



CASE STUDY

# Examining Alternative Schools at Norfolk Public Schools (VA)

*by Nathan Levenson*

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# Examining Alternative Schools at Norfolk Public Schools (VA)

Nathan Levenson

Superintendent Melinda Boone has always cared passionately about helping all students succeed. A change-agent leader, Boone had had a positive impact in advancing student achievement during her six years as superintendent in Worcester Public Schools (MA). In December 2015, Boone returned to her hometown as superintendent of Norfolk Public Schools (VA), where she had previously served in various administrative capacities including the position of chief academic officer. Stepping in as the fourth superintendent in five years, Boone knew that, as in any sizable urban district, the work would not be easy. But she was determined to work with staff to make a real difference for the students of Norfolk.

Boone’s plan to turn around the district includes key initiatives of strengthening and expanding specialty academic programs, reviewing attendance zone boundaries, offering more school choices, developing a new equity policy, and revamping special education services. One issue that quickly surfaced and that greatly concerned Boone was how the district was serving the group of students requiring an alternative school or program. As in every district in the country, whether large or small, urban, suburban, or rural, some students in Norfolk need a very different environment from their peers: they need an alternative to large, typical schools. Like most sizable districts, Norfolk Public Schools had responded to the needs of these students by creating specialized programs and dedicated schools, loosely



referred to as “alternative” programs and schools. But recently, the number of students with explosive or other problematic behaviors had been increasing in Norfolk Public Schools, and there was growing pressure from middle and high school principals and teachers to place an increasing number of students in alternative settings.

For a new superintendent with myriad issues to tackle in this struggling district, it could have been easy to backburner addressing the needs of students served by alternative programs or schools, for they account for just 1–2% of students in a district of over 30,000 students. But Boone wanted to address the needs of these students and respond to the concerns of her staff. She and the district’s leaders pondered, “Should the alternative programs be expanded? Should they be altered in some way? Or should

## FAST FACTS



**NORFOLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS (VA)**

Home to the **largest naval station** in the world

**Largest urban district** in Virginia

- 5 High schools and other auxiliary facilities (including alternative and specialty programs)
- 8 Middle schools
- 33 Elementary schools
- 1 K–8
- 1 pre-K–8

Operating Budget: **\$321.9** million\*

Per Pupil Cost: **\$10,671** (state FY2014, latest available)

\*FY2017 unless otherwise noted

traditional schools be better equipped to serve a wider range of students? Given the growing focus on building teacher-student connections and personalized learning, could the traditional schools meet the needs of kids who needed something a little different? And, perhaps the most important question of all, which programs or settings would best assure that all students succeed in school and thrive after graduation?"

Wanting to delve into these issues as quickly as possible, Boone sought a partner in this work and selected the District Management Group (DMGroup) to conduct a review of existing programs, services, and alternative schools. She wanted to assess the existing programs and obtain recommendations on how to better serve students needing an alternative both inside traditional home schools and in specialized programs and schools.

### Assessing the Situation

A team from DMGroup undertook a comprehensive and inclusive study of Norfolk Public Schools' current offerings, services, and results. The team began its work by conducting interviews, focus groups, and classroom visits in order to hear directly from key stakeholders on their experiences, insights, and wisdom. Interviews and focus group participants included students, parents, staff, and leaders in both home and alternative schools. This qualitative research was followed by significant quantitative work, including analysis of staffing and staff schedules as well as a deep study of achievement data, types of students served, and the services available in the district.

