

Oriskany's Alternative Education Program Prepares Students for Life and Careers after Incarceration

Second chances don't come easily for incarcerated teenagers, but the Oriskany Alternative High School program aims to make the transition back into society smoother by giving students the knowledge and skills they need to find success.

Oriskany's Alternative High School is an Incarcerated Youth Education Program, providing high school-level education to teenagers who are currently incarcerated at the Oneida County Correctional Facility. On any given day, the facility houses 20-25 inmates between the ages of 16 and 18, who are eligible for alternative education through the program.

"These two organizations, the Oneida County Sheriff's Office and the Oriskany Central School District, are working together with the common goal of ensuring that our youth have the tools they need to turn their lives around and make themselves positive members of society," said Oneida County Sheriff Robert Maciol. "I'm a strong believer that giving these kids an education is the best way to have them transition back into the community on a positive note."

The Alternative High School program gives incarcerated students who are at risk of dropping out of school the opportunity to remain engaged and active in an alternative learning environment that focuses on their particular skills, abilities and learning styles.

Classes are held weekday mornings in the Alternative High School classroom, located inside the correctional facility. During a typical school day, students participate in several subject-specific classes including English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, real world math and a career exploration project.

"It's filling their day with something positive and proactive," said Sheriff Maciol. "It's making their day seem worthwhile because they're working toward a goal."

For most students in the program, that goal is to take and pass the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), which has replaced the General Educational Development (GED) exam in New York state. The TASC assesses students' knowledge and comprehension of language arts (reading and writing), mathematics, science and social studies. The test, which takes about nine hours to complete, is administered over the course of two days, every two months.

After passing the TASC, students are awarded a high school equivalency diploma, increasing their employability as they pursue job and career opportunities in the future. A special graduation ceremony is also held each spring and fall to recognize students who pass their TASC test and have completed the Alternative High School program.

The program, led by one classroom teacher and two teaching assistants from the Oriskany Central School District, is truly an extension of the classes taught at Oriskany Jr./Sr. High School. Teachers utilize the same Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) concepts to establish the social culture needed for all students to achieve social, emotional and academic success in the classroom and beyond.

The same traits of integrity, adaptability, responsibility, ambition, grit and perseverance that are reinforced on a daily basis for academic success, also give students the self-confidence and positive mindset that they need to turn their lives around.

Sheriff Maciol knows that when graduates of the Alternative High School program are released back into the community, that their education and new mindset will help them to embrace their second chance and make better choices. "I can confidently say that alternative education is a huge advantage in decreasing the recidivism rate. If we can positively transition someone back into the community with a high school equivalency diploma, the chance of them coming back is much less than if they left without a degree."