

# Alternative Middle School Models in North Dakota: An Overview



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The purpose of this project is to provide policymakers and educators in North Dakota and beyond with an overview of the various types of alternative middle school programs offered across the state of North Dakota.

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School of Education

October 2013

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## Project Overview

The purpose of this project is to provide policymakers and educators in North Dakota and beyond with an overview of the various types of alternative middle school programs offered across the state of North Dakota. The project began at the request of ND Senator Tim Flakkoll; \$300,000 in foundation aid had been set aside during the 2011-2012 biennium for grants to provide supplemental funding to school districts that applied for the funding and met qualifications for an alternative middle school program. The ND Department of Public Instruction (DPI) administered the grants, and 17 schools from 13 districts were approved to receive funding. See the list of schools and the community in which they are located in Figure 1 below. A small research grant was also provided through legislative funding to support this study to learn about these alternative middle school programs.

Beulah Middle School	Beulah
Horizon Middle School	Bismarck
Simle Middle School	Bismarck
Wachter Middle School	Bismarck
Devils Lake Central Middle School	Devils Lake
A. L. Hagen Junior High School	Dickinson
Ben Franklin Middle School	Fargo
Carl Ben Eielson Middle School	Fargo
Discovery Middle School	Fargo
Grafton Central Middle School	Grafton
Valley Middle School	Grand Forks
Jamestown Middle School	Jamestown
Mandan Middle School	Mandan
New Town High School	New Town
Warwick Public School	Warwick
Cheney Middle School	West Fargo
Williston Middle School	Williston

*Figure 1.* List of ND schools that applied for and received legislative funding through the alternative middle school grant.

According to the notification given to the schools who received the grant, the amount received was based on the formula of .15 per enrolled student, which works out to be about \$600/student. In order to qualify for the grant, the school needed to provide at least 15 hours of alternative middle school services to each of the students per week. If the district qualified, a check was sent by August 15, 2012.

## Importance of the Study

Students who lack academic readiness or are chronically in trouble for behavior issues are at high risk for dropping out of school (Kennedy, 2011). People who drop out of school are more likely to become involved with the justice system, and they earn less income over a lifetime than their peers who earn a diploma.

Alternative middle schools are, potentially, one way to address the needs of these students who have not been successful in the traditional school format. Both the state of ND and 13 school districts within the state have invested significant resources into developing alternative middle school programs, and it is important to determine the impact of this work. It is also essential to create a detailed, written description of the models being implemented to share with educators around the state and nation, as educators can

learn from one another. Such efforts may lead to more effective and efficient methods of implementation in the future.

## Alternative Middle School Programs

There does not seem to be a single definition of alternative; although, there tend to be commonalities that lead toward a broad-based description of the concept. Alternative middle school programs typically target students who are considered “at risk.” At risk is defined in multiple ways, including at risk for dropping out of school, truancy, academic failure, social and peer issues, violence, crime, and emotional and behavioral issues (Lloyd, 1997; Vann et al., 2000). Having a disability can also be found in the profile of students served by alternative education (Foley & Pang, 2006). Additionally, many alternative programs are closely linked with the local juvenile correction system (Vann et al., 2000).

To meet the needs of these at-risk adolescents, alternative programs provide not only content-focused instruction, but also skills related to personal development, designed to help the students to be successful in and out of school. Many programs are centered on a point system which rewards students for behaviors such as efficient completion of school work, interacting positively with peers, and even meeting behavior goals outside of school (Lloyd, 1997; Vann et al., 2000). The academic programming is often focused on remediation to help the student catch up to peers in regular classes (Vann et al., 2000).

## Participants

The researchers, Dr. Stacy Duffield and Dr. Larry Napoleon, Jr., contacted the principal at each of the schools identified in Figure 1, inviting participation in an interview to provide information about the structure of their alternative middle school program. While there are more alternative middle schools in operation in ND, because this study was commissioned by a legislator with a funding for the completion of this report, only schools that applied for the legislatively-funded DPI grant were included. See Figure 2 for a list of schools from which some level of participation was agreed to. The principals were initially contacted through email. If they did not respond, a follow-up email and a telephone call were made. A message was left if the principal was not available at the time of the telephone call. Thirteen of the 17 principals agreed to some level of participation. The principals from the three Bismarck middle schools responded and referred the researchers to Bismarck Youth Works, the entity that is responsible for the alternative middle school in Bismarck; however, the Bismarck Youth Works director declined to participate. Principals from Mandan, Newtown, Warwick, and Valley Middle School in Grand Forks either declined participation or did not respond to correspondences.

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Grafton Central Middle School	Grafton
Jamestown Middle School	Jamestown
Cheney Middle School	West Fargo
Williston Middle School	Williston

Figure 2. ND schools that participated in this study.

## Methodology

A structured interview was used to determine how the programs were designed and operated. When possible, supporting documents such as student contracts and referral forms were collected. The researchers used Skype, Interactive Video Network, conference calls and face-to-face visits to conduct the interviews. The interviews were conducted during the spring 2013 semester. See Figure 3 for a list of the interview questions. Information was also provided by ND DPI, including the grant application and the process for grant administration. The interviews were transcribed and coded for information related to the following elements: program structure (location and physical space, staffing, population served and admission process), program goals and services, and program funding. These elements were used as headings for the school profiles found below.

1. What factors served as the impetus for starting this program?
2. What are the specific target goals for this program?
3. How is the program funded?
4. What are the curricular goals for this program?
5. How does the typical day progress for a student enrolled in this program?
6. Does this program operate as a subset or parallel program to any others?
7. Is there an exit plan embedded within the program?
8. How are students selected for participation within this program?
9. Is there formal protocol for participation in the program?
10. How are teachers selected for participation within this program?
11. How many teachers and staff are part of the alternative program?

*Figure 3.* Interview questions used for the structured interviews.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Alternative middle school educators should document processes that are being used in the alternative programs.

Written records should be kept of what interventions, practices and procedures are being used so effective practices can be replicated, and ineffective practices can be revised or replaced. Bernhardt (2009) explains that in order to understand student achievement results, schools need to document what is happening. She describes mapping processes that schools can use in her article, "Measuring School Processes" (2009). The records should be written and stored in a school database so knowledge does not reside in a single educator, which can easily be lost if that educator leaves the school.

2. Maintain student records of achievement and behavior while in program to document impact of program.

Documentation of student response to the interventions provided through the alternative middle school setting is essential in determining if the programs are effective. The results can be used on an individual level to make adjustments to the programming provided to particular students and studied at a program level over time to determine the overall effectiveness of the program.

3. Track the students after they leave the alternative middle school programs. Several questions could be addressed such as whether or not the program impacts factors such as persistence in school, truancy, or academic performance.

