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**ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS  
EVALUATION REPORT  
1995-96**

**NATIONAL, LOCAL, AND SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVES**

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**WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS EVALUATION  
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***NATIONAL, LOCAL, AND SPECIFIC  
PERSPECTIVES***

# ***ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS EVALUATION REPORT 1995-96***

## ***National, Local, and Specific Perspectives***

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

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### **BACKGROUND**

The National School Safety Center indicates alternative schools for disruptive youth are expected to increase in number in the 1990s. In the fall, 1995, three alternative learning centers (ALC) opened in the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS). Subsequently, WCPSS staff members identified a need to evaluate the factors that are common to successful alternative schools nationwide, the general status of all WCPSS alternative schools, and specific outcomes that were associated with the ALCs. This report summary describes major findings in these areas. The report has three sections: Alternative Schools Nationally, Alternative Schools Locally, and Alternative Learning Centers Specifically.

### **MAJOR FINDINGS**

#### **ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS NATIONALLY**

The term, alternative school, has a variety of meanings in different contexts including magnet schools, year-round schools, charter schools, and schools for students at risk of school failure. In this report, the focus is upon schools for the at-risk student, and major findings noted in this report summary pertain to this population.

***“Alternative schools in the public sector are alive and well and are likely to remain so. Whether or not they gain the legitimacy their successes warrant remains a question.”***  
**Mary Anne Raywid**

- There is evidence of effective alternative schools, and positive outcomes have been identified in areas such as academic achievement, student attitudes, and progress towards graduation. Most studies, however, reflect short-term results.
- Authors generally agree that voluntary membership, small school size, low teacher-student ratio, and individualized curriculum are four factors that are very important to students' success in alternative schools. Some other factors often referenced include close teacher-student relationships, an informal school climate, non-coercive discipline policies, and counseling support.

- Opinions are divided over whether alternative schools should have a policy of returning students to the mainstream program as soon as possible or allowing students to remain at the alternative school possibly through graduation.

### **ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS LOCALLY**

The WCPSS has a constellation of alternative schools for the at-risk student population. The collection of schools has evolved since the early 1970s to serve varied organizational purposes and student needs. At some alternative schools, students are voluntary participants insofar as they and their family control the decision whether to remain at the regular school or attend the alternative school, while at other alternative schools, students are involuntary participants insofar as their suspension from the regular school leaves them with only the option of attending the alternative school.

*“Alternative schools are the bridge between the present and the future. They have the potential of providing immediate solutions while giving regular schools the time they need to develop effective remediation and prevention strategies.”*

**National School Safety Center**

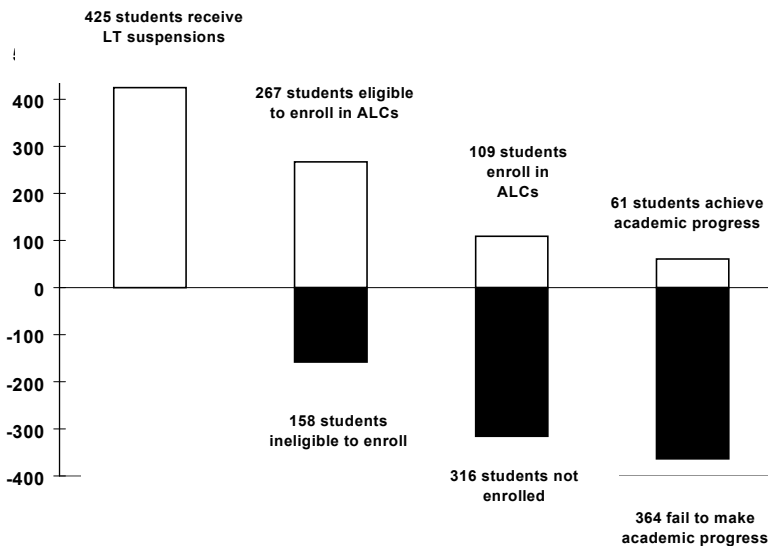
- WCPSS staff members are virtually unanimous in their opinion that alternative schools such as Phillips, Longview, Redirection, Bridges, A Growing Place, and the three ALCs serve an important function.
- Most WCPSS administrators, counselors, and teachers in the regular schools have only a cursory knowledge of how the various alternative schools function in their day-to-day operations.
- Phillips and Longview operated near capacity throughout the 1995-96 school year. Underenrollment at Mt. Vernon Redirection, A Growing Place, Bridges, and the three ALCs appears to be due to communication and referral problems rather than a lack of demand for the service.
- Reports from regular school staff members about disruptive students still in their schools (estimated to be 465 to 775 students), and the increasing number of students receiving suspensions over the past three years, suggest the demand for alternative school placements for disruptive students greatly exceeds current unused capacity.
- The most frequent suggestions for other types of alternative services were for vocational training programs, programs to stimulate the unmotivated student, and an expansion of alternatives at the regular school site.

### **ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CENTERS SPECIFICALLY**

The Alternative Learning Centers (ALC) were established in the fall, 1995, to offer WCPSS students with long-term (LT) suspensions a way to earn academic credits. The ALCs were housed on three WCPSS campuses and classes were held after regular school hours. Students provided their own transportation to the schools. One ALC served middle school students in grades 6-8, and two ALCs served high school students in grades 9-12.

- The curriculum and course of study at the ALCs generally followed that of the regular schools, but the method of instruction with students was individualized.
- ALC staff members did not feel the NovaNET computer software was worth its high cost, but did agree that it was useful for individualizing instruction, helping students master basic skills, allowing students to pace themselves, and providing students an opportunity to explore new subject matter.
- Active membership at the ALCs reached a peak of 69 students on April 24, 1996. In all, 109 students enrolled at an ALC during the 1995-96 school year, and 61 (56%) of these made some academic progress--either through being promoted to the next grade or earning some units of credit.

- Of the 425 students with long-term suspensions in the 1995-96 year, 267 students were eligible to enroll in the ALCs, 109 students did enroll, and 61 students were promoted or earned some academic credits through their participation in the ALC program.



- Students at the ALCs were disproportionately distributed by
  - a) gender--males constituted 72% of the enrolled students;
  - b) race--African-Americans constituted 50% of the students;
  - c) grade level--eighth and ninth grade students constituted 57% of the students; and
  - d) reasons for suspension--57% of the LT suspensions were for fighting, drug or alcohol offenses.
- Lead Teachers, other teachers, and counselors at the ALCs were in agreement that the most pronounced problem which students exhibited upon entering the ALC program

was an inability to set realistic goals and follow through on strategies to achieve those goals.

*“It’s the exception when a student establishes an important relationship with even a single adult during high school....If you want to influence young people, you first have to convince them that being a potential member of the adult community is an exciting prospect.”*  
Deborah Meier

- Among students enrolled for at least nine weeks, Lead Teachers perceived that student behavior improved on 6 of 6 indices, and the middle school counselor perceived improvement on 9 of 10 indices.
  - In the absence of LT suspended students, many regular school administrators, counselors and teachers interviewed perceived benefits of the ALCs to be that
    - a) classroom instruction was better quality (64%);
    - b) schools were safer (48%);
    - c) teachers were spending less time on student discipline (43%); and
    - d) two-thirds of administrators felt more comfortable suspending students knowing the ALCs existed.
  - ALC counselors and Lead Teachers perceived counseling sessions with the students to be beneficial.
  - ALC staff members and students alike perceived benefits of the ALCs to include the low teacher-student ratio, individualized curriculum, and informal school climate.
- Most regular school and ALC staff members, along with ALC students, indicated operations at the ALCs could be enhanced through earlier operating hours, more communication with the regular schools, greater emphasis upon vocational curricula, improved counseling services, and more support for students transitioning back to the regular schools.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Knowledge Base.** Most WCPSS staff members have only a cursory knowledge of the district’s alternative schools, and this knowledge base needs expanding. A pamphlet or brochure could provide information on each of the alternative schools, including location and operating hours, type of students served, unique curricular features, and referral procedures.
- **Communications.** Communications between regular and alternative school personnel needs improvement. The demand for alternative school placements exceeds current capacity, and staff members in the regular schools need to be better advised on space at the alternative schools and procedures for making referrals. Also,

personnel at the regular and alternative schools could make better use of written requests to gather information, utilize computer technology such as faxes and e-mail, and visit the other school to meet teachers, counselors and administrators.

- **Staff Development.** Thorough staff development training for alternative school staff members should be conducted, especially in three areas: **a)** individualizing an experiential and integrated curriculum; **b)** computer software applications for student use; and **c)** the role of all staff members in guidance and counseling functions.
- **Curriculum.** More innovative, experiential, and integrated curricula that tap into students' interests, aspirations, and cultures should be acquired or developed. Real-world experiences should be a more important part of this curriculum, including community service, internships, externships, and school-to-work transitions. Affective components need to be embedded throughout the curricula.
- **Transitions.** Better ways of assisting students with transitioning back to the regular schools are needed. Placing a higher priority on transitional support at both the alternative and regular schools would increase the likelihood of students' long-term success. The example of transitional support provided by the Longview school is a good model for other alternative schools to emulate.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every student has unique talents, abilities, interests, strengths and weaknesses. Because every student is unique, there will always be some who do not fit the mold of the regular school environment. These students may need educational services greater than or different from those available in the regular schools; these students may need alternative educational services. The Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) has a history of providing alternative educational services to meet student needs as these are identified, and this report is an evaluation of alternative schools in the WCPSS.

*This report has three principle objectives:*

- *to evaluate whether alternative schools can have positive outcomes for students and identify some of the factors which contribute to the making of a successful school;*
- *to evaluate the general nature of all WCPSS alternative schools; and*
- *to evaluate the specific impact or short-term outcomes of three WCPSS Alternative Learning Centers established in the 1995-96 school year.*

The Evaluation and Research Department in the WCPSS collected information for this report from a variety of sources including,

- a review of the professional literature;
- interviews with regular school staff members;
- information on students maintained on the WCPSS mainframe database;
- information on students receiving long-term suspensions from the WCPSS Office of Student Due Process; and
- surveys completed by ALC staff members and students.

## ***ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS NATIONALLY***

### **OVERVIEW**

The National School Safety Center (1991) indicates alternative schools for disruptive and at-risk youth will grow through the 1990s; however, a review of the literature reveals that the term, alternative school, has a variety of meanings in different contexts. Groups concerned with school desegregation issues may use the term to refer to magnet schools or other alternatives to traditional school assignment plans based upon geography. Groups concerned with educational opportunities for handicapped children may use the term to describe schools specially designed to meet the needs of students in special education programs. Groups concerned with dropout prevention may associate the term with schools designed to serve at-risk student populations. Others who may appropriate the term include private or charter schools, school-within-school programs, and remedial or disciplinary programs. In recent years, educators have increasingly used the term to refer to schools designed for students who exhibit adjustment difficulties for a variety of intrapersonal and/or interpersonal reasons.

Some authors who have written on alternative schools have created categories to classify the different types of schools. Raywid (1994), for instance, organizes the different forms of alternative schools into a typology of three types:

#### **TYPE I**

**Type I** alternatives are schools of choice that are usually popular and typically reflect organizational and administrative departures from the traditional schools. Type I schools are likely to emphasize programmatic themes or particular pedagogical beliefs.

#### **TYPE II**

**Type II** alternatives are last-chance programs. Raywid indicates students are “sentenced” to these programs with few options or choices. Type II schools emphasize behavior modification and basic skills.

#### **TYPE III**

**Type III** alternatives are for students who are presumed to need remediation or rehabilitation in academics, social/emotional skills or both. Raywid notes that Type III alternatives emphasize creating a “community” environment and seek to return students to mainstream programs.

While a particular alternative school can be a mix of these pure types, Raywid explains that there are fundamental differences in the assumptions that each type of program makes about schools and students. One basic assumption in Type I schools is that student difficulties can be explained by the match (or mismatch) between the school and

student. Accordingly, Type I schools seek to change the school program and environment in an effort to improve the match between the student and the school. In contrast, a basic assumption made in Type II and Type III schools is that difficulties encountered by a student in school are largely the fault of the individual. Therefore, Type II and Type III schools are designed to change the student rather than the school.

Raywid's description of alternative schools is a very general overview of the field. The typology of three pure types is useful but simplistic, and a particular program may have characteristics of more than one type. In this report, we will focus on alternative school programs that generally fit Raywid's Type II and Type III models.

## **EVALUATION METHODS**

The database maintained by Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) is one source of information on reports that evaluate the effectiveness of alternative schools designed to serve at-risk student populations. Using a combination of three descriptors--nontraditional education, program evaluation, and high school students--a search of ERIC turned up 42 reports for the years 1985 to present. Also, a set of articles obtained from the Educational Research Service agency (ERS) and others in personal collections were additional sources of information on the effectiveness of alternative schools.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

### *Are There Effective Alternative Schools in Other Districts?*

Our review of the literature identified many reports which describe effective alternative schools, some which report mixed results (Schoenlein, 1994; Stevens, Tullis, Sanchez & Gonzalez, 1990-91; Swanson & Williams-Robertson, 1990), and others which failed to find positive outcomes (Brownlee & others, 1989; Reckless & Dinitz, 1972). The majority of reports we collected were positive about alternative schools, but there are several reasons for caution.

- **First**, evaluation reports with positive outcomes are more likely to be published-- authors and editors prefer to publish reports that have positive outcomes. It is possible that there are many studies of alternative schools which fail to find positive outcomes but which are not published.
- **Second**, reports which do appear in the professional literature are often authored by individuals who have a close association with the schools, and their interpretations of outcomes could be biased.
- **Third**, most of the reports that we identified cover relatively short periods of time, often one school year or that period when students are enrolled at the school, and long-term outcomes may not be investigated after students leave the school.

*There is evidence of effective alternative schools, and positive outcomes have been identified in areas such as academic achievement, student attitudes, and progress towards graduation. Most studies, however, reflect short-term results.*

Most of the positive outcomes that we identified can be clustered in four broad categories of measurement criteria plus one category for a collection of other observations.

- ***Student Academic Achievement.*** Improvements in academic achievement were noted in a number of reports. This improvement is typically noted for the period of time that students are enrolled in the alternative school.

