

## **Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of an Alternative School Program**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**This research study examines the perceptions that exist among teachers and parents regarding the effectiveness of alternative school programs in the Montgomery County Public School System in Montgomery, Alabama. Recently, there has been much debate over whether or not alternative schools are needed in this school system. Furthermore, many local school officials suggest that eliminating these alternative school programs would add additional funds, and decrease the likelihood of proration or reduction in state education appropriations. The following questions are addressed in this study:**

**(1) Are alternative schools in Montgomery County, Alabama effectively promoting academic achievement? (2) Are these schools effectively correcting inappropriate student behavior? Lastly, do parents and teachers alike believe that alternative school programs are needed? Study results indicate that alternative schools in Montgomery, Alabama have been successful in promoting academic achievement and facilitating the correction of inappropriate behaviors exhibited by students participating in the programs.**

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Concern among the public, educators, and policymakers about violence, weapons, and drugs on elementary and secondary school campuses, balanced with concern about sending disruptive and potentially dangerous students “out on the streets,” has spawned an increased interest in alternative schools and programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Furthermore, the majority of students who, for one reason or another, are not succeeding in regular public schools are being sent to mandatory alternative placements. It is estimated that there are nearly 20,000 alternative schools in the United States today. As of October 1, 2007, 64 percent of districts had at least one alternative educating 646,500 students, or 1.3 percent of all public school students, were enrolled in public alternative schools or programs for at-risk students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). According to Emery (2000) alternative schools have existed as long as the public school system and one is the cause of the other. Having quoted from Raywid 1994, she states that alternative schools “call for diversity in preference to common standards and uniformity” and “pose an organizational alternative to bureaucracy.” Furthermore, it is posited that the public school system which began to take shape in the 1940s developed systematically as a standardized and bureaucratic system so as to allow business leaders to control the socialization process of the nation’s children. This can be seen with growth and the expansion of the Progressive Movement (1890-1940) and the Free School Movement (1960-1975). This is included because there are many that believe alternative schools are only those schools which serve students with disciplinary, behavioral or other nonconformity issues that make them unable to function in the regular school environment. This research focuses on two such schools in Montgomery County, Alabama, however in the future other alternative schools that address other needs will be studied.

In Alabama, there are nearly 250 alternative schools serving nearly 25,000 students. Alabama was one of the last states (46<sup>th</sup>) to offer alternative placement for students who were not succeeding in the traditional setting. However, Alabama ranks near the top (9<sup>th</sup>) in terms of growth. Over half of Alabama’s 250 alternative schools have opened in the past five years (Paglin & Fager, 2001).

In 2001, Montgomery County Public School District opened the doors to two alternative school facilities, Fews Alternative and Daisy Lawrence Alternative. Fews was created to house secondary level students, serving grades seven through twelve. Daisy Lawrence focused on elementary students in grades kindergarten through sixth. The primary mission of both alternative schools is to address the critical need for a non-traditional redirection education strategy, safe schools, to create innovative learning communities within Montgomery County Public School System by providing an alternative to learning for the student who is not behaving in the traditional school setting (Johnson, 2000). Based on the lasted data reported the program for each school provides intervention that is multidimensional, regimented, intensive, and long term. In addition, each school provides specific non-traditional redirection and therapy to meet the academic, physical, behavioral, social, and emotional needs of students (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2000).

These two alternative schools are the result of the efforts of Clinton Carter, Former Superintendent to the Montgomery County Public School District, to foster safer and innovative learning environments for the traditional school students while providing

corrective opportunities for those students who otherwise would be expelled and not allowed to attend any school in the district for one full calendar year. Students are assigned to alternative placement in Montgomery County in lieu of expulsion because they have exhibited an unwillingness to conform to the policies and procedures set forth by the Code of Student Behavior. This Code details specifically how students are expected to behave when they arrive on school property, when they ride a school-owned or operated vehicle, and when they are at school-sponsored events (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2003).