Currently, the programs in ND do not have formalized tracking systems. While several experts (see Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGee, 2001) report potential detrimental effects due to the negative stigma often attached to alternative programs, educators need a way to know what works in alternative programming so these promising practices can be shared. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) suggest also tracking progress on reading and mathematics assessments and intention to enroll in further education.

4. Broaden the service mission of alternative high school programs or build bridge programs to fill the gap between middle and high school alternative programs.

Several of the alternative school staff and administrators spoke of the gap between alternative middle school programs that serve students in grades 6-8 and high school programs that are typically limited to serving students ages 16 and over. Many high school alternative programs only allow students admission after they have turned 16 and have formally exited—dropped out of—their regular high school, creating the potential for up to two years of high school without access to alternative programming. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) recommend “creating pathways among programs” (p. 32). While they refer specifically to vocational training or GED programs, their overall point is to make it easy for students to stay in school and focused on their career goals.

To address this issue, some schools have created support programs or school-within-a-school models such as the 9th grade academy model in place at Jamestown High School. Students who are identified as at risk are given the opportunity to attend specialized classes offered in a block schedule, allowing them to take fewer classes at one time with intensive support from a teacher with training and experience working with at risk youth.

5. Allocate both state and local funding to support the development of middle and high school alternative programs, creating accessibility for as many students as possible across the state.

While the allotment provided by DPI is generous, at approximately \$600 per student, the funding does not begin to cover the costs of operating an alternative program. The cost-prohibitive nature of alternative programs keeps many schools in the state from beginning or continuing their programs. For example, the principal in Beulah reported that their program was discontinued due to lack of available funding. A viable option was identified by Jeff Rerick, principal at Grafton middle school, to use a resource-sharing model among several schools that are in close proximity to one another. This model is used by schools across the state of ND for many other services including special education and vocational education. The Regional Education Associations are built upon this model and could possibly take a role in facilitating the collaboration.

## **Overview of Programs**

In the following section, the programs will be described according to their location and physical space, staffing, population served and admission process, program goals and services, and program funding.

### **Beulah Middle School, Beulah**

#### **Alternative Program**

**Interviewee:** Stacy Murschel, Principal

#### **Program Structure**

##### *Location and Physical Space*

The alternative program was located within Beulah Middle School in its own classroom. The classroom was similar to the other classrooms in the building.

##### *Staffing*

The alternative program was staffed by one fulltime para-professional. As of the 2012-2013 academic year the program was no longer in operation, as the state mandated that there be a certified teacher across all subjects due to the curriculum utilized. Additionally, due to the very small group of students served in their program, funding for a certified teacher was not feasible.

##### *Population Served and Admission Process*

The alternative program served as many as four students at a time. The students were admitted primarily due to behavioral concerns. The principal explained how students were selected.

I would say looking at the list of students that were in the program, the vast majority, I would probably go so far as to say 100% of them were mostly for behavioral issues, possibly some academic issues tied in however, I think the determination is that the academic issues that they're having are a direct result of the behavior that they're exhibiting...because if it was simply an academic issue, we have programs in place through Special Education and our own interventions that we have in place that would be able to deal with those types of things.

Students were recommended for the alternative program by Beulah's Teacher Assistance Team (TAT). The TAT team follows a process that is triggered by a report of student concern from a staff member. The team evaluated the full range of student issues and devised a strategic plan to address the concerns. The principal explained the TAT team process.

Any time we have concerns with students we put together a TAT team and then that brings in the parent, and we discuss the issues at hand. And, then they try to come up with possible solutions and ways to help the student, and sometimes...that TAT process leads to Special Ed referrals, sometimes it leads to counseling referrals or...it can lead to

a variety of different things. It would go through that process before they would have been placed into the alternative setting.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The alternative middle school program at Beulah arose from the realization that there were some students who did not function well within the framework of a traditional school model. The main goal was to improve academic performance, especially in the core subject areas. As noted earlier, however, program participants were identified largely based upon behavioral concerns. According to their TAT evaluations, the students who were selected to be part of their alternative middle school program performed below expected levels largely because of behavior. By creating an environment and circumstances where undesirable behavior could be modified, the staff believed academic success could occur.

Students in the alternative program had intervention plans that were developed according to their personal needs. Some students received almost all services through the alternative middle school model, while others spent part of their time within the alternative environment. There was a focus on integrating those students back into the regular setting, in part, through social interaction opportunities. The principal shared the following.

It varied for each student and what their needs were, for example, one of the students may have, it may have been the Language Arts say, and so they would take Language Arts in the alternative setting for part of the day and they would then try to integrate them into some of the other courses. I believe there was one student that was taking all of their four core classes through the Odyssey Ware and then they were trying to integrate that student back into the electives, and you know the PEs and Art and Music and those sorts of things, they would also participate in lunch and you know that social period with their peers as well.

The staff followed the state's curriculum as all other classes did, but there was an increased focus on behavior modification embedded within the program. Another primary difference was that the instruction was delivered through a computer software program called Odyssey Ware. The principal stated that she is not very familiar with Odyssey Ware as the program is not currently used at Beulah. Her understanding of the software program is that it allowed for individual lesson completion and advancement.

The ultimate goal of Beulah's alternative middle school program was to improve behavioral and academic performance and reintroduce students into a full-time, regular education schedule. Program dismissal was based on a recommendation from the TAT. The TAT would meet periodically to complete a progress monitoring process. If the progress warranted, the student would begin gradually phasing back into the regular setting.

### **Program Funding**

Beulah Middle School received a small amount of funding from the state; however, as 2012-13 was Principal Murschel's first year and the program was not in operation, she is not sure what that exact amount was. She does know that it was not enough to pay for fulltime, certified

teacher. She noted that there is still need for an alternative program, but funding options are a barrier.

## **Horizon, Simile and Wachter Middle Schools, Bismarck**

### **\*Youth Works Day Treatment Program**

**Interviewees:** Brian Beehler, principal, and Sherry Heaton, principal

#### **Program Structure**

##### ***Location and Physical Space***

Youth Works is located in a separate facility from the Bismarck middle schools.

##### ***Staffing***

According to the Bismarck Youth Works website, the day treatment program (DTP) is staffed by a licensed social worker, a licensed teacher, and an Education and Support Center Coordinator.

##### ***Population Served and Admission Process***

Students are identified for the alternative program for repeated academic and behavior issues. If other interventions are not successful, counselors will work with the assistant principals to identify students who would be better served in the day treatment program offered through Youth Works. The referral process involves identification of both academic and behavioral problems as well as goals that the school has for the student.

#### **Program Goals and Services**

According to the Bismarck Youth Works website, the DTP offers full day services to assist students with academic and behavior problems. They help these students transition back into the community and school after an out-of-home placement.

