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A Student Survey of the Effectiveness of Alternative Schools in Hamilton-Jefferson Counties, Illinois

Bryan Cross

Eastern Illinois University

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Author

Date
A Student Survey of the Effectiveness of Alternative Schools in Hamilton-Jefferson Counties, Illinois

(TITLE)

BY

Bryan Cross

Field Study

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Specialist

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1996

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to survey students who were enrolled in the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools in Mt. Vernon and McLeansboro, Illinois, to determine the effectiveness of the alternative schools from the students' perspectives. This information should serve as an aid to decision makers in determining if changes were needed in the alternative schools.

The 78 students in the survey were asked to respond to survey questions designed to provide information regarding what effect enrollment in an alternative school had on their attendance, behavior, academic success, citizenship, and self-esteem.

An analysis of the survey results indicated that a majority of students believe they have benefited from enrollment in an alternative school and that the alternative schools have been effective in meeting many of their needs.

The information from this study shows that the alternative school is effective in creating a good environment for the students; in having a positive effect on the students' attitudes, citizenship, and career awareness; and in having a positive impact on school attendance, academic success, and student behavior. The alternative schools, however, had only marginal success in fostering self-esteem in students. It is recommended that this information be shared with appropriate decision makers, including those associated with the proposed alternative schools for disruptive students, to help maintain educational settings which meet the needs of at-risk students.
Chapter 1

Overview

Many of today's children, especially those placed in at-risk circumstances, face a multitude of problems and barriers in our society and in our schools. It is understood and accepted that educators have an obligation to offer educational services that are beneficial to every child. Some students, however, have difficulty finding success in the regular classroom situations that are provided, and are often considered disruptive or difficult to teach. The universal right to an education has become a legal reality and the struggle to make it meaningful for many students identified as being at-risk of school failure continues to be an ongoing challenge.

Statement of the Problem

There existed a need to determine the effectiveness of alternative schools, which are funded through the Hamilton/Jefferson Counties Truant's Alternative and Optional Education Program (TAOEP) in Illinois. Due to the uniqueness of these schools and the students which attend them, many different opinions have been held regarding how well the needs of the students are being met. It was necessary to complete an objective evaluation to determine what effect these schools had on their students and to aid decision makers in making appropriate changes in the schools. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the alternative schools in Hamilton-Jefferson Counties from the students' perspectives.
Background and Significance of the Study

Many of the students who attend alternative schools have been identified as being at-risk of school failure. This identification is often based upon the students' previous attendance or discipline history. Because alternative schools work with at-risk students who often have many needs to be dealt with, it is important to determine how effective the alternative schools are in meeting these needs. Determining the extent to which students feel they have or have not benefited from enrollment in alternative schools should provide decision makers with an aid in determining how successful the processes and procedures the schools utilize have been.

Specific Study Objectives

In surveying the alternative school students, the following objectives were addressed from the students’ perspectives:

1. The environment and atmosphere at the alternative schools.
2. The effect enrolling in an alternative school had on student attitudes, citizenship, and career awareness.
3. The effect enrolling in an alternative school program had on student school attendance.
4. The effect enrolling in an alternative school had on student academic success
5. The effect enrolling in an alternative school had on student self-esteem.
6. The effect enrolling in an alternative school had on student behavior.

Operational Definitions

Alternative Schools - Schools established for students who are having trouble succeeding in the traditional school setting.
Attendance Rates - The percentage of days a student has been in attendance at school.

Detention - As a measure of discipline, a student is required to stay after school for a period of time or is required to stay in a certain area during lunch hour.

Home School - The public school which is located in the district that a student attended before enrolling at an alternative school and would be attending if he/she were not enrolled at an alternative school.

Student Outcomes - The educational results a student incurs due to being enrolled in an alternative school for a school year or portion thereof.

Suspension - As a matter of discipline, a student is prohibited from attending school for a certain period of time.

Demographics

The alternative schools, which are administered through the Hamilton-Jefferson Regional Office of Education in Illinois, are designed to serve students in grades 7 through 12 who are between the ages of 14 and 21. The schools are established to help students on a short-term basis (usually 1-3 semesters) in the hope that these students will eventually return to and be successful in their home schools.

