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A Preventive Intervention Program for Urban African American Youth Attending an Alternative Education Program: Background, Implementation, and Feasibility

Steven B. Carswell, Ph.D. and **Thomas E. Hanlon, Ph.D.**

Friends Research Institute, Inc., Baltimore, MD

Kevin E. O'Grady, Ph.D.

University of Maryland College Park, College Park, MD

Amy M. Watts, M.A. and **Pattarapan Pothong, B.S.**

Friends Research Institute, Inc., Baltimore, MD

Abstract

This paper presents background, implementation, and feasibility findings associated with planning and conducting an after-school intervention program in an alternative education setting designed to prevent the initiation and escalation of violence and substance abuse among urban African American youth at high risk for life-long problem behaviors. Evolving from earlier preventive interventions implemented in clinic and school settings, the program, entitled *The Village Model of Care*, consisted of structured group mentoring, parental support, and community outreach services administered to alternative education students and their primary caregiver(s) during the school year. Over a two-year intake period, 109 youth participated in the present process evaluation study. Findings from the study not only provided relevant demographic information on the characteristics of youth likely to be included in such programs but also indicated the importance of including the family in the rehabilitation effort and the need for school administrative system support for the underlying alternative education approach. The information presented in this report has a direct bearing on the planning of future prevention efforts conducted in similar settings that are aimed at reducing problem behaviors and promoting positive lifestyles among high-risk youth.

Keywords

African American Youth; Alternative Education; Preventive Intervention; After-School Program

Having been expelled from traditional public schools for committing violent acts or other serious infractions, youth referred to alternative education programs (AEPs) typically exhibit a long history of conduct and/or adjustment problems at school. Many have also begun experimenting with alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATODs), have engaged in risky sexual behaviors, and/or have manifested other problematic behaviors that if left unchecked would likely continue into adulthood (Grunbaum et al., 2002). Specifically designed to address such characteristics in an African American youth sample, the present application of a preventive after-school program in an alternative education setting yielded findings that not only provided relevant demographic information on youth who are likely to be included in such programs, but that also have a direct bearing on the planning of future prevention efforts conducted in similar settings. This process-oriented paper presents background, implementation, and feasibility findings associated with the conduct and evaluation of the program under examination.

Background

Emerging in the United States in the 1960s, AEPs initially grew out of a desire to meet the needs of poor and minority students underserved in traditional public school systems and to create innovative programming for suburban students (Meyers, 2001; Raywid, 1999). Although currently there are a number of different types of AEPs in existence throughout the United States, many of these programs have become a viable means of providing for the education and socialization of youth who have debilitating characteristics, are impoverished, and/or are otherwise at-risk of manifesting social, emotional, and/or behavioral problems in school (Franklin et al., 1990; Grunbaum et al., 2000; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Powell, 2003; Tobin & Sprague, 2000; Zweig, 2003). Typically, high-risk youth who attend these types of programs have been exposed to negative social and environmental risk factors throughout their lives stemming from problems associated with poverty, family adversity, inadequate parental monitoring, and/or physical and emotional trauma (Guerin & Denti, 1999; McIntyre, 1993; Waldie & Spreen, 1993). As a result of such negative life experiences, many of these youth display academic and behavioral difficulties that ultimately lead to their expulsion from traditional schools and eventual transfer to alternative education programs within the school system (Carpenter-Aeby & Kurtz, 2000; Guerin & Denti, 1999). When these behavioral patterns persist in spite of remedial intervention ordinarily available in general school settings, many of these youth experience such negative consequences as school dropout, delinquency, drug use and trafficking, and/or other serious life-long problem behaviors (Aron, 2006; Grunbaum et al., 2000; Tobin & Sprague, 2000; Zweig, 2003). Alternative education programs are designed to provide such youth a second opportunity to succeed within the established public education environment (Carpenter-Aeby & Kurtz, 2000; Reilly & Reilly, 1983). Offering small classes, low student to teacher ratios, and supplemental support services, these programs attempt to decrease the likelihood of school failure and school dropout by reconnecting youth to mainstream educational goals (Cox, 1999; Zweig, 2003).

Although alternative education programs continue to grow in scope and size throughout the United States, with approximately 20,000 such programs currently in existence (Barr & Parrett, 2001), limited empirical research is available regarding the feasibility of these programs or the types of students who attend them (Aron, 2006; Barr & Parrett, 2001; Foley & Pang, 2006; Hosley, 2003; Powell, 2003; Zweig, 2003). Because youth referred to AEPs are likely to be at-risk socially, environmentally, and economically, further research is needed on developing or implementing effective school-based preventive intervention approaches targeting highly vulnerable individuals, including African American youth in disadvantaged urban settings.

