

INNOVATION WITHOUT CHANGE OR EXTINCTION:
AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE PERSISTENCE OF ALTERNATIVE
SCHOOLS

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By

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U.S. public schools systematically serve some student populations better than others. Higher expectations, more resources, more rigorous content and instruction, and priorities reflecting students' purposes for education support opportunity for some. Social unrest in the 1960s reframed diverse education outcomes for students as inequity, a problem for democracy and civil rights. In that milieu, public secondary alternative schools emerged as innovative response to this socially articulated and shared problem in public education. In the first decade of the 21st century, public secondary alternative schools (alternative schools) serve consistently around 2.3% of secondary students in the U.S., about 600,000 students annually.

Institutional theory predicts that innovative organizations in highly institutionalized sectors, like U.S. public education, will not persist as heterogeneous alternatives. Current models (Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002) describe an institutional change path for innovation to either institutionalization, institutionalized organizations in a field adopt the innovative structures and practices, or extinction as fad or fashion. But, alternative schools have persisted as heterogeneous alternatives for more than forty years. This study addresses the question, "what about the role of public alternative schools allows them to persist as peripheral heterogeneous organizations in the institutionalized field of U.S. public secondary schools?"

A mixed methods approach to this study allows inquiry and analysis into multiple levels of the institutional dynamics: 1) an analysis of the history of alternative schools, as organizations that evolve to address unmet priorities for changing populations underserved by traditional school organizations, connects alternative structures and practices to stakeholders' alternative priorities for these schools; 2) a longitudinal analysis, of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) demographic and resource data, describes trends in differences between traditional and alternative secondary schools in the U.S. and makes the case that alternative schools engage in their work with different student populations and different levels of resources; and, 3) two case studies explain work that is understood as important for different stakeholders in two, different type alternative schools. The accounts of that work legitimate school structures and practices, and the schools themselves.

Findings trace alternative schools as innovation through the Stages of Institutional Change (Suddaby, et al., 2002) arguing for a third path of persistence for alternative heterogeneous organizations in institutionalized environments. Alternative schools address diverse priorities for public education in the U.S.; serve high-needs populations of students in much higher concentrations than regular schools and with fewer resources; and these schools may need to maintain their heterogeneity to effectively address the priorities of local constituent groups. Alternative schools stabilize the field by serving as safety net for students and as a pressure valve for public schooling. I.e., alternative schools address technical and normative problems in public education that require a response from constituencies significant enough to demand, at least, a persistent marginalized solution.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lauren Faessler has over 20 years of experience with teaching, learning, and leadership in education. She earned her AB in English from Cornell University, an MS in Teaching from the University of Dayton, an MS in Educational Administration from Cornell University, and now her PhD in Teaching, Learning, and Social Policy from Cornell University. Her career began as the English Department in a small alternative high school in upstate New York. Since then, she has led ongoing school improvement efforts focused in curriculum, instruction, and assessment with several alternative and traditional schools. Her son is a happy graduate of a progressive alternative school as well. Most recently, her work has focused on the systemic implementation of the NYS reform agenda focused on integrating Common Core Learning Standards, the accompanying instructional shifts, and new teacher and principal evaluation practices across regional school districts – always with an eye toward implications for all students.

I dedicate this work to my son, Jed Faessler, for never judging while growing up with a teacher/graduate student mom;

And to my parents, Larry and Nieleen Faessler, for their patient support and for continuing to like me whether or not I was making progress on the thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

U.S. public schools systematically serve some student populations better than others. Higher expectations, more resources, more rigorous content and instruction, and priorities reflecting students' purposes for education support opportunity for some. Much has been written about the U.S. comprehensive high school – how these schools have come to be and how hard they have been to change since becoming (Kaestle & Foner, 1983; Rury, 2002; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). School structures and practices evolved in the course of the early 20th century to be understood and reproduced in recognizable and accepted patterns. These patterns have their roots in democratic purposes: to support an educated citizenry; to establish a shared American experience among diverse immigrant populations; to create opportunity for individuals from families of varied wealth and income.

Over the course of a century or so, we have layered market, political, and social purposes onto public schools as well (Cuban, 2003; 2010; Labaree, 1997). Particularly in secondary schools, as increasing rates of Americans attended and remained in school, schools began differentiating options for students. Results include differentiated educational pathways and outcomes for students in public schools. This variation allows schools to reasonably represent many purposes to the public. Social efficiency and practical purposes require schools to efficiently train students for future work according to economic need and student interest and ability. Meritocratic

purposes assume that schools effectively sort for those students best suited to hard work and intellectual demands in college or the work place. Primarily private purposes prioritize the human capital that a student can bank from certain schools or the social mobility made possible by academic success or by going to school with certain people.

The comprehensive high school is designed to address the many different needs of the many different students in attendance. Historically, most of the public took for granted the different outcomes for different students that result. However, challenges to unequal inputs and outcomes in public education have appeared throughout the history of public schools: civil rights campaigns to desegregate schools with legislation, busing plans, and magnet schools; fiscal equity campaigns to redirect public funding to high needs students and schools with legislation like Title I; etc. (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Public alternative secondary schools gained the support and resources necessary to become established, throughout the 1970s, as school organizations that allowed smaller student populations to self-determine priorities and outcomes alternative to those assumed for them in traditional public secondary schools (Chalker, 1996; Cremin, 1978; Deal & Nolan, 1978; Duke, 1978; Riordan, 1972; Young, 1990).

Since then, alternative schools have come to serve at least two purposes in the institutional setting of U.S. public education. These schools educate a small portion of students in order to keep them out of the annual 20 to 30 percent of students who fail to graduate with regular diplomas (Mishel & Roy, 2006; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003), functioning as *safety nets* for the traditional system. Other alternative schools

prioritize purposes for public education that some students, families, and communities elevate over the market and political purposes often prioritized in traditional settings, functioning as *pressure valves* for the traditional system (Cuban, 2003; Kelly, 1993; Labaree, 1997; Nolan, 1978). These typically small schools, of both types, have persisted and steadily increased in number for the past 50 years, clearly meeting some need unmet by traditional secondary schools during these decades.

In that time, alternative schools have become established as organizations serving about 2.25% of the secondary student population in the U.S. When the National Center for Education Statistics began sharing data with the 1986-87 school year, alternative schools served around 1% of secondary students. This number grew to around 2.25%, over 500,000 students in 2010, of secondary student enrollment in 1998-99, where it has hovered since. In the decades since 1970, these schools have faced the same cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative pressures to conform as traditional secondary schools, yet they continue to identify themselves as alternative to traditional schools (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Scott, 2001). Institutional theory describes the benefits of isomorphism to organizations as garnering the legitimacy that buffers institutionalized organizations from close scrutiny and attracts the resources necessary to survival (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; March & Olsen, 1976; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Oliver, 1991; Rowan, 1999; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Weick, 1976). In fact, alternative schools struggle to maintain even low levels of legitimacy and the accompanying subsistence level resources, despite the institutional need for them suggested by their more than 40 years of persistence (Gregory, 2001; Loflin, 2000). Alternative schools, like all public schools in the

U.S., have endured even in the climate of repeated reform movements intended to pressure all schools toward certain priorities, structures, and practices.

When international economic competitiveness and related national security concerns became priorities for public schools, initially in 1957 after the Russian launch of the first Sputnik satellite and again in the early 1980s in response to the dire reporting in *A Nation at Risk* (1983),¹ policy and reform efforts refocused on content and standards in public schools. The Excellence and Restructuring Movements of the 1980s increased high school graduation requirements, called for higher standards for student learning and teacher training, explored methods of accountability, and experimented with school governance and decision-making structures toward these ends. As graduation requirements increased, alternative schools came to be recognized as settings where struggling students might find more success.

The most recent round of reform efforts, the standards-based reform movement (SBR), began structuring federal and state education policy in a systemic effort to improve curriculum, teaching practice, and academic achievement for every student (Clune, 2001; O'Day & Smith, 1993). The effective implementation of these reforms, designed to ensure all students access to a quality education and the support they each need to achieve academic proficiency, requires unprecedented coherence and alignment between federal, state, and local policies and between curricular, instructional, and administrative practices within and between schools. The historical fragmentation of these arenas of educational practice and policy stands as an obstacle

¹ This presidential report on the state of education in the U.S., commissioned during the Reagan administration, condemned the mediocre results of U.S. schools as a source of future American economic and international instability (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

to the universal and relatively uniform outcomes that are the goals of SBR (Fuhrman, et al. 1993; 2001; Ogawa, 2003; Sipple & Killeen, 2004a; 2004b; Spillane, 1996; 1998; 1999). Therefore, states, districts, schools, teachers and students must be held accountable for academic achievement.

Accountability mechanisms – the development of state learning standards for each subject area at each grade level, state developed exams in reading and math for grades 3-8, state developed high school exit exams in reading and math, measures to increase graduation rates, and sanctions for those schools and districts who fail to meet standards – were mandated by the federal government with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2002. Also known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, this reauthorization mandated SBR for all public schools in all states by establishing goals for universal academic proficiency in reading and math for students by 2014 and for increasing graduation rates. States, districts, and schools are held accountable for making sufficient annual yearly progress (AYP) toward these goals through the reporting and publication of annual exam results and graduation rates. All public schools in the U.S. face these accountability measures. Because the U.S. Department of Education (DoE) delegated the development of standards and monitoring of district, school, and student performance to the states, variations in standards and definitions of proficiency have developed between states (Manzo, 2007).

SBR policies, to greater and lesser degrees across states, include components designed to increase horizontal and vertical coherence within and between schools, school districts, state, and federal policy as well. In other words, national and state

policies direct districts and schools across a state to have all classrooms at a particular grade level teaching similar content and skills, to meet the same standards. These prescribed curricula ideally align with instructional practices, student assessments, teacher preparation and professional development, resource allocation and accountability measures (O'Day & Smith, 1993; Fuhrman, 2001; Goertz, 2001).

Multiple policy levers exist to affect this degree of alignment and coherence.

As with all schools, student performance data now determines alternative school success or failure to local, state, and federal publics and authorities. SBR signals another round of external pressures to conform, at least in terms of outcome measures. Because alternative schools have historically elevated purposes apart from academic achievement, in part to (re)engage students and families and in part to expand definitions of student success, the singular focus of SBR policies on students' academic achievement threatens long-held goals of some alternative schools. Because alternative schools have evolved to serve at-risk or non-traditional populations of students, SBR's emphasis on increased academic achievement, particularly for groups of students established as lower-performing, means something different for alternative schools. Many alternative school students have characteristically struggled academically or de-prioritized academic performance at some point in their public school careers. The longitudinal and case study analyses of alternative schools in this study describe characteristics, priorities, structures, and practices ten to fifteen years into the implementation of SBR policies.

On the other hand, alternative schools may be well-positioned to respond to the pressures of SBR. Some, if not all, of their alternative goals, structures, and practices

may be understood as the sort of local responsiveness to student needs that SBR ideally supports through the trade-off between accountability for results and the autonomy to determine how to achieve those results. For example, the relationship-building practices and democratic, participatory decision-making structures within small school organizations that characterize many successful alternative schools may serve as mechanisms for the motivation and engagement that encourage academic performance for students in these schools (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1981; Raywid, 1983; Smith, Gregory & Pugh; 1981; Wells, 1993; Wehlage, 1989; Young, 1990). Some structures, practices, and purposes may find support in this policy climate, others may find challenge. How are alternative schools organized and how are they organizing their work as regulative, among other, pressures toward narrowed outcomes increase?

Overview of the Study

My inquiry into the contemporary role of secondary alternative schools in U.S. public education explores this role from multiple perspectives using mixed methods. My multi-level inquiry allows me to approach this question, “what about the role of public alternative schools allows them to persist as peripheral heterogeneous organizations in the institutionalized field of U.S. public secondary schools?” I examine this from three perspectives: 1) a field level historical understanding of both why and how alternative schools evolved, *the “what” of these schools*; 2) a field level, longitudinal comparison of alternative and traditional school populations and resources, *the “who” and “how much” of these schools*; and 3) the intra-

organizational analyses of two schools' stakeholders understandings that shape contemporary meaning for the work of alternative schools, *the "how" and "why" of these schools*. Taken in combination, this work pieces together a gapping and overlapping representation of these organizations in relationship to other alternative schools, in relationship to traditional public secondary schools, and in relationship to their constituent groups.

Each piece of this investigation contributes evidence that describes an institutional change process with alternative schools, as innovative organizations employing alternative structures and practices in response to socially perceived problems, at the center. The Stages of Institutional Change model described by Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings (2002) summarizes and applies current theoretical conclusions around the change process in institutional theory. Each of chapters 4 through 6 contributes evidence of alternative schools successfully moving through four of six stages and entering the fifth. The model predicts either successful institutional change in Stage VI or the disappearance of an innovation as a fad or fashion. For over forty years now, alternative schools have done neither.

The analysis of the history of alternative schools presents alternative school purposes, practices, and structures across time. Though the review included texts contemporary to the time periods discussed, I do no analysis of primary documents or other artifacts of history. Instead, I compile and read this history with an eye toward the institutional processes and constitutive logics at work as alternative schools become established and persist through the late 20th century (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006). This literature review and analysis of history

documents the changing social understandings of the purposes of alternative schools and the problems or conflicts these divergent organizations are intended to address with new combinations of practices and structures designed to produce different outcomes for students and communities. As alternative school purposes shift from challenges to established public schooling priorities and outcomes to a set of strategies and structures understood to support underserved and struggling populations of students, this history provides a context for the analysis and interpretation of the field level longitudinal and micro-level intra-organizational data that follows. It also describes the appearance of alternative schools in the context of the Precipitating Jolt (Stage I) of social change movements of the 1960s and 1970s; the early local efforts of activists to establish and borrow alternative structures and practices and the early support for their efforts during Deinstitutionalization (Stage II); the organized discourse around the purposes and effective structures and practices during Preinstitutionalization (Stage III); and the more focused problem definition of a dropout phenomenon with alternative schools as an increasingly recognized effective response during Theorization (Stage IV).

I then describe historical and contemporary trend comparisons between alternative schools and traditional, or regular, schools using the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) publicly available Common Core of Data (CCD). The Center annually collects basic descriptive data on every U.S. public elementary and secondary school and district. The data in this set is reported annually to NCES, primarily by school districts and state education departments, through a number of survey instruments. The collected variables change over time, so the comparisons in

this chapter vary in duration from 10 to 20 years, depending on when reporting on a variable began.

These longitudinal trend comparisons make a case for understanding public secondary alternative schools as school organizations that serve student populations different from those served by regular schools with different levels of resources. From 1987-88 to 2008-09, secondary alternative schools include black, Hispanic, and Native American students at higher concentrations, on average 11.4%, 14.3%, and .69% higher respectively. These concentrations are persistently at least 50% to over 100% higher than those for regular schools for those 20 years. In the ten year time period from 1998-99 to 2008-09, the differences between the concentration of students receiving federal free lunch in the different school types change. The concentration of students receiving free or reduced price lunch (FRPL) regularly serves as an indicator for family income levels in schools. The students from families with the lower incomes qualify for free federal lunches. Early in the described time frame, regular schools serve slightly higher concentrations of students receiving free lunches. This changes in 2000-01 and alternative schools increasingly serve higher concentrations at rates about 7% higher than regular schools in 2008-09. Historically, black, Hispanic, Native American, and students from low income families have achieved at lower levels in U.S. public schools (Education Commission of the States, 2005; Bennet, et al., 2004). Title I federal funding provides schools with resources for academic intervention services for low income students to address part of this persistent achievement gap. When comparing the rates at which school types receive Title I funding, typically determined by FRPL rates, we find more disparity. For the ten

years that this data is available, alternative schools receive Title I funding at rates around 10% lower than regular schools, though rates increase for all school types over time. Though we find higher concentrations of high-need student populations in alternative schools over time, Title I funding levels and FRPL rates indicate that alternative schools likely serve these students with fewer federal resources than regular schools. These trends provide further evidence of Theorization as these schools clearly intend to serve high-needs populations of students, and do so with fewer resources. These trends provide the evidence for the early Diffusion (Stage V) of alternative schools as well. The strong increases in number of schools and enrollment from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s indicate growing legitimacy and an increasingly shared understanding of alternative schools as a response to certain failures in public education across the U.S.

This longitudinal comparison between alternative schools and regular schools informs a macro or field level understanding of some demographic and resource shifts over time. Taken with the longer history of understood purposes, structures, and practices, we begin to get a picture of the “who” and “what” of alternative schools. The two case studies contribute contemporary reports of “what” and “how” for two particular schools, and they uniquely contribute insight into “why.” It is only through the micro-level inquiry provided via the case studies that individuals from within and around the alternative school organizations describe their understandings of “most important work” of the school and how it is accomplished.

I select two cases that serve as hypothesized variations (Yin, 2006) of alternative school types as determined by school size, student population

characteristics, governing structures, available courses/curriculum, and prioritized goals. The smaller school serves students referred to the program by other high schools in the area because the students have been identified as “at-risk” of not completing high school. The larger school selects students by lottery from a pool of applicants and identifies itself as an alternative democratic community school. By selecting cases of varied types, I expect to maximize the scope and diversity of collected data as I explore the meaning, for various stakeholders, of alternative school practices and structures (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Stake, 1995; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

In both cases, observations, document analyses, and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from within and around the organizations inform my understanding of the micro-level interactions between school organizational features, the representation of purposes for these features, and the meaning assigned by stakeholders to these features. At this level of inquiry, I can search for evidence of the cultural and cognitive understandings behind ongoing activities and alternative structures (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; 2005; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2008; Suchman, 1995a; 1995b; Swidler, 1986; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). I ask all study participants, “What is the most important work of this school? Which structures and practices support this work, or how does this work get done?” Using their responses, triangulated with my observation notes and document analyses, I describe the represented priorities for these case schools. The varied interpretations of similar structures and practices across case studies provide insight into the persistence

of alternative schools, both obstacles to institutionalization and to extinction for alternative schools.

Taken together, each method of data collection and analysis provides pieces of a described institutional role for these alternative organizations as distinct from traditional schools and persistent in the field. Institutional theory predicts the extinction of alternative organizations in an institutional environment over time. Even when allowed to evolve, current institutional change models provide for two eventual outcomes, (re)institutionalization as taken-for-granted organizational practices and structures diffused throughout the field or disappearance as fashion or fad (Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002). Here, alternative schools suggest a third outcome for persistent alternative heterogeneity in institutional fields.

A Note on Institutional Theory

Institutional theory shapes this inquiry in two ways: it suggests the analysis of multiple levels, as described above, when exploring institutionalized organizational fields (Scott, 2008; Scott & Christensen, 1995; Strang & Sine, 2005); and it frames the inquiry into alternative school organizations as theoretically interesting (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Meyer, Scott & Deal, 1981; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995). Early neo-institutional theory describes the complex social processes and their outcomes that come to define the characteristics of legitimate “behavior” in institutionalized fields, in part, the organizational structures and practices that come to be understood as the right way to do the work in the field. Instead of efficiently producing a technically defined output, institutionalized

structures and practices represent socially understood purposes (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Scott, 2001). Once these structures and routines have persisted and diffused throughout a field, cultural-cognitive, normative, and coercive (regulative) pressures similarly shape most organizations in the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2001). This isomorphism engenders organizational legitimacy, “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 573). This credibility garners resources. Therefore it is interesting in a highly institutionalized sector, like U.S. public education, to find alternative organizations. Institutional theory accounts for heterogeneity in the change process, but heterogeneity should not persist. It should become institutionalized itself or disappear (Greenwood, et al., 2002).

In fact, it is the study of organizational heterogeneity in institutionalized sectors that promotes multi-level study of organizations. “Organizational and interorganizational research commonly emphasizes the importance of isomorphic pressures on the adoption and maintenance of organizational forms and processes” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Baron, et al., 1986) (Strang & Sine, 2005, pp. 514-515). Longitudinal research at these levels provides evidence of organizational change toward strengthening institutional patterns or away from established institutional patterns (Scott, 1995; 2001). Inquiry at the intraorganizational level allows investigation of the sense making, problem definition, and decision making processes that stakeholders engage as they conceive of a need and purpose for

divergent structures and practices (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Oliver, 1991; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Schnieberg & Clemens, 2006; Suchman, 1995; Zucker, 1988). The shared understandings that stakeholders develop in the course of these micro-processes, both within and eventually between organizations, sometimes evolve into the cultural-cognitive understandings and constitutive logics that define institutionalized structures and practices. This study gains insight into distinctions in constituent problem definition, sense making, and grounds for legitimacy only through the case level inquiry.

The Chapters

The chapters are organized to first frame the study, detail my inquiry, then pull together insights and conclusions from all analyses to develop a coherent description of the contemporary role of secondary alternative schools among public schools and their progress as institutional innovation through the institutional change process (Greenwood, et al., 2002).

Chapter 2, my review of neo-institutional theory, outlines the processes I describe briefly above. Early neo-institutional theory focused on explaining the implications of, and mechanisms behind, the organizational isomorphism observed in institutionalized settings. U.S. public schools were identified early as examples of organizations interacting in a highly institutionalized field, so the early part of this chapter illustrates the institutionalization process with U.S. public schools. Later in the chapter, I outline the thinking of more contemporary researchers and theorists as they seek evidence and explanations of the sources and mechanisms of institutional

processes, change, and the organizational heterogeneity sometimes found in institutionalized settings. This thinking sets the stage for the study of micro-processes in institutionalized settings.

The third chapter, my methodology section, begins by framing the study design with neo-institutional theory based reasons for the multiple methods and multi-level approach I adopt in this inquiry. This chapter goes on to detail the sampling, inquiry methods, and analyses of the three levels of inquiry described above: an analysis of the history of alternative schools that concentrates on stakeholder understandings of the need for alternative schools and the structures and practices that support these agreed upon purposes; a quantitative analysis of longitudinal NCES data describing the changes in occurrence, demographics, and resources of secondary alternative schools compared to that of “regular” secondary schools; and two different type case studies of alternative schools providing evidence for shared social understandings of the important work of alternative schools and how that work gets done. At the end of this chapter, I explain my involvement with alternative education and my motivation and interest in this research.

Chapter 4 is a repurposed literature review of the history and research conversation around U.S. alternative schools since the 1970’s. This chapter appears after my theory and methods chapters to emphasize the role of this history and historical discourse in framing contemporary tensions and understandings around the purposes and practices of these schools. Historically, alternative schools have been understood as either safety nets for the traditional school system, where students who are not successful in the traditional system may find supports and structures for

success, or as pressure valves, where families and communities who insist on alternative purposes and priorities for schools can work to meet those purposes. This chapter ends with a discussion of the institutional change process illustrated by understanding alternative schools as an innovation theorized as an appropriate solution to socially understood problems requiring response in U.S. public education.

Chapter 5 details the quantitative analysis of available 1986-87 through 2008-09 NCES data comparing demographic characteristics and resources of regular and alternative secondary schools. I chart the longitudinal comparisons of varied data sets. As described above, the charts reveal higher concentrations of higher need student populations in alternative schools and indicate lower levels of particular resources directed to alternative schools. The implications of these differences will be explored in the results chapter at the end. A New York State (NYS) subset of this data at the end of the chapter provides context for the case schools, both in NYS. This analysis show increased disparity between student populations in alternative and regular schools in NYS, though federal funding more closely follows low income students in NYS. As described above, the demonstrated trends provide evidence of the successful theorization and early diffusion of alternative schools as institutional innovation.

Chapter 6 is a cross case analysis of two alternative schools in NYS. Rich descriptions of each case are reported in the appendices. After brief descriptions of each school and its history, I categorize observed and documented school structures and practices that constituent groups from both schools identify as those supporting the most important work of the school. The second half of the chapter articulates themes from constituent group discussions of the most important work itself:

developing quality relationships between adults and students, building school community, practicing democratic citizenship, and reorganizing curriculum and/or instruction. This chapter ends with my assertion that both case schools reorganize the work of public secondary schools to address priorities that are specific to the schools and their constituent communities. The distinctions between understandings of constituent groups point to obstacles to institutionalization of alternative schools. They also provide evidence of the support that prevents the extinction of these two schools.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I present and discussing findings from Chapters 4-6 as a coherent, multi-level description of the role of alternative schools: who they serve; how some work; and why they find the support they need to persist. The discussion of these results reflects on the limits to generalizing from the case contributions to this description, while considering the potential to extend conclusions supported by generalizable evidence from other methods. The discussion challenges current models of institutional change that address organizational heterogeneity. Theory fails to account for persistent organizational heterogeneity in a highly institutionalized field. I argue for persistent alternative organizations as a third outcome of the institutional change process and promote the further study of these organizations as features of institutionalized environments.

CHAPTER 2

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY: A ROLE FOR ALTERNATIVES

Institutional theory explains processes that generate fundamental organizational forms repeated throughout institutionalized organizational fields.² Political, state, economic, social, and cultural influences interact with organizations in a field to establish assumptions and understandings that explain and expect certain organizational structures and practices. I structure my investigation of public secondary alternative schools, as organizations that deviate in significant ways from highly institutionalized organizational structures and practices in the field of public secondary education, using questions and arguments from institutional theory to structure my inquiry. I work to identify those understandings and assumptions that explain the existence and persistence of alternative secondary schools within the field.

Social forces, theorized below as shaping the institutionalized structures of traditional, comprehensive public secondary schools, eventually led to the emergence of alternative structures as well. The persistence and growth of these alternative forms suggest their own in-process institutionalization. Institutional theory has yet to explain the sustained presence of heterogeneous organization types within well-established institutionalized organizational fields.

² For DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organizational fields include organizations consciously engaged in the same work plus other organizations that focal organizations interact with regularly in the course of that work. I bound the organizational field of interest to this study as public secondary schools in the U.S., schools serving students in grades 6-12, and the education organizations that they interact with directly through administrative, professional, and other work relationships.

My multi-level investigation of public secondary alternative schools explores their history, contemporary organizational characteristics, structures, practices and shared understandings of the work these organizations do.

The Institution of U.S. Public Education

For decades now, the U.S. system of public education has been held up as an illustrative case of organizations interacting with and within a strong institutional environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Strang, 1987). Though researchers have documented local variations in practice and results throughout the system (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Firestone, et al., 1991; Meyer, et al., 1978; Sipple & Killeen, 2004; Spillane, 1998), fundamental forms have emerged over time that shape and structure educational organizations in response to social understandings of the purposes and work of educating a citizenry. U.S. public education is unique in that local education organizations developed across the country before any centralized authority structure emerged to manage their work or development. The process through which these organizations came to represent a collective effort toward a national purpose generated defining structures and routines shared by organizations in the field. These politically, legally, and socially-prescribed structures become institutionalized forms and scripts over time and are argued to stabilize an organizational field; organizations with these structures and purposes persist and reproduce. In this way, socially valued work represented by institutionalized structures and practices gets done with necessary support and resources provided.

Institutional theory provides an explanation for the structures and routines guiding school organization and practice that have no defined or measured technical purpose (Rowan, 1995). The theoretical and empirical work of Meyer and colleagues throughout the 1970s and 80s compare the effects of strong institutional environments to those of strong technical environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981; Meyer & Scott, 1983). Where the technical demands on an organization are clear, organizational structures evolve in response to technical demands for the efficient and effective production of technically defined results. For example, factories evolved to coordinate the production of material goods for a market. Managers in factories closely coordinate the work of subunits (e.g., departments) and monitor quality and efficiency at each stage of the work process. The work and its ends can be concretely measured by planners and managers and clearly evaluated using technical specifications or with market measures.

Organizations working with technical uncertainty, on the other hand, respond to more diffuse environmental pressures and develop common institutional forms that organize and explain the work of the organization. Instead of producing some undisputed, clearly defined, and precisely evaluated form of learning in pupils, schools produce students certified as graduates who have moved through a well-articulated system of symbolically significant levels and content areas presented by certified teachers in classrooms. These classifications, certifications, and structures define and shape the work of public schools (Cuban, 1993; Tyack, 1990). Or as defined by Meyer and Rowan in their classic 1978 piece, "Education is a certified teacher

teaching a standardized curriculum topic to a registered student in an accredited school” (p. 84).

The evolution of the loosely connected 18th century system of common schools into the education *system* we know today took generations. Jepperson (1991) describes this process of institution building as “a sequence of actions and interactions . . . [that] recurs repetitively and without overt intervention, or . . . a pattern of social action [that] reproduces itself according to some orderly set of rules” (p. 145). Our educational system has seen much change, experimentation, and ultimately much alignment over the past two centuries. A brief reframing of the history of U.S. public schools highlights salient features of the institution building process that shaped today’s public education system.

Initially, individual schools served separate communities without a great deal of interorganizational communication or sense of shared purpose (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kaestle, 1983). Publicly available schools were born out of local, state, and national interests in individual opportunity, the social benefit of an educated populace, and the unification of a diverse citizenry – all stated goals of the common school movement. But individual schools relied on local circumstances for support, resources, and the determination of priorities. Various structures and arrangements defined individual schools, ranging from small physical structures in rural settings housing intenerate teachers and mixed age small groups of students for short school terms (with resources provided by the communities served) to large urban charity schools housing multiple teachers and hundreds of students year round with resources provided by churches, foundations, and philanthropists. Predictably, differences in

resources, organizational structures, local politics, etc. resulted in very different outcomes. The increasing involvement of state and federal governments over time and the successes of administrative progressives in professionalizing the field resulted in laws (e.g., compulsory attendance, certifications, accreditations, etc.), organizational and administrative structures (e.g., grade classifications, teacher classifications, academic content classifications, factory model schools, superintendencies, etc.), and practices (e.g., fourteen-year-old students attending ninth-grade classrooms taught by ninth-grade teachers teaching ninth-grade material at variously tracked levels in expected subject areas in a high school) that came to characterize schools more generally by the mid-twentieth century (Callahan, 1962; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). These structures and practices continue to characterize schools today.

As increasing numbers of students attended increasing numbers of schools, school district structures developed. Localities required multiple schools or larger schools or both, and therefore required more resources, more teachers, more classrooms, etc. One social agenda, concerns for equality, demanded standards and definitions of quality (Meyer, Scott, Strang & Creighton, 1988). Another, the professionalization agenda initially of the progressive era, demanded monitoring of both classifications and standards regarding students, teachers, content, and curriculum (though notably not much monitoring of instruction and its outcomes) and replaced the authority of local board members and other local voices with those of professional education administrators. In response, district level organizations developed to manage increasing scale and growing organizational requirements.

Rules and roles formalized into school and district structures eliminating the need to negotiate these details of the task of educating. Bureaucratization formally organized and coordinated schools' efforts around common, though sometimes conflicting, social purposes.

This formal organization allows schools and districts to avoid conflict and legitimacy concerns (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). In Meyer & Rowan's (1977) terms, the ritualized scripts and routines employed in schooling reflect the institutionalized myths around U.S. public schooling: e.g., education equalizes opportunity for all students/citizens, provides an educated populace and workforce for the sake of society, and prepares citizens for active roles in our democracy. Through formalized structures and routines, schools and districts symbolically represent their efforts toward the collective activity of schooling to a public that has come to understand these formal organizational structures and practices as "educating" while excusing the technical uncertainty and lack of scrutiny surrounding outcomes and instruction.

Increasing state involvement in education has contributed to the shape of institutionalized organizational and inter-organizational structures in the field as well. State constitutions have provided for the creation and maintenance of public schools, so far preventing centralization under federal authority. As states' policy and funding roles grew, another layer of authority in the education bureaucracy emerged. This more complex bureaucracy points to increasing rationalization but the lack of one clear centralized authority points to increasing rationalization toward societal, not state, purposes (Meyer, et al., 1988). Eventually, the federal government began asserting its own authority over certain categories of students (e.g., those with physical

disabilities or from low income families) through national policy and funding strategies like IDEA and ESEA. The field responded by adding school and district administrators to manage organizational responses to state and federal programs (e.g., Title I funding coordinators). The resulting fragmentation, some administrators concerned with specific resource streams and mandates from federal authorities vs. others concerned with state or local versions, has led to both vertically and horizontally complex structures and relationships, both between and within education organizations (Meyer, Scott & Strang, 1987).

A second effect of increased state penetration of these organizations is the consolidation of districts across the country. Toward the goals of efficiency, rationalization, and standardization of the classification and certification system described above, state authority over certification, curriculum, accreditation, etc. has encouraged widespread consolidation since the 1940s (Strang, 1987). These larger districts, serving greater numbers of students in larger schools, organize according to the institutionalized logics and structures explored above and produce the departmentalized, differentiated comprehensive middle and high schools described by many historians and researchers as the dominant form or standard for U.S. public high schools (Cuban, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The persistence and ubiquity of these organizational forms, without some central authority at work planning and managing secondary school development, point to the effects of powerful institutional forces.

In brief, institutionalized structures and practices for secondary schools serve societal purposes for educating all students toward their political, economic, and social roles as citizens by processing categorized students through certified categories of

classrooms, grade levels, subject areas, academic tracks and certifications. Individual certified teachers oversee and deliver instruction as each sees fit, so long as inspection criteria monitoring classifications and certifications are met. Increasingly centralized, fragmented, and complex administrative structures have partial authority over policy, resources, activity, and outputs at various levels: school, district, state, and federal. In the end, institutionalized structures and practices and the technical uncertainty inherent to the instructional process in public schools lead to a cornerstone of Meyer and Rowan's (1977; 1978) characterization of institutionalized environments. The difficulty of defining an unambiguous output for education, and then a clear technology leading to that outcome, has historically shifted inspection from the technical work of schools to those symbolic and ritual classifications that embody the meaning and value of schooling. So, administrations closely monitor the classifications, credentialing, and accreditation of students, teachers, curriculum, and schools – and less so the outcomes of these inputs and processes -- to legitimate the work of schools. The strong institutional environment of U.S. public education has supported the stability and consistency of these organizational forms for much of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.

Pressures toward Conformity

Pressures to look alike and stay the same have developed remarkable power to shape schools over time. The U.S. public school system has evolved into an institutionally influenced organizational field through the structuration process described by DiMaggio and Powell (1991) and detailed in the previous section. Public

schools interact as organizations mutually aware of being engaged in a common enterprise within a clearly defined system of inter-organizational hierarchies (e.g., schools, districts, state education departments, etc.) and coalitions (e.g., professional organizations, teachers' unions, organizations of like-minded schools, etc.). Likewise, the public school system in the U.S. has incorporated the evolutionary processes described by Meyer and Rowan (1977) for generating the rational myths of organizational structure that reflect an institutional environment. Schools, districts, states, federal laws, etc. have collectively organized a bureaucratic environment (characterized by legislation, credentialing, administration, etc.) through which organizations work toward achieving institutionally defined goals (economic, political, and ideological goals for education held by society). Within an organizational field shaped by institutional forces, organizations face multiple sources of pressure to conform to institutional norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978).

Early neo-institutional theorists (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Meyer & Scott, 1983) describe social and cultural pressures on organizations and organizational actors as determined by an organization's institutional environment. Their theoretical contributions address organizational behaviors not adequately explained through market forces or rational choice theories focused on internal decision making by powerful actors (Rowan, 1995). Though clear definitions and defining boundaries of institutions remain undeveloped in theory (Strang & Sine, 2005), institutional environments supply the meanings, norms, and

imaginable structures that both constrain and generate possibilities for the ideas and actions of institutional actors (Scott, 2001).

Institutions, and the embedded organizational forms they engender, are difficult to unpack as social structures. Some of the features that distinguish institutional effects include pre-conscious, taken-for-granted qualities like those of cultural symbols and social norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Jepperson (1995) defines institutions with their ability to reproduce without collective action, identification of interests, or the mobilization of resources. In effect, no one need pay close attention for institutions to persist, to develop, to evolve, and to shape the social landscape. In the end, however, we collectively embrace established institutions as felt sources of social stability and order (DiMaggio, 1988).

These collective realities and the structures and practices that grow up around them generate constraints and possibilities for actors in these environments. Institutional pressures shape organizations operating in embedded, complex, and overlapping institutional environments. These organizations must embody institutional priorities in the structures and practices they employ in the pursuit of institutionally sanctioned goals. For Meyer and Rowan (1977; 1978), institutional structures and forms have the symbolic power of myth and ritual. They indicate to the surrounding culture and society that the organization has embraced the rationalized myths that explain the organization's existence and functioning. Without the meaning derived from the use of these structures and forms, organizations in strong institutional

environments must work to establish cultural and social meaning in order to garner social support and the accompanying resources (Meyer, Scott & Deal, 1983).

Instead of encouraging variations in organizational forms, institutional pressures require organizations to conform to established structures, routines, roles, and scripts. Regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures reflect social and cultural expectations for legitimacy,³ which is necessary in order to benefit from the resources that support survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2001). The goals, structures, practices, and outcomes of an organization have various audiences that supply the resources for continued survival and determine an organization's credibility. Unique organizational structures "lack legitimated accounts" of their activities and therefore face pressure to conform to legitimated structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 352).

For schools, these goals include maximizing or equalizing individual opportunity, benefiting democratic society with an educated citizenry, unifying a diverse population, and preparing a workforce for a secure economy. The structures and practices of schools continue to reflect the factory model that represent the efficient and fair processing of students toward these ends.

Coercive, normative, and mimetic processes guide organizations toward isomorphic responses to regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Resistance is futile because organizational survival

³Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (p. 573)." The manifest goals, structures, practices, and outcomes of an organization have various audiences that supply the resources for an organization's survival and determine an organization's credibility.

depends on conformity in most cases. Because organizations within a given sector face the same institutional pressures, they each conform over time to the forms that embody institutional rules and logics -- they become increasingly homogeneous. All of these pressures are to be expected in an institutional environment, despite their effects on efficiency or effectiveness.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe the mechanisms of institutional isomorphism that, through structuration dynamics, shape organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Giddens, 1984; Jepperson, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Scott, 2001). The right ways to organize and do the work that is deemed meaningful for an organization in an institutionalized environment has been largely determined for all organizations in established, institutionalized organizational fields through an ongoing reflexive process engaging institutional actors and the shaping forces listed below.

Adherence to regulative rules (like laws and explicit policies) allows the organization to avoid accompanying sanctions. Coercive pressures from other organizations and from cultural expectations in society are felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to collusion. Common sources and mechanisms of coercive pressure include the legal environment through laws and sanctions, the political environment through government mandate and policy, the social environment through cultural and ideological expectations (that establish the requirements for legitimacy), and the institutional field itself through the structures and practices of other, depended-upon organizations. Regulative pressures overtly shape organizations through defined rules. If an organization's forms are inconsistent with the rules, they are not legally or

professionally legitimate and authorities will frequently challenge deviations through punitive measures. States, for example, must have developed state standards for student performance in content areas at each grade level. If not, states risk losing federal funding for schools.

Adherence to normative rules legitimates the organization and garners professional and other social/cultural support. Norms from within the organizational field and other norms of the institutional environment define appropriate organizational structures and practices through the information sharing of professional networks and through processes of professionalization like formal education, certification, and training. Consistency with social norms aligns organizations with audiences, their values and beliefs, and hence, garners the social support necessary to allow organizations to persist in social contexts. If an organization's forms are not consistent with social norms, people in and outside of the organization will find it impossible to support because the forms somehow conflict with social and professional values and beliefs. For schools, a curriculum mapped to state standards is an expectation promoted by professional organizations, consultants, and other organizations supporting and shaping school professionalism. Any school not engaged in the process of mapping is understood to be behind the times, unprofessional, or incompetent. A mapped curriculum represents the knowledge and ability to educate students to the level of state standards.⁴

⁴ A quick look at featured titles in the book stores of professional organizations and publishers, like ASCD or Corwin Press, provides clues to current normative pressures. Anyone can quickly find titles that prescribe curriculum mapping methods, sell supporting software, and provide rationales for the process.

Finally, mimetic processes also lead to homogeneity within organizational fields. Adherence to cultural-cognitive rules renders the organization meaningful or understandable, and hence possible. When organizations appear as expected, like other similar organizations, the threat of external evaluation is diminished (Meyer & Rowan, 1978; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1991; Kondra & Hinings, 1998). When organizations experience uncertainty in their technical environment (e.g., determining the best means to accomplish the technical work of educating), when organizational goals are not clearly articulated (e.g., debates regarding how to define “learning” or the priorities of public education), or when the relationship between work activity and goals is uncertain (e.g., determining which instructional strategies produce which learning or achievement results under which circumstances), organizational decision makers will model their behavior on that of other, similar organizations. In public schools, we find districts wishing to tackle a technical problem, like raising K-4 student ELA scores on state assessments, visiting more successful districts to understand and model their practices.

Other mechanisms for mimetic processes include the sharing of models through the labor force (as teachers and administrators change jobs) or consulting firms, the pressure to adopt the practices of other firms from labor or consumers (as when parents set expectations for schools based on other experiences or sources of information), and the availability of few models from which to choose. Cultural contexts determine the limits of imaginable practices and provide the definitions through which structures and practices are understood. If an organization's forms are not consistent with cultural understanding, the resulting lack of credibility prevents

organizational legitimacy. Therefore, public schools in the U.S. do not include 2 and 3 year old students though research has established the achievement advantage of expanded early language exposure through conversation and read alouds enjoyed by students from some households (Strickland & Shanahan, 2004).

So, schools face enormous pressures to work within the confines of regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive rules. Despite what might be technically more effective or efficient, certain structures and practices fall within an allowable range bounded by law and legal sanctions, social understandings of proper and professional, and the limits of imaginable possibilities or taken for granted realities.

Organizational Heterogeneity

So what allows for the variation in structure and practice that we find with public secondary alternative schools in the U.S.? From an institutionalist perspective of organization theory, the persistence of alternative schools makes little sense (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991). And Loflin (2000) details the legitimacy crisis faced by most alternative schools. What role do these schools serve that supports their proliferation throughout the public school system despite marginal claims to legitimacy?

Institutional theorists have turned their attention to organizational heterogeneity in institutionalized fields and institutionalization/institutional change processes in an effort to address apparent contradictions and partial explanations in institutional theory (Scott, 2001; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Because the effort is ongoing and theory development continues, ideas sometimes appear piecemeal or at

least as lacking coherent connections between one another. Each discussion referenced below engages the tension between the socially-constructed, taken-for-granted nature of decision-making constraints in institutional environments and the organizational agency in decision-making implied by organizational variation. Explanations include theorizing about degrees of institutionalization (Jepperson, 1991), about the complexity of institutional environments, about the importance of timing in the institutionalization process (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). I focus my discussion on contributions addressing conflict and process in institutionalized environments because these will both shape my investigation of alternative schools in their environment and my analysis of case study materials.

Conflict

Organizations often operate in conflicted institutional environments, and therefore reflect these conflicts with variations in organizational forms. Because different organizations feel, comprehend, and respond to conflicts differently, we find organizational heterogeneity in conflicted environments. Sources of conflict reside within, between, and external to institutional environments and may be understood as sudden or persistent. The discussion of the process of institutional change that follows identifies the perception and articulation of conflict (or a problem) as a starting point for these theorized processes. Given the long list of potential conflicts below, the remarkable consistency we find in institutionalized organizations seems even more unlikely.

Institutional rules may conflict with the technical demands on an organization so organizations balance use of legitimizing forms and technical production strategies to maintain resources necessary for survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer, Scott & Deal, 1981). Organizations may field multiple and conflicting demands from multiple legitimizing constituents, so organizations determine priorities and weigh the power/status of constituents (Cibulka, 1995; Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2001; Scott & Meyer, 1991). Agents of regulative and normative demands and existing cultural-cognitive demands may organize as multiple, fragmented, multilayered forces in the environment, so organizations adopt forms that reflect aspects of this complexity differently (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Powell, 1991; Rowan, 1982; Sipple & Killeen, 2004). Cultural symbolic systems generate less consistent understandings at times of social disruption or change, so organizations interpret forms differently and represent purpose with different forms (Swidler, 1986). Also, institutional demands may conflict with organizational priorities and /or bound organizational freedom enough that organizations resist, so organizations differ in the degree and shape of their resistance (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Oliver, 1991). Finally, organizations may occupy, or feel the influence of, multiple institutional spheres exerting different, sometimes conflicting, pressures, so organizations will embrace and shift between multiple defining, or evaluative, schemas (e.g., Scott, 2001; Zucker, 1988).

(De)Institutionalization and the Change Process

A contrasting approach to conceiving of organizational heterogeneity frames institutionalization as a process more than a property (Jepperson, 1991). Different

stages of institutionalization (of structures, practices, scripts, schemas, and routines) drive structuration dynamics differently and shape outcomes. This perspective examines the contexts and mechanisms through which individual, organizational, and field features appear or evolve, develop institutional properties, reshape and change institutions, or disappear. Each stage or sub-process requires theoretical explanation and empirical illustration because early neo-institutionalists so clearly articulated the external and objective nature of institutional pressures toward conformity and have yet to describe a detailed process of institutionalization, change, deinstitutionalization or failed institutionalization (Strang & Sine, 2005). Any discussion of heterogeneity, change or deinstitutionalization must address institutional dynamics that allow for diversity, destabilizing forces, their influence, and the agency necessary to somehow resist or innovate in stable institutional environments.

Distinctions between institutional change and deinstitutionalization appear vague. If anything, differences refer to degree of change along a continuum. When is an institutionalized social pattern changed enough to no longer be understood or reproduced as itself? For Scott (2002), the distinction demands hindsight. Institutions weaken and disappear as a result of deinstitutionalization. Institutional features like organizational archetypes and the diversity of organizational populations change as a result of the structuration processes leading to sustained institutional changes. Because the following discussions focus on process (e.g., precursor conditions, mechanisms for change, agents' roles, diffusion, etc.), instead of institutionalization as property, I posit that the distinction is not necessary to clarify in order to understand the dynamics of

variation and change in institutionalized environments. I illustrate current thinking here by including discussions of the conditions, loci, agents, and processes of both.

Most theorists identify the conditions for change in conflict. Persistent or high profile problems in the environment not remedied through current institutional structures, practices or understandings require a response from institutional actors (Suchman, 1995; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Such problems arise from conflicts between technical and institutional demands, from conflicts within the institutional environment, or conflicts between institutional environments. Greenwood and Hinings (1988) hypothesize that stability requires coherence between the interpretive schemes embraced by organizational members and organizational structures and practices. Oliver (1992) and Suchman (1995) cite changes in or problems with technical, social, or political demands that trigger deinstitutionalizing or institutional change processes, respectively. Zucker's (1988) theorized imperfect transmission of institutionalized structures and processes leads inevitably to at least localized conflict with broader institutional features. DiMaggio (1988) acknowledges the need for some account of group conflict and actors' interests to explain emerging and eroding institutions when dominant coalitions' interests lie with reproducing existing institutions (cf. Seo & Creed, 2002). And finally, many point to inevitable conflict stemming from stable institutional reproduction in a context of changing social, political, technical, economic, and cultural environments (Oliver, 1992; Rowan, 1982; Seo & Creed, 2002).

As suggested by the conditions for change above, theorists and researchers currently conceive of the agents and loci of institutional change and

deinstitutionalization processes from the micro level of the individual to the macro level of the organizational field (Scott, 2002). Agents of institution building, reproduction, or change work within the interplay of information sources, communication channels, institutional enforcement mechanisms, normative models, and cognitive definitions (Scott, 2002; Suchman, 1995). How conscious agents are of this work is a matter of continued debate among theorists and researchers. Individuals or coalitions with interests in change or problem-solving may replace or change incrementally sub-systems, scripts, and routines (DiMaggio, 1988; Seo & Creed, 2002; Suchman, 1995). For Oliver (1991; 1992) and Zucker (1988) organizations themselves exercise agency in reproducing, or not, institutionalized structures, practices, and forms in response to functional, political, and social pressures within organizations or from the organizational environment. Publics, professions, legislatures, regulating agencies, etc. may challenge and shape change in organizations, their structure, scripts, and routines (Rowan, 1982). Organizational forms change in response to technical crises or moral crises in social contexts where normative rules and cultural symbolic understandings may shift (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Oliver, 1992; Rowan, 1982). Peripheral organizations from outside of the field function as potential sources of alternative norms, interpretations, logics, routines and scripts that may challenge institutional reproduction (Powell, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002). Though not comprehensive, this list illustrates the potential for pressures against the automatic, unconscious reproduction of institutionalized patterns at any level from within or without the institutional environment.

The conditions for change introduced above trigger these processes. Suchman (1995) develops a model for change processes that incorporates individuals acting collaboratively in institution building, reproduction, and change into top-down and bottom-up processes. Top-down processes reproduce institutionalized patterns or contribute to institutionalization by reflecting and proliferating patterns of structure and practice and their associated logics: socialization, social control, cultural hegemony, diffusion, imposition, authorization, inducement, etc. (Scott, 2002; Suchman, 1995). Bottom up processes may reproduce institutionalized patterns as well, but both Scott (2002) and Suchman (1995) identify these processes as those most likely to result in change: selective attention, interpretation, sense-making, identity construction, error, invention, mobilization efforts, revolutionary processes, conformity, compromise, avoidance, defiance, manipulation, etc. (cf. Oliver, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002).), individuals take action in response to technical, political, and hermeneutic problems. The novelty of the problem determines the processes engaged. If a problem is congruent with pre-existing institutional models, then it is possible to extrapolate from prior institutional schemes to contrive a solution. In this case, the larger system provides a response to the particular problem – a top-down process. If, on the other hand, the problem is novel enough, large and/or recurrent, affects a central or vocal constituency, or arises in culturally-designated problematic arenas, individuals will collaboratively engage in problem cognition and sense-making around a solution so that an institutional resolution can begin to be established. This collaborative effort toward understanding/defining the nature of a problem and

assigning meaning to the proposed/developed solution is the sort of bottom-up process that leads to change (Suchman, 1995; Zucker, 1987).

Scott's (2002) practical and political categories of action roughly parallel the distinctions between these top-down and bottom-up processes. Practical actions are those that accept given structures and understandings, and therefore they change institutional structures very little. Norms and rules reproduce in this case. Political actions, on the other hand, have the purpose of changing logics, schemas, rules or frameworks governing actions.

The institutionalization of change continues to be contingent on complex social, cultural, and resource structuration dynamics. The likelihood increases under certain observed and theorized conditions. For Suchman (1995), a four stage process incorporates conditions for the institutionalization of standardized solutions. The problem naming process must render the problem understandable and identifiable as the same as other problems found in the larger institutional discourse, and the entities involved must occupy a central enough position in the larger system to warrant an institutional response to a problem made important enough, at least in part, by this centrality of involved persons, organizations, networks, etc. In the second stage, actors categorize and compare responses – processes that may impose top-down definitional structures unless the responses result from ad hoc, bottom-up processes. These first two stages serve somewhat as conditions for stages three and four, which parallel most other discussions of the change process. The institutionalization of responses may or may not continue. Significant institutional change results from potentially schema changing, bottom-up responses.