Assumptions

This study focused on students who attended the alternative schools during the traditional school day or in the after school classes, which provide an opportunity for students who are behind in credits to attend
classes after the regular school day. It was assumed that most of the students enrolled in the Hamilton/Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools who received the survey would complete and return it. It was also assumed that the students had adequate knowledge to respond to the questions, were as honest and forthright as possible, and that their answers were based on their own experiences.

Limitations

The students at the Alternative School are transient, with some students moving between the Alternative School and their home school. At the time of the survey, the Alternative Schools had 78 students enrolled. The survey (See Appendix A) was developed by gathering information from students and their Individualized Optional Education Plans (IOEP), past and present Alternative School personnel, and from the grant proposals which were approved by the Illinois State Board of Education, which provides funding for the alternative schools. From this information a survey was developed to measure the success of the program from the perspective of the students who were currently enrolled in it.

This study concentrated on students who attended alternative schools that are administered through the Regional Office of Education for Hamilton-Jefferson Counties in Illinois. This includes two alternative school sites, located in Mt. Vernon and McLeansboro in Southern Illinois (See Appendix B). Some of the students who are involved in the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties TAOEP program only participate in tutoring or in truancy prevention services. These students were excluded from this study,
as their participation in the alternative schools was limited and their educational outcomes were different than those of the other students.

Because the data for the study were obtained from a sample of at-risk youth in Southern Illinois, caution must be exercised when generalizing the findings of this study to other areas in different locations.
Alternative schools in this country now date back for more than a quarter of a century. The first public alternative schools, launched in the late 1960s, were mostly inspired by the ideas and events of that decade. Those that enrolled largely white, middle-class students were typically influenced by the humanistic impulses and liberation theme of the 1960s. Those in the south, and in northern cities, tended to reflect the civil rights emphases of the time and were focused on giving poor and minority youngsters the education previously denied them (Raywid, 1981). In the early 1970s, the federal Experimental Schools Program (ESP), seeking ways to refashion entire school systems, funded three districts to create multiple alternative schools. Although ESP was more concerned with establishing models for school change than with enhancing educational effectiveness, a rationale was developed for enhancing outcomes through such systemwide options (Wang, 1995).

In 1976, the federal government offered yet another stimulus to the alternatives and options idea when it began funding magnet schools under the Emergency School Aid Assistance Act. Today the nation has 2,652 magnet schools offering 3,222 magnet programs (Steel, 1993). From the start there have been important differences between magnet and alternative schools, although some observers initially saw magnets as alternative schools created to stimulate voluntary racial desegregation. But alternatives were the forebears of the magnet genre, and many of the schools calling
themselves “alternatives” have been funded as magnet schools (Wang, 1995).

There are many definitions of what alternative education means. Most descriptions emphasize smallness, personalization, interpersonal relationships, and a primary focus on students as human beings. Organizationally, most call attention to flexibility, autonomy, the frequency of extended and diffuse staff roles, and to the alternative as a distinct administrative unit with its own separate identity and mission. Many analysts also note innovative and non-traditional curricular organization and instructional strategies as traits (Morley, 1991).

Three distinct ideal types of alternative schools have been identified, with individual schools approximating these to varying degrees. Type I alternative schools intend to make school engaging, challenging, and fulfilling for all involved. Their efforts have yielded a number of innovations and creative programs and arrangements that are now widely urged as general school improvement measures. Type I alternatives are schools of choice, and are usually extremely popular.

Type II alternative schools, by contrast, are programs to which students are “sentenced,” usually as a last chance to avoid expulsion. Variants include in-school suspension programs, “time-out” rooms, and longer term placements for the behaviorally disruptive. One distinctive feature of the Type II program is that it is assumed to be temporary and promises time off for good behavior.

Type III programs are generally nonpunitive and more positive and compassionate in orientation. They are designed for students presumed to
need extra help, remediation, or rehabilitation. After treatment, successful students will be able to return to mainstream and continue in the regular program.

High School administrators spend a great deal of time dealing with chronically disruptive students. While these students may create few serious problems, they frequently suffer from low self-esteem and high absenteeism, are academic underachievers, and are likely to drop out of school (Kellmayer, 1995). Some alternative programs developed for these students operate during normal school hours, while others operate during non-traditional hours, such as after school. While some critics suggest alternative schools are nothing more than watered-down versions of traditional schools where students are warehoused rather than educated, many school districts are using alternative schools to, not only isolate problem students, but to also offer them an academic environment targeted to their special needs (Glass, 1995).

