Getting Youth Back on Track: A Case Study of Two Alternative Learning Centers

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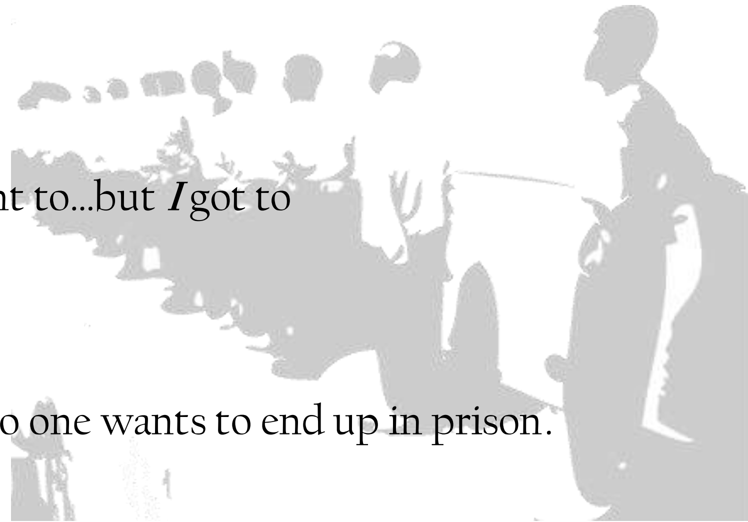
Getting Back on Track

This poem was created from the voices of youth in alternative learning centers.

Stay focused because I used to be side tracked a lot
I got to stay focused
Keep doing what you doing
Just be good.

Try to do good.
Cause you want to get out.
Like just let stuff go
You got to do work...you don't want to...but ***I*** got to



Being good that stands out
Everybody has a dream
Everybody has dreams [and] and no one wants to end up in prison.

Stay out of trouble
That's what I leave with
Help anybody
Get anybody where they want
You can further your education
It changed me

Help students get back on the right track!

Executive Summary

Alternative education has played an important role in providing education for students who experience academic and behavioral challenges in traditional school setting. Such environments are designed to promote equal access to education and create modified environments that are conducive to individual student needs.

There is a link between student placement in alternative education and suspension. According to Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin (2007), repeated suspension or expulsion results in student enrollment in alternative education programs (Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007). More likely, schools use alternative education to address the academic and behavioral needs of students who violate school codes of conduct. A model of alternative education in North Carolina, alternative learning centers, is an *innovative* alternative education approach designed to meet the needs of behavioral at-risk youth in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools.

This evaluation reflects collaboration between Winston-Salem State University's Department of Psychological Sciences, Center for Community Safety and Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools. The project aimed to: 1) understand program characteristics of alternative learning centers (ALCs); and 2) understand the effect of alternative learning centers (ALCs) on the lives of youth across two sites. Multiple methods were used to provide a "rich" description of ALCs and demonstrate ways in which these settings promote educational attainment among youth. Qualitative data were collected through site observations and interviews with administrators, ALC coordinators and staff, and youth. Quantitative data were gathered on ALC participants to include, ethnicity, grade level, gender, and offense. Findings from the project indicate ALCs:

- Model "promising practices" outlined in the NC Department of Public Instruction's Alternative Education Program.
- Foster teamwork and a "family-oriented" atmosphere.
- Address the psychosocial and academic needs of youth.
- Successfully transition a majority of youth back to the traditional classroom.

These findings provide a snapshot of the unique contexts of ALCs and their effect on the lives of at-risk youth.

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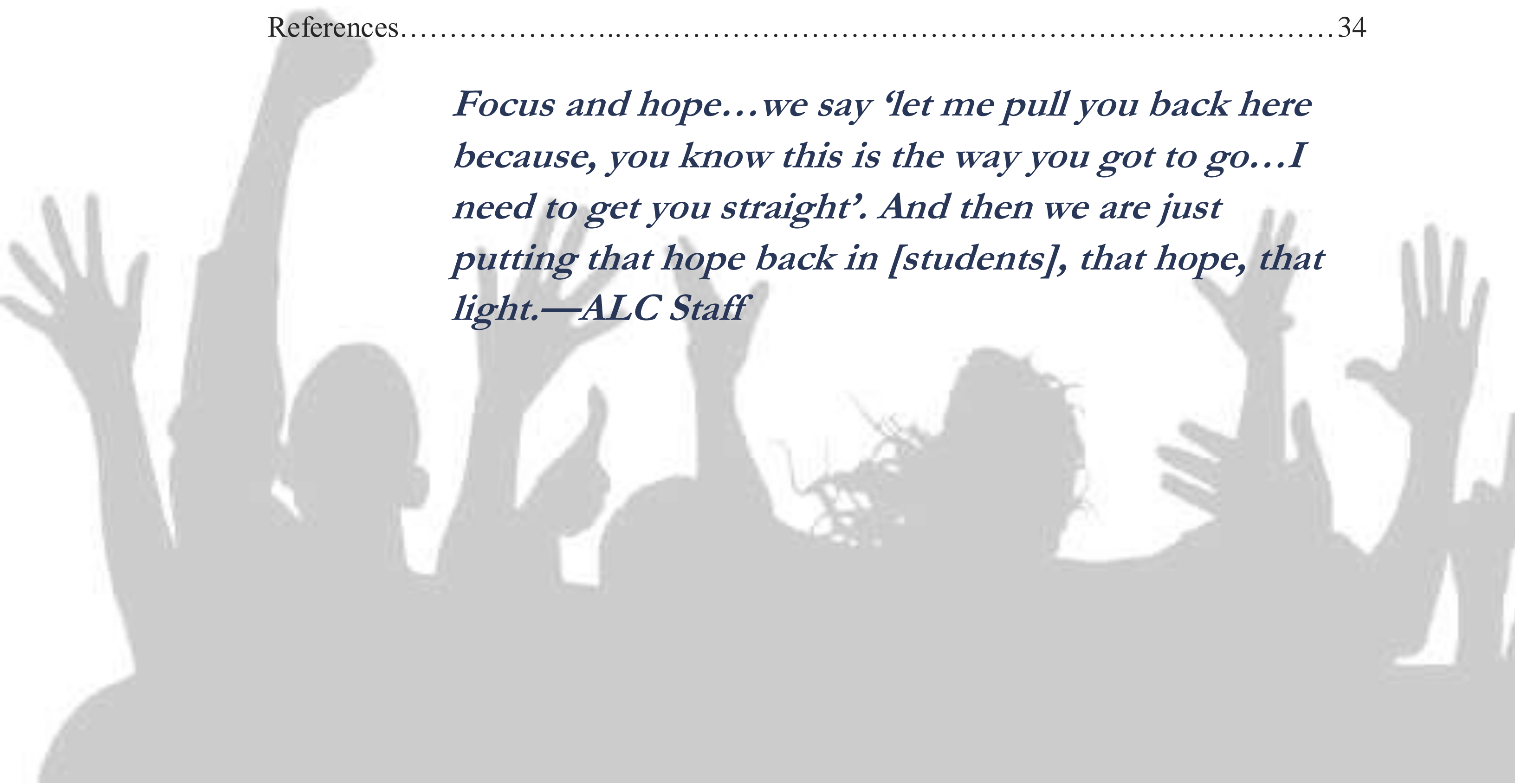
Focus and hope…we say 'let me pull you back here because, you know this is the way you got to go…I need to get you straight'. And then we are just putting that hope back in [students], that hope, that light.—ALC Staff



Suspension in Context

Let us reform our schools, and we shall find little reform needed in our prisons.—John Rushkin

North Carolina reflects one of the top 10 states with the highest suspension and expulsion rates in the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Analysis of suspension and expulsion in the state reveal significant disparities between ethnic minority and white students. In 2011, ethnic minority[1] students comprised about 47% of the student population in North Carolina Public Schools but 71% of students receiving short-term suspension. Figure 1 demonstrates short-term suspension trends over four years. Accordingly, non-white students are 2.5 times more likely to be suspended than white students. Moreover, data suggest that black, Hispanic, and American Indian males are suspended at higher rates than any other group (i.e., white, Asian/Pacific Islander, and female; NC Department of Public Instruction, 2014b). These disparities exist in a number of school districts throughout North Carolina. In Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools black and Hispanic students comprise about 51% of the student population but 79% of students receiving short-term suspensions (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2014b). Suspension, *without intervention*, has deleterious effects on student's ability to transition back into the school setting and onto graduation.