Services provided through the Day Treatment Program include tutoring, behavior assessment, homework assistance, professional assessment, individual counseling, family counseling, and mentoring services. The program also emphasizes skill development, including study skills, time management, problem solving, decision making, anger management, parenting adolescents, peer pressure, and codependency. All students involved in the DTP work under a treatment plan developed by the staff team.

#### **Program Funding**

Information not available.

\*This information was gathered from brief telephone or email conversations with the middle school principals, the Bismarck Youth Works Website (<http://www.youthworksweb.com/programs/311-2/>), and the referral form used by Youth Works. The staff at Youth Works declined to participate in an interview to describe their day treatment program.

## **Central Middle School, Devil's Lake**

### **Alternative Program**

**Interviewees:** Josh Johnson, Principal; Jared Schlenker, Assistant Principal; Derek Gatham, Alternative Education Instructor

#### **Program Structure**

##### ***Location and Physical Space***

The alternative program is located within Central Middle School in its own classroom. The program was described as being a “school within a school.”

##### ***Staffing***

The alternative program is staffed by a full-time, certified teacher and one social worker. While appropriate teaching credentials were important when considering who to hire for the teaching position, the principal said they were very deliberate about hiring the right *person* for position. Given the population of students to be served by the position, hiring someone who had an understanding of their population was important for the program to be effective. The principal explained:

Yeah, the part really for us that makes it successful is the teacher. In anything that we do, you can have everything set up in terms of your plan and the strategies and everything else, but if you don't have the right personnel working with these at-risk kids, it's not going to work.

The teacher hired was a former student within the district, and a former student teacher at Central Middle School. His deep relationships within the district and the school itself assured the principal that he was the right person for the position.

##### ***Population Served and Admission Process***

Over the past two years, the alternative program has served seven or eight students during the academic year. Typical candidates for the program are students who are not only doing poorly in the traditional classroom setting, but also are doing poorly after extensive and diverse intervention strategies prove unsuccessful. The principal was careful to clarify that the alternative program was not a time-out space where minor, yet interruptive behaviors served as legitimate reasons for entry.

We've set up a referral process so that either teachers or administrators can make a referral to the administration, and we will work with Mr. Gatham in the alternative room to basically go through the criteria for selection in the alternative classroom. Oftentimes, what's happened is classroom teachers will either think a student should be in the alternative room because they are missing three or four assignments or because they talked back to the teacher one day, and so what we've had to do is kind of go through that

on our end and even though they are a part of the team we have definitely filtered a lot of their referrals and basically made it clear to them that there's a specific criteria that we are following and that criteria is basically, a student is not being successful in the traditional classroom and all interventions to help that student be successful have been attempted by the classroom teacher.

If a student is determined to be a good candidate for the program, a meeting is held with the student and parents. The principal noted that due to the numerous intervention strategies that precede alternative placement, many conversations have typically been held with parents by this point. The principal noted that while the afore-mentioned process is pretty standard when considering alternative program placement, there have been instances where a student may have unique circumstances and that process is expedited for their benefit.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The Central Middle School alternative middle school program has been operating since the 2011-2012 school year. The principal explained that the superintendent of schools in Devils Lake initiated a conversation with him about how they were serving students who demonstrated needs that went beyond the basics, but did not necessarily fit into the special education arena. That conversation led to research on alternative education models and the first year of alternative schooling in the following year. The program's focus is to serve students who exhibit significant struggles in the traditional, general education classroom. Students in Central Middle School's program typically exhibit struggles due to emotional, social, or behavioral issues. The principal noted that they avoid placing students in the alternative program if they are already served by an IEP, as special education services provide them with a lot of resources.

Students' days are structured. Their day starts earlier than their peers with breakfast in the cafeteria before the school is open for the rest of the students. When the school opens, they report to the alternative education classroom. For the first 30 to 45 minutes of the day, the social worker works with the students on social skills and character. Students then work on their core classes. The curriculum, while similar to that of their traditional education peers, is administered through the online program, Odyssey Ware, which allows them to work independently at their own pace. The classroom teacher supervises their work and supports them as needed. After going through their core classes, the students pick up their lunches from the cafeteria and return to their classroom to eat. Following lunch, the students have another core class in the afternoon and then go to physical education class. They typically get 30 to 45 minutes for P.E. After P.E. they take another break, where they have snacks as part of a school-wide snack program where everyone gets fruit and vegetables. When the snack break is complete, they finish with their last core class and are dismissed at 3:20.

Participation in the alternative education program is not intended to be long-term; rather, it is seen as a short-term pathway back into the regular classroom. The ultimate goal is always to transition the students back into the regular classroom. A level system is utilized to make this process as efficient and structured as possible. Each student starts on the same level. There are three levels, and each level contains higher expectations for behavior and responsibility. Every day, students are given a point sheet which reflects behavior, academics, and social interactions. Once students complete the third level, which takes about three months, they enter the transition

phase. In this phase they get to re-enter one regular education class a week. If that goes well, a class is added each week until they maintain a fulltime, regular class schedule. This gradual transition is seen as a controlled way to reintroduce the students to the regular class setting while still having time to reinforce the skills worked on in the alternative education program.

The main focus of this program is to provide comprehensive support for students, which includes behavioral, academic, and emotional assessments and improvement. When students leave, the intention is for them to have learned social skills, behavioral skills, and self-management skills that they can utilize in the regular classroom setting and beyond.

### **Program Funding**

The program is funded by combining resources from several sources. In the 2012-2013 school year, the state of North Dakota provided funds in the amount of \$7,164. Additional funding has been secured from the state through a Title I grant focused on serving “neglected and delinquent” youth. Funding also comes through a partnership with a local boarding house called Harmony House. Several students who are enrolled in the program come from Harmony House, so they have been willing to provide supplemental funding. Lastly, Devils Lake Public Schools provides funds. The combined amount of these funds has allowed Central Middle School to secure one fully dedicated teacher for their program and has also assisted in securing a full-time social worker who operates primarily out of the alternative education program, but who also helps out with other students as an intervention strategist.

## **Hagen Junior High, Dickinson Day Treatment Program**

**Interviewees:** Pam Dean, Day Treatment Director, and Marcus Lewton, Principal

### **Program Structure**

#### ***Location and Physical Space***

The Day Treatment Program (DTP) is located in the basement of Hagen Junior High, occupying the same building as all Hagen Junior High Students. Hagen Junior High serves students in grades 7 and 8. DTP has been operating at Hagen for 23 years.

The program is located in two rooms including one classroom and an office. The office provides a space where the social worker can meet with families and students. The director described the furniture and equipment as being in need of replacement, characterizing it as a “room full of hand-me-downs.” Ms. Dean had hoped to purchase new computers to replace the old units with the grant funding. Unfortunately, the low amount of funding and format of the funding prevented using the money for equipment.

