

Alternatives that aren't just for 'bad' kids

The *Star's* suggestion school districts use "temporary alternative schools" to curb suspensions is well intended, but misguided. The idea that alternatives to suspension would help reduce dropout rates is not new; it's an old and flawed concept that needs review.

In the early 1970s, believing the causes of student failure were flaws in the educational system, alternatives were innovative schools of choice to the traditional model. By the late 70s, districts added in-school suspension programs. In the mid-80s, off-campus discipline-oriented alternatives were created for students who needed rehabilitation. These alternatives of the system, where students went to be "fixed" then reassimilated, were designed to keep students in school and graduating.

So, if alternatives are to increase graduation rates, recent graduation numbers imply alternatives are suspect. Programs in certain districts may help some students. However, in IPS, with a 10-year graduation rate of less than 30 percent, its numerous alternatives appear no more than "warehouses" simply keeping difficult students temporarily out of regular classrooms.

But, families need alternatives. Maybe the issue is: What kind? Are districts following best practices? According to the *Pseudo-Alternative School Checklist* published by the IALA, (www.learningalternatives.net) most are "alternative" in name only, representing punitive approaches that isolate and segregate students.

One best practice includes removing the stigma that alternatives are just for "bad" kids. Stigmatizing backfires, further weakening students by branding them as unfit.

Opening all alternatives to any student by choice for any length of time will rid them of their negative image--putting them on par with options and magnets. Alternative educators know students want to come to school and learn, and simply need the best environment for doing so. They'd like to keep students and many students want to stay, but can't. Why?

If districts opened alternatives to anyone, they would have to realize school climate might be just as important in determining school success as a student's behavior, race, gender, economic, or academic level.

Although created to uphold the public school system's standards and authority, it is ironic that current alternatives expose its underbelly. Their very existence proves traditional schools are not working. It is important for Hoosiers to examine within the greater social context, the function of alternatives in the unequal social formation of a large section of society. Instead of directly challenging traditional structures, the existence of alternatives allows legislatures, policy makers, and educators to avoid the necessity of making any major educational reforms. Failure is attributed to individual character flaws rather than the larger more broad-based system of exclusion students must traverse.

Indeed, students must be responsible for disruptions, but so must schools. IPS has admitted it was responsible for its own failure. Its high schools are now smaller, more hospitable, inclusive and preventative climates, emphasizing individualization and relationships--practices that alternatives of choice pioneered.

Today's alternatives are a more refined type of differentiation and segregation. Since the students are stigmatized as problematic, this exposes the true status and ranking nature of tracking, grouping, and labeling in

Indiana schools and belies their promise of an equal educational opportunity. In whatever form, segregation is harmful and particularly insidious when based on a status of being in need.

Why offer families temporary alternatives, but not schools with educators and a curriculum equal to the best in the country? Ultimately, we must examine why certain groups do not have the institutional access to acquire the cultural capital necessary to succeed in the existing schools.

By limiting who attends alternatives to those who are “problematic,” districts actually limit the potential of alternatives to help all students. Why wait until students become disruptive? Learning alternatives for everyone all the time!

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