- ***Student Attitudes Towards the Alternative School Staff and Environment.*** One of the most common findings is that students who attend these schools hold more positive perceptions towards the alternative school and staff members than they held at their home school. Some examples are that students express a liking for curricular elements such as individualized instruction and non-grading formats, perceive the alternative school as a pleasant experience, and believe that teachers at the alternative school are more concerned about them.
- ***Student Attitudes Towards Themselves.*** Another common finding is that students hold more positive perceptions of themselves relative to perceptions they held before they attended the school. Examples of these perceptions are that students note improvements in self-esteem, say that their behavior has improved, express more confidence that they will stay in school, and indicate a greater interest in postsecondary education.
- ***Making Satisfactory Progress Towards Graduation.*** Evaluations of alternative schools frequently report that the schools do well at keeping students enrolled in school and making satisfactory progress towards graduation, at least for the period that they attend the alternative school.
- ***Other.*** Other positive outcomes that are noted in evaluation studies include a decrease in the incidence of discipline problems and delinquency, and significant numbers of graduates entering college or holding a job.

**Figure 1. Evaluation Studies Reporting Positive Outcomes**

Measurement Criterion	Outcome
<p><b>Student Academic Achievement</b></p>	<p><b>Allen, S. D., &amp; Edwards-Kyles, R. (1995)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When students return to their home school, principals at the home schools report that the alternative school had a positive influence on student academics.</li> </ul> <p><b>Gittman, B. (1991)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in the program was associated with improvement in student academic achievement.</li> </ul> <p><b>Gold, M., &amp; Mann, D. W. (1984)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A semester after returning to a conventional school program, former alternative school students received higher grades than did those in a control group.</li> </ul> <p><b>Heger, H. K. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program evaluation found increased academic achievement.</li> </ul> <p><b>McHale, S. (1991)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements in student academic achievement were noted.</li> </ul> <p><b>Norris, C. A., and others (1981)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most pregnant girls enrolled made academic progress.</li> </ul> <p><b>Stevens, C. J. and others (1991a)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants improved their performance on a standardized achievement test, and outperformed a comparison group on math achievement.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Student Attitudes Towards Alternative School Staff and Environment</b></p>	<p><b>Adelman, N. E. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students report high levels of satisfaction with the program.</li> </ul> <p><b>Allen, S. D., &amp; Edwards-Kyles, R. (1995)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When students return to their home school, principals at the home schools report that the alternative school had a positive influence on student attitudes.</li> </ul> <p><b>Gittman, B. (1991)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in the program was associated with improvement in student interest in school.</li> </ul> <p><b>Heger, H. K. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students perceive the program to be helpful.</li> </ul> <p><b>McNeely, S. R. (1993)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graduates and dropouts report that the alternative school was a pleasant experience.</li> </ul> <p><b>Norris, C. A. (1981)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Former (pregnant) students held positive opinions of school.</li> </ul> <p><b>Richardson, M. D., &amp; Griffin, B. L. (1994)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students perceived that alternative school teachers were more genuinely concerned about students, less authoritarian than traditional high school teachers, and allowed more input into decision-making.</li> <li>• Students expressed greater satisfaction with the alternative school than with the traditional high school.</li> </ul> <p><b>Speckhard, G. P. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of student interviews reveals that individualized instruction was well received, teacher interaction was positively perceived, and the non-graded format was supported by most of the students.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1 (continued). Evaluation Studies Reporting Positive Outcomes**

Measurement Criterion	Outcome
<p><b>Student Attitudes Towards Themselves</b></p>	<p><b>Adelman, N. E. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proportion of students expecting postsecondary education appeared to have doubled.</li> </ul> <p><b>Heger, H. K. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation found improvements in self-respect.</li> </ul> <p><b>McHale, S. (1991)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvement in self-esteem was noted.</li> </ul> <p><b>Swanson, L. A., &amp; Baenen, N. R. (1989)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most students were confident about staying in school through graduation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Swanson, L. A., &amp; Williams-Robertson, L. (1990)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most students believed their own behavior had improved.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Making Satisfactory Progress Towards Graduation</b></p>	<p><b>Allen, S. D., &amp; Edwards-Kyles, R. (1995)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When students return to their home school, principals at the home schools report that the alternative school had a positive influence on student attendance.</li> </ul> <p><b>Gittman, B. (1991)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvement in attendance was noted.</li> </ul> <p><b>Heard, F. B. (1988)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation findings reveal that 95.5% of high school students at an alternative school completed the first semester.</li> <li>• At the alternative school, the retention rate for sophomores in the first term was 28.8% better than for the state.</li> </ul> <p><b>Heger, H. K. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation found dramatic improvement in retention and reintegration from 1990 to 1992.</li> </ul> <p><b>McHale, S. (1991)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements in student attendance were noted.</li> </ul> <p><b>Norris, C. A. (1981)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Almost 75% of pregnant or parenting girls at an alternative school completed year or graduated.</li> </ul> <p><b>Schoenlein, J. J. (1991)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The alternative school was meeting the needs of at-risk students in achieving a diploma.</li> </ul> <p><b>Speckhard, G. P. (1992)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At-risk students who were in jeopardy of not completing high school were in the process of doing so at the alternative school.</li> </ul> <p><b>Stevens, C. J. (1991a)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examination of withdrawal rates indicates that the alternative program appears to be keeping more of the at-risk, over-age, low performing ninth graders in school than if they had not attended the program.</li> </ul> <p><b>Yagi, K. (1985)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The alternative educational program appears to be having good success with students obtaining General Equivalency Diplomas and re-entering high school.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1 (continued). Evaluation Studies Reporting Positive Outcomes**

<b>Measurement Criterion</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Other</b>	<p><b>Allen, S. D., &amp; Edwards-Kyles, R. (1995)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were no discipline problems from any students in the year following their completing the alternative school program.</li> </ul> <p><b>Bowman, P. H. (1959)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two years after students had experienced an alternative school program, the students' delinquency records were significantly sparser than those in a control group.</li> </ul> <p><b>Cicchelli, T., &amp; Marcus, S. (1995)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 1993, 92% of 75 graduates were accepted into college.</li> </ul> <p><b>Meixner, C. (1994)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A 1993 survey of 1987-1992 graduates from a high school alternative program (81% response rate) indicated that only 3% were unemployed.</li> </ul>

### *What Factors Contribute to Student Success in Alternative Schools?*

While there is no typical model of alternative schools serving at-risk student populations, our review of the literature reveals that there is considerable consensus on the factors that contribute to the success of students at these schools.

*Authors generally agree that voluntary membership, small school size, low teacher-student ratio, and individualized curriculum are four factors that are very important to students' success in alternative schools. Some other factors often referenced include close teacher-student relationships, an informal school climate, non-coercive discipline policies, and counseling support.*

- ***Voluntary School Choice.*** Assignment by choice or voluntary membership--for both students and staff--is said to be an important factor contributing to school and student success (Alternative Schools, 1996; Neumann, 1994; Raywid, 1994; Scherer, 1994). Moreover, the staff members at the alternative school should have some choice or say in whether a student is admitted (DeBlois, 1994).
- ***Small School Size.*** There is virtual unanimity among authors that small school size is important to the success of at-risk students attending alternative schools. One report indicates that 100-125 students may be a maximum advisable enrollment (Alternative Schools, 1996), and DeBlois (1994) suggests a good range for school size is between 100 to 160 students: "Any smaller, and you risk not being able to justify the school's existence. Much larger, and you risk becoming a dumping ground for every kid with every kind of problem" (p. 34). Cicchelli and Marcus (1995) explain that "smallness allows for low teacher-student ratios, a family atmosphere, close relationships among students and staff, and a strong sense of affiliation" (p. 4). Scherer (1994) maintains that "schools need to be small enough so you can have a community" (p. 6).
- ***Individualized Curriculum.*** There is near universal agreement that curricula in successful alternative schools are highly individualized, interdisciplinary, and experientially-based. Scherer (1994) explains that curricula are built upon the interests of staff and students. While being student centered, curricula also emphasize basic skills and take into account the students' individual ability levels and

interests (Alternative Schools, 1996; Gold, 1995). Meixner (1994) indicates teachers use a variety of instructional methods, classes may be nongraded, and credit can be earned in small bits such as 1/2 unit of credit per three-week block. Gold (1995) explains that “students are not permitted to fail” (p. 8), and Scherer says that “No (alternative) high school should have a requirement for graduation that every single member of the faculty can’t meet” (p. 8).

- **Low Teacher-Student Ratio.** Along with small school size, a low teacher-student ratio is said to be important to student success. With a low teacher-student ratio, staff members are able to provide more individualized and personalized attention compared to what the students received in the regular school environment. Teacher-student ratios in the range of 1:9 to 1:15 are considered optimal by Cicchelli and Marcus (1995) and Richardson and Griffin (1994).
- **Close Teacher-Student Relationship.** Most authors consider the development of a close and personal relationship between teachers and students to be crucial. Gold (1995) notes that an essential attribute of an effective alternative school is that “the staff provides a great deal of warm, personal support” (p. 8); Scherer (1994) notes that adults and young people are “joined together in a shared community” (p. 6); and Raywid (1982) indicates “Considerable attention typically goes to cultivating a strong sense of connection...between students and teachers” (p. 29). When teacher-student relations are close, students perceive that teachers are genuinely concerned about them (Richardson & Griffin, 1994), that teachers do not play favorites (Griffin, 1993), and that teachers are accessible (Scherer, 1994). This close teacher-student relationship may be characterized by behaviors such as teachers and students sitting in the same room when they have free time, playing games together, and calling each other by first names.
- **Informal School Climate.** Successful alternative schools were often described as exhibiting a family atmosphere and informal ambiance (Meixner, 1994; Raywid, 1994; Scherer, 1994). A democratic ethic is characteristic of these schools, albeit with clearly defined standards of behavior and high performance expectations (Allen & Edwards-Kyles, 1995; National School Safety Center, 1991). Also, the school environment is often characterized by the use of tables, chairs and couches rather than desks; there is an absence of class bells or specific time between classes; and, like a family, classes may have a span of ages among the students.
- **Non-Coercive Disciplinary Policies.** While disciplinary policies may vary from the externally imposed, highly structured behavior management systems of points and levels to internally based systems of self-control such as peer mediation and student courts, coercive practices with a heavy reliance upon threats or punishers are minimized (Alternative Schools, 1996; Meixner, 1994). Gold (1994) emphasizes that “discipline should not dissipate the warm, interpersonal support that the students require from the staff” (p. 9).

- **Counseling Support.** There is a consensus among authors that counseling services are an integral part of alternative schools for at-risk students. The National School Safety Center (1991) indicates successful programs are characterized by “*mandatory parent and student counseling*” (p. 10) (emphasis added). In most cases, teacher roles are extended to include guidance and counseling with students (Neumann, 1994), and schools usually provide counselors, psychologists and/or social workers to work with students as well. Cicchelli & Marcus (1995) explain that the link between ongoing counseling, social learning, and academic learning is an extremely strong component of alternative schools.

There are a variety of other factors that authors sometimes mention are important to students’ success in alternative schools, including a building or site that is clearly separate from the regular school(s) (DeBlois, 1994); flexible hours of operation (Meixner, 1994; Richardson & Griffin, 1994); a culturally diverse staff (National School Safety Center, 1991); day-care services (Allen & Edwards-Kyles, 1995; Meixner, 1994), and site-based management (DeBlois, 1994; Meixner, 1994; Raywid, 1994).

There does not appear to be any consensus on the optimal length of time for students to stay at an alternative school, but most authors would probably agree that students should not be returned unwillingly to the regular school or before they are socially and academically ready.

*Opinions are divided over whether alternative schools should have a policy of returning students to the mainstream program as soon as possible or allowing students to remain at the alternative school possibly through graduation.*

There are many aspects of operating and evaluating an alternative school which can not be addressed in this brief review. Additional information may be obtained from agencies such as Educational Research Services or the Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina. Other sources of information are to consult with other professionals involved in alternative education and/or visit an alternative school.

**International Affiliation  
of Alternative School  
Associations and  
Personnel**

The **International Affiliation of Alternative School Associations and Personnel** (cited in Raywid, 1994) is a volunteer organization with no membership dues established to “assist states and independent members in developing associations, alternative schools, programs and services.” To join the association,

contact the Iowa Association of Alternative Schools, c/o Joyce Jeanblanc, 1212 - 7th Street, S. E., Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52403.

In our literature review, there were two schools that were referenced in a number of articles as successful programs--Oasis High School and Central Park East Secondary School.

### **Oasis High School**

**Oasis High School** (Meixner, 1994) is an alternative school for at-risk high school students; is one of two high schools in Michigan to receive the Middle Cities Excellence in Leadership Award; and is one of 15 schools nationwide to receive the *Reader's Digest* American Heroes in Education award in April, 1993 (Meixner, 1994). An address for the school is OASIS High School, 310 W. Michigan, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan 48858.

### **Central Park East Secondary School**

**Central Park East Secondary School** (Raywid, 1994; Scherer, 1994), an alternative high school in New York City, is an example of an alternative school said to be successful with reducing dropout rates among minority and low-income students. An address for the school is Central Park East Secondary School, 1573 Madison Avenue, New York City, New York 10029. Also, a three and one-half hour video about the school can be purchased for \$400 from Zipporah Films, 1 Richdale Avenue, Unit #4, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140.

## ***ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS LOCALLY***

### **OVERVIEW**

The Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) has a variety of alternative schools, providing different types of service to different types of students. One of the very first alternative schools was Phillips High School, established in the early 1970s and housed at Broughton High School. In the 1980s, another type of alternative school, the magnet schools, were added as alternatives to promote integration. The most recent additions to the alternative schools include year-round schools, A Growing Place, Bridges, and three alternative learning centers.

The collection of WCPSS alternative schools has evolved over time to serve varied organizational purposes and student needs. Two of the early alternative schools to be established--Mt. Vernon Redirection Middle School and Longview--were designed to accommodate regular education and special education students who were disruptive in the regular school environment. Many of these students were perceived to need long-term placements of a year or more. Recent alternative schools to be established--A Growing Place and Bridges--have been designed to provide short-term interventions for specific student populations such as the homeless or socially maladjusted. The three alternative learning centers that began operations in the fall, 1995, were designed to serve only students who had received long-term suspensions from the regular schools.

