

JUVENILE HALL RAISES STAKES FOR TEACHERS

Reaching a student in trouble can mean the difference between a productive life and one spent behind bars.

Destiny tilts forward at her desk, legs slung off the side of her chair so she can direct all her attention to the teacher standing in the opposite corner of the room.

The 14-year-old has never been so engaged in class.

She volunteers answers, asks questions when she doesn't understand and helps fellow students find the answers.

But her life had to turn upside down for her to discover that she actually likes learning.

"I would never go to school on the outs," she says. "I never thought I would like math, but it's kind of cool."

Now she has no choice but to make it to class on time every day.

Destiny sleeps in a bare concrete room. When school begins, the classroom door is locked from the outside. And if she doesn't show up for class, the entire campus will be on lockdown.

This is Otto A. Fischer School at Juvenile Hall in Orange, where classes are held year round – and the stakes of teaching are higher than at any other public school in Orange County.

Reach children here and they might turn their lives around. Fail and they will likely end up in Juvenile Hall again and again – or worse.

"That motivates us," substitute teacher Wendy Leece said. "This is serious business."

So teachers seek ways to be creative under extraordinarily restrictive circumstances, juggling classrooms with students often separated by years in age and miles in ability. And they try to think beyond English and science and math to impart the kinds of lessons that could change a life forever.

"Kids are moving targets. They are still malleable, they can still change," said Elizabeth Cauffman, a professor of psychology and social behavior at UC Irvine who specializes in juvenile justice. "If there ever was a time for intervention, this is it."

DEFINING SUCCESS

Every minor arrested in Orange County who must be detained until a court date is brought to the Juvenile Hall intake center, a wide room with tan walls and fluorescent lighting.

The average daily population of Juvenile Hall is about 250; throughout 2012, 2,432 minors were detained there. Some stay a day, others several years.

The county Probation Department operates other centers where sentenced teens serve their time, including the Joplin Youth Center in Trabuco Canyon and the Youth Guidance Center, a substance-abuse-treatment program, in Santa Ana.

Juvenile Hall itself is a collection of single-story brick classrooms ringed by manicured lawns, basketball courts and housing units, where kids spend most of their time.

The complex houses minors who are going through the court process, awaiting an opening at one of the other facilities and those convicted of the most serious crimes.

As soon as they are booked in Juvenile Hall, the learning begins.

Whether teens are in Juvenile Hall for three days or three years, they are enrolled in classes run by the county Department of Education. Even teens with high school diplomas or GEDs must attend classes.

The school teaches a California standards-based curriculum, said Dorothy Stafford, a teacher and curriculum adviser. Students read the same textbooks used in traditional schools, though English language arts books with themes like "responsibility requires action" and "justice requires restraint" are taken from a character-based literacy program.

High school students are placed in classes of 10 to 15, groupings based on criminal or mental health attributes – high risk, general population, mental health needs.

Teachers must work with a range of abilities in each group. Studies show the average IQ of incarcerated minors to be about 85, Cauffman said. Some students are operating at grade level; others can barely read.

“I always try to target more to where I see the average grade mean, but I also make sure I vary it from day to day,” English-language development teacher Martin Juarez said.

As at all California schools, Fischer’s achievement is measured by test scores and graduation rates. Juvenile Hall’s numbers are well below county and state averages.

But real success looks different for each student.

For general-population students locked up for a few weeks to a few months, teachers try to keep them current with classes at their regular schools.

In the mental health wing, getting the students exercising, learning basic skills and feeling normal is about as good as it gets.

And for teenagers facing long prison sentences for crimes such as murder or rape, teachers say they try to change how teens think about life and offer them hope.

“Did we teach him something about himself? Did he learn something about respect ?” program director Kirk Anderson said. “Did he learn how to work with others, to make peace with a rival gang?”

STRICT ROUTINE

The school day starts at 7:45 a.m. when correctional officers unlock row after row of concrete rooms and lead the teenagers outside.

Fischer School sits in the middle of the Juvenile Hall complex. Students line up in front of their residential buildings, facing the walls, waiting for permission to disperse to their classes.

They march off in silent, single-file lines, arms crossed behind their backs, past the manicured lawns, rose bushes and magnolia trees.

“The classrooms and campus are very nice,” Anderson said. “But then you go see a kid’s room and see how small it is and you go, ‘Oh, it’s not paradise.’ ”

Whether it’s because of the forced attendance or the lack of other stimuli, many students say they find it easier to learn at Fischer.

“I didn’t get enough attention and guidance on the outs on a one-on-one basis,” said 18-year-old Danny, one of the high-risk teens who face possible adult sentences for felonies and violent crimes.

(Because of court privacy laws, the Register is using only the first names of the students in this story.)

Students say they just didn’t care enough to show up before, that they fell through the cracks, or that it was tough to focus.

“It’s harder on the outs to pay attention,” said Raymond, a 17-year-old serving time for breaking probation rules. “You have a cellphone and can get distracted.”

Some distractions are missed more than others.

“I miss the girls,” Danny said with a grin.

Boys and girls are not allowed to mingle in Juvenile Hall, not since officers caught two teens having sex in a coed housing unit in 2012.

