

Top programs put 'education' in 'alternative education'

By Matthew Tungate

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Denise Adams, principal of The Providence School in Jessamine County, remembers Kirk as an angry young man, seething with an implusive type of anger that made staff fear the outcome if he should ever fight with someone.

But over the period of two or three years, Kirk became more willing to listen and less angry – and began to learn. His reading scores soared as he began to pay attention in class, and eventually the school had to dismiss him from special education services because he no longer qualified.

"Since graduating in 2005, Kirk has worked at least one job steadily and often has held another part-time job so he could help his wife – his high-school sweetheart – attend college part-time," Adams said. "After being married for three years, Kirk and his wife have purchased a home and have become the proud parents of a baby girl."

Kirk's story is just one that Adams can tell about The Providence School, which was one of six alternative education programs recently designated as Best Practice Sites to recognize the work of educators and programs that serve at-risk students.

The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) began designating Best Practice Sites this year to highlight exemplary practices in programs that provide services to at-risk students. School districts nominated their programs, and finalists received site visits from a review committee. Each program selected as a Best Practice Site will receive \$1,000 for instructional support and be formally recognized at a meeting of the Kentucky Board of Education.

ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

A5 Programs are district-operated and district-controlled facilities designed to provide services to at-risk populations with unique needs.

A6 Programs are district-operated instructional programs in non-district-operated institutions or schools serving youth who are state agency children. These youth are the responsibility of the Departments of Juvenile Justice, Community Based Services, and Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services.

The programs were self-nominated in the categories of Academic Performance, Learning Environment and Efficiency. The other five programs named as Best Practice Sites for 2009 are:

- Beacon Central High School (Daviess County) – Best Practice Site in the Learning Environment category
- Brooklawn School (Jefferson County) – Best Practice Site in Efficiency category
- Calloway County Day Treatment – Best Practice Site in all three categories
- Graduation Success Academy (Bath County) – Best Practice Site in the Efficiency category
- Ramey-Estep High School (Boyd County) – Best Practice Site in all three categories

Best Practice Site designation will be awarded annually, according to Nijel Clayton, Secondary Education Branch manager with the Kentucky Department of Education. Districts can begin nominating A5 and A6 programs in early 2010, with reviews finished by April or May, and Best Practice Sites named by the end of the school year.

Clayton said the state estimates more than 45,000 students spend all or some of the year in an A5 program, and there are about 20,000 per year attending A6 programs.

"Those two numbers, if we were to add them together, would constitute Kentucky's second-largest school district," she said.

The evaluation for Best Practice Sites is modeled after the state Standards and Indicators for School Improvement, Clayton said.

"We feel that alternative education programs should be like schools, in terms of rigorous content, high-quality instruction – all of those things that people would



Photos by Amy Wallot

Senior Paul Clem writes his name in Arabic during Eric Sowers' World Civilization class at The Providence School.

normally associate with quality indicators for school," she said.

A5 and A6 schools also should have more support for behavioral and academic interventions, Clayton said.

"The students are there for a purpose, and our job is to ensure that students in alternative programs are still receiving a high-quality education, the same as any other student," she said.

The Providence School a model of excellence

The Providence School, which opened in 2002, was recognized in all three categories, but state education officials knew of its excellence well before this year.

The state Department of Education has a DVD about The Providence School that will be used as a training opportunity for outside audience to show the "possibilities of a fully functioning, exemplary alternative education program," Clayton said.

Among many other traits, the Best Practice Sites review team noted that The Providence School focuses on professional development for its teachers. Students are dismissed early on Fridays to allow for staff collaborative planning time. Students are dismissed for the entire day the last Friday of each month, which allows for five



Travis Spann teaches mathematics to middle school students at The Providence School (Jessamine County). At Providence, students are dismissed early on Fridays to allow for staff collaborative planning time.

hours of training time for teachers and classified staff.

"All teachers either meet the requirement to be highly qualified or are working toward certification," according to the review. "Staff members use the students' early release time on Friday for collaboration and training to focus classroom instruction on the school's goals and objectives."

Principal Adams said The Providence School, which is an A5 school with a small A6 program designed specifically for teen mothers, is constantly creating and refining programs to address the needs of the students who are currently not succeeding in traditional schools.

"Success is dependent on how well we personalize education for each individual student," she said. "Therefore, when a new initiative is introduced to our district, we have to learn the same basic information that all educators in Jessamine County have to learn. However, we then have to adapt

the information to make it work with at-risk students."

For schools that aspire to be Best Practice Sites, Adams suggested they address cultural issues first.