#### ***Staffing***

The DTP has three full-time employees including a licensed social worker, licensed teacher and a para-professional. The teacher is licensed in special education to allow her to serve students who are on Individual Education Plans (IEPs). The social worker’s role is to support students in areas such as developing social skills and student-parent relationships. The teacher focuses on academics.

#### ***Population Served and Admission Process***

The DTP exists to meet the needs of “at risk” students who are not experiencing success in mainstream classrooms. The DTP at Hagen Junior High serves about 30 students in grades 7-8 annually. Students are identified as “at-risk” by counselor and principal based upon behavioral, academic, and home situations that can include both behavioral and personal issues. Students can be referred by teachers, the principals, counselors, or the court. The program is voluntary, but so far no one has refused the program. Parents must consent for their children to participate. They try not to overlap services with special education because of the scheduling difficulty it causes with trying to find time for the student to attend both the special education services and the DTP.

While the DTP is partially funding by ND’s juvenile corrections services, it does not just serve students who have been identified by the juvenile justice system. They work with a wide range of students. For example, they worked with a student who had an eating disorder and fell behind in school after missing a significant number of school days.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The director described the Dickinson DTP as an entity of the Department of Juvenile Services. There are seven DTPs in the state, located in Jamestown, Beach, Belcourt, Bismarck, Dunseith, Grand Forks, and Dickinson. While they all have the same mission, each has a different delivery

model. For example, Bismarck contracts with Youth Works and provides an off-campus program, which contrasts with Dickinson's program that is offered within the existing junior high school by the public school system. See Figure 4 for the Mission Statement.

The goals of the Day Treatment Program are to assist at-risk students, in becoming successful, contributing, law abiding members of society, through the following interventions:

- *Assist at-risk students in improving social skills in the educational, home and community settings*
- *Increase academic success*
- *Improve self esteem*
- *Increase age appropriate behavior*
- *Increase awareness of behavior-consequence factors*
- *Improve interactions with authority figures*
- *Improve problem solving skills*

Parental, school and community collaboration and intervention are integral components for the success of the student.

*Figure 4. The mission and goals of the Dickinson Public Schools Day Treatment Program.*

The DTP strives to help students increase their academic success, improve behaviors, and become law-abiding members of society. Whenever possible, the goal is inclusion in the regular classroom, but a pull-out approach may be used to help a student get back on track. For example, the staff worked with a student who was out of school for quite a while, hospitalized with an eating disorder. They helped her get caught up by doing intensive, one-on-one work with her. All students attend the day treatment program for Home Base and study hall, and for other periods of the day as needed.

The students spend about three hours a day with the DTP, including home base and study hall time. The typical student spends about 15 hours per week with DTP. The teachers also send students to DTP if they need help with school work or are not doing well in the classroom that particular day. The director said the staff spends the first hour of the day focused on "temperature taking" to see how the students are doing and if they can handle going to their regular classes. If a student seems to be in crisis, the student will be kept in the DTP for that day.

The staff values a team approach, working closely with parents and guardians to support the students. Parents come in once a week to meet with social worker and sometimes the director. Family counseling is offered through social worker with the goal of helping students find success outside of school.

The director explained that the staff tries to make the DTP a safe place for students, a place where they are not judged. She explained, "If students had a bad day the day before, they can come to DTP and know they have a fresh start." The DTP provides a space where students can do homework and feel comfortable and supported. The director believes many of the students they work with would have dropped out of school without this program. She said they keep students who would have been sent away to places like the Boys Ranch, allowing the students to stay with their parents and in school.

Participation in the DTP is confidential and not included in student files; students are not labeled or identified as having attended the DTP. District officials believe this allows students to transition to high school with a clean slate. The district does not keep formal records of persistence and high school completion for students who participated in the DTP. The director said that some students from the DTP will attend the alternative high school. There is not a DTP at the high school level.

### **Program Funding**

The majority of the funding for the ETP is from the school district. The principal, Mr. Marcus Lewton, stated that the cost to run the program each year is approximately \$148,000. This figure does not include undocumented costs such as the principal's time. About \$43,000 is funded through the state's Department of Juvenile Services, and the district pays the salaries for the director, para-professional and social worker.

## **Ben Franklin, Carl Ben Eielson, & Discovery Middle Schools, Fargo Day Treatment Program**

**Interviewee:** Barb Christiansen, Program Director

### **Program Structure**

#### *Location and Physical Space*

The alternative program is located within a district building away from the three schools it serves with two classrooms devoted to the alternative program. Each of the district's three middle schools has access to up to five admission spots. A school may request to secure an additional spot from one of the other schools if not all the spots are being used.

#### *Staffing*

During the 2012-2013 school year, the program was staffed by two certified special education teachers. Both teachers were qualified to work with students who have emotional behavioral disability. Each room also had a para-professional assigned to it.

#### *Population Served and Admission Process*

The program served 13 students during the 2012-2013 academic year, with the capacity to serve as many as 18. The students who are typically selected represent a cross-section of severe behavioral or emotional concerns. There may also be academic concerns, but the selection process is more closely triggered by the extreme behavioral and emotional concerns. Ms. Christiansen explained:

I think just pretty much that the kids were not being successful academically or mostly behaviorally in their home school, and they were causing more disruption to the others. They were interfering with their education and the education of others. Office incident reports, or we've also had a couple kids that the superintendent has placed, because it was either come here or go through the expulsion process. One of our kids started a fire in one of the schools. We've had some that have had weapon charges, so then rather than going through expulsion, they place them here.

Students are recommended for the alternative program by administrators from the three home-school sites. The director and staff all meet to review the recommendations. Part of the review process is to evaluate what interventions have been staged at the home-school site, and a completion of a rubric-based assessment of the stated behaviors. If the student is identified as a possible candidate for the program, a meeting is held with the parents and student. A detailed review of the program is completed, including answering any questions or concerns from the parents and/or student. Lastly, the program director simply asks the parents and student if they are interested in participating in the program as it is completely voluntary.

The program director stated that, typically, the response from the parents is good. The response from the students is not usually as favorable initially. This seems to change, however, when the

facets of the program become clearer. She noted that the students tend to appreciate the reduced amount of social pressure and expectations. She also indicated that they appreciate the greater amount of one-on-one attention they receive in this environment.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The Fargo Public Schools alternative middle school program has been operating for 12 years; although, the current location has only been used for two years. Previously, the program was located next to and in partnership with the Dakota Boys Ranch. The program is intended to serve students who have not been able to be successful in the regular, general education classroom. The primary mission of the program is to “get the student to feel successful, so they know that they can do it back in their home school and get them back to their home school.”

Students in the alternative program attend school at this off-campus site for the length of the school day. They are picked up by bus and delivered directly to the site. Their academic curriculum is the same as that of their peers back at their home-school site. Many of the materials are the same as well, but the delivery and pace is slower. They use a special reading curriculum known as Read 180. The director stated that this program has been very helpful and has yielded positive results for their students.

