

ANNUAL REPORT

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS ADVISORY COMMITTEE



OTTAWA-CARLETON
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD



Committee Members

Ananda Kelly (Parent Member), Dennis Murphy (Parent Member), Shannon Smith (Superintendent of Instruction), Emily Addison (Parent Member), Carolyn Webb (Parent Member), Christine Boothby (Trustee), Sam Kazak (Parent Member), Gil F.G. Miranda (Parent Member), Maxime Champagne (Parent Member), Alastair Mullin (Parent Member)

Committee Chair

Ananda Kelly (Parent Member, Co-chair), Dennis Murphy (Parent Member, Co-chair)

Activities and Achievements 2020-2021

- In August, the Alternative Schools Advisory Committee (ASAC) advocated for the inclusion of the Alternative Program as an option in OCV. Initially, virtual school did not include an Alternative Program pathway, but ASAC's advocacy highlighted how the alternative tenet of multi-age groupings would enable enough students in an Alternative Program class to justify the program virtually.
- In November, ASAC gave a presentation and facilitated discussion of the seven tenets of the Alternative Program to school board trustees, school staff and parents. The presentation and discussion were done as a way to promote the benefits of the Alternative Program, especially to those not familiar with the program's core values, the seven tenets. It was also a means to hear examples of how each of the tenets are exemplified in OCDSB's different alternative schools.
- In March, ASAC solicited feedback from school staff and parent councils at OCDSB's six Alternative Program schools - Lady Evelyn Alternative, Churchill Alternative, Regina Alternative, Riverview Alternative, Summit Alternative and OCV Central-West. The feedback was gathered by means of a community conversation whereby seven questions were posed about the merits of the Alternative Program, what sets it apart from other programs and what can be done to promote and strengthen the program going forward. The seven questions asked were.
 1. Why is it important to have an alternative option in the OCDSB?
 2. What do alternative schools (the program) offer that other schools do not?
 3. What outcomes do you want for your child/children/students coming out of the Alternative Program?
 4. What makes a thriving alternative school?
 5. In your wildest dreams, what would an alternative model/school/classroom look like?
 6. What are the current impediments to alternative schools/teachers that the OCDSB could help remove?
 7. What support could the OCDSB offer to encourage thriving alternative schools?

Participation from both staff and parent councils was highly successful, with close to four hundred separate comments contributed in the community conversation.

In May, ASAC provided a slide presentation, summarizing the community conversation with school staff and parent council. All alternative school principals were in attendance for this presentation and each contributed their experience and perspective to the conversation. Also in attendance were Camille Williams-Taylor, OCDSB Director of Education; Shannon Smith, Superintendent of Instruction; Christine Boothby, School Board Trustee; and numerous parents. Presenters shared how the community feedback gathered aligns with the objectives, goals, and exit outcomes of the OCDSB's 2019-2023 Strategic Plan. Included in the findings were a number of actions that could be pursued to further strengthen the program. Please see the attached slide deck for highlights from OCDSB school councils and staff's community conversation about the Alternative Program.

Plans for the 2021-2022 School Year

ASAC expects that its work will be varied in 2021-2022. Much of the focus will be on taking what we learned from the community conversation this past spring and working to implement and support the OCDSB in implementing some of the recommendations that came forward from the community. These recommendations include:

- Actions to better promote the Alternative program.
- Improving communication among Alternative school communities.
- Increasing understanding of the Alternative tenets with staff and families who attend Alternative schools.
- Removing some of the specific impediments that teachers face in delivering the Alternative Program.
- Providing ongoing professional development specific to the Alternative model.

While we have seen a marked improvement in ASAC membership, it would be wonderful to have more participation. We have discussed how we would like to engage school staff more with ASAC as their voice is extremely valuable in terms of shaping the Alternative Program and school cultures. We also anticipate facilitating conversations across schools as we resume having each Alternative school 'host' one ASAC meeting per year. Even if the meetings are online, it will be an opportunity to feature the work of each Alternative school through virtual means.