African American Youth at Risk

For the past 30 years, researchers have documented the disproportionately high rates of poverty, unemployment, crime, substance abuse, homicide deaths, incarcerations, illegitimate births, sexually-transmitted diseases, and HIV infection that are becoming increasingly concentrated in America's cities (Carswell, 2007; Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007; Hanlon, O'Grady, Bennette-Sears, & Callaman, 2005; Jargowsky, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Research clearly indicates that African American youth who live in socially and economically disadvantaged urban environments are at disproportionately higher risk for serious educational, social, and physical health problems than are more affluent African American and Caucasian youth (Carswell, 2007; Children's Defense Fund, 1995, 2002; Myers & Taylor, 1998; O'Donnell et al., 2001).

Negative outcomes associated with the early emergence of school-related problem behaviors have particularly severe consequences for African American youth compared to Caucasian youth, with research consistently indicating that the former are suspended from school more

frequently and for longer periods of time (Bennett & Harris, 1982; Reed, 1988; Shaw & Braden, 1990; Voelkl, Welte, & Wieczorek, 1999). Higher rates of disruptive and violent behavior in school settings among African American youth have also been reported (CDC, 2000), and these behaviors have been found to be related to a number of adverse consequences, including poor relationships with peers and teachers, high rates of school disciplinary action, and low levels of academic achievement (Gibbs et al., 1988; NCHS, 2000; Paschall et al., 2003; Taylor, 1991). Recent data regarding high school graduation rates among African American youth have been reported, indicating that approximately 50% of these youth do not graduate from high school and that among African American males the graduation rate is an especially dismal 43% (Aron, 2006). Sadly, it has been estimated that a significant number of African American youth who drop out of high school are subsequently incarcerated during their lifetime (Western & Pettit, 2000). In urban environments, particularly, the daily rate of incarceration for young African American men has been found to be approximately 10%, with a lifetime rate of 33% (Bonczar, 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 1992).

The Origin of the Present Research Program

In order to address the unique and specialized needs of troubled city youth, the legislature of the state in which the after-school program under investigation was implemented authorized the creation of Alternative Education Programs within the state's largest city public school system. The programs were designed to serve youth in grades 6 through 10 who were expelled from traditional city public schools for one or more of the following reasons: 1) violent and/or aggressive acts against teachers, students, or school personnel; 2) chronic behavior problems and/or disruptive acts; 3) illegal drug possession; 4) arson offenses, bomb threats, and/or destruction of property; and 5) the carrying of dangerous weapons (e.g., knives, guns) onto school property. The mission of these programs was to provide referred students crisis counseling and supportive services in addition to remedial classroom instruction. Following enrollment in an AEP, students were scheduled to stay for approximately one year, provided they met the program's academic, behavioral, and attendance requirements, at which point they were to be reassigned to the general school population.

The interest and involvement of the present investigators in the AEP under current study stemmed from three years of collaboration with school officials, staff, parents, and students involved in this program. Our initial contact with AEP staff occurred when AEP school administrators and our research staff to discuss a potential collaboration designed to supplement existing school services. As a result of this discussion, it was jointly decided that a more precise determination of the needs of the AEP and their students was needed. Thus, prior to the implementation of any supplemental intervention, we conducted two pilot studies at an alternative education site, one involving the use of focus groups with both students and school personnel, and the other using a case management approach involving the families of the students.

The AEP Pilot Studies

Focus Groups: Because violence and other indicators of overly aggressive behavior were the most frequent school problems prompting referral to the AEPs, the purpose of the student focus groups was to obtain information about the experiences and beliefs of the students regarding violence as a means of resolving inner-tensions and interrelationship problems. However, after reviewing transcripts of the information obtained from these focus group sessions, it became clear that the youth were not only prone to violent behavior and gang involvement but were also becoming increasingly involved in such health-compromising behaviors as ATOD use and risky sexual behaviors (including early initiation and multiple-partner sex).

A review of focus group sessions with AEP staff members revealed that the education and counseling program conducted at the school was in need of additional support services that both reinforced classroom instruction and fostered greater involvement of family and community members. Reporting that many students were difficult to manage, lacked emotional and behavioral controls, and tended to display a wanton disregard for authority, staff members were of the opinion that to be effective any supplemental prevention program targeting their high-risk students should strive to reduce conduct problems; facilitate academic achievement; and take into consideration the interrelatedness and multiple impact of individual, family, school, and community influences on student behaviors.

