

**Establishing a New Normal in Alternative Education for At-Risk Youth**

Includes:

Final Report, Project Information Document, Informed Consent Waiver, Semi Structured Interview Questions, Email Sent to Potential Interviewees

By: Bryce Hunt-Parker

Completed for: Dalhousie Youth Support Services

Supervising Professor: Dr. Joel Cahn

Trent Community Research Centre Project Coordinator: Brittany Finigan

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Suite 3.10, Trent University Student Centre

1600 West Bank Drive

Peterborough, ON K9L 0G2

Phone: [\(705\) 748-1093](tel:(705)748-1093)

Email: [terc@trentu.ca](mailto:terc@trentu.ca)

Website: [trentu.ca/terc](http://trentu.ca/terc)

Establishing a New Normal in Alternative Education for At-Risk Youth

By Bryce Hunt-Parker

Department of Forensic Science, Trent University

FRSC 4890: Project #6008

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Joel Cahn

Host Organization: Dalhousie Youth Support Services

Host Organization Supervisor: Karen Carr

Trent Community Research Center Coordinator: Brittany Finigan

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**Abstract:**

Alternative education offers a different style of education than the traditional school model and uses a different approach to provide education to at-risk youth in a more personalized and supportive way. Alternative education promotes flexibility, individualized support from peers, and smaller class sizes to peak interest and appeal to the learning styles of at-risk youth. This research project was completed with the Dalhousie Youth Support Services and sought to investigate different alternative education models such as the charter school model, the alternative program model, and the alternative school model. The Dalhousie Youth Support Services requested the findings for increasing the number of students in the program by expanding upon criteria which students can qualify. This study examined different factors such as program funding, the benefits that the program delivered to at-risk youth, and the distinctive features of the program. Findings from this research and the interviews found that the alternative school is the only model available in Ontario that met the criteria of the Dalhousie Youth Support Services. This research project primarily focused on the alternative school model and explored unique characteristics that various existing alternative schools possessed. Overall, the alternative school model showed many promising features that could support an increase in student enrollment in programming at Dalhousie Youth Support Services by reducing the requirements for admission. Moreover, this model is fully funded by the provincial government.

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## **Introduction**

The term At-Risk youth is defined as a child who is less likely to transition successfully into adulthood (At Risk Youth Programs, 2021). The likelihood of one's success can be assessed in many manners such as academic success, the ability to be independent, job readiness and most relevant for this study, the ability to become a positive member of society by avoiding criminal involvement (At Risk Youth Programs, 2021). There are many factors that may have an influence on an individual being more susceptible to becoming an at-risk youth. Some of these influences may include home life, school life, and the condition and/or disabilities that one may possess (At-Risk Youth Programs, 2021). The pressures created by society have influenced many youths and have affected their transition to adulthood. These poor transitions are seen to be related to a youth's social and educational challenges (Berzin, 2010). The vulnerabilities that at-risk youth reveal in early adolescence can be strong indicators of whether a youth is likely to become at-risk and if the use of alternative education can be used to mitigate these effects. Dalhousie Youth Support Services (DYSS) is a non-profit organization located in Peterborough, Ontario. The DYSS currently runs four programs through their facility: the enhanced learning program, the attendance center program, the reintegration and community support program, and the extrajudicial measures and extrajudicial sanctions program. The DYSS can host at-risk youth who have been charged under the Youth Criminal Justice Act but does not receive funding for teaching at-risk students who have not yet been charged. The DYSS would like to find a program model and sources of funding that will allow their organization to host at-risk youth that have not yet been charged. This project investigated different alternative school models that have been implemented in Ontario and across Canada, the costs and benefits associated with running an

alternative education program, and possible sources of funding that are associated with running alternative education programs.

The purpose of this research is to investigate funding for an alternative education program that can be implemented in Peterborough by the Dalhousie Youth Support Services to reduce the likelihood that at-risk youth will have contact with the Youth Criminal Justice System. A review of existing alternative education programs was completed in addition to interviews with current educational professionals and organizations who have implemented alternative education for at-risk youth. Together this information was used to assess the possibility of similar programs in Peterborough, offered by DYSS. The research explored possible sources of funding for this program as well as the costs and benefits for at-risk youth who will be enrolled in this program, and investigated different alternative education models in Ontario and across the Country. Alternative education for at-risk youth is important as it delivers extra academic support to students (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). The use of extra academic support and a lower student-to-teacher ratio allows students to engage in the type of schooling that best fits their needs. With the implementation of this program, more youth in Peterborough will have access to alternative learning and prevention-style programming which will help reduce the likelihood of contact with the youth criminal justice system. This will not only benefit the academic lives of at-risk youth in Peterborough but will also help students develop life skills that will support them in becoming positive members of society.

The significance of this research is to provide at-risk youth with an alternate source of education that will help them become more successful members of society. Youth face many challenges and obstacles which may lead them to become at-risk. Some of these challenges are early risk factors that may put youth at risk of encountering the Youth Criminal Justice System. Some of these risk factors include temperament and personality, impulsiveness, low educational achievement, child rearing and parental conflict (Farrington, 2005). Using the knowledge of characteristics of at-risk youth can help create efficient programs that meet the needs of students.

One important feature of alternative education is the decrease in student-to-teacher ratio. Studies have documented that the relationship-based, student-centred method has shown academic and social success for at-risk students (Basford & Trout, 2020). There are also many alternative education programs across the United States that have hosted students who have not succeeded in the traditional system but who are successful in alternative programming (Basford

& Trout, 2020). The Bronx Arena High School is an alternative education program that serves students who do not have enough credits to graduate, who are over age, and who have dropped out of high school. They employ a self-paced personalized plan as well as a focus on relationship-building to help at-risk students succeed (Basford & Trout, 2020).

Another alternative education program, the Rise Up Program delivered by the Santa Clara County Library District, has created alternative education for youth at risk of violent or drug crime. This program has shown the importance of improved equity and flexibility to meet the needs of students (Brown, 2021). There are many key features involved with alternative education for at-risk students that have helped lead to their success. Alternative education in Peterborough will allow students to have schooling with the potential to help and better benefit their life with a higher likelihood of success as compared to their participation in the traditional school system. There is a need for alternative education for at-risk youth who have not been involved with the Youth Criminal Justice System. The research completed can allow at-risk youth in Peterborough to have access to alternative education before contact with the Youth Criminal Justice System.

