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Seniors Robert Bond, left, and Samantha Morgans, right, look over some material with Alternative Learning Center Director Ron Musto at the Plains Township facility. Bond and Morgans selected the school to complete their high school educations.

## At-risk students find structured environment for education at Alternative Learning Center

By Brian Jarvis  
Staff Writer

PLAINS TWP. — Envision a school filled with students whose criteria for admittance ranges from truancy to failing grades to criminal behavior, and no doubt the image that comes to mind leans toward the negative.

Once called reform schools, alternative learning centers still bear the stigma of decades past, recalling dreary dungeons infested with drugs and fist fights that serve as little more than dead ends for incorrigible teens.

For students at the Alternative Learning Center in Plains Township, however, the truth is anything but.

"People think it's a hell-raising school where you throw books and smack teachers, or the staff beats up the kids, but it's not like that at all. It's 100 percent lies, because we come here to do our work," senior Robert Bond said. "And if you ever see staff put their hands on students, it's not for no reason. It's to restrain them for something they did wrong."

Hailing from Plymouth Township, Bond decided on the ALC his junior year after a series of physical confrontations at Greater Nanticoke Area. He still wrestles for his sending school's varsity team, however, and recently competed in the AA district tournament. After graduating, he

plans to enlist in the Marine Corps.

Overseen by Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18, the Alternative Learning Center serves 220 students in grades 6-12 throughout Luzerne and Lackawanna counties. Its recidivism rate is only 15 percent.

For program Director Ron Musto, therefore, the ALC represents not a punishment but an opportunity.

"We offer structure to prevent at-risk youth from falling through the cracks as well as a stepping stone back to a public school," said Musto. "Like any school, our goal is a safe learning environment, and our students can get the same resources and the chance they deserve thanks to the LIU and (Executive Director) Michael Ostrowski."

In following a traditional schedule of core subjects like English, math and science, the school offers a credit recovery program as well as standardized testing for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment and the Armed Services Vocational-Aptitude Battery. Students are also allowed to take part in extracurricular activities and graduation ceremonies at their sending schools.

With a police officer and a probation officer on campus, Musto believes the ALC is one of the safest schools around.

"We run our program on reputation and our teachers are trained to verbally de-esca-

late a situation before it becomes physical," said Musto. "If you read the national news, the concept of a safe, rural school with a non-confrontational environment is unfortunately nothing more than a memory."

For senior Samantha Morgans, who used to fail half of her classes at Meyers High School, the ALC simply offered a slower-paced, more personalized journey along her academic career.

"Before, I wasn't really getting the extra help I needed. I wanted more one-on-one with my teachers, and this has been a step up for me. I want to make something of my life, grow up to be stable and know I can have a good job," said Morgans, who gave high praise to Life Skills Instructor Darcy Berti. "I've never had a teacher as a friend before. (Berti) makes everyone feel comfortable."

As with any school, however, dealing with fellow students is never easy.

"Some of the kids are nice. Others have anger problems. It's not a place you want to come to, but if you're having second thoughts about dropping out, you can come here and make the right choices. The teachers will help you," said Morgans. "And we don't put people in groups like at other high schools. We look for who you are."