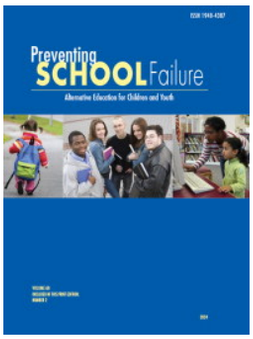

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"They come here for sanctuary": educator perspectives on trauma engaged alternative education

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ABSTRACT

Alaska's alternative high schools use trauma-engaged practices in their education model. Thirteen focus groups with 100 alternative high school educators, staff and administrators were conducted. The study sought to describe the Alaska alternative high school staffs' perspectives on effective practices and impact of alternative education on drug and alcohol use, suicide ideation, feelings of hopelessness, and community support of alternative high school students. Seven overarching themes related to trauma-engaged education and a focus on social-emotional learning were described by educators. The Alaska alternative education model addresses the root causes of youth engagement in health risk factors.

KEYWORDS

Adolescent health; Alaska; alternative high schools; educator perceptions; focus groups

Introduction

There is no national definition of alternative education programs, the absence allowing states and districts to develop their own policy and structure for alternative education programs (Lange & Stetten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2008; Porowski et al., 2014). Broadly speaking, alternative schools across the United States are designed to address the needs of students who were marginalized, exhibited disruptive behaviors, and/or academically unsuccessful in other school settings (Paglin & Fager, 1997; Tierney, 2020). Nationally, the majority of alternative schools operate under state definitions and legislative statutes, serve secondary students at a separate school site, and target students with behavioral problems (e.g. students who commit severe disciplinary infractions) or academic problems (e.g. students who are behind in school credits) (Lange & Stetten, 2002; Porowski et al., 2014). Alternative schools administered by school districts are often characterized as smaller in size, emphasizing smaller student to teacher ratios, thereby creating and maintaining a supportive school environment, allowing a flexible structure with student decision-making, and providing opportunities for independence into early adulthood (Lange & Stetten, 2002, Maillet, 2016; McGee & Lin, 2020).

Alternative high school students have been found to face high levels of individual stressors and social risk factors including homelessness, parental incarceration, low income, and abuse (Carver & Lewis, 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2011a; 2011b). Alternative high school students have experienced institutional and community inequities such as discipline policies and the social stigma of being a "bad kid" if attending an alternative high school (Clayton, 2019; Huerta & Hernandez, 2021; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Zolkoski et al., 2015). There is a significant body of international research findings that the more exposure students have to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the higher the child's risk for poor social, health, economic and educational outcomes in both childhood and adulthood (Webster, 2022). It is recognized that childhood trauma impacts every aspect of teaching and learning (Brunzell et al., 2015). Consequently, alternative educational systems have developed trauma-informed approaches that seek to address the impact of trauma on learners through policies, procedures, and support services (Griffiths et al., 2019; Stokes & Turnbull, 2016). These approaches, through the efforts of educators, students, parents, and community members, embed an understanding of trauma, are prevention-oriented and sustain healthy relationships (Brunzell et al., 2015; Offerman et al., 2022).

Alaska's alternative schools (defined as those serving high-risk students) provide a spectrum of critical educational and health enhancing services to, arguably, Alaska's most vulnerable youth (State of Alaska & Alternative Schools, 2022). Alaska's alternative schools primarily serve youth who have been unable to achieve academic success in traditional school environments for one or more reasons. Examples of the identified student barriers to learning include homelessness, poverty, untreated mental health issues such as depression and social anxiety, teen parenting, substance use and abuse, and unaddressed health needs.

"Alternative education program" is defined in Alaska State statute AS 14.30.365 (c)(1) as a public secondary school that provides a nontraditional education program, including the Alaska Military Youth Academy; a public vocational, remedial, or theme-based program; a home school program accredited

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by a recognized accrediting body; a charter school authorized under AS 14.03.250–14.03.290; and a statewide correspondence school that enrolls students who reside outside of a district in which the student resides and provides less than three hours a week of scheduled face-to-face student interactions in the same location with a teacher who is certified under Alaska State statute AS 14.20.020.

