

The Alternative Learning Center Model

Common Core is a welcome instructional shift, but the students who struggle will still be sitting in classrooms with the same difficulties they have always had. The Alternative Learning Center Model offers a variety of educational platforms for these students.

If you Google “I Choose C” there is a cartoon video of a girl applying for a position in a research company. In the opening moments, the employer asks the applicant to describe her most desirable quality. She pauses a moment and asks him what the choices are. He is confused at first, but she quickly clarifies, “You know, A B C or D,” referencing multiple-choice options.

A little later, in response to another question, she tells the interviewer that she chooses “C.” When asked why, she remarks that her teachers told her that if she didn’t know the answer to a question, she should choose “C” because statistically that answer has the highest probability of being correct.

Toward the end of the video she doesn’t know the answer to another question and looks around the room. When the interviewer asks her what she is doing, she tells him that she is looking for someone to think-pair-share with.

When we speak at educational conferences, our audiences laugh aloud in places as they watch the video. It is a funny clip simply because there is truth to what is depicted – probably more than we would care to admit. We have told kids to pick “C” if they didn’t know the answer to a question.

We have inadvertently created a generation of students

who fill in the blanks, write persuasive essays to principals about dress code violations and who can’t for the life of them tell you how math, English, social studies and science are related. Thankfully, Common Core is coming, with the promise of focusing on 21st century thinking skills and the four Cs: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication.

Helping students thrive and excel

Common Core is a welcome instructional shift; however, we know that Common Core or not, the students who struggle – the ones who don’t fit in on a comprehensive campus for any number of reasons – will still be sitting in classrooms with the same difficulties they have always had. Common Core can’t fundamentally change an educational environment that doesn’t work for all kids.

That’s why we created an Alternative Learning Center Model in Oceanside Unified School District.

Ultimately, we feel it’s simple: The outcome of student

By Barry Tyler and Barbara Higgins Perez

learning should be to thrive and excel, ultimately becoming college and career ready. You would be hard-pressed to find anyone – educator, parent, community member, business owner, even the students themselves – who would not agree with that seemingly simple premise. After all, isn't that one of the fundamental goals of Common Core implementation in the first place?

What we know, though, is that it doesn't matter which educational initiative or plan is implemented; a student will only find success in the right setting, with the right mode of instruction that can be defined as uniquely as the individual learner. What that means is not every student thrives in the traditional brick-and-mortar setting.

"What if?" scenarios

Recognizing that students come with a variety of 21st century needs that are profoundly different, we set about creating and discussing several "what if?" scenarios: What if teachers told their administrator that working at their school was their dream job? What if students who came to your school told you they were able to be academically successful for the first time? What if a 10th-grade student, wanting to be a nurse, didn't know her multiplication tables? What if that same student got support to learn them, and then successfully completed both Algebra I and Geometry that same year?

But our "what ifs" didn't end there. As we brainstormed and talked to teachers, students, parents and administrators, they expanded: What if each student had a unique course of study and schedule that fit his or her individual needs? What if each student was able to access both group and individual counseling sessions to address social/emotional concerns? What if each student had access to internship and employment opportunities facilitated at the site?

These conversations, along with research and a lot of planning, led us to create the Alternative Learning Center Model based on what we know and discovered: today's learners require the utilization of visual, auditory and kinesthetic modalities via independent, online and accelerated learning opportunities.

Moreover, without these varied educational platforms, families often wonder why their child is struggling, become angry that no one is assisting them, and are prompted to seek answers that will allow their child to be academically successful outside their school or district of residence.

We spent the next few months looking at our current reality and recognized that many districts were operating in the same manner as our district. We discovered significant groups and numbers of students who were essentially receiving their educational services outside the district simply because there was not a program within the district to specifically address their needs.

Students with social anxiety or phobia were placed in

home hospital instruction or non-public schools. Students stopped attending school because their issues could not be addressed in a traditional setting, and the School Attendance Review Board was unable to address their poor attendance effectively.

Students with behavior issues were repeatedly suspended without necessary interventions to correct the behavior. Students seeking an online educational experience but still desiring daily interaction with teachers and peers lacked opportunities, and expelled students were sent to community schools outside the district without the necessary support to successfully complete their required conditions to return.

From these conversations, observations and research, what would become the Alternative Learning Center Model's motto was created: "Serving Our Kids First!" In short, we felt that philosophically, as a district, we should be able to both educate and attend to every student's social, emotional and career readiness needs except in the most extreme cases. Why would a school district of

22,000 students not strive to create a program to reach those students who had been previously turned away? And so, an Alternative Learning Center Model was born.

Whenever we present, educators and community members alike want to know how we did it. What would make the difference for these kids? How could you structure something that would make a difference? Simply put, they agree with us, and want to know "so now what?"

Commitment to academic rigor

We created an online independent study program within two computer labs in re-locatable trailers on the continuation high school campus. We structured the program so that each student attends a two-hour instructional block. They use a digital curriculum to work on one course at a time, and are required to work an additional three hours at home in order to complete courses in an appropriate time frame. In addition, the students attend both individual and group counseling either before or after their instructional block.

In our application, four teachers, two aides and one counselor are able to serve 120 students; in essence, the program focuses on three distinct facets: academic integrity and rigor, social/emotional support and college and career readiness.

