

**What's the experience of Minnesota students who attend alternative-education programs?  
StudentsSpeakOut.org Survey Results as of May 21, 2008**

***60 students who attend alternative-education programs have taken this survey.  
To learn more about them, see "Methods and Demographics" below.***

Student respondents agreed that they are better off academically (79.3%) and socially (52.8%) in their alternative-education program compared to previous "mainstream" schools they have attended. Almost 28% said they neither agreed nor disagreed that they were better off socially.

**One-hundred percent said they feel that alternative-education programs are helping them to meet their educational goals.** We asked "how so" and asked them to check all that apply from a spectrum of reasons developed from previously reported stories on StudentsSpeakOut.org. They reported:

- There is less pressure to accomplish goals at the same time as everybody else. 70.2%
- I can get more help. 70.2%
- I feel more supported academically. 70.2%
- I know I will graduate. At my mainstream school, I wasn't sure I would. 66.7%
- Teachers know me personally. 64.9%
- I feel more supported socially. 63.2%
- I can learn subjects at my own pace (quicker, slower, or average). 63.2%
- There is more respect between teachers and students. 61.4%
- I know "it's not just me". Others experienced difficulty succeeding in mainstream schools, too. 50.9%
- The schedules are flexible, so I can take care of other responsibilities. 47.4%
- There is more respect between students. 42.1%
- I can explore subjects that interest me in depth. 40.4%
- There is more understanding about my social issues (like chemical dependency, pregnancy, being a parent, mental health disorders) or learning disabilities. 40.4%
- 8.8% answered "other". Replied included: "They guide students." "Teachers rock." "Because now I'm passing; before I failed ALL my classes."

**Most students said they are learning more, attending more, more motivated to learn, and more confident in their ability to achieve when asked to rate their progress in their alternative programs compared to how they were progressing in the mainstream schools.**

| 11. Rate your progress at your alternative school compared to how you were progressing in the mainstream schools you attended. |                   |          |                                       |            |                   |                      |                |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------------------------------------|------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|
|  | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral (don't agree, don't disagree) | Agree      | Strongly agree    | Does not apply to me | Response Count |
| I am learning more at my alternative school.   | 3.6% (2)          | 1.8% (1) | 19.6% (11)                            | 25.0% (14) | <b>48.2% (27)</b> | 1.8% (1)             | 56             |
| I attend school more at my alternative school.   | 1.8% (1)          | 0.0% (0) | 14.5% (8)                             | 23.6% (13) | <b>54.5% (30)</b> | 5.5% (3)             | 55             |
| I am doing better on standardized tests at my alternative school.  | 1.8% (1)          | 1.8% (1) | 23.6% (13)                            | 23.6% (13) | <b>38.2% (21)</b> | 10.9% (6)            | 55             |
| I am more motivated to learn at my alternative school.   | 3.6% (2)          | 0.0% (0) | 10.7% (6)                             | 25.0% (14) | <b>58.9% (33)</b> | 1.8% (1)             | 56             |
| I am more confident in my ability to achieve at my alternative school.   | 1.8% (1)          | 1.8% (1) | 10.9% (6)                             | 20.0% (11) | <b>61.8% (34)</b> | 3.6% (2)             | 55             |
| I am more "on track" toward graduation at my alternative school.   | 3.6% (2)          | 1.8% (1) | 3.6% (2)                              | 20.0% (11) | <b>69.1% (38)</b> | 1.8% (1)             | 55             |
| I am better able to balance my social responsibilities with school at my alternative school.                                   | 3.6% (2)          | 1.8% (1) | 14.3% (8)                             | 26.8% (15) | <b>50.0% (28)</b> | 3.6% (2)             | 56             |
| I am better able to cope with social issues (learning disabilities, chemical dependency, etc.) at my alternative school.       | 0.0% (0)          | 1.8% (1) | 20.0% (11)                            | 16.4% (9)  | <b>50.9% (28)</b> | 10.9% (6)            | 55             |

**Students were influenced to enroll in an alternative-education program in a number of ways.**

- A friend told me/my family about the alternative school. 37.3%
- An adult at my mainstream school encouraged me to attend because s/he noticed I might do better elsewhere. 33.9%
- I/my family sought out the school after growing concerned about my progress. 30.5%
- It was either "go to the alternative school" or "drop out". 23.7%
- An adult at my mainstream school discouraged me from continuing to attend that school, and told me an alternative school might be better. 20.3%
- An adult at my mainstream school encouraged me to attend after I/my family approached them with concerns about my progress. 16.9%
- I wasn't "at risk" and could not attend. So I purposefully did something to be "at risk" so I COULD attend. 1.7%
- 15.3% answered "Other", with most frequent replies including the need for flexibility.

**Almost 83 percent said they would be better off if they had attended an alternative program sooner.** We asked those who said they'd be better off why they didn't enroll sooner, and asked them to check all that apply from a spectrum of reasons developed from previously reported stories on StudentsSpeakOut.org. The following were the results:

- I wanted to try and make things work in my traditional/mainstream school. 36%
- My parents and I hadn't heard about them. 34%
- I thought alternative schools were for "bad" or "stupid" kids, or I had other negative perceptions of alternative schools. 28%
- I didn't yet want/need to attend an alternative school. 26%

- My parents had negative perceptions about the schools. 24%
  - My parents were not aware that I was doing poorly in school (academically). 16%
  - I was not old enough. 14%
  - My parents were not aware that I was facing a social issue. 12%
  - I was worried that people’s negative stereotypes about alternative schools would limit my success in the future. 10%
  - I was not eligible because I did not yet meet the “at-risk” criteria. 4%
  - Other 10%
- Answers included:  
 -“My counselor wouldn’t sign me up to try to get enrolled.”  
 -“I started in 8<sup>th</sup> grade then had to go to mainstream for 90 days when I started 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I did 9<sup>th</sup> grade in mainstream and hated it.”