### **EVALUATION METHODS**

A team of staff members in the WCPSS Evaluation and Research Department evaluated the alternative schools using a variety of methods and resources. Raywid's (1994) model of three types of alternative schools was used to characterize different types of alternative schools in the WCPSS. The evaluation team interviewed staff members associated with each alternative school for information about their school, and staff members associated with the regular schools for information on their perceptions of the alternative schools. The evaluation team collected data on student variables such as gender, race and special educational status from the student database maintained on the WCPSS mainframe computer, and information on student variables such as date of enrolling and credits earned at an alternative school through interviews with WCPSS Central Office and alternative school personnel.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

### *What Is the Nature of WCPSS Alternative Schools?*

The WCPSS has a constellation of alternative schools that have evolved since the early 1970s to serve varied organizational purposes and student needs. Some alternative schools in WCPSS are entirely voluntary for parents, and student membership is solicited among the general population. In other alternative schools, the membership is limited to particular types of students who are typically referred by school staff, but the student's guardian retains some choice in the matter of whether to attend. In a few of the WCPSS alternative programs, membership is restricted to students who have committed specific offenses resulting in suspension from school, and there is essentially no choice for the parent or guardian if they wish for the child to continue their public school education in the WCPSS.

The nature of the various alternative schools in the WCPSS will be described using Raywid's (1994) typology of three types. The principal distinction among types is the matter of how much control or choice the student has over the decision whether to attend the school.

- **Type I Alternatives With Voluntary Membership.** The WCPSS magnet school program includes schools that vary in organizational structure with year-round calendars, schools that emphasize special pedagogical frameworks such as Montessori instruction, and schools that emphasize curricular themes such as communications. Membership in these schools is voluntary although selection is sometimes by lottery. The school system solicits students and families to apply for enrollment. Raywid notes that "Type I alternatives are schools of choice and are usually popular" (p. 27). The Type I alternative schools in the WCPSS are similar to regular schools in many respects with a large student body and full complement of administrators, teachers and support staff. Type I alternatives offered through the magnet school program have been extensively described and evaluated in other WCPSS reports (e.g., Johnson & Dunley, 1996; Prohm & Baenen, 1996) and will not be discussed any further in this document.
- **Type II Alternatives With Membership By Offense.** WCPSS has also established programs for students who have been excluded from mainstream schools because of specific offenses such as fighting or the possession of drugs. The three Alternative Learning Centers (ALC) which opened in the 1995-96 school year are examples. Students who enrolled in these programs had received long term (LT) suspensions from their regular school and had no other option available to them in the WCPSS

system if they desired to continue their education for the year. The Families In Development (FIND) program, providing substance abuse education and counseling for students who committed drug offenses and received suspensions from school, is another example in that the students had no choice but to participate in FIND if they wished to be reinstated in school. Because Type II schools have little to do with options or choice, Raywid says students are “sentenced” to these programs (p. 27).

- **Type III alternatives with membership by referral.** WCPSS has established a variety of programs and schools for students who are in need of remediation, rehabilitation services, or a different environment from that of their regular school. Students are typically referred to these schools by school staff members, and guardians retain final control over the decision whether their child shall attend. Examples of Type III alternatives in the WCPSS include A Growing Place, Bridges, Mt. Vernon Redirection, Longview, Phillips, and the Cary High School Computer Lab. Raywid explains that Type III alternatives “focus on remedial work and on stimulating social and emotional growth--often through emphasizing the school itself as a community” (p. 27).

Some of the salient features to be evaluated for the Type II and Type III alternative schools in the WCPSS include school history, program design, capacity, and eligibility criteria.

## **TYPE II WCPSS ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAMS**

### **Alternative Learning Centers**

Established in the fall, 1995, the three Alternative Learning Centers (ALC) all have similar eligibility criteria and procedures for enrollment. The ALCs were conceived as a way of allowing students with long-term (LT) suspensions to earn academic credit while they were banned from all regular school campuses and activities. An eligible student could be LT suspended for any violation with the exception of firearm(s) on campus, and sale or distribution of controlled substance such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, or ritalin. One ALC operated for middle school students and two ALCs operated for high school students.

After a student received a LT suspension, procedures for enrollment followed a sequence: a determination was made by school personnel that the student may enroll in an ALC; the student and family initiated contact with their designated ALC site and requested to enroll; and the student and family met with ALC staff members who retained final authority for whether to enroll a student (except in instances where the student had been assigned to the ALC by the superintendent or school board).

### **Families In Development**

Operating since 1981, Families In Development (FIND) is a substance abuse

education and counseling program for students and parents which is operated by the Pathways Counseling Center, a division of SouthLight, Inc., a private, not-for-profit agency. FIND is an authorized alternative to LT suspension available to WCPSS students who violate Board Policy 6429 prohibiting possession or use of controlled substances and drug paraphernalia. Students may be offered this opportunity to avoid LT suspension only once in their academic career and only at the discretion of the principal. Students can also be referred to FIND for reasons other than LT suspension, and self-referrals can be made as well.

Students who enroll in the FIND program as an option to LT suspension must be accompanied by one or more significant adults, and student and adult must both complete the 12-hour program, meeting in parent and adolescent groups once a week for 5 weeks. Failure to successfully complete the program results in the school reactivating the LT suspension. Educational aspects of the program include units on communication skills, parenting skills, pharmacology, peer pressure, alternatives to drug use, and study skills.

### **TYPE III WCPSS ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAMS**

#### **Mount Vernon Redirection**

Initially established in 1976, Mt. Vernon Redirection is presently a self-contained school site. Mt. Vernon Redirection serves students in grades 6, 7, and 8 who exhibit extremely disruptive behavior in mainstream classrooms. The focus of the program is behavior change and improved academic performance that will enable students to return to their regular schools. Counseling services and individualized instruction are emphasized, and staff members attempt to coordinate services with other community agencies.

Students are referred to the program, usually by administrators or counselors in the regular schools, but referrals can also be made by community agencies or parents. Reasons for referral include academic, behavior and attendance problems. Students who apply to attend Mt. Vernon are interviewed by staff members at the school who make the determination whether the student may enroll at the school, but the ultimate decision whether a child will enroll rests with the guardian.

#### **Phillips**

Phillips High School was established in 1973, and presently offers a day program and an evening program to serve students in grades 9-12 who have been, or are likely to be, unsuccessful in the mainstream high schools. Phillips High School is a self-contained school site. The curriculum at Phillips includes all courses required for high school graduation along with some vocational training. Classes do not normally exceed 15 students, and block scheduling enables students to complete year-long courses in one semester.

Students are referred to Phillips High School, usually by a counselor or teacher in their home school, by someone in an agency working with the student, or by the student or

parent. Acceptable reasons for referral include being over age for grade, manipulative behavior, underachievement, low motivation, chronic absenteeism, pregnancy or parenting, and discipline or suspension records. Following referral, enrollment procedures involve an application which staff members at Phillips screen, and an interview which staff members conduct with the student and parents. In the interview, staff members advise the student and parent on Phillips High School, and ascertain their expectations of the program. Phillips retains final authority over whether to enroll a student except in instances of administrative assignment by the superintendent or school board. Students may continue in their enrollment at Phillips through graduation.

### **Longview**

Established in the early 1980s to provide a vocational outlet for special education high school students with behavioral and/or emotional problems (BEH), Longview was originally known as the Barbee Work Study program. The program has evolved over the years, and Longview is now a self-contained school for middle and high school BEH students in grades 6-12 whose behavior problems cannot be managed in their home school. Longview currently provides intensive services to approximately fifty students.

BEH students and an occasional learning disabled (LD) or educationally mentally handicapped (EMH) student are referred to Longview by staff members at the regular schools where the students attend. An Administrative Placement Team determines if Longview is the most appropriate placement for the student, and changes are made in the student's individualized educational plan reflecting this change of placement to a more restrictive environment. The parent or guardian can refuse this change of placement.

The goal of the Longview program is to return students to regular schools where they can become successful in achieving selected academic and behavioral goals. Students may attend Longview for periods as short as 30 days or as long as a couple of years, depending upon their individual needs. Some students earn their high school diploma while at Longview. Students who return to their home school receive transitional support from four teachers and three assistants at Longview who meet with regular school members to develop plans for the student, meet with the students to counsel them on their progress, and return students to Longview if they are unable to be successful at the regular school. Transitional support for a particular student may continue for six months or longer.

### **A Growing Place**

Established in 1993, A Growing Place operates as a classroom at Millbrook Elementary school. The program is designed to serve 15 to 25 elementary grade students whose families are living in homeless shelters or temporary housing. A Growing Place provides a transitional school environment until families become settled and students can enroll in a regular school. Primary grade students (K-3) receive all of their instruction from one teacher and assistant attached to the program, and

intermediate grade students receive their instruction with other students in the regular classrooms. A Growing Place is also served by a full-time social worker who offers assistance to the students and their families.

### **Bridges**

Bridges was established in 1995, and shares facilities on the Mt. Vernon Redirection campus. The program is a self-contained school serving students in grades 1-8 who are experiencing emotional or behavioral difficulties in the regular school setting and who require specialized comprehensive assessment of their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs. The Bridges school emphasizes thorough identification of needed services, coordination with other community agencies, and the return of students to the regular school program. Bridges is designed to provide short-term interventions of 30 to 90 days length.

### **Cary Computer Lab**

Established in 1995, the Cary High School Computer Lab offers an alternative instructional model through the provision of a computer lab for students who are at-risk of failing courses required for graduation. The computer lab is located at Cary High School. The lab is equipped with NovaNET courseware that allows students to pursue independent study of material identified by regular teachers. Students attend their regular classes and use the lab during an elective period to cover material that they have failed to master or to study topics on which they need additional assistance. Up to sixteen students may use the lab during each of the six class periods in an instructional day.

**Figure 2. Selected Characteristics of Type II WCPSS Alternative Programs: 1995-96**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>FIND</b>	<b>Mt. Vernon ALC*</b>	<b>Millbrook ALC*</b>	<b>Garner ALC*</b>
<b>Eligible Students</b>	First-time possession of drugs for grades 6-12	Students who are LT suspended from grades 6-8	Students who are LT suspended from grades 9-12	Students who are LT suspended from grades 9-12
<b>Operating Hours</b>	After school and evenings	4-8 pm	3:30-8:30 pm	4-8 pm
<b>Contact Person</b>	Debbie Harrison	John Cooper	Greg Gault	Rochelle Guilford
<b>Phone</b>	872-7373	233-4036	850-8787	662-2429
<b>1995-96 Capacity for Enrollment</b>	170 students served with capacity for many more	80	80	80
<b>Service Plan Calendar</b>	Year-round	School Year	School Year	School Year
<b>Program Goal</b>	Prevent further substance abuse through drug and alcohol education or counseling	Promotion to next grade level	Credits toward graduation, behavior counseling, and readiness for re-entry into the regular school program	Credits toward graduation, behavior counseling, and readiness for re-entry into the regular school program
<b>Curriculum Scope or Focus</b>	Communication Psychopharmacology Decision-making Peer Pressure Parenting Skills	Math Language Arts Social Studies Science	Math English Social Studies Science Coop. Vocational	Math English Social Studies Science Coop. Vocational
<b>Computer Availability and Use</b>	No	NovaNET courseware and keyboarding classroom	NovaNET courseware	NovaNET courseware
<b>Transportation Provided?</b>	No	No	No	No
<b>Staffing</b>	1 Coordinator 6 Substance Abuse Professionals 1 Physician	1 Lead Teacher 8 Part-time Staff 1 Part-time Psych. 1 Part-time Coun. 2 Part-time Support	4 Teachers 1 Part-time Coun. 1 Part-time Psych. 1 Half-time Voc Ed. Teacher	4 Teachers 1 Part-time Coun. 1 Part-time Psych. 1 Half-time Voc Ed. Teacher

Note: \* The Mt. Vernon, Millbrook, and Garner ALC programs were discontinued after the 1995-96 school year, and the Richard M. Milburn High School is designated to serve this population of students in the 1996-97 school year.

**Figure 3. Selected Characteristics of Type III WCPSS Alternative Programs: 1995-96**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Mt. Vernon Redirection</b>	<b>Phillips High Day Program</b>	<b>Phillips High Extended Academy</b>	<b>Cary High School Computer Lab</b>
<b>Eligible Students</b>	Students in grades 6-8 at risk of failure because of behavior issues	Students in grades 9-12 who need an alternative to the traditional high school	Students in grades 9-12 who need evening courses to continue progress toward graduation	Students in grades 9-12 needing remediation for promotion
<b>Operating Hours</b>	7:50 - 2:30 pm	7:50 - 2:30 pm	3:15 - 8:30 pm	7:00 am - 8:00 pm
<b>Contact Person</b>	Fred McNary	Pat Johnson	Pat Johnson	Michael Downey
<b>Phone</b>	233-4313	856-7710	856-7710	460-3564
<b>1995-96 Capacity for Enrollment</b>	96	125	100	16 per class period
<b>Service Plan Calendar</b>	School Year	Semester (block schedule)	Semester (block schedule)	School Year (possible summer hours)
<b>Program Goal</b>	Promotion to next grade level and readiness to return to regular school	Return students to base school, earn diploma, or prepare for work force	Return dropouts to base school or keep on diploma track	Enable students to complete core credits for graduation
<b>Curriculum Scope or Focus</b>	Behavior management and individualized instruction in core subjects	Math English Social Studies Science Vocational Prep.	Math English Social Studies Science	Individualized computer assisted instruction for a course that student may fail without special assistance
<b>Computer Availability and Use</b>	Computer Lab, Keyboarding Classroom, and Media Center	NovaNET Courseware and math computers	NovaNET Courseware	NovaNET Courseware
<b>Transportation Provided?</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Part of regular Cary program
<b>Staffing</b>	1 Principal 15 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Teachers, 2 Counselors, 1 Social Worker, and 3 Support Staff	1 Principal 18 FTE Teachers, 1 Counselor, 1 Social Worker, 1 Cities In Schools Coordinator, 1 Media Specialist, and 1 Secretary	4.5 FTE Teachers	2 half-day and 1 evening Teacher/Coord.

