

Comfort Zone

*At-risk students find a home
in alternative schools*

By Bob Evancho

Veteran teacher Bob Taylor sits in his Meridian Academy classroom. On his desk are two quarters. "They've been sitting there out in the open since 1990," he says, referring to the year the alternative high school opened. "I call them 'trust quarters.'"

"They're there because they're there. They were taken just once. But all the students were so upset when it happened, the quarters were back on my desk the next day. The kids don't touch them; it would be like stealing from your own family."

In many ways, alternative schools take on characteristics of a surrogate family. In an age of single-parent households, two working parents, increased mobility, dysfunctional families, growing numbers of children living below poverty levels, and more non-English-speaking children entering school, alternative schools fill a huge void in the lives of youth, both high-risk youth and many who lead more stable lives.

The above passage is taken from the book *How to Create Alternative, Magnet, and Charter Schools*

That Work, which was co-written last year by Bob Barr, dean of Boise State's College of Education, and Bill Parrett, education professor and director of the Center for School Improvement at BSU.

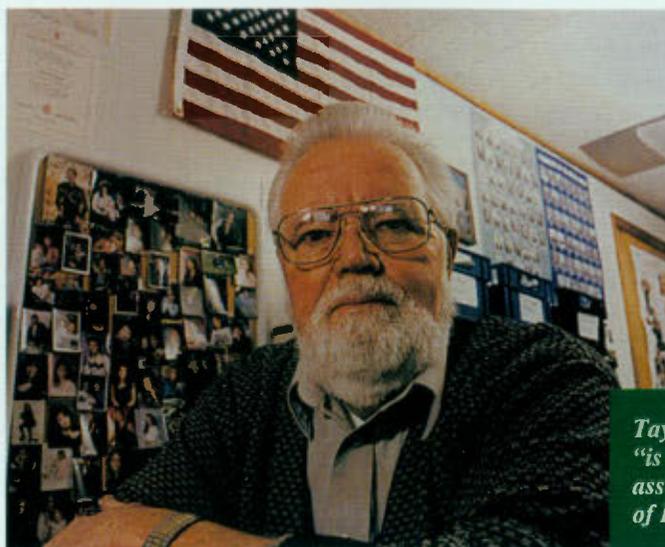
The students attending the 43 secondary alternative schools in Idaho are considered at risk. They may come from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle academically or have

behavioral problems. "The majority of the kids here have failed for one reason or another in the regular school system," says Taylor. "There are as many reasons as there are kids."

According to Tom Farley, chief of the Bureau of Instruction for the Idaho Department of Education, alternative schools in Idaho are becoming more popular because of their effectiveness. Across the state, one or two new alternative schools have been started each year for the last five years, he says.

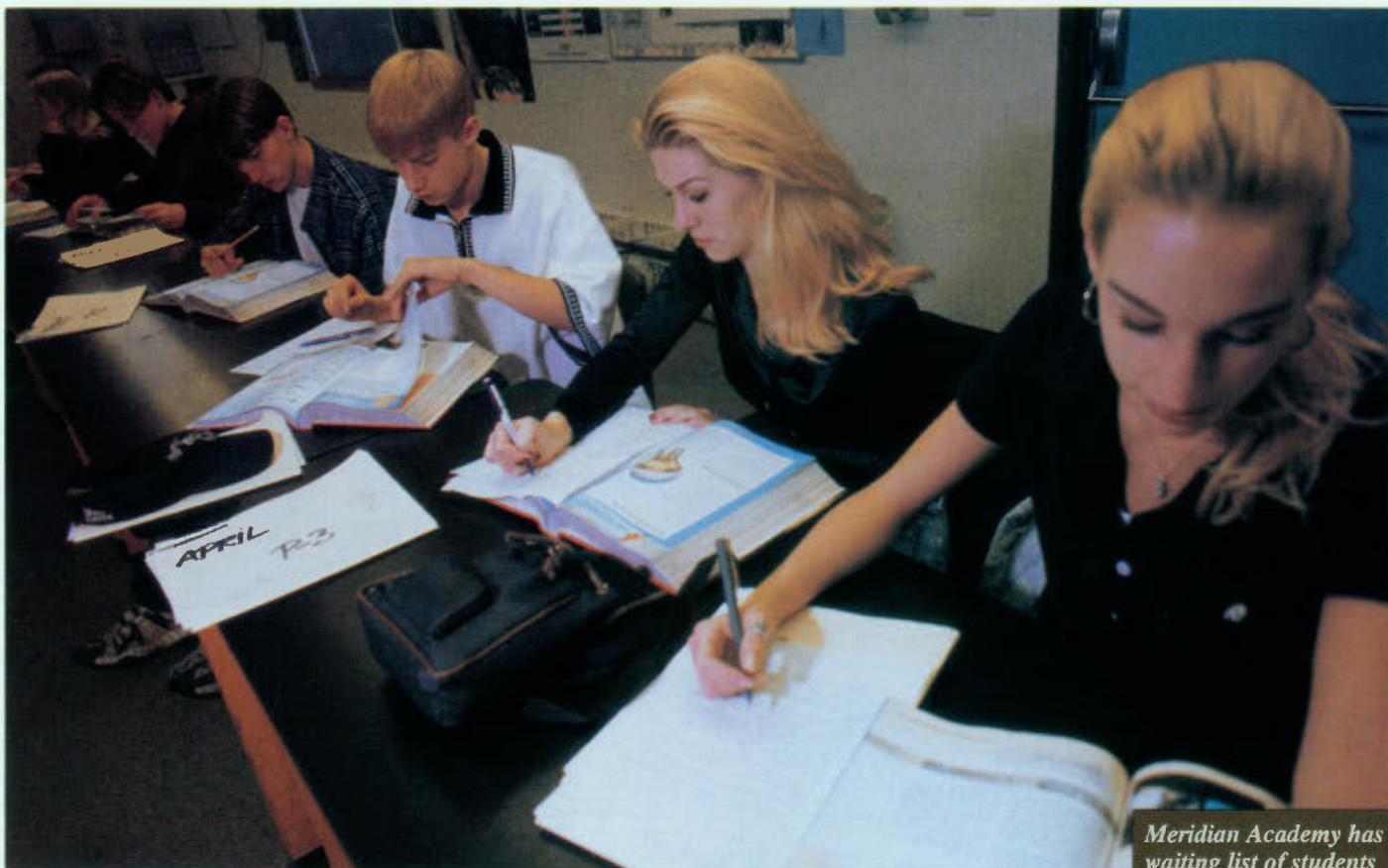
"If we can help keep kids in school and facilitate their earning a high school diploma through alternative schools, we are helping everyone," Farley adds.

