

Towards a Revitalization of the Alternative Program

Alternative Schools Advisory Committee

Draft 4

November 26th, 2007

Executive Summary

The Alternative Schools Advisory Committee is tasked with advising the school board about matters pertaining to the Alternative Program. Over the years the Alternative Program has introduced an educational philosophy based on multi-age classrooms, non-competition, child-centred learning, anecdotal reporting and parental involvement. While these ideas have been both successful and well-received, there has also been a feeling that changes in educational approach outside the Alternative Program, restrictions in government regulations and a certain complacency of parents and/or educators has eroded the distinctiveness of the program in comparison to other board programs, in particular the English program.

The Alternative Schools Advisory Committee, representing the six Alternative Schools in the board, believes that the program does offer a valuable and distinct learning environment. At the same time, however, there is a recognition that more experimentation and revitalization is possible. As a result, starting in 2006, ASAC engaged in a Revitalization Project that has sought feedback from parents, teachers and parents, formulated options and worked with the six alternative schools to produce a solid set of recommendations to the board.

Results of the surveys and feedback from school councils indicate that the Alternative Program is different and offers different options to students. At the same time, however, there is an acknowledgement that the program is being hamstrung both externally and from within. While the program does deserve more support from the school board in order to maintain its core philosophy, distinctiveness and innovation, it is also acknowledged that the Alternative Schools must be accountable to the board for their programs and how each school's program fits within the core philosophy.

Revitalizing and supporting a successful and innovative educational program within the board is a two-way street; therefore ASAC recommends the following broad actions, detailed later in the report:

- *(Actions by board to support program)*
- *(Actions by schools to provide accountability for their programs and Alternative Improvement Plans)*
- *(Plans by ASAC for further best-practices sharing, program support, board advisory work and program re-alignment or expansion options)*

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History

In 1982, local parents banded together and convinced the Ottawa Board of Education to turn Lady Evelyn Public School into Ottawa's first Alternative School based on the philosophy of parental involvement, non-competition, anecdotal reporting, mixed grades and an integrated curriculum. During the first three years of this primary-grade pilot, lady Evelyn's program was evaluated by independent researchers (Watkin and Bonyun, 1983-5) and positively reviewed. With this endorsement and in response to demand, the program was allowed to expand over time to three additional locations

(Churchill in 1984, Crichton in 1987 and Riverview in 1985) and into the junior grades by 1989. In 1991 the program expanded into grades 7 and 8 with the establishment of Summit.

In 1998 the Ottawa Board of Education and the Carleton Board of Education amalgamated. After amalgamation it was decided that current Alternative program boundaries would remain, effectively limiting the Alternative program to the old OBE area. Then came the provincial government's take-over of funding, which implemented a cap on new school construction in the suburbs if there was any space unused elsewhere in the board. The resulting school closure process, which included the closure of Crichton Alternative School, scared many of the more downtown schools into defensive mode and convinced many in the Alternative program that it was in the cross-hairs of the administration. This feeling of threat was not helped by the September 1998 recommendation by the Director's Council of Superintendents that the Alternative designation be removed. This did not lead to a supportive environment for expanding or experimenting with the program.

At the same time, many of the successes of the Alternative Program, such as parental involvement and integrated curriculum, were being picked up by non-Alternative schools and even pushed by the board. At the other end of the spectrum, tighter provincial curriculum requirements and standardized report cards made it harder for the Alternative Program to deliver on mixed-grade classrooms and anecdotal reporting. Labour contracts also lead to difficult staffing models at two of the co-located schools. The Alternative Program survived, and thrived in some schools, but some felt that some of the innovation and experimentation had been lost.

Core Philosophy

The Alternative Revitalization Project is not intended to alter or redefine the core goals of the Alternative Program:

- Co-operation and Teamwork

Cooperation and teamwork are emphasized instead of competition in all aspects of the school. The core belief is that children who are motivated from within, instead of by rewards, will become lifelong learners, eager to take on challenges.

- Innovative Approaches to Teaching and Learning

A commitment to innovative approaches to teaching and learning through a shared responsibility among staff, students, and parents.

- Child-centred Learning

A balance between student-directed and teacher-directed learning: the teacher acts as a facilitator/mentor/ guide of the child's learning; enhances self-concept, enthusiasm for learning, and personal responsibility.

- Multi-aged Groupings (as distinct from multi-grade classrooms)

Multi-aged groupings: interaction among children of different ages and at different stages of development provides an environment wherein students learn from each other as well as from the teacher.

- Integrated Curriculum

Integrated curriculum: this provides a natural progression from whole to parts and stresses the interrelation of all learning and subjects.

- Parental Involvement

A family-centered school environment wherein parental involvement is a partnership between the home and school fostering self-respect, respect for the ideas and the opinions of others, and an appreciation for people's differences.

- Anecdotal Reporting and Self-Assessment

Assessment and evaluation is on-going using multiple strategies which include student self-evaluations. The primary focus of this process is personal growth, as well as being used as a tool for program planning and assessment.

These goals have long been the pillars of the program and are laid out both in the Alternative Program Brochure as well as the Alternative Program Letter of Understanding. None-the-less, "Innovative Approaches to Teaching and Learning" is on the list and requires that the program evaluate itself and seek out new ideas and new approaches.

