with multiple-choice responses. In the case of writing, the test is audiotaped with a constructed response. Hoskins explained that Westerby High School was concentrating on applied mathematics, reading for information, listening, and writing. He explained that when a

student achieves at a particular level, the employer reviewing the test results can look at the WorkKeys chart and determine the student's competencies. Hoskins explained that the WorkKeys ranking is more descriptive to an employer than are grades. The employer may say, "Hey, yeah, you've graduated from high school You got an A in algebra," but you lay [the WorkKeys scores] down, now I know you can do this, this, and this— because they are broken down into levels." Mapleton High School also used the ACT WorkKeys assessment, and educators at that school incorporated that measurement into the school's North Central Association (NCA) Transitions credentialing process for 1999-2000. Mapleton established WorkKeys Level 3 as the "needed score" for students to be credentialed in the areas of reading comprehension, writing, mathematics (middle/secondary), science reasoning, employability skills, and career awareness/ exploration. (See Table 3 for criteria.)

Table 3. ACT WorkKeys—Reading for Information (Level 3)

Level	Characteristics of Reading Materials and Questions	Skills
3	Short, uncomplicated passages which use elementary vocabulary Basic company policies, procedures, and announcements All necessary information stated clearly in the reading materials Focus on the main points of the passages Wording of the questions and answers similar or identical to the wording used in the reading materials	Identify uncomplicated key concepts and simple details Recognize the proper placement of a step in a sequence of events, or the proper time to perform a task Identify the meaning of a word that is defined within the passage Identify the meaning of a simple word that is not defined within the passage Recognize the application of instructions given in the passage to situations that are also described in the passage

In summary, then, administrators and teachers pointed to some specific indicators of success used by the alternative high schools. The list of student behaviors for New Century Academy illustrates what the educators who designed that form considered as important goals for their students. Retention rates are important schoolwide indicators of success. Teachers and administrators who were interviewed generally indicated that not a great deal of emphasis was placed on the MEAP test, and staff in two schools indicated that they preferred ACT WorkKeys for assessing students.

The Admission Process

Before heading to class at any of the alternative high schools in this study, students must first go through a systematic, individualized admission process. This process includes testing of entering students and individual interviews with an administrator or counselor. The tests are used for placement purposes, and also to determine basic skill levels. At New Century Academy, counselor Sarah Dexter explained the process used at that school:

> We give what we call the Adult Placement Indicator, API for short. That tells us an approximate level of reading and vocabulary skills. . . . During the registration we send the student who is here for an API assessment. Then they come back and for scoring we have red, yellow, and blue on our score sheets. If a student scores red, that's a basic reading type [student] that we would not put into regular classes at that point, especially in reading. If they score yellow, then that's a caution— more like an entry-level class. Then the blue is above 9th-grade level, which is the high school level and where we put them in any class.

Dexter added that the placement test used at New Century Academy for mathematics was the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT). "It's basic stuff," she explained. "It's fractions, decimals, times, and averaging." Teachers also administered proficiency tests to new students.

Carl Jackson, an instructor at Northshore Alternative High School, used a proficiency test in his English classes to determine whether students could read and "just to see where they are." He added, "from there we start finding out: Do they have a problem with spelling? Do they have a problem with vocabulary? Word recognition? And then we just kind of start building on wherever they are."

Interviews with prospective students were also part of the admission process at each school. Principal Hal Hoskins, from Westerby High School, commented: "I meet with every single student in here. We'll explain what our program is and what it isn't, and try to get the motivation of why he wants to and make sure that the reason they want to come here is the right reason."

Attendance Requirements

Once they were enrolled, students were expected to attend classes. Each school had elaborate, specific attendance requirements. Everyone knew and understood these requirements. For example, Jim, a student at Northshore Alternative High School, saw the attendance requirements as "the biggest difference from high school." He explained, "They give you all kinds of slack, they have better things for kids that are bad, but you only get six absences. And if you are over six, you lose credit. No matter what. You're over six, you're out." After saying that, a few minutes later Jim conceded that, under certain conditions, the teacher just might give a student one-quarter credit:

> If you go up to the teachers, and you're nice to them, you know, you're not a bastard, they are cool with it. They'll give you deals, like if you come the rest of the quarter and do your work, they'll give you credit. It's a ridiculous amount, but you get credit. If you're bad, you're out. They're not going to give you no breaks, you know?

New Century Academy allowed students to miss eight times per semester before they lost credit. After more than eight absences, students lost credit, but, as at

Northshore, they could still earn one-quarter credit. New Century instructor Karen Anderson explained that, if students had missed more than eight times and truly wanted to complete the class, there was a possibility that they could earn one-quarter credit instead of the one-half credit usually earned for the semester-long class: "I will offer them an option of quarter credit, with some stipulations. You have to tell me that you are not going to miss from now on. I'm not going to give you a quarter credit and then you turn around and miss six more times. No, I'm not going to do that. I don't have a license to do that."

At Mapleton, students could have eight absences per semester before losing credit. If they missed more than eight times but still completed the class, the credit they would have earned went in a "credit bank." Sam, a student at Mapleton, explained that if "the only thing not done is those attendances, they'll put it in a credit bank and they'll pass you on." If, during the next marking period, the student completed all of his or her other coursework and did not miss more than eight times, the student would also earn the credit he or she had banked. "So they give you the benefit of the doubt on that," Sam added, "unless in the next marking period you screw up and they take it all back."

At Westerby High School, students could be absent up to seven times in a semester. Once they went beyond seven, they were ineligible to receive credit. Westerby principal Hal Hoskins explained that there could be exceptions:

> Now there is an asterisk, as there often is. And this is if on the eighth absence say, for example, a parent calls and says, "Ben is throwing up. He is sick," I consider that an excused absence. Ben can still earn credit in his class, provided he makes up the time, and that means after school. And it's pretty systematic; we have a form and everything.

In summary, attendance was an important institutional requirement at the alternative high schools in this study. Students, teachers, and administrators talked a

great deal about attendance, and the specific requirements students must meet in order to earn credit. School officials and students also explained allowable exceptions to the attendance regulations and appeal process. In short, a well-defined set of rules governed attendance requirements—rules that were clearly understood and followed.

Earning Credits

Toni Thompson, a student at Northshore, summarized what she liked about going to that school: "It's a cool place," she said. "I mean, I love coming to school 'cause it's so easy and you get your credits and you can graduate, like if you just show up." Administrators, students, and teachers described a variety of systematic procedures designed to assist students in keeping track of their credits. They talked about creative ways students could earn credits, and they explained how teachers helped students so they would not lose credit. The number of credits required for graduation differed from school to school (see Table 4), but many were consistent across schools. For example, in most traditional high schools (at least the ones not on a "block" schedule), students earn one half credit for one semester-long class. At alternative high schools, the year is divided into quarters, and students earn credits in increments of one-quarter units. Westerby High School principal Hal Hoskins explained, "Our marking periods are really four different semesters." As a result of this organizational technique, students at alternative high schools earn one-quarter credit for the first quarter of a "two-quarter-long" course, even if they do not meet the requirements of the second quarter. At a traditional high school, the student who fails to meet class requirements in the second marking period of a semester-long course would usually lose the entire one-half credit for that semester-long course.

