

# Charter school alternative in Akron helps students catch up, district keeps money

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Published: August 11, 2015 - 10:25 PM | Updated: August 12, 2015 - 10:42 AM



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the spring of her junior year at Garfield High School, life had caught up to Natasha Smith.

Already six classes behind where she needed to be to graduate on time, she was nine months pregnant with a son.

"I felt like I wasn't going to graduate. I was going to fail him," Smith, 18, said.

Some 7,100 teenage women give birth in Akron each year; 95.5 percent are unmarried, increasing the likelihood children will grow up in poverty. U.S. Census data show teenage births occur twice as often in Akron as they do elsewhere in Summit County. The same disparate trend applies to



marriage rates.

What isn't as easy to calculate is how many teenage mothers or troubled young men will drop out of high school in Akron.

young adults — have yet to graduate.



Smith refuses to join them.

Since Kaiden was born, Smith has enrolled in APS-Online, a new credit recovery and Internet-based program piloted in the spring and extended into the summer. Already, she's made up four missed courses and should finish a fifth before the summer session ends.

"This program has given me hope when all else failed," she said.

The online offering tackles two problems that have long eluded Akron Public Schools or any high-poverty urban school system: How do educators keep students engaged in learning when life gets in the way, and how can administrators stop hundreds of millions of dollars from leaving for for-profit online charter schools, which draw tens of thousands of students?

High praise

With plans this year and next to market the program and triple enrollment to 350 students, seven students spoke to or recorded testimonies for the school board, touting the nascent program.

Thirty high school students attended the online program's pilot "virtual credit recovery" option, which combines in-class intervention and test-taking at East Community Learning Center with at-home lessons. Students have averaged more than three makeup credits each in the past six weeks of summer. Two earned enough to graduate this fall.

Before the learning begins, students take a pretest. If they score 65 percent or better, they are permitted to attend online, as opposed to the hundred in traditional summer school at East. Some board members worried that requiring students to know 65 percent of the coursework sets the bar too high, cutting off access to needier students.

But the near-passing score is intentional. Whatever students miss on the test becomes their curriculum. No time is wasted rehashing what they have proven they know. Smith, for example, finished a course in three days. Her speedy success has been driven by a motivation to finish, Smith's teacher said.

The program is "for students who want to be involved in other things in life" and "work at their own pace," Firestone senior Kristen Myricks, part of the pilot group, said.

In the absence of classroom distractions, many found it easier to focus. Others reluctantly enrolled only later to praise the smothering contact provided by lead educator Darlene Shuler.

Shuler called parents and students to track progress. When emails went unanswered, she switched to text-messaging, which studies and surveys have shown younger generations prefer.

"I made myself available to the students on pretty much a 24-hour basis," Shuler said, sharing late-night and weekend anecdotes of communicating with tech-savvy students.

Everyone learns

The students, and their preferred learning habits, have surprised administrators.

They learn at all hours of the night. One student logged online after 1 a.m. on the morning after the Fourth of July.

"What we've learned over the past 16 weeks has been really unbelievable," said Howard Lawson. As director of data and accountability, he witnessed the random times students chose to learn.

Support, also, was pivotal. Most students attending online charter schools enroll in massive statewide programs where more than 70 students vie for a single teacher's attention and communication is mostly limited to message boards, emails and the occasional phone call.

Akron administrators coordinating the new online venture quickly scrapped an original format developed by the Virtual Community School of Ohio, a Columbus-area charter school sponsored by Reynoldsburg City Schools.

Marcie Ebright, Akron's digital learning coordinator, said the minimum half-day of one-on-one interaction under that program didn't provide enough support. She also emphasized the need to hire local educators, if not to appease local taxpayers then to employ teachers who know the city and its children.

"They're accountable to us, and they're accountable to this community," Ebright said.

Ebright stressed that the program relies on blended learning, not just online.

#### Charting competition

Akron administrators hope to expand the program this fall to retain or recapture students who have left for charter schools, or those who need to catch up or want to get ahead (not all students in the pilot program started off behind).

Administrators hope the stories of success help them cut into an industry cornered by massive online charter schools.

Some online charters enroll up to 14,000 students. As a group, the largest of the lot **produce the bulk of Ohio's high school dropouts and drag down the state's average academic performance**. Scores are so bad that a high-level state official, who has since resigned, unlawfully **threw them out** when applying accountability to Ohio's charter school sector.

More than 40,000 Ohio students now attend online charter schools, which have grown two times faster than brick-and-mortar charters in the past decade despite recent efforts to cap their growth.

But competition is nothing new in Akron. The traditional public school system here has long sought ways to stop, or reverse, the exodus of students and state dollars.

Akron Public Schools founded Akron Digital Academy in 2002 in response to statewide online charters. Ten years later, Akron Digital began drawing students away by the hundreds. And after continually posting low academic marks, the district **moved to shut down the online charter school** in 2013.

Akron Digital resisted, shedding the Akron Public Schools administrators who served on its board.

Competition also is stiff in the dropout prevention and recovery industry, where high school charter schools run by Akron-based White Hat Management or other for-profit groups promise individualized instruction.

However, the White Hat schools, also called Life Skills, accounted for half of the 20 dropout recovery charter schools that graduated fewer than 10 percent of students on time last year. Towpath Trail High School, another online credit recovery charter school based in Akron, graduated about 8 percent.

The better schools — the dozen that graduate more than half of their students on time — most often operate with close ties to local public schools.

Like Akron Public Schools' initial discovery, the most successful dropout schools — including those run by nonprofit groups — have found that **more teacher interaction, which might cost more, produces better results**.

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