Students enrolled at both Daisy Lawrence Alternative and Fews Alternative must adhere to the school's dress code, attendance, and conduct procedures. The behavior point system ensures that all students amass at least eighty percent in five areas of evaluation before exit consideration is given. The five areas of evaluation are attendance, dress code, satisfactory progress in the academic program, respect for authority and compliance with other rules found in the Code of Good Student Behavior. Each classroom teacher maintains students' point totals daily. Before exit consideration is given, students must not only be enrolled, but present a minimum of 45 days (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2000). Daisy Lawrence and Fews were both created on the premise of offering a non-traditional setting for correcting negative student behavior and student achievement as the focal points of both programs. The New Century software assesses students academically. This program provides a diagnostic summary of a student's academic needs as well as prescriptive plan for remediation in reading, language, science, social science and mathematics. All students undergo a daily physical training regimen and weekly character education sessions. In addition, both alternative schools have a Successful Parenting Program that encompasses six sessions that will assist parents and students to deal with relevant issues. All parents or legal guardians of students are required to attend six sessions before their child can exit the program (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2000).

During the 2003-2004 school year, Daisy Lawrence had a total enrollment of eight-two students, fifty-seven males and twenty-five female and continues to maintain this student teacher ratio in Academic Year 2007-2008. At the time of this study the total student enrollment of Fews were two hundred fifty students, one hundred seventy nine males and seventy-one females. In terms of race, only two of Daisy Lawrence's students were Caucasian. The remaining eighty students were African-American. Fews had seven Caucasian students and two hundred forty three African American students. Twenty-four of Daisy Lawrence's twenty-nine faculty and staff members are black; five are white. Twenty-nine of Few's thirty-one faculty and staff members are black; two are white. Further study will be conducted at a later date based on the question of why are the students and teachers at these schools predominantly African-American.

The purpose of this study was to determine what perceptions exist among teachers and parents concerning program effectiveness in Montgomery County Alternative Schools. This study seeks to answer three questions: (1) Are alternative schools effective at promoting academic achievement? (2) Are alternative schools effective at correcting inappropriate student behavior? (3) Are alternative schools needed in the Montgomery County Public School System? This study assesses the perceptions of both parents and teachers of alternative school programs in Montgomery County Public School System

which is to promote academic achievement and correct negative student behavior. In addition, this study is significant because if these schools are not meeting their stated objectives, and research shows that Alternative Schools can be effective, The System must be accountable.

### Review of Literature

One of the most pressing issues facing educators in America today is how to best educate all of the nation's school children. Alternative schools have emerged as one way to serve many of our youth who have not succeeded in the traditional public school setting. A common definition of alternative schools accepted by practitioners, administrators, researchers, and policymakers does not currently exist. However the Common Core of Data, the Department of Education's primary database on public elementary/secondary education, defines an alternative school as "a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). One estimate suggests that there are about 20,000 alternative programs and schools in the United States (Barr and Parrett, 2001). Current research suggests that the number of alternative schools has grown substantially over the past five years (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002; Tobin & Sprague, 2002).

As the number of alternative schools grows and programs evolve, more questions are being raised about how they should be defined. Considerable variation exists in definitions across states. Some states include charter schools as alternative schools. Some states differentiate between alternative schools and alternative programs. Some states suggest that alternative schools are accessed by choice, whereas others indicate that students are placed in alternative schools. Alternative schools are often used as short-term options in place of suspension or expulsion, whereas others foster a long-term commitment for students until they reach graduation. Despite these variations in definition, several characteristics are common among the options currently in existence. Lange and Sletten (2002) found that alternative schools are generally described as having small enrollment, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, supportive environments, opportunities and curriculum relevant to student interests, flexibility in structure and an emphasis on student decision making (Arnove & Strout, 2000; Gold & Mann, 2001; Morley, 2001; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 2000; Young, 2000). In the literature there are three primary types of schools addressed.

- **Type I:** Schools of choice, sometimes resembling magnet schools, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students.
- **Type II:** "Last chance" schools where students are placed as a last step before expulsion. Emphasis typically on behavior modification or remediation.

- **Type III:** Schools designed with a remedial focus on academic issues, social-emotional issues, or both. These schools ascribe to more of a non-punitive, therapeutic approach.

