

2009-10



WAKE COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

AN EVALUATION OF THE WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS

Author

Anisa Rhea, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) alternative educational options. The WCPSS options are similar to those in other North Carolina districts. WCPSS student outcomes based on state assessments and federal standards are also equivalent or higher than other districts, although the capacity for WCPSS students served at each alternative setting is generally lower. Students at WCPSS alternative schools receive benefits such as smaller classes and greater access to counseling services. Student data also indicate that these environments help build student resiliency. Base school personnel understand some aspects of the alternative schools, but greater transparency is needed, especially at the high school level. Additional alternative education sites are needed to better meet the needs of at-risk elementary students. Comprehensive services and settings for long-term suspended students and students with severe behavioral issues who are ineligible for special education services should also be created.

Evaluation & Research Department
E&R Report No. 10.15
November 2010
www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research
(919) 850-1863

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	3
Contextual Framework	9
Review of Alternative Education Literature: A National Perspective	9
Review of Alternative Educational Options in Fairfax County Public Schools.....	13
Review of Alternative Education Models in Selected North Carolina Districts.....	14
Implementation Information	19
Wake County Public School System Alternative Schools and Programs.....	19
Alternative School/Program Transparency: Base School Administrator and Staff Survey.....	40
Impact and Student Outcomes	62
Student Academic and Behavior Outcomes for Selected Alternative Schools in North Carolina	62
Alternative School/Program Benefits: Student Survey.....	67
Alternative School Student Outcomes: Longitudinal Analyses of Entering Cohorts at Alternative Schools.....	79
Alternative School Student Outcomes: Longitudinal Analyses of Booster Cohorts 1 and 2.....	88
Alternative School Costs and Benefits Description.....	94
Discussion	100
Recommendations	102
References	105
Appendices	106
A: Alternative Schools in Selected North Carolina Districts	
B: Base Middle School Assignments for Alternative Schools	
C: Sample Alternative Schools and Programs Survey	
D: Sampling and Survey Procedures	
E: Alternative Schools and Programs Qualitative Survey Results	
F: Student Views of Alternative Schools, Spring 2010	
G: Alternative School Allotment Data	

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) alternative educational options. The current options that are analyzed in this study include two middle schools and one high school for students with moderate behavior and academic needs, an elementary program and a grade 6-12 school for students with disabilities (SWD) who have severe mental, emotional, or behavior issues, and a program to boost over-age students back to their appropriate grade level and set them on a path toward on-time graduation. Although various data sources and multi-level analyses are utilized in this evaluation, three main sections comprise this study.

- First a contextual framework is presented that offers national data on alternative educational models and describes the models used within comparable school districts.
- Second, implementation information is provided to explain the various WCPSS alternative educational options and to empirically examine their level of transparency within the district.
- Finally, the impact and student outcomes of the educational options are analyzed based on student perspectives, student-level academic and behavior data, and longitudinal analyses of students' academic progress. A description of the alternative schools costs and benefits is also provided.

Trends across Alternative Schools

The alternative educational options in WCPSS are similar to those available in comparable North Carolina school districts, except that WCPSS does not provide a physical site for long-term suspended students and most other districts do. The capacity for WCPSS students served at each setting is generally lower as well. Student outcomes tend to be equivalent or higher based on state assessments and federal standards. Students benefit from attending a WCPSS alternative school in other ways as well. According to WCPSS staff and student survey data, the primary benefit of the district's alternative schools and programs is the availability of smaller classes with low teacher/student ratios which promote relationship building and individual attention. Students have greater opportunities to access school-based counseling services at alternative schools because the counselors and social workers serve fewer students and can allot more individual time.

Research suggests that at-risk students can be successful with the support of family, school, and community environments that use protective factors such as caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation to build resiliency. Resiliency refers to the student's capacity to successfully adapt to challenging life experiences (Benard, 1991). Data from middle and high school alternative school students indicate that protective factors are being used to build resiliency in most students. Students also believe that many of their problems, particularly earning poor grades, have decreased since attending their alternative school.

Although base school personnel know about some of the alternative education options and make appropriate student referrals, specific information about certain alternative schools and programs especially at the high school level should be made more transparent, that is, more visible, accessible, and understandable. Overall, the needs of students districtwide seem to be

disproportionate to the number of students the alternative settings are currently able to serve. The largest gap appears to be in serving more at-risk elementary students. Additionally, the district is in need of a site for students with severe behavioral issues who are not eligible for special education services and a separate setting for students serving long-term suspensions. WCPSS should also partner with community agencies to provide more alternative education sites.

Providing small classes with greater support is a more costly yet recognized strategy utilized by alternative schools to improve the academics and behavior of specific student populations; however, this makes it more difficult to calculate equitable allotments between base and alternative schools. Base and alternative schools receive different allotments because they are different institutions. Base schools receive both instructional Months of Employment (MOE) and non-instructional funds set by WCPSS formulas using a 10 day Average Daily Membership (ADM). Alternative schools have different staffing patterns than base schools based on standards for alternative school staffing set by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) as well as the characteristics of the student populations served in those settings.

