

Systemic Interventions With Alternative School Students:

Engaging the Omega Children

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### Abstract

Alternative school placement continues to be a final option for many students who have experienced ongoing academic and behavioral difficulties. As the majority of these students tend to be at-risk for school failure and truancy, it is critical that during alternative school placement opportunities are afforded to reconnect or engage these youth. This article explores options for increasing multisystemic engagement and support for students in alternative school placements.

## Systemic Interventions With Alternative School Students:

### Engaging the Omega Children

*Our challenge is not to educate the children we used to have or want to have, but to educate the children who come to the schoolhouse door. –H. G. Wells*

At-risk students in alternative school placements are a rapidly growing population in the educational system. As recently as 2001, it was reported that over 10,900 alternative programs existed in the United States with 612,900 primary and secondary students enrolled (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). In 2006 a study conducted by the Urban Institute found that the number of students placed in alternative education continues to grow (Aron, 2006). Students may be placed in these programs as a result of being considered at-risk for academic failure due to poor grades, drug use or possession, truancy, disruptive behavior, possession of a weapon other than firearm, pregnancy, disengaged or other identified risk factors (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Oregon Department of Education, 2007; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008).

Moreover, a large number of these students are also identified as having emotional or behavioral disabilities (Hughes & Adera, 2006). Issues that can further confound these students' ability to achieve academic success can also include family disengagement from the school setting, low levels of positive school engagement due to poor school climate and poor student-teacher relationships (Amatea & West-Oatunji, 2007). These students' needs not only include aid towards achieving academic success, but also reengaging the social support systems around them that can help them to achieve said success, namely parents/caregivers and school personnel.

Because of these students' specialized needs, professional school counselors (PSCs) should be prepared to intervene systemically with schools, families, and peer groups in order to ameliorate students' overall academic and social functioning. This article will describe a brief history of alternative schools, the authors' conceptualization of the systemic school relationship and some systemic interventions that PSC's can use in the alternative schools setting.

### *Alternative Education*

Alternative education programs were initially developed in the early nineteenth century, but did not gain widespread notice until the 1960's and 1970's. The purpose behind these nontraditional schools was to provide an innovative and unique way to educate students who did not respond to traditional forms of education (Miller, 1995). Unfortunately, for three consecutive years preceding their report, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2002) found that a majority of school districts in their study had a higher demand for students to be placed in alternative school placement than they had capacity for. This is one indication that enrollment in such placements continues to increase and is beyond the current available services. In addition, public policy interest in alternative schools appears to be increasing, as now nearly every state has legislation regarding these schools (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004). Much like their traditional counterparts, alternative education takes place in school buildings, utilizes the same subjects, and depends on a hierarchy of school personnel and administrators to function (Foley & Pang, 2006; Raywid, 1994). However, these schools are marked by a disproportionate number of students who are minorities, live at or below the poverty level, and tend to be concentrated in urban areas (United States

Department of Education, 2001). To further confound the situation, alternative schools are often over crowded, take place in motley facilities (such as juvenile detention centers or community centers), and have high rates of staff who are not properly licensed to teach to students' needs (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002).

Raywid (1994) created a three-tiered typology of alternative schools. Type one schools are those that students wish to attend, and are generally flexible and autonomous paths towards a high school diploma or GED. Type two schools are characterized by their focus on discipline and segregating the problematic few from the mainstream classroom. These schools are often considered "last chance" schools in which students are forcibly placed. Finally, type three schools are designed for students with more severe emotional and social issues, and as a result they provide access to counseling and social services along with academic support.

