

**Remarks to the Learning Choices Expo
May 26, 2006
Maroochydore, Queensland**

**Laudan Aron
The Urban Institute, Washington, DC**

I'd like to begin my comments today with a small confession of sorts...

As a researcher who has worked on many parts of the human service system—income support and safety net programs, justice system programs, health and disability programs—I have found education an especially challenging system to study. And there are several reasons for this...

First, most of us bring a whole host of strong personal “opinions” to the topic of education—whether grounded in our own educational experiences or those of our families; in what we read about schools, and schooling, and students; in what current social or economic ills we attribute to public education; and what we expect of the education system in future ... as parents, neighbors, employers, voters, and even as world citizens. We need to recognize this quality, both in ourselves and in others we are trying to learn from and influence.

Second, education is fundamentally a local, community-level phenomenon... meaning that the objective reality of an educational encounter or experience happens locally with each and every teacher and his/her students. It is also perceived, evaluated, and understood locally by the community surrounding this student and teacher. And so the tremendous diversity of educational experiences, such as they are, also makes it very tricky to study education at a higher multi-district, state, and even national level—the level at which many policies, funding, and other critical forces that shape the educational system are set.

Finally, the first two reasons I've mentioned—the many opinions we bring to education and its local-level nature—along with the high importance most of us place on the role of

education make it a very political issue. This observation may be obvious but it is not a popular thing to say. And yet I think it needs to be said, and acknowledged, and managed. Anyone interested in playing a part in changing the educational system—whether you call it reforming or improving or diversifying—has to understand the political reality of such an undertaking. And I’m not speaking here about “the left” or “the right” because I’m not convinced either of these groups (at least their American versions) have a firm handle on how to build the best education system for the 21st century. Nor, should I add, do *I* have any real answers to the political question ... I just know it is a critical dimension of the discussion.

Despite these challenges, I do see some promising directions that can guide us in our efforts to improve the system, especially for the very large numbers of students for whom “traditional” schools do not work.

Our main goal should be to develop a multiplicity of high quality educational options for large numbers of youth, at scale, without sacrificing excellence. This means that all young people learn what they *need* to learn, learn what they *would like* to learn, are taught with respect and dignity and expertise, and given genuine opportunities to develop a sense of accomplishment and a lifelong love of learning. If we can achieve these objectives, then I think our work is done, at least on the education side of the school-to-work transition.

That said—we don’t have any universal agreement about what diversifying educational options means, much less how to do it. The reality is that no single set of prescribed educational routines or approaches will ever enable all children to learn, at least not at the level required for success in the 21st century. As evidence, just look at the very high dropout rates we are witnessing in the US. Researchers are arguing about just how high the rate is, but everyone agrees it is unacceptably high (with as many as one-third of all young people not graduating from HS). Kids are not just dropping out, they’re also being “pushed out”—as a result of high-stakes testing and zero-tolerance discipline policies that

alienate many children. That's the traditional end of the continuum... the side failing many students in need and producing the demand for the "alternatives."

At the other end—the alternative or supply end—we have a dizzying array of alternative schools and programs (many wonderful ones, some terrible ones) and certainly not enough to meet the need.

How big is the need? Well in 2003, there were about 1.1 million youth aged 16-19 and another 2.4 million youth aged 20-24 without a HS diploma or GED and not enrolled in school — that's a total of 3.5 million young people.

The educational needs of these youth vary considerably. Based on her work with the Chicago public school system, Melissa Roderick has described four distinct groups of young people in need of educational alternatives:

