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From the Los Angeles Times

A Year at Locke

The Advance Path Academy: learning that clicks

An innovative program using computers and self-motivation offers a second chance to potential dropouts.

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Teachers call Kendle Malbrough "The Philosopher." The Locke High School senior embellishes the margins of his math papers with musings on the intersection of religion and science. Ordinary conversations lead him to flights of theory on all manner of topics. Why dinosaurs grew so big. What the planet would look like over time if humans were to disappear.

Kendle has one more course to complete before graduation, and then he knows exactly what he wants to do: train as a firefighter. Firefighters, to his way of thinking, help other people more than just about anyone.

"It's not just the fires," he says. "Firefighters, they do lots of stuff to save people. If I could be a firefighter, my life would be so good. It's good now, but it would be ... " He pauses to shake his head at the deficiency of words. "I would do anything. I would learn anything they told me to learn. I would go to school, I would tell all the kids everywhere, 'Stay in school and study.' "

Those are significant sentiments coming from an 18-year-old who considered himself a dropout nine months ago, one of the 75% or so of the 2003 freshman class who never made it to Locke's graduation last June. He lacked nine of the semester class credits he needed to graduate because he had cut too many classes.

"My friends," he explains, "they would say, 'You don't need to go to school today. Come on with us.' "

But Kendle heard that Locke would be changing once it was taken over by charter operator Green Dot Public Schools, and his mother pushed him not to give up lest he set a discouraging example for others. He wasn't sure he would be allowed in, though; from his perspective, he'd had his chance and blown it.

Kendle wasn't just welcomed, he was introduced to a new program designed for students in similar predicaments. When Green Dot administrators examined the Locke records, they found that dozens of students were too far behind on required course work to stand much chance of graduating. Only drastic intervention -- in this case, online classes -- would prevent them from becoming a part of Locke's historically dismal dropout numbers.

'Classes' in a warehouse

At first, the Advance Path Academy looks more dreary than dramatic: Long institutional tables with computer stations fill a warehouse that previously served as a hide-out where kids smoked marijuana while ditching classes. The 160 students in the academy, mostly juniors and seniors, are divided into two shifts, each shift sitting at the computers for four hours a day. On one wall hangs a blue cap and gown, a constant reminder of the goal. On another is a chart listing all the students, with gold stars representing the number of classes passed.

Green Dot contracts with education company AdvancePath Academics, which provides similar programs in the Glendale, Sacramento and San Bernardino public schools. At Locke, AdvancePath remodeled the warehouse, supplied the course work, which is aligned with California's curriculum, and paid for the computers. Students take their "classes" and some of their tests on the computers, pacing themselves and organizing their time as they wish. Most take one course for four hours a day until they pass. Others split the time among several courses. They consult one of the four teachers when they're stuck; the teachers also grade most of the tests and papers and walk the aisles, prodding students who spend too much time chatting or gazing off into space.

You'd think this would be the educational model least likely to work for these students. How are teenagers who struggled to pass classes taught by flesh-and-blood teachers going to master course work by reading computer screens? The answer comes in conversations with them. One after another, they tell nearly identical stories: They flunked because they seldom went to class. They hid amid the rows of portable buildings, or on rooftops or in closets.

Besides, they say, they weren't learning anything. Instead of instructing them, teachers would hand out work sheets and then ignore them. They didn't get to ask enough questions. With the computer, they're in charge. If they don't understand something, they can click a few steps back. There's always a teacher willing to answer as many questions as they have, working one-on-one or in small groups.

The four-hour school day helps too. Many students hold part-time jobs to help their parents, or have children of their own. Some simply can't stand being in school for a full day. Others do their classwork on home computers, and within weeks pass classes they flunked in years past. Suddenly, they discover their own quick-mindedness. Many have passed eight classes this academic year, more than one a month. For the first time, they also understand the direct correlation between effort and success. The harder and longer they work, the faster they rack up credits.

Nancy is one of the few sophomores in the program, placed there after her rebelliousness toward her mother and her nonstop truancy landed

them in court-ordered counseling. A star of the academy, on a recent Friday she was about to pass her 12th class. At her current rate, she's on track to graduate in December, less than halfway through what would be her junior year. She especially likes biology, and is thinking of becoming a medical technician, or maybe a doctor.

This is how far behind Isaac was: The 17-year-old has passed eight classes and has 23 more to go. He was among those who ditched class more often than he attended. Now he can't decide which subject he likes most. World history, maybe, the beginnings of civilization, the birth of new kinds of art during the Renaissance. And Chaucer -- well, he loves Chaucer. "Why did he have to die before he could finish writing 'Canterbury Tales'?" Isaac complains. "I wanted to read them all."

He recounts his moment of insight after reading "The Pardoner's Tale." At first, he was irritated by the three young men who traveled in search of Death and ended up, at the direction of a stranger, finding gold and killing one another for it. "And then when I thought about it, I realized they got what they wanted. That's exactly what happened. You know? They went on a journey to find Death, and they did."

Besides, it would be too hard to ditch at Locke these days, Isaac notes. Security guards and aides constantly roam the campus to make sure students are in class; the academy is in a fenced-off section. The days are shorter here, which makes them easier to bear, though Isaac finds himself logging on at home to get ahead in his studies. He wants to join the Navy.

The lure of a cap and gown

Of course, these inspiring stories come from students who are in the warehouse, plugging away. On a recent Friday, close to half the students in each shift were nowhere to be found. Fridays, says lead teacher Katie Thomason, are always tough on attendance, but on average, more than 80% of students attend -- close to the numbers at the main school.

There's still the state exit exam to be passed before they can take diplomas, and the results from the midyear test haven't arrived yet. And some students have completed only two classes so far. Yet the Advance Path Academy is clearly rescuing significant numbers of bright students who have the capacity for hard work but who were lost in traditional classrooms.

The common and often justified complaint about charter schools is that they attract the most motivated students and families, not the truants and gangsters at urban public schools. Perhaps more than anywhere else in Green Dot's empire, the academy shows a charter school using innovation to succeed with problematic students where the Los Angeles Unified School District has failed for decades. Coaxing students back to school is of limited use if their only choice is the same classes and schedule that led them to truancy in the first place.

Here in the warehouse, one such former truant calls Thomason over to his workstation to show off the 100% he just got on his French test. As another boy wearing a Junior ROTC uniform sticks a gold star next to his name on the wall chart, the room breaks into applause. A few of the names are adorned with stickers showing a graduation cap, the sign that these students have completed all of their course work.

Within a few weeks, one of those mortarboard stickers should go up next to Kendle Malbrough's name. He will don a cap and gown in the pale blue of the Locke Saints and march outside to the ringing of a bell that proclaims his achievement, the reward for the many days he came in two hours early to get extra work done.

What about June? Will he return for the official graduation ceremony, the one with the school band and the crowds of proud relatives fanning themselves on the bleachers?

"Can I do that?" he asked a teacher, this aspiring firefighter who last year was just another one of Locke's sad statistics. "Can I finish now and still come back in June with all the others?"

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