Alternative Education Programs: Program and Student Characteristics

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Alternative education programs are often viewed as individualized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth identified as at-risk for school failure. Increasingly, these programs have been identified as programs for disruptive youth who have been referred from traditional schools. The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of the administrative structures and physical facilities of alternative education programs and to describe the student population and educational services being offered to youth attending such programs. The findings suggest programs appear to be largely site-based programs, often operating in physical facilities with limited access to academic supports. The student population appears to be mostly high school students with a large portion of students identified as disabled. The general education curriculum is reported as a predominant course of study among alternative schools, supplemented with vocational education. Students appear to be provided with a number of school and community support activities. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Within the past decade, a rise in the number of alternative education programs serving youth at-risk for education failure has been observed. In 1993-1994, 2606 alternative schools operated separately from traditional schools. A 47% (3850) increase in the number of alternative education schools was observed by the 1997-1998 school year (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). However, when the definition of alternative education for at-risk youth is expanded to include public alternative schools, charter schools for at-risk youth, programs within juvenile detention centers, community-based schools or programs operated by districts, and alternative schools with evening and weekend formats, the number of programs increased substantially. The National Center on Educational Statistics, for the academic year 2000-2001, reported 10,900 public alternative schools and programs serving 612,000 students were operating in the United States (Kleiner et al., 2002).

Alternative education programs are often viewed as individualized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth identified as at-risk for school failure. More recently, these programs have been viewed as programs for disruptive youth who are experiencing difficulty in traditional schools (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1999). Likewise, the approaches and orientation of the programs appear to differ accordingly. Some programs emphasize a disciplinary orientation and others focus on developing an innovative program that seeks to meet students' unique educational needs (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Raywid (1994) identified three categories of alternative education programs. Type I programs refer to schools of choice such as magnet schools which may have a programmatic theme for content (e.g., math, science, art), and/or instructional approaches (e.g., open grade). Type II programs are for students who have been identified as disruptive to the traditional school. These programs may represent one "last chance" before being expelled from school. The emphasis is on behavior modification without regard for modifications of curriculum or pedagogy. The third program type, Type III, has a rehabilitation/remediation emphasis. The goal is for students to return to the traditional school.

Descriptions of alternative schools and programs have suggested such programs exhibit specific structural and programming characteristics. For example, alternative education programs have often been characterized as small enrollment programs. Earlier reports have suggested the student populations of programs were approximately 200 students or less (Franklin, 1992; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Paglin & Fager, 1997). Other descriptions have identified individualized instruction which meets students' unique academic and social-emotional needs as characteristic of alternative education programs (Franklin, 1992; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Third, supportive environments that strengthen relationships among peers and between teachers and students are often reported as a quality of alternative education programs (Franklin, 1992; Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Furthermore, youth attending alternative education programs appear to have diverse educational backgrounds and needs. Often times, youth are referred to such programs for a variety of reasons including experiencing behavioral difficulties in schools, being suspended or expelled from school, being a pregnant or parenting teen, experiencing academic failure, or having a disability. Youth who attend the programs have also been identified as being a member of an ethnic minority group (Lange & Lehr, 2003; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Raywid, 1994).

In Illinois, alternative education programming for youth at risk for educational failure is offered through three potential entities; local school districts, special education cooperatives, and Regional Offices of Education (ROE) of the Illinois State Board of Education. Alternative education programs of local school districts and special education cooperatives may serve both youth with and without disabilities. A number of ROEs participate in the Safe Schools Program which is a statewide system of alternative education programs for expelled, expulsion-eligible, suspended or suspension-eligible students in grades 6-12. This system was developed in response to a legislative directive to provide an alternative education system for disruptive students and, in 1997, began serving youth (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). In some instances, the alternative education programs of the Safe School Program and special education cooperatives are combined into alternative school programming for children and youth with and without disabilities.

Despite the history of alternative education programs, few data are available describing the governance, physical facilities, student population, educational programming, and supports being provided to students at risk for educational failure. The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose was to examine the governance, funding, and physical facilities supporting alternative educational programs. A second purpose was to describe the student population and the educational and support services of alternative school programs. These data have implications for programming and evaluation–first, identification of the components of the alternative education programs

serving at-risk youth and second, to facilitate evaluation activities to enhance the effectiveness of educational programs.