Table 4. Required units for credit at alternative high schools included in this study.

Required Areas of Coursework	Units of Credit Required for Mapleton	Units of Credit Required for New Century	Units of Credit Required for Northshore	Units of Credit Required for Westerby
English/language arts	4 units	4 units	3-1/2 units	5-1/2 units
Mathematics	2-1/2 units	2 units	2 units	2-1/2 units
Science	2-1/2 units	2 units	2 units	2 units
American history		1 unit	1 unit	
American government		1/2 unit	1/2 unit	
Social studies		1-1/2 units	1/2 unit	4 units
Global studies	3 units			
Sociology/psychology			1/2 unit	
Physical education/ health	1 unit		1/2 unit	1 unit
Computers	1 unit		1/2 unit	1 unit
Consumer education			1 unit	
Fine or practical arts			1 unit	
Art	1/2 unit			
Pre-employment			1/2 unit	
School to career	1 unit			
Experiential learning	1/2 unit			
Electives	10 units	9 units	6-1/2 units	6 units
TOTAL REQUIRED UNITS	26 units	20 units	20 units[a]	22 units[b]

[a]The total required units for Northshore Alternative High School was increased to 21 units in 2003 and will be 22 units in 2004.

[b]The total required units for Westerby High School was increased to 25 units in 2003, and will be 27 units in 2004 and 29 units in 2005.

Daniel and Patrick, students at Westerby High School, described the techniques a

teacher named Marty used to help them succeed:

Patrick: Marty always makes lists of all our assignments. Every two weeks or every three weeks, she hands out lists of your entire assignments.

Question: So she is keeping track of you?

Patrick: Yeah. She'll write down our grade and what we got on each paper.

Daniel: And if you miss an assignment . . .

Patrick: She'll put a star next to it or something.

Mapleton Alternative High School teacher Donald Ward talked about some of the procedures he had developed to help students not lose credit. "My students all know if they don't pass a test, they can retake it, but they usually have to do a few more assignments in between to show me they worked at it." Ward explained that when it was close to the end of a marking period and a student had a cumulative score of 50% to 65% (with 70% required for passing), he had developed other ways for the students to earn credit:

> I have offered them the opportunity to either do the work, retake the test, and get the grade you want to get; or you can get the book and make all the corrections so you know all the right answers and the highest grade you get is 70%. Some of the kids like that, but the thing you have to be careful of are the kids who will say, "Forget this test!" and do the open book later. But I haven't run into that yet.

Some teachers helped students experience success and earn credits by placing more emphasis on daily assignments and giving less weight to testing. New Century Academy instructor Karen Anderson explained, "I do not give tests. . . . I go more for the daily. Every day is an examination." Ron Holaday at Mapleton Alternative High School also followed this philosophy. He explained, "The way I set up my classes is that if you do the homework assignments and you do well on those, you don't have to worry about the test. The test is going to be part of it; you won't get an A, but you'll certainly pass the class."

Another teacher made the point that teachers needed to be careful about "piling on" daily assignments. New Century teacher Caroline Lorenz said she was known as "the queen of the packets." Packets, she explained, were daily assignments copied and handed out to students in batches. The downside was that students were intimidated by the size of the packet. "They think, 'Oh, my gosh! You're giving me all this work. I'm going to die!'" Lorenz said she would tell them that not all of it had to be done today, but

they still did not like it. So she said, "I had to tell the copy lady, not a packet, a couple of pages only."

Finally, another technique used by alternative high schools to enable students to earn credits expeditiously was independent study. Some of the schools made extensive use of independent studies for students; others used this type of approach infrequently. However, all had some form of individualized, for-credit program for students. Mapleton Alternative High School made extensive use of what it called "self-paced" classes. Principal Bill Chandler said self-paced classes at that school took several forms.

> It all depends on what class it is. If they are taking a self-paced art class, Gary will let them propose their own contract. They negotiate out a contract in the beginning, and he turns them loose. So that class is really designed by the students. There are other classes, like self-paced math, where the teacher says, "Okay, we tested you, here is your skill level; over the next nine weeks here is what you are going to accomplish." So it depends on the subject matter and how much direction a teacher has in putting it together. But most of the classes are put together by the teachers.

For many independent studies, Mapleton used Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's *Nova Edition* programmed course studies. Students read from texts and other supplemental materials, completed written assignments, and then took the unit test. They also took an examination at the halfway point of the course of study, as well as a final examination. If the student's cumulative score was 70% or higher, he or she earned one-half credit for completing the independent study.

Alternative high school teachers, then, had created many well-articulated procedures, practices, and programs to help students earn credits and a diploma. The procedures and practices were well understood by all of those interviewed—students and staff members alike.

Always Welcomed Back

Despite the structure and encouragement offered by teachers, many students did not earn credit. However, even then, all was not lost. Those students could still come back, and many did. Westerby principal Hal Hoskins said it was sometimes obvious that students were not going to earn credit. He used the example of a student who, with five weeks of the nine-week quarter gone, had "0%" and had completed only half of one assignment out of 30. Hoskins said he told the student that he should consider "taking off the next four weeks" and coming back for the next nine-week quarter. "And a lot of times they come back," Hoskins observed, "and, you know, some of them are successful and some of them will be like, 'Yeah, you're right. I saw what happened when I didn't put forth the effort.'" Westerby teacher Kelly Gleason agreed with her principal. After she acknowledged that "we lose quite a few," I asked whether they just stopped coming, or whether there was some sort of procedure they went through. "No," she responded, "they usually just discontinue their attendance." She went on to explain that some came back for their GED or to attend night school. "They don't usually go away completely," she added.

Northshore students Toni and Carissa talked about the reaction of alternative high school staff when students took some time off:

Carissa:	For two years, I was in and out of here. I'd sign up and go for a couple of days.
Question:	But they don't give up on you?
Both:	No.
Carissa:	Every time you are always welcomed back.
Toni:	Yeah.

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Carissa:	It's not like, "Oh, you didn't do anything last time!" It's not like they don't care. They do.
Question:	So, if I don't get credit that first quarter, no big deal. I just come back for the second one.
Toni:	Yeah. Well, if you're 16 or older, you don't have to come any more. . . . But if you're 15 or younger, you have to come because of truancy.

In summary, students who did not earn credit, or who left mid-semester, were not seen as dropouts by other students or staff members in this study. The process of earning credit and getting a diploma at an alternative high school was flexible. Students who left usually were viewed as just "taking some time off." They could be readmitted to the alternative high school in good standing, and they often were. Students thought that they were, in fact, welcomed back to the alternative high school (without being scolded for their past failures).

