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From the Director

Dear KECSAC community,

Welcome to the newly designed Collaborative newsletter! As we continue our mission of serving the educational needs of state agency children, it is becoming increasingly important to share our work in a broader scope. The voices of our students should continue to be at the forefront of our work and we should continue to incorporate the wisdom of our educators. This new format does both of those things. Public education, as you know, has one of the most significant roles in the advancement of our country, and certainly our state. As legislators and economic leaders of our Commonwealth discuss our changing economy and develop policies to engage our students and citizens in new, emerging markets, it is imperative that our students have the skills and resources to compete. In short, to ensure the success of state agency children, our economy and our future, it is essential that we prepare our students to meet the challenges they will face in a highly complex, competitive world.

I am proud of the educators who have dedicated their lives to our students. They continue to go above and beyond in every single thing they do to meet the changing needs of our students. When necessary they work longer than is expected, they dig deep into their own pockets for supplies, and they spend their emotional capital on the children and youth we serve. Their leadership is beyond compare and I am grateful to work with educators and advocates who continue to put the needs of our students above their own. As the director of KECSAC, I appreciate your continued support in advancing the achievement and success of our students, teachers, staff and community. Together, we are building a stronger future for our children and our country.

Sincerely,

Ronnie Nolan, Ed.D.
Director, KECSAC
Training Days

KECSAC’s Annual At-Risk Summit draws record crowd in July to learn from professional educators and state-agency youth.

A record number of educators all the way from Paducah to Pikeville came together on July 25-26 for the 16th Annual Alternative Strategies for Educating Students At-Risk Summit. Over 300 teachers, administrators, and others invested in providing quality education to Kentucky’s students had a whole new experience this year as the summit was held in a new location. Embassy Suites in Lexington hosted the event and proved to be a fantastic venue. The large ballroom allowed plenty of room for opening keynote speaker Kim Thomas to move amongst the audience during her energetic and motivational address. Kim set the upbeat tone for two days of learning and networking with colleagues.

During that time participants had a wide variety of breakout sessions to choose from. Topics covered in included content strategies, trauma informed care, project based learning, and much more. Resources were shared by veteran teachers in alternative setting classrooms, by legislative and mental health experts, and by many partner state agencies. The range of workshops offered attendees the opportunity to focus on self-care and mental health alongside content mapping and using technology to enhance instruction. A whole group session on day one focused on Culturally Responsive Teaching and Universal Design for Learning, skills that every educator can put into practice. Day two featured a highlight of the summit – a panel of students who had been enrolled in state agency children education programs. These students shared their experiences, both positive and those that challenged them, in order to inspire those present to better understand the needs of their pupils. Department for Community Based Services Commissioner Adria Johnson moderated the panel and thanked the audience for their hard work while reminding them of the great responsibility of shaping young minds.

The annual State Agency Children School Administrator Association awards luncheon was held during the summit. Outstanding teachers, support staff, administrators, and students were recognized for their exceptional work and achievements. One student winner, Tessa Bowling from Northern Kentucky, shared her story and explained how education has been a key to her success.

The summit was capped off by closing keynote speaker, Michael Bonner. Michael is a young and inspirational teacher who drew the attention of Ellen DeGeneres due to his energetic and innovative strategies with his students. His message really invigorated the group and got them ready to tackle the
challenges of another school year with positivity and creativity.

KECSAC would like to thank the members of the planning committee, our state partners, and our generous sponsors, the Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Education, Department for Community Based Services, and Kentucky Center for School Safety, for making this year’s summit possible. We look forward to working together to make next year even more exciting!
Like many of the students in KECSAC programs, Lucinda Mills, school administrator at McCracken Regional School located in the McCracken Juvenile Detention Center, didn’t know what she wanted to be when she grew up. Out of high school she pursued a degree as a music major with a full scholarship to Murray State University, but soon realized that being a performance major was not in her future. So she transferred to Western Community and Technical College System and soon joined the working world. However, after 15 years working various jobs including warehouse and factory positions, she decided she wanted to contribute something more with her life.

“I felt like there had to be something better out there,” Mills said. “I felt like I was only contributing to the company’s bottom line, and that something else was calling me.”

That’s when Mills went back to school and started her undergraduate degree at Murray State in learning behavior disorders. She graduated in 1998 and taught an Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) unit at Ballard County schools. Then when McCracken RJDC opened the next year she began working as a teacher and administrator there and found where she belonged. She has been an educator there for the past 18 years now. She later earned her Master’s degree in assistive technology with an emphasis in the area of autism from the University of Louisville in 2002. Mills is also National Board-Certified as one of the first alternative educators to earn the certification.

“I’m very blessed to be here, I really am. I really feel like God put me here for a reason, and not very many people are able to say that about their job.” Mills explained. “This program is my bragging right, and my cause. I feel like this is where I’m supposed to be and where I’m needed. I wear a lot of hats around here, and I’m proud of how far we’ve come since the beginning.”