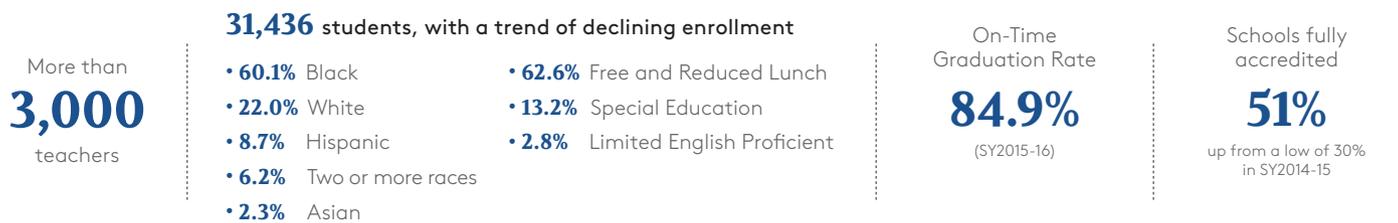
A fundamental but crucial step was cataloguing the services and programs available in the district. Like many districts, Norfolk Public Schools had programs formally designated as alternative schools as well as specialized classrooms within traditional schools and a multitude of supports scattered across the traditional middle and high schools. The three most visible efforts comprised a free-standing alternative school for students with long-term suspensions, Madison Alternative Center; a blended learning site, Bridgescape Learning Academy; and a program within the elementary school for students with serious repeat rule violations, the Elementary

Alternative Education Program.<sup>1</sup> These programs together had a budget of nearly \$4 million a year. In addition, Norfolk Public Schools had established a foundation to begin meeting the behavioral and social-emotional needs of its students, had a strong emphasis on anti-bullying, and had a well-respected teacher development program with a focus on using data for progress monitoring and improving instructional practices.

The wide-ranging set of supports across the district is a positive characteristic, but the roles and responsibilities among those involved in providing services were confusing and, with no one person in charge, there were sometimes conflicting decisions. For example, home schools would refer for alternative placement those students serving out-of-school suspensions at home, but the final decision was in the hands of a cross-functional Tribunal Hearing Panel that would sometimes reject the home school's referral. This would often lead to disagreements over entry and exit criteria for the alternative programs.

Another key step in the review was to better understand which types of students were being served by the different programs and schools, and to identify the underlying needs that drove the placements. This information would allow the offerings to be evaluated in relation to the specific needs of the students being served. For example, it wouldn't be helpful to review the blended learning program and share insights on whether it was a good blended learning program per se (it was); the real value came from assessing whether the program was appropriate and successful for the particular students it served (yes for some, not so for others). Few districts have this level of detail regarding the underlying needs of students readily available.

A few important trends emerged from DMGroup's analysis. First was that a wide range of students attended alternative schools and programs. They included students with problematic behavior, poor attendance, and issues with bullying (both bullies and the bullied); students who struggled to fit in at a large school or to thrive with traditional teaching styles, such



as stand and deliver lectures; over-age students; and those needing to make up many graduation credits. In short, students with a wide range of needs were being served in the same schools and programs. There were, however, a few commonalities to these students. Most had been suspended, often repeatedly and for an extended period of time. The largest alternative school, Madison Alternative Center, became the primary place to serve students on long-term suspension. Analysis of the data also revealed that the students in alternative schools or programs appeared to be disproportionately African American (*Exhibit 1*). And 47% of students placed in an alternative setting were on their second or more placement (*Exhibit 2*).

### Recommendations for Better Serving Hard-to-Serve Students

The DMGroup team spent a great deal of time reviewing and analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data to paint a clear and detailed picture of current practices and services, and to identify areas for improvement. Current practices were compared to best practices based on a wide range of published research, our experience with highly effective programs, practices from specialized schools, and the wisdom and insights of Norfolk Public Schools students, parents, staff, and administrators.

It was clear to the DMGroup team that Norfolk Public Schools had a caring and committed staff and a district leadership receptive to an honest appraisal of strengths and opportunities for improvement. The school board, superintendent, and central office leaders alike wanted

to know how to better serve a difficult-to-serve group of students. The staff at both the home schools and the alternative programs sincerely wanted to help all their students; they wanted their students to graduate and to be successful after graduation.

Based on the analysis, DMGroup sought to create a short, highly prioritized list of opportunities to maximize impact for students. Given the myriad challenges the district had to address, DMGroup sought to focus on the highest impact, most achievable changes given the fiscal realities.

