Flexible Learning Options For Disadvantaged Youth:
An Investigation Into Alternative Education in the United States And Australia

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Flexible Learning Options For Disadvantaged Youth: An Investigation Into Alternative Education in the United States And Australia

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Abstract

This project investigated theories and practices commonly used in the academic re-engagement of disadvantaged youth and connected the Northern Centre for Excellence in School Engagement (NCESE) with alternative education organizations in the US. The team identified relevant professionals in the US, interviewed them, and invited them to participate in a workshop on alternative education organized with the NCESE. The work resulted in the identification of several widely used strategies directed towards the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral development of students.

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Introduction

Every student is deserving of a quality education—one that will prepare them for a successful future career and help them develop fully as an individual. However, some students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can have difficulty engaging in mainstream schooling. Schools that focus on teaching these students are known as alternative schools, flexible learning options, or re-engagement programs—all work towards providing high-quality education for students whose needs are not met by traditional schools. This project aimed to establish connections with multiple alternative schools and educational organizations in the US to begin an international dialogue with the NCESE in Australia. These efforts culminated in a professional workshop that began a discussion on the fundamentals of alternative education, and key aspects of alternative education programs. This project, through literature review and interview with experts in the field in both Australia and the US, identified four commonly used strategies and explore the similarities and differences between them. This project also set out to investigate the means by which programs can accurately assess the implementation of these strategies and track the development of students in their programs.

Background

Academic engagement can be defined as a student's psychological and behavioral efforts and investment in learning, understanding or mastering skills, and knowledge in academic work (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, as cited in Kim et al., 2019). Naturally, academic disengagement is the opposite; a lack of investment/effort in learning and academic work.
In a study from the European Journal of Psychology of Education, student engagement is defined as a multidimensional construct consisting of several different types of engagement, some more observable than others (Schnitzler et al., 2020). The study breaks down engagement into three subcategories of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive

Behavioral engagement is characterized by "a set of externally observable behaviors, (Schnitzler et al., 2020), making it one of the easiest forms of student engagement to track.

Emotional engagement encompasses a student's emotional response to classroom learning activities (Schnitzler et al., 2020). Emotional engagement is usually only indicated by a student's enjoyment and interest in a subject matter, making it difficult to track.

Cognitive engagement can be broken into two subcategories of information processing: surface processing and deep processing. Surface processing is when a student processes information only well enough to reproduce it and deep processing involves much deeper and complicated thinking (Schnitzler et al., 2020).

The level of disengagement can be sorted into three tiers: tier one, tier two, and tier three (Figure 1). About 80-90% of all students are classified under tier 1: attending school regularly and are

engaged in their education. About 15% of all students fall under tier two: passively disengaged, struggling academically, and may or may not be attending school regularly. Tier three involves about 2-5% of all students being: actively disengaged, having low attendance, and repeatedly getting in trouble in class.

As a result, some students suffering from academic disengagement are unable to complete their education or drop out entirely, often limiting their options for future success and negatively impacting the community. The lack of adaptability in schools' curriculum and teaching style is one of the reasons behind students not completing their education. If traditional schools lack the means to accommodate a student's alternative learning needs, schooling can be significantly more challenging for them than their peers. **Flexible learning options (FLOs)**, alternative education, and re-engagement programs were created to provide students with a smaller and more individualized tailored learning environment that has shown to be an effective means of helping disengaged students. FLOs are schools or programs that serve as either a supplement or alternative to traditional school. Through employing educational frameworks which intend to develop students through a more holistic approach, they are able to better suit the needs of students who are unable to engage with regular schooling.
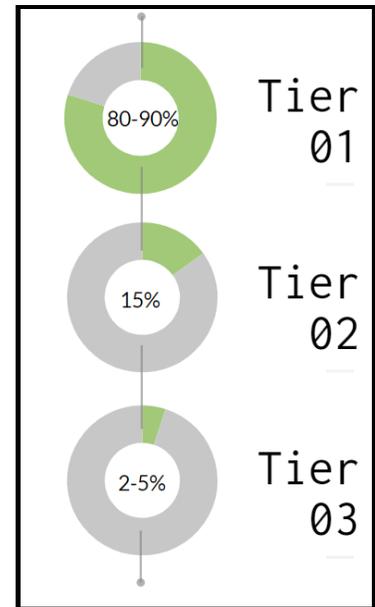

Figure 1: The three tiers of disengagement

Our sponsor for this project is the **Northern Centre for Excellence in School Engagement (NCESE)**, located in Broadmeadows, Australia. Currently, in Broadmeadows, some children are becoming disengaged for a variety of reasons, and sometimes this leads to them being expelled or temporarily removed from their schooling. In response to the challenge of disengagement and expulsions in Broadmeadows, the NCESE—composed of Banksia Gardens Community Services (BGCS), 16 primary schools, one secondary school, and the Victorian Department of Education and Training—created Project REAL. Project REAL focuses on regaining the interest of disengaged students in their education through FLOs. They offer activities and workshops focused on the students' emotional, physical, and cognitive growth, and they provide one-on-one student-teacher education. Once the students have improved in the program and gained strategies to help counter their disengagement, they are transitioned back into their school with a regular curriculum. FLOs are not a permanent option for these students nor are they meant to separate and stigmatize students who are disruptive. Flexible learning options should be viewed as a transition step in disengaged students' educational journey.

Methods and Findings

The NCESE is in need of a comprehensive pool of research to determine effective FLO practices, but little research has been solidified to determine which alternative education strategies are more successful for disengaged *and* disadvantaged youth. Our goal was to connect the NCESE with

alternative education programs in the US and to determine effective practices in re-engaging disadvantaged youth. We set three main objectives and identified the methods we used to achieve this goal (Figure 2).
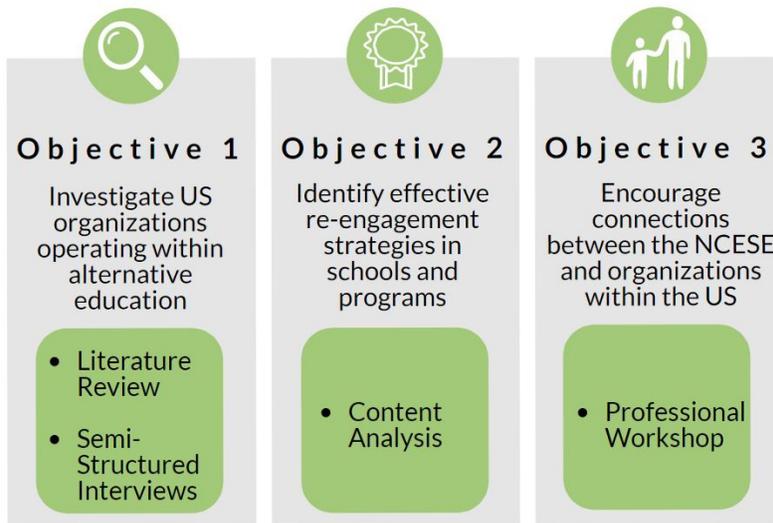

Figure 2: Our project objectives and methods

Through our research, we uncovered four main theories and curricula that continually appeared in interviews and literature: Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), and Attachment Regulation and Competency (ARC), summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the four main theories and curriculums

Theories	Description	Outcomes
Individual Learning Plan	A process that enables students to make informed decisions about which courses they take and which activities they participate in.	- Helping to counteract some of the factors that can lead to disengagement and helping students identify and achieve their academic, career, and social goals
Social and Emotional Learning	The framework "involves a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance" (Mahoney et al., 2020)	- Increasing school completion, attendance, academic participation, emotional understanding and social competencies - Reducing behavioral and social issues
Positive Behavior Intervention and Support	A 3-tiered framework that provides support for every student and improves student outcomes. It is known for improving and integrating data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes. The focus of PBIS is prevention, not punishment.	- Providing clear and consistent behavioral exceptions - Increasing positive language, academic performance, social-emotional competence - Reducing reactive discipline
Attachment Regulation and Competency	Focuses on three main aspects of a child's development: attachment, regulation, and competency. This type of curriculum is especially useful and effective when working with a student who has had past traumatic experiences.	- Enhancing skills, supports, and relational resources for the educators - Helping students increase their capacity to tolerate and manage their experiences - Reduction in children's symptoms of post-traumatic stress and mental health

All these frameworks not only aim to better students' academics but to help them develop emotionally, socially, and behaviorally as individuals. One thing that is key to understand about these alternative education frameworks (ILPs, SEL, ARC, and PBIS) is that they do not all exist within the same "level". For example, SEL can be incorporated within PBIS, with PBIS being more of an "operational" level framework focused on improving student behavior and school culture. Meanwhile, SEL is more of a "tactical" level conduct used to help teach students how to recognize and control their emotions in social settings. The same can be said about the other two strategies, ILPs and ARC, in that they too operate at different "levels". It is also worth noting that aspects from all frameworks can be employed simultaneously but in different quantities. It is hard enough to implement a single framework, so programs usually focus on one "operational" framework and utilize practices from "tactical" level frameworks.

Through our research, we also found that programs have a desire to be accountable for their work, but to do this they must be able to collect relevant data pertaining to student progression. Assessment in these programs is typically done through teacher observation, alongside traditional student records (such as attendance and test scores). The observational techniques used to assess students stem from widely referenced frameworks and rating scales developed through psychological research (Social Skills Improvement Rating Scales Teacher Form (SSIS-RST), Cooperative Learning Observation Code for Kids (CLOCK), Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES), etcetera). To ensure that teachers are providing a school environment that is conducive to higher attendance, engagement, academic performance, and socioemotional development it is imperative that teachers know how to observe and quantify the progress of their students. These rating systems all focus on directing a teacher's observation toward specific aspects of their students' development, as well as providing meaningful assessments of their academic skills.

Professional Workshop

To make connections for the NCESE, a short workshop was held at the beginning of May to facilitate a discussion on our findings from interviews and the literature, as well as to foster conversation among professionals across multiple programs. The attendees for the workshop were from the Woodward Day School, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, BGCS, and the NCESE. Perspectives from multiple leadership positions lead to an in-depth conversation on the similarities and differences of alternative education programs in the US and Australia.

During the discussion, three main topics were discussed: the fundamentals of alternative education, improvements needed in the field, and the most valued aspects of these programs. Attendees were first asked to give advice to new program leaders and agreed that establishing the core mission and beliefs of the program is where success begins, and keeping them consistent throughout the school is essential in maintaining an effective program. They also agreed that alternative education programs need to be student-centered to run properly. Understanding what a student needs and wants, along with continually adjusting to their needs, is extremely important in creating an effective and safe environment for re-engagement.

When asked what improvement should be made in alternative education, programs agreed that if programs were able to implement competency-based education and vocational schooling, students would be able to feel and see their progress, furthering their engagement with school. However, vocational programs are expensive and require people with special licenses and qualifications, so it is very difficult to get these services for students.

In terms of what programs valued the most, every attendee expressed how extremely important their staff is to the success of their program. Our sponsor at the NCESE explained how knowledge is a transformative thing, and the more one knows the better they are at teaching it. The Woodward Day Directors said how their staff is everything in making their program work for their students. These sentiments from our attendees show how vital the teachers are in alternative education programs and how they can really help to make a difference in students' lives.

Conclusion

Over the course of the project, we were able to identify multiple schools, programs, and organizations in the field of alternative education that can serve as possible connections for the NCESE. All who attended the workshop have shown interest in continuing the conversation and connecting in the near future with each other and the NCESE. We were also able to identify, through literature review and interviews, four commonly used strategies in alternative programming. These strategies all focused on what we found to be the four fundamental aspects of student development: social, emotional, behavioral, and academic. In addition to this, our research into assessment techniques showed the importance of observational data from teachers in identifying student progress beyond traditional academic assessment (attendance and test scores).

We hope that this project has made a meaningful contribution with a long-lasting impact on the field of alternative education and that we provided the NCESE with useful information on programs here in the United States.

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Introduction

Every student is deserving of a quality education—one that will prepare them for a successful future career and help them develop fully as an individual. The typical school day for a student consists of many hours sitting at a desk and digesting the material given by their teachers. However, some students, particularly those with disadvantaged backgrounds, can have difficulty engaging in this mainstream schooling. These young people have fewer chances to achieve success due to factors like low socioeconomic status, ethnicity, complicated home life, behavioral issues, or traumatic backgrounds.

Academic engagement can be defined as a student's psychological and behavioral efforts as well as their investment in learning, understanding or mastering skills, and knowledge in academic work (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, as cited in Kim et al., 2019). Naturally, academic disengagement is the opposite; a lack of investment or effort in learning and academic work. Studies have shown that students suffering from academic disengagement experience substantially decreased academic performance (Schnitzler et al., 2020), as well as a compromised ability to regulate their response to stress (Brunzell et al., 2016). This low performance combined with the behavioral issues associated with any underlying trauma the student may have experienced can result in punitive measures such as suspension, and even expulsion. As a result, some students suffering from academic disengagement are unable to complete their education.

When these students don't complete their education it has further consequences, limiting their options for future success and negatively impacting the community. In comparison to high school graduates, those who disengage and stop attending school are more likely "to be unemployed...living in poverty, in prison" (NDPC-N | Meta-Analysis, n.d.). Below list some alarming statistics:

- "On average, a high school dropout earns $9,200 less per year than a high school graduate" (NDPC-N | Meta-Analysis, n.d.).
- "Nearly 83% of incarcerated persons are also high school dropouts" (U.S. High School Dropout Rate [2021], n.d.).

The lack of adaptability in schools' curriculum and teaching style is one of the reasons behind students not completing their education. Flexible learning options (FLOs), alternative education, and re-engagement programs were created to address this issue. These words can be used interchangeably as all these programs aim to support at-risk students whose needs are not met in traditional schooling and to help them complete their education. There are a variety of causes for disengagement, and individual cases need to be handled with adaptive strategies. FLOs, alternative, and re-engagement programs provide students with a smaller, more individualized, and tailored learning environment that has shown to be an effective means of helping disengaged students.