**Figure 3 (continued). Selected Characteristics of Type III WCPSS Alternative Programs: 1995-96**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>A Growing Place</b>	<b>Longview</b>	<b>Bridges</b>
<b>Target Students</b>	Students in grades K-5 who are temporarily homeless	BEH students in grades 6-12 who need a setting outside of a regular school	Students in grades 1-8 experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties requiring comprehensive assessment
<b>Operating Hours</b>	Regular School Day	Regular School Day	Regular School Day
<b>Contact Person</b>	Malissa Obame	Kathy Chontos	Cathy Harris-Cannon
<b>Phone</b>	850-1865	856-7691	233-4046
<b>1995-96 Capacity for Enrollment</b>	15 in grades K-3 5-10 in grades 4-5	60	24
<b>Service Plan Calendar</b>	Until parents find permanent housing	Short- and long-term placements with emphasis upon short-term.	Short-term (30-90 school days)
<b>Program Goal</b>	Attend to special needs of children experiencing homelessness	Behavior change with transition back to base school as soon as possible	Identification of needed services and return to regular school
<b>Curriculum Scope or Focus</b>	K-3 multi-grade classroom offering individualized instruction, and K-5 social work assistance	Teach social skills and life skills as well as the standard course of study	Therapeutic behavior management and instruction in core subjects
<b>Computer Availability and Use</b>	None	1 computer lab with Internet access, and computers in middle school and life skills classes	Assorted equipment
<b>Transportation Provided?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Staffing</b>	1 Teacher 1 Teacher Assistant 1 Social Worker	1 Principal 8 BEH Teachers, 4 BEH Consultant Teachers, 1 Crisis Intervention Teacher, 3.5 Support Teachers, 2 Coordinators, and 1 Psychologist	1 Facilitator 1 Lead Teacher 1 Social Worker 1 Psychologist 4 Teacher/Counselors 2 Liaisons

### ***How Are the WCPSS Alternative Schools Perceived?***

In the spring, 1996, the WCPSS Evaluation and Research Department interviewed a selection of 95 principals, assistant principals, counselors, and teachers from 13 regular middle and high schools about the need for alternative school programs in general, and the value of the ALCs in particular. Principals were randomly selected, and they were asked to select assistant principals, counselors and teachers to be interviewed from among those who had knowledge of one or more students who received a long-term suspension in the 1995-96 school year.

***WCPSS staff members are virtually unanimous in their opinion that alternative schools such as Phillips, Longview, Redirection, Bridges, A Growing Place, and the three ALCs serve an important function in the WCPSS.***

There was overwhelming support for the existing alternative schools, but respondents did mention some concerns about their operation.

- A few administrators expressed the concern that it should not be too easy to place students at an alternative school. One administrator commented that base schools should have to make many efforts to serve the student before considering an alternative school placement: *“It’s worth it that schools have to work to get kids into these kinds of (alternative) programs.”*
- Other administrators indicated that they felt they were sometimes in a Catch-22 situation. They wanted to try everything possible to keep a student in the regular school, but if they waited too long before referring the student to an alternative school they could run the risk of not getting the student in because the school would be full.
- Other comments that were mentioned by more than one respondent include concerns that decisions to suspend students long-term should be consistent across races, and that there should be a way to ‘dip’ students into and out of an alternative program as needed. Some students might need only a short intervention after which they could be successful back at the regular school; others who return to the regular school might subsequently need to return to the alternative school for more intervention; and others

may need to remain at the alternative school for periods longer than the remainder of school year.

Individual administrators, counselors, and teachers in the regular schools did not know a lot about the different alternative schools, but their collective comments and concerns do paint a picture of regular school staff members' perceptions of each school.

### **A Growing Place & Bridges**

There were few regular school staff members among those interviewed who knew much of substance about A Growing Place or Bridges.

The few who were aware that Bridges existed had an impression that it was for students with behavior or emotional problems.

### **Mt. Vernon Redirection**

The Redirection school is well known, and perceptions about the school were mixed. On a positive note, some regular school

administrators and counselors felt that they had established good relations with the program and were usually successful getting students enrolled when they referred them. On a negative note, there were other administrators and counselors who felt totally confused about referral procedures. A few concerns common to almost everyone were that the school was often full, it was difficult to enroll a student unless the referral was started in the spring or summer before the coming school year, the regular school often had little advance knowledge that a student would be returning, and students were not always ready to return to the regular school when they were sent back. Many of the regular school staff members expressed considerable displeasure that there was little or no transition support when students returned.

### **Phillips**

On the whole, Phillips High School was viewed positively, and those who had some knowledge of operations at the school indicated

they believed the school was being creative in meeting the needs of at-risk students. Transition issues were not a concern of the regular school staff members, possibly because students who enroll at Phillips tend to remain there until graduation or dropping out of school.

### **Longview**

Longview school received many accolades for their efforts with transition issues.

Administrators, counselors and teachers who had had the experience of receiving a student from Longview indicated that the Longview staff worked diligently to support that student in making a successful transition into the regular school environment.

**Alternative Learning Centers**

Everyone interviewed was aware that the Alternative Learning Centers existed (recall that the interviewees were specifically selected on the basis of their having experience with a suspended student). Most knew basic facts such as which ALC location their students would attend, that the schools operated in the late afternoon/early evening, and that students arranged their own transportation, but they didn't know particulars such as the curriculum being used, whether students received counseling, or whether students suspended from their school were currently attending. Despite their unfamiliarity with the ALCs, virtually everyone agreed that it was beneficial to them in the regular schools to have an alternative site where students who received LT suspension could continue their education. They also expressed the hope that counseling which students might receive at the ALCs could positively impact their behavior.

*Most WCPSS administrators, counselors, and teachers in the regular schools have only a cursory knowledge of how the various alternative schools function in their day-to-day operations.*

### *What Is the Capacity for Alternative School Placements?*

Staff members at all base schools surveyed--teachers, counselors and administrators--expressed the belief that there is a need for more alternative schools and/or more space for students to attend existing alternative schools, especially in regards to the student who is repeatedly verbally and/or physically disruptive. The capacity for all WCPSS alternative schools numbers approximately 680 students at maximum enrollment.

**Figure 4. Capacities and Enrollment at WCPSS Alternative Schools: 1995-96**

Alternative School (Grades)	Capacity	1st Qtr	2nd Qtr	3rd Qtr	4th Qtr
A Growing Place (grades K-5)*	25	13	10	9	8
Bridges (grades 1-8)**	24	16	17	17	20
Mt. Vernon Redirection (grades 6-8)***	96	42	60	77	67
Mt. Vernon ALC (grades 6-8)*	80	0	13	22	29
Longview (grades 6-12)***	60	53	45	55	57
Phillips Day Program (grades 9-12)***	125	135	126	141	104
Phillips Extended Academy (grades 9-12)***	110	69	54	103	92
Garner ALC (grades 9-12)*	80	4	15	18	22
Millbrook ALC (grades 9-12)*	80	9	16	17	16
<b>Totals</b>	<b>680</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>356</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>415</b>

Notes: \* Enrollment figures at these schools are reported for the 45th, 90th, 135th and last day of school.

\*\* Enrollment figures at Bridges were reported by the lead administrator for each quarter.

\*\*\* Enrollment figures at Mt. Vernon Redirection, Longview, and Phillips are reported for the 1st, 3rd, 6th and last month.

Some of the alternative schools functioned at or near capacity for the year and some did not.

- Enrollment at **Longview** and **Phillips** appears to have been at or near capacity throughout the school year.
- Enrollment at **A Growing Place**, **Mt. Vernon Redirection**, **Bridges**, and the three **ALCs** appears to have been below capacity throughout the year.

*Phillips and Longview operated near capacity throughout the 1995-96 school year. Underenrollment at A Growing Place, Mt. Vernon Redirection, Bridges and the three ALCs in the 1995-96 year appears to be due to communication and referral problems rather than a lack of demand for the service.*

At A Growing Place, the self-contained K-3 class, designed to serve a maximum of 15 students, is one factor that may function to keep enrollment below capacity. Another limiting factor is that enrollment can fluctuate rapidly when a family group with two or more children enters or exits. And seasonal variation is a third factor that may affect enrollment. In the 1995-96 year, enrollment became less with each passing quarter; average daily membership fell from 18.56 students in the first quarter to 6.89 students in the last quarter. At Bridges, a factor limiting enrollment may be that very few regular school staff members knew the purpose of the Bridges school, the type of students served by the school, or how to refer to the program. Also, decisions made by administrative placement committees may affect enrollment at Bridges. Small programs such as A Growing Place and Bridges will be more seriously compromised than larger programs if enrollment exceeds capacity, and a combination of situational variables and individual decisions may operate to keep enrollment below capacity.

Underenrollment at the larger Mt. Vernon Redirection and ALC programs appears due to a different combination of problems. Regarding Mt. Vernon Redirection, many regular school staff members held a perception that the school was usually full, or indicated that they found the referral procedures to be confusing or too lengthy. Some regular school staff members complained that they had had to start referrals in the spring in order to enroll a student for the fall of the next school year. Distance from the school will also limit enrollment as staff members indicated that parents were sometimes dissuaded from enrolling if they felt Redirection was too far from their home. And, the commitment to a long-term placement of as much as a year may also dissuade some parents. Regarding the ALC programs, many of the students who were eligible to enroll did not do so. These students were not interviewed or surveyed, but a number of factors surely influenced the decision to not enroll for many of these students. The evening hours of the program and the requirement to provide their own transportation are two likely factors. Also, the responsibility of initiating contact with the ALCs may have discouraged some families. A host of communication and referral problems at these larger schools appear to have limited enrollment although the demand for these programs is strong.

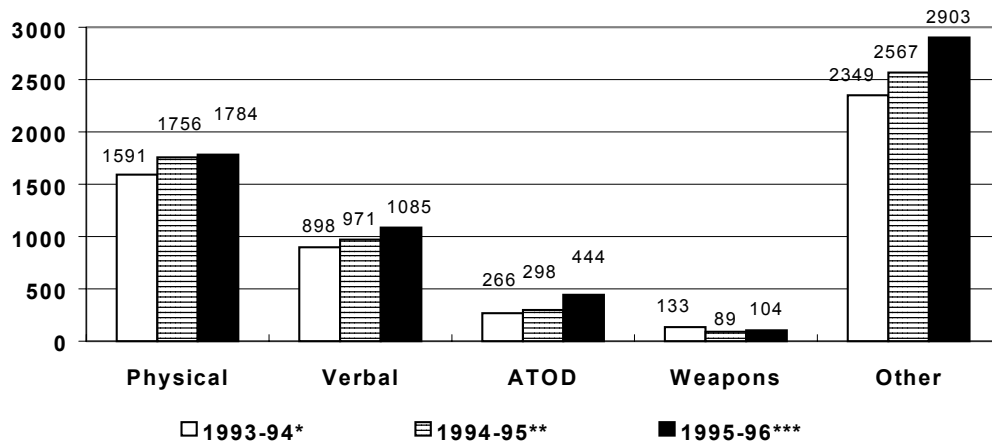
Regular school staff members interviewed for this report were virtually unanimous in their view that more alternative services are needed for disruptive students. Asked to estimate how many students still in their classrooms were extremely disruptive and needed an alternative school placement, most classroom teachers could immediately think of one or two students. When regular school administrators estimated how many students still in their whole school were disruptive and needed an alternative placement, their estimate was typically in the range of 15-25 students with the mode being toward the low end of this range. The teachers' and administrators' estimates are consistent in light of the fact that four or five teachers, on average, will know the same set of students.

With 15-25 students per school and 31 WCPSS middle and high schools, we would therefore estimate that there may be as many as 465 to 775 disruptive students countywide whom staff members perceive need an alternative educational program in addition to those already in such programs. These numbers far exceed the unused capacities at Bridges, Mt. Vernon Redirection, and the three ALCs.

*Reports from regular school staff members about disruptive students still in their schools (estimated to be 465 to 775 students), and the increasing number of students receiving suspensions over the past three years suggest the demand for alternative school placements to serve disruptive students exceeds current unused capacity.*

The number of ST suspensions of 10 days or less have increased over the past three years. When ST suspensions are clustered by type of offense, the increase is most noticeable in a general ‘Other’ category, but is also evident for Verbal, Physical, and Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug (ATOD) categories. Only Weapons offenses are less than what they were three years ago.

**Figure 5. ST Suspensions for All Students for Five Categories of Offenses in Three Years**

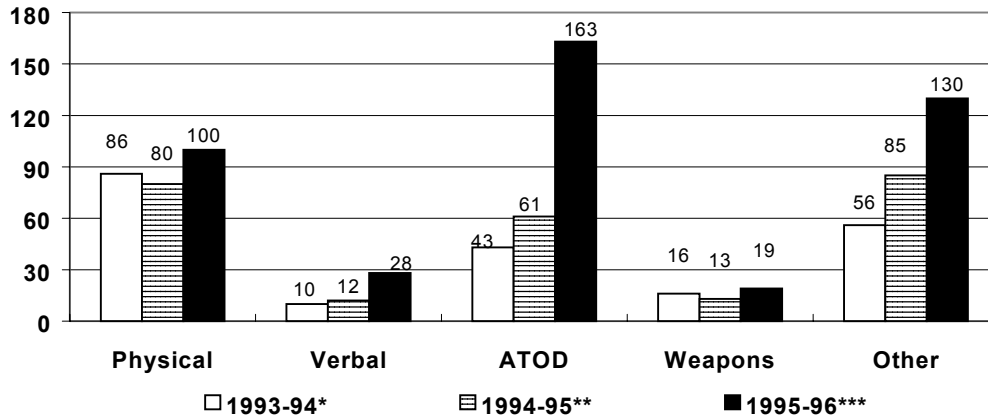


Notes: \* June 5, 1993 through June 14, 1994      \*\* June 15, 1994 through June 14, 1995  
 \*\*\* June 15, 1995 through June 14, 1996

The trends in LT suspensions--for the remainder of the school year--are similar to those for ST suspensions. All categories of LT suspensions show increases over the past three years with the Other and ATOD categories showing the largest increases. The large

increase for ATOD offenses in the 1995-96 school year is partly a function of the Operation Check Up drug sweep that was conducted on December 1, 1995, which resulted in 68 students receiving LT suspensions.

**Figure 6. LT Suspensions for All Students for Five Categories of Offenses in Three Years**



Notes: \* June 5, 1993 through June 14, 1994      \*\* June 15, 1994 through June 14, 1995  
 \*\*\* June 15, 1995 through June 14, 1996

### *Are Different Types of Alternative Schools or Programs Needed?*

Teachers, counselors, and administrators in the regular schools were asked to brainstorm varied types of alternative schools or programs that were needed for students who were faltering in the regular schools. This question was prefaced with a statement to the effect that many students drop out of school for a variety of reasons--not always because of behavior, emotional, or even academic problems. Most of the respondents believed that the regular schools could meet the needs of all but the chronically disruptive student, but there were a few suggestions that did receive frequent mention.

