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Syracuse and New York City, New York  
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United States Senate  
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Good morning, Chairman Kennedy, Senator Gregg, and members of the Committee. I appreciate the invitation to appear before the Committee today at this hearing on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and specifically the role that quality programming can play in the lives of children in alternative schools. I am speaking here on behalf of the Center for Community Alternatives, also known as CCA, which is a private, not-for-profit agency that works in the fields of youth development, juvenile and criminal justice and related human services. Established in 1981, CCA's mission is to prevent crime, reduce recidivism and promote the healthy and safe development of youth, adults and communities. In addition to our direct service programs, CCA also conducts research, training and technical assistance through its Justice Strategies division.

CCA's work focuses on youth who are defined as "high risk" by a number of now widely recognized criteria that encompass community, family and individual conditions. Research has also identified protective factors that reduce these risks: connections to pro-social institutions, - families and schools, conflict resolution skills, safe and supportive after school activities and activities that promote positive cultural identities. Programmatic responses can help to shore up protective factors and to some extent can compensate for resources that may be absent in the youth's natural support system.

The Strategies for Success program that is the focus of my testimony is operated by CCA in collaboration with the Syracuse City School District. Strategies for Success works with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who have been suspended from their mainstream schools and placed in the alternative school. This initiative grew out of CCA's longstanding commitment and work with high risk youth, many of whom are enrolled in alternative educational programs and the Syracuse City School District's recent efforts to improve and reform its alternative schools.

In 1999, the then newly-appointed District Superintendent, Dr. Stephen Jones, began his tenure by appointing a committee composed of parents, teachers, administrators and community-based agencies to examine the SCSD's alternative programs and recommend changes and improvements. I was one of the members of this committee. Among the key findings of the Committee on Alternative Education was the large number of students who subsequently drop out of school following placement in an alternative school, the disproportionate number of poor and minority students placed in alternative schools, the large number of students from these schools who wind up in the juvenile or criminal justice system as well as insufficient programming and services in these schools. The Committee recommended both short and long term improvements, including significant restructuring of the alternative program and the possibility of moving to school-based responses to disciplinary problems such as the "schools within schools" model. While the implementation of more profound reform is still a work in progress, CCA's Strategies for Success Program serves an immediate response to the needs identified.

While we work in an alternative school, it is our experience that too many young people are being removed from mainstream schools. Between 1994 and 1997, the number of school suspensions almost doubled, with African American children and special education students particularly vulnerable to this form of school discipline. With better resources that include smaller classrooms, more flexibility for different learning styles, and more teacher training, it is likely that the number of school suspensions would be reduced. Options within mainstream schools, such as "schools within schools" could accommodate those few students who cannot be integrated into regular classes.

That said, it is CCA's mission to work with the highest risk young people and it is for this reason that we find ourselves working in the Carnegie Alternative School. CCA and the District share a common commitment to ensure that students in the alternative school continue to receive a quality education and a belief that alternative education must not be an "alternative to education."

CCA's perspective on at risk youth including those with disabilities comes from our work with youth in the most high risk settings - the juvenile justice system and alternative schools. We know from research that anywhere from 30 to 40 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system are learning disabled; we also know that about 20 percent of youth in alternative education settings are classified as special education students.

Beyond these labels, we see the challenges that youth at risk face in their daily lives, challenges that undermine their ability to make sound and healthy decisions about their future. Yet we also see the strength and survival skills of these young people and their ability to overcome these challenges with adult support from their families, their teachers, their communities, including supportive programs.

CCA began working with youth in alternative schools through our juvenile justice work. Helping kids stay out of the juvenile justice system required that we network with schools and ensure that youth were complying with court orders that of course required them to be in school. In doing this work, we soon found

ourselves at the alternative school door - most of our young clients were not only involved in the juvenile justice system, they were enrolled in alternative education programs. We observed how few resources there were in the school - few books in the library, no computers, and no activities like school newspapers or after school clubs and teams. It became part of our mission to try to develop support services for the children who are placed in this setting.

Beginning in 2001, with funding from the United States. Department of Education and the New York State (Office of Children and Families, the Department of Health), and our local United Way, CCA has been able to offer a comprehensive set of services, called Strategies for Success, that includes mentoring, health education and community service work, violence prevention, academic supports, after school programming arts workshops, support groups for youth and parents and what we call transitional planning.