The 13 Alaska alternative high schools provide regular academic instruction and career education, are accredited or affiliated with an accredited school, and do not specify target populations (e.g. students with behavioral problems, students who have dropped out, students with truancy or attendance problems). Alaska's alternative high schools provide a spectrum of critical educational and health enhancing services using trauma-engaged practices.

In 1998, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted the first and last Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in alternative high schools. It provided a nationally representative prevalence estimates of health risk behaviors in this growing and understudied youth population (Grunbaum et al., 2000). Comparing the national alternative school YRBS with the national YRBS results in traditional schools, the prevalence of most at-risk behaviors (e.g. behaviors that contribute to unintentional and intentional injuries; substance initiation and misuse; sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases infection; unhealthy dietary behaviors; and physical inactivity) were higher among students attending alternative high schools compared to students at traditional high schools (Grunbaum et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2017).

Few states monitor health risk behaviors among youth attending alternative high schools. Alaska is among the few states that continues to conduct the YRBS using a convenience sample of alternative high schools (Johnson et al., 2017). The Alaska Alternative YRBS results, from 2009 to present, provide additional insight into the self-reported myriad of social, psychological, and behavioral challenges that must be addressed before students can maximize their academic potential. For example, Alaska's Alternative School youth reported disproportionately elevated levels of victimization; they were twice as likely to have acknowledged being the victims of domestic violence as well as sexual assault, indicated higher levels of hopelessness, and reported lower levels of community support or connectedness as their traditional school peers (Mannix, 2018). The 2017 Alternative School YRBS results reveal a nearly universal pattern within Alaska's Alternative School students of heightened involvement in the risk behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of premature death, disease, injury, and social challenges in the US (Mannix, 2018).

This project is directed at efforts to better understand the behavioral health issues of substance abuse, mental health, and suicide ideation among adolescents aged 14-20 attending Alaska's alternative high schools. The purpose of this paper is to describe Alaska alternative high school staff perspectives on effective practices in alternative education and the impact of alternative education programs on drug and alcohol use, suicide ideation, feelings of hopelessness, and community support of alternative high school students.

Methods

In the 2019–2020 school year, there were 54 school districts in Alaska (State of Alaska & Alaska Public Schools Database, 2021). Twenty six of the 54 school districts had high schools (9–12 grade) and high schools that were combined with junior high schools (7–12 grade). The 13 alternative high schools were within eight school districts with high schools. Three were in the largest urban city of the state, one was in the state's urban capitol, three were in suburban areas, and the remaining six were in rural communities with populations of ten thousand individuals or less. Staff and administrators of the Alaska Alternative Schools collaborate *via* the Alaska Alternative School Coalition (State of Alaska & Alternative Schools, 2022). Ten of the 13 Alaska alternative high schools focus on students in grades 9–12 while the remaining three schools support students from grades K–12, grades 6–12 and grades 7–12. The number of students in Alaska alternative high schools ranges from 29–1632 and the number of teachers at the different schools ranges from 4–25.

The statewide Alaska Alternative Schools Coalition is funded through a collaboration between the State of Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services' Division of Behavioral Health and the Department of Early Education and Early Development (State of Alaska & Alternative Schools, 2022). The coalition reflects a shared understanding that student health and learning are interdependent, and the multi-year interdepartmental partnership was created with the intention to provide vital health enhancing services and programming for students. The coalition develops trauma-engaged strategies, programs, policies and practices tailored to meet the needs of each of the Alaska Alternative School Coalition member schools (State of Alaska & Alternative Schools, 2022).

Sample, recruitment, and data collection

The overall sample consisted of three stakeholder groups: (a) staff of the alternative high school; (b) current students at the alternative high school and (c) community members involved in alternative high school activities. For the analysis reported in this paper, we analyzed the staff sample as COVID-19 disrupted recruitment of student and community members.