The alternative schools germane to this article are type two, those that have been established for forced placement of students with behavioral--mainly disciplinary problems. As discipline is the main focus of these institutions, there is a concentrated interest in helping students build specific skill sets, such as anger management and behavior modification. Consequently, children placed in this type of alternative education setting often come with a set of stigmas attached to them. As Van Acker (2007) stated, "placement of these children within the alternative school setting is thought to protect the majority of the students from the dangerous behavior of the few..." (p. 6). This quote illustrates the perception that educators, and the community at large, may hold for these students, that they are dangerous and unpredictable individuals in need of rehabilitation. Unfortunately, statistics on alternative school

students may also support this opinion. These non-traditional students are more likely than their traditional counterparts to drop-out of school (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Scott, Nelson, Liaupsin, Jolivette, Christle, & Riney, 2002) Furthermore, the Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001) reports that 82% of the adult prison population and 85% of juvenile justice cases are comprised of school drop-outs. These circumstances have led to a phenomenon that Christle and colleagues have provocatively referred to as the “school to prison pipeline” (p. 69).

Perceptions held in society about these students often trickle down into the microcosm of the school classroom. Within the classroom, a caste-like system can be formed, where certain students may be more socially dominant, or popular, within a hierarchy that is difficult to vertically navigate. One study found that those students who attain lowest social ranks are not accepted by peers, can experience long lasting repercussions, such as low academic achievement and poor socialization and behavioral problems (Garnica, 1981). Students placed in alternative schools may have displayed dangerous behaviors; they may also have been acting out in reaction to their relegation in low social dominancy rank within their previous class (Blum, 2005). The term “omega” is used herein because it describes the lowered status or last place rank of these individuals when compared to others. Due to their negative school experiences, these “omega children” can suffer long-term impediments in their academic and social development (Garnica, 1981).

However, behavioral outbursts and poor peer acceptance are just a few of the many reasons that students are placed in alternative schools. The overarching issue that students face is a breakdown in the systemic school relationship, a term used in

this article to encapsulate the various relationships that students must negotiate in their everyday experiences at school. Examples include relationships with teachers, administrators, peers, parents, and members of the greater community that interact with the school. In order to effectively intervene with these students, multi-systemic concerns should be addressed.

### The Systemic School Relationship

The systemic paradigm was chosen as a framework for this article because it lends to a more holistic understanding of how individual human interactions can have a profound effect on groups of people. A systemic approach has potential to be one of the most effective methods of programmatic change as it is marked by “proactive, contextual strategies that emphasize the construction of new, interlocking behaviors among all members of social networks and organizational communities,” (Erickson, Mattaini & McGuire, 2004 p. 104). In this case, the use of an ecological model is important because it takes into account the multilayered needs of alternative school students (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004). Further, according to the American School Counselor Association’s *National Model* (2005), professional school counselors (PSCs) work to remove barriers that impede student success; PSCs do so by working on multiple levels including interventions with caregivers/ parents, teachers, administrators, and community partners to increase student achievement.

In effect, the systemic school relationship is simply a magnification of Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) microsystem level of the ecological model. In its original context, proponents of the theory of social ecology posited that individuals are influenced by four interactive levels that build upon each other. The microsystem

encapsulates individuals' functioning, their family systems, as well as their school and community life. The mesosystem refers to the interface between individuals' microsystem and exosystem. The exosystem are larger systems that affect the individual, such as school peers, governing school boards, or extended family, and the macrosystem are broad forces that affect individuals, such as social class or gender.

In its traditional form a child's microsystem consists of: (a) home (parents and/or caregivers), (b) school (teachers, school counselors, principals), (c) peers (school friends, neighborhood friends), and (d) spiritual community (ministers, adults, peers). However, for the purposes of this article, the microsystem will be enhanced to include those individuals who are the greatest influence in the day-to-day school functioning, which will still include the home, school, and peers, but also includes the school principals and administration as a member of the microsystem.

It is important to note when discussing systemic relationships, particularly a circuit such as the systemic school relationship, to mention feedback loops. Feedback loops are defined as "circular mechanisms whose purpose is to introduce information about a system's output back to its input, in order to alter, correct and ultimately govern the systems functioning and ensure its viability," (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008 p.85). These methods of introducing information can be called either negative feedback loops or positive feedback loops. Negative feedback loops serve to make sure that the system maintains a level of stability if it is threatened with some type of change element. In contrast, positive feedback loops help to promote change within the system by introducing new information. The idea of both positive and negative feedback loops will

be further discussed in relationship to the systemic school relationship in the following sections.

