

Conversations with alternative school students at MAAP STARS Spring Conference April 25, 2002

Kim Farris met with MAAP STARS students around the edges of their annual conference, where they presented projects and competed in areas of employment interviews, public speaking, team management decision-making, community service, entrepreneurship, and more. MAAP STARS are selected leaders from individual alternative programs and ALCs that are affiliated with the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs. The students were mostly in grades 10 – 12.

This brief memo highlights some of their thoughts.

Why are you attending your ALC or alternative program?

"My mainstream school was too big." "What do you mean by that?" Farris asked. "Too many students." Another said, "You were walking down the hall and you only knew a few of the people around you. You put that many people into a building that can't even hold that amount and you're just asking for a mob -- our age or not."

"Too many kids without trust in the people around them [students and teachers] – you just don't feel safe. Different cliques hate each other. This doesn't happen in the ALC." "Why?" Farris asked. "Not as many kids," one said. Another added, "Our teachers know us [at the ALC]."

"I didn't want to end up like my friends. They were all getting messed up on drugs and stuff." Another added, "Me too. My old school was becoming a big drug ward. I was sick of it. I wanted a normal, 'real world' environment."

"My friends were getting into trouble. I was starting to get into trouble with alcohol and drugs, but I saw what was happening to my friends. I didn't want to end up like them. I am doing well now at a sobriety high school."

"I was the class clown, and I was not getting my work done. It was BORING!" "What do you mean?" I asked. "Too much talking," answered another. "Other students?" Farris asked. "No, the teachers," he answered, "They stand up there all day and talk. I wasn't getting anything from that." "Me too," added the first. "I needed more hands on and more individual attention. I get a lot more done now."

Could your mainstream school have done anything differently, to make learning easier for you?

"It's just too big!" one of the students said. Another added, "You're given assignments that just don't have anything to do with you because they don't know you."

"There is no recognition of YOU," said another.

What do you like about your ALC?

"My friend and I both couldn't pass the state math test at our mainstream schools. When we met here, we made a pact to study together. And we did. We studied every day, doing problems and teaching them to each other. We both just passed. We did well, too."

"[The mainstream teachers] told me I wouldn't graduate on time, and I thought I couldn't. Here, I feel limitless. I can do what I want, and I will accomplish things."

"My school is working out a way to get credit for learning while you're also working for the community and getting paid. That is a good option for me."

"I get to do my work at school. I CAN'T work at home. At the mainstream school they would lecture us and then send us home to read and write up what they said!"

A good number of students said they like the smaller size: "There are always four or five teachers and 45-50 kids per session." "Smaller," said several. "Teachers in mainstream have too many kids to deal with."

A good number also mentioned a greater sense of community:

- "I'm more motivated now. You go from people telling you that you have to go [to school], but you won't graduate, to where you actually want to go and want to graduate."
- "It's the golden rule. Teachers respect me so I respect them."
- "Teachers know my name and I can call them by their first name. If I didn't get my homework done, they ask why. Then we work out a plan to make up work. Sometimes they already have an idea of why, because they know me."
- "I used to have an authority problem, but I don't now." He went on to explain that he gets personal attention; he trusts authority figures. He felt teachers cared about him. It was easier, then, to get his grades up. He was behind, and people always reminded him of that. Now he will definitely graduate on time.
- "At my old school, you are either popular or you're not. Here everyone – we're all very different – but everyone knows each other and gets along." "So, would you say a diverse mix of students contributes to problems at mainstream schools?" "Not really," one responded, "It's the size. We're all diverse at my school right now, but we get along just fine." "Do you all agree with that?" I asked. "Yes," they said.
- "They ask about my home life."
- "I used to skip all the time. It was really bad. But now I don't. I have more trust with my teachers – I can call them by their first names. They treat me like a person. I feel more respected, so teachers get through to me."

If you could have attended a school that is similar to your ALC when you started high school, would you have done better than you did (academically or socially)?

"I would have been much more on target from the beginning if I STARTED at an ALC." In another session, a student said, "If I started at my ALC, maybe I wouldn't have gotten into trouble."

When asked to think about whether the ALC teachers would be as effective in their mainstream schools, a student responded: "I'm worried about growth! We've talked about it a lot," she said, looking around at her peers. They nodded back at her, acknowledging what she said. "Why can't every school be small? Learning environments need to be small!"

What do your parents think about you attending an ALC?

"My parents were like, "You're going to an alternative school? Are you a bad kid?"

"Yeah, my parents thought that too," said another. "I went to _____ ALC for summer school before I started my regular year there. My parents noticed right away, 'We don't have to fight with her anymore!' They would fight with me every day about [going to school]. Now I WANT to go! They're happy about that, so they like the school!"