

Be Here, Behave, and Be Learning: DAEPs that Work

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The pipeline from school to prison closes at the doors of Beechnut and Ferndale Schools, Disciplinary Alternative Programs (DAEPs) in Houston Independent School District. These schools are operated by Community Education Partners (CEP), a private education company under contract with Houston since 1997. In Beechnut and Ferndale, students get the opportunity to acquire the academic and social skills necessary to return and succeed at their home schools. Most students at CEP clutch this opportunity, and, against all of the odds, turn themselves around and earn a high school diploma.

A visit to Beechnut shows why CEP has it right. Classes are small with a 1:12 teacher to student ratio. Students, from grade 6 through 12, are grouped by academic ability and sex. Uniforms are required, and students follow the CEP motto: "Be Here, Behave, and Be Learning." Teachers, formally dressed, provide direct instruction on the required state curriculum from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, and maintain strict order—a job that doesn't seem to interfere with friendly banter between students and teachers. A large man, dressed in a suit walks from classroom to classroom as a visible reminder for students to "behave and be learning." When students fail to "be here," a truant officer goes to their homes and delivers them to their classrooms.

Houston ISD typically places students at Beechnut and Ferndale for an entire academic year. During 2004-05, Houston assigned 3,186 students in CEP. Approximately 40 percent of these students received mandatory placements, referred for such things as assault, weapons, gang activity, and drugs/alcohol use; others were referred for repeated disruptive or abusive behavior.

Arriving at CEP, students are given an academic evaluation, which typically shows performance at or below the fourth grade level in math and reading, and an individualized academic plan is devel-

oped. Students also receive a behavioral evaluation and a behavioral plan is developed, with community-based social providers located at the school to provide individual, group, and family services. Before leaving CEP, students are taught the transitional skills needed to be successful when they return to their home schools.

While in CEP, students generally gain two years' academic growth, compared to the half year academic gain typical of low-performing students in Houston ISD. Although CEP has a lower average attendance rate than Houston ISD, at 85 percent CEP's attendance significantly exceeds the average of 78 percent posted by DAEPs. For the last several years, CEP's dropout rate is significantly lower and its high school continuation rate is significantly higher than Houston ISD.

Houston ISD spends about \$2,000 more per pupil annually for students enrolled in CEP—an amount that actually represents about \$8,000 less than Houston spent before contracting with CEP. This investment is reaping rewards. Comparing CEP students who return to their home schools with their district peers, a recent Temple University study shows few disciplinary infractions, lower retention rates, and higher graduation rates for former CEP students. "Be here, behave, and be learning" is a formula for success in Houston ISD and a model for rethinking state policy on disciplinary alternative education programs.

Sources: Attendance, dropout, and high school continuation data-Texas Education Agency, Campus AEIS Report, 2003, 2004, and 2005. Placement, program, evaluation, and performance information-Community Education Partners (2636 Elm Hill Pike, Ste. 500, Nashville, TN 37214, www.communityeducationpartners.com).