

School Administrators of Iowa

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515/224-3370 • 515/224-3372 FAX • www.sai-iowa.org

"BEST PRACTICES"

Special Education Students and the Alternative School

Task Force Purpose: In the spring of 1999 School Administrators of Iowa convened a task force to examine some common practices in school districts that operate or send students to alternative schools and to recommend "best practice" ideas for those districts when students identified as qualifying for special education seek to enroll or are recommended for enrollment in alternative schools.

Personnel: We thank the members of the Task Force for their experience, insight, and wisdom: Mike Baethke, Principal, Indianola Learning Center; Kevin Crawford, Principal, Knoxville High School and GOAL (Knoxville Alternative); Lou Howell, (former) Assoc. Supt., Urbandale Community School District; Fae Ramsay, Principal, Walnut Creek Campus, West Des Moines Community School District; Greg Reed, Dir. of Human Resources, Cedar Rapids Community School District; and Steve Waterman, Supt., Clarke Community School District. Special thanks to Lana Michelson and Dennis Dykstra, Special Ed. Consultants, Iowa Dept. of Education. Kathy Lee Collins, Director of Legal Services for School Administrators of Iowa, chaired the Task Force.

Coverage: The primary issues examined by the Alternative Education/Special Education task force included funding, eligibility, procedures, decision-making, communication, and philosophy. Although funding for special education students who attend alternative schools is a significant public policy issue and one of practical importance to school administrators, the task force concluded that it is a legislative issue. We can best affect the need for funding alternative schools by contacting our professional associations and legislators to encourage legislative platforms to include additional funding for alternative school students. *Note: As the law currently exists (1999-2000), districts **may not count** students for supplemental weighting purposes for both attendance in an alternative school program and in special education; for supplemental weighting, the district is entitled to count the student for special education only.*

The following constitutes the advice of the Task Force on the other significant issues revolving around special education students and placement at the alternative school.

ISSUE:

Some school officials may be requiring that a student be "staffed out" of special education prior to enrollment in the alternative school.

ADVICE:

School officials can't deny a student the opportunity to attend an alternative school solely because the student has an IEP, 504 plan or special needs. Such a denial would likely be discrimination on the basis of disability in violation of state and federal civil rights laws.

BEST PRACTICE:

If an entitled (identified) student with a disability and his or her family seek to attend an alternative school, or if that setting is recommended by one or more members of the general education staff or administration, the question of whether that student should attend the alternative school must be addressed and resolved by the IEP team. No one individual has the right to make unilateral decisions in this regard; the parent may not insist upon or refuse the student's enrollment in the alternative school, and school officials may not require or refuse to consider the student's attendance there. If the alternative school is a desired option, that option gets discussed and decided upon by the IEP team. Placement on a trial basis may test the appropriateness of such a placement where agreement of the team cannot be reached. In the alternative, the party (parent, school district, or AEA) disagreeing with the recommendation of the IEP team may request a due process hearing to resolve the question.

ISSUE:

Decisions are reportedly being made by IEP teams about whether a special education student can or should attend an alternative school, but team members may not be well versed about what goes on at the alternative school and what that school's personnel are capable of providing.

ADVICE:

The alternative school philosophy and operations may differ significantly from those of the regular school. Administration and staff at the high school should learn all they can about the alternative school, or someone familiar with alternative school operations should be invited to IEP team meetings whenever the placement of a student at the alternative school is at issue.

BEST PRACTICE:

Alternative school teachers or administrators should prepare written materials explaining the alternative school philosophy and mission. The "general education" administration should invite alternative school staff to present at staff meeting or for in-service days and engage in question-and-answer dialog with the regular education staff. This should help to eradicate some of the myths or misunderstandings about the alternative school that may be held by regular education teachers or administrators as well as to enable the regular and special education teachers on the IEP teams to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the alternative school environment to help guide decision making at IEP team meetings. In the alternative, if the issue of the appropriateness of a placement at the alternative school is on the table for a certain student, the team should invite either a teacher or administrator from the alternative school to attend the IEP

ISSUE:

District personnel may fear that placement of a special needs student at an alternative school means that they have to hire special ed.-licensed staff at the alternative school.

ADVICE:

Placement of a special education student at an alternative school does not automatically mean that the district needs to place a special education-licensed teacher at the alternative school. The IEP team determines whether and to what extent a student requires direct instruction from a special ed. teacher. It may be possible for a student to attend part of the school day at the alternative school and part at the regular school or elsewhere to receive special services. Clearly, even if direct instruction by a special ed. teacher isn't necessary, a special ed. teacher still needs to monitor the student's progress and report to his or her parents. This must be done at least as frequently as the school monitors and reports the progress of general education students.

BEST PRACTICE:

Again, the IEP team is the best vehicle for resolving all questions of appropriateness of program, including whether a special education student can receive FAPE (a free appropriate public education) at the alternative school with or without a special education-licensed teacher. If it is not necessary that a special education teacher directly provide the instruction at the alternative school, he or she should nevertheless meet with alternative school personnel on a consulting and monitoring basis.

