

Testimony
Lost Educational Opportunities in Alternative Settings
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I would like to thank Chairwoman McCarthy and Ranking Member Mr. Platts of the Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee and Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Mr. Gohmert of the Crime Terrorism, and Homeland Security Subcommittee for holding this hearing and the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Bob Whitmore. I am the CEO of Manito Inc, a private non-profit organization based in Pennsylvania. I began my career as a Juvenile Probation Officer in Pennsylvania, and I have worked with at-risk adolescents in alternative settings for 36 years. Thirty years ago, a colleague and I wrote a federal grant and initiated a Day Treatment program for court adjudicated youth, and today we operate programs in 11 counties in Pennsylvania and West Virginia and serve over 600 students on a daily basis.

Most students placed in alternative education settings are failing in the traditional public school setting due to a complexity of behavioral, social and mental health issues. All of the students who enter Manito alternative education Centers have violated one of the defined offenses under Pennsylvania disruptive youth guidelines (violation of school policies, drug possession, weapon possession, disruptive behavior or defiance, truancy). The placements time is usually a short duration of six months to a year. Their presenting issues are multi-faceted and complex. Many can be described as having difficult temperaments and are slow to read nonverbal social cues in others and struggle with interpersonal relationships. They are more sensitive to changes in their environment, are more volatile, and are more at risk for impulsive reactions. These children have the greatest problems adjusting to school, and they often become a frequent flyer in the juvenile justice system.

Specifically, they are the students who are experimenting with drugs and alcohol; students who have poorly developed social skills that frequently result in aggression, violence, and irresponsible decision making; students who are experiencing mental health issues of being oppositional defiant, attention deficit, or conduct disorder; and students who exhibit learning disabilities and are several years behind in grade level. They have lost all interest in attending school, complying with school rules, or performing well academically. Many of these are living in poverty, living in communities plagued with violence on the streets, come from families where family role models are or have been in prison, and have parents who are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Students bring all of these social and behavioral issues with them into the alternative setting in which they are placed. These behavioral issues often act as an impediment to the student being able or willing to learn.

Our first priority is to address the complicated and interwoven social and behavioral issues by providing an array of services that include social skills development, life skills and career education, service learning projects, mental health counseling, and

academic instruction. Our education programs focus on basic reading, writing, math, and credit recovery.

Successful alternative education settings share common characteristics.

1. Educational programs are diverse and based on student needs and interests;
2. The program has caring and demanding staff who create a nurturing family environment;
3. Creative instructional approaches are used that are based on assessments of student needs and connect with all learning styles;
4. There is a small staff to student ratio;
5. There are counseling and social services available to assist students and their families;
6. The program has clear rules that are fairly and consistently utilized and establishes high standards for behavior, attendance and performance.

During my more than 30 years of professional experience working with at-risk youth I have seen an erosion of respect for other individuals, a decline in acceptance of authority and organization structure, a deterioration in the social bonds of communities and families, and an increase in the severity of personal issues and needs. I have also seen a reluctance of the people responsible for solving these problems to develop solutions that are focused on saving our children. We continue to work within categorical silos that shift responsibility for funding our education and social services between agencies. Many times the needs of our children get ignored in this process.

The question placed before us is “are at-risk youth missing out on educational opportunities while in foster care, juvenile justice facilities, alternative education settings and other environments.” These students began missing out on educational opportunities in our traditional public schools due to their inability to deal with the issues these children experience. In reality the public school system alone does not have the resources to address these issues. Our children involved in alternative settings within the juvenile justice and foster care systems need alternative education environments that can provide consistency in services and address their needs. Our financial resources and our work efforts at the local level should be combined into one collaborative seamless system that can deliver services to children. Services can be delivered to students based on an assessment of their risk and protective factors and interventions provided based on the need level identified. These integrated services should be provided as part of a school wide service system. By combining our resources and focus, our children, our schools and our communities will benefit.

Thank you.