Alternative education can be seen as a tool to help at-risk youth develop skills and abilities that reduce the likelihood of contact with the Youth Criminal Justice System. The use of alternative education moves away from the traditional schooling model and gives at-risk youth the ability to become more engaged while receiving more focused care and attention. This is done by lowering the student-to-teacher ratio while also exploring alternative learning methods that best suit the student. Alternative education programs address the needs of students who have become detached from the traditional education system (McFadden, 2010). Extra academic support and a focus on developing essential social skills in alternative education can help provide at-risk youth with essential skills to become successful members of society. This can be done by incorporating community collaboration and participation to improve and expand on self-determination skills (MCFadden, 2010). Alternative education can provide essential programming for students to help with their social and academic success. The programs that at-risk youth engage in can help connect student's academics to real-world skills. Connecting student's interests with real-world skills allows at-risk students to engage in interests and explore different occupations that can support their involvement in the community (MCFadden, 2010). Exploring students' interests and ensuring that learning is relevant can help motivate at-risk

students to continue with their academic success while also finding purpose for their future life opportunities. Alternative education for at-risk youth can contribute many positives to the lives of students, such as academic and social success. The use of alternative education creates an important starting point for at-risk youth while also using real-life experiences to provide a more suitable education for their needs. Alternative education can be seen as a key factor in the lives of at-risk youth.

There are many different programs throughout Ontario that deliver funding for alternative education for youth who have been involved with the Youth Criminal Justice System. This is the result of the implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act. Before the implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act, many more youth were incarcerated (Government of Canada, 2021). However, in Ontario, it is difficult for organizations to find funding for students who are at risk of being in contact with the system. Research has identified that there remains a major knowledge gap in programming for at-risk youth in Ontario. This continues to have a negative effect on programs that need funding for at-risk students. Although there are many viable options for convicted youth, funding for at-risk youth is not as easy to secure for many organizations. This is due to a lack of access to information online or through literature review. From this research, funding for at-risk youth was only found through the interview process. Finding sources of funding will allow the Dalhousie Youth Support Services and other organizations across Ontario to have access to information regarding funding to help create programs in their region. With the use of alternative education programs, at-risk youth who have the potential to encounter the Youth Criminal Justice System can be guided on the correct path.

The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) serves Canadian youth between the ages of 12 and 18-years old. This Act was implemented in 2003 to replace previous legislation that caused many concerns for Canadian youth (Government of Canada, 2021). These concerns involved the overuse of incarceration and courts in less serious cases, unfairness in sentencing, lack of reintegration for released youth, and better accounting for the interests of the individual (Government of Canada, 2021). The purpose of the YCJA is to better address the needs and desires of young persons who need assistance. To prevent future incarcerations, discovering the challenges that at-risk youth face and delivering proper reintegration programs following incarceration can mitigate the risks associated with young offenders (Government of Canada, 2022). There are many different alternative education models that have shown success when

enrolling at-risk youth. Some examples of these programs are the Charter School Model which is only found in Alberta, the Alternative Program Model, and the Alternative School Model.

Establishing a program for at-risk youth before they are convicted and enter the Youth Criminal Justice system creates a positive path for youth who have difficulty following the traditional school model. Developing an alternative education system for at-risk youth helps students engage in the schooling that best fits their needs while delivering essential life skills needed in society. The implementation of this program will also deliver a middle step to prevent contact with the youth criminal justice system. Rather than having youth commit a crime and then be eligible for enrollment in alternative education, this program will prevent contact with the justice system while also delivering essential academic and social skills.

The use of alternative education has been implemented in many different areas, which has shown many benefits for the development of at-risk youth. Alternative education has been seen to succeed in helping students who have had difficulty in the traditional school system and who were in danger of the school-to-prison pipeline (Lewis, 2020). The Rise Up program implemented for at-risk youth had overwhelmingly positive responses regarding alternative education and at-risk youth. Key factors to the success of this program included flexibility and adjusting assumptions (Brown, 2021). These factors helped with the accomplishments of the students in the program as well as helping at-risk youth avoid contact with the justice system. Allowing at-risk youth to experience a positive program that does not follow the same guidelines as the traditional school system created a better and more efficient work environment for at-risk youth. The purpose of alternative education is to contribute to the culture and desires of at-risk youth. This helps at-risk youth to feel engaged as positive members of the community while experiencing peers who care for them and a feeling of importance within their program (Brown, 2021). Alternative education programs for at-risk youth also use a variety of strategies to offer appropriate structure and support to meet the needs of the student (Merenda, 2020). This information is relevant to creating a model for at-risk youth as it shows the necessity of the program.

Understanding the risk factors of at-risk students can also provide information on how alternative education can be used as a suitable model to prevent contact with the Youth Justice System. There are two categories of risk factors, Static and Dynamic risks (Merenda, 2020). Static risk factors can be defined as characteristics of individuals that cannot immediately change

and for which the at-risk student is not responsible. Examples of these include an at-risk student's age, ethnic status, sex, socioeconomic status, and parental status (Merenda, 2020). The static risk factors that an at-risk student may face provide disadvantages and issues for students in their lives. Alternative education assesses and recognizes static risk factors but should not provide any programming to change these factors. Alternatively, dynamic risk factors have characteristics that can be changed and potentially can create a positive change in the life of at-risk students. Examples of dynamic factors include school motivation, confidence, social skills, and peer relationships (Merenda, 2020). At-risk students may demonstrate the inability to balance these risk factors which is why at-risk students are in the position they are in. Alternative education can provide resources and education to help address these risk factors. By engaging with at-risk youth and determining the risk factors they face, alternative education can provide a great source for improving the dynamic risk factors of a student. The use of alternative education has the possibility to provide essential skills which will allow the youth to become more successful in life and become a positive member of society.

