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Dear KECSAC Community,

Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, is quoted as saying “change is the only constant in life.” Over the years this has been adapted and reframed, but the essence of the statement remains. Certainly over the last few years educators across Kentucky and the nation have been keenly reminded of this sentiment. In just the last few months we have adopted new graduation requirements, new core course standards, new writing policies, new testing requirements, and new accountability models. We are no stranger to change. In fact, educators, both those serving state agency children and those in more traditional settings across Kentucky, often lead the way in promoting innovation in education. Our programs were on the forefront of program improvement assessments, we led the way in integrating technology in our classrooms and have always been out front in our efforts to enhance blended learning environments. Indeed, state agency programs, under the leadership of dedicated teachers, administrators and program directors, continue to be leaders in education in Kentucky. As we prepare for a new semester I encourage all of us to keep our focus on the children and youth we serve and continue working to ensure they have every educational opportunity we can provide. Through our shared work and commitment to state agency children, we can embody the motto of KECSAC, “working together to educate all of Kentucky’s children.”

Sincerely,

Ronnie Nolan, Ed.D.
Director, KECSAC
Program Spotlight

Students at Foothills Academy are learning valuable trade skills and seeing their hard work pay off as they build a cabin on the program’s property in Clinton County.
Down the secluded winding roadways of Clinton County there sits a cabin under construction in a picturesque field with woodland close by, and the bank of the Cumberland River winding just behind the house. The substantial, all-wood cabin has been busy with activity as students help install poplar wood wall boards, sand the walls, and measure planks that are being sawed by the adults teaching them a valuable craft.

Looking at the workmanship and expertise of the nearly-finished product, you might be skeptical that a group of young men from a KECSAC program built such an undertaking, yet that is exactly what the boys at Foothills Academy have accomplished. In less than two years, the students will have built a completely furnished, two-story cabin with electricity and plumbing that will be utilized by boys at the program for years to come.

Foothills Academy is a residential facility in Albany, KY that serves young men from 13 to 18 years old. In October the program had about 76 students in residence and seven teachers providing educational services, including Principal Todd Messer. The length of time students are at the program can vary up to a year and a half, but typically the average stay is around 10 months.

The vocational shop teacher Mr. Jerry Ridge, also known as Brother Ridge to the students, is the person guiding the work on the cabin. He was a carpenter in Indiana for many years before becoming a vocational teacher, where he built everything from houses to hospitals. He has been teaching at the program for 14 years.

“We started building the four units that came together to make up the structure of the cabin in November 2017 in a barn on the program’s campus, and started with making floor joists, cutting floor boards, and laying out the walls,” Mr. Ridge explained.

The framed “units” of the cabin were essentially pre-fabricated sections that would be brought together on the final site of the cabin and attached together. Assembling the cabin began in the spring of 2018 when the units were transported by a trailer and lifted and maneuvered into place on the cabin’s foundation by a backhoe. Each section was then attached together to create the finished frame of the structure.

Each of the four units weren’t small sections either. The cabin altogether features two bedrooms and bathrooms downstairs, a stackable washer and dryer space, a living area, and a kitchen that comprises around 960 square feet. There is also a spacious second story loft that will house bunk beds for the boys and comprises around 640 square feet. The wraparound porch also adds plenty of space for experiencing the outdoors. They are also thinking about adding a fifth unit, or addition, to the cabin later that might house a game room, but the initial construction of the cabin should be completed in the spring of 2019.

Top: Students at Foothills Academy take precise measurements for wall boards and install them in the cabin’s loft room.

Bottom: One student sands the newly installed walls in a downstairs bedroom to create a smooth finished look.

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According to Mr. Messer, all the materials for the build are provided by the Foothills organization. “A project of this scope would not have been possible without the support, collaboration, and vision of the Foothills Chairman of the Board Jeff Choate,” he added.

The cabin is intended to be used for outings and reward trips for the young men so youth workers will have accommodations to sleep as well as the boys. Since the cabin is right next to the river, fishing and kayaking are also activities the students can expect to benefit from at the location.

“When the project was pitched to the school district our Superintendent, Charlotte Nasief, was equally excited and supportive because of the unique experience it would provide to our students,” Mr. Messer said.