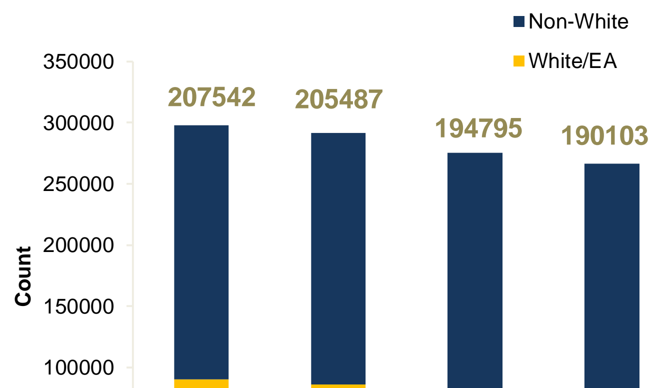


Figure 1. Number of short-term suspensions between white and non-white youth in North Carolina schools, 2011 - 2012.

There is a link between out-of-school suspension (OSS) and involvement in the juvenile justice system. The pathway has been termed the *prison- to- school pipeline* (Houchin & Shippens, 2012; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Students who are not engaged in prosocial activities and continuously experience school suspension are more likely to transition from one system (school) into another (prison). Disconnecting youth from school will more likely connect them to the criminal justice system. Consequently, black and Hispanic youth account for 78% of the youth population in juvenile development

[1] Ethnic minority included youth who were identified as American Indian, Asian American, Black/African American, Hispanic, Multi-racial, and Pacific Islander

centers and 68% of youth admitted in juvenile detention (North Carolina Division of Juvenile Justice, 2011).

Out-of-school suspension (OSS) appears to target youth who commit low-level violations. OSS is a blanketed approach to reinforce "zero tolerance" of *any* behavior that violates the school's code of conduct policy. Skiba, Michael, and Nardo (2000) found that the disproportionate representation of ethnic minority students in suspension was related to office referrals. The authors demonstrated that African American students had significantly more office referrals from misbehavior than white youth and "misbehavior" was a result of less serious and subjective factors. Losen (2011) also demonstrates black/African American students' behavior referrals to the office are more often a result of subjective judgment from the referral agent (teacher).

Out-of-school suspension (OSS) reduces academic engagement among students. Nichols (2004) found that students who are suspended miss important instruction and have gaps in learning. Furthermore, suspended students tend to have higher rates of school absence and learning gaps. Persistent absence leads to student grade retention, frustration, and eventually drop out (Arcia, 2007; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

Out-of-school suspension also disproportionately affects students who are economically disadvantaged (Howarth, 2008; Terriquez, Chlala, & Sacha, 2013). These students are less likely to have home supervision during out-of-school time and live in neighborhoods with limited resources (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). Unsupervised students may be prone to engage in delinquent and risk-taking behavior. Moreover, suspended youth who lack supervision and engagement in prosocial activities are more likely to participate in further truancy (Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; Kriezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006).

Alternative Education

Alternative education is not an alternative to education.—Dr. Johnson-Green

Alternative education in the public school system is uniquely tied to the Civil Rights Movement and the challenge for educational equality in the United States (Lange & Sletton, 2002). Today, alternative education varies across states and exists as programs or a school. Lange and colleague (2002) identify three types of alternative education models in the United States:

- Schools of choice that may include both magnet and charter schools.
- A "last chance" program/school for youth who may be at-risk for expulsion.
- A remedial program designed to address academic and socio-emotional issues of target youth.

In North Carolina, alternative education programs target youth who experience significant attendance issues and who have academic and behavior difficulties (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2014a). The North Carolina General Statute115C-105.47A outlines the state's policy on alternative programs in schools. The policy grants LEAs (Local Education Association) the responsibility to hire staff and provide resources to support the academic and behavior needs of youth (North Carolina General Assembly, 2014). Under this statute alternative education programs fall in two categories:

- *Alternative learning programs* affiliated with traditional accredited schools. These programs are often located within traditional schools; whereas, documentation and data generated by the program are a part of the traditional school records.
- *Alternative learning schools* separate from traditional schools. These schools target youth at risk for school failure. These schools have unique school codes and are required to generate their own data and reports on state standards of education (NC Association for Alternative Educators, 2014).

In 2000, the NC Department of Public Instruction produced a report on "best practices" in alternative education, *Case Studies of Best Practices: Alternative Program and Schools 1998-1999.* The report identified several promising practices:

- Alternative education programs have **a strong sense of purpose and mission.**

- Alternative education programs have **strong leadership and staff**.
- Alternative education programs have **a family-like atmosphere of respect**.
- Alternative education programs have **student-focused interventions**.
- Alternative education programs have **flexibility with high standards**.
- Alternative education programs have **creative strategies for course offerings**.
- Alternative education programs have **strong community connections**.

Alternative learning centers reflect a school-districts commitment to allocate resources for students who may have behavioral challenges. These centers are embedded in a history of alternative education, suspension, and best-practice models.

What are Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs)?

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school district has 28 alternative learning centers (ALCs) operating in middle and high schools. ALCs are not alternative schools but rather alternative spaces located in traditional schools that focus on academic support and behavior modification. ALCs are designed to provide academic instruction and support in smaller learning environments. Similar to in-school suspension (ISS), youth are supervised by a certified teacher (coordinator) and able to access school support services (e.g., school counselor, social worker, IEP instruction, etc.). Referrals to ALCs are based on the discretion of the assistant principal and Level 4 offense (e.g., repeat offender, use of controlled substance, use of counterfeit item and under the influence of alcohol). The length of time in ALCs varies from as little as 10 days and up to 90 days.

In ALCs, all students have the opportunity to meet academic and behavior benchmarks and goals. They can earn the privilege to return to one traditional classroom after 10 days. The students' ability to transition back to the traditional classroom is dependent on student behavior, recommendation of the ALC coordinator, and assistant principal. ALC coordinators work closely with school administrators, personnel, and teachers to access coursework and student support services. Youth who do not meet expected academic and behavior benchmarks and goals may be referred to Main Street Academy or Kingswood School.

Method

This project aimed to explore alternative learning programs (i.e., alternative learning centers) in two high schools in the district. The project employed multiple methods in a case study to address the following two objectives:

> **Objective 1. To identify program characteristics of ALCs across two sites in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools.**
>
> **Objective 2. To evaluate the effect of ALCs on youth's academic and behavior outcomes.**

The use of case study methods is a common research strategy in understanding organizational behavior. Case studies develop rich description of settings and explore processes and behaviors of individuals and organizations (Meyer, 2001; Yin, 1982). This was achieved by collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data.

The two schools selected for this project were chosen from a suspension report presented by the Director of Alternative Education at a local DMC (disproportionate minority contact) Committee meeting in spring 2013. The report had revealed a disproportionate number of minority male youth being suspended from three high schools (two of which were included in the project) in the district. To maintain anonymity, the schools in this report are identified as Site A and B and assigned pseudonyms. The main goals of the proceeding section are to provide an overview of data collection, description of sites and analysis.