In the case of such responses, actors can develop new accounts of how the system works and which solutions are appropriate in which situation – stage three (Suchman, 1995). This shift in understandings, or constitutive logics, drives other theorists’ conceptions of change. For Seo and Creed (2002), contradictions between social structures generate conflicts and tensions that reshape the consciousness of self-aware actors who recognize their own unmet needs and interests. These actors apply alternative institutional logics toward praxis and thereby mobilize commitment and resources. Zucker (1988) cites the imperfect transmission of institutional elements, patterns and understandings of their purposes, as a process inevitably leading to shifts in the schema and resources that define structure, institutional structures for Sewell (1992). The institutionalization of alternative schemas at this stage requires a single account, which gradually becomes prescriptive or definitional, emerging from this sense-making process (Strang & Meyer, 1993; Suchman, 1995). For Tolbert and Zucker (1999), this is habituation and objectification, “the development of patterned problem-solving behaviors and the association of such behaviors with particular stimuli and . . . the development of general, shared social meanings attached to these behaviors, a development that is necessary for the transplantation of actions to contexts beyond their point of origination” (p. 174; cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As publics, professions, legislatures, regulating agencies, etc. engage in the sense-making process, the response, or solution, gains the legitimacy necessary for increasing adoption throughout an organizational field (Rowan, 1982). This diffusion of a new structure or practice and its understood meaning is the final stage of institutionalization for Suchman (1995). The mechanisms, conditions, and effects of

institutionalization inhere through this widespread adoption, a subsequent period of stabilization (Rowan, 1982), and a sedimentation process (Tolbert & Zucker, 1999) through which the transmission of changes over time imbue the structures and/or practices with the objectified, taken-for-granted quality of institutionalized responses.

Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings (2002) combine much of the above theorization and research into a model of institutional change.

- In Stage I, social, technological, or regulatory conflict generates jolts to an institutionalized system and thereby creates the opportunity for change.
- Deinstitutionalization (Stage II), when field level understandings are disrupted, is characterized by the emergence of new players, the ascendance of existing actors, and institutional entrepreneurship. At this point, a decision has been made to engage a political or bottom-up response to conflict or a problem, one that existing institutionalized responses may not solve. The possibility for change increases under these conditions.
- Technically viable independent innovation evolves during Preinstitutionalization (Stage III), when problems and solutions are defined and addressed locally. During Stage III, the number of unique responses is maximized.
- For local innovation to progress toward institutionalization, a general and shared understanding of new structures or practices as solution to a problem, also understood and felt as shared, must develop within the

field. During theorization (Stage IV), the problem definition and sensemaking processes must prove compelling to enough central constituents within the field to begin to develop moral or pragmatic legitimacy. A new response becomes understood as either a more right way to do things in the field or as a functionally better way to do things. Theorization, when successful, leads to diffusion (Stage V).

- The process of diffusion (Stage V) allows increasing objectification of the innovation as social consensus regarding the value of the innovation spreads. A shared account of the new practice and/or structure, purpose and reasons for legitimacy, becomes abstracted and simplified enough to consistently spread and reproduce. “. . . practices do not flow: theorized models and careful framings do” (Strang & Soule, 1998).
- Reinstitutionalization (Stage VI), or full institutionalization, is realized when dense adoption results in cognitive legitimacy and the one time innovation becomes taken for granted as the appropriate way to do things, reproducing across generations.
- When semiinstitutionalized (Tolber & Zucker, 1996) innovation fails to reach Stage VI, it should eventually fade away, as a fad or fashion would.

So Why Alternatives?

Contemporary institutional theory then both makes the case of public alternative schools interesting and may help explain the growing numbers of small,

heterogeneous, consciously alternative, public secondary schools. These schools, often characterized by participatory, democratic decision making; less formalized, extended roles and relationships; organizational autonomy; curricular freedom; etc., persist as smaller and different school organizations. They are interesting because so few other schools resist institutional pressures this way. The historical, descriptive quantitative, and case study work that follows will characterize the differences between alternative schools and other public secondary schools, identify constitutive logics behind differences in organizational structure, and evidence these organizations' stage in a process of institutionalization.

Central tenets of institutional theory would predict either the demise or the eventual isomorphic evolution of these organizations. The pressures on organizations to conform to specific structures and forms are powerful and ubiquitous (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Scott, 2001). As the Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings (2002) model above predicts, over the course of time we expect alternative schools to diffuse as a taken-for-granted response to some shared problem in public education, or we expect this organizational form to fade as fad or fashion that failed to be institutionalized.

The social unrest of the 1960s with its accompanying shifts in social priorities provided the sort of instability, the jolt and conflict needed for Stages I and II, that would allow alternative schools to emerge from the efforts of new players in the public education (Swidler, 1986). The support for their continued proliferation is less clear.

The persistence and proliferation of alternative schools throughout the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s suggests the processing of alternative forms through stages III, IV, and V of the institutional change process. When structures and practices are diffused throughout an organizational field over time, adopted and embraced across broad geographic areas, and similarly understood by organizations' audiences, these structures and forms have progressed far in the process of institutionalization (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Rowan, 1982; Sewell, 1992; Strang & Meyer, 1993; Suchman, 1995; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Alternatives continue to experience obstacles to reliable legitimacy, however (Loflin, 2000; Gregory, 2001). Instead of changing the institutionalized structures, ritual classifications, scripts, and roles of comprehensive high schools, as we would expect in successful reinstitutionalization (Stage VI), the field allows for heterogeneous organizational forms to persist on the margins of the field. In the case of alternative schools, innovation results in neither institutional change or in the extinction of an innovative form that has failed to fully institutionalize, after more than 40 years.

Diverse structures and strategies within the organizational field may benefit the field by providing possibilities for transformation, for improving performance, or for responding effectively to exogenous shocks (Kondra & Hinings, 1998). Also, marginalized, alternative organizations may exist to delimit an institution, thereby stabilizing the institution in times of uncertainty by narrowing social/cultural expectations of institutional organizations (the marginalized organizations do the work that institutional organizations do not, in this case) or by managing the segments of the field where institutionalized approaches have proven ineffective (Strang & Sine,

2005). Institutional theory has not yet explained the sustained presence of heterogeneous organization types at the boundaries of well-established institutionalized organizational fields.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

I begin this chapter with a theoretical defense of my multiple level mixed-method approach. This approach and its defense feel necessary for two reasons. In my effort to describe a role for alternative schools in the U.S. public school system, I felt that no one of these explored levels would provide sufficient explanation. So, I kept going. My multi-level inquiry allows me to approach my question, “what is the contemporary role of secondary alternative schools in U.S. public education?” from three perspectives: 1) a field level historical understanding of both why and how alternative schools evolved, *the “what” of this study*; 2) a field level, longitudinal comparison of alternative and traditional school populations and resources, *the “who” and “how much” of this study*; and 3) two intra-organizational analyses of stakeholder understandings that shape contemporary meaning for the work of alternative schools, *the “how” and “why” of this study*. My analysis of the history of alternative schools, as organizations that evolve to address unmet priorities for changing populations underserved by traditional school organizations, connects alternative structures and practices to stakeholders’ alternative priorities for these schools. The longitudinal analysis of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) demographic and resource data describes trends in differences between traditional and alternative secondary schools in the U.S., making the case that alternative schools engage in their work with different student populations and different levels of resources. The case studies

explain what work is understood as important for different stakeholders in two, different type alternative schools. The accounts of that work legitimate school structures and practices, and the schools themselves, for particular audiences. The context provided by historical frames of reference and contemporary demographic and resource trends may extend our understanding of what work makes alternative schools meaningful and legitimate.

I detour back to neo-institutional theory at first because current discussions of heterogeneity and change in institutional theory suggest that, in order to best understand institutional phenomena, a multiple level and longitudinal inquiry is likely to provide the most insight. Institutions change slowly, over time and the perspective of decades helps to ascertain if structures, practices, and understandings reproduce or change as generations of stakeholders cycle through institutionalized fields. Also, the phenomenon of alternative school organizations and their persistence in U.S. public education is, as noted before, made more interesting through the lens of neo-institutional theory. In a highly institutionalized field like U.S. public education, deviant organizations should not garner the legitimacy and associated resources to persist, like alternative schools do.

In the sections below, I detail my decisions around the inquiry methods, sampling, data collection, and analysis strategies that I use to understand this persistence. Though I mention my analysis of the history of alternative schools, I do not detail any decision making around that upcoming chapter. The history itself is more a literature review, not at all a coherent study of uncovered primary documents or other firsthand historical research. Its value lies in the context we gain for

understanding the social meaning assigned to the structures, practices, and work of alternative schools as they emerge, proliferate, evolve and persist. The NCES data situates alternative schools, through comparison to traditional schools, within the field of public secondary schools in the U.S. And the case studies detail the significance of the work of these organizations to those participating in that work. At the end of this chapter I detail my own role in this inquiry process.

These varied methods at these varied levels of inquiry do not tidily interlock and fill one another's gaps of information or insight. Instead, they more clumsily overlap in few places and, sometimes from a distance, provide partial information and perspective for interpreting other data. Inelegant as this application of multiple inquiry strategies may be, I believe the combination allows me to address this question of organizational role with perspectives from across time, through relationship to other organizations, and through the meaning constructed with stakeholder understandings of alternative school work.

Research Design

Institutional analysis can treat both the isomorphic and the constitutive nature of institutional processes. Organizational and interorganizational research commonly emphasizes the importance of isomorphic pressures on the adoption and maintenance of organizational forms and processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Baron, et al., 1986). Intraorganizational research often examines emergent institutional processes such as the creation and adaptation of scripts and roles (Barley, 1986; Ashforth & Fried, 1988). While in this review we have considered models of interorganizational institutional change, multilevel analyses may offer the firmest ground for theoretical and empirical advance (Strang & Sine, 2005, pp. 514-515).

My inquiry is both triggered and shaped by neo-institutional theory. As outlined above, the persistence and increase in number of alternative schools, because they contrast with traditional school structures in the field and resist institutional pressures to conform, indicate a current and observable instance of institutional conflict and change in process. The design I outline below uses theoretical emphases in neoinstitutional theory to shape the analysis of data gathered through mixed means in order to explore multiple organizational levels. Such a mixed methods, multiple level approach is increasingly endorsed and practiced in neoinstitutional approaches to the study of organizations (Scott, 2008; Scott & Christensen, 1995; Strang & Sine, 2005). Scott and Christensen (1995), in their collection of international empirical studies of institutional mechanisms and processes, illustrate the tendency of researchers exploring institutional processes and effects to use inquiry strategies across levels, or within multiple levels.

Interorganizational analyses address regulative, normative and cognitive elements of institutions through cultural and structural carriers: rules, laws, sanctions, certifications, accreditations, common beliefs and shared logics of action (Scott, 2001, p. 52). For DiMaggio and Powell (1991), this level of analysis works to explain the coercive, normative, and isomorphic pressures and illustrates the mechanisms through which institutional pressures shape and define organizations. Suchman (1995) describes top-down processes as the source of ready-made structural responses to collectively understood problems that serve as institutional (isomorphic and constraining) forces.

I will use the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data as a source of nation-wide data to describe characteristics of public secondary alternative schools in the U.S. Study of the organizational field allows me to detail the context and outcomes of structuration processes engaged throughout decades of organizational identity building for alternative schools (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Giddens, 1984). Longitudinal information about changes to the number, size, population demographics, and resources of alternative schools, as compared to traditional schools, may provide clues to the status and meaning of these organizations in the institutionalized organizational field. Why, when, and where did they emerge? How do interorganizational, organizational and intra organizational structures evolve and shape alternative schools over time? Scott, et al. (2000) conclude that change in organizational fields can be observed over time by noting changes to features of the field: the numbers and types of social actors signal changing archetypes or changes in cultural-cognitive, constitutive processes; institutional logics that reveal changes in culturally or normatively determined appropriate ends and means; and the characteristics of governance systems to indicate normative and regulative shifts.

“Longitudinal studies are particularly suited to institutional arguments, because institutionalization is both a condition and a process. Regulations, norms, and cognitive systems do not appear instantaneously but develop over time; the diffusion of common activity patterns and structures through time is viewed as important evidence for the developing strength of an institutional pattern (Scott; 1995, p. xx).”

Schneiberg and Clemens (2006) point to the study of heterogeneity as a next step in the empirical study of institutional processes. They assert the potential to better understand the cultural and cognitive pressures to challenge institutional arrangements

through the analysis of historical discourse. Especially when a dominant model exists in an institutionalized field, the discourse around deviating organizational structures and practices can point to the cultural and cognitive dissent leading to heterogeneity. The longitudinal quantitative analysis understood in the context of the historical discourse preceding this chapter should allow for insights along these lines.

Additionally, investigations of intra-organizational processes, primarily decision and meaning making, allow insight into the creation and adoption of divergent structures and practices of some schools. Efforts to resist existing institutional pressures (Oliver, 1991) and problem solve (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Suchman, 1995), from within and between organizations, sometimes evolve into the cultural-cognitive understandings and constitutive logics that define institutionalized structures and practices. Bottom-up processes like interpretation, sense making, identity construction, error, invention, compromise, avoidance, and defiance also contribute to the eventual shape of organizational structures and processes (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995; Zucker, 1988). Insight into these micro-processes requires inquiry at the intra-organizational level (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Schnieberg & Clemens, 2006; Strang & Sine, 2005). The evolution, and potential institutionalization, of alternative schools as organizations with collectively understood purposes, structures, and routines may offer uniquely timed and detailed evidence of these theorized processes. “Challenging logics carried by marginal actors or by mainstream actors invading from neighboring fields can undermine current truths and provide the foundation for the legitimation of new actors, practices, and governance structures” (Scott, 2001, p. 203).

Two case studies, selected to represent distinct types of alternative schools, allow my investigation of the micro level processes contributing to organizational structures, processes, and relationships in the field. Observations of classes and meetings in each school provide evidence and descriptions of structures and practices unexpected in public secondary schools. Documents and interviews with school stakeholders provide insight into the shared understandings and constitutive logics supporting and shaping structures and practices. Because the schools are understood as two different alternative school types, a comparison of structures, practices, shared understandings, and logics will illustrate the degree to which these schools may be understood as engaged in the same work. Through analysis of the explanations for alternative structures and practices provided with the qualitative data, I will articulate constituent understandings defining the problems addressed with these structures and practices (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; 2005; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2008; Suchman, 1995a; 1995b; Swidler, 1986; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Combined with insights from the historical and organizational demographic data, I might frame an explanation for the role, hence persistence, of these organizations in the field of public secondary education.

NCES Common Core of Data

Sampling

The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) publicly available Common Core of Data (CCD) provides data surveyed annually from the universe of U.S. public schools (NCES, 1986-2007). Representatives of states, districts, and

schools respond at different rates and to questions addressing different variables. The NCES Common Core of Data includes survey responses from the universe of public schools in the U.S. The “Build a Table” feature on the website allows users to select variables and aggregate data at the school, district, and state levels. These levels are somewhat artificial and incomplete because all reporting comes to NCES through state level data coordinators (Sietsema, J., telephone conversation on 1/5/04). Each state collects data differently; therefore variables reported from the school building level in one state may be reported from the district level for another state. The data are organized in the CCD according to a logic that determines which level is most appropriate as a source for data, not necessarily according to the actual source for data; for example, some school level variables contain repeated district level data points. Furthermore, each state collects data on different combinations of reported variables, therefore for any variable it is possible that entire states’ worth of data is missing from the CCD.

Nonetheless, this is the most complete source of data on schools in the U.S. By filtering data according to school types, specifically public alternative schools and regular schools, I am able to build data sets for each type. As subsets of the CCD, these data sets present the available data for the universe of each type of school. Using these sets I present comparisons between features of alternative schools and regular schools. These comparisons are between actual totals, calculated percentages using these actual totals, and calculated averages using these actual totals. Therefore, I have no need for probability measures in these descriptions. My presentation of school characteristics is limited by the availability of variables reported from the

school building level in the CCD. Once reported from the school district level, distinctions between school types disappear and no longer allow for the comparison between alternative and regular school types. The U.S. Department of Education defines alternative schools, in most part, by what they are not: “A public elementary/secondary school that (1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, (2) provides nontraditional education, (3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or (4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education” (Chen, 2011). Though NCES researchers suspect significant underreporting of alternative schools in the data (Sietsema, J., telephone conversation 1/5/05), I was able to identify 9003 schools in existence, some temporarily, from 1986-87 to 2006-07 that were identified as alternative. Throughout the presentation of the data, I compare the population of public alternative secondary schools to public secondary regular schools. NCES defines a regular school as “A public elementary/secondary school providing instruction and education services that does not focus primarily on special education, vocational/technical education, or alternative education, or on any of the particular themes associated with magnet/special program emphasis schools” (Chen, 2011).

Underreporting of Alternative Schools in the CCD

These cases should represent the universe of public alternative schools, but a NCES Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) project investigating public alternative schools and programs for students at risk reported that their pilot study uncovered discrepancies between the CCD’s 1998-99 account of alternative schools and the

FRSS pilot results, using the 1998-99 CCD cases, in 2000-01 (Kleiner, et al., 2002). Forty percent of the 87 percent of districts not reporting any alternative schools in 1998-99 actually had at least one, two years later, in 2000-01. Also, 10 percent of the 11 percent of districts reported as having an alternative school in 1998-99 did not have one in 2000-01. Some of these discrepancies are explained by the opening and closing of schools over the course of two years, but the great difference between the CCD accounting of 11 percent of districts with one or more alternative schools and the FRSS pilot study's estimate of 45 – 55 percent of districts suggests gross underreporting of alternative schools in the CCD data. Finally, because the FRSS survey identified only alternative schools for at risk student populations, a definition of alternative school that includes those for heterogeneous or other populations would likely increase the FRSS numbers.

Other evidence for underreporting includes the absence from the database of a common model for alternative schools in New York State (NYS), a single school enrolling students from multiple districts under the supervision of a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), from the CCD file. This means that alternative schools serving about 7800 NYS students in 2002 were missing for NYS (NYSED, 2003). A few states appear to have missing data regarding alternative schools in all or in various years of the CCD. And, using district level filters with the CCD data results in a higher percentage of alternative schools in Table 1, approaching 7% instead of 5%. I use school level filters for these analyses under the assumption that school level numbers are likely more accurate. Discrepancies in the CCD are

understood as the result of variations in state data gathering strategies and reporting practices (Sietsema, J., telephone conversation 1/5/05).

I use the district level data in state totals from the CCD file to calculate totals for two tables: alternative schools as a percent of all schools and alternative school enrollment as a percent of total U.S. public school enrollment. I suspect that a higher concentration of districts respond to NCES' annual requests for data when compared to individual schools' response rate though I have no documentation to that effect. By "all schools," I mean the total of alternative and regular schools. My calculation of totals does not include vocational and special education schools. In 2006-07, states reported about 90% regular schools, 7% alternative schools, 2% special education schools, and 1% vocational schools (NCES. Table 2. Numbers and Types of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2006-07. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/pesschools07/tables/table_02.asp. Accessed 6/11/2009). Because special education and vocational schools represent a small fraction of elementary and secondary schools, and leaving them out streamlines my calculations, I exclude them.

Variables

The available descriptors and points of comparison used in the study include the following.

School Type Trends

- Alternative schools as a percentage of all schools from 1986-87 to 2006-07 calculated using annual total counts of alternative schools divided by annual total counts of schools
- Student enrollment in alternative schools as a percentage of total U.S. student enrollment from 1986-87 to 2006-07 calculated using annual count of total student enrollment in alternative schools divided by annual count of total U.S. enrollment
- Percentage of school type – alternative and regular – identified as charter schools from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of each school type flagged as charter schools divided by total annual count of each school type
- Percentage of charter schools classified as regular or alternative school type from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of regular charter schools and alternative charter schools each divided by total annual count of all charter schools

Student Race and Ethnicity

- Percent of student population identified as Black, Non-Hispanic in each school type from 1987-88 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of Black, Non-Hispanic students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type

- Percent of student population identified as Hispanic in each school type from 1987-88 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of Hispanic students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type
- Percent of student population identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native in each school type from 1987-88 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of American Indian or Alaskan Native students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type
- Percent of student population identified as White, Non-Hispanic in each school type from 1987-88 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of White, Non-Hispanic students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type
- Percent of student population identified as Asian or Pacific Islander in each school type from 1987-88 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of Asian or Pacific Islander students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type

Indicators for Students from Low Income Households

- Percent of alternative and regular schools receiving federal Title I Funds from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of schools receiving funds divided by total annual number of schools in each school type
- Percent of student population receiving federal funding for free or reduced price lunches from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using annual counts of students receiving funds divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type

- Percent of alternative and regular schools receiving federal Title I Funds for school-wide programs from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of schools receiving funds divided by total annual number of schools in each school type
- Percent of student population receiving federal funding for free lunches from 1987-88 to 2006-07 calculated using annual counts of students receiving funds divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type

Student Gender

- Percent of student population identified as Male in each school type from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of Male students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type
- Percent of student population identified as Female in each school type from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of Female students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type

Migrant Students

- Percent of student population identified as Migrant in each school type from 1998-99 to 2006-07 calculated using total annual count of Migrant students divided by total annual student enrollment in each school type

Pupil Teacher Ratio

- Average pupil to teacher ratios in alternative and regular schools from 1986-87 to 2006-07 calculated by totaling all pupil teacher ratios then dividing by number of schools reporting ratios in each school type

Important variables not available at the school level for comparison include better indicators of school household and community wealth, per student spending, school funding levels, school operating expenses, graduation rates, and other indicators of student outcomes.

Case Studies

Sampling

Two case studies were selected to generate the broadest range of variety in collected data: observations of practice and structures; self-reports of stakeholders' experience and understandings of public secondary school alternative structures and practices from interviews; and current and historical public documents from both schools. The literature describing the evolution and characteristics of alternative schools emphasizes the heterogeneity of structures and practices in the field. This heterogeneity prevents the identification of one typical case for study. Through the identification of two cases of different types, I will maximize the diversity of experience and understandings to inform my exploration of current intraorganizational micro processes supporting alternative structures and practices in context (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Stake, 1995; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

To accomplish this, the cases serve as hypothesized variations (Yin, 2006) of alternative school types as determined by school size, student population characteristics, governing structures, available courses/curriculum, and prioritized goals as found in introductory materials like school websites, written descriptions in public communications, and my own initial familiarity with the cases as detailed below. The contrast of these organizational characteristics as indicative of different organizational types is supported by the preceding discussion and detailing of alternative school characteristics. Using the typification schema described in Chapter 4, Case A is best described by Sagor's (1993) Pacification Programs and Raywid's (1994) Type III schools since it serves an exclusively "at-risk" population of students without the central remediating focus described by Sagor's Treatment Programs or Raywid's Type II schools. Though students are recommended by school authorities to Case A, students actively choose the setting after at least an extended visit and series of interviews. Case B is best described by Sagor's Prevention Programs or Raywid's Type I schools because it serves a heterogeneous population of students, who are selected by lottery, and focuses on organizational, curricular and instructional innovation.

I do not include a case to represent the third type described in the literature for a few reasons. Sagor and Raywid both consider the structures and practices of the Therapeutic Programs or Type III schools ineffective. Possibly for this reason, it is difficult to find schools or programs associated with larger public systems that better fit into this category. Without a large scale accounting of individual alternative school structures, practices, and priorities, it is difficult to speculate about the prevalence of

these programs. That accounting is beyond the scope of this study, and resource and geographic limits of this study prevent the identification and inclusion of this type. With that said, because these alternative school types are not formalized as exclusive sets of forms, practices, and priorities, the two selected cases may well include practices and structures from this category. I do believe that the two selected cases provide the opportunity to describe a meaningfully broad subset of the alternative school structures, practices, and priorities described in existing literature.

Accessibility

Stake (1995) tells us that the first criterion in the selection of cases should be “to maximize what we can learn (p.4)” at least in part based on the accessibility of particular cases. Yin (2006) also identifies accessibility to key persons and the likely availability of rich data as important screening criteria for cases.

In part, I selected these two cases based on my unique relationships with both schools. I had, in years prior to data collection, formally and informally worked for some time in each setting. In an effort to maintain some confidentiality for each site, I will keep the details of the duration, timing and nature of my work general. I worked in teaching, administrative, and volunteer capacities. Though I had not worked in either setting for at least a year before beginning my formal study, many of the adults and students still present in each setting knew me in some capacity.

I had maintained positive professional, personal, and community-based relationships with individuals in both settings. I need to continuously monitor the influence of my familiarity with the sites and certain individuals on my own

assumptions, interpretations, and decisions in order to maximize the value and credibility of this study. Nonetheless, I believe that these relationships allowed me increased access to people, information, and various settings (e.g., classrooms, meetings, and activities), an expedited process for developing my own engagement and participation in both settings, and an increased level of trust from the schools' community members. To defend against potential bias generated from my familiarity, I triangulate throughout data collection and analysis. Interview subjects included individuals I did not previously know; no data informed my analysis without confirmation from other interviews, documents, or observation; and my access, surpassing typical access, would expose contradictions to reports and interpretations.

The cases prove geographically accessible as well. The schools serve separate counties in different regions of upstate New York. The localities, though separated by multiple school districts and towns, are both nearby enough to facilitate ongoing study and unanticipated return visits. The schools have some awareness of one another; a few individuals in each school have had some contact historically with either the other school or individuals connected to the other school.

Finally, these schools represent likely sources of rich data about the structures, practices, and priorities of alternative schools. For Yin (2006), a case study screening criteria should include participants' willingness to work with researchers, the case as likely source of rich data, and "evidence that the case has had the experience or situation that you are seeking to study (p. 115)." Both schools had existed as alternative schools for at least 20 years when I approached them for study. Their longevity alone is evidence of breadth of experience and both organizations had

founding members still working in the organizations. Both schools were also recognized within the field as examples of successful practice: evidence included regular visits to the schools from other alternative schools' faculty and students, ongoing projects with other local and national researchers, and multiple invitations to both schools to present their programs to audiences at regional and national conferences. Finally, both schools sustained long waiting lists of students who hoped to attend. Since I wish to gain insight into the evolution and purposes of alternative organizational structures and practices, these two cases, as hypothesized variations, likely serve as sources of alternative best practices, developed across time by people with long experience in alternative education, and sustained through the support of stakeholders who choose their involvement with these organizations. I trust these cases as sources of rich and relevant data.

Data Collection

Interviews, observations and the analysis of historical, public relations, and policy documents provided case data. The interviews of stakeholder group members associated with the case schools allowed me to explore individuals' understandings of the logics and priorities of the organizations' work (Creswell, 2003; McCracken, G., 1988; Noblit, 1984; Patton, 1990). I used a semi-structured interview protocol with all participants, with exceptions noted below. The structure of the protocol allowed me to maintain consistency between interviews by asking the 122 interviewees the same core questions. This consistency will improve data credibility for some (Patton, 1990). Perhaps more importantly, the balance between structure and open-ended questioning

ensured that I covered the topics and categories that I deemed important from existing literature and my research focus while I asked open-ended questions that allowed participants' internal categories and logics to shape their responses (Brenner, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 2003; Patton, 1990).

While asking varied stakeholders the same set of open-ended questions begins to shore up the validity and credibility of collected interview data, I maximize both by including multiple data sources. Collected documents, my formal observations of school routines, and historical interviews provide material for triangulating data in order to make findings as robust as possible (Cresswell, 2003; Cresswell & Clark, 2007; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994, 2006). This confirming role of triangulation extends to data collected using the quantitative methods described above. These multiple data, collected through multiple methods and sources, provide complementary information and perspective as well, thereby broadening potential for accurate and robust interpretation (Smith, 2006).

Interviews

I made initial contact with decision makers at the state, regional, district and school levels in the winter of 2005. I introduced myself and the project with a letter that requested the participation of the individual and/or program in the study (see Appendix X). In the letter, I detailed my plan to include, from within each alternative school community, administrators, teachers, students, and parents. To request participation outside of each school organization, I directly addressed district administrators, BOCES administrators, New York State Alternative Education

Association (NYSAEA) officers, and a NYSED representative involved with state alternative secondary schools.

All interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol begins by asking the respondent to describe their relationship to the school and the basis for any choice of this relationship. I asked students and parents a subset of the protocol questions. I asked all respondents to identify the most important work that gets done in the school and how that work gets done. I continued the interviews with school staff and external administrators associated with the schools by asking each to describe how current NYS Regents standards-based reform policies affects how work is done in the schools. And finally if time allowed, I asked how the respondent might improve the work of the school. In many interviews, if I did not have a clear sense of the respondent's ideas regarding the purpose of the alternative school, I asked, "Why is there an alternative school here?" When speaking with external administrators associated with the schools or NYS alternative education in general, I also asked how he or she evaluated the effectiveness of an alternative school. Most interviews lasted 30 – 90 minutes. Exceptions are noted in the narrative below. Each interview was both tape recorded or digitally recorded, and I took copious handwritten notes recording responses in the course of individual interviews.

School principals in both cases provided introductory interviews. Principals had significant longevity with their programs. In Case A, the principal had started working with the program within five years of its beginning. In Case B, the principal had founded the school. In both cases, the introductory interview was conducted over the course of two meetings that ranged from 90 minutes to three hours in duration. In

these meetings, principals traced the histories of the schools' evolutions, changes in the climate of support for the schools, and changes to criteria for effectiveness as an alternative school. Both principals provided historical documents to illustrate their answers. Document selection in both cases was determined, in large part, by ease of access to the documents. After these introductory interviews, principals facilitated my introduction as researcher to school staff as described below.

To recruit adults working in each school, I presented the study and requested participation in person at staff meetings after securing the permission and cooperation of the principal. After the respective staff meetings, I approached individual staff and faculty to schedule interviews. No individuals refused an interview. In Case A, I interviewed all staff and faculty because the school is small, serving around 40 students, in grades 9-12, with 5 full time staff: a teacher/principal, 4 classroom teachers, and an administrative assistant. In Case B, I conducted interviews with a sample of 12 teachers, 1 teacher aide and 5 (all) administrative staff. This school serves about 250 students, in grades 6-12, with about 40 staff members. In this case, I purposefully sampled teachers from all content areas and from both middle school and high school levels. My sample included all teachers considered by others to be more active in school decision making. In this sense, I used snowball or chain sampling to determine who to request an interview with next. I continued to recruit teachers until interviews became redundant. At this point, I had maximized the variation of responses from teachers.

The two schools required different strategies to recruit student participation. Case A required the active consent of parents. I sent letters of introduction home with

interested students after presenting the project to the entire student body in an all school meeting, a regular event at the school. The letters included informed consent statements that parents would need to sign in order for students to participate. It took repeated reminders over the course of three weeks to eventually gather sixteen signed consent statements from parents. In the course of those weeks in the late spring of 2005, I interviewed all sixteen students in four separate focus group settings. Focus groups ranged in size from two to six students. I interviewed nine female and seven male students across grades 9-12. The school served no students of color at that point in time. Each student began the interview by reading and signing a statement of assent. One male student left one interview early. Once again, I used redundancy as the criteria for no longer pursuing interviews. Variation in student responses had waned, so I did not pursue more student interviews.

Case B required passive consent from parents for student participation in the study. In a beginning of the year school newsletter mailing home to parents in the fall of 2005, I included a letter of introduction to all households. In that letter, I asked parents to contact me if they did not want me to interview their student. No one contacted me. In the course of that fall, I interviewed 40 students in grades 6-12 in a series of 7 focus groups. Focus groups ranged in size from three to eight students. I returned in the spring of 2006 to interview three more students, for a total of 43 interviews, in an attempt to increase middle school student representation. In total, I interviewed 22 female students and 21 male students across grades 6-12. With the help of school administrators, I consciously recruited for representation of students of color and students from families with low incomes as measured by eligibility for the

federal free or reduced price lunch program. I stopped recruiting students once I felt I had adequate representation of student demographic characteristics and that no new themes appeared in student responses to interview questions.

Both schools scheduled time for regularly scheduled advisory groups: groups of students facilitated by a staff member that serve as informal peer support groups, as peer and adult guidance counseling, as affinity groups, and occasionally as shared project/work groups. The students are accustomed to sharing ideas and feelings with one another. These groups are mixed grade and otherwise heterogeneous in composition and are generally large enough that a subset of the group, assuming that not every student will participate either through their own or a parent's reluctance, provided sufficient numbers for a focus group. This school structure facilitated the scheduling and organization of student focus groups in both settings.

Interviews with parents proved most challenging. I approached individual parents/caregivers and parent groups to ask a subset of the structured interview questions. In Case A, I phoned all current parents/caregivers by phone, at least twice, using the school supplied phone list during the winter and spring of 2006. Of the 39 listed phone numbers, three were no longer in service. I called at different times of day, and I left messages when able. In the end, I interviewed a parent or caregiver of six different students over the phone, taking handwritten notes as we spoke. After receiving verbal consent over the phone, conversations focused on parent/caregiver descriptions of the most important work done in the school lasted between 5 and 15 minutes. In Case B, my recruitment approach was more opportunistic and casual. Because the Case B school regularly scheduled events that included

parents/caregivers, I approached parents/caregivers at events through the 2005-06 school year and, if the conversation allowed me to, I asked them to describe the most important work of the school or why it is that they send their student to the school. Because I am interested in parents'/caregivers' perspective of the purpose of the alternative school, the answer to either question provides evidence of some understanding. I also attended parent/caregiver council sponsored events where twice groups of eight to ten parents addressed my questions, serving as parent focus groups for a part of their meeting or discussion. In this way, a parent or caregiver of approximately 25 students addressed at least one of my questions. My notes in this case focus on themes in parent responses, which had begun to repeat with little new variation. Nonetheless, my sample clearly biases the perspective of parents/caregivers who actively engage with the business of the school or who attend school events.

The remaining interviews were with district, regional or state level administrators who work indirectly with either school. In Case A, I interviewed three administrators from the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The school is one of many programs, including Career and Technical Education, Special Education Services, and administrative support services, administered through the BOCES. This particular BOCES runs about nine alternative education programs, not all schools. Interviewees included the BOCES Regional Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent for Student Services, and the Director of Alternative Education. Because nine districts send students to the school, I also interviewed administrators from four of these districts' high schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the fall and winter of 2005 and followed the protocol described above. For

Case B, I interviewed only one district specific administrator, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, in the Spring of 2006. Because the school is a district school, I spoke with the person in the district office most familiar with the school. And finally, I interviewed the New York State Education Department (NYSED) administrator who oversees Alternative Education in NYS. Two administrators, one internal to the schools and one external, had served as officers in the NYS Alternative Education Association (NYSAEA) and offered that perspective as well. Table 1 summarizes the interviews described above.

Table 3.6 - Summary of Case Interviews

Case A		Case B	
Interview Type	# of interviews	Interview Type	# of interviews
Teachers	4 of 4	Teachers	13 of about 30
Students	16 of about 39	Students	43 of about 250
Parents	6 of 39 families	Parents	25 of 250 families
School Administrators	1 of 1	School Administrators	5 of 5
External Administrators	7 total	External Administrators	2 total

Case reports reflect the difference in size between the two schools. The Case A school serves about 40 students and the Case B school serves about 250. Comparative quantities of collected data are proportional to the different sizes of the schools. The analysis and interpretation of more data for Case B results in a longer case report and more text devoted to making parallel points. More Case B voices, documents, and observations combine as evidence to support conclusions parallel to those in Case A.

Documents

I collected case documents in three ways: by request from principals in the course of their interviews; infrequently, by request to other interviewees, and finally, through internet searches of available school or district, NYSED and NYSAEA documents specific to the cases or alternative education in general. These documents provide contemporary and historical text for analysis of organizational structures, priorities, and contexts. These documents serve as a source of triangulating data in combination with interview and observation data (Cresswell, 2003; Cresswell & Clark, 2007; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994, 2006). Also, analysis of the historical and contextual discourse represented in these texts supplements evidence of the co-evolution of organizational structures and associated logics (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006).

For Case A, collected documents include the initial Program Proposal, program descriptions for varied audiences from the school's first year, student work, staff evaluations/reflections, staff meeting agendas, student letters in support of school practices, student results reporting, and student intake materials. For Case B, collected documents include monthly newsletters from 2004-2006, position papers, student committee products, site-based council agendas and notes from 2005-2006, court and state level documentation of performance-based assessment campaign, and multiple student surveys. In both cases, administrative and student voices are documented more regularly and thoroughly than staff and faculty or parent voices. Because both schools embrace participatory processes and distributive leadership

practices, documents may represent staff and faculty voice more than is made explicit in the documents themselves.

Observations

My observations of classes and meetings in both settings preceded and coincided with interviews. Both schools regularly host observers because of their reputations as experienced and successful alternative programs. My access to classrooms, events, and meetings of all sizes was never refused in either school. Faculty and students in both settings acknowledged me, welcomed me, approached me to explain activities, and answered all of my questions without apparent reservation. In the course of each observation I took notes and, soon after, took time to reflect on the observation. My note-taking followed the guidelines of low inference transcripts of classroom observations. Low inference observation is a strategy used to promote teacher reflection on practice, identify patterns across classrooms, and support collegial discourse on teaching and learning (Children's First Intensive & the NYC Department of Education, 2008). Reflections generated questions and understandings that I could ask or test later.

My observations serve as source data, in particular, for organizational practices. I gathered evidence beyond the reporting of interview informants. Observations provided examples to apply in interviews when clarifying or prompting. I could also check my understandings of practice with informants in the course of interviews. In this way, observations and interviews supported one another beyond triangulation and complementarity.

Analysis

My analysis of interview, document, and observation data will initially focus on coding the “important work” of the case schools and the structures and practices that embody or support that work. I intend to build an explanation of the meaningful work of these schools, as a partial effort to describe a distinct role for them, through an inductive process that begins by searching for patterns around my imposed theorized category of “important work” (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994; 2006). According to Yin (1994), explanation building requires an iterative process that begins with an initial proposition that is repeatedly compared to increasing detail of data findings and subsequently revised. My initial proposition asserts that the descriptions of important work identified by interview participants, observations, and documents indicate the logics generating and constraining the practice and structures resulting in that work (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; 2005; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2008; Suchman, 1995a; 1995b; Swidler, 1986; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). The schema analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) of repeated associative linkages, metaphors, and unspoken assumptions in the data can reveal the institutional logics or “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumption, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p.804). By detailing the meaningful work of these schools, I hope to identify patterns and categories in the thinking around these organizations that explain their distinction from other public secondary schools.

I began by reviewing collected documents, observation notes, and interview recordings for Case A twice. My first reading was to get a general sense of the case as a whole (Cresswell, 2003). I began initial coding, as described above, during the second reading. As I coded, I took particular care to identify any of my own presumptions about included structures and practices. Based on the history and existing research of alternative schools, I would expect to find certain structures and practices identified and associated with specific logics (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995). As I read, I hoped to find surprising categories, rationales and connections too.

I identified emerging categories of important practices and structures as I more carefully coded during my second review of collected data. This phase of analysis assisted with reducing the data to those elements that proved most salient to establishing the meaningful work of this alternative school (Stake, 1995; Tashakori & Teddlie, 1998). A third close reading of the reduced data allowed me to apply honed definitions of work, emerging categories, and to identify any data irregularities (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994). Throughout this process, I changed coding indicators in order to maintain data and to create a process trail. The excel spreadsheet that includes interview details pulled from the second read through is then color coded to indicate conceptual categories emerging from the analysis (Eisenhart, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Another worksheet contains a log of considered categories (Patton, 1990).

I then generated a case report, based on rich description and case evidence, that focused my discussion on the major themes of my analysis in the cross-case analysis (Eisenhart, 2006; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994). I asked at least one participant from Case

A to critique the report's details and insights as a member check to ensure that the themes and categories make sense and ring true to others familiar with the case (Creswell, 2003; Tashakori & Teddlie, 1998).

I repeated these steps with Case B. Once having decided upon and confirmed my assertions around the meaningful work of both schools, I explored case similarities and differences in my effort to draw conclusions about the particular, or distinct, meaning of these school organizations. From both cases, I considered potential disconfirming evidence, rival explanations and irregularities as I worked to establish valid inferences around distinct meaningful work for each, or for both, cases (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 1990; Tashakori & Teddlie, 1998).

My Role in the Inquiry

In order to best evaluate the methods and conclusions of this inquiry, any reader needs to know more about what brought me to this question, my motivations and concerns. The construction of data and the interpretation of its meaning is a microcosm of the structuration process described in the above theory chapter. It is through my interaction with interview informants, text, and observed phenomena that this particular subset of potential data became the object of analysis, an analysis initiated by my concerns, then shaped through my understanding of others' research and theoretical work. I am engaging an ongoing conversation with this work, and I bring my own perspective, history, and abilities with me to this task.

I taught, managed, volunteered, and researched in secondary alternative school settings for 15 years in upstate New York. Before that, I even served for a year and a

half as a graduate assistant in a small alternative high school in Dayton, OH when I was earning my teaching credentials. Though I continue to work in public school settings, in the administration of curriculum and instruction, it has been about five years since I have focused exclusively on alternative settings. Because I began teaching in an alternative school, it took me a few years to understand that our practices and priorities were quite different from the traditional schools our students hailed from. My only point of reference had been a semester of student teaching in a suburban high school in Ohio.

I am intentionally vague about what work I did in which settings because as I describe above, some of that work was in the schools that serve as cases for study. While conducting these case studies, I promised interview participants that I would make every effort to maintain the confidentiality of their identities. That leaves me walking a line between that effort and my desire to disclose meaningful experiences and relationships. As I explain above, it had been at least two years since working in any capacity at either site when I began my formal inquiry into the cases. In the course of those two years, I had maintained relationships with some individuals from each school.

These relationships pose another challenge to the credibility of my interpretations. Though these relationships allowed me access to people and settings that I may not have negotiated in other settings given similar time constraints, I must regularly check my own interpretive process for potential bias generated through those relationships. As detailed above, I worked to maximize diverse data sources so that I might consider as many varied understandings and perspectives as possible. To defend

against potential bias generated from my familiarity, I triangulate throughout data collection and analysis. Interview subjects included individuals I did not previously know; no data informed my analysis without confirmation from other interviews, documents, or observation; and my access, surpassing typical access, should expose contradictions to reports and interpretations. Member checks of case reports confirm, as much as possible, the accuracy of my reporting and interpretations. Multiple opportunities for disconfirming data to emerge included interviews with varied individuals among each constituent group; many historical and contemporary documents representing the purposes and priorities of the case schools; observations planned to uncover the most variation in structure and practice; and the member checks by two individuals with long familiarity with each case school. In addition, the five year gap between gathering and analyzing this data provides some of the distance that some readers will equate with improved objectivity.⁵ I cannot recall, without notes and recordings, the specific understandings and perspectives of those with whom I had maintained relationships.

My experience with alternative education generated the central questions of this study. Alternative schools continuously address concerns for legitimacy (Gregory, 2001; Loflin, 2000). In the case of the BOCES alternative school, districts buy slots for students in the program. The school must sell enough slots to garner the resources it needs to continue. In the case of the district alternative school, ongoing presentations and reports argue for the successes of the school and make the case for

⁵I prioritize informed analysis of thoughtfully collected data over attempted detachment or neutrality as a condition for sound analysis. As Patton states, “distance does not guarantee objectivity; it merely guarantees distance” (Patton, 1992, 480-481).

directing district resources to the school. Though both schools maintain waiting lists that would fill each school again with students, this concern for legitimate status in the organizational field, and in the larger institutional environment, persists. Interestingly, in the five years since collecting this data, all public schools in the U.S. face a legitimacy crisis in mainstream consciousness as documented throughout contemporary press.

Nonetheless, alternative schools have consistently managed a perceived lack of legitimacy for decades longer. This raises the questions, “What are the legitimating outcomes for alternative schools? For whom?” What are the structures and practices that indicate these purposes? Or in other words, what is the work that distinguishes alternative schools? Without clear answers to these questions, or with many different answers to these questions, how do we explain the persistence of these organizations through decades of changing educational priorities? In this second decade of state and national standards-based reform policies demanding standard outcomes for all learners, why do alternative schools persist? These questions are made more compelling through the lens of institutional theory, as described throughout this study.

I started asking questions like these as a teacher in an alternative school. Alternative schools were serving students who, for different reasons, did not find the conditions for their success in traditional school settings. The students attending my school were almost exclusively from families with low incomes. The early versions of my questioning considered the tension between segregating populations of students and the potential for providing conditions for their increased success. My concerns evolved as it increasingly appeared that fewer resources supported our own and other

alternative schools when compared to their traditional counterparts. Public schools in the U.S. serve social, democratic, and economic purposes: develop a shared American experience, provide opportunity for all, teach the foundations of engaged citizenship, and support a future workforce. This inquiry attempts to describe the role of alternative schools in those efforts.

CHAPTER 4

PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Alternative schools have evolved and persisted against the odds. As established by educational historians, theorists and researchers, the institution of U.S. public education has developed over the course of more than a century to presuppose a system where secondary students attend a comprehensive high school in a consolidated district that is governed by local, state, and federal laws and policies (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Strang, 1987). In this school, a public expects that a student will be in a grade level appropriate to her age, will attend classes in standard subject areas, will have teachers certified in those subject areas, will have principals and superintendents who will ensure those certifications, and the student will earn credit for her work so as to graduate with certification of her successful studies (Cuban, 1993; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Tyack, 1990). The preceding chapter on institutional theory provides more detail about the institutionalization process and the organizational structures that reflect the institutional isomorphic pressures and constitutive logics that result in remarkable regularity among schools.

This chapter began as a review of the research literature around alternative schools. It now appears on this side of the methodology chapter because the institutional analysis driving this study requires a longitudinal perspective. The following account of the emergence and evolution of alternative schools over the course of more than 40 years combines the conclusions of theorists and researchers

throughout those decades. The effort to detail this history on my own with primary source historical documents and artifacts would have narrowed and likely mimicked parts of this broad and comprehensive historical perspective. Further study of the institutionalization process of alternative schools may be well served by discourse analysis of archival records of the development of individual alternative schools and the movement itself. For the purposes of this study, this history provides evidence of the initial stages of institutionalization. As public alternative schools begin to appear as a new generation of schools, after the earlier work of free and freedom schools, I trace their evolution within the field through most stages of institutionalization (Greenwood, et al., 2002). This chapter details the logics, structures, and practices of alternative schools through semi-institutionalization (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). Together with the following chapter, I present evidence that alternative schools worked their way through Stage V, Diffusion, of the Greenwood et al. Stages of Institutional Change model. The following history and account of alternative structures and practices is punctuated with my analysis of the institutional significance of characteristics and changes.

Why Do Schools Look Like Schools?

Horace Mann and his contemporaries in the 19th century conceived of a public system of education that would serve a number of important social goals: to develop and improve social order in the U.S. through common experience; to teach social virtues like truth, justice, and love of country; to provide social and economic opportunity to all in a class-divided society; and to provide the workforce for national

economic development (Young, 1990; Wells, 1993; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Cremin, 1961). Given increasing class disparity, increasing rates of immigration, and the religious, racial, and cultural diversity of a growing U.S., proponents of common schools either feared the conflict that could arise from such diversity or disapproved of the results of such diversity as they set about defining standards for American lifestyles (Cremin, 1961; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Wells, 1993). In the course of establishing and shaping what was growing into a system of universally available, locally controlled public schools, reformers began our tradition of viewing public education as a means of guiding social change and fixing social problems – a theme we hear repeated throughout most discussions of educational reform, historic or contemporary.

The Progressive Era polarized conflicting goals in U.S. public education. At the turn of the century and through the first few decades of the 20th century, models of education evolved to embrace or prioritize subsets of these goals, and groups of supporters of the various models aligned with one another into separate professional camps. In a time of clear and fast-paced social change, with the accompanying sense of disorder and instability, each of these progressive camps viewed themselves as working to improve society. Their different solutions reflect their different perceptions of society's failings.

The administrative progressives, identified as such and named by David Tyack in *Managers of Virtue*, embraced the ideals of efficiency and uniformity defined by the scientific managers. They were determined to make public education work to meet diverse needs of society: to integrate the flood of immigrants into modern

industrial society; to provide a workforce to serve the needs of our industrial and capitalist society; and to educate that workforce to understand the importance of its role in the U.S. economy so that workers would find the inspiration and motivation to work at productive levels. The values associated with this ideal of education included a productive and efficient work ethic – a shift to defining a secular set of social and cultural values that could better unify U.S. citizens. Efforts to professionalize the field of education led the administrative progressives to embrace the results of current scientific research, generally focused on information gathering and practical administrative strategies, and to base organizational and policy decisions on this research. Coupled with a background in scientific management practices, this practice allowed these educators and administrators to present themselves as the experts in charge of policy decisions with two important results. Public participation in public education policy setting declined because the consideration of public opinion was resisted as uninformed. And, because educational policy was now based on science and expert opinion, education maintained its status as “above politics.” Public education was now in the hands of successful businessmen with their expertise in management and efficiency, the superintendents of the large developing urban public school systems, and the new education scholars produced in the new education colleges of universities (Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Callahan, 1962). The Administrative Progressives generated the logic and garnered the resources that shaped the large, comprehensive secondary schools that characterize most of U.S. public secondary education throughout the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st. These factory model schools – with their hierarchical, departmentalized structures;

categorized and certified roles for staff, students, and administrators alike; pre-defined courses of study, using established curricula and pedagogical practices, that provided options for sorting students based on tests and expert opinions; and their economies of scale and rationalized, efficient processes – persist as the archetype for public secondary schools in the U.S. (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1990; Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Ravitch, 2000).

Though we find the blueprint for a traditional public education in the work of the administrative professionals, we gain much of the rationale and some models for contemporary practices in mainstream and alternative education from the Progressive Education movement of the same era. The ideals and concerns of the Progressive Education reformers contrast considerably with those of the administrative professionals. The ideas of social reformers, philosophers and educators (most notably characterized through John Dewey's work) and the advent of psychology as a science of human behavior led to the development of a Progressive child-centered theory of education that focused on the development of the individual child and his or her participation in society. For these progressives, public education also served as a means to social ends, but the ends reveal fundamental differences. Instead of sharing the progressive administrators' emphasis on the workforce and efficiency, their focus was fixed on social change. The Progressive Education movement clearly stemmed from progressive social concerns regarding the economic and living conditions of American workers, especially in the rapidly growing urban centers (Dewey, 1990; Cremin, 1961).

The child-centered approach advocated by John Dewey, his associates, and others considered many pedagogical issues beyond these focused social concerns: the determination of what to teach and how to teach; how children learn best; the educational issues presented by diverse combinations and levels of skill and aptitude in diverse classrooms; and more. But Dewey also understood schools as means for improving society through cultural transmission, a traditional function of schools, **and** cultural renewal, a function requiring new educational practices (Archambault, 1964; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Ideally, we would teach the communication, social, and academic knowledge and skills necessary for successful adult and advocacy roles in a participatory democratic community. We would differentiate instruction according to a holistic assessment of students' needs, interests, and social context. And we would accomplish this through meaningful, structured, experiential processes guaranteed to translate into student learning through teachers' efforts and expertise. His model demanded much in terms of resources, especially in terms of teachers' time, energy, and expertise, and it is difficult to reconcile Dewey's vision of each school as an extended family, its own community, and a model democratic society with the large comprehensive secondary schools established by the administrative progressives.