Even though a positive school environment is a major contributor to school success, current research indicates that many at-risk youngsters perceive the school environment as a hostile place with little to offer them (Conrath, 1986). Although all students need a caring environment, at-risk children will be lost if the school does not pursue protective factors with as much commitment as it pursues traditional academic components. Building protective factors is not optional with at-risk children; it is mandatory (Anderson & Bowden, 1993).

The Illinois TAOEP program was established to provide educational services to chronic truants, potential dropouts or dropouts. As authorized in
the Illinois School Code (105 ILCS 5/2-3.66) and effective August 1, 1985, pilot projects may be established to offer modified instructional programs or other services designed to prevent students from dropping out of school. The pilot projects shall allow dropouts up to and including age 21, potential dropouts, including truants, uninvolved, unmotivated and disaffected students, as defined by the state board, to enroll, as an alternative to regular school attendance, in an optional education program.

The primary goals of the program are the reduction of student truancy and incidences of dropping out. The ultimate goal is for all students receiving program services to eventually complete their high school education (Illinois, 1995).

There is currently little data in regards to the success of Alternative Schools in the Illinois counties of Hamilton and Jefferson. Statewide research on Truant's Alternative and Optional Education Program exists in the form of an annual statewide evaluation report. This information, however, is generally more characteristic of large urban areas where more students and Alternative Schools exist. Therefore, the intent of the study was to collect necessary data to determine how successful Alternative Schools are for Hamilton and Jefferson Counties.

Alternative schools have many components which are different than those found in the traditional school setting. One major difference is how these schools are funded. The alternative schools examined in this study are funded on a year-to-year competitive grant basis. Although some programs may supplement their finances with other state or federal grants, the main source of funding is through the state TAOEP grants. The state
Alternative Schools

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currently authorizes about $17 million a year to fund TAOEP programs in Illinois (Illinois, 1995).

The students who attend the alternative schools are referred to the program by the school in which they are enrolled. The referrals can be made by the principals, deans of students or other staff as designated by the school. A staffing involving the student, parent, referring school representative, and TAOEP representative is held to determine if placement in an alternative school is best for the student.

The referred students are in the regular school mainstream and have not been identified as needing special education services. The students who are referred have been identified as being at-risk of dropping out of school and are having trouble finding success in the traditional school setting. Almost all of the students have a history of truancy. Also, many of the students have an unstable family situation, show consistent failure to achieve in regular school work, demonstrate a disinterest in school and/or show overt antagonism toward teachers and staff.

A written individualized optional education plan (IOEP) is developed for each student using input from the student, the parents, the appropriate school officials, and TAOEP staff. The IOEP includes measurable outcome based objectives reflecting each student's needs. Other relevant information contained in the plan can include transportation or child care needs, status as a pregnant teen or school-aged parent, cooperating youth service agencies, medical and personal health limitations, legal constraints placed on the student, and any other circumstances that may affect the student's performance in the program.
The program services, which include prevention and/or intervention and optional education, are designed to prevent students from dropping out of school (Illinois, 1995). Some specific services which are commonly available include small group instruction, counseling, and tutoring. Due to the lower teacher/student ratios common in alternative schools, the students have an opportunity to be involved in smaller classes, which allows the staff and the students to get to know each other better. Also the smaller classes allow the students to receive more individualized instruction.

Many alternative schools provide counseling services which are designed to include small group or individual counseling on problem solving, decision making, study skills, self-esteem building and family counseling issues.

Also, the alternative schools in this study offer tutoring services to students. Tutoring can occur after school or whenever school is not in session, including during the school day at appropriate time intervals. This is an effective component of the program as tutors not only meet with the students but also have daily contact with other teachers, school personnel and student records.

A recent study of alternative school students produced some interesting results. The study indicated that alternative school students felt teachers were genuinely concerned about students, that teachers were less authoritarian, and that the students felt they had more input into decision making at alternative schools (Richardson & Griffin, 1994). These findings could have resulted from smaller classes, lower number of students in the
school, lower pupil-teacher ratios, or the training of the staff, which are common characteristics of alternative programs.

