International Association for Learning Alternatives
www.learningalternatives.net

Position Paper: Educational Options for All
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The mission of the International Association for Learning Alternatives (IALA) is *to lead, promote and support learning alternatives in education.* Learning is best served by having differing models of schooling for students and staff to choose from. A one-size education program mandated by district, state or federal authorities does not fit everyone. Consequently, learners must have choices of educational programs to meet their unique needs and varying interests.

Why have school reform efforts failed over the past decades? Present schools work for some students but not for many. Howard Gardner estimates that present schools work well for only about 20% of students, those strong in verbal linguistic and logical mathematical intelligences. That leaves 80% at various levels of discomfort, frustration and failure. This means a variety of approaches must be used to meet the needs of all students and to prepare all to become effective citizens, productive workers and lifelong learners.

Providing educational choices is meaningless unless the options differ from each other. It is nearly impossible to provide different types of programs without giving innovators decision-making powers about the curriculum, the program, staffing and budget. The rigidity of the standards-based one-size-fits-all imposed system as a consequence of No Child Left Behind discourages approaches that deviate from standard practice.

Without program autonomy, appropriate staffing and multiple measures for determining a program's progress, schools will remain much as they are. Hence, children and youth are left without options and much frustration, boredom and failure result.

In order for a variety of schools and programs to thrive, IALA has identified four initiatives that can contribute significantly to the school reform movement for greater student learning in the United States and other countries.

1. **School Autonomy**
   School autonomy refers to the authority to make decisions by a school's stakeholders about the program, its staffing, and how the budget is allocated. Stakeholders include all who have a stake in the program's success, most fundamentally the school's parents, students and staff.

   For the past several decades school districts have talked about "site based management" which meant that the district would delegate to the school greater authority to make its decisions. In practice this seldom happened. Most school boards and district administrators were reluctant to give more than token authority to a school principal or school site council. This prolonged traditional top-down administration and schools remain without important decision making authority.

   School accountability is greatly weakened unless a program's participants make decisions they can be held to. If others make decisions for a school, as is the usual situation, most of the accountability properly resides with others. Giving decision authority to a school site yields important benefits:
   - quicker and more responsive actions
   - enhanced creativity of stakeholders
   - energized staff, students and parents

- increased staff commitment
- greater ownership and accountability

Many principals, teachers, parents, students and citizens have exciting ideas about how to improve their schools but are seldom granted the authority to implement their plans and dreams. Beyond strong charter legislation, states could provide for district schools to choose to become site-managed schools upon a vote of staff with, say, a 60 percent majority.

Evidence of the power of this approach comes from, for example, the Edmonton, Canada school district where for the past two decades all 190 schools each make decisions about their program, staffing and budget. To increase productivity and humane work conditions, management principles in business stress delegation with accountability. A resource on school-based decision making is http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/cdm/

2. **Multiple Measures**
   Multiple measures refers to evaluating program quality and student growth using a variety of methods in contrast to using only a single measure such as standardized test scores. The federal No Child Left Behind and state legislation to raise academic achievement emphasizes test scores as a way of measuring progress. Unfortunately, this has led many school districts to concentrate on the single measure of a test score to determine if a program is succeeding despite the fact that teachers work at many types of learning. For example, schools serving at-risk students work with attitudes, attendance, perseverance and responsibility. Such schools often have to overcome students' feelings of failure and giving up. Judging such schools and staff by test scores alone results in an incomplete picture and is an unfair practice.

   Multiple measures of student achievement provide a more comprehensive picture of a student's strengths and weaknesses than does a single score on a standardized test. High stakes (so named because promotion or graduation rides on the results) reliance on a single measure such as standardized tests tends to narrow the curriculum because teachers and administrators know that that is how they will be judged. It limits interest in outcomes not measured by the tests. Innovative schools aim for the broader goals of citizenship, career preparation and lifelong learning. Assessment programs must include valid and reliable high-quality instruments, including teacher-designed formative assessments, performance-based assessments, portfolio assessments, student and parent satisfaction surveys, and other data collection methods before making key decisions such as student promotion and retention. Measures should include so-called 21st century skills needed for work and citizenship including problem-solving, collaborative and analytic skills. Multiple sources of evidence and performance assessments provide comprehensive ways to view student learning.

   The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (www.fairtest.org) and other organization have accumulated a wealth of material related to comprehensive assessment and the results of research on testing. The Compendium of Assessment and Research Tools CART (http://cart.rmcdenver.com/) has a huge database of information on instruments that measure attributes associated with youth development programs. CART includes descriptions of research instruments, tools, rubrics, and guides and is intended to assist those who have an interest in studying the effectiveness of service-learning, safe and drug-free schools and communities, and other school-based youth development practices.

3. **Flexible Teacher Licensing**
   Flexible teacher licensing refers to staffing schools with a greater mixture of talents to support innovative learning strategies. Schools are adopting interdisciplinary approaches, project based,

community based, technological, personalized instruction and non-course based learning. Limiting who can help student learning to teachers narrowly trained in a single subject ignores how much students learn from many kinds of people and situations. The movement in education toward licensing specialization increases costs and reduces opportunities for learning from the community's rich human resources. Rigidity about teacher licensure restricts employment of interesting and capable people for student learning. The changing work world requires 21st century skills which today's school programs aren't well-geared to produce. Innovative schools could staff with a mixture of certificated teachers and vital community resource people, some part-time, some on contract. Existing teacher quality standards neglect the skills regarding personal learning plans, management of behavior, motivation to learn, quality interaction for cooperation and teaming, interdisciplinary approaches, and the skills to help students complete self-analysis and plan for their future. Schools need staff who are proficient managers of student learning. States must be encouraged to broaden the definition of highly qualified teachers to include key human management skills and to establish interdisciplinary licensure or offer waivers for staffing innovative programs.

A considerable body of research supports interdisciplinary approaches to learning. These range from modern calls for reform such as *Preparing Schools and School Systems for the 21st Century* by the American Association of School Administrators, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* by National Association of Secondary School Principals, *Turning Points 2000* by National Middle School Association to classic studies such as "The Effects of Interdisciplinary Curriculum and Instruction" by Gordon Vars, "A Century of Interdisciplinary Curricula in American Schools" by William Wraga, and "The Implementation of Interdisciplinary Curriculum and Instruction" by Laura Van Zandt, et al. For an excellent description of skills needed for today's world see Partnership for 21ST Century School Skills www.21stcenturyskills.org/. A resource for encouraging teacher innovation is www.homeroomteacher.com/teacher_grants.html.

4. **Exemptions for Schools and Programs**
   Exemptions for schools and programs help cope with the very difficult problem of making changes in existing programs. Schools and staff need exemptions from existing rules, regulations and restrictive accountability measures in order to establish and demonstrate improved successful student learning programs. Exemptions from standard rules and polices permit sites to develop innovative approaches toward breakthroughs in learning. Moreover, exemptions will encourage schools and staff to participate in action research and new approaches to learning. This recognizes the significant effort and challenge of developing and establishing new procedures and practices.

   Supportive legislation and policies can encourage and provide for experimentation as has occurred with the Boston Public Schools with pilot high schools and New York Public Schools with New Century High Schools. Early indications are that these schools are achieving academically, attracting students and providing staff satisfaction according to a four-year study by the Center for Collaborative Education (www.ccebos.org). Legislation and policy change can also serve to encourage innovative teachers within all schools, particularly in small and rural schools and programs. A school choice resource is: www.ncrel.org/gap/clark/factors.htm

   These initiatives support breakthroughs in learning that work for all students. The International Association for Learning Alternatives seeks public policy change to give every child a choice for their education.