Goals

The goal of the Alternative Program Revitalization Project is to:

1. Work with parents, teachers and students at the Alternative schools to gain an understanding of the uniqueness, problems, goals and possible changes to the program.
2. Work with school councils and school staff to evaluate the responses and create recommendations, based on the core philosophy of the program.
3. Develop a set of recommendations for the school board.
4. Provide a set of expectations and reporting structures for schools so that the school board can have confidence that the program remains innovative, distinct and valuable.

Partners

The partners in this consultation process are the three cornerstones of the program:

- Families. The Alternative Program has always emphasized parental involvement and leadership.
- Educators. The knowledge, ideas and experience of educators is vital to understanding what is possible.
- Students. The Alternative Program has always emphasized engaging children in their own learning process.

Process

1. ASAC consulted with school councils on the project goals, stakeholders and timelines. (Fall

2006)

2. Creation of survey for staff, parents and students. (Winter 2007)
3. Administration and collection of surveys. (Spring 2007)
4. Analysis of survey Results. (Fall 2007)
5. Development of draft recommendations.
6. Each Alternative school council be contacted and asked to provide feedback, proposals and ideas, possibly through an education committee. The principal and staff are expected to be involved. (second round of feedback)
7. Where appropriate, school councils will engage student councils for ideas and comments.
8. Special Meeting of Principals, School Council Co-chairs and ASAC to discuss recommendations. (Target: Winter 2008)
9. Refinement of revitalization proposals based on feedback and meetings.
10. Third round of feedback from school councils.
11. The recommendations will then be presented to the board's education committee. This may be shepherded through committee and council by a trustee member of ASAC. (Target: Spring 2008)

Survey

During the winter of 2007 ASAC, in consultation with the six school councils, developed a survey for parents, students and teachers (see references). The survey asked a series of anecdotal and option-based questions in four broad categories:

1. Current Situation
2. Challenges
3. The Future
4. Supports and Resources

The surveys were made available in paper format to all teachers, parents of guardians and junior students (primary level students were allowed to also take it, but it was not automatically provided to every student. As well, an on-line survey with the same questions was made available on the ASAC web site.

Although the anecdotal questions resulted in interesting and informative responses, and fits within the anecdotal assessment model favoured by the Alternative Program, it does not lend itself to statistical analysis as well as option-based questions did. This is not surprising when the goal of the analysis is data collection and not individual assessment.

Survey Analysis

Current Situation

The first section of the survey asked parents, teachers and students for their perception of how different the Alternative program was from other non-Alternative Schools.

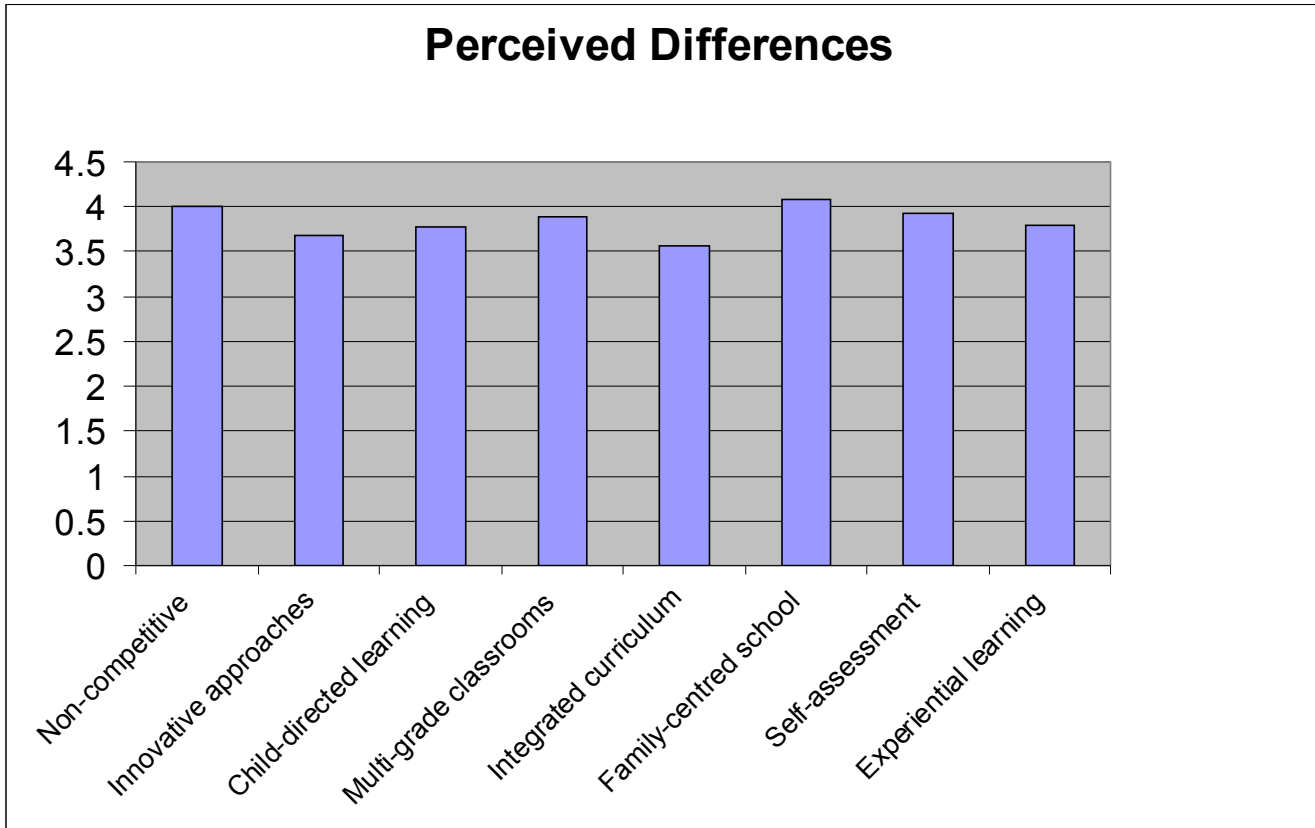
Adult Results:

	Non-competitive	Innovative approaches	Child-directed learning	Multi-grade classrooms	Integrated curriculum	Family-centred school	Self-assessment	Experiential learning
Average	4	3.681416	3.767857	3.893805	3.571429	4.087719	3.929204	3.787611
Count	114	113	112	113	112	114	113	113
Median	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Mode	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	4
STDEV	0.959351	1.095979	1.106754	1.227387	1.054499	1.186662	1.066677	1.137442
Variance	0.920354	1.201169	1.224903	1.506479	1.111969	1.408166	1.1378	1.293774
Somewhat different or higher	93.00%	81.30%	85.60%	87.50%	85.60%	86.80%	90.20%	85.80%
Quite or Very Different	76.20%	67.00%	66.70%	75.90%	58.60%	78.80%	69.70%	67.00%

Full Questions:

Rank how different the Alternative Program at your school is from other OCDSB programs and non-Alternative schools in each of the following areas. (1=no difference, 2=a little different, 3=somewhat different, 4=quite different, and 5=very different)

1. Non-competitive, emphasizing cooperation and teamwork
2. Innovative approaches to teaching and learning
3. Child-directed learning
4. Multi-grade classrooms and other multi-age groupings and activities
5. Integrated curriculum
6. Family-centred school environment with an emphasis on parental involvement
7. Emphasis on self-assessment and anecdotal reporting
8. Experiential learning with hands-on activities and curriculum-linked field trips



Student Results: Note that, to simplify the questions, the student survey offered three options for every question and not five.

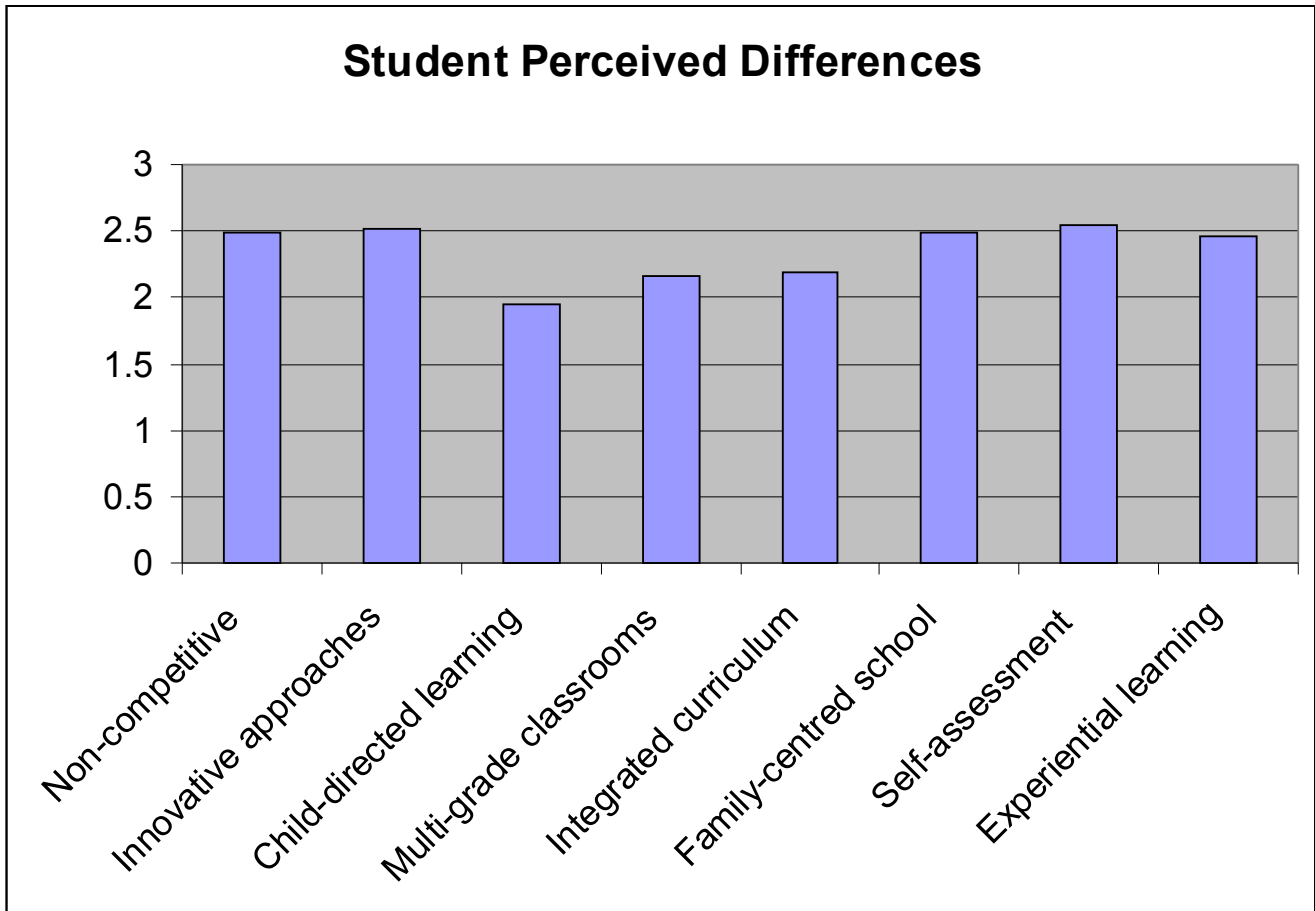
	Non-competitive	Innovative approaches	Child-directed learning	Multi-grade classrooms	Integrated curriculum	Family-centred school	Self-assessment	Experiential learning
Average	2.492063	2.519841	1.951807	2.154762	2.191837	2.492	2.548	2.464286
Count	252	252	249	252	245	250	250	252
Median	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	3
Mode	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3
STDEV	0.615161	0.595136	0.699717	0.78574	0.69537	0.647777	0.580555	0.633332
Variance	0.378423	0.354186	0.489604	0.617388	0.48354	0.419614	0.337044	0.40111
Somewhat or a lot	93.70%	94.90%	73.00%	75.70%	83.70%	91.60%	95.60%	92.50%