Transitioning out of the alternative program is based upon scoring on a level system performance metric. There are four levels with a different privilege associated with each level. When students make it to level 4, the team begins to consider the process of transitioning back to their home-school. Every student has a monthly progress meeting, and it is at these meetings that such determinations are made. The meetings involve the staff, the parents, the home-site principal, and any other relevant personnel. For instance, if the student has a probation officer, that person is encouraged attend the meeting.

In some circumstances, even though all criteria may be met for transition, some students request to stay at the alternative school site for the remainder of the school year. If students make this request, it is typically honored, as the staff is reluctant to force students to go back. If a student does return to their home-school; however, they are not allowed back. The alternative program director and staff believe that any problems should be worked out at the school as to not create a revolving door effect within the program.

The program director explained that situations where students return to their home-schools only to revert back to previous behavior illustrates a program weakness. She suggested that perhaps a dedicated fulltime social worker who makes school visits might be a way to help avoid such tendencies to revert back to negative behaviors. According to the director, another possible solution to the problem is to abandon the off-site model and provide space within every school building for an in-house program, which would keep support systems near the student and allow for gradual transitions. She explained:

I am a firm believer it should be on site. It should be in one of our schools. We were in our other site for 12 years, no gym, no elective options, no option of transitioning out to a school. I really pushed this summer when I heard that that building had been sold, and they were coming here and they were adding a classroom. I said please put one

classroom here for the kids that do need to be out of the, off campus. And put one of the classrooms in one of our middle schools.

### **Program Funding**

Fargo Public Schools funds the alternative middle school program through a district allocation and a small amount of additional state funds for “neglected and delinquent children.” The program did receive grant funding from the state, but the amount was very small. The district contribution provides the salary for the full-time teachers and para-professionals. The program director said that they received funds from the state earmarked for neglected and delinquent children. These funds allowed them to bring in an art teacher last year for some sessions, but all other funds are provided by the district.

## **Central Middle School, Grafton**

### **Alternative Middle School Program**

**Interviewee:** Jeff Rerick, Principal

#### **Program Structure**

##### *Location and Physical Space*

The alternative program is located in a classroom within the school. Aside from the purpose of the room, it is not different from other classrooms in the building.

##### *Staffing*

Initially, the program was staffed by a full-time certified teacher. The principal mentioned that vital to their search was finding someone who was not necessarily certified in special education but who had a background working with special education teachers to ensure that they had a credible background of success working with students with special needs. He also mentioned that there was a focus on hiring a teacher who possessed the types of dispositions that were necessary to be successful in this position. Particularly, they wanted someone who would have the patience and temperament to work with students who demonstrated troublesome behaviors and someone who could and would work well with colleagues. Due to a shortage of funds however, this dedicated staff position was eliminated.

##### *Population Served and Admission Process*

The program served two students during the 2012-2013 academic year. The two students who were served last year were both prone to highly disruptive behavior. It was determined that staying in the regular education setting was a disservice to them and their peers. There were also academic concerns, but they were more related to the behaviors than the students' abilities. In fact, both students were described as being quite capable. The principal explained:

Both students that were actually enrolled were very smart young men, so they could easily handle the curriculum that we had for them without the addition of extra instruction.

Students are recommended for the alternative program through a team meeting process that involves teachers and administrators. As noted, qualifying students typically exhibit behavior that is particularly disruptive to the learning environment. Toward this end, the principal required extensive documentation to legitimize the placement of a student into the program.

The teachers would get together at team meetings and they'd talk about a kid, so you'd have John Doe being spoken about. "We're seeing X,Y, Z in the classroom," and every time that was brought up, my statement always was "are there referrals?" Because if I don't have paper documentation to support moving this student into this room, I'm not going to do it. If we see that it's more academically based, then we're going to put that back on the teacher and say "alright, you need to, these are the changes you need to make

within your classroom” to help this student out. If we’re seeing that after we’ve checked off the academic list, we’re seeing a lot of behavior, now that’s what we’re going to go with.

There was no formal system for exiting. The process revolved around the team meeting and discussing the student’s progress. As a result of the discussion, considerations of releasing or retaining the student were made.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The 2012 - 2013 academic year was the third year that Central Middle School operated its alternative education middle school program. The program is housed inside of the main school building. The program is intended to serve students who exhibit extreme misbehavior and emotional outbursts. Central Middle uses a Tier RTI system that has been beneficial for most students. The principal noted that the few students who reach tier three, however, are often in need of other strategies that keep them on pace.

As you get within your Tier Three students you tend to see an increase in behaviors and things like that and what we have found even with Tiering, that we’re putting all our Tier Three students together and so you have a lot of different factors that go along with those students but typically your behaviors increase. We didn’t really have a way to address that. Again, trying to keep kids in school, you don’t want to suspend them because it’s either that’s what they want or you’re putting a kid even farther behind from where they should be any way type of thing. So, it was a lot more targeted behaviorally than it was academically. It just worked out well for us that you’re able to keep them in their academic programs, and that was the big thing for us.

Central Middle School serves students in grades five through eight. The principal noted that in some cases when students return to their regular classes, they do quite well for reasons that are beyond basic academic modifications, or even behavioral strategies. Despite the success with the students, the toll on the teacher was too much.

We were able to put them back in the classroom, and they actually functioned very, very well. A lot of that is because they grew up, and a lot of that is because we had that room for two years that allowed them to stick within the school, stick with their peers so when they were brought back into the classroom it wasn’t a big, you know, mushroom type thing. It wasn’t a negative segue. They came in, transitioned very well, and did absolutely wonderfully, so it did its intended target, but we completely burned out that teacher in two years.

As noted earlier, funding constraints would not allow for a para-professional or other support staff in the alternative room. The principal believed the strain this intense work load created is what ultimately pushed the teacher out. His solution to this problem can be found in the resource-sharing model used in many academic programs, including many career and technical education centers throughout the country. He noted that there are several other school districts in the near Grafton that might benefit from a similar program and that having a centrally located center where resources can be pooled might be the answer to funding issues.

We have Minto 9 miles, St. Thomas 10, Drayton a little bit [farther], 20. We've got a lot of schools in the area that will probably have one or two kids that could utilize something like that, and I know they'd love to have something and because we obviously have the highest need for it, we'd love to have something in place as well. That might be something that is done like with CTE as well because we do have the Multi-District Vocational Center. It's located in Grafton. It services, I think, nine or ten different districts. So the potential is there to work in conjunction with them.

