Perspectives in Alternative Structures: A Rapid Qualitative Review

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COVID-19 PROJECT UPDATE

Data collection for this project started in fall of 2019 and was designed as a rapid programmatic review of alternative structures. The inquiry design, data collection framework, and project timeline were selected to accommodate a draft of the final report for consideration for the SY2021 school year budget cycle. Due to impacts of COVID-19 on the district school schedule, budgeting, shifting priorities, etc. the timeline for this project was adjusted.

There are several lenses with which to read this report. First, it is a programmatic snapshot in time. Programs, human capital, and plans constantly shift across the district. Further, and more extremely, these data were collected shortly before historic worldwide shutdowns in public education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This had led to large changes in organizational resource allocation and significant shifts in district priorities. Secondly, some of the themes and lenses may have new value when considering that the district has launched a district-wide virtual school. More specifically, much of this report describes the space between policy and practice as it pertains to identification of special needs and various intersection programs and placement; thus, it may be interesting to consider these themes as the question of "who is virtual school for?" solidifies over the next several academic years.

Some new next steps also arise when considering this report in Fall 2020. First, it would be prudent to reach out to key participants to compare how alternative structures may be impacted by the creation of a systemwide virtual school. Further, as much of this report is centered on an understanding of suspension policy, a prudent next step would be to more fully understand suspension policy in virtual spaces. From a district perspective, this may have impact on state accountability structures as virtual academic and behavioral norms are created and subsequently enforced. Finally, a close look at the implementation of Night Alternative

Programming over the next few years may be insightful to understanding placement options for different students. Now that there are district virtual options for instruction, the ontological bounds of school exclusion are in flux. It may prove worthwhile to track and study shifting constructions of school exclusion in virtual and physical spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Knox County Schools offers alternative placement options for middle and high school students who have been suspended from their base schools. These structures are geographically and programmatically entangled with special education policy, special education programs, and community mental health issues. At the center of this report, we discuss the implications and mechanisms for how a student obtains a special education certification, under what conditions, and potential implications for discipline policy. In large part, participants struggled to identify a comprehensive district-wide structure that focuses on the consistent enforcement of transition policy for non-special education certified students between the alternative and regular education settings. Unlike students with a recognizable and certifiable disability where legal and scripted placement options are outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), non-special-education students with significant behavior issues do not necessarily have access to the same level of support services and associated systematic accountability. Reportedly, alternative placements of non-certified students are often more crisis driven, reactive, and less preventive than special education students with a required Individualized Education Plan (IEP.)

However, participants did identify specific pockets of staff working to support transitions and align attitudes, expectations, and restorative culture around suspensions and corresponding transitions. These “pockets” provide examples of how we might think about systematizing and

improving the transition of vulnerable students in our district (both with and without a special education certification), protecting early behavior investments in elementary, and ultimately addressing attitudes toward behavior and exclusionary policies that isolate students from participating in the activities and culture of their base school and community. This report reviews alternative structures through the lens of community mental health, frameworks for special education certification, and attitudes towards transitioning behaviorally vulnerable kids back to their base schools.

Goals, Limitations

The goal of this project is to investigate the nature and status of alternative structures in the district. Through this process, we offer key discussions to structure conversations around alternative placements, create a starting point for future inquiry, and provide evidence that there may be value in the redress of transition policy across the district. Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (REA) engaged key participants across the district and convened a review panel to provide feedback on early drafts of this report. This report is largely incomplete in the sense that it fails to completely articulate the complexity and entanglement of the topics discussed. There undoubtedly many more staff in the district who have invaluable experiences and data that could expand our understanding of the issues discussed. In this report, REA offers a lens with which to examine alternative structures that focus on vulnerable segments of students through observable programs, policy, and participant narrative.

Qualitative evaluation and investigation designs can vary widely based on the parameters of the project. Our project timeline necessitated an inquiry design that would allow us to gather information as quickly as possible. From an evaluation perspective, one limitation is that much of what we can accomplish from this rapid inquiry is simply discovering whether a particular

program exists rather than obtaining a textured understanding of that program. In our interactions with participants, we have worked to gain a better understanding of how these programs interact with each other as it concerns the nebula of alternative placements. REA cautions against using the perspectives presented here to create false tautologies or to cite anecdotal evidence for monolithic policy positions. We posit the information here is best used as a starting point for future inquiry, to present staff perspectives at the district level, and provide basic information regarding what core programs exist.

The findings outlined in this report should not be considered rigorous qualitative research. In this case, rigorous qualitative research would require more robust and intentional sampling techniques and more formal analysis. What follows should be considered a qualitative rapid review. We have been able to speak with a number of critical staff and we are able to communicate various perspectives and narratives. Further, we aim to leave an artifact of what programs currently exist. Our description and reported is based in the descriptions and histories that participants shared. Our descriptions are written to inform the alternative school's conversation generally—they should not be considered comprehensive programmatic reviews or assessments and are not necessarily appropriate for district policy decisions in isolation. To reiterate, REA aims to highlight information that conveys the complexity and entangled nature of alternative programs.

As REA has conducted interviews with key staff, many of whom have devoted decades of their professional careers to some of the most academically and emotionally vulnerable students in our community, it is not possible to fully capture the textured experiences of participants. This report was written to draw attention to core programs, highlight important discussions, and serve as a starting point for deeper inquiry in the future. We encourage future

lines of inquiry to revisit and analyze these programs and experiences more closely and incorporate them into a broader district narrative of alternative programs and practices.