The inability of at-risk students to use protective factors affects their ability to continue in the traditional school model and creates disadvantages for their success in school. Protective factors can be defined as strengths that individuals possess which help them overcome difficulties they face in life (Short and Russell-Mayhew, 2009). The two protective factors that are of great interest are assets and resources. An individual's assets can be described as an individual's characteristics or internal attributes that they obtain. Some examples of these characteristics are self-regulation, problem-solving skills, independence, self-esteem, cognitive skills, and self-esteem (Merenda, 2020). These characteristics help individuals become more positive members of society. When an individual has issues building their individual assets, this may create challenges in areas such as the traditional school model. The next protective factor is an individual's resources. The resource protective factor can be defined as external mechanisms that help provide individuals with different opportunities that can help lead to resilience (Merenda, 2020). Some examples of resource protective factors are social factors such as wealth and education as well as environmental factors such as having a strong support system. Developing social and environmental factors are essential to the development of youth. In the case that a youth does not have the ability to develop these factors, this may increase the chances that a youth is at risk of being involved with the Youth Justice System. Learning the importance

of protective factors in the life of youth is important to the prevention of criminal contact. This is important to the research as the use of alternative education can help assist at-risk youth in learning protective factors that may not be taught in the traditional school model. Developing protective factors is essential to the success of an individual and the use of alternative education can provide essential life skills to youth who are at risk of contact with the Youth Criminal Justice system.

The current methods of scholarly disciplinary actions for at-risk students involve suspensions and expulsions. These discipline policies are common and are intended to prevent students from creating issues while also demonstrating to peers that there are consequences (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Suspensions and expulsions can be seen as punishments that are only beneficial to the school, whereas the disciplinary action has little to no benefit for the student. They benefit the school system as teachers and principals will no longer have to deal with the student, but for at-risk students, this disciplinary action may cause more harm than good. Research has found that youth who experience a suspension have an increased risk of being involved with the criminal justice system in adolescence and early adulthood (Mowen, 2020). This shines a light on the negative impacts that the traditional school system can have on at-risk youth who are currently attending. Alternative education programs have explored using restorative practices and positive behavioral supports and interventions as opposed to disciplinary actions (Education Commission of the States, 2018). The use of alternative disciplinary actions can teach students valuable lessons while not interrupting their academic studies. Throughout the life of a child, schools have been documented as one of the most important social institutions for youth (Mowen, 2020). If one of the most important social institutions is providing disadvantages for at-risk youth, this may create issues that may lead to criminal contact. Gaining insight on the condition of the traditional school model is crucial in identifying the early signs of challenges faced by at-risk students. By shining light on the negative impacts that the traditional schooling system can have, the potential future benefits of having alternative education introduced throughout Ontario become evident. Although the traditional school model may be effective for most students, at-risk students should have the option to find the most beneficial education that fits their needs.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this research project included academic literature review, interviews of alternative education professionals, and an analysis of the interview's scripts. This project began September 20, 2022, when the Community Based Research Center Coordinator matched this project with the host Karen Carr and the Dalhousie Youth Support Services.

The initial literature review began on September 20, 2022, as soon as the project had received its match. The literature review of this project initially researched through two different academic source sites. The two academic libraries were Omni and Google scholar. Omni is an academic library through the My Trent portal that will search for scholarly articles that a user would like to access. Google Scholar is an open-access scholarly library that can be accessed through the internet. This academic literature review was continued until March 17, 2023. The academic literature review was relevant to this project as it used peer-reviewed research to expand and develop the research questions. This was relevant to the research project as it took reliable findings from multiple different sources of literature to answer the research questions. The literature review was also relevant to the research project as it was able to identify research gaps that were associated with alternative education for at-risk youth. Furthermore, the literature review was relevant as current existing research for at-risk youth was examined. The variables and factors examined through the literature review involved (1) investigating different alternative education models that have been implemented in Ontario and Canada, (2) the costs and benefits associated with running alternative education and, (3) the funding that is associated with running alternative education in the province. Through peer-reviewed articles and papers, this research project was able to propose answers to key research questions, and explored any pros and cons that are associated with the variable being examined. Information was collected from research articles and papers and placed into a word document containing different subtitles. There were four initial subtitles labelled in the word document. They were titled, alternative education models, costs associated with alternative education, benefits associated with alternative education, and sources of funding associated with alternative education. When information from the literature review was found using a scholarly paper, the hyperlink of the paper was added, the page the information was on was noted, and quotes found in the research article were recorded. This information was then later revisited and analyzed to determine if there was an interpretation of findings. If there was value to the literature found, it was assessed and used in the research

project. If the information was found to be unimportant, or did not fully answer the research question, it was deleted from the word document.

Interviews were conducted with alternative education professionals throughout the province of Ontario. Interviewees were recruited by contacting alternative education programs and alternative education professionals throughout Ontario. Prior to the interviews, an ethics application was completed through the ROMEO portal in the MyTrent system. The ethics application involved general information, research project information, study design and intervention, study participants, and risks and benefits. This application was completed by the head researcher, Bryce Hunt-Parker, on November 8, 2022, and then reviewed by the faculty supervisor Joel Cahn on November 21, 2022. The ethics application was then sent to ROMEO on November 26, 2022. The ethics application was sent back for further clarification, and responses were re-submitted on December 16, 2022. The ethics application through ROMEO was approved on December 22, 2022. After the approval of the ethics application, an email was created by the researcher and reviewed by the project host. Once approved, the email was sent to alternative education professionals and alternative education programs in Ontario (See Appendix D for an example of the email sent to participants). When individuals replied and showed interest in the project, they were given an information document (See Appendix A for Information Document), as well as an informed consent waiver (See Appendix B for Informed Consent Waiver) describing the research project. Once the waiver was completed and reviewed, interviewees were approved to participate in a virtual interview conducted via Zoom. An interview script was completed prior to the first Zoom meeting and was reviewed by the project host and the Trent Community Research Center coordinator (See appendix C for Interview Script). Interviews were recorded for the purposes of gathering information for the research project. If an interviewee requested that information remained private, the recording would be ended for that period. If interviewees requested that information be deleted, the information was deleted. After completion of the Zoom interview, the zoom recording was downloaded to an encrypted file stored on an encrypted laptop to ensure the privacy of the interviewee. The relevance of conducting interviews with alternative education professionals was to further investigate the research questions and to elaborate on questions that were not explained in the literature review.