Schools integrated vocational, health, and home economics courses in an attempt to respond to the holistic and experiential concerns of the Progressives, but few schools incorporated the social vision and encompassing practices to realize the central goals of the reform movement. Pressure to address these goals would persist as the comprehensive high school became the template for secondary education in the U.S. The comprehensive (traditional) high school model is itself a reform response

from the progressives to competing purposes for public education (Cuban, 2004; Kaestle, 1983; Tyack, 1974). These schools could concentrate resources in order to supply different students with different experiences toward different outcomes, thereby meeting the multiple needs of students, parents, communities, reformers, policymakers, and the economy. By being all things to all people, these schools could accommodate multiple purposes as well: educating for democratic civic participation and advocacy; educating for a future workforce; and educating for individual opportunity. Depending on perspective, criticisms of the model abound: these schools sacrificed rigorous academic standards and watered down the curriculum in these efforts (Ravitch, 2000) or they became unresponsive, impersonalized settings where social inequities reproduce generation after generation (Gatto, 2002; Meier, 2003). Even the criticisms reflect the conflicting priorities held for schools. Remarkably, though the object of constant reform efforts for the past 50 years, comprehensive high schools persist as “the dominant form of secondary school organization in the United States” and continue to serve, not all, but “the vast majority of students” (Cuban, 2004, p. 17).

These embedded, competing purposes prove persistently problematic and provide one explanation for the resilience of the comprehensive high school model. Larry Cuban (2004) argues that, because U.S. educators, policymakers, and researchers cannot reconcile the different sets of structures and practices that support different purposes (democratic, meritocratic, or practical for Cuban), our failure to endorse coherent policies around explicitly identified and prioritized purposes prevents successful efforts to rally enough support to sustain real change. David

Labaree (1997) presents a similar argument when describing overlapping and conflicting pressures on schools toward overlapping and conflicting goals. Democratic, social efficiency and social mobility goals respectively call for equal treatment and educational opportunity for effective citizenship, efficient sorting for meeting workforce needs, and differentiation through academic hierarchies in support of individual social positioning. “As a result of being forced to muddle its goals and continually work at cross-purposes, education inevitably turns out to be deficient in carrying out any of these goals very effectively (p. 71).”⁶ The organizational structures and practices of the traditional high school persist today through climates of greater and lesser, but never in the absence of, conflicting purposes.

By the 1950s, the strength and influence of progressivism in education was fading. Many agree that the social changes concurrent with WWII and the U.S. post-war recovery – increased prosperity, slowed immigration, the seeds of an information-based economy instead of an industrial one, the onset of the Cold War, and the general embrace of political conservatism – undermined any remaining momentum of the progressive movement (Cremin, 1961; Young, 1990; Posner, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). This combination of post-war social factors insured the retreat from progressivism in education when the public response, in the U.S., to the Russian launch of the first Sputnik satellite in 1957 was to insist on renewed focus on math and science instruction. Our perceived need to compete technologically with other countries gave momentum and support to this narrowed focus through federal funding

⁶For Labaree (1997), one result of the tension between priorities has been the elevation in the social and cultural value of education credentials and the concomitant devaluing of learning in schools as students pursue those credentials. I.e., the rising priority status of the social mobility goal may contribute to the lower standards for curriculum, instruction, and learning that SBR intends to address.

legislation with the National Science Foundation Act of 1950 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958, both offered money for improvements in math and science education. At the same time, other education critics were noting the increased demands of the U.S. job market: entry-level jobs required more education, and success in the job market demanded the same. Their concerns led to an overlapping back-to-academic basics movement intended to develop human resources for a changing labor market (Wells, 1993). As educational priorities changed once again, increasing numbers of students who, earlier, would have been in the work force, were staying in secondary schools. Those who perceived diluted academics to be a result of Progressive Education practices may have been noting curricular changes made to accommodate a still increasingly diverse student population (Ravitch, 2000; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). By 1960, 70% of secondary school aged children in the U.S. earned high school diplomas from comprehensive high schools that, for the most part, reflected the influence of the administrative progressives -- with the addition of few practices from progressive education, and those practices minimized by an academic emphasis on math, science, and "the basics".

The above overview of the structuration dynamics at work on public schools for the first half of the 20th century outlines a process of institutionalization.⁷ As common schools came to understand themselves as similar organizations engaged in similar work toward shared outcomes, social and political forces work to shape organizational structures and practices toward those negotiated outcomes. Because these outcomes proved difficult to technically define and measure, the symbolic

⁷ The institutionalization process of schools is detailed in a number of other sources. See, for example, DiMaggio & Powell (1983), Meyer & Rowan (1977; 1978), and Scott (2002).

structures, roles, and scripts evolved that represent socially significant purposes for schools (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978). State, social, market, and other political forces and the bureaucratization of a growing system led to increasingly complex, hierarchical district and school structures (Meyer, Scott, Strang, & Creighton, 1988; Strang, 1987). These increasingly isomorphic structures, roles, and scripts maintained the legitimacy of schools, so that the work of teaching and learning remained buffered from close scrutiny (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; March & Olsen, 1976; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Oliver, 1991; Rowan, 1999; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Weick, 1976). Finally, we find early evidence of persistent institutional conflict and/or stages of institutional change in the efforts of the Progressive Education movement to redefine the structures, routines, roles, and scripts of schools in order to prioritize different outcomes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988; Oliver, 1992; Rowan, 1982; Scott, 2002; Seo & Creed, 2002; Strang & Sine, 2005; Suchman, 1995; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Another period of relatively high social conflict in the U.S. allowed for the emergence of alternative schools as intentionally different organizations, structurally and in practice, designed to challenge and change the established structures, practices and outcomes of the 50 year old public education system.

It was in the historical, social, and political climate that characterized the 1960s that momentum for social change came to reshape public education once again. Social pressures began to demarcate the divisions among theorists and policy makers that persist today in debates over educational reform. Civil Rights legislation, first with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, then with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, generated new pressure on public schools to indeed educate

everyone. The comprehensive model designed to educate students according to their *needs*, determined through professional speculation about students' employment futures, and *abilities*, determined through intelligence testing, clearly resulted in de facto racial segregation. The War on Poverty extended these concerns for equality to students from low-income backgrounds and generated further federal funding and legislation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. At the same time, political radicalism, liberalism and progressivism generated pressure for fundamental change in schools to reflect concerns regarding power and equity. "Reform periods in education are typically times when concerns about the state of the society or economy spill over into demands that the schools set things straight." (Tyack, 1990, p. 174)

The 60s demanded the experimental reforms of the 70s.

Why Do Some Schools Look Different?

The popularity of private free schools and the deschooling movements in the 1960s reflected a strong philosophical shift toward the anti-authoritarianism of theorists like John Holt, A. S. Neill, and Ivan Illich. For many, the child-centered focus of the progressive educators took center stage again as these schools structured themselves to support children as they naturally seek to educate themselves (Cremin, 1978). By the late 1960s, writers like Jonathan Kozol and Herbert Kohl were documenting the race-based and income-based inequity in both educational inputs and outputs, in the public school system. An independent school movement, freedom schools, strove to develop schools to empower poor and minority children by providing basic skills training for social and economic mobility and by establishing

freedom from the manipulation toward traditional roles found in mainstream schools (Ravitch, 2000; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Wells, 1993). Though few of these independent schools persisted beyond the 60s, their existence pressured the public school system to start offering alternative school options to families seeking fundamental change in education. As a reform movement, the alternative education movement has effected limited change in traditional, comprehensive high schools, but the increasing number of smaller, more peripheral public secondary schools that developed then, and have continued to develop since, has shown remarkable staying power when compared to the reform efforts discussed above.

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, hundreds of schools throughout the U.S. experimented with public school structures, roles, and practices in an effort to challenge the priorities and outcomes of traditional public schools. Federal programs and funding, as well as a significant influx of private foundation money, supported the development of experimental or alternative public secondary schools (Wells, 1993; Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Ravitch, 2000). Educational researchers and theorists worked to identify the motivations and roles for alternative schools for the general U.S. population concluding that disparate priorities, goals, and roles for schools in a democratic and pluralist society required systems of discreet alternatives (Fantini, 1973; Goodlad, 1975). Thomas La Belle (1975) identified three distinct categories of culture-based approaches to alternative education: those concerned with the relevance of education; those concerned with the efficiency, or fiscal priorities, of education; and, those concerned with equality, or equal opportunity to access social resources and participate in decision-making. He concluded that, "No single alternative will meet

the requirements of the total culture since the rationales for seeking alternatives do not come from a common source (p. 34)."

For the first time, the debate regarding public education moved away from defining and developing the one best system for educating all U.S. students and considered instead addressing different priorities or meeting different students', families', and communities' needs with alternatives. The educators leading these reform efforts were motivated by social and political concerns for equity, for meeting individual needs in increasingly diverse student populations, for responding to a recently defined dropout phenomenon, and for institutional renewal (Goodlad, et al., 1975; Raywid, 1981, 1983; Wehlage, Rutter & Turnbaugh, 1989; Young, 1990; Tyack, 1990; Wells, 1993; Chalker, 1996).

What Needs Fixing in Public Schools?

Proponents of public alternatives justified their existence with arguments still presented today in support of alternative schools and programs. Each rationale articulates a conflict, for some constituency, with institutionalized priorities of traditional schools.

Results for a Diverse Population

The first justification begins with the need generated by U.S. diversity. An increasingly diverse population of students – once growing in diversity through the inclusion of more students in public schools, now through increasingly diverse demographics in the U.S. – staying in schools through graduation; graduating with the

skills and knowledge required for work and self-determination; and continuing on to college level study requires alternative approaches. Comprehensive schools stand as obstacles to success for too many students. Established practices that include the sorting of students into different academic and career tracks limit students' futures, and in some critics' eyes, serve to recreate the established economic and social hierarchy (Bowles, 1972; Giroux, 1992; Oakes, 1985). Certain alternatives could challenge the tendency of comprehensive schools to recreate structural and cultural hierarchies in the U.S. and could thereby insist on the democratic promise of equal educational opportunity to a pluralist and multi-cultural public. Many alternative schools initially sought to change the structures, processes, and outcomes of traditional schools in the name of fighting oppression and working toward social justice (Deal & Nolan, 1978; Duke, 1978; Riordan, 1972).

Many theorists characterize the structures and practices that evolved from early reactions to this institutional conflict or failure as those most responsive and supportive to racially, socially, culturally, and economically diverse student populations: smaller school settings with smaller classes, shared decision making, meaningful relationships between students and adults, responsive and differentiated approaches to instruction, concrete connections between curriculum and the world outside of school, etc. (Chalker, 1996; Chesler, 1978; Fantini, 1973; Kozol, 1983; Wehlage, et al., 1989; Young, 1990). Some theorists and researchers continue to call for diverse programs designed to meet the needs of specific populations of students who fail to achieve in traditional settings (Aron, 2006; Cox, et al., 1995; Duke & Griesdon, 1999; Hahn, 1987; Raywid, 2001; Wehlage, et al., 1989). Others call for

alternative schools that serve heterogeneous populations of students in order to avoid the further segregation of those minority and low-income students who are more likely to fail in traditional settings and to assert the value of alternative organization and practices for the general population (Gregory, 2001; Kohl in Nathan, 1991; Sagor, 1999; Soleil, 1999; Young, 1990). For this second group of theorists and researchers, the organization, practices, and climate of alternative schools support the success of all students and promote participatory democratic skills for all populations.

This strand of the logics that explain alternative schools addresses a conflict between cognitive understandings within the institution itself or a technical failure of schools, both triggers for institutional problem solving and potential change (Cibulka, 1995; Oliver, 1991, 1992; Scott, 2001; Scott & Meyer, 1991; Suchmann, 1995). For those who would prioritize the democratic ideal of equal opportunity for diverse citizens, the realities of different treatments and outcomes for different groups of students demands an institutional response to the conflict between this taken-for-granted understanding of the purpose of public schools and structures, like academic tracking, that better represent efficiency or economic priorities. The patterned variation in outcomes for students is also understood as technical failure. If our purpose is to provide the opportunity of education to every American student, then we had clearly been failing in that effort once we included minority, female, or low income students in our calculations.

The Drop Out Phenomenon

A more focused version of the above problem formulation understands alternative schools as a response to an increasing understanding of the drop out phenomenon as an issue of national concern. This impact of dropping out of school is detailed in many places and is summarized in the 2006 Gates Foundation report, *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio Jr., J.J., Burke Morison, K., 2006).

The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student. Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves.

Our communities and nation also suffer from the dropout epidemic due to the loss of productive workers and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services (p. i).

According to current estimates, 65-82% of students successfully graduate from public secondary schools; as few as 30% of students graduate with regular high school diplomas in some school systems (Greene & Winters, 2002; Kaufman, et al., 2001; Mishel & Roy, 2006; Swanson, 2004; Young, 1990). In response to NCLB policy demands, more local, state, and national data has recently become available to calculate dropout rates than ever before. Debate over the accurate calculation of graduation and dropout rates persists however.⁸ Points of contention include the accuracy and inclusiveness of available data, definitions of high school completion (e.g., the inclusion of GED completion data), current trends in rates, and the degree of rate gaps between black, Hispanic, and white students (Mishel & Roy, 2006; Swanson, 2004). Researchers agree that black, Hispanic, and students from families

⁸ See Mishel & Roy (2006) for a detailed analysis of remaining questions surrounding definitions and accounting of graduation and dropout rates.

with low socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to drop out than white, Asian-American, and students from families with middle to high SES (Hahn, 1987; Mishel & Roy, 2006; Swanson, 2004; Wehlage, 1989). Bridgeland, et al. (2006) suggest that schools address the needs of students in danger of dropping out with practices and structures characteristic of effective alternative settings: relevant and engaging curriculum and instruction, access to support services, meaningful relationships with at least one adult in school, a school climate fostering academic press, and smaller class size for more individualized attention. Practices and structures like these are understood by those studying alternative schools to foster student engagement with school and school work, or alternatively, to fight student alienation in schools (Aron, 2006; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 1983; Wehlage, et al., 1989). Many of the structures and practices that characterize effective alternative schools today have their roots in the original schools of the 70s: revitalizing curriculum through student interest and making it relevant with connections to life outside of school; experimenting with instructional practices to actively engage students; developing less formal relationships with adults based on mutual respect; extending the formal roles of students, teachers, parents, and administrators to share responsibility for teaching, learning, and governance; restructuring schools to support broader definitions of learning and to respond to students' needs, etc.. The central concerns of the founders of these early alternatives focused on progressive practices, student empowerment, social justice, democratic ideals and social change (Chalker, 1996; Cremin, 1978; Deal & Nolan, 1978; Duke, 1978; Riordan, 1972; Young, 1990). As these schools were recognized over time as successful with discouraged students, district and state policy

increasingly supported the development of alternative schools and programs for at-risk populations of students and dropout prevention (Gregory, 2001; Young, 1990).

Today, alternative schools are considered one effective response to the persistent high school dropout rate phenomenon in the U.S. (Aron, 2006; Chalker, 1996; Wehlage, et al., 1989; Young, 1990).

The above perspective focuses more on the social and economic impact of education outcomes for individuals, for business, and for the national economy. In this instance, market logics dominate the definition of a technical failure of traditional schools. Increasing numbers of drop outs requires an institutional response now. Their existence costs too much. Alternative schools emerge from an existing, though narrow, range of possible organizational responses in public education. These peripheral organizations working on the margins of the field appear to have some answers to a phenomenon that had not been framed as a problem before the late 20th century (Strang & Sine, 2005).

Our Priorities for a Public Education

Yet another logic elevates the democratic purposes of public education in the U.S. above economic or private purposes (Cuban, 2004; Labaree, 1997). Dewey's progressive goals for public education were designed to prepare all individuals with the creative, problem-solving, group membership, and critical thinking skills needed for participation in the democratic process. Progressives, in general, embraced pluralism and ostensibly worked to develop an educational system that prepared all people to influence a democratic process that serves all people (Archambault, 1964;

Cremin, 1961; Schutz, 2001). More contemporary theorists contrast a standardized, market-driven, technological achievement-focused educational system to a system that prepares individuals with disparate backgrounds and values to confront issues of social justice; to share power in order to determine their own and their community's standards; and includes students, parents, community members and educators in determining the priorities of their own schools (Deal & Nolan, 1978; Finklestein, 1984; Giroux, 1992; Gutman, 1999; Wells, 1993).

In this framing, an identified subset of alternative schools share the progressive goal of educating democratic citizens for democratic participation and therefore structure governance, curriculum, and instruction using democratic processes as means and ends: members choose their schools; all constituents participate in decision-making; schools function as communities; schools practice consensus decision making; schools self-govern; students have input at classroom level as well; curriculum includes school administration, problem-solving, conflict resolution, effective communication, group process experience, critical thinking skills, and democratic norms; participants emphasize continuous evaluation and improvement; and school boundaries extend into surrounding community and environment (Aron, 2006; Center for New Schools, 1978; Deal & Nolan, 1978; Duke, 1978; Fantini, 1973; Huguenin & Deal, 1978; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 1983; Riordan, 1972; Smith, Thomas & Pugh, 1981; Wehlage, et al. 1989). Advocates for democratic education insist on democratic structure and practice as basic components of any public school. Whether or not a particular alternative educates for democratic participation is determined by the individual priorities of the school. Because alternative schools

typically serve segments of the population that remain underserved by traditional comprehensive schools, many are predisposed, or at least positioned, to address issues of equity and inclusion through organization, curriculum, and instruction. In this capacity, alternatives can provide democratic educational possibilities for our pluralistic society.

Perhaps most importantly for those alternative schools serving discouraged learners, most of these democratic structures and practices are believed to decrease student alienation and increase student engagement (Aron, 2006; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 1981; Wehlage, et al., 1989).

Two particular challenges appear in discussions of democratic efforts in schools however. Students embrace having a voice in matters that concern their personal freedom and decision making. It takes conscious effort, planning, and instruction to actively engage students in action and decision making around matters of whole group, school, community, or society level issues. Also, individual self-interest and group priorities regularly conflict, and convincing students to act apart from self-interest has been a point of problem solving since schools have organized around these principles (Center for New Schools, 1978 [1976]; Cohn & Finch, 1978; Duke, 1978). Finally, researchers and theorists warn against the imposition of white, middle class (alternative) values on decision making in alternative schools with diverse populations (Center for New Schools, 1978; Kozol, 1983; Riordan, 1972; Young, 1990). Because the history of the democratic schools movement has some roots in academic and affluent social contexts, genuine support for self-determined

outcomes in diverse schools, in many cases, requires challenging the cultural assumptions of some.

These theorists, researchers, and community activists frame the problem of traditional schooling in the U.S. as a failure to prioritize democratic purposes of public schools, this time understood as the structures and practices that teach and encourage civic engagement around issues of equity and justice. This logic addresses a conflict between cognitive understandings, both within the institution itself and between institutions. Because the multiple taken-for-granted purposes of public schools conflict, room is created for stakeholder factions to promote the structures and practices that best represent their understandings and beliefs (Cibulka, 1995; Cuban, 2004; Labaree, 1997; Oliver, 1991, 1992; Suchmann, 1995). At the same time, more wide-spread concerns with definitions of democracy and social justice characterized the civic unrest of the sixties and early seventies. At times of strong social movements and civic unrest, the cognitive boundaries that constrain stakeholder understandings of problems and possibilities within institutional contexts become more flexible across institutional contexts resulting in new logics, forms and problem definition theorizing (Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006; Schneiberg, King & Smith, 2008; Suchmann, 1995; Swidler, 1986). These contextual cognitive conflicts generated the democratically purposed organizational structures and practices in alternative schools, instead of traditional schools, quite possibly because social movements and challengers often “do this work of transposition and recombination at the margins or interstices of institutional fields (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006, p. 219).”

Schools' Resistance to Change

A final rationale presents alternative schools as a mechanism for institutional change in public education. As was characteristic of the social unrest of the 60s, many educators, students, parents, and communities were looking for fundamental change in education. Federal and private foundation money for experimental schools supported this call for transformation through the 70's. "Supporters of alternatives in education were quick to point out that the notion is highly consistent with the principles of a democratic society, a pluralistic culture, the need for community involvement in education, the need for institutional self-renewal in schools, and the need for financial austerity" (Raywid, 1981, p. 552). Goodlad (1975) identifies the school as the fundamental unit in efforts toward educational change and lists conditions under which schools can become self-renewing. Many of these conditions characterize alternative schools: extended roles for teachers, decentralized control and decision-making, and participation from parents and community members. In contemporary terms, Young establishes that "Alternative schools and programs serve as an ideal research and development arm of public education. Because of their smaller size and greater autonomy and flexibility, they are more easily adaptable to experimental designs" (Young, 1990, p. 35). At least some alternative schools today embrace their role in encouraging growth and change in public education through continual experimentation and efforts to remain "alternative" to mainstream educational practices (Lehman, 2/14/2001, State of the School Address). For the past two decades, researchers and theorists have issued a general call to recognize alternative schools as

effective, innovative organizations and as the source of innovations found in traditional settings (Chalker, 1996; Gregory, 2001; Hahn, 1987; Raywid, 1994). Others point to alternative school structures and practices as the best response to problems prioritized in the standards-based reform movement embraced in the 1990s: high school dropout rates, the achievement gap between students characterized as from families with middle and upper SES and, racially, as White and Asian-American students and other students characterized as from families with low SES and, racially, as African-American and Latino students, and the relatively low academic achievement of U.S. students when compared internationally (Carbone, 2006; Conrath, 2001; Hahn, 1987; Newman, 1981; Young, 1990). As evidenced by increasing amounts of private foundation and state support of new small school development and restructured large schools, historically alternative structures and practices are central features of contemporary public school reform. We find evidence of renewal effects in the structures and practices promoted 30 years later by professional organizations like the Coalition of Essential Schools' Common Principles (CES, <http://www.essentialschools.org/items/4>, retrieved 1/8/12) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals in *Breaking Ranks*(1996) and the current Breaking Ranks Framework at the heart of the association's school improvement work (NASSP, <http://www.nassp.org/school-improvement>, retrieved 1/8/12). We continue to find contemporary federally commissioned reports exploring alternative schools as a source of responses to persistent problems in traditional school settings, problems like the success of special education students and students who drop out of school (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr, 2004; Aron, 2006). These improvement schema

emphasize caring, respectful relationships; a collaborative culture; shared decision-making; meaningful content taught and learned for deep understanding – all systematically identified as organizational priorities in alternative schools before. This understanding of alternative schools frames them, once again, as a source of solutions to a system of traditional schools that requires either answers to technical problems or research and development to supply ideas for ongoing evolution in response to changing social contexts over time.

Some Schools Should be Different

The above logics continue to justify the existence of alternative schools as the number of available alternatives continues to grow. Raywid speculated that, in 1983, "There may well be two to four times the 2,500 alternative schools that we were able to identify" (Raywid, 1983, p. 685). Young extrapolates from his own Washington state data, which shows more than 60% growth in alternative education between 1981 and 1988 that, even at half that rate of growth nationwide, 7% of U.S. students in 1988 would have been in public alternative programs (Young, 1990). The U.S. Department of Education generalizes from their own survey completed in the academic year 2000-01 that 10, 900 alternative schools and programs for at-risk students alone served about 1.3% of all students enrolled in public schools that year (Kleiner, Porch & Ferris, 2002). Researchers agree that public alternatives continue to increase in numbers.

Justifications have changed emphasis somewhat in recent decades, however. While most reasons given for alternatives early on were ideological, in the 1980's,

criticism of public schools that arose from contemporary research and reports led to some shifting in the reasoning behind the continued proliferation of public alternatives. Ernest Boyer's *High School* (1983) and John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* (1984) reported a lack of variety in practices in schools that led to student disengagement. *A Nation At Risk* (1983) condemned current educational practices that resulted in a failure of public schools to adequately educate students according to any reasonable standard. Popular responses to these reports included calls for higher learning standards, increased graduation requirements, improved teacher training, and other reforms of the Excellence and Restructuring Movements in U.S. public education.

Alternative schools responded in large numbers by redefining themselves, or were redefined by states and districts, as programs for students who are at-risk of dropping out of school in response to school failure. In order to better meet the needs of these "at-risk" students and to challenge an increasingly narrow definition of success, alternative schools strived to broaden definitions of success by emphasizing different goals, beyond purely academic ones, for public education. Increasing numbers of these programs focus their efforts on dropout intervention and prevention (Aron, 2006; Kleiner, et al., 2002; Young, 1990). Gregory (2001) explains this shift of emphasis as a response of educators and policy makers to the success that alternative schools had with "tough-to-teach students." It is easy to imagine a process whereby schools designed to be responsive to dissatisfied students, parents, educators and communities become institutionalized as schools for struggling students. Following the path of many social movements and institutional innovations, a niche

for alternative schools within the institution of public education was negotiated. Policy and funding was channeled to develop alternative programs for specific populations of underserved students and the shift in connotation gradually followed (Lehr, Lanner & Lange, 2003; Loflin, 2000). Though ideological concerns for equity and diverse educational options in response to U.S. pluralism continue to drive the efforts of alternative educators, more immediate pressures for meeting the needs of failing students and potential dropouts control the agenda for many, if not most, schools (Conrath, 2001; Gregory, 2001).

Schools Designed to be Different

Sources of Risk

Most research and discussion of alternative education throughout the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s has focused on meeting the needs of at-risk students. It may be more accurate to describe this shift as a splintering of earlier theorization around alternative schools: some charter schools and innovative small district schools embody many of the early priorities of alternative schools, while the schools primarily understood as serving at-risk student populations more consistently use the label, “alternative school”. Having garnered the funding and policy support to prioritize this purpose for doing school differently, a strong majority of alternative schools exist to support a population of students who struggle to succeed in traditional school settings.

The first hurdle in discussions of these alternative schools has been the complexity involved in describing or defining this population of students.

- "Someone who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of: work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, inter/intra personal relationships." (Sagor, 1993)
- ". . . children who hurt, physically or psychologically, and children who have problems – educational problems, personal problems, or social problems." (Frymier, et al., 1992)
- ". . . students not successful in regular education programs." (Gregg, 1999)

The simplest definition, those students who are at risk of failing in school or of dropping out, describes an incredibly large and diverse group of students with complex combinations of risk factors present in their lives. Frymier, et al., in their 1992 study of students at risk, develop a 45 item list of risk factors that had been either theoretically or statistically associated with youth risk by previous research. Factors that correlate significantly with school failure, or dropping out, characterize students' social and economic backgrounds, their family lives, personal problems independent of SES and family background, and school factors. Social and economic student characteristics that statistically correlate with at-risk status in the U.S. include low socio-economic status, minority status, and having a primary language other than English (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Students disadvantaged in such ways are three times more likely to drop out (Hahn, 1987). Family characteristics and/or issues include single-parent households, having a sick parent, having a parent die, recent divorce, having a parent who did not graduate from high school or who doesnot value education, and frequent moving. Personal issues include the attraction of work or military service, pregnancy, involvement with drugs,

arrest/involvement with the legal system, health issues (physical or emotional), attempted suicide, having been a victim of abuse, having learning disabilities, or low self-esteem. Finally, school factors that are associated with risk include low grades, school failure, grade retention, suspension, problem behaviors, dislike of school, being overage for grade level, and attendance issues/many absences (Barr and Parrett, 1995; Chalker, 1996; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Finn, 1987; Frymier, et al., 1992; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Wehlage, 1989; Wehlage, et al., 1989; Young, 1990).

These factors are obviously inter-related and affect different individuals in different ways. In fact, any student who is at-risk in one area is likely to be at risk in others (Frymier et al., 1992). On the other hand, no combination is a guarantee of school failure. Taken as a whole, these factors represent the perspective of researchers and educators who have tried to understand or predict risk through student characteristics alone -- a perspective that suggests that the student is the source of any incompatibility with his or her school.

One consequence of such a perspective is programmatic and policy responses that try to fix the student and, in the process, ignore the possibilities for effective organizational responses (Sagor, 1999). Another consequence has been the effect of this perspective on research design -- most early studies investigated only student backgrounds and factors (Frymier, et al., 1992). This perspective, taken to an extreme, leads many to the conclusion that these problems are bigger than schools, so schools cannot effectively intervene. Because the problems that students face are social, economic, and cultural in nature, schools, as organizations that function within the same contexts, cannot be the source of any real solutions (Finn, 1987; Rothstein,

2004). These solutions must be fundamental, structural social and cultural responses that work to change economic priorities, power relationships and privilege (Apple, 1989; Kohl interview in Nathan, 1991). Frymier, et al. (1992) concludes that "Teachers and administrators did not create or cause most of the problems that confront young people today, nor can they solve the problems by themselves. The problems will be solved only if society changes in ways that enhance children's lives rather than endanger them (p. 7)."

An alternative perspective acknowledges these risk factors in students' lives but focuses instead on the organizational responses that schools can, and do, have to successfully meet the needs of at-risk students. Some authors argue against the use of the term "at-risk" because it associates risk factors with individual students, instead of with the social, cultural, and economic structures that generate the conditions for risk (Kohl in Nathan, 1991; Ogbu, 1989; Sagor, 1999). Gary Wehlage (1989) argues that the above focus on student characteristics paints an incomplete picture of student risk or failure, that without consideration of schools' responses to at-risk students, we cannot identify how schools contribute to student failure or success. In Wehlage, Rutter & Turnbaugh (1989), the authors develop a theory of the causes of students' decision to drop out. They combine the effects of low socio-economic status and other complicating problems with discouragement from school failure and the perception of discipline at school as unfair or ineffective to create the conditions that lead to students' decision to leave school. Here, school climate and students' interactions with school determine how much risk a student faces due to individual circumstances and characteristics. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) support such a position when they

establish Catholic schools' superior effectiveness in retaining and working with at-risk student populations. Though mediating factors, like the motivations of parents who place their children in Catholic schools, probably contribute to the extent of Catholic schools' success, most accept that the practices and structure of the schools themselves have a significant effect. Researchers have worked to identify what might be the most effective school practices and organizational strategies for supporting at-risk students.

Effective Strategies for Working With At-Risk Student Populations

The most often cited strategies for supporting the success of at-risk students describe extended roles of teachers and students within the school resulting in a strong sense of the school as a community, high-interest or engaging curriculum, innovative instructional practices, and the role of school choice. Raywid's (1994) summary of success factors for alternative schools includes generating and sustaining community within the school and making learning engaging. Bryk & Driscoll (1988) conclude that schools that score high on their "school as community" index are more effective in terms of student achievement and retention of at-risk students (cited in Wehlage, et al., 1989). This sense of community is developed through the extended roles of teachers and students. Most of the literature on successful alternative programs discusses the quality of teachers' and students' relationships, emphasizing the development of involved, active, respectful, caring, and reciprocal relationships among all school members. The development of these relationships often leads to the less formal environment that characterizes many of these successful schools, to a shared sense of purpose, and to social norms that characteristically govern behavior

more than rules (Aron, 2006; Aron & Zweig, 2003; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Gregg, 1999; Gregory, 2001; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Hahn, 1981; Lange & Sletten, 2002; McVey, 2006; Newmann, 1981; Raywid, 2001; Vivian, 2000; Wehlage, et al., 1989; Young, 1990). Many cite democratic participation and decision-making as central to this sense of community and the engagement of at-risk students (Aron, 2006; Barr & Parrett, 1995; Newmann, 1981; Deal & Nolan, 1978; Duke, 1978; Huguenin & Deal, 1978; Raywid, 1983; Smith, Thomas & Pugh, 1981; Wahlberg & Wahlberg, 1994; Wehlage, et al., 1989).

Another feature of successful alternative programs, that encourages student engagement, is the development and implementation of high-interest, integrated, and meaningful (to students) curriculum presented through innovative, creative instructional practices (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Chalker, 1996; Kohl in Nathan, 1991; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 2001; 1983; Wehlage, et al, 1989). Though curriculum and instruction can take on many forms, many agree that when classroom activities are designed by the teachers who will implement them, according to the teachers' own strengths and interests, student engagement follows (Guerin & Denti, 1999; Newmann, 1981; Wehlage, et al., 1989; Raywid, 1994). Examples of curricular and instructional strategies used in successful alternative programs include alternative assessments, thematic units, portfolios, affective education, a focus on the intrinsic rewards of education, helping students to develop a sense of competence, linking learning to the completion of collective tasks, interdisciplinary projects, integrating academic learning with out of school work, building on student strengths, experiential learning, in-depth exploration of high-interest topics, a changing variety

of classroom activities, etc. As can be seen from the unpatterned variety of the above list, no single prescribed pedagogy has been identified as most effective or theorized as best suited to an at-risk population of students. In part, these possibilities reflect the diversity among students and reflect a theme repeated throughout the literature, that no one program design will meet the needs of all students. Effective instructional programs are as diverse as the students themselves.

One final effective practice, presented regularly by researchers and theorists, is the implementation of choice for all school members. Teachers, administrators, and support staff who choose to work in these settings, and who participate in the selection of others who choose to work with them, are better able to build positive, respectful relationships with students and each other; to develop innovative, engaging curricula; to embrace the multi-faceted, extended roles of teachers in these settings; and to help generate and contribute to a sense of community (Barr & Parrett, 1995; Gregory, 2001; Iowa Department of Education, undated; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Newmann, 1981; Raywid, 1994; Wehlage, et al., 1989). Teachers placed in alternative settings, without a choice, are less likely to share in the values of the school community and to embrace the work. For analogous reasons, students and their families must choose alternative settings as well. When students choose programs, they choose the values and norms of the school community; they choose the opportunity to belong and participate; their choice reflects the basis for some affinity with their school (Barr & Parret, 1995; Gregory, 2001; Newmann, 1981; Raywid, 1994; Wehlage et al., 1989). Smith, Thomas and Pugh (1981) identified choice as the common element among the alternative schools that they studied to conclude that alternative schools were better

settings for meeting students' three most advanced psychological needs. According to Maslow's hierarchy, those are belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Choice is the basis for success for most elements of effective alternative programs.

Effective Structures for Working With At-Risk Student Populations

Another essential structural element of successful programs is their size. Successful alternative programs for at-risk students must be small. Only Smith, Thomas and Pugh (1981) find that size does not matter; choice, for them, is the defining characteristic of alternative programs that successfully meet students' psychological needs. As otherwise established in the small schools literature, all students benefit from smaller school size, but struggling students require the benefits associated with small school size to engage with school culture and academic work (Aron, 2006; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Gregory, 2001; Hahn, 1981; Kozol, 1983; McVey, 2006; Newmann, 1981; Pittman & Haighwort, 1987; Raywid, 2001; 1994; 1983; Swarts, 2004; Young, 1990). Raywid (1997) cites Oxley and McCabe's (1990) work where small school size correlates significantly with the involvement of marginalized students; student engagement is the necessary precursor to student success for Wehlage, et al. (1989). Pittman and Haighwort (1987) found that students in smaller schools participate in more activities and receive a greater diversity of experience in these settings. They theorize that as school size increases, the quality of the social climate decreases, specifically through less social integration and a resulting decrease in student identification with the school. The result is a measured increase in the

dropout rate. In fact, their estimates assert that for every increase of 400 students in a school, the dropout rate will increase by 1%.

These effects on student engagement, the effects most pertinent to alternative programs, result from the decrease in academic differentiation and bureaucracy demanded when fewer adults work together to provide the spectrum of academic and support services for students. Less academic differentiation may lead to stronger norms -- thereby increasing student engagement and contributing to a student self-concept that includes school membership -- and hence, less dropping out (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Vivian, 2000). Less bureaucracy allows for the flexible and extended roles for teachers and students discussed above and the resulting sense of reciprocity and community within the school. These conditions and the implied autonomy that accompanies them also allow for the institutional, classroom, and personal accommodations to individual students that lead to increased student engagement (Miller, Leinhardt & Zigmond, 1988). As Newmann (1981) points out, organizational responses intended to reduce student alienation must happen at all levels -- organizational, programmatic, and staff -- in order to be successful. Piecemeal efforts do not work (Newmann, 1981; Raywid, 1994). Small school size appears to be the basic structural element that provides the possibility for successful combinations of the above structural features of alternative programs.

A great variety of these combinations exist within an equally impressive variety of structures. The structure of alternative programs ranges from autonomous schools in buildings apart from other district schools to separate classrooms within

students' schools where students are assigned for at least a part of the day. Most programs can be described by one of the structures defined below.

- Continuation schools – characterized by flexible scheduling, often in the evenings and on weekends, and individualized instruction for students who have already left the traditional school setting.

- Learning centers – places where learning resources and programs are concentrated to offer alternative instruction, typically for part of the day.

BOCES programs in New York State serve as learning centers.

- Schools without walls – structure student learning in the community through classes, apprenticeships, and planned learning experiences using community members, organizations and resources as sites and tools for learning.

- Schools within schools – smaller independent programs organized within larger schools to provide more manageable units for specifically defined instructional alternatives.

- Separate alternative schools – typically autonomous schools housed in separate buildings to provide a comprehensive alternative in the district.

Students are sometimes placed in these programs by the district.

- Theme schools, Magnet schools, and Fundamental schools – autonomous alternative programs designed around a particular theme meant to attract interested, often heterogeneous, populations of students. These are most often schools of choice designed to provide innovative instruction.

Fundamental schools focus on back-to-basics academic curriculum through teacher-directed instruction. Many charter schools would fit into this category.

Given the above discussion of the importance of autonomy, choice, and the organizationally holistic adaptation of an alternative approach, implemented structures must be clearly differentiated from other district or school programs. This clear definition as an independent alternative may be easier to achieve in a physically separate setting.

Table 4.1 summarizes goals, structures, and practices associated with effective alternative schools. It is important to note, once again, that no single element, or combination of elements, is argued to be a wholesale success. Piecemeal approaches do not work (Raywid, 1994; Gregg, 1999; cf. Aron, 2006). Instead, thoughtful combinations that define a clear alternative approach on all organizational levels seem to be effective toward increasing student attendance, positive attitudes toward school, engagement, positive behaviors, achievement, positive interactions with adults and one another, and affective development (Raywid, 1983; Cox, Davidson & Bynum, 1995). Unfortunately, the lack of clear research results describing the outcomes, for students, of alternative programs is lacking in the literature. To date, as is generally true of education research, most efforts to measure or describe outcomes either lack a

Table 4.7 - Elements of Successful Alternative Programs

Goals	Structures and Organizational Features	Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group awareness and responsibility • Development of democratic skills and attitudes • Emphasize authority over one's self • Greater academic achievement of students • Freedom from some standard practices to pursue more substantial education • Improved student attitudes toward school • Institutional renewal • Racial and social integration • Meet needs of specific groups of students • Respond to truancy and dropouts • Provide alternatives for those who seek them – i.e., choice • Provision of diverse responses to diverse needs of diverse student populations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Schools • Schools of choice for teachers and students • Relatively autonomy in district – e.g., control over budget and educational decisions • School as community • Surrounding community as extension of school and vice versa • Participatory governance • Extended and cooperative roles for teachers and students • Informal tone to student and teacher relationships • Clear and consistent goals or mission • High, consistent academic and social expectations of students • Targeted populations of students • Heterogeneous populations of students • Charismatic leadership • Active participation from parents and community members • Note: Many "back-to-basics" programs rely on more traditional organizational characteristics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic, participatory decision making and governance • Reliance on close personal relationships instead of rules • Empowered teachers – e.g., teachers choose to teach in alternative setting, design own curriculum and instruction • Curriculum chosen from broad range of knowledge and life • Novel instructional practices in unusual settings – often individually paced • Constant evaluation of program – internal and external • Integrated studies • Practices focus on social relationships – e.g., community building, relationship building, etc. • Inclusive admissions practices – no tracking • Student centered curriculum with focus on student achievement – opportunities for student success • Experiential or Action Learning practices • Efforts to better meet student social, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs through relationship building, advisory groups, etc.

(Synthesized from Aron & Zweig, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; NAEA, 2009; Raywid, 1981; Raywid, 1983; Smith, Gregory & Pugh, 1981; Wells, 1993; Wehlage, 1989; Young, 1990)

comparison control group or clear pre- and post-tests (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Cox, Davidson & Bynum, 1995). In summary, Raywid (1994) presents three sets of factors

that "appear to account for the success of alternative schools". Successful schools establish communities within them; they succeed at making learning engaging; and school organization and structure are designed to support the first two.

Different Schools Same Outcomes

By the 1990s, a clear subset of the logics shaping alternative schools more narrowly define the purpose, effective structures and practices of most alternative schools. Some schools established before the shift in priorities described above continued to embody structures and practices compelled by other logics. But, the understood solution of schools designed to support the success of at-risk student populations – addressing market requests for a prepared workforce and decreased social costs; democratic mandates for equality and opportunity; and federal and state government policies and funding to support both – produced a generation of schools that continue to embrace this student population and work effort today. In the 1990s however, alternative schools met new pressures to conform from the standards-based reform policies that all schools now encountered. The conflicts between institutional logics and the problem theorization around U.S. public schools that created a purpose for schools that are different persist. However, new federal and state level policies demand similar outcomes for all students, forcing changes in organizational structures and practices in most schools.

The Standards Based Reform Movement

In the early 1990s, educators and policymakers embraced the standards-based reform (SBR) movement in U.S. public education as a systemic effort to improve curriculum, teaching practice, and academic achievement for every student (Clune, 2001; Smith & O'Day, 1993). The effective implementation of these reforms, designed to ensure all students access to a quality education and the support they each need to achieve academic proficiency, requires unprecedented coherence and alignment between federal, state, and local policies and between curricular, instructional, and administrative practices within and between schools. The historical fragmentation of these arenas of educational practice and policy stands as an obstacle to the universal and relatively uniform outcomes that are the goals of SBR (Fuhrman, et al. 1993; 2001; Ogawa, 2003; Sipple & Killeen, 2004; Spillane, 1996; 1998; 1999). Therefore, states, districts, schools, teachers and students must be held accountable for academic achievement.

Accountability mechanisms – the development of state learning standards for each subject area at each grade level, state developed exams in reading and math for grades 3-8, state developed high school exit exams in reading and math, measures to increase graduation rates, and sanctions for those schools and districts who failed to meet standards – were mandated by the federal government with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2002. Also known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, this reauthorization mandated SBR for all public schools in all states by establishing goals for universal academic proficiency in reading and math for students by 2014 and for increasing graduation rates. States,

districts, and schools are held accountable for making sufficient annual yearly progress (AYP) toward these goals through the reporting and publication of annual exam results. All public schools in the U.S. face these accountability measures. Because the U.S. Department of Education (DoE) delegated the development of standards and monitoring of district, school, and student performance to the states, variations in standards and definitions of proficiency have developed between states (Manzo, 2007).

SBR policies, to greater and lesser degrees across states, include components designed to increase horizontal and vertical coherence within and between schools, school districts, state, and federal policy as well. In other words, national and state policies direct districts and schools across a state to have all classrooms at a particular grade level teaching similar content and skills, to meet the same standards. These prescribed curricula ideally align with instructional practices, student assessments, teacher preparation and professional development, resource allocation and accountability measures (O'Day & Smith, 1993; Fuhrman, 2001; Goertz, 2001). Multiple policy levers exist to affect this degree of alignment and coherence. Federal Race to the Top grant money, beginning in the 2011-12 school year, is intended to increase the alignment described above and the alignment between states by requiring states to adopt the Common Core State Standards in ELA and Math, common assessments of those standards, and accountability measures for teachers and principals based on student achievement (<http://engageNY.org>, accessed 2/11/12).

In New York State (NYS), skills or content standards exist for all grade levels in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Technology, Social Studies, The

Arts, Career Development and Occupational Studies, Languages Other Than English, and Health, Physical Education and Family and Consumer Science. As is required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB), or by elements of the requirements for Race to the Top funding in 2011 students take reading and math tests every year in grades 3-8 and again in high school. In NYS specifically, students must pass five Regents Exams in order to graduate from high school with a state endorsed diploma: one in English Language Arts, one in Mathematics, one in a Physical or Living Science, one in Global History and Geography and one in U.S. History and Government. The state sanctions districts and schools who fail to meet participation, graduation or Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals set by the state. Sanctions progress from public identification as a School/District in Need of Improvement after the second year of failing to meet AYP to restructuring or closing after the seventh year of failing to meet AYP. Throughout the process, schools and districts receive resources and guidance toward school improvement from the state.

SBR policies in the U.S. maintain the authority of local schools and districts to determine the particulars of implementation as they centralize public education goals, accountability, and governance structures at the state and national levels. Because of varying will and capacity for reform at local levels (Fairman & Firestone, 2001), we find varied schema for SBR implementation at local levels, even within districts (Spillane, 1998). Sipple and Killeen (2004) document variations in local implementation efforts in NYS. This variety is often understood as an ideal response

to the different needs of diverse localities; the development of different paths accommodates different needs to arrive at the same or similar outcomes.

The notion that these outcomes represent goals for student achievement generally shared by a public in agreement suggests that we have somehow come to consensus about how to prioritize our conflicting purposes for public education. As Susan Fuhrman (1994) points out, “. . . the idea of societal agreement on student expectations is at the core of the current reform movement (p. 6).” In NYS, SBR policies based in these assumptions are understood by school personnel at all levels as “pressure” to focus schools’ efforts toward increasing rates of student proficiency as measured by state exams (Sipple, Killeen & Monk, 2004). Un-assessed learning goals and more holistic goals for student growth take a back seat to those tested standards defining district, school, teacher, and student success.

Alignment or Conflict?

The policy levers and systemic approach described above combine to direct change toward state-defined expectations for student achievement. This assumption of societal agreement denies historically embedded conflicts between purposes for public schooling. Even in discussions of contemporary reform efforts, we hear disparate goals for reform emphasized. For example, O’Day and Smith (1993) base purposes for systemic standards-based reform in their discussions and definition of equal educational opportunity for all students (where they recognize the idealism behind the idea of a pluralistically defined and agreed upon common curricular core) while Allen Greenspan, then Chair of the Federal Reserve, publicly called for improvements in

elementary and secondary education in order to improve U.S. economic productivity (as reported on *All Things Considered*, August, 27, 2004). Such disparities underscore ongoing debates over outcome priorities for public schools.

As with all public schools in the U.S., student performance data now determines alternative school success or failure to local, state, and federal publics and authorities. Because alternative schools have historically elevated purposes other than academic achievement, in part to (re)engage students and families and in part to expand definitions of student success, the singular focus of SBR policies on students' academic achievement threatens long-held goals of some alternative schools. Because alternative schools have evolved to serve at-risk or non-traditional populations of students, SBR's emphasis on increased academic achievement, particularly for groups of students established as lower-performing, means something different for alternative schools. Many alternative school students have characteristically struggled academically or de-prioritized academic performance at some point in their public school careers.

On the other hand, alternative schools may be well-positioned to respond to the pressures of SBR. Some, if not all, of their alternative goals, structures, and practices may be understood as the sort of local responsiveness to student needs that SBR ideally supports through the trade-off between accountability for results and the autonomy to determine how to achieve those results. For example, the relationship building practices and democratic, participatory decision-making structures within small school organizations that characterize many successful alternative schools may serve as mechanisms for the motivation and engagement that encourage academic

performance for students in these schools (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1981; Raywid, 1983; Smith, Gregory & Pugh; 1981; Wells, 1993; Wehlage, 1989; Young, 1990). Some structures, practices, and purposes should find support in this policy climate, others may find challenge.

Conclusion

The variation in practice, structure, and approach to alternative education throughout the past four decades indicates the diverse priorities of the school districts and educators that support these programs. The characteristics of successful alternative schools – their small size, participatory democratic structure, status as schools of choice, emphasis on community and relationships, and meaningful academic expectations – indicate a shift in the logics or priorities that shape and explain the schools. These structural elements emphasize student engagement with the school as community, and through that, engagement with academic work. The organizational features of successful alternative programs point to student outcome goals including democratic participation and self-determination, relationships built on respect and inclusion, mastery of the skills and knowledge that allow self-sufficiency and future options.

The proliferation of alternative schools over the past four decades suggests that a single system for all students does not work. The comprehensive (traditional) high school model is itself a reform response from the progressives to competing purposes for public education (Cuban, 2004; Kaestle, 1983; Tyack, 1974). Depending on perspective, criticisms of the model abound: these schools sacrificed rigorous

academic standards and watered down the curriculum in these efforts (Ravitch, 2000), or they became unresponsive, impersonalized settings where social inequities reproduce generation after generation (Gatto, 2002; Meier, 2003). Even the criticisms reflect the conflicting priorities held for schools. Remarkably, though the object of constant reform efforts for the past 50 years, comprehensive high schools persist as “the dominant form of secondary school organization in the United States” and continue to serve, not all, but “the vast majority of students” (Cuban, 2004, p. 17).

These embedded, competing purposes prove persistently problematic and provide one explanation for the resilience of the comprehensive high school model. Larry Cuban (2004) argues that, because U.S. educators, policymakers, and researchers cannot reconcile the different sets of structures and practices that support different purposes (democratic, meritocratic, or practical for Cuban), our failure to endorse coherent policies around explicitly identified and prioritized purposes prevents successful efforts to rally enough support to sustain real change. David Labaree (1997) presents a similar argument when describing overlapping and conflicting pressures on schools toward overlapping and conflicting goals. Democratic, social efficiency and social mobility goals respectively call for equal treatment and educational opportunity for effective citizenship, efficient sorting for meeting workforce needs, and differentiation through academic hierarchies in support of individual social positioning. “As a result of being forced to muddle its goals and

continually work at cross-purposes, education inevitably turns out to be deficient in carrying out any of these goals very effectively (p. 71).”⁹

SBR policies intend to serve as regulatory pressure to align priorities around academic achievement for all students. State assessments associated with these policies, to measure outcomes for students, may contribute to the definition of a technical core for public schools. That these policies intend to monitor outcomes for all students indicates attention to democratic purposes for public schools as well. Will these policies exert enough coercive pressures toward these outcomes, monitoring and applying sanctions, to reshape structures and practices in U.S. public schools?

How alternative schools fare in this historical, social, and policy context may contribute to our understanding of how highly institutionalized environments resist change, manage conflict, and respond to increased monitoring when structures and practices have had the symbolic legitimacy to resist external evaluation. The following chapters build on the preceding characterization of alternative schools as organizational responses to the pressures of social change that articulated the democratic priority and equity problems of U.S. public schools in the 1960s. By the 1970s, local districts generated alternative school options in response to public demands to solve these problems. With the support of federal government and private foundations, the field began to theorize the need for alternative schools, sharing model practices and structures. Understandings of the purposes and priorities of alternative schools converge in the 1980s as they become recognized and supported as the most

⁹ For Labaree (1997), one result of the tension between priorities has been the elevation in the social and cultural value of education credentials and the concomitant devaluing of learning in schools as students pursue those credentials. I.e., the rising priority status of the social mobility goal may contribute to the lower standards for curriculum, instruction, and learning that SBR intends to address.

successful school setting for potential school drop outs. Alternative schools sport all the earmarks of successful institutional change as they continue to proliferate and persist. Equally persistent are a lack of legitimacy bemoaned throughout the literature and the lack of a single shared definition delimiting the priorities and purposes of these alternatives. The next few chapters, a quantitative longitudinal comparison of alternative schools to regular schools and a cross case analysis of two school level case studies, focus more detailed analysis on the past few decades of alternative school evolution. Detailed case reports in the appendices provide historical accounts of both schools but the analysis will detail contemporary understandings of priorities and purposes. The analyses that follow take the semi-institutionalization established with the evidence from this chapter as a starting point from which to explore the contemporary role of alternative schools and explain the tension between their persistence and struggle for legitimacy.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT THE NUMBERS TELL US ABOUT PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN THE U.S.