About five years ago Banksia Gardens Community Services (BGCS), a not-for-profit organization located in Broadmeadows, Australia that focuses on supporting the surrounding community and its residents, began to discuss a frequent problem they witnessed: local children missing school due to expulsions and suspensions (Project REAL | Banksia Gardens Community Services, n.d.). Currently, in Broadmeadows and the surrounding areas of Northern Melbourne, some children are becoming disengaged for a variety of reasons, and sometimes this leads to them being expelled or temporarily removed from their schooling. In response to the challenge of disengagement and expulsions in Broadmeadows, BGCS created Project REAL. Project REAL is the BGCS's main FLO and focuses on regaining the interest of disengaged students in their education. Project REAL is directed towards improving a handful of outcomes in the classroom: the capacity to form relationships, engagement in learning, increased self-regulation, and reduction in absenteeism and disruptive behaviors (Banksia Gardens Community Services Annual Report, 2019). About one year ago, the Northern Centre for Excellence in School Engagement (NCESE)—a collaboration of BGCS, 16 primary schools, one secondary school, and the Victorian Department of Education and Training —joined Project REAL to help with their mission. FLOs are a relatively new approach, so the NCESE is looking to improve on its current programs.

The goal of this project was to determine effective practices in re-engaging disadvantaged youth and to connect the NCESE with alternative education programs in the US. To this end, three main objectives were identified to aid us in obtaining this goal:

1. Investigate US organization operating within alternative education
2. Identify effective re-engagement strategies in schools and programs
3. Encourage connections between the NCESE and organizations within the US

As one of the first collaboratives of its kind in Australia, the NCESE seeks to establish connections with similar, more developed, educational programs in the United States. By starting communication between the NCESE and schools or organizations within the US, international collaborations may be enabled to further progress the field of alternative education. To better understand the landscape of alternative education in the United States, we needed to establish a developed view of the common strategies used to create these programs and how they may differ from what's being used in Australia. We also set out to investigate the means by which programs can accurately assess the implementation of these strategies and track the development of students in their programs. In identifying the most effective and common practices from schools in the United States, we provided useful discussions and contacts for the NCESE to consider when improving their programs.

Background

In this section, we take an in-depth look at disengagement and its causes, defining flexible learning options (FLOs) and how they attempt to re-engage students. We also review the Project REAL program developed by the NCESE and BGCS, and we review the literature on FLO assessment and its challenges.

Definition of Academic Disengagement

Academic disengagement, simply put, is the absence of academic engagement. Academic engagement is simply defined as a student's complete investment in their learning. However, it can be difficult to distinguish actual disengagement from forms of engagement that are simply more passive. So in order to help better understand academic disengagement, it is important to first grasp the concept of academic engagement. In a study from the European Journal of Psychology of Education, student engagement is defined as a multidimensional construct consisting of several different types of engagement, some more observable than others (Schnitzler et al., 2020). The study breaks down engagement into three subcategories of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.

Behavioral engagement is characterized by "a set of externally observable behaviors, which comprise several distinct aspects as absenteeism, disruptive behavior, withdrawal, following instructions, and student participation in whole-class dialogues in accordance with rules and classroom norms" (Schnitzler et al., 2020). This makes behavioral engagement one of the easiest forms of student engagement to track. However, not all aspects of engagement are as easy to observe.

Emotional engagement encompasses a student's emotional response to classroom learning activities (Schnitzler et al., 2020). Emotional engagement is usually only indicated by a student's enjoyment and interest in a subject matter. This makes it difficult to track emotional engagement from an external perspective, as the only way to determine a student's interest and/or enjoyment of a subject area is through direct inquiry.

Cognitive engagement can be broken into two subcategories of information processing: surface processing and deep processing. Surface processing refers to when a student processes information only well enough to reproduce it. Deep processing, as the name implies, involves much deeper and complicated thinking, and occurs when students connect what they have just learned with prior knowledge, forming links between new and old information (Schnitzler et al., 2020).

It is important to note that these three categories of engagement should be seen as separate but overlapping (Wang et al., 2019, as cited in Schnitzler et al., 2020), and can occur simultaneously during learning activities. This implies that students might employ different types of engagement more than others, causing their engagement to take on different forms (Schnitzler et al., 2020). Failure to recognize this could potentially lead to falsely identifying a student as being disengaged. However, despite these complicated layers and forms of engagement, disengagement can still exist. Students that are defined as disengaged lack all three types of engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) (Schnitzler et al., 2020).

Causes of Disengagement

Factors that lead to disengagement can be broken into two general categories: dispositional and structural (Welters et al., 2019). **Dispositional factors** can include perceived hostility between student and teacher, as well as a general uninterest in school, learning, and academic achievement. **Structural factors** tie more into a student's background and can include gender, indigenous status, low socio-economic background or poverty, non-traditional family structure, a complex home environment, parental background (e.g. low-skilled occupation), poor health (either mental or physical), pregnancy, and drug abuse (Welters et al., 2019, Msapenda & Hudson, 2013). Many of these factors correlate with childhood trauma and can contribute to a decreased ability to effectively learn in a traditional classroom setting.

The level of disengagement can be sorted into three tiers: tier one, tier two, and tier three. The majority of students fall under tier one. About 80-90% of all students are classified under this tier. Tier one represents the average student that attends school regularly and is engaged in their education. About 15% of all students fall under tier two. These students are passively disengaged, struggle academically, and may or may not attend school regularly. Tier three involves about 2-5% of all students. These students are actively disengaged, have low attendance, and repeatedly get in trouble in class.

According to studies, adults who experienced traumas in their youth (referred to as "adverse childhood experiences") were far more likely to have experienced problems in school, such as being expelled, suffering from language delays/difficulties, and most notably dropping out of mainstream education (Brunzell et al., 2016). Trauma-affected students can exhibit behavioral problems due to severely compromised

Figure 1: The three tiers of disengagement

regulatory abilities (i.e. inability to control their response to stress or arousal, environmental factors which can be present in a classroom) (Brunzell et al., 2016). Trauma can also impair a child's ability to form healthy attachments, especially to primary caregivers (such as teachers in the context of a classroom setting). This difficulty is a direct result of trauma's impact on a child's developing brain. The inability to form healthy attachments with instructors can cause difficulties for students that result from daily classroom stressors that would be more manageable for their non-traumatized peers. Stressors such as cognitive delays, new learning, and behavioral expectations can be difficult for such students to cope with (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015, as cited in Brunzell et al., 2016). Furthermore, the effect of trauma on pre-existing disorders (psychological, social, and biological) can be detrimental to a student's ability to learn in the traditional classroom (Brunzell et al., 2016). As a result, it is important that students in these positions can have access to alternative ways of learning and instruction which may serve to keep them academically engaged.
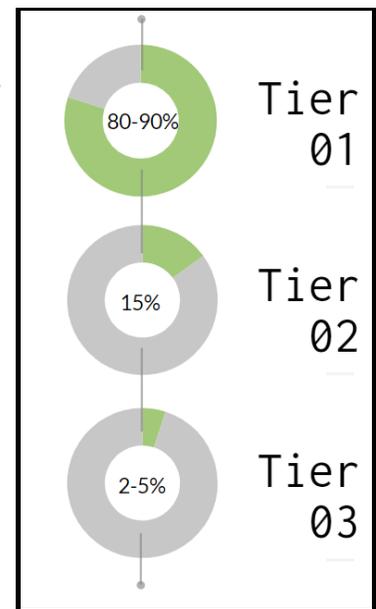
The Effects of Disengagement

Academic disengagement can lead to a variety of undesirable outcomes. In the short term, disengagement has been linked to issues like poor academic performance all the way up to expulsion. In the study by Schnitzler and colleagues (2020), it was found that students exhibiting disengagement performed significantly lower than their peers, achieving lower end-of-year grades compared to students exhibiting different patterns of engagement.

According to an article from *The Australian Education Researcher*, approximately 580,000 Australian people, ranging in ages from 15-29, are either unemployed or not receiving any education or training (Thomas et al., 2017). This has a substantial economic and social impact not only on the individuals in question but on the broader community as a whole. Furthermore, as of 2015 more than 81,000 Australians fail to complete their upper secondary education by the age of 19 (Lamb et al., 2015, as cited in Thomas et al., 2017). Young people who become disengaged from mainstream education can, as a result, fail to complete secondary schooling. This is especially likely for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. While academic disengagement might not account for 100% of students who never complete their education, it likely makes up a sizable portion of the deficit in educated youth. This is a huge problem because they are not gaining the skills nor confidence they need to reach their full potential and become contributing members of society. Educational re-engagement researcher George Myconos (2016) argues that lack of such options and support is "a form of institutionalized social exclusion and injustice" (p. 1). In the long term, the dropout rate caused by disengagement can lead to unemployment later in life. Failure to complete this level of education makes individuals far more likely to end up in one of the previously mentioned categories (either unemployed or uneducated/untrained). Keeping students engaged in school, and providing options for re-engagement if need be, could not only secure their own future (both socially and financially) but also bolster the economy of the broader community. The issue is that mainstream schooling has proven unsuccessful at engaging some students within the classroom.

Academic Re-Engagement

A more complex topic is that of student re-engagement. Academic re-engagement is when students regain interest in their learning journey. As stated above, student disengagement from mainstream schools is not fully understood and occurs for a myriad of reasons. The primary objective of alternative education programs is to find a way to re-engage these students so that they may finish their education and be more likely to see success in their careers. However, there is a high degree of complexity in determining student engagement because it is such a multidimensional phenomenon (Christenson et al. 2012; Fredricks et al. 2004). Engagement is ultimately dependent upon the state of the student, which is to say all the factors that have led the student to the position they currently occupy in life are also factors that influence their engagement level. For this reason, the "psychological elements of engagement (attitude towards learning, motivation, and interest) and cognitive elements (learning goals and investment in learning) tend to be reported through commentary from young people…" (te Riele et al., 2017). The most effective way to produce

evidence of success in re-engagement is through case studies or notes from professionals working directly with students to understand their perspectives.

Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of student engagement are deeply intertwined. **Behavioral engagement** may be assessed as we noted previously: through interactions in class such as hand raising, participating in the group discussion, or generally acting in a good manner with the learning environment. One study counted the number of hand raises in order to quantify this type of engagement (Schnitzler, 2020). **Emotional engagement** is described by how the student feels about being in class, the pre-conception of their own ability, interest in the subject, and overall attitude toward the learning environment. Assessment of this type of engagement typically requires communication with the student through the use of a scaled questionnaire to quantify results (Schnitzler, 2020). The third type of engagement, **cognitive**, occurs when the student is thinking about what they're being taught in a multitude of ways. For instance, the student may be thinking of the examples to do with class material, deeply considering the subject material, or pondering the teacher's questions (not necessarily answering them out loud). Cognitive engagement may also be quantified through the use of a questionnaire where students are asked to rate their own engagement, but these types of assessments are dependent on the student's individual perspective of themselves with the course material (Schnitzler, 2020). Definitions of engagement such as these help with identifying it in students during educational programs and may be useful in assessing the ability of the program to re-engage the student (Schnitzler, 2020).

Re-Engagement Through Flexible Learning Options

Traditional education simply doesn't work for everyone. For students who cannot engage with and achieve academic success in traditional classroom practices, there exist FLOs. FLOs are more commonly known as alternatives or re-engagement programs in the US. FLOs provide options for learning outside the traditional classroom setting. Often taking a more individualized approach to education, FLOs can be a good alternative to traditional learning practices for disengaged students, as they can focus on an individual student's passions and interests, help students learn to deal with the cause of their disengagement, and still provide a means by which a student can achieve a traditional diploma.

"Flexible learning options" is a term used by the Victorian Education system to describe re-engagement programs in Australia. These programs were developed as a potential solution to address the high number of young people who are at risk of becoming or who have already become disengaged from mainstream schooling. The main goal of FLOs in Australia and many other countries is to address needs that are not met in a traditional education setting. Victoria's Education and Training explains that FLOs provide "individualized learning structures" (1 Introduction | Education.Vic.Gov.Au, n.d.) and holistic support for disengaged young people.

It should be noted that FLOs are not a permanent option for these students nor are they meant to separate and stigmatize students who are disruptive. Flexible learning options are typically viewed as

a transition step in disengaged students' educational journey. Students should only be referred to a FLO "if the referring school, the student and their family are on board" (1 Introduction | Education.Vic.Gov.Au, n.d.). This agreement between the school, family, and student will ensure that the FLO is indeed the optimal option. The Flexible Learning Options Mandatory Guidance and Procedure separate FLOs in the Victoria government school system into the three interchangeable categories shown below (1 Introduction | Education.Vic.Gov.Au, n.d.):

Figure 2: The three categories of flexible learning schools in Australia

Flexible Government Schools

Flexible government schools are registered in Victoria through the VRQA. These schools mainly enroll students with some form of disengagement history (1 Introduction | Education.Vic.Gov.Au, n.d.) and offer an individualized type of curriculum. While all of these alternative schools are beneficial and aid in meeting young people's academic needs, there is still some controversy. Author Jeong-Hee Kim (2011:1) and many others compare alternative schools solely for disengaged youth to "dumping grounds or juvenile detention centers". They note that isolating all students who have experienced disengagement or are at risk of disengagement to the same school can create problems. Student confidence levels are already at an all-time low because mainstream education doesn't work for them. The additional stress from being stigmatized by society makes things much worse. In contrast to the idea of FLOs as a "dumping ground," Mykonos and colleagues (2016:page) consider FLOs as a means of inclusion because they provide an "unconditional acceptance of young people, and the integrated well-being support upon which inclusion is premised". They emphasize that FLOs should not be a substitution of mainstream schooling, but should rather serve as a school partner working hand-in-hand to reduce social and educational inequalities.