Case Management: Needs assessment and case summary findings from the case management pilot study, which involved case reports on 11 families, indicated that AEP families were almost universally in need of outside help in obtaining assistance from community service agencies. Thus, the pilot study's case manager became directly involved in helping the families obtain such services, including scheduling appointments for families that did not have access to a telephone, providing transportation for families that had difficulty getting to appointments, and acting as an advocate on behalf of those caregivers who were having difficulties dealing with community agency personnel. Medical assistance information was the most frequent service request made by the caregivers, along with information that would assist them in paying their utility and telephone bills. Regardless of their age or gender, youth participating in the study primarily requested assistance in obtaining part-time employment information.

On the basis of the above pilot-study findings and information obtained in subsequently-held meetings with school administrators, we were in a better position to tailor our preventive intervention model to fit the needs and characteristics of AEP students by broadening the scope of the program to include community outreach services for youth and their families and by complementing the student counseling services routinely provided by the school. As a result of the pilot studies, we had a much more realistic idea of the types of problems we would encounter in implementing an after-school preventive intervention in an AEP setting, the difficulties we were likely to face with AEP students, and the types of community resources that would be needed by the families involved.

The Prevention Model

The after-school program model that we used to supplement ongoing AEP services was one that we had originally developed in our previous research with high-risk urban African American youth having characteristics similar to those of the youth presently targeted, who had been referred to a community youth services clinic because of problematic behavior (Hanlon, Bateman, Simon, O'Grady, & Carswell, 2002, 2004). This after-school programming model, *The Village Model of Care*, was found to reduce involvement in criminal activities, including violence, among these youth services clients.

The primary objective of the present application of the principles of the *Village* model was to foster the development of a positive lifestyle and to prevent the initiation and/or progression of deviant behavior among AEP youth, most of whom were also involved in health-compromising behaviors. Employing an approach that involved family, school, and community to address problems experienced by youth living in disadvantaged urban environments, the present approach involved three major components: 1) Structured group mentoring; 2) Parental support services; and 3) Community outreach services.

Structured Group Mentoring: A core component of our after-school approach involved structured group mentoring, whereby small groups of youth met on an ongoing basis with young adult mentors who functioned in a dual capacity as educators and advisors (Hanlon et

al., 2002). At the AEP, three mentoring groups were scheduled to operate simultaneously, providing a capacity to serve 30–36 youth at any given time, 5 days per week, for approximately 3 hours each day. Mentored group activities involved remedial education and study skills exercises, assistance with homework assignments, and discussions regarding social skills, personal competence, health promotion and risk reduction strategies.

Parental Support Services: In addition to access to needs assessment and referral services, as needed (see below), caregivers were directly involved in program activities principally through their participation in 2-hour bimonthly family gatherings at school, which offered them an opportunity to network with other parents regarding common issues, bond with project staff, directly communicate with school administrators and teachers, and talk informally with individuals from the community having expertise relevant to child development and family issues.

Community Outreach Services: This component of the program served a dual purpose, the first involving the caregiver and the second the student: 1) Community outreach services were designed to assist families in identifying and obtaining needed community resources during the course of the program; and 2) For the students, supplemental program services consisted of field trips that were both educational and recreational in nature. Besides providing cultural enrichment activities, field trips were intended to strengthen mentor/mentee relationships and provide opportunities for mentors to model pro-social behaviors. They also promoted the interaction of both mentors and mentees with participating caregivers and community volunteers.

Theoretical Perspective

The program was guided by the tenants of the *social developmental model* of Hawkins et al. (1992), specifying the role that risk and protective factors play in the development of deviant behavior. Aimed at decreasing risk and increasing protection, the program was specifically designed to prevent both the initiation of, and escalation to, risky behavior, while simultaneously enhancing internal strengths and fostering resilience. In view of the relationship found between increased academic achievement and a reduction of subsequent problem behavior (Gottfredson et al., 2004; Tarter, Sambrano, & Dunn, 2002), the program was also designed to improve academic performance through remedial education, instruction, and study-skills exercises and by assisting students with homework assignments.

Staff Training

Because of our past experiences in implementing the core components of the model with urban African American youth having characteristics similar to, but less deviant than, the youth presently targeted, descriptions of program activities were contained in an implementation manual that provided prescribed interaction and sequential topics of discussion employed during the course of the study. Mentors were trained in the use of this resource, as well as in methods of assisting participants to cope with the problematic aspects of their lives, including those currently occurring at the school, and in their preparation for the future. All of the mentors underwent a six-week training course prior to the start of the intervention phase, which was conducted by an individual with many years of mentoring experience. The Project Manager, an experienced social research scientist, also participated in these training sessions, contributing information relating to the research aspect of the program under study. Topics covered during this training course included the initiation and development of rapport; sensitivity with regard to culture, gender, and sexual orientation; responsibility for the protection of confidentiality; and the importance of respect for the child and the preservation of trust. Because of the uniqueness of the students in attendance at the AEPs, specifically with respect to their involvement in violent activities, ATOD use, and risky sexual behaviors, staff

also underwent two additional weeks of training under the direction of the AEP Crisis Counselor Supervisor. Topics covered during these supplemental sessions included training in crisis management and behavioral control; the maintenance of vigilant monitoring and supervision of youth; and the utility of reward systems in promoting program attendance, academic achievement, and positive behaviors.