Full Questions:

Tell us how ‘alternative’ your school is compared to other schools that you know about. The statements below describe the goals of the Alternative Program. Do these things happen in your school?

1=not really, 2=sometimes, 3=a lot/all the time

1. We cooperate and work in teams, don't have contests where only some people win, and everyone can participate in sports
2. We get to try out cool and different ways to learn about things
3. We get to make some choices about what we learn about and how we learn
4. Kids help each other learn in multi-grade classrooms and other multi-age groups
5. We can learn about the one theme in different classes, like history, language, and art
6. We have lots of family events and some parents spend a lot of time helping out at the school
7. It's important for us to think about how we're doing and set goals, the teachers tell our parents how we're doing, and we get chances to show our work
8. We get to do hands-on activities to 'learn by doing' and go on field trips related to our schoolwork



These results show that:

1. The primary cited differences to the Alternative program among adults are parental involvement and non-competition.
2. The lowest variance is in non-competition, integrated curriculum and self-assessment.
3. Across all questions, 81% of adults viewed the Alternative program as "somewhat

different” or “very different”.

4. Students had slightly different opinions, viewing self-assessment and innovative approaches above parental involvement and non-competition. These two areas also had the lowest variance for students.
5. Students felt strongly that the Alternative Program was different, with significant weakness in their assessment of child-directed learning and multi-grade classrooms.

Challenges

The second section of the survey looked at the current challenges the Alternative Program faces and how much parents and teachers feel certain issues detract from the program

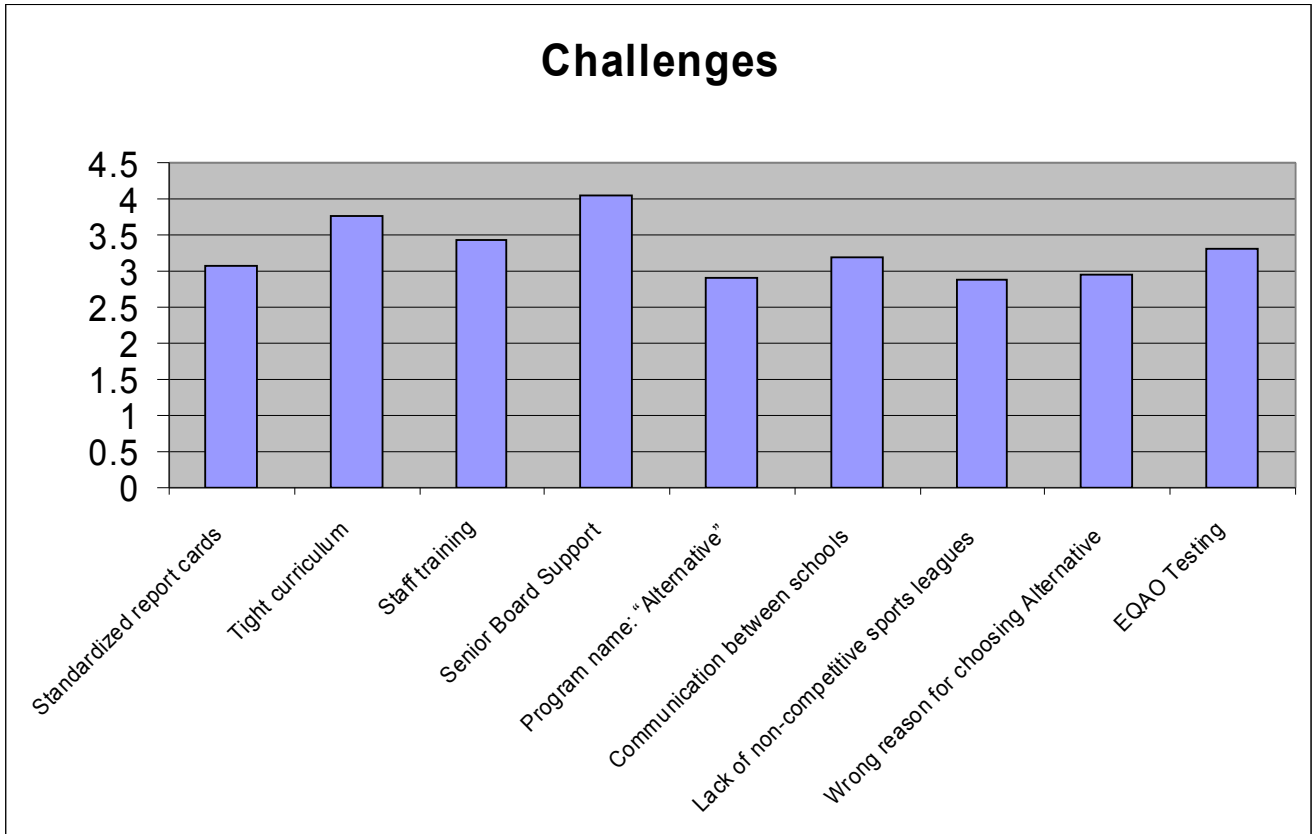
Adult Results:

	Standardized report cards	Tight curriculum	Staff training	Senior Board Support	Program name: “Alternative”	Communication between schools	Lack of non-competitive sports leagues	Wrong reason for choosing Alternative	EQAO Testing
Average	3.078261	3.754545	3.420561	4.054348	2.908257	3.202128	2.888889	2.944954	3.307692
Count	115	110	107	92	109	94	108	109	104
Median	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3
Mode	3	5	4	5	2	3	3	2	5
STDEV	1.325511	1.190069	1.281489	0.998506	1.384713	1.093281	1.170776	1.352877	1.38702
Variance	1.756979	1.416264	1.642215	0.997014	1.917431	1.195264	1.370717	1.830275	1.923824
Moderate challenge or higher	68.50%	85.40%	75.50%	91.30%	56.50%	77.50%	67.30%	56.50%	71.90%
Significant or critical challenge	36.00%	62.40%	54.80%	73.70%	34.30%	38.80%	29.00%	33.40%	47.60%

Full Questions:

The following points have been identified as challenges currently faced by the Alternative Program. To what extent do you agree that these are significant challenges? (1=not a challenge, 2=a minor challenge, 3=a moderate challenge, 4=a significant challenge, and 5=a critical challenge)

1. Provincially mandated graded report cards
2. Tight curriculum with no flexibility for multi-age classes
3. Lack of proper staff training / accreditation
4. Lack of support from senior Board staff
5. Meaningless/poor program name: “Alternative”
6. Insufficient communication between schools
7. Lack of non-competitive sports leagues
8. Parents choosing the program for non-program reasons (bussing, avoiding another school, etc.)
9. EQAO Testing



Student Results:

These questions were not asked to the students

These results show that:

1. The most significant impediment to the current program was perceived to be school board support and the provincial curriculum.
2. The lowest variance in responses concerned the board support and concerns about communications between schools.

The Future

The third section of the survey looked at where parents, teachers and students would like the program to go.

Adult Results:

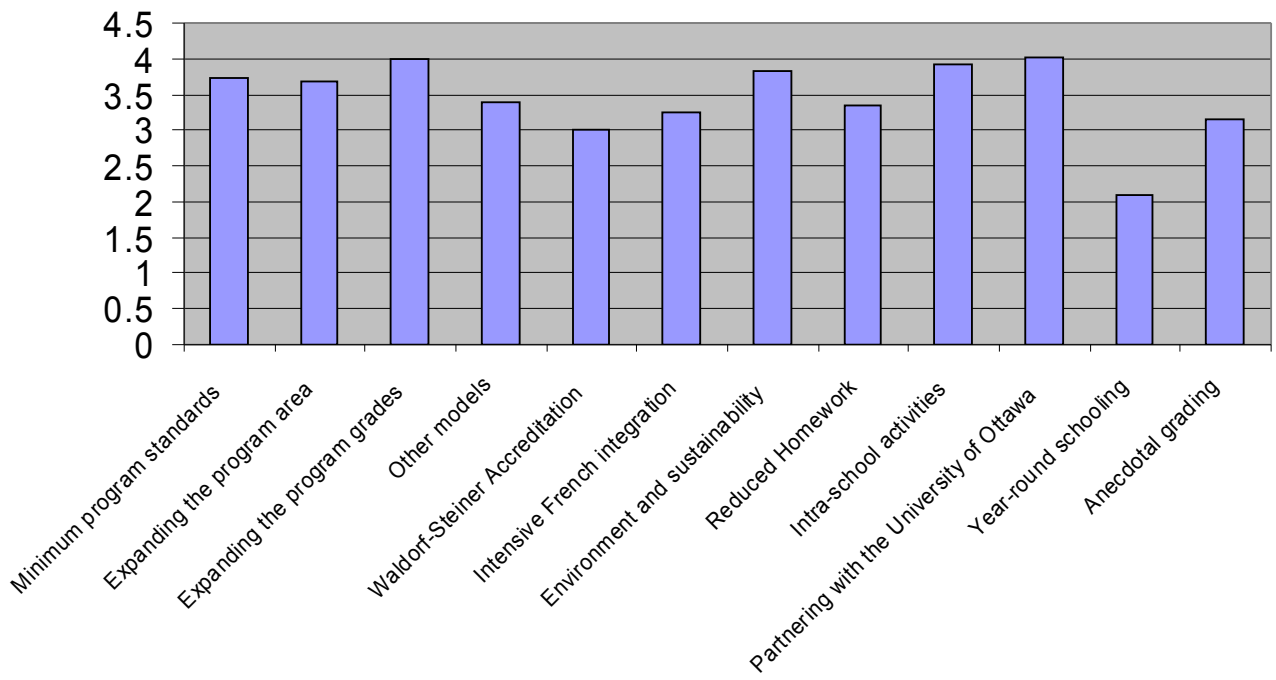
	Minimum program standards	Expanding the program area	Expanding the program grades	Other models	Waldorf-Steiner Accreditation	Intensive French Integration	Environment and sustainability	Reduced Homework	Intra-school activities	Partnering with the University of Ottawa	Year-round schooling	Anecdotal grading
Average	3.732	3.684	3.991	3.394	3.02	3.245	3.824	3.347	3.930	4.026	2.104	3.160
Count	112	111	113	109	100	114	114	115	115	114	115	112
Median	4	4	4	4	3	3.5	4	4	4	4	1	3
Mode	4	5	5	4	2	5	4	5	5	5	1	5
STDEV	1.251	1.205	1.264	1.254	1.263	1.430	1.107	1.389	1.048	1.084	1.372	1.510
Variance	1.567	1.454	1.598	1.574	1.595	2.045	1.225	1.930	1.100	1.176	1.883	2.280
Moderate support or higher	81.10%	77.30%	84.90%	73.20%	57.60%	62.00%	85.00%	70.20%	91.30%	89.40%	31.60%	61.30%
Good or Excellent idea	66.70%	60.00%	71.50%	51.00%	37.40%	49.60%	69.10%	50.90%	66.70%	71.70%	18.50%	42.40%