Although there is no reliable documentation of the number and kinds of alternative schools in existence today, most educators, researchers, and policymakers seem to agree that alternative schools are designed for students who are at risk of school failure (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994). The need to serve students at risk of dropping out of school is greater than ever in recent history. Hundreds of thousands of students in the United States drop out of school each year without successfully completing high school. Achieving a 90% high school completion rate across states is one of the eight national goals established in 1990 (National Education Goals Panel, 1999). Yet, the dropout rate has changed very little during the period between 1990 and 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

Furthermore, substantial disparities in school completion rates exist for various populations. Youth who are at an increased risk of dropping out tend to come from low income families and communities, single-parent backgrounds, large urban centers, and of Hispanic or Native American descent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; Rosenthal, 1998). The dropout rate for students with disabilities is nearly twice that of general education students. With the latest legislative push to “leave no child,” the importance of facilitating school completion for all students is critical. Alternative schools are one educational option serving students who are most at risk, including students with disabilities, students from minority backgrounds, those who are pregnant or parenting, those who have been suspended or expelled, and those who are most disenfranchised from the traditional experience (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

### **Governance and Policies of Alternative Schools**

Alternative schools have operated with a relatively high degree of autonomy, and little is known about their governance or the consistency of program policies across various states or regions. A review of state legislative and policy mandates revealed that 22 states had legislation addressing alternative education in 1996 (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). Preliminary research suggests that the number has increased significantly to about 40 states. The statutes, codes and regulations for each state vary in terms of completeness and the extent to which they include definitions, information on funding, criteria for enrollment, or information about the instructional program offered. Although most states have legislation and some written policies, alternative schools continue to have considerable flexibility in operation at the local level (e.g., exit or entrance procedures, program design, staffing curriculum). Some states have developed handbooks describing policies and procedures related to alternative schools in their state (e.g., California, Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina) (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

The lack of comprehensive policies or legislation on alternative programs in many states and the potential for limited involvement at the state level have negative implications for alternative programs especially when circumstances call for leadership and advocacy. Limited visibility in the education arena may enhance autonomy at the

local level, but may hinder receipt of services such as staff development or technical assistance, and may hamper funding. Given fiscal constraints of many states, and lack of policy, alternative programs may be considered expendable. Adequate funding for alternative programs is a primary concern identified by personnel at state departments of education. In addition, when state policies on accountability and reporting guidelines are not in place, there is the possibility that poor quality programs may increase (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

### **Mission/Purpose of Alternative Schools**

Alternative schools gained popularity in the late 1960's and 1970's and largely originated from a drive to create more innovative schools with a progressive orientation (Young, 2000). Both Raywid (2001) and Young (2000) suggest that alternative schools became more conservative and remedial in the 1980's and began serving more students that were disruptive or failing in their home schools. Alternative schools are more and more seen as schools for students who have had disciplinary problems in traditional schools (National Association of State Special Education, 1999). They are described as a place for those who have difficulty adjusting to the regular class environment or for those students who have experienced disciplinary problems in the classroom. For example, Minnesota's mission statement describes an alternative program having a more hands-on experiential approach, smaller class sizes, resources to assist with social or emotional issues, and a vocational and career emphasis. Some alternative schools appear to be a desirable option for students at risk of school failure, whereas others are mandatory placements as a last resort for students. This distinction is important because it has implications tied to student motivation, outcomes and overall program effectiveness.

Voluntary or involuntary student enrollment in alternative programs has a direct influence on program approaches and goals. Programs that allow enrollment via student or parental choice tend to be characterized more by flexible scheduling, innovative teaching and instructional strategies, and individualized programming. Alternative programs that have mandatory placement appear to be characterized by a more disciplinary approach, short-term placement, and a focus on skill building (e.g., anger management or conflict resolution) (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Many states have both choice and placement options. For those programs that offer choice, often students may initiate interest in attending an alternative school, but they must meet qualifying criteria in order to enroll. For example, in Minnesota, students can choose to transfer to an alternative program if they meet one or more of the criteria for at-risk status stated in the High School Graduation Incentive Law established in 1987 (e.g., pregnant, or parent, chemically dependent, behind in credits, suspended or expelled). Many proponents of alternative education cite choice as a crucial ingredient for success (Lehr & Lange, 2003). In the Montgomery County Public School System, the choice option is non-existent. Students are placed in an alternative setting in lieu of expulsion (Johnson, 2000).

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## **Identifying Student Needs**

Historically, alternative school programs have served a wide variety of students with varying interests, background, and abilities, Lange and Sletten (2002) reported on several specific student populations that are expected to benefit from alternative education, including students who drop out of school, students with disabilities, and students with high-risk health behaviors.