Method

Subjects

Eighty-four program directors or principals of alternative programs were requested to describe the characteristics of their individual alternative education programs. The names of participants were obtained from two sources. First, 102 directors of special education as identified by the Illinois State Board of Education were contacted via e-mail explaining the purpose of the study and asking each of them to indicate whether or not they have an alternative education program. If the district/cooperative had such a program, they were asked to provide the name and postal mailing address of the individual who was the program director/principal of the program. Fifteen of the directors of special education indicated alternative education programs were not provided by their districts or cooperatives. Of the remaining 88 special education directors, 45 directors provided the names and addresses of principals of alternative schools serving their cooperatives or districts.

Second, 56 superintendents of Regional Offices of Education (ROE) of the Illinois State Board of Education were also contacted by e-mail asking each to indicate whether or not they operated an alternative school program. If so, the superintendents were asked to indicate the name and postal mailing address of the principal of the program. Names and addresses of administrators were received from 39 of the ROEs. In addition, 10 identified administrators served programs jointly operated by ROEs and special education cooperatives.

Of the identified 84 directors/principals, 50 of the individuals returned their surveys, for a return rate of 59%. Two additional surveys were returned as undeliverable by the U.S. mail service. Of the respondents, 66% ($n = 33$) held Master's degrees, 22% had earned either education specialist ($n = 2$; 2%) or doctorate ($n = 10$; 20%). Five (10%) of the respondents held a Bachelor's degree.

As administrators of alternative education programs, the respondents averaged 5.30 (_SD_ =

4.63; Range = 0-22) years of experience. The teaching experience of the administrators was predominantly general education with an average of 12.61 ($SD = 11.42$; Range = 1-38) years. Related to special education, the respondents indicated an average of 3.59 ($SD = 6.25$; Range = 2-26) years of teaching experience.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to identify the characteristics of alternative education programs including the administration of the program, student population, educational programs, school and community supports, educational faculty and staff, and administrators' experience and educational background. The six domains of interest were identified through a 10 year literature review examining the characteristics of alternative education programs. From previous research of alternative education programs and program descriptions, 31 questions were developed to address six domains of interest. The final draft of the survey was sent to three principals of alternative education programs for review. Each principal was asked to review the questionnaire for clarity, appropriateness of items, and to provide suggestions for improvement. Based upon this feedback, several changes in wording and order of items were made. However, the content of the questionnaire remained the same.

The final draft of the questionnaire included six domains of interest. First, program administration, addressed the issues of administrative structure (i.e., independent program, regional program), funding sources (e.g., state appropriations, federal grants), school management approach (e.g., site-based, centralized), and quality of the facilities and accessability to resources such as libraries and science laboratories.

The second domain, student population, asked participants to describe their students relative to ethnicity, gender, age range, and disability categories. Program characteristics were of interest in the third domain. Specifically, the respondents were to respond to questions indicating whether their program was an open or closed campus, locale of the program (e.g., urban, rural), length of the school year, length of the school day, length of class period, availability of summer school and the length of the sum-

mer school session, teacher-student ratio, educational and functional skill program offerings (e.g., GED, Chapter 1), and admission criteria for a student to enter the program.

Program supports comprised the fourth domain. The respondents were asked to describe the availability of program supports for parents such as parent support groups and parent training, personnel supports such as paraprofessionals and transition specialists, and community supports such as community health services or service learning opportunities.

The fifth and sixth domains of interest requested descriptions of the characteristics of the instructional staff and school leadership. Specific points of interest were the number of general and special educators, number of fully certified staff and the number of paraprofessionals employed by the program. Finally, the respondents were asked to describe their academic background (e.g., degree) and to indicate the number of years of experience as an administrator, general educator and/or special educator.

Procedures. Each identified alternative education program administrator was sent a packet of materials which included a cover letter, questionnaire, and postage-paid addressed envelope. The cover letter stated the purpose of the study, instructions for the completion and return of the questionnaire, an assurance of confidentiality of responses, and an opportunity to receive the results of the study. The participants were provided with an e-mail address to request a copy of the results upon conclusion of the study. The participants were given a two week time period to complete and return the questionnaire. Three weeks after the initial mailing, a second mailing was completed with a packet of identical materials

Results

Administration of the Program
Program management. The majority (52%) of alternative education programs were administered by the Regional Offices of Education of the Illinois State Board of Education. In addition, 22% of the programs were provided by independent school districts and 20% were operated by a consortium of school districts through

special education cooperatives. Of the reporting programs, 10 (20%) were located in rural communities, 14 (28%) small cities, 9 (18%) suburbs, and 10 (20%) urban communities. Seven (14%) of the respondents did not identify their locale.