The actual academic curriculum within the alternative program is the same as for students in regular education classes. The students in the alternative program are also learning it the same way through traditional instruction, as opposed to the on-line models that are popular in many places. The only difference in the formal curriculum is that behavioral strategies are taught which are aimed at helping to direct them back to the traditional setting. The principal explained:

The goal is integrating with the traditional curricular goals. The biggest thing for us is when they hit that room, there's a lot of societal norms being missed, and that's our goal when you want to integrate with the traditional. You know, we want our kids to understand when you're in a school building, these are the ways, these are the appropriate ways in which you act. These are the appropriate ways to diffuse situations. Safety planning, and those types of things for kids, making sure that you understand if "A" happens, these are options "B", "C", and "D" follow that, and we do that for all of our kids, but in that room at that time it allowed us to hit on those things so much more than if...we wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise, you know, maybe a counselor visit, maybe a principal visit, you know, you can't do it without having that person who's dedicated to that.

### **Program Funding**

As of the 2012-2013 academic year, the alternative program received approximately \$8,000 from the state. There were no other funding sources and served as the reason for the shift in how the program was operated. As this funding is not adequate for supporting a full-time position, the principal anticipates shifting to a model where counseling personnel provides resources and materials as opposed to a truly separate program.

## **Jamestown Middle School, Jamestown Day Treatment Program**

**Interviewee:** Kerrie Soulis, Day Treatment Program Director

### **Program Structure**

#### ***Location and Physical Space***

The Day Treatment Program (DTP) at Jamestown Middle School is housed within the middle school building. They have a separate classroom in the same wing of the building where the special education classes are held. The room is equipped with six study cubicles around the edges of the room and a table in the center of the room where staff can work with students individually or in small groups.

#### ***Staffing***

Following the Day Treatment model, the Jamestown DTP has three full time staff, including a certified special education teacher, a social worker, and a classroom aide. Beyond the certification requirements, the director described several qualities the DTP staff must have. The director said, “They have to be thick skinned, and they have to be able to be firm and consistent. This is a tough job.” She also said that the staff needs to be energetic and passionate about this work, adding, “They have to want to build relationships with kids that can get under your skin. The students aren’t always easy to get along with because they have so many emotional and social needs.”

#### ***Population Served and Admission Process***

The DTP serves students in grades six through eight who have multiple risk factors for out of home placement. The risk factors include legal difficulty, attendance issues, truancy, behavioral problems, poverty, and academic concerns. The DTP also targets dropout prevention. During the 2012-2013 school year, the DTP served five students. The director said that eight students is the capacity for the classroom space and furniture. She also explained that because of the high needs of the students, they did not want to exceed eight students. In the past, the DTP was also responsible for an additional 15-20 students, called the “pull-out group.” They were students who had fallen behind academically or were missing work. The students would come into the DTP classroom for their study hall. The director explained the district’s choice to serve these students in a different way, “We decided to stop doing that this year because we felt like we had, five very needy full time kids, and we were concerned with the amount of time that we could put into their education and their day while serving the pullout students. We just weren’t doing either group justice.”

There is a formalized referral process for student admission into the DTP. Up through this year, the pull-out program was one avenue used for referral to the DTP. The director explained, “They started out in study hall with me, and then their needs just didn’t get better. I got to know kids a lot through that avenue, so next year I’ll have a better handle on how they’re [the teachers] going to give me referrals.” The middle school also has a process in place through the daily team meetings held by the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. During these meetings, the teachers have an opportunity to discuss students they are concerned about and can make a referral to the DTP

director, but only after trying several other interventions. The director said it is important to ensure that everything possible has been done before assigning the student to the very restrictive DTP environment. The juvenile court system may also be involved with referrals. The director shared an example of a student who was told he could attend the DTP, or if he chose not to, he would be sent to a juvenile detention center.

Parents are involved during the decision making process because the district feels it is important that the parents support the DTP for their child. The director described the relationship that is essential with parents:

It [DTP] certainly is a decision that we make with their parents. Parents are partnering with us you know; we are a team, and this is a decision that their parents or their guardians or whoever is in charge of them has to agree to. It's not something that we can force anyone to do unless court orders say they have to participate in the Alternative Program. I haven't had a parent say they didn't want to do it. I have had parents pull out of the program and say they don't want to do this anymore, but that doesn't happen very often.

Regular communication is maintained with the parent after the child is enrolled in the program through daily messages referred to as "passports." Passports tell the parents what the child's behavior rating was for the day and what kind of homework the student has for the night. Communication and involvement is also expected from the parent. For example, if the parents are targeting certain behaviors at home such as not fighting with siblings, not swearing, or doing chores, they rate those behaviors and send the passport back to the school.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The primary focus of the DTP is to help students achieve the behavioral and social skills needed to be successful in and out of school. According to the program director, the typical student in this program is referred for being behaviorally disruptive in the classroom, difficulty with authority, and compliance issues. The director has partnered with a juvenile court probation officer who works with many of the DTP students. Every other week, they meet as a group to implement the *Why Try* and *Equip* programs. These programs focus on helping the students develop decision making and social skills.

Students in the DTP have the same school day start and end time as the rest of Jamestown Middle School unless it has been determined that having a shorter school day is in the best interest of the student. The students also work toward mastering the same curricular goals. The director explained:

We match the curriculum because they're going to back to that class. I don't want to say we're on the exact same chapter or they're learning the exact same things because the way the [DTP] teacher teaches can't be the exact same thing as the classroom. They don't get to do the labs; they don't get to do field trips; they don't get to do some of those hands-on things that the teachers do in their classrooms, but yes, they work out of the same work books and text books.

The DTP operates on level system that includes Entry Level, Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3. Each day, students are rated for their behavior on a scale of 0-6. When they have been able to consistently maintain a score, they are able to move to the next level. There is an increase in privileges and responsibilities for each level. When students are mid-way through Level 2, they earn entrance back into a mainstream class, and as they continue to move through the remainder of Level 2 and 3, they gradually move back into a fulltime, regular school setting. The director said it typically takes the length of a school year to work through these levels. A “safety net” is in place because students who have transitioned out of the DTP continue to have homeroom with the DTP staff. The director explained:

They go out for all their classes for the day, and then they come back. They have a check in and a check out, we always continue to have that relationship with them until they’re either out of middle school and they transition into high school, or they choose not to continue with the program.

Transition to high school is a concern for the director. The DTP is highly structured, supportive and supervised, which is different from the regular high school environment. Recognizing the difficulty of such a drastic change for students, the district has developed block programming for students who are high risk for behavior problems or academic failure. The students take two core classes at a time in a smaller setting than regular high school classes. The director described the class as modified to meet the needs of the students. She stated, “They typically get all their school work done in that block that they’re in.” The students are also offered the block program their sophomore year to help ease the transition into a full, regular high school schedule. The block program does not meet the needs of all high risk students moving from the middle to high school, though. The director shared an example:

I had two high risk boys ...they don’t fit the block. One is very intelligent, and the modified program of the block will not be challenging enough for him. My worry is that his social skills and his behavior are such that my concern is that he is going to sabotage other kids’ education as well as that he’s just going to be really difficult. The other kid, he is on an IEP, and he has some issues with learning. He can learn and does well in a very structured setting, but he needs more, and I just worry about some of his behaviors too coming out of the block.

