

Serving Colorado Springs & the Pikes Peak region since 1872 | Friday, November 22, 2013

Community collaboration gets former dropouts back on track for graduation, jobs

By **Carol McGraw** (/author/carol-mcgraw) Updated: October 31, 2013 at 12:54 pm • Published: October 26, 2013 | 8:30 pm •  2

22

0

email

70

print

 Google Survey FAQ (<http://gazette.com/google-survey-faq>)

Rick Johnson is a 6-foot, 7-inch-tall guy who everyone describes as "strapping." He's a success in the tough world of plumbing and heating.

But recently he was brought to tears by a thank-you note from a student at The Career Building Academy. Johnson, who founded the academy to help former dropouts learn a trade, says "You have no idea. A lot of these kids could have been left behind."

That could have happened to Khadejiah Biglow, 18, the student who wrote the note.

She started skipping classes at Sierra High School a couple of years ago. On a trip to attend a funeral in Seattle, she refused to come home for a year. "I was sick of the drama," she said. But while staying with a relative, her days became endless marathons of watching bad TV, she says. "I was so bored I came back."

One day, her mother drove her to the academy where the Engage-Educate-Employ Dropout Recovery Solution is housed. "She didn't tell me where we were going until the last minute."

E3, as it is called, is a community collaboration among the Career Building Academy, E-cademy Learning Center, the Youth Transformation Center, Harrison School District 2 and Colorado Springs School District 11.

The mission is to encourage high school dropouts to return to school, recover required credits to graduate and learn social skills and a trade that will lead to employment.

Khadejiah was surprised how much she liked E3. "It's cool," she said, noting she is able to work at her own pace and the teachers explain things if she needs help. She was named a top scholar in September and received a coffee shop gift certificate. "I want another vanilla bean frappuccino, so I'm going for top grades this month, too," she said with a laugh.

About 80 high school students or dropouts between age 16 and 21 are enrolled. They graduate when they complete their credits, usually in a year or two.

About 150 students dropped out of D-2 in school year 2010-2011, or about 3 percent of the students in the district, according to state education statistics. About 466 students, or 3 percent, dropped out of D-11. Statewide, more than 12,256 students were dropouts, again about 3 percent of the student population.

D-2 Superintendent Andre Spencer says that while the district's numbers don't sound huge, they are huge in terms of lost opportunities.

"We want a zero dropout rate," Spencer said. More than two-thirds of the district's students are minority and more than 70 percent are from low-income families. Often these students drop out to help their families, have behavior problems or become discouraged. D-2 administrators, including Spencer, have gone door to door to tell dropouts about the program and encourage them to sign up.

Leaving school is particularly damaging these days, as schools concentrate on getting teens ready for college and careers. Jobs of the future demand critical thinking, career readiness, collaboration and technology know-how.

Those without such skills can affect local economies adversely, studies have shown.

The "engage" part of E3 refers to the Youth Transformation Center's Boomerang workshop, which is a 10-hour intensive workshop to inspire students to drop risky behaviors and learn how to set goals to realize dreams. The class includes lessons in communication and relationship skills, and emphasizes taking responsibility.

The "educate" part of the equation are half-day classes administered by Pueblo-based E-Cademy Learning Center. High school classes, such as science, math and reading, are taught online with teachers and tutors helping in the classroom. The computer lab and classrooms for this program are at the Career Building Academy in the Johnson Heating and Plumbing offices, 410 Tia Juana St.

The third prong of E3 is "Employ." Students spend part of the day in the Career Building Academy' trade program, which includes hands-on lessons in automotive and home construction work and associated skills such as framing, plumbing, electrical and mechanical work. The students have built two houses. The academy gets low-cost government startup loans from the El Paso County Housing Authority, and repays the loan after the house sells. Additional money helps pay for program expenses.

"They love this part," says Johnson, showing off an old Cadillac and assorted trucks the kids are working on. "It's like sports. They have to stay academically eligible to work on them. There's nothing worse for them than staying in computer class all day." The hands-on work helps with academic skills, too, such as math.

There are other requirements that will steady them well when they get a job. There are mandatory drug tests, and they must look presentable, be on time and have top-notch attendance.

"For some kids, just getting here is success," says Joy Cress, academic director. Overcoming fear of failure is a big challenge for some students. "They have failed in the past and are afraid to take a chance," she says.

