



Research Brief

Self-Contained Programs

Question: How effective are self-contained programs?

Summary of Findings:

Schools everywhere are struggling with how to respond to their “hard to teach,” special needs, at-risk, and behaviorally challenged students. These students are the most challenging to a school, and schools are anxious to find a way to respond productively. Self-contained programs are one solution schools are exploring.

It was quite easy to find information about various school’s self contained programs, but it was much harder to find any research on the effectiveness of self-contained programs (i.e. although a lot of schools are doing it, we aren’t sure how well it works). The little research that was available was from the perspective of dropout prevention. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network has identified 15 effective strategies that have the most positive impact on the dropout rate. These strategies have been implemented successfully at all education levels and environments throughout the nation. Strategies in the category “Basic Core Strategies” include: Mentoring & Tutoring, Service Learning, Alternative Schooling, and After School Opportunities.

Self-contained alternative classrooms is one of 5 approaches to alternative schooling identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (the others include the School-Within-a-School, the Separate Alternative School, the Continuation School, and the Magnet School). NDPC/N categorizes these organizational strategies into three purposes: Schools of Choice, Last-Chance Schools, and Remedial Schools. Although there is no research showing the relative effectiveness of one over another, NDPC/N points out that there is much anecdotal literature about the effectiveness of alternative schools for keeping students in school. Alternative schools have been successful in: reducing truancy, improving attitudes toward school, accumulating high school credits, and reducing behavior problems. It was noted several places that self-contained programs are impractical in smaller schools.

It’s important to remember that it isn’t keeping our challenging students in a self-contained environment that leads to success, but rather the quality of the program within that environment. According to the NDPC/N, there does appear to be a consistent profile of the most successful alternative schools. The profile includes the following characteristics:

1. a maximum teacher/student ratio of 1:10;
2. a small student base not exceeding 250 students;
3. a clearly stated mission and discipline code;
4. a caring faculty with continual staff development;
5. a school staff having high expectations for student achievement;
6. a learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style;
7. a flexible school schedule with community involvement and support; and
8. a total commitment to have each student be a success.

An article in *HGSE News* (Harvard Graduate School of Education) highlights that successful intervention programs contain three common elements: a smaller organizational structure such as self-contained academies within a school; a core curriculum of high standards combined with opportunities for students to recover from failure without risk of retention; and teacher supports such as professional development by department and scheduled common planning time.

The learning program may be the most important component to consider. Effective strategies identified by NDPC/N in the category “Getting the Most from Instruction” include Professional Development, Active Learning, Educational Technology, and Individual Instruction. A recent site visit by the American Youth Policy Forum to high schools in New York concluded that student engagement is key. They report, “Data show that by the middle of the year, the lowest performing students have 20 or more absences. That is a clear sign that students are not engaged, but many schools do not collect that information and are unaware of this pattern.”

Another strategy that has met with success are self-determination practices. For example, Conant High School (IL) has incorporated self-determination into a self-contained setting for students with severe behavioral and emotional problems, and a



Research Brief

half-day self-contained setting for students at risk for dropping out of school (called LifeWorks). They have identified the following exemplary Self-Determination Practices:

- Students are presented with their options and staff allows them to make their own choices. Even if students make choices that result in negative outcomes, the staff waits until students have experienced failure and are motivated to succeed before helping the student re-evaluate options. Teachers and other staff members emphasize mutual respect and support for the students, without taking responsibility for students' decisions or the outcomes from those decisions.
- A self-determination philosophy exists among staff, including administrators and general education teachers. The school's mission statement includes themes of problem-solving, personal responsibility, and citizenship. Self-determination is viewed as important for all students at the school.
- Teachers infuse principles of self-determination into existing academic curricula.
- Self-determination practices are incorporated in the entire range of special education courses, including mainstream, self-contained, and resource settings.

Online Resources:

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

The mission of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network is to serve as a research center and resource network for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to reshape school and community environments to meet the needs of youth in at-risk situations so these students receive the quality education and services necessary to succeed academically and graduate from high school.