Alternative education programs appear to be funded through a variety of sources. Of programs reporting state grant funding ($n = 32$), approximately 50% of the funding is provided by state grants ($M = 52.98\%$, $SD = 30.35$). State appropriations accounts for, on the average, 47.17% ($SD = 29.54$) of the funding of 28 programs. Other programs are funded by local school districts ($n = 24$) and account for approximately one half of their funding ($M = 51.68\%$; $SD = 32.04$). Other programs supplement their funding through federal grants ($n = 20$; $M = 20.50\%$; $SD = 22.83$) and community funding ($n = 4$; $M = 9.25$; $SD = 12.07$).

The predominant management approach governing alternative education programs appears to be site-based management. Over three-fourths (78%; $n = 39$) of the respondents indicated their programs engaged in site-based management. One fifth (20%; $n = 10$) of the survey participants reported a centralized management approach is utilized for their programs.

Program facilities. An overwhelming majority (80%; $n = 40$) of alternative education programs operate in off-campus facilities. Small percentages of programs reported utilizing the same building as traditional education programs (8%, $n = 4$) or community colleges (2%, $n = 1$). Likewise, a majority (80%, $n = 40$) of the programs operate as a closed campus, meaning students are not allowed to leave and return during the school day. Eight programs (16%) reported having an open campus.

The principals rated the adequacy of the physical facilities of the program as slightly above average ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.03$). Ratings of good or excellent were assigned by 58% ($n = 29$) of the principals; 26% ($n = 13$) reported average ratings and 16% ($n = 8$) issued satisfactory to poor ratings. Interestingly, in spite of above average ratings, accessibility to physical education ($M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.64$), library ($M = 2.15$; $SD = 1.25$) and science laboratory facilities ($M = 1.64$; $SD = .92$)

were rated below average. Twenty-eight percent of the administrators reported no access to physical education facilities, 30% indicated some access and 40% stated above average or full access to physical education facilities. Accessibility to libraries and science laboratories appears to be more limited. Forty percent of the principals indicated their programs do not have access to a library while 12.5% reported more than average or full access to a library. Forty-eight percent of the principals reported their students have some access to a library. The discrepancy increases for accessibility to science facilities with 70% of the principals reporting no access to science labs for their students. One-fifth of the program administrators reported some access to science facilities. An additional eight percent noted above average or full access to science lab facilities. An additional 20% of the programs also reported accessibility to other types of supports including computer labs (16%).

Program supports. One third or less of the programs actively involved or supported parents in their adolescent's education in alternative programs. Participation as an advisory committee member was a potential option for parents reported by 34% (*n* = 17) of the respondents. Likewise, 32% (*n* = 16) of the programs prepared newsletters for their parents. Other parent support opportunities were parent support groups (24%, *n* = 12), parent training (14%, *n* = 7), and parent-teacher associations (6%, *n* =3).

Educational program support service providers. The predominant educational support service providers appear to be social workers (74%, *n* = 37), counselors (58%, *n* = 29), paraprofessionals (50%, *n* = 25), school nurses (46%, *n* = 23), school psychologists (46%, *n* = 23), and vocational educators (42%, *n* = 21). Other less frequent supports included child advocates (32%; *n* = 16), speech-language pathologists (28%, *n* =14), transition specialists (22%, *n* = 11), clinical psychologists (12%, *n* = 6), and community counselors (12%; *n* = 6). Service providers reported by less than 5% of the respondents were probation officers, truancy officers, and case managers.

Characteristics of Students
The student population of alternative education programs appears to vary considerably across programs. The average student population of the alternative education programs is 90 students (*SD* = 90.3). The size of the programs ranged from 11 to 458 students. Furthermore, the average number of male and female students was 53.6 (*SD* = 51.54) and 35.5 (*SD* = 43.0), respectively. On the average, the most frequently reported ethnic backgrounds of students were Caucasian (*M* = 62.86%; *SD* = 30.2%) and African-American (*M* = 31.28%; *SD* = 23.87%). Other ethnic groups served in alternative education programs included Hispanic (*M* = 15.07%; *SD* = 1.25%), Native American (*M* = 3.68%, *SD* = 10.12%), and Asian (*M* = 1.64%, *SD* = 1.25%).