Testing Out

At Northshore, "testing out" of specific classes was one way for students to earn credits. Both students and staff members were expert in describing this procedure. Naomi, the Northshore Alternative High School student who had previously attended a tribal school, explained that she would have 17-1/2 credits (of the 20 required) by the end of the current school year. I asked whether she planned to return the following semester and enroll in classes to earn the other 2-1/2 credits needed for a diploma. Naomi explained that was not going to be her approach. But she did have a plan, and in the interview she shared her strategy for completing her requirements for graduation:

Naomi:	Well, they have this thing where you can test out, where you take tests, and each test is worth a half a credit.
Question:	Talk to me about that. How does that work?

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Naomi: Well, you have to enroll for classes for another quarter. And you can only take [the test] if you—let's say my class graduates this year, in 2002, and because I don't have enough credits to graduate this year, I can take the tests next year. But then you have to be 18 also. Next year I'm going to have to come back, because my birthday is at the beginning of September, so I can enroll for classes and tests. And next year I'm done. I have to come back and take a specific class. I have to enroll in a class to test out. But then I have to go to regular classes too. I don't know if I have to be there every day.

Question: What kinds of tests are they?

Naomi: They are just like regular high school tests.

Question: If you can pass the test, you don't need to take the class. Is that the bottom line?

Naomi: Yeah.

During his interview, Northshore student Greg Hughes told me he was just about ready to take a test. "I'm working on psychology," he told me. I asked him whether the test was hard.

Oh, yeah, it's hard. You have to do a lot of reading. It's like multiple-choice questions, all the tests are. But in the tests there is a lot of reading, you know what I mean? You've got to take in a lot of information. Like the psychology test. You've got to read about it and learn about psychology and what different psychologists do. How many different psychologists there are. And math, there's math. They've got a math one. And sociology tests basically everything.

Tony Williams, the principal of Northshore, indicated that the tests used for testing out of classes were purchased from Educational Development Services. He explained that "they are really adult ed. tests that fill the void that was left when the GED said, 'Look, you can't give high school credit for GED tests.'" In the 1980s, the Board of Education of Northshore Area Schools approved allowing students to test out of regular classes. A total of five credits could be earned by successfully passing these tests, including two credits in English, one credit in mathematics, one credit in science, and one credit in social studies. "I think it works great now," Williams concluded, "because the

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student has to be 18 and the class has to be graduated." I then commented to Williams that the students "seemed street smart" about these testing-out credits and what it took to get them. Williams smiled and gave a one-word answer: "Yep."

<u>Summary</u>

Data presented in this section dealt with perceptions concerning student success in alternative high schools. Interviews revealed that such success frequently was associated with student behaviors and student responses to institutional requirements. Therefore, this section also included data related to several aspects of the forms of schooling in alternative high schools, including things like attendance requirements, strategies for earning credits, admission processes, "testing out," independent studies, and the procedures used by students to drop out and return. Specific indicators of student behaviors and achievement used at alternative high schools, such as student progress reports, data on retention rates, and student testing programs, also were discussed.

Alternative high school administrators and teachers who were interviewed talked in detail about many procedures, practices, and programs designed to keep students in school and help them earn their high school diplomas. These things were creative and were well understood by all of those interviewed for this study—students and staff members alike. Responses related to academic achievement were, by contrast, not as specific or prevalent as discussions related to institutional requirements.

<div align="center">Perceptions Concerning the Curriculum</div>

The perceptions held by administrators, teachers, and students regarding the curriculum of the alternative high schools are examined in this section. I highlight common beliefs shared by those interviewed regarding curriculum development and

implementation at these schools. One belief is that alternative high school administrators and teachers have considerable flexibility and freedom in designing and implementing curriculum. In other words, a considerable amount of the curriculum at alternative high schools is teacher determined. That said, most administrators and teachers indicated that they followed some sort of curriculum framework, benchmarks, or guide that established the basic direction. However, the curriculum of alternative high schools also was seen as being highly teacher driven. Another belief shared by the administrators of all four alternative high schools was that "others" see alternative high schools as having a "watered-down" curriculum. A number of teachers and administrators thought that, to an extent, this impression was accurate.

A "Loosely Aligned" Curriculum

A cursory examination of the courses offered by alternative high schools reveals a curriculum that looks a lot like that offered at traditional high schools (see Table 5 for an example). However, many of those interviewed indicated that, when it came to the issue of curriculum, there was more "flexibility and freedom" in an alternative high school than in a traditional high school. Westerby High School principal Hal Hoskins talked about his experiences as an alternative high school teacher at nearby Galway Public Schools, a position he held for several years before moving to Blue Harbor. "We were left to our own devices, which can be good to a degree, in that you have a lot of flexibility and freedom." However, there was a downside to that flexibility and freedom. Hoskins explained that "usually when you drift like that, you don't have the benefit of a lot of resources."

Table 5. Course offerings at Northshore Alternative High School, by instructor, third quarter: January 21 to March 22, 2002

Teacher	1st Period	2nd Period	3rd Period	4th Period	Lunch	5th Period	6th Period	7th Period	8th Period
One	Monitor attendance	Monitor attendance	General math	General math	Lunch	Intermed. math	Advanced math	Fitness group	Teacher conf. period
Two	Pre-employment	U.S. history	Sociology	English	Lunch	Pre-employment	Sociology	Teacher conf. period	U.S. history
Three	Science	Science	Teacher conf. period	Consumer education	Lunch	Consumer education	Health	Health	Parenting
Four	Teacher conf. period	Basic English	English literature	Basic English	Lunch	English composition	English literature	Selections; English	English composition
Five	Government	American citizenship	Social problems	American citizenship	Lunch	Computer exploration	Government	American citizenship	Teacher conf. Period
Six	Media	Art	Art	Teacher conf. period	Lunch	No class: half-time teacher	No class: half-time teacher	No class: half-time teacher	No class: half-time teacher
Seven (parapro)	Reading	Teacher conf. period	General math	General math	Lunch	Math	Reading	Reading	Monitor business students
Eight (parapro)	Options room	Options room	Options room	Options room	Lunch	Options room	Options room	Monitor attendance	Teacher conf. period

Christian Piper, a science teacher at New Century Academy who also taught university classes, also talked about flexibility. When asked whether, in the area of curriculum development, there was anyone "looking over her shoulder," she responded, "No, especially in the sciences." Piper added, "Of course, we have guidelines to follow and the classes are related to different benchmarks, but we're very flexible."

Mapleton Alternative High School principal Bill Chandler agreed. He talked about the alignment of the Mapleton curriculum with the MEAP and ACT tests. "The curriculum is very, very loosely aligned with the tests," he reported. Moreover, he added that there was not a lot of "outside" pressure to create that alignment. "And the only pressure right now that is put on teachers to tighten up the [curriculum] alignment," he added, "is the pressure they put on themselves." He went on to say that the focus at Mapleton was going to be aligning the curriculum with the ACT Plan assessment and not the MEAP. He described the ACT Plan as "more relevant to what most of our students are going to do after high school."