Full Questions:

The following points have been identified as ideas that could strengthen or renew the Alternative Program. To what extent do you agree that these are good ideas? (1=a bad idea / do not support, 2=uncertain, 3=moderately supportive, 4=a good idea, and 5=an excellent idea)

1. Set minimum standards to ensure program philosophy is upheld (e.g. all JK-6 classes are multi-age)
2. Expanding the program to suburban areas; a second intermediate program in the east end
3. Expanding the program to new grade levels (secondary program)
4. Look to other models (smaller JK-12 schools)
5. Investigate Waldorf-Steiner Accreditation of schools.
6. Intensive French integrated with other subjects
7. Develop a program-wide focus on the environment and sustainability
8. Program-wide homework guidelines (reduced homework)
9. Support more intra-school activities (sports, ecology, field trips, socials, PD days)
10. Partnering with / involving the University of Ottawa in suggesting new learning strategies and programs
11. Year-round schooling
12. Remove non-anecdotal grading from JK-6

The Future



Student Results: Note that, to simplify the questions, the student survey offered three options for every question and not five.

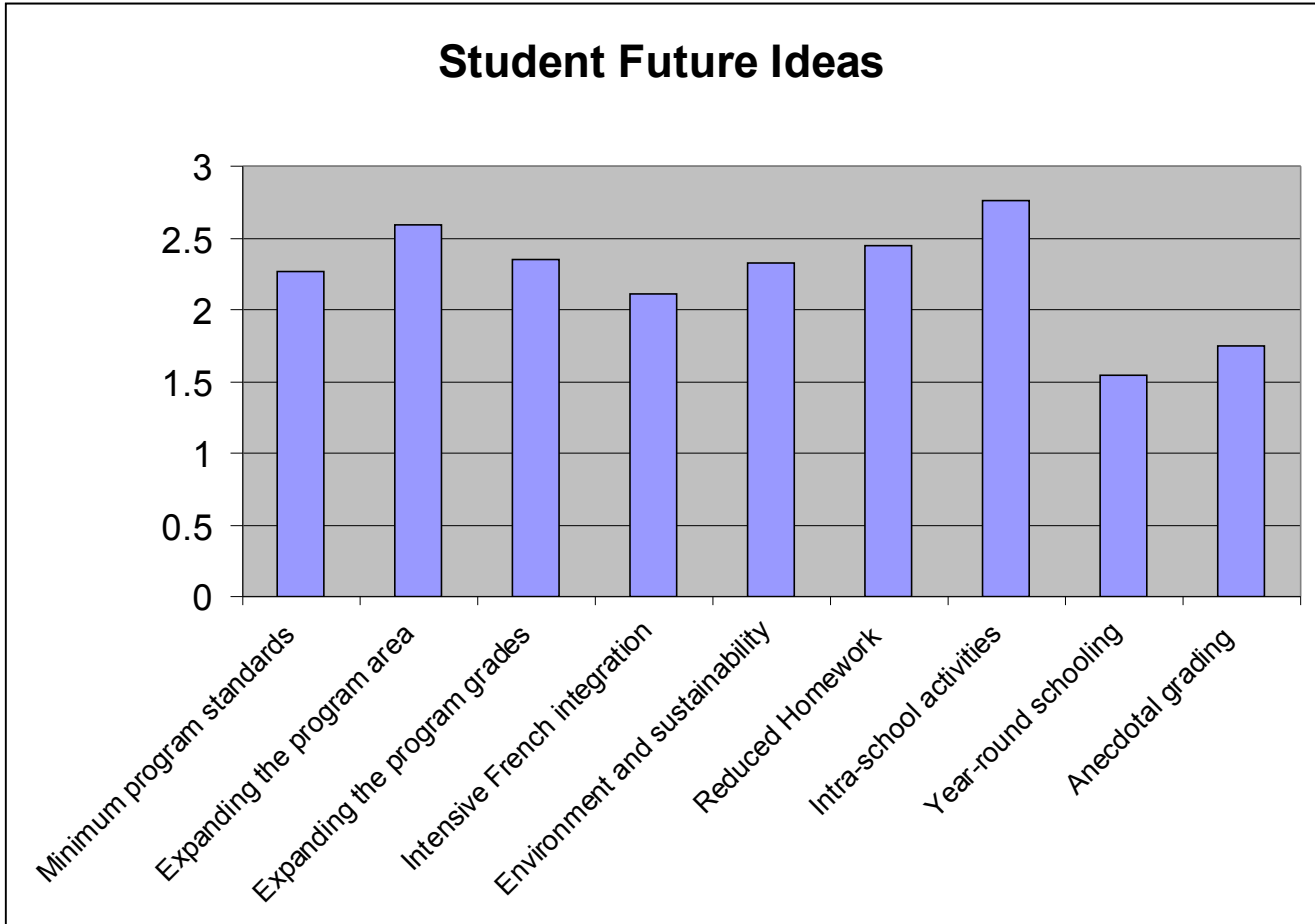
	Minimum program standards	Expanding the program area	Expanding the program grades	Intensive French integration	Environment and sustainability	Reduced Homework	Intra-school activities	Year-round schooling	Anecdotal grading
Average	2.260504	2.5875	2.34728	2.108787	2.326271	2.441176	2.757447	1.544304	1.746835
Count	238	240	239	239	236	238	235	237	237
Median	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	1	2
Mode	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1
STDEV	0.608827	0.647372	0.83055	0.791689	0.720157	0.807863	0.543707	0.809857	0.82032
Variance	0.37067	0.41909	0.689814	0.626771	0.518626	0.652643	0.295617	0.655868	0.672924
Moderate support or higher	91.20%	91.30%	76.90%	73.60%	85.20%	79.80%	94.50%	33.90%	50.50%

