



Reconnecting Youth Centers: *Engagement options at work*

By Mark Skolnick

Since spring, 2010, MESD has operated Reconnecting Youth Centers (RYC) at Alpha, Helensview and Donald E. Long schools. The RYCs are the entry point for out-of-school youth to find immediate re-engagement with education.

Functioning within the framework of the **Reconnecting Youth Initiative**, MESD's centers are quietly, and without external funding, working with over 50 young people, as of the end of October. While the RYCs are in full swing, Director of Instructional Services **Kelvin Webster**, and principals **Kris Persson**, **Peter Kane** and **Kevin Hunking**, continue to work on funding and inter-district agreements.

The centers use data-driven analysis of student strengths and challenges based on academic, career interest and social assessment. Center-based teams strengthen the quality of decisions made to improve student achievement in literacy and mathematics, and in life-skills and problem solving that will result in a high school diploma, GED attainment and transition to post secondary education. The centers offer flexible attendance options and individualized instruction.

The RYCs can be explained using educational jargon, as above. But a better way to understand their impact is to meet a couple of students.

Alpha Reconnection Center: Coles Johnson

Coles Johnson (pictured at right) has just returned to Alpha from her job site experience at Gresham Heights Learning Center. Meeting her interviewer with a disarming smile and a look-you-in-the-eye confidence, Coles (pronounced Co-LES) Johnson extends a firm handshake.

"Do you need me to stay?" asks **Michael Lancaster**, one of her teachers at Alpha School's Reconnection Center.

"No. I'm fine. I'm a people person," she says confidently.

An articulate young woman, Coles is at ease talking about her new educational direction. She radiates poise and self-assurance. However, she doesn't mince words when talking about past behaviors that stymied her attempts to stay in school. She is flush with transparency and unsparing in her honest appraisal.

"I went to Barlow and by the end my sophomore year I didn't have enough credits. I was going to transfer to Mt. Hood and never ending up going there. I got pregnant and was planning on going back," she said

Fast forward a bit and now, at 18 years of age, she has a nine-month old son and has been out of school for a couple of years. A friend knew about Alpha's Reconnection Center (RYC) and said "just go check it out." That was in May and she been re-engaged with her education at Alpha ever since.





"I'm glad that I am in school now, but I wish that in my freshman year I could have started high school here because I just work better in a smaller environment. I am glad I am in here now," she said happily.

What makes Alpha a good fit for Coles? The teachers, she said, don't talk to everyone in the same way. They take time to understand and connect with each individual, said Coles.

"I really feel like they want you to succeed. They are on you, but in a good way."

Coles has a goal of graduating as soon as possible, but doesn't want to jinx it by thinking about it too much. "I have a goal, but I don't want to set a time because I don't want to be disappointed. I am just taking it day by day."

As a sign of her growing maturity, she questions some of the choices she's made in the past. "What was I thinking?" she said in another moment of self-reflection. "I want to get that diploma. Why would I shortchange myself like that? I also want to show my son: don't take the easy way out."

Helensview Reconnection Center: Arturo Alvarado

18-year old Arturo Alvarado (*pictured at left*) has just come off the basketball court at Helensview School. Out of his practice sweats and now in street clothes, he has the bearing of an athlete. Lean, with a chiseled face and earnest features, Arturo is anxious to talk about the recent change in his educational direction. Like a point guard who sees a play before it happens, Arturo is picturing a better life for himself now that he is enrolled at Helensview's Reconnection Center.

He willingly reflects on his descent into disconnection, and subsequent rise to re-engagement at Helensview.

"I went to Parkrose High School. I was a junior but only had two credits. Before there, I went to Madison High and Clackamas High. I was easily distracted, I was talking to girls and I really wasn't focused on my school work," he said.

At the start of what should have been his senior year, with still only two credits, he determined there was no point in continuing. "So I dropped out for a couple of weeks, just hanging out not really doing anything," he confided.

"I looked at my life and looked around at myself and at the people around me," he said, his voice trailing off. "You can easily see what is going on in the streets, that can be your motivation. You can see the homeless and basically I asked myself, do you want to be like that? And I don't. I want to be successful."

Arturo's sister, who is a student at Helensview, encouraged him to check out the Reconnection Center. He immediately sensed that the RYC might offer a different experience.

"The people are real welcoming and the principal, oh she is lovely, I just love her. It felt real safe here," he said.