Alternative programs have been identified as one strategy that can be effective in helping students stay in or complete school (Drynrski & Gleason, 2002; Schargel & Smink, 2001). In a survey of students in alternative programs, more than half indicated they had dropped out of school at least once (defined as missing school for 15 or more consecutive days not due to illness or vacation; Lange & Lehr, 1997). Many alternative schools possess several characteristics that are described as key elements of effective strategies for reaching students at risk of dropping out of school, including individualized flexible programming, high expectations, an emphasis on care and concern, and small school size (Duttweiler, 1995; Natriello et al., 2000; Wehlage & Rutter, 1997). However, many students drop out of alternative schools as well (Lange & Lehr, 1999).

## **Staffing and Instruction**

Availability and quality of staff are key issues concerning alternative school programs. Alternative school research suggests that the majority of staff members are licensed teachers. Research also indicates that it is often difficult to staff alternative programs with teachers who have licensure in particular subject areas or in special education (Lehr & Lange, 2003). This presents a very challenging dilemma. If a teacher with appropriate licensure (certification) is not on staff, options may include having a licensure teacher work at the alternative school for part of the day or having a specialized teacher consult with the non-specialized one, who then delivers the instruction on an indirect basis. In either scenario, the educational needs of the student may become a secondary consideration because of logistics and pragmatic issues (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). In many instances, districts have been quick to send students to alternative schools but slow to provide necessary resources. Most of this paper serves as a critique on the presence of alternative schools and the lack of qualified staff, who may be some of the individuals who were surveyed.

## **High Expectations and High Standards**

Although alternative schools may serve many students who are at risk of school failure, it is important to continue to maintain high standards and expectations for these students (Wehlage, et al., 1999). It is essential that educators realize that a wide range of students can become at risk of school failure and that students at risk of dropping out are not necessarily those with the least intellectual ability, and that standards labels for student characteristics do not capture the nature of the interaction between at-risk students and school (Wehlage, et al. 1999).

Federal legislation focused on education that promises to “leave no child behind” has been put into place. In an attempt to leave no child behind, this must include the growing number of students who leave and dropping out of traditional schooling. Most states require students in alternative education to pass the same high-stakes exams as those students in regular programs. Kraemer and Ruzzi (2001) suggested that the same expectation of passing the graduation examination must exist for both the traditional and alternative school student. However, the current capacity of many alternative education programs to help students meet those standards may be limited because of lack resources, quality instruction, and access to professional staff development. Meeting the call to implement and measure standards that are common to all students may be perceived by some as contrary to alternative school. In response to this notion, Kramer and Ruzzi (2001) stated, the best alternative programs have always searched for ways to make learning relevant and applicable to life outside of school. The conditions in which alternative schools operate require flexibility and openness to innovation and new approaches. In the end, the pledge to reach all students with high standards will rise or fall on the performance of alternative education programs that serve a quarter or more of those who must be educated (Kramer & Ruzzi, 2001).

### **Outcomes and Effectiveness**

As the number of public alternative schools and programs continues to grow, there are increased calls for accountability. Previous research on alternative programs has been criticized because of poor evaluation methodology, including the use of internal evaluators, no comparison or control groups, focus on short-term outcomes, and difficulty generalizing from many individual evaluations. Despite the lack of many well-designed and rigorous quasi-experimental studies, available findings lead to some general conclusion about outcomes for students in these schools. Studies have shown improved outcomes for students who attend alternative schools in the areas of increased satisfaction and self-esteem (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Nichols & Steffy, 1997). Alternative education programs have a small overall positive effect on school performance, attitudes toward school, and self-esteem but little or no effect on delinquency (Davidson and Bynum, 1995). Furthermore, growing evidence suggests that alternative education programs serving specific populations with particular characteristics seem to yield better outcomes for students (Drynarski & Gleason, 2002; Gold & Mann, 1994).