Alternative education programs appear to primarily serve adolescents within age range of 12 to 21 years. Seventy-six percent (*n* = 38) of the program administrators reported serving youth between the ages of 12 to 21 years. Others reported serving children between the ages of 7 and 21 years (*n* = 5; 10%), 11-19 years (*n* = 2, 4%), and 10-20 years (*n* = 2, 4%).

Youth with disabilities appear to comprise a large portion of student populations served by alternative education programs. Program administrators reported, on the average, 49.89% (*SD* = 38.99) of their students were identified as emotional and behavior disordered. Approximately 10% of the student populations were identified as learning disabled (*M* = 11.67%; *SD* = 10.85%), attention deficit with hyperactivity (*M* = 13.07%, *SD* = 10.39%), and attention deficit disordered (*M* = 12.42%, *SD* = 13.84%). Small percentages of youth were identified as mentally impaired (*M* = 6.39%, *SD* = 5.14%), communication disordered (*M* = 4.68%, *SD* = 4.26%), and sensory impaired (*M* = 1.60; *SD* = 1.96).

School Program Characteristics
On the average, alternative education programs provided educational services for 177.70 days (*SD* = 11.86, Range = 108-200 days) per academic school year. The average number of class

periods per day was 5.98 (*SD* = 1.68). The average number of minutes per class period was 64.65 (*SD* = 51.78; Range = 0 - 310 minutes). The average length of the school day was 6.20 hours (*SD* = 1.65; Range = 3 -11.50 hours). Summer school was provided by 20 (40%) programs with an average length of 24.40 (*SD* = 9.66, Range = 10-41 days) school days. The average length of each school day was 5.47 hours (*SD* = 1.44 hours; Range = 2-11.50 hours).

Multiple and diverse criteria were used to guide admission of students into alternative educa-tion programs. Table 1 provides the 10 most frequently reported criteria for admission to alternative education programs. The three most frequently identified criteria for admission to programs were history of social-emotional problems, truancy problems, and referred by home district. Other frequently reported criteria included expelled or eligible for expulsion from traditional schools, suspended from traditional school, or school dropout or potential to be a school dropout.

Criterion	n	%[1]
Referral by home school	15	30
Social-emotional/behavioral issues	15	30
Truancy	15	30
Expulsion from traditional school	12	24
Suspension from traditional school	11	22
Expulsion eligible from traditional school	10	20
Academic underachievement	10	20
Within designated age range (e.g., 10-19 years)	8	16
Dropout	6	12
Potential dropout	6	12
Teen parent	6	12

[1] Percentages total more than 100% as respondents had opportunity to provide more than one criterion for admission to programs.

Table 1: The Ten Most Frequently Cited Criteria for Admission to an Alternative Education Program

The predominant educational program provided to youth was the general education high school curriculum. Seventy-six percent ($n = 38$) of the programs reported delivering general education curriculum to their students. Other available programs included work readiness programs ($n = 24$; 48%), vocational education ($n = 23$; 46%), functional curriculum ($n = 22$; 44%), and General Education Development programs ($n = 18$; 38% [GED]). The availability of remedial programs such as Chapter 1 or Title I reading, math and language programs is limited with two (4%) programs reporting Title I/Chapter 1 reading programs. Other programs made available to youth were life skills instruction ($n = 4$; 8%), career awareness ($n = 4$; 8%), college level coursework ($n = 2$; 4%) and independent study ($n = 2$; 4%).

Alternative education programs appear to collaborate with a number of community services to support the educational needs of their students. Unfortunately, the most frequent community agency working with alternative school youth is juvenile justice with 82% ($n = 41$) of the programs collaborating with probation officers. On a more positive note, 70% ($n = 35$) of the programs use service learning programs and community social services. Sixty percent ($n = 30$) utilize community work-study programs. Community health services are accessed by 25 (50%) of the programs. Less than half of the programs seek the services of wraparound programs ($n = 22$; 44%) and mentors ($n = 17$; 34%). Child care services including daycare and preschool are made available to students in less than 20% of the programs ($n = 8$; 16%).

