



Characteristics of Successful Alternative School Programs in the United States

Bob Michels

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The focus of this paper is to examine some the characteristics and attributes that have proven successful in a variety of alternative school programs – programs that are not traditional and typically include settings that serve delinquent and other antisocial youth. These characteristics work regardless of where the school is located, the racial or ethnic background of the youth and/or economic levels of their families. Most of the findings in this paper come from over 42 years as a teacher and school administrator in elementary and secondary schools in California, of which the last 37 years were working with delinquent and non-conventional youth as an administrator of alternative school programs. This document is intended to serve as a guide in setting up and maintaining programs that will be successful in a variety of situations; including but not be limited to, a school within a school, a stand-alone school program, or a residential program, where students live at the facility.

How interesting to note Socrates (469-399 B.C.) said, „Children nowadays are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food and tyrannize their teachers”. One could make a case that things have not change since then – or can they? I believe they have changed.

News about troubled, delinquent youths behaving destructively and problematically seems to pervade the United States national and local media. Stories about adolescents harming themselves, their peers, their families, and their communities frequently surface and deeply disturb people in many parts of the country. But, while there seem to be unending challenges in American society among youths, many caring adults are working to create programs and strategies that truly help at-risk, delinquent students.

Delinquent youth within American society pose a continuing problem for all educators. At-risk children with antisocial behavioral problems present an ongoing challenge that in recent years has reached epidemic proportions in America. Although the problems associated with delinquent youth are societal in nature, the expectation is that schools, because of their unique position in society, are in the best position to implement programs of prevention and intervention to address this serious problem. Although the ultimate solution to this problem lies outside the scope of the school system, change must begin somewhere and the problem at the school level is at least a first step towards resolving the problem. Ultimately, through education, communication and adoption of Best Practice models that work, a comprehensive solution will be found. That solution must encompass a combined effort between family, schools, teachers, social services professionals, policy makers, religious institutions, public safety officials, the students themselves, and society at large. It will not happen overnight; however, it will through a gradual multifaceted sustained effort over time.

Because delinquent behavior is strongly connected to child development issues, it makes sense to begin to focus on the problem at the school level. Many antisocial children bring behavioral problems to school from the beginning of their educational process while others develop these problems as they progress through the system. Antisocial youth problems; such as, truancy, rising school dropout rates, aggression, bullying, depression and harassment are just a few of the issues faced by teachers in schools today. The challenge of schools and educators is to find ways to facilitate academic and social development for all students while working to solve problems of antisocial students that disrupt the process.

A positive beginning towards resolving this problem is to agree on fundamental and basic beliefs about these youths. First, all youth need to stay in school. It is important for the teacher to find creative ways to motivate students to want to stay in school. Second, delinquent and troubled youth who exhibit antisocial behavior can be rehabilitated. Third, delinquent youth are just children who need help, understanding, guidance, and love to become socially responsible adults capable of making positive and meaningful contributions to our society.

To understand Best Practices, I prefer to look at programs that may have met some of the above criteria but did not work for a variety of reasons. The Surgeon General of the United States in a report, *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*¹ identifies certain programs that have no effect or negative effects on violence or known risk factors of violence. Peer led programs; such as, peer counseling (students helping other students through a crisis), peer mediation (students mediating conflicts with their fellow students) and peer leaders (students assuming some of the responsibilities of school staff) showed no evidence of a positive effect with young people. It can be assumed that this is because of the maturity and sophistication level of the students. However, it should be noted that adult led programs proved effective, especially in mediating problems.

Another method widely used by many schools is retention or not promoting a student to the next grade. This does not help students but rather promotes negative attitudes towards school, staff, attendance, behavior and achievement. This is applicable at all grade levels from elementary school through high school. It should be noted that a school where a combination of grades are taught together tends to lessen the effects of retention. The long-term results of retention tend to increase the school drop-out rate and drug usage, thus creating a cadre of young people who have no marketable skills and are prone to crime.

For many years there was a common belief that if you could scare students enough they would not want to be involved in the juvenile justice system. One such program was Scared Straight where students met with inmates who told them about the terrible life in prison. The youths were expected to develop a fear of this type of lifestyle; however, the program had no long-term effect. In numerous instances, some of the youth who attended this program were drawn to this way of life and found it to be comforting and secure as an incarcerated way of life takes care of all your needs.

Many alternative school leaders believed until recently that antisocial youth would strive with a paramilitary program – thus

¹ U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*, pp. 110-111, 117-119.

the birth of boot camps. There are many variations of boot camps from students living at home to students living away from home in barracks that resemble a military facility. The program models itself by using a military basic training format with a major emphasis on physical training. All wear uniforms and many have attached themselves to one of the military service branches with personnel from that branch on staff.

Implementation of Best Practices programs at the school level may be the best hope for beginning the process of finding long-term solutions to the problems associated with delinquency in schools. Best Practices programs are truly a work in progress, a sustained long-term effort to find effective solutions to a major problem facing schools and society today. According to the National Center on Education and Juvenile Justice, eight components have been identified that ensure Best Practice programs will be effective². They are: 1) Individual Juvenile Planning – a plan for the youth that might include behavioral goals, academic attainment, progress monitoring system, 2) Skill Based Interventions including counseling, social skills, vocational, academic and life skills, 3) Medical Interventions, 4) Behavior Systems including coping and anger control management, 5) Family Involvement, 6) Transitioning, including a transition plan and system of care that has a wraparound component (all-inclusive and needs driven), 7) Staffing, and 8) Assessment of program effectiveness.