The boys also build many other projects in shop class such as pieces of furniture and swings to use around the campus, or as presents for their family. The students are also helping with construction of a new vocational building at the Foothills campus.

Mr. Messer has made it possible for the boys to work in longer stretches on the cabin by rearranging their schedule to allow different groups of students to have a whole day at a time to work on construction while still maintaining all their required instructional hours.

The cabin project also seems to be a favorite of the students as well. When Mr. Ridge asked the students if they liked working in the shop an hour a day or working in the cabin for extended periods, it was resounding agreement that working on the cabin was their choice. And while they still maintain their academic goals, the skills they are gaining by learning this trade are very beneficial as well.

“In school, of course they’re acquiring knowledge, which is essential, but sometimes that’s hard for our students to grasp when they only see it in a grade or credits,” Mr. Messer explained. “With this cabin however, they’ve been able to see a tangible result of their hard work and that’s really rewarding to a lot of these students.”

“This project also demonstrates the vast degree of real-life vocational skills Brother
Ridge imparts to students,” he added. “When you couple that with the amount of modeling, mentoring, and counseling he is able to provide from a work site, he truly is an invaluable resource for our school and students.”

The boys take pride in their work too. When they are working they are focused and precise, intent on the task at hand. A testament to their craftsmanship is the fact that they were responsible for measuring, assisting cutting, and sanding every tongue and groove into the wall boards in shop class. This definitely seems like an insurmountable task considering how many wall boards are used in the cabin.

“I’m hopeful we’re giving these guys something they enjoy, and providing them with useful trade skills they can use their whole life,” Mr. Messer said. “We want our students to be academically successful and strive to provide exceptional education instruction every day. However, we also want to equip students with a wide scope of life skills and knowledge, so they have every advantage when they graduate or leave our program.”
You only have to spend a few minutes in Mrs. Erica Brooks’ elementary classroom at the Western Day program in Louisville, KY to experience the whirlwind of energy and positivity she brings to teaching. On any given day students are singing, dancing, interacting with their lessons, and even enjoying special “guests” in the form of Mrs. Brooks’ various teaching personalities she creates. She also named 2016 KECSAC Outstanding Teacher of the Year.

In the guise of Super Duper Cope she bounds into the room with a purple wig, crazy purple pants, light up shoes, and a super hero shirt and cape to hype her students up for the math lesson she has managed to make fun and something they look forward to. Super Duper Cope is one of the characters she has created to help students learn coping mechanisms in the classroom. She takes over for Mrs. Brooks occasionally when needed, and depending on the needs of her students at the time.

“Technically, I’ve had three characters this year,” Mrs. Brooks explained jovially. “Super Duper Cope also has a talk show and she’ll bring kids on the talk show at the end of the day during our coping skills time and ask them questions from flash cards pertinent to the lesson, or about what may be going on in the classroom at the time. She also likes to bring things like ‘cope cakes,’ ‘coping cookies,’ and ‘cope tokens’ for the kids to earn.”

Considering her enthusiasm for what she does, you might think Mrs. Brooks has always wanted to be a teacher, but that’s not the case. A native of Louisville and lifelong resident, Mrs. Brooks attended Ballard High School, and after graduation attended Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC) for two years. She then transferred to the University of Louisville where she graduated with her Bachelor of Science in Theatre Arts in 2008. It was during her undergraduate years that she found her calling for helping young kids. One summer she decided to intern for the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom School program that had several sites in Louisville at the time, mainly at churches and community centers. The Freedom School is a summer literacy and enrichment program designed to help at risk youth from grades K-12 who struggle with reading and need positive influences in their lives. In this position she was trained as a servant leader intern where she learned classroom skills and skills to work with those types of youth, or “scholars” as they were called.

