Avon Park Youth Academy Demo

Avon Park Youth Academy
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Program Highlights

Resources

Both academic and vocational instruction is aided by abundant resources, ranging from computers to tractors, libraries to lawn maintenance equipment, and so on.

Community Partnerships

Community activities include educational field trips, guest speakers, and services, such as the Avon Youth Choir, Operation Christmas Child, building and repairing community projects, and landscaping and gardening projects.

Vocational Program

Together with the Home Builders Institute, Avon Park offers a curriculum of 12 vocational courses to meet the needs of their older population.

The vocational curriculum provides employability training and gives students the opportunity to earn an Occupation Completion Point.

Aftercare

The Street Smart program monitors and provides aftercare services for one year after each student’s release.

Educational Staff

The Street Smart program monitors and provides aftercare services for one year after each student’s release.
About the Program

Avon Park Youth Academy is a moderate risk residential program located in Polk County that houses up to 200 males, from ages 16 to 18, for an average of 270 days. Students come from all over the state, and approximately 30% of the students qualify for ESE services. In order for students to be placed in Avon Park, they must be assessed as being unlikely to return home or to public school upon release, and must not have any significant mental health or substance abuse problems. Due to the relatively older age of its residents, Avon Park focuses on vocational education and life skills training, while still offering a full range of academic courses, diploma options, including GED, and college selection services. G4S Youth Services, a for-profit organization, operates both the facility and the educational program, while the Home Builders Institute provides six of the twelve vocational course offerings, and Street Smart provides aftercare services that are funded by the state of Florida.

Avon Park’s Best Practices

School Environment

Avon Park Youth Academy began as a collaborative effort between the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice and G4S Youth Services specifically to serve older youths. Department of Juvenile Justice commitment managers were trained and given a screening instrument to assist in placing youths in this facility. The population was to consist of older juveniles who were not likely to return home or to school, and who did not have cognitive disabilities, dual diagnosis, or a history of taking psychotropic drugs. The screening phase is no longer formally in place, but the Department of Juvenile Justice commitment managers are still trained the same way, and juveniles matching these criteria continue to be placed in the facility. Avon Park is a unique juvenile residential facility in this respect.

Avon Park Youth Academy is located on 36 acres of land that was formerly used as staff housing on the United States’ Air Force Bombing Range. The academy is now adjacent to an active Air Force base and state prison. A 12-foot barb-wired fence surrounds the academy. The grounds and buildings are very clean and attractive, while numerous gardens are filled with manicured flowers and shrubbery. All classrooms are neatly arranged
with individual and group working stations, and educational displays and student work products adorn the walls. In addition, students’ vocational accomplishments—such as buildings, wells, gardens and sidewalks—can be seen throughout the Academy’s grounds and nearby neighborhoods. The surrounding community, in turn, plays a large role in the vocational experiences of the young men, as the youth provide numerous community services, such as building playgrounds, setting up for festivals, planting trees, donating Christmas cookies, washing cars, building homes for Habitat for Humanity, and so on. Furthermore, several community members also provide materials and services to the youth, such as donating landscaping and masonry equipment and participating in Avon Park’s job fair.

G4S Youth Services operates both the facility and the educational program, and there is consistency in expectations and behavior management procedures. The philosophy is reminiscent of the 1800’s delinquency work programs, where residents spend the majority of their 8am-4pm weekdays in vocational training. Specifically, the day is separated into four one-hour-and-forty-five minute class periods, three of which are spent in vocational courses and one of which is devoted to academics. However, students who request additional academic instruction receive modified class schedules reflecting their educational aspirations (i.e., two periods of vocational training, two of academics, and evening academic tutoring and/or computer lab instruction).

In academic classrooms, the student-to-teacher ratio is 20:1, while the vocational course ratio is 10:1. Paraprofessionals, who may first be hired as youth care workers and then train to become paraprofessionals (and sometimes eventually teachers), assist the academic teachers in the classrooms. Most of the academic class time consists of individualized computer activities, but teachers and support staff also provide innovative and exciting activities, such as thematic instruction and lessons directly based on the students’ selected vocations. Vocational class time is primarily devoted to hands-on learning.

