

Basic Skills Bulletin

News for and about the largest network of alternative learning centers in the nation



A Basic Skills Model Salem Alternative School, Salem, IN

This article is part of an on-going series about the learning centers and sponsoring organizations that make up the U.S. Basic Skills Network.

Salem Alternative School is located in the National Guard armory in Salem, Indiana, a rural community in the southern part of the state. The school opened in 1998 and serves about 35 students at a time, in grades 7-12. The students come from three high schools and three middle schools and are referred by their home school administrators. They include seniors who have failed their state graduation test, kids on probation, pregnant teens, special education students and those who are just having a hard time in school.

Students attend for half-day shifts each day, with most also attending their home school. The school's goal is to have the students return to their home school respecting themselves and feeling confident about their skills. In a few situations, such as a fifth year senior, the school helps the student prepare to earn a GED.

Start Slowly

"They tend to be really hostile when they first come," explains Carol Holsapple, the school director. "But by the second week, it's home for about 90 percent of the kids."

The school's approach is to take things slowly at the beginning as the students are introduced to the components of the U.S. Basic Skills Learning System. This gives students time to take the entry tests that help individualize the instruction and to become familiar with the system and materials. This is also the time when Holsapple and the students reach agreement about what they each expect from each other.

Share Responsibility

The school staff consists of Holsapple and Sharon Morgan. Holsapple found the role of teacher took on a different dimension with this system, one that was scary and hard. "You have to have the faith to let the kids do it."

As a result, the students take ownership and responsibility in this setting, organizing Parents' Day and Success Day as well as their own learning. "It blows my mind and home school

administrators' minds," said Holsapple. "They or the counselors walk in and the kids don't even notice they're in the room."

The students also serve as resources and teachers to each other. With the range of ages and skills all in one room, and the expectation that each will help another, having younger and older students together works well.

Provide Structure

Each week, Holsapple and Morgan use the U.S. Basic Skills system to help each student set a guideline of work to be done by Friday. That goal, along with the frequent feedback from mastery tests, gives the students a good sense of how they are doing.

There is also structure for resolving conflict at the school. If something cannot be settled—between two students or between a student and Holsapple—each side selects a student and tells them their side of the situation. The decision of the two "arbitrators" is final for all parties.

Another example of structure is that each young person has a personal space on the wall. That

is where students can put up their work and home school administrators can leave a note.

Use the System

Holsapple explored the U.S. Basic Skills Learning System for a year before purchasing it, questioning the results, which she thought “were too good.” In 1998, the decision was made to go with the system. The school has added to the system each year, purchasing additional instructional materials.

During the 1999-2000 school year, over 100 kids attended the Alternative School. One aspect of the system that made it possible for just two people to provide instruction for that many students was the test scoring system. As Holsapple explained, “You give the kid one form of the mastery test he or she needs, they fill out the answer sheet and then run the sheet through the scanner. If they score 80 percent or better, they move on. If not, they study some more and then test their mastery again, using a second form of the test.”

For Holsapple, an important part of using the system is measuring learning gains. Using the system’s data analysis program, Holsapple found the students averaged 3 grade gains in reading, 2.4 grade gains in math and 2.6 grade gains in language arts. In addition, several seniors who had failed the state test showed a “significant increase” in scores as determined by the state education department.

For more information about Salem Alternative School, contact Carol Holsapple at (812) 883-4893.

What the Students at Salem Alternative School have to say about their school:

What would you tell your parents?

- I can focus more
- I am making up the skills I need.
- I am accepted here, therefore I feel good about myself.
- I have friends.
- My grades are good!
- Get more kids here.

What do you like?

- Get to set your own learning times and choose materials.
- Get more help, 1-on-1.
- Smaller classes.
- No switching classes every hour.
- Everyone is equal – no favorites.
- Only have one guideline/rule: RESPECT

Positive things about the school:

- It’s better than detention.
- Makes peace at home — not grounded all the time.
- Have my own wall space.

What would you tell your friends about the school?

- Come!
- You get to work at your own pace.
- They work with you to get your grades up.
- No put downs are tolerated.
- You will be treated with respect and no one will talk about why you are here.

What would you tell your teachers and administrators?

- Send more kids.
- Let kids have choice to come to Alternative school instead of just principals being able to make the decision.
- We get respect for our efforts.
- Staff really cares.
- Feel relaxed and accepted hear.
- Feel more at home here. Not ashamed to be here.

What I would tell friends, parents, teachers, whoever would want to know about Alternative School is that:

“It isn’t just for troubled students. If you are depressed all the time, and need to have your own space far away, it is very quiet, the work is easy, you only have to be here 3 hours. The teachers are great here. If you need help, just raise your hand. Things are 1-on-1, and we’re like a family. If something is wrong with someone else, then we are here as a group to help them.

They now have a U. S. Basic Skills history program which is very fun, exciting, easy. You learn a lot and get to talk to someone. I think their policy if you get lower than 80% you redo your lesson is great. They try to help you understand that you can do better if you try hard enough, and if you can learn it, you will make it. There are no negative thoughts.”

Amanda B.