Program Implementation and Findings

Obtained in compliance with IRB guidelines, self-report information was provided by 109 (78 males and 31 females) youth at baseline by means of an interview schedule, the Youth Questionnaire, which examined risk and protective factor information based on self-report characteristics, circumstances, and experience during adolescence that had previously been found by us to be predictive of drug use and criminal activity in adults (Hanlon et al., 2002, 2004). In addition to demographic information, the principal areas covered by the interview schedule were: 1) family stability and functioning; 2) school interest and performance, 3) the deviance of peer associates; and 4) the extent of delinquent behavior. At baseline, the time periods covered by the questionnaire were lifetime and past six months. Those individuals primarily responsible for the care of the children were also administered an interview-based questionnaire, the Caregiver Questionnaire, which, in addition to containing family background and parent information, also provided information on the behavior and adjustment of the children from the caregivers' perspective.

Findings

Considering the uniqueness of the prevention-targeted sample and setting and the resulting implementation experiences of the program evaluation to date, the following descriptive and process findings are presented because of their potential to inform the planning of future investigations in this challenging area of prevention research. Specifically, the reported findings contain information regarding the behavioral and background characteristics of the AEP student sample and, with respect to the after-school program, the nature of the AEP school setting that necessitated changes in intervention program procedures from those originally envisioned. Also included are considerations regarding intervention obstacles, modifications, and policies, as well as recommendations relating to after-school programming that are likely to be helpful in determining the feasibility of prevention strategies targeting alternative education student samples at high risk for the development of lifelong deviant behavior.

Characteristics of the Evaluation Study Sample—The social and demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Over a two-year evaluation period, 109 (60 experimental; 59 comparison) urban African American male and female youth attending two middle-school alternative education programs participated in the project. These youth, primarily male (72%), who ranged in age from 11 to 16, were typically from low-income, multi-problem families who resided in poor urban neighborhoods. Of the 60 students who participated in the intervention, 21 failed to complete the program. Analysis of participant information indicated that students who failed to complete the program were essentially equivalent to those students who completed the program on the following relevant characteristics: age, gender, school performance, overall involvement in delinquent activities, criminal history, and alcohol and tobacco use. Students who failed to complete the program were, however, more likely to have smoked marijuana and sold drugs. (It is of interest here that for the entire sample, substance abuse and related distribution behavior was relatively low in spite of extant negative environmental influences.)

Information on the involvement of the youth in risky behaviors is presented in Table 2. In spite of the relatively young age of the students, their history of involvement in problematic behaviors was extensive. Seventy percent having previously been arrested in spite of their

relatively young age, they had been referred from the city's public school system to the AEPs for committing violent acts or engaging in other serious infractions on school property. All of the students were considered to be at especially high-risk for continued academic failure, escalating behavioral problems, and eventual initiation of substance abuse.

The Effect of School Setting on Study Routines—Except for a recruitment shortfall, initial study routines at the school offered few unanticipated challenges — the first months of the study were devoted to start-up activities, including steering committee meetings, project staff trainings, recruitment, site preparation, and school staff orientation sessions. A continual problem-solving dialogue with AEP school administrators and staff during this first year of the project provided a forum for addressing study-related issues and further tailoring of the proposed intervention to meet the unique needs and characteristics of the high-risk AEP youth participants.

Recruitment: The recruitment process was fraught with difficulties from the outset. As part of school start-up activities, initial contact with families was made by the Principal of the AEPs participating in the study, in order to determine potential interest in the research program and obtain family permission for future contact by staff. Upon receiving notice of interest from the family, research staff attempted to contact prospective participants to inform them about the nature of the project and obtain informed consent for participation from both caregivers and students. However, in spite of initial indications of a willingness of families to participate, numerous attempts were typically required to arrange face-to-face meetings with both caregivers and students. In the majority of instances, caregivers were difficult to contact because they either failed to return telephone calls or business card messages left at their homes, refused to answer the door when at home, could not be reached by telephone calls at work, or did not show up for scheduled appointments. The students themselves were difficult to contact because many either did not regularly attend school; could not be located, even though attempts were made to contact them at home or in their neighborhoods; or were unable to be located because caregivers did not know their immediate whereabouts.