Damon DiFabio, a D-2 administrator who oversees the D-2 dropout recovery program, notes that many start with few social skills that are important in the work world such as making eye contact or shaking hands when introduced. "Some of it is a trust issue. In the past, they have not sensed that people would go the extra mile for them," he says.

That trust is built in part by the small-size classes where they get individualized attention and aren't distracted by the classroom drama of regular high schools. "We become part of their lives," DiFabio said.

The program also helps students and their families with a variety of wrap-around social services in the community.

D-2 uses its per pupil funds for its students in the program, D-11 uses general fund money. Students receive diplomas from their districts.

D-11 students can participate in a one-year program where they spend time at the Career Building Academy site in Colorado Springs to work on high school credits, and then spend time at the academy's refurbished Lathrop Education and Training Center site in Walsenburg, said John Keane, D-11's director of K-12 schools.

The students follow career tracks in construction, culinary arts or medical work. They are taught work skills and get experience at work sites, including a hospital. They participate in supervised independent living in dormitories at the Lathrop site, and study

in the evening.

Keane says it is vital to recover dropouts. "They aren't contributing to society and can't get good jobs. We want them to graduate with job skills rather than hanging out at the park."

Not all returning dropouts students stick it out, Johnson says. "Some you just can't reach. If they don't follow the rules, after help, they are gone. If they don't have respect for the program, they aren't going to have respect for employers or coworkers. That's why we are tough."

Deon Edwards, 16, says of the E3 program: "It's been hard, but I like everything about it." She dropped out of Sierra High School at age 15 because she got behind in classes and began ditching school. At one point she was homeless, living on the streets with a friend. "I didn't like it. It was freezing."

She is back home now and has a new respect for her parents. "They were there for me, and I had thrown that away."

Her mother, Leslie Kelley, says she approached the D-2 school board to find a solution to Deon's education challenges, and they referred her to the program.

"She has turned around and is excited about learning," Kelley said.

Deon says she likes the classes because she gets plenty of help and doesn't fall behind. Her favorite class is biology. But she wishes there were more options in the trade classes. "I'd like more things that girls might like," she says.

After graduation, she hopes to attend cosmetology school. Nevertheless, the construction class has helped her with math. And, she says with a laugh, "I can be the man in my house and fix everything."

Johnson founded the Career Building Academy in 2010 in part because he knows the challenges kids face. His son Ricky went through some hard times "but he figured it out." Now 27, he is successfully running the family business.

Johnson says that those in the construction business tell him they can't find enough good workers and will place students coming out of the program.

Khadejiah, who wrote the thank-you note that brought tears to Johnson and other staff members, has raced successfully through her classwork. She had 10.5 credits when she started in April and now has 16.5. She needs 23 to graduate. She had never thought of college as an option. Now she wants to be an anesthesiologist.

Her note to the staff said in part:

"I'm so glad I found this program. I feel like I'm going to succeed and be the best that I can be. I'm so close to graduating, so close to success, so close to making my family and friends proud of me and so close to happiness."

Contact Carol McGraw: 636-0371 *Twitter* @mcgrawatgazette

Facebook Carol McGraw

22

0

email

70

print

[Google Survey FAQ \(http://gazette.com/google-survey-faq\)](http://gazette.com/google-survey-faq)

[Comment Policy \(http://gazette.com/comments-faq\)](http://gazette.com/comments-faq)



Comment



Dennis McAfee · Colorado Springs, Colorado

So students dropped out of school after Mike Miles made the decision to eliminate vocational classes in both high schools. The classes that made a finite connection between a career and graduation, thank you Mike, for your lasting contribution.

[Reply](#) · [1 Like](#) · October 27 at 9:27am



Jeff Faltz · Top Commenter · University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

A decision to eliminate vocational offerings was the absolute, 100% attributable reason these kids dropped out? Would it be more accurate that "these students drop out to help their families, have behavior problems or become discouraged"?

No matter why they left, since the mission of E3 is "to encourage high school dropouts to return to school, recover required credits to graduate and learn social skills and a trade that will lead to employment", it's fantastic that this resource is available to them, and I hope that many more students reach their goals through the program.

[Reply](#) · [4 Like](#) · October 27 at 9:49am

Facebook social plugin



Wesley BetterSurf

Wdy ZWw uJm89d3NhciZkPSZ0PTE7MjszOzQ7NTs2Ozc7ODs5OzEwOzExOzEyOzEzOzE0JmE9NDMwMCZzPTEwMDcmdz1nYXpldHRILmNvbSziPWJkMiZyZD0mcmk9