Proposed 2021-2022 Meeting Schedule

- 25 October 2021
- 29 November 2021
- 24 January 2022
- 14 February 2022
- 25 April 2022
- 30 May 2022

Attachments/Links

[Slide deck](#) - Highlights from community conversations with OCDSB school councils and staff on the Alternative Program

OCDSB Alternative Schools Advisory Committee

Highlights from school council and staff input on the Alternative program

ASAC meeting - 31 May 2021



About the input that we collected:

- To inform ASAC's future work, we developed seven questions to ask our community through conversations at the school level. The questions were developed with input from the superintendent and trustee for the Alternative program.
- Alternative school staff and school councils were approached for input. Information was collected at the school level and then shared back with ASAC.
- We heard back from five school councils and staff from five schools. Future input with even more voices could be helpful.
- These slides highlight some of the key findings as identified by Emily Addison & Carolyn Webb - tasked to analyze what was shared by schools.
- Much of what we heard aligns with the objectives, goals, and exit outcomes of the OCDSB's 2019-2023 Strategic Plan.



Question 1: Why is it important to have an Alternative option in the OCDSB?

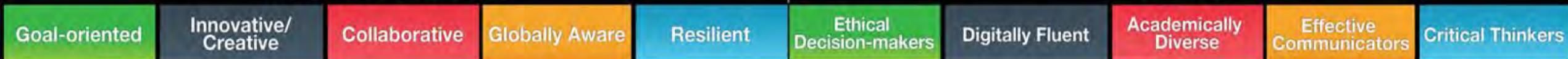


- **Not all students learn the same way. The Alternative program supports different ways of learning. Teachers work to support individual needs and meet students where they're at.**
"People learn in different ways. The alternative program acknowledges that, and finds ways to meet the needs and strengths of all students (not a cookie cutter approach)" [Lady Evelyn Council]
- **By taking the emphasis off of competition the Alternative program creates the space for self-directed learning and intrinsic motivation, emphasizes doing your best and encourages students to develop a love of learning.**
"It reserves a space for a less competitive, more collaborative approaches to learning" [Staff]
- **The Alternative program offers different kinds of learning opportunities: non-competitive; focus on the arts, social justice, environment, outdoor, play-based, critical thinking, student-led learning, and extracurricular activities.**

EXIT OUTCOMES — What we want for our graduates

CHARACTERISTICS

SKILLS



Question 1: Importance of Alternative option continued...

- The Alternative program is a good place to try out new approaches to learning.
- The Alternative program gives students lots of opportunities to connect with a mix of age groups and to share peer learning and support.
- The Alternative program's tenets are based on what are now considered best practice. This ensures that what is now considered best practice is the norm in alternative schools. Families can be reassured that their children are a part of a program that has best practice at its core.
- The program offers a diverse, accepting and innovative learning environment.



Question 2: What do Alternative schools (the program) offer that other schools do not?



- **Alternative schools have a child-centred approach to learning. They focus on cooperation and help students develop a love of learning and of doing their personal best. Students are supported to work together, to develop intrinsic motivation, to problem solve, innovate, and to challenge themselves.**

*“I believe that the alternative program puts a greater emphasis on social skills, collaborative learning and problem solving.”
[Churchill Council]*

“The emphasis on cooperation over competition is often not appreciated in regular programs. Teachers and administrators may say that cooperation is primary, but don’t realize how pervasive a presence inherent competition really is in their programs. Developing a culture of awareness within a school allows the feelings of respect, understanding, empathy, and natural curiosity to flourish... Cooperative learning happens best within a supportive community.” [Staff]

EXIT OUTCOMES — What we want for our graduates

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Question 2:

What Alternative schools offer continued...

- **Alternative schools put an emphasis on community, connection, and family involvement. This connection happens both within the school and with the broader community. There is a feeling that the entire school community is working together to support the needs of students.**

“Emphasis on CONNECTION - Students connect with a wide variety of peers with multi-age groupings. Cross-curricular connections with integrated curriculum. Connect their school life with family and broader community.” [Regina Council]

“A high level of collaboration between teachers, parents, and community members in delivering meaningful and authentic learning experiences for students, both at school and in the wider community.” [Staff]



CULTURE OF CARING

We will advance equity and a sense of belonging to promote a safe and caring community.