- Students who have fallen “off track” simply because they have gotten into trouble—because adolescents tend to be adolescents—and need short-term systems of recovery to route them back into high schools. (The goal of getting them back into regular high schools is both appropriate and realistic for this group.)
- Students who are prematurely transitioning to adulthood either because they are pregnant or parenting, or have other home situations that do not allow them to attend school regularly (e.g., caring for younger siblings, complications with the juvenile justice system, etc.)
- Yet another group are students who are substantially off track educationally, but who are older and are returning to obtain the credits they need to transition into community colleges or other post-secondary programs very rapidly. These include, for example, older individuals who are just a few credits away from graduation (many of whom dropped out at age 16 or 17), or are transitioning out of the jail system, or have had a pregnancy and are now ready to complete their secondary schooling.
(Rodderick notes that these students are currently populating most alternative education programs in large urban areas—they are a very diverse group and tend to be well served by the existing alternative school system.)
- The final group is students who are substantially behind educationally—they have significant problems, very low reading-levels, and are often way over age for grade. Many of these children have been retained repeatedly and a number of

them have come out of special education. They include 17- or 18-year-olds with third and fourth grade reading levels who have never graduated from 8th grade (or who have gone to high school for a few years but have never actually accumulated any credits).

Rodderick notes that this is a very large group of kids, and most school systems do not have any programs that can meet their needs.

We have no real sense of the size of each these groups Rodderick has identified. Nor do we have a good accounting of the numbers or types of alternative schools or programs that can serve them... One estimate puts the number at about 20,000 nationally, mostly for kids at risk of school failure.

Another quite recent estimate of the number of full-time, federally funded education, employment, and national service programs available to teen-aged high school dropouts is about 100,000 (based on an estimated total of 300,000 opportunities for the 2.4 million low-income 16-24 year olds who are out of school without a diploma or with a diploma but unemployed).

We also know from a 2001 survey of public school districts that 39% of them offered at least one program or school for at-risk students in grades 1 through 12: these make up about 11,000 programs serving about 612K youth. In more than half of these school districts, the alternative options are oversubscribed and a third were unable to enroll *any* new students in the prior year. So it's pretty clear from what we know that demand far exceeds supply.

We also still figuring out how to describe the range of alternative education programs we have. One popular typology that continues to be used despite being quite old now is that of Mary Anne Raywid.

- Her first type—what are known as “popular innovations” or “true educational alternatives”—offer full-time, multiyear, education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas. Characteristics include divergence from standard school organization and practices (deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, and teacher and student

empowerment); an especially caring, professional staff; small size and small classes; and a personalized, whole-student approach. Models include schools-within-schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums.

The other two types identified by Raywid are more correctional in focus, one being primarily disciplinary (“last chance” or “soft jail” programs) and the other therapeutic (“treatment” programs).

- The disciplinary programs aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Students typically do not choose to attend, but are sent to the school for specified time periods or until behavior requirements are met. Since placement is short-term, the curriculum is limited to a few basic, required courses or is entirely supplied by the "home school" as a list of assignments. Familiar models include last-chance schools and in-school suspension.
- The final group consists of short-term but therapeutic programs for students with social and emotional problems that create academic and behavioral barriers to learning. Although they often target specific populations— those needing counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation—students can choose not to participate.

Often programs blend elements of more than one of these types—still they are helpful to think about since they remind us of the many reasons why students disconnect from mainstream schools in the first place, and they can remind us of the many programs out there that we may not want to encourage or replicate.

Traditional, mainstream options are also not working for many students who stay in school — we know this from surveying high school students about their experiences and attitudes. And so the new options are not just for “poor performers” or students who we might label as unlikely to succeed based on their individual, family, or community circumstances. They are also for students from relatively advantaged backgrounds whose educational needs are simply not “mainstream.” These kids include cutting edge innovators—the next Bill Gates’ of the world—who have different ways of thinking and learning. This diversity among the students needing educational alternatives is an important part of managing the message politically.

The need for multiple options is also confirmed by recent advances in neuroscience: our new understanding of the brain and its development and plasticity, especially early in childhood and later in adolescence, along with Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences and Mel Levine's research on "All Kinds of Minds" show that there are clearly different ways of learning, ways that need to be recognized and respected as we tailor educational experiences for different groups of young people. Of course any well-trained, experienced teacher knows this to be true, but we are now beginning to understand the brain science behind it all.