NDPC/N Home: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/ndpcdefault.htm>

Effective Strategies: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/effstrat.htm>

Alternative Schooling: http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/alt_school/altsch_over.htm

Alternative Schooling Model Programs: http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/alt_school/altsch_modprog.htm

Resources: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/resource/resource.htm>

New Studies Shed Light on Dropout Crisis

Harvard Graduate School of Education; HGSE News

Successful Intervention Programs Contain Three Common Elements

Programs that successfully keep students in school share three components: a smaller organizational structure such as self-contained academies within a school; a core curriculum of high standards combined with opportunities for students to recover from failure without risk of retention; and teacher supports such as professional development by department and scheduled common planning time. Researchers James McPartland and Will Jordan (Johns Hopkins University) found that a comprehensive set of specific changes that addressed these three areas could retain most of the current dropouts and help each student succeed at a high-standards program of study while enjoying school.

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/features/conf01132001.html>

An American Youth Policy Forum Field Trip — January 8-9, 2004

The purpose of this site visit was to learn about (1) the New Century High School Initiative, (2) the transformation of large, comprehensive high schools into smaller learning communities in the Bronx, NY, and (3) the early and middle college high school programs at LaGuardia Community College, Queens, NY. They identified 2 important areas to address: We need help with special education students. Schools have to integrate them into regular classes because the schools are too small to provide self-contained classes and Student engagement is key.

<http://www.aypf.org/tripreports/2004/tr010804.htm>

James B. Conant High School - Hoffman Estates, Illinois

James B. Conant High School is located in a suburb directly west of Chicago, Illinois. The school serves more than 2,700 students in grades 9 through 12. Self-determination was infused into the special education programs at Conant High School beginning in the early 1990s through a federally funded transition systems change grant that included interventions for students and parents. Since then, self-determination also has been incorporated into a self-contained setting for students with severe behavioral and emotional problems, and a half-day self-contained setting for students at risk for dropping out of school (called LifeWorks).

<http://www.uncc.edu/sdsp/conant.asp>



Research Brief

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Washington High School: Transitional Independent Learning Center

2525 North Sherman Boulevard, Milwaukee, WI 53210, TEL: (414) 444-9760, FAX: (414) 874-3186

The Transitional Independent Learning Center (TILC) opened as a school-within-a-school in August of 1998, in a single classroom at Washington High School. The TILC mission is to serve at-risk students in a caring, self-contained atmosphere that will emphasize the advisor-advisee relationship. Students will acclimate themselves to the regular curriculum and the nurturing nature of the school, find immediate success in academic and social situations, gain knowledge and confidence in their abilities to succeed independently in the regular Washington High School program, and subsequently, be transitioned back into the regular program.

<http://www2.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/scs/482.htm>

SAC (Social Adjustment Class) Special Education Division

The Lewisville Learning Center, Lewisville Independent School District, 1601 S. Edmonds Lane, Lewisville, TX 75067, Phone: 972-219-6900, Fax: 972-221-7362

SAC is a nurturing, self-contained program designed to assist students to develop the social, emotional and academic skills necessary to succeed in school and the workplace. All students are taught specifically to their IEP, and in coordination with their BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan), as outlined when admitted. The Boys' Town Behavior Model is used by all the staff and has proven to be a very effective teaching model for young people with severe challenges. CPI (Crisis Prevention Intervention) training is provided to all the staff in this division and has proven very successful in creating a positive and social environment that causes students to become successful. A (5:1) student-teacher ratio allows extensive teacher intervention and successful results.

<http://www.lisd.net/main/schools/learningcenter.html>

Community Day School: Secondary Program

San Bernardino City Unified School District, Y Academy, 588 W 6th Street, San Bernardino, CA 92410

Community Day School is a one-year intervention program designed to assist 9C students to establish a pattern of academic success and good attendance, transition back to a regular or alternative high school, graduate from a high school, and develop new habits in attendance and academics that facilitate the student's future success in school. Community Day School provides a self-contained classroom setting at an alternative site separate from the regular high school campus. Each class has a teacher, an instructional assistant, and a maximum of 20 students. It is a full day program that runs from 8:00 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. and include Algebra 1, English 1 and English 2, World History, Targeted Support, and Biology.

<http://www.sbcusd.k12.ca.us/new/index.cfm?function=gettemplate&De=7&Cat=21&PID=312&TempID=5>

Pacific View High School (Community Day School)

1701 Gary Drive, Oxnard, CA 93033, (805) 483-2378

Pacific View Community Day School provides a self-contained classroom environment in which students work to improve attendance, academic performance, and behavior. The curriculum is aligned with that of the district's comprehensive high schools and is based on the district's state adopted content standards.

<http://www.ouhsd.k12.ca.us/schools/pvhs/>

Submitted Date: 2/6/2006 By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning <http://www.principalspartnership.com>

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