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Learn about the first installment of KECSAC’s newest PD series that took administrators, staff, and partners to Indiana to learn best practices from alternative programs in the state.
Dear KECSAC Community,

Over the last few years I have witnessed the transformational growth of vocational offerings in our programs across the Commonwealth. Partnerships with the Kentucky Departments of Juvenile Justice, Community Based Services, and Education have resulted in the rapid expansion of course offerings, apprenticeship programs and project-based learning; all culminating in our students earning real world experience and employability skills. The growth of these programs represents a larger movement already underway in our society. Our school districts have also responded to this shift in focus, recognizing that our students need both college and career readiness skills. We know that a majority of our students are kinesthetic learners who excel when they get to work with their hands; and our partnering schools have embraced these expanded learning opportunities.

This growing interest in and expansion of employability focused education indicates a positive trend not just for our students, but also for the nation and world. I applaud our educators who are “moving the needle” for our students and who are empowering them with the skills and resources they need to be successful in the future. Because of their great work, our students are learning skills that are preparing them for meaningful careers, with many earning career readiness certifications. Our students are energized, mission-driven, smart, and equipped with the skills to succeed. For this reason and many others, I am optimistic about the future and about how our children and youth will continue growing and learning as they transition beyond our doors. Our partnerships have never been more critical to our students and I am grateful for the ongoing work to engage our students in new and expanding opportunities.

Sincerely,

Ronnie Nolan, Ed.D.
Director, KECSAC
As Angela Austin ends her tenure as an educator in the Daviess County school district, including four years as a teacher, and four years as the principal at Owensboro Day Treatment, she will have contributed 30 years to an impressive 80-year record of teaching in the district among her family. And according to Ms. Austin, she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Education has been my whole life - my mom was an educator and so was my sister. I never, not one time, thought of being anything else other than a teacher,” she said. “This is what I was destined to do, and when I got to this program I knew this is where God put me.”

Ms. Austin began her path to teaching with an undergraduate degree from Kentucky Wesleyan College, then received her Master’s Degree and Rank 1 at Western Kentucky University. Before working in alternative programs she was somewhat of a jack-of-all-trades for 22 years at Daviess County Middle School where she began her career. When asked about her role at the middle school, she laughed ominously. “I taught EVERYTHING, including music, art, and intramural football. I’m not kidding I’ve taught it all!”

As part of an ongoing series in the Collaborative we interviewed Angela Austin, Principal of Owensboro Day Treatment in Daviess County as she completes her 30-year tenure as an educator.

she said. At different points in time she also taught English, history, spelling, math, science, social studies, reading, and life skills.

While she loved the middle school, Ms. Austin always felt her calling was helping the most vulnerable of her students, and decided to pursue that calling further when a teaching position opened in 2010 at the day treatment. As a teacher there she provided math, science, reading, and practical living/vocation studies instruction.

“I always had a heart for these kids, and always worked really well with the at-risk students in school,” she said. “Other kids who went to stable homes at the end of the day didn’t need me as much, and didn’t need that stabilizing force that I could provide. I became somebody they could count on, so that’s why I was always drawn to those kids.”

Her role at the program changed in 2014 when the head teacher retired and no one else at the program was interested in the position. “I’ve never really had any aspirations of being in administration, that was the furthest thing from my mind, but I thought, ‘why not? I’m not letting somebody else come in here and ruin what we’ve got!’” she laughed.
Even though her plans never included her being principal of the day treatment, as well as Owensboro Residential Treatment Center until it closed last year, she adjusted to the role quite well. In 2016 she was even awarded the State Agency Children School Administrators Association (SACSAA) Outstanding School Administrator Award that was presented at the KECSAC annual alternative summit.

As an administrator, one of her missions was to continue to improve the instructional setting for students in terms of technology at a Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) program setting, which was somewhat behind in the use of tech in the classroom. In fact, her programs were among the first in the state to move to the public school's internet provider, which was much more robust and efficient than DJJ internet service. Students often couldn’t use their credit recovery software correctly before the move due to restrictions in the service.

“I worked really hard to move us towards a more public school educational setting rather than focusing solely on behavior,” she said. She also credits reaching this goal with the fact that the educational branch at DJJ chose her and her program to attend a training in Seattle to work with the Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings (CEEAS) about getting more technology into secure facilities.

“That really opened up a lot of opportunities for us to get more regular technology because we were learning about all the monitoring and safety software that makes it possible,” she said. “We’re charged with giving our kids an education that is commensurate with those public school counterparts and blended learning is the way. As a result, we were inadvertently handicapping these kids educationally.”