The potential sources of biases that were present in the research project are publishing bias and bias from the interviews. Publishing bias is when limitations are excluded from

published research reports, in order to strengthen the findings of the study. To overcome the effects of publishing bias, both strengths and limitations of the study were included in the review. To account for the publishing bias, when negative findings of alternative education were found through academic sources or from the interviewees, the results were incorporated into the costs of alternative education section in the research. The addition of this section in the research showed flaws and issues present in different alternative education models. This helped provide the Dalhousie Youth Support Services information on alternative education programs that had little effect on preventing contact with the Youth Criminal Justice System.

The next source of bias that was present in the research project was from the conducted interviews. The bias from the interviews may stem from the interviewees not explaining questions fully due to professional risk. Professional risk may be a cause for an interviewee to withhold information due to the risk of affecting their employment. The bias from professional risk was minimized by allowing interviewees to have the option of being quoted directly or anonymously. This option gave interviewees the ability to share and expand on questions without professional risk. Another potential bias with interviews is the interviewees being biased to the organization they are affiliated with. To minimize this bias, only alternative education professionals and intervention program staff with experience in multiple alternative education programs were interviewed. This allowed interviewees to have different perspectives on multiple alternative education programs while having a greater chance to see issues presented within different programs. To further prevent biases from interviews, an interview script was created. This allowed all interviewees to be exposed to the same questions and the same opportunities to share their knowledge on alternative education programs for at-risk youth.

The ethical concerns involved with this research involved the use of interviews. During interviews, individuals provided information on their knowledge and experiences within alternative education for at-risk youth. To meet these needs, prior to conducting interviews, a set list of questions was created and reviewed by the researcher, host organization and ethics review board. The interviewee also had the option to not participate in the research, and the option to opt out of answering specific questions that they were not comfortable with. The ethics application allowed participants to decide if they would like to be quoted directly or anonymously. The research that was completed for this project involved the research of youth. Although the research involved at-risk youth, there were no interviews of any youth or questions regarding any

information that may disrupt the confidentiality of youth. The research project did not require the sharing of any experiences or names of children which will ensure the confidentiality of at-risk youth. Overall, this research project did not pose many ethical concerns for any party that was involved. This is due to the research focusing on the importance of alternative education, the impact of alternative education as well as the funding associated with alternative education.

### **Results/Major Findings**

The goal for this research project was to investigate different alternative education programs throughout Ontario and Canada and to determine the costs and benefits associated with running a program for the Dalhousie Youth Support Services. Another factor of this research was to determine how these programs could be funded. Overall, the research completed in this project had three major findings that can be associated with the proposed research questions. The first major finding from this research is that there are multiple ways that alternative education can be provided to at-risk youth throughout Ontario and the county. The three main models of alternative education that this research project focused on were Charter Schools, Alternative Programs and Alternative Schools. Charter schools have not yet been introduced in Ontario but are prevalent in Alberta and are able to deliver alternative education to at-risk youth. Alternative schools are present in Ontario and through research it was shown that many are involved with the Toronto District School Board. Alternative programs have also been offered in Ontario and can be found throughout the province. All three styles of alternative education are useful when considered as supports for at-risk youth. Another major finding of this research is that there are many different types of alternative schools that are found throughout the province. Through research, this project was able to discover many ways that alternative education can be delivered to at-risk youth in Ontario. The last major finding is that alternative education can be funded in different manners. Through the interview process of this research project, it was found that funding for alternative education is a slow and political process. Some funding for alternative education may be found through the Education and Community Partnership Program (ECPP) or through the City of Peterborough Trustee.

Examining the types of alternative education that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services could provide to at-risk youth, the three main styles were the Charter School Model, the alternative school model, and the alternative program model. The Charter School Model is currently implemented in the province of Alberta in Canada. Although it is only offered in

Alberta, in Ontario there are a few programs that very similar to the Charter School Model. These programs include the YMCA Academy and the recently closed Dragon Academy. The YMCA Academy is located in Toronto, Ontario and is considered an alternative school, but there are fees attached to the enrolment of a student (YMCA Academy, 2023). The YMCA Academy uses individualized special education support, small class sizes, socio-emotional support, and experiential learning to help benefit the students that attend the program (YMCA Academy, 2023). The YMCA Academy also allows high school students to earn their diploma through coursework and class material (YMCA Academy, 2023). From an interview, it was stated that these schools do “sponsor a handful of children but a majority attending are privileged”. This school has recently closed due to the pandemic, but was a private school that required tuition from students to attend. The Charter School Model was created to provide students with education in a different or enhanced way (Government of Alberta, 2023). The Charter School Model that is provided to at-risk students also follows the Alberta school curriculum allowing students to gain credits at the Charter School (Government of Alberta, 2023). This can be seen as a major benefit for Charter Schools as they help develop the skills of students while also allowing the student to finish their diplomas. From the interviews conducted for this research, two out of the three individuals were aware of the Charter School Model in Canada, while both interviewees explained that this model will likely never be implemented in Ontario. This was due to a variety of factors that were examined. The main being that the Charter School model is not fully funded by the government. A quote from an interviewee stated that “a vast majority of [students who attend charter schools] have the privilege to pay.” This poses many issues for the public who may not have the funds to send their child who requires alternative education. Delivering an appropriate school model for the Dalhousie Youth Support Services would require the public to have access to attend without having the needs to pay tuition fees. Another statement from the interviews explained, “I believe in public education, and we have a number of great schools [that do not require tuition]”. Although the Charter School model has shown promising characteristics that have helped at-risk youth, only dealing with a subset of the population does not solve the issue that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services wants to change.