Flexible Learning Campuses

Flexible learning campuses are registered, specialized independent learning centers for disengaged young people. These campuses need not be limited to a single school as they serve all schools in the Victoria government school system. In this type of flexible learning option, students are transferred to the program site by school recommendation for a short period of time to undergo

re-engagement programs and are then sent back to their original school.

Flexible learning campuses work with mainstream schooling to provide the extra support individuals need through re-engagement programs. While flexible learning campuses are not a substitute to mainstream schooling and are only temporary placement, it requires students to be separated from their home school. This may cause students to feel excluded and raise author Jeong-Hee Kim's (2019) concern that these options are being seen as a dumping ground. It would be ideal if teachers at mainstream schools could be able to offer the same support that these flexible government schools and campuses do to disengaged students so that they don't need to be moved around and placed in alternative settings. Unfortunately, not all teachers are trained on how to support these students, which is why these secondary programs are required.

Flexible In-School Programs

Flexible in-school programs are incorporated within 'mainstream' schooling itself. These programs take many forms: electives, extracurricular activities, and/or placement to smaller classroom sizes. In this model, students are not isolated and moved to registered flexible learning campuses. It should be noted that while mainstream school strategies are essential, flexible in-school programs further aids in the prevention of student disengagement.

Project REAL

One initiative designed specifically for students at risk of school disengagement is Project REAL (Re-Engagement in Education and Learning). This program is located in the Broadmeadows area of Hume city in Australia, which is one of the most disadvantaged and diverse cities in the country (*Banksia Gardens Community Services | About Us*, n.d.). Broadmeadows has a significantly higher percentage of individuals where the language spoken at home is not English (*2016 Census QuickStats*, n.d.). This presents a possible language barrier problem in schools since the Australian education system is English-based. It was also found that about 34% of households' income in Broadmeadows is less than $650 a week (2016 Census QuickStats, n.d.). Currently, the poverty line in Australia for a couple, with one member in the workforce, and one child is roughly $885, which means students in Broadmeadows often find themselves living in near poverty (Melbourne Institute, 2020). Additionally, according to the 2016 census, 30% of students in the Broadmeadows area did not finish their Year 12 education due to leaving school (*2016 Census QuickStats*, n.d.).

	Broad-meadows	Victoria	Australia
Students that did not complete their Year 12 education	30%	23%	24%
Household income is less than $650 a week	34%	31%	29%
Language spoken at home is something other than English	57%	28%	22%

Figure 3: Comparison of disengagement factors Broadmeadows and other Australian regions

Staff at Banksia Gardens Community Services (BGCS), a not-for-profit organization located in Broadmeadows that focuses on providing the surrounding community's residents with opportunities for educational and personal growth, often witnessed dozens of children every day who were not in school due to expulsions and suspensions (*Banksia Gardens Community Services | Project REAL*, n.d.). In response to the challenge of disengagement and expulsions in Broadmeadows, BGCS created Project REAL in 2017. About one year ago, the Northern Centre for Excellence in School Engagement (NCESE)—a collaboration of BGCS, 16 primary schools, one secondary school, and the Victorian Department of Education and Training—joined Project REAL to help with their mission.

Eric Dommers, the NCESE's co-director, explained that the program's purpose is to "better equip the children and families to have access to [school] re-engagement." According to Dommers, at the beginning of Project REAL's founding, the schools working with the NCESE wanted the program to become a referral option, particularly for their problem students, since school staff typically do not have the right tools to deal with disengaged students. Now Project REAL is considered a Flexible Learning Option (FLO) program, which entails more tailored and individualized programs for specific students. They offer activities and workshops focused on the students' emotional, physical, and cognitive growth, and they provide one-on-one student-teacher education. Dommers stated that students will often spend three days a week in the program and then can remain in the program anywhere from three months to two years depending on the severity of the situation and the student's individual needs. Once the students have improved in the program and gained strategies to help counter their disengagement, they are transitioned back into their school with a regular curriculum. These FLO programs are especially useful for students coming from disadvantaged or traumatic backgrounds, as they offer a specialized learning experience for each student depending on the necessary level of intervention.
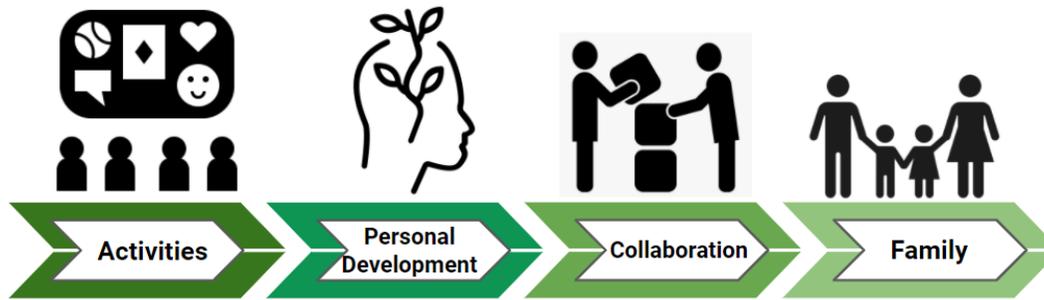
Figure 4: Project REAL's key areas of work

The program currently aims to achieve these outcomes: improved capacity to engage in learning and form relationships, increased self-regulatory capacity, improved self-esteem and parental engagement, and reductions in absenteeism and disruptive behaviors (Banksia 2019 Annual Report). These outcomes are fulfilled using four key areas of work: activities, personal development, collaboration, and family (depicted in Figure 3) (Dougall, 2020). So far the students in the program have done beach excursions, art workshops, adventure playgrounds, obstacle courses, nature education, and swimming lessons (Dougall, 2020). These engaging activities allow students to become more "in tune" with their bodies, giving them strategies to identify emotional and physical states that allow self-regulation. The personal development workshops help students to learn about their emotions, strengths, values, and how to problem-solve and make mistakes right again (Dougall, 2020). These workshops are specifically important for teaching Project REAL's students self-worth and identity to make them aware of how special they truly are. The collaboration between the NCESE and its partnering schools is especially important for sharing new strategies and learning from each other while they work towards creating approaches that target the most at-risk students. Project REAL also heavily focuses not only on their FLOs for their students but opportunities to engage and educate the parents. By doing a considerable amount of family work, Dommers is hopeful that a more conducive home environment for learning will be established. This parental work is a crucial step in creating a safe place for students to practice their schooling and feel confident in themselves and their abilities. Overall, the Project REAL program has been a successful one in attempting to re-engage the Broadmeadow community's disengaged youth.

However, over time, staff at the Northern Center for Excellence in School Engagement realized that the schools and organizations involved with Project REAL would need more information on alternative models for FLOs and a wider range of strategies and activities to re-engage the most disengaged students, particularly in the context of their own schools. According to Dommers, the NCESE already has 5-6 engagement training models to provide to their schools at the moment, but they want to provide even more support to the teachers and educators to be more proactive and better equip them to work with students reentering the classroom after re-engagement programs. The NCESE does not just want to be a referral program for troubled students; they wanted to help educate both the students and the teachers about disengagement. In 2019 alone, the NCESE had 65 teachers and educators regularly participating in their CoP (Community of Practice) professional development sessions and activities (Banksia Gardens Community Services | Project REAL, n.d.). In addition to

this, 90 teachers also completed the Trauma-Informed Positive Education training provided by the NCESE, and cumulatively, over 450 teachers and educators have participated in sessions, activities, and training pertaining to the subject of student trauma and disengagement. These initiatives have helped to solidify a positive relationship between the teachers and educators working with the NCESE. Resulting from this, the NCESE and their 16 partner primary schools have established a partnership committed to sharing practices and strategies to "reduce the impacts of trauma and to provide more opportunities for our children to heal and to remain engaged in school" (Banksia Gardens Community Services | Project REAL, n.d.).

Educational Philosophy Of The NCESE

A key educational framework the NCESE implements in their schools and programs is the Attachment Regulation and Competency (ARC) framework, which is meant specifically for children with early adversity, active stress, and trauma (Banksia Gardens Community Services | Project REAL, n.d.). Attachment, self-regulation, and competency are thought to be the three core aspects of a child's healthy development; however, students with a history of traumatic experiences have both immediate and long-term functional, behavioral, and mental health challenges that interfere with these core developmental areas (Watters & Wojciak, 2020, Kinniburgh et al., 2005). According to Kinniburgh, the interference from these traumatic experiences result in an array of vulnerabilities across behavioral, cognitive, physiological, relational, and self-attributional functionings. Children affected by trauma need a flexible intervention option that can be embedded into their developmental and social contexts that address previous and ongoing trauma exposures (Kinniburgh et al., 2005). Through the ARC framework, students become capable of utilizing their internal and external resilience factors by increasing their ability to self-regulate, develop social competency, form a secure attachment with an adult, and as a result, may experience positive outcomes following trauma (Watters & Wojciak, 2020). Additionally, Dommers stated the ARC framework explains to teachers the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects on the kids in traumatic situations and gives potential interventions that teachers can use to disrupt these effects and better respond to their needs. This method is the closest thing the NCESE currently has to a working practice manual for their schools and programs, but they are interested in creating other FLO options and resources outside of what they already offer to implement into the schools themselves.

Other than the ARC framework, the NCESE relies on an educational theory that guides Project REAL's curriculum and teaching style. The NCESE's main engagement theory highlights the key risk factors that shape both a student's engagement and disengagement within a school setting. These factors are in line with the literature, focusing on engaging disadvantaged students. As highlighted before, these factors can be a low socio-economic background, complex home environment, parental background, and many more that can lead to childhood trauma (Welters et al., 2019, Msapenda & Hudson, 2013). These disengagement factors have helped to shape the NCESE's Building Blocks for School Engagement that outline what educators are responsible for knowing and what they should be implementing into the classroom. The Building Blocks identify the two main pathways listed below

—which are very similar to the disengagement factors—that lead to a student disengaging in school. It is important to note that while some students may only be affected by one pathway, many students may experience both.

- Pathway 1: Students who have experienced trauma
- Pathway 2: Students from very low socio-economic families/communities

The NCESE identifies options for re-engaging "at-risk" students in the form of 3 tiers, which are very similar and in line with the 3 tiers of disengagement highlighted before. Tier 1 focuses on mainstream schools' classroom techniques using all components of the Building Blocks for School Engagement to support all students, most of which have very low levels of disengagement and are comfortable with school. Tier 2 involves implementing trauma-informed learning strategies to small groups of 6-10 students. The students in this tier tend to have less than adequate attendance and are not doing well in school. The sessions for teaching these strategies are short-term and are aimed at supporting "at-risk" students and helping them increase their engagement in school. Lastly, tier 3 is aimed at very "high risk" students who barely go to school, repeatedly get in trouble, and are hard to get involved. The tier 3 approach contains very small groups of 1-3 students and develops Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies. The strategies help students to recognize, understand, and act on factors that lead to disengagement, which in turn help them to slowly transition back to regular schooling.

One main theory the NCECE follows in Project REAL is the Science of Learning & Development (SoLD) theory. This theory states that a child's "experiences, environments, and cultures are the defining influences on development" (SoLD Alliance, n.d.). These three factors work to shape a child's brain and can impact how they both learn and develop. So when a child comes from a disadvantaged background and faces a lot of adversity, this can have significant negative effects on the child during their development. In response to this challenge, the NCESE worked to create social environments that were conducive to learning, especially for students facing a great deal of adversity. These environments are predictable, safe, and meet the child's physical, emotional, and cognitive needs. It was found that nurturing, positive, culturally responsive, identity-safe, and instructionally rich learning environments have profound positive impacts on the child's developing brain (SoLD Alliance, n.d.). With this being said, the NCESE believes that if they can offer their students a higher quality social environment, they will produce greater learning opportunities for their students.

Defining Outcomes for Flexible Learning Programs

In order to define what success means more broadly for alternative education programs we must first look at what they are and their purpose. These programs are and have always been "first and foremost educational programs, so they need to focus on preparing students academically while also meeting the additional needs of their students" (Aron, 2006). Recent research has focused on defining

success factors for FLOs. Table 2, shown below, summarizes some of the outcomes and associated methods for measuring FLOs from articles by te Riele et al. (2017) and Schnitzler (2020).

Table 2: Defined Outcomes and Potential Assessment Methods

Outcome	Definition	Assessment Methods
Traditional Academics	- Basic literacy and numeracy skills - Ability to complete assessment tasks - Achievement of various credentials and qualifications	- Acquisition of certifications or licenses - Completion of year 12 (or equivalent) - Other licenses or certifications for employment 'Mainstream' school-based assessments - Testing, Evaluations, Grades - Task completion
Overall Engagement	- Attendance - Enjoyment of learning - Reduction in disruptive behaviour - Types of engagement - Behavioral - Cognitive - Emotional	- Logging attendance and infractions - Measuring class participation - Involvement in discussion "Hand raised" method (Schnitzler, 2020) - Asking the students how they feel about being in school - Personal Reports, Individual Questionnaires - Assessing the level of engagement - Individual Questionnaires
Post-Program Actions	- Destinations - Employment - Further Education - Aspirations and Skills - Plans for the future - Actions for long term success	- Count the number of students moving to future education or employment - Number of students seek employment immediately after the program or move on to further education - Acquire reports from students years after the program on their current status - Maintain contact with student, ask how they're doing years after (if capable of contacting)
Personal Development	Confidence, pride, self-esteem, trust, security, acceptance, self-regulation, optimism, respect, mental health, etc.	- Individual reports from students/ family/ peers/ professionals 'Distance travelled' - Comparison between student perspective at the beginning vs. the end of the program

Social Development	• Teamwork skills • Positive relationships with adults and service providers • Less behavioral issues • Positive relationships with peers •	• Similar methods to personal development • 'Distance travelled' ○ Reported by peers and community members, teachers/parents, direct comparison of student behavior before and after program
Community Activism	• Social inclusion • Reduced criminal activity/ delinquency • Activities in the community • Participation in communal events	• Activities done with the community • Types of activities and number of them • Collaborative work with agencies (employment, mental health, housing, youth aides, etc.) • Activities referenced by community members, as well as family and other involved professionals

Traditional academic outcomes involve the ability of a flexible learning program to provide its students with "the kinds of traditional academic outcomes that are highly valued in education policy (e.g. COAG 2009), such as school-based qualifications (at lower and upper secondary levels), vocational education certificates and industry-specific licenses" (te Riele et al., 2017). Another outcome to consider is the post-program destination of the student. Outcomes such as these are more fickle as "several reports note the difficulty in tracking destinations post-FLO, since young people may not have a stable address or phone number for being contacted" (te Riele et al., 2017).