### Dysfunction in the Systemic School Relationship

The decision to place a child in alternative school comes with the gravity of understanding that this determination may have a profound effect on the student in question. Placement of a child in an alternative school setting is an indicator that something in the systemic school relationship is not working. More than likely, the *something* that isn't working is many small issues that, when put together, have worked to erode the integrity of the relationship. When the school, family and student find themselves at the place of the alternative school, there is the underlying knowledge that other roads for engaging the system to aid in the student's success in school have been exhausted and there will not be many more opportunities to salvage the systemic school relationship. Examples of avenues that may have been utilized--albeit unsuccessfully--include disciplinary action, counseling, additional supports such as mentoring or instructional modification, plans implemented by school building level child study teams, and behavior intervention plans.

As previously mentioned, the alternative school setting is particularly challenging for multiple reasons. Students in attendance are generally considered at-risk for academic failure, may have a history of problematic behavior, and have not responded to traditional methods of education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; Oregon Department of Education, 2006; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008). More importantly, these students have low levels of positive engagement in the

school setting in general. For them, school is not a place to experience success, social acceptance, or a sense of belonging.

There is evidence to suggest that students who do not succeed in school are consistently found to perceive that their teachers do not care about them (Goff & Goddard, 1999; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Kester's (1994) action-research study of belonging among African-American middle school students found that although close teacher-student bonds are imperative to a sense of belonging, most schools are not structured in such a way that fosters these types of close relationships. Without the benefit of these important relationships, some students can become disenfranchised from the group leading to a subculture that can promote low academic achievement and poor social functioning (Kagan, 1990; Ma, 2003). The importance of the classroom teacher as a model of functional relationship building between individuals is not lost on students, their perceptions of how teachers treat specific students in the classroom gives children the social cues that they need to differentiate between the "haves" and the "have nots" in the educational system. These social situations can affect children's perceptions of mattering, which is the need to feel significant to others, and can greatly influence student's self-concept and overall wellness (Dixon-Rayle, 2004). When these issues are exacerbated by other contributing factors, such as familial dysfunction, lower socio-economic status, and other types of minority status, the path to becoming labeled "at-risk" becomes clearer.

Moreover, these students may also be members of families who also have lower levels of positive school engagement due to a lack or loss of trust in the school system (DeBlois & Place, 2007). Antecedents to the lack of trust can include parents and

caregivers feeling that they are only contacted when there is a problem at school, they are asked to attend parent-teacher conferences in which they have a passive role, or they are confronted with a system that reflects the values and beliefs of the majority culture, which may not be congruent with their own values and needs for their children (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman & Vandiver, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Adams and Christenson (2000) maintain that parents and caregivers are reticent because their relationship with the school system does not have reliable and predictable patterns of interaction. Unfortunately, initial interactions can develop into patterns of behavior that continue to be perceived by parents as negative and uncaring, which can lead to ongoing dysfunction in the relationship between home and school, i.e. the negative feedback loop.

For example, at a school where the first author worked, a student was chastised by a school teacher and other staff member for not having a home phone number. The fourth grader was told by these personnel that she needed to make sure that a home phone was installed because it was unacceptable for the school to not have a contact number, as if the nine year old had control over the situation! In this case both the student and parents felt judged by a school that made no allowances for their financially strained circumstances. In an example such as this, negative communication patterns can lead to ongoing strain and misunderstanding in systemic school relationship.

To some degree, the previous example also illustrates the authoritative, expert role that traditional educators have been expected to fulfill. As the “expert” in education, teachers are often responsible for prescribing appropriate educational interventions for students without including families in planning (Epstein, 1995). As the teacher takes the

authority role, parents and caregivers are left out of the educational loop with regard to their children. When parents are contacted because of a deviation in the educational plan, school counselors may be circumvented and uninvolved in parent teacher meetings, where they could be very useful in facilitating school-home communications, consultation and collaboration (Erford, 2007). Rather, students are labeled as at-risk, parents are seen as uncaring, and the school system is perceived to be judgmental of the home dynamic.