Structure, Context

"In some ways I feel we are as confused as ever, but I believe we are confused on a higher level, and about more important things." –Interviewee

Many of the programs discussed in the following sections are somewhat connected but are not necessarily designed to work together. Programs may have been created and implemented at very different times. When discussing alternative placements and related programs, participants with longitudinal experience talked in terms of programmatic transformation and decay, administrative changes, and evolving values. Programs may be both programmatically isolated and logistically entangled at times. The systems and structures are in many ways disjointed and complicated by special education (SPED) law, and sometimes programmatically usurped by changing funding priorities.

When reading the following sections, it is critical to maintain this lens: alternative programing is largely decentralized full of idiosyncrasies. Pulling back layers reveals histories and stories; programs are often kept in name, but not necessarily in purpose, essence, or level of funding. Thus, programs may become co-opted to new needs, attitudes, cultural moments, or political ambitions. Grants that pay for a program to be fully staffed and implemented eventually expire. Positions are not always renewed. Over time, programs can find themselves trying to solve very different problems than the ones for which they were created. Further, consider the implementers of programs and policy. School administrators and staff often work in terms of money, safety, logistical access, etc. In the following sections, consider programs not as monolithic functioning entities, but as tools that can be used for evolving purposes and changing needs.

Our discussion of alternative programs and placements is also centered around the legal and programmatic distinctions between regular and special education. In this report we use language often used by participants, but we draw attention to the idea that a language of "regular education" and "special education" may be a disingenuous dichotomy, or at least, limiting to a more nuanced conversation. Consider the wide-ranging needs within special education: a special education certification could indicate a non-verbal autistic student, a violent student with an emotional disturbance, a student with a reading disability, or any combination of other certifications. Some participants' language and case management strategies highlight the tension between IDEA/state designations and the realities of mental health.

OVERVIEW: SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

PBIS

One of the earliest elementary behavioral programs that Knox County Schools provides to students is PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports). PBIS is a framework that can be implemented in varying degrees, and implementation can look different between sites. A key preliminary distinction needs to be made between "PBIS" and a "PBIS classroom." PBIS generally can refer to a common framework and language around setting behavioral and classroom expectations and rewarding positive behavior. Within the Knox County Schools district, PBIS classrooms refer to seven elementary schools (as of SY1920) that have designated a separate classroom staffed for behavioral support. Notably, schools can and often do use other funding sources (e.g., Title I) to hire behavioral staff, who may deploy the PBIS framework to some degree. (Note: One elementary school reported that in large part, they have been able to substantially reduce behavioral issues. They reported this allowed them to not necessarily need the staffed classroom anymore.)

Critically, the amount of time a particular student can spend in a PBIS classroom can vary dramatically. The PBIS classroom can be a "pull-in/pull-out" flexible space where escalating student behavior can be brought down to baseline, then the student can be placed back into the regular education classroom. As an example, a student may start out in the PBIS classroom full time with the goal of spending 50% of the time in a regular education classroom by a specific date.

Participants of this study highlighted the importance of the relationship between the behavioral and instructional teams. Because the PBIS classroom model transitions students into and out of the classroom, one component of healthy implementation appears to be how the behavioral and instructional teams comingle their practice, hand off escalating and de-escalating behavioral situations, etc. Thematically, this is a key example for our discussion of programs and placement: some participants focused on relationships between instructional and behavioral teams as a key to success rather than simply the strategies of the program itself. As we will discuss, the relationships and culture that drive programs often define the nature of those programs.

Moreover, participants discussed how the "pull-in/pull-out" model inherently means individualizing success for each student—students involved may need very different levels of support, and those levels may vary day-to-day. Having behavioral and instructional staff programmatically aligned and common, negotiated approaches to behavior and mental health, may provide a starting point to establish frameworks for more effective PBIS implementation. Behavioral and instructional teams that establish clear expectations of one another and mutually agree on what individualized success looks like for their students may operate more smoothly. More research and follow up is needed.

Some participants also discussed their thoughts on the logic and strategy behind which schools were given PBIS classrooms. Anecdotally, some school-based participants felt that they were chosen because they were high-needs schools behaviorally. Some schools also reported cases where the behaviorally high-needs schools seemed to become "magnetized" for other severe behavior in their surrounding area.

REA has done some preliminary investigation to determine whether the magnitude and patterns of students on a de facto PBIS transfer are measurable. At the time of writing, REA has not located specific data to track this in the district student information system. REA was provided a short list of students recorded individually by the Department of School Culture. More research and investigation is needed to determine the precise magnitude of these transfers. It should be noted, however, that some participants report they feel the impact of these transfers in their buildings. It may be both practically and symbolically relevant that some participants feel their own challenges with student behavior are now exacerbated by additional behavioral transfers in the area. As several participants across the district echoed in various forms, "It only takes one kid to tear a whole building up."

It is worth taking a moment to highlight the severity of behaviors that these schools are addressing though PBIS. One participant writes:

> "7:30 Began wading through 11 bus referrals by investigating and calling parents.
>
> 8:30 A kindergartener had flipped the class off, called them bitches, dicks, and assholes, punched the teacher, hit a peer with a shoe, kicked, hit and punched the principal. Also called principal a variety of names.

9:15 The assistant principal went to the next class to help the teacher run the behavior plan that takes 3 people to implement. This student kicked and hit the assistant principal and teacher. A new student was sitting in the lobby crying for his mom. Principal and other office staff checked on the student throughout the day.

10:30 Covered a class for a teacher for 30 minutes.

11:00 Stopped by cafeteria to greet parents for Thanksgiving lunch.