A successful FLO or similar program should be able to improve "a wide range of attributes such as sense of security and acceptance, confidence and self-esteem, pride, trust, self-regulation, resilience, mental health, positive outlook and respect for others" (te Riele et al., 2017). These attributes are typically assessed through the "distance traveled" by the student over the course of the program. This "distance traveled" is assessed through a direct comparison of not only the academic progress made by the student, but also of their social, emotional, and cognitive functions before and after the program.

For the most disadvantaged youth in these programs "the demonstration of new abilities to confront and overcome manifest barriers to their social and economic integration comprises (perhaps the most) significant evidence of the impact of FLOs" (Thomas et al., 2017). Programs focusing on providing students with the above outcomes must have an understanding of how the social, emotional, and behavioral development of the student influences the effectiveness of curriculum delivery. By establishing an accurate baseline for a student's current state, alternative schools are able to adjust programming and assessments such that the student's progress can be effectively tracked from that point forward. There are, however, many ways in which the above outcomes may be assessed, most of which in a qualitative manner. As such, the development and implementation of effective assessment methods are paramount to the accountability of FLOs or similar programs.

The Questions of Accurate Program Assessment

Flexible learning options and similar alternative education programs for youth typically require funding from either a third party or through government subsidies. As such, it has become necessary for these educational programs to display convincing evidence that their methods produce results deserving of financial aid. Thomas et al. (2017) noted that "amidst a rapid expansion of Australia's flexible learning sector, service providers are under increasing pressure to substantiate participant outcomes." However, this work is not easily done as there are many questions surrounding the meaning of these programs on a fundamental level "due to debates about the purposes of education and to difficulties in measurement [of alternative education success]" (te Riele et al., 2017). In a 2006 review of the past literature surrounding the topic, Aron found that "The research base for understanding what works and for whom in alternative education is evolving. There are few scientifically based, rigorous evaluations establishing what program components lead to various positive outcomes for youth" (Aron, 2006). Though much work has been done since then, it still remains difficult to assess program outcomes. It is just as true today as it was 14 years ago that the "accountability and outcome measures used in [mainstream] schools may not be sufficient for alternative education" (Aron, 2006). A convincing argument for the success of a program can be derived by applying a 'numbers and narrative' approach (Light and Pillemer 1982) to the assessment, whereby statistical data from students is combined with personal responses that place "a strong emphasis on valuing the voice of key people in the FLOs (staff, young people and external stakeholders)" (te Riele et al., 2017). It is also worth noting that "many reports explicitly comment on issues of measurement [of success]" in that methods to measure student performance and progression are currently debated in the literature leading to many programs using individualized methods at their own discretion (te Riele et al., 2017).

Ultimately, the progress a student makes in an alternative education program will be dependent on the "challenges faced by the students in their life and through their previous educational experiences" (te Riele et al., 2017). In this way, tracking the success of students once they leave the program, and knowing how much of that success is to be attributed to the program itself, is impossible considering the complexity of human lives. Nevertheless, there are basic requirements and certifications already in place from 'mainstream' schooling that may be used to assess certain aspects of alternative education programs.

Programs that are capable of providing the equivalent of year 12 completion yield a beneficial outcome, as "raising attainment of upper secondary education is seen, at least from a governmental perspective, to achieve enhanced economic outcomes for both young people and society" (te Riele et al., 2017). Other efforts to define the success of these programs have mainly focused on the student's development within the program itself, as well as the immediate outcome for the student upon completion. Subsequently, the outcomes of alternative education are also judged by a "distance traveled" method. Reports for this type of assessment are typically constructed from the perspective of students and their families, as well as those who worked professionally with them.

A more quantitative method of evaluating programs can be done by tracking the immediate post-program destination of students. By presenting this data numerically in categories the program is able to offer evidence of its success, such as the example from Knight (2012) on an evaluation report from Alternative Learning at Ohana For Youth school (see Figure 5).
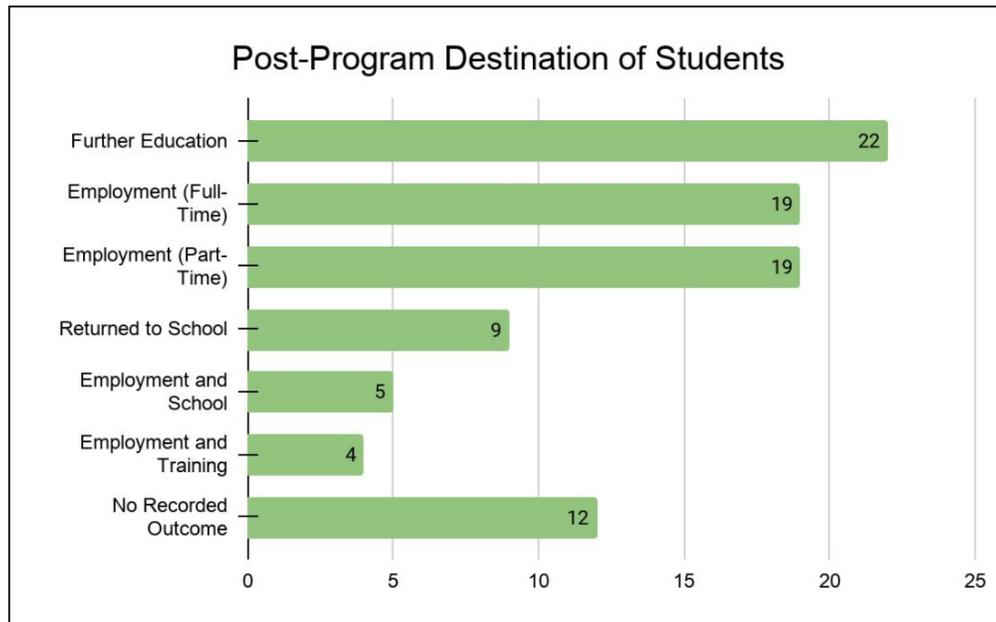

Figure 5: Post-program destination of Ohana for Youth students. Adapted from Riele et al. (2017) and Knight (2012)

As seen in figure 5 it is possible to quantitatively record some of the final outcomes for a student (Knight 2012). Results such as this help to validate the program's effectiveness in leading the student into employment or further education or training. Though it should also be noted that a significant number of students may not report their outcome, as they lose contact or stop communicating with the program.

The methods for assessment of alternative education programs are not uniform across all reports. It is still expected, however, that "alternative education accountability measures should include interim measures and measures that track continuous 'added value' or recognize that some youth may cycle in and out of a program before experiencing steady progress" (Aron, 2006). These interim measures or tracking of 'added value' mostly take the form of case studies and case notes, done either by researchers in the field or professionals working within the program. In addition, these case studies are usually small in scale due to the non-uniform way in which FLOs are offered. As a result, "many of these case studies are based on practice-reflection or on evaluation [similar to mainstream schooling], rather than on academic research, and many are published as [individualized program] reports rather than in journal articles and academic books" (te Riele et al., 2017). The information presented by these case studies and/or case notes allows for the collection of useful information from which an assessment of the program may be derived using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Results from these reports are "highly valued by staff, students and other stakeholders, both in their

own right and as the preconditions to attainment of formal outcomes" (Myconos 2014, te Riele et al., 2017). Riele et al. noted in their 2017 article that "these reports collectively represent a significant body of knowledge that may be hard to access beyond the FLO or commissioning agency." Reports such as these are coined 'grey literature' and "by definition may be more ephemeral than books and journal articles authored by scholars through traditional publishers" (Lawrence et al. 2014). In addition to the data presented in these reports, a significant amount of case studies with youth provide a glimpse into the individual's perspective within the program, and staff value the power of such individual narratives. If one "wanted to learn about outcomes from the program... the best way of doing this would be through detailed case studies of the young people" (Mills, McGregor, and Muspratt 2012).

In conclusion, it is possible to offer, for certain outcomes, convincing and reliable evidence pertaining to the success of an alternative education program through the use of quantitative and qualitative data: individual testimonies, graduation rates, employment and other statistics, and case studies or unique methods of assessment that demonstrate student development. However, it is important to note that the field of alternative education is ever-evolving, and there is not a clear and general methodology for such programs to convey their effectiveness, nor should there be.

Methods

The NCESE is in need of a comprehensive pool of research to determine effective FLO practices. The NCESE is specifically interested in benchmarking United States organization's FLOs against others to find out what programs deem to be effective. But little research has been solidified to determine which FLO strategies are more successful for disengaged youth.

In this chapter, we will describe the methods we carried out to ultimately achieve our goal: to determine effective practices in re-engaging disadvantaged youth and to connect the NCESE with alternative education programs in the US. We set three main objectives and identified the methods we used to accomplish each to achieve this goal (Figure 6):

1. Investigate US organizations operating within alternative education
2. Identify effective re-engagement strategies in schools and programs
3. Encourage connections between the NCESE and organizations within the US

We produced three main deliverables: an extensive report on the current literature, a list of possible connections in the United States, and a summary of effective practices and evaluation methods used in other alternative education programs. These deliverables were accomplished through literature review, semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and a professional workshop.

Objective 1
Investigate US organizations operating within alternative education

- Literature Review
- Semi-Structured Interviews

Objective 2
Identify effective re-engagement strategies in schools and programs

- Content Analysis

Objective 3
Encourage connections between the NCESE and organizations within the US

- Professional Workshop
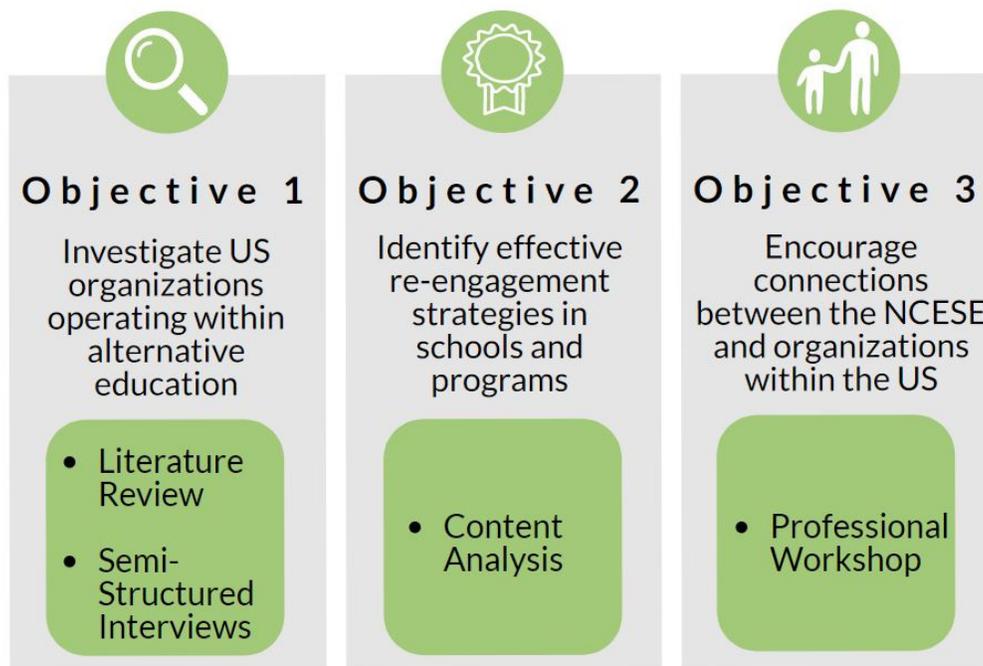
Figure 6: Project objectives and methods

Objective 1: Investigate US organizations operating within alternative education

In order to find local education programs that specialize in alternative education, we first performed a literature review to investigate common educational theories and curriculums that programs and schools tend to use. We also identified strategies for assessment and common outcomes that programs aimed to achieve. A literature review helped to provide us with methods used by various programs to measure success. Using this method, we were also able to compare and contrast information we gathered, allowing us to highlight differences and any patterns/similarities that might exist. We focused predominantly on research about primary education programs (ages 6-12) instead of secondary, as this is what the NCESE is specifically looking for. While it was expected that the methods for assessment and achievement are not uniform but rather based on a program's specific targeted outcomes, the goal of the literature review was to establish a metric for alternative education programs. Additionally, the literature review allowed us to identify organizations, programs, and education experts that would be viable to reach out to for information regarding our project. Throughout this process, a detailed compendium was created that includes program names, type of program, individual's positions and contact information, and short program descriptions. This compendium will ensure the NCESE has a comprehensive pool of information regarding United States programs that are similar to their own, as well as offering a comparison and international benchmark for the success of other alternative education programs.

From the individuals we identified from our literature review, we proceeded with our second method: semi-structured interviews. The main goal of conducting semi-structured interviews was to hear from educational experts and leaders of alternative education programs firsthand to get their personal views on how to assess success for alternative education programs.