### **Teachers and Parents Perceptions**

When queried about indicators of alternative school effectiveness, teachers and parents for thirty-two alternative schools across the nation cited two primary domains, academics achievement and psychosocial/behavioral progress (Duke, Griesdorn, & Kraft 1998). Indicators of academic achievement as perceived by teachers and parents included the following:

- High expectations from stakeholders (e.g. administrators, teachers & parents)
- Increased percentage of eligible students who graduated with a diploma



- Increased percentage of students who earned a GED
- Adequate instructional resources for teachers
- Commitment to academics first, discipline second
- Appropriate academic structure for students
- Consistent, periodic academic reports for students and parents
- Enrichment, remediation, and/or tutorial service for students
- Increased percentage of students who returned to a regular secondary school
- Increased percentage of students whose GPAs improved after arriving at the alternative school
- Reduction in the dropout rate for the entire school district
- Increased percentage of students earning credits toward graduation
- Increased percentage of students who returned to a regular secondary school and earned passing grades
- Increased percentage of students who improved scores on standardized tests required by the state district
- Reduction in the percentage of failing grades

Because many students who attend alternative schools have records of discipline problems, most alternative schools have identified goals related to improved behavior and psychosocial development. Students generally are not allowed to return to regular secondary school unless they have demonstrated the ability to follow rules and control impulsive behavior. Indicators of progress in the area of behavior and psychological development as perceived by teachers and parents included the following:

- Clear communication to students and parents concerning behavior objectives of school
- Adequate resources (e.g., behavior interventionist, character education program, etc.)
- Students and teachers feel safe
- Low number of serious violations of code of conduct
- High daily attendance rate
- Accepted responsibility for behavior from students which led to alternative placement
- Reduction in daily disciplinary referrals
- Usefulness of program felt by teachers and parents
- Acquisition of social skills such as anger management and peer mediation
- Low number of suspension/expulsions

Results of the study conducted on thirty-two of America's alternative schools suggest that they can be an effective intervention for students who have not experienced success in regular school settings. Twenty-eight of the thirty-two schools reported at least one indicator of academic success, and twenty-one schools reported at least one indicator of behavioral or psychosocial improvement.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to determine what perceptions exist among parents and teachers regarding program effectiveness in Montgomery County Alternative Schools. This section describes the research design, the population sample, the instrument, the data collection and the method for analyzing the data for this study.

### **Research Design**

In 1998, authors Daniel Duke, Jacqueline Griesdorn and Martin Kraft conducted a study of thirty-two alternative schools in America. The purpose of the study conducted by these authors was to ascertain information from teachers and parents regarding program effectiveness of alternative schools. The authors targeted three domains: academic achievement, behavior improvement and overall usefulness of alternative school programs. Using the results gathered from teachers and parents, the authors created a list of indicators for each targeted domain that could be used by other alternative schools to determine the effectiveness of their programs. For this study, I created a survey for parents and teachers. The survey was created from the list of indicators compiled by authors D. Duke, J. Griesdorn, and M. Kraft. For this study, the population sample consisted of all teachers (n=43) and parents (n=60) of students at two alternative schools in Montgomery County, Alabama.

In order to determine what perceptions exist among teachers and parents regarding the effectiveness of alternative school programs in Montgomery County, a four point, Likert scale survey instrument was administered. The survey contained twenty closed-ended questions. The secretary of each school gave teachers and parents a survey. A total of forty-three surveys were distributed. Forty teachers returned completed surveys. The individual teacher and parent responses of the closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

### **Analysis of Data**

Seventy-eight percent of the teachers at these two alternative schools agree strongly that the administrative staff expects students to perform at a high level academically; fifteen percent of teachers agree, and seven percent of teachers somewhat disagree.

Fifteen percent of teachers agree strongly that they have adequate resources to provide quality instruction; twenty percent agree; twenty-eight percent somewhat disagree, and thirty-seven percent of teachers disagree strongly.

Forty-two percent of teachers strongly agree that in these two alternative schools, academics are second to discipline; twenty-five percent agree; twenty percent somewhat agree, and thirteen percent of teachers strongly disagree.

Thirty-eight percent of teachers strongly agree that parents are informed about their child's academic progress in a timely manner; forty percent agree; twelve percent somewhat disagree, and ten percent of teachers strongly disagree.

Twenty-eight percent of teachers strongly agree that there are other programs in place at this school to help students achieve academically (e.g., enrichment and/or tutorial services); thirty five percent of teachers agree; twenty five percent of teachers somewhat disagree, and twelve percent of teachers strongly disagree.