Question 2: What Alternative schools offer continued...



- Alternative schools focus on the strengths of each student. They meet students where they're at and support all types of learners.
- The Alternative program offers an inclusive environment. Students develop a strong sense of empathy for each other and differences are accepted and celebrated.
- Students are encouraged to be leaders in their school community. Multi-age groupings allow students to both challenge themselves and mentor others with different strengths and needs.
- The Alternative tenets offer a learning environment that is based on best practices. They attract families and teachers who value these approaches to learning.

Question 3:

What outcomes do you want for your child / children / students coming out of the Alternative program?

- **A love of learning and a sense of intrinsic motivation.**

Innovative/
Creative

"A love of learning - where independent research and exploration is second nature and leads them to open doors and develop new skills without the need of external rewards or an adult telling them when and how to do each step." [Lady Evelyn Council]

"I want my children to come away from grade school with increased curiosity and desire to learn about everything - from themselves to their community to the world around them." [Churchill Council]

"To learn to appreciate the joy of learning and the importance of challenging themselves." [OCV Council]

"To enjoy learning, and be motivated to pursue interests on their own initiative." [Staff]



CULTURE OF INNOVATION

We will build a learning community where innovation and inquiry drive learning.

Question 3: Desired outcomes continued...

- **Self-confidence, a sense of value and self-worth and the feeling that they are being heard.**

“Self-confidence, Sense of value and worth.” [Summit Council]

- **A sense of self-awareness.**

“An understanding that there are many pathways to learning and a sense of the ways that work best for them.” [Staff]

- **Collaboration skills.**

“Collaboration, social skills are extremely high on my list and I think are highlighted much more in the alternative model through some of the tenets and their associated practices.” [Churchill Council]

- **Creative thinking skills.**

“We hope students to be innovative, adaptable and creative thinkers.” [Staff]



Question 3: Desired outcomes continued...

- **A sense of being socially responsible, a global and caring citizen.**

“Socially responsible - with an awareness of the experiences of others, and a wish to make choices that benefit others as much as themselves” [Lady Evelyn Council]

- **A sense of empathy.**

“I want our children to appreciate their own and their friends' abilities and strengths and be ready to be friends with all the group instead of ignoring some students” [OCV Council]

- **A sense of being a positive member of a community.**

Globally Aware

Ethical
Decision-makers



CULTURE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

We will strengthen our community through ethical leadership, equitable practice, and responsible stewardship.

Question 4: What makes a thriving Alternative school?



- Includes strong understanding of, valuing of, and commitment to the Alternative tenets by the Board leadership, school leadership, staff, parents, and students.

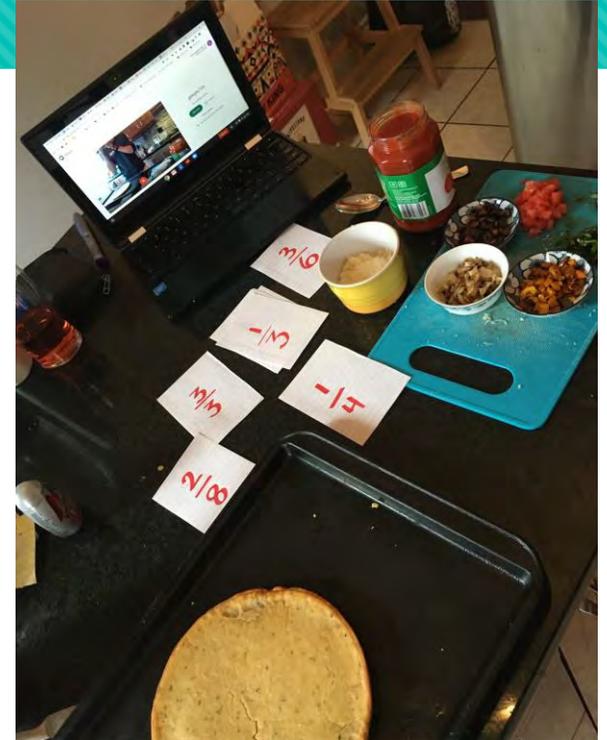
“A thriving alternative school is one where the 7 tenets are embraced as the foundation of everything the school does; from basic school policy to creating learning opportunities for children.” [Churchill Council]

- Involves much collaboration and a focus on community.
 - A focused effort on building community and school culture (e.g., school-wide activities focused on community).
 - Strong communication between school staff and parents.
 - Strong parental involvement.
 - Collaboration among staff.
 - Collaboration with the wider community – connections outside of school.
 - Collaboration with and among students (e.g., of different ages/stages of development).