11:30 Called to a classroom because a student had smacked a peer and called the teacher stupid.

12:30 A different student stomped on a peer's hand. The assistant principal went to class and removed the student.

1:00 Went to 1st grade room to deal with a screaming student.

1:30 A different student didn't have medication so the student galloped around the classroom like a horse. We couldn't address this until the next day so the teacher and students just continued on. Principal called mom that night.

2:00 Watched bus video and called parents."

Transferring Qualitative Knowledge. We need to take a moment to clarify the inclusion of elementary support structures in a discussion of alternative programming. As we will discuss in following sections, participants discussed how the district transitions (or does not transition) students between programs and academic structures. We argue that behavioral structures at the elementary level are a critical starting point to the story of alternative programming – elementary schools are often at the frontline of a student's behavioral development, possibly indicating an underlying issue or undiagnosed disability. Behavior itself in elementary can trigger an S-Team

(support team), which may lead to testing, diagnostic programming, etc. We will argue in future sections that how we codify mental health and non-conforming behavior at the elementary level may set much of the stage for alternative programming in secondary education. Moreover, the district may want to consider the broader framework of elementary behavioral investments in a longitudinal context, where we search for key moments in a student's academic career where the district can strategically protect that behavioral investment.

Elementary broadly identifies students that will struggle to successfully transition to middle school as a fact of interacting with the students in K-5. Consider an elementary school that has worked with a behaviorally challenging student, but the student may not be certified for special education (or perhaps, just not yet). Over the course of the student's K-5 career, the behavioral and instructional teams learn, for example, what actions escalate or de-escalate behavior for that student. When that student graduates to middle school, a student who has already struggled to conform behaviorally with support, now has to, as many participants called it, "do big school." It is not clear to what end we systematically transfer rich qualitative information we already have about a student into the practice and culture of the new school.

In special education, there are commonly "bump up" meetings, where at times beyond the requirements of the IEP (individualized education plan), special education facilitators work with schools to identify students who may need additional support transitioning. The "bump up" structure may provide a kind of outline for a district-wide structure considering how we transition non-certified students with intense behavioral needs. Here we make a critical distinction: we use the terms "non-certified" and "certified" to contrast the commonly used dichotomy of "regular" and "special education." Again, a regular education student may in fact eventually certify, or perhaps their behavior does not flag them for testing while they are in

elementary, or they are impacted by a condition not currently recognizable and certifiable within the IDEA/state framework.

Satellite

The term "satellite" refers to the Knox Adaptive Education Center (KAEC) satellite program for students with a certified emotional disturbance (ED) and is represented in elementary, middle, high, and alternative settings. Though implementations vary, participants of this study generally report that the core goal of satellite programming is to get students with an emotional disturbance certification into a regular education setting as much as possible.

Students certified with an emotional disturbance can look very different in the context of functioning in an educational setting. At times, a student's symptoms indicating a possible need for additional support though satellite could look like adverse or violent behavior, but it could also be that they are severely depressed or emotionally withdrawn. Specific programming for students with an emotional disturbance is determined by the student's IEP.

Satellite programing was designed to be therapeutic and emotionally responsive. This may include time in the satellite classroom, time in a regular education setting with teaching assistant support, therapeutic support, etc. Participants shared that the room is ideally a kind of "home base" for students where the environment is safe and controlled. Further, there is a TPP (Therapeutic Professional Partnership) staff member, generally a therapist, who drops in and out as required by the terms of the students' IEP. The therapist supports individual student needs and works with teachers to more routinely identify opportunities for the student to be socially and emotionally successful. (Interestingly, in a succinct allegory for much of what we will discuss, the "partnership" TPP refers to the fact that in previous iterations of the program, the therapist had additional support staff assigned to the student. More research is needed on the

programmatic history of TPP. Anecdotally, the associated funding for those positions has evaporated over time, making a professional "partnership" of one.)

Further, satellite classrooms are sometimes used as an intermediate service option between a regular education environment and KAEC. For example, a student with an ED certification who starts showing more severe/violent behaviors can be placed in the satellite room, and then pulled in and out as is appropriate within the school. Similarly, a student at KAEC who is showing progress might be served in a satellite program with the ultimate goal of transitioning them back into a regular education setting to the greatest possible degree.

Some participants contemplated why there are disproportionately more satellite classrooms in secondary than elementary. One perspective is that as a student progresses though their academic career, students are exposed to different environments. As students spend more time in the district, there are more opportunities to demonstrate behavior of an emotional disturbance. One participant also discussed that in some cases, evidence of emotional disturbances often manifests as the student ages; the divergence from behavioral norms may become easier to recognize and diagnose. (Empirically, it also stands to reason – the older a student, more data is necessarily created and collected though staff interactions.) Other participants insinuated a strategic rationale that leaned on economic models, i.e., placing satellite programming in elementary schools might also be akin to making mental health and behavioral investments early.

NAP

Traditionally, NAP (Night Alternative Program) is a program for high school students who have been suspended from their base school for more than eleven days. The high school Night Alternative Program exists at four different sites in Knox County. NAP is typically held

away from the student's base school, currently at Richard Yoakley and Byington-Solway Technology Center. At the time of this report's writing, Central High School and South-Doyle High School are piloting their own in-house NAP. NAP can also be opened for middle schools as additional space is needed. (As of March 2020, Northwest Middle School had also been opened as a middle school NAP site.)

