

## **Students excel in alternative education settings**

The growth is stunning.

More than 112,000 of Minnesota's students are attending alternative education programs this year. That's up from just over 4,000 10 years ago. Traditional, large junior and senior high schools clearly are not the right place for a large and growing number of students.

This growth doesn't surprise Joan Sorenson, director of St. Paul's Alternative Learning Centers, who has been in public education for three decades. "We learned that one approach doesn't work with every youngster. Kids' needs are different. And alternative programs offer more flexibility."

Many of the youngsters attending alternative schools are very bright. Sorenson said, "Some national research shows that dropouts have above average intelligence. Schools need to be more flexible and to make greater use of research about how students learn."

The traditional approach of teachers talking and students listening does not work for more and more students.

Jay Martini, director of ROC, an alternative public school in Rochester, Minn., explained, "More and more students want to be recognized as individuals. What we've created is a small-town, family atmosphere."

Pat Campbell, 17, says the smaller size at ROC means "people know who we are -- we're not just someone who walks by in the hall." Niki Portillo, 15, feels the "teachers here have greater trust for students."

St. Paul Area Learning Center student Brian Scholegel, 19, told me that the school "is all around better for me. It's more flexible, and the people are open-minded." Nicole Lee, 20, said that "I'm working harder and learning more. The teachers' encouragement, and the school's flexibility have really helped."

The steady growth of alternative programs in Minnesota doesn't surprise Bob Barr, Dean of the Boise State College of Education in Idaho. Barr has studied alternative schools for 30 years while teaching at universities in Oregon and Indiana, as well as Idaho. He's concluded alternatives often are very good for students.

As he explained last week to hundreds of educators at Minnesota's Alternative Programs Conference, these schools generally "are smaller, safer, often offer a customized curriculum, personalized instruction, tend to attract caring, demanding teachers and usually work closely with social service agencies."

An author, Barr describes himself as ``a strong advocate of public school choice, because it works. For three decades now, I've seen smaller, more focused public schools of choice increase achievement, improve student attitudes, reduce violence, and prepare youngsters for success in later life. ``

Barr's research and experience lead him to very hopeful conclusions: ``Schools can make a difference, can overcome deficiencies of the home and dysfunctions of the family. Education, done well, can transform the lives of children."

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