

Conversations with students at MAAP STARS Spring Conference April 25, 2002

Setting: Kim Farris-Berg met with MAAP STARS students around the edges of their annual conference, where they present projects and compete in areas of employment interviews, public speaking, team management decision-making, community service, entrepreneurship, and more.

Demographics: Grades 10 – 12 (some are grade 9, but most are not referred until second year); variety of racial backgrounds. Spoke with about 14 students overall.

Comments: MAAP STARS are selected leaders from individual alternative programs and ALCs that are affiliated with the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs. Their lingo for “traditional district school” is “mainstream school.” Some comments are also taken from a MAAP STARS presentation at the annual MAAP conference.

QUESTION	ANSWERS
<p>Why are you attending the ALC or alternative program?</p>	<p><i>WANTED TO LEAVE MAINSTREAM SCHOOL BECAUSE OF SIZE and SAFETY/ABILITY TO REMOVE SELF FROM DANGEROUS SITUATIONS OR OTHER SITUATIONS THAT DID NOT ALLOW THEM TO FOCUS ON LEARNING</i></p> <p><i>***Note that most students didn't see themselves as being "dumped" or "kicked out". If I (Kim) didn't know anything about ALCs, I would have assumed from talking to students that most chose to attend the ALC to improve their lives. That's how they communicated their answers to this question. Their answers, below, might give you a better idea:</i></p> <p>"My mainstream school was too big." "What do you mean by that?" I asked. "Too many students." Another said, "You were walking down the hall and you only knew a few of the people around you. You put that many people into a building that can't even hold that amount and you're just asking for a mob -- our age or not."</p>

Why are you attending the ALC or alternative program? (continued)

"Too many kids without trust in the people around them [I clarified that he meant students and teachers] – you just don't feel safe. Different cliques hate each other. This doesn't happen in the ALC." "Why?" I asked. "Not as many kids," one said. Another added, "Our teachers know us [at the ALC]."

"I didn't want to end up like my friends. They were all getting messed up on drugs and stuff." Another added, "Me too. My old school was becoming a big drug ward. I was sick of it. I wanted a normal, 'real world' environment." [Students expanded on this later.]

"My friends were getting into trouble. I was starting to get into trouble with alcohol and drugs, but I saw what was happening to my friends. I didn't want to end up like them. I am doing well now at a sobriety high school."

SIBLINGS WENT

"My sister went here. My parents thought it would be a good place for me, too." "Did you attend a mainstream school first, though?" I asked. "Yeah, but I didn't do very well there."

NEED CHILDCARE TO STAY IN SCHOOL

****One group of young women I spoke with went to a high school for pregnant women or young mothers. (White Bear Lake)*

"I left my mainstream school because I was pregnant. This ALC allows me to stay in school and get childcare." Two others echoed this statement. Three of five has sisters that had previously attended the school.

NOT GETTING WORK DONE BECAUSE OF LEARNING STRUCTURE

"I was the class clown, and I was not getting my work done. It was BORING!" "What do you mean?" I asked. "Too much talking," answered another. "Other students?" I asked. "No, the teachers," he answered, "They stand up there all day and talk. I wasn't getting anything from that." "Me too," added the first. "I needed more hands on and more individual attention. I get a lot more done now."