Members of the research team emailed alternative high school administrators about the project, followed by a phone call to discuss the project goal, recruitment, and scheduling of focus group dates. All potential participants were made aware of the opportunity to participate in the focus groups by an invitation letter addressed to parents/guardians of students, to staff, and to students enrolled at the high school. In addition, flyers for the focus group with the date of the focus group were distributed by the school administrator.

Throughout the Spring of 2019, two research staff from the Center for Human Development at the University of Alaska Anchorage conducted the first half of a comprehensive assessment of students attending Alaska's alternative high schools. Focus groups in the remaining seven schools were scheduled for March 2020. Due to the start of the

COVID-19 pandemic, in-person activities at schools across Alaska were stopped and the scheduled focus groups were canceled. After careful consideration, the research team worked with school administration and decided to attempt the remaining focus groups using Zoom video conferencing. Data collection was completed at six of the seven focus groups before the end of the 2020-2021 school year.

Recruits were screened to ensure eligibility requirements were met. Researchers collected signed parent consent forms for students who wished to participate. Staff and community members provided verbal informed consent; students provided verbal assent. Researchers checked that all eligible youth had a signed parent/guardian consent form prior to focus group participation. Given the small population of staff at each school and research question of interest, we chose not to collect information about nor differentiate results by participant age or sex to maintain participant anonymity.

Focus groups were digitally recorded, and then transcribed for analysis. Interviewers used a semi-structured interview guide to complete the focus groups. Focus groups followed a round robin format giving everyone a chance to answer the question before opening it up for group discussion. Focus groups lasted an average of 69.5 min. No incentives were provided to participants. The project received approval from the University of Alaska Anchorage Institutional Review Board (protocol number 1345161).

Establishing trustworthiness of data and data analysis

To ensure the qualitative research was conducted with rigor to the extent possible, efforts were made to ensure trustworthiness of data as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To address confirmability, all efforts were made to clearly articulate the recruitment and research procedures and the data analysis methods. To ensure credibility, we engaged in member checking during the focus groups, and second by sharing initial results with the Alaska Alternative Schools Coalition. To promote transferability, we have attempted to share sufficient detail of the results through quotations and the context in which they were stated. To reduce interviewer bias, two moderators were present for data collection, and a semi-structured guide was implemented in a manner allowing respondents to answer the same questions, increasing comparability of responses.

For this analysis, we focus on the staff sample only. First, data from each round of data collection were analyzed using a thematic network approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to identify common views within a school site and by school district if applicable, then a phenomenological qualitative approach (Paley, 2016) was used to examine data across sites. The two researchers reviewed the transcripts, listened to audio recordings, and reviewed notes taken by the research team during and following the data collection. A set of *a priori* codes were then developed based on interview guide question constructs. Transcripts were coded with interrater reliability determined through comparison of applied codes on a transcript-by-transcript basis. Researchers discussed any differences in coding per transcript to come to consensus on code application. Researchers moved through four phases of analysis that included: (1) horizontalization of the data using the *a priori* codes to highlight significant statements on community context, effective educational strategies and health impacts; (2) theme development where coders met and developed clusters of meaning derived from significant statements; (3) school/district textural descriptions, where researchers used the developed themes to write descriptions of the community context, effective educational strategies and health impacts of the school/district's approach to alternative education noting the rural, suburban and urban locations of respondents and lastly, (4) a composite textural description of cross-cutting themes found across Alaska alternative high schools (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). The six focus groups that were held in Spring 2020 described concerns for students related to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures which we describe as an emergent theme.

Results

Focus groups with staff were completed at all alternative high schools across the state with a total of 13 focus groups completed with 100 staff participants. Group size ranged from 5 to 23 people. During the focus groups, staff were asked to describe their positions at the alternative school, experience as an educator, their tenure within the alternative school and their favorite thing about the school. Seven overarching themes from all focus groups were described by staff from across the state when reflecting on alternative education practice in Alaska.