With classroom disruptions and youth violence on the increase in many places, few disagree with the need for schools that serve those children whose truancy and/or behavior is inappropriate for the regular classroom. Alternative schools are seen as another chance for these students to "get their act together."

Currently under consideration in the state of Illinois are the establishment of alternative schools for disruptive students. These schools are proposed to be established to provide an alternative learning site for students who face suspension or expulsion. Each Regional Office of Education is required to conduct public hearings to help determine the need for the establishment of these schools in that region.

After a need has been identified and in cooperation with representatives from each school within the region, the Regional Superintendent shall establish policies and procedures that guide districts in the identification and placement of students in the alternative school for disruptive students. An alternative duration plan must be developed for each student which includes an academic component, behavior component, method of evaluation, and identify the duration of the plan. A principal shall implement a multi-disciplinary curriculum to address individual needs and insure the program is meaningful and worthwhile. These alternative schools are part of the Safe Schools Law, which was recently signed into law. The program, which is to begin with the 1996-97 school year, is
currently awaiting funding as the budget for the upcoming fiscal year has not yet been finalized.
Chapter 3
Design of the Study

General Design of the Study

As previously indicated, the purpose of this study was to survey students who participated in the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools which are located in Mt. Vernon and McLeansboro, Illinois. From this survey, information was collected from the students' perspectives to determine how successful the Alternative Schools are in meeting the needs of these students.

Data were collected from students currently enrolled in the Alternative Schools in Mt. Vernon and McLeansboro. A survey instrument was developed by the researcher which identified components of the Alternative School program that students believed were beneficial.

Sample and Population

The population for the study consisted of the 78 students enrolled in the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools during the week of December 4-8, 1995, when the survey was administered. Respondents were junior high students (7-8) and high school students (9-12) drawn from 18 school districts in Hamilton and Jefferson Counties.

The students surveyed typically had a history of adverse behavior, chronic truancy, low self-esteem and little academic success which can lead to frustration with school and, eventually, dropping out of school.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The survey questionnaire was designed by the researcher of this study. The instrument utilized information from numerous sources and
would be considered a hybrid instrument. Information collected from staff, students, grants, and research proved beneficial in the construction and make-up of the instrument.

The final draft of the survey instrument was developed to seek variables that enhance the amount of success a program had when working with at-risk students (See Appendix A). These variables included academic success, discipline referrals, attendance, and self-esteem, along with various other factors.

The survey was moderate in length and could be completed within 10 minutes. Statistical validity and reliability are unavailable because this survey was designed expressly for the purpose of this study.

The researcher disseminated copies of the questionnaire on a class-by-class basis. In each class the purpose of the study was briefly explained and students were told that participation was strictly voluntary. Directions were given and the importance of reading each question quickly and making the appropriate response accurately was explained. It was also stressed that names or other identifiable information was not needed and that all information was confidential. Finally, a request was made by the researcher for honest and accurate responses. Once this was done, students were asked to complete the survey and instructed on what to do when finished.

Once all students were finished and all surveys in the class were collected, another class followed. Average time for completion of the survey by a class was 10 minutes from beginning to end. During the time students were completing the instrument, the researcher checked roll to
identify students participating in the survey. Students who were absent on the first day were given an opportunity to complete the survey the next day. Provided they were in attendance some day that week, each student had an opportunity to complete the survey.

During the week of December 4-8, there were 78 students enrolled in the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools. At the conclusion of the week, 72 (92%) students participated and completed a survey instrument.

**Data Analysis**

The completed survey responses were tallied according to the frequency of each response. The gathered information was then analyzed to reveal which components of the Alternative School program students indicated were effective. Conclusions were drawn regarding how successful Alternative Schools in this area were in meeting the needs of their students.
General Information

The results of this study are presented in eight tables. Together, these tables provide the necessary data to determine the effectiveness of the alternative schools in the area described earlier.

The purpose of this study was to seek information from students enrolled in the Hamilton and Jefferson Counties Truant's Alternative and Optional Education Program. Surveys were distributed to all students enrolled in the Alternative Schools operated through the program. Each student was asked to complete a survey. The survey was conducted during the first week of December, 1995. All students in attendance during this week had an opportunity to participate. Of the 78 students currently enrolled in the program, 72 (92%) students agreed to participate by completing a survey instrument.