"Even when students are disrespectful, adults must remain calm and respectful. Examine discipline procedures and philosophy, spending time thinking about the goal of discipline. If students believe adults have their best long-term interests in mind when disciplining them, the vast majority will respond positively," she said. "When discipline becomes a synonym for punishment, students will become angrier, more difficult to manage and more resistant to learning – all responses wise educators do not want to elicit."

Beacon Central High School promotes community involvement

Beacon Central High School was named a Best Practice Site in the Learning Environment category. The A5 school, which has been open since 1996, accepts students

based on academic, truancy and pregnancy issues.

The review team noted, "The principal has a vision of changing the name of Beacon Central Alternative School to Beacon Central High School in an effort to remove the punitive stigma and community perception of this program."

Principal Tony Bryant said he and his staff believe that all students can and will succeed given the proper support and encouragement.

"The most important dynamic is the relationship that exists with the student," he said. "If a student feels a sense of belonging, he or she will succeed."

The review team saw that an important element of the Beacon Central High culture has been a renewed sense of the students' role in the community. Last year students hosted a Veterans Day program and raised money for a student with cancer at another school. Students also have been involved in a service project of

beautifying the school grounds by planting flowers; painting the flag pole base and picnic tables in the school colors; and clearing the grounds of debris after two storms.

School staff noted that Beacon Central High staff work with families and the community to remove barriers to learning by providing services such as providing food and clothing; prom dresses; referrals to local health clinics; and an on-site child care center for students' babies.

"We feel it is important for students and the community to see Beacon as an option for success rather than a 'place' to send students that are struggling to earn credits," Bryant said.

Bryant said he would tell other A5 and A6 schools "to focus on building relationships with students and to look for positives instead of roadblocks."

Brooklawn School promotes educational excellence

Brooklawn School is an A6 residential facility serving students



Teacher Becky Lynch helps a group of students bake squash during her cooking class at Ramey-Estep High School (Boyd County).

from throughout the state whom various state agencies place into the program. Associate Principal Trish Joyce said many of her students arrive at the school below grade level in reading and mathematics skills due to their movement from facility to facility.

"Our role is to increase their skills and make their school experience academically strong plus trying to provide a 'wow' factor for the students through special school projects, field trips and guest speakers," she said.

The review team was impressed with Brooklawn's commitment to academics. Its report noted that

"the program is equipped with several curriculum/software programs and students have access to (Kentucky's) Core Content subjects and receive credit toward graduation. The daily school schedule reflects that students receive six hours of instruction and have access to the entire curriculum necessary for their grade placement. Teachers' class schedules are evidence that the staff makes efficient use of instructional time to maximize student learning."

The review team also observed that teachers use varied instructional strategies, effective questioning techniques and integration of content. Students are able to participate in an Automobile Mechanics class in a fully functioning garage, and in a Horticulture class complete with a greenhouse.

"The Brooklawn students are given the opportunity to excel



Murray State University police officer Kenny Jenkins, left, and Calloway County Sheriff's Department Deputy Brandon Gallimore patrol the Calloway County Day Treatment Center. The two agencies, along with the Murray City Police, visit the school frequently and conduct walkthroughs to build positive relationships with students and families.

under the direction and efforts of a staff that has high expectation for each student," the review team's report said.

The report also said the staff promotes team planning vertically and horizontally across content areas and grade configurations. Planning consists of 30 minutes each morning, prior to the arrival of students; one hour weekly; and four days included in the school calendar.

"Our school has a committed staff that is willing to work as a team for the success for our students," Joyce said. "We continue to look at new programs and opportunities to make our school more

academically engaging. We want students to come to school to learn and have a great day where they feel confident and successful."

Calloway County Day Treatment Center builds positive relationships

Calloway County Day Treatment Center (CCDTC) was recognized in all three areas as a Best Practice Site. One thing the review team noted was the involvement of the community in the A6 school.

"An advisory committee meets quarterly to review policies, procedures, and to refine the overall operation of the program. Outreach

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agencies, for example Big Brothers/Big Sisters, are used to mentor students and families. Murray City Police, Calloway County Sheriff's Department and Murray State University Campus Police visit the facility frequently and conduct walkthroughs to build positive relationships with students and families," the report said.

"Community resources are used to provide programs and learning opportunities for students in the areas of drug awareness and prevention, Internet safety and job applications, and interviewing and shadowing. Furthermore, the superintendent and other central office staff visit the school frequently and demonstrate a caring support for the students."

Facility Director Susan Bucy said community involvement is critical to helping her students.