Alternative programs are another style of alternative education that is offered in Ontario. Through the interview research, it was stated that alternative education programs are “fully funded” by the provincial government. This allows both privileged and non-privileged students

to have the ability to access this type of alternative education. There are two reasons that an at-risk student would be entered into an alternative program. An interviewee explained the first reason is that “this student needs more options” and is not able to meet the requirements of the traditional school model. This may be due to many factors such as requiring help in school motivation, confidence, social skills, and peer relationships (Merenda, 2020). The stated reason one would attend an alternative program from the interviewee was that students may fit into one of four categories. These categories include “the students are a threat to the school, the student has medical issues, the student is a poor attender, or the student is suffering from mental health”. An example given for the student being a threat to the school is if the student “brings five pounds of dope to school or were to stab another student”. This student would be charged and then potentially put into an alternative education program that deals with students who have been suspended. One alternative education professional from an interview explained “These programs will likely not mitigate at-risk youth contact with the criminal justice system”. This was explained as these programs “do not avoid exposure to the life of crime.” Although alternative education programs are implemented to help prevent criminal involvement in the case of a student being a threat, students will still have the same opportunities outside of the program. The next example of the use of alternative programs is if a student has medical issues. If a student were to be diagnosed with a disease that would require their absence from school, there are alternative education programs created to help continue education for these students. The next reason that a student would need an alternative program is due to bad attendance. This may be due to issues within the family, or may result when a student has missed enough classes that they will not be able to graduate. This student would be able to participate in a form of alternative education programs to help them achieve their diploma. In the event a student develops mental health concerns, alternative education programs would also be used if the student was able to continue education. This program would take them away from the traditional school model and allow them to complete schooling at their own pace. The main takeaway that was found in this research project through an interviewee is that they are “to meet curricular expectations at the most basic level to secure exits for students” as well as to “allow students to get through quickly and catch up”. The research of alternative education programs conducted in this research project, has shown that the main use for alternative education programs is to have students be caught up and through school without being a part of the traditional school model. The alternative program

model has shown that it is mainly to catch students up but not deliver life skills or personalized schooling to students.

The last model of alternative education that was researched in this research project was alternative education schools. From an interviewee, alternative schools can be described as “charter schools that are entirely funded by the provincial government”. Many of the qualities and characteristics that the charter school model possessed were key to delivering alternative education. The one challenge associated with Charter Schools was that they were not entirely funded by the provincial government. Alternative education schools are highly engaged, use a non-traditional hands-on approach, and deliver learning required by the Ontario Ministry of Education Curriculum (Brock University, 2022). Alternative education schools are also very versatile, and each school has a different identity and focus for at-risk youth. Some different alternative school approaches include: democratic education, holistic learning, mindful living, social justice, community outreach, and many more (Brock University, 2022). The ability for alternative education to be versatile and different from the traditional school model allows for at-risk students to attend to have a completely different source of education. Alternative education is being used for students who have become detached and have been unsuccessful in the traditional school model (MCFadden, 2010). By allowing the alternative school to mend to the abilities of students this has the potential to allow attending students to become more successful than they would be in the traditional school system here in Ontario. Overall, the alternative school model has shown many promising factors that are beneficial to at-risk students in Peterborough and across the province. Allowing students to have alternative education fully funded by the provincial government is a positive as it allows both privileged and non-privileged students to attend. This will allow for more students in the surrounding area to have the ability to attend, and alternative schools have many characteristics that have been shown to improve the learning of at-risk youth. The ability of alternative schools to step away from the traditional school model and mend their teaching to the styles of at-risk youth will greatly benefit the attending youth. From a research participant, it was also stated that “a benefit of alternative schools is that not all students must be at-risk”. This is a benefit to the Dalhousie Youth Support Services as their program required youth to have been in contact with the criminal justice system. This style of alternative education will help avoid that challenge.

Other major findings reflected the number of alternative schools that are present in Ontario. This study focuses its findings on alternative schools due to the costs and benefits determined from the research. Furthermore, it will investigate alternative schools as they are fully funded by the provincial government, as well as having many key characteristics used in alternative education for at-risk-youth. The Charter school model failed to have the appropriate funding that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services were looking for. This is due to the Charter School Model being partially funded by the government. Although partial funding does help some students, this may lead to alternative education being inaccessible to some at-risk students who cannot afford the program. Alternative programs provided challenges as they were used as a fast-tracking system for students to earn their diplomas. The alternative school model can provide efficient funding while also using alternative education to benefit the lives of at-risk youth.

The major findings of alternative schools focused on different alternative schools in Ontario, how they delivered alternative education to at-risk youth as well as the benefits associated with the education they offer. The first alternative school that was evaluated in this research project was the SEED alternative school with the Toronto District School Board. SEED Alternative School uses the catalyst model to direct learning to students (Barker, 2023). The catalyst model takes learning from inside the classroom to the community and allows students to learn while being a part of the community. Classes for the SEED alternative school could be completed in many ways. Classes could have been completed with painters, writers, researchers, and anywhere the student requested (Barker, 2023). SEED alternative school also provides a dynamic space and environment that optimizes learning potential for attending at-risk students (TDSB, 2023). This has helped SEED continue working as an alternative school since the year 1968. For an alternative school to continue running this long, the ways in which SEED provides education to students have shown positive results on the students attending. SEED alternative school allows students the opportunity to direct their own learning, addressing their own individual needs (TDSB, 2023). Allowing students to direct their own learning while also being able to work within their comfortable environment has shown great success within alternative education for at-risk youth.

The next alternative school that was researched in this research project was Parkview Alternative School, located on Scarborough, Ontario. The capacity of this alternative school is

approximately 90 students which is much greater than that of the Dalhousie Youth Support Services currently. This alternative school is offered by the Toronto District School Board for students grade 10-12 and its courses are delivered via quadesters (TDSB, 2023). A Quadester is a way of breaking schooling up into four different semesters (10-week periods) while the traditional school models use a two semesters system (Fraser, 1991). The quadester system uses a shorter period of schooling to provide the students with the same education. This has the potential to allow at-risk students who are easily bored or who require change to focus the ability to continue with education. Parkview Alternative School has been developed to re-engage at-risk students with few completed credits, fostering the ability to gain future credits and finish their diploma (TDSB, 2023). Students have the ability to complete two credits per quadester. Another important discovery from the research of Parkview Alternative School is that students can be enrolled into the school during four periods of the school year. This is a great advantage as at-risk students may not have had the opportunity to join the school during September. The quadester format allows students to join in February, April, September, and November (TDSB, 2023). The Parkview Alternative School model provides many opportunities for at-risk youth and can help many at-risk youths in Peterborough and the Peterborough area. Overall, this school's use of the quadester style of learning allows students to both enter the alternative school at appropriate times, while also allowing students to gain two credits for every 10 weeks that they attend and pass their schooling. This alternative school style also offers a greater capacity than that currently available to Dalhousie Youth Support Services.