Barr and Parrett's book refers to dozens of model alternative schools nationwide. "But you don't



CHUCK SCHERER PHOTO

*Taylor says his job
"is the best teaching
assignment in the state
of Idaho."*



Meridian Academy has a waiting list of students who want to join the 150 teens enrolled in the alternative school.

need to leave the Boise area to see a great example," says Barr. "Just go to Meridian Academy. Now *that* is how you run an alternative school."

The greatest power of an alternative school is the simple fact that people choose to participate, write Barr and Parrett. No one is assigned; participation is not mandatory.

Some students dropped out or were expelled from their previous schools. Others are pregnant or have babies. The incidence of drug/alcohol abuse, academic woes and domestic problems is higher than normal.

Still, the 150 students at Meridian Academy are not here for punitive reasons. Quite the contrary, Taylor says. "We have a waiting list. These kids are here because they want to be here."

Are these students at risk? Yes, Taylor allows, most of them are. Are they troublemakers? "This is not a college prep school by any stretch of the imagination," he responds. "What they get here is a good, well-rounded education and the opportunity to get their high school degree. But if the truth were known, we have fewer problem students here than at other schools."

Alternative schools provide a place for safety and respect for students, a place to learn and a place to belong. They provide them with an opportunity to create a positive identity.

Seventeen-year-old Danielle Hall is a Meridian Academy senior. She dropped out

at Eagle High School the previous year. "I wanted to come here, but at first my mom wouldn't let me," she says. "She thought it was full of drug addicts, and she was afraid I would get into drugs. But that isn't the case. Nobody is judgmental at this school. Here, everyone is on a first-name basis with each other. The teachers are more like friends than authority figures."

Alternative schools with significantly smaller enrollments provide a dramatically different educational environment. Everyone knows one another, and this familiarity tends to foster mutual respect and far less violence.

"If kids here had previous trouble, it was usually with their [previous] school, not with the law," Hall says.

A key reason that so many students drop out of school or fail academically is that they simply are lost in a big, confusing junior/senior high school.

"At Eagle High School, the classes were large and crowded, and if you couldn't figure things out, they just left you behind," says Hall. "That's what happened to me; that's why I dropped out. There's no way I would have graduated from Eagle. Now I'm going to graduate. I plan to take a year off and then go to college."

[The alternative school's] community of support enables students to become educationally engaged in relevant, meaningful learning in an intimate small setting, Barr

and Parrett state in their book.

"You get more personal attention from the teachers here," Hall says. "Since I've been here, I've gotten almost all A's."

[T]he alternative school allows teachers who care deeply about [their] students to join together in a small, intimate learning environment.

Taylor, who graduated from Boise State in 1984 and returned to get his master's degree in 1997, knows what works and what doesn't. A high school dropout himself, he didn't enter college until he was 50. "The reason this school works is because it has an outstanding staff that cares about these kids," says the government and economics teacher. "The atmosphere is great. We keep the enrollment at 150, and we keep the classes small."

The research is unequivocal on this aspect of alternative schools: If students are surrounded by teachers who both care about them and demand high-quality work, significant learning occurs.

Here's one other reason why Meridian Academy works: Bob Taylor, 67, leans back in his chair with a satisfied look. His eyes twinkle as he looks around his empty classroom. In a few minutes, it will be filled with kids. And he knows the quarters will still be on his desk when the students go home.

"This," he says, "is the best teaching assignment in the state of Idaho." □