Theme 1: alternative high school education is needed to support a subgroup of students who were not successfully accessing educational, social, emotional, and physical support in the traditional school setting

Participants in all regions noted the unique role of the alternative education model in their community. Staff across groups described the majority of the alternative student body as a subset of students who were unable to conform to the structure of the traditional high school model within their school district as "*many students attending alternative programs have experienced ACEs throughout their lives, which naturally leads to risky behaviors. And that eventually leads to those academic struggles and, you know, academic struggles oftentimes leads students to alternative programs.*" A participant from a different region of the state noted: "*It's just that the kids are struggling with things like homelessness, poverty, or histories of abuse and neglect, mental issues either that they have or maybe somebody in their immediate family has. It just makes them vulnerable.*"

The alternative education model which allows for flexibility in course load, credit recovery, and smaller school population and class size along with a focus on trauma-engaged practices and restorative justice was a consistent better fit for this subset of students. The alternative

high school setting was able to offer both an education as well as vocational skills and life skills at a pace and in an engaging manner that is acceptable and feasible to the student and their family.

Several core issues were noted as important to making Alaska alternative high school education settings work: small class sizes, teachers who employ a trauma-engaged framework, a school setting that is focused on building positive relationships first then academics, belief in student change, and practicing restorative justice. Participants endorsed these characteristics as one stated: "*these programs have intentionally been staffed in a way that gives a lower student [to teacher] ratio, that allows for building relationships, [leading to] a sense of safety, and trust-building with our students.*" Participants placed a high value on the possibilities available within alternative models compared to traditional schools (and for having multiple alternative high school models within a larger school district). Participants noted that each of the alternative high schools had unique aspects that they considered to be the alternative practice compared to their traditional school counterparts with practices including: "*allowing [educators] to have varying differentiations in instruction*", "*freedom to allow the kids to express themselves in multiple different formats*", service learning, "*see education as something more than just the books*", "[focus on] *what somebody needs to succeed in life and move forward in a positive direction or a positive future*" and individual student pacing.

Theme 2: alternative high school students have and are experiencing trauma which directly impacts their emotional and mental health, and lowers their protective factors

Participants in all regions and groups described lifelong traumatic experiences by the majority of students attending the alternative high schools with one rural participant noting:

> "Sometimes it's early education, that they didn't get the intervention, so they feel bad about themselves. … family instability and not staying in the same school, and not staying in the same home. I mean most of our kids have moved so many times and that, you know, the data on that shows what happens with kids, even in – when it's a positive move. And a lot of our kids have been abused. I mean they come from backgrounds that I can't even imagine."

Many focus group participants noted that substance misuse is present in both traditional and alternative high school student populations as substances are used by adolescents and young adults as a method to cope with the challenges that youth face in their daily lives. The ongoing and sometimes pervasive negative life experiences of the students was noted as a cause of alcohol and drug use and depression and suicide ideation:

> "I think teens nowadays have just started using that [alcohol and drugs] as a coping mechanism all around… and kids in alternative schools especially, like I'm not saying that kids in general schools, in public schools don't struggle with this, but we tend to have more of a hard home life sometimes and you watch your parents do it, you watch your friends do it, you go through stuff at home and you try to keep it to yourself and you hear about it. You see it on TV. It's everywhere now and you realize it and you go, 'Well, maybe that might help me' or, 'Maybe the best way is just to not be here anymore.'"

Participants described multigenerational trauma and lack of healthy role models both in the family unit and the community, particularly when reflecting on small rural communities. A suburban staff member describes different traumatic circumstances of their student population:

> "There's something that is broken or incredibly unhealthy that's happening, or has happened, or continues to happen so that they don't have the support that they needed. That could be well we have everything, parents in prison, personal traumas, suicides, seeing people die. Poor, being poor is a big one. Homeless, domestic violence, you name it."

Once a student is in the alternative high school, the philosophy, teaching, and social network serves as a safety net for the students. The school curriculum, delivered by staff with training in trauma-engaged educational practice is able to assist the students in addressing their social, emotional, and behavioral health needs and progressing academically, in the absence of family support.