We reached out to our contacts via email, cold calls, or direct messaging LinkedIn (shown in Appendix B). The interviewees were mainly alternative education experts and program directors (shown in Table 3). Experts in alternative education were important in providing us with a background of current programs and their typical requirements and practices. Program directors were critical contacts because they had important information about how the program as a whole is run. In these interviews, we aimed to understand how their particular program operates, the program's strengths and weaknesses, and any assessment methods they currently implement. These findings can help to increase the quality of FLOs in Australia so that the disadvantaged youth is better supported in their academics. The interviews were expected to last approximately 45 minutes, but in some instances, the time went a little under or over. Before any interview, we received oral consent from the participant (shown in Appendix B).

During the interview, there was a primary facilitator asking the questions and keeping the interviewee engaged during each meeting. The other three team members split the job of primary notetaker to record answers, while occasionally jumping in to add to the conversation. A list of guiding questions, slightly altered to fit the interviewee's position, was asked in a semi-structured style. This style allowed the conversation to flow naturally in any way that seemed fit and for as long

as necessary. Below is the list of generic questions asked during our interviews, although others were added specifically towards individual programs and positions (Figure 7).

1. Can you explain what your role is at [their program or institution]?
2. How is your program/curriculum structured?
3. Do you currently use any educational theories to structure your program?
4. Have you noticed any shortcomings in these theories as they are applied to your program?
5. Have you noticed any aspects of these theories that have proven to be particularly effective?
6. What outcomes does your alternative education program aim to produce for its students?
7. What assessments are currently in place to measure the behavioral, emotional, and/or academic growth of your students?
8. How is a student's progress reflected in these assessments over time?
9. Have you faced any challenges assessing the students in your program?
10. Overall, how do you think students have received/responded to the program?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add that you think would be beneficial for our research?
12. Would you be interested in participating in a workshop with other professionals on this topic?

Figure 7: Interview questions for program directors and teachers

During the semi-structured interviews, we expanded our pool of alternative education experts through the snowball sampling technique to inquire about other programs or individuals (shown in figures 8 and 9). We asked the interviewee if they knew of any other schools, programs, or experts willing to talk to us or that would be of use for our research. For example, we interviewed Kathy Chen and Donna Taylor at the WPI STEM Education Center. During this interview, we used snowball sampling and discovered a number of possible new contacts. These people served as our potential interviewees and compendium contacts for the NCESE to expand their international networks.

1. Have you collaborated with any similar programs or professionals in the field and would you be willing to put us into contact with them?
2. Can you recommend any other programs or professionals that would help us in our research?

Figure 8: Interview questions used for snowball sampling
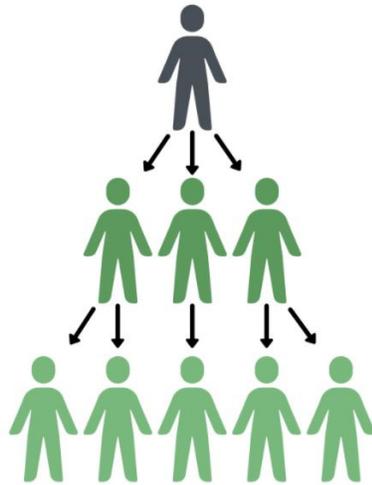
Figure 9: Depiction of the process of snowball sampling

Overall, the literature review and semi-structured interview methods allowed us to dive deeper into the intricacies of alternative education practices. Responses from these interviews gave us a first-hand perspective on alternative education practices, helped us determine potential workshop attendees, and allowed us to start identifying international benchmarks for the NCESE.

Table 3: Individuals interviewed

Position	Organization/Program
Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist	Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Head of the Exemplary Practice Committee	National Alternative Education Association
Program Director	Woodward Day School
Assistant Program Director	Woodward Day School
Program Director	Robert Goddard Academy: Therapeutic Day School
Professors	WPI STEM Education Center

Objective 2: Identify effective re-engagement strategies in schools and programs

To identify effective re-engagement strategies, we coded and analyzed the information collected from our initial interviews to recognize common practices used in programs (shown in Table 3). The strategies' effectiveness was then judged by comparing interview responses from multiple programs, looking at how prevalent certain practices were, and analyzing the theory behind these practices using background information combined with discussions from experts and our sponsors. From this, we

determined common and effective theories and practices used throughout programs in the United States.

Analysis of Interview Responses

To organize the responses from our interviews we implemented a coding method whereby prevalent themes in the interview data were identified and used to color-code the notes taken during these interviews. The method also helped reveal patterns in the theories and practices used across programs, as well as their assessment methods and outcomes for students. Shown below in Table 4 are the categories we created to separate the information we collected from interviewing along with the descriptions of each category.

Table 4: Coding categories

Coding Category	Description
Personal Information	Interviewee position, past experience, quotes, worklife (excluded from final report unless explicit permission is granted)
Program Structure	Number of students attending, how students get involved in the program, how long they stay, type of program, etc.
Program Goals	What programs primarily aim to accomplish
Practices	The day-to-day operations of programs, specific classroom instructions, extracurriculars, methods to engage students, flexible scheduling, etc.
Theory/Curriculum	The basis for how programs go about developing their practices
Challenges	Difficulties in delivering aspects of the program
Assessments & Outcomes	How programs assess individual growth, and what results the program yields for its constituents
Collaboration	Any meetings or regular work done with other organizations/ networks
Facts/stats	Any statements/ statistical data provided about programs/ their operating nature

To create the categories for our coding, we first needed to identify the type of information we wanted to synthesize from the responses. This project focused on analyzing the practices, theory, and assessment techniques used by alternative programs. As such, these became the first categories created to sort data. These categories, however, did not cover all the responses received. Significant data regarding the structure and goals of programs were also collected, so they needed categories of their own. In addition to this, programs spoke at length on the challenges they face in implementing theories and practices, as well as the collaborations they maintain with other community services or schools—so categories for this information were also created. To help indirectly referencing factual or statistical data from interviews in the report, a separate category was created to isolate this material from the rest. Lastly, to focus on the work that they do in their program or department, a category separating personal information from relevant response data was created. Overall, these categories were able to cover all aspects of interview responses and provide specific information to relevant sections of the project.

Objective 3: Encourage connections between the NCESE and organizations within the US

To make connections for the NCESE, a short workshop was held at the beginning of May to facilitate a discussion on our findings from interviews and the literature, as well as to foster conversation among professionals across multiple programs. According to Community Tool Box, a workshop should be participatory, informal, time-limited, and self-contained. The ideal goal of the workshop was to arrive at some sort of consensus on what techniques have worked best for students over time and across a variety of programs. This was also a method for establishing connections for our sponsor with programs and professionals here in the US. Hosting a conversation between program professionals allowed them to compare and contrast their practices and ideas for what alternative education programs should aim to be, and constructed arguments over what might be deemed an effective practice.

We took notes on the conversation and synthesized consensus or dissensus points that arose in the conversation. The workshop began with a short presentation we created by summarizing our project as a whole. After this presentation, each participant briefly introduced themselves and described the kind of work they do. Next, we proposed a few broad topic questions to begin an open discussion:

1. What advice would you give someone who is looking to start their own alternative education program?
2. If you had no limitations what would you do to improve your program?
3. If you had to keep one thing from your program above all, what would it be?

The first question aimed to get their opinion of the fundamentals of alternative education. We wanted to hear their thoughts on how an alternative education program should be run. The goal behind the second question was to get everyone's view on the improvements needed in these programs. With that, we also got to see where they think the field should be heading toward in the future. Lastly, we aimed to figure out what these programs valued most and what they wouldn't give up under any circumstance with the third question. We facilitated parts of this discussion by highlighting individual's expertise on specific topics then allowed relationships to be made. To that end, we achieved our goal to connect the NCESE with alternative education programs in the US.

Common Alternative Education Strategies in the US

Through interviews of alternative education program experts and a literature review, we gained a wide range of strategies and educational theories that could be applied to the NCESE's current program. In this section, the four main educational theories discovered in the interviews and literature are described in detail. These four theories were found to be commonly implemented in alternative education programs in the US and help to provide a strong curriculum for disadvantaged students.

Individual Learning Plan (ILP)

An ILP is a documented process through which students define and outline their postsecondary plans and career goals, enabling them to make informed decisions about which courses they take and which activities they participate in. ILPs are used at the secondary level and students develop them with their school counselors, teachers, and parents (Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) | NCWD, n.d.). They are essential to creating the individualized approach to education that most if not all students at risk of disengagement need. According to Prepare Rhode Island, an initiative of the Rhode Island state government to improve youth career readiness, there are several key elements to a "good" ILP. They state that ILPs should start no later than entry into sixth grade and continue into twelfth grade. They also say ILPs should be revisited at least twice a year and during key transition periods for students, should help students identify and achieve their academic, career, and social goals, and should coordinate with other support plans (i.e. IEPs) when applicable/appropriate.

When it comes to implementation, ILPs can take on a variety of forms. Many schools use online platforms as part of their ILP process. Such platforms can be used to support individualized learning in several ways, like building and tracking 4-year academic plans, organizing college applications, or tracking a senior year internship semester. Two platforms we discovered during our research were Naviance and Your Plan for the Future (YPFF). Naviance charges a subscription fee to districts who utilize it. YPFF, on the other hand, does not but is exclusive to Massachusetts school districts. This is because YPFF was developed by the Massachusetts Education Financing Association (MEFA) to help MA school districts implement personalized planning options for students. ILPs can also be integrated into classroom activities and curriculum. Teachers can give career-related assignments, or facilitate career-related classroom activities for students to complete. For example, one high school has a career research paper that students complete during their sophomore year. Students can also pursue a senior year internship semester in a career field of their choice in place of taking regular classes.

Massachusetts uses a form of ILP, known as My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP for short). In an interview with a Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist, we learned that MyCAP is fairly new, with no state requirement for its implementation, and is heavily student-driven. MyCAP is based on Massachusetts' state definition of college and career readiness, which according to the Specialist is, "that students will acquire the knowledge, skills and experiences in the personal-social-emotional, career development, and

academic and post-secondary planning domains." What this means is that MyCAP is a means to ensure that all three domains are addressed over the course of a student's education, ensuring their success and growth as not just students, but individuals. MyCAP also helps a student identify their passions, interests, and strengths early on in their secondary education, allowing them to better choose a career and research their prospects during their 4 years of high school. The Specialist also mentioned that the state is anticipating a large number of unfilled jobs within the labor market in the coming years, due to students graduating without the necessary skillset to fill them. MyCAP can help students understand the labor market, research their career interests, and assess their potential for being hired into the jobs they're interested in. It can also help give students in high school a sense of purpose, giving them the reason behind why they might be taking certain courses and sparking their interest in the subject matter. (Massachusetts DOE Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist, 2021). Through the use of MyCAP, both student and state could benefit: students with interest in the jobs that need to be filled will become interested in and able to focus on the skills necessary for filling them, and the state will receive an educated workforce and less unfilled positions.

Individual Learning Plans can help to counteract, or at least accommodate, some of the factors that can lead to disengagement. As mentioned in the paragraph above, ILPs can help spark a student's interest in their course material by helping them align their coursework with their career goals. If the student has a passion for what they are learning and can see that passion for themselves, they are less likely to become disengaged or become re-engaged if they have already reached the point of disengagement. As another example, many students become disengaged because they work in order to provide for their families on weekdays when school is normally in session (Massachusetts DOE Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist, 2021). At some schools, ILPs can allow students to come to school at non-standard hours, through means such as teachers volunteering to provide remote schooling during the weekend. However, this solution may not be possible at every school, as working weekends could cause union issues. There are also schools that allow students to ignore standard scheduling practices, letting students pick and choose when and in what order they take classes. For example, they might only be taking math, and upon completion of their math class, they start taking English and only English, rather than taking math and English simultaneously. They might also choose to avoid certain classes for a day in order to take a break from subjects/instructors that might trigger them, allowing them to remain in the classroom without compromising their emotional stability (National Alternative Education Association Region 2 Director., 2021).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a theoretical framework developed by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). In recent years it has seen a substantial increase in implementation within alternative education schools, quickly becoming, "a foundational piece of all alternative schools" (Massachusetts DOE Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist, 2021). By implementing SEL into their curriculums, alternative schools orient themselves

toward an emotionally and socially intelligent way of teaching. The framework "involves a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance" (Mahoney et al., 2020). According to CASEL, decades of research studies have demonstrated that SEL is capable of improvement in students' social and emotional skills, attitudes, relationships, academic performance, and perceptions of classroom and school climate. This leads to a decline in students' anxiety, behavior problems, and substance use, as well as long-term improvements in students' skills, attitudes, prosocial behavior, and academic performance (Mahoney et al., 2020).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which has done significant work pertaining to the SEL framework, identifies five domains where SEL should aim to provide the most development in students, as seen in table 5.

Table 5: Domains of SEL (as defined by CASEL)

Domain	Developmental Target
Self-awareness	The ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts (CASEL).
Self-management	The ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations (CASEL).
Social awareness	The ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts (CASEL).
Relationship skills	The ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups (CASEL).
Responsible decision-making	The ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations (CASEL).

Through the development of these domains, schools are able to increase the overall engagement of students and progress towards outcomes that alternative schooling should aim to achieve, as summarized by te Riele et. al (2017). Traditional outcomes, such as school completion, attendance, task completion, and participation in academics see higher achievement rates in schools using SEL. "Fostering these competencies, in turn, facilitates students' academic performance, positive behaviors and relationships, and reduces behavior problems and distress" (Mahoney et al., 2020). By reducing behavioral issues, social complications, and enabling the student to manage their own emotions and form positive relationships, both in and outside academics, they become more capable learners and workers. Beyond traditional outcomes, SEL provides students with personal and social development which impacts more than academics. In becoming able to manage their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, students are able to more effectively work towards their goals and aspirations. This leads to increased confidence, self-understanding, self-esteem, optimism, and respect for themselves as well as others—all of which involve students controlling their own lives and establishing purpose for themselves. Additionally, when a student becomes more aware of their own perspective and how it relates to the perspectives of others, they become more capable of forming positive and healthy relationships with adults and peers.