Longview is classified by NCDPI as a special school indicating that all of the students served are eligible to receive special education services. The small pupil to staff ratio at Longview is largely determined by state formulas and the majority of teachers are funded through special education funding, which is formula driven. The Bridges program for behaviorally challenged elementary students in need of special education services is funded similarly although it is a part of the Mount Vernon allotments. Overall, the pupil to teacher ratio is also considerably smaller at the four alternative schools compared to base schools.

Trends within Alternative Schools

Mount Vernon Middle School

- Base-school personnel appear to have a general knowledge of the purpose of Mount Vernon. The targeted student population, service provided, and the process of transitioning back to a base school also seem to be clearly understood. There is a misconception by many base school personnel (75%) that students who attend Mount Vernon might matriculate to either Longview or Mary Phillips high school when students generally transition to their base schools.
- Qualitative data indicate that base schools what to know about students' academic and behavioral needs and successful interventions when they transition back from Mount Vernon.
- Mount Vernon students perform just as well or better on state assessments compared to other similar alternative schools in North Carolina.
- Based on longitudinal analysis of a 6th-grade student Mount Vernon cohort, 2009-10 data for five of the 11 students showed that four students are 10th-grade students that their base high schools. The other student was retained and subsequently dropped out.

River Oaks Middle School

- There is little consensus from the base-school administrators and staff on the purpose of River Oaks. Since River Oaks was recently redesigned to be the companion school to Mount Vernon, more transparency about this change may be necessary. However, the reasons base school personnel refer students to River Oaks do align well with its mission and targeted student population. Similar to Mount Vernon, survey results show that some River Oaks respondents (56%) have the misperception that alternative middle school students might ultimately attend an alternative high school.
- The services base school staff expect—peer mediation, small class size, and self-paced instruction—are actually offered at River Oaks. When students transition back, base school respondents want River Oaks staff to offer suggestions for interventions that can reasonably be provided in a regular school setting.

Mount Vernon and River Oaks

- Mount Vernon and River Oaks were compared to alternative schools in other North Carolina districts. In some cases, the schools were similar in terms of grade span and achievement data from state assessments. In other cases, Mount Vernon and River Oaks had better outcomes than the other alternative schools serving both middle and high school students.
- Based on combined student survey results, Mount Vernon and River Oaks appear to foster resiliency in their students through high expectations, caring relationships, and meaningful participation. Students also reported that their problems with getting in trouble for behavior and earning poor grades have improved since they have attended the alternative school.

Mary Phillips High School

- In general, administrative and staff base school respondents are unclear about the primary purpose of Mary Phillips high school and describe a lack of communication between the alternative school and themselves. The type of student that should be referred to Mary Phillips is also not well understood; however, the top referral reasons are in line with the Mary Phillips target population.
- Students at Mary Phillips are expected to graduate from the school—a fact seemingly unknown by base school personnel who would benefit from greater transparency on this point. In the rare event that a student does return to their base school, the staff would like to be notified before-hand and expect that Mary Phillips will offer transitional services.
- Over 80% of students surveyed reported that Mary Phillips offers them meaningful opportunities for participation and caring relationships, and therefore has increase their resiliency. Students also noted experiencing fewer problem behaviors and better grades since attending Mary Phillips. Qualitative input from students focused on how attending Mary Phillips has helped them get on track toward a successful future.

- In 2008-09, Mary Phillips performance composite was most similar to Hawthorn High in Charlotte; however, Mary Phillips performed better on other measures. Mary Phillips and Hawthorn High also had comparable drop out rates. Other districts' alternative schools serving high school students had slightly less favorable outcomes than Mary Phillips.
- Longitudinal data for 72 students who entered Mary Phillips as 9th-grade students in 2005-06 shows that by December 2009, over half (44 students) of the cohort had dropped out and eight student had transferred out of the district. The remaining 20 students graduated from Mary Phillips. Nearly all did so in just two or three years.

Longview School

- Base middle school personnel appear to know more about Longview than personnel at base high schools. Whereas base middle school administrators and staff viewed the school as nearly always focusing on discipline and behavior, base high school personnel were much less certain of the primary focus of the school. In general, both levels of personnel know that SWD students in grades 6-12 with severe emotional and/or behavioral problems can be referred. They are also aware to the types of transition services Longview staff offer.
- Qualitative feedback indicate that the district might need an alternative environment that serves students struggling with major behavioral issues yet do not need special education services, and thus are ineligible for Longview.
- Longview student survey findings reveal that building student resiliency has occurred less frequently at Longview compared to the other alternative settings. Additionally, students reported inconsistent levels of improvement within their problem areas.
- Longview has a considerably narrower grade span for students served compared to other special education centers in North Carolina district. The school's 2008-09 performance composite fell between the lowest and the highest performing centers located in Guilford and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.
- A five-year longitudinal study of a Longview cohort of 30 entering 9th-grade students indicates that few students have been successful. Based on complete data for 20 students, three students graduated, 14 students dropped out, and three students were still attending Longview as of December 2009.