In general, students, teachers, support and guidance staff, and administrative personnel agree that the school environment is safe, effective, and pleasant. In fact, climate surveys of both students and teachers indicated that most of them would not change anything about the educational program, if given the chance. Additionally, students generally provided positive reviews of their teachers, classmates, and administrators, while most teachers praised their students and administrators. Students typically reported that they felt as though education is a priority at Avon Park, and they confirmed that class rules are the same as program rules. Finally, teachers agreed that the school provides them with sufficient learning materials, encourages their participation in decision-making, and expects quality work from them.
Resources and Community Partnerships

The program has four academic classrooms with individual computers for each student, while all teachers have personal computers and Internet access. Classrooms are also equipped with textbooks, workbooks, overhead projectors, globes, maps, and TV/VCRs. In addition, there is a library containing hundreds of fiction, nonfiction, and reference materials, as well as an auditorium that houses a 61-inch TV/VCR that is used for special purposes.

The program provides numerous community activities, which include educational field trips to the Tampa Job Fair, the American Red Cross, the bowling alley, and the bombing range. Community service activities include the Avon Youth Choir, resident entertainment, puppet shows, Operation Christmas Child, Pathfinders, building and repairing community projects, landscaping and gardening projects, and digital publishing projects. Guest speakers include people from the Avon Park Fire Department, the World Championship Weight-Lifting Organization, and Career Fair speakers from the Florida Technical College, the U.S. Marines, and the U.S. Army.

Avon Park Youth Academy contracts with the School Board of Polk County to provide additional educational support services upon request. More specifically, the school district employs the reading and transition specialists and provides in-service, management information systems (MIS), and Title 1, Part D training. They also process the state academic and vocational certifications.

The Home Builders Institute (HBI) (a workforce development arm of the National Association of Home Builders), and Street Smart (a community based aftercare program operated by G4S Youth Services and funded by the state of Florida for youth on conditional release status and post commitment probation), are both housed at Avon Park Youth Academy. Additional money has come from the Workforce Perkins Grant for the Computer Assisted Design (CAD) system and for a new teacher. Title 1, Part D provides funding for library books and other reading instruction material, as well as technological equipment and a reading resource specialist. The school district book depository, staff donations, and school supplies from closed juvenile detention facilities also supplement the existing resources.
Assessments, Diagnostics, and Guidance

Upon entry, education staff and Street Smart staff work together in order to develop an appropriate and individualized plan for each student. Students take a series of diagnostic tests including: New Century Education (reading and mathematics), Curriculum Based Measurement (writing), Test of Word Reading Efficiency (fluency, phonics, and vocabulary), Chronicle Career Quest, Choices, and—as needed—the Daniel Memorial Vocational assessments. During these first few days, the guidance counselor and administrative assistant make requests for all of the student’s education records.

By ten days into a student's stay, he will join the guidance counselor and Street Smart counselor for a needs assessment meeting. Prior to the formal meeting, however, the student meets with the guidance counselor for an informal needs assessment interview. During this short meeting, all aspects of the program are explained, especially the student’s academic standing and options. Shortly thereafter, during the more formal needs assessment interview, the student’s educational status and progress, personal and social adjustments, educational opportunities, diploma options, and career/vocational opportunities are discussed. Ultimately, the student’s individual academic plan (IAP) is developed, which includes specific and measurable long-range goals and short-term instructional objectives for reading, writing, mathematics, and the career/technical area. For each ESE student, however, the ESE specialist writes educational goals into his individual education plan (IEP). Additionally, throughout this process, there is close communication between guidance and Street Smart staff, and solicited participation from the students’ parents.

One of Avon Park’s key processes is the continual monitoring of the students' progress and consequent adjustments to the students’ goals and objectives. Specifically, treatment team meetings are held twice a month, and each student’s academic progress toward achieving his established goals is reviewed, as is his overall performance in the program. If the student changes his mind about his diploma option or selected vocation, or if it appears that he has made insufficient progress, the guidance counselor will reschedule the student into different courses and the student’s goals and objectives are modified.