In many alternative school settings, discipline is strongly enforced in an effort to maintain control of students. These punitive policies may be a short-term solution to problematic behavior, but studies show that these measures are not long term solutions to helping students become more socially and academically successful (Lehr & Lange, 2003). In some ways, the alternative school setting can be likened to a triage unit of a hospital, administrators and teachers involved are highly skilled in variety of interventions, and they can work to react to students' specialized needs in a rapid and responsive manner. While these skills are extremely valuable in this type of setting, where student problems can be long-term issues that manifest themselves in explosive ways, they can also be reactionary, with personnel looking to rapidly de-escalate situations and maintain control in the classroom setting. However, this type of intervention does not lend itself to school staff and students working toward what the school environment could be like if a cohesive plan was developed for a functional school environment.

There are several factors that can contribute to the atmosphere of a school. Included in these is the nature of the relationships between faculty, staff, students and

families; the leadership style of principals and administrators; the nature of the relationship between the community and the school; the support and involvement of stakeholders, such as local government and businesses; and programming aimed at increasing caring within the school setting (Ray, Lambie, & Curry, 2007). For the purposes of this article, school climate is defined as “the set of internal characteristics that distinguish one school from another and influenced the behaviors of each school’s member,” (Hoy and Miskel, 2005 p. 185). The definition itself evokes the power that a system of individuals can have to influence the group as a whole. This power has the ability to affect individuals for the better or worse, and in the case of alternative schools, disruptive behavior, negative mindsets of both students and teachers, and an overall atmosphere of failure can pervade the climate, making school an unhappy and dysfunctional place for all members involved.

There are multiple studies that suggest that school climate can be an ameliorating factor for students who are at-risk for failure (Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Ma, 2003). On a basic social level, schools can provide a sense of belonging for students, which Maslow (1962) identifies as the need that must be satisfied before other needs can be met. For most students, a sense of belonging begins in the classroom, with the students’ relationship with their teachers. Teachers are instrumental in setting the tone of the classroom which they do through their expectations of students’ achievement, how consistently and fairly discipline is given to all students, and the types of labels that are assigned to students.

The dynamics between the members of the systemic school relationship, students, parent, teachers and administrators, can be very difficult to negotiate.

Because PSCs are trained to understand and promote positive interactions between individuals, they are uniquely qualified to implement interventions that can improve systemic school relationships. What makes this particularly important in the type two alternative school setting is the level of erosion that has taken place among the various relationships which may result in feelings of mistrust and anger. The following section will discuss some strategies that PSC's can use to improve these relationships in the alternative school setting.

### Promoting Successful Systemic School Relationships in Alternative Schools *Systemic Interventions*

The interventions included in the section are designed to help PSC's effectively engage with the many individuals that make up the school community. However, "it is important to keep in mind that youth do not disconnect from traditional developmental pathways because of the failure of any one system," (Aron, 2006 p. 2). Therefore, it is equally important to stress that the following is designed to be implemented in a *systemic* manner. That is to say, utilizing one intervention strategy may not be successful, because these interventions are designed for use in *conjunction* with one another. In effect, these interventions work to create a positive feedback loop, where new information is introduced to the system in order to create a change.

The ecology of a type two alternative school is such that students are there for their "last chance," and their social support networks are floundering for a way to help them stay in school. Reengaging the members of the systemic school relationship can be one avenue to help these students. PSCs can function as a mechanism getting new information, i.e. beginning more positive interactions between the members of the

system, in order to create changes-the result being students' achieving higher levels of academic and social success. Therefore, it is important for counselors to be active leaders in their schools so that they can implement multilevel interventions that involve all members of the school community.

### *Professional School Counselor Leaders*

Leadership is a major theme of professional school counseling (ASCA, 2005) and in order to promote change in the systemic school relationship, school counselors need to be leaders in the alternative school setting. The dynamics of alternative schools are such that innovative practices and creative solutions to issues that arise are part of the school counselor's daily routine. In order to execute these practices effectively, school counselors must first understand the expectations that school principals have for their position, learn to advocate for modification of their role in the school to align with the *ASCA National Model* (2005), and implement interventions that can create systemic change within the alternative school climate (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007).