Public alternative secondary schools in the U.S. enroll high-needs populations of students at about one-and-a-half to two-times the rate of regular secondary schools while receiving less, often half, of the federal resources designated to these high need student populations. The following series of longitudinal comparisons reveal regular patterns of disparity in enrollment and resource allocation between the two school types. What emerges is a picture of 5700 alternative schools enrolling 600,000 secondary students, most of them members of demographic groups who historically achieve academically at lower rates in schools: Black students, Hispanic students, American Indian students, and students from low income families. That these schools serve higher need student populations with fewer resources simultaneously describes their marginal legitimacy in public education and begins to explain their persistence.

The first few charts document the growth in numbers of alternative schools as reporting begins in 1986, then their persistence at the highest levels after peaking in the early 2000s. The early diffusion of alternative schools suggests that, by the mid-1980s, these innovations in public school organization and practices garnered significant legitimacy as pragmatic and valued alternatives within the public school sector. Enrollment patterns evidence that these schools respond to specific problems in public education by serving student populations who are least successful in regular

schools. The limited resources suggested by federal funding patterns and leveling of school population growth point to limited legitimacy however. Greenwood, et al. (2002) predict that innovative, legitimated solutions to institutional problems will continue to diffuse until understood by fields as the best solution or will disappear as a response fails to be institutionalized. Instead, alternative schools persist, without decreasing prevalence. They persist, however, at numbers far below those needed to serve the 20-30% of students who fail in regular schools. They have neither disappeared nor built sufficient legitimacy to be understood as required responses wherever student populations struggle in school.

This section begins with the challenge of defining alternative schools. After a discussion of inconsistencies within NCES and between NCES and other population estimates of alternative schools, I use the NCES Common Core of Data to compare longitudinal trends between alternative and regular secondary schools in the U.S., including those described above. I conclude the section with a summary of the historical achievement gap between groups of students represented in the comparisons and how that contributes to an understanding of the work of alternative schools.

The following section repeats the analysis with schools from New York State because the case study schools in the next chapter are located there. The conclusion interprets these analyses as contributions to a better understanding of the institutionalization process of alternative schools.

Definitions

Most discussions of alternative schools in the U.S. begin with this disclaimer: The variety of structures, practices, and goals that we find in alternative education prevents a coherent definition of alternative education in the U.S. (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Lehr, et al., 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2003; Loflin, 2000). Some of this variability stems from the local control of schools as discussed in reference to SBR; some from historical process. Public alternative schools, identified as such, appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s after the private free schools and independent schools established a public demand for varied schools that served the needs of an increasingly racially and economically diverse student population; challenged academic, social and economic priorities of the existing public school system; implemented innovative or experimental instructional practices; and applied principals of progressive education (Ravitch, 2000; Wells, 1993; Young, 1990; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Many alternative schools continue to embrace such priorities, and these schools' structures, practices, and goals reflect these priorities.

These schools look different from the alternative schools and programs that school systems develop to serve the needs of student populations at high risk of school failure (Raywid, 1994; Sagor, 1993). As school systems came to recognize the success that early alternative schools had with educating high needs populations of students throughout the 1980s and 1990s, increasing numbers of high needs students were directed to these settings and increasing number of schools were established exclusively for these student populations (Gregory, 2001; Young, 1990; Raywid,

1981). Contemporary definitions and understandings of alternative education reflect this shift. Lehr, Lanners, & Lange (2003) surveyed state legislation for definitions of alternative education and found four themes among the 34 states with explicit definitions and guidelines. These schools or programs exist in non-traditional settings apart from the general education classroom (25 states); they serve students at risk of school failure (17 states); they serve students who are disruptive or have behavior problems (11 states); or they serve students who have been suspended or expelled (8 states). The U.S. Department of Education definition is more inclusive in that it defines alternative schools, in most part, by what they are not:

“a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.55).”

The broadest definitions of public alternative education include both schools of choice presented as alternatives to local traditional programs and schools or programs designed to meet the needs of specific populations of students, with plenty of overlap between the two categories (Mintz, 1995; Raywid, 1994; Sagor, 1993). I detail the features and successful practices of both categories of alternative programs in other chapters.

Finally, I must note that many charter schools, small schools, schools-within-schools, etc. fit the working definitions and characteristics of alternative schools applied in this study. Because they do not self-identify as alternative schools, they are not treated as such here. That they do share many structures and practices with

successful alternative school programs and frequently serve similar populations of students without identifying as alternative serves as another indicator of the legitimacy concerns of alternative schools.

The National Data

The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) publicly available Common Core of Data provides data surveyed annually from the universe of U.S. public schools (NCES, 1986-2002). Though NCES researchers suspect significant underreporting of alternative schools in the data,¹⁰ about 500 alternative schools, not run by state or federal agencies, exist across the country from year to year since 1993. Suspected underreporting does not systematically bias the CCD alternative school data set. No patterns of exclusion emerge between states. Because underreporting is primarily due to individual state practices in data gathering and

¹⁰ These cases should represent the universe of public alternative schools, but a NCES Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) project investigating public alternative schools and programs for students at risk reported that their pilot study uncovered discrepancies between the CCD's 1998-99 account of alternative schools and the FRSS pilot results, using the 1998-99 CCD cases, in 2000-01 (Kleiner, et al., 2002). Forty percent of the 87 percent of districts not reporting any alternative schools in 1998-99 actually had at least one, two years later, in 2000-01. Also, 10 percent of the 11 percent of districts reported as having an alternative school in 1998-99 did not have one in 2000-01. Some of these discrepancies are explained by the opening and closing of schools over the course of two years, but the great difference between the CCD accounting of 11 percent of districts with one or more alternative schools and the FRSS pilot study's estimate of 45-55 percent of districts suggests gross underreporting of alternative schools in the CCD data. Finally, because the FRSS survey identified only alternative schools for at risk student populations, a definition of alternative school that includes those for heterogeneous or other populations would likely increase the FRSS numbers.

Other evidence for underreporting includes the absence of a common model for alternative schools in New York State (NYS), a single school enrolling students from multiple districts under the supervision of a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), from the CCD file. This means that alternative schools serving about 7800 NYS students in 2002 were missing for NYS (NYSED, 2003). A few states appear to have missing data regarding alternative schools in all or in various years of the CCD. And, using district level filters with the CCD data results in a higher percentage of alternative schools in Table 1, approaching 7% instead of 5%. I use school level filters for these analyses under the assumption that school level numbers are likely more accurate. Discrepancies in the CCD are understood as the result of variations in state data gathering strategies and reporting practices (Sietsema, J., telephone conversation 1/5/05).

reporting, we will find variability in omission patterns. For example, New York State fails to distinguish state and federally run alternative programs for one year, so numbers of schools in the state jump dramatically without any increase in enrollments. NYS’s mistake does not impact the national trends, describing the universe of U.S. public secondary alternative schools.

Though quantities, hence the calculated percentages, are almost certainly low, Figures 5.1 and 5.2 below diagram an increasing concentration of alternative schools, as a percentage of all schools, since 1986-87 and an increasing percentage of students served by these schools, respectively.¹¹

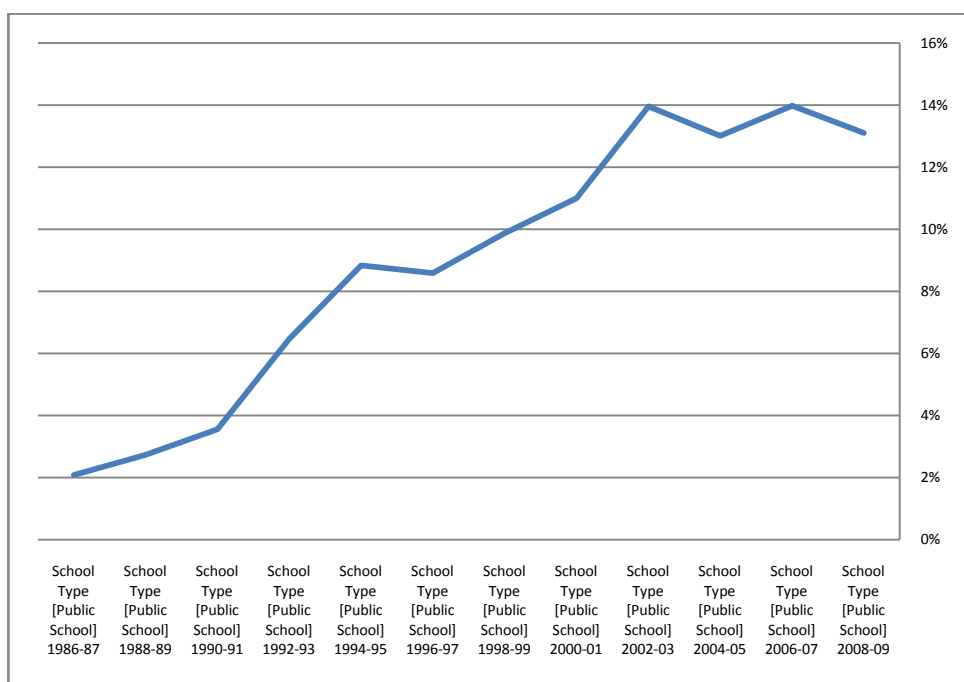


Figure 5.4 – Alternative Schools as Percent of All School Types 1987-2009

¹¹ By “all schools,” I mean the total of alternative and regular schools. My calculation of totals does not include vocational and special education schools. In 2006-07, states reported about 90% regular schools, 7% alternative schools, 2% special education schools, and 1% vocational schools (NCES. Table 2. Numbers and Types of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2006-07. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/pesschools07/tables/table_02.asp. Accessed 6/11/2009). Because special education and vocational schools represent a small fraction of elementary and secondary schools, and leaving them out streamlines my calculations, I exclude them.

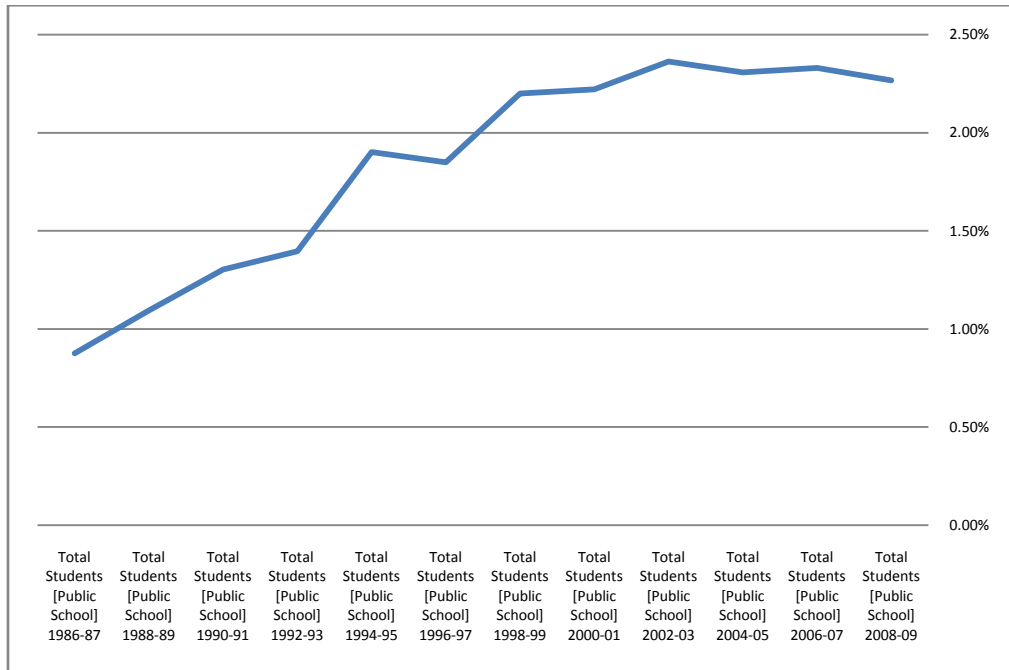


Figure 5.5 – Percent of Secondary Public School Enrollment in Alternative Schools 1987-2009

In absolute numbers, the number of alternative schools in the CCD ranges from 583 in 1986-87 to 5714 in 2008-09 and student enrollment numbers range from 182,902 nationally in 1986-87 to 614,871 students in 2006-07. It is important to note that other sources, some detailed in later sections, indicate much higher numbers. For instance, for 2000-01 the CCD identifies about 18%¹² of regular school districts as having one or more alternative schools while some NCES Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) researchers estimates that 39% of all U.S. public school districts and 48% of districts that serve students beyond the eighth grade administered at least one

¹² I estimate this percent based on the number of districts reporting alternative schools in the 2000-01 CCD files (2640 districts) and the CCD’s home page estimate of 14,500 regular school districts in 2002-03 (<http://www.nces.ed.gov/ccd/>, 1/10/05). Using the CCD files to calculate a more precise count of regular school districts proves prohibitive without greater technical resources. A more precise percentage of 15.45% results when I use the total of all local education agencies in 2000-01 as the denominator.

alternative school or program specifically for at risk students, a large subset of the alternative student population, in 2000-01 (Kleiner, et al., 2002). In all, Kleiner, et al. (2002) estimate 10,900 public alternative schools and programs for at risk students serving 1.3% of the entire U.S. student population that year. Compare these numbers with the CCD's 4,395 total number of alternative schools (for all student populations) serving 2.2% of students in 2000-01. That the FRSS survey team identified public alternative schools and programs only starts to explain their larger numbers, despite surveying only a subset of alternative schools. Why the differences between percentages of students served do not reflect the school count differences is another problematic question in the available national data. Another source of discrepancy is Raywid's (1983) alternative schools project where she and colleagues identified 2,500 public alternative schools in the U.S. in 1983, which more than quadruples the CCD 1986-87 numbers above. These comparisons are summarized below in Table 5.1. These discrepancies begin to illustrate the problematic nature of defining, counting, identifying, and researching alternative schools in the U.S. The lack of an authoritative national accounting of alternative schools is bemoaned throughout the literature.

Table 5.8 – Historical Estimates of U.S. Public Alternative School Counts

School Year	U.S. Alternative School Counts from varied Sources		
	CCD Files	FRSS 2002 Report	Raywid 1983 Project
1983-84	x	x	2,500
1986-87	583	x	x
2000-01	4,395	10,900 (includes programs)	x

A Comparison of U.S. Public Alternative Schools and Regular Schools

Even if we consider the CCD file a sample, instead of the universe, of public alternative schools and as representative, which its large size (n=9003) suggests is a reasonable leap of faith, then we can continue to rely on the CCD data to at least point reliably to trends over time and to provide some basis for a description of alternative education demographics nationally. All following comparisons between alternative schools and other schools use the CCD, so any biases in the data will persist throughout the aggregate dataset.

School categories are defined in the CCD as follows:

RegularSchool - A public elementary/secondary school that does not focus primarily on vocational, special, or alternative education.

Other/Alternative School - A public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, and falls outside of the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education.

Charter schools fall into one of the four CCD public school type categories: regular, special education, vocational, other/alternative. In this chapter's analysis, charter schools identified as public alternative schools are included in the alternative school type category. Charter schools identified as public regular schools are included in the regular school type category.

Figures 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 below illustrate the higher concentration of Black, Latino or Hispanic, and American Indian students in alternative schools. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 12.3% of the U.S. population is Black or African American. Student enrollment of Black students in alternative secondary schools ranges from 24.34% of the total alternative school student population in 1988-89 to 29.72% in

1996-97 (see Figure 5.3). The enrollment of black students in alternative schools has remained steady in the range of 26% for almost 15 years. For regular schools, the percent of all students identified as Black ranges from 12.92% in 1988-89 to 16.64% in 2006-07. The average difference between the percent of all alternative school students who are identified as Black and the percent of regular school students identified as Black from 1988-89 through 2008-09 is 11.4%. The differences fluctuate a little over time with the 2008-09 difference calculated at 9.17%.

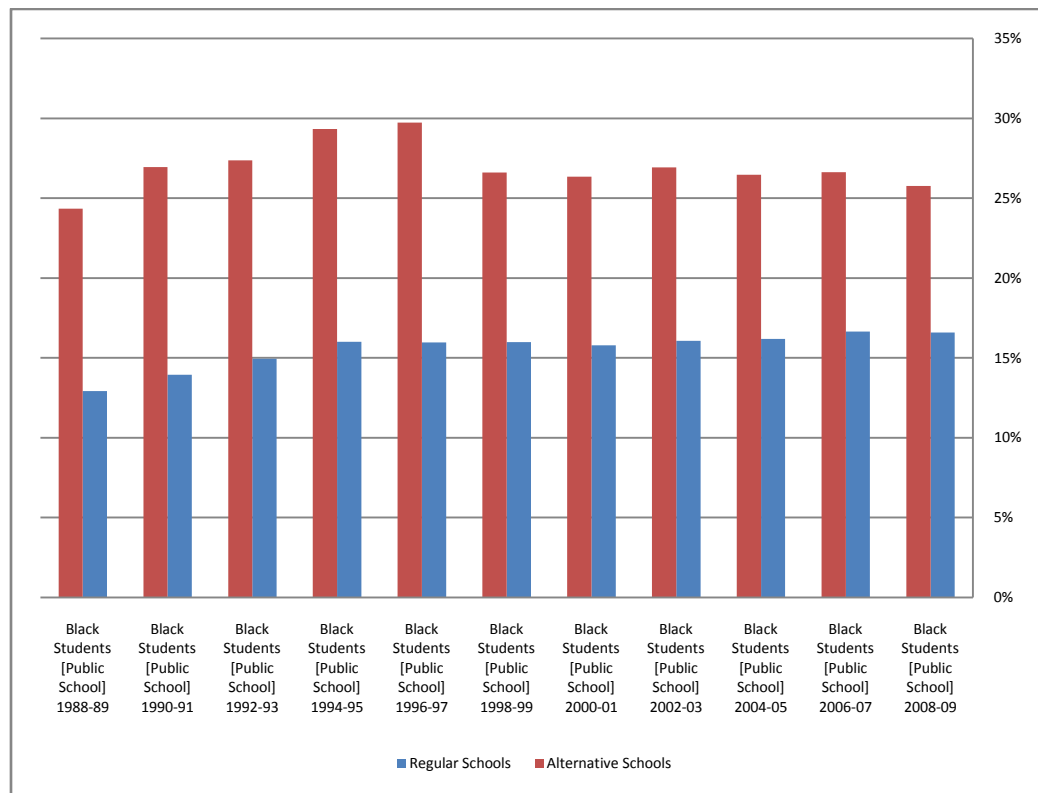


Figure 5.3 – Percent Black Student Enrollment by School Type 1989-2009

For Latino or Hispanic students, differences increase (see Figure 5.4). The 2000 Census estimates that 12.5% of the U.S. population, of any race, is Latino or

Hispanic. The percent of alternative school enrollment identified as Latino or Hispanic ranges from 19.4% in 1988-89 to 33.2% in 2008-09. For regular schools, the range is 8.9% in 1988-89 to 19.2% in 2008-09. The average difference between the percent of students identified as Latino or Hispanic in alternative schools and those identified in regular schools over the same years is 14.3%. The differences range from 10.5% in 1988-89 to 17.6% in 1996-97, and the difference is 14% in 2008-09.

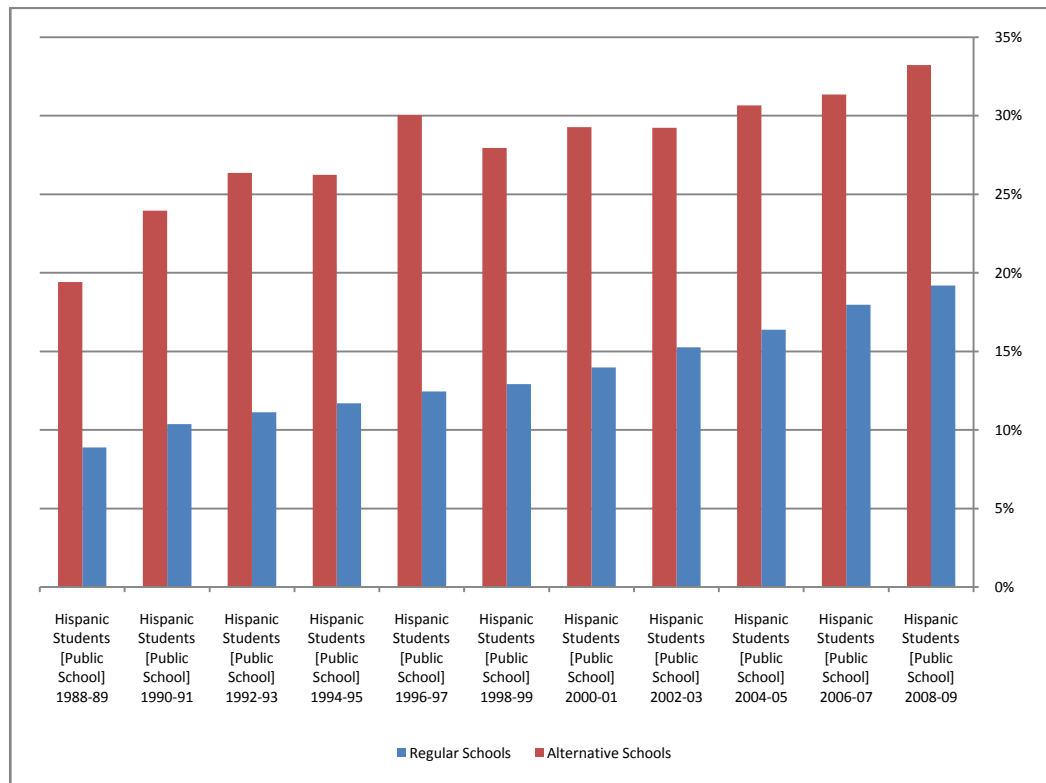


Figure 5.4 – Percent Hispanic Enrollment by School Type 1989-2009

For Native American and Alaskan Native Students, the differences are much lower because the populations are so much smaller (see Figure 5.5). The 2000 Census estimates that .9% of the U.S. population fall into this race category. In alternative schools American Indian student population ranges from 1.3% of the total in 1988-89

to 1.96% in 2006-07. The 2008-09 American Indian alternative school student population is 1.89% of the total. In regular schools, the American Indian student populations range from .79% in 1988-89 to 1.21% in 2002-03, 1.19% in 2008-09. The average difference between American Indian population percentages in alternative and regular schools is .69%, and the difference in 2008-09 is .7%.

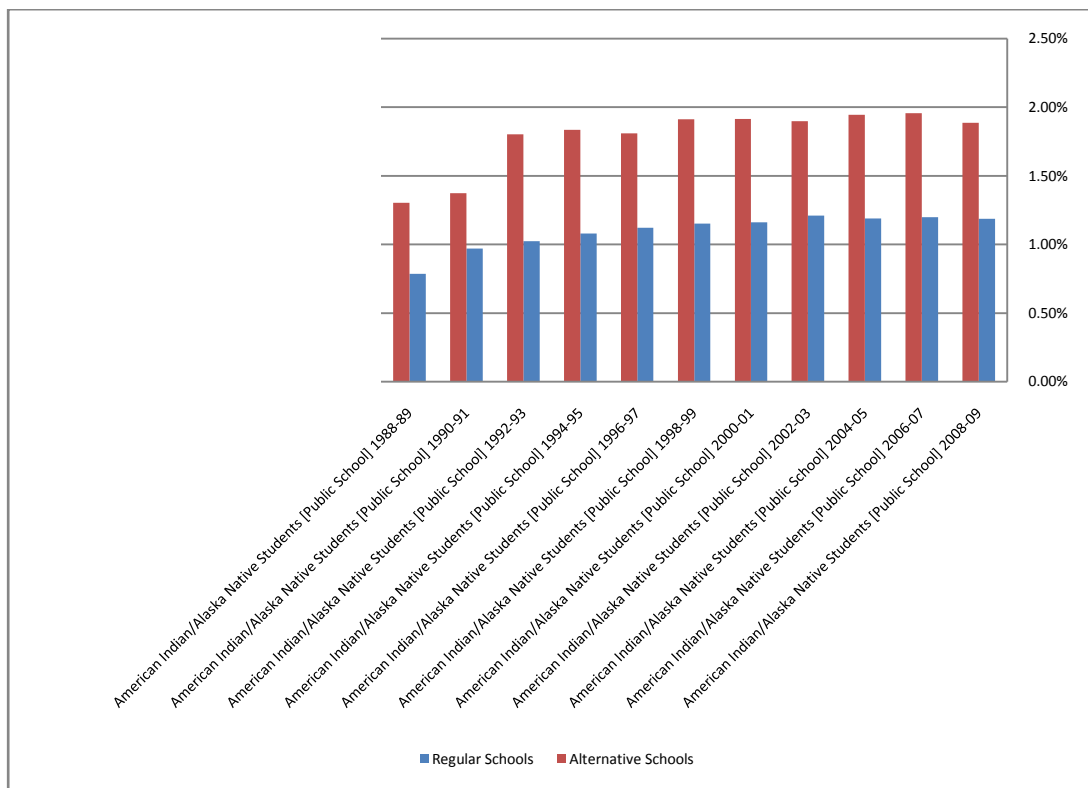


Figure 5.5 – Percent Native American Enrollment by School Type 1989-2009

Table 5.2 summarizes the census figures for the total 2000 U.S. population and alternative school student concentrations and regular school student concentrations from the CCD files. Higher percentages of Black, Latino or Hispanic, and American Indian students than in the general population reflect increasing populations. We would expect to see those increases when concentrating on public school students, i.e.

members of the general population under 18 - 20 years old. Aside from the purpose of general description, I present these comparisons to illustrate that the concentration of these minority groups is consistently 1.5 to 2 times higher in alternative schools than in regular schools.

Table 5.9 – Race/Ethnicity Population (as percent of total)

	Black	Latino or Hispanic	AmericanIndian
U.S General Population in 2000	12.3	12.5	.9
Regular Schools 1988-89	12.92	8.88	.79
Alternative Schools 1988-89	24.35	19.43	1.3
Regular Schools 2008-09	16.58	19.18	1.19
Alternative Schools 2008-09	25.75	33.23	1.89

For the sake of contrast and a more complete picture, Figures 6 and 7 present parallel information for White and Asian student populations. The relationship between race categories and school type is changed. The white student populations in both school types closely match one another throughout the 20 years. The 2000 census estimates that 75.1% of the population is categorized as white. In alternative schools, white students as a percent of the total population ranges from 43.29% in 2008-09 to 59.34% in 1988-89, steadily decreasing across the 20 years. In regular schools, the trend begins to decrease in 1996-97, with percentages ranging from 42.02% in 2008-09 to 56.18% in 1994-95. The differences between alternative and regular schools average 1.54% and the difference in 2008-09 is 1.27%.

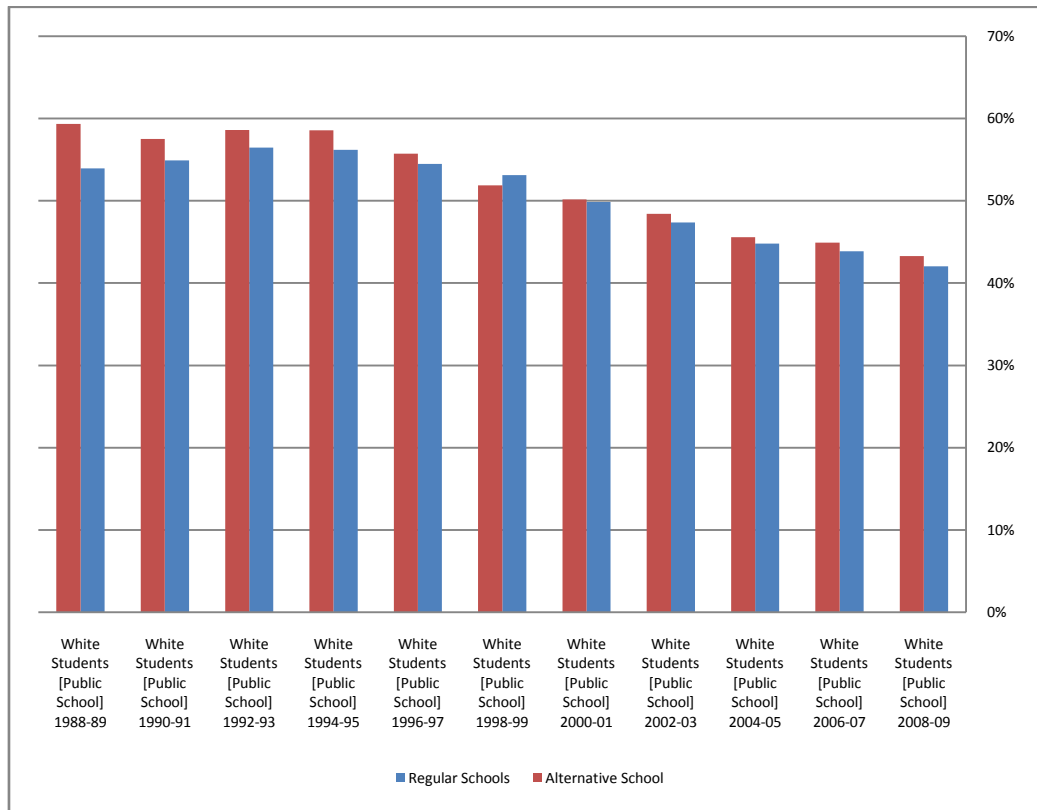


Figure 5.6 – Percent White Student Enrollment by School Type 1989-2009

For Asian American student populations, the relationship between alternative and regular schools reverses (see Figure 5.7). The 2000 census estimates that 3.7% of the U.S. population is Asian American. In alternative schools, the percent of total students identified as Asian American ranges from 2.75% in 1988-89 to 3.69% in 1998-99. The 2008-09 percentage is 3.1%. In regular schools, 2.84% of students in 1988-89 were of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. In 2008-09, 4.73% of students in regular schools were Asian American. The differences between regular school and alternative school enrollments of Asian American students range from .09% in 1988-89 to 1.63% in 2008-09. The average difference is .58%. Regular and alternative

schools serve relatively similar concentrations of White and Asian American students when compared to other race and ethnicity types, although regular schools serve an increasingly greater concentration of Asian American students in the 21st century.

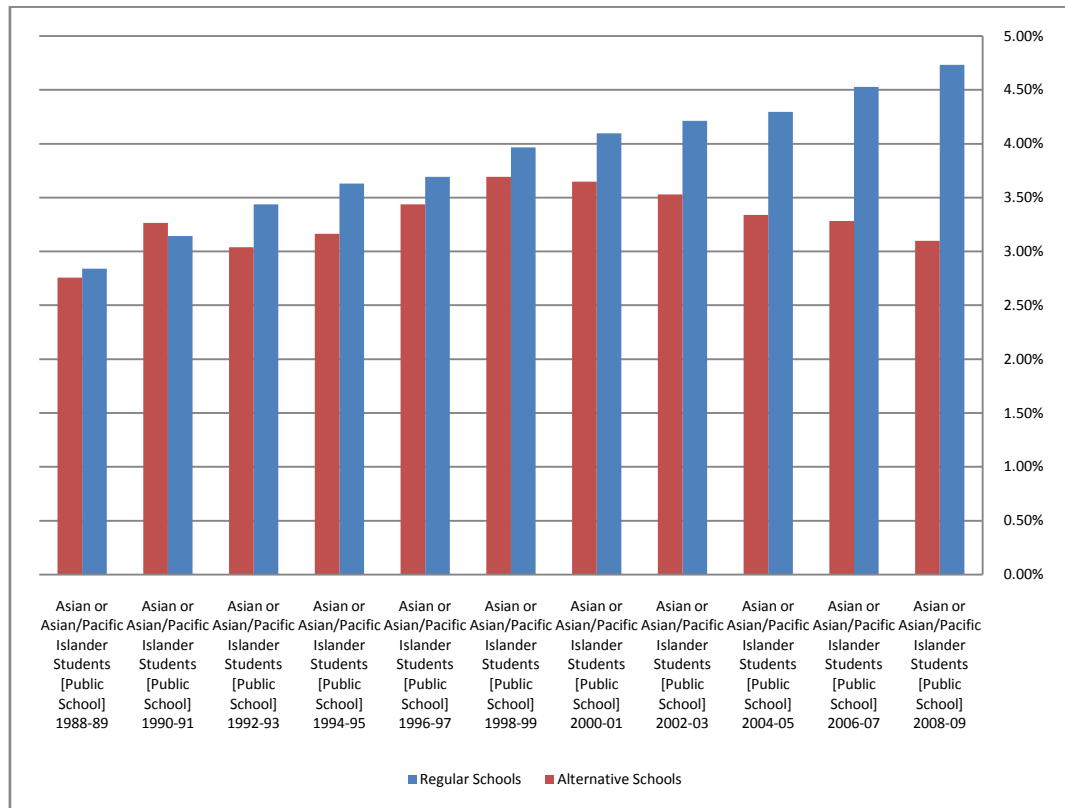


Figure 5.7 – Percent Asian Student Enrollment by School Type 1989-2009

This picture of traditionally lower achieving student group populations concentrated disproportionately in alternative schools changes somewhat when our focus shifts to groups defined by income levels. In addition to Black and Latino or Hispanic students, recent research reports on the achievement gap between groups of U.S. students find students from low income households more likely to achieve at

lower levels (e.g., Education Commission of the States, 2005; Bennet, et al., 2004).

Widespread and available indicators of school families' income levels include schools' Title I funding and the concentration of students who participate in the federal program for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL). CCD definitions for these indicators are as follow.

Title I schools are designated as eligible for participation in programs authorized by Title I of Public Law 103-382. Those with school-wide programs are schools in which all students have been designated by state and federal regulations as eligible for participation in Title I programs.

Free or reduced-price meal eligibility is the number of students in a school who indicate that they are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Act.

Eligibility for Title I programs is determined by the poverty level of schools served. Title I eligible schools serve a high enough number of students living at or below poverty levels (e.g., 5% of student body) for individual students to receive academic intervention services when needed, and schools eligible for school-wide programs serve a high enough concentration of students living in poverty (e.g., 50% of student body) to be funded for academic intervention programs that serve all low achieving students in the school (San Francisco Unified School District, 1996). Title I of Public Law 103-382 funds these individual and school-wide programs with federal education money (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2005). FRPL calculations rely on individual families to apply to the program; therefore researchers generally consider this an under-reported indicator. The assumption here is that many eligible families never apply.

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents. (For the period July 1, 2004, through June 30, 2005, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$24,505 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$34,873 (USDA, 2005)).

Because Title I eligibility is determined in large part by the concentration of students receiving FRPL, the disparity we find below in funding each for different school types is perplexing. Title I grants from the federal government are disbursed to state education departments who are responsible for determining the eligibility and award amounts to local education agencies. Therefore, states may have varied requirements and practices regarding Title I funding. Also, income levels alone determine eligibility for FRPL; Title I eligibility adds criteria for achievement levels and sometimes student status, for example, as an orphan or documented delinquent. Apart from these differences in eligibility requirements, a popular organizational model for alternative schools in NYS provides one other potential explanation for the discrepancies we find between Title I and FRPL funding rates. This BOCES model serves families from multiple school districts and receives all funding through per student tuitions paid to the supervising BOCES organization by students' home districts. These schools receive little to no direct federal or state funding.

Figures 5.8 and 5.9 below display concentrations of Title I funding and FRPL participation by school type. The CCD provides this data for only the ten most recent years. Both figures show alternative schools serving smaller concentrations of eligible

students, though the difference is much greater when comparing Title I eligibility. The percent of regular schools receiving Title I funding steadily grows from 22.94% in 1998-99 to 57.76% in 2008-09. The same is true for alternative schools, though at much lower percentages: from 11.16% in 1999 to 32.69% in 2009. Proportionately, over time, one-third to two-thirds as many alternative schools receive Title I funding when compared to regular schools using percentages of the school type. The differences between these percentages fluctuate over time and average 18.96% from 1998-99 to 2008-09, with the 2008-09 difference at 25.06%. In 2008-09, regular schools received Title I Eligible funding at the highest rate difference when compared with alternative schools; 57.76% of regular schools receive these funds compared to 32.69% of alternative schools. This suggests that public alternative schools nationally are not serving low income populations of students in similar concentrations to regular schools or are, at least, are not receiving Title I eligible funding for doing so.

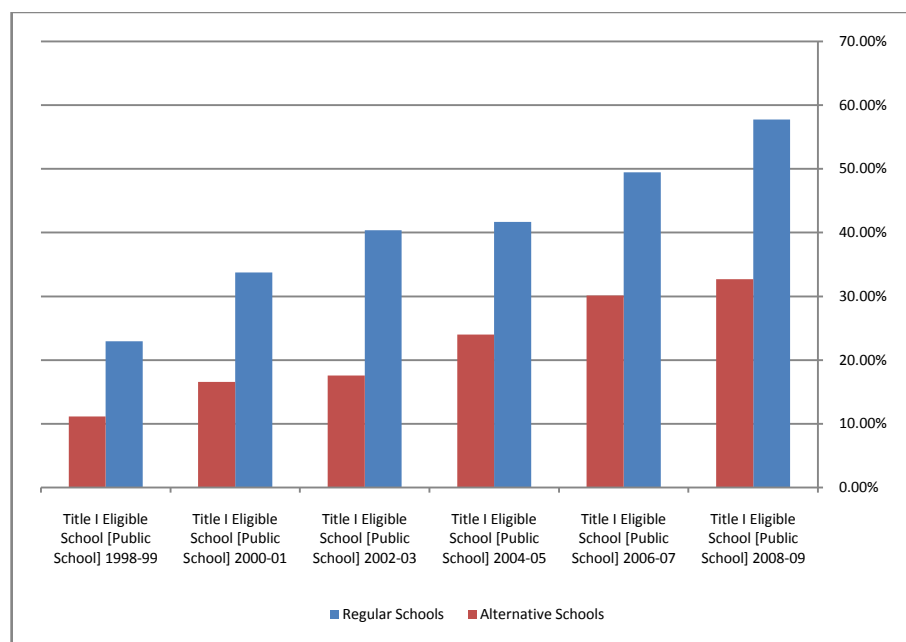


Figure 5.8 – Percent of School Type Eligible for Title I Funding 1999- 2009

FRPL rates reveal much more similarity between school types. From 1998-99 to 2008-09, the concentration of students eligible for FRPL increased from 22.74% of all regular school students to 39.19%. For alternative schools, percentages grew from 19.8% in 1998-99 to 46.81% in 2008-09. Unlike the Title I funding scenario, differences between regular school FRPL percentages and alternative school percentages decreased until negative over the nine years from a 2.94% greater concentration of FRPL eligible students in regular schools in 1998-99 to a 7.62% greater concentration of FRPL eligible students in alternative schools in 2008-09. The gap between regular school students and alternative school students receiving FRPL funding has increased but reversed. In order to understand both the Title I data and the

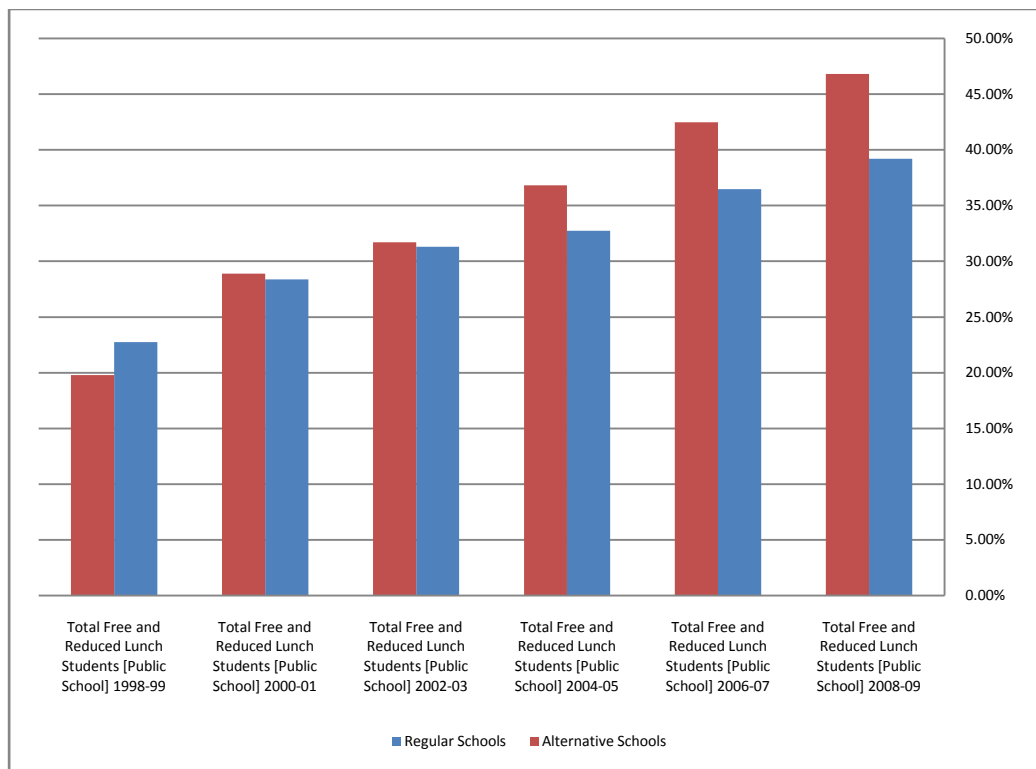


Figure 5.9 – Percent of Enrolled Students Receiving Federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch in School Types 1999-2009

FRPL data as accurate, we understand that alternative schools are serving low income students in concentrations greater than regular schools without receiving the federal funding directed toward meeting the needs of low income, low achieving students.

Another perspective on the percentage of low income students served by regular and alternative schools, respectively, focuses on the neediest of these student populations. Figure 5.10 presents the concentration of school types receiving School-wide Title I funding. The Title I picture remains consistent when we concentrate on those schools with high enough concentrations of low income students to qualify for school-wide programmatic funding. From 1998-99 to 2008-09, the 8.57% of regular schools receiving funding rose to 35.8%. In contrast, 2.67% of alternative schools funded for school-wide programs in 1998-99 rose to 22.37% in 2008-09. The differences between school types increased throughout the ten years from 5.9% to 13.43% in 2008-09, with an average difference of about 10%. Again, though working with lower concentrations of schools funded at these levels, we find regular schools funded for school-wide Title I programs at higher rates than alternative schools.

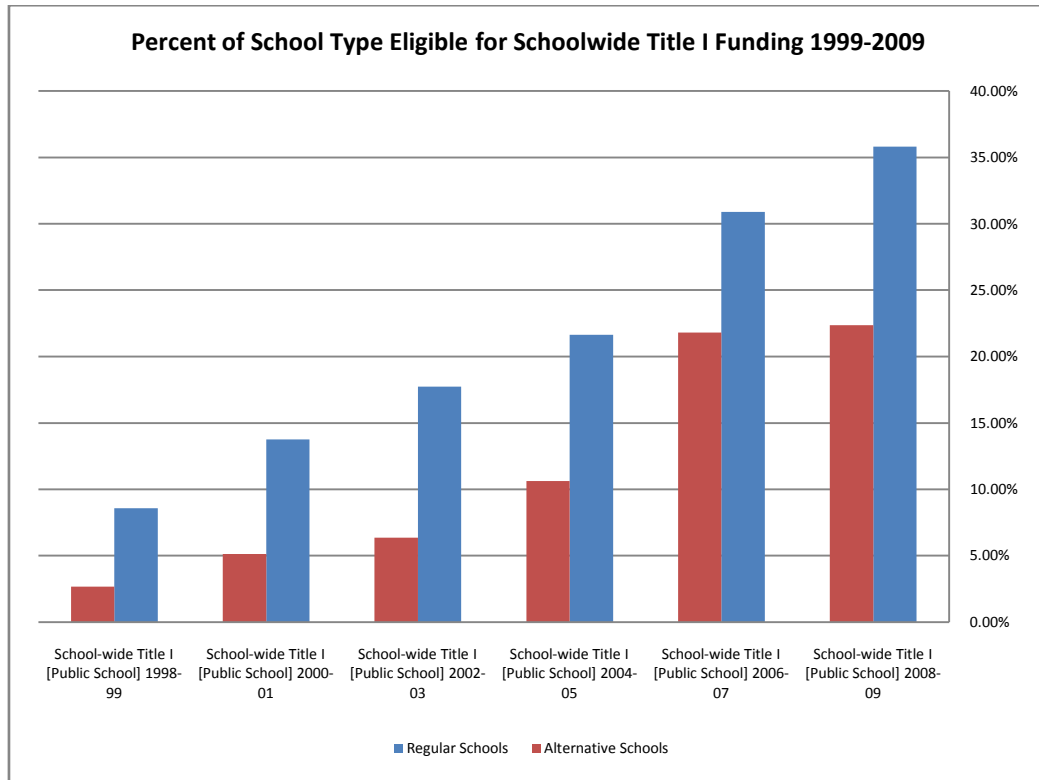


Figure 5.10 – Percent of School Type Eligible for School-wide Title I Funding 1999-2009

Figure 5.11 presents the concentration of students in schools receiving federally funded free lunch from 1998-99 to 2008-09. In the course of these ten years, regular school rates ranged from 21.68% of students receiving free lunch in 1998-99 to 31.5% in 2008-09. In alternative schools, a low of 22.83% of students receiving free lunch in 1998-99 rose to 41.15% in 2008-09. Concentrations of these students from families with lowest incomes increase substantially across school types. The differences between the two school types range from 1.15% in 1998-99 to 9.65% in 2008-09. Alternative schools enroll higher concentrations of students receiving free lunch when compared to regular schools. Current trends show alternative school concentrations increasing at higher rates than regular schools as well. As with schools

receiving Targeted Title I funds and students receiving FRPL, a pattern of disparity persists. Schools with the highest concentration of students from the lowest income families receive lower levels of the federal funds intended to support academic programming for these students. Though enrolling higher concentrations of students receiving free lunch, alternative schools receive Title I school-wide funding typically at about half the rate of regular schools.

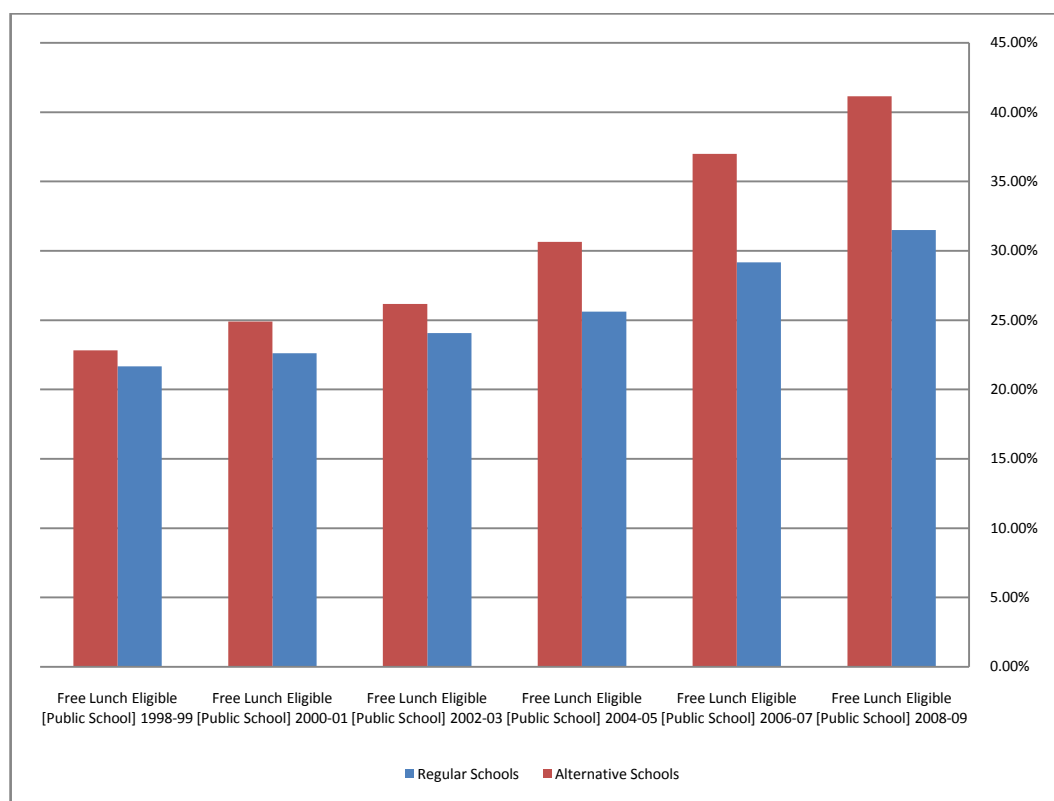


Figure 5.11 – Percent of Enrolled Students Receiving Federal Free Lunch in School Types 1989 - 2009

Finally, I compare the average pupil teacher ratios (PTR) in school types. Here we find marginally higher ratios in alternative schools when compared to regular schools. We would expect lower ratios in alternative schools because these schools

serve higher-needs populations of students and frequently concentrate on relationship building between students and staff. The data here indicate that these characteristics of alternative schools do not translate into lower PTRs. Regular school averages range from a low of 15.96 in 2008-09 to 16.54 in 2004-05. In alternative schools, average PTR ranges from 14.91 in 2002-03 to 17.73 in 2006-07. Differences in average PTR between regular and alternative schools range from 1.65 more students per teacher in alternative schools in 2006-07 to .37 in 2004-05. Over the course of the 10 school years shown here, the average difference between regular schools and alternative schools is .38 more pupils per teacher in alternative schools. Overall, PTRs are similar

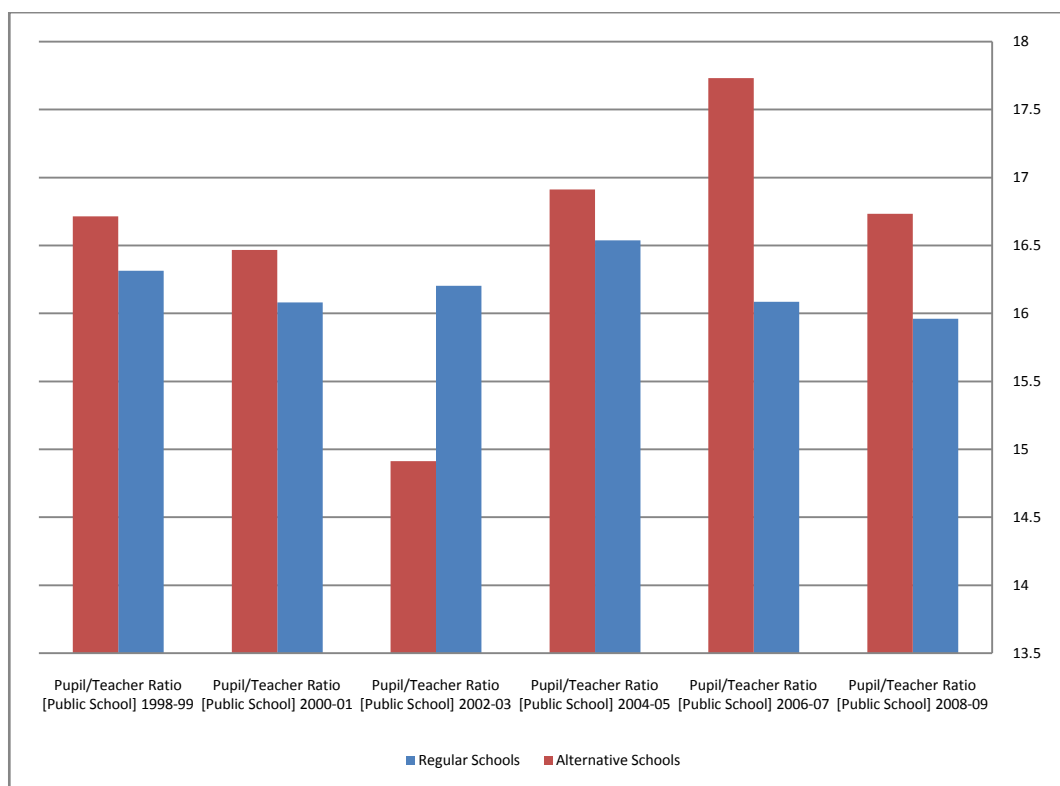


Figure 5.12 – Average Pupil to Teacher Ratio by School Type 1999-2009

between the two school types. These comparisons again support the conclusion that alternative schools serve higher-needs student populations without increased resources.