To ***identify program characteristics of ALCs***, site visits were coordinated through the assistant principals at Site A and B and Director of Alternative Education. Visits entailed interviews with assistant principals, ALC coordinators and staff, and youth respondents. Data were also gathered from notes from professional development meetings, newspaper articles, and reports from Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools and the NC Department of Public Instruction.

To ***assess the effect of ALCs on youth***, qualitative data were gathered from interviews with assistant principals, ALC coordinators and staff, and youth respondents. Quantitative data were obtained on students who participated in ALCs during the 2013-2014 academic year. Data included the number of youth served in Site A and B, days attended, and an indicator of whether the student returned to their traditional classroom, remained in ALCs, or sent to alternative placement. Additional data from 2012 to 2013 were used to examine trends in ALCs across Site A and B.

Description of Site A: Progress High School

Site A is "Progress High School," once troubled by a high number of suspensions and students transitioning out into alternative placement. Under the direction of the principal, the school has made significant progress in reducing suspension rates and providing community initiatives for students. "Progress High School" has a minority population of 86% and 74% of the youth receive free or reduced lunch. The school is designated as an *Equity+* school and qualifies for additional funding to support teachers and school infrastructure (Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, 2014). In 2012 – 2013, more than 1200 youth were enrolled in the school and 9% were enrolled in AP courses. On average, about 26% of the youth met the districts expectancy level on end-of-course exams (percentage of youth who score at or above grade level). The school had an SAT participation rate of 49% (lower than the state's and districts) and a cohort graduation rate of 82%. There were 1.56 acts of crime per 100 youth, which was higher than the district (.97) and state (1.34). During the same year there were about .5 short term suspensions (no long term suspensions or expulsions) per student (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2014b).

The alternative learning center is located in an isolated space that sits on the outside of the school building and serves youth who receive ISS (in-school suspension). The space is designed similar to a traditional classroom and youth have access to computers that line the rear wall. The coordinator's desk sits at the front of the entrance and they are able to supervise all activity and see the "coming" and "going" of individuals throughout the day. Traditional teachers are afforded the opportunity to visit the center to assist youth in subjects (e.g., math) and provide additional support. On occasions, the center can have up to 30 youth who transition daily through the center (this includes youth referred to ALCs, ISS, and for being "disruptive" in class). Most youth are referred to the program by the assistant principal; however, teachers may refer youth to the center for "period detention." The coordinator has worked with alternative education for more than 10 years and serves as the liaison between youth and their teachers. This includes sending emails, telephone calls, and teacher visits to collect student coursework. The coordinator, similar to other coordinators in the district, is certified in a core subject and coaches high school sports.

During 2013-2014, the site served 51 youth in the center. Seventy-eight percent were black/African American, 14% Hispanic, and 8% white; 63% were males. Consistent with statewide suspension trends, the majority of youth referred to the center were in the 9th grade (51%).

Description of Site B: Legacy High School

Site B is "Legacy High School," once considered a school for predominately-black students it remains embedded in strong historic traditions and ties to the community. Its strong alumni presence supports the school's resilience despite neighborhood transitions and school choice options. "Legacy High School" has a minority population of 89% and 80% of the youth receive free or reduced lunch. The school is designated as an *Equity+* school and qualifies for additional funding to support teachers and school infrastructure (Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, 2013). In 2012 – 2013, there were less than 600 youth enrolled in the school and none were enrolled in AP courses. On average, about 13% of the

youth met the districts expectancy level on end-of-course exams (percentage of youth who score at or above grade level). The school had an SAT participation rate of 40% (lower than the state's and districts) and a cohort graduation rate of 73.8%. There were 1.85 acts of crime per 100 youth, which was higher than the district (.97) and state (1.34). In regards to suspension, during the same year there were about 1.2 short term suspensions (no long term suspensions or expulsions) per student (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2014).

The alternative learning center is located in a large classroom in the school and serves youth who receive ISS. The classroom is designed in "auditorium style" and youth have access to computers that line the rear wall. The coordinator is located on the back side wall and able to supervise all activity from the rear and see the "coming" and "going" of individuals through two entrances at the front of the space. On occasions, given the size of the center, it can have up to 50 youth who transition daily through the center (that include youth referred to ALCs and ISS). At site B there is a coordinator, assistant coordinator, and support teacher. The coordinator has worked with alternative education for more than 7 years and serves as the lead liaison between youth and their teachers. However, the assistant coordinator and support teacher provide assistance in academic support and obtaining coursework for youth. The center at Site B grants flexibility to ALC coordinators and teachers may bring in outside programs for the youth (approved by administration). These programs provide opportunities for youth to discuss behavior challenges and issues, engage with community members, and receive counseling. The professional background of the staff includes more than 10 years in special education and experience coaching high school sports.

During 2013-2014, the site served 33 youth in the center. Ninety-seven percent were Black/African American; 88% were males. The majority of youth referred to the center were in the 9th and 10th grade (79%).

Respondents

The project was approved through the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School's Office of Research and Evaluation and IRB at Winston-Salem State University. There were 15 respondents who participated in interviews in the project: 2 assistant principals, 4 ALC staff, and 10 youth. Interviews were coordinated through assistant principals and the Director of Alternative Education and occurred at the school site. The principal investigator conducted and recorded all interviews. Eighty-three percent of adult respondents were black/African American and 17% white.

Youth respondents were referred by ALC coordinators and required to obtain parental consent and complete assent forms. The only criteria to participate in interviews were currently attending the ALC or already transitioned out. Youth selected for interviews committed a variety of school violations, to include disruptive behavior, skipping school, and repeat incidents of disrespect. The demographics of the youth respondents: 11% white, 22% Latino/Hispanic, and 67% black/African American; 70% were male.

Secondary data on youth who attended ALCs during the 2013-14 academic term were collected from Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools. Figure 2 provides the ethnic composition of youth across Site A and B. During 2013 - 2014, 84 youth participated in ALCs across Site A and B; 73% were male and 94% were ethnic minorities (i.e., Black/African American and Hispanic).

Interviews

An interview protocol guided semi-structured interviews. The principal investigator audio recorded and conducted interviews. Interviews were later transcribed by a research assistant (verbatim). Interviews lasted between 50-minutes to 1 hour. Transcribed interviews were sent back to adult respondents to review for accuracy, make revisions, or remove any comments.

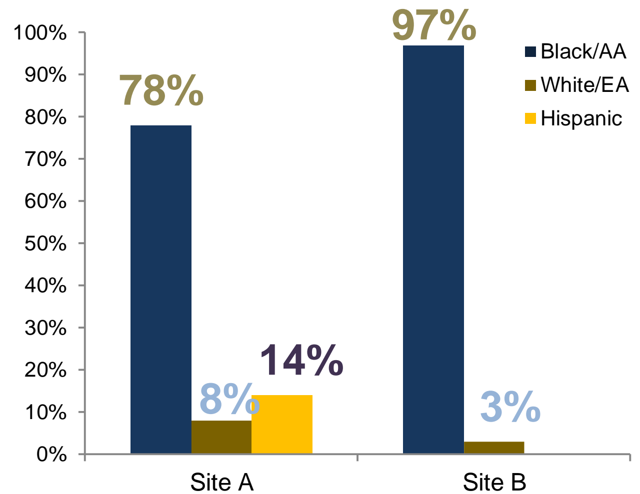


Figure 2. *2013-14* ethnic/racial composition of ALC youth, by site.

Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a series of steps. First, two coders openly coded adult and youth interviews separately and developed an initial code list. Codes were then reviewed for definitions, text segments, and rectify differences. To frame the analysis of interviews, the Principal Investigator developed a grid listing each objective. A total of 30 codes were used in a selective coding. To establish inter-coder reliability, the Principal Investigator assigned "1" to every code that was consistent across each coder and "0" to every code that was not consistent; percent agreement was 95%.

To assess objective 1, codes from interviews were compared with site observations and notes. Codes were used to support or refute promising practices in alternative education programs (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2000). For example, *parent away from home* was a code assumed to correspond with the "promising practice" **family-like atmosphere of respect** outlined in the report.

To assess whether the site displayed the "promising practice" a Likert scale was developed to rate the level in which the sites demonstrated the promising practice: 0 = Not demonstrated, 1 = Somewhat Demonstrated, 2 = Demonstrated, 3 = Strongly Demonstrated. The ratings were based on data gathered through interviews and site observations.

To assess objective 2, an inductive analytic approach identified text segments that addressed youth academic and behavior outcomes. This involved an open coding process

of all transcripts to identify codes that specifically demonstrated how academic and behavior outcomes were revealed in interviews. For instance, *behavior modification* was a code identified as describing how youth's behavior changed through interactions with staff.

Quantitative Analysis

There were 84 youth who attended ALCs during the 2013-2014 academic term. Variables used in the analysis included: age, grade level, gender, race/ethnicity, EC status, date entered ALC, date exited ALC, total days, and student status (e.g., returned to classroom, other, returned to ALC). Data also included the kind of offense and was recoded into Level 1 through IV. For example, disruptive behavior was coded as "1" for Level 1 offense. All data were converted from text into numeric data, entered into SPSS, and analyzed using descriptive (e.g., frequency distributions) and inferential statistics (e.g., correlation). The Principal Investigator assigned text descriptors to numeric values to discern frequencies within the data and conduct correlational analysis. For example, gender descriptors were assigned values of 1 = male and 2 = females. Given the small sample size no robust analysis were used in the analytical strategy.

Findings

ALC taught me how to focus…going to class and do work. That's why I'm focusing right now.—ALC Youth

Examining the kinds of offenses youth committed in ALCs provided a snapshot by gender, grade level, and school type. Figure 3 provides an overview of the type of offenses committed by youth in the ALCs. A correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship between school type and level of offense ($r = -.35$, $p < .05$). This indicates that Site B had more students classified as Level III and IV offense than Site A. Figure 4 also demonstrates that, on average, youth who committed a Level I offense (n = 6) spent more time in ALCs than those with higher offenses.

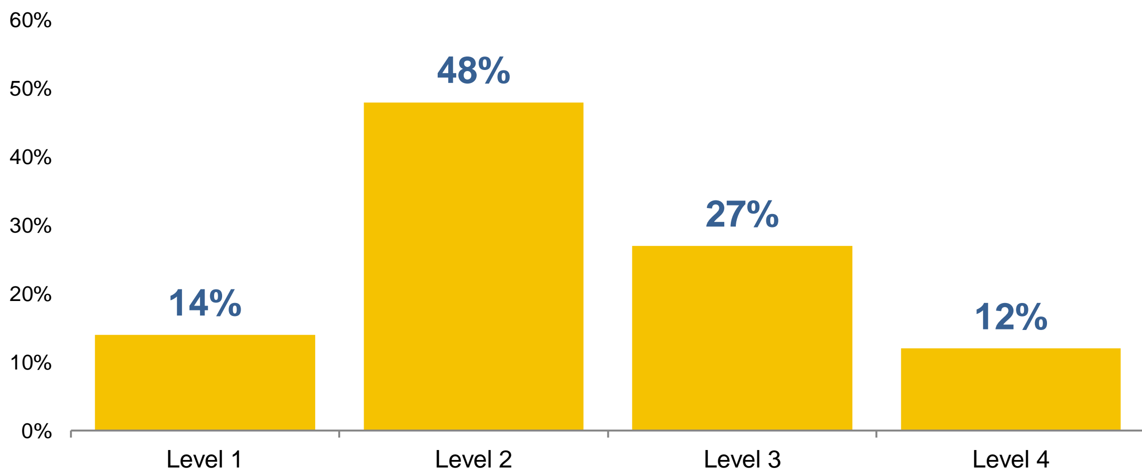


Figure 3. *Percentage of offenses (Level) committed by ALC youth.*

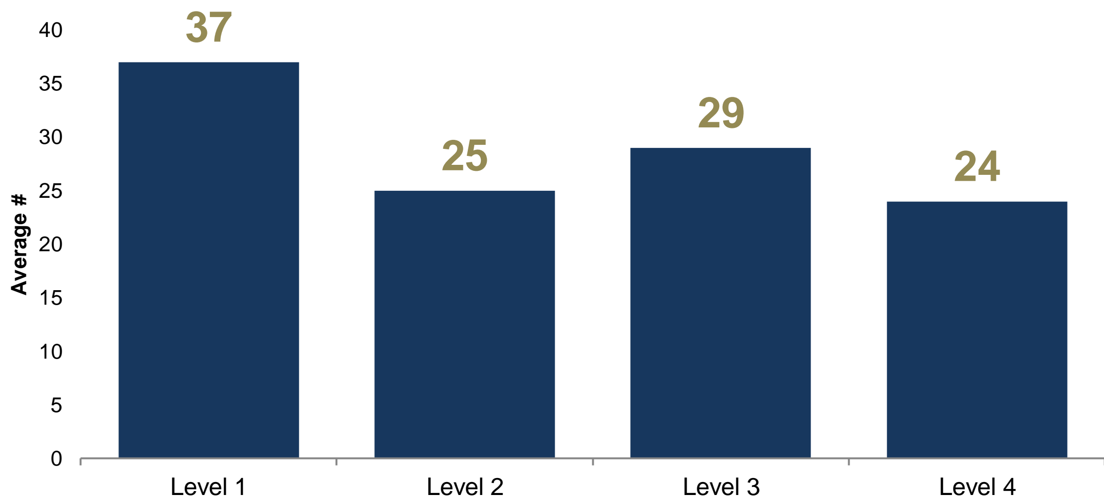
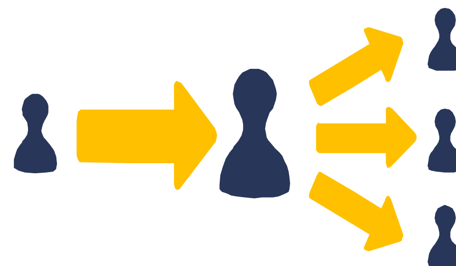


Figure 4. *The average number of days spent in ALCs, by offense level.*

Objective 1. To identify program characteristics of ALCs across two sites in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools.

Site visits and interviews revealed distinct and similar characteristics across Site A and B. The data identifies several program characteristics found within the structure of ALCs from the referral process to centers' environment.



Referral Process. Youth are referred to ALCs by assistant principals. Assistant principals use a combination of information, to include student history, offense, etc. Youth are referred to the program if they continuously violate Level I, II or III offense in schools. For example, one assistant principal discussed how youth referred to the program were often "*repeat offenders...youth who have been given chance after chance*." Thus the referral process to ALCs serves as a mechanism to intervene between youth placement in alternative schools (i.e., alternative high schools), long-term suspension or the "streets". Interviews with assistant principals and youth revealed that many youth in ALCs have already experienced ISS, and, in some cases OSS, prior to their referral. This is reflected in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools' student handbook, "*ALCs serve as a disciplinary measure for Level IV violations and used for youth who repeatedly commit Level I, II, and III offenses and/or when other interventions do not improve the student's behavior*" (p.41).