*The most frequent suggestions for other types of alternative services were for vocational training programs, programs to stimulate the unmotivated student, and an expansion of alternatives at the regular school site.*

- **Vocational Training.** The most common suggestion by middle and high school respondents was for an alternative school where there would be an emphasis upon technical, vocational and/or career training. Respondents indicated that many students, including the slow learner, the over-age student, and the bored student are disaffected with the academic, college-oriented curriculum and would be better served with a curriculum that taps into their immediate interests. One high school administrator noted that, *"It's incredible that we don't have a massive vocational emphasis upon everything from floral arrangement to heavy equipment."*
- **Unmotivated Students.** Respondents expressed a need for an alternative school or program for the type of student who is unmotivated to learn or complete academic work. This student may not be a discipline problem, but does require more time and attention or support services than what the classroom teacher is able to provide.
- **On-Site Alternatives.** Respondents expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the in-school suspension (ISS) program. Some teachers said that sending a student to ISS often made more work for the teacher because they had to provide the student with make-up instruction; some said that ISS was just another opportunity for students to socialize; and some said that ISS did not help students to learn better ways to behave. While there were many criticisms of ISS, there was strong sentiment for some type of alternative program on the school campus.

## ***ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CENTERS SPECIFICALLY***

### **OVERVIEW**

Three Alternative Learning Centers (ALC) were established in the 1995-96 school year to offer WCPSS students with LT suspensions a way to earn academic credits. The ALC schools were housed on three WCPSS campuses--Mt. Vernon Redirection, Garner High School, and Millbrook High School--and classes were held after regular school hours. The Mt. Vernon ALC served students in grades 6-8 from all 19 WCPSS middle schools. The Garner ALC served students in grades 9-12 from Apex, Athens Drive, Broughton, Enloe, Fuquay-Varina, Garner, and Phillips high school populations. The Millbrook ALC served students in grades 9-12 from Cary, East Wake, Leesville, Millbrook, Sanderson, and Wake Forest-Rolesville high school populations.

Students who were eligible to enroll and their parents or guardians were advised of the opportunity, told that they would need to provide their own transportation to the school program, and encouraged to contact the ALC about enrollment. At a conference, ALC staff members explained academic and behavioral expectations to students and parents. The two high school ALCs required parents and student to sign a behavioral and learning contract, holding students accountable for attendance, school behavior, and academic progress. The determination to enroll a student or not was made by ALC staff members, and all but one of 110 students who applied were accepted. One student who applied was not accepted because the student indicated in words and attitude that she didn't want to attend the school.

The first students to be enrolled entered the Millbrook ALC in September, 1995, and the Garner and Mt. Vernon ALCs in October. The ALCs were closed to enrollment as of May 10, 1996; however, four students did enroll between May 13 and May 17 due to communication snafus. After a student enrolled, ALC staff members contacted the student's home school to ask for background information on the student and obtain books the student was using. ALC staff members kept records of student attendance and grades, and communicated this information to the students' home school where the students' official records were maintained.

### **EVALUATION METHODS**

Evaluation of the three WCPSS ALCs is more detailed than evaluation of the other WCPSS alternative schools. In addition to using the evaluation methods indicated in the previous section, staff members with the Evaluation and Research Department interviewed ALC staff members and students.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

### *What Was the Nature of the Instructional Program?*

Instructional programs at the ALC sites varied from those at the regular schools in that classes were very small, typically averaging 4-8 students, and teachers provided students with considerable individualized attention. With small classes, it was also possible to maintain a highly structured environment where academics and discipline could both be emphasized.

The core courses taught at the three ALCs were math, science, English, and social studies. There were some instances in which students did not take all four core courses. Typically, these were cases where a decision was made by the student and ALC staff members to concentrate efforts on one or a few courses in an attempt to earn a passing grade. This practice became more common late in the school year. Other courses taught at the ALCs varied across the three sites. Mt. Vernon ALC offered keyboarding as one elective and a computer tutorial as another elective. Garner ALC emphasized an accelerated curriculum. Millbrook ALC offered vocational counseling, placement services, and work-study for credit.

*The curriculum and course of study at the ALCs generally followed that of the regular schools, but the method of instruction with students was individualized.*

ALC staff members did not always begin instruction at the same point where the student had been prior to being suspended, due in part to communication difficulties with the student's home school and due in part to difficulties the student had been having with the subject matter. Even so, it was often the case that students at the ALC could cover the essentials of a course because of small classes, block scheduling, computer assisted instruction, and individualized mentoring.

#### **Mt. Vernon ALC**

Mt. Vernon staff members reported generally following the curriculum and instruction of regular schools with the exception of more individualized attention and more classroom discussions. Many of the middle school

students were not below grade level and were therefore able to follow and succeed using the standard curriculum.

**Garner ALC**

At Garner, the staff members viewed their instructional program as accelerated. The coverage of subject matter at Garner was reportedly greater than at regular schools, there was a strong emphasis upon writing, and staff members encouraged more applied learning than at regular schools.

**Millbrook ALC**

Millbrook staff felt constrained by the regular school curriculum used in the ALC as they found their students to be considerably below grade level. They perceived that many of the students were unable to follow the high school curriculum, and noted that a lower level curricula would have been more appropriate for their students.

## *How was Computer Technology Used?*

Cary High School was the first school in the WCPSS to implement the NovaNET computer software in the 1994-95 school year. At Cary, students who were failing one or more courses critical to their graduation could drop a course such as an elective and use the NovaNET laboratory for that time period to catch up, reinforce skills, and develop new skills to earn a passing grade in the critical course(s). Cary staff members felt that students enjoyed the program and earned more credits than they would have without the program. Students were able to work at their own pace, building successful experiences and improving attitudes toward school and motivation to learn. Staff members reported that the program increased student attendance, self-esteem, and willingness to stay in school, and enabled teachers to work individually with students. In the 1995-96 school year, Cary High School continued to maintain the laboratory, and NovaNET was implemented at the three ALC sites.

When interviewed, the ALC staff members indicated they did not feel NovaNET was worth the high cost, but attitudes and use of the software varied across the three ALC sites and there was agreement that the software had some useful applications.

### **Mt. Vernon ALC**

Mt. Vernon staff members had conflicting views on the NovaNET software system. Some staff members reported that the middle school curriculum on NovaNET was limited, but the computer instructor asserted the curriculum was available to match student needs. NovaNET was used for a computer tutorial elective which met twice a week for 45-minute periods, emphasizing spelling,

### **About NovaNET**

Developed at the University of Illinois, NovaNET combines the power of an integrated learning system with the flexibility of a wide-area network. It offers courseware for grade 3 through post-secondary, and is used by more than 100,000 learners and educators nationwide. It has been used in alternative school settings (Heger, 1992).

Topics covered in NovaNET include: mathematics, algebra, calculus, language arts, spelling, social studies, writing, General Equivalency Diploma preparation, English as a Secondary Language skills, pre-employment skills, and others. The topics are accessed through packaged curricula or may be customized using NovaNET's curriculum development software which can also be used for word processing and spreadsheets.

reading comprehension, mathematics, and motivation. Also, staff members occasionally used the system to support their instructional activities, mostly in science and math.

### **Garner ALC**

Garner staff members were the least supportive of the NovaNET system. They reported that the program had few graphics, was nearly all drill and practice, was not interactive, bored most students, and exasperated the attention span problem that many students exhibited. The system was primarily used at Garner to supplement science and consumer education units lessons which staff members felt were the better software units. NovaNET was also used by accelerated students to supplement their lessons, by others to work independently or explore new subjects, and by staff members to conduct chapter tests.

### **Millbrook ALC**

Millbrook staff members felt that NovaNET could have been more effective if teachers had received training earlier in the year. They received training in January, 1996, and were not proficient until February. Generally, Millbrook staff members used the system to supplement regular instruction, but it did serve as the primary vehicle of instruction for a few students. Staff members noted that a few students liked to study alone and worked on NovaNET the majority of the time. One staff member felt that NovaNET would be better used for instructing core curriculum which she understood was its intended purpose.

*ALC staff members did not feel the NovaNET computer software was worth its high cost, but did agree that it was useful for individualizing instruction, helping students to master basic skills, allowing students to pace themselves, and providing students with an opportunity to explore new subject matter.*

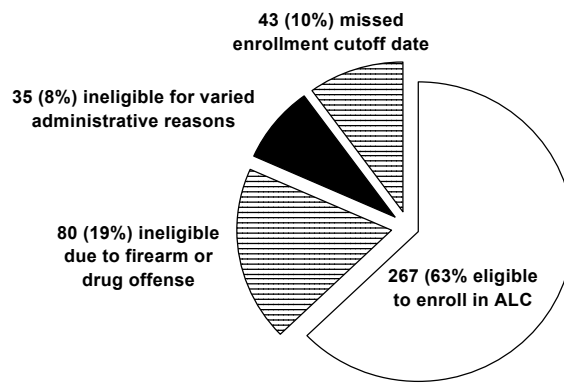
### *How Many Students Enrolled?*

In the 1995-96 school year, 829 students were recommended for LT suspensions from school in the period from August 22, 1995 through June 11, 1996. Not all of those recommended for LT suspension actually received a suspension.

- 189 special education students could not be suspended from school because their special education classification was determined to be causal to the offense.
- 177 students who were suspended for possession of a controlled substance were allowed to re-enroll after participating in the FIND program.
- 36 students had their recommendation for LT suspensions overturned by school review panels, the school superintendent, and/or the school board.
- 2 students awaited review of their cases at the end of the year.

Of the remaining 425 students with LT suspensions, 80 (19%) were ineligible to participate in the ALC program because their suspensions involved possession of a firearm (3) or sale or distribution of a controlled substance (77); 43 (10%) were ineligible because their suspensions ended after the May 10, 1996, cutoff date for enrolling in an ALC, and 35 (8%) were ineligible to participate due to a variety of administrative reasons. There were 267 (63%) students with LT suspensions who were eligible to participate in an ALC program.

**Figure 7. Eligibility of 425 Students with LT Suspensions for ALC Program**



Less than half (41%) of the 267 eligible students enrolled in an ALC. Nearly all (94%) of the enrolled middle school students completed the program, while about half of the high school students (49%) completed the program.

**Figure 8. Enrollment at the ALCs: 1995-96**

ALC Site	Eligible to Enroll	Enrolled at ALC	Changed ALC*	Rsgnd#	Dsmsd+	Dropped Out	Completed ALC
Mt. Vernon MS	65	31	0	0	1	1	29
Garner HS	96	48	(-1)	0	24	1	22
Millbrook HS	106	30	(+1)	1	11	3	16
<b>Totals</b>	<b>267</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>67</b>

Notes: \* One student moved and transferred ALC locations.  
 # One student was reassigned (Rsgnd) to regular school by the school board.  
 + Thirty-seven students were dismissed (Dsmsd) from the ALCs for disciplinary reasons.

Students who enrolled at the ALCs did so at different times throughout the school year, although no middle school students enrolled in the first quarter of the year.

**Figure 9. When Students Enrolled in the ALCs**

ALC Site	First Quarter*	Second Quarter*	Third Quarter*	Fourth Quarter*
Mt. Vernon Middle School (n = 31)	0%	42%	29%	29%
Garner High School (n = 47)**	15%	23%	34%	28%
Millbrook High School (n = 31)**	29%	19%	39%	13%

Notes: \* The first quarter is defined as days 0-45, the second quarter as 46-90; the third quarter as 91-135; and the fourth quarter as 136 through the end of the school year.  
 \*\* One student who transferred from Garner to Millbrook is accounted for at Millbrook.

Almost half of the students (48%) were actively enrolled at the middle and high school ALCs for nine weeks or less.

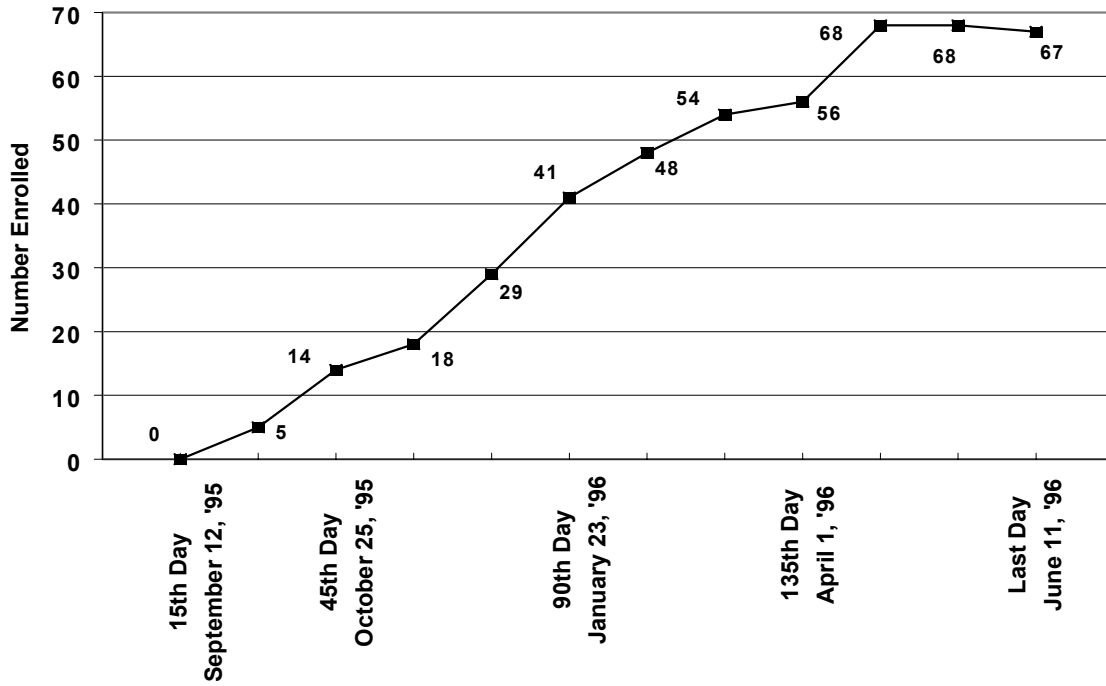
**Figure 10. Weeks Students Participated in the ALCs**

ALC Site	1-9 Weeks	10-18 Weeks	19-27 Weeks	28-36 Weeks
Mt. Vernon Middle School (n = 31)	29%	23%	48%	0%
Garner High School (n = 47)*	66%	21%	9%	4%
Millbrook High School (n = 31)*	39%	29%	13%	19%

Note: \*\* One student who transferred from Garner to Millbrook is accounted for at Millbrook.