At the core of the program is the commitment to academic rigor. As with so many alternative programs, the first thing people want to know is if the program is comparable to the traditional courses. We knew from its inception that the academic piece had to be rigorous. Within our digital



curriculum, we chose to require students to pass each assessment with 70 percent mastery. We offer differentiated course pathways, including remedial options for those who struggle, as well as honors options for the more accelerated learner.

Tutorials, labs and weekly teacher meetings also contribute to a student's overall success. Students have personal interaction each day within their instructional block and via virtual discussion boards and emails after hours. Moreover, each teacher has weekly communication with the students and parents regarding academic progress.

We discovered almost immediately that the social/emotional component of the Alternative Learning Center was going to be every bit as important as the academic part.

After all, every single student enrolled in the Alternative Learning Center had struggled, for a variety of reasons, in their previous academic setting.

We implemented and committed to providing both individual and group counseling for students. We utilized an outside counseling agency to provide group counseling sessions – anger management, decision making, gang prevention, social skills and substance abuse – as well as individual counseling sessions. The key here was that students were re-

quired to access these services outside of their instructional block; this was important because we wanted to ensure that the counseling sessions were authentic. Students participate in counseling due to a true desire to improve themselves, not as a vehicle to “get out of” their instructional block.

Other social/emotional support includes McKinney Vento Child Find services for homeless students, as well as bus pass assistance and weekend nutrition support through a community agency called “We’ve Got Your Back,” which supplies students in need with a backpack full of food for the weekend.

The third prong of the program is focused on college and career readiness. In the Alternative Learning Center Model, we focus on assisting students with post-secondary plans. We use an online program that utilizes career and personality surveys to assist students in identifying possible career pathways. In addition, students work on cover letters and resumes.

Another facet of college and career readiness is specifically focused on creating community partnerships. To date, we have been able to work with both the Chamber of Commerce and a hotel resort chain to secure both internships and paid jobs for our students.

As we worked to implement the first three components of

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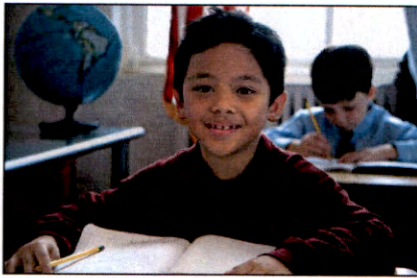
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Smarter Balanced

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more likely than their peers to falter in later grades and drop out before earning a high school diploma. We can't just focus on K-3, however. In 2014, the district developed a specific, comprehensive literacy plan across all grade levels. A literacy conference was held, providing K-12 teachers and instructional assistants training in instructional strategies to increase reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Looking forward, two new literacy coaches will be deployed at our high schools to support content-area teachers in developing their skills with content-area literacy instruction. Administrators and teacher-leaders will be trained in implementation science in order to close the "knowing-doing gap." Additionally, to help students develop the technology skills needed to succeed on



the new assessment, collaborative teams of teachers have embarked on a 1:1 computing initiative with to-date deployment including all eighth- and ninth-grade students. The plan is for 1:1 computing at fourth-12th grades by 2017-18.

Acting with a growth mindset

Just as we aim to cultivate a growth mindset in our students, we aim to act with a growth mindset ourselves, viewing the challenge of adapting to new standards and assessments as an opportunity for learning. By collaborating across traditional boundaries

– across diverse district contexts and across the K-12/higher education divide – we expand our opportunities for learning and ultimately strengthen our ability to improve students' experiences and outcomes in our districts. ■

References

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Alternative Learning Center Model ensures academic rigor

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the Alternative Learning Center Model, we realized that a fourth, essential facet could be added: The Alternative to Suspension Program (ATS). Much like the ALC Model, which strives to provide a viable long term academic, social/emotional and career and college readiness program for our students for whom the traditional setting wasn't ideal, the Alternative to Suspension provides a short-term alternative to exclusionary discipline practices such as at-home or in-school suspensions for students.

Sixth- through 12th-grade students who would have had a two- through five-day home suspension were assigned to attend the ATS. While there, students worked on their regularly assigned classwork. In addition, however, students participate in Restorative Practice Exercises designed to assist students in:

- recognizing and owning their behavior;
- making amends with those harmed both directly and indirectly;
- participating in a decision-making workshop/orientation session; and
- planning and practicing to successfully reintegrate back in to their classrooms and schools by using role play and scenarios.

The early results proved significant; between February and June 2014, more than 175 students were served in the ATS, saving a total of 443 days of at-home suspension and more than 2,600

instructional hours.

The Alternative Learning Center Model has provided a viable alternative for students who previously would have been sent outside of Oceanside to receive their educational services. It has been developed with the understanding that not all students can be successful in a traditional school setting. To address this need, districts, charter schools and independent companies have tried to implement online and virtual programs.

The social/emotional approach to ensuring excellence

The Alternative Learning Center Model is not just another online learning/independent study program. The Alternative Learning Center takes a social/emotional approach to ensuring academic excellence – without sacrificing rigor. ■

Barry Tyler and Barbara Higgins Perez developed and implemented the Alternative Learning Center Model in the Oceanside Unified School District. The success of the ALC and ATS implementation contributed to promotions for both. Perez is now the director of student services for the Oceanside Unified School District, where she implements restorative practices districtwide. Tyler is coordinator of alternative education in the Fontana Unified School District, where he is collaborating to implement similar components in an independent study program and the ATS Model.