Theme 3: alternative high school students have early assumption of responsibilities that impact academic and socio-emotional progress

Students at alternative high schools were often described as having assumed responsibilities during childhood and adolescence that are more typical in a later life stage. Staff noted that some alternative high school students are tasked with caring for younger siblings, are or are becoming a parent, being the caregiver for their parents and are a wage earner for the family. For example, one urban staff member stated:

> "Some of them have to have responsibilities at home taking care of siblings, and so they're torn between what they're told or what they feel like they're supposed to do for themselves, but also honor their family and help their family out."

Students had assumed adult responsibilities that were competing with the student's ability and focus on their development and transition to adulthood, their academic and personal growth.

Staff described the difficulty and emotional burden that their students faced with daily assumption and coordination for managing their family households. Rather than experiencing an adolescence that was relatively carefree and where the youth is dependent on others, many students were the primary caregiver and/or wage earner. A suburban staff member stated:

> "Some of the kids here that I know of, like one young man is the sole financial support for his family, which is a really big load for a senior in high school. Other kids, you know, they just want to have normal experiences, but their parents are fighting like cops involved, like weekends. [They] just wanted a sleepover. And so it's really a much bigger load of trauma and responsibility, so that could definitely lead to a lot of hopelessness feelings."

Other focus group participants commented on the pressures experienced by students when they had not yet acquired the skills necessary to successfully navigate the burdens of adulthood:

> "There's just a sense of, like, 'I'm just exhausted 'cause I don't know how to deal with real life adult problems without the tools of how to do it.' And it's just, the idea of they're just starting out so behind. They're smart. They see that. They know that."

In addition to supporting students with life skills training and vocational education, many staff have created space within their classroom to let the young person be a student. One rural staff member spoke about their classroom:

> "I try to provide them with a space for where, for 90 minutes, they can maybe compartmentalize some of those thoughts and just get a break. They can be a student, they can be united in their frustrations against me or the assignment, they can learn together in groups, they can be 13, 14 or 15 [years old] in that we can be silly and we can do experiments, we can get messy, and laugh and just really engage in the information and they can just be "normal," you know, for that class period and kinda forget about that."

Theme 4: alternative high schools focus on promotion of social-emotional learning skills

All participants described promotion of social-emotional core competencies within the alternative school setting. Staff described working with students on steps to support students improving their self-image and manage emotions as one rural staff member shared:

> "I'm thinking of a couple of the kids that I know that have struggled with mental health, a lot of them, you know, the high trauma, the self-talk that they have and the constant dialogue they have of negativity towards themselves. The first time they make a major mistake or a major failure and you see how that doesn't change how anyone interacts with them at the school. You see how they separate the deed from the doer and that you're still this special person that made this thing happen. You see how they come out of that and just start tweaking that self-talk just a little bit. You watch them through all the supports that we have, but really they start to believe in themselves and change that self-dialogue."

In addition, students are acknowledged daily and are routinely recognized for their unique attributions as a person. One staff member from the rural region described the impact that showing person-first value has on a student's beliefs about themselves as they said, *"Regardless of how they [the students] perform academically, they're valued as people first and that their voice does matter and that their feelings do matter"*. Staff described not reducing the student to a measure like attendance or a grade as the most important outcome of a student's education, but rather connecting student accomplishment to self-acknowledgement of abilities and interest in growing in personal responsibility and self-efficacy:

> "… valuing them regardless of academic performance. Sometimes we have these really positive conferences that are about or with a student who has not passed any classes so far that year, but we can still focus on all the great qualities they bring to our community… placing that kind of value on them as individuals, just you can see them lift up, and sometimes that's one of the first times that they've had a school staff member say in front of their parents or guardians how much they're appreciated, and I think that's something really special that we do at [school name]."

Staff often spoke of a primary outcome for students as *"good citizens"* and *"community members"* rather than graduation. Staff noted that many students did not have home or family support or earlier training in basic life skills that are expected of youth and young adults. Teaching staff described working in tandem with community service providers to provide social awareness and relationship skills. Staff from a rural region school noted:

> "It requires a lot of strategy and collaboration to make those needs and that support happen for those individuals because the community and the outside organizations are making up for some of the support that the student might be getting – the average student might be getting at home."