*Active membership at the ALCs reached a peak of 69 students on April 24, 1996. In all, 109 students enrolled at an ALC during the 1995-96 school year, and 61 (56%) of these made some academic progress--either through being promoted to the next grade or earning some units of credit.*

**Figure 11. Active Membership at 15-Day Intervals**



***What Were Some Characteristics of Students Who Enrolled?***

Among those enrolled at the ALCs, 43% of the white students were suspended for alcohol and drug offenses, while 46% of the African-American students were suspended for fighting offenses.

**Figure 12. Policy Violations by Gender and Race Among ALC Students**

Policy Violation	Black Male	Black Female	White Male	White Female	Asian	Totals
6000: Attendance	5	1	5	1		12 (11%)
6400: Student Conduct	5		3			8 (7%)
6410: Student Behavior		2	1	1		4 (4%)
6420: Disruption	3	1		2		6 (6%)
6425: Fighting / Assault	17	8	4	3	1 female	33 (30%)
6427: Weapons	2	1	9	1		13 (12%)
6428: Theft / Damage	2	1	1			4 (4%)
6429: Drugs / Alcohol	6		16	7		29 (27%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>40 (37%)</b>	<b>14 (13%)</b>	<b>39 (36%)</b>	<b>15 (14%)</b>	<b>1 (1%)</b>	<b>109</b>

**Figure 13. Grade Level by Gender and Race Among ALC Students**

Grade	Black Male	Black Female	White Male	White Female	Asian	Totals
Sixth	2	0	2	1	0	5 (5%)
Seventh	4	1	2	1	0	8 (7%)
Eighth	5	3	9	1	0	18 (17%)
Ninth	18	8	12	6	0	44 (40%)
Tenth	5	1	8	1	1 female	16 (15%)
Eleventh	3	1	5	2	0	11 (10%)
Twelfth	3	0	1	3	0	7 (6%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>109</b>

*Students at the ALCs were disproportionately distributed by a) gender--males constituted 72% of the enrolled students; b) race--African-Americans constituted 50% of the students; c) grade level--eighth and ninth grade students constituted 57% of the students; and d) reasons for suspension--57% of the long-term suspensions were for fighting, drug or alcohol offenses.*

Sixteen (15%) of the enrolled students were special education students with exceptional needs, including academically gifted, learning disabled, behaviorally/emotionally handicapped, and other health impaired categories.

**Figure 14. Exceptionality by Gender and Race Among ALC Students**

Exceptionality	Black Male	Black Female	White Male	White Female	Totals*
Academically Gifted			5		5 (31%)
Learning Disabled	4	1	4		9 (56%)
Behaviorally/Emotionally Handicapped	1				1 (6%)
Other Health Impaired				1	1 (6%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5 (31%)</b>	<b>1 (6%)</b>	<b>9 (56%)</b>	<b>1 (6%)</b>	<b>16</b>

Note: \* Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding error.

At the end of the 1995-96 year, 19 of the 29 students still attending the middle school ALC program were promoted to the next grade, but promotion for the other 10 students (7 black males and 3 black females) was withheld pending successful completion of summer school. At the two high school ALCs, 42 of the 78 students who initially enrolled earned some units of academic credit. Not counting the 10 middle school students whose promotion was withheld pending their participation in summer school, 61 of the 109 middle and high school ALC students achieved some academic progress through their participation in the ALC program.

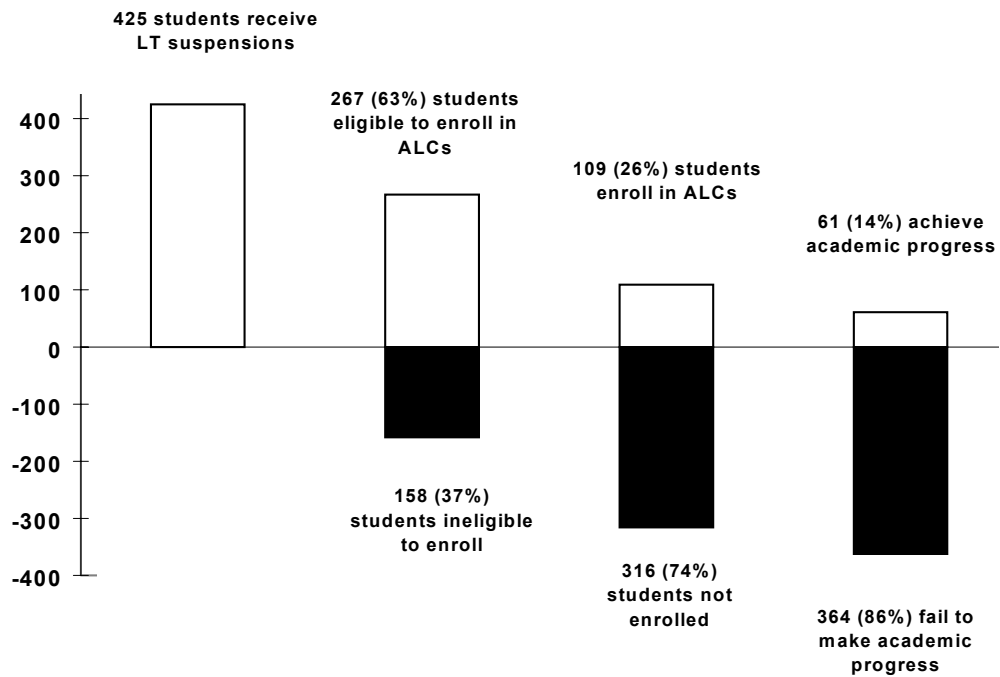
**Figure 15. Units of Academic Credit Earned by ALC Students\***

ALC Site	Units of Academic Credit											Total Units of Credit
	0.5	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5	5.0	6.0	
Garner ALC	2	4	2	3	3	2	2	6	1		1	69
Millbrook ALC		1		2		1		5		1	6	69
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>138</b>

Note: \* The number of students earning academic credit at the high school ALCs exceeds the number of students who completed the program due to some students earning credits in the first semester but not continuing to complete the program in the second semester.

*Of the 425 students with long-term suspensions in the 1995-96 year, 267 (63%) were eligible to enroll in the ALCs, 109 (26%) students did enroll, and 61 (14%) students were promoted or earned some academic credits through their participation in the ALC program.*

**Figure 16. Number of Students with LT Suspensions Who Made Some Academic Progress Through Participation in the ALC Program**



### *What Was the Nature of Student Problems?*

The Lead Teachers, other teachers, and counselors at the ALCs completed surveys on students when they entered and exited the program. Analyses of this survey data must be cautious. The **reliability** of some items is questionable because it is not always possible to know when staff members completed the surveys. Staff members' recall of what problems a student exhibited upon entry could be unreliable if they completed that portion of the survey at a date much later than when the student entered the program. **Validity** of some items is questionable because of how staff members may have been biased to report positive outcomes, and responses to some items may have been affected by responses to other items. This is especially the case for the Lead Teachers who had pre- and post-measures on the same survey. **Generalization** is questionable because lasting behavior change is difficult to achieve in a short period of time. For these reasons, positive changes in behavior reported in this section might be viewed as a best case scenario.

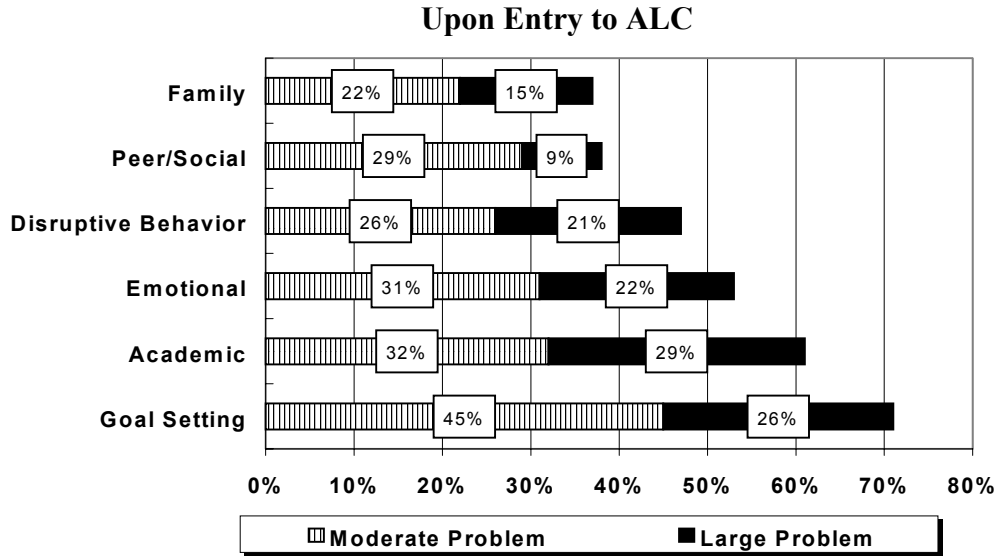
*Lead Teachers, other teachers, and counselors at the ALCs were in agreement that the most pronounced problem which students exhibited upon entering an ALC program was an inability to set realistic goals and follow through on strategies to achieve those goals.*

#### **Lead Teacher Perceptions**

Lead Teachers at each ALC completed a survey (Appendix A) for students who were enrolled in the ALC programs. One portion of this survey listed six problem areas and the Leads rated the magnitude of each problem for students at the time they entered the ALC program. At a later place on the same survey, the Leads rated these same six problems when students subsequently completed the program, were dismissed from or dropped out of the program. Another item on the survey asked the Leads to rate the students' academic efforts while in the ALC program.

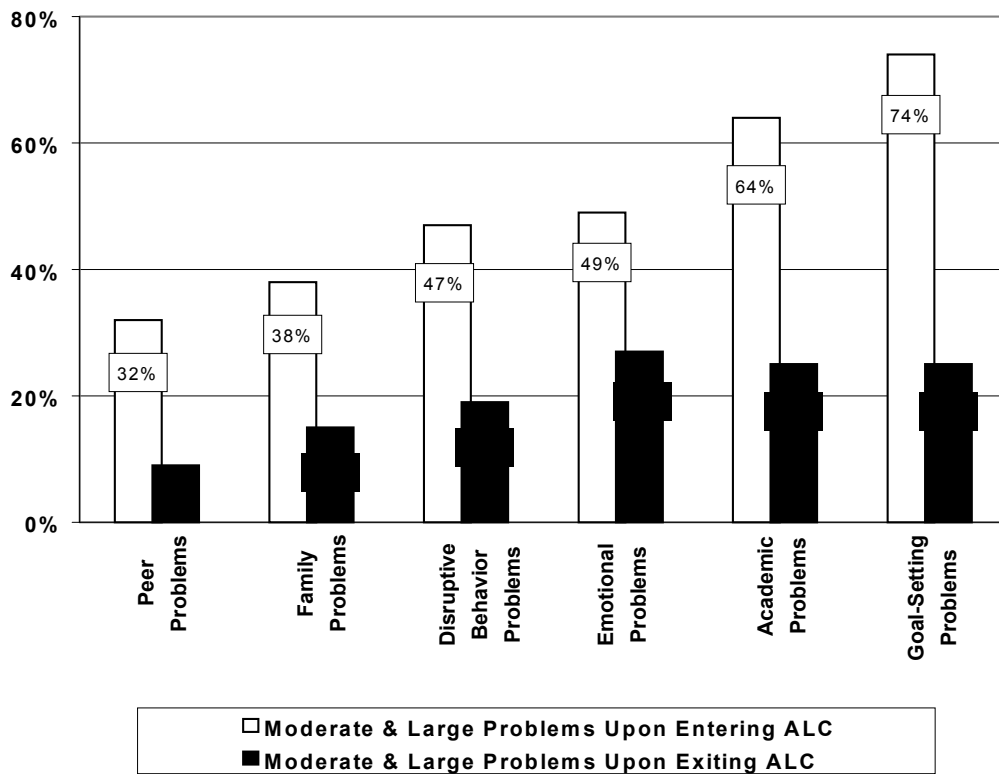
The three Lead Teachers completed 69 surveys for students when they first entered the ALCs. They perceived that students' most pronounced problems at the time of entry involved an inability to set goals, academic difficulties, and emotional problems.

#### **Figure 17. Lead Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Problems**



Considering only students who were enrolled at an ALC for nine or more weeks, there were 53 surveys where the Lead Teachers' perceptions of student problems could be compared between the time students entered and exited the ALC program. The Leads perceived that students' problem behaviors improved in each of the six areas measured.

**Figure 18. Lead Teachers' Perceptions of Change in Students' Problems**



The Lead Teachers' perceptions of improvement in behavior sometimes differed according to whether students completed the program (38) or exited early (15) because of being dismissed or dropping out. The Leads' perceived that those who completed the program made greater improvement in the areas of disruptive behavior and ability to set goals relative to those who exited early, but they perceived that those who exited early made greater improvement in family problems relative to those who completed the program. There was not a large difference in perceptions of improvement made by the two groups for the other problem areas (academic, emotional, and peer relations).

Another item completed by Lead Teachers for each student inquired about the students' academic efforts while in the ALC Program. Among those students enrolled for at least nine weeks, 66% were perceived to exert "reasonable" or "very strong" effort. There was not a pronounced difference between students who completed the program and those who left early.

