

Counselors' Handbook – working with alternative education students

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Change your thoughts and you change your world.

Norman Vincent Peale (1898 - 1993)

Overview

The OTAC staff has many combined years educating, counseling and otherwise working with at-risk students. The staff has also had the opportunity to observe, evaluate and advise over 300 alternative education programs in the state of Oklahoma for more than a decade. We have drawn from our own personal experiences and those experiences of other practitioners to bring you the *Counselors' Handbook – working with alternative education students*. We hope that you find this publication helpful. If we can assist you or other members of your staff by answering questions or providing professional development, please let us know.

Tips for success and pitfalls to avoid

1. If you are a school counselor and are working with alternative students, you may want to consider the following circumstances.

Alternative students' needs are complex and varied. Counselors should avoid spending too much time with students on scheduling, transcript checks, and career and academic guidance. It is easy to fall into the "guidance trap" because these services are what are typically expected from school counselors. Guidance continues to be important to alternative students, but services should be expanded to address other personal, social, and familial situations.

Establishing trust and confidence is critical to the success of any counseling program. Unfortunately, some schools place counselors in the awkward and inappropriate position of disciplinarian. It is not possible to serve alternative students as a disciplinarian and as their counselor. If you find yourself in this position, talk to the administration.

Students must be able to talk openly and frankly with their counselor without fear of reprisal. What students tell counselors should be kept confidential. There are however limitations to confidentiality. In some circumstances, the counselor has a duty to warn or legal obligation to report. These instances include cases of suspected child abuse, threats of harm to self or others, or when otherwise directed by a court order.

2. Before you start group counseling sessions, talk to the staff, students, administrators and even parents to help you formulate a global picture of needs to be addressed.

You may want to consider asking questions like: "If I could work on some things with your child, what do you think those things should be?" or "If you could learn some things about yourself or others, what would some of those things be?" or "What classroom behaviors have you observed that are interfering with learning?"

Once you have assimilated information from these varying points of view, organize the information into topical and thematic strands. Prioritize needs and estimate how much time may be needed to accomplish your goals. Remember that the best-laid plans are only plans. Counseling is a dynamic process that should ebb and flow with changing students' needs and group dynamics. However, it is very important to approach sessions with a plan in mind. Without a clear mission, sessions are likely to wander aimlessly and fail to give students the opportunity to adequately evaluate their feelings, thoughts and behaviors.

In a perfect world, you would have adequate time to let the four stages of the group process (initial, inclusion, intimacy, and transition stages) run their course. The realities are that with a limited number of sessions and the likelihood that students will be entering the group throughout the process, you just need to establish some basic ground rules that are based on mutual respect and jump right in.

Many alternative education students live from one crisis to the next. In a group setting, it is wise to consider whether a particular discussion has some wider benefit to the group, or whether an individual's circumstances might be better addressed individually. It is sometimes difficult to gauge how much direction and structure to

provide to groups. Enough structure is needed to prevent students from simply chatting. However, too much structure will stifle student participation and diminish introspection.

Sessions should be interesting, non-threatening and thought provoking. There are resources at the end of this document that should give you ideas for opening activities, media support, counseling models and other professional support.

3. Do not allow yourself to become the “life skills” teacher.

Life skills include things like filling out job applications, writing résumés, exploring careers, applying for credit, preparing a budget, learning how to take tests and study, and registering to vote. These are all very important things for students to learn. However, the question becomes, “who should teach life skills?” *The answer is that the teachers should teach life skills...with help from the counselor.* Instruction becomes more meaningful to alternative learners when life skills are integrated into instructional areas.

It is not the best utilization of staff resources to devote counseling time to tasks that sensibly fall within the context of lesson objectives. This view does not absolve the counselor from assisting teachers. Effective counselors are constantly gathering and securing resources for teachers to consider using. Likewise, the best counselors are more than willing to personally introduce content that compliments classroom instruction.