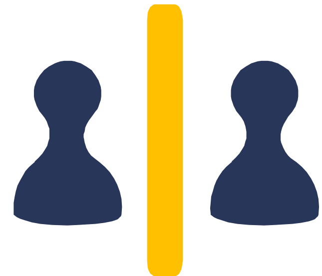
ALC Coordinators. Observations from site visits, attendance at ALC professional development meetings, and interviews with youth and adult respondents indicate a common "model" of using coaches as coordinators of ALCs. Across Site A and B, the lead coordinators were coaches of one of the high school's sports program. Additionally, coordinators are licensed teachers and, in combination, had more than 15-years of experience working with alternative education. Youth and coordinators discussed how staff were able to relate and connect with youth because of their own history of walking similar paths. This is captured in the response of one youth:

> **Male***: Until you hear [*Coordinator*] story, you won't understand why [*Coordinator*] is helping you.*
> **Principal Investigator***:* Ok, what do you mean by that?
> **Male***: ...[Coordinator] used to do the same thing we do in high school, knocking people out, like 15 years old. [*Coordinator*] just tried [*their*] best to keep us out of that situation.*

Academic Support. All youth respondents and staff discussed ways in which ALCs provide academic support. There was a common practice among coordinators to contact teachers to obtain work for youth through emails, phone calls, and face-to-face visits. In ALCs, youth have the opportunity to work independently and/or receive one-on-one assistance from support staff and teachers who drop in. Site A and Site B however differed in their daily routine of "academic support". For example, youth and staff from site B consistently referred to the use of *CompassLearning* and completing assignments on the computer for specific classes. Although this practice may be used in Site A, neither youth nor the ALC coordinator described the online program in their daily activities. Youth respondents also discussed importance of having access to assistance that they would not normally have at home.

> *You have actual access to the teacher, where if I have work, I can get help, instead of when I'm home* (ALC Youth).

Value of Time: The amount of time youth spend in ALCs is extremely important because it fosters youth connections to school. Specifically, ALC coordinators and staff repeatedly discussed the value of building connections over time with youth and how that would be difficult if students were just in ISS or OSS. This was evident in the response from an ALC coordinator:



> *...I think kids that come to ALC get in there [to] do work and develop a connection. Cause ISS, is hit and miss, you know, cause your there two days then you're gone... Whereas ALC your assigned 45-90 school days although there are ways you can get out [but] you are able to develop that connection. At least that's my experience, you know, you're able to develop that connection.*

Time in ALCs varies and is dependent on the discretion of school administrators who evaluates "aggravating" factors for less serious offenses and "mitigating" factors for more serious offenses. Students can be referred to the program for up to 90 days but some may transition to the traditional classroom after 10 days for "good" behavior. Allowing youth to *earn* the privilege to return to the traditional classroom serves as a positive behavior strategy that uses incremental rewards (reviews every 10 days). As mentioned by one administrator:

> *When they are in ALC, normally after 10 days of good behavior, we start to transition them back out into the regular population. And we do it normally one*

> *class at a time. Starting with the core courses first…I think that's unique right there. Because they are receiving that one-on-one about their specific behavior issues and….helping them to reflect and make better choices so that they can go ahead and make that transition and not return.*

Youth respondents revealed variations in how this policy is interpreted. For example, one youth indicated they were able to return to one of their classes after 6-days because "*I'm an athlete*…"

Isolating and Smaller Environment. ALCs are physically located in a space designed to keep students away from most social activity in schools. Youth respondents discussed how they are often banned from attending extra-curricular activities and sporting events. As a discipline measure this practice isolates youth from their peers and has both benefits and cons from the perspective of youth. On the one hand, youth respondents appreciated being away from their peers and distractions. Youth commented on how the environment allowed them to "*reflect*" and have "*time to think*" about their actions. On the other hand, youth respondents indicated how the lack of social interaction was difficult to handle and they often felt "*bored*" and as if they were "*going crazy*."

> *…some people, Closter phobic. Being in that room all day, some people can't do that, ADHD problems or something…for some people it's worse, for some people it's better; for people who can just sit in one seat all day. But for people that need to move around, that's not good for them. It makes them go crazy; want to get up when they're not supposed to get up…*(ALC Youth).

Although youth described ALCs as isolating, adult respondents discussed how smaller learning environments afforded staff the opportunity to meet and attend to student's individual needs.

Promising Practices

Outlined in Table 1 are "promising practices" and a description of how these were evident across sites. Any rating less than 3 indicates the evidence was not found or only slightly supported in the interviews and site visits. For instance, both sites received a 1 in student-focused interventions due to partially demonstrating this practice. The rating was based on whether ALCs maintained smaller learning environments, provided individual and "hands-on" instruction, and addressed the socio-emotional and academic needs of students. There were perceived barriers in ALCs addressing these areas. Youth and ALC staff mentioned the challenge of ISS students transitioning in and out of the center and how that influences the center's dynamic. As one youth respondent mentioned:

> *This* [is*] what I don't like really, ISS mixed up with ALC. Your [*in there*] with people how don't care, that's a distraction. [*That is*] the thing I don't like*.

Although the coordinators are licensed teachers, it appears that the majority of their time is spent coordinating coursework between teachers and youth and managing behavior. There was no clear evidence how ALC coordinators designed new ways of learning or use "hands-on" activities in the center to engage students. Additionally, having the responsibility of being a liaison for youth, managing behavior, and "counseling" individual students may prevent coordinators from implementing *flexibility with high standards* and *creative strategies for course offerings*.

There are also distinct differences between Site A and B regarding *strong community connections*. Site B received a rating of 2, which indicates that this "promising practice" was demonstrated through site visits and interviews. For example, the administrator and staff from Site B mentioned using community members to facilitate sessions with ALC youth on decision-making, future goal planning, careers, etc. The assistant principal and ALC staff mentioned how teachers and community members bring in programs to youth and provide mentoring opportunities. This was not evident in Site A nor expressed in any of the interviews.

Table 1
Descriptions of Promising Practices and Ratings for Sites A and B

Promising Practice	Site A	Site B	Description and Text Segment
Strong sense of purpose and mission.	3	3	A strong sense of purpose and mission denotes a common belief that ALCs provide opportunities for youth to continue to maintain attendance and complete education credits. This was evident across adult and youth respondents who articulated the value of ALCs in assisting youth with staying on track academically. Interviewer: *What part of the ALC do you think had the greatest impact in your life?* *…basically all of it because they're just trying to get [*you*] help* [get] *everyone to graduate in time* (ALC Youth).
Strong leadership and staff.	3	3	Strong administration and staff denotes a commitment to youth's academic and behavioral success. A team defined by collegiality and support was evident among adult respondents. Assistant principals repeatedly referred to their staff as "valuable" adults in the lives of youth and to the larger school community. *We work together, we really do. And we feed off each other… And [coordinator] and the administrative staff tend to listen… And they know how I feel about it and the passion for the children. So everybody, even down to the family engagement coordinator, we all come together. And even now, like I said, teachers…So, we, it's a good team. We have a god team, and everybody works and gets everything [done] in a timely fashion…like hey I need work for the kids, I got to have it and they* [are] *very diligent, just on it* (ALC Staff).
Family-like atmosphere of respect.	3	3	A strong relationship among ALC staff and youth denotes the value of bonds and transient connections. Although "respect" was mentioned as something youth had to earn in one site, it was evident that youth valued the connections they formed with ALC staff. For many youth this meant accessing staff after leaving ALCs and using them as advocates. *Well you know…we really take an active interest in the kid. Not just the person who has been assigned to [ALC]. We learn, we try to learn a little bit about their family, where they come from, their history, you know life situations whether it's positive or negative, uh we just try to help, you know, connect with them…and not only try to develop that relationship so that they can open up to us talk to us; while they're there as well as when they leave. Ultimately, that's the goal but you know that's kind of that family approach there* (ALC Staff).