High School NAP is typically held in a computer lab. Students log into a computer application called Edgenuity and work through online coursework. Participants of this study report that much of the work is unguided, and teachers at NAP can float around the room to support students, but much of the work is self-guided by the student and the software. Middle School NAP has traditionally maintained direct instruction. One participant writes, "In the past, kids were group[ed]… [one staff] was teaching math and one [staff] was teaching ELA. With the new location, maybe it has changed."

Participants expressed a number of concerns about NAP (specifically High School), including how realistically it addresses students' academic needs, the creation of communication and logistical issues between the NAP site and base school, and consistency in programming. Some shared the perception that students in NAP often require more individualized support to be academically successful, while the nature of a self-guided academic program requires students to hold themselves accountable for their time, be academically driven, and earn credit with removed supports. independently. One participant shared, "You are… talking about students who are not typically academically motivated and then are expected to be motivated enough to complete the work independently." Another participant focused on the practical challenges for students, "Another concern with the NAP population is the 'condition' students are in. Many are groggy… and it is often apparent the students have indulged in illegal drug usage while remining

idle all day. The evening hours are not the best for young people who have been idle all day and who are already immersed in unhealthy behaviors."

REA attempted to pull data for students in NAP and analyze student patterns, the number of credits earned, etc. At the time of writing, NAP related data make this kind of analysis problematic. The student's teacher of record remains the teacher at the base school, and thus, their school remains the base school, even though they may be offsite at Richard Yoakley School (RYS) or Byington-Solway Career and Technical Education Center. It becomes very difficult to track these students in the data and investigate the impact of NAP on their academic careers.

ALTERNATIVE

KAEC

Students with an ED (emotionally disturbed) *certification* are impacted at varying levels of severity. Many of them are in comprehensive regular education classrooms most of the day. For some, it may be difficult to distinguish a student with an ED certification from their non-certified peers day-to-day. Many of these students are functioning independently in their base schools. Students with an ED certification who need more therapeutic support may be in a KAEC Satellite. They spend some part of their day in a regular education class with support. The most severely impacted students with an ED certification may be considered for full time enrollment at KAEC. (Please note: some participants also brought attention to KAEC's characterization as a "special day school" and not an "alternative school." Thematically, our conversation would be detrimentally incomplete without a discussion of KAEC and its relative programmatic position in the district.)

Participants discussed the recent addition of an autism support room at KAEC. The specific history and rationale behind its placement are still unclear, and more research and inquiry is needed to gain deeper understanding of the rationale and context. While dual-certified students (students with both autism and ED certifications) in theory could be placed at a comprehensive school that has both autism support and a satellite program, at a programmatic level, some participants agree that the needs of autistic students and students with an emotional disturbance may seldom overlap meaningfully. The autism support class at KAEC is likely worth more investigation.

Ridgedale: Upstairs, Downstairs

Ridgedale has categorically different programs happening under one roof for significantly different student populations. Participants commonly discuss Ridgedale in terms of "upstairs" and "downstairs." Downstairs at Ridgedale is an alternative day program for middle school students who have been suspended from their base school. They can be regular or special education students and they arrive to serve short- or long-term suspensions. Upstairs at Ridgedale houses several intertwined programs for special education students, where classrooms serve students with a range of different needs. There is one specific classroom exclusive to CDC-A high schoolers. Other classrooms, ranging in ages from elementary to high school, can contain co-mingled programming for CDC-A, autism support, and diagnostic. (Note that multiple participants report that the nature of the diagnostic programs in the district has changed over time. Some participants suggested diagnostic placement differs from "testing" in a base school or alternative setting due to the inclusion of a clinical component to the assessment.)

One participant broadly drew attention to the needs of students receiving services upstairs at Ridgedale. Many comprehensive schools have CDC-A, autism support, and satellite programs,

so the participant made the point that there are inherent differentiating factors why the student is moved to receive services at Ridgedale. Reportedly, the staff-to-student ratio at Ridgedale allows for more support when needed to maintain a safe environment for themselves and staff.

RYS

RYS (Richard Yoakley School) also houses a number of categorically different programs. Most commonly, RYS is thought of as an alternative day school for high school students that have been suspended from their base school. It is also a NAP site, a KAEC satellite, provides alternative day classes for middle school, a CDC-A classroom, a transition classroom, and houses a KPD officer. At any given time, there is a range of regular education and special education students at RYS impacted at various levels. Currently, the set of RYS programming must be structured to accommodate regular education, special education, severely impacted ED, and CDC-A students.

Moreover, the administrator of RYS administrates NAP across all sites. It has been difficult to develop a cogent theory to discern why this is the case beyond historical precedent. One explanation may be that RYS has historically been a NAP site. Speculating, this may be a point of convenience, given that if the administrator at RYS "suspends" a regular education student out of the RYS day program, NAP is a further alternative option.

It is worth noting here that transportation policy for RYS seems counterintuitive to some participants. Transportation for RYS day school is provided to students who have an IEP, a 504 plan (special accommodations), ELL students, and all middle school students. However, regular education students who have been suspended to RYS do not receive transportation. Several participants discussed a bizarre result – they provided anecdotes of busses passing neighborhoods and homes of regular education students to pick up their classmates. In an

extreme case, two siblings living in the same home were suspended together, one had an IEP. Reportedly, Knox County Schools bussed the student with the IEP and refused transportation for the regular education sibling.