Even the classes are separated.

The girls in Destiny’s class are more outspoken and boisterous than the boys’ general-population classes.

When teacher Maria Martinez shows a math problem on the projector and asks students to describe the angles on a polygon, three shout the answer: “Complementary!”

“The sum of the angles always adds up to ...” the teacher says.

“To 180,” Destiny calls out before Martinez can finish her sentence.

At the back of the class, two students drop a ruler on the floor. It clatters. They giggle.

“What are we doing?” the student sitting next to Destiny asks, as they prepare to work on an assignment.

Once Destiny’s figured it out, she’s ready to help.

“You are just going to add the terms and multiply,” Destiny tells her with a grin.

The tone of classes in the higher security population is subdued.

For Skyler, a soft-spoken 17-year-old who said he is facing murder charges, part of the appeal of school is having so much time on his hands. He’s been in Juvenile Hall for more than two years already.

“I never really thought school was important. I just went to school because my parents made me. I was never into it,” he said.

“It makes you want to learn here. Being here makes you think about your life and what you’ve done.”

The most important lessons are about character.

A big part of a teacher’s job is pastoral work, teacher Stafford said.

Teachers select books that they hope students will forge a personal connection with, such as “The Contender” by Robert Lipsyte, which many students are reading this semester in a thematic unit about decision-making and integrity.

“It’s a good book, a book we can relate to about gang life and how to change it,” Skyler said.

Other teachers use games like chess to impart life lessons.

“I think chess restructures their minds,” said Mike Kane, who assists in math and science classes. “It teaches them patience, how to play well with others, and that the best move at times might be sitting on your hands. If one kid walks away with that, it’s a success .”

The best-behaved students are the high-risk ones. Going to class is a privilege, a way to get out of their locked rooms. And nobody wants to mess that up, Anderson said.

They talk quietly, the low tones carried over from the rules in the housing units where they spend most of their time.

“I never really thought school was important,” Skyler said. “Here it was totally different. It made me ... care about my life.”

The teen graduated from Fischer in June and celebrated with family visitors.

Because they are going to be here the longest, with some who will head to prison to serve out longer sentences, many high-risk students can enroll in college distance-education classes.

Students say they are excited to start college this

fall, though that exuberance is tempered by the sobering reality that it could be decades before they can apply that knowledge.

“I hope to get a good career, go to college if I can,” Skyler said. “Get my life straight if I can.”

TOUGH CYCLE

Destiny said she is going to do things differently once she is released.

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to go to school more,” she said.

This is her first stint in Juvenile Hall – she was brought in on charges of petty theft, assault and battery, and possession of a weapon on school grounds, she said.

Turning kids around is the goal, though teachers say the challenges for students returning to the “outs” are immense.

“We don’t sugarcoat the life they go back to,” Stafford said. “We just hope we send them back a little stronger.”

Though students in Juvenile Hall profess a new appreciation for education, many general-population students will fall into old habits when they leave.

Teachers say they pick up newspapers only to see familiar faces: a former student killed in a drive-by shooting, another stabbed to death, one who committed a terrible crime.

Some will return to Juvenile Hall 10, 15 times.

"You probably see that 50 percent of these kids continue to come in until they are 18," Anderson said.

Teachers often feel conflicted when they see a returning student.

"I want to be happy because they are alive and I want to see them," Leece said. "But I'm also a little disappointed."

The best she can do, Leece said, is look for moments to encourage them while they're here, writing little notes to students getting ready to go home.

"You have potential," the note might say. "Now walk the straight and narrow."

CONTACT THE WRITER:

714-796-7970 or

jterrell@ocregister.com



PHOTOS: PAUL BERSEBACH, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Students leave their cells to go to lunch at the Otto A. Fischer School at Orange County Juvenile Hall. The facility's average daily population is about 250.



Juvenile Hall students play basketball surrounded by barbed wire. Youths held at the facility can be there for a few days or for years, with some convicted of serious crimes facing more time in adult prisons.



JESSICA TERRELL
REGISTER WRITER



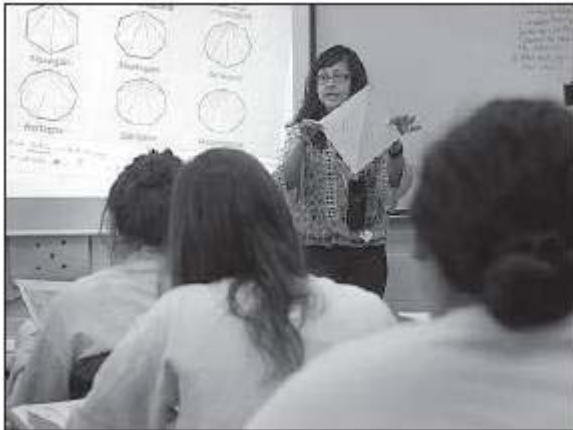
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AND VIOLENT
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PAUL BERSEBACH, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Students form a single-file line to move from one building to another at the Otto A. Fischer School at Orange County Juvenile Hall in Orange.



Maria Martinez teaches math and science to the school's girls. Once students are in the room, the door is locked for the duration of class. Boys and girls are not allowed to mingle.