The director explained that they work with the high school staff and administration to try to find a solution that will be best for each student, holding transition meetings with the assistant principals and school counselors. For example, in one case, the transition team was able to take advantage of a special education teacher at the high school that has specialized training and experience working in the adolescent unit at the ND State Hospital. A student who was likely exhibit highly disruptive behaviors in the block programming was placed with her until he was able to develop the skills to transition to the block program. Jamestown also has an alternative high school, Jamestown North, but students are unable to access this school until they are 16 years old. Jamestown North works with students to earn their high school diploma, using an individualized approach.

Involvement in the DTP is formally recorded in the students' school files, but at this time, they are not tracked after they leave the program. Program success is determined in terms of the current students and their progress in the DTP. The director pointed out that it is also important to consider the indirect effect the program has on the other classrooms at the middle school. Students who were likely to cause significant disruptions to learning for their peers are placed in a more appropriate learning environment.

### **Program Funding**

The DTP is funded both through the school district and the Department of Corrections, with the majority of the funding provided by Jamestown School District. The director stated, "It's a huge commitment for the school district... Jamestown has been very committed to doing this. They have never once since I've been here in anyway said 'we're not going to do this program anymore.'"

## **Cheney Middle School, West Fargo Alternative Program**

**Interviewee:** Don Lennon, Principal

### **Program Structure**

#### ***Location and Physical Space***

The alternative program is located within Cheney Middle School (CMS) in its own classroom, which is a classroom that is slightly larger than the typical classrooms at CMS. The principal described it as a school-within-a-school approach.

#### ***Staffing***

The alternative program is staffed by a full-time, certified teacher and one para-professional. When considering who to hire for the teaching position, the principal said they looked for someone who had a variety of teaching experiences in different academic areas. They also looked for someone who could be flexible and would not be afraid to take on new challenges. The current teacher is certified as a science teacher but also has a strong mathematics background. The para-professional is also a licensed teacher with a language arts background.

#### ***Population Served and Admission Process***

The alternative program served 10 students during the 2012-2013 academic year. The year began with fewer students, but as the year went on, students were identified and added to the program. The program serves mostly 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, but there were two seventh grade students in the program during the 2012-2013 school year. The principal felt more students may benefit from the alternative program is cautious about expanding.

I worry that it would be too easy [for staff] to say “Let’s go to the alternative school,” depending on the behavior of the student. This way, knowing that we are limited the number of students that we have, we need to follow the interventions. Yeah, we could have more, but again, it’s that accountability of making sure we’re following the steps before we place someone in.

Students are recommended for the alternative program by the teachers on the students’ middle school teams typically after multiple recurrences of behavior and academic issues. Parents are invited to meetings with the team and are kept informed as the team works with the student to address the issues. The principal explained that if the issues do not improve or get worse, the parents will often be informed of the option of including their child in the alternative program. In a situation where building security is an issue, the student may immediately be recommended for the program, by-passing the team intervention process. Students are apprised of the program and informed about the expectations and requirements before they are enrolled.

The principal explained that some parents who are reluctant to consider this option when their child is in seventh grade often reconsider and support the alternative program if problems recur or escalate in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The principal emphasized the importance of parent buy-in, “We want parents who are going to be supportive as we move through this.” Once students are in the

program, parents are kept informed through daily notifications that are sent home with the students. A weekly memo is also sent home to parents.

Most students in the alternative program are not classified as Special Education. The principal explained that for these students, the IEP should be addressing behaviors and other needs. A student with an IEP may be brought into the alternative program only if the behavior or academic problems are unrelated to the services the student is receiving for the IEP. In this case, the student will continue to work with a case manager and will continue special education services.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The alternative middle school program has been in operating in the West Fargo district for over nine years. The principal stated that he was not sure of the year it began but knows it was operating before he began with the district in 2004. The program is intended to serve students who have not been able to be successful in the normal, general education classroom for various reasons. The principal stated that discipline and safety issues are the two most prevalent reasons students are referred to the alternative program.

Students in the alternative program attend school in their separate classroom for the length of the school day; although, they have a shorter schedule, beginning their school day at 9:10 and ending at 2:10, leaving for the day before the rest of the Cheney Middle School students do. They leave their classroom to get lunch, but bring the lunch back to the alternative program classroom. Some students may attend elective courses such as orchestra if their individualized plan allows for it. As the principal explained, “We do adjust specific schedules once that trust has been earned.” Students are also able to participate in extra and co-curricular activities.

The alternative program uses the Boys Town model points system. In this model, structure is important. Expectations are set for student behavior, and points are used to reward good behavior. The students move through levels; each level is earned by reaching a certain number of points. Students earn more responsibilities and privileges as they move through the levels. The goal is for students to reach level three and enter back into the mainstream school population. If students are on track and gain points each day, it takes about 80 days to work through the program. Students who reach the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade without earning their way to level three still transition to 9<sup>th</sup> grade at the regular high school, but the 9<sup>th</sup> grade staff is aware of the students and are ready to offer additional support.

Some students are unable or unwilling to meet the behavioral expectations and have pro-longed stays in the alternative program. The principal shared an example of one student who was in the program from 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Because the alternative program is described by the principal as the “last stop,” the staff will continue to work with the students who are not successful initially with the program to try to help them get back on track.

In addition to behavior goals, academic goals are set when students enter the program. Individualized plans are developed to help students progress with grade-level curriculum. The principal described the typical process, “They are going to be working with the level that they were at when they came into our program. So if did we looked at math for example, there will be individual lessons for the kids at each level.”

**Program Funding**

West Fargo Public Schools fund the alternative middle school program. The program did receive grant funding from the state, but the grant only awarded about \$600 per student, making the district contribution the salary for a full-time teacher and para-professional.

## **Williston Middle School, Williston Success Program**

**Interviewee:** Marcia Bartok, Principal

### **Program Structure**

#### ***Location and Physical Space***

When the Success Program began, it was housed in a corner of the library. Soon after the school year began, the modular classroom was complete. The classroom is connected to the main building by a hallway. In addition to the Success Program, other electives are in the modular building. The principal stated, “The students took a lot of ownership in setting up their room and making it really specially theirs.” The principal wanted the focus of the program to be on achievement. She explained, “I didn’t want it to be ‘oh, we go to the room for losers’ as kids usually say.” When the district first determined that they would invest in an alternative education program at the middle level, its name was the Alternative Education Program. The principal explained, “I immediately changed it to be called Success Program because I didn’t want to make a mistake or to misconstrue in any way to the kids that they were alternative in some ways, but instead that they were successful.”

