Ohio | Department of Education

Guiding Principles for Alternative Education in Ohio

Issue Date: February 1, 2005 Revised: January 13, 2009
Key Words: Alternative Education Challenge
Summary: This document is a set of guiding principles that alternative programs should follow in order to have a lasting, positive impact on the lives of students.

Overview

The Alternative Education Challenge Grant Program was designed and funded to have a positive impact on the life course of students at risk for school failure and related problems (delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, and multiple mental health concerns). In order to have a lasting, positive impact on the lives of students, alternative education programs should follow a set of guiding principles. These principles were summarized in the 2001-2003 application for funding. The principles are listed below along with research-based approaches that increase the likelihood of having a sustainable impact on the lives of children and youth.

General Principles

1. Children and adolescents have basic developmental needs that must be met if problem behaviors are to be avoided. These needs are best addressed by the early and continuing engagement of youth in a range of activities that develop citizenship, build social, academic and vocational competencies, enable adult guidance, and provide opportunities for positive peer interaction.

2. Encouraging positive child and adolescent development and responding to problem behaviors often should be shared responsibilities. Parents, other significant caretakers and schools are the most important influences on individual pupils and students. Their efforts should be supplemented and enhanced by a comprehensive community-wide strategy that helps all youth to develop the values and skills they need to become productive members of the community. Positive parent/caretaker involvement is a core expectation and strategy of Alternative Education programs.

3. In developing a community-wide strategy, a strong effort must be made to coordinate and integrate the efforts of schools, non profit youth serving organizations, family support and intervention programs, health and mental health care providers, substance abuse and alcohol treatment programs, law enforcement and juvenile justice organizations and private sector businesses. Rarely will a single agency be able to achieve all of the desired outcomes.

4. Planning and development of alternative education programs must take place within the overall community-wide strategy and connections with community-based agencies should be established at the outset.

To the extent possible, all collaborating agencies and organizations should share an evidence-based approach that draws upon the knowledge bases of all relevant disciplines and professions. Where evidence is not readily available to guide program practices, attention should be given to the most promising approaches yet to be thoroughly researched or evaluated.

5. Children and adolescents function best in environments that encourage interaction with peers who exhibit positive behaviors and choices. Given that antisocial behavior is a predominant reason for placement in alternative programs, every effort should be made to promote and maintain participant contact with positive peers while minimizing contact with antisocial peers.

6. Interventions that focus on specific strengths and problems are more effective than "general" interventions. Good assessments of student strengths and needs are a first step in developing effective interventions.

7. The successful transition of students into and out of alternative education programs is one of the most critical indicators of long-term success. Alternative programs must work closely with the "feeder" schools that send students to and receive students from these programs. In cases where program participants are older and unlikely or unable to graduate from high school, programs should focus on helping them make a smooth transition to adulthood.

8. Professional development and training opportunities should be readily available to persons working in alternative programs and in collaborating agencies. Cross training of staff in the alternative programs and supporting agencies should be encouraged. Wherever possible, professional development and training activities should be conducted in cooperation with college or university faculty members or others with particular expertise in the areas to be addressed. Opportunities should include attention to cognitive and non-cognitive barriers to school success and to building effective collaborations.

9. Evaluation is a necessary pre-condition of program improvement. All programs must collect information about the effectiveness of their efforts and use that information in a continuous improvement process. More importantly, all programs should develop and employ a formative (process) evaluation strategy that will help in improving performance in the short term. Wherever possible a third-party evaluator should be involved to increase objectivity.