The key points are:

- a) teachers should make a deliberate effort to teach living skills to the extent that those skills are identified in their lesson plans and
- b) counselors should develop a more comprehensive plan to address the personal, social and familial needs of students that goes beyond the basic functional level.

4. Allow adequate time for reflection and practice.

Counselors often feel rushed and to some extent overwhelmed by the quantity, magnitude and severity of problems found in typical alternative education programs. The best advice is to prioritize needs and make sure that the counseling that you are able to provide is quality. One of the biggest mistakes that counselors make in working with at-risk students is to spend too little time on any one thing to make a lasting difference. Some counselors find it helpful to ask students to journal, write poetry, draw pictures, or record music as ways to extend reflection on counseling sessions. These are usually very private expressions for students and should be respected as such. Some students will however want to share their reflections and should be given the opportunity to do so in a group or individual setting.

5. Enlist the help of others.

Try to utilize service providers in your community to help you meet counseling objectives and connect students to more comprehensive services when appropriate. Most counselors agree that there are not enough hours in the day to meet all the needs that alternative education students have. If you do not know where to begin, introduce yourself at the county health department, the department of human services, youth and

family services, the housing authority, Salvation Army, domestic violence crisis center, the office of juvenile affairs, and charitable church organizations. One contact will lead to many more. You will soon have a network of like-minded helpers on your side.

Three essential questions for counselors to ask themselves

1. What is my counseling program doing for students?

- a) The most effective counseling programs have high participation levels for both group and individual counseling.
- b) Home visits are usually necessary in alternative education settings. Counselors should be at the center of these efforts.
- c) Group counseling topics should be varied and appropriate to the developmental levels and needs of the students.
- d) There should be a sufficient number of sessions offered to effect change. One group session per week is recommended with individual counseling frequencies varying between students.
- e) The best and most comprehensive alternative programs usually offer elective classes that help prepare students for adult living. Goals for counseling should be designed to complement, not replace, such classes. Some of the more common classes include parenting, child development, job training and service learning. Again, it is recommended that the counselor be intimately involved in the planning and implementation of these specialty classes.
- f) The counselor should be on a first name basis with social service and mental health providers in their communities. It is equally important for counselors to network with governmental entities and employers to help students overcome obstacles. Communities usually have provisions to provide daycare, housing, substance abuse counseling, job training and other services.
- g) Students should be supported and assisted to transition to post-secondary ambitions. This process should include ongoing and developmentally appropriate career exploration, guidance, and financial aid assistance for those who qualify. Students need to be reassured and shown that continuing education and training is possible through grants, scholarships, and work-study.

2. What is my counseling program doing for parents?

- a) One of the surest ways to get parents involved is through positive communication. Parents need to hear about their child's success. Many of the best educators live by the following motto. "Catch students doing something right and tell others." It is time well spent to drop parents a note or make a quick phone call when students are doing well. And it certainly makes it easier to get their help when a problem arises.

- b) Consider providing parental training seminars or information sessions during evening hours throughout the year. Schools that have tried this find that experts in the community are usually willing to present information from their areas of expertise. Additionally, many schools own commercial training materials that would be suitable for you to use for a series of meetings. While the intent of this handbook is not to promote one set of materials over the other, we would like to provide some direction about where to begin. Two popular commercial approaches that you may want to consider are as follows:
- i. Systemic Training for Effective Training by Don Dinkmeyer and Gary D. McKay
 - ii. Becoming a Love and Logic Parent by Jim Fay and Foster W. Cline, M.D.

Of course, there is no substitute for your own creativity. Remember, there are eager people in your communities who are willing to help. Be able to clearly state what you want them to do and spread the work around so that it is not too burdensome to any one individual.