The following information was derived from school records based only on those students who participated in the study and is provided to supply the reader with additional data relative to the population surveyed. Students enrolled in the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools are of various grade levels and ages. This information is presented in Table 1. Of the 72 participants, 43 (60%) were male and 29 (40%) were female. Of these students, 61 (85%) attended the Mt. Vernon Alternative School and 11 (15%) attended the McLeansboro Alternative School. Finally, all of the students in this survey had been identified as at-risk of dropping out of school and/or was a retrieved dropout.
Table 1
Grade Levels and Ages of Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>% of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>% of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Environment and Atmosphere

Table 2 illustrates the extent to which the students felt the alternative school provided an environment and atmosphere that met their needs. The majority of students reported that the alternative schools were to a great or moderate extent supportive (83%), caring (75%), creating a sense of belonging (76%), and establishing clear expectations (85%).

Attitude, Citizenship, and Career Awareness

Respondents were asked to indicate how their attitude toward school, ability to set and achieve goals, problem solving skills, desire to finish school, and optimism for the future changed after they enrolled in an
Table 2

Environment and Atmosphere

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent did you find the environment and atmosphere at the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. To be supportive to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a great extent</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a moderate extent</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little extent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To be caring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a great extent</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a moderate extent</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little extent</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Created a sense of belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a great extent</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a moderate extent</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little extent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Established clear expectations of what was expected of you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a great extent</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a moderate extent</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little extent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

alternative school program. As Table 3 indicates, since enrolling in the alternative school 71% of the students had a more positive attitude toward
Table 3

**Attitude, Citizenship, and Career Awareness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After enrolling in the Alternative School program, do you:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. have a more positive attitude toward being in school?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. have a better ability to set and achieve goals?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. have better problem solving skills?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. have more of a desire to finish school and graduate?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. think about and plan for the future more often?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

being in school, 60% felt they had a better ability to set and achieve goals, almost half (47%) reported having better problem solving skills, 82% reported having more of a desire to finish school and graduate, and more
than three-fourths (76%) reported having thought about and planned for the future more often.

Also students were asked to indicate if they felt they had reduced or stopped substance abuse, decreased or stopped contact with gang members, and gotten along better with family members after they enrolled in the alternative school. As represented in Table 4, 46% (19 of 41) of the students with substance abuse problems had reduced or stopped substance abuse; 46% (16 of 35) of the students who were involved in gangs had reduced or stopped contact with gang members; and 46% (33 of 72) of the students indicated they got along better with parents, brothers, and sisters since enrolling in an alternative school.

Attendance

The next two questions surveyed students about school attendance and showing up for classes on time. As Table 5 reflects, enrolling in an alternative school had a significant or moderate positive impact on school attendance for 81% of the students surveyed. Also shown is that 65% of the students felt they show up for school and classes on time more often.

Academic Success

A number of questions asked respondents to provide information about class performance, homework and assignments, and academic skills. As shown in Table 6, after enrolling in an alternative school program 71% of the students believed they performed better in class, over three-quarters (78%) reported making better grades, and 79% reported that they
Table 4

**Attitude, Citizenship, and Career Awareness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After enrolling in the Alternative School program, have you:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. reduced or stopped substance abuse?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never had a substance abuse problem</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. decreased or stopped contact with gang members?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never had a gang problem</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. got along better with parents, brothers, and sisters?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

completed more homework and assignments. Also, Table 6 shows that 42% reported having better reading and math skills while over half (54%) believes they had better writing skills. Finally, Table 6 illustrates that over two-thirds (67%) of the students reported having passed more or all of their courses.
Table 5

Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. To what extent did enrolling in the Alternative School program have on your attendance?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>significant positive impact</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moderate positive impact</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little positive impact</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no impact</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative impact</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. After enrolling in the Alternative School program, do you show up for school and classes on time more often?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-Esteem

The next two questions surveyed students regarding their self-confidence and self-discipline. As Table 7 demonstrates, after enrolling in the alternative school program, 58% of the students reported having more self-confidence and more than half (51%) believed they had more self-discipline.
Table 6