**Figure 19. Lead Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Academic Efforts**

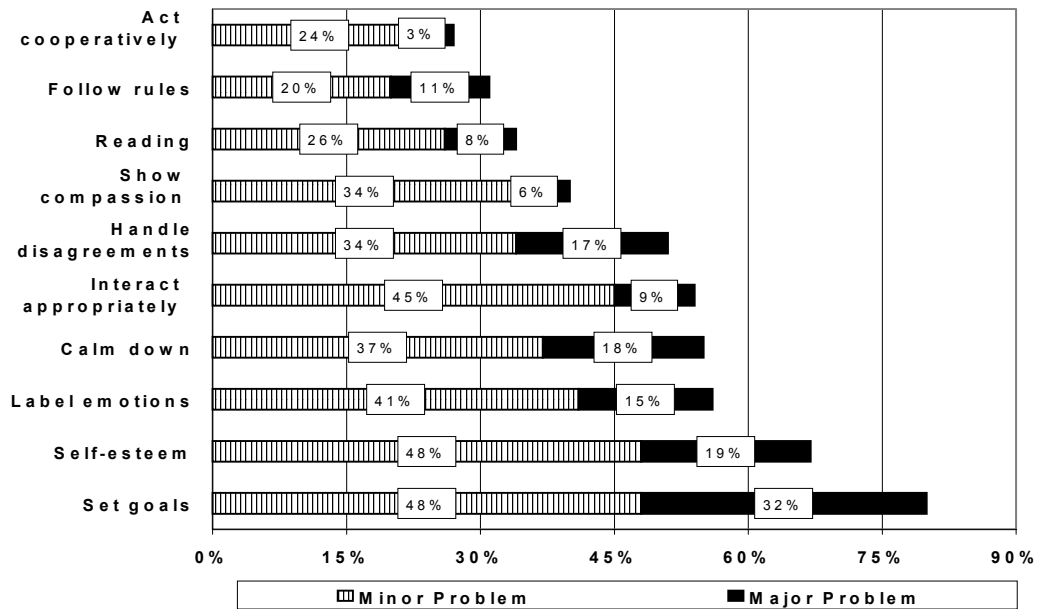
<b>Student Group</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Very Little</b>	<b>Reasonable Effort</b>	<b>Very Strong</b>
Completed Program (n = 38)	0%	32%	50%	18%
Left Program Early (n = 15)	7%	33%	53%	7%
All Students (n = 53)	2%	32%	51%	15%

### **Teacher Perceptions**

Teachers at the ALCs, other than the Lead Teachers, also completed surveys on the students (Appendix B). These teachers completed one survey reporting their views of students when they entered the program (a pre-survey) and a separate but identical survey when students exited the program (a post-survey); however, few teachers completed post-surveys, and analyses of changes in teacher perceptions could not be conducted.

Early in January, 1996, nine different teachers at the three ALCs completed 103 of the pre-surveys on 34 different students who were enrolled at the time. It was usually the case that three or four high school teachers completed surveys for each student, but only one middle school teacher completed surveys. The nine teachers perceived that students' most pronounced problem areas involved the students' inability to set goals and problems with self-esteem.

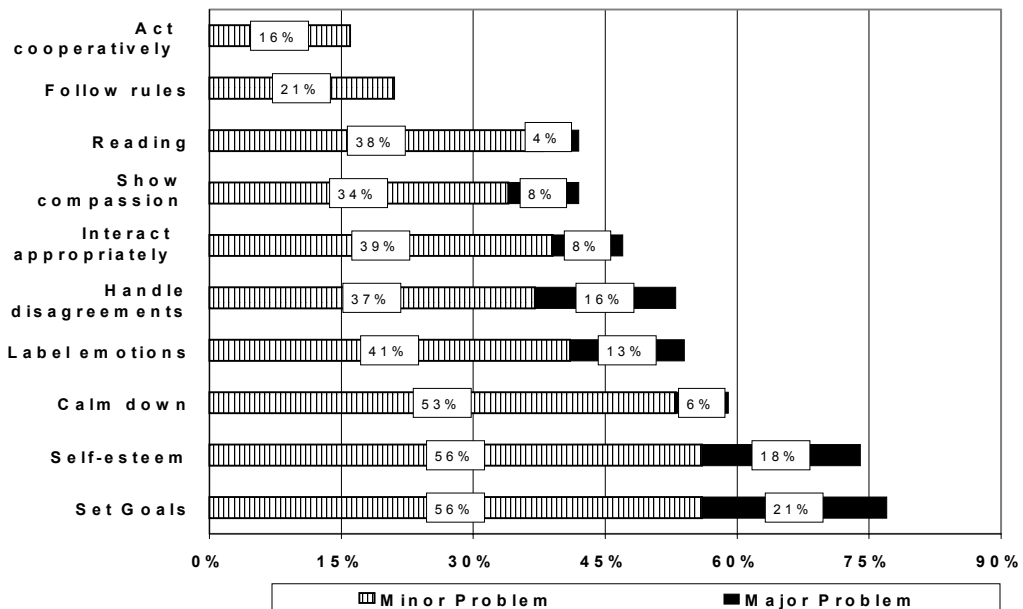
**Figure 20. Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Problems Upon Entry to ALC  
(n = 103 surveys)**



**Counselor Perceptions**

The three counselors at the ALCs completed the same pre- and post-surveys that the teachers used. The counselors completed pre-surveys on 39 students, and they perceived students' most pronounced problems at the time of entry involved an inability to set goals and self-esteem.

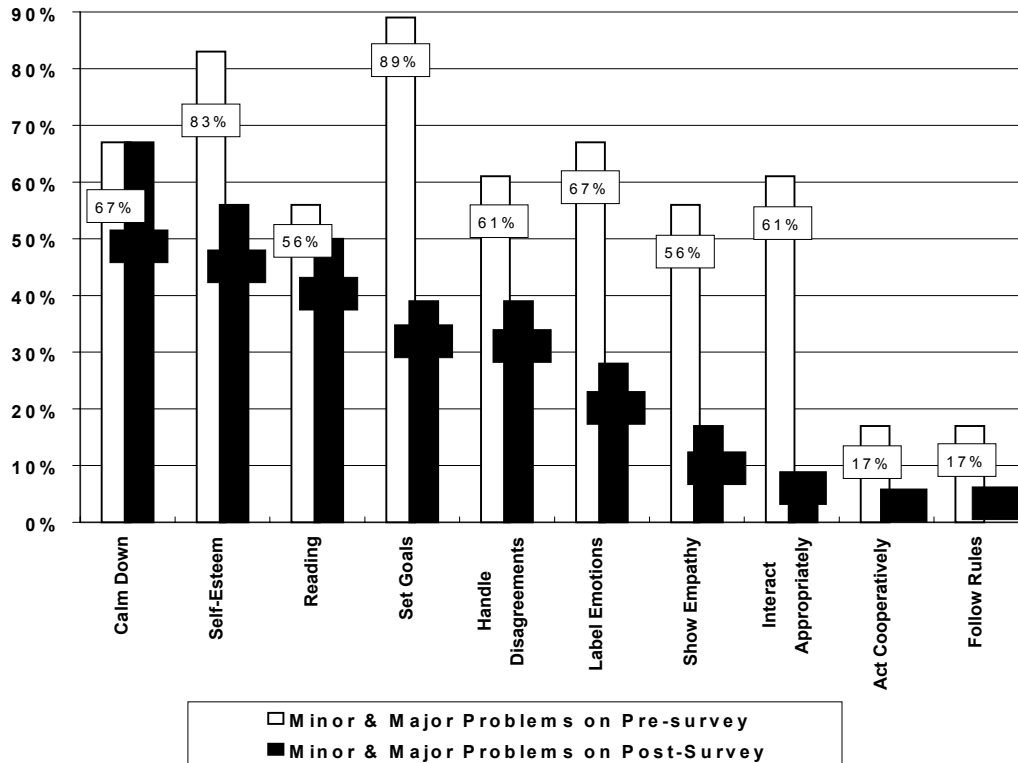
**Figure 21. Counselors' Perceptions of Students' Problems Upon Entry to ALC**



The middle school counselor completed both the pre- and post-surveys on 18 students enrolled for at least nine weeks (16 who completed the program and 2 who were

dismissed or dropped out). When the middle school counselor’s ratings on the pre- and post-surveys are contrasted, nine of the ten problem areas showed improvement. The two areas which showed the greatest improvement were the ability to interact with others in an appropriate and positive manner and the ability to establish goals and follow through on strategies to achieve goals. The only area to not show improvement was the ability to stop and calm down when excited or upset.

**Table 22. Middle School Counselor’s Perception of Change in Students’ Problems**



*Among students enrolled for at least nine weeks, Lead Teachers perceived that student behavior improved on 6 of 6 indices, and the middle school counselor perceived improvement on 9 of 10 indices.*

### *What Counseling Services Were Available?*

Interviews with the three ALC counselors indicated that they originally planned to hold group counseling sessions, and focus on helping students set and achieve goals. At the middle school ALC, where most students remained in the program following enrollment, group counseling was possible because regular attendance allowed for group dynamics to be established and maintained. Counselors at the high school ALCs reported that they were not able to hold group sessions because many students dropped out of the ALC program after enrolling, making it difficult to establish or maintain group dynamics. The high school counselors opted to provide individual counseling to students who elected to participate.

When interviewed for this evaluation, the three counselors reported that their sessions with students were effective. At Garner, the teaching staff noted that the relationship which the counselor established with them was helpful in working with the students. The Garner counselor was not able to continue working with the ALC program after April due to personal scheduling conflicts, but kept in contact with the teaching staff and supported them as needed. At Millbrook, the counselor worked separately from other school staff members. The Lead Teacher expressed concern that communication between the counselor and other staff members was inconsistent.

**ALC counselors and lead teachers perceived the counseling sessions to be effective.**

One item on the Lead Teachers' survey asked them to "describe the extent to which counseling sessions were effective with helping (students) learn to set goals." The Leads completed this item for 53 students enrolled for at least nine weeks. The Leads perceived the counseling sessions to be moderately or very effective for 58% of this group, but minimally or not effective for 42%.

**Figure 23. Effectiveness of Counseling Sessions to Help Students Set Goals**

<b>Student Group</b>	<b>Not Effective</b>	<b>Minimally Effective</b>	<b>Moderately Effective</b>	<b>Very Effective</b>
Completed Program (n = 38)	5%	37%	32%	26%
Left Program Early (n = 15)	7%	33%	53%	7%
All Students (n = 53)	6%	36%	38%	21%

## *What Were the Perceptions of WCPSS Staff Members?*

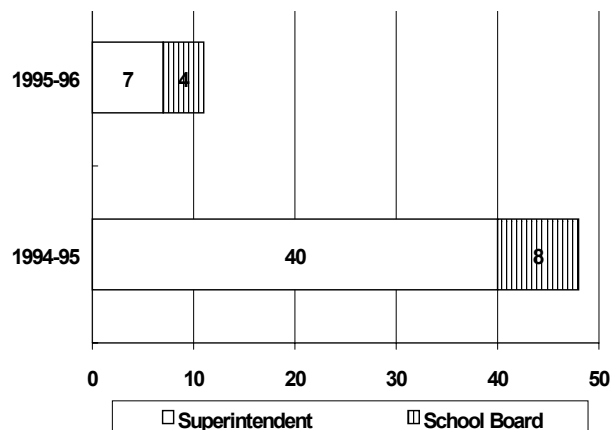
### **Regular School Staff Members**

Personnel in the Evaluation and Research Department interviewed a selection of 95 principals, assistant principals, counselors and teachers from 13 WCPSS regular middle and high schools in the spring of 1996. Staff members in the regular schools were unanimous in their perception that the three ALCs served an important function in the WCPSS. They mentioned a variety of direct and indirect benefits to them as educators, to their school, and to the suspended students.

**In the absence of LT suspended students, many regular school administrators, counselors, and teachers interviewed perceived benefits of the ALCs to be that a) classroom instruction was better quality (64%); b) schools were safer (48%); teachers were spending less time on student discipline (43%); and two-thirds of administrators felt more comfortable suspending students knowing the ALCs existed.**

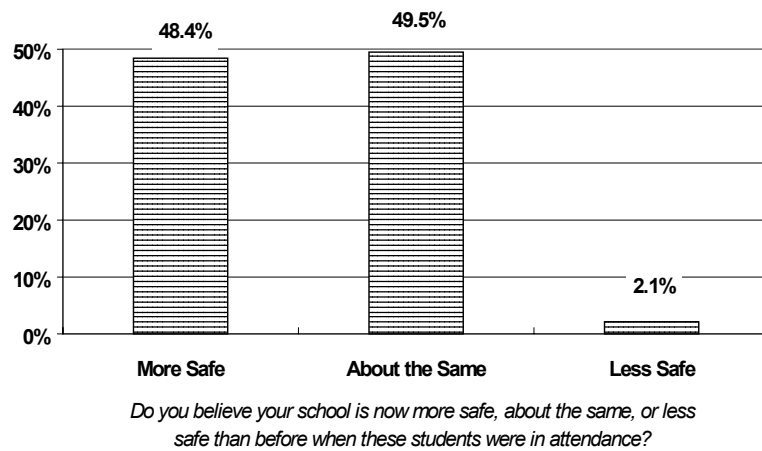
- Student Assignment.** Nearly all (97%) of the respondents (n = 94) believed it was better to place students with severe discipline problems in an alternative school setting rather than keeping them at the regular school or reassigning them to another regular school. Many regular school staff members credited the existence of the ALCs for a reduction in the number of students reassigned from one regular school to another for disciplinary reasons. There was a 77% reduction in reassignments between the 1995-96 and the 1994-95 school years.

**Figure 24. Reassignments of Students Recommended for LT Suspensions**

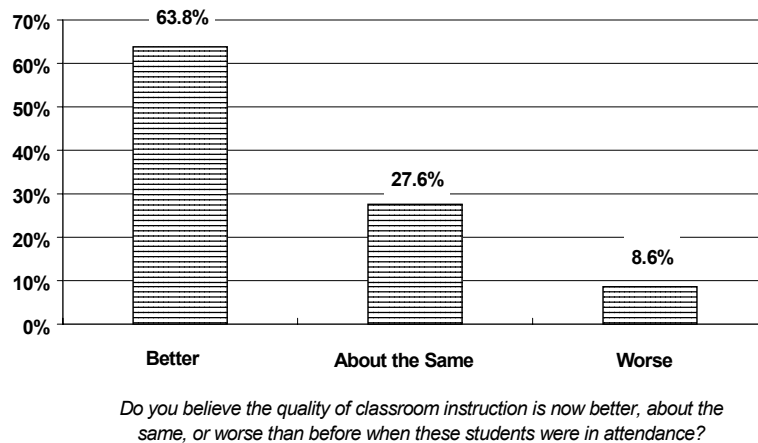


**Figure 25. Perceptions of School Safety Among Regular School Staff Members (n = 95)**

- School Safety.** Almost half (48%) of the respondents perceived that school safety had improved since students with LT suspensions had left school; only 2% felt that school was less safe.