Promising Practice	Site A	Site B	Description and Text Segment
Student-focused interventions.	1	1	An emphasis on student-focused interventions denotes a commitment by ALC staff to address not only academic issues but psychosocial issues of youth. Both adult and youth respondents discussed how ALC staff use “real talk” with youth to assist youth in making stronger and better choices. *Anyway, what I learned is that kids…are growing up in real world. They are not living in a life…where momma and daddy going to protect them whatever…what I think, they develop a bond with me because I keep it real with them, ‘hey man, if you don’t make it through school, where are you going?’…and we talk about it from time to time…And I don’t hide it…and I do keep as real with them as I can. Uh within, what’s acceptable. There are something’s you know, you can’t touch on. But I believe talking to these kids about what their facing in the real world is part of my job because I don’t know if there hearing it, in the same way. And I think that they appreciate that* (ALC Staff).
Flexibility with high standards.	1	1	ALCs are integrated into the traditional school environment and adhere to the same NC Department of Public Instruction standards as every school in the district. Youth are held accountable for completing their assigned tasks and ALC coordinators work to ensure students have access to coursework every day. *…it’s an alternative approach; it’s an opportunity that kind of keeps them connected versus being out of school suspension. You know there um disconnected from the whole learning experience. When they're in ALC they're able to you know, still be engaged, you know the learning process. As well as get the necessary reinforcements that they need to you know, either modify, correct the behavior that they may have that is getting them in there. So with them being there, them having access to the computer…know to be able to get their assignments. To be able to complete their work; as being able to getting contact with their teachers who are still in the school, to be able to, you know, get that…I guess that in which they need to be able to perform well, academically and still make progress…when you come to ALC, you still are somewhat connected you know, to the teacher and you somewhat connected to the learning environment. Even though it's in a different…location* (ALC Staff).

Promising Practice	Site A	Site B	Description and Text Segment
Creative strategies for course offerings.	1	1	Given the purpose of ALCs, coordinators work in collaboration with teachers to offer coursework to students. This may include having teachers volunteer in their planning period in ALCs as a resource to students or structuring the ALC environment for students to get individualized support. *Well, when I was born, the diagnosis me with ADHD, and ODD. And so it's really hard to concentrate on my work. [That is] how I come get in real trouble.* Interviewer: How do you think that ALC has assisted you? *They uh, helped me out a lot because they're just, they help me calm down, if I got frustrated at my work* (ALC Youth).
Strong community connections.	0	2	One ALC partners with community members to facilitate sessions to students in the afternoon. Students have the opportunity to learn about the working world, interact with community members on topics relevant to youth, and form connections with other adults outside the school setting. *…We also have our teachers in the ALC classrooms, they have their own programs that have gotten approved by administration. Where they're really trying to talk with the students, counsel the students to redirect misbehavior. They even bring in speakers from time to time, who they believe might provide some kind of mentoring for the kids to redirect behavior that needs to be changed. So I think it's just a real…small environment where the student receives one-on-one attention to help them with their individual behavior concerns, as well as academic needs* (Administrator).
Total	**12**	**14**	

Objective 2. To understand the effect of ALCs on youth's academic and behavior outcomes.

Quantitative Findings

Results from the quantitative analysis did not reveal any significant findings as it pertains to demographic variables and students outcomes (e.g., whether the student returned to their traditional classroom). However, the descriptive results provide evidence of variation across sites. On average, students spent about 31 days in ALCs (ranged between 1 to 90 days). Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate variation in the average number of days spent across ethnicity and site; on average, females spent more days in ALCs (35 days) compared to males (29 days).

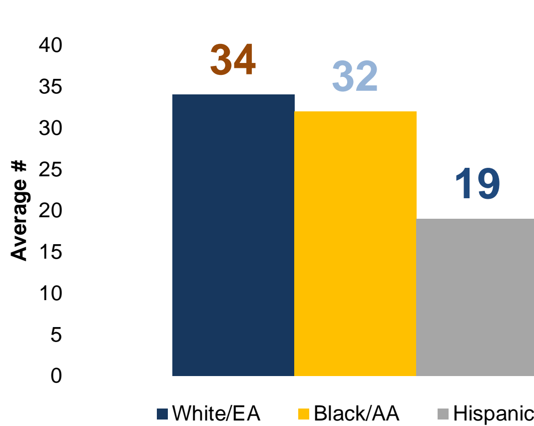


Figure 5. *Average number of days spent in ALCs, by ethnicity.*

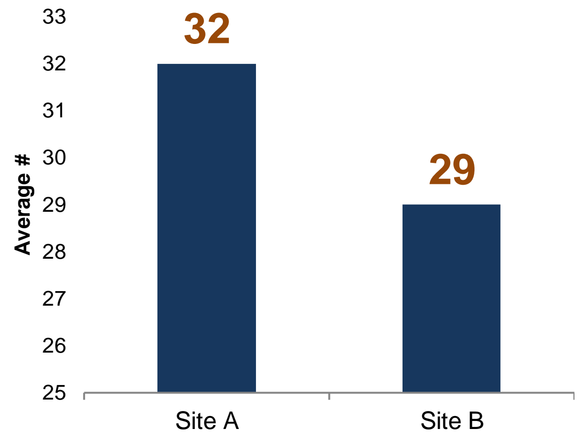


Figure 6. *Average number of days spent in ALCs, by site.*

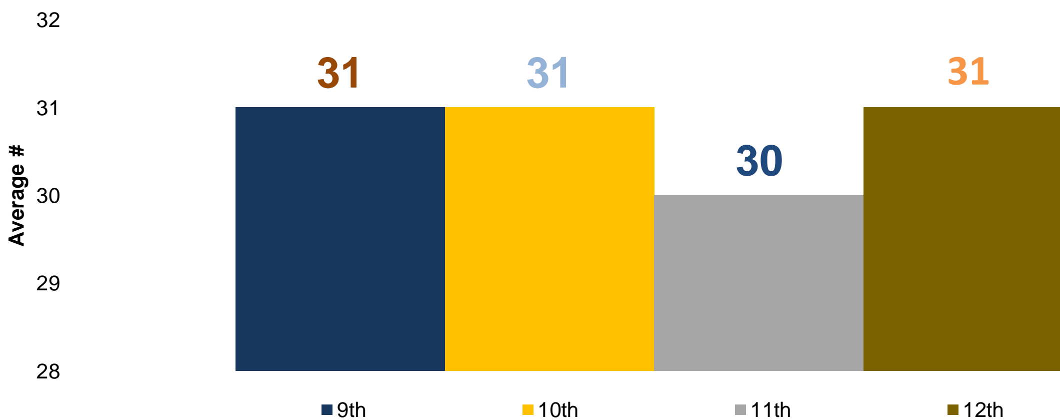


Figure 7. *Average number of days spent in ALCs, by grade level.*

Evidence of student outcomes was captured by their successful transition back to the traditional classroom environment. For instance, Site A successfully transitioned 82% of students back to the traditional classroom; Site B transitioned 64%. Youth who did not transition back to the traditional classroom either remained in ALC at the end of the school year, transitioned to an alternative school, or "other" (Figure 8)