Full Questions:

Here are some ideas for ways that the Alternative Program could change. How much do you agree that these are good ideas? (1=a bad idea, 2=not sure, 3=a good idea)

1. Make rules so that all the Alternative schools will try to reach all the Program goals (in Question 1)
2. Make another Grade 7-8 school so it will be easier for more students to go to an Alternative school after Grade 6
3. Look into making Kindergarten to Grade 12 Alternative schools, or an Alternative high school
4. Make French more related to the other things we are learning in other classes
5. Spend more time learning about the environment
6. Less homework

7. Support more activities for all the Alternative schools to come together (sports, ecology, field trips, socials, PD days)
8. Go to school all year long, with more 1 or 2-week breaks
9. No grades, just comments



These results show that:

1. The strongest support among adults is for a partnership with the University of Ottawa to support innovative approaches, expanding into high school, doing more activities between the schools, and getting involved in environmental teaching.
2. Students had similar interests (they were not asked about University partnership)
3. The greatest variance in opinion was in anecdotal reporting and Intensive French integration.
4. Year-Round schooling was of limited interest to both adults and students.

Supports and Resources

The final section asked parents, guardians and teachers what specific actions should be taken to strengthen the program and help achieve some of the targeted goals.

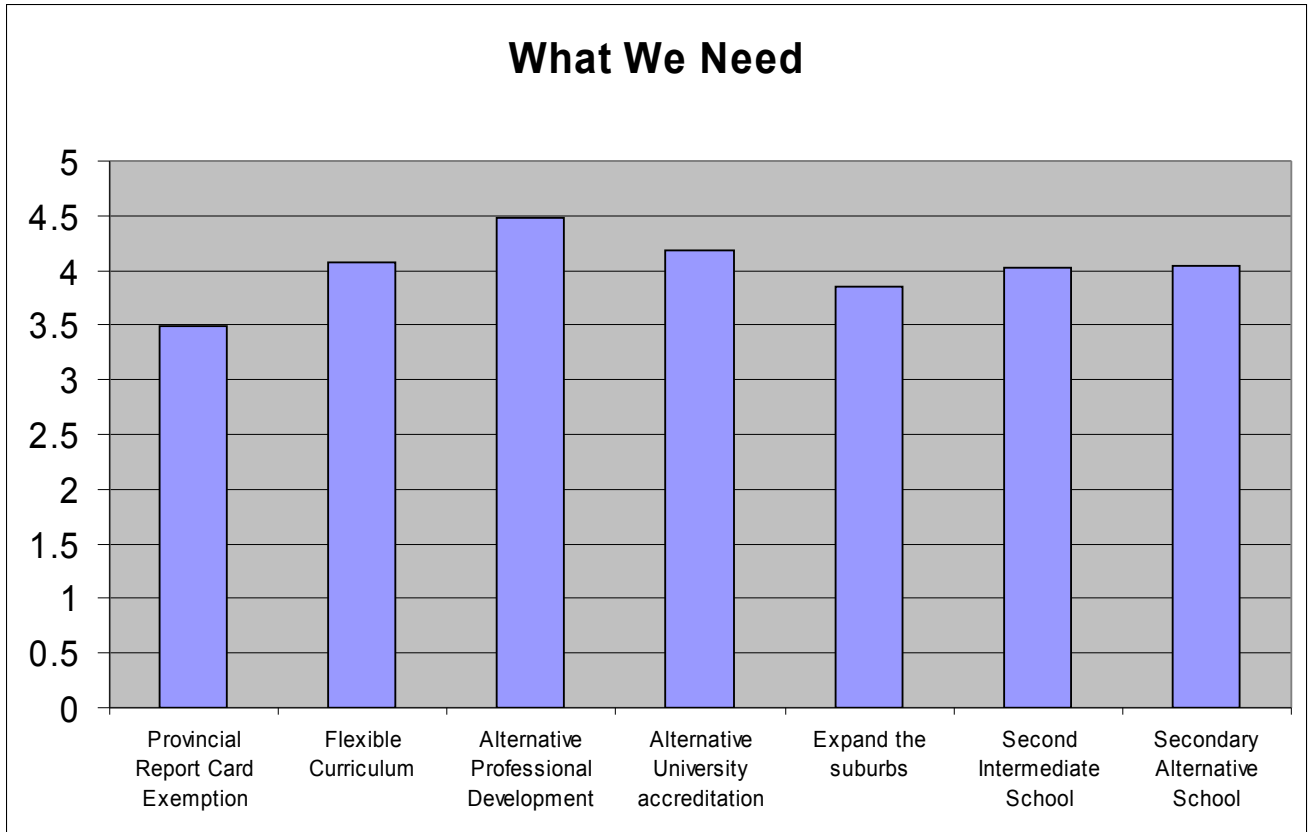
Adults Results:

