



MOTHER'S DAY
The holiday mixes sentiment and commercialism. **D 1**

IN WITH OUTLAWZ
An indoor football league gives grads another chance. **C 1**

WINNING GAMBLERS
Pennsylvania's slots are stealing some customers. **E 1**

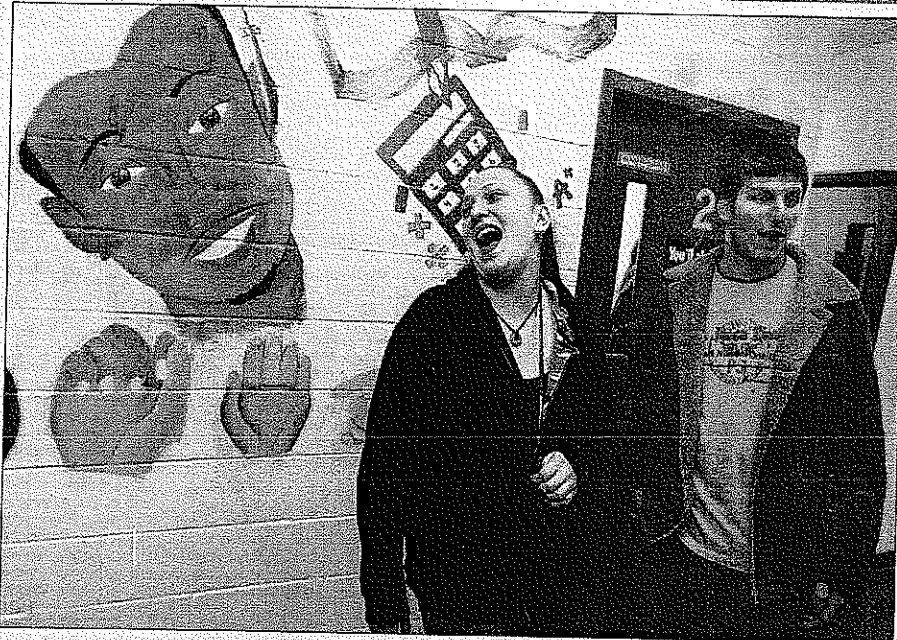
The Intelligencer

phillyBurbs.com In print and online

Sunday, May 13, 2007

Serving communities in Bucks and Montgomery counties

\$1.50



Rick Hirtzel/The Intelligencer

Ashley Christman and Alex Parmit joke around before class at Delaware Valley High School in Philadelphia. Alternative schools allow students who struggle in a traditional setting the chance for more flexible learning.

S = May 13 2007 Article
E = JEE/DUITS marketing/
The Intelligencer

Exploring the alternatives

More students are being taken out of public schools, for behavioral or criminal reasons, to be educated in alternative schools.

BY MARION CALLAHAN
THE INTELLIGENCER

Mike Boardman had a shot at high school — twice — and didn't make it.

Fights got him kicked out of William Tennent High School in ninth grade, then again in 10th grade. He said the drama of high school, the name-calling, the large class sizes and crowded halls were too much for him. At 15, he wanted out.

North Penn is moving its alternative school.

"I was this close to getting the papers signed to drop out," said Boardman,

pinching his fingers together. "But I couldn't do it. My family and friends talked me out of it."

An alternative school was his option, but he was wary of going that route.

"I thought they were for kids who didn't care and wanted out, you know, kids who did bad things. After a while, I could see it wasn't just for kids who got in trouble but kids who didn't fit in — like me."

Boardman is among a grow-



Instructor Elsa Murphy thumbs through a textbook at Delaware Valley High School. Private alternative schools can save districts money because they can pay teachers less and loosen certification requirements.

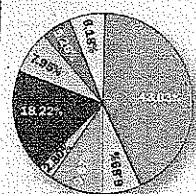
ing population of students enrolled in alternative schools in the region. In the last 10 years, the number of alternative programs in the state has more than tripled, jumping from 194 in 1997 to 650 in 2007. Students in alternative schools represent just a small fraction of districts' overall student body — ranging from five to 50 students in each

district — but their education could cost three times as much as the average student.

