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# **PROMOTING HIGH QUALITY ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: An Executive Brief for the New Administration**

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## **NAEA**

**National Alternative Education Association**

*February 21, 2009*

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The National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) is a member-based organization of alternative education practitioners, state education agency coordinators, directors, program advisors, state alternative education associations, paraprofessionals, researchers and advocates. The guiding charge of the NAEA is to enhance educational opportunities for youth who are at high risk of expulsion, suspension, and/or dropping out of school. The intent of this executive brief is to provide the new Administration with recommendations on how to support the development of high quality alternative education services and prevent alternative programs and schools from becoming dropout mills.

Across the United States, alternative schools, programs and classrooms (also called alternative and nontraditional education) are serving students who are not succeeding in the traditional educational setting. Often this population of learners exhibits one or more of the following traits: under-performing academically, possessing learning disabilities, displaying emotional or behavioral issues, being deliberate or inadvertent victims of the behavioral problems of others, displaying a high risk of potential expulsion, suspension, or dropping out of school, and/or displaying the need for individualized instruction. Alternative education offers innovative, non-traditional approaches to teaching this population of learners, which aids in preventing them from becoming dropouts. In addition, alternative education presents an opportunity to identify, intervene, and recover dropouts, help school districts meet performance standards, and reduce overall juvenile justice costs by providing appropriate interventions and wraparound services. Often, alternative education is the best delivery system with which to meet the needs of this most challenged of challenging population of students.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, “Every year, approximately 1.2 million students—that’s 7,000 every school day—do not graduate from high school on time. Nationwide, only about 70 percent of students earn their high school diplomas.” The Alliance also reports that for every one dropout that can be recovered, taxpayers will save approximately \$260,000 in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over the lifetime of the potential dropout. Services for students vary by state, but we do know that the cost is about twice the amount of traditional education funding (approximately 9,000 in addition to the money currently spent) and the average length of stay is 1 year. Even though providing funding costs money, the taxpayer would realize a huge cost savings. Consider investing an additional \$9,000 on a dropout entering into an alternative learning setting. Recovering that dropout would save the U.S. government \$260,000 **which is a total cost savings of \$251,000 per student.** From a fiscal perspective, this is a worthwhile investment. From a human capital perspective, this is imperative. Alternative education is a cost efficient way to create **tax contributors** as opposed to **tax consumers.**

Yet, as we are beginning to understand the cost savings associated with alternative education, programs are being cut across the nation to save money during these harsh economic times. Looking at alternative education from a national perspective, the quality of programming varies from state to state, district to district, and even school/program to school/program. In the absence of federal guidance and any direct funding stream, the quality of services often depends upon the resources allocated by the state and local education agencies and the innovation of the educators coordinating the services. **With a scarcity of resources,**

**alternative programs and schools are at risk of becoming dropout mills.** Understanding our current predicament, the NAEA has set forth priorities for alternative education aimed at raising the bar and ensuring that high quality educational programming takes place across the United States. **With the right tools and resources, alternative education can serve as an opportunity to recover and retain high school dropouts.**

While the NAEA has been working diligently at the national level to meet many of these challenges, it will take the support of all stakeholders to overcome many of these obstacles. With this in mind, the NAEA presents its top four priorities for alternative education and affirms the organization's commitment to working in partnership with the new Administration on these reform efforts. Together we can ensure that high quality alternative education programming is taking place across the United States.

***1. Establish a multi-discipline, inter-agency Alternative Education Task Force at the federal level.*** The task force should review current challenges facing this at-risk population of students attending an alternative setting. In addition, this body should be composed of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers from juvenile justice system, alternative, traditional, and special education, mental health, family service provision, career and workforce development and other appropriate stakeholders providing support for at-risk students. The task force should make recommendations on how to meet those challenges and seek to improve alternative education delivery systems in the United States.

