

Alternative schools fill educational need

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One-fifth of public school students in Minnesota go to some form of an alternative school. Alternative schools, centers, and programs have existed in Minnesota for over 20 years, gaining popularity every year. Litchfield Alternative School was established in 1996. The program was originally located in a portable building behind the high school and last year it was moved to the former public health building. In four years, the school has had over 80 students and 23 graduates. Students come to the program for many reasons: chemical health problems, truancy problems, problems at home, and problems fitting into the traditional educational model are just a few.

I have been working in alternative schools for six years and in that time I have had many people ask me why there is a need for alternative programs. The argument is "If they can't get along in a traditional high school, how can they possibly get prepared for the real world?" My answer is this: traditional schools (and alternative schools) cannot be designed to be perfect

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for every person. Some students thrive in traditional schools. I did. I loved school. But many of my peers hated every second of it, and regardless of how much they hated it and how poorly they might have done, many of those same peers are wildly successful now. We have to realize that eight periods a day, homework, an institutional setting, and being shuffled from class to class in a sea of people is not a perfect model for everyone. One model of education may be perfect for one student, but very ineffective for another. Just as in adult life, one career may be great for one person, but horrible for another. There are a wide variety of career options available to young people when they get out of school. I think it is very exciting that diversity in education has become available too.

Many people ask me if alternative school has the same educational standards and opportunities that traditional school has. My answer is that they are different standards and opportunities, but they are not unequal.

All alternative schools teach the basics: English, math, science and social studies; and offer alternative ways of teaching the basic knowledge needed for life. All public school students in Minnesota have to pass the basic standards tests regardless if they go to alternative school or traditional school.

The difference between alternative schools and traditional schools is that alternative schools have a different way of delivering the curriculum. Some schools offer evening classes for students who have to work during the day; some schools offer independent study for students who cannot go to classes during the week. Some schools have declared themselves to be "sober schools" for students with chemical problems who don't want to have to deal with the peer pressures at other traditional or alternative schools. Some schools offer day care for students that have children. There are countless ways an alternative school can make itself "alternative," but the important thing to remember is that they are all filling a need and providing the best education for their students.

Alternative programs are starting all over the state. In the past four years Atwater-Cosmos-

Grove City and Eden Valley-Watkins have started programs, and Dassel-Cokato has started an alternative learning center. It is becoming common for a district to offer a traditional setting as well as an alternative setting for their students. Our alternative school (Litchfield Alternative School) caters to students at risk of dropping out. Students must meet at least one of eight criteria to enroll at LAS:

- ◆ Score at least two years below performance on local achievement tests;
- ◆ at least one year behind on completing coursework;
- ◆ assessed chemically dependent;
- ◆ physically or sexually abused;
- ◆ homeless in the last 6 months;
- ◆ pregnant or a parent;
- ◆ experienced mental health problems; or
- ◆ referred by school district or other social agency.

LAS offers English, social studies, math, science and life skills. Our school hours are from 8:45 to 4:10. Students at LAS must meet attendance requirements and academic requirements to remain in the program. To find out more about our school call us at (320) 693-0633.