"Our students are a part of our community, and in order for them to learn to be positive contributors to the community, they need to feel important and valued in it," she said. "Law enforcement is often seen as the enemy to some of our students, but their presence in our building provides a sense of security and stability that all of our students and staff members appreciate and need in their lives."

The review team also noted that CCDTC uses many of the same practices that improve students' learning at traditional schools. Teachers give students opportunities to apply knowledge to real-life situations, integrate multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles, and use a shared lesson-plan template that combines *Program of Studies* and *Kentucky Core Content for Assessment*.

Bucy said CCDTC staff is involved in planning to improve student achievement and to improve program performance. But, it is how staff interacts with each other and with students that is the real key, she said.

"Each staff member chooses to work at CCDTC and has had the opportunity to go to other schools, change positions, etc., if they wanted," Bucy said. "They all want to work at CCDTC because the culture is so positive. The way the staff interacts with each other is a great

benefit for our students because they are able to see appropriate and healthy adult relationships.

Graduation Success Academy starts off right

Graduation Success Academy (GSA) Principal Todd Neace said his school was created to help reduce the number of dropouts in Bath County. Neace, a former football player, is so driven by that goal that he pulled a student out of bed last year when the child's mother said he wouldn't get up.

"I feel that everyone in the state of Kentucky realizes that there is a major problem with dropouts, and there needs to be something done to address the needs of the students we are losing," Neace said. "I feel that Bath County is on the cutting edge of the solution, and we at GSA have developed some innovative ways to address the specific needs of our individual students."

The review team, which named Graduation Success Academy a Best Practice Site in Efficiency, praised the Bath County school district for designing space in the new Bath County High School addition specifically for alternative education. The review team also noted that the A5 program, which began in the 2008-09 school year, works closely with Bath County High School "to provide opportunities for instruction in business, agriculture and Spanish."

"We feel that the students need to learn to interact with all types of people, and they need to be able to work with different teachers for them to be successful later on in life," Neace said.

However, his students usually have difficult home lives and need a smaller environment with one-on-one interaction with teachers, Neace said.

"You really get to know these kids, and they start to respond to that," he said. "It's not a punitive alternative school."

Neace said he would tell other A5 and A6 programs, "I feel that in an alternative setting you can't be afraid of change and if something isn't working then you need to be willing to attack it and change it as necessary. Don't wait until next year or next month – you will lose students by then. You must change immediately."



Photos by Amy Wallot

Calloway County Day Treatment Center 8th-grader William Feckley talks with mathematics teacher Amy Futrell and counselor Tiffany Pitman during a treatment team meeting.

Ramey-Estep High School blends treatment, academics

Ramey-Estep High School is an A6 residential facility serving students with academic, behavioral, social and emotional deficits. The review team noted that the school and Ramey-Estep Homes, the residential treatment facility, have established a comprehensive treatment plan for each student.

"Communication flows both ways so that the youth can perform to the best of their ability in the classroom and within the treatment group. Because Ramey-Estep Homes is a treatment facility, each child receives an individualized treatment plan tailored to his/her personal needs. Each student's educational and treatment plan is reviewed weekly by a Treatment Team composed of the teacher to whom the student has been assigned and Ramey-Estep Homes staff," the report said.

Principal Ann Brewster, in her 47th year in education, said, "We teach our students based upon their treatment plan, therefore, there is always collaboration between treatment and education for the student to get the whole package."

Brewster said her school has regular student turnover, and many of them come to the school



Jim Trimboli helps a student with a latch-hook project at Ramey-Estep High. Trimboli has been teaching at the school for five years. "This is the best teaching job you'll ever have," Trimboli said.

with low mathematics and reading scores and with few credits toward promotion or graduation. However, the review team noted that all teachers at Ramey-Estep High meet the requirements to be considered highly qualified; use differentiated instruction and a variety of assessments; and provide "quality, intensive, individu-

alized instruction based on each student's needs."

"Our educational staff is extremely committed to the high expectations for all students regardless of their needs. I see the importance of having high expectations for my staff and students," Brewster said. "While in our school, the students are eager to learn and always wanting to know how many credits they have earned and where they stand in their education."

The review team also noted that students build relationships with the community by participating in various service projects, such as sending cards and packages to members of the United States military in Afghanistan and Iraq annually since 2006, managing a blood drive four times a year, participating in the annual Christmas parade and teaching reading at the Boyd County Early Childhood Learning Center.

Brewster said, "I do think this is extremely important for our students to learn to serve others and by doing this they are also gaining work experience and social skills."

MORE INFO ...

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