In order to be effective agents of change within any school, PSCs should promote a positive working relationship with the principal and other administrative leaders. In a recent qualitative research study on facilitating counselor-principal relationships, study participants, principals identified by ASCA, were asked to summarize specific qualities that made their relationship with their school counselor successful. Study participants overwhelmingly responded that they were partners with their school counselor, and that their relationship was marked by trust, good communication, positive regard for each other, and the counselor's empathy to the principal's needs (Dollarhide, Smith & Lemberger, 2007). Although relationship building

between principals and school counselors may not always be an easy path, it is important that both make an effort to create a healthy and productive working relationship.

In addition to examining relationships, Dollarhide and colleagues (2007) also investigated principals' expectations of PSCs role in the school setting. Since most study participants had no formalized knowledge of the specific role of the school counselor, it is interesting to note that most of their expectations were in-line with duties outlined in the ASCA national model. Overwhelmingly, principals agreed that PSCs should work to create connections between children, parents, school teachers and staff. PSCs were thought to be instrumental in creating a positive school climate by working as systemic change agents, solving problems, advocating for children, and working with teachers on behavior issues (Dollarhide et al., 2007). Moreover, principals stated that they expected PSCs to be more assertive in advocating for changes that would promote quality programs for their school, be it changes in school counselor's role, creating innovative interventions that promote family school collaboration, or helping build more collegial relationships between teachers.

To this end, PSCs need to assert their status as leaders within the school, create programmatic goals that are in-line with the mission of the school, and utilize school teachers and staff in an effective and efficient manner (Lewis & Borunda, 2006). It is not necessary for school counselors to take on all systems level interventions as another role responsibility; rather they can collaborate and coordinate services to ensure students' needs are being met through effective school-student-family ties (Erford,

2007). The next section will show how school counselors can be instrumental in working towards more functional and healthy systemic school relationships.

### *Administration*

In order to have a more successful systemic school relationship, principals must work to create a positive and supportive school climate. However, goals for working towards a more positive environment must be clearly articulated and understandable to all members of the system (Kelley, Thornton & Daugherty, 2005). Before goals can be outlined, school counselors should work in collaboration with principals and administrators to conduct a comprehensive self-study to ascertain whether their alternative school has the elements needed to ensure best practices and more successful interventions with students and families (Powell, 2003).

### *Teachers and Staff*

PSC are specifically trained to be aware of, and responsive to, multicultural differences among individuals and family groups. As stated before, students placed in alternative school settings are often poor minorities, which is a sharp contrast to traditional schools that were established to teach middle class white children (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007). School teachers often teach out of a traditional paradigm, without consciously considering that their expectations reflect a value set that may not be appropriate for most students. Moreover, historical studies have shown that teachers will make generalizations regarding students' abilities based on family structure, socioeconomic status, and mental health status (Amatea, Smith-Adcock & Villares, 2006). Therefore, school counselors can be proactive in meeting with teachers to discuss how their values and expectations may not be appropriate for their students.

Teachers and counselors can work together to determine how teachers can augment their practices (i.e. through culturally relevant teaching strategies) to work collaboratively with families to help make their relationship with the school more successful. One way to accomplish this is through staff professional development that the school counselor can provide as part of a comprehensive school counseling program.

PSCs can help in these situations by working with teachers to help them gain insight into how their values are affecting their teaching, and in turn the school environment for both students and parents. School counselors can introduce the idea of the family resiliency perspective, which capitalizes on a family's ability to overcome obstacles in order to be as functional as possible. Resiliency is a mechanism that can be used to reframe a teacher's view of students and their family life, which may not fall within the parameters of what is considered middle class values, but is a positive, qualitatively different way of functioning nonetheless.