Theme 5: stigma and community prejudice of students and quality of education at alternative high schools is widespread

Participants highly endorsed the feeling of community and the quality of education at alternative high schools. They felt that the community in which the high school was located looked down upon the school overall, the students attending the school and the quality of education provided at the school. One suburban participant stated: "*the attitude and the community with people I've experienced, there's a lot of judgment around alternative schools. And your child must be a failure in some way if they have to go to an alternative school.*" The poor community perception of alternative schools is somewhat upheld in the education community. Staff across the school districts in which an alternative high school is located have negative perceptions of the students and quality of education. There is a pervasive stigma surrounding alternative high schools within the community. A staff member from a rural community shared both educator reactions and a description of compounded prejudice:

> "I do think there's a lot of stigma about our school, even for teachers. I know I personally run into, 'Oh, you teach there, that must mean you're not a good teacher.' And it's the same if you go there, that must mean you're not a good person."

Many individuals within the broader community were thought to only know of alternative education models from outside of Alaska that were punitive or part of the justice system. A suburban teacher described the perception of alternative education as they shared:

> "I think there is a traditional viewpoint of alternative schools where we do things kinda loosey-goosey, not as structured, kinda – and we don't believe that. Here we believe in structure and predictability for our students because we know where our students are coming from and we know that these – our students deserve the very best education, they deserve the best everything because they're already a step behind when they walk into our school, so we need to help and support them to have the very best. And so I just wanna throw that in there, that I think we're – it's not the traditional model of alternative schools."

Theme 6: alternative high schools provide physical and emotional safety

The physical space of the school and the atmosphere that the staff are able to create with the students plays a key role in how students experience their time at the alternative school. Participants spoke of the role of the physical space such as:

> "I've seen students that come in and we're told that they've had all these kinds of struggles, things weren't going well, and suddenly just because they have a new environment that's different than what they're used to, they're actually succeeding."

Many of the school buildings differed from the physical layout of traditional schools in the region. The space and how it was used reflected and emphasized the philosophy of the school. Staff described how the open space created an environment where all individuals in the school were made visible to one another, students *"can't hide in the bathroom"*, *"everyone gets to know the new person quickly"* and relationships were fostered due to close proximity and shared daily experiences. Many focus group participants described conflict between students, particularly physical assault, as rare and conflict resolution and restorative justice practices as common and immediate when conflict arises. These practices create a feeling of emotional and physical safety that is less common in traditional high schools. An urban staff member stated:

> "[something] pretty amazing happens at our school- even though we have all sorts of different students from all sorts of different backgrounds, they all are really, really, really kind to each other. I've never really had to deal with behavior issues. I don't think we've ever really had a fight. It's more the opposite, of other high school settings where it's cliques and bullies."

Theme 7: relationships between students, teachers, and other caring/trusting adults are vital to student wellness

Staff across the regions noted the role of non-educator staff in the alternative schools. All adults in the school play critical roles in not only building a positive school environment, but in supporting students. For instance, an urban staff member noted:

> "It's very different at [school name]in that, when there is a staff member there, no matter what the capacity of that staff member, no matter what their job title is, there is an adult, there, who truly, truly cares about that student, and 100 percent knows their name and will at least connect them to someone if they can't offer the service themselves."

All staff members are key members of the school and are respected as such. Staff noted that usually only teaching staff or counseling staff are provided with training, however, all staff interact with and are selected by students to engage with them. One rural staff member noted:

> "I think one of the basic human needs that everyone has – it doesn't matter whether you're a kid or an adult – is to be valued. And here at [school name], kids are valued. And a lot of that goes back to relationships. And just like what [participant name] was saying, it doesn't matter whether you're going to [listing off staff at school] or whoever, they find that one person. And in some instances, they have more than one person."

