

Organizational and Instructional Factors Contributing  
to Alternative Schools' Retention of At-Risk Students:  
Perceptions of Students, Faculty, and Parents  
Involved in Alternative Schools

A Dissertation

by

Gary Calvin Cone

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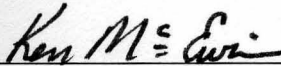
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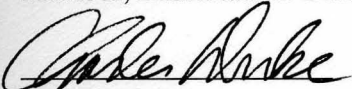
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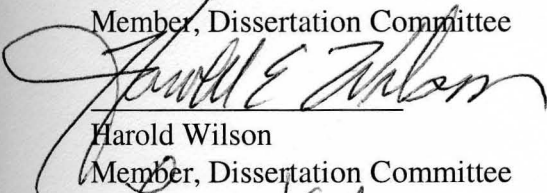
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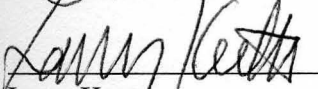
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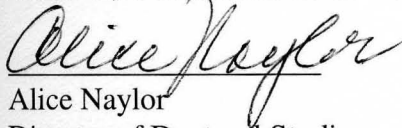
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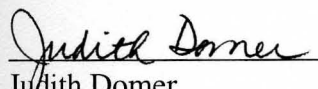
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## ABSTRACT

### Organizational and Instructional Factors Contributing to Alternative Schools' Retention of At-Risk Students: Perceptions of Students, Faculty, and Parents Involved in Alternative Schools

Gary Calvin Cone, B.A., College of William and Mary  
M.A., Appalachian State University  
Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Chairperson: Ken Jenkins

The purpose of this study was to examine alternative high school faculties', parents', and at-risk students' perceptions of organizational and instructional factors that contribute to program completion of alternative schools for at-risk students. The study focused on five alternative high schools in North Carolina.

This study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Survey data were collected from four hundred and seventy-two parents, students, and faculty members at the five alternative schools. Focus group interviews were conducted with parents, students and faculty members at each school. Interviews with administrators were held and field notes were acquired during the site visits.

The researcher sought to determine answers to the following research questions:

(a) What factors in the organizational structures and processes of alternative schools do parents, faculty, and students perceive contributing most significantly to at-risk students remaining in school? (b) What factors in the instructional practices of alternative schools do parents, faculty, and students perceive as contributing most significantly to at-risk students remaining in school? The study examined the extent

to which alternative schools enhanced program completion for at-risk students through implementation of targeted and student-appropriate curriculum and instruction - in other words, best practices.

The literature review focused on types of alternative schools and the effects of alternative schools. The literature review was concerned with those variables over which schools can exert control (i.e., organizational variables). Effective practices in the areas of organization and instruction were identified, including: (a) small class size, (b) individualized instruction, (c) flexible scheduling of instructional periods, (d) emphasis on basic skills, (e) performance-based instruction, (f) curriculum integration, (g) structured environment, (h) work-study programs, (i) flexible hours of operation, (j) individual counseling, (k) group counseling, (l) family counseling, (m) available equipment, (n) available supplies, (o) student recognition programs, (p) volunteer assistance, (q) paraprofessional assistance, (r) mentoring, (s) collaboration with community service agencies, (t) parent involvement, (u) teachers' participative decision making, and (v) students' participative decision making. The survey instrument was constructed with two components. First, respondents were asked to rate (using a Likert scale) how important they felt particular practices (i.e., survey items) were to helping at-risk students remain in school. Second, respondents were asked to rate (using a Likert scale) how well they felt their alternative school was performing a particular practice (i.e., survey item).

In the focus group interviews and administrator interviews, questions were asked to determine which practices participants felt contributed most significantly to

students remaining in school. The format for these questions was much more open-ended and the responses were triangulated with the survey results.

Results of the study showed that participants' placed greater importance on certain organizational and instructional practices than others. Class size, a structured learning environment, counseling, and the availability of resources were perceived as most significant for organizational structures and processes. Individualized instruction, an emphasis on basic skills, the use of performance-based instruction, and student recognition programs were perceived as most significant for instructional practices. Participants in the focus group interviews also reported a family atmosphere in the alternative school as a primary reason for students remaining in school, contrasting this climate with a larger, more impersonal atmosphere in conventional high schools that allowed students to "fall through the cracks."