

K-12 Alternative Education Programming Policy Brief

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## **Executive Summary**

The Maine State Legislature under Maine Revised Statutes states that the Alternative Education's primary purpose is to provide at-risk students with curricula and assessments in a setting designed to effectively meet the student's academic, social, and relational needs. [PL, 2007, c. 667, §1 (NEW).] and 1-C. The definition under this statute is that Alternative learning as an educational option that a public school or publicly supported program offers at-risk students by offering some combination of the following: alternative education programs; small class size; flexible scheduling; relevant alternative curricula and assessment; mentoring adults; skilled teachers; a focus on social, emotional and relationship skills; collaboration among home, school and social service agencies; and any other measures designed to accommodate the needs of at-risk students. [PL, 2007, c. 667, §2 (NEW).] ([Title 20-A: EDUCATION](#))

The "At-risk student" is defined by the The Maine State Legislature under Maine Revised Statutes as a student who: A. not meeting the requirements for promotion to the next grade level or graduation from high school; [PL 2007, c. 667, §3 (NEW).] B. Is at risk for dropping out of school; [PL 2007, c. 667, §3 (NEW).] C. Is truant; or [PL 2011, c. 614, §2 (AMD).] D. Is economically disadvantaged as signified by qualification for the National School Lunch Program under 7 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 210 (2007). [PL, 2007, c. 667, §3 (NEW).] [PL 2011, c. 614, §2 (AMD).] 3.04 ([Title 20-A:EDUCATION](#))

Alternative Programs according to the Maine Department Commissioner of Education, states that a school administrative unit may establish or participate in one or more programs as alternatives to the regular course of study to meet the needs of students at risk. Alternative programs shall support student social and behavioral development in addition to performance on the content standards of the system of Learning Results. (Maine Department of Education, Chapter 127: Instructional Program, Assessment and Diploma Requirements, Commissioner of Education, October 10, 2002)

These programs shall have stated goals, objectives, and procedures for implementing and assessing their effectiveness. Such programs may include interventions such as programs outside the school administrative unit, specialized instructional settings, extended or shortened school day, or extended school year, and may be scheduled outside of the regular school day, if appropriate. (Maine Department of Education, Chapter 127)

## **Alternative Education and Drop Out Prevention**

“Maine’s high school graduation rate is consistently above the national average, in part, because of Maine’s strong statutory support for dropout prevention and educational alternatives. We can reach Maine’s goal of achieving a 90% high school graduation rate by ensuring that existing resources, protections, and research based interventions reach our most vulnerable students.

School and Student Supports provides technical assistance to school dropout prevention committees, promotes best practices in student support and alternative education programming, and works with partner agencies to make sure that students experiencing educational disruption remain on track to graduate.

## **Alternative Education**

The Office of School and Student Supports provides technical assistance to school dropout prevention committees, promotes best practices in student support and alternative education programming, and works with partner agencies to make sure that students experiencing educational disruption remain on track to graduate.”

([MDOE Attendance and Truancy](#))

The current Gorham School District's Alternative School Program Policy recognizes that students are at risk because they are not meeting the requirements for promotion to the next grade level or graduating from high school. The policy also states that the student(s) are at risk of dropping out, habitually truant, or are economically disadvantaged, as signified by qualification for the National School Lunch Program under Federal regulations.

The policy says that when there is an identified need, the Gorham School Department may establish one or more alternative education programs aligned with Maine's system for Learning Results. The purpose of the current policy for alternative education programs within the Gorham School Department is not to substitute for or an alternative to special education services. It clearly states that any student identified through the IEP team as having a disability and required special education services the student will be provided appropriate services within the alternative education program as specified in their IEP. ([ihbh alternative school programs](#))

## **Introduction**

Research literacy reveals that students in the 21st Century are more likely to show signs of disengagement from the curriculum that does not relate to the real world. Information is coming to students faster, and the schools are not able to keep up. This brief is requesting a revision to the current Gorham School Alternative Education policy with the sole purpose of adding a clear vision, purpose, and programming that will assist alternative learners throughout the entire Gorham School District. The current policy directs and defines solely students not making credit at the secondary level and fails to provide a more direct purpose of alternative programming, identification, and program implementation goals for the at-risk K-12 students attending Gorham Schools.