The implementation of the SEL framework in alternative schools varies depending on the program, as alternative education is oriented towards building curricula based on the student's current needs and developmental position. Responses from interviews suggest that SEL is fundamental to alternative schools as a method to understand student's perspectives and help direct their development toward a more rounded and functional individual. While the details in its execution will ultimately depend on individual programs, the key developmental areas it emphasizes for curricula remain the same. Taken in tandem with other foundational theoretical frameworks, alternative schools are able to establish a program logic for themselves from which to build their curriculum. It should be emphasized that the outcomes which SEL targets for students are intrinsically linked with outcomes that other frameworks or strategies aim to achieve. In this way, SEL can be implemented alongside other strategies while not being the "main" framework programs utilize.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a framework where students are taught behavioral expectations and are rewarded for achieving them. The focus of PBIS is prevention, not punishment and the goal is to move from a reactive approach of discipline to a proactive one. In a guide for effective classroom behavior called "Proactive Discipline for Reactive Students," author Dr. Johnson explains that usually when a student misbehaves, teachers respond with consequences and punishments (Johnson, 2007). Unfortunately, both consequences and punishments only deal with the immediate problem. They don't teach the student the positive way of behaving, so the likelihood of that student misbehaving again is high. He then states that there is this lasting effect that changes student behavior patterns when educators move from consequences to interventions. This can also help improve both the behavioral and emotional dimensions of engagement.

PBIS is less of a curriculum and more "a commitment to addressing student behavior through system change" (*Center on PBIS | Tiered Framework*, n.d.). PBIS approaches can help improve both the behavioral and emotional dimensions of engagement. This framework consists of 3 tiers of support. A connection between these three tiers of support and the three tiers of disengagement used in Australia explained earlier in the report can be made as each tier of support is more intense than the last. These tiers are Universal Prevention (All), Targeted Prevention (Some), and Intensive, Individualized Prevention (Few).
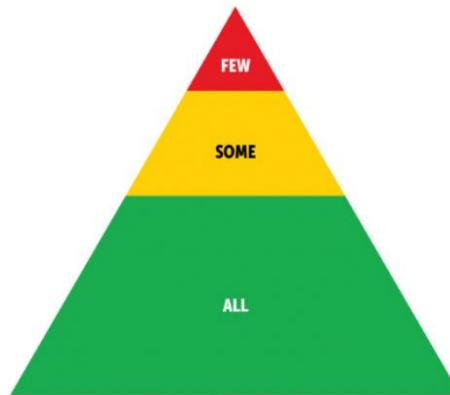

Figure 10: The multi-tiered Positive Behavior Interventions and Support triangle that shows the needs of various learners

Universal Prevention

Tier 1 practices represent the foundation of the PBIS triangle upon where the other tiers are built (Figure 10). This tier impacts everyone across multiple settings. This tier's support level aligns well with the support needed for students in Australia whose disengagement level is categorized as tier one(described on page 7) because they are mostly engaged in their academics. The goal is to prevent new cases of "problem behaviors by implementing high-quality learning environments or all students and staff and across all settings" (Center on PBIS | Tier 1, n.d.). Alternative programs should implement some key tier 1 practices before tier 2 or 3 practices. These practices are listed below (Center on PBIS | Tiered Framework, n.d.).support.

- Procedures for establishing classroom expectations and routines consistent with school-wide expectations
- Continuum of procedures for encouraging expected behavior
- Continuum of procedures for discouraging problem behavior
- Procedures for encouraging school-family partnerships

Targeted Prevention

      Those who are not responding to tier 1 practices can be introduced to tier 2 interventions. The level of support in this tier corresponds with the support needed for students in Australia categorized as tier 2 in terms of disengagement(described on page 7). Tier 2 focus is on students who are at risk of developing severe problem behaviors before they begin. Tier 2 practices are not effective without the strong foundation tier 1 provides. With the school-wide system tier 1 practices provide, it is easy for alternative programs to identify students who need additional support. Some key tier 2 practices are listed below (Center on PBIS | Tiered Framework, n.d.).

- Increased instruction and practice with self-regulation and social skills
- Increased adult supervision
- Increased opportunity for positive reinforcements
- Increased pre-corrections
- Increased focus on possible function of problem behavior
- Increase access to academic supports

Intensive and Individualized Prevention

      Tier 3 interventions are implemented when it is shown that students need additional support. These students are actively disengaged, have low attendance, and repeatedly get in trouble in class, so their disengagement level is categorized as tier three in Australia(described on page 7). This tier's focus is on addressing disruptive behaviors that create a barrier to learning. These interventions provide intensive and individualized support to students to improve their academic and behavioral outcomes. Key tier 3 practices include (Center on PBIS | Tiered Framework, n.d.).

- Function-based assessment
- Wraparound support
- Cultural and conceptual fit

Implementing PBIS Practices in Programs

      A common note that emerged from our interviews was that students are likely to meet behavioral expectations if they are aware of what those expectations are. In understanding the roots of why a student is not successful and then designing supports around that, PBIS creates consistency across classes, shared expectations, and a positive shared language for communicating those expectations. PBIS teaches students how to behave and prioritizes a proactive approach to discipline instead of a reactive one.

      From our interview, we aimed to discover how programs actually implement practices from the PBIS frameworks. We found that many alternative schools in the Massachusetts area have decided to create unique systems of assessment that allow educators to track their students' progress in a flexible

and engaging way. In this form of assessment, the students can "track" themselves through their classroom behavior and academic work. In one particular school, students can collect "badges" in each class over the course of the week. These badges are awarded to students depending on how well they performed academically, how engaged they were with the material, and how well behaved they were. These expectations are consistent in every class and every teacher and student is aware of them. At the end of the week, students can either see how much they improved or how much they should work towards improving themselves. When incentives are added to this assessment method, students may be more likely to want to work harder towards improvement as well. Incentives such as field trips, snacks, free time, and currency for the school store motivate students to work harder and earn more badges while also giving a reason for them to want to be in school.

This strategy has been crucial to schools in instilling positive habits and good work ethic in their students. Another program we interviewed used a similar system. Instead of badges, students aimed to earn points. These points are the same across all classes (0-5 scale), and a score of 3 is the set number teachers expect every student to get and the number every student is aiming to achieve. According to the Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist we interviewed, tracking systems like this have proven to be important in helping "break down" state-mandated assessments into manageable and understandable pieces for students, along with helping them easily see their own personal success in a school setting. As a result, from PBIS practices, a supportive environment that incorporates positive language, social-emotional wellness, and a clear and consistent set of behavioral expectations is formed.

Attachment Regulation and Competency (ARC)

It was found that many schools in Massachusetts, including the Woodward Day School, implement the Attachment Regulation and Competency (ARC) curriculum. This is a unique case for our findings because our sponsor, the NCESE, also uses this curriculum in their alternative education programs.

As stated before, the ARC curriculum focuses on three main aspects of a child's development: attachment, regulation, and competency. This type of curriculum is especially useful and effective when working with a student who has had past traumatic experiences. When a child experiences trauma, it often affects many domains that help them to function correctly: behavioral, cognitive, relational, affective, physiological, and self-attributional (Kinniburgh et al., 2005). However, research has shown that the implementation of ARC into schools leads to a reduction in children's symptoms of post-traumatic stress and mental health (Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) | Justice Resource Institute, n.d.). Additionally, this research gave insight that a child's social skills increased, along with reduced stress and dysfunctionality, was achieved using the ARC framework. Teachers can help to implement the ARC curriculum into schools to help disadvantaged students by offering numerous and flexible strategies that can be tailored to each individual. Below are some strategies for implementing each aspect of the ARC curriculum.

Attachment

The attachment aspect of ARC primarily focuses on strengthening the system through which care and instruction are given, in this context educators, by enhancing skills, supports, and relational resources for the educators themselves (*What Is ARC?*, 2016). When working with students with a disadvantaged and traumatic background it is crucial for the educator to understand what the child is going through, how it makes them feel, and how they can help to address it. The relationship between educators and their students can be addressed by emphasizing three main targets (*What Is ARC?*, 2016):

1. **Support** in recognizing, understanding, accepting, and managing the educators own responses to a situation (emotional or physiological)
2. **Enhancing** reciprocity in the relationship while helping educators to fully understand the student's behavior
3. **Building** effective, trauma-informed responses to student behavior

These three targets can be implemented using a few strategies in the classroom. One that has been effective for educators is creating "comfort zones" in the classroom where a student can go to feel safe and comfortable. These zones can help to create a sense of privacy and seclusion for the student if they get too overwhelmed and need a safe space to cool down until they are ready to go back to their previous activity (ARC and ARC Grow considerations for implementation, 2020). In the case that privacy is compromised in the "comfort zone," the educator and student may consider discussing topics that should either be included or avoided in the zone to optimize its functionality.

Regulation

Oftentimes when students are referred to alternative education programs it is because of a struggle in mainstream schooling due to out-of-control emotions, difficult behaviors, and impulsive tendencies. The reason behind these outbreaks is typically because the student does not have the capacity or strategies to regulate their own thoughts, feelings, and physical movements. When an educator is implementing the ARC framework, it is important for them to have skills in identifying, understanding, tolerating, and managing students experiencing regulatory issues (What Is ARC?, 2016). This aspect can be addressed in the classroom through:

1. **Supporting** students in developing an understanding and awareness of their feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and body states
2. **Helping** students increase their capacity to tolerate and manage their experiences
3. **Enhancing** skills and tolerance in building educator-student connections

Helping a student increase their regulatory capacity can be implemented in many flexible ways. One strategy is creating fun, hands-on experiences in the classroom, as it is more likely to increase a student's connection and motivation towards school and work times (*ARC and ARC Grow considerations for implementation*, 2020). This can be done through engaging science experiments, educationally stimulating games, and outside activities. Another strategy in the classroom is to invite the student to bring something from home that they enjoy or is important to them, specifically something that makes them remain calm. Once they bring this article into the classroom, the educator (who can also bring in their own article) and student can have a discussion about it to identify how it makes them feel (*ARC and ARC Grow considerations for implementation*, 2020). Once the student has left the classroom for the day, it is hard for educators to regulate what happens to them. A strategy to account for the time in between classes is giving the students an opportunity to capture their feelings and experiences through art while at home (*ARC and ARC Grow considerations for implementation*, 2020). For elementary-aged students, this may be asking them to draw a picture of their day, while middle-high school students might be to keep a journal log. This strategy helps the students to express and understand their emotions in a way that is often more comfortable for them.

Competency

The last aspect of the ARC framework mainly focuses on addressing key factors that are associated with resilience in students. The main, overarching goal of the framework is to increase positive outcomes among the students who are receiving the ARC intervention. This is especially important in increasing student's grades and creating a desire to actually be in a school setting. There are two main goals in implementing the competency aspect (*What Is ARC?*, 2016):

1. **Increasing** student's opportunities for choices and empowerment, while enhancing skills in recognizing effective decision-making
2. **Identification** and exploration of self-identity aspects, and developing an understanding of key life experiences, including the traumatic ones

Competency is best addressed by identifying and celebrating success in a student. Students with a traumatic or disadvantaged background often have a hard time seeing their success and potential, so the educators need to celebrate their accomplishments. It is important to identify and track positive experiences that happen over time so an educator can refer back to them to remind the student of their successes. If a student is given opportunities in the classroom to receive a form of positive reflection, they are more likely to believe in themselves and their abilities as a student (ARC and ARC Grow considerations for implementation, 2020). Showing a student's success can be done by creating a wall or scrapbook showcasing their accomplishments at school. Altogether, there are many ways to support disadvantaged students by implementing the ARC curriculum, educators just need to identify specific strategies that both work and do not work for each individual.

Synthesis of Main Educational Theories and Strategies Used in the US

Information from both the interviews and literature review has been presented in the table below to summarize the educational theories behind the practices used in programs. The information in the table highlights each theory's methods of implementation and desired outcomes, along with a brief description of the theory.

Table 6: Main Educational Theories and Strategies Used in the US

Theories	Description	Implementation	Outcomes
Individual Learning Plan	A process that enables students to make informed decisions about which courses they take and which activities they participate in.	- Used in high schools and developed with school counselors, teachers, and parents - Revisited at least twice a year and during key transition periods - Sometimes lets students pick and choose when and in what order they take classes	- Helping to counteract some of the factors that can lead to disengagement - Helping students identify and achieve their academic, career, and social goals
Social and Emotional Learning	The framework "involves a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance" (Mahoney et al., 2020)	- Building curricula based on students needs and developmental position - Utilizing a points system or color-coded system as an assessment method (also used in PBIS) - Giving students step-by-step lessons on identifying emotions and potential triggers/ personal discussion opportunities	- Increasing school completion - Improving attendance - Improving participation in academics - Reducing behavioral and social issues - Increasing confidence, self-understanding, and self-esteem -Emotional understanding and social competencies

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support	A 3-tiered framework that provides support for every student and improves student outcomes. It is known for improving and integrating data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes. The focus of PBIS is prevention, not punishment.	- Preventing unwanted behavior - Teaching acceptable behavior - Rewarding positive behavior - Increasing access to support - Encouraging family engagement	- Providing clear and consistent behavioral exceptions - Increasing positive language - Improving academic performance - Improving Social-emotional competence - Reducing reactive discipline
Attachment Regulation and Competency	Focuses on three main aspects of a child's development: attachment, regulation, and competency. This type of curriculum is especially useful and effective when working with a student who has had past traumatic experiences.	- Creating "comfort zones" in the classroom where a student can go to feel safe and comfortable - Creating fun, hands-on experiences in the classroom - Giving students an opportunity to capture their feelings and experiences through art while at home - Identifying and celebrating success in a student	- Enhancing skills, supports, and relational resources for the educators - Helping students increase their capacity to tolerate and manage their experiences - Enhancing student skills in recognizing effective decision-making - Reduction in children's symptoms of post-traumatic stress and mental health

Through our research and interviews, we were able to identify a number of evidence-based frameworks that are widely used in alternative education here in the US. These frameworks consist of ILP, SEL, PBIS, and ARC. All these frameworks not only aim to better students' academics but to help them develop emotionally, socially, and behaviorally as individuals. ILPs define and outline students' postsecondary plans and career goals, enabling them to make informed decisions about which courses they take and which activities they participate in. SEL helps students regulate and manage their emotions in various social settings as well as understand the emotions of others. The PBIS framework creates consistency across classes, shared expectations, and a common language for communicating those expectations. The ARC framework helps students with past traumatic experiences feel comfortable in school, build trust with teachers and peers, and regulate their emotions and actions.