Table I  
*Teachers' Survey (Academic Achievement)*

Questions	SA	A	SWD	SD
1. The administrative staff at this school expects students to perform at a high level academically.	78%	15%	7%	
2. Teachers at this school expect students to perform at a high level academically.	100%			
3. Teachers at this school have adequate resources to provide quality instructions.	15%	20%	28%	37%
4. Students at this school have the same academic ability as those of any other school.	30%	55%	10%	5%
5. Academics are second to discipline at this school.	42%	25%	20%	13%
6. The academic structure of this school is appropriate for the student it serves	75%	20%	2%	3%
7. Students are informed about their academic progress in a timely manner.	88%	12%		
8. Parents are informed about their child's academic progress in a timely manner.	38%	40%	12%	10%
9. There are other programs in place at this school to help students achieve academically (e.g. enrichment and or tutorial services).	28%	35%	25%	12%
10. The courses offered at this school are ideally suited for students.	78%	5%	15%	2%

SA-Strongly Agree    A-Agree    SWD-Somewhat Disagree    SD-Strongly Disagree

Note: N= 43 Teachers. Totals vary because several respondents did not answer some items.

Forty-five percent of teachers agree strongly that the primary purpose of these two alternative schools is to improve inappropriate student behavior; thirty percent agree; twenty percent somewhat disagree, and five percent of teachers strongly disagree.

Fifteen percent of teachers agree that teachers have adequate resources to accomplish the behavior goals of this school (e.g., character education, behavior interventionist); thirty-five percent agree; thirty percent somewhat disagree, and twenty percent of teachers strongly disagree.

Twenty percent of teachers strongly agree that teachers and students feel safe at this school; fifty percent agree; seventeen percent somewhat disagree, and thirteen percent of teachers strongly disagree.

Thirty-five percent of teachers agree strongly that students' office referrals decrease after being in these alternative schools; thirty percent agree; twenty-three percent somewhat disagree, and twelve percent of teachers strongly disagree.

Seventy percent of teachers strongly agree that parents are informed about their child's behavior progress in a timely manner; twenty-five percent agree, and five percent of teachers disagree somewhat.

One hundred percent of teachers strongly agree that the minimum stay requirements for students (45 days) is long enough to accomplish the behavior goals of this school.

Table 2  
*Teachers' Survey (Academic Achievement)*

Questions	SA	A	SWD	SD
11. The primary purpose of this school is to improve inappropriate student behavior	45%	30%	20%	5%
12. Before enrolling, students and parents are informed about what this school seeks to accomplish from a behavior aspect.	80%	10%	10%	
13. The minimum stay requirement for student is long enough to accomplish goals of this school.	100%			
14. Teachers have adequate resources to accomplish the behavior goals of this school (e.g., character education, behavior interventionist).	15%	35%	30%	20%
15. Students and teachers feel safe at this school	20%	50%	17%	13%
16. Students' office referrals decrease after being at this school.	35%	30%	23%	12%
17. Parents are informed about their child's behavior progress in a timely manner.	70%	25%	5%	
18. Students are informed about their behavior progress in a timely manner.	80%	13%	7%	
19. Students at this school were treated unjustly at their home schools and should not have been placed in an alternative school.	2%	5%	38%	55%
20. Alternative schools are needed in the Montgomery County Public School System.	75%	12%	13%	

SA-Strongly Agree      A-Agree      SWD-Somewhat Disagree      SD-Strongly Disagree

Note: N= 43 Teachers. Totals vary because several respondents did not answer some items.

Eighty-five percent of parents strongly agree that the administrative staff at these schools expects students to perform at a high level academically, and fifteen percent of teachers agree.

Five percent of parents strongly agree that teachers at these schools have adequate resources to provide quality instruction; twenty-five percent agree; fifteen percent somewhat agree, and fifty-five percent of parents strongly disagree.

Forty-two percent of parents strongly agree that academics are second to discipline in these two alternative schools; twenty percent of parents agree; twenty five percent somewhat disagree, and thirteen percent of parents strongly disagree.

Thirty-three percent of parents strongly agree that they are not informed about their child's academic progress in a timely manner; seventeen percent agree; forty-two percent somewhat disagree, and eight percent of parents strongly disagree.

Twenty percent of parents agree that there are other programs in place at these two alternative schools to help students achieve academically (e.g., enrichment and/or tutorial services); forty percent agree; seventeen percent somewhat disagree, and twenty-three percent of parents strongly disagree.