Discipline, Diagnostic

Our discussion of alternative structures requires a common understanding of the disciplinary process, which differs between regular and special education. This is prerequisite knowledge to understanding alternative placements in regular education or programmatic placements in special education. Critically, the chief distinction is that if a behavior incident is determined to be a manifestation of the student's disability, a disciplinary hearing is not called, and a student cannot be placed *for a punitive reason* into an alternative setting. However, the IEP team may discuss concerns about the student's current programming and placement. At times, these programmatic and punitive placements are in the same building and may overlap staff.

S-TEAM. The regular education discipline process and the relevant special education structures are perhaps most efficiently understood through a hypothetical example. Take Johnny, a seventh-grade regular education student. (When we use the term "regular education student," we are specifically referring to the notion that this student does not currently have special education certification, and thus no IEP, etc. Given that our discussion hinges on programs and staff observing and codifying "pathologies" in a policy and legal framework, this is a relevant distinction.) Now imagine that Susie, Johnny's classmate, had a nonviolent behavior incident as a sixth grader that raised some concern with her teacher and school psychologist. She was tested in her base school and certified as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and OHI (other health impaired).

One day, Johnny and Susie get caught vaping (no THC found, thus not a zero-tolerance offense) in the hall with an eighth grader who let them try it for the first time. First, the principal is required to conduct an investigation and collect statements from the students. Because Susie has an IEP, the principal will call the special education supervisor and alert them that a special education child is being investigated in a behavior incident. If the principal is considering a suspension of five or more days for Johnny (regular education), then the principal is required to collect evidence and convene an S-Team (support team). Note that the principal is not required to call an S-Team if he decides to suspend Johnny for less than five days.

S-Teams are comprised of a school administrator, a regular education teacher, and other staff as needed. An S-Team can be called for a number of reasons, including health, attendance issues, etc., in addition to discipline. For example, if an S-Team is called for medical reasons, the school nurse may be asked to provide information. One participant reported that much of the data collected from the S-Team is done electronically, and a physical meeting may not be called in some cases. The administrator then takes the information collected to the next step of the process, the disciplinary hearing.

Manifestation. Because Susie has an IEP, she has an IEP team that will meet to discuss the incident, programming, and placement options, so an S-Team is not called. Before Susie can undergo a disciplinary hearing, there must first be a manifestation determination. Manifestation refers to the process of determining whether a student's behavior is a direct result of or significantly relates to their disability. If it is determined that the behavior is a manifestation of the disability, a disciplinary hearing is not called, and no disciplinary action may be legally taken. As a second requirement, if the behavior is determined to be a manifestation, but it is also determined that the district failed to enforce Susie's IEP, then a disciplinary hearing is deemed

inappropriate. (Please note: if a special education student has a behavior that does manifest, there are guidelines that allow a principal to suspend the student, up to 45 days, for three reasons: carrying a weapon to school, possession or use of illegal drugs while at school, or inflicts "serious bodily injury" on someone at school. [Procedural Safeguards, TDOE])

Not all manifestation decisions are clear or simple. Perhaps the data used to write Susie's IEP suggests that her ADHD results in impulsive behavior. How might we view her vaping for the first time in the hallway? What if she had brought it from home herself? How does her OHI certification need to be considered? Perhaps an easier case would be if Susie had only a reading disability, and it may be more obvious that a reading disability has no tangible or evidentiary connection to her decision to vape.

Over the holiday break, Susie's hypothetical grandmother passes away. Her parents start the process to legally separate. Susie's second semester is rougher, and she begins to demonstrate more serious behaviors. One day, in a sudden outburst, she lashes out at a student and strikes him several times. When the teacher attempts to de-escalate the situation, Susie swears at the teacher in front of the class. She reaches for a pair of arts-and-crafts scissors and threatens another student.

Professional Review. The special education supervisor is called again. This time, the school staff may call for a professional review—the situation is getting more difficult to manage with the resources at the school. Professional review is an opportunity to plan and assess what services and programs the student has had access to, where they staff has seen progress, and what programs or interventions may not be as effective as expected. Notably, the only structure that is legally able to make a placement decision is the IEP team. Parents are present for IEP meetings, but not professional review.

After professional review (which may or may not be called in specific cases) the IEP team will meet. They discuss that Susie's ADHD and OHI certifications do not fully capture the severity of the behaviors they are seeing. The IEP team suggests that she needs more testing—they suspect that she may qualify with an emotionally disturbed (ED) certification. If Susie certifies as ED, she will have a number of additional programs and placement options available to her, namely Knox Adaptive Education Center (KAEC) and satellite classrooms for ED students housed in comprehensive schools, co-owned by KAEC and the base school.

Diagnostic. Susie can be tested at her base school, or she can be sent to what is commonly referred to as "diagnostic." Diagnostic refers to a program housed upstairs at Ridgedale (for elementary and middle) and at KAEC (for high school). Psychological evaluation staff float between these two sites and evaluate students with suspected disabilities or misdiagnoses. In our example, it's not immediately clear if Susie would be placed at Ridgedale or KAEC diagnostically, or if she would be tested at her base school. Participants cite safety as a chief reason for diagnostic placement; i.e., if a student is dangerous or unmanageable in the base school, they could be placed into an environment with more support staff.

For our hypothetical example, Susie is placed diagnostically upstairs at Ridgedale. Because Susie already has a special education certification, there is no legal timeline requirement to finish her evaluation. Note: if a regular education student is placed diagnostically with a suspected disability, the district is legally required to complete the evaluation in sixty calendar days. Susie is now in a classroom with other students who may be receiving different special education services or may have also been placed there diagnostically. Thus, students in diagnostic may have special education certifications, and some may not. While Susie is in a

diagnostic placement upstairs at Ridgedale, Johnny is serving a twenty-five-day suspension downstairs in the alternative day program for middle schoolers.