When contact was made with caregivers and youth by study recruitment staff, reactions related to information regarding project participation were often negative. Among the concerns of the caregivers were the logistic and safety problems associated with the early evening release of program participants, the prior commitment of the children to other sponsored after-school activities, and/or the perception of marginal benefits for subjects not assigned to the after-school intervention. Among the concerns of the youth were a reluctance to participate daily in an additional school program activity; prior involvement in other sponsored after-school activities; lack of participation by a close friend; potential interpersonal conflicts with other program participants; and, for those subjects not included in the after-school program, the expectation of marginal benefits.

A lower-than-expected AEP school enrollment of 11–14 year olds, largely resulting from “No Child Left Behind” legislation, reduced the number of general school students transferred to AEPs for disciplinary reasons. In reaction to this legislation, referring schools tended to reduce the number of students they suspended or expelled in order that they not be classified as “persistently dangerous schools” and thus be subject to unfavorable central administrative action. Ultimately, this resulted in a reduced number of general school students transferred to AEPs for disciplinary reasons. This reduction in the potential pool of study candidates necessitated a decision on our part to broaden our age range of eligibility to include 15 and 16 year olds in our study selection process. This decision was actually more consistent with earlier focus group study discussions with AEP school administrators and staff. In these discussions, it was determined that contrary to the previous application of our intervention model, which targeted younger students prior to their habitual involvement in deviant or disruptive behaviors,

we would now be uniformly dealing with students who habitually manifested problematic behavior. All of our study participants, regardless of age, would tend to be similar in terms of behavioral problems, academic shortcomings, levels of social maturity, class attendance, and involvement in problematic activities. Including older, as well as younger, students in the pool of eligible study candidates for the program was thus not only deemed acceptable but warranted.

Implementation of the After-school Intervention—Because at the beginning of the school year (September/October) numerous AEP school admissions had been transferred from other schools, school administrators requested that after-school prevention program activities be delayed until November to allow sufficient time for student orientation and acclimation to school routines following summer recess. The after-school program time schedule had to be further modified for student safety reasons because of the occurrence of early darkness during the winter months and the fact that most of the students were dependent on public transportation because they were not from the immediate school neighborhood. This modification reduced the number of hours per day devoted to after-school program activities from three to two, which was counterbalanced to some degree by increasing the number of days per week the program was administered from four to five. Fortuitously, because the additional day was a Friday, this latter change also allowed for more effective preparation in assisting the students to cope with challenges they could potentially face over the weekend.

After-School Program Location: Unfortunately, lack of space in the main school building necessitated utilizing space in an adjacent building for after-school program activities. This separation from the main school building, which was a deviation from our previous experiences in implementing similar preventive intervention programs with middle-and high school students, resulted in numerous disruptive changes to previously established program routines. The use of an adjacent building necessitated a daily transfer of highly distractible students from one building to another. Students were escorted from their individual classrooms to the school's lunchroom, where they were required to sign-in and wait until all program participants were assembled. When all students were present and accounted for, they were then escorted to the annex by project staff. Maintaining order among the more problematic students during this routine, even though accompanied by mentors, generally proved to be daunting. On most days, youth who were typically prone to highly active and excitable behavior failed to remain orderly and engaged in such disruptive activities such as running, purposely walking slowly, and/or engaging in “horse play.” In an attempt to address these difficulties, program routines were continually modified, including the creation of more stringent student escorting routines and the granting of behavioral incentives for good behavior during transit procedures.

As previously indicated, as a result of a lower-than-expected number of transfers of general school students to AEPs for disciplinary reasons (an indirect consequence of “No Child Left Behind” legislation) and despite the inclusion of a wider range of students as part of the pool of eligible study candidates, recruitment of a sufficient number of students who met study-related eligibility criteria proved to be quite challenging. Because of the dearth of referrals to the schools, recruitment of subjects had to be continued throughout the school year, which created a number of unanticipated problems, including the shortening of intervention exposure. Recruitment of participants well into the intervention period severely limited the number of days some participants took part in program activities. Also, ancillary material and instruction provided to early enrolled participants were not routinely available to subsequently enrolled individuals because they either represented distractions and/or were inappropriate for longer-term participants. Cohesive group development, reflecting the bonding of program participants to one another and project staff, was also undermined by the influx of later participants into the program. Frequently, delayed entries into the program tended to hinder or disrupt an already precarious group development process that had the effect of causing some early participants

to revert from what Tuckman (1984) described as “norming,” or group bonding behavior, to “storming,” or disruptive confrontational behavior.