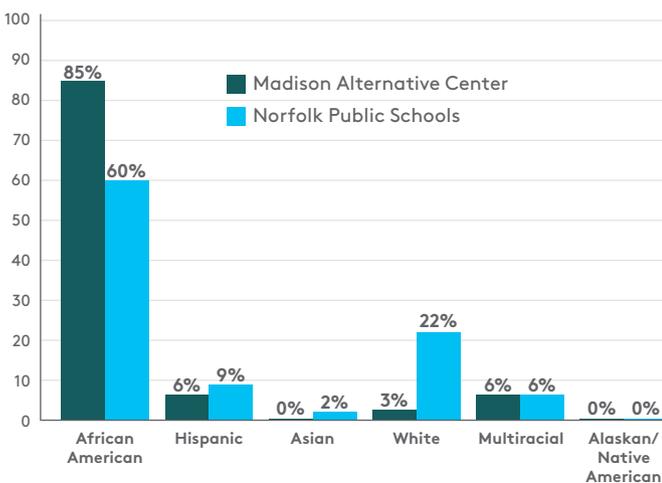
Five interconnected themes were identified:

#### 1. Strengthening supports in home schools could reduce the need for alternative placements and would better serve some students

Principals and students alike wanted more and better supports in their home schools to reduce the need for alternative school placements. Certainly not all students would be best served in their home school, but many could. Expanding the capacity of home schools, especially middle and high schools, could include the following:

- Creating small, safe spaces within the larger schools. For example, a hallway, wing, or even a few rooms off the beaten path could be dedicated as a small, socially safe environment.
- Adding additional mental health counseling supports.

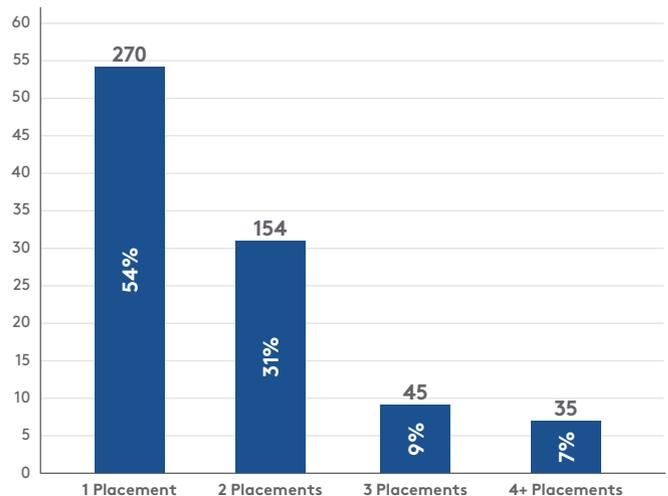
*Exhibit 1* COMPARISON OF RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS AT MADISON ALTERNATIVE CENTER AND NORFOLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS, SY2015-16



A larger percentage of African American students enter Madison Alternative Center compared to the percentage of African American students in Norfolk Public Schools overall.

*Exhibit 2* REPEAT ALTERNATIVE PLACEMENT FOR STUDENTS

#### In-District Programs and Tidewater Regional Alternative Educational Program, SY2015-16



47% of students placed in an alternative setting were on their second or more placement.

Superintendent Boone reads to district students



## Should the alternative programs be expanded? Should they be altered in some way? Or should traditional schools be better equipped to serve a wider range of students?

- Reviewing discipline policies to better understand why African American males were disproportionately being suspended, especially for long-term suspensions.
- Ensuring that core-content teachers (e.g., in math, science, English) teach students within the smaller school setting.

Setting an alternative program within the home school has many potential benefits. It could be less disruptive for students at the start of placement and could facilitate their return at the end. It makes gradual transition possible; for example, the student could transition from the smaller setting into one or two classes in the larger school to test the waters and build the needed coping skills. The alternative program within the home school also facilitates access to high-rigor instruction and a wider range of electives. Success in high-rigor courses raises self-esteem, and the opportunity to explore electives can help students tap into their interests. Both create a greater desire to learn and to succeed, and these opportunities are easier to provide within the traditional school.