Last, participants mentioned the need for students to have several trusted adults in student's lives. However, for many alternative high school students, the trusted adult only exists within the school. A rural staff member describes:

> "We do an assessment every year, and it's an assessment of our kids, and it's kind of a survey, and it kind of measures their connectedness to the school and what not. The last few years that data has showed that the kids feel a sense of trust and connectedness to the adults in this building, but then when you ask them the same question of do they feel comfortable going out and talking to someone in the community about a job, about living situations, about someone they can even express their own feelings about, and that data information drops way down. They don't have that trust. They don't have that sense of, yeah, I feel like I can go out and do that. That's one of the things we've tried to work on and it's not easy."

COVID-19 pandemic impacts on alternative schools

Data collection occurred during the last two weeks of instruction of 2020 but was hampered with all school districts conducting the fourth quarter online due to the pandemic. Staff in urban and rural schools mentioned concerns for the student body during the pandemic. There were no mentions of concern for students or staff becoming infected with COVID-19, rather the concerns described were for the emotional safety of students. Staffs were concerned about students not having access to a trusted adult for an extended time period. Several staff mentioned not being able to connect with students online. The lack of communication from the students caused staff to worry and fear that students were not communicating because they were experiencing social or emotional distress, were using drugs and/or alcohol, or were in physical danger due to interpersonal violence and/or neglect.

One urban teacher reflected on how students struggled with having adult and community support during shorter school closures such as a snow day or the week-long closure following the large southcentral Alaska 2018 earthquake. The multi-month non-contact period was thought to compound the issues that were seen in shorter non-contact school periods. One urban teacher described their concern:

> "And I think the place where I see that is, during this pandemic time, closing the doors, is just like the most horrific thing for kids. I just think this is horrible. But then we also saw some of the same things, on a snow day, 'yay for getting to go back to bed and climb back in your jammies'. But then you think about our students who, that is not a good thing. We don't need snow days for our kids. We need them to be at school. I don't care if they do one thing that day, they need to be with [school name] staff member, the aunties and the uncles of the building. And then, like, back to the time when we had the earthquake, you initially get past that, 'Oh, crap, the sky is falling', and then, a week out of school and, you know what, that, that's not okay. Our kids need to be with a caring adult…. Just that fact that someone's gonna see you, every day, and recognize you, call you by name, and make that real connection, I think, is just super, super important for our kids. I think it's important for all kids. I think it's really important for our kids."

On a positive note, staff mentioned that they have been able to work with community-based organizations to obtain services for students that hadn't been available prior to the pandemic. One important innovation in service delivery that was mentioned by several staffs at rural region schools was telebehavioral health services. Prior to the pandemic, students needing counseling had struggled with getting an appointment and keeping the appointment due to transportation. The local behavioral health clinic began offering telemedicine counseling for adolescents which was a new service for the urban alternative high school.

Discussion

Staff in urban, suburban, and rural alternative high schools described how the alternative high school's program and service intensity characteristics are needed to support a subset of students who were not successfully accessing or receiving needed educational, social, emotional, and physical support in the traditional school setting. Students at alternative high schools in Alaska are supported by staff who use trauma-engaged practices as the majority of alternative high school students have and continue to experience trauma (Mannix, 2018; State of Alaska & Alaska Association of School Boards, 2019).

Students at alternative high school's report incidence and prevalence of major health risk factors including drug and alcohol use, suicide ideation, feelings of hopelessness and low protective factors. Alaska alternative high school staff noted how trauma directly impacts students' emotional and mental health, and negatively impacts their protective factors (e.g. feel they matter to people, can seek help from three or more adults). Alaska alternative education is focused on growth of the student to become fully engaged member of society (Maillet, 2016). Alternative high school staff describe the creation and maintenance of an educational environment that encourages each student to be known to staff and other students in a manner that is comfortable for the student (Clayton, 2019; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The physical environment along with a flexible format provides room for emotional connections between students and between students and staff. These alternative education practices are thought to support students on a social-emotional level, allowing them to overcome barriers that prevent them from seeking help for substance misuse and behavioral health issues that have developed due to trauma histories. Sung et al. (2023) studied students in an alternative school in a large south eastern US city and found that despite students having a significant history of trauma exposure, the alternative high school students who had more self-awareness and family coherence had less symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Alaska alternative schools are seen as safe physical spaces for students that have been marginalized in other public and private areas in their community, a finding that was noted by Williams (2019) in the description of supportive safety nets at school. Our findings echo the issues brought up by Williams (2019), Schmitz and Tyler (2016) and Johnson and Mollborn (2009) regarding the need for student wrap-around support services to ease the adult burdens felt by many alternative high school students. In addition, the alternative high school's trauma-engaged practices allow educators to differentiate academic and social-emotional learning experiences to address specific student assets and needs (Jacobson, 2021).