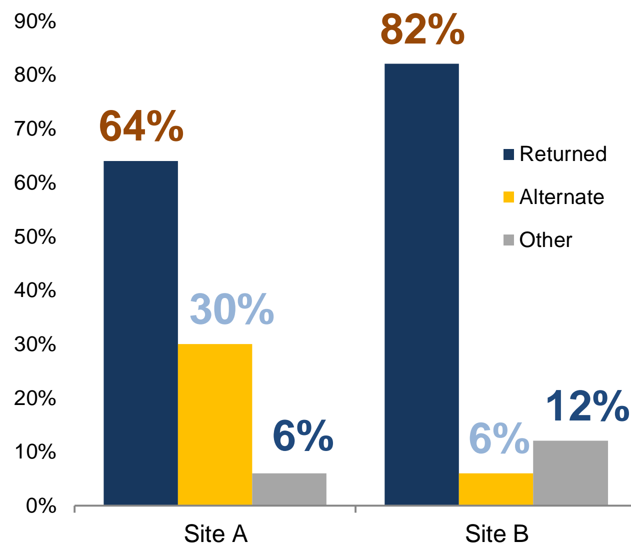


Figure 8. *The number of youth who transitioned from ALCs, by site.*

A dichotomous variable was created using 1 = Yes, student transitioned back to traditional classroom or 2 = No, student did not transition back to traditional classroom. There were no significant relationships between demographic variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, grade level, and EC classification) and outcomes. However, descriptive analysis revealed that 74% of females successfully transitioned back to the traditional classroom in comparison to 64% of males. Students classified as juniors had the highest percent of returning to the traditional classroom (92%) followed by seniors (75%). Given the small sample size of white students there were significant differences between students. The analysis also revealed that those students who did not successfully transition back to the traditional classroom spent more days in ALCs (on average 38 days; Figure 9).

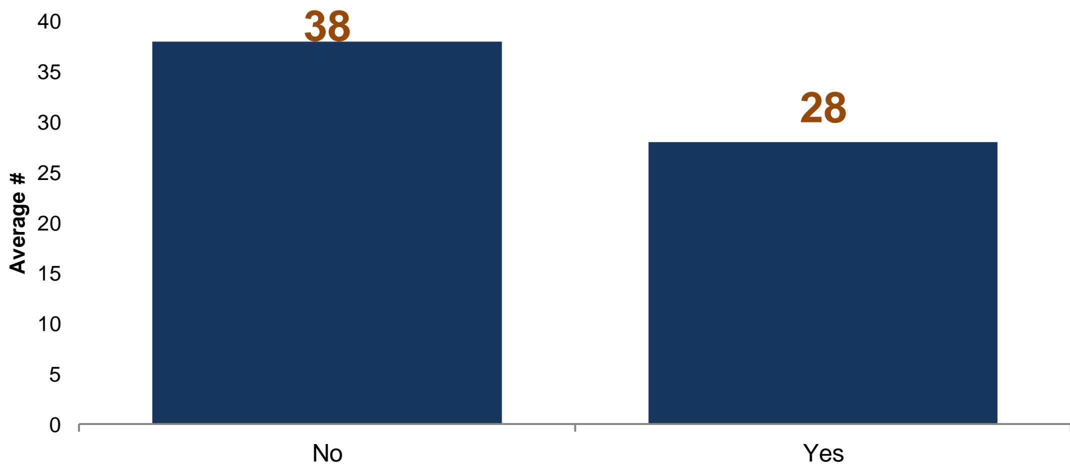


Figure 9. *The average number of days spent by youth, No = did not return to the traditional classroom and Yes = returned.*

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings across adult and youth respondents revealed academic and behavior themes. Figure 10 demonstrates the interactive relationship between academic support educational attainment and psychosocial development-behavior modification. More specifically, analysis revealed that academic and behavior outcomes are associated with the perceived ability of ALCs to target psychosocial development (e.g., improving confidence and competence) and youths' to transition to graduation. In table 2, illustrates quotes from adult and youth respondents.

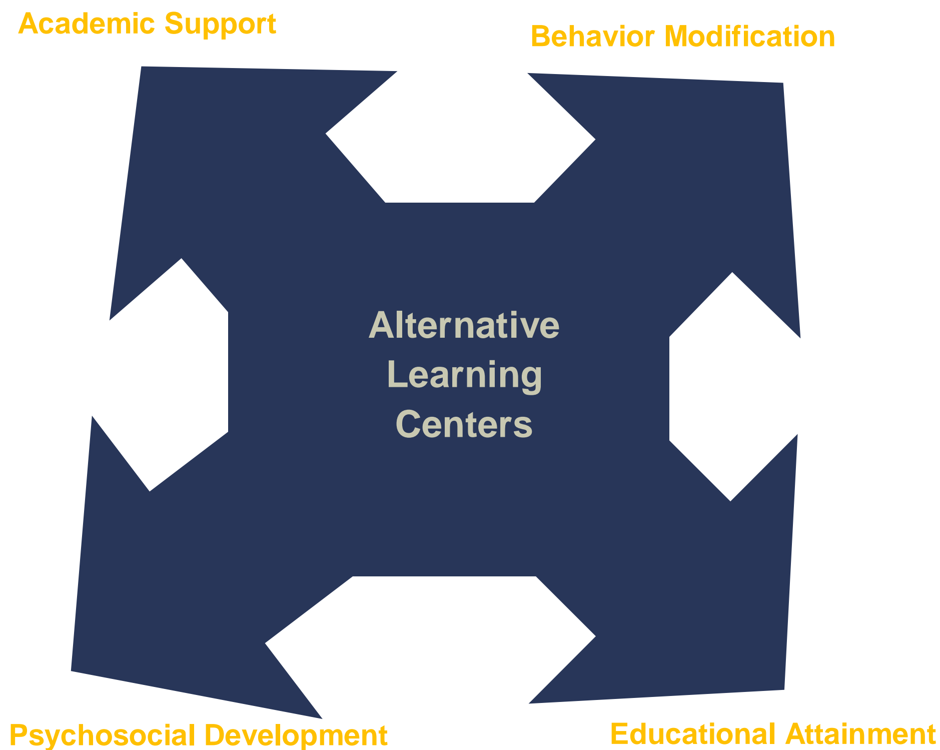


Figure 10. An interaction model between educational and psychosocial development.

Table 2
Generated Themes and Corresponding Quotes

Theme	Text Segment
Academic Support	…there is just a teacher [who] comes to you if you need help, instead of going, and asking them and [they] say "hold on a minute, I'm with another student."…the teacher comes down and helps…(ALC Youth, School B).
Behavior Management	Well I think it is a great opportunity and privilege for a student to take time to reflect. To reflect on the behavior that landed them in there in the first place because the ALC teachers are talking with them about doing the right thing, making the right choices and what they could have done to prevent them from being in there in the first place. And helping to prepare them for that transition (Administrator, Site B)
Educational Attainment	[It is] pretty intrinsically rewarded for me to be at graduation to see different youth graduate who were at a point and time in ALC. And I know for a fact, we save kids. There's no doubt in my mind. The number...I can't give you the number. But I know, without ALC, I don't want to call it ALC intervention, some people would refer to it as that but without their experience in ALC they probably wouldn't have made it through school (ALC Staff, School A).
Psychosocial Development	[In ALC] it's more like, like preparing myself. Like getting ready mentally to do my work cause I feel like if you're not ready mentally, you are not going to do your work. And you start you can try but, you won't finish to succeed if your mind [is] not prepared for it (ALC Youth, Site B).
Improving Youth Confidence	The most important part is building the kids confidence back up. Showing that you messed up this quarter but while you in here, we're going to do our work and get you back on track…Staff building their confidence and getting their grades up. I think once you get their grades up, they see they can actually do it; 'they like oh, I got a 'B'?' Alright cool. So, I think once you build confidence up…The kids going to be successful, they'll be okay (ALC Staff, School B).
Improving Decision-Making	Yea, because [ALC Staff] is basically telling us like to use our head. That we have to think before we do stuff cause me, me, I don't have a brain sometimes, I just do it. And since I been in there, I've been using my head…(ALC Youth, Site A).