Extent and Quality of Program Participation

Participant Behaviors: On most days, implementation of after-school program routines was continually hampered by the occurrence of behavioral problems. Students routinely engaged in disorderly conduct and were uniformly resistant to completing required academic exercises and homework assignments. Moreover, participants tended to display a wanton disregard for authority and/or authority figures that required staff to restate program rules and procedures continuously and to conduct meetings with the most egregious transgressors on numerous occasions. In a few instances, students engaged in fights with one another while at the program that required project staff to forcibly intervene. (One particularly egregious incident involved a staff member being threatened with physical harm by a student.) As a result of repeated problem behavior and a consistent lack of participation in scheduled activities, project staff had no choice but to remove many of the more disruptive students from the after-school program. Unfortunately, because of such behavior, a larger percentage of students than originally anticipated, based upon our past experiences, were considered unable to be engaged and retained in the preventive intervention process. In effect, a remedial education-based group approach for many of the students was finally, though reluctantly, considered to be inappropriate.

For less recalcitrant students, we found two practices to be especially useful in countering behavioral problems and a lack of motivation regarding academic exercises and homework assignments. The first involved modeling program procedures on ongoing school practices by creating student behavioral and academic incentives. As part of daily after-school program routines, students were already being provided a nutritious snack, and it was decided that every two weeks, students could earn an additional snack if they engaged in positive behavior and completed academic exercises and homework assignments. The effectiveness of this relatively simple procedure was quite remarkable. In the second modification, assignment of students to a particular mentoring group was determined on the basis of similarly inclined interpersonal relations and academic abilities rather than an assignment based on grade level alone. In contrast to our prior group assignment routine, it quickly became apparent that student behavioral problems were significantly reduced when mentoring groups were comprised of students who had favorable interpersonal relationships with one another and who possessed similar academic abilities.

Parental Engagement and Involvement—Through the provision of case management services to families, the program was able to forge strong bonds with a majority of the parents enrolled in the program, which seemingly motivated a large number of them to consistently participate in the two-hour bimonthly family gatherings held at the school during the 7-month intervention period. Typically, more than half the caregivers of those students who were attending the after-school program participated in the family gathering meetings held at the school. These meetings provided the caregivers an opportunity to bond with project and school personnel, share information with other parents regarding common issues, speak directly to community experts regarding child development and family issues, and observe the participation of their children in student performances. Highlighting the unique talents of the students (e.g., poetry readings, skits, dances, etc.), these performances were designed as an additional motivating factor to promote parental involvement in family gatherings and as a means of showcasing the involvement of their children in positive activities at the school.

Observations and Recommendations

As indicated throughout this report, implementing an after-school preventive intervention for youth attending AEPs can be exceptionally challenging, and undertaking such a task requires an extraordinary degree of determination and commitment from project staff and school personnel, as well as the aggressive enlistment of the support of often overburdened parents. Youth referred to AEPs require highly structured programming, vigilant monitoring and supervision, and the constant provision of performance incentives designed to engage them in program activities. In addition, it is imperative that project staff be appropriately trained to be able to function under adverse circumstances and to remain alert with respect to the likely occurrence of disruptive and/or violent behavior among the student participants.

Addressing the unique and specialized needs of students referred to AEPs for disruptive behavior and the challenges faced in implementing a suitable preventive intervention program, the school administration and preventive programming recommendations presented below are based on the findings of others reported in the literature, as well as our own experiences.

School System Administration

Research has shown that AEPs can have a positive short-term effect on youth academic performance, self-esteem, and attitudes toward school because of their small class sizes, low student-to-teacher ratios, and provision of supplemental support services (Cox & Davidson, 1995; Hosley, 2003; Zweig, 2003). However, AEPs that are used as “dumping grounds” and/or as punishment alternatives for troubled youth and that lack sufficient school system support with respect to funding, staff, and adequate physical resources are likely to fail to alter the problematic behaviors of their students (Aron, 2006; Cox, 1999; Hosley, 2003; Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Zweig, 2003). Administrative support is especially necessary to ensure that AEP students do not undermine the rehabilitative process through persistent truancy. In spite of their potential, AEPs are powerless as an educational rehabilitative mechanism if students do not attend school. Understandably, in such settings, “after-school” programs are likewise untenable.