In contrast to the high school where students have choices of electives and in the middle school students are offered choices of clubs and where to sit in the lunchroom, students at the elementary schools have only one program for all students. (page 135, Tewksbury) This one program may not engage diverse learning styles effectively for academic success and due to the one size fits all of elementary schools may often increase student behavior challenges within the classroom. Thus the reason for many schools to seek to provide student-interest, unique hands-on curriculum that effectively engages and supports the at-risk elementary school student. (page 134, Edgar-Smith and Palmer)

Although in its infancy, Village Elementary School has been a leader in creating and actualizing a vision for success for our younger most at-risk learners in the form of alternative programming. The Village School Alternative Education programming is continuously evolving and adding more student interest learning opportunities for our deeply disenfranchised learners. It serves as a model for the other K-5 schools within our district and other districts looking to create a K-5 Alternative Programming structure. However, throughout K-12, the systemic structure has been more challenging to clarify. It would benefit by establishing a centralized vision and overall leadership, guided by a policy to extend more deeply into implications for implementation across all Gorham School District levels. (Dr. Brian Porter, Village Elementary School)

The Village Elementary Alternative education programming offers student interest learning opportunities as well as embeds Social and Emotional Learning strategies in the classroom and across content learning to the disengaged student. The specific programmings apply cooperative learning, team building, academics, and other group activities where students have the opportunity to exercise the development of personal/social/emotional life skill behaviors that are vital for successfully living within a community.



[The Village Elementary School  
Alternative Education Student Voice  
Video 2018-19 K-5th](#)

**Note: Students attending the K-5th grade alternative education programming at Village Elementary were referred through the RTI process and took a student interest survey for placement and learning needs.**

**Village Elementary School's Alternative Education Programming Data**

Dr. Brian Porter, Principal, Village Elementary School, Gorham, Maine

**Village School Alternative Education Programming Data: 2017-18**

The number of students attending Alternative Education = 25

- Academic (Real World Connection) Students = 14
- Attendance Students = 2 (overlap- (1 K-Social Skills)(1 Academic)
- Enrichment Students = 5
- Social/Emotional = 5

**Village School Alternative Education Programming Data: 2018-19**

The number of students attending Alternative Education = 59

- Academic (Real World Connection) Students = 15
- Attendance Students = 7 ((overlap- (2 K-Social Skills)(1 Academic 2)
- Enrichment Students = 33 (newspaper and art - overlap 2)
- Social/Emotional = 4

**Village School Alternative Education Programming Data: 2019-2020**

The number of students attending Alternative Education =

- Academic (Real World Connection) Students = 15
- Attendance Students = 7
- Enrichment Students = 33 (newspaper and art - overlap 2)
- Social/Emotional = 4

**Social / Emotional = K 2; 1st 4; 2nd 1 TOTAL: 7**

**Academic = 2nd 1; 3rd 3; 4th 14; 5th 9 TOTAL: 15**

**Attendance = K 2; 1st 1; 3rd 1; 4th 1; 5th 2 TOTAL: 7**

**Enrichment = 2nd 2; 3rd 6; 4th 10; 5th 14 TOTAL: 33 (newspaper, art, music & dance)**

“Although there are pods of excellence and strong student support at each grade level, there is not a defined passage for the at-risk K-12 alternative education student, thus leaving significant gaps in certain grade levels and the inability to meet alternative programming needs for at-risk students. The policy itself commits solely around students that are not attaining credit at the secondary level. Therefore, it fails to encompass the purpose of alternative programming, identification, and program implementation goals at each level. Although great things happen in different areas, creating a more systemic approach and community understanding would provide the Gorham Schools alternative program or programming more conducive and substantial learning opportunities to meet the needs of the "whole child" throughout the at-risk student's Gorham educational learning experience.” Dr. Brian Porter, Principal of Village Elementary School