Conclusion

You look at ALC as an opportunity for a kid to get on track.—Administrator

This project aimed to explore alternative learning centers and their effect on youth outcomes across two high schools. Using multiple methods, the project was able to (a) identify program characteristics of ALCs, and (b) assess immediate effects on student outcomes. The findings provide a richer understanding of ALCs, their practices, and potential implications on the academic trajectory of youth.

"Promising practices" was evident across sites in an administration's commitment to alternatives for normally suspended youth and positive adult-student interactions. The unique contributions ALC coordinators and staff provide in centers and to students was an important characteristic. There are also challenges coordinators and staff encounter daily. As one ALC coordinator mentioned, "*There are good days and bad days*." Staff is often confronted with maintaining behavior as well as coordinating coursework, counsel students about challenges. It takes unique individuals to continue in this position. Staff and administrators discussed the importance of having the "right" people in place to work with students. The unique value and commitment ALC coordinators and staff appear to add to the program is essential in maintaining positive youth-adult-school connections.

In terms of student outcomes, there were no significant differences found among groups (i.e., race, gender, and grade level). Overall, 70% of youth successfully transitioned out of ALCs by the end of the school term. These outcomes suggest ALCs support student transitions back into the traditional classroom and may sustain youth-school connections. Additional evidence may compare ALC students to non-ALC students to demonstrate overall effect. The findings also indicated students who received a Level I offense actually spent more days in ALCs. This finding suggest lower level offenses actually had harsher penalties (i.e., longer time in ALCs) in relation to higher-level offenses.

Across both sites, ALCs are resources that allow students to continue to access academic and support services. Academic support is crucial in providing students with opportunities to continue to work towards graduation credit. Youth discussed how valuable their time was in ALCs and how they would not have had the opportunity to do coursework if they received out-of-school suspension. This was evident in numerous responses among youth respondents who discussed how "*doing nothing*" was a common practice if they were sent home rather than attending ALCs. Although youth respondents mentioned the challenges of their coursework and inability to access teachers, ALCs provided

opportunities for youth to "*catch up*" on work and not feel behind in school. Youth consistently mentioned how ALCs served as a "*safe and quiet*" space to reflect, work on their anger, and receive valuable "*real talk*". Among all respondents ALCs were importance spaces for youth to receive social support and build their confidence up to tackle tasks and life challenges. As one coordinator commented:

> *I think it is important because it's a connection, a lot of students fail [and there is] a disconnect between them and the teachers…that is part of my job. To educate…*

The Next Steps

There are important issues to consider in moving forward. During interviews, principals and coordinators were asked about how they would measure the success of ALCs. One example included the importance of reviewing student performance data prior to attending ALCs, while in ALCs, and after ALCs. Another recommendation was identifying measures that assess student's psychosocial skills to understand how ALCs affect student assets. Using data gathered from interviews and site visits, the following indicate key issues to consider as ALCs move forward as a "promising practice" in alternative education:

- **Challenge of managing ISS and ALC youth.** Youth respondents and coordinators discussed the challenge of housing ISS and ALC youth in the same space. From the perspective of youth, ISS youth tend to serve as distractors for students and were perceived as being the most "disruptive." Youth discussed how ISS students are not familiar with the coordinators and often come in as if "they don't care." One youth discussed his frustration with ISS youth:

  > *…sometimes they come in with a bad attitude for the day. They got in their head they not going to do no work, they just going to talk… it's really just the ISS kids though.*

  Although youth and coordinators indicated that the youth eventually adhere to the authority of staff or know they have to get out, the transition of temporary youth in and out on a daily basis may present some challenges in managing the ALC environment. It is evident that some schools house ALC and ISS youth together due to staffing, thus training may target strategies that "redirect" youth disruptiveness.

- **Challenge of accessing support for academic assignments.** Youth respondents discussed the challenge of accessing support materials and teachers on subjects that are more difficult and not in the area of expertise of ALC staff. Youth discussed how they often have to wait for the coordinator to speak with the teacher or the teacher to visit the ALC. Youth may also not feel confident enough to proceed through concepts or there may be gaps in understanding how to

complete a specific problem or task. This challenge is evident in a response from one youth:

> *It aint easy. You know, you can do your computer [and class] work, but it aint nothing like being in there (class); you might want to ask questions or something.*

- **Challenge of accessing mental health services for youth.** Adult respondents from Site A discussed the increasing need to provide services for students who have serious family and mental health issues. Although respondents discussed how academic concerns of youth are being addressed in ALCs, respondent suggested that some youth have deeper behavioral issues that present a challenge for ALC coordinators and staff. This was expressed in the response from an:

  > *Our greatest challenge [is] we need our counselors going through. We need a counselor in ALC every day. Even if it's just for a certain amount of time. And we're working on that because a lot of times our counselors declare they don't have enough time…Because our young people also have so much baggage. And you just can't expect ALC to be all of everything to everybody who comes out there, with what they're all are dealing with…*

- **Increase need for training and professional development.** Adult respondents discussed the importance of improving training and professional development opportunities for ALC staff. Respondents were asked how the school system could assist ALCs in the challenge of working with at-risk youth and answers varied from "no assistance" to working more with families. This was expressed in an administrator's discussion on training:

  > *I think that the school system could provide more... professional development for ALC and ISS teachers... I think that we should have a way to monitor the students coming in…I think some kind of unified program throughout the school system that includes professional developmental training.*

- **Challenge of defining "success".** Defining success may be important in designing clear metrics for ALCs. How to define success was not asked in the interviews; however, there was a theme that resonated across youth and adults. Youth graduating was an important metric and appeared within adult and youth responses. In fact, at the end of the academic term 92% of seniors in all ALCs in the district graduated. So, for some, success is about youth finishing high school. Success may also be defined by the number of youth who transition back to the traditional classroom; however, transitioning out of an ALC may not guarantee success for youth. Some youth respondents indicated "people still judge you by your past" and youth encounter challenges from teachers and other administrators

who are often unable to grant youth a clean slate. Thus youth often felt targeted because of choices they made in the past and unjustly blamed and penalized in certain situations. Working with school administrators and schools to create a climate that is welcoming and supportive of all youth may be beneficial in defining success. Adult respondents mentioned how some youth may spend time in ALCs but transition to Main Street Academy; this may be important in deterring youth receiving OSS or long-term suspension (LTS) but additional data is needed to understand long term effects. For instance, how many youth who transition from ALCs to alternative placement graduate may be an important metric. There is ambivalence around what "success" means and, in moving forward, this may warrant metrics that identifies various levels of success by site, by youth, etc.

The project's objectives were achieved and additional data are needed to fully understand how specific practices in alternative learning centers impact youth's academic and behavior outcomes. This project had some inherent limitations; for one, program effect was defined using youth and adult perspectives of the program. Additional data from a larger sample of youth may provide a richer perspective. Secondly, this project did not have a comparison group and thus our conclusions are based specifically on youth who attended ALCs. Another limitation to consider is youth were referred for interviews by ALC staff and our findings may not accurately represent all youth in ALCs. At Site A, youth only represented about 10% of the youth serviced and in Site B about 12%. The relative small sample size (n = 84) may have also influenced our ability to obtain any significant findings.

The quantitative data revealed youth who attend ALCs are more likely to return to the traditional classroom environment than transition into an alternative education school. Albeit an important outcome, to accurately assess program effect, additional data regarding pre and post assessments of coursework completion and discipline referrals are needed. It is anticipated that future research will examine these variables. Despite these limitations, the findings provide a snapshot of the unique context of ALCs across two high schools. It is anticipated that findings will support advanced research and evaluation efforts in understanding the effects of ALCs on youth outcomes and alternative education practices.

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