#### ***Staffing***

The Success Program is staffed by a fulltime teacher with a secondary license in social studies. Originally, the district sought a teacher certified in language arts because the focus of the program is on building reading skills. The principal stated that she was seeking a teacher “who clearly wanted to help students succeed.” For her, this was more important than a particular licensure area because content knowledge could be supplemented through training. The principal also stated that the teacher needed to be flexible and willing to complete the required training for the Corrective Reading program. To support the new teacher, the school librarian, who was certified in language arts provided mentoring. The district also provided training in Response to Intervention (RtI).

#### ***Population Served and Admission Process***

Based upon MAP and NDSA test results, the district determined that the focus on the Success Program would be on building reading skills. To identify the students who would be the best candidates for this new program, the district relied on data from AIMSweb and View Point. The principal explained, “We could pull up all our different data for our academic pieces as well as [student] log entries for behavior, and the team entries for anybody that they talked to a parent or they had a conference with.” Initially, there were 76 students who were identified as possible candidates for the Success Program. Students were removed from candidacy if they were receiving special education services because their needs could be met through that path. Then, they looked for students who were most needy in the area of reading. As a final step in the admission process, it was decided that if the district wanted fidelity in the Corrective Reading program, it was essential that the students be there to participate in the interventions; therefore, if students had a poor attendance record, they were removed from consideration. Through this process, the list of 76 possible students was reduced to 17.

The principal contacted the parents or guardians to describe the program, build buy-in, and secure permission for their students to participate. The principal wanted to be sure the parents understood the requirements of the program. The students need to be in the Success Program classroom for a minimum of 15 hours per week, which means that these students forgo many of the electives offered to students attending Williston Middle School. The principal explained that parental support was essential for maintaining student participation in the program. With that in mind, she engaged in a great deal of communication with parents prior to the start of the school year, including letters and telephone calls. Once the school year began, communication of student progress was made to parents, but there were no formal requirements for parents such as meetings or family sessions. The principal explained that she did not want parent involvement to be a variable impacting success of the program. Once parents gave permission, the students were told they would participate. Of the 17 students who began the 2012-2013 school year, 14 remained in the program until the end of the school year.

One area the principal identified for improvement was the student identification process. She expressed a desire to move toward more data-based decision making and rely less on impressions. She pointed out that teachers are often too compassionate, and this can lead to unreliable selection. The principal explained identification issues using the example of summer school recommendations. “The teachers know kids better than [the administration] do oftentimes, but, we still get kids who have behavioral issues, but they’ve mastered and are proficient in everything. Well, that doesn’t fit the academic piece for summer school at all. Or you get the kid who’s just so sweet and so nice, yet she’s a novice but doesn’t get picked for summer school.”

Because the Success Program was only in its first year of implementation during the 2012-2013 school year, a firm plan is not yet in place for tracking the students or determining program effectiveness. The principal identified several ideas for evaluating the effectiveness of the Success Program including students earning credits in a timely fashion and not dropping out of school. The students can easily be tracked through high school because the Success Program is listed in their course schedule and is visible on their official transcript.

### **Program Goals and Services**

The Success Program is operated by Williston Public Schools with a primary goal of improving student literacy skills. There is also a focus on teaching students skills that help them take ownership for their behavior and their academic ability. Students spend a minimum of 15 hours per week in Success programming. The Success Program curriculum is nearly the same as it is for the regular middle school with the exception of the two elective classes; students in the Success Program attend Success programming; whereas, students in the regular middle school choose two elective classes. The students in the Success Program attend tutoring time in place of one elective and participate in *Corrective Reading* during the other. The principal explained the district’s choice to purchase *Corrective Reading*, a scripted intervention program, stating that they believed the program would guarantee a one-to-two year increase in reading skills if the program was implemented with fidelity.

All Williston Middle School students have an advisory period at the beginning of the school day. Students in the Success Program attend a special section with the Success teacher. During

advisory period, Success Program students listen to school announcements and set their daily goal with the Success teacher. The teacher also guides them through determining what they are going to do that day and what needs to be turned in.

Because the Success Program students do not get the elective choices the other students get, the principal has worked with the Success teacher to incorporate fun activities into the time the students spend in the program. The principal did not want these students to feel they were missing out on opportunities their classmates may be having. The principal also explained that they wanted to ensure that the Success students did not become overwhelmed by or resentful toward the program. She explained:

When you have kids who don't like school if you just keep shoving more school at them, it doesn't work really well. We changed this semester to SSR [Sustained Silent Reading], and it fits really well with this example. It just so happened that the SSR for this group was last period. So, all day long the kids had been working hard trying to do what they have to do. They get to the last period of the day and the last thing they want to do is sit down, read a book and get AR [Accelerated Reading] points in SSR. So, I sat down with the teacher first and then we had a group meeting with the kids and I said, "Ok, we need to get AR points. I know that you're reluctant readers, but you're getting better, but don't really like to sit down 8th period and read. How about if we have some group reads and do some group kinds of activities, and you could get AR points for working in the group?" I think sometimes we have to think of ways that we get the district initiatives and the school initiatives like AR accomplished, but you have to modify it in ways that meet the needs of students who are struggling with it.

The district is still defining the Success Program, but the principal explained that they have begun to outline an exit plan for students to leave the program. Although, they have found that Corrective Reading is generally an intervention that requires two to three years for students to realize full benefits.

The district is also in the process of determining measures of effectiveness for the Success Program. With the program being so new, student achievement data is not yet available. The principal was able to confirm that they have seen an 86% decrease in grades of "F" for students in the Success Program. She also noted that attendance has improved. Most importantly, 10 out of the 14 students saw a gain in literacy scores as measured by the Corrective Reading assessments. The four students who did not show improvement had attendance problems.

Anecdotally, the principal described differences in student behavior over the course of the first year. Rather than hearing excuses from students, the principal reported that students were more focused on how to fix the problem because of the skills taught through the Success Program. The principal believes many of the issues are alleviated by the frequent visits she and the assistant principal make to the Success Program classroom, asking if any of the students want to visit. Because the program is small, the teacher is often aware when a student is having difficulties or when there is conflict in the group. She stated, "I think you kind of nip a lot of it in the bud [by making preventative classroom visit] and you just don't have as much. So, yes absolutely behavior has changed."

**Program Funding**

The Williston school district supports the program, with minimal supplemental funding provided through the DPI grant and continued alternative middle school appropriated funds from the state. The district received \$8,900 for the initial grant and will receive this amount annually if they continue to enroll the same number of students in the program for at least 15 hours per week of services. The principal explained that the grant funding is used for resources and materials, while the teacher salary and benefits are paid by the district.

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