Program Staff Characteristics
Persons who hold certificates to teach general education content appear to comprise a large portion of the faculty of alternative school programs. The average number of fully certified general educators was 6.00 ($SD = 7.19$; Range = 0 - 38). The number of fully certified special educators per program is less, averaging 2.15 ($SD = 3.76$; Range = 0 - 15) special educators. Some programs have a number of persons who are not fully certified to teach students. The average number of persons who do not have initial or standard certificates for their area of instruction was 2.15 ($SD = 4.32$; Range = 0 - 25).

However, it appears that programs utilize paraprofessionals to support their program activities. The average number of paraprofessionals per program was 4.63 ($SD = 5.73$; Range = 0 - 25).

Discussion
The purposes of this study were to describe the administrative arrangements, physical structures, student populations, and educational programs serving youth enrolled in alternative educational programs. Site-based management was the primary administrative structure identified by over 75% of the respondents. The results suggest that administrators and program personnel have the authority to make decisions about various parameters of the program such as admission standards, coursework, behavior standards, and integration of support services (e.g., counseling, support groups). Previous research has indicated administrators and their personnel have a high level of autonomy over curriculum, course offerings, grading and evaluation, instructional methodology, and student behavior standards (Lange, 1998). Others have also suggested site-based management is a defining characteristic of alternative education programs (Franklin, 1992; Raywid, 1983).

The funding sources of alternative education programs appear to be largely from state grants and appropriations for nearly 50% of the programs. State and district appropriations were predominant sources for the remainder of the programs. These data appear to be a reflection of the administrative unit of the respondents. Over one-half of the respondents were principals of alternative education programs operated by the ROEs of the Illinois State Board of Education. These programs are an extension of the state agency and are funded through grants solicited by ROEs. Other programs appear to be funded by appropriations made from state and district monies as traditional school programs are funded in the state. These sources are similar to funding sources identified by others (Fager & Paglin, 1997). It is unknown whether these programs are funded at the same level (e.g., cost per pupil) as traditional educational programs. It has been suggested alternative schools fail to seek or receive their fair share of revenues budgeted for students' education

when compared to the expenditures per pupil in traditional schools. For example, the calculation of the cost per pupil of traditional schools include costs for several administrators (e.g., principals, athletic directors), counselors, and extra-curricular activities (e.g., sports, band) of traditional schools (Gregory, 2001). Findings from a survey of Minnesota alternative school administrators indicated nearly one-third of the administrators cited concerns about funding and budgeting over the foreseeable two-three year period (Lange, 1998).

A majority of the principals of alternative education programs reported their programs were operated in a separate physical facility from the traditional school. The responding principals rated their physical facilities slightly above average, yet accessibility to academic supports such as libraries and science labs were negligible for a large percentage of the programs. The inadequacy of physical facilities has been identified as an on-going concern by other researchers (Gregory, 2001; Lange, 1998). Alternative school facilities are often "hand-me-down" buildings and may not meet the physical needs of an innovative educational program (Gregory, 2001). Nearly half (42%) of the administrators of alternative education programs in Minnesota identified physical facilities including space and location as the most critical issue facing their programs in the next two-three years (Lange, 1998). Certainly, as alternative education programs are serving increasing numbers of students, attention should be turned to securing physical facilities that meet the space, location, and educational needs for efficient and effective educational programming.

Efforts to increase the school involvement of parents of alternative school youth appear to be limited to approximately one-third of the reporting programs. The absence of such efforts may be linked to perceptions students do not want their parents involved in their education (Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 2005). However, previous research has suggested alternative school youth perceive their parents as not supportive or involved in their activities (Weist, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001). Yet, more than one-quarter (27.8%) of youth who attended alternative schools reported their persistence in school was related, in part, to supportive family and peer relationships (May & Copeland, 1998). Thus, program administrators and others may need to utilize innovative strategies to involve parents and other family members in the program's educational activities and to support students' successful completion of secondary school.

On the average, the students attending alternative programs in the state appear to be largely high school age children who attend small programs (< 100 students). These data are similar to previous research reporting that the average chronological age of youth attending alternative schools was 15 years of age (Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Markham, Kelder, & Kapedia, 2002). Other national data have reported 88-92% of the alternative school programs are at the secondary school level, which are consistent with the findings of this study (Kleiner et al., 2002). These data suggest these schools are often the "last chance" before students are able or decide to leave school without a high school diploma.