Fifty percent of parents strongly agree that the academic structure of these two alternative school is appropriate for the students its serves; seventeen percent of parents agree; twenty percent of parents somewhat disagree, and thirteen percent of parents strongly disagree.

Table 3  
*Teachers' (Parents) Survey (Academic Achievement)*

<b>Questions</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SWD</b>	<b>SD</b>
1. The administrative staff at this school expects students to perform at a high level academically.	85%	15%		
2. Teachers at this school expect students to perform at a high level academically.	60%	30%	10%	
3. Teachers at this school have adequate resources to provide quality instructions.	5%	25%	15%	55%
4. Students at this school have the same academic ability as those of any other school.	75%	25%		
5. Academics are second to discipline at this school.	42%	20%	25%	13%
6. The academic structure of this school is appropriate for the student it serves	50%	17%	20%	13%
7. Students are informed about their academic progress in a timely manner.	50%	20%	20%	10%
8. Parents are informed about their child's academic progress in a timely manner.	33%	17%	42%	8%
9. There are other programs in place at this school to help students achieve academically (e.g. enrichment and or tutorial services.	20%	40%	17%	23%
10. The courses offered at this school are ideally suited for students.	55%	15%	20%	10%

SA-Strongly Agree    A-Agree    SWD-Somewhat Disagree    SD-Strongly Disagree

Note: N=60 Parents. Totals vary because several respondents did not answer some items.

Forty-three percent of parents agree strongly that the primary focus of these schools is to improve inappropriate student behavior; twenty-two percent agree; twenty percent somewhat disagree, and fifteen percent of parents strongly disagree.

Sixty-seven percent of parents strongly agree that teachers have adequate resources to accomplish the behavior goals of these schools (e.g. character education, behavior interventionist); seventeen percent of parents agree; thirteen percent somewhat disagree, and three percent of parents strongly disagree.

Seventeen percent of parents strongly agree that teachers and students feel safe at these alternative schools; fifty-eight percent agree; twenty percent somewhat agree, and five percent of parents strongly disagree.

Twenty-five percent of parents strongly agree that students' feel safe at these alternative schools; fifty percent agree; seventeen percent somewhat agree, and eight percent of parents strongly disagree.

Twelve percent of parents strongly agree that they are informed about their child's behavior progress in a timely; manner; twenty percent agree; forty-two percent somewhat disagree, and twenty-six percent of parents strongly disagree.

Ninety-five percent of parents strongly agree that the minimum stay requirement for students (45 days) is long enough to accomplish the behavior goals of this school, and five percent of parents agree.

Eighty percent of parents strongly agree that alternative schools are needed in the Montgomery County Public School System; five percent agree; ten percent somewhat disagree, and five percent of parents strongly disagree.



Table 4  
*Teachers' (Parents) Survey (Academic Achievement)*

Questions	SA	A	SWD	SD
11. The primary purpose of this school is to improve inappropriate student behavior.	43%	22%	20%	15%
12. Before enrolling, students and parents are informed about what this school seeks to accomplish behavior aspect.	85%	15%		
13. The minimum stay requirement for students is long enough to accomplish the behavior goals of this school.	95%	5%		
14. Teachers have adequate resources to accomplish the behavior goals of this school (e.g., character education, behavior interventionist).	67%	17%	13%	3%
15. Students and teachers feel safe at this school.	17%	58%	20%	5%
16. Students' office referrals decrease after being at this school.	25%	50%	17%	8%
17. Parents are informed about their child's behavior progress in a timely manner.	12%	20%	42%	26%
18. Students are informed about their behavior progress in a timely manner.	50%	25%	15%	10%
19. Students at this school were treated unjustly at their home schools and should not have been placed in an alternative school.	5%	12%	13%	70%
20. Alternative schools are needed in the Montgomery County Public School System.	80%	5%	10%	5%

SA-Strongly Agree    A-Agree    SWD-Somewhat Disagree    SD-Strongly Disagree

Note: N=60 Parents. Totals vary because several respondents did not answer some items.

### Summary, Findings, and Recommendations

A research study was conducted in two alternative schools in the Montgomery County Public School System in order to determine what perceptions exist among teachers and parents regarding program effectiveness of those schools.