The program has been able to update their computers and other hardware in the past few years as well, including the purchase of iPads, Chromebook, interactive white boards for classrooms, and other technology tools such as Makerspace programming and coding kits that promote STEM learning.

“People outside the program used to think we were just doing coloring pages and worksheets, which we weren’t, but we weren’t where we needed to be,” she said. “The students’ love that it’s not just paper and pencil all the time, and again it’s just learning like everybody else is doing. We now have tech Fridays every Friday afternoon and the students get to work with our tools and learn how to code and program.”

Ms. Austin does emphasize however, that none of their successes, especially in technology, would be possible without a great working relationship between the education staff, and the DJJ program and treatment staff.

“In a day treatment facility, especially a DJJ facility like we have here, you have to have a really good working relationship – and both entities are very important don’t get me wrong – but my teachers and I understand that the kids are here for treatment and that is really going to take top priority,” she said. “Because until you get some of these treatment issues resolved or moving in the right direction, they’re not going to be able to learn well.”

This mutual understanding and communication also applies to the DJJ Superintendent of the facility, Keith Wells, since they understand and respect each other’s roles. “I will always go to the superintendent and get his input and advice on decisions, and in turn he comes to me to ask about education’s role in decisions,” she said. “So if it’s a great partnership and I’m blessed to be a part of it. We know we’re all on the same team and the kids know that as well.”

Another personal educational mission of Ms. Austin’s has always been to level the playing field for at-risk students by ensuring they get quality instruction, comparable to what they’ll get when they return to a public school setting, and also to help students realize they can be successful at school.

“While students are here I hope they achieve some academic success again. A lot of our kids come to us so far behind and they’ve lost all their confidence,” she said. “They’ve been put out of class for behavior or they’ve missed extended periods of school and so they haven’t been successful and haven’t had good grades. So I hope they experience...

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KECSAC’s newest professional development offering that was held this spring took administrators and partners to Indianapolis alternative schools to learn about best practices for programming in their state.

KECSAC School Administrators, state agency partners, and staff embarked on an adventure this spring to learn more about what neighboring states are doing to best educate students like our own. In partnership with the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) out of Washington D.C., 23 Kentuckians gathered in Indianapolis, IN for a three-day study tour of alternative programs as part of the KECSAC Expanded Horizons Professional Development Series. AYPF selected a variety of different types of programs and schools for us to visit and arranged for the group to meet with leaders in education and corrections at the state level.

The opening meeting with these leaders provided an overview of how Indiana operates alternative schools, a process very different from Kentucky. The rest of the trip was spent touring facilities both similar to, and different from, KECSAC programs while debriefing to reflect on what could be taken back and incorporated into Kentucky’s programs.

Visits included alternative schools, adult education programs, and juvenile correctional facilities. Indianapolis Metropolitan High School is a free public school operated by Goodwill Education Initiatives. Participants met with Goodwill and school leadership, as well as hearing from some incredibly impressive students. At the nearby Goodwill Excel Center, we learned how Indiana allows older youth and adults to earn a diploma in a high school designed to meet their unique needs.

A trip to Options Charter School gave...
insight into how the agency focuses on relationship building to meet the needs of students who struggled in the traditional classroom. A student panel highlighted these relationships and the academic success that follows.

Two partnering programs were visited on the final day of the tour. Marion Academy Open Campus serves students who have been suspended or expelled from Indianapolis Public Schools and focuses on college/career exploration and workplace readiness. Hillside Academy at Marion County Juvenile Detention Center serves detained students and focuses on transitioning those young people into Marion Academy upon release so as to maintain credit achievement and consistency.

The wide variety of programs operating in Indianapolis gave the group lots of ideas to bring back and an opportunity to reflect on the good work being done in Kentucky. Like Indiana, Kentucky educators strive to provide high quality education and transition services and secure more resources for the students in our care. We will continue to reflect on lessons learned as we move forward and explore opportunities to expand our horizons even further!
some sense of success and that builds confidence to go back to regular school and be more successful.”

Ms. Austin credits her great team of teachers and their ability to reach students on a personal level, and often change their mindset about learning, in order to accomplish academic goals. Her team is comprised of: Amanda Miller, who teaches English and language arts, and who was also awarded SACSAA’s Roy L. Chapman Outstanding Teacher of State Agency Children Award for 2017; Travis Atwell, who teaches social studies and credit recovery; Lee Heppler, who teaches math and science; and Robert Bryant, who is an instructional assistant in charge of online testing and supplemental instruction.