### 2. Provide targeted, need-specific alternative supports and programs

Nearly every student being served in an alternative school or program in Norfolk Public Schools needed something different from the traditional setting. That said, the particular needs of these students differed. The current programs were geared to serve all students, but this often meant that supports and approaches were not finely tuned enough to address a particular student's needs. It is more effective, for example, to have one program specifically targeting students with problematic behavior, and

a separate program for students who struggle in a large environment, are challenged by complex social dynamics, or are bullied. Perhaps a program for students struggling with depression or substance abuse might also be added. These programs could be housed in the same alternative school, but students would need to be thoughtfully assigned to a specific program, and the services and supports would differ in each. The behavior program might have greater structure and explicit behavior expectations, while another program might have a greater focus on building community, and another might have extra counseling services and partnerships with local mental health service providers.

The programs might also be differentiated by expected duration of enrollment. Nearly all of the district's alternative programs and schools were intended as temporary assignments, typically a few months to a half a year. For example, the goal and expectation was that nearly all students at Madison, the largest alternative school, would return to their home school. Success assumed no longer needing an alternative placement. For some students, this is the right goal, but other students might need a small, quieter place until graduation. The data showed that many students returned again and again to the alternative school. Some students shared that they purposely acted out in their home school so they could return to the alternative setting.

### 3. Embrace alternative teaching styles and match these to student learning styles and academic needs

Just as programming needs to be tailored to different student needs, so should teaching styles. To be sure, the teaching approach at the

# Why is it so hard to create great alternative schools?

When district leaders are asked what's working really well in their district, one rarely hears, "Our alternative schools and programs are hitting it out of the park. Kids are thriving, they are prepared for college or career, and staff morale is high!" More often, students, parents, and staff have a sense that something ought to change, but they aren't sure what. The truth is that creating, staffing, and managing effective alternative schools or programs is especially challenging for virtually all districts.

This difficulty shouldn't be surprising and certainly isn't a reflection on the staff or leadership—it's the very nature of the need. Alternative schools or programs are intended to serve students for whom a traditional environment isn't appropriate, and yet the alternative school functions within a traditional system of staffing, departments, grades, regulations, and policies. Having an alternative school as an island within the sea of traditional structures creates an immediate conflict. Let's look at the tensions and potential solutions in a bit more detail.

## Who is being served?

The first challenge to creating a highly effective (and cost-effective) alternative school is defining which students the program or school will serve. Too often the target population is defined by what it's not, rather than what it is. It's for kids who need "something different." This is true, but not sufficient, because lots of kids need "something different," but their needs differ. Consider the following partial list of students requiring something different:

- Students with problematic behaviors
- Students with substance abuse/addiction issues
- Students who need a small, calm, drama-free environment
- Students on the Asperger's or autism spectrum
- Students who are unmotivated by traditional teaching methods

These are not mutually exclusive needs, but programs specifically designed for students with substance abuse or for students with Asperger's or for students who are emotionally frail would each be designed differently. Highly effective alternative schools and programs have a clear target population in mind and a formal screening process to ensure that students are matched to the appropriate

program. Students are not just placed in the first open spot or in a multipurpose school or program.

Because the number of students served in alternative programs is small, districts struggle to specialize their offerings. And because enrollment changes from month to month, districts can't easily flex the skills and expertise of staff assigned to specific alternative programs. Traditional district practices of setting staffing months before the start of the school year and keeping it fixed for the duration of the school year don't mesh well with the needs of specialized alternative services. Creating more targeted and flexible student and staff assignments and staffing levels will serve students and the budget well.

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## Short-term or long-term placement?

Beyond the question of defining the target population of a school or program, there is the question of whether the alternative placement should be short-term or permanent. The answer is often unclear, or a student's circumstances force a difference between the stated goal and the reality. While there is no right answer to whether a placement should be short or long term, not having a clear and coherent answer is problematic. Many programs and schools are designed for 45- to 90-day stays to allow students to be further assessed and find equilibrium or to address acute needs. But some students have needs that require all or most of their secondary education to occur in

an alternative setting. The demands from traditional schools, however, can play havoc with this decision. If a program is intended to be a short-term placement, then traditional schools must have extensive re-entry supports or programs because of the challenges of moving students from an alternative to a traditional setting. If it's a long-term program, staffing and classroom space must be reserved at the start of the year to be able to accept students identified throughout the school year. The traditional model of assigning students to a specific school for a year isn't a good fit for alternative schools and programs.