AEP Program Administration—Recommendations with regard to the functioning of AEPs can best be determined by examining the literature with respect to the characteristics of those AEPs that have been shown to be effective. Effective AEPs have generally been highly structured in their approach, but flexible with respect to programming components. They tend to be academically focused, with curricula tailored to meet the multiple needs of their students. Generally, their instruction is creative and engaging, and the culture of the school designed to promote high student expectations. Although successful AEP teachers are caring and supportive, they employ positive disciplinary techniques; absent or tardy students are contacted or monitored; and reward systems are employed to promote academic achievement and school attendance (Cox, 1999). Tending to be located in clean and well-maintained buildings that are conducive to learning, effective schools have established support networks within the immediate social, cultural, and business communities (Aron, 2006; Hosley, 2003; Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Schorr, 1997). Teachers in effective programs participate in rigorous ongoing professional development activities (Aron, 2006; Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Schorr, 1997) and generally receive supplemental training in crisis management and behavioral control to enhance teaching strategies and to reduce the likelihood of staff burnout. Ideally, monetary incentives for school personnel are provided to compensate for the numerous stressors and hazards faced in these unusually challenging environments.

AEP Student Selection and Placement—Although AEPs are specifically designed to meet the needs of youth who manifest social, emotional, and/or behavioral problems in school,

even these dedicated programs may at times be ill-equipped to meet the needs of youth requiring specialized medical and/or counseling services. Ideally, to determine program placement suitability, a comprehensive assessment of the salient characteristics and needs of prospective AEP students should be undertaken. For example, older youth with long histories of disruptive and/or uncooperative behavior in general academic school settings often show disinterest in typical AEP educational or behavioral services. Instead, such students may represent suitable candidates for alternate programs focused on vocational and/or more tailored life-skills training.

After-School Preventive Intervention Programs

Transitional Nature of AEPs—Because youth are temporarily assigned to AEPs for rehabilitation and/or special support purposes at any time during the school year, they are likely to be unfamiliar not only with their new school but with their fellow students and the surrounding community. They are also likely to be uneasy about the remedial nature of AEP programming and, along with their caregivers, likely to view such placements as punitive in nature. Because of what they consider as a temporary arrangement, and one that is not especially appealing, youth and their caregivers may experience difficulties bonding with AEP school personnel and have little inclination to participate in supplemental preventive programming activities occurring at the school.

Beyond the usual challenges associated with implementing a preventive intervention model in a general school setting, problems encountered in AEP settings are additionally complicated because of the transitional nature of the typical AEP. Contrary to general schools, whose admission rates decrease substantially after the beginning of the school year, AEP schools are unique in that their admissions, which consist of problematic students transferred from other schools, remain at a relatively constant rate over the course of the school year. As a result of this fact, conducting an after-school intervention involving a set sequence of topical presentations at an AEP site requires that the duration of the program be sufficiently comprehensive, yet uniquely tailored in length, to enable the processing of successive groups of students over the year in order to avoid the logistical and disruptive problems associated with the continual influx of new program participants.

Caregiver Involvement—Although ordinarily difficult to achieve, establishing strong, positive relationships with caregivers and fostering their involvement in program activities are especially important in the preventive intervention process that are likely to influence youth participation in program activities and ultimately contribute to overall program success. In AEP settings, where the needs are so great, providing case management assistance to caregivers in the utilization of needed community resources, as an additional component of a preventive intervention, has the potential to establish a bond between project staff and parents, with a resultant increase in student after-school program participation. The latter effect assumes, however, that caregivers are able to exercise control, or at least have an influence, over the behavior of their children, which is not always the case in many of the families of AEP students.

Low Student to Staff Ratio—Because of the constant need to monitor the after-school program activities of AEP youth to facilitate learning and reduce interpersonal conflicts, the involvement of at least two to three staff members is recommended for each group of eight to ten students. In view of the volatile nature of the recipients, the use of smaller groups and ensuring the compatibility among group members are desirable, although not easily attainable, program objectives.

Program Flexibility and Structure—Modifications to the preventive intervention program structure or activities (e.g., changes in start time, number of hours of participation,

etc.) may occasionally be necessary to meet school and/or participant needs. However, program activities should remain as structured as possible in terms of topics and activities, while at the same time be creative and engaging, in order to maintain student focus, interest, and involvement. In addition, the program's academic goals, schedules and routines, student expectations, and rules of behavior should be simple, clear, and consistently enforced.

Supplemental Staff Training—In view of the potential for violent interpersonal conflicts among students or between students and program staff, training of staff in anger defusing and physical containment techniques should be provided to staff prior to the start of program activities and be repeated periodically during implementation of the program to reduce the likelihood of serious participant and/or staff injury. Health and education safety training should also be provided to staff to insure an effective response to emergency situations.

Recruitment and Program Incentives—Because youth may be reluctant to prolong their school day by participating in an after-school intervention program, recruitment efforts clarifying the need for, and potential value of, the proposed intervention should be addressed in participant recruitment efforts. Such efforts may include providing general information about the program to parents and students during school orientation sessions, setting-up small group meetings with students to discuss and demonstrate typical program activities, and/or presentations by former participants regarding the potential benefits of program participation. Once youth are enrolled in the program, performance incentives should be used in the promotion of academic achievement, the fostering of positive behavior, and the maintenance of high rates of attendance.