But it isn't just the nice welcome that's keeping Arturo in school. The self-paced curriculum and the individual attention give him a chance to succeed within his own learning style. It's also what he calls the "seriousness" of the teachers and staff.

Reconnecting Youth *Continues from page 1*

"I want to show my son that I am somebody, that I can succeed and graduate and go on to have a good job," she said. "I have a whole new direction to go in. My life is going to amount to something now."

Coles was understandably reluctant to come to another high school since her previous experience was negative, she said. She assumed it would just be another place where she'd get lost in the crowd, couldn't get help and she would end up following the same trajectory.

"When I started here it was totally different from what I thought. When I was thinking of high school I was thinking it was class, class, class. I will forget what I am learning, all these kids in the classroom, not getting the help I need because there are so many other people who need help," she said.

Then she came and saw small classes and met instructors who will devote time to help her through rough patches. "We get a lot more attention in class for what we are doing and they explain it so thoroughly, it's like - 'this is easy.' There are so many ways you can get credit."

Coles is just taking it a day at a time, but can't help but express some regrets about what might have been had she discovered Alpha sooner.

"I think it is the seriousness, with a small class you have to get down to business," he said.

He also appreciates the staff's direct communication style and demand for accountability. At intake, he was told of his options, including going back to his district high school. But his choice was Helensview. "I really didn't know why, but in the end I told them I really like this school. Bigger schools just distract me. It's not a good environment."

Arturo's school day begins in the afternoon - another hallmark of Reconnection's approach is having flexible hours - in class with Student Liaison **Vicki Rountree**. He starts with journal writing and the "word of the day." Then they cover a variety of subjects, including math, in which he is at about a sixth-grade level, he said.

Arturo was genuinely excited to talk about the life skills component. He has learned to write a check and how to fill out a job application "the right way, with correct spelling."

Arturo grew up in Texas. He said he didn't really know his dad, but was quick to say that he did have a male role model - his grandfather. "He taught me how to be a man, have a firm handshake and look people in the eye."

Arturo is on his own now, living with his sister, who has two children. Back home he is hanging with some guys in similar situations, but Arturo sees his path differently, starting now. "I want to get my high school diploma and I want to go somewhere," he said. "Since I've been here I've been just learning," he said.

With perspective that accompanies maturity, Coles and Arturo have had an educational resurrection, internal renaissance and awakening of possibilities. Not finishing high school was a void they could not fill, seal or ignore. They are being given a second chance as part of the Reconnecting Youth initiative.

The simple philosophy of RYC is to meet students where they are, regardless of credit deficiency, reading or math level, or personal challenges. RYCs create an educational home where a mixture of accountability, inspiring teachers and supportive staff allows students to deploy their most salient assets.

MESD has not advertised the RYC or been aggressive in recruitment. At this time, student inquiries come through word of mouth: friends telling friends, sisters telling brothers. Although RYCs were envisioned as a short-term step on the road to the goal of a "best fit" placement, most alternative schools are full to capacity. MESD is not turning away prospective students but keeping them engaged.

At Helensview Kris Persson said staff work hard to integrate RYC students into their school's daily flow and culture. To accommodate the new students, schedules have



Sally Kissell, Michael Lancaster and Coles Johnson

been tweaked and the building is buzzing with students until late in the day.

At Alpha's RYC, Teacher **Michael Lancaster** jumped at the chance to get involved with RYC students. According to Alpha Principal **Peter Kane** "Michael is always interested in new challenges, so this doesn't surprise me."

Michael said that when a student makes an inquiry, he has to find out where they live and if they are still enrolled in a district. Using as much information as he can get his hands on, Michael talks with the prospective student about the opportunities the RYC can provide. He doesn't sugarcoat the road ahead and lets each student know that the responsibility to work hard is theirs alone, but they will receive a lot of support.

"I err on the side of giving them hope. Even the students who are 19 and have five credits. If they come back in and know what they are signing up for, even if they don't hit the target of a diploma, I think they see the value of working toward it and learning the skills. I don't fudge the numbers. When it comes down to it, you have to put in so much work, and this is how it would look in two years or four years or whatever their time frame is," Michael said.

"Each student is different, a challenge," said Michael. "Teen parents, loss of credits, juggling jobs, they have been disconnected and before then, marginally engaged. Most have been out of school for a year or two or three."