	Provincial Report Card Exemption	Flexible Curriculum	Alternative Professional Development	Alternative University accreditation	Expand the suburbs	Second Intermediate School	Secondary Alternative School
Average	3.486726	4.078947	4.482456	4.184211	3.849558	4.017857	4.035088
Count	113	114	114	114	113	112	114
Median	4	4	5	5	4	4	5
Mode	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
STDEV	1.476694	1.057169	0.800801	1.093551	1.151251	1.004334	1.254583
Variance	2.180626	1.117606	0.641282	1.195855	1.325379	1.008687	1.573979
Moderate support or higher	71.50%	89.40%	96.50%	89.40%	83.10%	90.10%	85.00%
Very supportive	59.90%	77.00%	87.70%	82.40%	67.00%	73.00%	71.70%

Full Questions:

The following ideas have been proposed as possible resources / supports that the Alternative Program should be seeking. To what extent do you agree that these should be actively sought? (1=not supportive, 2=uncertain, 3=somewhat supportive, 4=supportive, and 5=very supportive)

1. Negotiate exemptions and/or flexibility in provincial report card requirements (e.g. non-graded reports for primary division, enhanced anecdotal reporting)
2. Develop guidelines to allow more flexible curriculum delivery in multi-age / multi-grade classes
3. Support professional development opportunities specifically aimed at enhancing delivery of the Alternative Program
4. Support the development of university accreditation for alternative program teachers
5. Expand the JK-6 program to make it more accessible to all residents (e.g. Orleans and Kanata)
6. Expand the intermediate program to a second location
7. Expand the Alternative Program into the secondary level



Student Results:

These questions were not asked to the students

These results show:

1. Parents, guardians and teachers feel that we need more Alternative Professional Development support. This has broad support, with the highest average, lowest variance and 87% of respondents thinking it is a very good idea.
2. Similarly there is broad support for seeking out some sort of accreditation system for Alternative teachers in the future.
3. 89% of respondents support asking for a more flexible curriculum. 72% would like exemptions from the Provincial Report Card requirements.
4. There is broad support for either a second Alternative middle school and an Alternative High School.

Recommendations

For Schools

In order to give the school board confidence that the program they are supporting is different and innovative, each school will provide the board every year with:

1. An outline of concrete structures, programs and projects that provide innovation and support the Alternative Program tenets and philosophy as promised to parents and students in board literature.
2. A plan for the upcoming year on new projects or plans to improve and strengthen their Alternative Program
3. Commitment to one joint Professional Development devoted to Alternative practices and concepts.

For the School Board

ASAC recommends that the school board consider the following actions and implement some or all of them in order to support and strengthen the Alternative Program:

3. Require Alternative schools to indicate in their School Improvement Plans what steps they will take in the coming year to strengthen their Alternative program and offer innovative programming based on the Alternative tenets.
4. Designate a staff resource to work with the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa to develop programming options and investigate accreditation possibilities in Alternative Education.
5. Develop, in consultation with Alternative teachers) guidelines for flexible curriculum delivery in order to accommodate multi-age classrooms. The target for the development of the guidelines will be June 2009.
6. Permit Alternative schools to provide anecdotal report cards to their parents.

For ASAC

ASAC will undertake the following in order to provide ongoing support to the Alternative Program and advice to the board concerning the program:

7. Work with Alternative schools to bring them together as a community in order to share best practices and innovative ideas.
8. Evaluate possible program alignments in order to advise the board on where new Alternative schools could be added or removed (when they are no longer supported by their communities).
9. Develop a common Principal Profile that will support each school's Principal Profile and will guide the board in the placement of new principals into Alternative Schools.

10. Act as a resource for principals and school councils in the support and enhancement of their Alternative programs.

References

1. OCDSB Alternative Program Brochure:
http://www.ocdsb.ca/general_info/Fact_Sheets/Alternative%20Elementary%20Programs.pdf
2. Alternative Program Letter of Understanding
3. A New Vision: 1998: http://www.asac-ottawa.org/index.php?module=pagemaster&PAGE_user_op=view_page&PAGE_id=3
4. Revitalization Survey: http://www.asac-ottawa.org/index.php?module=documents&JAS_DocumentManager_op=viewDocument&JAS_Document_id=7