Out of 'regular classrooms'

Pennsylvania's Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth report says the bulk of students in alternative school programs "fall in the regular classroom environment because they become frustrated, act out in a

Reasons for placement in alternative schools



- Disregard for authority
- Drugs
- Violent behavior
- Weapons
- Habitual truancy
- Transition program
- Committed crime
- Misconduct
- Suspension
- Expulsion

Source: PA Department of Education

disruptive manner or are truant." Some students have been expelled for fights, defying authority or bringing weapons to school. Some have a criminal past and an alternative school is their last chance to get back on track. But a growing number of students are being referred to

See **SCHOOL**, Page A 4

School

Continued from Page A1

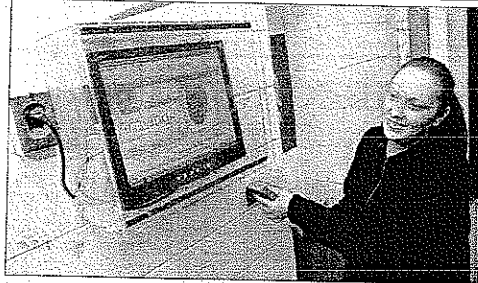
schools because of mental health or anxiety issues.

"They have the capability to learn, but other things are getting in the way," said Quakertown High School principal Martin Galante, who placed about eight students in alternative programs last year. "Someone may get panic attacks when walking into class or someone may resort to self-harm because of anxiety and need a more therapeutic environment. We are not equipped to handle that."

But the point is to help them, "not get rid of them," he said. In fact, one of the high school's five counselors is tasked with keeping tabs on students' behavioral and academic progress in alternative education. "We want to get them the personal intervention they need to keep them out of crisis situations and then bring them back to the main school," he said.

Annual state reports, however, show that while most students boosted their grades, only about 30 percent of students return to their public high schools and only about 9 percent graduate. Still, enrollment in alternative education programs has grown from 5,049 in 1997 to nearly 29,601 in 2006. Though alternative education programs and number of students served are on the rise, funding has not kept pace, forcing many districts in the late 1990s to close in-house programs.

State per-pupil spending for alternative education dropped from \$1,950 in 2000 to \$1,000 in 2007, with the bulk of programs' expense coming from local school district taxes. Educating an alternative student could cost an additional \$2,600



Ashley Christman, 18, of Warminster, has her fingerprint scanned as she checks in at Delaware Valley High School. Christman, who nearly flunked two grades for skipping public school, has an A average at Delaware Valley.

or \$20,000, depending upon the service and support a student requires.

Still, state funding isn't expected to come to the rescue any time soon. Mary Ramirez, director of student services for the Pennsylvania Department of Education, said the state is more likely to invest in early childhood programs that identify students who are at risk for behavioral and academic problems. Such programs, she said, "may prevent students from having to enter alternative schools."

Outsourcing education

The state made it easier for districts to save money in 1999 when it passed Act 46, a measure allowing districts to contract with private providers, many of which can pay teachers less and loosen certification requirements.

Facing a decreasing pot of funds with an increased load of requirements brought on by No Child Left Behind put a

PROGRESS IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

In the 2004-05 school year, 27,534 Pennsylvania students were enrolled in alternative education. Of them, about:

- 56 percent increased their grade point average
- 55 percent improved their attendance
- 29 percent returned to a regular classroom
- 10 percent achieved treatment goals
- 9 percent graduated

strain on an alternative program that Centennial School District run. When it contracted with a private provider, expenses were cut by more than 50 percent. Today, dozens of schools in the region contract with private providers instead of housing in-house programs.

The program was just too expensive, and the in-house alternative school was too similar to the traditional four-year high school structure, said

Sandy Homel, the Director of Secondary Education at Centennial.

"Kids didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel," she said. "In the past, there was a tendency to have students re-try the same setting over and over again. We needed to find an acceptable way to help them meet graduation requirements without cutting corners that would cheapen the diploma for everyone."

Act 48 gave public schools



Mike Boardman plays basketball outside of Delaware Valley High School. Boardman says he appreciates the smaller classrooms and the personal attention he receives at the alternative school.

more options to outsource, and certificates for good nearly doubling the number of state-approved private providers. Today, dozens of programs operate in the region some out of shopping centers serving a handful of students and others serving hundreds from a free-standing business. Some providers offer programs in prisons, detention centers and drug treatment programs. All programs are required to follow state curriculum and testing requirements, with districts expected to monitor their quality. But they can offer more flexibility than some public schools can allow, requiring fewer mandates for teacher certifications and fewer credits for graduating seniors, Homel said.