In summary, the CCD data indicate higher concentrations of historically low-achieving minority and low-income student populations in alternative schools when compared to regular schools. NCES reports regularly on achievement gaps based on fourth and eighth grade reading and math scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The most recent reports available discuss the historical progression of achievement gaps between black and white student groups nationally and Hispanic and white student groups nationally (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson & Rahman, 2009; Hemphill, Vanneman & Rahman, 2010). In both comparisons, white students continue to outperform underrepresented minority students in fourth and eighth grade reading and math tests, and students not from low-income families outperform students from low income families. The gap is narrowing between black and white students and between students from low-income families and students not from low-income families. (The analyses include disaggregating students within race types by income type.) Asian American students on the other hand have historically outperformed white students on measures of achievement and continue to do so. These same gaps between all four discussed groups are widening at advanced levels of achievement on eighth grade state level achievement tests (Chudowsky, N. & Chudowsky, V., 2011). On these eighth grade measures of achievement, Native American students earn proficiency scores at rates very close to black students (Chudowsky, N. & Chudowsky, V., 2011). We find these achievement patterns

clearly reflected in public secondary alternative and regular school enrollment patterns.

In addition, alternative schools serve concentrations of low-income students at rates increasingly higher than those of regular schools, especially for the lowest-income student group as indicated by Federal Free Lunch (FFL) rates. The most recent years' data showing rates 7.6% (FRPL rate) – 10% (FFL rate) higher in alternative schools. The CCD indicates that alternative schools report receiving federal Title I funding directed to low-income, high-need student populations at about half the rate of regular schools. Pupils to teacher ratios (PTR) across time support this picture of alternative schools working to serve high-needs, lower achieving student populations with fewer resources.

The number of public alternative schools has increased ten-fold in the past 20 years, from 583 schools in 1987-88 to 5714 schools in 2008-09. In that time, the percent of US public secondary school students served has increased from less than one percent to around 2.25 percent consistently for the past 10 years. Though increases in the number of schools and rate of enrollment have slowed in recent years, we find no indication of decrease. These organizations persist well into the 21st century, serving higher concentrations of high-needs student populations when compared to regular schools and with fewer resources when compared to regular schools.

New York State

Enrollment and resource distribution in New York State (NYS) public secondary schools appear less patterned than the detailed national numbers above. Problematic reporting explains some of the anomalies in the data. I detail indications of reporting error in the first few paragraphs below. Other changing patterns may be explained, with future hindsight, as the evolution of alternative schools in NYS. The case studies following this analysis center on two upstate NY alternative schools, so I take a brief look at the NYS numbers below.

NYS has a changing concentration of alternative schools, with a similarly volatile percentage of students attending alternative schools, when compared to national trends (see Figure 5.13). Except for the spike in NYS alternative schools in 2002-03, explained in part below, the national numbers substantially exceed the NYS alternative school counts and enrollment rates. A lack of reporting in NYS from 1989 to 1993 prevents an accurate description of early trends in NYS. But as national trends increase to a sustained population of alternative schools of around 13%, the NYS alternative school population increases to a maximum 8.36% in 2004-05. In 2007, the NYS population decreases to the almost 1.5% that persists through 2011.

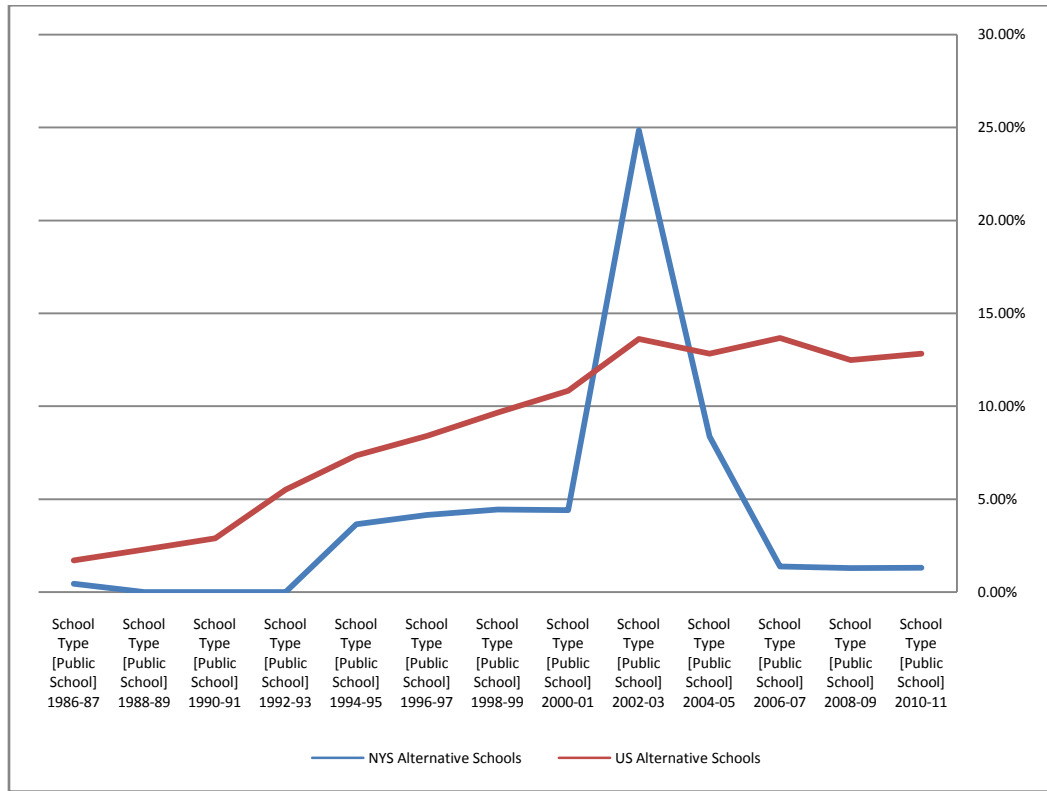


Figure 5.13 – Alternative Schools as Percent of All Schools in 1989-2011

Figure 5.14 indicates vagrancies of reporting practices in NYS. I have included all available years of NYS data from the CCD, reported here every two years. In the past 25 years, very few to zero alternative schools are reported from 1987 until 1995, when almost 4% of public secondary schools in NYS are suddenly reported as alternative. (These numbers appear first in 1994, an unreported year above.) Then in 2003, another reporting anomaly explains the spike to 25%. In that year, all of the Alternative/other schools operated by state or federally run institutions were included as “local district” schools. I have filtered these programs from the state and national numbers. Hundreds of schools were identified as alternative schools run by local

districts in 2002-03, when in 2001-02 and in 2003-04 they were run by state or federal institutions, many with names including the word “correctional.”

With these reporting anomalies accounted for, almost 5% of public secondary schools in NYS were reported as alternative schools from 1994 to 2002. After 2002, we see an increase to almost 10% until numbers fall to around 1.5% in 2006, where they remain through 2011. Unlike national trends, NYS sustains a lower concentration of alternative schools for the most recent five years of available data. NYS sustains a population of alternative schools nonetheless.

Figure 5.14 shows enrollment concentrations for alternative schools in NYS compared to national trends for the same 25-year period. Enrollment numbers do not

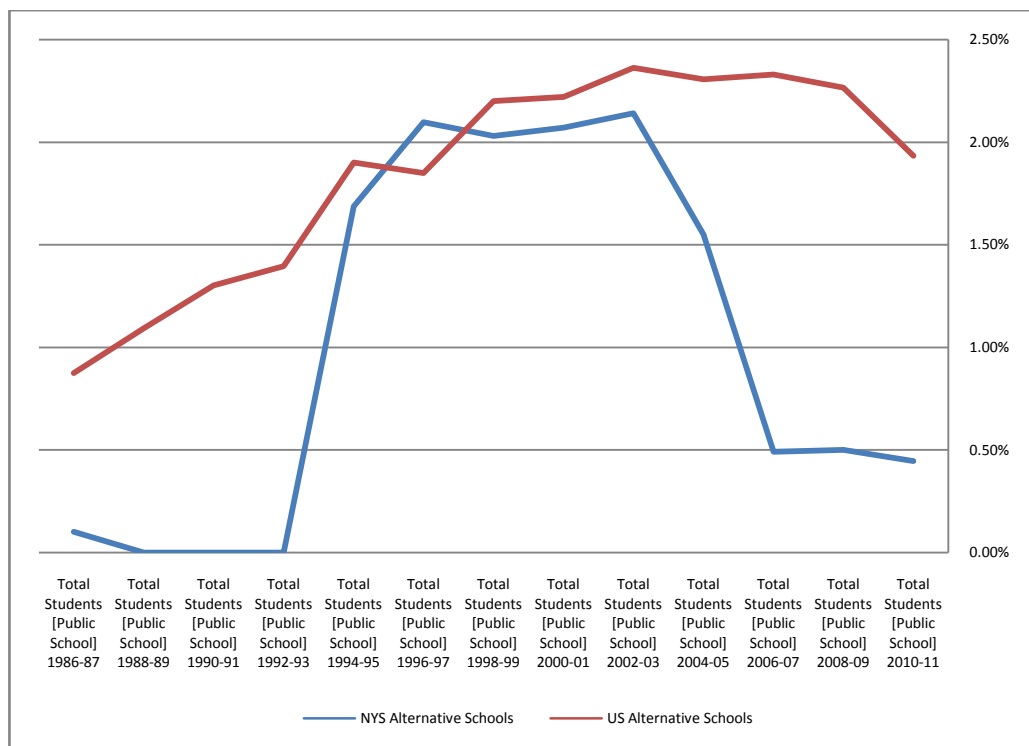


Figure 5.14 – Percent of Secondary Public School Enrollment in Alternative Schools 1987-2011

suffer from the same reporting anomalies above because most of the mis-reported schools in 2002-03 reported enrollments of zero. NYS alternative schools enroll 1.5 to 2% of the secondary student population from 1995 to 2005. In 2006, enrollment concentrations drop to about .5%. This lower enrollment persists through 2011. National trends are less volatile and are sustained at higher levels around 2.3% from 1999 - 2009. NYS sustains a decreased enrollment rate of around .5% for the five most recent years of available data while the national enrollment rate dips to almost 2% in 2010-11.

An analysis of enrollments by race and ethnicity in NYS public secondary schools repeats most of the general patterns found nationally. Figure 5.15 shows Black student enrollment concentrated in alternative schools at never less than twice the rate of enrollment in regular NYS schools from 1995-2011. Figure 5.15 reveals similar rates of enrollment for Hispanic students in the two school types. Native American enrollment in alternative schools, reported as similar to enrollment in regular schools from 1995-2007, increases over time to more than 1.5 times greater than in regular schools in 2011. Table 5.3 shows that, by 2011, alternative schools in NYS enroll Black, Hispanic, and Native American students at about twice the rate we would expect, if alternative schools were reflecting the general population of NYS.

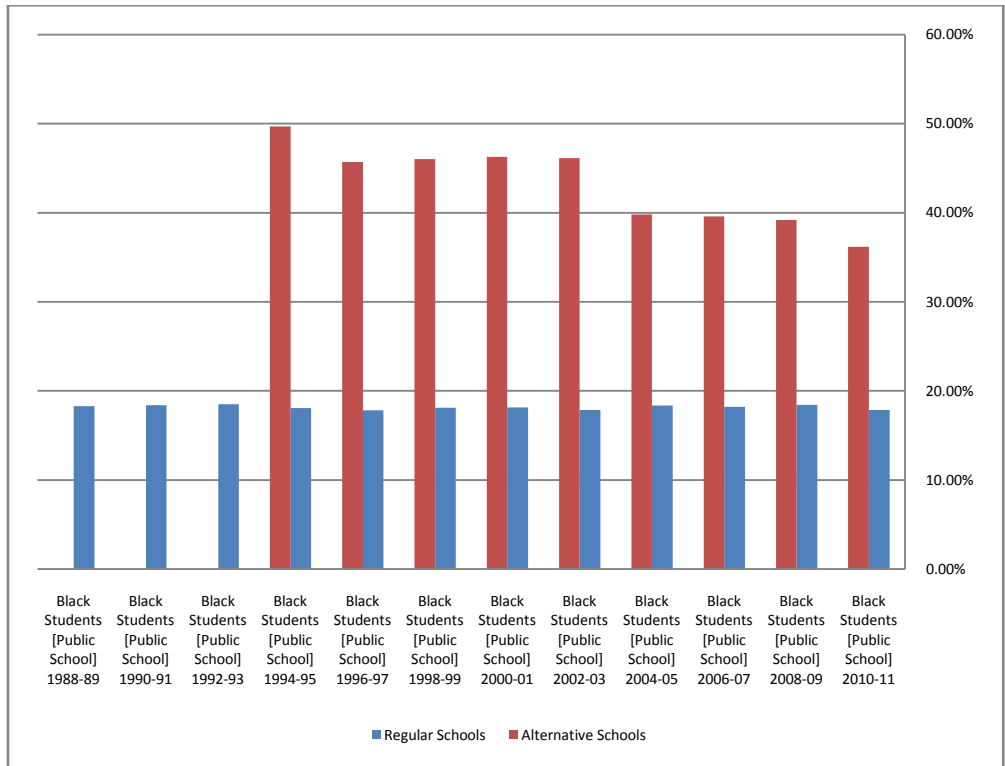


Figure 5.15 – Percent Black Student Enrollment by NYS School Type 1989-2011

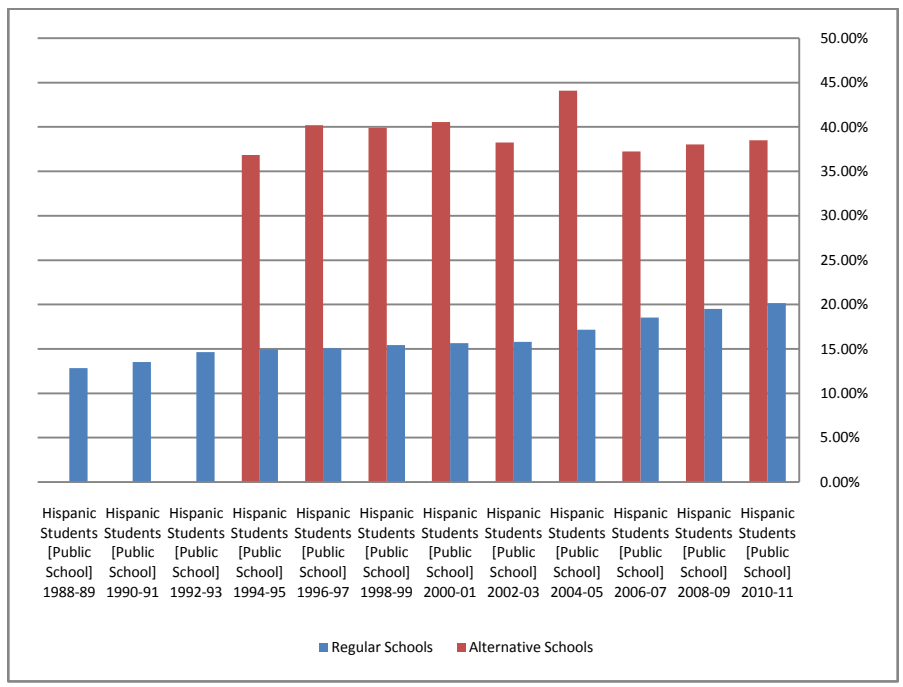


Figure 5.16 – Percent Hispanic Student Enrollment by NYS School Type 1989-2011

Asian American and White student enrollments in NYS public secondary schools are distributed very differently than in the national patterns described above. Asian American student enrollments in regular schools better reflect the concentration of Asian Americans in the general population, 8% in NYS and 5.1% in the U.S. according to the 2010 Census. Figure 5.18 illustrates that alternative schools in NYS reportedly enroll Asian American students at increasingly higher concentrations than regular schools, beginning in 2007. From 1994 to 2005, enrollments in alternative and in regular schools were similar. The growth of Asian American student enrollment from 6% to 13% of the NYS alternative school population during the past six years is interesting and will remain unexplained here. Unaddressed questions include who are these students and which schools do they attend?

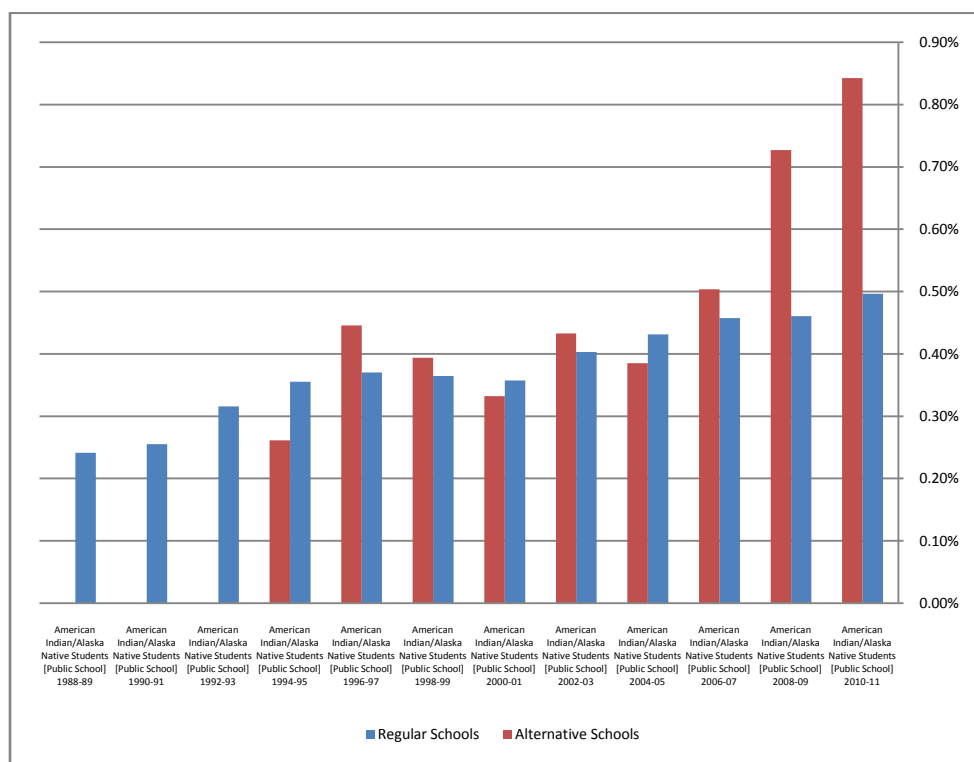


Figure 5.17 – Percent Native American Enrollment by NYS School Type 1989-2011

Table 5.3 – Race/Ethnicity Population (as percent of total)

	Black	Latino or Hispanic	American Indi an
NYS General Population in 2000	17	15.1	.9
Regular Schools 1994-95	18.06	14.95	.36
Alternative Schools 1994-95	49.69	36.86	.26
Regular Schools 2010-11	17.86	20.17	.5
Alternative Schools 2010-11	36.19	38.49	.84

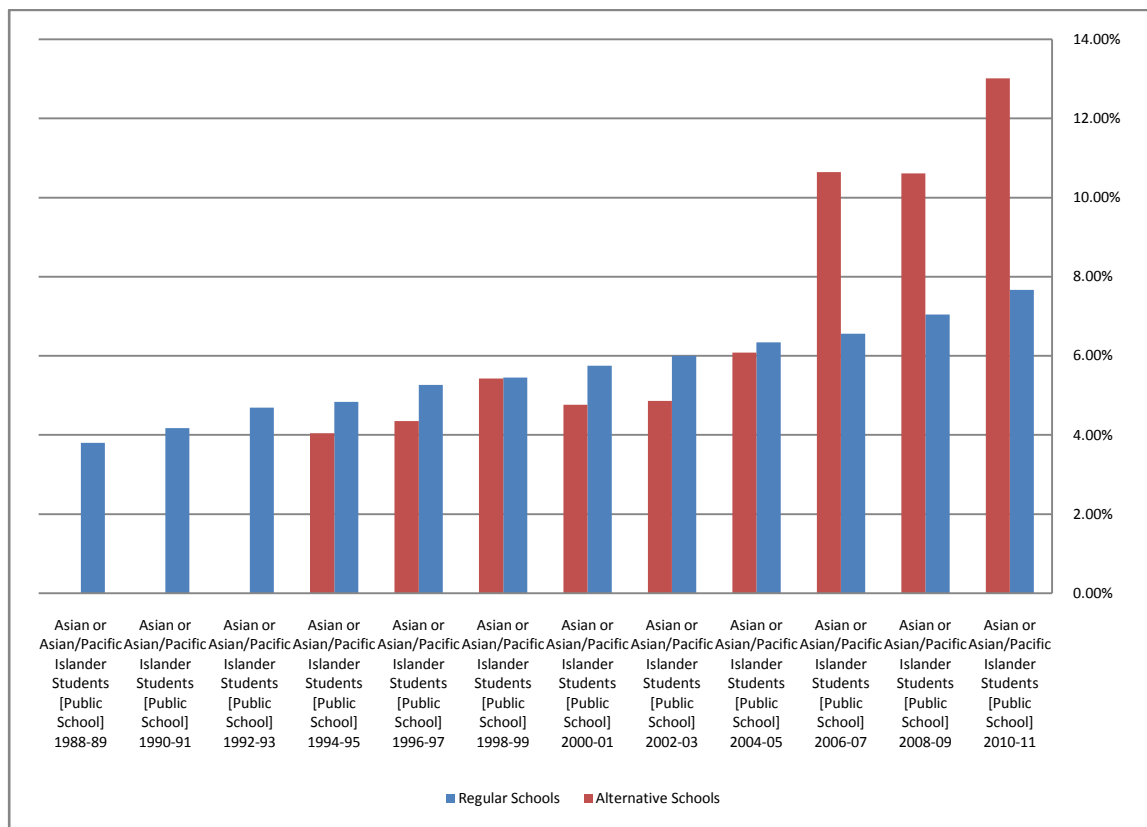


Figure 5.18 - Percent Asian American Enrollment by NYS School Type 1989-2011

Nationally, Asian American and White student enrollment in regular and alternative schools remain similar across time, with enrollments of both groups somewhat higher in regular schools. These patterns change recently for Asian American students enrollments in NYS but reportedly never existed for White student enrollments. We find the greatest discrepancy in student enrollment rates between regular and alternative schools here in Figure 5.19. From 1995 – 2011, White student enrollment in alternative schools in NYS hovers at around 10%. In regular schools in NYS during the same 16 years, White student enrollment decreases across time from about 65% to about 55%. Alternative schools in NYS primarily enroll students of

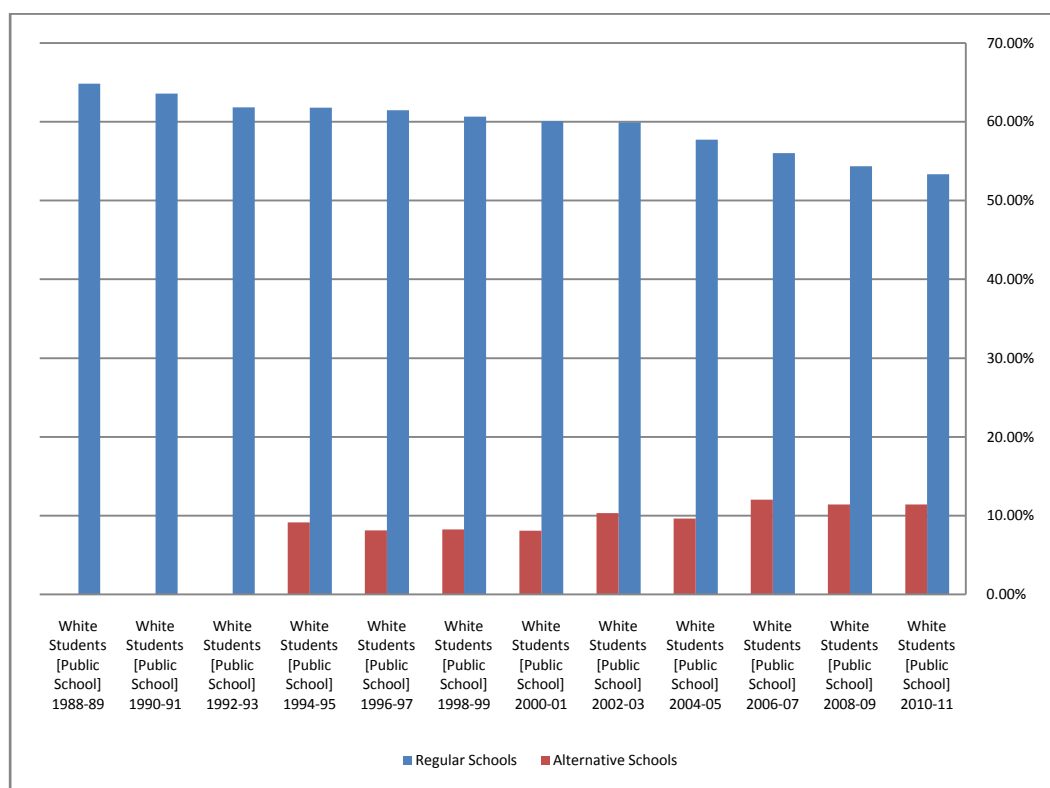


Figure 5.19 - Percent White Student Enrollment by NYS School Type 1989-2011

color. The majority of these students are members of the Black, Hispanic, and Native American student groups who achieve at lower levels when compared with White and Asian student groups, as discussed above.

Since 2008-09, most schools in NYS qualify for some level of Federal Title I funding. Title I funding and the Federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) programs are described in more detail above. NYS schools again show less patterned trends over time when compared to the national trends above. In Figure 5.20, alternative schools in NYS receive Title I funding at rates similar to regular schools, at least for the six most recent years of available data. (Please recall that reporting issues affect the counts of alternative schools in 2002-03 such that high counts of schools with no enrollment lead to very low eligibility rates.) In national trends, alternative schools trail regular schools in Title I eligibility by 15-20%. NYS schools report more equitable eligibility rates. It is only the discrepancies between Title I Eligibility rate comparisons and FRPL rate comparisons below that indicate that these similar funding rates support different student populations.

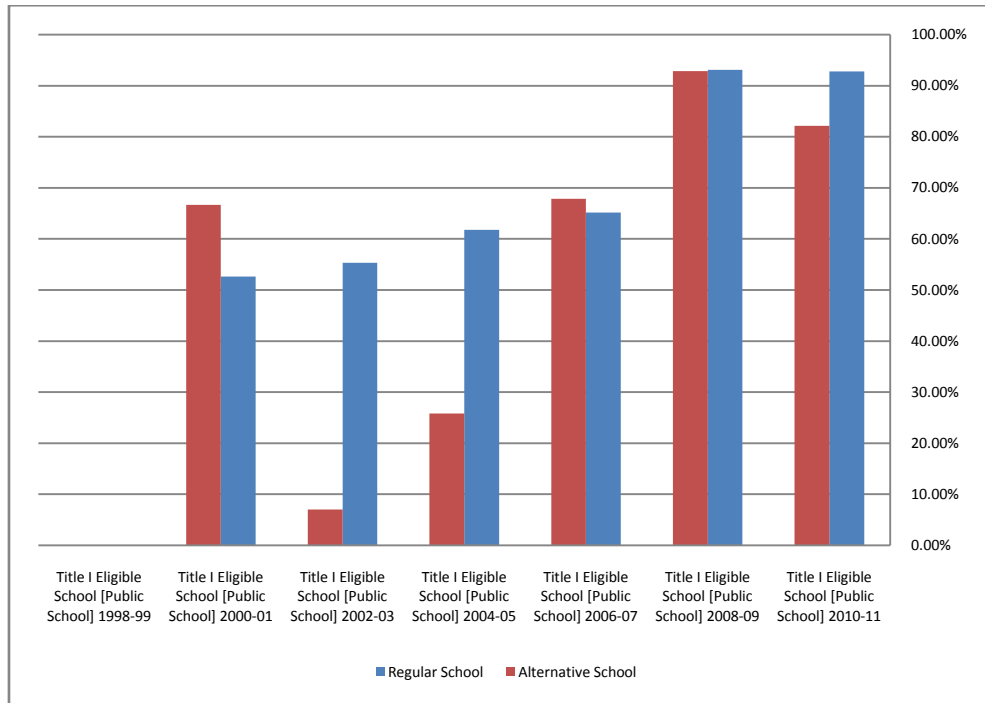


Figure 5.20 - Percent of School Type Eligible for Title I Funding 1999-2011

Figure 5.21 demonstrates that alternative schools in NYS serve significantly higher concentrations of students receiving free or reduced price lunches. For the six most recent years with available data, alternative school rates exceed regular school rates by 30% or more. Like national trends, we find low income and lower achieving students concentrated in alternative schools at much higher rates than in regular schools. If Title I eligibility funding is proportionate to individual student need in NYS, the eligible NYS alternative schools might receive proportionate Title I per student funding.

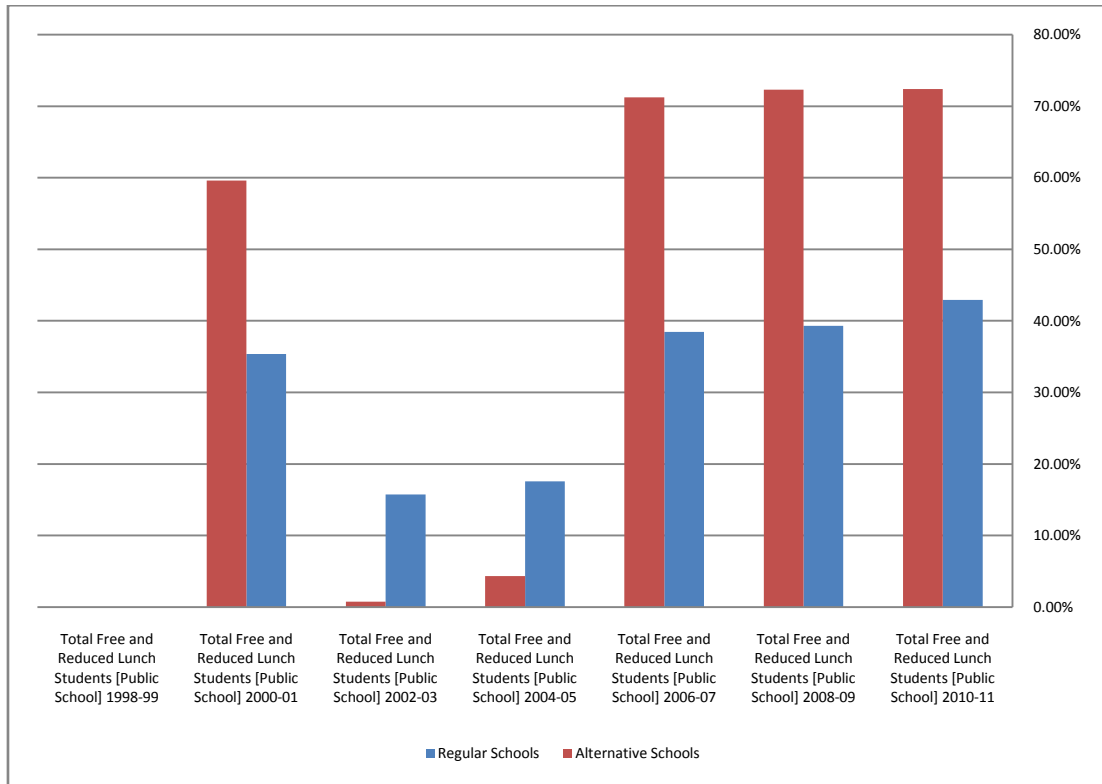


Figure 5.21 - Percent of Enrolled Students Receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch in NYS School Type 1999-2011

Schoolwide Title I eligibility indicates high concentrations of low income students and low academic achievement. Figure 5.22 shows NYS reversing national trends by funding alternative schools with Schoolwide Title I funds at higher rates than regular schools. Whereas steadily increasing rates of regular schools receive schoolwide funding, 15%-30% more alternative schools have received schoolwide funding for the past six years of reported data. The data in Figure 5.22 cannot tell us whether or not the funding is proportionate to the need, but Free Lunch rates are at least 30% higher in alternative schools for the same six year period.

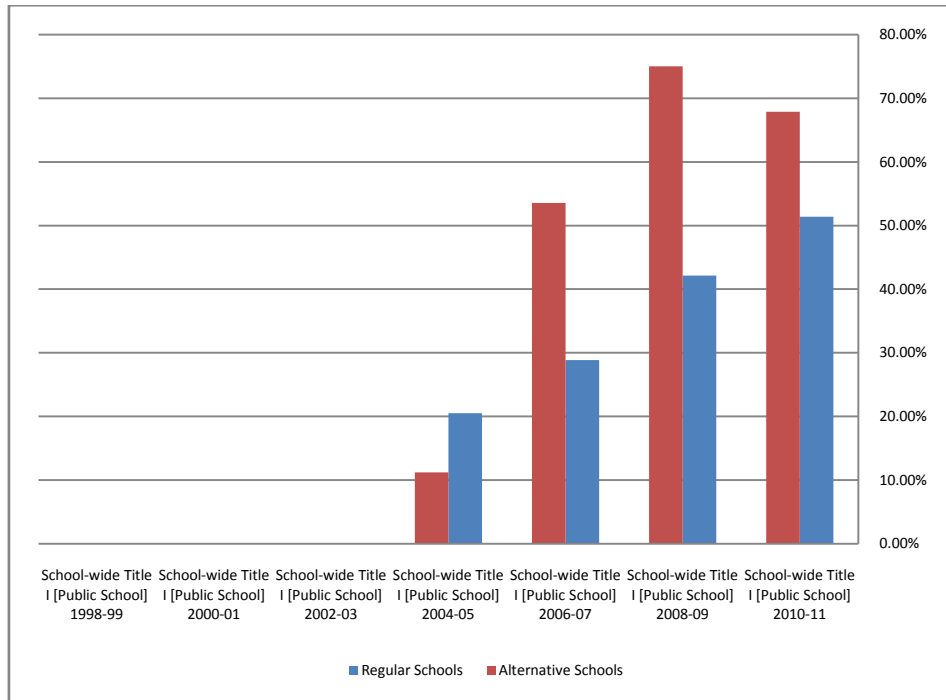


Figure 5.22 - Percent of School Type Eligible for Schoolwide Title I Funding 1999-2011

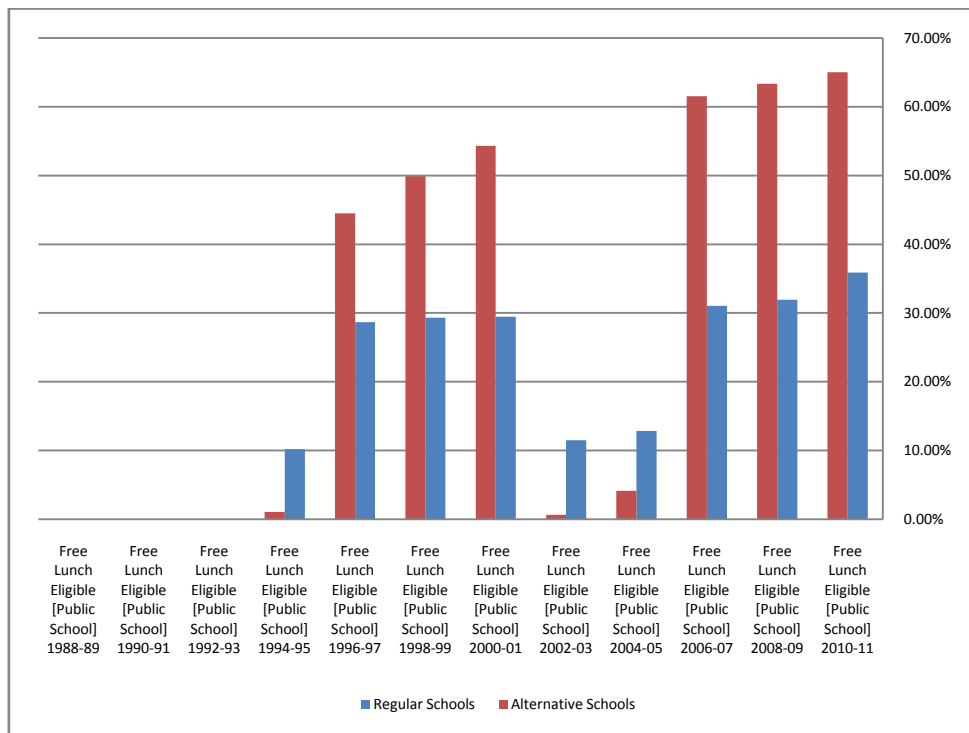


Figure 5.23 - Percent of Enrolled Students Receiving Federal Free Lunch in NYS School Type 1989-2011

Though nationally we find increasingly higher rates of students receiving FRPL and Free Lunch at both alternative and regular schools, the concentrations increase more quickly in alternative schools. There is increasing disparity between alternative and regular schools. But, higher concentrations of regular schools receive Title I funding. In contrast, NYS schools' Title I funding may follow student need. Alternative schools enroll higher concentrations of low income students and receive Title I funding at higher rates in NYS. What is remarkable in NYS is the consistently 30% higher enrollment of students from low income households in alternative schools. Nationally, this difference has grown over time to almost 10%.

National patterns are exaggerated in NYS. Excepted patterns include a sustained decrease in the number of enrollments in alternative schools; Asian American student populations increasing in NYS alternative schools; and Title I funding patterns following economically disadvantaged student enrollment. Otherwise, we find high need student populations concentrated even more heavily in NYS alternative schools. Black and Hispanic student enrollments are 5%-10% higher in NYS alternative schools, White student enrollments are 30%-45% lower, and low income student enrollment is 20% higher than in regular schools. As only 1.5% of schools and serving only .5% of enrolled secondary students in NYS, NYS alternative schools continue to serve a specifically high-needs student population.

A map of NYS alternative schools can be accessed at this link, <http://geocommons.com/maps/314691#>. The concentration of schools in and around New York City suggests location as one explanation for the remarkable skewing of demographic trends in NYS when compared to total U.S. trends. Only five of the 28

schools reported in 2010-11 are outside of the greater New York City Metropolitan area, and one of those is in Buffalo, another urban area. Reporting is problematic, as described earlier. In 2008-09, NYS reported two-thirds fewer alternative schools than three years earlier when the numbers had last trended at stable levels. Therefore, these numbers present a dramatic contrast between alternative and regular schools, primarily in the New York City area.

Conclusion

These comparative demographic and resource trends characterize alternative schools across the country as schools that enroll student populations with the highest needs while receiving fewer of the federal resources dedicated to serving these high needs and low-income student populations. As the NYS example shows, degree and patterns are variable, but overall, these patterns likely indicate the pragmatic legitimacy that supports the persistence of alternative schools (Suchman, 1995). Stakeholders in alternative schools have interests served by these peripheral school organizations. Some communities, districts, families, and students want secondary school options for high-need populations of students who struggle in regular school. If the alternative to alternative schools is a larger population of young adults without a high school education or its equivalent, then a range of stakeholder interests may be met with alternative schools. Policies supporting alternative schools have value for constituents; respond to constituents' interests; and, for some constituents, have their best interests at heart (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). The question is whether or not these schools have garnered the moral legitimacy from a broader audience that understands

school outputs, techniques and procedures, and structures as socially valued representations of work toward the social good. Moral legitimacy garners broader support for doing the right thing than the stakeholder self-interest driving pragmatic legitimacy.

Greenwood, et al. (2002) identify both as necessary for successful theorizing of institutional innovation as an appropriate response to a shared and mutually understood institutional problem. Burgeoning social agreement that the innovation is the right response, the basis of an increasingly externalized social account necessary for cognitive legitimacy, is necessary for an innovation to diffuse. An innovation must diffuse to breadth and numbers that make it the expected response to an institutional problem. Only then might an innovation gain the taken-for-granted quality of cognitive legitimacy, the most stable type. The trends described in this chapter make a case for considerable diffusion of alternative schools through the early 21st century, a ten-fold increase in reported numbers across all fifty states. Alternative schools are an innovation that entered the fifth of six stages of institutional change. Instead of continuing on the path to institutionalization, or to extinction as predicted, the schools persist at these levels. The case studies of the next chapter investigate the micro-processes at work. These analyses will better characterize sources of, and challenges to, legitimacy for the case schools and provide evidence of the perceived value of two different type alternative schools.

CHAPTER 6
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STRUCTURES, PRACTICES, AND
PURPOSES: A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Public secondary alternative schools are a four to five decades-old organizational form in U.S. public education that has served over 2 percent of the secondary student population for the past 15 years. Since before 1987, their numbers and enrollment have persistently grown to these levels. These schools serve a higher needs population of students, with fewer resources, when compared to regular schools in the U.S. But why? And how? The macro level, quantitative description of U.S. public secondary alternative schools in the preceding chapter establishes alternative schools as organizations distinct from U.S. public secondary regular schools by delineating a population of students and funding patterns different from those of regular schools. The diffusion of alternative schools through the early 2000s, described by increasing trends in the number of schools and students attending, locates alternative schools well into the institutionalization process.

The preceding quantitative description does not, however, detail the purposes, structures or practices that further distinguish alternative schools from regular schools. Also, attention to inter-organizational priorities and values will inform the central question of this study: What about the role of public alternative schools allows them to persist as peripheral heterogeneous organizations in the institutionalized field of U.S. public secondary schools? Institutional theory predicts that innovation in institutional environments become institutionalized themselves, or disappear like a fad

(Greenwood, et al., 2002). The historical and empirical evidence presented so far establishes that alternative schools emerge as an innovation in public education; they manage almost five of the six steps of the institutional change process; but they have failed to become institutionalized or decline. The investigation of stakeholder accounts of these organizations provides evidence supporting my explanation.

This chapter compares two divergent type alternative schools in order to both detail the scope of differentiating structures and practices found in some alternative schools and to characterize stakeholder understandings of the importance of the schools' work, their structures, and practices. In 2005 and 2006, I spent months in both school settings observing classes, meetings, and general operations, collecting current and historical documents, and interviewing stakeholders. Case reports feature more detailed descriptions of each school in the appendices.

The Schools

Case A

The Case A school opened in 1985 as a collaborative response among county school districts to address chronic high school failure rates. County schools combined had the highest dropout rate in NYS in 1982 and one of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates in the state in 1985. A group of district administrators and guidance counselors researched local needs and successful alternative school practices to develop their plan. Six goals for students guided initial decisions: develop academic competencies for graduation; develop academic competencies consistent with life and career goals; acquire necessary vocational skills; work toward a positive self concept;

improve interpersonal and communication skills; and meet NYS diploma requirements. The school is managed by the regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), one of a network of state education agencies established to combine resources from a region's districts to provide shared services.

In 2005, about 40 students from primarily seven districts attend the school. Five of the seven districts are "High Needs" districts in NYS, as determined by a measure that determines the district's ability to meet student needs with local resources. The seven districts together have an average Free and Reduced Price Lunch rate of 40%. The students range in age from 15 to 21 years old, in grades 10-12. A lack of students of color in the school stems from little racial diversity in the county. Students come from a range of small cities, villages, and rural settings and all are identified as at-risk of dropping out of high school.

The school is housed in a renovated grocery store at the edge of a small city and shares a parking lot with a 1960s style strip mall. The surrounding neighborhood includes small industry sites, a convenience store/gas station, small businesses, apartment buildings, and pockets of single-family homes. The space is shared with an adult education program that does most of its business after school hours. The school has exclusive use of six classrooms, 5 offices, and a small gym. Six adults staff the school: four Learning Coordinators who are certified teachers in ELA, Math, Social Studies, and Science; a Program Coordinator; and an Administrative Support Professional. Staff and students all choose to work in the school, an important central assumption of the school. Classes mimic a traditional schedule with exceptions to accommodate some alternative priorities, described in more detail below. Specific

instructions were included in planning documents to adopt an informal tone with students to contrast with traditional schools. Founders identify student opportunity to build reliable relationships with caring adults that students can trust as a critical variable for student success. This insight, and an initial focus on student personal development, foreshadows the school's unequivocal emphasis on building and maintaining positive relationships between staff and students, students and students, and the school and the surrounding community.

Case B

The Case B school opened as a junior high school option within a single district with two other junior high schools and one high school, in 1974. The school had its roots in an independent free school effort engendered by a coalition of community members with overlapping purposes sometimes in tension: free school goals for student self-determination, freedom, and self-governance and schooling for social justice goals that included designing a school to meet the needs of underrepresented minority students and students from low income families. The district and Board of Education, on the advice of a blue-ribbon panel appointed to study alternative education the preceding year, planned a 3-year trial period for a 7th-9th grade program. The new district junior high school students, staff, and parents developed goals that made explicit a commitment to shared decision making, teacher developed curriculum addressing student interests and contemporary/social justice issues, an inclusive environment responsive to individuals, and a space where adults and students “teach, learn, work, and play together.”

The district hired a founding principal/teacher with experience and relationships within the alternative school movement. The school community has consciously worked to manage legitimacy in the district, the surrounding community, and with NYS. With board members and the district attorney, the principal first worked with the NYS Education Department to earn status as a NYS recognized alternative school. Active memberships over time with the New York State Alternative Education Association (NYSAEA), The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), and the NY Performance Standards Consortium (the consortium) have buoyed legitimacy when challenges to the school and its practices would materialize with some regularity. The school earned status with NYS as a New Compact for Learning Partnership School, with the school's CES-inspired Graduation by Exhibition (GBE) and supporting performance-based assessment practices spotlighted as model school structures and practices. The most recent challenge to school practices revoke this model school status and insist that, instead, the school administer the Regents exams required for high school graduation in NYS. In 2005, the school was actively resisting this mandate with other consortium members.

The school grew and moved a few times before it landed in its current location in 1983. In 2005, about 250 students in grades 6-12 were attending school in a closed district elementary school building on the edge of a residential neighborhood on the outskirts of the small city at the center of the district. School grounds include a community-built outdoor amphitheater, a semi-forested playground area with a paved basketball court and a number of small parking lots. The building itself includes about

25 classrooms and offices on two floors, a large Fine Arts room and a small gym, all sized for elementary students. All space is maximized for student use.

The heterogeneous student population reflects community demographics, with a FRPL rate of 32% in 2005. When compared to the county containing the Case A school, this county reports a higher poverty rate, lower unemployment rate and a higher per capita income, suggesting more income disparity. This population is generally older and more diverse in terms of race and nationality. Though high school graduation rates are similar between the two populations, twice as many adults hold bachelor's degrees in the Case B county. Students are selected by lottery from annual applications. The school maintains a well-populated wait list. Like with the Case A school, students and staff choose to be here.

Alternative Structures and Practices

Both schools begin as alternatives to existing traditional school options. The schools were intended from the start to be different learning contexts for students, where the work of schooling is done differently. Conscious planning and ongoing reflection in both settings shape the evolution of practices and structures not commonly found in traditional secondary schools. By the time I arrived to observe in 2005, the schools had been fine-tuning these structures and practices for 20 and 30 years. This analysis of the structures and practices of two distinct-type alternative schools provides some sense of both potential arenas for alternative practices and structures the range of school alternatives within these arenas. The categories used below emerged from repeated comparisons between the cases and stakeholder

understandings of the effects of the structures and practices within. Case reports in the appendices contain more contextual and descriptive detail. In the following section, I describe stakeholders' understandings of the purposes for these alternative structures and practices.

These structures and practices were all identified by stakeholders as supporting the most important work of the school. It is not a comprehensive list. Taken together, these structures and practices indicate effort to prioritize and do the work of schooling differently. It is beyond the scope of this study to establish empirically that traditional schools do not, as a rule, employ structures and practices like those above. In the context of these cases however, representatives from surrounding traditional schools recognize these practices as unique to the alternative school in their region. For the Case A school, students' home school administrators point out that they do not engage in the relationship building or problem solving practices embedded in Family Groups, Individuals, Trips, etc. and that these school features determine student success in the Case A school. For the Case B school, teachers and administrators from other district schools anecdotally share that they would embrace such practices, if structures allowed, or that they are not at all interested in the same priorities of the school. The following section elaborates on this connection between structures, practices, and priorities and priorities. Stakeholders from the case schools describe their priorities for the work of the school and identify the structures and practices supporting these priorities.