Question 4:

What makes a thriving Alternative school continued...

- Focuses on intrinsic motivation and downplays grades (e.g., not providing grades on report cards unless requested; focus on cooperative games).
- Focuses on innovation in teaching (e.g. teachers are engaged in new teaching methods; encouraging collaboration across alternative schools and beyond to bring in new ideas that align with the alternative model).
- Other comments included:
 - Specific comments relating to the important role of teachers, school leadership, and the Board.
 - Curriculum-related characteristics (e.g., appreciation of and emphasis on the arts, environment/outdoors, social justice, and indigenous knowledge; more flexibility in how the curriculum is taught such as more integration).



Question 5:

In your wildest dreams, what would an Alternative model/school/classroom look like?
(Thinking outside any obstacles.)

Overall, responses reflected the fact that staff and school councils want strong implementation of the alternative tenets (e.g., community engagement; innovation). Both parents and school staff identified opportunities to strengthen that implementation.



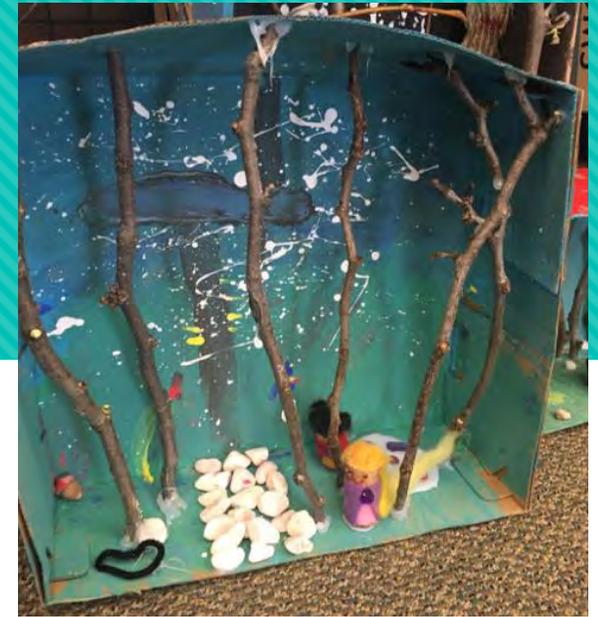
- **The most common response was the wish for more learning outside in nature (e.g., students spending much of their day outside; holding classes in parks; having purposeful outdoor classrooms).**

“For [our school], I envision a Forest school kind of model for learning. I would be at [outdoor location] SEVERAL times a week-if it were made possible (ratio of adults to students is a barrier). Where learning happens outdoors as much as possible. Classrooms that open to the outside.” [Staff]

- **Staff and parents want connections with community partners (i.e., bringing the community into the school and going out into the community).**

“Many members of the community visiting to share their expertise, also students having experiences outside of the school as much as possible (visiting local businesses to see what is involved; volunteering projects; exploring nature). [Regina Council]

Question 5: 'Wildest dreams' continued...