So we need to move beyond the one-size-fits-all/industrial revolution model of the school by developing high-quality educational options for all youth, learn how to match students to the programs that can best serve them *before* they experience failure, and educate the larger community about this new way. This is what we do with modern medicine... it's what we need to do with education.

Diversifying educational options requires solid research. A key aspect to diversification, and cultivating support for it, is ensuring and demonstrating that the alternatives are indeed high quality. This means that they—you—need to be subject to rigorous evaluation by independent researchers like myself! Part of the rigor may involve activities like random assignment (at least among the sub-group of students for whom a given program is designed to serve) so that successful outcomes cannot be attributed to selection bias... meaning that a program is not just succeeding because it has "creamed" the very best or most motivated or most "fill in the blank" students among all those who might attend. It also means developing a systematic strategy for measuring and monitoring a variety of fine-grained measures of treatment and outcomes, including outcomes that may not be central to the program's mission as you see it. And programs will also need to prove their success in new and larger communities and under leaders other than their visionary originators.

Truly successful alternative education programs must be able to demonstrate their impact on a variety of possible educational outcomes: ¹

- Educational Attainment
- Grade Repetition
- Achievement Motivation
- Academic Self-Concept
- School Engagement
- Good Study Skills
- Basic Skills: Reading Writing and Mathematics
- Higher-Order Thinking Skills
- Oral and Interpersonal Communication Skills
- Language Skills
- Arts Participation Skills and Knowledge
- Computer Technology Skills
- Research Related

Right now, research on alternative education programs is still very young. We are still learning about how to define alternative education, who needs what alternatives, and how to identify and demonstrate quality and performance. We have a growing number of case studies and lists of promising practices. The lists are surprisingly consistent and very inspiring and describe educational qualities we would want for all students, but they don't really tell us that much about how to transform the system or bring a handful of seemingly successful programs to scale.

We also know there is a tremendous amount of variation in the quality of alternative schools. To advance the field, we need to acknowledge that like some mainstream schools, some alternative schools should probably be shut down immediately, while there are others that are among the very best and doing everything we expect of our schools.

¹ Other youth development domains—health/safety, social/emotional well being, & self-sufficiency.

New research on how to distinguish high- and low-quality programs will be very useful in directing future investments and disinvestments in these systems.

Interestingly, high-quality programs at both ends of traditional-alternative continuum are eyeing each other with a blend of interest and skepticism. Hopefully, the two ends will influence each other in positive ways, will become more integrated (for students) and provide communities with a reliable range of high quality educational options.

Ultimately, we should be able to dispense with the labels “mainstream” and “alternative” altogether.

I think the changes that those of you working in the “alternative education” field are wanting—more widespread recognition of the need for alternatives, more respect for alternative education students and teachers, identification of effective programs and approaches, more funding, more stable funding, etc. —will come about incrementally, and in one community at a time. The nature and timing of these changes will be affected not only by the quality of new educational options on offer (which is critical), but also by:

- The ability to match students to programs (which implies a balance between the educational needs of students and educational offerings at the community level);
- The ability to demonstrate to objective observers the quality, educational effectiveness, and cost effectiveness of the new options;
 - A single high standard for all students;
 - Equitable per-pupil funding;
 - A data-driven accountability system for all programs/schools.
- The ability to replicate top programs and bring them to scale while retaining efficiency and effectiveness; and of course,
- Managing the political landscape (which these other things will help with).

I suspect that most of the high-quality educational alternatives needed for the 21st century education system already exist, even if we don’t know which ones, exactly how they work, or for whom—researchers, like myself, can help with these questions. Indeed,

many of these programs are here, participating in this Expo. But an equal if not greater challenge needed to effect system change will be disseminating knowledge, educating the public, building coalitions, securing resources, and cultivating political support outside the narrow boundaries of the alternative education community. This is an ambitious but exciting agenda and I look forward to bringing all that I have learned here back to the States and helping this agenda along.

Thank you for having me here today.