The principal ethnic group served by alternative schools as reported by the principals appears to be Caucasian youth. Previous research has been conflicting about the predominant ethnic group of students being served in alternative education programs (Franklin, 1992). An early review of the research examining the characteristics of alternative school populations indicated that a majority (approximately 60%) of the youth were Caucasian (Deal & Nolan, 1978). Whereas, Duke and Muzio (1978) reported that findings of a review of programs, 40% of the youth served in alternative schools were Black youth. A more recent review of the characteristics of alternative education programs indicated that predominant population of alternative school populations were representative of the demographics of their communities (Foley & Pang, 2004). For example, 55% of the students enrolled in an alternative school located in a predominant Latino community were Latino with remaining youth identified as Black (33%) and other ethnic groups (10.5%) (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2002).

The alternative education programs appear to serve large portions of youth with disabilities, predominantly youth with emotional and behavior disorders. Other disabilities such as learning disabilities, mild mental impairment, and attention deficit disorders with and without hyperactivity appear to comprise smaller portions of the student population. These data may be inflated by the inclusion of special education programs serving youth for whom alternative education programs have been identified as an appropriate educational placement. National data suggest approximately 12% of the student population in alternative schools are students with disabilities (Kleiner et al., 2001). Certainly, the education programs of alternative education programs will have to incorporate special education services to meet the educational needs of youth with disabilities.

History of social-emotional problems, truancy problems, and home school referral were the three most frequently reported admission criteria for entry into alternative school programs. The admission criteria are similar to criteria cited in a national survey of alternative schools. Findings from that survey indicated approximately 50% of the school districts reported physical aggression (52%), chronic truancy (51%), and verbal disruptive behavior (45%) as criteria for removal of a student from a general education program (Kleiner et al., 2001). Likewise, youth attending alternative schools have reported their placement was most often for absenteeism (57%), low academic performance (47%), suspensions and expulsions (36%), and classroom behavior problems (27%) (Saunders & Saunders, 2001-2002).

General education curriculum was the predominant curriculum provided to students attending alternative education programs. Nationally, general education curriculum was also reported as the predominant program offered to youth in alternative education programs (Kleiner et al., 2001). Certainly, a number of factors may be considered when choosing to follow the standard general education curriculum. These factors may include the state and district requirements for obtaining a high school diploma, state learner standards, and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation. However, the lack of academic supports (e.g., science labs, computer labs, libraries) may suggest the integrity of state learner standards and academic expectations are being comprised for these youth. Failure to meet the academic demands of state-mandated standards has implications for students who transition back into their traditional schools. Such students may not have acquired the necessary academic preskills to advance through the remainder of their high school curriculum or meet academic progress standards of the federal legislation, No Child Left Behind. Others have also voiced similar concerns for the academic preparedness and expectations of youth enrolled in alternative education programs (Kraemer & Ruzzi, 2001; Lehr & Lange, 2003).

In contrast, nearly half of the programs provided work readiness and vocational education to facilitate student's success in seeking and retaining employment. Likewise, a similar percentage (48%) of the alternative schools in the country also provided vocational education or skills training to their students. Previous research has shown that youth with (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yarnoff, 2000) and without disabilities (Black et al., 1996) who have vocational education (e.g., work readiness, employment experience) appear to have more success obtaining and maintaining employment.

The collaboration by alternative education programs with community-based agencies appears to be primarily focused with juvenile justice agencies and community partners for service learning projects, community work-study opportunities, and community mental health services. The percentage of alternative schools involved with these agencies is reflective of the findings of a national survey of alternative education programs. Nationally, 84% of the alternative education programs collaborate with juvenile justice and 65% are engaged with health and human services agencies. The predominance of service learning and work-study programs among alternative education programs may be a reflective of adopted program guidelines which stipulated programs were to include community resources including work-study programs (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). Surprisingly, less than half of

the programs access wraparound services. Over the past 10 years, Illinois has developed an extensive network of local area networks which implement local wraparound services which are primarily geared toward youth and their families whom are experiencing significant well-being issues (Illinois Department of Child and Family Services, n.d.). Previous research has suggested wraparound services provide the necessary support for youth to allow them to develop appropriate skills. Juvenile delinquents who received wraparound services when compared to those receiving conventional services (e.g., counseling, substance abuse treatment, tutoring) missed less school, were suspended from school less often, did not run away from home as frequently, less assaultive, less likely to be picked up by the police, and more likely to have a job (Carney & Buttell, 2003).