	<p><u>Why are you attending the ALC or alternative program? (continued)</u></p> <p>MAINSTREAM ADMINISTRATION ASKED TO LEAVE</p> <p><i>***A handful of students did feel abandoned by their mainstream schools, but were happy to leave, particularly after a final interaction with administration.</i></p> <p>"I was pregnant, but I wanted to stay in my mainstream school. One day I was in biology, and we were talking about reproduction. The teacher was telling us about cycles or something, and said, 'But SOME of us aren't careful,' as she turned around and looked at me – in front of the whole class! I was so mad. I was thinking, 'How can she make these assumptions about me? She doesn't know how I got pregnant! And, I DID use protection, for her information. I used a condom and it didn't work!'. My mom was REALLY mad at [the teacher], and she set up a meeting with the principal. We came in and the principal said, "Well, maybe it wasn't appropriate for Ms. _____ to say that. But it was irresponsible of _____ to get pregnant, and we don't want her at this school anymore.' He didn't even tell us about the ALC, but my mom found out about it."</p> <p>One student, who was very knowledgeable and articulate about state laws governing education, said, "My family already had a legal issue with the school because of something that happened with my brother, but I also had a lot of issues with the school and was outspoken about them. The school district gives you this book with a set of rules, for example. They make you sign a contract that you'll abide by [the rules], and the penalty for not abiding to the rules is in the "insubordination clause." If you don't sign it, you are insubordinate. First of all, minors can't sign contracts. And second, you technically can't be insubordinate if you haven't signed it yet. Things like this I would talk to other students about. The principal called me into his office and said, 'We don't like your kind here,' – I assumed he meant people who called attention to their disrespect."</p> <p>"Yes," the young woman who told the previous story said, "I respect people who respect me. There is more respect at the ALC."</p>
<p>Could your mainstream school have done anything to make it work better for you?</p>	<p><i>Students all said "no" at once, almost frustrated that I even asked the question after our previous discussions about size (see above).</i></p> <p>"It's just too big!" one of the students said, exasperated. Another added, "You're given assignments that just don't have anything to do with you because they don't know you."</p> <p>"There is no recognition of YOU," said another.</p>

<p>What do you like about your ALC?</p>	<p>MORE CHOICE ABOUT LEARNING MODEL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “You get to CHOOSE how you learn. You have your own pace, and your own choices.”• “[The mainstream teachers] told me I wouldn’t graduate on time, and I thought I couldn’t. Here, I feel limitless. I can do what I want, and I will accomplish things.”• “You get to come to this [the MAAP STARS conference]. You get to be leaders. We learn about and take trips to Europe – that’s not available to all kids at mainstream schools.” Another added, “And students are running this conference. We didn’t do that in mainstream.”• “My friend and I both couldn’t pass the state math test at our mainstream schools. When we met here, we made a pact to study together. And we did. We studied every day, doing problems and teaching them to each other. We both just passed. We did well, too.”• “We get our work done at school. My school has a ‘no homework policy.’”• “My school is working out a way to get credit for learning while you’re also working for the community and getting paid. That is a good option for me.” <p>SIZE (<i>I didn’t get into detail on size here because we discussed in the first question.</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “There are always four or five teachers and 45-50 kids per session.”• “Smaller,” said several.• “Teachers in mainstream have too many kids to deal with.” <p>BETTER TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS/LESS THREAT OF NOT GRADUATING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I’m more motivated now. You go from people telling you that you have to go [to school], but you won’t graduate, to where you actually want to go and want to graduate.”• “It’s the golden rule. Teachers respect me so I respect them.”• “Teachers know my name and I can call them by their first name. If I didn’t get my homework done, they ask why. Then we work out a plan to make up work. Sometimes they already have an idea of why, because they know me.”• “I used to have an authority problem, but I don’t now.” He went on to explain that he gets personal attention; he trusts authority figures. He felt teachers cared about him. It was easier, then, to get his grades up. He was behind, and people always reminded him of that. Now he will definitely graduate on time.
---	---

	<p><u>What do you like about your ALC? (continued)</u></p> <p>FAMILY-LIKE ATMOSPHERE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I was home for two weeks because my daughter and I were sick. My teacher called me every day to see if we were okay, and then when I got back she helped me catch up.” • “At my old school, you are either popular or you’re not. Here everyone – we’re all very different – but everyone knows each other and gets along.” “So, would you say a diverse mix of students contributes to problems at mainstream schools?” “Not really,” one responded, “It’s the size. We’re all diverse at my school right now, but we get along just fine.” “Do you all agree with that?” I asked. “Yes,” they said. • “They ask about my home life.” <p>FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES (ONLY SOME SCHOOLS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My school has morning session that goes till 1:00 pm, and an afternoon session from 1:00 – 5:30 p.m. Some do one session; some do both. I like the schedule, because I can have a job in the afternoon and still get enough rest.”
<p>If you could have attended a school that is similar to your ALC when you started high school, would you have done better than you did (academically or socially)?</p>	<p>“I would have been much more on target from the beginning if I STARTED at an ALC.” In another session, a student said, “If I started at my ALC, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten into trouble.” <i>Several agreed with these statements, but did not expand on the idea much beyond what was already discussed – environment (size, teacher relationships, etc.)</i></p> <p>I asked, “If your ALC teachers were asked to teach at your old mainstream school, would they be as effective as they are here?”</p> <p>“I’m worried about growth! We’ve talked about it a lot,” she said, looking around at her peers. They nodded back at her, acknowledging what she said. “Why can’t every school be small? Learning environments need to be small!”</p> <p>“I think it’s cool that there are long waiting lists, but now they’re trying to accommodate them and more people encroach on our school!”</p>

