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August 2010

Second-Chance Schools

Maricopa County Regional School District officials are shifting their focus from defending the district's rep to helping local youth avoid a life of crime.

DOWN THE HALL at the Maryvale YMCA, past a workout room with stationary bikes, 15 young men who had been going down the wrong path are getting a push toward the right one.

Maricopa County Regional School District Superintendent Ernest Rose surveys the room where the young men - Maryvale teens recently released from juvenile detention - earn school credits through computer-based lessons. Rose hopes they also see a better future for themselves along the way.

"Our goal is to get them back to their home schools caught up," Rose says of the students, who have fallen behind at or can't return to their home schools because of past disciplinary problems.

Continued Hope High School West opened in the YMCA in April, the second of what school officials hope will become a system of six community-based schools. It is part of a renewed focus by the school district - which serves 3,000 young people a year, most of whom have been in trouble with the law - on breaking the cycle of crime and reducing recidivism among students who have been detained in county juvenile facilities.

In previous years, the school district's focus had been on the 1,500 homeless youth who attended the Thomas J. Pappas schools in Downtown Phoenix, Rose says. Rose had been principal of the Pappas middle school for three months when Maricopa County

sheriff's deputies raided it in 2006 as part of an investigation into then-Maricopa County Schools chief Sandra Dowling. A 25-count indictment of Dowling alleging theft, fraud and misuse of public money was eventually tossed out by a county judge, but the Pappas schools were closed as part of a settlement agreement with the county board of supervisors.

Rose, who had been in charge of closing and dismantling the Pappas schools, is now working under Dowling's elected replacement, Dr. Don Covey, to re-adjust the regional district's focus. In addition to the two Continued Hope high schools, the district, which has an annual budget of about \$3 million, also runs the educational programs in the county's two ju-

venile detention centers and the Tumbleweed Transitional Learning Center, which serves refugee children and troubled youth.

Last year the detention centers began revamping educational programs. Students now set educational, recreational, familial and career goals and get follow-up attention

from teachers. In the Maryvale area, the district has hired a former probation officer to stay in contact with about 100 students after their release from detention.

Jessie Galas, who was locked up for marijuana possession earlier this year, says

he decided to attend the school to stay out of trouble. At Trevor G. Browne High School, he says he felt pressured to fight and get involved in gangs. While in detention he decided he wanted to be an architect and is now focused on that goal. "I'd rather do something with my life than stay in prison," he says.

Covey says that for every 175 students kept out of incarceration, the county can save \$8.75 million. Rose says twice the number of students

in the district's programs have earned GEDs this year versus last year.

"It is going in the right direction," Covey says. "We are really reaching out to young people who made poor decisions in their lives to reverse that trend."

— Amanda J. Crawford



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