And when there is no curriculum, what do teachers do? I asked Mapleton Alternative High School instructor Donald Ward. Ward had been at Mapleton for a relatively short time, having previously taught at an alternative high school in the Garrison School District. I inquired whether, when he first came to Mapleton, anyone reviewed with him what he was supposed to teach—or did he just "dive in"? "Kind of dove in," he responded. "Actually, dove in at both school systems. In Garrison we asked a number of times if we could get some of the high school criteria—give us some guide so we know we're doing the right thing. We never received any. Here [at Mapleton] I was able to get them right away. That's kind of what I based off of."

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Perceptions of a "Watered-Down" Curriculum

All of the administrators whom I interviewed talked about the perception held by others, especially traditional high school staff members, that the curriculum at alternative high schools is not as rigorous as at traditional high schools. New Century principal Dorothy White said that opinion might have some merit, considering the size of alternative high schools:

> So curriculum-wise, there is the perception of a watered-down curriculum. Well, you are not as tough as a high school! Well, we're not. Unfortunately, we can't fund a class for just six people for calculus. We can't do it even though we got the foundation grant money for pupils. The funding source for adult ed. is very different. So we can't do that. . . . The perception is that we don't measure up. And, in actuality, we don't in some areas.

Hal Hoskins, principal of Westerby High School, also talked about how others view alternative high schools. When asked how he thought high school staff regarded Westerby, he answered, "With suspicion, I think. There is no question that, I think, a number of teachers, counselors, administrators, you know, are suspicious of what we do." Hoskins went on to say that these people believe in the stereotype of alternative high schools as places where "all the losers" go. And what do they think about curriculum? Hoskins responded that they think "there is no curriculum." And he admitted, "In all honesty, I think that some of that is deserved because I've visited a bunch of alternative schools, as I mentioned earlier, and some of them actually were jokes."

Northshore Alternative High School principal Tony Williams noted that others sometimes view alternative high schools as educational "ugly stepsisters." In the case of Northshore, he indicated that school had been criticized for the way it dealt with Native American students and the dropout rate. He added:

> So the alternative has come under fire. But it's always been kind of viewed as the ugly stepsister or whatever—the stepchild. But we are given the materials to develop the curriculum—well, not to develop, to deliver the curriculum—and I

don't see anybody ever coming in with the authority above me to say, "Look, we've got to start doing this." We're pretty much given free reign.

Mapleton Alternative High School principal Bill Chandler spoke at length of the curriculum initiatives under way at that school. Mapleton is an NCA-accredited school, and Chandler indicated the staff took school improvement efforts seriously. However, at the conclusion of the interview, Chandler concluded, "If I had to point to a weakness in this program, it would be in curriculum. And I think we have a stronger curriculum than a lot of alternative ed. programs, but I still think our curriculum is not what it could be."

The Curriculum Reflects the Teachers

Some persons interviewed for this study also indicated that, just as with teaching styles, the curricula of alternative high schools are tailored to fit the needs and strengths of teachers. "I think that the curriculum reflects the teachers," Northshore Alternative High School teacher Carl Jackson said. "Nothing is really set in stone. 'Cause, yeah, look at my schedule! I'm teaching health and science. Health was my major and earth science was my minor. Where does consumers ed. fit in?" Jackson (Teacher 3 in Table 5) taught two sections of consumer education and one section of parenting.

Mapleton principal Bill Chandler noted that, when it came to electives, the staff members themselves often submitted creative proposals. Describing the process for implementing a new elective class, he explained that teachers "come to me and say, 'I want to teach this particular elective,' and we put it on the agenda for the next staff meeting." Next, Chandler said, the staff member proposing the class explains "how they think it fits into our total curriculum and our mission for the school." He said the staff "kick it around" for a couple of weeks, and then they come back together and make a

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decision. As an example, he talked about a first-hour drum class[1] taught by a language arts instructor:

> It's just fabulous. The kids love it . . . they have made instruments out of materials, and they are really getting pretty good. I thought it was going to be a blow-off class. Quite frankly, I was an obstacle to starting the drum class, and now I'm glad I didn't win that battle because it has turned out to be a great elective.

Teachers and administrators from other alternative high schools also indicated that staff had a great deal of flexibility in establishing elective classes and that often these classes reflected the interests of teachers.

Summary

The data indicated that curriculum guidelines at alternative high schools often were not the primary focus for instruction. Most alternative high school educators acknowledged that they did use some sort of a district-provided guide as a framework for their instruction. Often these guides were based on State of Michigan curriculum benchmarks. That noted, persons interviewed indicated they retained a great deal of flexibility and freedom in designing what was to be taught and how it was to be taught. Often the school curriculum was influenced by teachers' needs, desires, and strengths. The administrators of these alternative high schools noted that staff members at traditional high schools often viewed their curricula as "watered down." And these administrators conceded that, at least to some degree, this was an accurate observation. There was little discussion of curriculum developed exclusively for these alternative high

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[1]I came to Mapleton early one day so that I could observe the drum class. An amusing thing happened during this observation. Students came in, picked out their "instruments," and took a seat around tables placed together to form a large rectangle. I took a seat at one corner of the rectangle. A young woman carrying a stainless steel bowl and a wooden spoon came and sat next to me. She looked a little pale. She told me her name, and I introduced myself. "I don't feel very well," she told me. She held up the stainless steel bowl. "I picked this so that if I have to throw up I can use my instrument." She made it through the class without that happening; her color eventually returning as she whacked the bowl with her spoon in time to the music.

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schools, with the exception of the creation and design of electives. Teachers and

administrators consistently indicated that teacher-designed elective classes were common

at their alternative high schools.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

"Our efforts at *education* appear woefully inadequate in
spite of the remarkable accomplishments of our schools."
Harry F. Wolcott, 1983, p. 247

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain how alternative high

schools in Michigan compared with traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum,

organization, and pedagogy. To have a basis for comparison, I first needed to understand

what happened at traditional high schools, so I turned to the large body of literature

dealing with the nature and development of the traditional high school. In Chapter II, I

summarized key points that scholars have made concerning the curriculum, organization,

and pedagogy of *traditional* high schools. This was the mirror I held up to *alternative*

high schools. In other words, the literature dealing with the curriculum, organization, and

pedagogy of traditional high schools served as a basis for comparison when, during the

course of this study, I examined four alternative high schools in Michigan. As I gathered

and analyzed the data, I formed conclusions concerning the ways that alternative high

schools were similar to, or different from, what the literature said about traditional high

schools. Those conclusions are reported in this chapter.

What Is Alternative About the Curriculum of Alternative High Schools?

The literature dealing with traditional high schools described the modern

traditional American high school as a buffet of educational choices. Development of a

curriculum varies from school to school, and different curricula are developed for

different types of students. The historical trend in American secondary education has been to expand what is taught in traditional high schools in order to promote students' success (Powell et al., 1985). Students who plan to continue their education beyond high school often enroll in more demanding courses. For students who do not intend to continue beyond high school, the curriculum is less demanding. In many cases, the objective of the curriculum seems to be student success with minimal effort on the part of the student (Grant, 1988). The curriculum is designed—some would say diluted—to accommodate the needs of students.