The professional qualifications of the educators serving youth in alternative schools appears to be certified secondary education teachers with the support of special educators. However, this student population has a percentage of youth who are disabled or characteristically similar to youth with disabilities. Previously, researchers have reported high school teachers who have more special education knowledge, training, and experience with students with disabilities appear to be related to positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and teaching students with disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2000-2001). Given that many of the youth have experienced academic and behavioral difficulties, it may be beneficial for alternative education program administrators and educators of such programs to have a strong background in special education.

Implications
Research. The findings from this study suggest a number of areas for future research. First, data describing the outcomes of youth who have attended alternative schools will be valuable to program development. Among the issues to be investigated are students' outcomes for employment (e.g., length of employment, type of employment), educational outcomes (e.g., enrollment in postsecondary institutions; completion of degree programs), and community involvement (e.g., participation in community organizations; contacts with police). These data may be instrumental in developing or focusing program components to meet the academic, vocational, and social needs of youth attending alternative schools.

Related to the outcomes of youth, research is needed to describe the rate among alternative youth earning either a high school diploma or a GED certificate. These schools are operating in buildings that appear to have limited or no access to facilities to provide the same or similar opportunities accessed by in youth in traditional school programs. Among the issues to be addressed include alignment of the general education curriculum of alternative schools with state learner standards, student performance on state assessment measures of student performance, and alternative school students' level of achievement compared to traditional school youth.

Given a percentage of these youth are in elementary and middle school, future research may be focused on developing appropriate programming to serve younger youth enrolled in alternative school programs. While a majority of the youth are of high school age, a sizeable population of younger youth are being served in alternative school programs (Kleiner et al., 2001). Research is needed to examine appropriate educational programs for these youth to facilitate successful adjustment back to their home schools to complete their secondary school education. If they remain in alternative education programs, investigation of appropriate transition planning activities may be necessary to facilitate a successful move to post-secondary education or employment.

Practice. The results of this survey have a number of implications for practice. An initial implication is the lack of accessibility to appropriate resources to provide educational experiences similar to students in the traditional school program. A sizeable number of principals reported no or limited accessibility to key tools such as libraries, science laboratories, and computer labs, yet indicated they were providing the general education curriculum. It appears administrators and other policymakers may need to review the academic resources being

provided to students in alternative schools to assure they have the necessary resources to allow them to achieve the state learner standards.

Previous research has suggested parental involvement is one of the key factors in alternative education students persisting in school and achieving either their high school diploma or GED certificate (May & Copeland, 1998). The findings from this study suggest approximately one-third of the programs have opportunities for parents to participate in their child's education. It appears seeking innovative methods of involving parents in their child's education may be beneficial to supporting the child in the completion of his/her secondary education. For example, consideration may be given to alternative communication strategies for conveying student successes, working with the child and his parents through self-directed transition plans, or the use of family-centered approaches such as wraparound services to support the student in the school environment.

The academic and social-emotional characteristics of the alternative school population may suggest a role for community-based services such as wraparound programs. These programs, which assist the child and family in accessing support systems necessary for the youth to be successful in school and community, may be a valuable component to meeting the diverse needs of youth attending alternative schools.

Finally, alternative school youth appear to have a diverse set of academic and social-emotional characteristics which require highly skilled and effective educators. General and special educators teaching alternative school youth may need to develop knowledge of the general education curriculum and the GED curriculum as well as effective behavior management strategies such as positive behavior supports. In addition, educators will need an awareness of the school and community resources available to support the diverse needs of youth such as health care services, substance abuse treatment programs, service learning opportunities, and social service agencies. A second set of skills for alternative school educators appears to be communication and collaboration skills to work with related service school personnel, community-based professionals, and students and their families. These skills are necessary to guide the design of appropriate educational programs and to identify and implement the necessary supports for students to complete their secondary school program and/or transition to desired school or post-school outcomes.

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