This study began with the following questions:

1. Are alternative schools in Montgomery County, Alabama effective at promoting academic achievement?
2. Are alternative schools in Montgomery County, Alabama effective at correcting inappropriate student behavior?
3. Is there an overall need for alternative schools in the Montgomery County Public School System?

This research study revealed that the majority of teachers and parents agree that these alternative schools are effective at promoting academic achievement. Also, this research study revealed that the majority of teachers and parents agree that these alternative schools are effective at correcting inappropriate student behavior. Lastly, this research study revealed that the majority of teachers and parents agree resoundingly that there is a need for alternative schools in the Montgomery County Public School System.

## **Findings**

Findings of this study reveal that there is very little disparity that exists between the perceptions of teachers and parents regarding the effectiveness of alternative school programs in the Montgomery County Public School System in Montgomery, Alabama. When questioned about the performance of students from administrators and teachers, the majority of teachers and parents agree that the administrative staff and teachers expect students to perform well academically. When queried about the primary purpose of alternative schools, teachers and parents agree that correcting inappropriate student behavior is the main focus of the alternative schools in Montgomery County.

Teachers and parents are also in agreement with the curriculum design of alternative schools. The overwhelming majority (95%) of teachers feel that the academic structure of these alternative schools is appropriate for students. Although the percentage of parents who feel the same is considerably less, 65%, it is the majority no less. In addition, the majority of teachers and parents surveyed agree with the courses students take while enrolled in these alternative two schools.

The majority of teachers feel that students and teachers are safe; the majority of parents feel that students and teachers are safe at school. The majority of teachers and parents agree that these alternative schools have help to decrease the number of discipline referrals student receive. The majority of teachers agree that students are adequately informed about their academic and behavior progress. When presented with the same two questions, the majority of parents responded that students were adequately informed about their academic progress, and the majority of parents responded in agreement that students were adequately informed about their behavior progress. However, when asked if parents were adequately informed about their child's academic and behavior progress there is substantial disagreement among teachers and parents.

While the majority of teachers feel that the information given to parents regarding students' academic and behavior progress is timely and consistent, the overwhelming majority of parents' responses were quite the contrary. A low percentage of parents

agreed that information relative to their child's academic and behavior progress was given to parents in a timely manner.

Another area where teachers and parents agreed was in the area of instructional resource. The majority of both teachers and parents agreed that teachers at the local alternative schools lack the resources needed to provide quality instruction. Perhaps the most significant agreement among those teachers and parents, who responded to the questions presented, was that the majority of teachers and parents agreed that alternative schools are needed in the Montgomery County Public School System.

## **Recommendations**

In Montgomery County, two alternative schools have provided administrators, teachers, parents and students with a viable option for addressing the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school. However, there are many critical issues that ultimately affect the overall success and effectiveness of these schools.

Administrators and teachers must be innovative in their approach to bridge the communication gap that exists between them and parents. The burden to communicate effectively with parents should not be placed on the shoulders of students. Nor should parents be left to assume how their child is performing.

There must be a serious effort put forth to adequately equip these alternative schools with the necessary resources. These resources include, but are not limited to adequate staffing, adequate instructional resources for teachers, remediation resources for students and specialized training for teachers in dealing with students who are considered at-risk.

Most importantly, there must be a serious commitment to academics from all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and students. Alternative schools should not be regarded as "holding tanks" or "dumping grounds" for unwanted students. However, everyone involved should view alternative schools only as learning institutions at which academic achievement is strongly encouraged, greatly expected and truly believed to be attainable.

State education policy makers must establish governance policies and performance standards for alternative schools. This should be done in a manner whereby these individual schools are not forced to conform to uniform mandates, thus stifling their creative growth. The purpose of this would be two fold, provide a model for creating highly successful alternative schools and have a system of accountability intact for those schools. All alternative schools must create and adhere to models of accountability that include readiness indicators, indicators of student discipline problems, indicators of student persistence, contextual indicators, indicators of achievement (writing, reading, and math), and indicators of meeting goals and school completion such as promotion to the next grade, course completion, credit completion, graduation and proficiency development. Lastly, although alternative schools have been in existence for nearly sixty years in the State of Alabama, research relative to their effectiveness is fairly new. Consequently, more studies need to be conducted in this area so that a more definitive word can be offered.

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