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At-Risk Programs in States

Introduction

This publication compliments “At-Risk Programs and Title I, Part D” by highlighting three programs in Arizona, Montana, and Nevada that serve students who are at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system. Each profile includes background information about the program, the characteristics of the students that the program serves, and information about the program structure and key partnerships. Finally, each profile discusses how the programs use Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 funding to augment regular instruction.

Paris Gibson Education Center, Great Falls, Montana

Background

Great Falls Public Schools established Paris Gibson Education Center (PGEC) as the district’s alternative school in 1969. Positive relationships, mutual respect, and collective accountability guide the school’s culture. PGEC serves students through three programs: a traditional alternative high school program (the core program), a Native American immersion program, and an alternative to expulsion classroom. Student choice, independent learning opportunities, and targeted academic supports are central to PGEC’s model. This profile focuses on PGEC’s traditional alternative high school and alternative to expulsion programs.

Student Characteristics

PGEC educates students who are at risk for a variety of reasons. The students include youth formally adjudicated and returning to the district, students who have had expulsion hearings, students at risk of failing or dropping out or have done so because they did not thrive in traditional settings, youth from immigrant and migrant families, and youth who are pregnant or parenting. The traditional PGEC alternative education program serves students from Grade 9 to graduation, at times serving students well into their twenties. The alternative to expulsion program serves students in Grades 7–12.

Program Structure

PGEC’s traditional alternative high school program has five learning blocks during the day. Teachers craft their schedules a week in advance, use a seminar instructional approach, and serve as student advisors. The flexible schedule accommodates students who are parenting and students who are working or participating in internships in the afternoon. Some students also attend classes for credit at Great Falls College–Montana State University.

PGEC’s alternative to expulsion program provides direct instruction and support by one teacher for a portion of the day. This teacher provides social and behavioral improvement supports. After students successfully adjust to the instructional setting and show evidence of academic and behavioral readiness, PGEC increases students’ instructional time in the traditional alternative high school program.

Key Partnerships

PGEC has a strong collaborative relationship with traditional Great Falls Public Schools secondary school administrators, faculty, staff, and district administrators. Important external partners include the following:

- Youth Court and probation services: Provides funding for the alternative to expulsion program and those on probation
- Alluvion Health: Provides an onsite healthcare clinic for students, families, and staff; access to healthcare and payment support for families; and copay waivers for PGEC staff
- Montana Board of Crime Control: Provided partial seed funding to start the alternative to expulsion program
- United Way of Cascade County: Provides funding for on-site daycare and the Graduation Matters dropout prevention program
- Great Falls College–Montana State University: Provides college coursework and credit opportunities for PGEC students

PGEC students have a unique opportunity to learn business firsthand through the school’s profit-sharing business enterprises, such as Lynx Graphics (silk screening, vinyl printing, three-dimensional printing, and specialized graphic work), Paris Gibson Designs (business cards, brochures, and pamphlets), an in-house coffee shop called The Alternative Coffee Shop, and Catering by Paris.

Supplemental Services Supported by Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 Funds

Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 funds pay for a small portion of a paraprofessional’s salary plus staff training on restorative practices and mindfulness to build the capacity of PGEC educators to support students’ abilities to be present and mindful of their thoughts and actions. In past years, Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 funds also supported tutors, collaborative academic support, and transition activities with the Cascade County Regional Youth Services Center.

Contact the principal for more information about PGEC:

Drew Uecker, Principal
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Pioneer High School, Carson City, Nevada

Background

Pioneer High School (PHS) is a fully accredited, public alternative high school in the Carson City School District. Its official alternative high school status allows PHS to meet the diverse needs of youth by providing various routes to success. PHS students can earn nine or more credits through a traditional course schedule, at their own pace in a credit recovery approach, or through a hybrid of traditionally structured classes and flexible computer-assisted instruction.

PHS also offers students career and technical education options, including dual college credits in the areas of medical technology, health science, and health information management through partnerships with Western Nevada College's Jump Start College program and the local chapter of the Health Occupations Students of America.

Student Characteristics

PHS accepts students who apply and interview for its Grades 9–12 program. Students apply to PHS for a variety of reasons. Typically, students formally adjudicated and returning to the district from the Murphy-Bernardini Regional Juvenile Detention Center attend PHS because they have academic credit deficiencies. Some students have failed, are at risk of failing, or have had negative social experiences at other schools and desire a fresh start. Other students apply so that they can benefit from the small school and class size structure, low student-to-teacher ratio, and targeted guidance and supports at PHS, which they do not get in other schools.

Program Structure

PHS offers three learning options: traditional, hybrid, and full-time distance education. The traditional program operates four quarters per year from August to June. The school day runs from 7:35 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. and consists of four 84-minute class periods and a 30-minute advisory period. PHS staff mentors provide students with social and emotional learning opportunities and supports, funded by Title I, Part D, Subpart 2, during the advisory period. A hybrid option blends traditional instruction and distance learning. PHS also offers distance education classes with an online teacher or the support of a daily classroom teacher who is available on campus 5 days per week from 7:35 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. PHS offers full-time distance education for students with work or parenting commitments. This option provides students with flexible computer lab hours and off-campus work arrangements. PHS also offers blended supplemental and extended summer learning opportunities supported by a Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 online learning lab assistant.

