

# At-risk students flourish in college atmosphere

After dropping out of high school, Sarah Zana mostly sat at home all day watching television. “I spent the better half of a year doing nothing,” she admits.

These days, the 19-year-old is busier than she ever imagined. She is getting straight A’s in a program that allows dropouts to earn their high school diploma and college credit at the same time.

She attends a charter school sponsored by the Riverside Unified School District on the Riverside Community College campus. The Riverside Gateway to College Early College High School caters to at-risk youth, ages 16 to 20, who have dropped out of school or are close to dropping out.

Opened in 2003 due to the efforts of Shelagh Camak, associate vice chancellor of workforce development at the college, it was the first to replicate Portland Community College’s successful Gateway to College dropout recovery program funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other partners. Eight other college sites throughout the U.S. have since replicated the Portland model.

The school has enrolled more than 300 students from the fast-growing Riverside County area, which has been described as having one of the lowest college-going populations in California. The program pays for students’ books and tuition to ensure that financial need won’t prevent students from taking advantage of the opportunity.

Potential enrollees are carefully screened to make sure they are minimally qualified at the eighth-grade reading level. Project director Jill Marks says there are “three R’s” that make the program successful: rigor, relevance and relationships with caring staff.

The first semester is very structured. Students attend school five days a week and are enrolled in high school reading, English composition and math courses. They also take college courses on keyboarding, the library information systems and career exploration. After the first semester they become “transition students” and take a variety of courses on the community college campus — such as science



While earning high school and college credit simultaneously, students at this Riverside charter school can rediscover the joy of learning, says reading instructor Grace Kalnin. Facing page: Resource specialist Kathleen DeWitt teaches Aundra Evans and Tejawn Edwards college-level study skills.

or social studies — that fulfill requirements for a high school diploma and rack up college credits. The number of units students are allowed to take is determined by how well they progress academically.

This way some students receive their high school diploma and associate degree simultaneously.

Gateway participants attend group support meetings and meet regularly with independent study instructors, who check to make

sure they are taking careful notes, completing assignments and passing their tests. Also crucial to student success are “resource specialists” who teach college guidance classes and help connect students with resources they may need to stay in school. Many students need to find part-time employment to help support a household.

“It’s not for everyone; it fits a particular personality,” says Peter Kalnin, an independent study teacher for transitioned students. “Kids who don’t like the rigidly traditional high school environment sometimes respond better to the challenge that college provides them because they are treated like adults instead of children. We can see the rewards of students taking responsibility for their own life. It’s a huge jump because a lot of these students have always had other people solve their problems, but now they’re solving their problems themselves.”

“Without this program, some of these kids would be lost altogether and throwing their hands up in the air, saying, ‘I’ll never get my high school diploma, let alone my college degree,’” adds Kalnin, a member of the Riverside City Teachers Association (RCTA). “To be earning a high school diploma and working toward a college degree at the same time is unimaginable for some of these students.”

It was definitely more than Jeff Lents, 18, envisioned for his future after dropping out of high school and losing his way. “I was working a little bit, hanging out with friends and digging a hole for myself with lots of bad behavior,” he recalls. “I was told that if I didn’t go to school, I would go to juvenile hall. My counselor put me here.”

At first he was skeptical he could succeed. But soon his doubts were replaced by confidence as he made academic progress. “Now I don’t even see my old friends. Education is a bigger part of my life. I guess you could say I’ve gone through changes.”

Some of the students say they didn’t “fit in” socially at their regular high school and say the immaturity and harassment of their peers contributed to their dropping out. But at the Gateway program, they find the student population less judgmental and more accepting of individual differences.

“At the beginning they are leery of everyone and each other,” says Kathleen DeWitt, a student resource specialist who teaches the Intro to College class. “But when they start telling their stories, they find they have so much in



common with each other, and they are not so fearful to talk and hang out with each other. We encourage them to study together and to congratulate each other when they achieve something. Students who come here say they like being treated with respect here.”

Gateway staff members act as facilitators with students by helping them reach their own decisions regarding which classes and career path to follow, says DeWitt, a member of the Riverside Community College District Faculty Association. “We never say, ‘This is the path you should take.’ We want them to design that path and, by doing so, we create buy-in.”

Gradually, say staff, students become a part of the “college culture,” which may be reflected by boys cutting their hair and belting their baggy pants and girls dressing in a more adult fashion. The changes happen because students want to fit in, be taken seriously and become employable.

**Reading instructor Elizabeth Hall relies on Thorndyke, a registered therapy pet, to encourage students like Adriana Talavera.**

As the students rediscover themselves, they also rediscover the joy of learning, relates Grace Kalnin, an RCTA member and foundation reading instructor. “They have been told to read since childhood, and some of them need help with the technical reading skills. But it’s just as important to inspire them to become independent readers and help them develop curiosity for learning. Being inspired to read is much better than being pressured to read.”

Foundation reading instructor Elizabeth Hall has a secret weapon to inspire reading — a “reading assistance dog” named Thorndyke that has been trained and certified by the Delta Society Pet Therapy Partners. The dog’s purpose is to provide a little “comic re-

lief” and also help students to relax. Thorndyke pats pages with his paw when students stop reading as a way of encouraging them to continue, says Hall, a member of RCTA.

Nearly 70 percent of the students successfully complete their first semester and transition into community college their second semester, reports Marks. This nearly matches the state’s high school graduation rate — but reflects a more challenging population.

“They are wonderful kids,” says Grace Kalnin. “They have been given a very special opportunity, and they are very appreciative of this. And their enthusiasm has a very positive effect on me.”

“When I first came here, I felt lost and confused on this big college campus,” relates Adriana Talavera, 17. “But they helped guide us and made us want to come to school. They made us see that getting a high school diploma isn’t the end; it can also be the beginning.”