3. What is my counseling program doing for teachers and administrators?

- a) One of the most important roles for counselors is to advocate for students. The reality is that most at-risk students are going to mess up, and many will mess up more than once! The best counselors are there to present reasonable options to administrators to help students return to a successful path. Reduction of School Violence: Alternatives to Suspension – Second Edition offers reasonable alternatives to suspension for a variety of common infractions. The book can be ordered from LRP Publications at 800.341.7874.
- b) Administrators can come to rely on knowledgeable counselors a great deal. Therefore, it is important to be prepared and even proactive with information from your professional associations and readings.
- c) Most teachers in alternative settings teach multiple subjects to diverse age groups. They appreciate classroom management tips and instructional support. The Internet is packed full of resources, but finding what you need is sometimes a challenge. Follow this link for Internet search tips that will not fail! <http://home.sprintmail.com/~debflanagan/main.html> Following are some additional links to get you started.

Additional Resources

<http://sde.state.ok.us>

Locate the link to counseling in the site index. There are categorized links for child abuse prevention, career and college planning, professional organizations, and resources for counselors.

<http://pecentral.org/climate/index.html>

Links from this site provide tips and strategies for school climate and classroom management.

<http://www.teachwithmovies.org/index.html>

This is an inexpensive subscription site that categorizes movies into character themes. Teaching guides are provided as accompaniment.

<http://teenink.com/>

This is an inexpensive publication written by teens.

http://maxweber.hunter.cuny.edu/pub/eres/EDSPC715_MCINTYRE/715HomePage.html

Teachers submit practical strategies and possible solutions for common behavioral problems.

Area Prevention Resource Centers can often loan counseling related materials or conduct special programming. For a listing of the resource center in your area, go to

<http://www.odmhsas.org/subab.htm#prevention>

The Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Offices have videos and publications that you may find useful. For a listing of the office in your area, go to

<http://countyext.okstate.edu/>

County Health Departments are good resources for health related materials. For a listing of the office in your area, go to <http://www.health.state.ok.us/phone/chdphone.html>

Great Leaps Reading is an inexpensive supplementary reading program that is worth a look. You may want to pass this along to teachers or your administrator.

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Here is a link to some research on Great Leaps

http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports/PDF/Great_Leaps_Report.pdf

End of Instruction Tests from Texas that might be helpful in preparing your students for our End of Instruction tests (Be sure to evaluate for yourself how similar the Texas tests items correlate to the Priority Academic Student Skills).

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/resources/release/index.html>

There are a number of publishing companies that offer quality-counseling materials. We would certainly encourage you to examine materials from multiple sources before purchasing; however, if you are struggling to find something, you might want to begin looking at the “best sellers” from Walch Publishing at <http://web.walch.com>

If you need some counseling materials right away and do not have a lot of time to search for your own, you might want to try one of the following books to get you started.

Helping Students Overcome
Depression and Anxiety (A
Practical Guide)
By Kenneth W Merrell
The Guilford Press
72 Spring Street
New York, NY 10012
www.guilford.com

The Power of Social
Skills in Character
Development
By Jennifer L. Scully
National Professional
Resources, Inc.
25 S Regent Street
Port Chester, NY 10573
800.453.7461
www.nprinc.com

Managing Stress and
Promoting Wellness
(Activities and Strategies
for Students Grades K-12)
By Sandy Schuster
Innerchoice Publishing
P.O. Box 1185
Torrance, CA 90505
310.816.3085

50 Activities for Teaching
Emotional Intelligence (Level
II: Middle School)
Innerchoice Publishing
P.O. Box 1185
Torrance, CA 90505
310.816.3085

50 Activities for
Teaching Emotional
Intelligence (Level III:
High School)
Innerchoice Publishing
P.O. Box 1185
Torrance, CA 90505
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Turning Them Around (Developing Motivation, Responsibility, and Self-Discipline in At-Risk Youth) is a training package developed by a long time alternative education administrator.

By Vicki Phillips
Personal Development
P.O. Box 203
Carmel Valley, CA 93924
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www.personaldevelopment.org