It is the same in alternative high schools. The data from this study consistently supported the conclusion that the curriculum in these schools follows the same logic of accommodation characteristic of traditional high schools. However, there is a significant difference. Alternative high schools take the public school logic of accommodation to new lengths to promote the success of their students. Almost all of the alternative high school administrators and teachers interviewed for this study indicated their willingness to reduce institutional requirements to their most basic terms to encourage students to stay in school and help them get a high school diploma. They indicated they did whatever they needed to do to "keep them here" and "get them through."

The strategies of Donald Ward, a teacher at Mapleton Alternative High School, illustrate just how basic accommodations could be. He explained that, when alternative high school students were failing his class, they still had options. "I have offered them the opportunity to either do the work, retake the test, and get the grade you want to get; or you can get the book and make all the corrections so you know all the right answers and the highest grade you get is 70%." When talking about testing and daily assignments, teachers talked in terms of procedures and not content. They described things students

did to "bring up their grade." There was little discussion concerning how students demonstrated they had mastered content standards established for that course.

That is not to say there were no established standards. Alternative high school educators, when interviewed for this study, consistently indicated that instruction at their schools was framed by some sort of a curriculum guide or guides, most of which were based on "imported" district-level or State of Michigan benchmarks. However, most alternative high school teachers and administrators interviewed for this study also shared a common belief concerning oversight. They responded that only rarely did someone "look over their shoulder" to determine whether they were implementing any sort of curriculum standards. As principal Bill Chandler at Mapleton Alternative High School noted, the only "pressure that is put on teachers right now to tighten up [curriculum] alignment is the pressure they put on themselves."

At first glance, the course offerings of the alternative high schools included in this study looked much like those offered at the districts' traditional high schools. However, a great deal of energy and detail went into the design of elective classes in the alternative high schools included in this study. Moreover, the data revealed that the curriculum often was shaped to fit the needs of individual students. At New Century Academy, teachers spoke with pride of their plan for a student who had been home-schooled and could not read. The "self-paced" classes at Mapleton allowed students to earn credits relatively quickly, if they were motivated.

To succeed at alternative high schools, students did not need to master a one-size-fits-all prescribed set of academic standards, or even choose from two or three options. Teachers indicated they met students "where they were at." Students took placement exams to determine their current levels of achievement, and that is where instruction

started. If students could handle more, they were encouraged to do more. There were fewer demands on students who were struggling. Greg, a student at Northshore Alternative High School who had difficulty with math, first told me, "I can barely do my times tables." Then a few sentences later he added, "I actually have got all my credits for math. . . . I ain't gotta take any more math."

In summary, the data from this study consistently indicated that there was little or no support among alternative high school administrators and teachers for a more uniform, more demanding curriculum for *all* students. There was, by contrast, considerable support for a curriculum that would accommodate the specific needs of students. Alternative high school administrators and teachers designed learning plans for individual students. They created programs, like self-paced independent studies, that accommodated the needs of their students. And teachers taught what they wanted to teach. They designed elective classes based on their interests and what they thought would interest students. Moreover, when asked about curriculum, most alternative educators did *not* feel compelled to give "lip service" to the need for intellectual rigor and demanding courses of study. Instead, they talked about the need to keep the curriculum flexible to accommodate students and help them get a diploma.

<u>What Is Alternative About the Organization and Structure of Alternative High Schools?</u>

To provide a basis for comparison to alternative high schools, I reviewed literature dealing with the organization of the traditional high school. The literature indicated that American high schools were designed primarily to provide direct, uncomplicated ways to maintain control and promote orderliness. The school day was arranged into periods, and the clock regulated the lives of students and teachers. The

layout and design of the school promoted efficient education of batches of students (Cusick, 1973). There were all sorts of rules for all sorts of things: smoking, being tardy, and behavior in class and in the halls. Students did not "come and go" as they pleased. These were complex bureaucracies, and it took effort to ensure that they were orderly and that educators were the ones in control. Powell et al. (1985), Cusick (1983), McNeil (1986), and Sizer (1984) all talked about the relationship between control and instruction.

Many students did not want to be in school. At best, they were quiet and unresponsive. At worst, these students were abusive and disruptive. Given this reality, teachers often promoted strategies and agreements designed to keep order. Sizer observed that, in traditional high schools, "getting agreement takes persuasiveness, flexibility, trust, and time. Failing to get agreement, and agreement on ends and means that forward serious intellectual activity, however painful, results in an empty school" (p. 160). A significant challenge facing educators in traditional high schools, then, was keeping order in spite of the lack of motivation of many students. And educators could not say to those uncaring students, "Just leave!" Americans valued education as a key component of good citizenship. Fundamental American values said it was important for all students to attend school, even if they were unruly or unmotivated. An egalitarian ideal charged educators with the responsibility for getting students to attend classes, and working with disorderly students to see whether they could complete the work (Cusick, 1983).

The data collected for this study consistently revealed that alternative high schools were organized much like traditional high schools. Alternative high schools looked like traditional high schools in many ways. Like traditional high schools, alternative high schools were organized to promote orderliness and maintain control.

Subject areas were divided into classes. The school day was divided into periods, and the clock regulated the day for students and teachers alike. Students earned credits for classes—at the rate of one half credit for a semester-long class that met for one period a day. Like traditional high schools, alternative high schools were organized to accommodate the needs of students.

However, as was the case with curriculum, there was a significant difference between the organization of alternative high schools and that of traditional high schools. When organizing their schools, alternative educators took the public school logic of accommodation one step further. Alternative high school educators reduced institutional requirements to their most *basic* terms. Again, the objective was to encourage students to stay in school and help them get a high school diploma. Educators in alternative schools made little or no pretense that their primary mission was to nurture the intellectual development of students. At alternative high schools, students succeeded by mastering well-defined institutional demands that were reduced to a set of "bottom-line" requirements. The requirements were specific and well articulated. Everyone talked about them. Everyone, including students, understood what had to be done to meet these institutional demands. To illustrate how alternative educators created and shaped these institutional requirements to accommodate students, four areas related to the organization of alternative high schools—attendance, earning credits, dropping out, and standards for student behavior—are reviewed in the following paragraphs. Data concerning each of these areas initially were presented in Chapter IV.

Attendance requirements at alternative high schools were an interesting combination of tough standards and clever exceptions. Jim, a Northshore student, explained it by saying, "You only get six absences. And if you are over six, you lose

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credit. No matter what. You're over six, you're out." However, Jim went on to say that, under certain circumstances, you might get a teacher to give you partial credit for the class. He said, "If you go up to the teachers, and you're nice to them, you know, you're not a bastard, they are cool with it. They'll give you deals, like if you come the rest of the quarter and do your work, they'll give you credit." Among the schools included in the study, the number of absences allowed varied from school to school. However, the basic procedure that Jim outlined held true (in some form) in all of the schools. And everyone understood the limits, and everyone understood what one had to do to get partial credit.

