



Research Brief

Alternative School Curriculum

Question: What is a proven curriculum for alternative school students – students who have had a hard time learning in a traditional school setting?

Summary of Findings:

Exemplary curriculum for reaching alternative school students and other hard to teach students can be understood by examining the curricula of successful alternative schools. Four highly successful schools that reach hard to teach students are highlighted here: The Met (Providence, RI), Central Park East (NY, NY), CART (Fresno, CA) and the Educational Video Center (NY, NY).

The Met & The Big Picture, Co.

The Big Picture Company was founded by educators Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, both formerly of the renowned Thayer High School in New Hampshire and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. In 1995, they began collaborating with Rhode Island policymakers to design a student-centered high school, and created The Big Picture Company as the launching pad for what has now become a national education reform movement. The result of their work in Providence was the Metropolitan Regional and Technical Center (commonly called simply The Met). Opened in Providence in 1996, The Met is a unique state-funded public school, open to all Rhode Island students in grades 9-12. The Big Picture Company believes that schools must be personalized, educating every student equally, ONE STUDENT AT A TIME. Each student's learning plan should grow out of his or her unique needs, interests, and passions.

CPESS (Central Park East Secondary School)

Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) is part of the Coalition for Essential Schools and therefore is guided by its principles. The school was founded in 1985. A key element of the school's program is the Community Service/Learning Program. The philosophy behind this program is that students are part of a larger community, and they should participate in and benefit from regular community service. The CPESS curriculum allows highly individualized design in order to promote innovation in education. CPESS offers a common core curriculum for all students in grades seven through ten that is organized around two major fields: mathematics/science for half of the school day and humanities (art, history, social studies, and literature) for the other half. Interrelationships between different subjects of study are integrated and communications skills are taught in all subjects by all staff. At the end of tenth grade, students enter the Senior Institute. Each student has a Graduation Committee. The committee prepares a personal program of study designed to prepare the student for graduation and the world of work.

CART - The Center for Advanced Research and Technology

The Center for Advanced Research and Technology (CART) is the most comprehensive, state-of-the-art education reform effort at the secondary level to date. The CART combines rigorous academics with technical, design, process, entrepreneurial, and critical thinking skills. The 75,000 square foot CART facility, designed as a high performance business atmosphere, is organized around four career clusters: Professional Sciences, Engineering, Advanced Communications, and Global Economics. Within each cluster are several career-specific laboratories in which students complete industry-based projects and receive academic credit for advanced English, science, math, and technology. CART provides a state-of-the-art research and technology facility where students design and complete projects in collaboration with partners from the local, national, and international business community. Through learning plans, individualized attention, and a coordinated sequence of projects, CART students explore the variety of ways they can achieve their career goals.

EVC (The Educational Video Center)

The Educational Video Center is an alternative high school in New York City, whose curriculum revolves around documentary making. Through the process of documentary video production, EVC students learn valuable research, writing and reporting skills, enhancing their capacities for critical analysis and creative self-expression. EVC's unique methodology of media education brings together the powerful traditions of student-centered progressive education and independent community documentary making. This approach uses media and technology to engage all students in creative and rigorous inquiry-based projects on current issues of importance to them. Documentaries produced range in topic from domestic violence, to race relations, drug abuse and teen pregnancy, bearing witness to the problems and possibilities of life for today's urban teenagers. Using this multidisciplinary



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approach, teachers can integrate English, social studies, art, and technology into video projects as students develop their literacy, research, critical thinking, and civic engagement skills.

What are the curriculum characteristics shared by these successful programs?

- Personalization & individualized attention
- True advisory and advocacy structure
- Active engagement in authentic, real-world tasks about issues that are of interest to them;
- Hands-on, project-based learning
- Integrated curriculum
- Student reflection and self assessment throughout all work
- Work connected to the students' lives, communities, and local businesses or industries
- Authentic assessment
- College & career preparation
- Technology use integrated throughout

Each of these schools have been successful because of the hard work of educators who believe that these hard to reach children can learn and are capable of high quality work. "Canned" curriculum programs, such as computer learning systems, are largely ineffective with these students since the focus is largely on content delivery and not on relationships with the students and the other characteristics listed above.

There was much more information on each school than could be presented in this brief brief. Additional information and links to resources related to each school has been posted to the Every One Learns blog (<http://everyonelearns.blogspot.com>):

The Met & The Big Picture, Co.:

<http://everyonelearns.blogspot.com/2006/07/met-big-picture-co.html>

Central Park East Secondary School:

<http://everyonelearns.blogspot.com/2006/07/cpess-central-park-east-secondary.html>

The Center for Advanced Research and Technology:

<http://everyonelearns.blogspot.com/2006/07/cart-center-for-advanced-research-and.html>

The Educational Video Center:

<http://everyonelearns.blogspot.com/2006/07/evc-educational-video-center-ny-ny.html>

Online Resources:

(Note: ERIC documents can be found by going to <http://www.eric.ed.gov/> and entering the ERIC ID#)

Alternatives for At-Risk and Out-of-School Youth. ERIC Digest.

Educators are considering ways to help youth identified as "at-risk" succeed in school and beyond. Alternative programs (AP) can be effective environments for students who may not fit the mainstream mold and need additional support.

Effective AP use a holistic approach that encompasses social, academic, psychological and career-related needs. The following eight factors consistently recur in research reports and descriptions of effective AP: (1) caring, knowledgeable adults; (2) a sense of community; (3) an assets approach; (4) respect for youth; (5) high expectations for academic achievement and responsible behavior; (6) holistic, comprehensive, multidimensional developmental curriculum; (7) authentic, engaging learning that connects school and work; and (8) support and long-term follow-up services.

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/2a/3a/ca.pdf



The Principals' Partnership
<http://www.principalspartnership.com>
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Principal's Partnership Research Brief on Alternative Schools

Estimates suggest that there are more than 20,000 alternative schools in operation in the United States. The number of alternative schools as well as the number of students educated in these schools has increased significantly over recent years. Oftentimes these schools serve students who are not successful in the traditional school setting, and those who are considered at risk of school failure including students with and without disabilities.

<http://www.principalspartnership.com/altschool.pdf>

Learning from the Margins: The Lessons of Alternative Schools

By Suzie Boss

NW Education, Summer 1998

Students attending the nation's estimated 15,000 alternative schools come in all sorts of colorful packages. More than a few adopt hairstyles, wardrobes, street language, and attitudes that would make them stand out—or be kicked out—of mainstream classrooms. But what's most remarkable about this diverse student body isn't outward appearances. It's that these students, many of whom face obstacles ranging from poverty to teen pregnancy to long-term academic failure to chronic delinquency, are making an appearance in school at all.

http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/summer_98/article2.html

Alternative Schools: Caring for Kids on the Edge:

The entire Summer 1998 issue of Northwest Education Magazine focuses on Alternative Schools

http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/summer_98/

The Big List on Project-Based Learning

Edutopia – George Lucas Education Foundation

<http://www.edutopia.org/php/biglist.php?id=037>

Submitted Date: 7/9/2006 By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning

<http://www.principalspartnership.com>

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