The West End Alternative School is another alternative school that was investigated. This alternative school is offered by the Toronto District School Board and is open to at-risk youth from grades 10 to 12. The capacity of the West End Alternative School is approximately 74 students. Resources emphasize that this alternative school allows students to learn at their own pace (Barker, 2023), in contrast to the traditional school model where students keep pace with their teacher while also balancing schoolwork from multiple different classes. Allowing at-risk youth to learn at their own pace provides many positives for their academic success. The West End Alternative School also offers a large variety of classes for its students to allow them to direct their own learning (Barker, 2023). Although the traditional school model allows students to select electives of their choosing, some of these classes may not interest students. Allowing students to design their own program while also offering many different engaging classes will

allow at-risk students to be more engaged in their area of study. One challenge faced in this alternative school model is that students must have completed grade 9 courses in English, science, mathematics, and geography to enroll (TDSB, 2023). These classes can be taken at both the academic or applied level. This requirement does pose challenges for at-risk youth as they may struggle to pass these classes in a traditional setting due to ability or barriers posed by personal circumstances. This would make them ineligible for the schooling that they require. Overall, this alternative school shows many promising characteristics for delivering alternative education to at-risk youth and delivers a great model that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services could use.

Another alternative school that was investigated in this research project was Contact Alternative School. Contact Alternative School is offered through the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). This alternative school offers alternative education to at-risk youth who are grade 10-grade 12 and can host approximately 183 students (TDSB, 2023). The Contact Alternative School serves at-risk youth who left high school prior to graduating, or youth who believe they could benefit from alternative education. Key characteristics of Contact Alternative School include small class sizes (8-15 students), a free lunch program, and a flexible co-op program to help students earn their credits to graduate (TDSB, 2023). Small class sizes are beneficial in decreasing the student-to-teacher ratio thus allowing students and teachers to interact more. This will allow at-risk students the ability to be more engaged with class, while also having the appropriate attention that is required for their learning. The free lunch program is a great aspect of the Contact Alternative School which allows students to both prepare and clean up the lunch. This allows students to both eat while also being taught valuable life skills such as cooking and cleaning. The co-op program that is offered by the Contact Alternative School is also a strong resource that allows students to create their own co-op schedule while also being involved in a co-op of their choosing. Daily attendance at the Contact Alternative school is required for students to earn their credits. Overall, the Contact Alternative School demonstrates features that can benefit at-risk youth and that can deliver education that allows at-risk youth to gain credits toward their diploma.

Subway Academy II is an alternative school that is also offered by the Toronto District School Board. This alternative school hosts students who are in Grades 11-12 and has a capacity of approximately 98 students (TDSB, 2023). Subway Academy II offers flexible, one-on-one, or

small group learning which helps youth engage with teachers more, and that allows youth to complete schoolwork when they can. The Subway Academy II is also the only school in the Toronto District School Board that provides an independent study program to its students (TDSB, 2023). This study program is given to students to allow them to continue their education with little supervision. This is a great opportunity for at-risk youth as it allows students to take on responsibility of their own without direction, while also finishing credits towards their diploma. Courses offered within Subway Academy II include: Mathematics; English; Canadian and World Studies; Interdisciplinary Studies; Photography; First Nations, Metis and Inuit Studies; Visual Arts; and Social Sciences and Humanities (TDSB, 2023). Overall, the Subway Academy II alternative school has demonstrated many key characteristics that can promote the development of academic and life skills. This is through their independent study program as well as their small class sizes. Some areas of concern for this alternative school are the small variety of courses offered. Unlike other alternative schools, there is little variety in classes which may be a concern for at-risk youth. Some changes could see the addition of new classes that can be used towards credits for a diploma.

Overall, the alternative schools researched showed many interesting and individual characteristics that could benefit both the life skills and academic skills of at-risk youth. The alternative school model is completely funded by the provincial government which allows all at-risk youth to attend if they meet the program requirements.

The final major finding from the research completed in this research project is that there are multiple ways that an organization can find funding for an alternative school in their area. The two main options identified are: the Education and Community Partnership Program (ECP) and the City of Peterborough Trustee. These recommendations for pathways of funding for alternative schools came from the interviews that were conducted in this research project. One interview participant indicated there are some mandatory requirements for establishing an alternative school. These include: (1) five or more compulsory aged school students, (2) a common school-wide assessment and evaluation policy, (3) a common system for reporting to parents, (4) a school-wide attendance policy, (5) a central office, (6) a teacher (either part-time or full time depending on funding) and (7) a superintendent. Once each of these details has been established, organizations can apply for funding.

The fastest pathway to funding for an alternative school is through the Education and Community Partnership Program. The Education and Community Partnership Program was created to help provide critical support to meet the needs of at-risk youth who cannot attend school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023). The ECPP is a voluntary collaboration between government-approved facilities and the Ontario District School Boards (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023). Applications can be filled out online through the Ontario Ministry of Education website. A link to the ECCP program can be found here “<https://efis.fma.csc.gov.on.ca/faab/Section%2023.htm>”. The Dalhousie Youth Support Services is encouraged to build relationships with the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board and the Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board to help meet requirements needed for certification as an alternative school. This relationship also has the potential to help the Dalhousie Youth Support Services receive referrals for at-risk youth who may become enrolled in their program.