Key Partnerships

PHS partners with the Murphy-Bernardini Regional Juvenile Detention Center and the Carson City Juvenile Probation Division by sharing information and resources and planning student transitions during quarterly joint Title I, Part D team meetings. The State Title I, Part D coordinator trains probation officers, school counselors, and social workers on collaboratively implementing Nevada's School Transition Planning Tool. Other PHS partners include the following:

- Project Discovery: Provides educator professional development and student team-building activities
- Western Nevada College: Provides dual-credit classes for PHS students who participate in the Jump Start College program
- Health Occupations Students of America, Renown Regional Medical Center, and Carson Tahoe Health: Give students opportunities to learn real-life job skills and obtain certifications in health information management
- Jobs for America: Provides college and career readiness training, mathematical skills, employability skills, public speaking competitions, and job shadowing experiences to learn what working in various fields looks and feels like

Supplemental Services Supported by Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 Funds

PHS uses Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 funds to partially fund a truancy clerk who ensures that youth are consistently coming to school and provides supports to students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 also partially funds an online learning lab assistant to support supplemental extended learning opportunities through blended online summer school classes during the June and July sessions. Lastly, the funds also pay for social and emotional learning programming, enrichment activities, team-building activities, and recreational self-esteem-building activities.

Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 funds support PHS students' participation in Project Discovery and Rocksport. These recreational extracurricular activities help students build self-reliance, problem-solving skills, communication, team-building skills, and other social skills that help them successfully navigate high school and beyond.

Contact the principal for more information about PHS:

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Esperanza Community School and Hope Academy, Maricopa County Regional School District, Arizona

Background

Esperanza Community School (grades K–8) and Hope Academy (grades 9–12) are “accommodation” schools in Tempe and Phoenix, Arizona, that are in the Maricopa County Regional School District. Keeping children and youth in community schools by diverting them from juvenile detention facilities is the aim of both schools. Esperanza Community School is an elementary school that may act as a pipeline to Hope Academy. The overall goal of the schools is to encourage and promote students to graduate with a high school diploma and move on to a technical/vocational school, an associate degree program, or college.

The school aims to meet the unmet behavioral, social, and academic needs of students by “understanding the impact of trauma and adversity on people, creating positive and culturally responsive discipline policies and practices, having access to comprehensive school mental and behavioral health services, and establishing partnerships that connect students to their community.”¹ Both schools also prioritize knowing their students through small class sizes (about 12 students) and learning communities, which help build a safe environment by supporting “strong, long-term relationships that attach students to the school and each other.”²

Student Characteristics

Esperanza Community School (students are 5–14 years old) and Hope Academy (students are 14–18 years old) serve those who are at risk for entering juvenile detention, plus those formerly in juvenile secure care settings who need a more supportive environment than traditional schools in the community can provide following release. Students have typically experienced trauma and adversity before starting their schooling. According to school leadership, many students require special education services and/or have had repeated disciplinary issues in previous schools.

“At my old school, I got in trouble a lot and didn’t feel like the teachers liked me. At Esperanza, my teachers are helping me know how to behave in class and get along with my classmates. Mr. Mike checks in with me during the day and encourages me to keep doing a good job. I really like this school.”—*Female student, Grade 7, Esperanza Community School*

Program Structure

Esperanza Community School and Hope Academy have specialized teaching staff who are hyperfocused on meeting students’ social and emotional needs. Both schools have a traditional school schedule and use comprehensive trauma-responsive approaches—such as community circles, teaching students brain science (i.e., what happens when their brain gets

activated and learning mitigation strategies), meditation and yoga, and a therapy pig in the elementary school—on a daily basis. Students are not suspended, and a priority is implementing behavioral interventions to keep students in their classrooms.

The schools also focus on connecting students with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and role models in their community. Creative and interesting courses, such as robotics and forensics, are available as well as high-quality mathematics and science instruction. These courses encourage higher order thinking and hands-on learning that are critical to youth’s educational progress and to meet learning style needs. A “makerspace,” a collaborative school space for making, learning, exploring, and sharing, also is on both campuses. This comprehensive approach helps students further develop their identity as learners and participate in real-world problem solving, further encouraging them to engage and explore with STEM.

Key Partnerships

Both schools engage in several key community partnerships. These partnerships—which help connect students to mental healthcare services, ensure a meaningful connection to the community, and provide creative outlets for learning—include the following:

- Valle del Sol: Students can access individual and group counseling through a community healthcare organization that provides behavioral health services and human services.
- Skate After School: This nonprofit organization partners with schools and provides skateboarding instruction to underserved youth in grades K–12.
- KDIF LPFM: This hyperlocal, bilingual, multicultural radio station provides classes for students.
- Arizona State University: Both schools receive teacher interns from the university.

Supplemental Services Supported by Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 Funds

Title I, Part D, Subpart 2 funding provides comprehensive training to teachers. This professional development helps build the capacity of teachers to better support students and address their needs in the classroom without bringing in outside specialists. This approach also helps build relationships between students and their teachers, further supporting the schools’ safe environment. Past training included topics such as social and emotional learning, cultural responsiveness, and behavioral coaching in the classroom.

Contact the deputy superintendent for more information about Esperanza Community School and Hope Academy:

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¹ See the district’s caring culture: <https://www.mcrsd.org/culture>.

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