<p>In a recent report called "What Works? Ask the Students!" [by Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation] students reported that for the physical environment of the school, "Freedom is very important: open campus, open hours, open access to resources like libraries and computer labs." Do you have any reactions to that statement?</p>	<p><i>Students (across different groups) reframed my question, saying it's less about freedom to leave than about respect from their teachers: for the students, for students' time, for the students' home lives, and for their ideas about what they want to learn.</i></p> <p>"I can sort of relate. You can't have a totally open campus, or it would be chaos, though. I used to feel that way, but that's what's weird. At the ALC I don't even want open campus. I mean, I don't even think about it. I like to be there. And there is so much freedom to make my own learning schedule that I don't have a desire to leave."</p> <p>"I used to skip all the time. It was really bad. But now I don't. I have more trust with my teachers – I can call them by their first names. They treat me like a person. I feel more respected, so teachers get through to me."</p> <p>"Yeah! That's another thing. I get to do my work at school. I CAN'T work at home. At the mainstream school they would lecture us and then send us home to read and write up what they said!"</p>
<p>What do your parents think about you attending an ALC?</p>	<p>"My parents were like, "You're going to an alternative school? Are you a bad kid?"</p> <p>"Yeah, my parents thought that too," said another. "I went to _____ ALC for summer school before I started my regular year there. My parents noticed right away, 'We don't have to fight with her anymore!' They would fight with me every day about [going to school]. Now I WANT to go! They're happy about that, so they like the school!"</p> <p>"My brother is on the waiting list," said another. "Does that happen a lot?" I asked. "Yes," she answered. "My parents are over [the stigma of ALCs] now. They want whatever works. My brother started getting into the same things I got into." "So your parents stigmatized the ALCs?" "Yes, but that is going away," she said.</p> <p>"My parents did too," said another, "but I wasn't going anywhere else [to any other school], so..."</p>

<p>Kim showed the groups pictures of students at MNCS, and explained the physical environment as well as project-based learning model.</p> <p>Do you have any reactions to these pictures, or to what I've described?</p>	<p><i>***Students were intrigued by the pictures. They looked at them for a while, and said things like 'cool' and 'awesome'.</i></p> <p>"That looks like what we have at my ALC. But students start there?" "Yes," I said, "Are you asking if they go there only if they got bad grades or got into trouble?" "Yes," she said. "No," I said. "That's cool," she said.</p> <p>Another added, "That's a lot like what I have now. But I would have loved if I had the option to attend a school like that in the beginning."</p>
<p>Would you like to have more involvement in conversations about how schools are designed – the physical and learning environments?</p>	<p>"Adults make too many of the decisions," said one.</p> <p>"Schools need to start listening to kids"</p> <p>"I would do anything to promote ALCs, and to help more students go to them."</p>
<p>Is there anything else you would like to talk about?</p>	<p><i>A number of students were concerned about grad standards. Some were very bitter about them.</i></p> <p>"They're meant to make learning more 'hands-on', but they're actually preventing us from doing some of the stuff we'd like to do."</p> <p>"Yeah! They [she meant the state] want us to write down how many manatees are in the ocean... That's ridiculous! How does that help me later in life? And then, my teacher said, 'Well, I don't know how to do this, so just fill the form out as best you can and I'll grade it according to what they [the state] laid out for me about how to grade them'. If she doesn't know how to do them, why should I do them?"</p>