### Who is in charge?

Alternative programs don't easily mesh with traditional organizational charts either. Determining who should run the alternative school or program is no simple question. It's not uncommon that half or more of the students attending an alternative school or program have an IEP; as a result, the special education director or head of pupil services will often be in charge of such schools or programs. That said, often half the students don't have special needs. Moreover, even students with disabilities have different needs than many other students with IEPs. Traditional reporting structures can create splintered leadership, where the alternative school principal reports to an area or assistant superintendent; half the staff report to the special education department; the abundant psychologists, social workers, and counselors report to one or two other departments; and the rest of the general education teachers report to the principal and get direction from the chief academic officer. In order to provide cohesion and coherent programs, all staff would benefit from a unified reporting structure with dedicated and specialized central office supervision. It is best if everyone is on the same team, working in close collaboration, and reporting to a single leader with deep expertise in serving the target populations.

### Is the focus on both academic and nonacademic needs?

The final challenge to having great alternative schools and programs is ensuring that staff have the expertise to meet both the academic and nonacademic needs of students. Alternative settings have two very different needs. The students, like their typical peers, must master math, English, science, and so on, while also learning to address

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social, emotional, behavioral, and/or substance abuse challenges. Effective programs must be successful on both fronts. This requires having both skillsets—math, science, English teachers, and so on, as well as special educators and counselors.

An added complication in staffing alternative programs is that they are often small and multigrade; thus, only a few students might need to take Algebra 1, others might need to take geometry, a couple might be ready for Algebra 2, and a handful might need more basic math. A single teacher will thus need to teach multiple courses at once. This situation harkens back to the one-room schoolhouse or forward to personalized learning. The realities of alternative schools also often require rethinking graduation requirements, acknowledging that student's grade level and courses won't align in the same way they do in the traditional school. Often, however, traditional collective bargaining agreements, policies on earning graduation credits, and staffing patterns make achieving this flexibility difficult.

It's no wonder that great alternative schools and programs are hard to design, staff, and manage, because they have to serve those students who need something different from that which district structures are designed to support. Since every district has students who need something different, recognizing that rules, policies, and practices might also have to differ will help districts provide highly effective alternative services and meet the needs of a vulnerable group of students.

alternative schools was different from that at the traditional home school: Madison Alternative Center utilized small classes and co-teaching, and the Bridgescape Learning Academy utilized online, self-paced instruction. The differentiated teaching approach was closely correlated to the school a student attended, however, rather than to the student's learning style.

For example, students who were over-age or well behind in credits to graduate might seek to attend Bridgescape Learning Academy. This school had an independent learning approach best suited for self-motivated, eager learners. A student who needed a small, quiet environment and felt overwhelmed in a big school would thrive in such a program, whether they were over-age and behind in credits or not. However, a student who was short on credits due to a lack of interest in school would not be a good fit for a program that required intrinsic motivation or academic curiosity. The systems in place did not include assessing the student's specific needs.

**Nearly every student being served in an alternative school or program in Norfolk Public Schools needed something different from the traditional setting. That said, the particular needs of these students differed. The current programs were not finely tuned enough to address a particular student's needs.**

Providing differentiated teaching styles is not easy, but it is especially valuable in an alternative setting or program. DMGroup's examination of existing programs revealed that many of the teachers assigned to the alternative programs were less experienced teachers, which made differentiating teaching even more challenging. To improve services for students, the district would benefit from providing teachers with coaching support and professional development to help cultivate

differentiated teaching abilities. This might include incorporating hands-on learning classes and adding advisory time.