'More time for me'
Alternative schools, Homel said, can put students on an accelerated track to their diploma, offering night and summer school and opportunities to graduate throughout the year, instead of only in the spring. "If you are truly about alternative education, we need to break the mold that 'high school equals four years,'" she said. "I think we've gotten a better understanding of the disruptive student. I think we have come to realize that one size does not fit all."

She said the private schools are able to provide bigger support staffs and a smaller student-to-pupil ratio, giving students the attention and intensive therapy they may need. Through alternative education, Boardman, 17, was able to get help with "anger issues" that led to two expulsions in the past. He said the smaller classroom setting and personal attention at Delaware Valley High School helped him get through classes he never expected to pass — such as algebra.

"I had this teacher here who was able to break it all down so I can get it, he also had more time for me," said Boardman, sitting in class one recent day. "Here, you can't get away with not raising your hand, not when there are only six or eight kids in a class."

The added attention, though, comes with added restrictions. The environment, he said, is clearly different, but he doesn't mind. Delaware Valley High School in an industrial pocket of Philadelphia looks like a commercial business from its exterior. The school's entrance is far from the Rovers greeting students in the bucolic center of Bucks County. Students must enter through a metal detector, show electronics — including cell phones and iPods — in outside lockers and press their fingertips over a scanner twice a day for an identity check.

"We want to make sure our kids are coming to school and staying," said Tarah Doyle, social support coordinator for the school that serves public and private students from Delaware, Bucks and Montgomery counties. "If they don't, parents get two phone calls. We're not just watching over them while they're here; most times if a student has a poor attendance record, there is something happening out of school they may need our help with."

To discourage truancy, the school awards students gift

more options to outsource, and certificates for good nearly doubling the number of state-approved private providers. Today, dozens of programs operate in the region some out of shopping centers serving a handful of students and others serving hundreds from a free-standing business. Some providers offer programs in prisons, detention centers and drug treatment programs. All programs are required to follow state curriculum and testing requirements, with districts expected to monitor their quality. But they can offer more flexibility than some public schools can allow, requiring fewer mandates for teacher certifications and fewer credits for graduating seniors, Homel said.

A different way to learn
Christman said she couldn't "relate" at her old school. She had a tough time absorbing lessons from a book, adding that she needed more explained. She didn't like having to get up early. So she would head to school for the first two hours, check out and return home to sleep. And Christman, who works a full-time job in landscaping, said she didn't fit in with the culture of students "who get everything paid for by their parents."

"At one point, I told them I refuse to come back. I just couldn't relate, and I wanted out, but my mom talked with the guidance counselor, and they put me here."

Though she failed her sophomore year at William Tennent High School, she was able to catch up during the night program at Delaware Valley High School. "This really gave me another chance to graduate," she said. "Now I can finish and join the Air Force, which is what I really want to do... but I needed a diploma to enlist."

Central Bucks District Superintendent Robert Laws said a flexible schedule may be what some students need to succeed.

"I think we'll see more and more ways for students to earn a diploma, and that's a good thing," said Laws. "We know we have kids who are not able to get their needs met with 25 kids in a classroom in 90-minute classes."

Right now, Central Bucks is considering an in-house alternative "Twilight" program, which would run from 3 to 6:30 p.m. and serve students who are falling in the traditional school setting. While the proposal is still in the discussion phase, the school would share some similarities with North Penn School District's in-house alternative program, which opened five years ago and serves 30 students a year.

The Twilight school would also give students, who may be short one or two credits needed to graduate, an opportunity to catch up. "We want it to be different, offering an alternative pathway for students who are not doing well in the traditional model."

Today, Boardman said going the alternative school route changed his future.

"I'm doing something here. Now I have my heart set on a career. Working on cars is what I love to do. I'm getting the chance to do it," said Boardman, who is exploring the school's vocational program. "I thank people constantly for changing my mind and helping me stick with school... Here school is not about who you like or dislike; we're all here for the same reason: to get things done — to get through it all and start our lives."

Marion Callahan can be reached at (215) 345-1246 or mcallaha@phillyburbs.com.