Susie spends the rest of the semester upstairs at Ridgedale. She certifies as ED (emotionally disturbed). Her IEP team meets to discuss placement options. With her ED certification, she is now eligible for placement full time at KAEC, a KAEC satellite, or could be placed back at her base school with supports outlined in her IEP. Legally, Susie's placement must ultimately be determined by her IEP team. Among other things, their calculus will consider: 1) which schools have satellite programming, 2) the escalating nature of her disturbance, and 3) transportation cost, among other contextual case data.

Please note, while the diagnostic program exists upstairs at Ridgedale (middle school students) and KAEC (high school students), many students are tested for specific special education certifications in comprehensive settings and at RYS. Consider a high school student who does something dangerous that warrants a long-term suspension, but school staff suspect a certifiable disability. In specific cases, the student could be placed in RYS for testing, for example, for 60 days. If that student does not certify, it is at the discretion of the base school administrator to decide if that time at RYS for testing is considered "time served" against the suspension or if the suspension term begins when the testing ends. If the student did certify, then a manifestation meeting would be called and the process would continue in light of the new certification.

DISCUSSION

The following sections discuss themes and conversations that we encountered through the data collection process. This does not begin fully capture the history, depth, and complexity in

the system of alternate programming and associated realms of policy. REA offers these underpinning themes as starting points for future inquiry and possible frames of analysis.

Alternative Structures and Special Education

Alternative programs and special education structures are inextricably connected. Upstairs at Ridgedale houses CDC-A, diagnostic, and autism support. Many of the special education students upstairs receive services there because their behaviors require more intense support. Diagnostic students placed upstairs may or may not have a special education certification when they arrive. Downstairs at Ridgedale is an alternative day program for regular education students or special education students whose behavior was not determined to be a manifestation of the disability.

RYS houses a KAEC satellite, CDC-A, transition (students in the juvenile justice system), inclusion classrooms (co-taught classrooms), and regular education classes. The logistical challenge of moving the properly certified teachers appropriately to meet changing behavioral needs poses a significant challenge and inherently involves some amount of administrative overlap. One participant reported that the students' needs in satellite take a significant portion of their time day to day, despite satellite just being one of many programs implemented.

The need for so many different programs at RYS may in part explained by the entanglement of regular education and special education students. The critical point here is that oversimplifications or one-dimensional descriptions about alternative structures obscure the entangled nature of programs, special education policy, and student needs. RYS is often discussed as an alternative day program for suspended students, but it is also home to programs that entangle the population and broader school challenges with special education students

requiring varying support. In sum, the range of needs expected to be accommodated by RYS, short and long term, are expansive. Richard Yoakley is a tapestry of entangled regular education, special education, social-emotional, and juvenile justice programs.

KAEC specifically serves students with an emotional disturbance, but they are also a diagnostic site, house CDC-A classrooms, and an autism support classroom. Thus, at times there are students who may or may not have a special education certification who are in the building.

Culture

Participants discussed the importance of culture within programs and buildings, focusing on two domains regarding how culture impacts outcomes in alternative and discipline settings: attitudes toward returning students to their base schools and intra-program culture between building-level staff.

Participants reported a range of attitudes among schools considering how students are transitioned between alternative and comprehensive settings. Ultimately, participants in both alternative and comprehensive settings have discussed that there may be disagreement among school administrators regarding the role, philosophy, and appropriate severity of a suspension. Conversations in interviews with alternative staff who manage the transition process corroborate this cultural/policy tension. Some participants anecdotally report that administrations exist on a spectrum of buy-in regarding restorative processes that transition students from an alternative placement back to their base school. One participant commented, “These kids have a target on their back when they go back to their school, so I tell them that they have to be extra good when they go back and show their school that they can do this…” Another writes, “We welcome students back with open arms, however, we have never been able to transition a kid back to the base school [from satellite] due to staff at other schools not wanting the behavior issue to return.”

Secondly, participants discussed the contrast between cultures associated with different programs. Decentralized programs like NAP may inherently struggle to have a cohesive culture among staff and students. Specifically, the decentralized and "off-site" nature of traditional NAP, rotating staff, etc. may be contributing to some participants' concern. Some participants discussed the benefits of having NAP at the base school (two schools are piloting this format as of SY1920). Participants focused on the relational benefits of NAP at the base school—the on-site NAP principal already knows the teachers of record and is embedded in that school's team. Participants report that the proximity to the teachers alone can help provide a more seamless transition between the classroom and work on Edgenuity, as well as testing. In contrast, one participant implied that on-site NAP was antithetical to the purpose of a suspension. They suggested that part of the punishment is that you are not allowed to physically be on school grounds. Others illustrated dissonance of a suspension as a punishment in specific contexts. (Consider for example a student who is suspended for cutting class.)

Other participants discussed confusion and conflations of coursework and student ownership. Some participants drew on a history regarding how work is assigned to a NAP student. Once a student is suspended from their base school and enters NAP, their teacher from the base school is still the teacher of record, even though they may be receiving work assigned by the teacher at the NAP site.

Finally, consider the role of culture, relationships, and buy-in in the deployment of PBIS/PBIS classrooms. Deploying PBIS and/or behavioral staff in a building inherently involves interaction between the behavioral team and the instructional team. The program's function appears to rely on the behavioral and instructional teams' common language and understanding of what behaviors are under the teacher's purview, and what is too significant or unmanageable

for a teacher alone. Some participants suggested that the interaction between the behavioral and instructional teams defines the nature of the program itself. Does the teacher call the behavioral team to intervene too early? Does staff make every reasonable effort to de-escalate the situation first? What does "every reasonable effort" mean, and to whom? Is the child embarrassed by the way the teacher hands them off to the behavioral staff? Is the student just having a bad day? Is the teacher? Do the teacher and behavioral team agree on what kinds of situations that require intervention?