Consultation is another method of intervention that school counselors can use to help alternative school teachers (Erford, 2007). A study by Ray (2007) found that when school counselors met with teachers for brief, ten minute conferences to discuss students' needs and classroom challenges, participants experienced a greater level of support from staff, felt better able to cope with management challenges, and were overall more satisfied with their daily classroom performance. Furthermore, teachers' alleviation of stress led to lower levels of their perceived tension between themselves and more challenging students, resulting in a report of more quality relationships with their students. This intervention is particularly important as it relates back to Kester's

action research study presented earlier in this article stating that students need to feel a bond with their teachers in order to foster a sense of belonging in school.

Finally, school counselors can work with teachers to help make schools a more family centric environment (Erford, 2007). Parents and families who have a low level of positive engagement in the school setting may avoid school because of the potential view that it is a negative place, where communication is largely negative. However, introducing activities that make school more family friendly can be a first step in re-engaging in a more positive family-school interaction cycle. For example, instead of holding a tradition parent-teacher conference day, alternative schools could invite both parents and children to come in to discuss triumphs and challenges that are happening everyday in the classroom (Amatea et al., 2004). Students could be given the first ten minutes of the conference session to lead parents and/or caregivers in the conference, showing their workspace, explaining daily routines, and showing where class friends work as well.

The second portion of the conference could focus on issues that the child is having in the classroom, not necessarily to place blame, but in an air of attempting to create solutions to the everyday problems that are inhibiting academic and social success for the student. Parents, teachers and students could all be involved in this process of problem solving, each with an integral role in helping the student gain greater levels of success. This process also allows the student to see how the entire system, parents, teachers, student, must be accountable for their part, and also helps the student to see that he/she can take part of the problem solving and has a level of control over the situation. These meetings could also be considered a first step on a

path to more successful communications that are founded on trust and mutual support to the goal of helping students to achieve. One other possibility is to procure grant funding to provide transportation to school conferences and functions, child care for parents wishing to attend but who have small children, and meals for families participating in school activities during evening hours.

### *Families and Caregivers*

In order to help reactivate family trust in the systemic school relationship, parents must be engaged as experts on their children and allowed to talk about their home experiences (Amatea, Smith-Adcock & Villares, 2006; Davis & Lambie, 2005). In effect, there must be an active effort to reduce parental feelings of shame, blame and guilt over their child's placement in the alternative school and a conscious effort to help caregivers gain control over their child's social and educational development. Some of this can be accomplished by utilizing the family-centric parent teacher meetings discussed in the previous section, but another mechanism for activating parental involvement is to encourage more frequent positive communications between the alternative school and home. Teachers can send home brief notes or make phone calls about a positive event that happened in the classroom, parents can be encouraged to call teachers regarding school rituals, such as homework or in-class projects, as well as concerns that they have regarding their child's behavior at home. As teachers and parents move towards more open communication with each other, hopefully a cognitive shift can occur for members of the systemic school relationship, which can allow parents to feel a greater level of control over their child's education. Moreover, it may be a catalyst for fostering greater levels of parental involvement in the school setting.

*Multidisciplinary Teams*

Alternative school students can be successful if members of the systemic school relationship are in agreement on appropriate educational and socio-developmental interventions that will help students to succeed in their new environment. School counselors can help in these meetings with parents, teachers, principals, and students by addressing key elements. First of all, parents and students can be shown the goals and mission of the school for a healthier and proactive systemic school relationship and engaged in a discussion about their impressions and reservations about this new way of conceptualizing their roles in the system. It is an important first step to have an open and honest dialogue with families about dysfunction in the systemic school relationship so that momentum can be built to work towards a healthier relationship.

A side benefit to this discussion could be greater insight for principals, teachers and counselors as to the environment in which the family is living, how they are functioning in their particular situation, what they do well and what issues they have with which the school system can help them. For example, alternative school students are often diagnosed as emotionally or behaviorally disabled (EBD). Many EBD students can benefit from more intensive therapeutic interventions than are being offered through mainstream schools and perhaps even the specialized alternative environment. School counselors can work to develop school based counseling services with outside agencies in order to meet this specific need (Canfield, Ballard, Osmon, & McCune, 2004).