These students have flawed educational histories, reflecting that end of the human spectrum in which mistakes made at a young age can continue to haunt and hold people back. The schools serve as a mirror in which young people look to re-discover themselves. 📖

Doing whatever it takes:

A story of educational engagement at Donald E. Long

By Janelle Emery and Mark Skolnick

Two conversations: reflections on GED testing

Student A:

“School was moving fast for me and I really didn’t understand some of the stuff because it all went so fast. Once I got here and my teacher (Rob Jensen) marked everything down real simple, I picked everything up and learned a lot.”

“My aunt has her GED so I’m the second one in my family to get my GED”

“My favorite subject is math because I like the spinning-wheel football game we play”

“I brought up the subject of getting my GED and I set up an IEP meeting to switch from high school diploma to GED. I took practice tests then it took me three days after that to get my GED. It was then presented to me. Kevin Hunking called me from Manhattan to tell me I had my GED. I felt proud. I called my auntie, my mom, grandma and little sister to tell them the news.

“I know I want to go to college and get my degree in social work. I feel I can relate to people who are struggling because of my struggles. I think I can really help people. I’m going to tour Concordia and PCC. The Donald E. Long staff is going to take me on a tour there.”

“I only had 7.25 credits as a senior before I got my GED”


Student B:

“I attended high school for 1.5 trimesters before dropping out. I went back and then dropped out again, three total times my freshman year.”

“I come from a family were my parents and older brother all attended college. My older brother graduated from college.”

“I went to college and took art. I don’t have any high school credits. At Clackamas Community College I took four out of five tests and passed them all. I tried to take math twice. The third time I took it at Donald E. Long because I heard there was testing here and so I applied. I talked with Manon (Veilleux). We looked at the PLATO program to see if I could refresh my memory with anything I had learned in high school. I took a practice test to see if I had raised my score from the last test I took in college and took the test the next day and passed.”

“I kept saying I don’t need a diploma to determine who I’m going to be but I caved-in and decided to take the test. I didn’t know I’d pass or knew I had it in me but I passed.”

“I used to want to be a graphic artist then a tattoo artist. Now I want to work at a coffee shop.” 

Within the secure walls of Multnomah County’s Juvenile Justice facility, Supervisor **Kevin Hunking** and the staff at Donald E. Long (DEL) School are doing whatever it takes to ignite students’ interest and passion for learning. With a boost from visiting artists and other outside resources, staff are teaching skills and concepts through special projects in art, writing and woodworking. Their approach engages students and captures their interest in education.

At D.E. Long there is ample opportunity to reach and teach youth. Through a partnership with Multnomah County, MESD provides the educational component for young people living in the secure units and with court-involved students who come to the Education Success Center (ESC) for the day.

Kevin said that he and his staff won’t compromise on setting high expectations for their work and for their students.

“I set the bar high and as a team, we’re doing whatever it takes to change statistics and engage students so they develop a love for learning or at least get the realization that they really can do the things that interest them, while learning at the same time. The results are showing,” Kevin said.

ESC: a partnership with the county and local schools

The ESC operates as one of MESD’s Reconnecting Youth Centers, although in a different way than the centers at Alpha and Helensview. Out-of-school youth, ages 16-18 involved in the juvenile justice system are referred to the center by their parole or probation officer. Since last year, about 100 students have come through with about 15 students currently enrolled.

ESC students spend their day at DEL, but not in the secured areas. Each morning, they enter through a separate door, are fed a nutritious breakfast (there are some students who are homeless), then attend school until 2:30 p.m. MESD teacher **Maryellen Meeks** and bi-lingual educational assistant **Monica Blaylock-Root** provide the educational component. Staff from the detention center and counselors from Juvenile Court provide groups that focus on behavior and decision-making skills.

New students undergo a comprehensive assessment in reading, writing and math. The small class size allows Maryellen and Monica to give individual help to struggling students. The students also have taken field trips to local colleges as a way to expand their views of what is possible with education and work ethic.



Kelvin Webster, director of Instructional Services, said MESD is the natural partner with the county. He said the ESC addresses the educational needs of out-of-school youth who are also involved with the justice system. MESD's presence at D.E. Long and experience with short term education, made the agency a good fit to provide the service.

Engaging students with art and writing

For DEL Measure 11 (long-term) students, Special Education Consultant/Art Instructor **Manon Veilleux** wrote and received a Young Audiences Grant for an artist in residence. This allows artists to visit the students and work with them on various art projects.