The intent of the program is to create a positive and supportive environment for youth who have few safe havens in their lives. Risks are present in every corner of the lives of these young people. But because of their own unbelievable strengths, these young people can be empowered to make healthier, life affirming choices. It is up to schools and community supports to provide the opportunities for these youth to continue their education and tap into their unique abilities.

I will briefly describe how the program works and how it goes about its business.

First, the students. There are about 250 students a year placed in the alternative school. They are:

- economically disadvantaged - 100 percent qualify for free or reduced cost lunch
- disproportionately male - 65%, although we have seen an increase in the number of girls who have gender specific needs often related to sexual abuse, incest and relationship violence.
- disproportionately minority -75%
- have had difficulties in school and are marginally attached to school as reflected by a 28 percent drop out rate
- they test below the students in other Syracuse City schools in all subject matter tested
- About 40 percent of students are diagnosed as special education students.

The program begins the day that the student is placed in Carnegie. One of the first things we confront when a youth enters the school is parental concern and student anxiety that is attributable to the stigma associated with alternative school placement. Carnegie is known as the school that the “bad” kids go to. We have to convince them that although their suspension from mainstream school was imposed as a punishment, their school experience in Carnegie will not be punitive. The Strategies’ social worker meets with the parent and student the first day of their school and, along with the school guidance counselor, conducts a comprehensive assessment of educational needs and interests as well as social needs and interests. The school is responsible for

meeting their educational needs: Strategies provides the social supports to help this happen.

Each youth is assigned a transitional planner who helps the youth see how the work that they undertake while in the Carnegie program will help them set a new academic course that will follow them back into their home school. The transitional planner works with the student and family throughout their stay in the alternative program, helps the youth build his or her portfolio, makes sure that the student is enrolled in after school programming and other community services that might be helpful.

Briefly, the key elements of the Strategies for Success Program are:

### **1. Collaborating with Principals, Teachers and Staff**

The program is fully integrated in the school, with staff co-located in the building, as is the operation of the after school program. The school principals, Joanne Crisafulli and Ernest Wood as well as Area Superintendent Wayne O'Conner, have worked closely with us to ensure the program is integrated into the school operations. CCA staff meet regularly with the principals, guidance counselor, teachers and area superintendent. There are several events, including a day long retreat before the beginning of the new school year, that brings together school faculty and administrators, support staff, police officers assigned to the alternative schools and CCA staff. The intent is to create a total environment where students are encouraged and motivated to learn and behavior in a pro social manner and are prepared to make a successful transition back to a mainstream school. Part of the work of building a positive school environment is incorporating an understanding of the essential role that culture, race, ethnicity and gender play in working with young people.

### **2. Connecting to Families**

The positive school culture is introduced to parents and students on the day the child is enrolled in Carnegie. However, in addition to school-based meetings with parents, program staff meet with parents through home visits and parent support groups. It is important to see parents as individuals and not a "one size fits all" negative stereotype. Many parents are working low wage jobs often at hours inconvenient to ensuring that their child gets to school or does his or her homework, others are struggling with their own demons - low education, unemployment, and addiction. Many of the parents have had their own negative experiences with school as students and have heard only negative reports on their own children. We try to raise problems in the context of strengths - sharing with the parent some of the positive achievements such as a good grade, a class contribution, an improvement in attendance, a thoughtful poem, or work on a community service project. This approach often opens the door to a more constructive dialogue with the parent. Parents are invited to special events to see their children become peer educators or perform their poetry and hip hop music.

### **3. Intensive, Comprehensive Youth-Centered Activities**

What we mean by “youth-centered” is quite simply activities that tap into youth interests and give them opportunities to be active leaders and creators. For example, we designed the after school component with input from the youth with whom we work. We asked the kids what would entice them to stay after school - what did they like to do- what did they want to be? Their answer, (not ours) was they wanted to perform hip-hop music. They said they would come if there was a sound studio to record their music. And so we constructed a small studio right in the school building. The youth helped us select the kind of equipment needed and helped to set up the studio.