As an alternative, organizations seeking funding for alternative education programs can gain the support of a local Trustee by demonstrating need and an ability to provide services. One interviewee stated that to push forward funding for the alternative school, an organization must reach out and identify different variables demonstrating the need and desire for an alternative education school in the area. At the time of writing, the Trustee for the Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board (PVNCCDSB) is Kevin MacKenzie and the Trustee for the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (KPRDSB) is Steve Russell. The interviewee stated that if a Trustee could not be reached directly, a city councillor should be contacted about the requirements and needs for alternative education to be implemented. From this research, the best way for this process to move smoothly is to contact the Trustee directly. Prior to meeting with the Trustee, a document should be created highlighting challenges facing the area and why an alternative school would be beneficial. Arguments in support of Dalhousie Youth Support Services’ launch of an alternative education program may include: (1) that there is no other alternative education models offered in the Peterborough area, (2) there are students that require alternative education who are not able to because they do not meet the current requirements (have not been convicted in the Youth Criminal Justice System), (3) there are at-risk youth present in the City of Peterborough and surrounding area who would benefit from the program. There are many other factors that have been presented in this research

that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services could present such as showing the effectiveness of alternative education and the current models that demonstrate the best outcomes for at-risk youth. The interviewee did recognize that this is a very political way of finding funding which may lead to success or no funding at all. The expected time frame if this funding plan was successful is likely two years. Overall, with help from community partners such as the local school boards (PVNCCDSB and KPRDSB), and other alternative education schools this funding process has a great probability of succeeding.

The Education and Community Partnership Program will likely be the quickest way to find funding for an alternative education program. Whereas if done correctly showing a need for alternative education through the city Trustee is likely the most efficient. It is important to remember that, for both pathways, relationships with local school boards (PVNCCDSB and KPRDSB), and other alternative education schools may support Dalhousie Youth Support Services' successful application.. These relationships demonstrate to the Ontario Ministry of Education and Trustee that the alternative education school is being supported and that there is a need for the alternative school to be implemented. Through research and the interviews conducted, relationships were developed with SEED Alternative School. This relationship can help increase the likelihood that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services is able to find funding, and may help the Dalhousie Youth Support Services develop an alternative school. This relationship may also be able to provide further partnerships and relationships with other alternative schools.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

From research, the best model for the Dalhousie Youth Support Services to implement alternative education in the Peterborough region is to use the Alternative School Model. The Alternative School Model has shown many promising characteristics such as being fully funded by the government and lessening the requirements for admission. This allows for alternative education to be accessible to all at-risk youth in Peterborough. The Dalhousie Youth Support Services is encouraged to implement an alternative school in Peterborough, Ontario and to access funding either through the Education and Community Partnership Program or through their local school board Trustees. An alternative school will allow the Dalhousie Youth Support Services to deliver alternative education to at-risk youth while also increasing the capacity and broadening the requirements for the program.

This study highlighted the many different variations of alternative schools that have been established in Ontario. The Dalhousie Youth Support Services will still need to follow the Ontario Education Act, but the variations of an alternative school are endless. There is a need for alternative education in Peterborough as there are no other programs currently offered in Peterborough. At present, students enrolling with Dalhousie Youth Support Services must have been charged under the Youth Criminal Justice System.. Implementing an alternative school will broaden the requirements for enrollment, thus allowing more students to have the privilege of attending the school. The Dalhousie Youth Support Services can choose whichever variation of alternative school best suits their organization. If the Dalhousie Youth Support Services has connections with both local school boards (PVNCCDSB and KPRDSB) and the Trustee/ City Councillor, bringing findings to the Trustee would likely be more efficient. However, the Education and Community Partnership Program is another route that could be used if there are relations with the local school boards and other alternative schools. Overall, the Dalhousie Youth Support Services should implement the alternative school model in Peterborough and apply for funding through the Education and Community Partnership Program as there are existing relationships with other alternative schools. This process will likely take up to two years but can be reasonably expected to allow the Dalhousie Youth Support Services to find funding, expand their current capacity and broaden the requirements for admission.

The alternative education school model is an important way to deliver extra academic support to students (Tobin and Sprague, 1999). Research has shown that important aspects of alternative schools can provide support and deliver both academic and life skills to students. This was seen through the SEED alternative school where attending students can direct their own learning (TDSB, 2023). This encourages students to develop their own responsibilities while also completing academic work towards their diploma. Another alternative school that showed promising characteristics was the Parkview Alternative School. This alternative school used quadesters to deliver education to youth while also providing multiple entrance dates (TDSB, 2023). This allows students to be engaged with their learning while also being able to enter the school whenever is necessary for their learning. The West End Alternative School used a model that allowed students to learn at their own pace (Barker, 2023). This allows students to both learn without being rushed, and gives them the ability to focus on challenges that they may be facing. Allowing at-risk students to learn at their own pace is very beneficial to the development of both

life skills and academic success. The Contact Alternative School used small class sizes and a flexible co-op program to meet the needs of its students (TDSB, 2023). Flexibility has been seen as a key factor in the success of [at-risk youth] (Brown, 2021). This allows students to work at their own pace as well as in their own time. Another benefit to this program was the small class sizes. One-on-one teaching allows students to have more contact and connection with the teacher, thus, allowing at-risk youth the ability to be more engaged in class. The Subway Academy II alternative school also uses the same model as the Contact Alternative School. Both have had many successes with at-risk youth using this model. Overall, the research completed by these alternative schools has shown success and the ability to help at-risk youth. The Dalhousie Youth Support Services could adopt important aspects when designing and creating an alternative school.

Through this research, there were some implications of findings and limitations that were present in the research. The main limitation that was present in this project was the lack of interviewees. There were multiple emails sent out to multiple alternative schools, charter schools, alternative programs, and alternative education professionals but only three were able to participate in the interview portion of the project. Many sources did not reply to the emails that were sent out, there was a second wave of emails that were sent out with no reply as well. There were some individuals who did reach out but who were unable to take part in the interview as it was February to March, and they were busy doing work with their organization. The interviews conducted in this research project were very insightful and provided information that was not easily accessible on the internet, or that was not present. Another limitation of this research project was the lack of literature on different alternative education models in Ontario. Most information, including details distinguishing alternative programs and alternative schools, was not readily available in the literature. The sources of funding were also not easily found on the internet. Details on the Education and Community Partnership Program was available on the internet but not easily located, and the recommendation to source funding through a Trustee came only through conducting interviews.