At each of the alternative high schools included in this study, understanding the procedures and regulations related to earning credits was considered serious business. Teachers and students understood that accumulating credits was the lifeblood of "getting through" and earning a diploma. Administrators, teachers, or counselors made sure students knew exactly where they stood "credit-wise" There were periodic conferences or audits to ensure that students were making progress. Moreover, at these schools there were ways to earn credits other than sitting in a classroom participating in regular classes. For example, at Northshore, another way to earn credits was through "testing out." At Mapleton, self-paced classes provided students another route for earning credits. At New Century Academy, a student earned credit while learning to read, and Westerby High School emphasized job shadowing and work-related activities. What is important here is that administrators, teachers, and students all understood these options. Moreover, in the process of accumulating the credits needed to earn a diploma, alternative routes (some might label them shortcuts) were both allowed and extolled. The bureaucracy was not

designed to limit and restrict. Educators designed bureaucratic requirements to help students succeed.

The data indicated that the general procedure for dropping out of an alternative high school was basic: You could not drop out. If you were over the age of 16, you could legally discontinue your attendance. But that did not mean you could not come back. Carissa, a student at Northshore Alternative High School, explained that over a two-year period she "was in and out of here." However, when it came time to return, Carissa explained, she did not have to battle through bureaucratic red tape. "Every time you are always welcomed back," she said. Alternative high school educators had created procedures for leaving, and then returning, that were truly basic. If you were over 16, you could leave. If you wanted to come back, you could come back.

Finally, there is the matter of standards for student behavior. Alternative high school students reported that, when it came to student behavior, you were given "more slack" at alternative high schools. Greg, a Northshore Alternative High School student, observed about that school, "You can goof off a lot more without getting in trouble for it." Administrators, teachers, and students who were interviewed for this study generally acknowledged that alternative high schools did not have as many rules and regulations as a traditional high school. That is not to say there were no boundaries for student behaviors. The data collected during this study indicated that there were limits, and, moreover, both staff and students understood those limits. Students seemed especially "street smart" concerning the requirements for staying in school. And students communicated those parameters to other students. Allison at Westerby High School explained that when new students started fights, they were given a message: "We just don't do that here."

The data dealing with student behaviors revealed that most alternative high school students smoked. So there were rules about smoking. However, the administrators, teachers, and students interviewed for this study pointed out that these rules differed significantly from the ways traditional high schools treated smoking. No alternative high school included in this study permitted smoking on school premises. Some schools, however, "allowed" students to smoke on the sidewalk near those schools. At others, students had to leave the school area to smoke. Although there was considerable variation from school to school, the alternative high schools included in this study shaped the organization to accommodate students' smoking. At Mapleton, students were allowed to leave campus at lunch time. At other schools, the day was structured to provide "breaks," and students were permitted to go outside to a nearby "smoking area" off school grounds. That did not happen at traditional high schools. Peter, a Westerby High School student, summarized the problem at the traditional high school: "You couldn't go off the bus and have a cigarette on the side of the highway. You had to go right to class." And once in class, students usually were not permitted to leave until the end of the school day.

Many students and educators interviewed for this study also indicated that the relationship that alternative education students had with their teachers influenced student behavior. They said this relationship was often more personal and positive than at traditional high schools. Students at some alternative high schools included in this study were on a first-name basis with their teachers. They shared in-house day care and talked about their children. Students and teachers bowled and played golf together after school. Administrators, teachers, and students indicated this relationship influenced behavior. Ron Holaday, a second-year teacher at Mapleton, talked about the benefits of golfing in a

league with students. He explained that when one of his fellow golfers started acting up in class he could say, "Ervingham, you don't act like this other places, why are you acting like that here?"

In summary, data related to attendance, earning credits, dropping out, and standards for student behavior illustrated how alternative high school educators went beyond what happened at traditional high schools to accommodate the needs of students. They developed tough attendance requirements—and then invented creative appeal processes and clever ways for students to earn partial credit. Students and teachers kept close track of the progress made toward earning a diploma, and they created new ways to earn credit. Students did not drop out; they just left school for awhile and generally were welcomed back when they returned. And, although there were definite limits on allowable student behaviors, those limits often went beyond the boundaries established by traditional high schools. Alternative high schools were organized to give students "more slack." Alternative high schools were organized to accommodate students, and to provide programs and procedures that enabled students to stay in school and get a high school diploma.

What Is Alternative About the Pedagogy of Alternative High Schools?

There was a general impression among many persons interviewed for this study that the art of teaching in an alternative high school was quite different from the pedagogy of traditional high schools. They noted that "alternative ed. type teaching" required a different approach. Alternative high school administrators, teachers, and students indicated that instructors in alternative high schools chose teaching styles that were less teacher centered. Instruction in alternative high schools emphasized "doing" more than in traditional high schools. There was less lecturing from the front of the

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classroom, and there were more dialogs between teachers and students than typically was the case in traditional high schools. In general, then, alternative high school students' and educators' data indicated that alternative high school classrooms were more student centered and included more interactions between teachers and students than was the case at traditional high schools.

The literature related to traditional high schools, reviewed in Chapter II of this study, confirmed that teaching in traditional high schools was often teacher centered (Sizer, 1984). In traditional high schools, teachers chose to set up the classroom so that they were on one side, and students were on the other. Then teachers lectured, passed out assignments, questioned, called on students to answer, and then corrected or commented on the responses. Traditional high schools included a great deal of "telling" (Cohen & Barnes, 1993; Cuban, 1984). So when I compared the literature dealing with traditional high schools to the comments of the persons interviewed for this study, differences surfaced.

That said, both the literature and the data collected in this study also revealed a significant similarity regarding the pedagogy of alternative and traditional high schools. The literature dealing with the pedagogy of traditional high schools confirmed that teachers in these schools often controlled what was taught and under what conditions within their classrooms. Teachers had a considerable amount of autonomy to decide what happened in their classrooms. In her *Contradictions of Control* (1986), McNeil noted that teachers at Nelson High were free to develop their own style behind closed doors. In his *The Egalitarian Ideal and the American High School* (1983), Cusick noted that "each person was allowed, even encouraged, to develop his or her own content and approach to subject matter, and was then allowed to deliver that curriculum to the

students in ways that he or she deemed appropriate" (p. 3). Lightfoot, in *The Good High School* (1983), wrote that she was struck by the centrality and dominance of teachers. She added, "They give shape to what is taught, how it is taught, and in what context it is transmitted" (p. 334).

The same was true in the alternative high schools included in this study. The data gathered in this research consistently indicated that the pedagogy of alternative schools was based on the teaching preferences of individual teachers. Teachers at alternative high schools had a great deal of freedom when it came to their style of teaching. Hal Hoskins, principal at Westerby High School, spoke for many other alternative high school educators when he said, "There are a lot of ways to teach." Hoskins added that as long as teachers could "demonstrate that teaching and learning is taking place," they could choose their own teaching methods.