Using grant funds, Manon launched the "Art in the School" program. The program engages DEL students while giving them the opportunity to earn high school fine art credits.

Manon also coordinates and works directly with **Barry Saunders** and students from Northwest Pacific College of Arts on a special writing project. Barry visits the students, initiates open discussion groups and provides each student with a journal so they can express themselves through their writing and within the group.

Another project of which Manon is especially proud is overseeing the **Arvie Smith** Mural Project. Arvie Smith (*pictured above with students*) is a well-known artist who visits Donald E. Long to work directly with students on painting five major murals. The murals will be unveiled at a special open house. Four of the murals will hang on

the walls of Donald E. Long and one of the murals is being shipped to the Cultural Heritage Museum.

"This mural project is a special one," said Manon. "The students are fortunate to have such a famous, historical artist here. His history is a large part of the work he produces and he requires a great deal of trust. He's very careful about who he lets work on his murals. It really says something that he lets the students have their hands on his work because his work is very important to him."

Students are not only involved in painting specific sections of the murals, they're involved in the planning process of each mural as well. Each panel has a story behind it.

"Arvie and the students put a great amount of thought and discussion in planning out each panel. Some of the students, who worked on the murals in the initial painting phase, are no longer at Donald E. Long, which makes it even more special that many of our students were involved in each phase," said Manon.

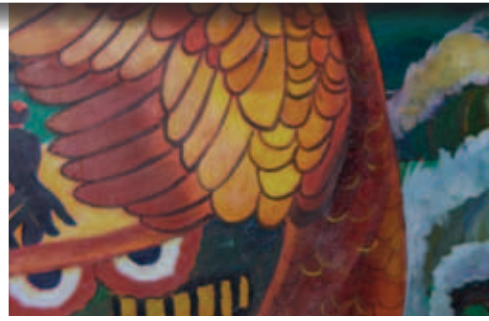
Manon said that Arvie is great with the students. He teaches them art techniques, art history and organizational skills. "We're very fortunate to have him here," said Manon. She encourages everyone to view Arvie's paintings at his website: www.arviesmith.com

GED testing too

In addition to Manon's involvement with the art projects at Donald E. Long, she oversees special education at Donald E. Long and helps prepare students for their GED test with practice testing.



Manon Veilleux (above) and Kevin Hunking (right)



Whatever it takes *Continues from page 5*

GED tests take place at the GED Center which is another incentive developed to help engage students and reach MESD's reconnecting youth goal. The GED center, endorsed by the state and federal government, is on-site and benefits other school districts in need of this service. Portland Public School District uses the GED center to help prepare students in programs such as SE Works, Portland Youth Builders and Portland Night School.

Staff at the test center rely on a special credit-recovery software program called PLATO, allowing students to complete course requirements at their own pace.

Another program designed to help engage students in learning is the wood-working program. A volunteer carpenter comes to Donald E. Long and helps students learn how to identify different types of wood and which type of wood is best when used for the interior and heating of a home. The volunteer also helps identify different carpentry tools. This education gives the students a snapshot and prepares them, should they choose to enter the field of framing, roofing or carpentry work.

Portland State University seniors working on their Capstone Project also contribute to the engagement of students. They work with students on a writing project in which their skills are showcased and critiqued. ❏

MESD's Incarcerated Youth Staff

Alice Beseau	GED Tester
Amanda Hay	Special Education Teacher
Annette Simms	Office Assistant III
Denise Taplin	Education Assistant
Maryellen Meeks	Special Education Teacher
Gary Roberts	GED Tutor
Gene Anderson	Education Assistant
Janie Zimmerman	Special Education Teacher
Jeff Kubasak	GED Tutor
Jill Harrington	Speech/Language Pathologist
John Galarza	GED Tutor
Julie Conroy	GED Tutor
Katie Blake	Education Assistant
Kevin Hunking	Corrections Education & Special Ed. Supervisor
Kristin Casey	Education Assistant
Leslie Smith	Office Assistant III
Manon Veilleux	Special Education Consultant
Mike Wodzewoda	Education Assistant
Monica Blalock-Root	Education Assistant
Rob Jensen	Education Assistant
Susan Hoelzer	School Psychologist
Tom Baker	Special Education Teacher

Educational Assistant Rob Jensen changes educational perceptions

By Janelle Emery and Mark Skolnick

Educational Assistant **Rob Jensen** works with Teacher **Janie Zimmerman** in a classroom found behind concrete walls, locked doors and windows. It is nestled in one of the lock-down wings of Donald E. Long. It resides adjacent to the same secured quarters where students spend their entire day. In contrast to the lock-down environment, Rob's classroom is inviting and comfortable.

