

DCBOCES SPOTLIGHT

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Tailor Made Education

ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

Those three words can conjure up stereotypes. Some say it's for trouble making students who don't want to learn. Others say it's for those who aren't capable of learning.

But for those who know best, the Dutchess BOCES Alternative High School is a safe, welcoming school that helps students succeed and take the next step in life. It's done by evaluating and identifying all of the student's needs and then shaping curriculum, structure, and supports to match each student's profile.

"Here they adapt to meet your needs – it's more 'what can we do for you' focused and not focused on the school regimen," said 11th grader Rocco Cacciatore. "A lot of kids feed into the stereotypes of BETA being for losers or drug addicts and that's not true. A lot of the students here are smarter than more than half of the public school kids. They struggle because of their life situation and it's nothing they can control, like not having a family, moving around in foster families, and even homelessness."



Rocco, 17, who resides in the Arlington Central School District, is student class president. He says he's gotten to know the stories of his classmates. He's thankful he's always had family support and pleased he's changed his ways thanks to his teachers' support.



"I'm not the person I was three years ago. You wouldn't recognize me," he said. "I never went to school and only cared about myself and hanging out. I hated school and was bullied throughout the years. I didn't fit in and had no friends. I thought school didn't matter."

After arriving at BOCES, Rocco decided he wanted to change. He shifted his priorities and actions. It's a decision he says most students eventually reach.

"I realized there is a real world out there and I had to get my life together," he said. "I didn't want to be stuck in my parents' basement for the rest of

my life." Self-paced work takes the pressure off, he said. That approach, counseling support, and caring teachers help guide students to graduation. Rocco plans to graduate next year and attend SUNY New Paltz.

"We really are as individualized as you can get" said Principal John Jeffrey. "Whatever works for them, they will get it here. Whatever level of support a student needs, they can get it here. Just listen to the kids talk. Their testimony is the best way to learn how they make it through."



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Alternative High School – Providing pathways to graduation and preparation for the future.

For graduating senior Tiffany Nelson, 19, the Alternative High School provided her a pathway to graduating and also helped her to prepare for the transition to living on her own. Originally from Schenectady, Tiffany struggled when she arrived at her new school in the Dover Union Free School District. She didn't have friends, missed the faster-paced city life, and became bored. She lost interest in school and also battled an eating disorder.

When she arrived at the Alternative High School, she found just what she needed. The small setting, counseling, and being able to work at her own pace was the key to her success. "English is easy for me so I started there and whizzed through it," she said. "Even after seven months out of school I was

able to study and pass the Global Regents. But then came math."

For Tiffany, the challenge of math was difficult. "I felt that this school helped me to keep moving, to keep trying which was good, because it was when I slowed down that I had difficulty sticking with it. I feel the teachers pushed me and helped me get through it. In another school, if you struggled you didn't have that sense of optimism that you could do it. I feel this place has optimism."

In addition to attending AHS, Tiffany also enrolled in the Early Childhood Program at the Career and Technical Institute. She spent 200 hours assisting in a kindergarten class in the Poughkeepsie City School District. Now, she is poised to study for her teaching assistant certification exam and to eventually attend college to become a teacher.



"Here, no one is going to pick your head up and constantly tell you to do your work," she said. "They will tell you once, but they will also tell you they can't force you to learn; you have to do it yourself. For some kids it may take a while, but then the moment comes and they get it. That's when you can look in a classroom and see those kids working at it, getting it done."

And while some students may have been in trouble or have been challenged with obstacles, the goal for all remains the same: graduation. The educational program is tailored with supports and options including Regents diploma, the Career Development Occupational Studies Credential, and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion, an equivalency exam.

"The smaller numbers in class, the larger staff, it all allows for greater support, especially with counseling as compared to other schools," said Mr. Jeffrey. "Here you have counselors that know you personally and you can go to any counselor every day if you have any problem."

For Tiffany, her counselor has helped her prepare to move out on her own by guiding her through an analysis of her future expenses such as rent and food and what hourly wage she would need to be self-sufficient. "I wouldn't have gotten that anywhere else," she said. "I feel very enthralled now that I'm here at graduation. I know I would never have had the experiences I have had without BOCES," said Tiffany. "Until I came to the AHS, I didn't even know BOCES was a choice."



John Jeffrey, AHS Principal