



Walla Walla Public Schools - High School Facilities Task Force

Quality Alternative High Schools

We believe facility questions, in the context of alternative education, can only be answered when the school district and community have a clear vision of the importance of alternative education and embrace a well-devised plan to provide it. This is more than a “community conversation.” It is an in-depth effort to evaluate and plan. Lincoln is not an acceptable home base for alternative education programs in this district.

There will always be students who need alternative education, those who direct themselves to it and those who are not best served by a large learning environment but continue to languish there. We know students who ultimately seek alternative education begin to lose ground early on, sometimes before entering school. Intervention strategies should be based on assessments of individual students throughout their K12 academic career. Alternative education addresses grades six through twelve and must be recognized as a viable part of the system, properly funded and in proper facilities. We believe Lincoln has or will become, perhaps more by default than plan, the “second high school.” If this is the case, shouldn’t we actually plan for this and do it right? If Lincoln does evolve into a “second high school,” there will still be a need for alternative education at all levels, including middle school.

The factors affecting quality alternative education closely mirror those of the more traditional high school. There are many successful alternative education models in districts of similar size and demographics to Walla Walla but there are some important distinctions. We believe high school students will become more complex. Poverty, language, and family and cultural differences will always present unique challenges for students who are best served in an alternative learning program. Facility requirements are much like a traditional high school, but scaled for the smaller class sizes and school sizes typical of exemplary alternative high schools. Many alternative high schools operate for extended hours and some offer year-around programs. These schools may need additional lighting and night time safety and security features.

In an article [Stacey Rosenkrantz Aronson 1995] read by the subcommittee, “true educational alternatives are based on the theory that all students can learn if provided with the right educational environment. These programs strive to meet students’ needs in order to help them succeed.” Exemplary programs usually incorporate many of the following features: choice in involvement (students, teachers, support staff, administrators); focus on the whole student (academic, personal, emotional, social); warm, caring relationships (with a focus on a supportive peer culture); expanded teacher roles (mentors, advisors, personal & career/life counsellors); academic innovation (giving teachers flexibility in design & method strategies); sense of community (that fosters positive relationships among students, teachers, staff); and high student expectations (allowing for flexibility according to student needs).

Successful organizational structure includes: small size (small school with class size of not more than 15:1); relative autonomy (students, teachers, support staff have a voice in management decisions); comprehensive programs (experiential, vocational classes linking future life to work); counseling (with a focus on the whole student and life/work planning); safe environment (with clear, fair, consistent behavioral standards); separation from traditional school (separate building/wing); and school-linked services to the community (health, social, employment).