It was her life experience before becoming a teacher that Mills says contributes to her passion for educating this special population of students. Having many years of work experience, often in grueling and physically demanding positions, she has experiences and advice that she can share with her students to help them find their path in education.
“I want my students to be academically successful first of all, because I feel like education is key to everything in the rest of their lives,” Mills said. “But I know what it’s like to work in a lot of different environments, I have an idea of what interviewers are looking for and what prospective employers want to see. I know there are many different ways to make a living and when you’re young, those jobs that are very physically demanding often aren’t reliable for the long term. So I try to bring my experiences to the classroom and encourage kids that yes, you can seek those kinds of career, and they are great careers, but don’t let that be your only focus. I try to encourage them to go on to some kind of post-secondary school – to get an endorsement or apprenticeship, or some kind of degree.”

The reality is that most of the students who end up in her program are students who have usually fallen through the cracks at regular schools and are already struggling academically. But Mills doesn’t let their past and their mistakes dictate how they succeed academically and in life going forward.

“These students have made mistakes but they’re kids and they’re supposed to make mistakes, that’s how they learn. I want them to do as much academically as they can, but at the end of the day with all the uncertainty many of them have grown up with, and many being bounced around in the foster care system, I just want them to have happy, normal lives with some sense of safety and security,” Mills explains.

This drive to help kids succeed can be mirrored in how she was raised. Mills shared that her mother was a huge inspiration and driving force in her life. As a single mother who didn’t graduate high school, she was adamant that all her children graduate, and she worked hard to make that possible.

“My mother was a very strong lady,” Mills said. “She was very supportive and sacrificed a lot so we could go to school.”

Mills is just as adamant about helping her students graduate, or at least helping them prepare for that outcome when they leave, because she sees potential in each of them. Even though their mistakes have led to a restrictive placement, Mills sees how this setting that provides security and wraparound services helps most students blossom.

“We have kids who when they came in here were out of control, and are now upper level, sitting in my class everyday earning credits and working hard,” Mills said. “I see the way kids change and I see the pride they take in what they accomplish here. One student recently said to me that he wanted to earn an 80 on an assignment, not just a 78, so he worked hard to reach that goal. That’s a big change for these students, and a big success. Because a vast majority of them don’t come in here with any academic success at all.”

That’s why when students are able to graduate while at the program, it is often an emotional but very joyous occasion. In fact, many academic successes are celebrated in order to help kids realize the excitement and pride that can come along with their achievement, since many are only there for the short term.

“We celebrate everything! We’re just looking for a reason to party,” Mills said jovially. “We have had several graduates this year, and some of those graduates have gone on to take college classes online and earn some credits. We also had one sixth grader who managed to win second place in his division in a statewide poetry contest this spring.”
You can tell her heart is fully invested in her job because hearing Mills talk about the accomplishments she witnesses, you can also hear the emotion in her words. And one of the greatest joys she experiences is when she can witness students who didn’t think they could do anything academically, graduate high school.

“Recently we had a student who told me, ‘I’m the first person in my family to graduate from high school.’ He also had a difficult background and said he wouldn’t have graduated if he hadn’t come to detention,” Mills said. “So it was a big deal and we were all emotional and had his family and district staff here to celebrate as well.”

However, Mills doesn’t take all the credit for the accomplishments her students celebrate. She credits the program’s success to a great staff of full-time teachers and support staff. Generous support from their district, along with the services DJJ provides also allows them to offer support for students’ mental and physical health, as well as academics. And while everyone who works at the program is doing their best to give students a second chance, Mills would like more people to understand their need for that second chance as well.

“'I want others to know that our kids are not disposable,” Mills explained. “Just because they’ve made a bad decision we can’t just wash our hands of them and hope for the best. We need them to be a part of our communities, a part of our lives, and in some cases a part of our families. And we need them to have the skills that are necessary to be able to do that successfully.”

When she’s not working, Mills enjoys golfing with her husband, hiking with her two rescue dogs, gardening, and visiting with her “perfect 4-year-old granddaughter.”

Young men at McCracken Regional School participate in yoga classes regularly to help develop important coping mechanisms and to improve physical endurance as well.
Program News

Solar Eclipse Activities at WRJDC

Students, faculty, and staff at Warren Regional Juvenile Detention Center welcomed speakers Dr. Richard Gelderman and Ms. Theo Wellington from Western Kentucky University’s Hardin Planetarium on July 28 in preparation for the solar eclipse this summer. The students started a unit of study related to the eclipse by reading Silas House’s book, “Same Sun Here,” which culminated in a book talk with donuts provided by Matt Rich from the Warren County Public Library. The WKU eclipse speakers brought several visual aids that allowed the students to see how the eclipse works, and learn more about our sun and how the size and proportion of our sun and moon make the eclipse possible. Thanks to the Bowling Green Independent School District, all students in the district were provided with a pair of safe eclipse viewing glasses. The program even served eclipse-themed food on August 21 to continue celebrating the event.