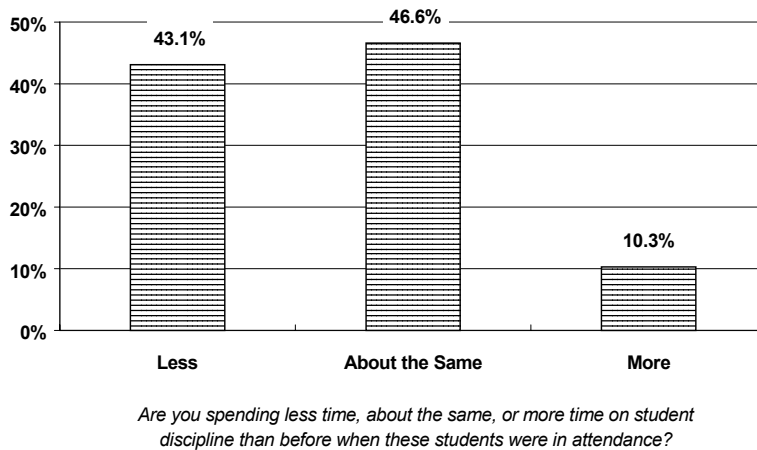
**Figure 26. Teachers' Perceptions of the Quality of Classroom Instruction (n = 58)**



- Instructional Quality.** The majority (64%) of regular school teachers felt that the quality of classroom instruction was better in the absence of students with LT suspensions.

- Student Discipline.** Almost half (43%) of the teachers felt they were spending less time on classroom discipline than before when LT students were in attendance, but 10% felt they were spending more time.

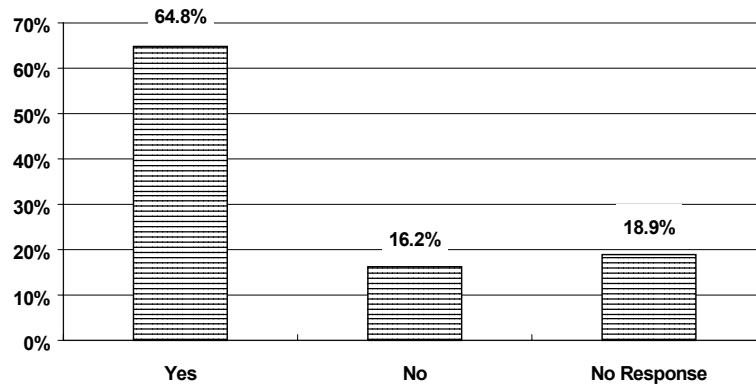
**Figure 27. Teachers' Perceptions of Time Spent on Discipline (n = 58)**



**Figure 28. Administrators' and Counselors' Report of Comfort About Suspending Students (n = 37)**

- **Comfort in Suspensions.**

Almost two-thirds (65%) of the administrators and counselors interviewed, felt more comfortable about suspending students from school knowing that there was an option for the student to attend an ALC.



*Do you feel more comfortable about suspending students from school now that there is an option of ALCs?*

### ALC Staff Members

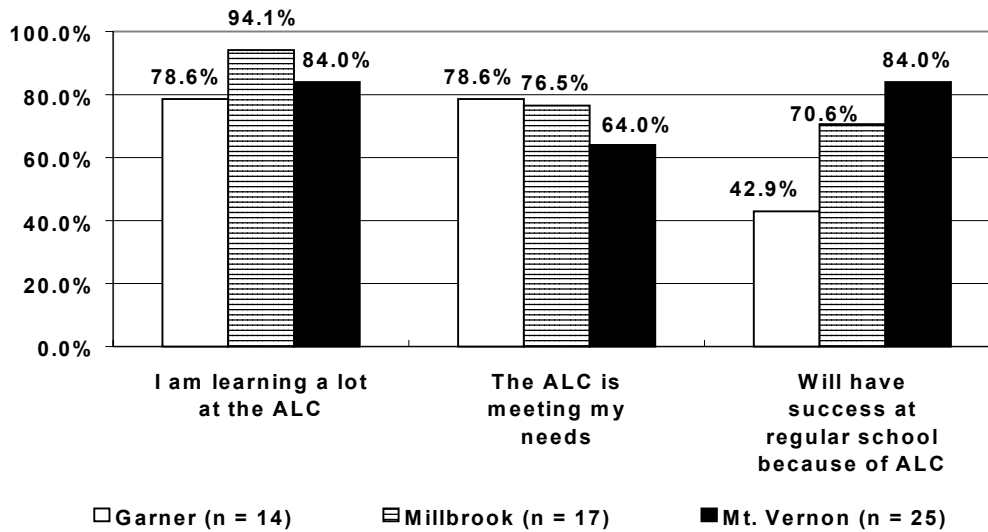
After one year of the program, the ALC staff members had many insights into what features of the ALC program made a positive difference in student attitudes, behaviors, and/or academics. Effective practices that were most frequently noted include the following:

- **Low Teacher-Student Ratio.** All ALC staff members felt the low teacher-student ratio allowed for individual academic assistance, helped to keep students on task, and provided time to cover topics in greater depth.
- **Individualized Curriculum.** ALC staff members sought to individualize the curriculum for each student. They credited the use of computers for helping them to individualize instruction, explore new subjects with students, and allow students to pace themselves. Garner staff members indicated the NovaNET consumer education and science units were most useful, and the Mt. Vernon computer instructor asserted that NovaNET was invaluable for helping students who were behind to catch up.
- **Vocational Education.** Millbrook staff members felt that the vocational work experience students received was one of the most important parts of the program. They noted that students took pride in their employment, and believed that the students kept busy and out of trouble through having a job. Garner staff members also indicated vocational work experience was important to student success even though this aspect was not emphasized in their curriculum.
- **School Climate.** The ALC teachers felt that they and the students were able to get to know one another on a personal level and create positive teacher-student bonds. They also noted that a disciplined and structured environment helped to increase the students' attention span, on-task behavior, and self-control.

***What Were the Perceptions of ALC Students?***

Students at the ALCs held positive views of the curriculum and instructional methods. Student responses to a survey (Appendix C), administered in the spring, 1996, indicate that approximately three-fourths agreed or strongly agreed that they learned a lot, that the ALCs met their needs, and that they agreed would have success at the regular school because of their experience at the ALC.

**Figure 29. Students' Perceptions at the ALCs**



Student views on the curriculum and instruction differed somewhat at each ALC site.

**Mt. Vernon ALC**

At Mt. Vernon, students emphasized that class discussion was often a part of their instruction. Many indicated that they felt the ALC curriculum was easier than at their regular school and they attributed their success at the ALC to the easier curriculum.

**Garner ALC**

At Garner, students emphasized the importance of flexibility in scheduling to accommodate their needs and interests. Several students expressed an increased confidence in the subject matter due to extra teacher assistance and the possibility for extended work time.

**Millbrook ALC**

At Millbrook, students stressed the significance of self-pacing and of teachers regularly following through with students to ensure that they completed their work. The students indicated teacher feedback was important to them.

Nearly all students expressed positive views about their experiences at the ALCs, although most indicated that they preferred to be at their regular school. Particular strengths in the ALC program mentioned by the students include the following:

- **Low Teacher-Student Ratio.** The vast majority of students interviewed indicated the small teacher-student ratio afforded them a unique opportunity for academic assistance and removed many possible distractions. They noted that they were able to focus on academics instead of negative behavior such as clowning around or extraneous conversation. A recurrent comment about the regular school classrooms was that, *"There are just too many kids there."* One disadvantage of the low teacher-student ratio noted by middle school students was that the associated small school size limited their choice of friends.
- **Individualized Curriculum.** The high school students said that they appreciated the individualized academic attention, noting that it also afforded teachers the opportunity to informally counsel with them. Nearly all students appreciated the opportunity to use computers in the classroom. Many noted that they were able to focus their attention and practice skills better on computers than they could do in regular classrooms. Nearly all of the students felt that they would be successful in their coursework at the ALC.
- **Vocational Education.** About half of the students at the Millbrook ALC started a job while attending the program, and received academic credit through a vocational elective. These students were pleased to have the opportunity to work during the day. They noted that work experience was an impetus to continue their schooling in order to get a better job. Students at the Garner ALC did not have the same vocational elective, but did express an interest in getting a job.
- **School Climate.** Several high school students asserted that the ALC fostered mutual respect between teachers and students, and middle school students reported that staff members were supportive of their efforts. Many students commented that the ALC

teachers were genuinely concerned about their academic progress in sharp contrast to how they perceived their teachers at the regular schools.

- **Schedule.** Students noted that the limited number of courses and longer class period helped them to focus on essential academics. Many high school students liked the evening hours because they could work during the day, although a few students complained that the evening hours disrupted their social life. The middle school students indicated they preferred an earlier start time such as 12:00 PM.

**ALC staff members and students alike perceived benefits of the ALCs to include the low teacher-student ratio, individualized curriculum, and informal school climate.**

***What Enhancements Would Improve the ALCs?***

Regular school staff members, ALC staff members, and ALC students identified a variety of common enhancements that could be made to the ALC program. These enhancements may be classified as falling into five categories: schedule, communication, curriculum, counseling, and transition.

**Figure 30. Enhancements to Improve the ALC Program**

Category	Regular School Staff Members	ALC Staff Members	ALC Students
<b>SCHEDULE</b>	Some of the staff members expressed concern that the evening hours may have limited enrollment, and thought that the program should operate during the daytime as well.	Millbrook staff members felt that late morning to early afternoon operating hours would be better because they believed the evening hours kept some students from enrolling in the program due to conflicts with their jobs. Mt. Vernon staff members also believed earlier hours would be better because middle school students need to be occupied during the daytime.	Some high school students with evening jobs preferred a day program, and middle school students also said they would like earlier hours.
<b>COMMUNICATIONS</b>	Counselors and teachers both wanted more communication with the ALC, especially in regards to information on academic progress and strategies for behavior management when the student returns to the regular school.	ALC staff members desired improved communications with the regular schools. They indicated that it was difficult to get information on students, and staff members sometimes had difficulty obtaining the students' books from the regular school.	Several students voiced concerns about the apparent lack of communication between the ALC and their regular school.

**Figure 30 (continued). Enhancements to Improve the ALC Program**

Category	Regular School Staff Members	ALC Staff Members	ALC Students
CURRICULUM	<p>Staff members knew little about the ALC curriculum, but they expressed the belief that hands-on, technical, and vocational activities should receive considerable emphasis.</p>	<p>Staff members at both high schools suggested expanding the vocational component and adding electives such as art and drama.</p> <p>On the whole, the ALC staff members did not feel that NovaNET computer software was worth its high cost. Garner staff members suggested that stand-alone CD-ROM programs would be better because they would be more up-to-date, interactive, graphic, flexible and much less expensive.</p> <p>At Millbrook, staff members found that many high school students had not mastered middle school skills, and believed that it would be helpful to have middle school curricular materials available for use.</p>	<p>A number of students commented that the ALCs should offer more electives, and Garner students expressed interest in vocational activities.</p> <p>Students at the three ALCs were critical of the NovaNET software, and believed that current CD-ROM programs would be more up-to-date and provide more sophisticated stimulation.</p>
COUNSELING	<p>High school teachers felt that counseling should emphasize objectives such as anger coping, dealing with authority, peer relations, and conflict resolution.</p>	<p>ALC staff members noted that counseling services could be improved. The original intention to conduct group counseling was quickly abandoned at the high school sites; counseling terminated at Garner before the year was out; and communication between the counselor and teachers at Millbrook was minimal.</p>	<p>Several Millbrook students mentioned participating in counseling, but few of these expressed positive feelings about the counseling sessions.</p>

**Figure 30 (continued). Enhancements to Improve the ALC Program**

Category	Regular School Staff Members	ALC Staff Members	ALC Students
T R A N S I T I O N	<p>Many staff members expressed concern that the ALCs should provide continuing support when a student returns to the regular school. One teacher commented that the, <i>“ALCs should be involved in transitioning. They are still a part of the child’s psycho-social arena and need to continue supporting the student in the regular environment.”</i></p>	<p>Garner teachers believed that establishing a mentor program for students while they were at the ALCs would be extremely useful, while Millbrook teachers believed mentors would be more useful to students when they returned to the regular schools. Upon return to the regular schools, ALC staff members emphasized that students would need small classes and individualized instruction. Mt. Vernon teachers indicated they had identified staff advocates at the regular schools to regularly meet with students upon their return.</p>	<p>Students recognized that the ALC schools provided a good education and opportunity to make progress, but all desired to return to their regular schools.</p>

Other suggestions for improvement included supplying students with basic materials such as paper and pencils, securing greater parent involvement or requiring parents to pay a part of the tuition cost, and incorporating a community-based recreational component with activities such as games, hiking, and canoeing.

**Most regular school and ALC staff members, along with ALC students, indicated operations at the ALCs could be enhanced through earlier operating hours, more communication with the regular schools, greater emphasis upon vocational curricula, improved counseling services, and more support for students transitioning back to the regular schools.**

## EPILOGUE

The three ALCs that functioned in the 1995-96 school year were discontinued at the end of that year. For the 1996-97 year, the WCPSS entered into a contract with Richard M. Milburn High School (RMHS), a private educational agency, to provide an educational program for students who receive long-term suspensions. RMHS enrolled their first student in October, 1996. The WCPSS Evaluation and Research Department will oversee an evaluation of the RMHS program for the 1996-97 school year.

The tradition in WCPSS of providing a variety of educational alternatives continues with the opening of programs such as A Growing Place, Bridges, and RMHS, and schools such as Poe International Montessori Magnet Elementary which opened in the 1995-96 year and the Southeast Raleigh High School: Center for Accelerated Studies which is scheduled to open in the 1997-98 year. Moreover, the variety of alternative schools will grow even more with the possible opening of charter schools in the near future. The diverse collection of alternative schools in the WCPSS serve a very important role which is that of demonstrating that there is a single best way to educate all students. As Neumann (1994) suggests, "Perhaps it is time to change the term *alternative* to something else or get rid of it altogether" (p. 549), and instead promote a system of diversified education.

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## **APPENDICES**

- A. Lead Teachers' Survey / *81-82*
- B. ALC Teachers' and Counselors' Survey / *83*
- C. ALC Students' Survey / *85*
- D. Regular School Teachers Interview Schedule & Survey  
Questionnaire / *87-88*
- E. Regular School Administrator/Counselor Interview Schedule  
and Survey Questionnaire / *89-90*























# ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS EVALUATION REPORT 1995-96

## *NATIONAL, LOCAL, AND SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVES*

November, 1996

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