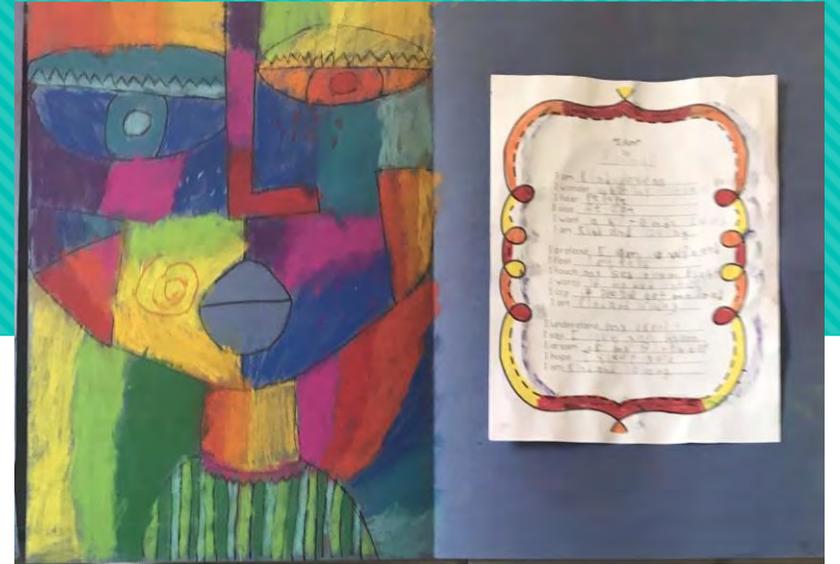
- **Student led learning with teachers in a facilitator role.**

“There would be resources available to allow students to run with ideas-to really embrace student-led learning.” [Staff]

- **Innovative approaches to the curriculum and learning (e.g., less-structured days/schedules that allow for more integration of subjects; more music and art; more freedom to pilot alternative teaching approaches; more experiential and hands-on learning).**

“Have pilot projects going on that can then be spread to other sites across the board when proven to be beneficial to students.” [Staff]

Question 5: 'Wildest dreams' continued...



- **Strong parent engagement.**
- **Different designs to learning spaces. In addition to more class-time outside/outdoor learning spaces, parents and staff wrote about standing desks, no desks, more collaborative workspaces, lots of plants, etc.**
- **More support for students and teachers (e.g., professional learning to support the model; greater involvement of OT and mental health professionals).**
- **Students who are curious, motivated to learn, and engaged.**
- **Even more ideas! More multi-aged groupings, support on the transition to high school, etc.**

Question 6:

What are the current impediments to Alternative schools/teachers that the OCDSB could help remove?

Lack of quality communication and promotion of the Alternative program.

- Virtually no information on the OCDSB website (e.g., no listing of schools & their catchment areas; not clear that all students in the Board are eligible to attend; no description of the value of the program and the benefits of an alternative education).
- Confusion between the elementary Alternative vs secondary Alternate program (e.g., when one searches in Google for 'OCDSB Alternative program', the Alternate program comes up as the first item listed).
- The need for better promotion of Alternative student success in high school and post-secondary education.
- Lack of knowledge among some Board staff resulting in lack of proper promotion of the program (e.g., messaging from other local principals; family reception centre).
- Lack of promotion generally as compared to other Board programs (e.g., French Immersion).
"I would like the board to promote the alternative program to the same extent that they promote the EFI and MFI programs. Many families do not understand what the alt program offers, and the FI message is given so much more loudly and clearly. We lose a lot of our students to FI, at G1 and G4 because of this." [Churchill Council]

The results of poor communication include that parents do not have enough information to make an informed decision as to whether to send their children to an Alternative school or not.

Question 6: Current impediments continued...

There was the perception that families choose the Alternative program for many different reasons.

- Closest school to home.
- Child is being bullied at another school.
- Parents looking for a strong English program and their local school has a small English program because so many families are selecting FI.
- Students with learning and/or behavioural exceptionalities struggling in another school.

Some comments suggested that *IF* the reasons for attending an Alternative school are different than for the Alternative model (e.g., tenets), there can be various consequences. For instance,

- Lower parent engagement.
- What teachers can offer in terms of program delivery.
- The overall perception of the program by the wider community in that it is for students with exceptionalities and therefore not an appropriate choice for all types of students.

“We receive many students who come to our program with the idea that it is an alternate program. Our tenets describe a profile of a student, yet more often than not, other school staff recommend that students struggling come to [our school] because we are a “special education program”. It would really help if the OCDSB would clarify to their central staff and admin/teaching staff what the alternative program is really about.” [Staff]

“Insufficient human resources to support students with exceptionalities or behavioural needs (who tend to gravitate to our program after not succeeding at other schools). It is almost impossible for the teacher to support these students while also creating and delivering learning opportunities that are more student-directed than in a traditional classroom.” [Staff]

Question 6: Current impediments continued...