Relationships with the Host School—Maintaining good relationships with AEP school administrators and teachers and ensuring their support for an after-school preventive intervention program are essential. It is important, therefore, that project staff and school personnel meet regularly to discuss program/school interactive activities, staff and student needs, and the existence of potential and actual issues or problems associated with program implementation. In supplementing AEP services already in place, project staff should be open to suggestions and advice from school personnel and be ready to respond promptly to possible areas of concern expressed by school personnel. In addition, project staff should be flexible with respect to programming demands and scheduling and, when possible, integrate effective AEP school practices into prevention program activities.

Structured Programming—To both increase interest and decrease distractibility, program activities with student participants should be sufficiently structured, consistently implemented, and appropriately tailored to meet their needs. Policies and procedures, projected daily program schedules, and behavioral expectation guidelines should be discussed with participants and posted at the outset of program implementation. Following these discussions and incorporation of necessary alterations or modifications, program operations should be strictly enforced and adhered to by both project staff and participants. Substantive deviations from standard operations by either staff or youth should be addressed immediately to avoid the undermining of program continuity, ill-advised alterations in planned activities, and the occurrence of disorderly conduct among participants.

A final process evaluation consideration involves a note of caution on participant selectivity that is likely to be operating in an after-school evaluation study conducted in an AEP setting. Since recruitment of study subjects is generally initiated through contacts at the school, there is a selection factor operating in those school settings with high absence rates, wherein more compliant students are likely to be contacted and ultimately engaged in an extracurricular preventive trial. This type of selection bias may be especially applicable to students involved in AEP programs, who typically have histories of school adjustment problems, including

chronic absenteeism. In limiting the range of targeted participants, this circumstance compromises an accurate assessment of the effects of any rehabilitative effort by potentially yielding more positive outcomes than would ordinarily be associated with an unselected group of AEP students. Evaluation studies need to take this selectivity into consideration in the interpretation of results.

Summary

Conducting a supplemental after-school prevention intervention program for AEP students is a daunting task because of multiple implementation obstacles and other challenges associated with the rehabilitative education of problematic youth. In addition to their immediate academic and behavioral management needs, youth referred to AEPs are in urgent need of effective preventive programming that modifies or curtails the trajectory of the early delinquent behavior in which many of them are engaged. The intent of the present report on the implementation of one such prevention effort is to contribute to the limited, but growing, body of knowledge regarding the functioning of alternative education programs; the types of youth who are likely to be referred to such programs; and the numerous, but not insurmountable, problems associated with supplemental prevention efforts in AEP settings. Besides revealing the importance of including the family in the rehabilitation effort, this report illustrates the need to supply school administrative system support for the underlying alternative education process to make meaningful rehabilitative efforts possible, including, among others, the establishment of student selection and triage procedures that include a vocational education alternative; the provision of strict monitoring and enforcement of school attendance; the selection of appropriately trained staff to deal with problematic child behavior; and the allocation of adequate physical resources. Demonstrating the importance of these issues, the information presented in this paper is also intended to assist in the design, development, and/or enhancement of future preventive intervention programs conducted under similar circumstances that are aimed at reducing problem behaviors exhibited by high-risk youth.

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Table 1

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	(<i>N</i> = 109)	%
Age		
11–12	11	10.0
13–14	64	58.7
15–16	34	31.2
Gender		
Male	78	71.5
Female	31	28.4
Race		
African American	109	100
Grade		
6	15	13.7
7	36	33.0
8	58	53.2
Family Structure (living in home)		
Both parents	25	22.9
Single parent (mother)	48	44.0
Single parent (father)	2	1.8
Grandparent(s)	20	18.3
Other	14	12.8

Table 2**Youth Involvement in Risky Behaviors**

Variables	(N = 109)	%
School-related activities		
Grade failure	52	47.7
Truancy	52	47.7
Suspension	108	99.1
Expulsion	94	86.2
Delinquent activities		
Damaging or destroying property	63	57.7
Shoplifting	41	37.6
Carrying a weapon (knife or gun)	70	64.2
Substance Use		
Alcohol	14	12.8
Tobacco	20	18.3
Marijuana	24	22.0
Illicit drug activity		
Selling drugs	23	21.1
Buying drugs for someone else	15	13.7
Paying to watch for the police	17	15.5
Criminal history		
Ever been arrested	76	69.7
Ever been convicted of a crime	26	21.1
Ever been on probation/parole	43	39.4