When it came to pedagogy, then, the literature dealing with traditional high schools and the data from this study revealed both differences and similarities. Teaching in alternative high schools was more student centered. Alternative high school teaching included less lecturing, less "telling," than the literature indicated occurred in traditional high schools. On the other hand, the literature and the data from this study indicated that, in both alternative and traditional high schools, individual teachers determined the pedagogy. This conclusion, in turn, raised an important question: Why would alternative high school teachers generally choose teaching styles that were more student centered? Mapleton principal Bill Chandler addressed this issue when he talked about the importance of positive relationships between teachers and students. "The key to getting a kid to learn is to have a relationship with the kid, especially when you are dealing with difficult kids." So, one reason for a student-centered approach to teaching was the need

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to develop closer relationships with "difficult kids." New Century principal Dorothy White provided another reason for less lecturing and more doing. She explained, "If they are not doing—and we're not talking reading a book—if they are not doing, manipulating, participating, then it is much more difficult to get them here." White concluded, "Retention is a huge problem." So teachers used methods that encouraged students to keep attending classes. The way teachers approached teaching at alternative high schools, then, can be viewed as one more thing they did to accommodate students. Teachers selected teaching styles that helped them form relationships with difficult students—styles that would keep students attending classes. Again, as was the case with curriculum and organization, the goal was to promote the success of their students. Teachers in alternative high schools did what they needed to do to encourage students to stay in school and help them get a high school diploma.

The Conclusion

The curriculum, organization, and pedagogy of the alternative high schools included in this study reflected the same logic of accommodation that the literature indicated was characteristic of traditional high schools. However, the data from this study consistently revealed that alternative high schools went beyond what happens at traditional high schools to meet the needs of students. And that is what is alternative about alternative high schools. Alternative high schools take the public school logic of accommodation as far as it needs to go for their students.

Almost all of the alternative high school administrators and teachers interviewed for this study repeatedly indicated their willingness to reduce institutional requirements to their most basic terms to encourage students to stay in school and help them get a high school diploma. Alternative high school educators were flexible and creative in

designing these "bottom-line" requirements related to schooling. Everyone talked about these requirements. Everyone understood them. Unlike traditional high schools, educators in alternative high schools made little or no pretense that their primary mission was to nurture the intellectual development of students. Instead, alternative educators explained that their goal for students was to "keep them here" and "get them through," and they did what they had to do to make it happen. This down-to-basics approach to the logic of accommodation explains much of what happens at alternative high schools.

Reflections

In many ways, then, alternative high schools follow the same basic logic as traditional high schools in the areas of curriculum, organization, and pedagogy. However, it is significant that administrators and teachers in alternative high schools are willing and able to take this logic one step further. As noted above, they consistently go as far as possible to keep students coming to school, and to help them earn their high school diplomas. What explains the tendency of administrators and teachers in these schools to be more flexible and permissive when it comes to curriculum, organization, and pedagogy? I would point to three areas as possible explanations for this increased flexibility and permissiveness.

First, alternative high schools are not faced with the same scrutiny and pressures from external forces as traditional high schools. As Northshore Alternative High School principal Tony Williams noted, alternative schools are "pretty much given free reign." I would propose that one reason for this relative lack of scrutiny is the result of the expectations many people have for alternative high schools. The objectives for success for alternative high schools are generally much simpler than the benchmarks for success many would establish for traditional high schools. For many people, it is enough that

students in alternative schools "just get through." Success means coming to school, staying out of trouble, and earning a high school diploma. When many people look at traditional high schools, they often focus on, and criticize, the dropout rate. When many people look at alternative high schools, they often focus on, and celebrate, the completion rate. Principal Dorothy White summarized it nicely. She noted that instead of saying that New Century Academy had a 40% dropout rate, she responded, "No, we have a 60% completion rate. Where others failed!"

The findings from this study also revealed relatively little "outside" scrutiny of alternative high school students' standardized test scores. There was little indication that students' aggregate scores on the MEAP or the American College Test (ACT) were of critical importance in these alternative high schools. All the alternative schools included in this study administered these tests, but alternative high school educators consistently indicated that results from such testing were not reliable indicators of the school's academic effectiveness. They pointed to factors such as the transient nature of the school's population to explain why these measures were poor indications of student success. Teacher Kelly Gleason at Westerby High School spoke for many other alternative high school educators when she noted, "When you have an alternative ed. population that is in such flux, we don't have a lot of the students taking the MEAP test." By contrast, the aggregate and individual MEAP and ACT scores of the traditional high school are first reported to, and studied by, a number of professionals in the school district. Then these scores are reported in aggregate form to people outside the school district and often are viewed as an indicator of the school's effectiveness. In many communities, it is not uncommon to have the aggregate MEAP scores of the district compared to those of nearby districts in a chart published in the local newspaper. In

traditional high schools, the content areas assessed in MEAP and ACT tests cannot be ignored without repercussions.

The second reason that alternative high schools are able to take the logic of traditional high schools one step further is related to the size of the schools. In general, alternative high schools have much smaller enrollments than traditional high schools. The enrollments of the alternative high schools included in this study ranged from approximately 90 students to approximately 125 students. The traditional high schools in the four districts visited for this study ranged from 850 students to 1,700 students. It is not uncommon to have a traditional high school with an enrollment of 2,000 students or more. Because of the smaller school size, alternative high school administrators have more time to meet with students and, in effect, customize procedures to meet the needs of individuals. Hal Hoskins, principal from Westerby High School, described the norm for the alternative high schools included in this study when he explained the admission process for that school. "I meet with every single student in here," he said. "We'll explain what our program is and what it isn't, and try to get the motivation of why he wants to, and make sure the reason they want to, come here is the right reason."

Because of the smaller size of alternative high schools, teachers also get to know their students. New Century Academy instructor Caroline Lorenz noted that many of the students attending that alternative high school had gone unnoticed at the traditional high school. They were students who had fallen through the cracks, but the size of the alternative high school brought them to the "front of the class."

> A lot of the kids [attending New Century Academy] don't even have behavior problems. They just fell through the cracks. They are the kids that sit at the back of the classroom [in a traditional high school] and maybe didn't cause a big disruption; they just didn't stand out in any way. For teachers to have 150 kids a day, somebody that is sitting at the back of the class, is not disruptive, but doesn't get their work done and isn't going to pass—they are not necessarily considered a

behavior issue. . . . So some of those kids that we get have, for the past 9 or 10 years, sat at the back of the class and not done anything but sat back and watched. And here they don't get away with that as much. We know their names, we know their parents, and we know their situation.

So smaller enrollment clearly makes a difference when it comes to getting to know students. In turn, this sets the stage for the third reason that explains why alternative high school educators are able to take the logic of the traditional high school as far as they can, within limits.

A third factor that explains the greater flexibility and permissiveness of alternative high schools is the relationship between educators and students in these schools. This research revealed a clear and consistent message from both students and educators: There are closer and more positive relationships between students and teachers in alternative high schools than is the case in traditional high schools. As noted above, this relationship is explained, in part, by the relatively small size of the alternative high schools. Another factor in the formation of positive student-teacher relationships is necessity. Mapleton principal Bill Chandler pointed out that "the key to getting a kid to learn is to have a relationship with the kid." Chandler added that difficult students would cooperate when they cared about the teachers. So positive relationships between students and teachers promote learning and cooperation. Then, too, there is the need to keep students coming to school, and to enroll new students on a regular basis. Positive relationships between students and teachers certainly promote regular attendance by students, and as current students talk to prospective students about their relationships with teachers, new enrollments are likely. Furthermore, in alternative high schools, there is a clear, direct link between student attendance and the existence of jobs, and even the school. If students don't attend, and in adequate numbers to provide financial support for

current programming, the number of staff members could be reduced or the school closed.