For example, the transitioning 5th-grade Alternative Education programming student attends 6th grade in the traditional educational setting due to only one option that may or may not provide an appropriate learning environment due to the developmental differences between a 6th-grade students and 7th or 8th-grade students and the specific profiles of those students already enrolled in the middle school alternative education program. "Each student's profile is reviewed here and must have full support and understanding of the program. The parent(s) and the student must completely invest in the program for it to work. Alternative education should be fluid so that if students choose to unenroll and try traditional education, they have that choice. The student should also be able to choose to return to Alternative Education should the "need" arise." - Heather Whitaker, Gorham Middle School Alternative Education Teacher.

Ryan Watts, Vice Principal of Gorham High School, stated that students transitioning from the middle school to the high school would have a Response to Intervention (R.T.I.), and the Social-Emotional team evaluate the student profile. They would have created a plan with parents, students, and the staff at Gorham High School before sitting as a group to review the student profile and status before transitioning from 8th to 9th grade. "Most students enrolled at the middle school," Mr. Watts says, "would transition to Alternative Education at the high school, while others would move to different services or more traditional classes. The meeting's results would then move onto work with students, parents, and staff regarding any placement that was undecided."

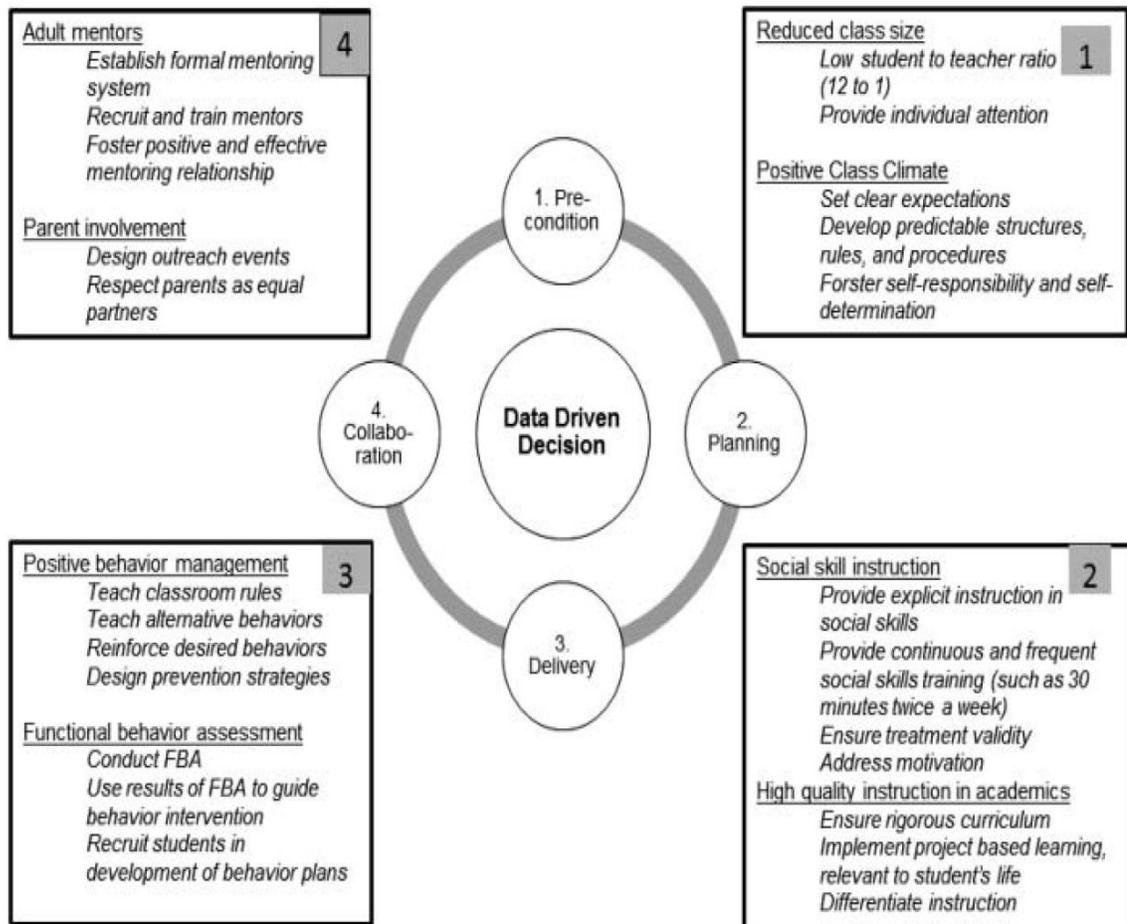
Understanding that the purpose of providing alternative education programs or programming whether conducted within a public elementary, middle or high school or a fully separated facility is not to claim superiority one over the other but to solely focus on the needs of the at-risk students within the district from Kindergarten to 12th grade. (page 134, Tewksbury)