***2. Create an executive level position (Director of Alternative Education) within the U.S. Department of Education and other appropriate measures to build an infrastructure to support alternative educators.*** This infrastructure should provide support and oversight to alternative education providers, local and state education agencies, and supply general information to the public at large. Under this structure, the preceding roles should be assumed by the Director and other appropriate support staff to include the following: supply information on best practice, provide technical assistance to providers, increase the coordination of wraparound services to students at all levels, begin reviewing ways to track this transient population of learners via data management systems, review accountability measures to include program evaluation, develop model state and local legislation relative to alternative education, create learning networks for providers, and identify exemplary programs for replication. In addition, the Director should oversee the Alternative Education Task Force, providing support and guidance for its activities and responsibilities.

***3. Develop a federal funding stream for alternative education.*** The NAEA would request that the new Administration consider a formula grant program that is awarded to state educational agencies, which in turn manage statewide competitions and award grants to eligible entities. This might be modeled after the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) program. State Education Agencies need a federal funding stream for the nontraditional education opportunities so they can provide resources for the disenfranchised students, such as course content through technology, behavior management resources, career introduction, transitional services, and additional professional development for alternative educators. If the Administration chooses to move forward, the NAEA would also suggest the program be based on the recommendations set forth under a recently released report entitled, *A Feasibility Study Related to Establishing Pilot Alternative Education Programs in Tennessee*. A copy of that report has been enclosed for your convenience. Furthermore, program activities should relate to the recently released document by the NAEA titled

*Exemplary Practices in Alternative Education: Indicators of Quality Programming.* A copy of that document has also been enclosed. Funded programs should serve as model sites for those encountering challenges, and in addition, serve as examples to policy makers who have an interest in the progress and expansion of alternative education. By establishing this initiative, the Administration would be putting teachers to work while also meeting the needs of this highly at-risk population. Moreover, a program of this nature would build an infrastructure for alternative education which will help promote quality. Finally, the NAEA would recommend this initiative be another job responsibility of the Director of Alternative Education and his or her staff.

**4. If possible, designate a portion of the stimulus package to specifically build or refurbish old educational facilities that will in turn serve as an alternative school/program once remodeling has been completed.** Often new state of the art schools are built and then the alternative school/program inherits the out-dated educational facility. The NAEA respectfully requests that the economic stimulus package include some funding to remodel old education facilities that will specifically serve this at-risk population of students via alternative education services (i.e. students at risk of suspension, expulsion, and dropping out of school). In fact, the Michigan Historic Preservation Society has been actively working on an exciting initiative that includes our students in recovering properties for public use. This would be an excellent service learning initiative for alternative education students. This act alone will support districts that cannot incur the expense of creating an alternative school or program. Furthermore, this will promote growth at the local level by putting contractors to work while also developing learning centers for recovering dropouts.

Respectfully, the NAEA strongly encourages the new Administration to adopt these policies and believes with good faith and collaboration that we can provide this challenging, at-risk population with education options that will recover dropouts and create productive, service-oriented citizens. Alternative education presents an opportunity to identify, intervene, and recover dropouts, help school districts meet performance standards, and reduce overall juvenile justice costs by providing appropriate interventions and wraparound services. **With an approximate cost savings of \$251,000 per student recovered, alternative education is a cost effective means of saving dropouts.** Furthermore, with the current varying of quality across the United States, these policies will build an infrastructure for accountability and excellence. In addition, the policies presented will help stimulate the nation's economy by putting teachers to work and by putting contractors to work constructing and refurbishing old educational facilities. It is through our collective vision, work, and collaboration that we ensure excellence in the field of alternative education.

For additional questions regarding alternative education, these recommendations, or any related information, please contact Lori Lamb, National Alternative Education Association President at (479) 996-4172 or via email to [Lori.Lamb@arkansas.gov](mailto:Lori.Lamb@arkansas.gov) or James Vince Witty, National Alternative Education Association Vice President at (615) 532-4768 or via email to [James.Witty@state.tn.us](mailto:James.Witty@state.tn.us).