Close communication between the educational and vocational staff, custody personnel, and mental health counselors allows for each student’s academic, vocational, and behavioral progress to be monitored and recorded in his file. For example, teachers can report a behavior problem by calling or placing a referral
sheet in a drop box for the counselors, while vocational teachers can call or meet with educational staff if they notice a specific academic deficit. Importantly, members from all three of these departments expressed their satisfaction with the quality and quantity of communication during interviews.

Every student spends his first 30 days in the program in orientation class, and does not formally select a vocation until the completion of the class. Orientation consists of training in five basic life skills areas: anger management, substance abuse, restorative justice, CPR/First Aid, and personal fitness. The main idea behind this introductory curriculum is preventative; future-oriented skills vocational education does not begin until the student demonstrates competence in the preventative training. In addition, the student undergoes a security assessment to determine whether he is an appropriate candidate for off-grounds community work, and the employment specialist meets with the student to assist in his selection of an appropriate vocational trade.

Exit and Aftercare Services

Although the transition process is a continual one that begins even before the student’s actual arrival to the facility, the actual exit process clearly begins 60 days prior to the student’s release date. At this point, there is a transition staffing during which the case manager, mental health counselor, Street Smart counselor, guidance counselor, and student meet essentially to ensure that all relevant parties are aware of the student’s educational and vocational standing. This information is also communicated to the JPO and parents at the conclusion of the staffing via documentation produced by the guidance counselor.

In addition, there is an exit conference two weeks prior to release and a three-day transitional home visit. Street Smart staff orchestrates the three-day transitional home visit. During the 60 days leading up to the students’ release, Street Smart communicates regularly with the student, checking on his progress and establishing his transition goals. Once these transition goals are established, Street Smart requests that the Department of Juvenile Justice allow the student to spend three days at his home in the community to accomplish his goals. During this visit, Street Smart provides intensive monitoring and counseling. At the end of the visitation period, the student returns to Avon Park and attends his two-week exit conference.

The exit conference is essentially a repeat of the transition staffing, although at this point—more concrete decisions and plans are made. For example, if the student plans to return to school, he needs to announce which school he plans to attend, and the guidance counselor will contact the school to ensure that the student meets all necessary requirements. The guidance counselor also
prints out copies of the student’s transcripts for the student, the new school, the JPO, and the Street Smart counselor.

At this point, the student meets the Street Smart counselor who will be assigned to him for a period of 12 months following his release from Avon Park. Particular Street Smart counselors are assigned to students on a geographic basis, and act primarily as mentors to help the youths attain their goals. In order to do so, they provide a wide array of services, such as meeting with the student and his family regularly, paying for vocational or educational materials, assisting the student with his transportation needs, and providing necessary household items. Moreover, Street Smart counselors frequently meet with groups of their students to provide constructive fun time (such as attending football games), and they meet with each student individually over lunch or dinner on a weekly basis.

The solicitation of parent participation is another key feature of Avon Park. With students from all over the state—as well as some students with out-of-state parents—Avon Park recognizes that it is difficult for parents to visit regularly and attend meetings. However, parental input is solicited at all stages of the student’s transition, and for formal visitation days, graduation ceremonies, and other special occasions. Informal visits can also occur at any time. Additionally, the guidance counselor sends the parents copies of their student’s report cards at the end of each grading period, while Street Smart personnel keep in close contact with the families, especially in the weeks immediately surrounding the student’s release.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

Avon Park is designed to serve older students who are unlikely to return to school following release, thus the bulk of the facility’s curriculum centers on vocational training. However, the academic curriculum includes English, mathematics, science, economics, American government, history, intensive reading, and GED preparation. Before a student begins to take his core academic and vocational courses, he must complete a minimum of 30 days in the orientation class, in which life management and social skills, critical thinking, and independent living skills are the focus.