**Academic Success**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After enrolling in an alternative school program, do you:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. perform better in your classes overall?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. make better grades?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. complete more homework and classroom assignments?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. have better reading skills?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. have better math skills?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
13. have better writing skills?
   Yes 39  54
   No  18  25
   Unsure 15  21

14. pass more or all of your courses?
   Yes 48  67
   No  12  17
   Unsure 12  17

Behavior

Respondents were asked to indicate if they got along better with other students and if they behaved better at school. As indicated by Table 8, after enrollment in the alternative school program 61% of the students felt they got along better with other students and 74% of the students indicated they behaved better and had fewer discipline problems at school.
Table 7

**Self-Esteem**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| After enrolling in the alternative school program, do you:  
18. have more self-confidence?  
  Yes | 42 | 58 |
  No  | 12 | 17 |
  Unsure | 18 | 25 |
| 19. have more self-discipline?  
  Yes | 37 | 51 |
  No  | 18 | 25 |
  Unsure | 17 | 24 |
Table 8

Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After enrolling in an alternative school program, do you:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. get along better with other students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. behave better at school (fewer discipline problems)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5
Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

This study surveyed students currently enrolled in the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools. The student body of this program is comprised of students who have been identified as at-risk of dropping out by their home school and referred to Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools. The program receives referrals from 18 school districts that are located in Hamilton and Jefferson Counties in Southern Illinois.

The necessary data were generated by surveying students in the program. The survey instrument was designed to determine the extent to which students felt they had or had not benefited from enrollment in alternative schools located in Mt. Vernon and McLeansboro, Illinois.

The completed survey responses were tallied according to the frequency of each response. The gathered information was then analyzed to reveal which components of the alternative school program students felt they were or were not benefiting from. The results of this analysis should aid decision makers when evaluating and making appropriate changes in the schools.

Conclusions

This study was developed to determine the effectiveness of the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools with regards to the environment and atmosphere, citizenship and attitude, amount of discipline problems, amount of absenteeism and tardiness, academic success, and self-
esteem of students after enrolling in the program. The objectives of this study addressed these areas and the information gathered was used to measure the effectiveness of the program.

Environment and Atmosphere. Information was collected regarding the environment and atmosphere the alternative school provided to the students. Eighty-three percent of the students found the environment and atmosphere to be supportive to a great or moderate extent. Three-fourths or more found the environment to be caring (75%) or created a sense of belonging (76%) to a great or moderate extent, while 85% reported that clear expectations were established for them. It would seem that the alternative schools are doing an effective job in providing a favorable environment and atmosphere for a large majority of the students at the schools.

Attitude, Citizenship, and Career Awareness. Additional information regarding attitude, citizenship, and career awareness of students were also collected. A majority of students reported that after enrolling in the alternative school, they had a more positive attitude toward being in school (71%), a better ability to set and achieve goals (60%), more of a desire to finish school and graduate (82%), and thought about and planned for the future more often (76%). Also, slightly less than half (47%) reported having better problem solving skills.

Of the students who reported they had been involved with substance abuse, 46% (19 of 41) indicated they had decreased or stopped substance abuse since enrolling in the alternative school. Of the students who
reported they had been involved with gang members, 46% (16 of 35) indicated they had decreased or stopped contact with such people. Also, it was reported that 46% of the students got along better with parents, brothers, and sisters since enrolling in the alternative school.

This information seem to indicate that the alternative schools are effective in helping students develop a better attitude toward school, develop more of a desire to finish school, and to plan for the future. This information also seemed to indicate that the alternative schools could be more effective in developing the students problem solving skills, their ability to set and achieve goals, their ability to get along better with their families, and in decreasing their involvement in drugs or gangs.

**Attendance.** Over four-fifths (81%) of the students reported that enrolling in the alternative school had a significant or moderate positive impact on their attendance. It was also indicated by 65% of the students that they show up for school and classes on time more often. This information seems to indicate that the alternative schools are doing an effective job in increasing the attendance rate of students.