**When asked about their perceptions of alternative-education programs before they attended, 56.9% of students checked, “I thought they seemed like a great option for students who needed something different from mainstream”. Students also checked:**

- I worried that if I attended them, people might think I am “stupid”. 34.5%
- I thought the academic work would be easier than it was at the school I was attending. 34.5%
- I worried that if I attended them, people might think I am a “bad kid”. 32.8%
- I thought the school might help me to overcome a major personal obstacle that could have delayed my graduation if I had stayed in my mainstream school. 31%
- I thought the social environment would be more respectful than the school I was attending. 27.6%
- I was scared to attend because I heard “bad kids” attended them. 22.4%

**Most students plan to attend a four-year college or university (49.1%) and 40.4% said they plan to attend a 2-year college. The following table describes more fully their post-graduation expectations:**

| 12. What are your plans for after you graduate from high school (check all that apply)? |  |                  |                |
|---|--|------------------|----------------|
|   |  | Response Percent | Response Count |
| 4 year college or university  |  | 49.1%            | 28             |
| 2 year college  |  | 40.4%            | 23             |
| Vocational, technical or trade school   |  | 15.8%            | 9              |
| Military  |  | 10.5%            | 6              |
| Travel  |  | 22.8%            | 13             |
| Service (volunteer corps, etc.)   |  | 0.0%             | 0              |
| Full-time job   |  | 31.6%            | 18             |
| Part-time job   |  | 33.3%            | 19             |
| Full-time at-home parent  |  | 1.8%             | 1              |

12. What are your plans for after you graduate from high school (check all that apply)?

|              |       |   |
|--------------|-------|---|
| I don't know | 12.3% | 7 |
| Other        | 14.0% | 8 |

### **Methods and Demographics: Who took the survey?**

The SSO Survey is not scientific. Respondents self-selected to participate. The survey was designed using Survey Monkey, an online survey software, and offered online at StudentsSpeakOut.org and on paper at a conference for student leaders arranged by the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs (held in Bloomington, MN in April 2008). Students who participated were entered to win a Best Buy gift card.

- 60 students total participated. Note: Not all students answered all questions.
- 62.5% were female. 37.5% were male.
- Ages varied, with most being 16-18 years old.
  - 44.6% were 17 years old.
  - 25% were 18 years old.
  - 14.3% were 16 years old.
  - 5.4% were 19 years old.
  - 3.6% were 14. 3.6% were 15. 3.6% were 21.
- Most were in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12 grades.
  - 42.9% in 12<sup>th</sup> grade or fourth year.
  - 30.4% in 11<sup>th</sup> grade or third year.
  - 12.5% in 10<sup>th</sup> grade or second year.
  - 1.8% in 9<sup>th</sup> grade or first year.
  - 7% other (graduates—mostly recent; 8<sup>th</sup> grade).
- Race, Ethnicity:
  - White 52.7%
  - Hispanic 18.2%
  - African-American 10.9%
  - Other 9.1%
  - Native American 3.6%
  - Asian-Pacific Islander 3.6%
  - White, non-Hispanic 1.8%
- Students were from at least 28 cities across the state of Minnesota, including: Arlington (2), Austin (2), Brooklyn Center (4), Brooklyn Park (5), Buffalo (3), Cokato (4), East Bethel (2), Gaylord (2), Little Canada (2), New Ulm (2), Roseville (5), St. Cloud (2), St. Francis (2), and one each from: Annandale, Barnum, Brainerd, Chaska, Cloquet, Columbia Heights, Esko, Marshall, Moose Lake, Oak Grove, Oakdale, Plymouth, Shakopee, Shoreview, Vadnais Heights.

### ***About the project leaders***

The survey was designed by Citizens League Students Speak Out Coordinator Kim Farris-Berg and Minnesota Anniversary Project Director Stacy Becker based on analysis of students' written and videoed stories as presented in their own words on StudentSpeakOut.org. "Students Speak Out Goes Alternative" student leaders are Molly Dietz, Ashley Iverson, Joe Otten, Shane Saunders. Other student leaders who have influenced this project include: Ilandrea "Nuny" Nichols and Eric Torgusen.

Access stories from alternative school students (both written and video testimony) on StudentSpeakOut.org, where we have posted a complete summary of quotes from the students' stories and a written brief asking "What's alternative about Minnesota's Alternative-Education Programs? The schools? Or the students who attend them?". We will also post a "supervideo", prepared by Southwest High School Freshman Annie Wood, featuring the students' video testimony.

### ***About StudentSpeakOut.org***

StudentSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it. StudentSpeakOut.org is a social networking Web site that has been testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota. In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in workshops to learn how to support them. The workshop designs and recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—75 new participants in the first three weeks!).

### ***Useful Links***

- Students Speak Out – Minnesota: <http://studentsspeakout.org> (Visit the SSO Goes Alternative Group).
- Students Speak Out – Milwaukee: <http://milwaukee.studentsspeakout.org>
- MN Statute 124D.68: <https://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/bin/getpub.php?type=s&num=124D.68>
- Minnesota Department of Education. *State Approved Alternative Program Handbook*. (Roseville, MN: Minnesota Department of Education, updated February 2007). <http://education.state.mn.us/mde/index.html>
- Kim Farris-Berg and Jon Schroeder, "Alternative-Education Programs: The Quiet Giant in Minnesota Public Education," (St. Paul, MN: EducationEvolving, June 2003), 7. <http://www.educationevolving.org/studentvoices>