#### **4. Ensure dignity and pride for students**

Having feelings of pride and dignity are important to a student's success. DMGroup's interviews revealed that staff at the home schools and alternative schools indeed cared deeply about their students, worked hard, and wanted only the best for them. We met and observed dedicated, devoted teachers and leaders. Despite this, many students shared that they didn't always feel pride and dignity in their alternative school or program. Why the disconnect? Student interviews shed some light on this paradox:

- The facility that housed the Madison Alternative Center was rundown and in poor repair. The students knew that their home schools were better maintained and more modern. They felt demoralized when sent to the Madison Alternative Center.
- Many of the classes assigned little or no homework. The teachers were trying not to overburden their students, but students felt that the rigor of classes was lower than in their home school; some students assumed these teachers had low expectations of them. Teachers definitely aimed to provide rigorous instruction and curriculum, but because alternative school staff seldom met, planned, or received professional development with teachers at home schools, they weren't always in sync with current standards and rigor.
- When students returned to their home school, they weren't allowed to participate in extracurricular activities for six months, which seemed unfair to them.

By engaging with students, sharing the reasons for the design of the program, and listening to their ideas and concerns, pride and dignity can be part of every effort.

#### **5. Create a consistent and collaborative process for entry and exit**

Determining which students should attend which alternative programs is not a simple question to answer. Nor is it easy to know when a student is ready to return to his or her home school. At the time of the program review, the district had put in place a joint decision-making process. However, there was a

sense that the home school (the sending school) had more sway in deciding whether a placement in the alternative school or program was appropriate; the alternative school was believed to have more voice in determining whether a student was ready to return to their home school, and these recommendations did not always align with the home school's opinion. A decision-making process, in which the sending and receiving schools jointly participate in the entry and exit discussions with a common set of criteria, is preferable. The benefits of joint decision-making are many. It is difficult for every home school in the district to have a deep understanding of the alternative schools and their respective programs, so it is highly beneficial to have alternative school staff or leadership at the table to determine the appropriate placement. The inclusion of alternative school staff or liaison during the discussion of placement also provides a consistent voice, thus ensuring that students, regardless of home school, are treated and assessed similarly across the district. An added benefit of having both alternative school and home school staff together is that they can better understand the student's issues and history, and thus better match services to needs.

A joint effort to discuss exiting the program will also force a number of important discussions, including:

- What data and observations suggest that the student is ready to return?
- What transition support services will be in place for the returning student?
- What transition support is required for a successful return?
- Have past returns worked out for this student or similar students?

Cross-school collaboration can place extra demands on alternative school staff members, home school staff, and dedicated liaison(s), but it is a worthwhile investment.

## The Path Forward

DMGroup presented its findings at a district planning retreat. After reviewing the findings and engaging in clarifying discussions, the district team turned to the critical next step of determining where to focus their efforts. Alternative schools and programs are complex, and few districts have the bandwidth to tackle every

worthwhile opportunity for improvement. As with most DMGroup program evaluations, we identified a short list of high-impact opportunities and counseled the district to select just one or two of these on which to focus their efforts over the next few years. DMGroup firmly believes that it is better to do a few things well than try to tackle too much at once. A short list coupled with persistence and systems thinking yields the greatest impact for students.

After thoughtful discussion, the planning team reached broad agreement that they would focus on the following initiatives:

- Improve and increase supports at home schools. They will review and implement effective efforts across all tiers of support to help more students successfully stay at and/or return to their home school.
- Create a collaborative and streamlined process of determining entry into the alternative schools and programs. This effort will define roles, responsibilities, and decision-making rights for both the home school and sending school administrators. It will also seek to increase consistency in determining who participates in these decisions and to streamline the paperwork involved to help make the workload more manageable.

It was agreed that detailed action plans would be developed quickly and implementation would begin shortly thereafter.

The district was determined to identify ways to help students whose needs differ from those of their peers. The decision to conduct the review was the first step in addressing this challenge. By gaining a detailed understanding of current practices and learning how these compared to best practices, the district could more clearly see opportunities for improvement using existing resources. Examining the data and reviewing the study as a district team provided a common understanding. The superintendent and the district are now able to take the next steps with focused efforts to improve services and work to ensure that *all* students succeed. ♦

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A fourth program in the district, Tidewater Regional Alternative Education Program, is an alternative program of the Southeastern Cooperative Educational Programs (SECEP), a public school consortium comprising eight school systems in the region including Norfolk. It serves students in grades 6-12 who have not achieved behavioral success in a traditional classroom setting. Although Norfolk students attend the program and space within Norfolk is given to the program free of cost, it is not run by Norfolk Public Schools.