“Many times our students don’t like school because they don’t think they’re good at it. They’re smart enough to know they’re behind so it’s easier to act like they don’t care, than act like they do care – that’s the wall they put up,” Ms. Austin explained. “Our classes are small and our teachers are excellent at giving them the individual help they need, so once they get a little taste of that success they let that wall down and start digging in.”

Even as Ms. Austin prepared to leave the program during the last weeks of school, she was confident in the team she is leaving behind. She also reflected on her tenure as an educator and what it meant to her and her students.

“My dreams and aspirations were to just make a difference to at least one kid in my career, because if I did it’s all been worth it,” she said. And I feel like I’ve been able to do that from the conversations I’ve had with some of my former and current students. They know they can depend on me and they will come talk to me about things because they feel comfortable. I make it a point to get to know them, because I think a lot of these kids have been given up on and I’m not going to be another person on that list.”

She also shared the joy and rewards of seeing students make progress in such a short amount of time, and then want to share that success with her. “They’ve gone through that productive struggle and made it to the other side and they’re so proud of themselves. That’s what has been awesome about this job,” she reflected. “We celebrate those accomplishments in the classroom, and give them high fives in the hallway, and always make a huge effort to share that with their counselors, so then everyone in the building is sharing in that.”

Ms. Austin also shared her thoughts for the future of at-risk education, and how trauma-informed care training is the key to helping students learn and achieve. “There is an onslaught of students who have suffered some sort of trauma in their life and those traumas are what keeps a lot of these kids from achieving their full potential,” Ms. Austin said. “What we have tried to do here in the last four years is seek out trauma-informed training, and develop more of a sense of empathy for students, and I believe we do a really good job here because of the communication in our treatment team meetings. It takes all of us to help make this experience work.”

Leading up to the end of the year, and her eventual retirement, many students have expressed denial at the fact that she won’t be back next year, even going so far as saying, “If you’re not going to be here I’m not coming back!” But, Ms. Austin knows they are in good hands. And although her students will miss her, she is leaving the job she loves how she always wanted.

“I always said I was going to do 30 years, and I want to retire while I still love this, and I still love these kids,” she said. “I don’t want to be that cynical, negative person who doesn’t have one good thing to say about something I devoted over half my life to. That would be so sad to me.”

In her retirement, Ms. Austin plans to substitute teach some, and looks forward to spending time at home cooking for her husband of 20 years, and her grown daughter. She’ll also enjoy her time hanging out with her three dogs and two cats, and may be planning some time at the beach as well!
Six KECSAC Programs Named 2018
Alternative Programs of Distinction

In an effort to recognize the work of educators and programs that serve students with a variety of learning needs, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) has named 10 Alternative Programs of Distinction. The Kentucky Board of Education recognized the programs at its regular June meeting in Frankfort. An alternative education program exists to meet student needs that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom setting, but can be met through the assignment of students to alternative classrooms, centers or campuses that are designed to remediate academic performance, improve behavior or provide enhanced learning experiences. Alternative education programs do not include career or technical centers or departments.

During the process that began this spring, 29 programs submitted applications, 24 site visits were conducted with representatives from KDE and KECSAC, and that list was narrowed down to the 10 honored. Of those 10, six of the programs were also KECSAC programs. Those named Alternative Programs of Distinction for 2018 are listed below, with the districts that operate or staff them in parentheses. The KECSAC programs are highlighted in red.

Adair Youth Development Center (Adair County)
Calloway County Day Treatment Center (Calloway County)
Covington Alternative Programs (Covington Independent)
Cumberland Hall School (Christian County)
Jackson Academy (Warren County)
McCracken Regional School (McCracken County)
McDaniel Learning Center (Laurel County)
Perry County Alternative School (Perry County)
Ramey-Estep High School (Boyd County)
Western Day Treatment (Jefferson County)

Each program selected as an Alternative Program of Distinction receives $2,000 from KDE for instructional support. Information on the schools also will be posted on the KDE website so other schools can use the programs as models.

KDE began highlighting exemplary practices in public school alternative programs in 2009. Alternative programs include school district-operated and district-housed instructional programs that provide services to students with a variety of unique needs. They also can be district-operated instructional programs that are located in nondistrict facilities or schools and serve youth who are considered state agency children through the Kentucky Educational Collaborative for State Agency Children (KECSAC), the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Community Based Services and/or the Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities.
Derby Day At Mayfield YDC!