Students and staff at College Street Campus also got to witness the eclipse that was visible across the U.S. on August 21. With the generous gift of certified eclipse viewing glasses from Western Kentucky University, everyone got to safely enjoy the spectacle. Since the program was very close to the path of totality, students got a rare glimpse at an almost total eclipse that many never get to experience.

College Street Campus Students Help Promote Literacy and Witness Eclipse First Hand

College Street Campus students along with 21st Century teachers who helped with book house construction pose with one of their creations in front of the central office. Adults pictured from left to right: Alyssa Pack, teacher; Bo Matthews, superintendent Barren County Schools; Heather Gardner, teacher; Cortni Crews DFF of Barren County Schools; Dan Belding, principal; and James Spence, vocational teacher.

Thanks to district support and a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, students at College Street Campus in Barren County were able to give back to their community this summer. The 21st Century program is designed to create and support community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The students used the funds to build book houses at all schools across the county, which provide community members and students the opportunity to borrow and return books at various locations. Principal of the school, Dan Belding, said the students really enjoyed the project and look forward to more projects with the 21st Century program in the future.
Expanding Technology for the Future

Mercer County Day Treatment students are integrating technology into every component of their learning experiences and the investments are paying off for students and teachers alike.

It’s been a busy start to a new year at Mercer County Day Treatment, a Department of Juvenile Justice contracted program located in Harrodsburg, Kentucky with the capacity to serve up to 30 students. Students in the program are using technology to change the way they learn and the way they interact with their peers. Teachers are also changing the way they deliver instruction, using technology in this A6 program that surpasses what is available in much of the school district.

The students in the program are too young to have experienced what school was like before computers and the internet changed everything. But they know exactly what it was like before the recent introduction of expanded technologies became available. Learning is way more fun and way more interactive as a result of the tech tools being offered by the Mercer County Board of Education. Now, students are using modern technologies both inside the classroom and out.

Chris Souder, principal of the program, along with his talented teaching staff have developed a great program geared towards preparing students for a life of purpose. The incorporation of tech tools have worked wonders in generating excitement among everyone associated with the program, including Superintendent Dennis Davis. During a recent Interagency Advisory Group meeting at the day treatment program, the governing board of KECSAC had the opportunity to witness firsthand the emerging use of technology in the newly minted STEM classroom. Students demonstrated how they were using a new 3D printer, purchased by grant funds, to design and build learning tools. They are also looking to the future as they partner with local community members.
to meet the changing needs of their environment. For example, the students are already working with a local performing artist to develop a guitar pick to help ease the stress of recently diagnosed carpal tunnel syndrome.

“Technology is an integral part of our work and lives today,” Kentucky Department of Education board member Sherri Clusky said. “Students at this program are engaged and it helps to create active learners when they are utilizing technology. It encourages collaboration with students and staff.”

Students at Mercer County Day Treatment have access to learning tools like iPads, laptops, 3D printers, robotic programs, touch screen smart boards, and, yes, even drones thanks to support from their superintendent, the local board of education and outside grant agencies. KECSAC programs across the Commonwealth are benefiting from the leadership at the local level who are investing in new technologies that are helping our students reengage in the learning process while becoming leaders in their classrooms and their communities. Clusky also noted, “To see the passion all of the students had in the various technology they were working with at the different stations within the classroom was the best part of our visit. My favorite was the drone demonstration! This one piece of technology can open so many doors for the students at MCDT. It can be used in the military, the delivery of small items, shooting commercial videos and law enforcement. By having the knowledge of how to effectively operate this technology these students are ahead of their peers.”

“The use of technology in the classrooms, both in the STEM area and in other areas of the program, has created opportunities for students to learn real world problem solving while also sharing their learning,” said Dr. Ronnie Nolan, director of KECSAC. “And as an educator and an advocate for state agency children, it is great, too, because it reinvigorates me, challenging me to discover new, emerging ways to support our teachers and our students through the use of technology. We have to use the new tools to create meaningful ways to engage our students and Mercer County Day Treatment is doing just that by integrating the technology into language arts, into mathematics, into every component of the program.

To see the students so focused when using the 3D printer or the robotics programs or outside using the drone to photograph topography is so exciting. This technology is helping our students with a rigorous curriculum that has real-world application.”

While the tech tools are nice to have, the real impact comes in integrating those tools with the blended learning philosophy that Mercer County has adopted for their program. Blended learning combines supervised learning in the classroom with online instruction, allowing students to choose their learning place, pace and path. It relies heavily on a multidisciplinary approach where students, like those at Mercer, get to tackle projects that integrate elements of various subjects, from language arts to social studies to science.

The personalized attention provided by the leadership at Mercer County Day Treatment, augmented by the tech tools provided at the school and the personal ingenuity of the amazing teaching staff, will continue to push students forward. We can’t wait to see what the future holds for these talented students!