Mrs. Erica Brooks is an Exceptional Childhood Education (ECE) teacher at Western Day in Louisville, which is a mental health day treatment program. Not only was she the KECSAC Outstanding Teacher of the year in 2016, she has also gained district recognition for her energetic and innovative teaching style. We talked with her to find out more about her passion for teaching state agency children.
“We learned the curriculum and books they’d be reading, which were mainly focused towards their life, including a lot of Afrocentric books and books that represented their heritage and neighborhoods and things like that,” she said. “I actually ended up being with a middle school group of boys, and it wasn’t until we pulled out the text and I saw they couldn’t read, or were struggling to read on their level, that I knew this is what I had to do. I just felt so sad and knew I had to become a special education teacher because these kids couldn’t read. I was adamant that I wanted to reach kids before they got to this point because there was a disconnect somewhere between elementary and middle school. I also knew I wanted to reach the students that nobody else wanted - those with Learning Behavior Disorders (LBD) and who were struggling the most.”

Mrs. Brooks ended up being an intern for five years with the Freedom School, and went on to Spalding University in Louisville to obtain her Master of Arts in Teaching LBD for grades K-12, while also substitute teaching in the district. After graduating she was hired to teach fourth and fifth grade at Uspiritus Brooklawn in Louisville in 2010. After two years there she transferred to teach second and third grade at Western Day and says it has been one of the best decisions of her life.

“I think there’s a common misconception about state agency schools and it’s a shocker when you get into a program and you see that these are normal kids who just had some sort of struggle or trauma in their life,” Mrs. Brooks said. “Being able to reach them and let them know ‘you’re no different from anybody else, you just may learn just a little bit differently but we’re going to figure out a way to get you there’ — is why I’m passionate about serving these kids.”

Her own experiences growing up helps her connect with students of similar backgrounds. It also fueled her need to be a positive role model for her students so she might be the factor who changes their path in life.

“We were a pretty normal middle class family growing up, however, the neighborhood I grew up in was not the greatest. I would hear gunshots all the time, and the police were a constant. It was an eye opener,” she explained. “I don’t want my students to feel like they are a product of their neighborhoods or environments they live in. I feel like I can relate to many of my students and I understand where they’re coming from. I want to be their keys, I want my students to believe that they can be anything, and do anything they put their minds to.”

Mrs. Brooks accomplishes this goal by instilling in her students the leadership and self-confidence needed to continue excelling in their academic journey. She incorporates a variety of innovative strategies not only to address education deficiencies but also to bolster the personal skills kids need to succeed. One way she does this is by creating a community and team bond in the classroom, and this year her class community is known as The Wolfpack.

“Despite my students’ difficulties, I want them to feel like they can achieve anything once they enter my classroom,” Mrs. Brooks said. “We work together as a family and I want them to be able to utilize the skills I’ve taught them – coping skills and learning strategies – to where they become student leaders. I want them to realize no matter their ability level or background, they can be leaders who encourage their peers and look to one another for help.”

Another strategy Mrs. Brooks utilizes to make her classroom experience unique, and to strengthen student confidence and interest is by letting students choose their own theme songs and their own characters each morning.

“Some students enter the classroom as famous WWE wrestlers, and some students will be superheroes for the day and they love this,” she explains. “This allows each student to have their own identity without being judged. It’s a great way to show them they have a choice and the power to be who they want to be.”

Of course a lot of the goals Mrs. Brooks’ students are trying to accomplish are within the treatment side of the program. While she does incorporate a lot of social skills lessons, and one-on-one sessions with students, there is also support from the therapists, and staff at the program.

“I think we really have one of the best, collaborative relationships with our Centerstone treatment staff,” she said. “We have our treatment team meetings on Thursday and every classroom has a therapist, so we have direct communication with treatment staff and we constantly work on the treatment plan for each student. That’s how we’re able to put effective strategies and interventions in place to really help these kids not just behaviorally, but academically too.”

Dressed as her character Super Duper Cope, Mrs. Brooks makes a math lesson fun and engaging.
Since it is usually trauma or other disruptive circumstances in a child’s life that brings them to Western Day, it can sometimes be hard to compartmentalize a child’s past story and what will be best for them in the classroom. Mrs. Brooks’s takes advantage of the fictional comic book research facility STAR Labs to help address this, and has created her own concept in the classroom. STAR Labs is where the super hero, The Flash goes to work on his powers, so when a student is in STAR Labs with her, she utilizes that one-on-one time to really get to know a student and them her.