The studio operates in the context of the peaceable, respectful school environment. There are rules and expectations governing its use. The youth helped establish these rules and talk about why they are important. Lyrics cannot be curse words, homophobic or misogynous. They also have a mission to produce material that can be used in the context of their roles as peer leaders against violence and to prevent HIV. To accomplish these goals, the students must learn about the topics by completing violence prevention and HIV/health education peer educator training. And finally, they have to compose the lyrics themselves and so they participate in a writing workshop. The results are tangible - I have brought them with me today - an anthology of poetry and a CD produced by the students.

There are other activities for youth as well including peer leadership training, academic support, computer training, leather crafting, and other art experiences and tai kwon do. The intensity of services is achieved by having services available during the school day and after school and by staff ability to meet with youth and parents in their home and community.

#### **4. Bonding with adults**

The program provides multiple opportunities for youth to connect with one or more adults. This is important as alternative schools are ignored - they are rarely, if ever, “adopted” by local businesses as are the other schools in the district and few organizations are interested in working in these schools. The youth are typically disconnected from youth serving organizations and so are thirsting for activities and interaction - for someone or “someones” to care. Strategies offers multiple opportunities for youth to connect to adults from their transitional planner, to other CCA staff and through mentors who are introduced to the student while he or she is in Carnegie and continues to work with the student after they transition back to a mainstream school. Many of these mentors are willing to continue their relationship with the youth after their formal program commitment is over. Mentors can provide youth with more informal supports ranging from recreational and cultural activities, to additional support to stay in school.

#### **5. Supporting Youth in the Return to Mainstream Schools**

Finally, it is imperative to provide support to students as they return to their home school. This is a difficult journey back and a time when the stigma of

alternative school placement is revisited by principals, teachers and other students.

Transitional support begins before the youth leaves the alternative school and continues to work with students for up to six months after their return to mainstream schools.

The Strategy for Success program is relatively new and we are presently engaged in a formal evaluation of the program that is being conducted by researchers from our Justice Strategies division. However the preliminary information we have is promising. We began serving students in April 2001 and, since that time, have worked with 86 youth, and 47 were eligible to return to mainstream school. Of those

- 78 percent remain in mainstream school
- the 22 percent resuspension rate among Strategies' participants is less than 35 percent resuspension rate for alternative students who returned to mainstream in 1999.
- 92 percent of the students remain active with the program
- 96 percent of the participating youth have been arrest-free.

This is significant given the fact that many of the students in the alternative schools have prior juvenile court involvement.

We have found that most, if not all youth want to learn and succeed in school, but they live in a world that does not make such success particularly important. If, by the age of 14, you have already been to the funerals of friends, have lost parents and siblings to AIDS or prison, and see a community bereft of jobs, towing the line in school does not necessarily seem all that relevant.

Youth who are considered discipline problems can be successful if these problems are addressed within a larger comprehensive and holistic youth development approach. We have a chance to intervene at a time in their lives that the more fortunate among us know to be an incredible period of self discovery - adolescence and young adulthood. Equally important are the benefits to communities that accrue from an investment in the potential of these young people. They are important social capital for their communities. Programs that can address disciplinary problems within schools and communities will help keep these children in school and out of the criminal justice system. Instead of women and men entering a Riker's Island or some other jail or prison, leaving behind their children and families, we may instead see strong, healthy young women and men functioning as productive citizens and parents to a new promising generation.

A poem by one of the young women in our program, now successful returned to her mainstream school and recently a "contributing writer" to the local newspaper, tells us what a difference we can make in the lives of these young students if we try:

**My Teacher's Goal**  
My Teacher has a goal  
I can see it in her smile

I thought it was to calm us down  
and bring us out the wild  
but it was way higher  
way far from that ...  
at times I didn't care  
but every time I decided to quit  
her smile was always there ...  
...as I grew older and older  
there was so much I wanted to be  
and slowly moving with time  
her statement had come true ...  
and now as I look back in life  
I see my role  
I see my success and accomplishments  
were helped along  
by my teacher's goal.

With proper support, the goals we set for our children, can be achieved.

Thank you.

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*The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) is a leader in the field of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Through pioneering services as well as the innovative research, policy analysis and training of its Justice Strategies division, CCA fosters individual transformation, reduces reliance on incarceration and advocates for more responsive juvenile and criminal justice policies.*

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