What is typically missing in all alternative education program programming is useful data collection and structure. A recommended Alternative Multidimensional Framework can bridge research and practices providing more information that would allow collaboration with all

stakeholders (parents, students, and the community) and influence the credibility of Alternative Education programs or programming development. (page 181, McGee and Lin)

McGee and Lin share four key components that would assist and provide structure for operating an Alternative Education; 1. precondition, through the preparation of learning environments, 2. planning, includes effective teaching of academic and social-emotional skills intending to prevent failure, 3. delivery, offering individualized management and positive behavior intervention, and 4. collaboration, creating and modeling positive interpersonal relationships. (page 184, McGee and Lin) Utilizing these components as a unit and individually may effectively assist schools with a vital blueprint in building programming and programs that may effectively address the diverse needs of the at-risk student K-12. (page 185, McGee and Lin)

**Alternative Education Multidimensional Framework** (page 181, McGee and Lin)



Today's 21st Century culture, every student experiences unique challenges at every level of their lives. However, at-risk students may experience even more. Their traumatic life experiences often affect their academic and relationships negatively. Therefore, it is crucial that Alternative Education programs and programming adopt a mission to assist at-risk students. Helping them improve how they perceive themselves, safely redirect their attitudes, teach them problem-solving skills, model appropriate social behaviors, assist them in improving their grades, and as well as provide opportunities to recover credits in order to graduate.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Providing a greater understanding for the Gorham community and stakeholders, several revisions of the policy would be beneficial. The policy should include that Alternative Education program or programming in the Gorham Schools District seeks to identify at-risk students' specific needs when the inability to succeed K-12th academically at any time or level of education.

The policy revision should reflect and include a "whole child" approach stating that the Gorham School District's alternative education program or programming's mission and purpose are to assist all at-risk students with their academic, social-emotional, and intellectual needs. Through a referral, Response to Intervention (R.T.I.) process, and the development of a personal learning plan offering a small student/teacher ratio learning environments, experiential learning, and primarily focusing on student's strengths, student's interests, the building positive student-adult relationships, creating flexible scheduling, aligning high expectations, and providing constant support from a strategic team of educators and clinicians.

The Gorham School District's Alternative Education program or programming team provides at-risk students personalized learning plans, offers student empowerment, and teaches students acceptance of their responsibility for their academic success, social and emotional growth, and the attainment of workplace readiness skills at all levels K-12.

Enrollment in the Gorham Schools District K-12 Alternative Education program or programming at any level and at any time of a student's educational learning experience is not a punishment but rather an opportunity to attain success in academic and personal growth.

Finally the The Gorham School District Alternative Education program or programming policy should also state that its mission, core values, and code of conduct are also upheld and expected. Through the modeling of honoring and respecting students' voices, aligning high expectations in the pursuit of academic, social-emotional, and personal skills through the provision of a safe and supportive learning environment, ensuring that all Gorham Schools students reach individual goals as life-long learners.

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Gorham School District

Dr. Brian Porter, Principal, Village Elementary School

Heather Whitaker, Alternative Education Teacher, Gorham Middle School

Ryan Watts, Vice Principal, Gorham High School, Gorham, Maine