As previously mentioned, students typically spend three one-hour-and-forty-five-minute periods in their vocational trade courses, and a one-hour-and-forty-five-minute period in an academic class—usually English or math. If a student opts for a return to school track, he is placed in two periods of academic courses; approximately 10 % of Avon Park’s residents fall into this category. Given the focus on employability and life management skills, instructional strategies are predominantly computer-based in order to accommodate the varying academic
needs and abilities of the students. New Century Education software is used to train and assess the students in reading and mathematics, and this is often supplemented by reading exercises, hands-on projects, small group assignments, lectures, and workbook assignments.

Avon Park also employs both a reading and a speech specialist. Although all students receive reading instruction independently via New Century Education, those who are identified with reading deficiencies are enrolled in an intensive reading course. The reading specialist uses a multitude of techniques to engage students and enhance their reading fluency, knowledge, and critical thinking skills. Additional tutoring sessions in reading may also be offered at night and for GED preparation. The reading specialist also collaborates with vocational instructors by utilizing the vocabulary associated with the student’s selected trade.

Further, all students have access to the library, where they can read a wide range of literature in science, life skills, and fiction. Students may check out two books a week. Moreover, when ordering books, the reading specialist surveys students’ choices, interests, and reading abilities. Rewards are given to students who can visually express the importance of reading through the creation of posters. The library also holds the DVD and video versions of their collections of literary classics; however, students cannot simply watch the video in place of reading the book. Instructors encourage thought-provoking discussion throughout the movies as another means of developing students’ critical thinking skills.

Twice a month, a contracted speech therapist visits Avon Park to work with those students identified as language impaired in their IEPs, while the ESE specialist offers her assistance. The speech therapist meets with students for 45-minute at a time, sometimes individually and sometimes in pairs or small groups. Rather than limiting her focus to simply improving the language skills of the students, the therapist incorporates anger management and problem solving strategies into her lessons. Moreover, she almost exclusively uses interactive instructional techniques, such as having two students play “Whatzit?” (a game wherein the players view a card and have to decipher a visually distorted word in order to arrive at the correct answer and move forward on the game board). She also presents potential conflict situations for which the students are asked to develop and explain problem solving strategies, and she tries to teach them appropriate language for expressing their anger and other feelings.

The vocational component at Avon Park, lead by Home Builders Institute and G4S Youth Services, provides an extensive array of training in trades reflective of current
job market needs. Student certification in a chosen field requires 840 hours, approximately 6 months, and three credits towards the trade. Upon completion, students will have earned at least one Occupation Completion Point (OCP), and will have learned the basic skills necessary for their particular trade. Students may choose between digital publishing, horticulture, automotive service, culinary arts, flooring installation, computer assisted design, carpentry, plumbing, electrical, landscaping, masonry, and building construction technology. The courses on this list are not mutually exclusive, however, as teachers will often integrate material from other classes into their curriculum. For example, the landscaping instructor has her students use the digital publishing equipment to design their own business cards. In addition, most vocational instructors incorporate assignments that reinforce the math and English that students have learned in the classroom.

Some vocational time is spent doing bookwork, but teachers employ the hands-on approach the majority of the time because it is so successful in helping the students learn their trades. In fact, the facility itself is nearly a self-sufficient “vocational laboratory.” Specifically, students cook meals, operate and fix machinery, maintain the grounds, work on plumbing, repair their dorms, renovate buildings, and also work for state, federal, and not-for-profit organizations in the community. The final goal of the vocational curriculum is to provide employability training and experience working at entrepreneurial businesses by the time students have completed their required hours. For instance, a local concrete company allows on-the-job training for up to three students at a time in the masonry program. Students leave campus each morning return later in the day, and receive payment for their work. The vocational curriculum at Avon Park is designed so that a student will learn, at minimum, the basic skills necessary for a particular trade. The program’s holistic approach, however, can ensure that students will succeed in their fields and will know how to eventually run their own business.