One school discussed a silent commutation tool they developed to help transition students from the classroom to the behavioral staff. In essence, they developed a notecard with agreed-upon categories. The teacher can get on the radio, call for support, complete the card with a few pen strokes, and the behavioral staff is equipped with basic information about what has happened. This helps them to ensure that the transition is the least disruptive to the classroom, and smooth and dignifying an escalating. The point here is not the communication tool itself; rather, the card is evidence of the behavioral and instructional teams are building experimental systems to work together, while negotiating the terms and language for intervention. They are building a culture and building level norms around the process and the child.

Support, Consequence

Participants in both comprehensive schools and alternative structures discussed the additional challenges that students face when transitioning back to their base school. "These students have a target on their back," one participant reported. The attitude and orientation to discipline reportedly varies from school to school and can significantly impact the student's transition into their base school. One alternative staff member discussed the process of how they prepare students to go back to base schools. This includes providing the student opportunities to

reflect on their experiences, what they have learned, and what they want the base school to know about them as they return. Additionally, school and district behavior staff can work to facilitate a dialogue with the base school and work to reestablish ownership of the student. Anecdotally, this happens with varying levels of success, depending on the specific school.

As previously discussed, some participants also report the challenges with transitioning fifth-grade students from PBIS to middle school. Some participants from the elementary level shared anecdotes about spending years working with the students through the PBIS or satellite structures, helping students build social and emotional skills towards profitable participation in a regular education setting. This progress can be painfully slow, exhausting for staff, and at times physically dangerous. Then, they report, within a few weeks after transitioning to middle school, that student is suspended and sent to Ridgedale. For some, this is a source of frustration. It is currently unclear to what extent or magnitude this happens across the district.

One participant shared some of their work around this issue. This participant acted as a facilitator and convened both elementary and secondary staff in a feeder pattern. This participant arrived at the meeting with individual student files for behaviorally fragile 5th graders transitioning to middle school. Importantly, elementary staff, in particular the elementary behavioral staff, are in a position to catalogue the nature of their students' behavioral challenges. In short, elementary staff are positioned to know which specific de-escalation strategies work, in what conditions, and what the student might respond to positively. But while elementary staff has built institutional knowledge and rapport with the child, the participant suggested that part of the issue was the failure to effectively transfer that knowledge with the student to their new school. The liaison works to facilitate a conversation between elementary and middle school staff to look over specific case files in order to prepare and educate the staff about specific children.

Note: as we previously discussed, special education has a structure called “bump up” meetings that works to fulfill a similar structure, but participants had difficulty identifying a district norms and language for students who may be struggling behaviorally or who may just not be certified with a disability yet.

Another example: one participant’s primary role is to support transitions between Ridgedale (upstairs) and base schools. This participant travels across the district to manage a caseload of students that may be in very different parts of the transition process and likely have very different needs. Besides supporting students though programs and across buildings, this participant also reported supporting relationships between programs— a mediator for the student, with a foot in both alternative and comprehensive settings.

My Kid, Your Kid

“The difference between my kid and your kid is that my kid got caught.”

We have previously discussed PBIS in simple, distilled, and incomplete terms and should consider the intensive human and emotional toll that working with vulnerable and behaviorally challenged students takes on staff. Further, we might consider the intensive support we provide elementary students through the classroom and PBIS as a kind of early investment in community behavior, one that may be sown throughout the feeder pattern and academic career of the students, enabling them to participate as meaningfully as possible in a regular education setting. Simply, if it is the case that the early behavioral intervention helps students who may not otherwise function in a regular education environment, it seems to follow that we would want to consider protecting that investment by interlocking those structures more systematically across feeder patterns.

Some participants discussed the perspective that in elementary, one teacher is often with his/her students for every subject—they spend the entire day together. This may somewhat contrast to the structure of secondary education, where a teacher is more likely to identify with a specific content area, and inappropriate classroom behavior becomes a threat to their ability to effectively teach the other students. Moreover, they only have the students for a short block of time so may feel more pressure to get through the material as efficiently as possible. Sampling a wider range of participants and the specific study of attitudes across the district is needed to determine the extent that this discussion should inform our conversation.

Participants report a similar dynamic in NAP. As discussed, once a student is suspended from their base school and enters NAP, their teacher for a particular enrolled class at their base school is still the teacher of record. It is still unclear who, and under what circumstances, the teacher of record or the NAP facilitator assigns student work. Further, the policy surrounding how grades in NAP might be difficult to implement with fidelity given the number of people involved if there is not ample communication and understanding of policy and the online software package. These may be a factor in a slew of idiosyncrasies with the way the district tracks data, transition students, and program for students in NAP.

One idea some participants discussed was that the geographic and programmatic dissonance of NAP may contribute to confusion or lack of ownership. One participant shared, "The teacher [at the base school] thinks that once the student leaves [the base school], they don't belong to them." In the end, participants generally suggested that students in NAP are sometimes those who likely need additional academic support (rather than somewhat more independent electronic instruction).