Reports home regarding alternative school special education students' progress toward their annual goals should be sent as frequently as the district reports progress to the parents of general education students.



SUMMARY:

Best Practices for Placing and Serving Special Education-Eligible Students at Alternative Schools

1. Conduct in-service training or otherwise establish a dialog between district, AEA, and alternative school personnel. Everyone, including AEA special education consultants who sit in on IEP team meetings, should understand the philosophy and operation of the alternative school.
2. Establish a profile, “check list,” or set of criteria to be met before **any student** transfers from the regular school program to an alternative school. (See attached “A” sample.)
3. Establish an intake procedure for students transferring into an alternative school setting. (See attached “B” sample.)
4. Remember, “special education” is not a place but services. Rather than deciding whether a special education student should attend an alternative school, the IEP team should decide what services the student needs, then whether those services are available or can be made available at the alternative school.
5. Part-time attendance at both the alternative school and regular school is an acceptable—but not exclusive—model.
6. The student’s IEP team decides whether and to what extent the student needs direct instruction by a special education-licensed teacher. That instruction may occur at the regular school, the alternative school, or elsewhere, as determined by the IEP team.
7. Progress of a special education student placed at an alternative school is monitored as established by the IEP team.
8. Neither the special education student/parent nor a school official has the right to decide unilaterally that a student shall or may not attend the alternative school. Differences of opinion by parents, the AEA, or the district may be resolved by a due process hearing.
9. Prior to recommending that a student attend the alternative school, regular school personnel should exhaust alternatives for serving a student in that environment.
10. The alternative school is not a “dumping ground” for students with behavior problems. Refer to the criteria/check list established for attendance there prior to considering a transfer.

Attachment "A"

**PRE-ENROLLMENT CHECKLIST
FOR ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL
PLACEMENT**

COUNSELOR/TEAM LEADER INTERVENTIONS (CHECK ALL YOU HAVE TRIED OR DISCUSSED):

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> At-risk class | <input type="checkbox"/> Resource Assignment | <input type="checkbox"/> Tutoring/Mentor Program |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community College options
(correspondence course, diploma, GED) | <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule Modification/
Pacing | <input type="checkbox"/> Student Assistance Team/
Counseling Referral |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Health referral | <input type="checkbox"/> Work Experience Prog. | <input type="checkbox"/> Alternate Teaching Methods |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social Interaction Supports | <input type="checkbox"/> Special Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Individualized Instruction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (explain) _____ | | |

Student Currently Identified as Requiring Special Education? Yes* No
(Please attach a copy of most recent IEP)

Grades in Progress if student is transferring to Alternative School: _____

Counselor/Team Leader signature _____ Date _____

Attachment "B"

Candidate _____ Date _____

Interviewer _____

Personal Information:

Date of Birth _____ Marital Status _____

Parental Status _____

Living Status: Dependent or Independent, Explain _____

Employment Information: Place _____

Hours _____ Name of Supr. _____

Notes: _____

Family Dynamics—Household Information:

Adults in Household	Relationship	Age
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_____	_____	_____
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_____	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

_____	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

_____	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

Minors in Household	Relationship	Age
---------------------	--------------	-----

_____	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

_____	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

_____	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

_____	_____	_____
-------	-------	-------

employment status of adults in household: _____

notes about general household dynamics: _____

Other Immediate Family Members

Relationship

notes about relationships with immediate family outside of household: _____

Parent information:

Father—Education level completed _____

Smoker? _____

Substance use information: _____

Mother—Education level completed _____

Smoker? _____

Substance use information: _____

Describe special relationships outside of family: _____

Interpersonal Relationships

Temper—Emotional self-control _____

Friendships _____

Romantic Relationships _____

Any specific problems with current school candidates? _____

Substance Use Information

Tobacco _____

Alcohol _____

Drugs _____

Special notes about substance use: _____

Physical-Mental Wellness

Physical disabilities: _____

Major illnesses or injuries: _____

Allergies-Asthma-Medication needs, etc.: _____

How often do you miss school because of illness? _____
or what types of illnesses? _____

emotional stress: _____

suicide threats or attempts: _____

Current doctors' or counselors' care information: _____

Past doctors' or counselors' care information: _____

Feelings about own self-image: _____

School Information

Number of high school credits to date _____

From what high schools? _____

Middle schools/Junior highs attended _____

Elementary schools attended _____

Have you ever been tested for or placed in special education? _____

If yes, please explain: _____

Attendance pattern or problems _____

What do you like about school? _____

What do you dislike about school? _____

School discipline history _____

Academic grades trend—elementary to middle to high school: _____

Special notes about school attitude: _____

Legal Information

Police record: _____

Probation-parole information: _____

Carceration information: _____

Life Goals

Career _____

Education _____

Family _____

Special notes about candidate: _____

Placement at alternative school: _____ Appropriate _____ Inappropriate

inappropriate, explain: _____