Extended Roles for Adults	
Case A	<p>Teach– design and teach all courses in a content area and a Seminar course</p> <p>Family Group Leader - informal individual and group counseling</p> <p>Guidance Counseling - meet with students, families, and home school officials re: scheduling, academics, behavior, and problem solving</p> <p>Trips and Events- planning, fundraising, transportation, chaperone</p>
Case B	<p>Teach - design and teach five teaching periods and a project,</p> <p>Family Group Leader - manage scheduling, family and school communication, fundraising, guidance through school requirements, social events for 10-15 students</p> <p>Committee Leader – groups of 5 -25 students responsible for some aspect of school governance or maintenance</p> <p>Shared Decision Making - weekly staff meetings, All School Meetings</p> <p>Formal School Leadership - roles like curriculum coordinator or treasurer</p> <p>Para-professionals and School Custodian -lead projects and committees, co-lead Family Groups, youth outreach</p>

All School Meetings	
Case A	<p>Town Meetings: all students and staff meet once daily to share announcements, address pressing school issues</p>
Case B	<p>All School Meetings (ASMs): a foundation of the school’s shared decision making model and the primary structure supporting student participation in school governance, a GBE requirement</p>

Teacher-Developed Curriculum	
Case A	<p>Seminar Series:</p> <p>Seminar I - first year students work on academic and organizational skills, literacy strategies, learning school culture, and school community building</p> <p>Seminar II - second year students work on career exploration, college visits and testing, and job shadowing placements in the community</p> <p>Seminar III - seniors develop senior portfolios and reflection pieces for graduation, plan the senior trip, and plan and implement community service projects.</p> <p>Seminars include group trips ranging from day hikes to overnight camping or sightseeing trips.</p> <p>Workshop - scheduled study hall with teacher support to work on projects, class work, make-up credit, independent studies</p>

	Teacher Developed Courses – parallel traditional courses from home schools
Case B	<p>The Essentials: community prioritized categories of learning outcomes: community participants and leaders; communicators; critical thinkers and problem solvers; designers, producers, and performers; researchers with a historical and multicultural perspective; contributors to sustaining the natural environment; and healthy persons</p> <p>Teacher-developed Courses and Projects - support the outcomes: interdisciplinary courses, block scheduling, portfolios of work and reflection as evidence of learning, performance-based assessment, and combined course content</p>

Community Involvement	
Case A	Job shadowing placements and Community service projects
Case B	<p>Community Studies Program: -Community Studies Coordinator supports student participation in community service and in community based career exploration experiences. Both of these GBE requirements, 60 or more hours of community service with documentation and reflections and at least two career explorations with documentation and reflections, require time for students to travel to and participate at community sites. Students may select Community Studies as one of two required areas for in-depth study, and demonstrate work done beyond the core proficiencies of the GBE requirements</p>

Advisory (Family) Groups	
Case A	<p>Family Group: small group of 6-14 students who meet twice a week for informal group counseling, peer support, and team building – a school requirement</p> <p>Individuals: Each student meets weekly with his or her family group leader in a 20-30 minute individual meeting</p> <p>Family group members and leaders stay consistent throughout a student’s time with the school.</p>
Case B	<p>Family Group: manage scheduling, communications with families, fundraising, guidance through middle school and GBE requirements, occasional family group-specific social events, etc. with 10-15 students</p> <p>Sometimes, amongst all the points of business, family groups serve as another forum for voicing student ideas in response to school issues.</p>

Instruction	
Case A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Personalize instruction in response to student interest, strengths, and academic and non-academic needs -Interactive lecture -Direct instruction -Teacher directed discussion -Less frequent student research and inquiry work
Case B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ongoing practice and process support with critical thinking skills, questioning social and intellectual stances, and authentic problem solving -Seminar style discussion of provocative questions based on student researched information -Problem solving, project-based inquiry practice - Coaching and facilitating student learning during research, discussion, and analysis -Less frequently delivering lectures or direct instruction

Assessment	
Case A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Quizzes, tests, writing demonstrations, short research papers and presentations - Standard grading practices incorporating homework and effort -NYS Regents Exams
Case B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Performance-based assessment: performance/demonstration/portfolio -Formative assessment through authentic class performances of discussion, analysis, debate, and research -Student self-evaluation -Quarterly narrative evaluation of students in lieu of grades -Some NYS Regents Exams -Graduation by Exhibition (GBE) requirements

Trips	
Case A	Small and Large group trips ranging from a multi-day all school bi-annual trip to an Adirondack camp, senior trips and visits to some cities to day trips like college trips, family group day hikes, and visits to nearby major east coast cities
Case B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Fall Retreat all school overnight to regional camp -National conference presentations -Annual week long trips groups: e.g., bike tour, camping, regional explorations, community service e.g., New Orleans hurricane recovery, Native American community service

Graduation Requirements	
Case A	NYS Graduation Requirements
Case B	<p>Graduation by Exhibition – a system of community prioritized learning outcomes articulated with guidelines for demonstrating learning in all areas and in-depth learning in two: community participants and leaders; communicators; critical thinkers and problem solvers; designers, producers, and performers; researchers with a historical and multicultural perspective; contributors to sustaining the natural environment; and healthy persons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -NYS Graduation Requirements are subsumed by GBE -a Coalition of Essential Schools requirement that pre-supposed authentic and performance-based assessment practices

Shared Decision Making	
Case A	Facilitated input from students through family groups, town meetings, and classes
Case B	<p>Shared Decision Making Model: an articulated system for school decision making explicitly including community members, parents, students, teachers, staff, and the principal; all groups in the shared decision-making model have responsibility for gathering input and communicating their decisions to the school community.</p> <p>All School Meetings: the primary structure supporting student participation in school governance, a GBE requirement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - proposals from students, staff, or community members are debated, discussed and voted upon. - may also divide into smaller Quarter School Meetings (QSMs) to create more opportunity for individual students to speak - when considering decisions, often exceed the allotted 10 minutes in the schedule - charged with decision making responsibilities for the allocation of special funds; the creation of committees; deciding how decisions are made in ASM; and Fall Retreat - also serves as the forum for shared discussions in the student-staff approval process for decisions regarding proposals about graduation requirements; timetables; philosophy statements; attendance policy; amending the shared decision making model; and evaluations - students must approve proposals by a 2/3 majority vote in the Shared Decision Making Model - Students as a group have responsibility for electing representatives to Site Based Council and the School Board, beyond the student-staff decision making process. <p>Site Based Council: includes representatives from other voting groups, does not vote but does enact a compromise committee when the student-staff decision making process is at an impasse; also makes recommendations to the principal regarding budget, hiring/dismissal of</p>

	<p>staff, buildings and grounds, and the five-year school development plan</p> <p>Staff Meetings: a staff only group with responsibilities beyond the student-staff decision making process for determining when classes and projects are offered; who will teach classes and projects; requirements and expectations for classes and projects; and deciding how decisions will be made in staff meetings; staff decisions made by consensus</p> <p>Committees: address varied and changing features of the school's governance and maintenance (e.g., Mediation, Yearbook, Curriculum, Library, Alternative Community Court, Anti-bias, and the Gay-Straight Alliance Committees); make decisions within their own purviews and bring proposals to other decision making bodies</p> <p>Principal: lone responsibility for issues relating to health and safety and the evaluation of staff</p>
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The Most Important Work

Why are parents, students, teachers, administrators, districts, and communities providing, to these divergent organizations, the resources and support that signal legitimacy? Though sometimes only marginally surviving, and in small numbers, these organizations persist for a reason. In these two cases, stakeholder groups identify the most important work of the school, then identify specific structures and practices as the means of achieving this most important work. This description of the work, its importance, and the structures and practices that support it serves two empirical purposes: describing the rationales that founded, shape, and maintain these schools and detailing their divergence with traditional school structures and practices.

Below, I describe themes from discussions of the most important work in each school. Stakeholder groups all discuss the work that goes into developing quality relationships between adults and students, building school community, practicing democratic citizenship, and reorganizing curriculum and/or instruction. Each school community understands the work differently and implementation reflects those

differences. So I introduce the conceptual theme, comparing the schools' emphases within the theme. A brief description of each school's implementation follows each introduction. The structures and practices identified in implementation are described in the previous section. Bulleted lists of evidence from the case studies follow my summaries of stakeholder characterization of the most important work. The references in parentheses refer to particular interviews. Undocumented statements are based in my observations, supported in documents or are my summary interpretations of interview, document, and observation data. *These lists are illustrative, not exhaustive.* The case reports in the appendices provide more evidence and detail of stakeholder group "most important work" responses.

Relationships

Stakeholder groups from both schools identify the quality of relationships in the school as primary to what they value most about the school. Different groups value relationships for different reasons and the two schools emphasize relationships and relationship building differently. The Case A school specifically focuses on developing relationship skills and positive relationships and many structures and practices are put to this purpose. All stakeholder groups voice awareness and effort toward the outcome of much improved relationships. Case B differs in that a school wide norm for caring and open-minded relationships guides interactions. Stakeholders appreciate the outcomes. Instead of conscious effort based in structures and practices toward building these relationships, stakeholders in the Case B school assume this quality of relationship. The discussion of structures and practices above further

elaborates on the specific employment of similar structures, like advisory groups, by the different schools. The differences in use align with these differences in emphasis.

Case A

Stakeholders in the Case A school recognize the work around relationship quality as the necessary pre-condition to student success. The school's small size, small classes, Family Groups (advocacy groups), Individuals (weekly informal counseling between students and family group leaders), Seminars (courses developed around student cohorts), and trips (day and overnight) are all identified as school structures or practices that support quality of relationships in the Case A school. Case reports in the appendices will provide even more descriptive detail.

Teachers are credited by students, parents, and internal and external school administrators for doing the work of relationship building. Students report being known, challenged, mentored, and cared for. They acknowledge learning how to be in positive relationships with teachers, one another, and family members and developing an expectation to build positive adult relationships after school.

- Students characterized the school as a place where a student can “be yourself,” where pressures to conform are challenged (AIS 1, 3, 4).
- One student defined the school's valuing of diversity as “inviting differences” in (AIS3). Another described needing to “get past stereotypes (AIS1).”
- The expectation that conflict will be addressed and, in time, resolved, is the second pre-condition students point to (AIS 1-4). Students and adults address conflict in many settings: in class, in town meetings, in family groups, and in individuals. Students describe a norm of addressing all “issues” and “getting down to dealing with it (AIS2).”
- Conflict management in this school context involves both the group problem solving process sometimes engaged in town meetings or classrooms. The one-on-one work between students and teachers in individuals identifies or frames conflict and generates solutions for students. Students report that someone, an

adult or another student, will always intervene so it is impossible to ignore conflict when present. Student-to-student conflict, that is not managed by the students' or by another's intervention, triggers a 3-way conflict resolution process where at least one teacher facilitates a resolution with two students in conflict (another role for LCs).

- Students manage relationships with one another regularly as members of a seminar cohort, family group, event committee, or class of students. As one student put it, "We have to be able to work together. Teachers make you deal with each other (AIS3)."
- . Family groups insure that "one teacher really knows you" through individuals and family group activities (AIS1). The school's small size makes it possible for teachers to take the time to understand and know students (AIS2). And most students reported that "teachers will do anything" to support student success, academic and personal (AIS1). Each student focus group identified teachers' individual and personalized support in classes as a condition for their academic success.
- One student described how teachers understand students and so can engage them in a process for looking for better ways to address or solve problems (AIS2).
- With teachers, students develop and improve their people skills or address and practice communication skills (AIS2, 4).
- Students report that benefits of this work include a school environment with less gossip than home schools and with students learning to interact more positively (AIS3, 4).
- Primarily however, students framed this relationship building work as the devoted, hard work of teachers on the behalf of students. Most students felt that at least one teacher really knows them, and that collectively, the teachers know "where everyone is at and needs in order to succeed (AIS2)."

Parents appreciate most that this work results in students feeling valued at school.

- Parents responded to the most important work question with one central theme: the work that teachers do so that students feel valued (AIP 3, 4, & 6).
- Parents identify the small size of the school, small classes and Family Group as the structures supporting this work.
- They identify the relationship work of teachers as the practices that allow students to be seen and heard in classes, feel safe to risk opinions or wrong answers, and feel that reported sense of belonging and support (AIP 1-6).
- Individual parent responses also identify holding students accountable, communicating with parents, and providing individualized support in classes as the most important work of the school.

Home school administrators identify the above structures along with 3-way conflict resolution and a less formal school culture as the source of problem-solving support that students need and would never receive at their home schools.

- One explains that “one size fits all does not apply” but in a school of 800 students, individualizing does not happen: “We do not want to know how you are feeling. Just get your work done (AIA3).”
- Home school administrators, across the board, believe that smaller classes, a student to teacher ratio that allows students and teachers to build relationships that support students, a less formal school culture, and an emphasis on problem solving are the structures and practices that lead to student academic success (AIA 3, 4, 6, 7).

Administrators associated with the school more directly share the teacher, student, and parent emphasis on relationships that allow student needs to be addressed in ways that students feel valued.

- “I think it is about authentic, sincere, caring relationships between adults and students, between adults and other adults, between students and other students. I think there is a culture in that program that creates a place that is caring and safe, but also has high expectations for students. I think it is a program that teaches through example, and through hands-on experiences, how to be a problem-solving learner (A1A2).”
- “. . . not only just graduate them, but have students feel very differently, I think, about themselves when they walk out the door compared to when they walked in (AIA5).”
- In the administrator discussions of student academic success, Family Groups, Seminars, problem solving and 3-ways were repeatedly credited with addressing the student needs that prevent learning.

Interestingly, all administrators identified high school completion as the most important work of the school. Then, each quickly began describing relationship-building structures and practices as the work that made graduation possible for students.

Teachers also credit the above structures with providing the time and space in the school day to know students the way they must in order to be responsive, supportive, caring, and effective with students. Teachers emphasize more the day-to-day attention they give to communicating genuine caring, however. Day to day interactions recognize and involve all students every day. Teachers listen closely, follow through on limits, and personalize responses to address academic, social, and emotional challenges. They work through conflict with and between students and address distracting classroom behavior to create a safe and caring environment.

- The time devoted to informal counseling, individual problem-solving, and directly teaching and practicing relationship skills allows adults to “. . . know where everyone is at and needs in order to succeed.”
- Family Group, individuals, Seminars, class trips, and 3-way conflict resolution were all identified as structures that support the relationships that staff build and maintain with students (AIT 1-4).
- Two teachers identified communicating caring to students as a supporting practice (AIT 2 and 4). They describe both a focus on the quality of day-to-day interactions and communication through recognizing and involving all students, all the time. Both mention making time to listen to students as a practice that communicates caring.
- And, teachers describe follow through on limits for students as a caring practice: “calling them on things (AIT 2 and 4),” and “addressing self-defeating behaviors and attitudes (AIT 2)” or “address the ‘real reason’ a student is not doing well (AIT 3).”
- The connections between teachers and students, resulting from the described structures and practices, allow teachers to tailor responses to students.
- Teachers use their understandings of students’ lives, not only to address the academic, social, or emotional challenges that students face, but to personalize class work, to work through conflict, to positively address distracting classroom behavior, and to create and maintain a safe place for students (AIT 1-4).

School founders incorporated into the program their understanding that caring relationships with trustworthy adults were necessary to student academic and social

success. Twenty years later, this priority is reflected in a schedule, structures, practices and assumptions that build and maintain such relationships and a normative culture that expects this work.

Case B

The Case B school takes a less overt approach to building quality relationships, instead caring and fair relationship behavior is assumed and only worked toward when violations demand it.¹³

- The most important work is “the commitment to having this school work for everyone who goes here (BI5S1).”

Only teachers explicitly name caring relationships as one of the structures or practices that support the outcomes for students they value most.

- Some teachers (and students) suggest the non-traditional relationships between teachers and students when describing conditions that make most important outcomes possible (BIT1; 2; 6; 7).
- Also, teacher responses indicate a general sense of how we do things or “It is in how we do everything, all the time – teaching behaviors, conversations, etc. (BIT1).”
- Another identifies shared expectations that students will grow into responsible, contributing members of the school community as a backdrop or context for the practices and structures supporting the most important outcomes (BIT11).
- More than one teacher asserts that the quality of interactions means as much, if not more, than the practices and structures generating those interactions (BIT1; 2; 4; 6; 7; 8; 11; 13).
- These expectations ensure that Family Groups, trips, conversations, questions, and interest result in ‘knowing each other’ in such a way that the most important work gets done: teachers know student interests and concerns; students trust teachers (BIT1; 2; 4; 6; 7; 8; 11; 13).

¹³ A mediation committee and an anti-bias committee address systemic conflict in the school. Discreet instances of interpersonal conflict might be managed with the help of adults like teachers, counselors or family group leaders when students do not manage alone.

- Authentic classes and curricula, decision-making, community service, and the range of student choice lead to the collaboration between students and adults that is necessary to the most important work getting done (BIT3; 9).

These non-traditional relationships and expectations for behavior and sense of how-we-do-what-we-do begin to define a normative environment that takes for granted expectations for how individuals relate, how interactions take place, and how students eventually contribute.

Parents, much as in Case A, identify how students are accepted, valued, and included as the most important work of the school. Students and parents comment on school norms of inclusiveness, how students are accepted “as they come.” In the next section, I describe ideas of community in each school. Younger students in the Case B school include in their discussion of community that they expect to, and are expected to, get along with everyone. They report having friendly, open relationships with most people in school and expect acknowledgement and acceptance from peers.

Because caring and fair relationships are managed normatively in the Case B school, no stakeholder group identified structures and practices supporting this outcome. Instead, students and teachers point to social interaction and cooperation beyond the classroom that result in “knowing each other.” Teachers show interest and know student interests and concerns. Students trust teachers. Smaller classes, Family Groups (organized very differently than in the Case A school), group trips and events, projects, and committees embed the opportunities for the conversations, questions, and interest resulting in that trust.

Community

Both schools consciously build strong school communities. In both cases, students and parents identify a sense of belonging to a community as a valued member as some of the most important work of the school. In the Case A school, many students feel they belong in school for the first time. In this case, the work parallels and extends that of the relationship building work above. Students learn to decide and act as members of a group. In the Case B school, students consider themselves members of multiple communities. They think about how communities interact and struggle with definitions of community. As decision makers in their own school community, they identify and challenge the barriers faced by communities wishing to include diverse groups and individuals. Teachers and administrators closer to both schools assume community. It both contributes to and results from the structures and practices that distinguish these schools from traditional schools.

Case A

Students in the Case A school learn that belonging to a group has requirements for the individual. Events like prom or the Thanksgiving feast, class and school trips, Seminars, and Family Groups all structure a way in to different school groups and cultivate school connected identities for students. Students describe a clear expectation from school adults and peers that each student find a way to participate in at least one of these ways.

- When students spoke of their sense of belonging to this school community, they emphasized non-academic features of the school. As one student put it, “involvement matters more than passing (AIS1).”
- Students described an expectation from staff and other students that each student would find a way to participate in the planning, management, and

cleanup of school events such as the school Thanksgiving feast, the prom, short or long trips, fundraising barbecues and car washes, basketball games with other schools, etc.

- Doing the mundane tasks that make the events possible was associated with family membership, being responsible to others and as opportunities to learn and practice social skills (AIS1, 4).
- Responsibility to, and respect for, one another, or the school as a whole, were presented as the individual qualities necessary to building and maintaining community. Interestingly, no student spoke of belonging without speaking of what it required of him or herself (AIS 1-5).
- Seminar classes were identified as a way in to belonging: a small group cohort that a student is structurally part of upon joining the program where many trips/events are planned and organized (AIS4). Seminars, understood this way, amount to time built into the schedule to cultivate school connection and identity.
- Two other school norms/practices stood out in student responses as pre-conditions for belonging. Students characterized the school as a place where a student can “be yourself,” where pressures to conform are challenged (AIS 1, 3, 4).
- This quality of the school community requires that students and adults alike accept differences between one another. One student defined the school’s valuing of diversity as “inviting differences” in (AIS3). Another described needing to “get past stereotypes (AIS1).”
- Whenever students pointed to this quality of belonging, each mentioned being challenged by the expectation that they will all work productively with one another.
- The expectation that conflict will be addressed and, in time, resolved, is the second pre-condition students point to (AIS 1-4).
- Students and adults address conflict in many settings: in class, in town meetings, in family groups, and in individuals. Students describe a norm of addressing all “issues” and “getting down to dealing with it (AIS2).”

In these contexts, students exercise their responsibility to and respect for one another and the school – qualities that individuals need in order to build and maintain community. Like building positive relationships, students and adults in the Case A school make explicit the work of maintaining school community.

A few expectations challenge students to interact with others in ways they hadnot before attending the school. Students work to “get past stereotypes” and

accept differences between one another. They “should be able to work with anyone.” Also, students believe that all conflict must be addressed and resolved over time. If not, an adult or fellow student will always intervene. Though not all students interviewed wholeheartedly embraced these expectations, they did credit them as a necessary condition for an accepting community where students can belong.

Students and parents quickly prioritized students’ sense of belonging as an outcome of the most important work of the school. Parents point to the school’s small size and the work of teachers to build relationships as the structures and practices supporting this outcome.

- Parents responded to the most important work question with one central theme: the work that teachers do so that students feel valued (AIP 3, 4, & 6). Parents identify the small size of the school, small classes and Family Group as the structures supporting this work.
- They identify the relationship work of teachers as the practices that allow students to be seen and heard in classes, feel safe to risk opinions or wrong answers, and feel that reported sense of belonging and support (AIP 1-6).

Teachers, on the other hand, talk about creating a positive environment that feels safe so that students can focus on the social, emotional, and academic work they are doing in school.

- Teachers use their understandings of students’ lives, not only to address the academic, social, or emotional challenges that students face, but to personalize class work, to work through conflict, to positively address distracting classroom behavior, and to create and maintain a safe place for students (AIT 1-4).
- Family Group, individuals, Seminars, class trips, and 3-way conflict resolution were all identified as structures that support the relationships that staff build and maintain with students (AIT 1-4).

This school community or family is practice for community and family membership after high school as well. The work toward group membership extends and applies the careful work on relationships described above.

Case B

Student sense of community is both broader and more elaborate in the Case B school. References to community span friendly, open relationships throughout the school to “the commitment to having this school work for everyone who goes here (AIS5).” That commitment includes the work of the Anti-bias Committee, anti-bullying efforts, and ongoing exploration of the tensions between the individual; cultural, economic, and racial diversity; and conceptions of community. Students regularly point to their membership in, and effect on, the larger community beyond the school as well, even in the world community. One district administrator categorizes one dimension of the most important work of the school by pointing to the school’s “clear sense of selves as a school community and as a part of the community.”

Student and parent stakeholder groups credit most structures and practices with contributing to the school’s strong sense of community and community membership. Smaller classes and student-centered, inquiry-based instruction, student choice in the classroom, and teacher developed curriculum engage students in intellectual community. Family Groups, trips, Fall Retreat (annual all school camping event), community service/career exploration requirements for GBE, and projects (quarter long academic; designers, performers, producers; sports/wellness; and craft/leisure/life courses) connect student to the social communities of the school and the surrounding

community. All School Meetings (part of the Shared Decision Making Model), committees, some projects, some coursework and Family Groups involve students in political community.

- Some middle school students describe community building as working together and getting along or as having friendly, open relationships with most people in school. These students describe a school norm that leads them to expect acknowledgement and acceptance from peers (BI5S6; BI4S2).
- High school representations add references to anti-bias work and “the commitment to having this school work for everyone who goes here (BI5S5).”
- Most students referred to, often matter-of-factly, an overt and ongoing conversation about the school as community: the community’s strengths and weaknesses; work to make the community more inclusive; the community’s beliefs and values; and the work on relationships between students and students and students and teachers (BI5S1; BI4S2; BI8S4).
- Smaller classes allow attention to relationships between students and students and teachers and students. Individual students get more attention and students get to know one another (BI4S2).
- Family groups, trips, Fall Retreat, ASMs and some projects require social interaction and cooperation beyond classroom teaching and learning.
- The mediation committee provides a process and structure for managing conflict between individuals, groups, or between people and school rules, norms, or other structures.
- School counselors, social workers, and family group leaders regularly address relationships with students through informal processes, and they formally plan ongoing responses to conflict in the school.
- The anti-bias committee exists to address systemic conflict and barriers to inclusion that extend into the school, challenging concepts of community.
- Every student focus group describes community service as some of the most important work that they do. With community service, “we actually contribute to our community as a whole (BI3S3; B18S4).”
- Students grow the boundaries of community, extending a sense of responsibility for contribution to community beyond the school (B18S4).
- Parents name all students being included in intellectual, social, and political communities as a most important work of the school (BIP2; BIP4; BIP5).

Teachers and administrators rarely identify community membership or community building as a separate effort. The community noted by parents and

students, in combination with shared decision making, clearly contributes to the good citizens' goals for students that teachers value. The work that building administrators point to as distinguishing the school as alternative, the Shared Decision Making Model and teacher and student driven curricula, contribute to and rely on the sense of community described above. Instead, teachers and administrator, most of whom have been with the school for decades, expect and assume that students will, increasingly over time, become active and responsible community participants. Students understand and accept this school norm. Older students report their own sense of academic, social, and political efficacy as a most important work of the school(BI4S2; BI3S3; BI8S4; BI5S6).We are “connecting our own power or knowledge to cause and effect (BI4S2).”

Democratic Citizenship

The community building work embraced by both schools provides a foundation for democratic citizenship. In the Case A school, a few democratic practices serve the goals of building trusting relationships and a school community inviting student ownership (Aron, 2006; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 1981; Wehlage, et al., 1989). No student, parent, teacher, or administrator identifies the work of democratic citizenship itself as most important in the Case A school. For the Case B school, the practice of democratic citizenship is considered by many to be the most important work. Most of the school's distinguishing structures and practices support the outcome of educating students to be active participants and leaders in democratic

communities. Students, teachers, and administrators promote the Shared Decision Making Model and student authority as the work defining the school's alternativeness.

Case A

The Case A school does not prioritize democratic citizenship as such, though structures and practices highlighted in the Relationships and Community sections provide practice with citizenship. The school's emphasis on recognizing and managing conflict through Family Groups, Individuals, 3-ways (a formal conflict resolution process), and Town Meetings (all school meetings) engages students in foundational skills for democratic participation: listening, acknowledging multiple perspectives, compromising, and problem solving. Individual responsibility to group needs is practiced as described above. In these ways, the school addresses the challenges for incorporating student participation and choice in alternative schools identified in the literature (Center for New Schools, 1978 [1976]; Cohn & Finch, 1978; Duke, 1978). No stakeholder group identifies democratic participation or citizenship as an important outcome, however. Instead, these structures and practices are understood to connect students to the school and build skills for productive relationships.

Case B

In contrast, according to many stakeholders, the democratic work of problem solving and decision making is the priority work that sets the Case B school apart from other schools as an alternative. All stakeholder groups in the Case B school identify

democratic participation and citizenship as a most important work of the school. For parents, this is true because these practices include their students in ways that they feel valued (BIP1; 3; 4; 5). For all other groups, the structures and practices that include all stakeholder groups in school decision making are defining features and the most important work of the school.

- The most important work is the decision making structure and teacher/student driven curricula (BIA1)
- Democracy and community keep some students coming to school (BIA4).
- Democratic structures make the school a model for what is possible in public education (BIA5)
- Academic skills a part [of the most important work] and goes way beyond - - advocate for self and others, research possibilities, make decisions, plans done through all structures ASM, Café, Courses, FG, Committees, Trips, Discipline (student ownership by graduation), democratic school processes (BIT6).
- One piece of the most important word is democracy at staff and student levels - DM structures, ASMs, staff meetings, committees, FG (BIT12).
- A sense of "voice" is important and participation in Democracy is important (BIT4).

Students help run the school. They exercise choice in classes where they contribute to the selection of curriculum topics, provide the research and ideas that drive inquiry based instruction, and often determine how they will demonstrate their own learning. The school's Shared Decision Making Model codifies student voice (teacher, parent, principal, and community member voice too) throughout defined decision making processes. Students sit on school committees that make policy recommendations, manage the plant, or complete needed projects. Students on Site-based Council help shape the agendas of decision making groups. Individual students have voice into school decisions in All School Meetings where problem solutions and policy decisions are vetted and voted on. Any ad hoc committee working on school

policy includes students who debate the issues and shoulder the work alongside adults.

Students know that “if there is something that you do not like, you can change it.”

And, they know how.

- Every focus group interview included discussion of student voice, often characterized as “if there is something that you do not like, you can change it (BI14S5).”
- Each identified ASMs as the opportunity for every student to (re)shape school policy.
- Students involved with the Site-base Committee cite the ability to shape the agendas of representative decision making structures, ASMs and Site-based committee (BI3S3).
- Students share authorship of the School Goals Document and the Philosophy Statement with parents, teachers, and community members.
- Students reveal an awareness of themselves as doing the work of democratic citizenship. We are “taught to think for ourselves (BI4S2);” we are “teaching governance (BI8S4);” and “learning democracy at a young age (BI5S6).”
- Throughout the decision making processes and within the governance structures ensuring student authority, students understand themselves as doing the most important work of discussing “how to keep our school alternative while still being a school (BI8S4)” and that by exercising that authority they, and the school, “serve as a beacon for alternative possibilities (BI5S6).”
- Every student description of choice or voice as the most important feature of the school led to a discussion of decision making processes and governance structures.
- One student summed up his culminating evidence for democratic structures and practices as the most important work with “just having the option to come here (BI5S6).”

Adult stakeholders in the school participate in all of the above structures as well. While they are at it, they model productive participation and guide student participation. The school has developed this model for over 20 years, and it is always under review. Committees and student groups bring up questions like “how do we include minority voice in our democracy?” or “how might we structure All School Meetings to keep them productive and shorter than 3 hours long?” Students, teachers,

and administrators independently indicate that their work on democratic practice within the school community provides a critical alternative model for public schools. Students know that by exercising their authority they, and the school, “serve as a beacon for alternative possibilities.”

Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum and Instruction serve as a source of legitimacy for both schools. The Case A school’s more traditional curriculum and instructional practices establish for stakeholders, and a broader audience, that students engage and complete the coursework of surrounding home schools. All stakeholder groups refer to this understanding to validate the academic credibility of the school and as evidence of student ability to do the work. Some voice in every stakeholder group names student graduation as the *raison d’être* for every other structure and practice in place at the school. Students who were at risk of not graduating complete a course of study that parallels that of their home schools. Parallel coursework has been validated by the home school districts. Therefore, the school has represented its work with the least debated priority outcome of public schooling in the U.S., a state sanctioned high school diploma like any other.

The Case B school takes a much different approach when communicating around curriculum and instructional practices. Stakeholder groups identify teacher-developed curricula and student-centered, inquiry based instructional practices as a point of distinction. The school strives to be an alternative model for public education. Therefore, a great deal of ongoing work goes into establishing the

networks, credentials, and state recognition that these distinguishing structures and practices meet or exceed state requirements, while addressing the community developed learning priorities outlined in the Graduation by Exhibition Essentials. Legitimacy as a true alternative with distinct outcomes requires alternative curricula and instruction. Alternative curricula and instruction however, require a great deal of selling in order to prove sufficiently legitimizing to provide the support and resources needed to continue the effort. Teachers who have worked in both the traditional and alternative settings within the district, describe how much more time and energy is demanded of teachers in the Case B school. The extra work, in part, documents and presents alternative curricula, instruction, and assessment as best practices to multiple audiences.

Case A

The Case A school schedule accommodates the interpersonal and intrapersonal learning described in more detail above. Family groups, Town Meetings, and Seminars are scheduled daily or semiweekly. Apart from these personal and social learning structures usurping what may be electives in a more traditional schedule, the schedule looks much like any other schedule in a NYS high school providing opportunity to earn the credit required to graduate. In fact, students, teachers, and parents all bring up that the content of their classes at this school parallels that of the students' home schools.

- Our work toward regents prep, a diploma, all academics challenge our “dumb image” (AIS1)
- Seminars prepare us for the academic work here (AIS2).

- We are not understood in the community. The BOCES label brings an assumption of special education. People think it is easier here but it is the same stuff. We learn the same stuff differently (AIS4).
- Here I get more help and support for Regents courses. It is the same curriculum (AIS5).
- Students do not struggle with the ELA Regents (AIT1).
- Students do better, score higher on state tests, in smaller classes (AIS1).
- My student gets more support. These are regular classes and a regular school (AIP5).

The point is always that students are capable and complete the same work, now that school context and instruction are responsive to their needs. Providing the same course content, taking the same state tests, earning credits and grades, and meeting the same graduation requirements legitimates the school and students' education. The school works differently, but in part, toward the same ends for students.

Classroom instructional practice incorporates and supports relationship and community work. Teachers' familiarity with students allows them to select interest driven content and assignments when they match the curriculum.

They easily differentiate instruction for students as well. Teachers routinely personalize entry points to class work, scaffold lessons and assignments, re-teach to small groups or individual students, and otherwise adjust instruction as and when needed. By understanding a student's history and current challenges outside of class, teachers better choose when to push students, challenge behavior, grant extra time, or modify expectations on any given day. Teachers use day to day interactions in the classroom to recognize and involve students regularly. In the context of small classes, they capitalize on the interpersonal work done outside of class. At the same time, they reinforce relationships by establishing that "teachers will do anything" to support student success. These accommodations to student needs personalize primarily

traditional lesson structures like lecture, discussion, modeling, guided practice, independent practice, and small group work.

Case B

Curriculum and instruction in the Case B school intentionally distinguish the school as alternative. Curriculum includes the social and democratic learning described above. In their academic classes, students become critical thinkers who develop questioning social and intellectual stances and who read, write, and think like historians and scientists (BI8S4; BIT3; BIT4; BIP4; BIA5). Instead of covering topics from state provided curricular materials, teacher developed curricula respond to student interest and current events (BIP1; BIT6; BIT3; BI14S5; BI8S4). Course content stems from the GBE defined essential learning for students, community determined priorities for student learning. Therefore, courses typically narrow the scope of content, include a focus on content area literacy skills, and frequently cross disciplines. Some examples include Shakespeare, Music in Our Lives, World Religions, Geometry, Algebra-Physics-Trig, People's Voice, Constitutional Law, Media and Criticism, Women-Writing-Art, Banned Books, Ratio and Proportions, Portfolio Art, Dollar and Sense and four levels each of French and Spanish. Because essential learnings include whole student outcomes like “designers, producers, performers” and “healthy persons,” most of the weekly project courses support GBE requirements too. The academic facets of the GBE essential learning subsume the NYS graduation requirements, so students meet both criteria by graduation.

Instructional practices prove defining to the school as well. Courses are frequently organized as seminars for discussion of provocative questions, with student thought and research providing information and diverse arguments. Others function as problem-solving, inquiry labs where students wrestle with current questions of science, math, history, or policy. Teachers most frequently coach and facilitate student learning during research, discussion, and analysis, less frequently delivering lectures or direct instruction. Instruction emphasizes quality of thinking. For example, students complete fewer math problems but explain their thinking. A favorite feature for students, teachers typically offer choices for demonstrating learning in class (BI8S4; BI5S1; BIT9; BIA1). The work of GBE and membership in the NY Performance Standards Consortium has required ongoing development and refining of authentic assessment practices. As described above, the school politically and legally resists NYS efforts to require all students to take state tests to graduate. Even grading practices differ. Students do not receive grades for courses. Instead, students complete self-evaluations in courses and quarterly for overall progress reporting. Teachers complete narrative evaluations for every student each quarter as well.

The Most Important Work

Though I have identified shared themes in the work of these alternative schools, the work is understood and accomplished differently in each setting. Even shared structures and practices are implemented differently, according to their purposes. Both schools have reorganized the work of public secondary schools, and

they have continued to garner the necessary political support and resources to have continued this work for over two decades. Though some traditional schools may value quality relationships, community building, democratic citizenship, and corresponding shifts in curriculum and/or instruction, few comprehensively reorganize schedules, student and teacher groups, governance, curricula, assessments, and adult roles to accommodate these values. We would perhaps find alternative structures and practices more pervasively in schools, if they did.

Managing Legitimacy

Students, teachers, and administrators from both schools indicate some conscious effort to manage legitimacy. Prioritizing different outcomes for students, looking different, and taking different action would warrant that effort (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Jepperson, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995). The Case A school, for its part, receives support and resources primarily from the regional secondary schools that pay to send students there. In order to maintain that support, students' families and communities must be satisfied enough to not dissent. Teachers and administrators therefore maintain close communication with home schools and families and teach students that their interactions with their home districts impact the entire school. Interestingly, students, parents, and teachers all indicated during interviews that the curriculum and state tests that students engage at the Case A school match those at home schools. The understood intent of each mentioning was to validate the academic work of the school while emphasizing the value of other features of the school. At those moments, stakeholders fell back on

pointing out conformity to indicate legitimacy. This is pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Alternative, or innovative, practices serve the interests of stakeholders; have their best interests at heart; and meet the previously unmet technical demands of graduating particular students.

The Case B stakeholders never point to conformity. Instead, stakeholders consciously work to manage the legitimacy of non-conforming practices and structures across audiences, employing varied strategies: collaborating with professional networks; state level lobbying; community organizing for board of education lobbying; recruiting stakeholder participation in school decision making; etc. Students, teachers, school administrators, and parents routinely present the school's work to potential students to recruit for diversity, to education conference audiences so that the school continues to be understood as a model of what's possible, to state education committees to promote GBE and supporting practices, and to colleges across the country where students apply for admission with narrative evaluations instead of grade point averages. Though incomplete, this list indicates a great deal of effort to ensure that school priorities, structures and practices are understood, make sense, and are accepted, or even better, supported and celebrated by audiences beyond the immediate school community. This is pragmatic and moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Pragmatic for the reasons listed above, but also moral in the effort to be understood as working for the social good beyond the interests of stakeholders alone.

Though many schools work to manage their image, few do it for survival. Both of the case study alternative schools have needed to defend their purposes,

practices and structures to governing bodies in the course of their histories. They have had to manage continued support to survive. Their non-conformity triggers this need, and their continued survival indicates some social value associated with these purposes, practices, and structures.

It is in this tension that we find evidence both for why these alternative schools both persist and fail to enjoy the stability of the taken-for-grantedness of cultural/cognitive legitimacy. Both schools have persisted for 20 and 30 years respectively. They have garnered the resources for survival and persistence that indicate reliable legitimacy based, for the most part, in serving the interests of stakeholders. Both schools feel an ongoing need to address legitimacy concerns however. This need indicates alternative schools' lack of institutionalized status. Full institutionalization brings cultural-cognitive legitimacy. Because of the taken-for-granted, self-replicating nature of institutionalized forms, campaigning for legitimacy is both unnecessary and ineffective at this level (Greenwood, et al. (2002); Suchman, 1995). Cultural-cognitive legitimacy presupposes the objectification of a form. For these alternative schools, and perhaps for alternative schools in general, shared practices and structures almost allow for this objectification. This level of abstraction requires a simple and clear shared understanding of an alternative school: what it does; that what it does is the right work; how it does this right work; and that structures and practices are the best and appropriate to these right and good purposes (Strang & Meyer, 1993; Suchman, 1995; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Alternative schools began this process and advanced enough to begin an incomplete diffusion process. They have encountered limits to institutional change that pragmatic and moral legitimacy

alone cannot breach. In these two cases, the shared understanding of the meaning of alternative schools, their structures and practices, does not extend across cases. This evidence of incomplete theorization or sense-making provides a credible explanation for the failure of alternative schools to move through Diffusion (Stage V) and to Reinstitutionalization (Stage VI) of Greenwood, et al.'s (2002) institutional change model.

CHAPTER 7

A THIRD PATH FOR CHANGE – A ROLE FOR PERSISTENT INSTITUTIONAL ALTERNATIVES

Public secondary alternative school organizations in the U.S. public education system challenge contemporary conclusions of institutional theory. Their established persistence as heterogeneous organizations in a highly institutionalized field suggests that current models, predicting diffusion or decline of heterogeneous structures and practices, fall short of explaining a feature of, or phenomenon within, institutional environments. Small alternative systems of organizations persist in other institutionalized sectors: alternative holistic medical practitioners in health care; alternatives to incarceration in the prison system; or Alternative Dispute Resolution in the legal system (Morrill, 2006). Why, when faced with the same institutional pressures to conform, do divergent organizations sometimes endure in institutional contexts? Or specifically for this study, what about the role of public alternative schools allow them to persist as peripheral heterogeneous organizations in the institutionalized field of U.S. public education?

Current thinking around institutional heterogeneity accepts that innovative organizational forms may emerge in institutionalized environments, but they do not persist as novel or unique indefinitely. “Models must make the transition from theoretical formulation to social movement to institutional imperative (Strang & Meyer, 1993,p.495).” As Chapter 2 details, innovations may appear in response to conflicts between institutional logics or between institutional rules and technical

demands (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981; Powell, 1991; Rowan, 1982; Sipple & Killeen, 2004; Zucker, 1988); in response to the sometimes fragmented, layered and multiple demands of the institutional environment (Cibulka, 1995; Oliver, 1991; Sipple & Killeen, 2004; Scott, 2001; Scott & Meyer, 1991); in response to technical failures; in response to exogenous shock like social disruption (Swidler, 1986); and as resistance to institutional demands (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings (2002) delineate a process through which innovation becomes, through theorization and diffusion processes, (re)institutionalized or fades away as fad or fashion. Institutional stability requires coherence in the interpretive schema of organizational members reflected in organizational structures and practices (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988). So, in stable institutional environments, innovation becomes understood as a new institutional imperative or fails. Public alternative schools, in this historically stable field, evidence a third outcome for innovation.

Public secondary alternative schools persist as school organizations structured differently and working differently than traditional comprehensive secondary schools, and have done so for more than 40 years. These divergent organizations have come to consistently serve about two percent of the U.S. secondary student population. One important difference between alternative and traditional schools is the student population served. Alternative schools enroll substantially higher concentrations of high needs student populations. Proportionately, 1.5 to 2 times as many Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, and 10% higher concentrations of students from low-income families enroll in alternative schools. And, alternative schools

reportedly receive two-thirds to less than half of the federal funding devoted to meeting the needs of students from low-income families and based on the enrollment of students with low-income and high needs. Also, constituent groups of my two case study alternative schools understand their schools as doing important work not prioritized in the structures and practices of comprehensive secondary schools: developing quality relationships between adults and students, building school community, practicing democratic citizenship, and reorganizing curriculum and/or instruction. Structures and practices of these schools reflect and support these alternative priorities.

Findings

Alternative Schools as Persistent Institutional Innovation

All U.S. public secondary schools respond to institutionalized pressures to conform to a departmentalized, differentiated, comprehensive secondary school model that evolved through the structuration process detailed in Chapter 2 (Callahan, 1962; Cuban, 2004; Ravitch, 2000; Tyack, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack and Tobin, 1994). Regulative pressures are felt from state and federal level policies and laws that require student attendance, certifications, accreditations, and accountability measures. Normative pressures are felt from the public, where the appropriate purposes for public schooling are articulated, and from professional associations, where the appropriate ways to work toward those purposes are determined. Cultural-cognitive pressures determine expected symbolic features that communicate to a public that the organization is engaged in meaningful work when there is uncertainty in the technical

environment, when organizational goals are not clearly articulated, or when the relationship between work activity and goals is uncertain. In schools, communities expect certified teachers to teach groups of students in age-graded classrooms organized hierarchically by department. Such isomorphic pressures are characteristic of highly institutionalized environments and compliance typically provides organizations with the legitimacy required for survival and status (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Giddens, 1984; Jepperson, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1978; Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995). Chapter 4 details the historical shaping of the comprehensive high school into the consistently reproduced traditional secondary school model of the past 75 years. Today we still find that, “Education is a certified teacher teaching a standardized curriculum topic to a registered student in an accredited school (Meyer & Rowan, 1978, p. 84).”

Alternative schools emerge as conscious innovation in U.S. public schooling in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Social movements characterized by concerns for equal treatment and opportunity, as with the ongoing struggle for civil rights, and anti-authoritarianism, as with the counter culture movement, generated conditions for successful deinstitutionalization (Greenwood, et al., 2002; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). Perceived technical failures of U.S. schools, triggered with the Russian launch of the Sputnik satellite, contributed to institutionally destabilizing conditions. Early innovators from outside of public education had presented de-schooling and freedom schools as responses to what were now understood as the social reproduction functions of U.S. public schools, reproduction of a social order that favored some and limited or harmed others. The understanding of the traditional comprehensive high school model

as the efficient way to provide all schooling for all students was now questioned by some (Wells, 1993; Tyack and Tobin, 1994; Ravitch, 2000).

The U.S. public demanded public school alternatives in the 1970s. These schools were understood to serve multiple purposes by organizing for different priorities (Fantini, 1973; Goodlad, 1975, La Belle, 1975). One priority understood a diverse U.S. student population as requiring diverse options for schooling. If we were concerned with equitable inputs and outcomes for all students, then traditional schools were failing (Kohl, 1967; Kozol, 1967; 2005). Another priority elevated educating a democratic citizenry to exercise skills of self-determination, civic participation, and democratic decision making (Center for New Schools, 1978; Deal & Nolan, 1978; Duke, 1978; Fantini, 1973; Huguenin & Deal, 1978; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 1983; Riordan, 1972; Smith, Thomas & Pugh, 1981; Wehlage, et al. 1989). A third perspective supported alternative schools as generators of innovative structures and practices that would promise institutional renewal (Goodlad, 1975; Raywid, 1981; Young, 1990). And finally, a fourth purpose for alternative schools, drop-out prevention, gained ground through the 1980s. The structures and practices appearing in alternative schools were increasingly recognized as (re)engaging and successful for many students who were leaving traditional school settings (Aron, 2006; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 1983; Wehlage, et al., 1989). Chapter 4 details the understandings of theorists and researchers who have studied the evolution of alternative schools.

Federal and private foundation funding helped establish public alternative schools throughout the 1970s, but new directions for school reform in the 1980s impacted alternative schools in two ways: most came to rely on school districts for

needed resources; and therefore, alternative schools more directly felt the same environmental pressures as traditional schools. In the 1980s, the Excellence and Restructuring movements provided some of those pressures. Together these reforms generated new requirements in response to new research-based criticisms blaming schools for mediocre student achievement and for student disengagement. Traditional schools absorbed these requirements without fundamental changes to structure or practices. Alternative schools similarly maintained their innovative structures and practices. For the past 20 years, Standards Based Reform (SBR) policies have demanded statewide learning standard across content areas, standards aligned assessments, measures of graduation rates, and sanctions for low student achievement and graduation rates. Both traditional and alternative schools feel these pressures. Both persist in structure and practice much as before -- predictably for traditional schools as institutionalized models for how we do this work, surprisingly for alternative schools as innovative types that should diffuse or decline in time (Greenwood, et al., 2002).

Alternative Schools and Institutional Change

It is not terribly surprising that alternative school types appear as heterogeneous organizations in U.S. public education. A great deal of recent work in institutional research characterizes environmental conditions for potential heterogeneity. The social movements of the 1960s generated the socio-political conflict that contested cultural-cognitive understandings of public schools as engaged in the democratically valued work of providing opportunity for every American

student, and they recalled the priorities of Social Progressives thereby bringing back to mind the school structures and practices lost to conflict with Administrative Progressives in the early 20th century (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008; Swidler, 1986). Multiple, conflicting normative priorities for public schools - democratic, social efficiency, and social mobility goals – allow for different interpretations or prioritizing schema that demand different structures and practices to communicate difference (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Labaree, 1997; Powell, 1991; Rowan, 1982; Sipple & Killeen, 2004). In the 1960s and 1970s, new understandings of unequal outcomes, social reproduction, and student failure indicated the technical failure of schools, demanding innovation in response (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1992; Suchman, 1995). Any and all of these conditions destabilize the cultural-cognitive, taken-for-granted understandings of schools' purposes and structures enough to generate a moment of deinstitutionalization (Greenwood, et al., 2002). The Precipitating Jolt, in this case a social jolt, is the first of Greenwood, et al.'s (2002) Stages of Institutional Change, a summary model of the institutional change process as articulated across institutional theory and research.

This potential for change allowed new players to reprioritize, innovate, and assemble new accounts for the meaning of public schools. Independent innovation and experimentation with alternative educational structures and practices worked to establish the technical viability of solutions to problems for which the public, schools, and institutional actors were developing shared definitions (Greenwood, et al., 2002; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995; Zucker, 1987). Chapter 4 details the

Deinstitutionalization and Preinstitutionalization, Stages II and III, through four decades of alternative school history.

The next phase in Greenwood, et al.'s (2002) model of institutional change is theorization. Successful theorization requires the specification of general organizational failure, the justification of an abstract possible solution, and establishing the moral and/or pragmatic legitimacy of that solution. Unequal outcomes for students indicate both technical and institutional failure for public schools. Schools fail to graduate almost 30% of students, and they fail to educate even more to socially promised levels of economic and social opportunity. As described above and in Chapter 4, the discourse surrounding alternative school organizations explained their structures and practices as solutions to these failings. The promise to educate student populations underserved by traditional school models and graduate them with the academic and social skills to advocate for themselves and impact their communities established enough pragmatic and moral legitimacy to garner the public and private resources to survive and grow in number. Chapter 5 illustrates the growth, enrollment, and resource trends that establish alternative schools as schools serving high concentrations of high-needs populations of students with fewer resources across the country.

What theorists, researchers, professional associations, schools and other actors in the alternative schools movement neglect to theorize is one alternative organizational type as the one best solution to the technical and institutional failure of traditional public schools. As Chapter 4 details, a variety of alternative structures and practices combine differently across a range of schools that identify themselves as

engaged in alternative work toward alternative goals. We lack a single abstracted alternative school model that may be easily understood as either the technically better model for educating all students to graduation, thereby earning pragmatic legitimacy, or the normatively better model for embodying the values of equality and opportunity we associate with schools, thereby earning moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). The comparative case study analysis of Chapter 6 demonstrates, for two schools, how alternative structures and practices that appear similar embody different meanings for constituent groups associated with each school.

The next phase of institutional change, Diffusion, requires a shared understanding of an objectified innovation as the best effective solution. It may be here that alternative schools falter on the path to reinstitutionalization. As innovation is increasingly adopted throughout an institutionalized field, it is increasingly understood as the best response to a socially defined problem. It either comes to be understood in the field as the right way to do the work, thereby earning cognitive legitimacy, or it disappears as a fashion or fad (Greenwood, et al., 2002). Alternative schools have done neither.

The Pragmatic Legitimacy of Alternative Schools

The analysis of CCD data in Chapter 5 demonstrates that in the 1980s, alternative schools grow in number and enrollment. The National Center for Education Statistics begins reporting the results of annual national surveys of the universe of U.S. public education - states, districts, and schools – with 1986-87 responses. In 1986-87, two percent of public secondary schools were reported as

alternative schools that enrolled .88 % of the secondary student population. By 1998-99, districts identified 9.9% of public secondary schools as alternative schools enrolling 2.2% of the secondary student population. The number of reported alternative schools increases to 13% in 2008-09, though the enrolled student population continues to hover around 2.3% since 1998-99. Since 1998-99, through 2008-09, around 600,000 secondary students in the U.S. have attended alternative schools every year.

Alternative schools have not significantly impacted traditional public school accounts, structures or practices. Instead, they have persistently occupied a marginal niche in public education. As Chapter 4 documents, with the 1980s came an increase in limited pragmatic legitimacy for alternative schools. Alternative schools increasingly came to be understood as the best public school response to an increasingly problematized student failure and drop-out phenomenon (Aron, 2006; Gregory, 2001; Kleiner, et al., 2002; Young, 1990). The alternative practices and structures derived to drive innovation, teach democratic citizenry, and promote self-determination over efficient sorting into social and economic roles also re-engage students in meaningful teaching and learning and increase student success in schools. As alternative schools failed to generate a single abstract, easily objectified model for diffusion, the institutional environment narrowed its understanding of alternative schools as a best solution to the problem of at-risk student populations. As federal and private resources for alternative experimentation and innovation in public schools disappeared, state and district resources began to support this account of alternative schools.

Chapter 5 documents that public alternative school enrollment trends for race and income based student groups reflect this understanding of their purpose. Researchers establish that black, Hispanic, and students from families with low socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to drop out than white, Asian-American, and students from families with middle to high SES (Hahn, 1987; Mishel & Roy, 2006; Swanson, 2004; Wehlage, 1989). And in two recent comparisons of academic achievement, white students continue to outperform underrepresented minority students in fourth and eighth grade reading and math tests, and students not from low-income families outperform students from low income families (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson & Rahman, 2009; Hemphill, Vanneman & Rahman, 2010). Persistently across the 22 years of calculated enrollment rates from 1987 – 2009, alternative schools have enrolled Black, Hispanic, and Native American students at rates 50 – 100% higher than regular schools. Increasingly, alternative schools enroll higher concentrations of students from low-income families as indicated by students receiving federal free or reduced price lunches (FRPL). In 2008-09, alternative school enrollments included 10% higher concentrations of students of students from low income families as measured by both FRPL rates and free lunch rates alone, a standard requiring lower income levels for eligibility. These schools enroll much higher concentrations of high-needs student populations when compared with regular schools.