“I try not to look at a student’s situation, which is sometimes very hard. Instead I look to the future and figure out what positive reinforcements I can do best for this child,” she said. “That’s why I love using STAR Labs in my classroom. I have them sign a little contract that says despite their backgrounds or what’s on their paperwork, they will ‘live’ in STAR Labs with me as we work on what needs to be addressed. Then I take time to really get to know their likes and dislikes, and I learn everything possible about the student, so I can design interventions best fit for them depending on their strengths.”

It is this freedom to be educationally creative with her students that brings her the most joy about her job, because she is seeing the results it has on her students. For example, one of her current students used to be triggered into physical aggression by math lessons, but now finds math fun and engaging.

“When my students are able to make connections to a lesson and effectively communicate with peers during discussion, using academic strategies to help them problem solve - that’s when I know they got it.” Mrs. Brooks said. “When a student says they’re having fun learning that’s when I know. We of course also see a lot of trackable progress in our students. They may not advance two or three grade levels, but they do experience growth and confidence. One of our main goals is to make students believe in themselves.”

The program definitely celebrates growth and success with students as well. There are various student accolades recognized school-wide and within her classroom, they practice positive praise every morning, and when students finish the program and reach treatment goals they have graduation ceremonies. The occasion is a big celebration, family members get to come, and everyone in the school makes a card for the student graduating. To Mrs. Brooks, seeing her students leave the program and transition back into the comprehensive schools successfully is the most rewarding part of her job.

“When parents thank me for helping them or their kid, and to know they are continuing to be successful at their new school, that does more for me than any award or certificate ever could,” she said.

Mrs. Brooks is hoping to continue her goals and aspirations as an educator by pursuing leadership and administrative roles in the future.

“It’s really a dream of mine to have more programs out there like Western Day that bridges the relationship between trauma-informed care, and educational academics. I want a part of that process,” she said. “I am also interested in a role in the future that would allow me to help a wider range of state agency programs to help implement best teaching practices for students who struggle with trauma.”

For now, Mrs. Brooks is using her leadership skills as a cooperating teacher with the University of Louisville for student teachers, being on several leadership teams within her school, and as a mentor teacher for first year teachers in the JCPS district. She is also an adjunct instructor for Jefferson Community Technically Colleges, where she teaches first year college experience course, and has done so for five years now. And just like with her students, Mrs. Brooks’ motivation in all these roles she fills can be credited to her passion to give back to her community, help others, and provide a positive influence in someone’s life.

Mrs. Brooks is married with four step-children who range in age from 16 to 22 years old. One of her biggest hobbies is Zumba, even becoming an instructor for several years. She says her happy place is either in her classroom with her “kiddos” and they’re having so much fun they forget they’re learning, or at home watching Netflix.
This past fall the students at Calloway County Day Treatment program were busy with lots of hands-on learning projects in their classrooms. In September, middle school students tested their hypotheses on whether or not you could push a pencil through a Ziploc bag of water without “springing a leak.”

In October the Assistant Principal at Calloway County Middle School, Jodi Butler, visited the program and presented various Halloween themed science experiments that were also very entertaining to the students.

In November, middle school students worked on their team building skills. They had to work together to come up with a way to stack cups without using their hands. This activity challenged them to work as a team and use their communication skills. When a group completed the task, a tool was then taken away to make the task more difficult, therefore prompting them to use their problem solving skills as well.

Student Poetry from The Circle Seven
A book written by students at Ramey-Estep High School

THE GAME

I’m sitting in the back seat gazing at the street with a quarter inch of glass separating me from my family and knowing I’ve been beat at this game I try to play. I would run from the police but I never got away. All I can say is, I’m sorry momma, I’m getting sent away. Now all I can do is live it day by day, doing my best to fix my negative ways. I did my best to get that drunken daze, instead of trying to get a pay raise. I’ve been here now for 2 hundred and 20 days. I’m fixing my life, so that is something to praise. I’m changing my ways so I don’t go back to that place. Life is crazy, but I’m not alone. So.... thank you Ramey for getting me home.

– 15-year-old boy