On May 16 the gymnasium at Mayfield Youth Development Center was buzzing with anticipation and a good bit of competitive spirit as students, teachers, DJJ program staff, administrators from the school district, and representatives from KECSAC and DJJ came together to participate in their annual pinewood derby competition. Mr. Delaney once again stepped into his side role at his deejay booth to provide upbeat music while the young men at the program waited for the chance to race their derby creations!

This is the third year Principal Justin Hubbard allowed students to build and race the cars as an end-of-year activity since it’s such a hit each year. “It’s such a joy to see the boys’ enthusiasm and hear their ideas for the cars they build,” he said.

Mr. Hubbard is somewhat of a veteran pinewood derby aficionado since he has participated in many competitions through Cub Scouts with his son when he was younger, and even has a seven-time champion derby car that he races against the students just for fun. Mr. Hubbard’s own father was also in attendance during the day of the race as part of the “pit crew” since he too has a long history of derby car construction. He helped get the students’ cars ready for the trip down the track.

The building process for their wooden cars began a few days before the race. With the help of their teachers the boys designed what they thought would be the fastest car, created a layout for the official derby kits, and finally cut out the cars that would soon be barreling down the aluminum track.

“My staff and I walked them through each stage offering guidance and suggestions, but I wanted them to learn, and possibly make mistakes along the way as part of the process,” Mr. Hubbard said.

Once the cutting was complete students painted their cars and also focused on the weight of their cars and installing wheels. This is an important step in the process since the weight of the car and the wheel alignment can greatly affect the speed of the car, and each car must be five ounces or less per official pinewood derby rules. Finally, cars were inspected to ensure all four wheels touched the ground and then a test run was made. Once a successful test run was completed the cars were then placed in the “pit crew” area and students were not allowed to have access to them until after race day.

While Mr. Hubbard says the pinewood derby is a way to allow the students to have some fun as a reward for their hard work at the end of the school year, they still incorporated academics and other educational and vocational skills in the activity.

“This is a collaborative activity across every class here at MYDC,” Mr. Hubbard explained. “The students learn about aerodynamics, weight distribution, acceleration, speed, averaging, and sportsmanship. The regular classrooms were used during the design and paint stage and the vocational classes were used during building.”

During the race each student’s car went down each of the four lanes of the track during several “heats” that were divided up by their classroom units, since different lanes could be faster or slower, and the four finish times for each student was averaged. Teachers Mr. Morris and Mr. Wood were on hand to track the races and record and average the times. Then the fastest car from each Unit heat was entered into the Grand Champion race at the end. Staff and guests who built a car or borrowed one also got to participate in the fun and show some competitive spirit with their own races after the students.
Once the races were completed, awards were presented to each Unit Winner, the Grand Champion Winner, and to the slowest car who was deemed “Most Cautious Driver” all in good fun. Best In Show was also awarded to the best designed car which was voted on by teachers, staff and participants the day of the race.

After the awards Mr. Hubbard addressed the students with some end-of-year remarks to his students, and left them with heartfelt wishes as they prepared to end the school year and possibly moved on to other programs. During these remarks it was not only clear to see Mr. Hubbard’s abundant care for his students, but also his dedication to providing normal experiences for these at-risk kids.

“I had a student tell me one year that he wished he had a dad that did this kind of stuff with him. That really impacted me and I didn’t know how to respond to what he had said,” Mr. Hubbard said. “I really try to give them experiences like this that they might not otherwise experience. The smiles and laughter that I hear during this activity is what lets me know that what I am doing is worth it,” he continued. “My hope is that they take this positive experience and will want to share it with their sons and daughters one day.”

Hope Hill Students Enjoy Educational and Fun Field Trips

Thanks in part to KECSAC mini-grant money awarded in the past, and cooperation with the Montgomery County School District, the girls at Hope Hill Youth Services have been able to enjoy several fun and educational field trips throughout the past school year.

Last fall the students visited the Newport Aquarium where they saw penguins, sharks and all different fish, and the Kentucky Science Center. At the end of this April they visited Carter Caves State Resort Park. While at Carter Caves they toured Cascade Cave and enjoyed a picnic. The girls were especially amazed by the underground waterfall in the cave, which geological experts cannot find the source of even after multiple experiments to do so.

“The girls were very excited and thoroughly enjoyed themselves at each of their destinations since most of them have never been to the places we took them,” Alternative Instructor Rebecca Potter said. “They all look very forward to each new adventure, and are so incredibly grateful!”

Left: Students from Hope Hill toured caves at Carter Caves State Resort Park this April. Right: On another trip to the Newport Aquarium last fall students saw penguins and other exhibits.
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