This study identified some possible challenges that Dalhousie Youth Support Services may encounter in finding funding. The first challenge is that the funding process is a slow and political process. This is a major barrier as the Trustee may not find a need for alternative education or may not want to push forward an alternative education school. The challenged

posed by this political process is that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services must meet the needs of the Trustee as well. Another important note in the findings is that the Dalhousie Youth Support Services must maintain regulatory compliance and meet the standards of the Ontario Education Act to allow the alternative school to be possible. There will need to be program planning completed before the school could be opened, ensuring that the program meets the requirements of the Ontario Education Act. This challenge may be overcome by referencing the plans of other alternative schools to guide program planning the alternative school for the Dalhousie Youth Support Services. The last challenge that Dalhousie Youth Support Services may face is staff recruitment. Depending on funding, the Dalhousie Youth Support Services may not be able to fund a full-time teacher but a part-time teacher. To prepare for this challenge, program plans for both a full-time and part-time teacher should be created in the case that funding is limited for the Dalhousie Youth Support Services.

Future recommendations for this research project would be to investigate different alternative school models further. Unfortunately, this research project was only able to investigate models that were found in Ontario, specifically the Toronto District School Board. Investigating further models may find more beneficial programs that could help at-risk youth with both their academic success and life skills. Further research may also seek to speak with the Trustees of both the Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board and the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board.

Overall, this research project was able to provide the Dalhousie Youth Support services with different insights on alternative education models while also identifying different methods of funding. For the Dalhousie Youth Support Services, an alternative school would be the most feasible avenue of receiving full funding from the provincial government, increasing the program capacity, and broadening the acceptance requirements. Having an alternative school established would greatly help the at-risk youth present in Peterborough and the Peterborough area.

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## **Appendix**

Appendix A: Information Document for Interview

### **Project Information Document**

Research Project Title: Establishing a New Normal in Alternative Education for At-Risk Youth

Research Investigator: Bryce Hunt-Parker

Email: [brycehuntparker@trentu.ca](mailto:brycehuntparker@trentu.ca)

#### **About the Project:**

This research project will be completed for the Dalhousie Youth Support Services (DYSS) to help establish a new alternative education program for at-risk youth in Peterborough, Ontario. Your interview will be useful to the research investigator by gaining information about alternative education programs, and their requirements for the implementation of alternative education. Your information will be used to make informed decisions on how the Dalhousie Youth Support Services can implement an alternative education program for at-risk youth.

#### **Rights as a Participant:**

At any point during the interview process or before April 4, 2023, you can withdraw the professional and personal information provided during your interview.

- You have the right to refuse to answer any question asked during the interview process.
- You have the right to request your personal information be left out of academic papers and presentations.
- You have the right to request access to the audio record of your interview.
- You have the right to request no audio record be taken during your interview

#### **Risk:**

As a participant, you will not be exposed to any risk during the interview process. The interview will be conducted over Zoom or phone call, following COVID19 guidelines. There will be no

professional or personal risk accompanying this research project. This research project has been reviewed and approved by the Trent University Research Ethics Board.

**Compensation:**

As a participant, you will not be receiving any compensation. There is no monetary benefit attached to this research project.

**Contact Information:**

Please feel free to contact the research investigator at any time during or after the interview process. You can reach them at their institutional email, [brycehuntparker@trentu.ca](mailto:brycehuntparker@trentu.ca)

Appendix B: Informed Consent Waiver for Interviews

## **Informed Consent Waiver**

Research Project Title: Establishing a New Normal in Alternative Education for At-Risk Youth

Research Investigator: Bryce Hunt-Parker

Research Participant Name:

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The interview will take approximately 25 minutes. We do not anticipate any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time. Please review the information sheet provided.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the research project Establishing a New Normal in Alternative Education for At-Risk Youth. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from Trent University require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying Information Document and sign this form to certify that you approve of the following:

- The interview will be audio recorded.

- You may request that any personal information be omitted from the interview, and/or request that the interview be re-done.
- The audio record of the interview will be produced and analyzed by Bryce Hunt-Parker as research investigator.
- Access to the interview audio record will be limited to Bryce Hunt-Parker
- Any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your explicit approval.

**Your words may be quoted directly in the final report of this research. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ I wish to review the audio record collected during my interview.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be quoted directly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published.

The information you provide in your interview may be used in:

- Academic papers
- Presentations by the research investigator, Bryce Hunt-Parker

By signing this document, I agree that:

1. My participation in this project is voluntary.
2. I can stop taking part in the research and withdraw my information at any point.
3. I will not be receiving any compensation for involvement in this research.
4. I can access the audio recording of my interview.
5. I may contact the researcher through email at any time during or after the interview process
6. I have read and agree to the Informed Consent Waiver and the Information Document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Participant's Signature Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**(YYYY-MM-DD)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Researcher's Signature Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**(YYYY-MM-DD)**

**Contact Information**

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Trent University Research Ethics Board. If you have any further questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Research Investigator: Bryce Hunt-Parker

E-mail: [brycehuntparker@trentu.ca](mailto:brycehuntparker@trentu.ca)

## Appendix C: Interview Script Questions used for Interviews

### 4890 Interview Questions

Question  
Sub-questions  
Method

What is the charter school model?

Is the charter school model currently used in Ontario?

If so, where, and what does that program look like?

If not, why not?

Are there other models for alternative education currently used in Ontario?

If so, what are they? (This may need to be a broad overview or a look at a few specific programs because there are likely very many.)

Could these be a good alternative to the charter school model?

Do people working in these types of programs feel they help limit risk of contact with the youth criminal justice system?

What factors might influence DYSS ability to implement an alternative education program?

What challenges might DYSS encounter (e.g., policy, funding)

What supports might DYSS encounter (e.g., funding, professional advice/support/consultation, etc.)

## Appendix D: Email Sent to Potential Interviewees

Hello,

My name is Bryce Hunt-Parker, I am a fourth year Forensic Science student who is taking part in the Community Based Research Project at Trent University. My project involves researching different school models that can be implemented to better serve at-risk youth in the province. I am emailing you to ask if you would participate in a zoom meeting that would take approximately 25 minutes. This would greatly help my research and allow for me to investigate more appropriate school models for at-risk youth in Ontario.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to email me,  
Bryce Hunt-Parker