Reported total alternative school enrollment rates of 2.3% of the secondary student population does not come close to accommodating the 18 – 35% of secondary students who fail to graduate from public school however (Greene & Winters, 2002;

Kaufman, et al., 2001; Mishel & Roy, 2006; Swanson, 2004; Young, 1990). Even limited pragmatic legitimacy does not explain the marginal enrollment impact of alternative schools. If alternative schools were generally understood as an effective response to technical failure in U.S. schools, we would expect enrollment rates to approach at least the 20% or so of total secondary student enrollment that fails to graduate. This lack of a legitimating-account for alternative schools is highlighted further when investigating resource levels. Title I funds are the federally supplied resources intended to support the needs of low achieving students from low income families. Though alternative schools enroll higher concentrations of low income students, they receive two types of Title I funding, student specific and school wide, at lower rates than regular schools. Another indicator of available resources, pupil to teacher ratios (PTR), demonstrates fewer resources in alternative schools. On average they enroll one more student per teacher since 2006-07 than traditional secondary schools.

Alternative schools serve higher concentrations of recognized higher-need student populations with fewer resources. If these divergent school types were institutionally legitimate responses to a defined problem of technical failure of public schools, we would expect resources to follow the understood solution (Kondra & Hinings, 1998; Oliver, 1992; Suchman, 1995). Marginal enrollment rates and fewer resources to do more work indicate that alternative schools continue to lack even the technical or pragmatic legitimacy to persist. Yet, though rates of growth may have peaked in the 1990s, there is no indication of decline in the number or enrollment of alternative schools. What explains their persistence?

The Moral Legitimacy of Alternative Schools

In order to garner the support required for survival, organizations and their actions must be perceived as “desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).” Since pragmatic legitimacy does not fully explain the persistence of alternative schools, and alternative schools, their structures, and practices have failed to attain the taken-for-granted status of cognitive legitimacy, understanding moral legitimacy requires insight into which structures and practices are valued, how, and by whom? Investigating the micro-processes of institutionalization requires methods that uncover the meaning that audiences assign to organizational structures and practices. Discourse and case study analysis methods access the intra-organizational processes that assign that meaning (Phillips & Malhotra, 2008; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Schnieberg & Clemens, 2006; Strang & Sine 2005).

The two case studies of hypothesized divergent types of alternative schools provide the answer to the questions, “What is the most important work of this school? How is it done?” Both schools have been enrolling students for at least 20 years and have public recognition as notably successful alternative schools from stakeholders, surrounding schools, networks of alternative schools, and in one case from multiple national professional networks. One school is an alternative school started by a coalition of regional districts to address an alarmingly high dropout rate in the early 1980s. The second is a public adaptation of a freedom school effort by a coalition of active parents of students of color, parents of students from low income families and

university based social activists, from the early 1970s, who were working to build a school to change outcomes for certain student populations and address social justice concerns. The immediate audiences of these alternative schools – students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members – respond to these questions. Documentation and observation further triangulate interview data in these cases. Stakeholders in both school settings addressed overlapping themes in describing the meaning of the school’s work and similar structures and practices supporting that work. Each school community understands the work differently and implementation of structures and practices reflects differences in emphasis and interpretation.

Both school communities describe, to different extent, the most important work as developing quality relationships between adults and students, building school community, practicing democratic citizenship, and reorganizing curriculum and/or instruction.

- The Case A school, a regional alternative school for an at-risk student population from regional districts, focuses on developing relationship skills and much improved, positive relationships for students in and out of school. Many structures and practices are devoted to this work. The Case B school, a district alternative democratic community school reflecting a somewhat diverse district population, instead enjoys school-wide norms for open-minded and caring relationships that do not consciously require the specific dedication of structures and practices.
- An emphasis on building community results in a sense of belonging and being valued for students in both schools. In the Case A school,

community building extends the focus on relationships to group membership. In the Case B school, students consider themselves members of multiple communities. They think about how communities interact and struggle with definitions of community. Many structures and practices provide the space for this exploration and practice with community.

- Structures and practices associated with practicing democratic citizenship appear in both schools. In the Case A school, no one identified practicing democratic citizenship as the most important work. Instead, a few democratic practices serve the goals of building trusting relationships and a school community inviting student ownership (Aron, 2006; Newman, 1981; Raywid, 1981; Wehlage, et al., 1989). In the Case B school, most of the school's distinguishing structures and practices support the outcome of educating students to be active participants and leaders in democratic communities. Many would identify learning to participate as an effective citizen in a democracy as **the** most important work of the school.
- Both schools adapt curriculum and instruction to school context. The Case A school's more traditional curriculum establishes for stakeholders, and a broader audience, that students engage and complete the coursework of surrounding home schools. Instructional practice responds to individual student need, capitalizing on caring, positive relationships. In the Case B school, stakeholder groups identify teacher-developed curricula and student-centered, inquiry based instructional practices as a point of distinction. A community-developed document describing essential areas

of learning for all students determines graduation requirements. Being alternative with distinct outcomes requires alternative curricula and instruction.

In the Case A school, the work put into relationship building is considered a necessary foundation for student academic and social success, the end goal recognized by most stakeholders. Parents and students, however, might argue that the work resulting in students' sense of belonging as a valued member of a community outweighs in importance the work toward high school graduation. In the Case B school, one teacher stated "We want students to be good thinkers, good citizens, and to have a strong work ethic – in that order." Many would add that a most valued outcome for students is a sense of efficacy in shaping their own lives and their communities. Here again, parents value their students' sense of belonging as a valued member of a community.

The different implementation of similar structures and practices in each school reflects the different contexts and values of each school. Though not a comprehensive list, overlapping structures and practices include extended roles for adults; advisory (family) groups; all-school meetings (ASMs); teacher-developed curriculum; instruction; assessment; trips; graduation requirements; shared-decision making; and community involvement.

- Both schools, by nature of being small and committed to quality relationships, expect adults to contribute to school operations and to engage with students in multiple ways outside of the classroom.

- Family groups in the Case A school focus on building relationship skills and trust. In the Case B school, family groups contribute to school operations, decision making, and social/community fabric.
- Town meetings in the Case A school occasionally extend beyond announcements. In the Case B school, ASMs are the central forum for shared decision making and sometimes extend to hours of debate.
- Curriculum and instruction are introduced above as some of the most important work.
- The Case A school embraces traditional and state required assessment results as a source of mimetic/cognitive legitimacy. The Case B school campaigns against state required high school exit exams; works in coalition with other schools to promote performance-based assessment as an alternative; and has implemented a well-articulated graduation by exhibition, based in performance assessment, that subsumes state graduation requirements.
- Both schools embrace trips, short and long, with students as central to the culture of the school, community building efforts, and student learning/growth. The Case B school has incorporated an annual 4 day trip week into school curricula.
- The Case A school incorporates some shared decision making structures and processes for student input into school decisions. The Case B school has a formally approved Shared Decision Making Plan that articulates the

decision making rights, responsibilities, processes, and purview of all school stakeholder groups.

- Both schools expect and organize career exploration for students with community mentors and community service projects. The Case B school includes career exploration and community service as graduation requirements and has classes, a department, and a coordinator devoted to both career and community studies.

Emphasis in implementation mirrors the valued purposes in each school. Stakeholders in the Case A school value the relationship work, community membership, and personalized social and academic problem solving. Student success is recognized as earning a diploma through a process similar to that which was insurmountable in the schools they left to attend the alternative school. Hence, alternative structures and practices are employed toward learning relationship skills, building school community, and providing the support students need to succeed academically at coursework that parallels the traditional school curriculum. The Case B school redirects and develops similar structures and practices differently to reflect stakeholder value of critical inquiry, democratic citizenship, active community membership, and self-determination. By organizing to represent the work that stakeholders value and to be understood to promote societal welfare beyond the interests of stakeholders alone, these schools garner the moral legitimacy needed at the local levels for continued survival.

Moral legitimacy brings the potential to garner legitimacy from an audience beyond constituent groups. If a broader audience understands the work of an

innovation as benefiting the community or society, as being the right thing to do, then a broader, more reliable legitimacy may support greater diffusion of the innovation and associated accounts as the right way to do the right work.

Barriers to Cognitive Legitimacy

In the above cases, institutional logics rearrange to require local organizational responses different from those offered in other local schools. Other researchers have asserted that U.S. public schools have, in an environment of competing institutional logics, prioritized economic, social efficiency, and social mobility logics before democratic or social equality logics (Cuban, 2004; Labaree, 1997). Stakeholders in the case study schools prioritized equal outcomes and democratic values for their schools. The schools organize structures and practice to address those priorities.

Administrators from the district schools sending students to the Case A school remark that their schools would not or could not provide the caring relationships, community building or responsive problem solving that they believe are necessary to student success in the Case A school. According to them, their students would have dropped out but will graduate from the Case A school. A teacher from the Case B school, who had worked in other district secondary schools, remarks that the Case B school demands much more work from her. Family groups, trips, shared decision making, teacher developed curriculum, and more require more of her time and concentration. Like other teachers in the Case B school, she chooses this work because of the priorities and values it represents. Both of the case study schools respond to a local demand for reprioritized schools. Other local schools do not

reorganize to meet these same demands. Though unable to generalize from these two cases, we can wonder if persisting alternative schools survive because they too represent different work for different purposes valued by a supportive community.

Limited pragmatic legitimacy and local moral legitimacy prove insufficient, decades into the innovations of alternative schools, to build cognitive legitimacy however. Both case schools have presented their work, by invitation, to other schools. The Case B school actively manages legitimacy by rallying local support when needed, through active participation and board membership with professional associations, by lobbying and networking with state policymakers, with regular presentations at national conferences, and with accreditations from national education associations. Recent publications from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 2012) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2006) recommend structures and practices of the Case B school in particular as best practice. Other publications of NASSP (1996) and Brown University's Coalition of Essential Schools (ongoing) promote many alternative structures and practices as best practice. Yet, alternative schools must devote resources to continuously maintain legitimacy, a defense against external pressures to conform (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). A lack of sufficient legitimacy or sufficiently generalized legitimacy keeps alternative schools in survival mode, unable to increase their impact in the field (Gregory, 2001; Loflin, 2000).

Chapter 4 describes the variety of structures and practices in different combinations across diverse alternative schools. I also detail diverse purposes across alternative schools. Though the early diffusion and persistence of alternative schools

described in Chapter 5 suggests the successful theorization of alternative schools, the difference between accounts for alternative practices and structures uncovered in the Chapter 6 case studies points to the heterogeneity of alternative schools as a barrier to the single, abstracted, shared, objectified account that could garner the cultural-cognitive legitimacy and institutionalization.

A Third Outcome

So, alternative schools evidence a third outcome for Greenwood, et al.'s (2002) Stages of Institutional Change model. Despite best efforts and indications of occasional success, 40 or so years into the change process, public alternative schools have not disappeared, declined, or become an institutional imperative. Instead, institutional forces in public education allow a marginalized space where varied alternative organizations persist. Alternative schools serve higher concentrations of high-need students with fewer resources than regular public schools, at least in part addressing technical failure in public schools. The two case study schools illustrate the possibility that alternative schools also represent the reorganization of work to prioritize different values for public education. In both roles, alternative schools can be understood to stabilize public schools by addressing technical and institutional failures. Regular public schools may continue to resist change while pointing to the availability of alternative schools to address technical or institutional pressures to change.

The empirical work of this study has only begun to shine a light on this third institutional outcome and does little to fully describe or explain it. Are persistent

alternative organizations a feature of some institutionalized fields? If so, under what conditions do these organizations persist? Very little literature within the vast corpus of neo-Institutional theory recognizes this phenomenon in institutionalized fields. One such example is Morrill (2006) who details the institutionalization in the U.S. legal field of Alternative Dispute Resolution from 1965 – 1995. He concludes that ADR is now increasingly taken for granted as a complement to conventional legal arrangements in U.S. law. Much of his discussion of the institutionalization process parallels the work of the Case B school to gain legitimacy, but these processes lead to different ends. Deephouse and Suchman (2008) speculate that moments when the dynamics of legitimation do not parallel the dynamics of institutionalization make for potentially interesting case studies. Only closer examination of the sense-making and theorization processes will allow insight to such divergence.

Conclusion

What about the role of public alternative schools allows them to persist as peripheral heterogeneous organizations in the institutionalized field of U.S. public education? Strang and Sine (2005) recognize that marginalized, alternative organizations may help to stabilize institutionalized fields by doing the work that institutional organizations do not or that they may exist to manage segments of the field where institutionalized organizations prove ineffective. This recognition is a step toward empirically illustrating these dynamics. Alternative schools are, in part, working in segments of the field where institutional organizations prove ineffective. Working with high-needs and at-risk student populations provides the field with a

solution when confronted with technical failure. Also, as suggested by the case studies, alternative schools, responding to constituent preferences for different priorities, may do the work that regular schools do not. By doing so, alternative schools alleviate pressure on regular schools to adapt. Alternative schools act as safety nets or pressure valves to stabilize the field.

Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings (2002) summarize the conclusions of theory and research in their model of the Stages of Institutional Change. This work details the change process of the innovation of alternative schools:

- Through the Precipitating Jolt of changing social priorities in the 1960s and 1970s;
- Through the Deinstitutionalization of public education when some logics and tools already available from the de-schooling, free schooling and freedom schools movements were put to use, when federal grants and foundation money supported public alternative and experimental schools throughout the 1970s, and when the Case B school was started by activist community member groups for equity and social justice purposes;
- Through Preinstitutionalization when the problem definition process determined social understandings include knowing that schools determine inequitable outcomes for different students and neglect democratic citizenship and student self-determination, determining that education needs renewal and innovation, and allowing alternative schools, like the Case B school, to be local responses to these understandings;

- Through Theorization when increasing numbers of alternative schools suggest growing legitimacy, patterns of practice emerge in the research and theory literatures around alternative schools, the Dropout Phenomenon becomes understood as a problem and alternative schools are understood as one effective solution beyond localities, and when the Case A school developed as a response to dropout counts, based on a collaborative study of practicing alternative schools;
- And some level of Diffusion when alternative schools increase enrollment from 1% of public secondary students in 1986 to 2.25% throughout the 2000s. The number of alternative schools increases from 2% of public secondary schools in 1986 to 13-14% throughout the 2000s. Alternative schools come to enroll high-needs populations of students at rates 1.5 to 2 times higher than regular schools from 1986-2009. Alternative schools come to enroll higher concentrations of students from low income families, from 2% higher than regular schools in 1999 to 10% higher in 2009. And, alternative schools garner the moral and pragmatic legitimacy to persist without decline since the 1970s.

From here the model predicts growth and institutionalization or decline and disappearance. I argue alternative schools generate a third outcome. As organizations addressing technical and moral failings of regular schools, they persist. In order to proceed through to the final stage of institutional change, Reinstitutionalization, alternative schools need a simple, objectifiable, and reproducible account of alternative structures and practices. Instead, alternative schools have multiple

accounts for differentiated implementation of assorted structures and practices. This is one explanation for the felt barrier to cognitive legitimacy needed for stability and institutionalization. “Staying stuck in survival mode prevents making a larger impact (alternative school principal in personal communication, 2013).” Alternative schools role in public education as safety net or pressure valve prevents extinction. The heterogeneity of logics revealed in discourse and the case studies prevents institutionalization. Alternative schools use the space in between to respond to local constituent needs for reprioritized goals and outcomes with customized combinations of structures and practices.

This niche for persistent alternative organizations in institutionalized fields deserves further study. Is the lack of a single reproducible account the only obstacle preventing more alternative schools from serving the full 20-30% of students failing in U.S. secondary schools? In other words, if alternative schools were to agree on a common narrative, structure, and language, would broader diffusion take place? What institutional conditions allow for the persistence of alternatives – of which there are many? Are there patterns among constituents of persistent alternative organizations?

Next steps should include an effort to collect more evidence of heterogeneous accounts or shared meaning between schools through case studies. The study of the micro-processes that build accounts for alternative structures and practices will reveal the logics that challenge institutional arrangements (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006), the sources of legitimacy, and barriers to legitimacy. This work invites close study of types of legitimacy and their implications for persistence.

The work here begins to analyze the contemporary discourse around alternative school organizations. Continued discourse analysis of persistent alternative organizations can establish perceptions of meaning for the organizations, their roles, structures, practices, and the barriers they face to full institutional legitimacy.

Investigations of persistent alternative organizations across fields may uncover potential patterns in populations addressed by alternative organizations or could begin to characterize the spaces within institutions where alternative organizations persist. Alternative organizations, like alternative schools, may do the right work the right way by addressing distinct local needs to reprioritize goals or outcomes with adaptable organizational structures and practices. With institutionalization comes pressure for conformity. An institutionalized account for alternative work trades adaptability for stability.

Alternative organizations persist in institutionalized fields apart from public education as well. Institutional analyses have neglected their presence and predict institutionalization or disappearance. A more robust empirical understanding of persistent alternative types will teach us much about the boundaries of and possibilities within the institutionalization of alternative forms.

APPENDIX A

CASE A REPORT

I collected data for Case A in the spring of 2005. As discussed in the Methods chapter, the Case A school serves as a hypothesized variation within the category of public alternative secondary schools. The school serves an exclusively at-risk population of students, a category defined by criteria developed by school founders and described later in this chapter. Students and staff choose to attend and work in this setting. Because the school maintains a waiting list, neither the school nor any one student is pressured for enrollment. This chapter will detail the structures and practices that support the “most important work” of the school, as identified by stakeholders including students, teachers, parents, and administrators. I begin with a description of the school and its context within the community and among regional school organizations.

The Case A school is a Board of Cooperative Education (BOCES) managed program. In New York State, school districts in a region may pool resources to develop shared programs through these organizations that serve as administrative, policy, and financial liaisons between NYS and the member districts. BOCES also administer programs like Career and Technical Education programs, programs for high needs students with disabilities, and central business offices. Only member schools from within the region participate in BOCES programs.

Students attending the Case A school come primarily from districts within the county where the school is located, in the county seat. Seven districts sponsor most of

the 40 or so students attending the school for grades 10-12. The primary shared criterion for selected students is that they have been recognized as at-risk of not graduating high school. Some send as many as 13 students at a time, others only one or two. Five of these seven districts are identified in NY State's Needs/Resource Categories¹⁴ as High Needs Rural Districts, which means that the districts' resource needs outpace available local resources. Specifically, these districts are at or above the 70th percentile for need and have fewer than 2500 students a district where there are fewer than 100 students per square mile or they are at or above the 70th percentile for need and there are fewer than 50 students per square mile without concern for district size. The other two districts are identified as Average Needs, a category that does not distinguish between rural and urban settings. It is possible in this schema to be a low needs district but no participating districts fall into this category. The districts' 2006 Free and Reduced Priced Lunch (FRPL) participation rates range from 24.6% to 52.4%, with an average of 39.8%.

The history that follows describes why these districts came together to open an alternative high school in 1985 and what they hoped to do.

The History

In the fall of 1985, the Case A alternative high school opened its doors to students. Proposals and other communications describe its initial purposes and

¹⁴“The need/resource capacity index, a measure of a district's ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources, is the ratio of the estimated poverty percentage (expressed in standard score form) to the Combined Wealth Ratio (expressed in standard score form). A district with both estimated poverty and Combined Wealth Ratio equal to the State average would have a need/resource capacity index of 1.0.” (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/accountability/2011-12/NeedResourceCapacityIndex.pdf>, p. 1).

priorities. Collectively, the county schools had the second highest dropout rate in NYS in 1982 and one of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates in the state in 1985, according to one proposal (AD9). In response, county administrators researched the causes of and responses to student disaffection with school. Their work resulted in the model implemented in 1985.

The school opened with 35 students and 4 full-time adults: 2 teachers, 1 program coordinator/counselor, and a clerical/resources support person. The planners identified clearly alternative purposes, target population, and program structures. The six initial goals for the school follow:

1. develop at least minimal academic competencies (sufficient to meet requirements for graduation) in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies
2. secure such other academic competencies as are consistent with their life and career goals
3. acquire those vocational skills necessary to enable them to enter the world of work
4. develop a positive self-concept
5. improve interpersonal and communication skills
6. meet all diploma requirements prescribed in Part 100 of the Regulations of the Commissioner (AD8).

The targeted student population was, and still is, limited to “students who have been identified as being in high risk of dropping out of school (AD8).” These students “must meet all of the following minimal criteria (AD8)”:

1. They have either indicated an intention to drop out of school, or demonstrated a severe disaffection with their school’s programs, through behaviors such as:

- a. a serious non-attendance problem (as defined by the local district), or
 - b. a serious discrepancy between their academic potential and their performance record, not attributable to a learning disability, or
 - c. a seriously disruptive, or unusually withdrawn behavior pattern; and
2. They have both the academic and social potential to succeed in an alternative high school program; and
 3. They are between the ages of 15 and 17 (others will be considered, but as lower priority cases); and
 4. They have indicated a willingness to make a long-term commitment to the program (AD8).

It is explicitly stated in early documents that students must genuinely choose the alternative school as one of multiple options available to them (AD8; AD9; AD10; AD11).¹⁵

Several of the early program components have disappeared, but many persist. The process for earning academic credit was very flexible at first. The two teachers developed and coordinated Individualized Education Plans that identified goals for students in cognitive/academic areas, vocational/career areas, and in personal growth. Students could earn credits, or fractions of credits, through experience-based learning projects or activities. Options included classroom-based instruction in multiple settings like the alternative school, a local college, adult education courses, vocational education courses, etc.; interdisciplinary, complex projects that require diverse skills to complete; Experience Based Career Experience (EBCE) styled projects;

¹⁵ This rule, or required condition, persists, at least for the 20 years until this study. At least 3 of the 22 pages that students complete in the school's intake packet make explicit reference to a student's and staff's choice to be in the school.

independent study; work study; non-traditional physical education activities; and participation in group counseling in “family groups.”¹⁶

Though not for credit, the school was to involve students in a variety of personal development activities. “To this end, students will be encouraged to work toward: improved self-concepts; improved interpersonal skills; a better understanding of their own values and of society’s values; greater self-initiative; and an improved sense of responsibility – both as a student and as a citizen (AD8).” Planners even address the tone of the school. They instruct the staff to balance structure, discipline, and flexibility while adopting an informal tone with students that contrasts with traditional schools. The desired end result appears in text: “For students who have not succeeded in those traditional environments, it is the personal relationships they are able to establish with teachers who care about them and whom they trust which have proven repeatedly to be a critical variable to allow these young people to succeed in alternative schools. To fail to provide opportunities for such interpersonal relationships is to deny the alternative school an ingredient critical to its success (AD8).”

Twenty years later, the emphasis on interpersonal relationship building and communication skills persist, as described below. Much of the flexibility around earning academic credit has been removed, in part because the coordination demands on the teachers prevented student learning of much depth (AIA1). Also, the changing policy climate toward standards-based learning has eliminated a great deal of academic flexibility across all schools. Therefore, much of the experience-based

¹⁶ See below for further description of the practice and role of family groups in the current school program.

learning aspect of the early school has disappeared. We do find, in current practices and structures, the imprint of most of these early priorities. I begin describing the contemporary school by describing the county it serves.

The County

The 2010 Census data tells us that the county has about 50,000 people in almost 500 square miles. County population has increased 1.5% in the past decade. 95% of the population identifies themselves as white with the other 5% most likely to identify themselves as Black, Hispanic or Latino, or report a background of two or more races. Five percent of the population is under 5 years old; 21% of the population is under 18 years old; and 13% of the population is over 65 years old. Two percent of the population was born outside of the U.S.; compare this to about 22% in NYS. Four percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home; compare to 29% statewide.

Within the county, the median household income is about \$45,000; the state median is \$55,600. Per capita income in the past 12 months is estimated to be \$22,000; the state estimate is \$30,948. Poverty rates are about equal to the state with 14.1% of people living below the poverty level. Unemployment rates have increased since 2000, from 4.3% in 2000 to 9% in 2010 (New York State Department of Labor. <http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/laus.asp>, accessed 6-17-2012). In the population of adults aged 25 or above, 93% have graduated from high school. The state rate is 84.4%. 24.3% of the same population have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. That

rate is 32.1% across the state. There are 8 Colleges and Universities within 35 miles of the county seat.

In many ways, the county is typical of Upstate NY where the decrease in manufacturing and construction work is slowly being replaced with work in government service, leisure and hospitality industries, and education and health related organizations. Lower wages accompany this transition (NYS Department of Labor. <http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/cen/cnyindex.asp>, accessed 6-17-2012). Throughout the county and surrounding areas is agricultural land used primarily for crops and dairy farming or lying fallow. Properties throughout the county reveal a mix of well-maintained homes and yards with neglected homes and other structures. Pockets of extreme poverty persist alongside mostly modest homes and businesses within and between towns.

The School

Students come from across the county, a few even from outside the county, to attend the school in the county seat. For more than half of the students, this means that they catch a bus to their home schools and then take a second bus to the Case A school. Typically, these students travel with other students who attend BOCES programs. These include students attending the Career and Technical Education program and students with disabilities who attend specialized programs at the BOCES campus in the county seat. The drop-off at the school is a separate stop because the school shares space with the BOCES Adult Education program a few miles away and across town from the main BOCES campus. The two programs occupy a renovated

grocery store located at the edge of the small city (population of almost 20,000 in the 2010 census). A 20 foot tall sign near the entrance to the parking lot announces the BOCES programs found here. The renovated building shares a parking lot with a 1960s style strip mall and a few free standing buildings in a neighborhood characterized by a mix of small industry, convenience stores/gas stations, small businesses, public utilities, apartment buildings and pockets of single family homes.

Relative to its external surroundings, the inside of the building appears clean and new though the building has been in use by both programs for at least five years. The alternative school was housed on a local college campus for almost 15 years before moving to this location when the college reclaimed the space occupied by the alternative school. Aside from office and administrative work, the Adult Education program sees little activity in the day time compared to the school. Students, teachers, and visitors enter the building through two sets of double doors with the BOCES logo and program names stenciled on them. Past the doors, a hallway runs the length of the building with a series of doors to five classrooms and three offices along the right wall and a reception window to the Adult Education program, two shorter hallways, a classroom and an office for one alternative school teacher along the left wall. The two hallways on the left lead to Adult Education rooms and the bathrooms and a small gym used by the alternative school. Blue carpet and white walls with stenciled signs on the doors give the overall impression of a contemporary office environment.

The classrooms are shared by different teachers and classes, so materials adorning the walls are a mix of inspirational or content area posters, maps, and student work. All rooms contain conference style tables and chairs that seat two students per

side and at least one black or white board. Tables are arranged in lecture style rows in some rooms; U-shaped arrangements and clusters in others. Table arrangements change with classes and activities. The room equipped for science lab work contains a terrarium, aquarium, plants, animal skeletons, and lab equipment. All classrooms have an external wall with one or more large windows looking out to a small grass area and the two-lane road that leads to the school.

The “main room” serves as an all school gathering place every morning after second period for a town meeting (see below) and houses the school store, which sells school supplies and snacks and is open during breaks in the schedule and lunch time. Proceeds from the school store support school events like the annual prom. This room also serves as a study hall location and as a classroom, sometimes simultaneously. Two teachers’ offices open into the main room, the school administrative support person’s office occupies one corner, and the school computer lab, a row of 10 older desktop computers, takes up most of the back wall.

School Structures and Practices

The schedule is recreated in the table below. The school day begins at 8am, though not all buses arrive promptly each day. This means that some students are regularly late to school. As one can see from the schedule, there is no standard class duration. Durations change to accommodate unique features of the school and some courses.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:00 - 9:00	Class 1 English Math Tech Plan	Class 7 Computer Poetry 180 Part. In Govt/Econ Art	Class 1 English Math Tech Plan	Class 7 Computer Poetry 180 Part. In Govt/Econ Art	Class 1 English Math Tech Plan
9:00 -10:00	Class 2 English Math B1 Biology Plan	^{9:30} Family Group	Class 2 English Math B1 Biology Plan	^{9:30} Family Group	Class 2 English Math B1 Biology Plan
10:00 - 10:10	Town Meeting				
10:10 – 11:10	Class 3 Film Literature US History & Govt Biology Lab Plan	Class 4 Health Math A2 Math A3	Class 3 Film Literature US History & Govt Biology Lab Plan	Class 8 Seminar I Seminar II Seminar III	Class 3 Film Literature US History & Govt Biology Lab Plan
11:10 – 12:00	Class 4 Health Math A2 Math A3	^{10:45} Class 8 Seminar I Seminar II Seminar III	Class 4 Health Math A2 Math A3		Class 4 Health Math A2 Math A3
12:00 – 12:30	Lunch				
12:30 – 1:15	Class 5 Environmental Global Topics Plan	Class 5 Environmental Global Topics Plan	Class 5 Environmental Global Topics Plan	Class 6 English Math A2 US History & Govt	Class 5 Environmental Global Topics Plan
1:15 – 2:00	Class 6 English Math A2 US History & Govt	Phys Ed Workshop	Class 6 English Math A2 US History & Govt	Phys Ed Workshop Group	Class 6 English Math A2 US History & Govt
2:00 – 3:00	Academic Support Workshop				

Figure B.1 - Case A's Daily Schedule for the 2004-05 school year.

Students earn credits for English, Math, Social Studies, and Science courses in grades 10-12. Some courses lead to the NYS Regents exam (or the alternative Regents Competency Test) required for graduation. The courses address the state learning standards and meet the seat time and lab hours required by NYS education

law. In fact, one external pressure identified by most staff members was the need to maintain 180 minutes of seat time per required course. Meeting this requirement has diminished time available for electives and unique course offerings. Unique courses and features of the school's schedule include Plan time, Town Meeting, Workshop, Family Group, and Seminars I, II, and III.

- Plan time is scheduled time with no courses when a student may have independent study hall time in the main room. Students must manage this time well in order to have it built into their schedules
- Town Meetings bring all students and staff together once daily. Announcements are shared by staff and students and pressing school issues are addressed through a facilitated whole group process. Family groups take turns facilitating the town meetings, which results in a student facilitating discussion of agenda items with the support of a family group leader (one of the teachers) when needed for more complex facilitation. One typical agenda included a request to look for tent poles missing after a class camping trip; a singing of "Happy Birthday" to a student; reminders of deadlines for projects due, yearbook orders (designed and published by the school); a request for consent forms from me; a reminder for permission slips for an upcoming trip; the announcement that a teacher's office is closed; and a longer discussion about how to reorganize classes and the schedule to accommodate class trips that day that had taken teachers and students out of the school.
- Workshop is like a scheduled study hall with teacher support. This is time built into the schedule for teachers and students to meet outside of class to work on

projects, class work, make-up credit, independent studies, etc. Provided transportation, sometimes from an hour or more away, makes staying after school difficult for many students.

- Family Groups are small groups of 6-10 students, facilitated by a teacher, who meet twice a week for informal group counseling, peer support, and team building. During meetings groups discuss pre-determined topics like goal-setting, decision-making, or school issues; practice stress management strategies; share thoughts and feelings; take group trips; etc. This advisory group structure is central to the work of the school. Every student and staff interview identified Family Group as the structure supporting the school's emphasis on relationships - where students learn to build and manage relationships and where the relationships between staff and students are cultivated. Students sign a participation agreement in the school intake packet that explains, "You are coming here to work on your own **issues** and to make needed **changes** in your life. Family Group provides the time and structure to allow you to focus on those issues and changes (A6vii)." Each student meets weekly with his or her family group leader in a 20-30 minute individual meeting as well. These "individuals" focus on each student's process and planning while group meetings typically find shared concerns to address. It is not unusual for a family group to devote time, attention, and support to a single student in crisis when needed.

Family group members and leaders stay consistent throughout a student's time with the school. Because some of these relationships last for many years, family

group members and leaders regularly work through the complexities of long term relationships. Much of the school's emphasis on communication and relationship building manifests within and around family groups.

- The seminar series evolved to support the developmental needs of students in different years of the program and to address some alternative learning priorities. In Seminar I, first year students work on academic and organizational skills, literacy strategies, learning school culture, and school community building. In Seminar II, second year students work on career exploration, college visits and testing, and job shadowing placements in the community. In Seminar III, seniors develop senior portfolios and reflection pieces for graduation, plan the senior trip, and plan and implement community service projects. All seminars include group trips ranging from day hikes to overnight camping or sightseeing trips.
- The Academic Support Workshop is available after-school support time for those students who can arrange to stay for needed support.

Longer and shorter blocks of time reflect the varied priorities of the school. Class times are carefully calculated to meet seat time and lab requirements. Longer blocks of time allow for off campus activities, including the transportation of students, including job shadowing, service projects, and short trips. The schedule sometimes changes to accommodate the many demands on limited time. For example, when two staff members leave for a camping trip with a seminar class, courses are rescheduled to maintain meaningful attendance and seat time requirements over the course of the week.

The Staff

Six full-time adults manage this range and diversity of activity. The school is staffed by four full-time teachers, serving as Learning Coordinators: one each for English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. (It is assumed that students have earned a Language Other Than English credit before arriving at the school. Arrangements for independent study are made with home schools when this is not the case.) A teacher/administrator serves as principal and part-time Math or Science teacher as well. One full-time administrative support person completes the regular staffing of the school. Each of these six adults regularly works with students in capacities not included in typical school job descriptions.

The Learning Coordinators (LCs) serve as entire academic departments, so the administrative, professional, curriculum development and teaching responsibilities for content area work in a school lie on their shoulders. Each LC also serves as a Family Group leader and so meets twice weekly with a family group and once weekly with each individual student for informal counseling and advising.¹⁷ Each LC also has responsibility for one of the seminars. Because many of these roles require an LC to be out of the classroom or school many times throughout the year, LCs also cover one another's classes regularly. Also, adults eat lunch with students, sponsor student groups, and use any available prep time to meet with individual students, student groups, or students in plan time. Finally, the staff meets after school, 1 – 3 times per

¹⁷ LCs are certified teachers without specific training in counseling or social work. They share ideas and resources for group work and listen well in order to advise individual students through family, peer, school, and other personal decisions/dilemmas.

week, for staff meetings, philosophy meetings,¹⁸ or less formal debriefings after school.

The Program Coordinator serves as a science and math LC for two classes and a seminar and as the program administrator. She liaises with the BOCES administration around policy, budget, and reporting demands. In the rest of her time, she manages conflict not addressed through typical class and family group mechanisms.¹⁹ Her coordination efforts bring the very busy, student-focused LCs together to collaborate toward learning about, prioritizing, and interpreting their work in the course of regular staff meetings. This Program Coordinator has decision making authority for student outcomes that appears to me to extend beyond her formal role authority. Attention to process, collaboration, and information sharing creates a basis of trust evidenced by LCs' broad comfort with the Program Coordinator's authority in "their students" lives. I interpret this trust as evidence that the relationship tending emphasis of the program extends to the relationships between adults working there.

The remaining adult role in the school is that of the Administrative Support Specialist. This adult makes sure that students are transported to the school, that

¹⁸ Philosophy meetings are presentations and discussions of current questions and thinking in public education. Staff members take turns presenting questions or topics, maybe some reading, and discuss the implications for the work and decision making in the school.

¹⁹ Student discipline issues appear managed through practices relying on family group and the general school focus on building respectful relationships. In class, teachers gently steer or tease distracted students back to assigned tasks or class work. Teachers display flexibility and humor in the process. When teacher directive is not enough to reengage students, or when the occasional student outburst or meltdown occurs in class, teachers ask students to leave class with the expectation that the student will go to their family group leader's office to wait, or to another appropriate waiting place. Students may return to class after processing an incident with the classroom teacher, and perhaps the family group leader. Of the few students I observed leave class, I never observed a student taking advantage of his or her responsibility for follow through.

lunches arrive at the school, that attendance is reported, calls home are made, and that many more necessary details are managed. When she describes her own work however, she emphasizes spending time with students: chatting at lunch, walking together for physical education class, getting to know the students. From my observations, the support specialist's location in the main room is strategic to these ends. Informal, ongoing conversations between her and students, and between students and students, generate a constant stream of information about students, families, and community. Again in her own descriptions, she points to her relative lack of authority in the program and her presence in many students' community lives as features shaping her relationships with students. She points out that staff members are distinct personalities and different kids connect with different adults. Her contributions of "insider" information, her participation in collaborative staff work, and her hands-on work with students redefines the boundaries of administrative support (AIF1).

The Students

Most students identify the support they receive from the adults in the school as the foundation for their ability to successfully change. Upon arrival, they each fit the original criteria for selecting students cited above. Students are in grades 10-12, ranging from 15-21 years old. No students of color were attending the school at the time of this study, reflecting little racial diversity in the county. Social and economic diversity is found throughout this group of around 40 students however. Stylistically students sport goth, punk, preppie, and mainstream fashions. Some students come

from traditional nuclear families living in detached houses with yards and arrive in school wearing new, clean clothes. Others come from farm families and farm jobs and arrive in school in work boots and a change of clean clothes and coats that they keep in the car to change into after early morning work hours. And some students do not have access to a safe bed, clean clothes, or reliable food some nights. Forty-five student slots are available and enrollment numbers fluctuate as students come and go throughout the school year.

Graduating seniors give speeches at graduation that reflect on their time in high school. Most of them start with why the graduate came to the Case A school. Staff says that there are as many reasons for students being in the school as there are students. Instead of trying to characterize each student, I provide sample paraphrasing of senior speech segments devoted to describing why students chose an alternative.

- I was a trouble maker and not accepted at my home school. I came here to graduate.
- I had to drop down a grade level and start over. I never listened when people tried to help me.
- Having a child and a husband forced me to get it together.
- I had to start over. I didn't do any work, and I wouldn't go to school. Cheerleading was my life and then I wasn't allowed to cheer anymore.
- I was focused on friends and weekends. When I got pregnant, I had lots of time to think. I didn't want a GED, so I decided to come here.

- Surgeries and chemotherapy put me behind in school. I wanted to quit and give up. (I'd always been around losers doing nothing.) I have lived in multiple foster homes. Now I am graduating and going to college.
- I was depressed, had poor academics and I wasn't getting along with other students.

Most senior speeches and every student interview addressed the quality of relationships between students, and staff and students. Seniors talked about how each learned to get along with other students and adults in order to be successful (AO21). Students in focus groups talked about building relationships with other students and adults so that the school is a community. Conflict is addressed and managed through conflict resolution practices. Interaction and productive collaboration is expected. Acceptance of one another is the norm. Stereotypes are challenged. And students, who might never speak to one another in home schools, share thoughts and feelings in family groups. Norms of confidentiality work and students generally trust staff and one another (AIS1-5).

Classroom culture appears as varied as any high school. I observed focused, attentive students voicing concern about the quality of their work alongside students occasionally applying make-up in class. Students range in academic achievement from those pursuing NYS Regents²⁰ courses with the support of his or her home school to those who put in extra hours to complete the minimum. All graduates from

²⁰ NYS Regents courses, in 2005, were the courses for academically adept students. Combinations of these courses led to a Regents Diploma, considered a necessary level of study for entrance to college. By 2005, NYS has legislated that all students would graduate with Regents diplomas, but a local diploma option remained as a safety net for students who had failed to pass required regents exams, had identified special education needs or had other health needs. Many of the students in the Case A school had this option available to them.

the school, averaging 80% of the senior population over the past five years (AD13), pass state competency exams in Math, Science, Global Studies, American History, and English Language Arts and earn the credits required by NYS to graduate.

Across grade levels, students point to a range of structures and practices that bring them to this school, that keep them coming to school, and that create the context within which each expects to graduate with a high school diploma. Not every student stays in this school and graduates. But in my conversations with students, not one was considering leaving. Small classes (which, importantly, teach the same material as parallel courses at home schools), respectful and caring relationships, a norm of social acceptance, and the resolve to doggedly address all conflict come up repeatedly in student interviews as school features that promote individual student success. In the following section, I compare responses across constituent groups to my question, “What is the most important work that goes on in this school? What makes it important?” I will elaborate on student responses to that question below.

The Most Important Work

Students

Students identified all of the school structures and features described above when I asked what the most important work of the school was for them. I combine their responses into three overlapping categories: belonging, relationships, and future focus. I use these themes to accomplish two interpretive goals. My first goal is to represent the big ideas that students used to describe the important work of the school. Student references to specific structures and practices typically illustrated these big

ideas. Also, I attempt to assign structures and practices, as represented by students, to these themes in order to clearly represent the meaning assigned to them by students. Though it is difficult for me to separate relationship quality from a sense of belonging, students presented these as distinct processes or products. I will detail the categories next.

When students spoke of their sense of belonging to this school community, they emphasized non-academic features of the school. As one student put it, “involvement matters more than passing (AIS1).” Students described an expectation from staff and other students that each student would find a way to participate in the planning, management, and cleanup of school events such as the school Thanksgiving feast, the prom, short or long trips, fundraising barbeques and car washes, basketball games with other schools, etc. Doing the mundane tasks that make the events possible was associated with family membership, being responsible to others and as opportunities to learn and practice social skills (AIS1, 4). Responsibility to, and respect for, one another, or the school as a whole, were presented as the individual qualities necessary to building and maintaining community. Interestingly, no student spoke of belonging without speaking of what it required of him or herself (AIS 1-5). Seminar classes were identified as a way in to belonging: a small group cohort that a student is structurally part of upon joining the program where many trips/events are planned and organized (AIS4). Seminars, understood this way, amount to time built into the schedule to cultivate school connection and identity.

Two other school norms/practices stood out in student responses as pre-conditions for belonging. Students characterized the school as a place where a student

can “be yourself,” where pressures to conform are challenged (AIS 1, 3, 4). This quality of the school community requires that students and adults alike accept differences between one another. One student defined the school’s valuing of diversity as “inviting differences” in (AIS3). Another described needing to “get past stereotypes (AIS1).” Whenever students pointed to this quality of belonging, each mentioned being challenged by the expectation that they will all work productively with one another. Many pointed out that the school requires that they find ways to work with people with whom they had had conflict in home school settings. The expectation that conflict will be addressed and, in time, resolved, is the second pre-condition students point to (AIS 1-4). Students and adults address conflict in many settings: in class, in town meetings, in family groups, and in individuals. Students describe a norm of addressing all “issues” and “getting down to dealing with it (AIS2).” I distinguish between conflict management and problem solving, which I will address below. Conflict management in this school context involves both the group problem solving process sometimes engaged in town meetings or classrooms. The one-on-one work between students and teachers in individuals identifies or frames conflict and generates solutions for students. Students report that someone, an adult or another student, will always intervene so it is impossible to ignore conflict when present. Student-to-student conflict, that is not managed by the students’ or by another’s intervention, triggers a 3-way conflict resolution process where at least one teacher facilitates a resolution with two students in conflict (another role for LCs). These shared expectations for managing conflict, accepting differences, and

responsible and respectful participation were repeatedly the illustrations or explanations that students gave to explain their sense of belonging.

The work that students and adults do to build relationships is understood by students to be another version of the important work of the school. Whereas students describe their sense of belonging with an awareness of what they do to create it, when they talk about relationship building, they focus more on the work of the adults in the school. Students manage relationships with one another regularly as members of a seminar cohort, family group, event committee, or class of students. As one student put it, “We have to be able to work together. Teachers make you deal with each other (AIS3).” Another student listed “learning how to keep confidentiality” with family groups as important work (AIS4). But for the most part, students identify teachers’ role modeling and support as the locus of relationship work in the school. Family groups insure that “one teacher really knows you” through individuals and family group activities (AIS1). The school’s small size makes it possible for teachers to take the time to understand and know students (AIS2). And most students reported that “teachers will do anything” to support student success, academic and personal (AIS1). Each student focus group identified teachers’ individual and personalized support in classes as a condition for their academic success. Though I had a sense of students apprenticing as relationship novices, students never explicitly connected the group membership skill they addressed above with the relationships they develop with adults in the school. With family group leaders and other LCs, they learn problem solving strategies. One student described how teachers understand students and so can engage them in a process for looking for better ways to address or solve problems (AIS2).

With teachers, students develop and improve their people skills or address and practice communication skills (AIS2, 4). Students report that benefits of this work include a school environment with less gossip than home schools and with students learning to interact more positively (AIS3, 4). Primarily however, students framed this relationship building work as the devoted, hard work of teachers on the behalf of students. Most students felt that at least one teacher really knows them, and that collectively, the teachers know “where everyone is at and needs in order to succeed (AIS2).” It is in the context of these relationships that some students learn to get past the academic and personal obstacles that made them a candidate for the school (AIS3). For other students, these relationships are the source of the caring and respect that keep them coming to school (AIS 1-5).

The third category of “most important work” responses describe what students believe that they will bring, from their academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal learning, to life after high school. One student identifies college trips, job shadowing, community involvement, and family group work as preparation “to do something with your life (AIS 3).” Smaller classes and individual attention from teachers in classes or workshops support academic success and lead to graduation with a Regents Diploma (AIS 5), a strong step toward further education or training. Many students identify their own reorientation to the future as the work result that matters most. Students reported that they learn to be independent because they “have to do things by ourselves” and “get organized (AIS 2).” In other words, it is the student who must make it to school, complete work, follow through on commitments, etc. in the context of the school’s high expectations and support. Others identify “looking for

better ways (AIS 3)” or “looking forward to the future and how to make things better for others (AIS 4)” or “changing negative attitudes; there is more to life (AIS 4)” as their most important work. Students’ experience with belonging, relationship building, and academic success at the school generates new possibilities for adult roles as students look to the future.

Teachers

As anticipated by student responses, teachers identify the most important work of the school as relationship building. Every teacher begins with this response then elaborates on the practices and structures supporting this work a little differently. The bottom line, across the board, is that relationship building is a precondition for other successful work in the school. As one administrator put it, “The teachers see themselves as more than just teachers. It is a role they are willing to take on that contributes to the success of the program. They see themselves as mentors, mentor/counselor, . . . parent, you know, advocate, all of those things (AIA5).”

Family Group, individuals, Seminars, class trips, and 3-way conflict resolution were all identified as structures that support the relationships that staff build and maintain with students (AIT 1-4). Two teachers identified communicating caring to students as a supporting practice (AIT 2 and 4). They describe both a focus on the quality of day-to-day interactions and communication through recognizing and involving all students, all the time. Both mention making time to listen to students as a practice that communicates caring. And, teachers describe follow through on limits for students as a caring practice: “calling them on things (AIT 2 and 4),” and

“addressing self-defeating behaviors and attitudes (AIT 2)” or “address the ‘real reason’ a student is not doing well (AIT 3).” The connections between teachers and students, resulting from the described structures and practices, allow teachers to tailor responses to students. Teachers use their understandings of students’ lives, not only to address the academic, social, or emotional challenges that students face, but to personalize class work, to work through conflict, to positively address distracting classroom behavior, and to create and maintain a safe place for students (AIT 1-4).

Parents

Parents responded to the most important work question with one central theme: the work that teachers do so that students feel valued (AIP 3, 4, & 6). Parents identify the small size of the school, small classes and Family Group as the structures supporting this work. They identify the relationship work of teachers as the practices that allow students to be seen and heard in classes, feel safe to risk opinions or wrong answers, and feel that reported sense of belonging and support (AIP 1-6). Individual parent responses also identify holding students accountable, communicating with parents, and providing individualized support in classes as the most important work of the school.

Administrators (NYS, BOCES and Home School Districts)

Administrators all point to student success, defined as high school completion, as a most important outcome. Home school administrators, in particular, point out that these students were not going to succeed in their home schools (AIA3, 4, 6). One

explains that “one size fits all does not apply” but in a school of 800 students, individualizing does not happen: “We do not want to know how you are feeling. Just get your work done (AIA3).” The alternative school has a “really high success rate” of either graduating students or sending them back to home school ready to work (AIA3). Home school administrators, across the board, believe that smaller classes, a student to teacher ratio that allows students and teachers to build relationships that support students, a less formal school culture, and an emphasis on problem solving are the structures and practices that lead to student academic success (AIA 3, 4, 6, 7). No administrator limited their discussion to academic success.

Like the parents, the administrators working most closely with the school identify students’ resulting sense of self-worth, of feeling valued or valuable, as the most important work of the school (AIA1, 2, 5). “. . . not only just graduate them, but have students feel very differently, I think, about themselves when they walk out the door compared to when they walked in (AIA5).” These administrators, as did most of the home school administrators, believe that the school’s unique structures and practices (e.g., family groups, the smaller setting, active problem solving and conflict resolution) create a personalized climate where students connect with other students and staff and learning. “I think it is about authentic, sincere, caring relationships between adults and students, between adults and other adults, between students and other students. I think there is a culture in that program that creates a place that is caring and safe, but also has high expectations for students. I think it is a program that teaches through example, and through hands-on experiences, how to be a problem-solving learner (AIA2).” In the administrator discussions of student academic success,

Family Groups, Seminars, problem solving and 3-ways were repeatedly credited with addressing the student needs that prevent learning. High school completion was quickly identified by all as the most important outcome by home school administrators, but relationship building practices were almost as quickly identified as the means to that end.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that student and teacher interviews framed the most important work of the school more personally and described structures and practices in greater detail and nuance. Adults further removed from the day to day work of the school more generally framed important outcomes, structures and practices. These discussions attributed successes to a collection of structures and practices but did not detail the means by which these structures and practices led to specific results. Nonetheless, parents and administrators clearly attribute students' success to the unique structures and practices of the school.

My discussion section will explore potential loci of legitimacy for the studied alternative schools. But, it is interesting to note that members of each interviewed group mention that curriculum in the alternative school mirrors that of homeschools and/or all schools in NYS. This detail never described or supported the most important work of the school, but it did appear to serve as an important legitimating fact for all stakeholder groups. On the other hand, the most important work distinguished the school from homeschools for all stakeholder groups. The structures and practices that emphasize relationship building, belonging, problem solving, and

conflict resolution generated the outcomes identified as the most important work for most respondents. Teachers alone identified the work supporting caring relationships in the school as the important work itself. For others, this work supported the important outcomes: for students, a sense of belonging, building reliable relationships, and framing positive future outcomes; for parents, students' experience of feeling valued; and for administrators, students' success and sense of self-worth and efficacy.

APPENDIX B

CASE B REPORT

I collected data for Case B throughout the fall of 2005 and winter and spring of 2006. The Case B school serves as a second hypothesized variation within the category of public alternative secondary schools. This school serves a heterogeneous population of students and focuses much of its work on organizational, curricular, and instructional innovation. Students and staff choose to attend and work in this setting. Because many more students apply than can attend, students are selected by a lottery described in more detail below. This chapter will detail the structures and practices that support the “most important work” of the school, as identified by stakeholders including students, teachers, parents, and administrators. I begin with a description of the school and its context within the community.