If students are at least sixteen years of age, and have prior approval from both the principal and the director of student services, then they can work toward a GED. However, over 50% of the students complete requirements for a high school diploma while they are in residence at the Academy. Avon Park offers four different diploma options. Students can receive a standard diploma, which requires completing all of the requirements in the Polk County Pupil Progression Plan (i.e. passing the FCAT and earning 24 credits), or the requirements of their home school district. Diplomas are awarded from the home school upon approval of the home school principal. The students that do not have a home school will have their diploma awarded by Frostproof High School. Alternatively, students in their thirteenth year of school can take the Exit Option. In order to do so they must first pass the FCAT and then the GED. They must also earn a vocational certificate and credits in English and Math. The Polk County School District then awards the
diplomas. Third, the special diploma (Option IA), is for students with an IEP who are at least 17 ½ years of age and do not plan to return to regular school once they leave the program. Students must earn a vocational certificate requiring at least three credits in a vocational trade; master the Sunshine State Standards for their disability, if applicable; earn credit in Life Management skills, English and Math; and perform satisfactorily in employability skills classes and daily living skills groups. Polk County Schools, or the student’s home school, will award the diploma. The other special diploma is Option I. Like students receiving a standard diploma, the students obtaining an Option I special diploma must meet the standards adopted by the Polk County Schools Pupil Progression Plan, but must complete only twenty-two credits, as well as a vocational certificate from the program.

Educational Personnel and Teachers

Avon Park employs twenty-one teachers. Of those, five teach core academics while the other sixteen teach social, employability, and career/technical skills. All of the five core academic teachers teach in their areas of certification. Three have professional certification, and two have temporary certificates. Eleven of the non-core academic teachers have school board vocational certification, one teacher has professional certification, three teachers have temporary certificates, and one teacher has an application on file and has school board approval. Other employees include eight paraprofessionals, an ESE resource teacher, a reading specialist, a part-time speech/language teacher, a dean, and a principal.

The isolated location of the facility and the nature of juvenile justice populations pose a challenge to administrators with regard to hiring and retaining qualified teachers. Avon Park has attempted to overcome the retention obstacle by implementing a strategy involving creative recruitment and training practices. Specifically, the Academy attempts to recruit people who are not necessarily previously qualified as teachers, but who exhibit a desire to work with delinquent youths. These new hires are then given training that is intended to culminate in professional certification. They may even start as general staff, become a paraprofessional and, if they possess the needed qualifications, ultimately obtain academic or vocational teacher certification. The school pays for their tuition and mileage to and from class once they obtain their temporary certification. Staff members receive a pay raise with each additional level of training. HBI has a different hiring process for its vocational teachers, however. They recruit persons who are presently working in the construction trades and have at least 6 years of experience in the field. Most often, their vocational teachers have worked much longer than the minimum six years, but would prefer not to continue working directly in the field. These teachers find that teaching the students at Avon Park is
emotionally rewarding, and teaching at the Academy gives them the opportunity to remain in their professions. In fact, most teachers have been at the program for at least four or five years. Some educators have been at the program since its inception in 1998. The longevity among Avon Park’s staff members can, in part, be attributed to these well-designed practices.

New teachers must become a part of a support team in which they are paired with veteran teachers who are there to answer any questions the new teachers may have. In-service training topics include English speakers of other languages (ESOL), reading endorsement, troubleshooting, facilitating leaders in good habits of teaching (FLIGHT), MIS training, QA time frames, HIV/AIDS, school law, special needs vocational students, domestic violence, sexual harassment, ethics, gang awareness, cultural diversity, and accountability. In-service training is provided via the school district, community organizations, and the facility, and includes peer training and college course work.

The remarkably dedicated and qualified staff at Avon Park, and the fact that Avon Park has been specifically designed to handle a unique portion of the juvenile justice population has led to an environment conducive to the acquisition of independent living skills, and career/vocational working experience. The program-wide commitment to these goals is clear, and the staff members—academic, vocational, treatment, custody, support, and administrative—communicate and work together to help the students achieve these goals. The stability among those who work at Avon Park has no doubt played an important role in ensuring that the objectives and policies of the Academy have remained clear and consistent, and that the environment continues to be conducive to both cooperation and success.