One thing that is key to understand about these alternative education frameworks (ILPs, SEL, ARC, and PBIS) is that they do not all exist within the same "level". For example, SEL can be incorporated within PBIS, with PBIS being more of an "operational" level framework focused on improving student behavior and school culture. Meanwhile, SEL is more of a "tactical" level conduct

sed to help teach students how to recognize and control their emotions in social settings. The same can be said about the other two strategies, ILPs and ARC, in that they too operate at different "levels". It is also worth noting that aspects from all frameworks can be employed simultaneously but in different quantities. It is hard enough to implement a single framework, so programs usually focus on one "operational" framework and utilize practices from "tactical" level frameworks. From Table 6 it can be seen that these strategies generally aim to produce similar outcomes for students, save ILPs which more specifically focuses on academic planning and goal setting.

The most fundamentally essential piece of any alternative education practice is an individualized, student-centric approach. Just as each student is a unique human being, so too are their educational needs. However, it is unrealistic to expect educators to build a unique plan for each individual student from the ground up, but at the same time, they cannot expect to employ a "one-size-fits-all" approach and expect it to meet each student's needs. Instead, these frameworks identify base-level skills, or academic enablers, that are conducive to the development of academic skills and socioemotional growth (DiPerna & Elliott, 2000). Each is designed to be adapted accordingly on an individual basis, but at the same time has enough inherent structure to where it does not need to be redesigned for each new student. There is, however, the challenge of accurately assessing how effective the implementation of these strategies is in programs. Considering that the majority of the outcomes which these frameworks aim to achieve are qualitative aspects—it becomes necessary to frame assessments in such a way that they are able to use observational input from teachers and administrators to track a student's progress.

Assessment of Alternative Education Strategies

Through our research, we found that programs have a desire to be accountable for their work, but to do this they must be able to collect relevant data pertaining to student progression. In assessing the students, programs also assess the effectiveness of their re-engagement practices and their implementation of certain theoretical frameworks or strategies. Three main strategies are employed for this: observation, testing, and self-assessment. By observing students in the program throughout the day, teachers can watch how they interact with their peers and teachers, how they manage their emotions, and how engaged they are in the curriculum. Routine testing offers a standard approach to assessing a student's academic skill level and allows schools to meet the standardized testing requirements of their local state or county. These tests ensure that students are meeting basic academic requirements as they work towards their high school diploma. In addition to this, students may be given self-assessment questionnaires or discussion opportunities to share their perspectives, which can be used to assess the less observable qualities of their engagement and socio-emotional development.

The observational techniques used to assess students stem from widely referenced frameworks and rating scales developed through psychological research. As an example, the SEL framework is described as "evidence-based," with this evidence being drawn from psychological studies conducted in classrooms alongside statistical analysis from a variety of data (DiPerna et al., 2017). In order to

collect data for such an analysis, a number of rating forms were utilized by researchers and teachers participating in the study. A students' social skills and problem behaviors were measured via teacher ratings on the Social Skills Improvement Rating Scales Teacher Form (SSIS-RST) and with direct observations using the Cooperative Learning Observation Code for Kids (CLOCK) (DiPerna et al., 2017). The SSIS-RST is a professional assessment package offered by Pearson and developed by doctors Gresham and Elliott (2008) which aims to achieve a "targeted assessment of individuals and small groups to help evaluate social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence" (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). The rating system assesses students using a point format, where students' social skills and problem behaviors are ranked on a scale of 1-4 ranging from *never* to *almost never* (DiPerna et al., 2017). The SSIS-RST form is an example of how observational data may be collected from teachers in the classroom and shifted to a more quantitative form for numerical and statistical analysis.

The CLOCK is a similar rating scale for quantifying observational student assessment data, which "includes two categories of student behavior... active engaged time and passive engaged time" (DiPerna et al., 2017). A student is said to be "actively engaged" when they are tending to assigned tasks through actions such as "raising hand, asking the teacher a relevant question, or using their finger to guide reading" (DiPerna et al., 2017). Students are "passively engaged" when they go about their tasks in a more subtle manner, such as "listening to the teacher talk, looking at the whiteboard, or looking at a worksheet" (DiPerna et al., 2017). The CLOCK is particularly useful in that it helps to separate different types of student engagement so that they may be independently analyzed by associating specific behaviors with different aspects of engagement.

Another framework for assessing observational data is the Academic Competence Evaluation Scales or ACES. The ACES rating system focuses on assessing aspects of learning which are fundamental to the work of alternative schools, separated into "two domains: academic skills [and] academic enablers'" (DiPerna & Elliott, 2000). A student's academic skills are the usual focus of standard schooling and are a crucial part of educational work. Providing students with the cognitive skills to comprehend basic and complex aspects of subjects such as "mathematics, reading, and critical thinking" (DiPerna & Elliott, 2000). Whereas academic enablers are centered around a student's attitude and behavior in school, such as their "social skills, study skills, motivation, and engagement" (DiPerna & Elliott, 2000). From our interviews and preliminary research, it was found that while a school's primary goal is to provide academic skills to a student, some students are lacking the academic enablers necessary for effective learning. As such, flexible learning options or alternative schools must focus on building a student's academic enablers alongside their academic skills in order to provide the individual with more holistic development. "Facilitating the introduction of explicit instruction of academic enablers represents an excellent opportunity for educational support personnel (e.g., psychologists, special educators, resource teachers) to expand the impact of their professional practices" (DiPerna & Elliott, 2000). In terms of how these qualities are assessed through this framework, "items [pertaining to observed qualities in students] are rated using a 5-point format ranging from never to almost always" (DiPerna et al., 2017). Again, it can be seen that observational data is collected from teachers who rate students in a number of assessment categories

with points that correlate to the perceived level of motivation or engagement.

Observational data is a major component of student assessment, but it is also taken alongside more traditional forms of assessment: competency tests. While it is important to track the social, emotional, and behavioral development of a student, as well as their engagement, it is also necessary to assess their accruement of academic skills. One of the most common forms of this type of assessment is standardized testing, typically mandated or required by the state in which the alternative education program is based. The tests will vary depending on location, for example, Massachusetts has its own standardized test known as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Regardless of location, the main focus of standardized testing is in making sure students have basic academic competencies. On a smaller scale, in-school testing is an accurate method for measuring student academic growth and readily provides quantitative data for tracking a student's academic skills in their classes. Another key assessment method that directly provides usable data is keeping accurate attendance records. A major issue caused by disengagement is poor student attendance, and so it is an essential goal for alternative programs to track student retention and work to increase their attendance in school.

To ensure that teachers are providing a school environment that is conducive to higher attendance, engagement, academic performance, and socioemotional development it is imperative that teachers know how to observe and quantify the progress of their students. These rating systems all focus on directing a teacher's observation toward specific aspects of their students' development, as well as providing meaningful assessments of their academic skills. Similarly, in the Australian literature that we've reviewed, the overall progress a student makes in a program is typically judged as a "distance travelled" or "value gained" (te Riele et al., 2017). In this case, the student and their family, as well as the teachers they've had along the way, will provide observations or self-assessments that reflect the development of the student socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and academically at various points during their time in the program. The usefulness of observational reporting is an international pattern, and perhaps the most effective method currently available for assessing students. Overall, all of these assessment techniques are a basic outline for what we have seen programs typically implement, but it is ultimately up to the programs themselves to decide the specifics in how they want to measure each aspect.

Ensuring Positive Outcomes for Students

In the 2018-2019 school year, the drop-out rate of all Massachusetts schools was 1.8%; however, schools with drop-out rates that double the state average (3.6% or greater) qualify for federal grants (Massachusetts DOE Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist, 2021, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). According to the information gathered from our interviews, alternative schools have the highest drop-out rates out of all schools, and there are 28 of these programs in the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts DOE Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist, 2021). These federal grants help aid schools and programs in staying in session, but they need to produce a number of positive outcomes for their

students to continue receiving the grant. Primarily, most alternative schools focus on improving the attendance rates of their students. Many students end up at alternative schools because they have been long term suspended from their mainstream school— often from a very poor attendance record. So, educators in alternative schools need to create an environment that makes students want to be in school, like how the Woodward Day School implemented their PBIS incentive program. To create that environment, schools need to set concrete goals and have clear communication between all individuals involved.

Other than attendance rates, alternative schools also need to produce adequate grades from their students. While this may be difficult, schools need to implement a curriculum that engages students and makes them want to do better, while also following the state-mandated framework. For example, the Woodward Day School follows the core Massachusetts curriculum but offers a lot of hands-on opportunities in the classroom. This class structure helps to address a student's interests and needs while providing tailored instruction for each individual (Woodward Day School Program Director, 2021). When a student is interested in the curriculum's content, they are more apt to want to do well in that subject, therefore often leading to increased grades. Additionally, increasing student grades while enrolled in an alternative school will help to transition them back into their mainstream school with their normal grade-level abilities (Woodward Day School Program Director, 2021). Since alternative schools have the highest dropout rate of all schools, often greater than 3.6%, they need to decrease the number of students who drop out. While this is a daunting task in itself, it can be done with a high level of support and understanding from educators. This understanding can be gained through teacher training sessions based on English immersion, anti-racism, and overall inclusiveness strategies (Massachusetts DOE Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist, 2021). The Assistant Program Director at the Woodward Day School stated that "the goal is always to put a kid on a path for success," and this is key in helping to provide a positive future for students. Educators can work diligently to understand the needs of their students and create plans to get them back on track.

Alternative Education Challenges

Through our research and interviews, we have identified a handful of challenges that alternative education programs face. These challenges are post-COVID re-engagement, teacher training, student assessment, diversity, and alternative education evolution. These five challenges are being actively addressed in the alternative education community, but some are upcoming challenges and most will require additional funding and time.

One of the more recent and pressing challenges educators are facing now is re-engaging students after the COVID-19 pandemic. While most schools are facing this problem, it's especially hard for alternative programs since their students were already disengaged or at risk of disengagement before the pandemic. It can also be difficult for students to be engaged with online-based schooling because it is very easy to turn the camera off and get distracted by other factors that normally would not be present in classrooms. Because of this, students might fall behind in the curriculum and lose traction

in their classes. The transition from online schooling back to in-person is going to be even more difficult for students already struggling with engaging in school, as now they will likely be even further behind in their curriculum, and at young ages, their social and emotional development may have been stifled. To counter this, teachers need to be creative and persistent with their strategies of re-engagement, while also taking into consideration the effects quarantine may have had on students and their families.

While researching alternative education strategies, we recognized that it is a challenge for teachers to have the proper training for implementing and assessing them. Engagement itself can be difficult to observe in some students, so a trained eye is necessary to see the engagement in students; however, not everyone can do this implicitly. For example, trained psychologists were used to create and verify the "evidence-based" observation technique of assessment, which the theoretical frameworks identified above are supported by (DiPerna et al., 2017). But, you can not have a psychologist in every classroom at all times observing students. This presents the challenge of how alternative education programs can make sure all teachers are trained properly to accurately assess their students during class.

One challenge that has been consistently showing up in research and interviews is the means of assessing disengaged students in their programs. According to interviewees, the most challenging above all is standardized testing. It was discussed how standardized tests are not designed for different types of learners, nor are they made with diversity in mind. Due to this, students are often inaccurately represented by poor standardized testing grades. Sometimes it's not that the student does not understand the curriculum, it's due to the tests not being tailored to all students who have different learning abilities and backgrounds. Other than standardized testing, the use of self-assessments in programs has proved to be troublesome. Programs found that self-assessments may be biased and reflect negative preconceptions the student has about their academic abilities. This has been challenging because this form of assessment has the ability to be misleading and incorrect, so the teachers may not be able to provide the appropriate level of instruction to their students.

Through our interviews, we learned that having a diverse curriculum and staff can help students better relate to what they're being taught and who they're being taught by. Oftentimes, the diversity of the staff is not a reflection of the diversity of the community they are teaching. Students can find it hard to relate to instructors that cannot relate to them and understand where they're coming from. This creates a problem because students may not want to build a trusting relationship with their teachers, resulting in further disengagement. The curriculum that is presented to students must be diverse as well. Research has shown that students benefit from seeing their identities represented in their class curriculum. However, the current curriculum being implemented in school, especially standardized testing, is not diverse and students find difficulty in relating to and engaging in problems and scenarios presented in class.

Lastly, we came to the realization that the field of alternative education is ever-evolving, so it's hard to keep up with new strategies. While current strategies implemented in programs may be effective, new strategies that develop may address the needs of students even better than the current

ones. Overall, it is important that programs remain innovative, creative, and collaborative to continually meet the needs of their students.