Codes, Mental Health

"'...[A]re you sick, or are you mean?'" – Interviewee

Conceptually, a critical underpinning of our discussion is that the frameworks we use to diagnose and catalogue the mental health of our community's children inform policy, practice, and programs in the district. The underlying distinction between whether or not a particular behavior can be sufficiently linked to a recognizable and certifiable disability is the nucleus of how alternative placements are determined. Further, logistical and safety concerns can limit and drive placement decisions, particularly in extreme behavior cases.

We are given specific codes and diagnostic frameworks with which we come to place children into categories—consider ID (intellectually delayed), autistic, ED (emotionally disturbed), OHI (other health impaired), etc. These certifications effectively grant or deny access to a number of support services. It may be that these codes are sufficiently broad from a policy perspective, but it may also be that programs are challenged to accommodate the wide range of needs within any specific category. It seems that over time, educational institutions will be accountable to changing nomenclature for "pathologies." The assessment of relevant community needs may be better understood independently of/in addition to current mental health/IDEA taxonomy.

We offer this conceptual framing because a number of participants echoed each other's concerns about students who suffer from NAS (neonatal abstinence syndrome). Participants were unable to identify a district program to understand and address the specific needs of students with NAS. Participants reported the unique needs of students suffering with NAS, and anecdotally, it appears that some may be eligible for ED or OHI certifications. Consider a student with NAS being led down the programmatic road of accessing KAEC or satellite programming. Importantly, the insinuation here is not that these students may be

"misdiagnosed"; rather, the specific codes we currently recognize at the moment may not adequately capture the specific mental health needs of our community. The speed at which nomenclature and funding adapts to changing community needs may not be timely for students currently suffering from NAS.

The extent and magnitude of this issue is largely beyond the scope of this report. However, a number of participants shared their concern for the growing number of students with NAS. REA has suggested accessing local public health data and providing some preliminary cohort analysis to estimate the reported number of students suffering from NAS in a given grade level across Knox County.

It may be a nontrivial point that our programs and placements broadly synthesize mental health at the policy level through a rhetorical and legal frame while practitioners often speak in terms of specific students and specific disabilities. Practitioners on the ground may be able to recognize and specifically serve students within the bounds of their programmatic and financial resources, but we make the point here to help inform and localize district-level language around student needs. In short, legal frameworks like IDEA provide both policy context and lexica – we consider here to what degree these parameters assist or obscure our policy making and case management for special education students.

Conclusions, Considerations

In this report, we have offered lenses for discussion surrounding alternative placements, programs, and structures – specifically at the intersection special education and discipline policy. REA has discussed a number of limitations that readers should be aware of. Importantly, this report is unable to make claims as to the magnitude that a particular concern or situation may

manifest across the district. Readers of this report are encouraged to consider the utility of the frames for conversation offered and data provided here.

As discussed, REA also views this report as a general starting point for future inquiry. Future designs could include a formal literature and policy review to more rigorously integrate academic theory, extant literature, and policy analysis. This may orientate the data collected in this project within a broader framework of special education and discipline policy literature. A final possible example: much of the preliminary data in this report begs questions regarding the relative distribution of special education certification and 504 designations at the district level. This could include a quantitative analysis to illuminate the manner or timing in which certifications are distributed, to which students, what funding implications may exist, etc.

A closer investigation of alternative programs yields dividends beyond the exploration of the programs themselves. Inherently, understanding alternative is a study of the intersection of special education policy, school exclusion policy, mental health, and district culture around some of the most vulnerable students in our community. As one participant summarized, "[…culture is] so critical and it connects the alt school issues to the whole district. Their problems are the district's problems."

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH DESIGN OUTLINE

Core Research Questions

1) How do alternative schools understand their programmatic function?
2) What is the pragmatic nature of their role in the district?
    a. What might we learn from the narratives and patterns found in an alternative school experience?
3) What role might related structures (e.g., PBIS, NAP, etc.) have on an alternative experience in KCS?

Audience

1) KCS Executive Team

Inquiry Frameworks

1) Pragmatism/Generic Qualitative Inquiry
    a. Core questions: What are the practical consequences and useful applications of what we can learn about this issue or problem? (Patton, p.99)

Data Collection Strategy

1) Rapid Reconnaissance/Review

Data Collection Methods

1) Semi-structured qualitative interviews with key current and former administration
    a. Sampling strategies: Key informants/reputational sampling
    b. Chain sampling
2) Document analysis

APPENDIX B: LIST OF KAEC SATELLITE SCHOOLS (SY1920)

Elementary

- Amherst Elementary School
- Dogwood Elementary School
- Spring Hill Elementary School

Middle

- Bearden Middle School
- Gresham Middle School
- Karns Middle School
- Northwest Middle School
- South-Doyle Middle School

High

- Austin East High School
- Bearden High School
- Central High School
- Farragut High School
- Fulton High School
- Halls High School
- Hardin Valley Academy High School
- South-Doyle High School
- West High School

Alternative

- Richard Yoakley School

APPENDIX C: LIST OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS WITH A PBIS CLASSROOM (SY1920)

A.L. Lotts Elementary School (SY1920)
Beaumont Magnet Academy (SY1920)
Christenberry Elementary School (SY1920)
Dogwood Elementary School (SY1920)
Green Magnet Academy School (SY1920)
Lonsdale Elementary School (SY1920)
Sarah Moore Green Magnet Academy (SY1920)

APPENDIX D: LIST OF NAP SITES (SY1920)

Byington-Solway Technology Center (SY1920)
Central High School (Self-contained Pilot, SY1920)
Richard Yoakley School (SY1920)
South-Doyle High School (Self-contained Pilot, SY1920)