

# New education approach gives students a second chance to succeed

BY CYNTHIA SMITH

Connor, age 18, grew up in a home with drug abuse and eventually sold drugs himself. He told of frequent visits by police to his home and was at high risk of becoming a high school dropout. Then he heard about a Georgia high school where he could do schoolwork at his own pace.

"Coming to this school is what turned it around for me," Connor said. "Because here people actually care. For the first time in my life, somebody had my back. Someone was rooting for me." The school—Mountain Education Charter High School (MECHS)—helped Connor turn his life around and become the first person in his family to graduate from high school.

## A Second Chance

MECHS is making a difference in a lot of lives, today. MECHS seeks "to provide a second chance opportunity to students across North Georgia to earn an accredited high school diploma in a student-centered, self-paced, evening public high school."

Founded to decrease Georgia's dropout rate, MECHS is not an alternative school for behavior issues, nor does it offer General Educational Development (GED) also known as a General Education Diploma. Instead it offers a high school diploma to students who, for a variety of reasons, need another option to regular daytime high school.

Students who plan to pursue education beyond high school often find that a high school diploma is valued much more highly than a GED. A student seeking to enter the military, for example, will learn that most branches require a high school diploma. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a high school graduate earns about \$1,600 more per month than one with a GED.

Joeta Youngblood, a site administrator at the Pickens County campus, would like the public to know about the school on Church Street in Jasper.

"We are a fully accredited high school that serves our population in nontraditional evening hours. We provide a mentor for each student. We have a social worker, counselor, graduation coach, graduation partner and interventionist."

This support staff, according to Youngblood, develops personal relationships with students. This, coupled with the low student-teacher ratio, allows students to find school success—many for the first time.

Shea, 17, left her day school when



Students work on math with help from teachers and tutors. PHOTOS BY JIM FRANCIS



Science Teacher Laura Garner assists students.

her father was diagnosed with stage four recurrent melanoma. She cared for her dad during the day while her mother worked and she discovered that she could earn her high school diploma in evening classes at the mountain charter school. Shea says MECHS was much more understanding about her absences than her previous school.

"I was able to not only graduate early," Shea said, "but I also graduated with 25 college credits."

All classes needed for a Georgia high school diploma are offered at MECHS, which students affectionately refer to as "Mountain Ed." Classes are held in the evenings four days per week and many are taught by teachers who work in local high schools during the day. There are no traditional lecture classes but each classroom has a certified teacher, a paraprofessional and a tutor.

The classes are self-paced and mastery-based, meaning that students take as long as needed to complete coursework and classes are never failed. Students work



Teacher Patsy Jordan in the Senior Room at Mountain Ed.

using an online platform called Gradpoint until they successfully finish a course. Teachers are available to review with students until a passing grade is achieved and a tutor is always available to ensure success.

## Number of campuses growing

Begun in 1993, the MECHS system currently boasts 16 campuses in North Georgia. Pickens County students attended the Gilmer site until 2010, when the Pickens County MECHS site was opened. Some 300 students graduated from the system last school year and more than 2,500 students are currently being served.

Students enroll at MECHS for a variety of reasons. Some students have daytime jobs or parenting duties that keep them from finishing high school. Some need to make up failed classes. Still others need a self-paced curriculum in order to achieve success. There is no cost to full-time students but there is a nominal fee for credit recovery and joint enrollment.

## Support from the community

The largest charter high school in Georgia, MECHS is a Title I school, which

means that federal assistance is available based on high percentages of students from low-income families. The purpose of Title I funds is to help at-risk populations to meet rigorous state education standards. The schools receive state and federal funds but none from local counties though the building in which Pickens MECHS meets is leased from Pickens County Schools.

Dinner, funded by the MECHS system budget, is provided by local restaurants to students at no cost. The Partners in Education program fosters a relationship between schools and local businesses. Some of the restaurants who partner with Pickens MECHS include O'Charley's, Papa John's, Deb's Bakery, Shane's Rib Shack, McDonald's, Bojangles, Marcos, Johnny's Pizza, Taco Bell, and Chick-fil-A. Some other partners who help the Pickens campus include Woodstock Baptist Church and Cool Spring Baptist Church.

## Standard graduation requirements

Graduation requirements at MECHS are the same as those for traditional high schools and Georgia Milestones tests are taken as in any Georgia school. Students are eligible for HOPE scholarships and additional scholarships are offered by Rotary, Optimist, ETC Communications, Daughters of the American Revolution and the Big Canoe Chapel.

Students graduate throughout the year but a graduation ceremony is held each May for the students who graduated in that school year. Last year Pickens County grads went on to Chattahoochee Technical College, Kennesaw State University, military service and into the work force. This year, for the first time, all 16 campuses will have their graduation ceremony together at the University of North Georgia Convocation Center in Dahlonega.

In addition to a nightly meal, the central office for MECHS is always working on novel ways to entice students to attend and progress toward their goals. Special treats with dinner are offered periodically and students earn raffle tickets for attendance. This month's prize at the Pickens campus is a new mountain bike.

"It's important to remember," said site administrator Corey Thompson, "that many of these kids have struggled with very difficult situations. But they're still kids and we want to give them the best chance for a successful life that we can."



## Piedmont Mountainside Breast Cancer Support Group

**Meets 2nd Monday of each month**  
**5:30 to 6:30pm**  
**Conference room adjacent to cafeteria**  
**1266 Highway 515 S • Jasper, Georgia 30143**

Dr. Rosa Langella, Medical Director  
 Deanna Young, Clinical / Administrative Support

Open environment in which to share information under the direction of Dr. Rosa Langella, Breast Surgeon.

Light refreshments provided.

For more information, call **706.299.5564**.