The Bridges Program

- Behaviorally challenged elementary students in need of special education services can be served through the Bridges program, which is housed on the Mount Vernon campus. Base school personnel who refer students to Bridges are clear on the target population and referral process of the program. The program purpose is not completely clear to these personnel, as many believe counseling is a main priority whereas academics is a primary focus.
- Perceptions about student transitions do not align with reality. Base school personnel tend to believe that students typically transition into self-contained classes at base schools. Most of

the students actually remain at Bridges and then transition to Longview, although greater numbers of students are starting to transition back to base schools.

The Booster Program

- The Booster program, housed at Mount Vernon and River Oaks middle schools, gives motivated, over-age 7th-and 8th-grade students a chance to catch up to their appropriate grade level cohort and achieve on-time graduation. According to data from an analysis of the academic progress of 22 students in Booster Cohorts 1 and 2, many are on a path toward on-time graduation.
- One student from Cohort 1 graduated early in June of 2010. Given their current progress, several other students should graduate on-time during the 2010-11 school year. Other students have not been as successful. Two dropped out and another two have fallen behind academically and are not likely to graduate on-time. Two other students transferred out of the district.
- Cohort 2 students are not expected to graduate until 2011-12; however, most are doing well academically. Two are on-track to graduate in June of 2012 and six additional students could graduate on-time if they plan accordingly and maintain or improve their academic performance. Based on current data, the remaining two students are not likely to graduate on-time. This cohort also lost two students—one moved to another district and the other dropped out.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are being offered based on the empirical evidence presented in this report. The recommendations are intended to offer suggestions for how current alternative educational options might better meet the needs of WCPSS students, administrators, and staff. Ideas for additional alternative services are also given based on school-based input.

Recommendation 1: Increase the capacity for serving students districtwide by creating more alternative options for students.

Given survey respondents estimates of the numbers of current students who would benefit from an alternative educational experience, the need for service exceeds current capacity. WCPSS should consider expanding alternative options for at-risk elementary students. Alternative settings should also be created for students with severe problem behaviors who do not qualify for special education services and for students who are serving long-term suspensions. Currently, the SCORE program is available for long-term suspended middle and high school students to continue their education in an online learning environment. The district should also explore how it handles long-term suspended students and whether a separate alternative setting could be created to serve these students. Additionally, WCPSS should investigate alternative education models that partner with community agencies to serve the comprehensive needs of students and their families within a shared site.

Recommendation 2: Make information about the alternative education options more readily available and accessible and clearly specify the purpose and target population served.

Current Web sites may include some of this information; however, improvements can be made. School Web sites should offer consistent and comprehensive information about the purpose of the program, the target population served, the referral process, the services offered and the typical length of service, and any transition services provided. Each alternative school might have a “Frequently Asked Questions” page. Additionally, Mount Vernon and River Oaks might consider having a link for which base school personnel can obtain information about the Booster program. Ideally, Mount Vernon should add a link to the Bridges program on their Web site. Perhaps information about the available alternative options could also be shared at principal meetings.

Recommendation 3: Increase communication to base schools regarding the services available and student progress and establish a more standardized transition process.

Districtwide, alternative schools and programs are most commonly characterized by alternative and base school personnel as giving students the opportunity to be educated in small classes with a low teacher to student ratio. Survey results show that offering smaller classes is the primary service respondents expect alternative settings to provide. They are less aware that alternative schools and programs also offer counseling services, peer mediation, and social skills training that differ in frequency or intensity compared to base schools.

Data also suggest that WCPSS staff are not consistently aware of the expected length of service and transition expectations at alternative settings and would like improved communication about student progress and impending transitions. Most respondents think that alternative schools do provide some type of service to students who are returning to a base school setting and nearly all would like transition services. It appears that Bridges and Longview are believed to provide the greatest array of service.

Recommendation 4: Frequently review and adjust alternative school allotments.

The alternative schools’ non-instructional funds such as supplies and materials, travel, and contracts are based on student counts. These student counts tend to be higher or lower than the capacity of nearly all of the alternative schools, with Longview being the exception. It is recommended that these counts be reviewed and adjusted annually.

Recommendation 5: Increase the intentional building of protective factors at alternative schools to increase resiliency among students facing life challenges.

It is not clear whether alternative school principals are purposefully building protective factors and resiliency in their students. However, student survey data show that most students at Mount Vernon, River Oaks, and Mary Phillips, and about half of the students at Longview believe they have learned resiliency skills in the alternative setting. This finding suggests a need for staff to prioritize the intentional building of protective factors in the school environment so that students might succeed despite their difficult circumstances.