Board and provincial impediments such as...

- **Rigid rules around timetabling that stifle innovative approaches.**
- **Limiting of team teaching.**
- **Strict standards on the reporting of student learning.**
“Provincial/board level standards, for example one philosophy is “reduced emphasis on grades”, yet we follow standard reporting styles (letter grades on report cards). Also student-directed learning is much more challenging when required to meet curriculum standards.” [Regina Council]
- **Rules/paperwork around field trips which limit the frequency of trips.**



Question 6: Current impediments continued...



There were a few comments that mentioned the following:

- Lack of the tenets being applied to the EDP programs.
- Challenges related to school administration (e.g., occasional principals that don't support the alternative approach).
- Teachers who don't understand or aren't committed to the model (e.g., some teachers haven't chosen to be at an alternative school and it may not be the best fit).
- Lack of FI options in Alternative schools.
- Lack of parental involvement.
- The lack of evolution in the alternative tenets/program as teaching practices have changed over the years.
- Location of the alternative schools (i.e., all centrally located making it challenging for students at the edges of the Board boundaries).
- Start times for some alternative schools being challenging for families.
- Lack of communication across Alternative schools to share ideas/best practices among staff and school councils.

Question 7:

What support could the OCDSB offer to encourage thriving Alternative schools?

Provide learning opportunities for teachers:

- **Ongoing professional development specific to the Alternative program (e.g., PD days; release time).**
“The alternative schools need release time to meet and ensure our programs align and support each other.” [Staff]
- **Provide an easy way for teachers across all Alternative schools to share ideas.**
“Easy way for staff of the alternative schools to communicate and share ideas (through Google group conference).” [Staff]
- **Share best practices from other jurisdictions and current research in ways that is easy for teachers to incorporate.**
- **Offer training to all teachers who join alternative schools to learn about the tenets and how they can be enacted (e.g., have an experienced alternative teacher as a mentor).**

Question 7: Support continued...



Hire staff who value, and are committed to the Alternative model.

“Hire teachers who have the energy to tailor lessons to the current class, who believe in alternative teaching methods.” [OCV Council]

Better promote the Alternative program and schools.

- **Share stories that feature the amazing things that alternative students are learning and doing.**
- **Improve the OCDSB Alternative web space (e.g., make it easier to find information; include photos and videos).**
- **Have other OCDSB schools offer information about the local Alternative school in their area so that parents who may be interested in the Alternative tenets can learn about the school more easily.**
- **Educate OCDSB staff members about the program so they can better communicate about it.**

“People at board level need to understand what ALTERNATIVE programming is and advertise it accordingly.” [Staff]

Question 7: Support continued...



Other possible supports include:

- Hire dedicated staff at the Board level to support the program as they have for other programs (e.g., outdoor education).
- Develop partnerships with organizations that align with the Alternative program (e.g., Museum of Nature).
- Remove some of the rigid rules and bureaucracy that place limits on the program (e.g., field trips; timetabling).

“It is very challenging to be innovative and creative within a large bureaucracy that applies the same lens to every site. Alternative sites struggle to offer an “alternative” when forced to conform to the status quo on every front.” [Staff]

“Rules and paperwork around field trips have sometimes limited our ability to offer rich and frequent experiential learning. We can work together to find a solution that protects students but allows us to provide rich experiences on a regular basis.” [Staff]

Questions and conversation



Culture of Innovation

- Graduation Rate
- Annual Certification Rate
- EQAO Results
- Achievement Gaps
- Parent, Student, Staff Experience



Culture of Caring

- School climate
- Employee engagement
- Student engagement
- Parent engagement



Culture of Social Responsibility

- Social Emotional Skills
- Leadership Diversity
- Disproportionality indices
- Environmental Stewardship



EXIT OUTCOMES — What we want for our graduates

CHARACTERISTICS

SKILLS

- | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|-------------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Goal-oriented | Innovative/
Creative | Collaborative | Globally Aware | Resilient | Ethical
Decision-makers | Digitally Fluent | Academically
Diverse | Effective
Communicators | Critical Thinkers |
|---------------|-------------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|