While all Best Practices programs for schools are designed to lessen or prevent delinquent behavior among at-risk youth, the focus of these programs involve both a prevention and an intervention element. The programs can also focus on universal applications where the Best Practices are applied to all students within the educational community, on individual students who have specific needs based on their personal situation, or a combination of both. The choice of a program by a given educational community may depend on a variety of factors including target age groups, availability of resources, and individual needs. These

² National Center on Education and Juvenile Justice-Best Practices for Serving Court Involved Youth with Learning, Attention and Behavioral Disabilities. www.edjj.org/publications/ES3-10-25-99.pdf.

can change from time to time as resources change. For the most part, programs generally rely on a set of guidelines that includes assumptions based on verifiable research and solutions within the specific context.

Over the long term, studies show that the most effective programs reach kids before the age of eight and that schools provide the best way to disseminate this information. Sharing this knowledge with the professional community as well as the families and caregivers involved with our youth is crucial to devising long term solutions to the problems of delinquent youth and their effect on society.

Perhaps individual teachers play the most significant part in modifying the negative behavior of antisocial youth in school settings. They are the role models, the educational leaders, and the mentors for youth today. More on this later.

Students spend more time in school than they do with their parents. In *Antisocial Behavior in School, Evidence Based Practices*³ the authors review some generic strategies for implementing Best Practices interventions. They are: 1) Attempt to build a positive, trusting relationship with the antisocial student as a first step in positively influencing her or his behavior and development. 2) Establish the best universal intervention procedures you can for improving academic performance and social adjustment before resorting to selected interventions. In other words, keep these students with the rest of the class in as least a restrictive environment as much as possible. 3) Be sensitive to the behavioral efficiency of the responses you are trying to reduce and replace in comparison with those you are replacing them with – make sure the replacement is of equal or better interest for the student. An example could be a sports program during the time the minor would be hanging around with his friends. 4) Begin your intervention approach or strategy with positive procedures where there is a high probability of success; such as, setting limits and statement of rules. 5) Do all you can to involve the student's primary caregivers in the intervention process knowing

³ Walker, Hill M., Colvin, Geoff, and Ramsey, Elizabeth (1995), *Antisocial Behavior in School: Evidence Based Practices* Second Edition Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning p. 69-70.

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that this may not always happen. 6) Begin screening and intervening as early as possible for any student at risk for antisocial behavior patterns. 7) Teach empathy and socially responsible decision making as part of the intervention. 8) Remember that most often the antisocial student's interests do not depend upon academic success.

Brother Steve Johnson, SM, Director of the Educational Ethics Department at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, has spent a lifetime working with delinquent and troubled youth. He speaks of some of the early childhood predisposing factors that can lead to delinquency, antisocial behavior, and criminal factors. However, just because a child has some of these factors does not mean that they will become a problem. Nevertheless, there is high correlation between these and the road to delinquency.

A criminal model in the home – someone to provide a negative role model

Abuse, neglect, or experience of force upon the youth

Family dysfunction – they can't get it together

Antisocial value system – the world owes me

Poverty/economic access – less fortunate than others

Substance abuse – drugs in the house and being used

Disability – one or more of the caregivers are not able to care for the youth

Actions to monitor for elementary aged students that can lead to antisocial behavior include the following:

Aggression – the bully, acting out behavior

Frequent School Changes – Always moving, never a chance to get grounded

Uneven Development, especially in visual-spatial-auditory perception

Truancy – preferring to stay at home rather than come to school

Vandalism – destroying or defacing property of a person or an institution

Theft – taking things that do not belong to them

Fire Setting – An obsession to play with matches and watching things burn

Substance Abuse – Using illegal substances to get high, such as, alcohol, sniffing glue, or marijuana.

Schools that are efficient in handling antisocial behaviors usually have a parenting program or component that assists caregivers in providing a successful home and educational experience for the family. Brother Steve Johnson in his „Raising an Ethical Child Series” lets parents know areas that responsible parenting should include: 1) Talk to your child every day. Spend time with them. The saying, „I don't have a great deal of time to spend, but what I spend is quality time” has little or no effect on getting close. It is not quality time but quantity of time that is important. Talk to your child when they want to talk, not when it is convenient with you. Become the designated driver – kids like to talk in the car – it is amazing what you will hear and learn. 2) Know where your child is at all times. Although kids may not like it, parents need to know where they are. 3) Be involved with your kid's friends – they are more likely to talk to you than your own. 4) Be consistent in your reward system – don't reward when you are in a good mood and withhold when you are not. 5) Implement reasonable sanctions – make the punishments fit the crime.

Included in the rules for effective parenting are that a child must be in school each day and on time, the child must get sufficient sleep, the child must be fed, and that there are no arguments before school.

From observation, successful programs appear to have one key element that highlights their success. It is the teacher, the educational leader. The program alone will not help the troubled, antisocial non-conventional youth – it takes the expertise of this highly skilled professional to perform his/her magic, gain the respect from these young people, have superior classroom management skills, set a high level of expectations attainable for all students, know the various techniques for positive intervention, have subject matter expertise, a good knowledge in managing the physical environment of the classroom, be fair and consistent with students, be a good time manager, have a fantastic sense of humor, be able to work effectively with parents, co-workers, and administration, greet the students at the door upon entering the classroom, learn their names and the names of their family members, and find recreational time in their own personal life to prevent burnout.

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In closing, non-conventional antisocial youth are just that – youth. They have the same ability to succeed as all students given the opportunity, proper environment and mentoring. Although many programs have been attempted, some successful and some less so, the most important factor is the teacher and his/her belief that all students are worthy of a new start.

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