The Case B school is one of four public secondary schools in one upstate NY school district. The school serves about 250 students who are annually selected by lottery from a pool of applicants. All other district students attend one of the two other middle schools or the single traditional high school in the district. A few students, from a waiting list of applicants who did not win the lottery, may begin attending when individual students leave the school throughout the year. Students are not recommended to the school or selected against any criteria. The school does attempt to represent community demographics by selecting (by lottery) representative numbers of applicants from each of the district’s elementary schools. These practices support the school’s priorities as a democratic community school that values diversity and strives

to serve a student population that reflects the larger school district community. The rest of this chapter will, in part, detail school efforts to work according to priorities that distinguish the school from the other available district schools.

The District

The district serves a small metropolitan area (SMA) surrounded by increasingly rural towns. It is one of about 5 districts serving the county where the SMA serves as the county seat. The school district had a 2005-06 Free and Reduced Price Lunch rate of about 32% and is identified as an Average Need/Resource Category School District by New York State.²¹

The 2010 Census data reports that the county has about 100,000 people in almost 500 square miles. County population has increased about 5% in the past decade. 82% of the population identifies themselves as white, 4% as Black, 5% as Hispanic or Latino, 10% as Asian, and 3% report a background of two or more races. Four percent of the population is under 5 years old; 16% of the population is under 18 years old; and 11% of the population is over 65 years old. Thirteen percent of the population was born outside of the U.S.; compare this to about 22% in NYS. Sixteen percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home; compare to 29% statewide.

Within the county, the northern-most in Appalachia, the median household income is about \$49,000; the state median is \$55,600. Per capita income in the past 12 months is estimated to be \$26,000; the estimate for statewide per capita income is

²¹See the Case A Report discussion of Needs/Resource Categories in the preceding chapter, for more information.

\$30,948. Poverty rates are about 19%, 5% above the state rate of 14.1% of people living below the poverty level. Unemployment rates have increased since 2000, from around 3% in 2000 to about 6% in 2010 (New York State Department of Labor. <http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/laus.asp>, accessed 12-3-2012). In the population of adults aged 25 or above, 89.1% have graduated from high school. The state rate is 84.4%. Fifty percent of the same population have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. That rate is 32.1% across the state. There are 17 Colleges and Universities within 50 miles of the county seat.

When compared to the county containing the Case A school, this county reports a higher poverty rate, lower unemployment rate and a higher per capita income, suggesting more income disparity. This population is generally older and more diverse in terms of race and nationality. Though high school graduation rates are similar between the two populations, twice as many adults hold bachelor's degrees in the Case B county. Both counties share many of the characteristics of upstate NY counties described in the previous chapter. The Case B county, however, includes two large college campuses, one explanation for lower unemployment rates and higher rates of college degrees.

The History

The Case B school opened its doors as a district junior high school option in the Fall of 1974. The school had been evolving for about 5 years before this opening. Community members and local university-based activists started an independent free school as an alternative to district run public schools. Tensions between purposes, and

their supporters, surfaced right away. Some factions prioritized free school goals for student self-determination, freedom, and self-governance. Others prioritized related goals, schooling for social justice, understanding these goals to include designing a school that meets the needs of students of color and students from low income families. The school had a tumultuous beginning as strong personalities vied for implementing different structures and practices, while the local branch of the John Birch Society worked to dismantle the whole project (BAI1).

The local school district took over management of the school during the first few years. After a change in superintendents, the district closed and opened the school twice in the early 1970s. During this time, a local Blue Ribbon Committee researched alternative education for a year and made 12 recommendations for the school to the district including small student advisory groups, an advisory board with democratic representation, and a three year trial period for a school focused on 7th-9th grades. Alternative schools were increasingly becoming established across the county both as an effort of progressive social movements to effect social and political change and as schools providing support for students who struggled in traditional public schools.²² The school and the community were aware of its place in the larger social context of social change efforts.

When the Case B school opened as a junior high program in 1974, it had hired an activist principal, with a history of networking alternative schools, who understood both the progressive and support purposes for the school and who embraced the

²² See the discussion of alternative schools in the 1970s in The History and Purposes of Alternative Schools chapter. Federal education dollars supported the development of public alternative schools, and an identifiable alternative schools movement provided information, networking and resources to the same end.

challenge of legitimating the new junior high (BAI1). Board members, the new principal, and the district's attorney worked with the State Education Department in 1974-75 to establish the junior high as a NY state-recognized alternative school. A report on the school is included in the listings of the New Schools Exchange Newsletter in 1975-76, a publication of the New Schools Exchange networking the increasing numbers of free schools and alternative schools.²³ The principal collaborated with a local African American Community organization to recruit students from area elementary schools and to develop physical education and afterschool positions, shared with the organization, at the school. This collaboration also founded the school district's Affirmative Action Committee. The school became an early and active member of the New York State Alternative Education Association (NYSAEA) in the mid-1970s and continued that role at least through 2005-06, when this case study data was gathered (BAI1). The principal had been a founding member and Board officer. These efforts to garner support and shape the school's identity paid off in 1977, when the school outgrew its first home and the Board of Education voted, almost unanimously, to extend and expand the program in a new location.

The school expanded again in 1979, adding 6th and 10th-12th grades upon the advice of another district-wide Alternative Education Committee. Continued growth

²³ "The New Schools Exchange served as an organizing locus for [the free school] movement by collecting information and publishing school directories and the New Schools Exchange Newsletter, a widely read publication within the alternative school network. The newsletter printed a wide variety of materials including school directories and other educational resources, reports from schools, job openings and letters from subscribers. Many issues also contained more formal articles on educational issues written by Exchange staff members, including Allan Graubard, Kat Marin, Peter Marin, Michael Rossman and Tim Affleck (New Schools Exchange Records (MS 889). (Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, p. 4)." Two other schools from the same district had been listed in the Newsletter in preceding years, a district managed elementary free school and an independent secondary free/alternative school.

led to a second move, to the school's current location, in 1983. Since then, the school has maintained its student population at its capacity of more than 250 students. In most years, almost as many students populate a waiting list for admittance (BD; BD31). Current written goals for the school are revised versions of those originally developed in 1974-75.

1. To be a genuine **alternative** where:
 - a. students, staff, and parents/caregivers are directly involved in governance;
 - b. students have opportunities for personal interaction with many adults, both in school and in the community;
 - c. students may study subjects of personal interest;
 - d. students are involved in anti-racist/anti-sexist education; and
 - e. courses are available which relate to contemporary issues in society.
2. To be a cooperative, supportive **community** striving to share power and resources within the school and the larger community.
3. To be a **school**, an environment for active teaching and learning, working and playing together.
4. To remain steadfastly responsive to the people who make up our school community and, thus, to adapt to the changing needs of our students, parents/caregivers, and staff.
5. To encourage respectful relationships among people of different age, economic, racial, cultural and ethnic groups, providing opportunities to learn from each other, both academically and socially.
6. To provide curriculum and instruction which is non-competitive, heterogeneously grouped, and has constructive evaluation based on individual learning.
7. To provide a staff that is at least as diverse as the student body, providing role models and support for all students.
8. To encourage personally relevant expression and communication through the universal language of the arts.
9. To provide a curriculum that helps each student improve skills, from grade six through twelve, enabling each graduate to go on with education, to enter the job market, and to meet problems of daily life.

10. To provide appropriate support to help each student grow in skills, whatever the ability or subject.
11. To help students learn about their emotional, as well as intellectual and physical, selves.
12. To teach non-violent conflict resolution.
13. To act as a resource and forum for sharing our educational experiences within our District and beyond (BD1; BD3)

The school initially offered a series of mini-courses in seven cycles of five weeks at a time. By the second year, a schedule of five seven week cycles was adopted. When high school students joined the school, the schedule changed to four nine week cycles to allow for a high school semester schedule. From the beginning, students contributed to school decision making: through weekly All School Meetings (ASMs) where issues were presented, discussed, and voted on; through student committees like a review board that acted as a student court; and through student surveys used to determine course topics. Staff would present ideas for each of these forums as well, but the effort was in engaging and developing student ideas and participation. Courses were not based on textbooks or written curricula, but were instead developed in topic areas of student and teacher interest, often with teachers learning alongside students. English courses included thematic reading, social studies courses explored topics of interest, math focused on applied and consumer math. School members did what needed to be done to keep the school running. One teacher in the early years drove the bus, worked as the school custodian, taught photography and one science course. The understanding was that the junior high students needed to

be able to move into high school courses, at which point NYS required the accumulation of specific credits for graduation.

The school included Family (advisory) Groups from the beginning too. These were experimental structures at the time and functioned very differently than those in the Case A school. In the beginning, family groups planned and implemented community service projects between course cycles and served as another medium for generating and collecting student input and participation. Many other current practices and structures were present from the beginning: narrative evaluations of student work instead of letter grades; written student self-evaluations; annual school-wide trips; a culture that recognized student work without punishing for work not done; etc. (BAI1). I will detail these in the next section.

In 1986, the school applied for and was granted membership in the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), a network of schools dedicated to influencing the environment of U.S. schools so that more schools work toward creating more personalized, equitable, and academically challenging schools. Member schools embrace the CES Common Principles and commit to ongoing improvement efforts that generate structures and practices reflecting the principles: learning to use one's mind well; less is more, depth over coverage; goals apply to all students; personalization; student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach; demonstration of mastery; a tone of decency and trust; commitment to the entire school; resources dedicated to teaching and learning; democracy and equity (CES, 2013). At about the same time, the NYS Commissioner of Education, Thomas Sobol, was developing his New Compact for Learning. This compact defined NYS PK-12 school policy goals and practices for the

1990s thereby serving as the policy link between NYS's excellence movement policies and the standards-based reform policies of the turn of the 21st century. The compact, approved by the Board of Regents in 1991, promised learning standards and focused on creating a climate of support and accountability for schools and teachers that encouraged risk-taking toward more effective practices (NYSED, 2008).

Commissioner Sobol was looking for New Compact for Learning Partnership Schools and the Case B school became one of the first. All fourteen Learning Partnership Schools were members of CES. This status continued and deepened the school's communication with NYSED. The school initially focused on using this status to legitimate the practices of this alternative school with SED recognition and support that included exemption from some state requirements to allow quality alternative practices, like performance-based assessment (BAII).

As the school community cultivated state and national relationships in support of school priorities, structures, and practices, the local struggle for legitimacy continued. The mid-1980's saw a general decline in support for alternative education as many of the networks supporting the free school/alternative school movement fell apart and federal attention turned to the Excellence Movement. Locally, the association of "alternative education" with "bad" students and schools generated a need to proactively define the school as an alternative apart from that stereotype. The district superintendent at the time took away off-campus permissions for middle school students and implemented an elaborate off-campus permissions form after students attended a protest at a local college campus and demanded that the school earn regional accreditation. Once again, a few supportive BOE members and a vocal

small group of parents pressuring the district administration earned the Case B school some time and space. The school spent months preparing for and earning accreditation, while crafting an in-house effort to establish and promote school community-developed structures and practices consistent with alternative priorities. CES membership was a part of this effort. At the behest of the school's Advisory Board,²⁴ the Committee to Reevaluate and Redefine Our Curriculum (C2RC) was formed to articulate priorities and recommend school practices and structures consistent with both those priorities and the CES Common Principles. This group of students, staff, and parents presented a Philosophy Statement of Beliefs and three main recommendations in the spring of 1987. The recommendations were to not give Regents exams as graduation requirements for high school students (the school already had waivers from NYSED for some required state exams), to develop performance-based assessments in lieu of these exams, and to continue using teacher developed curricula. The Philosophy Statement, as revised by the school community in 1995-96, is copied here.

We recognize that change in our world is inevitable and we believe that it can be directed to promote the common welfare. Therefore, as an educational institution:

- We believe we have a responsibility to promote a broader world view and a positive change by the way we design our curriculum and prepare our students for learning throughout their lives.
- We believe in the importance of each individual student.
- We believe in encouraging students to use freedom responsibly, and to make educational choices appropriate to their individual levels of development.

²⁴ The Advisory Board was a group of parents, students, staff, and community members who collaboratively managed much of school policy and decision making. This group became the school's Site-based Decision Making Council mandated by NYS Regents Policy in the early 1990s.

- We believe in providing for the needs of a diverse population of students, and students of all abilities.
- We believe in being a fair, caring, community-run school with respectful consciousness of all minorities.
- We believe each student can excel through self-discipline, community support, and respect for people of all ages as educators and fellow learners.
- We believe that learning can be of value to students in their present lives, not just for the future, and that students have a place, and can make contributions to, their society.
- We believe the affective and creative aspects of learning are as valuable as objective and conceptual learning.

By acting on these beliefs and ideals we can enable our children to deal positively with change and to contribute constructively both socially and politically to our society (BD1).

Existing structures and practices identified above reflect many of the priorities articulated in these belief statements. The beliefs also support prioritized structures and practices like small classes, responsive and relevant curricula, personalization of learning, an inclusive drama program, and an expectation of relationship building in the school. The recommendations and belief statements from the C2RC also set the foundation for the school's next big challenge to assert its alternative identity and to maintain legitimacy.

Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the school worked toward the curriculum and assessment goals articulated by the C2RC. Graduation by Exhibition (GBE) required assessments and criteria through which students could demonstrate the skills, knowledge and attitudes of school community-prioritized areas of essential learning (the Essentials): community participants and leaders; communicators; critical thinkers and problem solvers; designers, producers, and performers; researchers with a historical and multicultural

perspective; contributors to sustaining the natural environment; and healthy persons. The shift to GBE and alternative assessment practices, like performance-based assessment, meant a shift away from NY state high school graduation requirements, specifically earning Carnegie units and passing Regents exams. In the fall of 1992, when NYS approved the school as a New Compact Partner school, NYSED waived NYS graduation requirements and approved the school's GBE plan instead. Teachers turned to maintaining and improving interdisciplinary courses, teacher developed curricula, and alternative assessments. Experiments with block scheduling, portfolios of work and reflection as evidence of learning, performance-based assessment, and combined course content explored, with ongoing feedback from students, the practices best suited to the school's alternative curricula.

A new Commissioner of Education, Richard Mills, began leading Regents reform efforts after his appointment in August of 1995. NYS Learning Standards were published for most content areas and a plan to phase out the Local Diploma option was approved. The new requirements for high school graduation meant all students would earn a Regents Diploma (or an Advanced Regents Diploma) with few exceptions for students with disabilities. NYS introduced high stakes testing, requiring all students to pass Regents Exams in English Language Arts (ELA), a Math area, Global History and Geography, US History, and a Science area in order to qualify for a diploma and graduate. The new graduation requirements were in place for 9th graders in the 2001- 02 school year. Initially, the New Compact for Learning schools

were assured that the new requirements would not change their arrangements with NSYED. The Case B school would keep the waivers that allowed GBE to continue, but not for long.

In May of 2001, the New Compact for Learning schools received letters announcing that the waivers would begin a phasing out process and the Regents exams would gradually become graduation requirements in these schools as well. The only recourse for schools committed to their alternative assessment practices was to apply for approval of their assessments to a state Alternative Review Board. Individual schools or districts could not apply, so the NY Performance Standards Consortium (the Consortium), an organization of 28 NYS public secondary schools committed to alternative assessment, determined 7 areas of GBE across all schools for which the Consortium would share resources and develop shared performance-based assessments tasks and criteria (NY Performance Standard Consortium. performanceassessment.org, accessed 1/28/13). These tasks and criteria were submitted for approval to the Alternative Review Board in early summer 2001. The Review Board denied approval of the Consortium's assessment tasks citing the tasks inability to meet technical standards of assessment validity and reliability met by large scale standardized tests like Advanced Placement test and the Scholastic Aptitude Test. This began years of professional, legislative and legal activism by the Consortium and years of extended waivers for the Consortium schools as expert panels convened, legislation was introduced, and legal appeals were

filed.²⁵ The decision to require Regents exams for Consortium schools was never reversed, just postponed, so the Case B school felt a responsibility to prepare by revising curricula to include NYS test preparation and learning targets prioritized in NYS curriculum guides (BAI1).

By the 2004-05 school year, the teachers and students in the school were working to maintain or reinsert the instructional and curricular priorities described above, after giving up time and space in classes to these testing priorities. Projects time, previously maintained for service work and interest driven, hands-on teaching and learning, was repurposed, in part, for student portfolio completion time. Teachers worked to keep courses as relevant and responsive as possible, though a few started looking more like courses in other schools in the region (BAI1). Documentation of GBE structures were revised to incorporate encroaching state testing practices, maintaining the primacy of GBE (BD1; BD3). When I returned to conduct interviews and observations in the spring of 2005, I interpreted ongoing discussions and revisions of curriculum and instruction as an effort to balance the school's explicit, historical priorities against the potential threat, from low test scores, to the school's legitimacy as an alternative public school that had been recognized by NYS as exceeding standards in the past.

²⁵ A more detailed history of these efforts is available at the Consortium's website, performanceassessment.org. The activism page offers electronic access to much of the documentation used in court and legislative challenges to Regents policy. Expert testimony and panel decisions detail the Consortium's arguments. A search of the NYSED website, nysed.gov, for "performance standards consortium" leads to documented policy decisions that describe a postponed schedule for phasing in Regents exams as graduation requirements for Consortium schools beginning with 9th graders in 2006, with all requirements in place for 9th graders in 2009 (NYSED. nysed.gov, accessed 1-28-13). The impact of these resultant decisions is beyond the scope of this study because the study predates most of the new graduation requirements for Consortium schools.

The Case B school and its founding principal consciously, proactively managed the school's legitimacy within the immediate community, the state, and professional networks throughout its history. As I began collecting data in the fall of 2005, the school continued to challenge testing requirements from the state as a member of the consortium; a new principal has replaced the founding principal who retired after 30 years at the helm; and students, staff, parents, and community members maintain practices and structures in support of school priorities. I will work to describe these next.

The School

Only students from within the district attend the Case B school. The school sits 5-10 blocks away from many of the most populated sections of the city, on the edge of a residential neighborhood located on the outskirts of the city. Students arrive in the morning on foot, by bus connection from the larger high school across the city, by city bus, by car, or by drop-off as evidenced by the dozens of cars that inch along the road and driveway before and after school each day. The residential area – a mix of older Victorian, 1960s style suburban ranch, and 1970s style contemporary homes – extend west, from the front of the school. The school's community-built outdoor amphitheater, a small apartment complex and an Army Reserves facility border the school to its north. To its east, the school's semi-forested playground area slopes down to a busy street leading to the Greyhound bus station, a union hall, a lumber yard, and more streets lined with businesses, restaurants and bars leading to the downtown area. This same street curves around to border the small student parking lot

and basketball court on the school's south. The school is a repurposed elementary school, so the grounds are planned and sized for smaller students. In the spring, the grounds are filled with landscaped perennials and dotted with dedicated plantings and sculptures in memorial of past teachers, students, and community members.

A semi-circular drive extends from the main entrance of the building to the far end of the grounds, providing some additional staff and visitor parking past the building itself. The main entrance allows entry to the middle of the upper floor of the school. The main office door is to the immediate left and the door to the resource room for middle school students is on the right. Immediately ahead, across the hall, is a suite of three counseling and social work offices. The hallway to the right leads to two science classrooms, a large multi-purpose room known as the Fine Arts Theater (used for music and drama classes and rehearsals), the school kitchen, and the small gym (without locker rooms) which doubles as the cafeteria at lunch time. To the left, three classrooms, the computer lab, the high school resource room, two bathrooms (with elementary sized fixtures), a home-made darkroom, the nurse's office, and an academic support office complete the top floor design. Doors exit to the outside at the east end of the building and from the Fine Arts Theater and the Gym on the west end. Student-created murals cover the top half of hallway walls and student-produced portraits of inspirational figures in education (e.g., John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Paolo Friere) circle the high walls of the gym. Because classrooms are shared among teachers, few are personalized, but most have at least one quote painted on a wall (e.g., Margaret Mead's "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has".) and a few

inspirational posters. Students share tables, arranged as needed around a blackboard, in most classrooms. Typical arrangements of tables allow all students to see one another for class discussions or to collaborate in small groups around clustered tables.

Students and adults use stairwells at either end of the upstairs hallway to access the lower floor. Three more full-sized classrooms, two more bathrooms, the technology classroom, the art room, the video studio, three small language classrooms, a small community studies classroom, a community participation office, and small (elementary school sized) school library fit in amongst the electrical and boiler rooms. Doors exit to the outside on either end of the hallway. The ceilings appear lower on this floor and the walls are more frequently interrupted, so there are fewer murals and more white wall exposed. Student graffiti adorns the walls in designated spaces at one end of the hall, outside of the language classrooms. Student lockers and 6" x 9" grey-green tile line the lower half of walls through the entire school. Almost every available surface sports an announcement of meetings, group activities, community events, etc., many with socially and politically progressive purposes.

Adults working in the school identify increasing available space and updating facilities, especially science labs, as needed improvements (BIT1-13; BIA1-4; BIS1-3). Available space is maximized for student use. Small offices and closets have been turned into space for studios, small classes, and a darkroom. Teachers have no offices or shared space for between classes. Therefore, a teacher with a planning period is typically at a desk in a classroom where another teacher is leading class for that period. At Family Group and Committee times, when there are more groups than rooms, dividers built in to the larger classrooms are used to create a few more rooms.

This consequence for teachers and the resulting maximized use of space for teaching and learning reflects the efforts of students and staff to create as many opportunities as possible for a broad range of exploration and learning in school.

School Structures and Practices

The school day changes in the course of the year, but a standard schedule is presented in the table below. During the fourth cycle, or quarter, of the school year, the Tuesday afternoon Projects periods are moved to Thursdays in order to provide full days for Spring trips planning and preparation before the school-wide departures to various trip destinations at the end of May. I will describe these trips in more detail below. Around 90 different courses are offered to the 6-12 grade students every cycle, or quarter, most run for two cycles, or a semester, or an entire year. The number of course offerings prevents listing them in the table below. Projects change more frequently, typically with every cycle, and all fourth cycle projects are trips preparation. Course offerings that meet GBE requirements include Shakespeare, Music in Our Lives, World Religions, Geometry, Algebra-Physics-Trig, People's Voice, Constitutional Law, People and Language (PAL), Facing History, Molecular Bio, Chemistry, Media and Criticism, Women-Writing-Art, Banned Books, Ratio and Proportions, Studio in Art, Portfolio Art, Dollar and Sense and four levels each of French and Spanish. Many projects also meet GBE requirements and are categorized in four major areas that match GBE outcomes: academic; designers, performers, producers; sports/wellness; and craft/leisure/life. As described above, student and faculty interests generate these areas of inquiry and practice, therefore the offerings

change, at least a little, every cycle. Students with expertise or developed interests often design and lead projects as well. Some examples of projects include Key Boarding and Word Processing, academic help sessions, Costume Shop, ACS TV, Ultimate (Frisbee) for Beginners, HS Drama, MS Play Productions, Set Design and Construction, Independent Media, Portfolio Completion, Woodshop/Clock making, Karate, Chess and Bridge, Filmmaking, and Silk Screen Design.

Period	Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	8:10 - 8:55				8:10 – 9:45 Project	
2	9:00 - 9:45					
3	9:45 – 9:55	Morning Meeting			9:50 – 11:30 Project	Morning Meeting
	10:00 - 10:40					
4	10:45 - 11:30					
5	11:30 – 12:10	Lunch				
6	12:10 – 12:50	Family Group	12:10 – 1:20 Project	Committee	Committee	Family Group
7	12:55 – 1:40		1:25 – 2:30 Project			
8	1:45 – 2:30					
Other						

Figure B.6- Case B's Daily Schedule from the 2005-06 school year

I describe the evolution and challenges to the school's teacher and student developed curricula above. Accommodations to the priorities of these curricula and GBE turn up in the schedule of classes, for example, as double periods for interdisciplinary courses or senior portfolio and senior team time fit into class periods

throughout the schedule. The schedule accommodates other structures and practices that reflect these priorities as well.

- Family Groups at the Case B school look different than at the Case A school. Ten to fifteen students meet twice a week with a staff member leader. Students may change family groups early in the year if space permits. Family group membership and leadership changes for each student every year, so in the Case B school, a qualitatively different set of relationships is cultivated in family groups. Students and leaders manage scheduling, communications with families, fundraising, guidance through middle school and GBE requirements, occasional family group-specific social events, etc. Sometimes, amongst all the points of business, family groups serve as another forum for voicing student ideas in response to school issues.
- All School Meetings (ASMs) more directly serve this purpose. This is a foundational piece of the school's shared decision making model and the primary structure supporting student participation in school governance, a GBE requirement. In these meetings, proposals from students, staff, or community members are debated, discussed and voted upon. ASMs may also divide into smaller Quarter School Meetings (QSMs) to create more opportunity for individual students to speak. When considering decisions, these meetings often exceed the allotted 10 minutes in the schedule. ASMs are charged with decision making responsibilities for the allocation of special funds; the creation of committees; deciding how decisions are made in ASM; and Fall Retreat. This structure also serves as the forum for shared discussions

in the student-staff approval process for decisions regarding proposals about graduation requirements; timetables; philosophy statements; attendance policy; amending the shared decision making model; and evaluations. In the case of the student-staff approval process, students must approve proposals by a 2/3 majority vote (BD3; BD9).²⁶

- The student-staff approval and the ASM decision-making processes are both part of the larger shared decision-making model. Other parts include the Site Based Council, staff meetings, students as a group, committees, and the principal. Site Based Council, because it includes representatives from other voting groups, does not vote but does enact a compromise committee when the student-staff decision making process is at an impasse. The council also makes recommendations to the principal regarding budget, hiring/dismissal of staff, buildings and grounds, and the five-year school development plan. Staff meeting is a staff only group with responsibilities beyond the student-staff decision making process for determining when classes and projects are offered; who will teach classes and projects; requirements and expectations for classes and projects; and deciding how decisions will be made in staff meetings. At the time of this study, staff decisions were made by consensus. Students as a group have responsibility for electing representatives to Site Based Council

²⁶If students and staff reach separate decisions in this process, a compromise committee creates a compromise proposal, using a process for gathering input from school community members, and the compromise proposal goes through the approval process once: proposal; shared discussion meeting (in ASM); separate meetings for the student vote and the staff vote (by consensus in staff meetings); if both students and staff endorse the proposal, it is enacted; if both students and staff do not endorse the proposal, it is dead; if students and staff reach separate decisions, a compromise proposal is developed by a committee from Site-based Council (or the compromise proposal is dead).

and the School Board, beyond the student-staff decision making process.

Committees address varied and changing features of the school's governance and maintenance. Some examples include Mediation, Yearbook, Curriculum, Library, Alternative Community Court, Anti-bias, and the Gay-Straight Alliance Committees. Committees make decisions within their own purviews and bring proposals to other decision making bodies (BD3; BD17; BD19).

And finally, the principal has lone responsibility only for issues relating to health and safety and the evaluation of staff (BD3), all other decisions being shared with staff and/or students. All groups in the shared decision-making model have responsibility for gathering input and communicating their decisions to the school community.

- The extended time allotted to projects supports the school's Community Studies program as well. The Community Studies Coordinator supports student participation in community service and community based career exploration experiences. Both of these GBE requirements, 60 or more hours of community service with documentation and reflections and at least two career explorations with documentation and reflections, require time for students to travel to and participate at community sites. Students may select Community Studies as one of two required areas for in-depth study, and demonstrate work done beyond the core proficiencies of the GBE requirements as well (BD3).
- Students and faculty take a number of overnight trips together in the course of the school year, some local and some to other countries. Some are to conferences where small groups of students and faculty are presenting or

participating. At least two are regularly scheduled events in the fall and spring, specifically for school members to spend time together outside of class. The Fall Retreat is an all school trip to a regional camp. High school students stay overnight and middle school students take a bus back and forth for the two days of the trip. Family group leaders stay overnight in cabins with their high school students. Staff and students plan activities and cook meals for the two days of community building early in the school year.

In the spring, all classes are temporarily cancelled for a week, and one day a week is used prior to Trips week to plan, train, and fundraise for each trip. Groups of 10 -20 students travel to other countries; or go biking and camping or canoeing and camping for a week or more; perform community service such as with Habitat for Humanity, and some stay local for a week of thematic day trips that explore the region instead. Most groups require a few parents to travel along. “Spring trips provide the opportunity for a challenging personal and group learning experience beyond the classroom. Students in a Trip Group learn to work together to organize their trip itineraries, budgets, and fundraising. They experience a different part of their community, New York State, the US, or the world. Teachers and students get to know each other outside the classroom context. Trips require group cooperation, collaboration, and personal sacrifice to accomplish the group’s goals (BD9).” Trip groups cover the cost of the trip through their fundraising efforts, and throughout the year, each Family Group does fund-raising to contribute to the all-school fund raising, so that all students may participate in any trip.

Both the Case A school and the Case B school value and build trips into the school year, reflecting the value both place on student travel experiences and the opportunity for out-of-the-classroom relationship building among trip participants. The structures and practices above provide examples of other priorities, presented earlier, as implemented at the time of this study. Course topics reflect priorities for teacher developed curricula focused on contemporary issues. The schedule accommodates learning projects devoted to arts, wellness, community participation, technology and academic subjects, thereby addressing the spectrum of GBE Essentials. Committees have students managing, with adult guidance, issues of mediation, diversity, anti-bias work, and other structures that keep the school running. All School Meetings and the Shared Decision-Making Model structure expectations for and practice with participatory democracy in the school. If it werenot for the reports of pressure to address curricula defined by state testing, the alternative priorities generating these practices and structures could camouflage competing state or federal priorities.

The Staff

The combined middle and high school faculty includes 14 full-time and 12 part-time teachers. Six more adults serve as support staff, in roles ranging from Administrator's Secretary to Instructional Support Para-professional. A full time principal, a full time high school counselor, and a half-time middle school counselor round out the regular staff in the school. A part-time district social worker and part-time district psychologist were not included in this study. The school maximizes the

number of adults available to students as part of the priority for personal interactions between students and adults. Though hiring part-time teachers may be driven more by part-time needs for special area teachers, the higher number of teachers “means more adults available to students and smaller classes by design (BD5; BA11).”

When teachers describe their roles in the school, most begin listing the many hats they wear: curriculum and instruction designer, Family Group leader, Committee leader, Trips leader, and participant in staff meetings and other representative groups or process committees involved in the Shared Decision Making Model (BIT1-13). A full time teacher designs and teaches five teaching periods and a project, leads a Family Group, and runs a Committee every week (BID 5). Many teachers report the freedom they have to design courses for depth of critical thought or inquiry, trading breadth of topic coverage for an emphasis on process and problem solving (BIT1; 2; 4; 7; 9; 10). Most also point out the responsibility that comes with the school’s democratic priorities: weekly staff meetings include staff decision making by consensus, typically a long and arduous process; many teachers take on formal school leadership roles like curriculum coordinator or treasurer for trips monies, while others feel more generally responsible to “help to run the school (BIT6)”; teachers support student decision making processes by encouraging student participation, by supporting critical thinking around current considerations, and by staying flexible around ASM process and duration (BIT1-4; 6-7; 11-12). Five of the thirteen interviewed teachers explicitly identify and embrace a social or political role as they work toward and teach to “social justice” or “social change” goals (BIT2-4; 7; 9). Like Learning Coordinators in the Case A school, teachers in the Case B school take on a surprising

number of roles beyond classroom teaching to support alternative outcomes for students.

Also like in the Case A school, the broad nature of support staff roles mimics the multi-faceted work of teachers in the school. No interviewed staff member described or wished for a more clear and narrow job description. Not limited to student support in classes, para-professionals lead projects and committees and co-lead Family Groups (BIS1). The school secretary describes her unique point of view in the school community. Because she works directly with students and their families maintaining communication between the school, families, and the community, she spends much of her time making connections between stakeholder groups work so that systems, like shared decision making and individual student accountability, keep running as planned. Her big picture perspective allows her to see when details are neglected. She therefore devotes a lot of time to problem-solving with staff and students around those system details (BIS2). The school custodian is a great final example of these extended roles. He receives a stipend to serve as youth outreach worker as well as daytime building custodian. His ability to go anywhere at any time has him typically available to intervene with or respond to “what comes up when it does (BIS3)” with students. He co-leads a Family Group and leads a committee as well. The creative extension of staff roles provides more available adults to support the school’s democracy-building, relationship-building, and community-building priorities.

Because teachers, staff, and, as I will describe below, students accept so much responsibility for building management and leadership, the principal and school

counselors are available to extend their work toward school priorities in different ways. Each administrator directs significant time and effort beyond the school to communicate its priorities, structures, and practices to external audiences, where the work of maintaining supportive networks and maintaining legitimacy gets done. Teachers and other staff regularly network and tend to legitimacy with external audiences too, but their other work allows the school administration deliberate time and focus to these ends. The historical narrative above provides some detail of what much of this work looks like: collaboration with professional networks; state level lobbying; community organizing for board of education lobbying; recruiting stakeholder participation in school decision making; etc. Add to that list organizing presentations of the school's work to potential students to recruit for diversity, to education conference audiences so that the school continues to be understood as a model of what is possible, to state education committees to promote GBE and supporting practices, and to colleges across the country where students apply for admission with narrative evaluations instead of grade point averages. Though incomplete, this list indicates a great deal of effort to ensure that school priorities, structures and practices are understood, make sense, and are accepted, or even better, supported and celebrated by audiences beyond the immediate school community.

Without the work of teachers, other staff, and administrators, school priorities go unmet or challenges to school priorities, structures, and practices gain traction. A significant effect of, or necessary pre-condition for, the successful orchestration of these efforts is the tone of relationships between adults and students in the school. I have described identifiable structures and practices above but there is a cultural or

normative underpinning that expects students to increasingly take on responsibility for their own growth and success and for participating in shaping school outcomes.

Because of adults' commitment to and availability for relationships built on acceptance and respect, students generally step up to increasing responsibility showing acceptance and respect to peers and adults alike. Though often appearing as controlled teenage chaos, school culture allows for assorted approaches that accept where a student stands now developmentally, socially, academically, etc. while consistently sharing expectations that all students will find their way to contribute to and shape school priorities (BIT1;3; 4; 6-9; 11-12; BIS3; BIA2-4).

The Students

The students, for their part, accept that they have signed up to grow into contributing members of their school community by choosing to attend the Case B school. When asked why they choose this school, more than 30% of interviewed students indicate that student voice in democratic governance either brought them there or keeps them there (BI#S1-5). Reasons also include needing an alternative to the larger, traditional middle and high schools in the district; the school functions as a community so I feel safer, at home, and have trusting relationships with students and teachers; the small size allows for familiarity and more attention in the classroom; instruction emphasizes why this learning matters and allows for choice in demonstrating learning; the school requires that students make choices about their own learning; we make an important difference in our community through our community service; and, teachers build collaborative and meaningful relationships with students.

Many also note the belief that the learning they embrace at the Case B school prepares them well for life beyond high school (BI#S1-5).

As one of its clear priorities, the school consciously wrestles with the complexities of diversity in democracy, through many of the structures and practices described above. More than 250 students, grades 6-12, guarantee some diversity. Students range in age from 11 to 21. The student population includes about 50 students of color and about 60 students qualifying for free and reduced price lunches (FRPL) (BD8). In aggregate, the student population reflects community racial diversity, though diversity varies between grade levels and between the middle and high school populations with the middle school maintaining more diversity than the high school in most years. The school's concentration of students qualifying for FRPL is about ten percentage points lower than the district's overall with the numbers remaining more consistent across grade levels but with higher concentrations in grades 9-12. The school recruits both students and staff for racial diversity. Nonetheless, about 75% of the student population is white and economically at least middle class. Individual students do not appear to mimic the range of styles or fashions found in mainstream U.S. culture or more visible subcultures. Instead, they appear more likely to mix and match or ignore these rules. Urban and suburban district neighborhoods are better represented in the student population than the surrounding rural communities. Students identify as central to school culture the work done by all to include all students in the school community, school decision making, and in relationship building efforts in such a way that all have a voice and sense of belonging.

Classroom culture reflects the high level of engagement reported by adults and students in the school. Classes are organized as seminars for discussion of provocative questions based on student researched information or as problem solving, project-based inquiry practice. Both students and teachers describe instruction as ongoing practice and process support with critical thinking skills, questioning social and intellectual stances, and authentic problem solving. Though critical and questioning thinking is taught and expected in coursework, a few teachers and students point out that there's rarely much debate around characteristically politically progressive conclusions in class. Students report valuing the opportunities they have to plan unique demonstrations of their learning with teachers, who report building choice into most student work. Though most every student identifies coursework and instruction as a valued feature of their school, a lack of full engagement from every student is identified as one of the major challenges faced by the school community.

The Case B school is living the challenges of democratic schools as described by researchers and theorists in the preceding History and Purposes chapter. Students value a voice in matters of their personal freedom and decision-making but it takes time and work to engage students in action around whole group, community, or society level issues. Also, personal and community interests conflict at times and students must occasionally act against self-interest in productive democratic communities, another lengthy learning process (Center for New Schools, 1978 [1976]; Cohn & Finch, 1978; Duke, 1978). Students are at different stages of learning to manage the trust and responsibility that come with school membership as evidenced by those few who are casually and frequently late to class, rarely completing

coursework, and skipping ASMs in the hallway outside the gym. Teachers and administrators accept that students will learn at different rates from different starting places and continue to hold expectations for responsible participation for all students in time. Even fully invested adults and students express frustration with the duration and tedious process sometimes associated with inclusive shared decision making processes. Democratic structures and practices prove messy. Allowing students the time to learn self-determination and self-regulation means that a subset of students consistently congregates in hallways instead of class, owes class work, and makes mistakes to learn from. In interviews, the same students identify the work toward community building and participatory democracy as the most important work of the school.

The Most Important Work

Students

As with Case A, I have organized student focus group responses to this question according to three overlapping themes: defining community; developing a sense of efficacy; and managing democratic citizenship. Though these themes clearly share roots in the democratic priorities of the school, they emerge from students' analyses of the purposes and relative value of the many structures and practices supporting those priorities. I have worked to have these themes accurately represent students' emphases and connections between structures, practices, and important work results. Each student response contributes to at least one of the themes illustrated below.

About one-third of the interviewed students identify community building as the most important work they engage with in school. Students characterize this work differently. I speculate that some of these differences correlate with student age but the focus group format of these interviews prevents a detailed analysis along those lines. Because a few of the groups were exclusive to middle school or high school students, I noted a difference between responses from those groups. Some middle school students describe community building as working together and getting along or as having friendly, open relationships with most people in school. These students describe a school norm that leads them to expect acknowledgement and acceptance from peers. High school representations add references to anti-bias work and “the commitment to having this school work for everyone who goes here.” Most students referred to, often matter-of-factly, an overt and ongoing conversation about the school as community: the community’s strengths and weaknesses; work to make the community more inclusive; the community’s beliefs and values; and the work on relationships between students and students and students and teachers. The described outcomes of this work range from student reports of a sense of belonging to wrestling with definitions of community and the tension between the individual, diversity, and community.

Students identify a range of structures and practices that contribute to community building in the school. Smaller classes allow attention to relationships between students and students and teachers and students. Individual students get more attention and students get to know one another (BI4S2). Family groups, trips, Fall Retreat, ASMs and some projects require social interaction and cooperation beyond

classroom teaching and learning. The mediation committee provides a process and structure for managing conflict between individuals, groups, or between people and school rules, norms, or other structures. School counselors, social workers, and family group leaders regularly address relationships with students through informal processes, and they formally plan ongoing responses to conflict in the school. The anti-bias committee exists to address systemic conflict and barriers to inclusion that extend into the school, challenging concepts of community. And finally, the GBE requirement for community service and career exploration extends the school community into the larger community surrounding the district.

Every student focus group describes community service as some of the most important work that they do. With community service, “we actually contribute to our community as a whole (BI3S3; B18S4).” Students grow the boundaries of community, extending a sense of responsibility for contribution to community beyond the school (B18S4). Service to the larger community serves as outreach as well, and as such, becomes service to the school. Student service work extends student sense of belonging and responsibility to the broader community.

One student describes community service as a way to share student efficacy with the larger community (B18S4). This second theme from student responses identifies the work of becoming effective learners and leaders as the most important work of the school. Student descriptions of learning in the school characterize the process as collaboration between teachers and students that leads to increasing student independence (BI4S2; BI3S3; BI8S4; BI5S6). Teaching is not something done to students, and students are not passive receivers of learning. Instead, teachers offer

choice and show flexibility for class topics, assignments, and demonstrations of student learning. Students report having “to learn in every class (BI8S4);” taking “classes that force careful thinking (BI5S6);” and then reflecting on their own learning when completing self-evaluations for assignment and entire courses. Students learn how to learn and leave school confident in that ability. The Senior Project applies these skills as students identify a problem, study it, and produce a response. Teaching and learning happens in a context that emphasizes the impact students can have when applying critical learning skills to self-directed purposes.

Purposeful and skilled learners serve a democracy, and Case B students extend their sense of efficacy to their participation in democratic community. For at least half of the students interviewed, learning to be effective members of a democratic community is the most important work of the school. Students report learning to work together; to think for themselves; and to contribute to community shaping decisions. As one student put it, we are “connecting our own power or knowledge to cause and effect (BI3S3).”

Everything about the Case B school supports this work: the expectation for active community membership; the emphasis on independent and critical thought in the classroom; and participatory governance structures. Students however, emphasize the role of governance structures in developing their own leadership skills. Every focus group interview included discussion of student voice, often characterized as “if there is something that you do not like, you can change it (BI14S5).” Each identified ASMs as the opportunity for every student to (re)shape school policy. Students involved with the Site-base Committee cite the ability to shape the agendas of

representative decision making structures, ASMs and Site-based committee. Students share authorship of the School Goals Document and the Philosophy Statement with parents, teachers, and community members. The responsibility to thoughtfully participate, sometimes with the support and guidance of Family Group or Committee leaders, appeared unquestioned.

Students reveal an awareness of themselves as doing the work of democratic citizenship. We are “taught to think for ourselves (BI4S2);” we are “teaching governance (BI8S4);” and “learning democracy at a young age (BI5S6).” Throughout the decision making processes and within the governance structures ensuring student authority, students understand themselves as doing the most important work of discussing “how to keep our school alternative while still being a school (BI8S4)” and that by exercising that authority they, and the school, “serve as a beacon for alternative possibilities (BI5S6).” Students do not separate the ongoing work toward effective democratic citizenship from their school’s identity as “alternative.” Every student description of choice or voice as the most important feature of the school led to a discussion of decision making processes and governance structures. One student summed up his culminating evidence for democratic structures and practices as the most important work with “just having the option to come here (BI5S6).”

Like in Case A, student responses to the most important work question primarily consider their own work. The work defining the boundaries, membership, and inclusiveness of community may have begun with adults but students know that their understandings, beliefs, and actions help shape their communities. They recognize, at every opportunity, teachers working to include students in shaping

curricula and instruction. Teachers provide the information and materials that allow them to demand that students think critically and carefully and learn. But students acknowledge teachers' efforts by showing up as active, participating, risk-taking learners, their work. And finally, students describe their responsibility to work alongside teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to make the decisions and do the work of governing, exercising the choice and voice they unanimously identify as reasons they chose this school.

Teachers

Teachers, instead, frame the most important work of the school as outcomes for students. As one teacher put it, "we are helping kids to become good thinkers, good citizens, and to develop a work ethic, in order of priority (BIT1)." Of the thirteen teachers interviewed, ten echoed or elaborated on one or more of these outcomes in their own responses. One identified the most important work as "helping kids to become self-possessed, self-actualized, confident (BIT6)." Three teachers explicitly identify caring for or getting kids to feel good about themselves as the most important work they do. Of the three teachers that emphasize caring for students, one is a resource room teacher who teaches students with disabilities and a second is the instructional support teacher who provides extra academic support for struggling students. One teacher identified the school's "broad impact [in Education] through collaboration" at national conventions and conferences. The teacher reported coming across materials developed in the Case B school as a participant in workshops at these conferences.

I have organized teacher responses below into the four categories, without repeating similar responses. Responses appear in multiple categories because outcomes overlap. There are more responses than teachers because teachers typically listed more than one response to the most important work question.

Table B.10 - Case B Categorized Teacher Responses to Most Important Work Question

Most Important Work Responses from Teachers			
Good Thinkers	Good Citizens	Work Ethic	Caring for Students
Get them excited about learning Teach kids to ask questions/think critically Get kids to be critical thinkers Having students care about their learning Teaching students how to learn	Empower students to create a better world Teach kids to have a voice Participation is important in Democracy Educate for organizing leadership Empowering kids as community members, as resources within a group Get kids to make choices Community Building Embrace service as own good work in the world Something to do with teaching kids to find their voice – being comfortable with adults Democracy at staff and student levels	Create possibilities for kids to create and re-create themselves with feedback and support Participation is important in Democracy Students take charge and form what matters to them. Learning to invest in whatever you are doing	Individualistic – we take care of kids Validate and support individual students – not “get with the program” Getting kids to feel good about themselves – to do wonderful things with their lives Empowering kids as individuals Creating community and support

The practices and structures that lead to these outcomes for students are listed below. Because almost every response included reference to decision making

structures or other structures and practices already discussed in depth above, the Caring for Students column includes the most elaboration. The Good Citizens column is almost as long, in part because this list again includes those structures and practices that foster citizenship within the school community and those that support the same beyond the school.

Table B.11 - Case B Most Important Work Practices and Structures

Practices and Structures Supporting the Most Important Work			
Good Thinkers	Good Citizens	Work Ethic	Caring for Students
Evaluations instead of grades Possibilities/options in class work Writing and Reasoning Choices in analytical strategies and concepts In classes, students do the work of scientists and historians: asking questions, creating knowledge, gain confidence. Academic skills Research possibilities Courses Curricula includes sustainability, fair trade, economics, world bank, IMF, genocide Choices – course options, within assignments Acknowledge students for academic work	ASM Family Groups Learn to make decisions, structure meetings, lead meetings, get work done Listening and getting heard Advocate for themselves and others Committees Democratic School processes Relationships Choices in community service placements Non-traditional relationships with adults prepare them Public speaking Expectation to grow into responsible, contributing member of school community Staff meetings Acknowledge students for community service	Learn to make decisions, structure meetings, lead meetings, get work done Evaluations instead of grades Make plans Café Discipline (student owned by graduation) Trips – planning, phone calls, organizing Expectation to grow into responsible, contributing member of school community	Guidance Teachers Communicating Support team Size of school Teachers know the kids Safe place to learn Family Group Trips Small classes Use of adults’ first names Relationships Acknowledge students for the relationships they build Be accessible as a person to students Build trust so can work on hard stuff Love Know kids so safe for all individually and as general environment Asking questions, being interested in students, paying attention Attend student events – games, plays, etc. Every kid is connected to an adult Being always

			available Family-school connection
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An institutional theme, occasionally explicit in the above lists, begins to emerge from consideration of teacher responses. Some teachers (and students) suggest the non-traditional relationships between teachers and students when describing conditions that make most important outcomes possible. Also, teacher responses indicate a general sense of how we do things or “It is in how we do everything, all the time – teaching behaviors, conversations, etc. (BIT1).” Another identifies shared expectations that students will grow into responsible, contributing members of the school community as a backdrop or context for the practices and structures supporting the most important outcomes. These non-traditional relationships and expectations for behavior and sense of how-we-do-what-we-do begin to define a normative environment that takes for granted expectations for how individuals relate, how interactions take place, and how students eventually contribute. More than one teacher asserts that the quality of interactions means as much, if not more, than the practices and structures generating those interactions. These expectations ensure that Family Groups, trips, conversations, questions, and interest result in ‘knowing each other’ in such a way that the most important work gets done: teachers know student interests and concerns; students trust teachers; etc. Authentic classes and curricula, decision-making, community service, and the range of student choice lead to the collaboration between students and adults that is necessary to the most important work getting done.

Parents/Caregivers

Instead of outcomes for students, parents emphasize how students are accepted, valued, and included while in school as the most important work. Parents remark that “You do not have to earn your way in; you just are (BIP6)” once here or that the school “take[s] everyone where they are and allow[s] for that they will not always be in that place (BIP6).” There is “no single script (BIP6)” describing how to belong. In part, the assumption of students’ development into responsible community members generates a welcoming atmosphere for any student. But, the norms of inclusiveness described by students when discussing community likely contribute most to this sense of acceptance. After some time in the Case B school, parents appreciate that students feel valued by adults. The school “values a broad range of student efforts and accomplishments (BIP1).” Adult response to student initiative in academics and decision making communicates esteem to students, as does the work toward relationship building embedded in practices, structures, and assumptions described above. Finally, parents identify how students are included in intellectual, social, and political communities as a reason for choosing School B. Interestingly, it is not that students learn to be critical thinkers, good citizens, action-oriented community members, or caring peers. It is the opportunities for participation and membership in these communities while learning that parents report as valuable.

Administrators

The five administrator interviews, when taken together, address multiple organizational levels when identifying the most important work. The district

administrator interviewed discussed the school's work on democratic priorities as a critical alternative for public education, and thereby serving as a model for alternative schooling, as the most important work. He acknowledged other outcomes. In his words, it is "more than innovative curriculum and instruction." There is a "clear sense of themselves as a school community and as a part of the community (BIA5)." But the possibility that the school presents to public education matters most.

Two of the school administrators consider three of the systems of practice in place as the work that most differentiates the school from other schools: the participatory democratic decision making structures; the teacher and student driven curricula; and hidden curriculum that sets expectations for community participation in all the ways described above. It is somewhat unfair to ask these administrators to name the most important work, with their understanding of the interdependence of all work in this well-established and complex school organization. Both approached the challenge by framing their responses to address the work that distinguishes the effort to be an alternative within public education.

The two remaining school administrators addressed many of the outcomes for students emphasized by teachers: the focus on how to think; trusting relationships between students and teachers; varied opportunities for students to step up and be recognized; keeping some students in school. In one's words, "Most students experience a change in self-respect and confidence, feeling that they can accomplish what they want to accomplish (BIA2)." These administrators met the challenge of my question by framing their responses to focus on student experience. The discussions

of structures and practices above help identify structures and practices meant to support these outcomes.

Conclusion

This chapter begins with a history that details long efforts to build support and legitimacy within the immediate community, in part by extending influence and recognition beyond the community by building relationships at the state and national levels. The payoff is detailed by stakeholders in interviews. Students note the work they do alongside teachers to make class work meaningful, manage the school, and create community. Teachers talk about efforts to support and steer students to become good thinkers, good citizens, and people who know how to work to effect conscious outcomes. Parents describe a place where their students belong and participate in work that they value, thereby feeling valued. Administrators emphasize the work all do to create alternative schooling that reflects democratic priorities and serves students and community.

Unlike Case A, stakeholders in Case B school locate efforts at legitimacy with those structures and practices that distinguish the school as alternative. The school historically aligned itself with, and contributed to, networks of alternative education organizations. Like the Coalition of Essential Schools, these organizations define purposes, structures, and practices that challenge business as usual in public secondary schools. Instead of emphasizing the similarities between the school's curricula and those of surrounding schools, the Case B school considers teacher and student generated curricula a mainstay of student engagement, strong critical thinking,

Graduation by Exhibition, and community connections. In both cases, stakeholders describe practices and structures that contribute to a unique school identity. The Case B school, as evidenced by ongoing efforts to define and (re)create its own “alternativeness,” locates its legitimacy with its differences.

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