### *Students*

School counselors can also engage alternative school students in creating a feeling of belonging to their classroom and school environment. Studies have shown that students who have a higher sense of belonging to schools tend to perform at an academically higher level than their less engaged counter-parts (Ma, 2003). Alternative schools tend to have more intimate settings than their traditional counter-parts; classrooms for most grades are self-contained. While students may be extremely resistant to their new environment, it does offer counselors and teachers the opportunity to begin building a community of learners. Students within the classroom also have the opportunity to socialize amongst themselves and learn more appropriate ways of interaction.

A study by Edwards and Mullins (2003) found that one way to create a sense of community ownership within the classroom is to hold problem solving meetings. Once a week, teacher and students can gather together to solve problems that are disruptive to the functioning of the classroom. Throughout the week students and teacher can write down problems that can be placed in the Problem Solving Box. On the designated meeting day, the teacher and students will examine the problems and choose the ones that can be solved through a classroom brainstorming session. It should be noted that some problems may be the results of individual differences in the room, and may need to be resolved between the individuals, depending on the issue. All students are invited to participate in the brainstorming session, coming up with different solutions to the problems. The class may take a vote on the way the problem can be resolved, using the most popular one as the solution.

These problem solving meetings function to build students' involvement in the day to day functioning of the classroom. Moreover, encouraging active participation in brain storming sessions can help to increase students' sense of control over their situation, thereby leading to an increase in their self-efficacy. At first, the school counselor may want to help the classroom teacher to initiate and conduct the meeting, but after the first few meetings, the class will become familiar with the format and the counselor's help will probably no longer be needed.

#### *Suggestions for future research*

Part of the responsibility of professional school counselors is to conduct school wide needs assessments and outcome evaluations as indicated by the ASCA national model. Specific to the aforementioned interventions, PSC's could create a brief survey to be distributed to students, parents/caregivers, faculty/staff/school leaders, and community stakeholders to get an indication of which interventions are the most appropriate and feasible for the type two alternative school setting. Coupling quantitative data with anecdotal or qualitative data could be even more beneficial to gaining a better picture of needs within the systemic school relationship. School counselors could set up problem solving meetings, as mentioned in the student intervention section of this article. Instead of limiting these meetings to classrooms, PSC's could utilize some faculty meeting time and set up a time where interested parents could come and participate in sharing their thoughts. These two initial data collection strategies could yield a great deal of information that could guide the system as to how current school policies and procedures are helping and hindering students' learning processes. As PSC's are guided by this information throughout the academic

year, they can keep an ongoing journal or log of their impressions and experiences of these interventions, along with strategies for modification. Finally, at the conclusion of programming (student return to mainstream school), school counselors could conduct a brief exit interview regarding student's and parent/caregivers' experience of the alternative school. A similar closing activity could be utilized at the end of the academic year with remaining students, parent/caregivers, administrator, and teachers/school staff. These types of action research interventions could add a great deal of data-driven information to the general knowledge regarding the needs of type two alternative school students and their families, which is still greatly lacking.

### Conclusion

The systemic school relationship refers to the interlocking layers of individuals that comprise the everyday experiences of students, such as teachers, caregivers and administrators. Students placed in type two alternative schools have experienced a significant break down in these relationships and as a result many of these students are considered at-risk for school failure. The purpose of this article was to (a) examine the components of the systemic school relationship, (b) give consideration to challenges for alternative students in regard to this relationship, and (c) provide suggestions for interventions aimed at engaging all stakeholders in improving this relationship. It is particularly important that PSC's not only engage in examining students' need in a systemic manner, but also utilize interventions that are intended to introduce change to the entire system in order to create holistic effects. To this end, it is also important that PSC's utilize assessment strategies, such as action research, that can work to better inform not only individual practice but can also be shared to inform the practice of other

school counselors in alternative school settings. Professional school counselors may be the ongoing purveyors of hope for alternative school students; as such, it is crucial that the needs of these students, and stakeholders, be addressed as comprehensively as possible.

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