The Alaska alternative education model seeks to improve the protective factors while addressing the root causes of youth engagement in health risk factors. The Alaska alternative high school model focuses on student social-emotional learning which leads to academic and personal success. The social-emotional focus is thought by staff to be integral in initiating and nurturing relationships between students, teachers, and other caring/trusting adults. Healthy relationships that are created through the Alaska alternative high school practices, and the willingness of students to participate in the educational programming provided by Alaska's alternative high schools, are vital to improving student mental and physical wellness.

Staff describe using positive behavioral support to enhance coping and resilience among students who experience early adultification in addition to providing educational system changes that make both learning relevant to students and makes learning opportunities available when students are available (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Maillet, 2016; McGee & Lin, 2020; McGregor & Mills, 2012). Participant's described the lack of understanding and respect shown to alternative educators by others in the education community as well as the larger social environment and the emotional toll that trauma-engaged alternative education takes on teachers and staff which is reflected in other alternative education settings (Quinn, 2021). Teachers and support staff describe genuine engagement with each student, making non-superficial connections with empathy and non-judgment, strategies described in the educational literature as essential to fostering an accepting school environment (Maillet, 2016; Romano & Wahlstrom, 2000; Slaten et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2019; Williams, 2019). Creating awareness of community career opportunities and building relationships between alternative high school students and adults in vocational programs, higher education, and community-based careers were strategies used to enhance protective factors. The development of a robust community-based apprenticeship and internship program for alternative high school students would codify the informal relationships between individual schools, businesses and community programs. The long-term sustainability for vocational, career and higher education support for alternative high school students are sparse in the current alternative schools' system in Alaska.

The uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic have further heightened stress among educators, staff, administration, students and parents as the ways that they connect with, educate and support have drastically changed (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020). Like other educators as described by Eblie Trudel and Sokal (2023), participants in our sample describe a reduction in student connectedness to other students in the school and staff.

While this study contributes to an understanding of alternative schools' models through direct responses with

teachers and staff who have extensive knowledge of the alternative school model in Alaska, the research is not without limitations. First the sample is small, however, for several schools, the sample was nearly the entire population of staff and teachers. The perspectives were shared at a single time point with no member checking of the results.

Conclusions

While the alternative school model in Alaska provides social and emotional support, particularly to students who experience early adultification, more research is needed to determine how and if alternative education models support students in learning reengagement and repositions students to experience deep meaningful learning for understanding or critical thinking (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Schmitz & Tyler, 2016; Slaten et al., 2015). The role of trauma-engaged alternative education in growing positive relationships in schools and in the community could be further explored using the nominal group technique to prioritize strategies for educational research interventions.

Given that two-thirds of US adolescents have experienced some form of trauma by age 17 (McLaughlin et al., 2013), the lessons learned from the Alaska alternative schools' models are worthwhile for additional replication and testing within traditional school settings. Parents, educators, researchers, and policy makers must ask what the best approach to alternative education is for students who are not succeeding in the traditional system. They may want to ask if the possibility exists to improve inclusion and equity in all educational settings through trauma-engaged educational practices. Administrators should consider protective factors when developing policies to support the social-emotional health of alternative school students. Administrators should consider incorporating trauma-informed educational practices that develop and enhance social-emotional learning skills for all students among their school policies.

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