That said, the research findings pointed to an even more persuasive explanation for positive relationships between teachers and students in alternative high schools. Again and again, I was impressed by the ways teachers, administrators, counselors, and secretaries in these schools showed they cared about "the kids" in their schools. And I was equally impressed by the number of students who truly appreciated the opportunities provided by their alternative high schools. These students respected their teachers, and they were grateful for the close relationships they had with their instructors and other staff who worked at the school. Smaller size, enhanced learning, greater cooperation, and the need to maintain current enrollment are important factors in producing positive relationships between teachers and students. However, I would propose that the most important reason for positive, productive student-teacher relationships is the sense of mission that I observed in the four alternative high schools included in this study. The consistent message I received from alternative high school staff was that their mission was to "help these kids." And it follows that, in the process of fulfilling this mission, they were obviously willing to go as far as possible (within limits) to keep students coming, interest them, and help them earn the credits they needed for a high school diploma.

Other Explanations

In qualitative research, issues related to generalizability, validity, and reliability ultimately depend on the researcher's ability to convince the reader that, as Geertz (1988) noted, this is "an authentic account by someone personally acquainted with how life proceeds in some place, at some time, among some group." Cusick (1983) said about

generalizability, "It is the obligation of the reader to determine if the descriptions presented in the account match his experiences in similar places" (p. 134). So, ultimately, it is the reader who will decide whether there could be another explanation. And, because that decision would be based on the reader's particular set of experiences, it is clear that, yes, there could indeed be other conclusions drawn from the data presented in this study.

Another possible additional explanation concerning what is alternative about alternative high schools emerged from the data collected for this study and is worthy of additional discussion here. Although this was outside the initial scope of this study and not an exploratory question, data collected from students consistently revealed that alternative and traditional high schools differed in the degree of importance placed on students' social groups. Students from all four alternative high schools included in this study held common opinions concerning the existence and influence of groups in traditional high schools. They explained that things like what you wore, how you looked, whom you hung out with, and whether or not you played sports or sang in the choir were all very important in traditional high schools. These things often "classified" you and put you in a group. As Melissa, a student at Mapleton Alternative High School, explained, "In high school, it really matters what group you are in and who you're with."

However, students interviewed for this study indicated the attitude toward social grouping was much different at alternative high schools. These schools were less judgmental and more accepting of all types of students. Naomi, a Northshore student, indicated that at the alternative school, "it's just like we are all friends, instead of 12 different groups." Kari, a student at New Century Academy, talked about the way she was accepted at that school: "I felt very welcome because everybody was the same as

me. Everybody had troubles like me, everybody is learning like me." Students interviewed for this study indicated that social distinctions were significantly less important in alternative high schools than in traditional high schools. Students interviewed for this study also reported that groups, or cliques, seemed both more common and more important in the lives of students at traditional high schools. At alternative high schools, groups were much less prevalent and much les important to students. According to the responses of these students, the different ways students regarded social distinctions and groupings at traditional and alternative high schools might provide another explanation of what is alternative about alternative high schools.

The Potential for Additional Research

The preceding discussion concerning social groups at alternative high schools illustrates that there is a great deal of potential for additional research involving alternative high schools. Despite the growing number of alternative high schools, there continues to be relatively little research dealing with these institutions. Limitations of this study included the number and types of alternative schools visited. Four schools were included in this research, and these four schools had several common traits. All had an enrollment of approximately 100 students. All were located in a building not connected to another school building. All had been in existence for several years. There are many different types of alternative high schools. Studies that included more schools, or different types of schools, could make a significant contribution to the discourse concerning the nature and effectiveness of alternative schools. Other types of schools that could be included in future studies include:

- Alternative middle schools
- Alternative high schools located within a traditional high school (sometimes called a school within a school)

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- Smaller alternative high schools (with enrollments of 20 to 40 students)
- Larger alternative high schools (with enrollments of 300 students or more)
- Alternative high schools that are also charter schools
- "Specialty" alternative high schools (such as schools for talented students or for students with special needs)

There also is potential for additional research based on the type of student included in the research. Another limitation of this study was that the students interviewed were, for the most part, students whom administrators and teachers would label as "mature." With some notable exceptions, the students included in this study had been at the alternative school for at least a year and were considered successful. Another study that concentrated on new students or students who were unsuccessful in alternative high schools could provide another perspective on these institutions.

Significance of the Findings

Geertz (1988) reminded readers that it is absurd to talk about "describing" nonentities like "culture" or "society" as if they were "fully observable, though somewhat ungainly, bugs." He explained, "In ethnography there are no 'things' there to be the objects of a description, the original appearance that the language of description 'represents' as indexical objects for comparison, classification, and generalization; there is rather a discourse" (p. 136). The significance of this study, then, is not the extent to which it describes "things" that explain alternative high schools, but rather the extent to which what is reported here adds to the discourse about these schools.

I would suggest two contributions this study makes to the discourse about the nature and effectiveness of alternative high schools. First, there are the data reported in Chapter IV. When I began this project, I was apprehensive that some people, especially students, would be reluctant to talk with me about their experiences. That did not happen. Every alternative high school administrator, teacher, and student I interviewed

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for this project willingly provided insight into their work, values, and goals. They spoke with candor, and many of their comments were insightful. I have attempted to report these people's comments accurately and within the appropriate context. I would hope and expect that others interested in alternative high schools would also find value in the observations of these administrators, teachers, and students.

The second contribution this research makes to the discourse concerning alternative high schools lies in its conclusions. The data revealed that alternative high schools consistently went beyond accommodations made at traditional high schools to meet the needs of their students. In fact, alternative high schools took the public school logic of accommodation as far as it needed to go for their students. Raywid (1998) observed that alternative high schools do not seem like "real schools" to many people. She noted that alternative educational programs are "somewhat marginal to the educational mainstream and a fringe rather than a fully accepted member of the educational establishment. As a result, even after decades, and even when providing leadership for others, they have never achieved institutional legitimacy" (p. 12).

I would submit that the conclusions of this study suggest that alternative high schools are indeed mainstream. When it comes to curriculum, organization, and pedagogy, traditional and alternative high schools share a common foundation—the public school logic of accommodation. Both traditional and alternative high schools are "real schools," and educators at both schools are doing what the American public wants them to do. They are helping students stay in school and earn their high school diplomas. Whether that is a sufficient and worthy objective deserves continued discussion, for *both* traditional and alternative high schools. Mapleton principal Bill Chandler went right to the heart of the matter, talking about the students in that alternative high school: "These

are not broken or dumb kids," he said, "and so if we don't present a challenging and

relevant curriculum, we are doing them a disservice."

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