"When I first came here, the walls were filled with graffiti, the lighting was harsh with bright fluorescent and the atmosphere was cold and uninviting. How could I expect any student to want to be here if I didn't even want to be?" said Rob. "This classroom is an extension of me so I needed to make it an organized, safe and nurturing place where students want to be."

Rob has accessorized his room with subtle and relaxing details. There's the sound of a waterfall running. A scent that smells like bubble gum and the temperature is comfortable and warm. Strands of miniature, clear lights are strategically placed throughout the room, intertwined with Rob's collection of Oregon Duck paraphernalia, creating a calming ambience.

"Most of the students are visual learners, this means if they don't see it, touch it or feel it, they won't learn it," Rob says. "The waterfall helps students with attention deficit disorder stay focused, which helps them retain the information they're given. They need white-noise to stay focused otherwise they lose their attention span, start thinking of other things."

Rob's two decades of experience in mental health has given him the tools he uses each day. "I'm just one piece of the puzzle and a lot of what I've learned, I learned from being involved in Outdoor school and from being around Outdoor school students. I've discovered that kids are huge indicators of their environment and they know what works and what doesn't work"

Aside of the comforts of home that are so important to Rob's students, his expectations in the classroom help his students feel secure and safe. Rob stresses a framework built around four tenants.

"The four tenants that are up on my wall are expected to be followed by both my students and me. The four tenants are safety, respect, caring and concern. Everyone in this classroom knows that we abide by these rules and we go over these four tenants daily, in order to remind ourselves," he said.

Rob uses his love for Oregon Duck football to his advantage. He developed and built a game that uses a spinning wheel to incorporate football, visual-learning and fun with math. He calls it the (Oregon Duck) Spinning Roulette Wheel Football Game and every Friday, the students look forward to playing the game. Rob makes it exciting by introducing the team players as if they're running onto the football field and being announced to the fans in a stadium. He announces each student's name as if they were on the roster. This gets the students excited and brings out a little friendly competition too.

"It's a success because 90% of the time, everyone's a winner and that's what I want. I want my students to win. Winning builds confidence." 🍌





E² Foundation News:

*Scholarship fund gets boost; award directed to FLS;
and a big "thank you" to donors*



More funds for direct student aid: The E² Foundation Scholarship program is the only effort of its kind to focus solely on students enrolled in MESD schools and those of Alternative Pathways partnership. The Paul & Sally McCracken Fund awarded \$5,000 to support the E² Scholarship program. In the early 1990s, Sally and her husband Paul started an Oregon Community Foundation advised fund with a strong focus on agencies that help low-income and at-risk individuals become self-sufficient. "It's just the right thing to do," McCracken says. "We want to help people who are having rough times." The E² Foundation is pleased to have the support of a long-time community philanthropist.

Teacher recognized as "Local Hero": MESD is proud of Functional Living Skills Teacher **Brett Bigham**, who was recently awarded a \$5,000 grant as a Bank of America "Local Hero" honoree. According to the B of A announcement, Local Heroes "contribute significantly to the health of their neighborhood through volunteer service and civic engagement." Brett will direct his grant to the E² Foundation to support students in MESD's Functional Living Skills program.

Thanks to our donors for their support: Congratulations are due to Outdoor School's biggest contributor: John Gray of the Gray Family Foundation. The Gray Family received the 2010 Association of Fundraising Professionals Vollum Award for Lifetime Philanthropy Achievement. The Gray Family Foundation, which operates under the Oregon Community Foundation, is a generous supporter of Outdoor School. Over the past year, the foundation has contributed about \$160,000 to local schools to participate in MESD's Outdoor School.

Read about the Gray Family Foundation's donation at: <http://www.oregoncf.org/blog/posts/community-notes-october-7>

Thanks to the most recent supporters of Workplace Giving: A "season of sharing" initiative with United Way, Black United Fund, Equity Foundation, Earthshare of Oregon and Local Independent Charities.

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Photo of the Year set for January 22nd: The annual Photo of the Year contest is a benefit for MESD's Outdoor School. The event is open to all amateur photographers -- if you have never seen the wide variety of photos submitted, it is a feast for the eyes! Go to www.photooftheyear.net for more information.

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