Post-Workshop Reflection
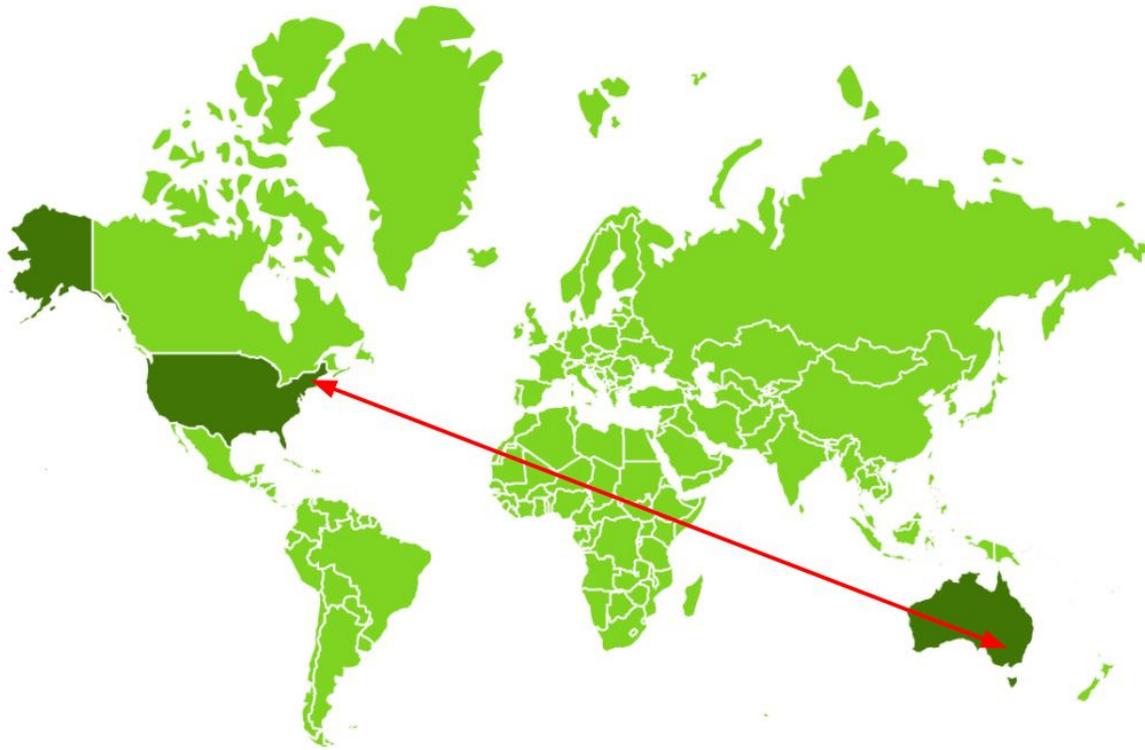
Figure 11: Depiction of establishing international connections

As the culmination of the project, we hosted an international workshop to create connections for the NCESE. The workshop was held on May 10, and attendees had a very rich, stimulating discussion about the field of alternative education. This discussion prompted interesting insights and questions about how programs are run, along with the current challenges they are facing. Our attendees for the workshop were from the Woodward Day School, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, BGCS, and the NCESE. Perspectives from multiple leadership positions lead to an in-depth conversation on the similarities and differences of alternative education programs in the US and Australia.

When the first question "what advice would you give someone who is looking to start their own alternative education program?" was asked, teamwork and core values were the main points of conversation. The Woodward Day School explained that establishing the core mission and beliefs of the program when it begins, and keeping them consistent throughout, is essential in maintaining an effective program. When all of the staff and students are on the same page, it makes the program run more smoothly. The consistency creates a clear understanding for students of what is expected of them in a school setting, and it allows easy collaboration, communication, and overall teamwork between the teachers. Woodward Day also noted that both the PBIS and ARC frameworks have been key in instilling the teamwork approach in their school. The teamwork created from these

frameworks has been effective in putting students back on track for success. The Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist stated that alternative education programs *need* to be student-centered to run properly. Understanding what a student needs and wants, along with continually adjusting to their needs, is extremely important in creating an effective and safe environment for re-engagement. Additionally, programs need to have staff who not only work as a team but can understand and empathize with the students. These staff members should prioritize moving their students forward in life while still maintaining high standards for them, as this is what makes the students succeed. Underestimating students in alternative education programs are not only offensive but is a disservice to them. These students deserve more credit than they are given. The re-engagement specialist describes these students as having "resilience, strength, [and] determination" having to survive disadvantages outside the classroom. The outlook on alternative education programs needs to shift from the "dumping grounds" for "bad" students, to a school of "choice" for students who want or need approaches to education that differ from mainstream schools.

When the second discussion prompt "if you had no limitations what would you do to improve your program?" was asked, attendees responded with competency-based education and vocational training. It was discussed that if programs were able to implement competency-based education, students would be able to feel and see their progress because the curriculum is in their language and there are clear-cut steps to it. This would serve to increase students' belief in themselves and their abilities, therefore furthering their engagement with school. When it comes to vocational training in alternative education programs, both the Woodward Day School and the NCESE expressed their desire to have this implemented. The Woodward Day Assistant Program Director stated how working vocational aspects (like culinary, cosmetology, auto-mechanics, etc.) into the regular, everyday curriculum is extremely beneficial to the students' growth and overall program. They noted that many of their students do not have any interest in pursuing higher education, and instead express interest in giving back to their community through trade work. On top of that, giving students the opportunity to develop skills in these areas could help to set them up for a career after high school and provide them with valuable certifications for their work. However, vocational programs are expensive and require people with special licenses and qualifications, so it is very difficult to get these services for students. In addition to this, the Woodward Day School Director noted that these programs tend to be selective, and "even though [these students] are the ones that need it the most, they tend to be rejected." If these professionals had no limitations, they would provide their students with both the tools and support needed to improve their future.

Lastly, when the opposite question, "if you had to keep one thing from your program above all, what would it be?" was asked, the responses were unanimous: the staff. Every attendee expressed how extremely important their main staff is to the success of their program and essential in providing their students the best opportunities. Our sponsor at the NCESE explained how knowledge is a transformative thing, and the more one knows the better they are at teaching it. The Woodward Day Directors said how their staff is everything in making their program work for their students. The Assistant Director exclaimed, "we don't even need walls, put them outside at a picnic table with the

right people and they will thrive." Similarly, the Drop-Out Prevention and Re-Engagement Specialist said "I would sweep the floors myself if I had to" to ensure they kept their staff. These sentiments from our attendees show how vital the teachers are in alternative education programs and how they can really help to make a difference in students' lives. Based on the initial workshop, it is evident that collaboration is key in progressing the field of alternative education and finding new and useful strategies to implement into programs. Participants were interested in building off the momentum from the workshop and establish collaborations. The workshop achieved its goal in making connections for the NCESE with alternative education programs in the US—hopefully, ones that will continue to grow and prosper well beyond this project.

Conclusion

In the past 14 weeks, our group took a deep look into the alternative education field and was able to identify several effective strategies in re-engaging disadvantaged youth. We found that the theories behind these strategies delve into some of the most fundamental aspects of human nature: behavior, sociality, emotions, and cognition. Unfortunately, no guide simply tells you the "best" practices as every student is different, and what might work for one might not have the same effect on another. When it comes to disadvantaged youth, educators have to aim to do more than just help them academically. They need to invest time into these individuals' social, emotional, and behavioral development to ensure they can succeed both inside and outside a classroom.

Through our research and interviews, we identified several common challenges educators in this field face. Those challenges were post-COVID re-engagement, teacher training, student assessment, diversity, and alternative education evolution. The challenge that deserves the most attention is the lack of training for teachers in these programs. It takes a special kind of skill to teach and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While it's great that we've identified evidence-based frameworks and strategies that have shown to be effective, teachers still have to be taught these methods to help these students.

Over the course of the project, we were able to identify multiple schools, programs, and organizations in the field of alternative education that can serve as possible connections for the NCESE. Due to the pandemic, our project experience was quite different than what we initially imagined. The context in which we completed our project had both its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage was that Zoom allowed us to connect with individuals worldwide, which, otherwise we wouldn't have had the opportunity to do in person. Zoom also provided us with a platform to get both the NCESE and these individuals in a room (while it might be a virtual one) to meet and spark a discussion on what they all deem to be the most effective in re-engaging disadvantaged youth.

On the other hand, it was difficult at times to set up interviews with professionals as most schools were on spring break at the beginning of the project. Schools were also transitioning back to in-person classes after being remote for a better part of a year. Finding the time out of their busy schedule was not easy, which was understandable as they needed to figure out how to adapt to this new reality of masks and social distancing in a school setting. The practitioners we've encountered in this field show incredible commitment and are often engaged in their work practice well beyond standard working hours. With that, we are even more appreciative of the individuals who, in spite of their busy schedules, took the time out of their day to meet with us. We were able to identify numerous schools and programs and conducted a total of four interviews with alternative program directors, a re-engagement specialist from the Massachusetts Department of Education, and a National Alternative Education Association board member. All of these individuals have shown interest in continuing the conversation from our workshop and connecting in the near future with each other and the NCESE. We hope that this project has made a meaningful contribution with a long-lasting impact on the field of alternative education and that we provided the NCESE with useful information on programs here in the United States.

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Appendix A: Authorship Page

Emily	Research Done: The effects of disengagement, Re-engagement through FLOs, Types of FLOs, PBIS framework Written Sections: Introduction, Background (Causes of disengagement, the effects of disengagement, Re-engagement through FLOs), Methods (objective 2 & 3), Finding (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Synthesis of Main Educational Theories and Strategies Used in the US), Establishing Connections, Conclusion
Mickaela	Research Done: Project REAL, NCESE, Broadmeadows background, ARC framework, SoLD Theory Written Sections: Introduction, Background (Project REAL & Educational Philosophy of the NCESE), Methods (Objective 1 & 2), Findings (Attachment, Regulation, and Competency; Challenges), Post-Workshop Reflection, Conclusion Additional Things: Graphics creator, Canva report creator, Final Editor
Tyler	Research Done: Outcomes and assessment of FLOs, Defining success for students and programs, Methods for measuring student engagement, SEL framework Written Sections: Introduction, Background (Defining Outcomes for Flexible Learning Programs; The Question of Accurate Assessment for Learning Outcomes), Methods (Objective 2; 3), Findings (Social and Emotional Learning; Synthesis of Main Educational Theories and Strategies Used in the US; Assessments of Alternative Education Strategies), Conclusion
Trevor	Research Done: Academic Disengagement, Academic Engagement, How Teacher Views Affect Alternative Education, The Effects of Trauma on Academic Engagement, ILPs Written Sections: Introduction, Background (Definition of Academic Engagement, Causes of Disengagement, The Effects of Disengagement), Methods (objective 2), Common Alternative Education Strategies in the US (Individual Learning Plan), Synthesis of Main Educational Theories and Strategies Used in the US, Conclusion Additional Things: Point of contact for interviewees

Appendix B: Interview Figures

Subject: Alternative Education Research Interview

Good Afternoon!

My name is Trevor Shrady and I'm part of a research group at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) in Massachusetts investigating alternative education programs for disengaged youth. We're working with the Northern Center for Excellence in School Engagement (NCESE), an Australian flexible learning campus, to determine effective practices of flexible learning options (FLOs) or similar programs in the US. Our goal is to provide them with findings that will help them to better educate disadvantaged youth in Northern Melbourne, Australia.

Based on the information we found on your website, we believe your school could provide valuable insight into re-engagement practices. As such, we would like to interview you about your organization and its alternative education practices and assessments. The interview will only take around 45 minutes and will focus on your organization's practices and means of assessing success. Interviews will be conducted over phone or held online (Zoom, MS Teams, ect.), whichever is most convenient for you. We are happy to share any of our findings and final products with you. Please feel free to reach out to me if you would like to participate! You can contact me over the phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX, or by email at tashrady@wpi.edu. We are available to conduct the interview from Monday to Friday any time between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm. We hope to hear from you!

Best,

Trevor Shrady
Worcester Polytechnic Institute '22

Figure 1: Email to programs and schools

Good (time of day)!

Thank you for responding! We are really appreciative of your participation and we believe it will benefit us greatly. There are five main areas we want to cover during this interview. We plan to discuss the structure of your program, the educational theories your program is based on, the assessments set in place for your students, any challenges you have faced within your program, and any collaboration you have had with other professionals or programs. In order to prepare us for this interview and so we can learn more about your program, is there anything you could send us beforehand? We are flexible with the times that we can meet—we are available Monday-Friday from 9am-5pm. The online platform used for the interview is also flexible depending on what you are most comfortable with. Attached to this email is a consent script that outlines our intentions for this interview, which will also be read before the interview begins. If you have any further questions feel free to reach out! You can contact me over the phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX, or by email at tashrady@wpi.edu. Thank you again for your time.

Best,

Trevor Shrady
Worcester Polytechnic Institute '22

Figure 2: Follow-up email if the individual did respond

We are students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute working with the Northern Centre for Excellence in School Engagement (NCESE) and would like for you to participate in an interview about alternative education. The NCESE is an alternative education program based in Northern Victoria, Australia focused on helping the disengaged students in their community. We are interviewing educators from a range of alternative education programs in the US to gain a better understanding of the techniques used for assessing alternative education programs, the outcomes they produce for students, and effective practices that lead to those outcomes. Our interview will be approximately 45 minutes. The information from our interviews will be published on our university website and shared with the NCESE for future planning purposes. We would like to reference your program by name in our report and if you would like, we are willing to share our final report and findings with you. You can decide whether or not to participate in this interview and stop at any time. If it is okay with you, we would like to record this interview (either audio or video) for our records. This recording will only be available to us for review. There are no correct or incorrect answers to our questions, as we want to learn about your particular perspective and your program's approach. Do you agree to participate in this recorded interview (say yes or no)?

Follow-up contact information: gr-Melbourne-NCESE-D21@wpi.edu, or our faculty advisor, Stephen McCauley at mccauley@wpi.edu

Figure 3: Interview consent script