**Academic Success.** Students were asked to provide information about how they felt regarding their academic success after enrolling in the alternative school program. A significant number of students reported having performed better in their classes (72%), making better grades (78%), completing more homework and classroom assignments (79%), having better reading skills (42%), having better math skills (42%), having better writing skills (54%), and passing more or all of their courses (67%).
This information seems to indicate that the alternative schools are effective in getting students to perform better academically at school.

**Self-Esteem.** A majority of students reported believing they had more self-confidence (58%) and more self-discipline (51%) since enrolling in the alternative school. These results seem to indicate that the alternative schools could do a more effective job in developing self-confidence and self-discipline in the students.

**Behavior.** After enrolling in an alternative school program, 61% of the students believed they got along better with other students and almost three-fourths (74%) believed they behaved better at school with fewer discipline problems. This information would seem to indicate that alternative schools are doing an effective job in improving the behavior of students.

Based upon the information provided by this survey, after enrolling in an alternative school program a majority of students believed they attend school more, had fewer tardies, made better grades, had better writing skills, passed more of their classes, had more self-confidence and self discipline, and had fewer discipline problems at school. Some of the students also reported having stopped or decreased substance abuse and contact with gang members, getting along better with their family, and improving their reading and math skills.

**Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to provide information regarding the effectiveness of the Hamilton-Jefferson Counties Alternative Schools regarding school attendance, academic success, discipline problems, and
self-esteem from the students’ perspectives. The information collected resulted in a significant majority of students indicating their belief that they have benefited from enrollment in an alternative school. For this reason, it is recommended that the results of this study be shared with all parties that might be interested or would benefit from such information which would aid decision makers in making appropriate changes in the schools.

Another recommendation would be to await the outcome of the new Alternative Schools for disruptive students that are currently being debated in the state of Illinois. If these alternative schools are established, their focus will be on students who face expulsion or suspension. Some of the students who attend alternative schools like the ones in Hamilton and Jefferson counties, which focus on students who are at-risk of dropping out of school, would also be eligible for the new alternative school for disruptive students. The data should be shared with those decision makers to demonstrate the effectiveness of current alternative schools that are funded through the Truant's Alternative and Optional Education Program. This information could provide those decision makers with information that would help them develop educational settings that continue to meet the many needs of today's troubled youth.
References


Appendix A

Alternative School Student Survey

Please circle the letter by the response which best reflects your own experiences at the Alternative School.

To what extent:

1. did you find the environment and atmosphere at the Alternative School to be supportive.
   A. Great Extent
   B. Moderate Extent
   C. Little Extent
   D. Not at all

2. did you find the environment and atmosphere at the Alternative School to be caring.
   A. Great Extent
   B. Moderate Extent
   C. Little Extent
   D. Not at all

3. did the atmosphere and environment at the Alternative School create a sense of belonging.
   A. Great Extent
   B. Moderate Extent
   C. Little Extent
   D. Not at all
4. were clear expectations of what was expected from you at the Alternative established.
   A. Great Extent
   B. Moderate Extent
   C. Little Extent
   D. Not at all

5. did you find the overall helpfulness of the Alternative School to be:
   A. Not helpful at all
   B. Somewhat helpful
   C. Extremely helpful

6. did enrolling in the Alternative School have on your attendance?
   A. Significant positive impact
   B. Moderate positive impact
   C. Little positive impact
   D. No impact
   E. Negative impact

After enrolling in the Alternative School program, do you:

7. have a more positive attitude toward being in school?
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

8. perform better in your classes overall
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

9. make better grades
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure
10. complete more homework and classroom assignments
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

11. have better reading skills
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

12. have better math skills
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

13. have better writing skills
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

14. pass more or all of your courses
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

15. get along better with other students
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

16. behave better at school (fewer discipline problems)
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure
17. show up for school and classes on time more often (less tardies)
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

18. have more self-confidence
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

19. have more self-discipline
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

20. have a better ability to set and achieve goals
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

21. have better problem solving skills
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

After enrolling in the Alternative School program, have you

22. reduced or stopped substance abuse
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Never had a substance abuse problem

23. decreased or stopped contact with gang members
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Never had a gang problem
24. got along better with parents, brothers, and sisters
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

25. more of a desire to finish school and graduate
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

26. thought about and planned for the future more often
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure

27. been more optimistic about the future
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Unsure
State of Illinois

Mt. Vernon

McLeansboro