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Positive press for DJJ on the front page of The State.

<http://www.thestate.com/news/local/education/article81954347.html>

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For juvenile inmates, education inside the fence is key to success on the outside

By Sarah Ellis

With the equivalent of a high-school degree in hand, 16-year-old Carban is on track to get his first college degree by age 18 on his way to owning a furniture business.

Lauren could see herself as a teacher, a psychologist, a chef or a corrections officer. With a college application submitted, the 17-year-old hopes to explore her interests and find the right fit.

Shikeem is trying to get a welding certificate and, soon, a job so he can support his year-old daughter. The 17-year-old has been learning "how to be a better man" and put all his "childish stuff" behind him.

Like their high school peers who donned caps and gowns over the past few weeks, the teens know an education is key to future successes.

They've attended four classes a day, studied, worked and made choices to further themselves.

But when the last bell of every school day rang – when their last exams were turned in, when their names were written on diplomas or certificates – there was no big yellow bus to carry them home to their families.

Life for Carban, Lauren, Shikeem and about 100 other juvenile inmates exists solely inside the high metal fence surrounding the S.C. Department of Juvenile Justice compound off Broad River Road in Columbia.

And inside those classrooms inside that fence, the choices those students make for success or otherwise can determine the paths they walk one day on the other side.

"What we do here will probably determine whether these young men or young ladies end up in prison for the rest of their lives or leave and go back a changed person," said Floyd Lyles, interim principal of DJJ's Birchwood school on the Broad River campus. "No. 1, I want you to be a better person. And No. 2, I want you to graduate while you're here."

DJJ's independent school system is responsible for the education of about 700 students at 15 sites across the state. Anywhere from 80 to 100 middle- and high-school-aged students attend Birchwood at any given time.

Whatever challenges DJJ might have – riots, gangs, underfunding, understaffing – its school system has the same goal as any other: Give the students a chance at education, so they can give themselves a chance to succeed in life.

'Success is our only option'

On Lyles' second day of work at Birchwood last September, there was a riot, he said. The school environment was chaotic at best, dangerous at worst.

"There was a major disruption any time there was movement," Lyles said.

He made it his mission to improve procedures and change the mindset of the school, its staff and its students.

"Success is our only option," Lyles said. "A lot of our students have never been successful in their life.

"A lot of them, they just never had that role model," he said. "They never had a cheerleader that was going to be in their face when they're doing well and in their face when they're not."

And DJJ students appear to be progressing.

Last year, only 11 percent of students made gains in their math scores in the state's Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing, and only 22 percent made gains in reading, said Marcie Gambrell, the school system's testing coordinator. Typical schools see at least 50 percent of their students meet testing growth goals, Gambrell said.

This year, however, 100 percent of students showed growth in their math MAP scores, and 43 percent grew in reading.

Lyles and Gambrell partially credit the progress to added layers of accountability being required of teachers and staff to ensure everyone is fully buying into meeting the students' educational goals, they said.

Birchwood will have a graduation ceremony in July when about 40 students will be presented their high school diplomas or General Equivalency Diplomas (GEDs) – to some students who didn't think they ever could achieve those goals or who had no interest in doing so.

Carban was one of Birchwood's most challenging students, Lyles said. An inmate for more than a year now at the Broad River campus, Carban's behavior had him spending a lot of time in lockup and out of school.

But Lyles targeted the 16-year-old and a group of some of the most difficult students on campus to join what he dubbed the Personal Vision Courage, or PVC, club. The group meets every other morning before the students go to class to focus their attitudes on setting themselves up for success each day.

"It's about ... belief and expectation," Lyles said. "You've got to empower people."

The club encourages the students to invest in themselves: A points system rewards them for achievements such as passing tests and getting good reports from teachers and deducts points for bad behaviors such as disrespect, use of profanity and not participating in class.

The PVC club was a major factor in Carban's turnaround, he said.

"They didn't give up on me," Carban said. "I opened my eyes. I'm getting too old to be back here. I wasn't

trying to go to prison, and I was trying to get home to my family.”

Carban earned his GED and now gets to spend the majority of his days working in the compound’s upholstery shop, where he has honed a craft and built up a savings of money he earns for working.

Carban will be able to start college once he’s released – he’s up for parole in July – and hopes to have his first college degree by the time he’s 18. He has ambitious plans to earn a doctorate in business so he can one day open his own furniture business.

‘The dreams happen outside of here’

The way Carban has channeled his talents and energy into upholstery work reflects the creative nature of many of the juveniles inside the DJJ fence.

One day last week, Lyles marveled at seeing three of the school’s most disruptive students working quietly and diligently in Edward Henderson’s highly sought-after music class.

“If they don’t have a creative outlet, that creativity goes to destruction,” Henderson said.

Art teacher Belinda McEachern tells her students that art, as her “outlet,” is what saved her.

“I could have easily been in any one of those (inmates’) seats, but I had people set in my path to show me a different way, and I wanted something different,” McEachern said. “And that’s what I want for them. It’s not (about) where you start; it’s where you end up.”

Too many times in her 15 years of teaching at Birchwood, McEachern said, she’s seen kids who left DJJ to return to the same unhealthy environments that landed them inside the fence in the first place.

“They want to come back here because it’s better than home. We’ve got to make home better than here,” she said. “This is not the place where dreams happen. This is the place where we can show you those dreams. But the dreams happen outside of here.”

Seventeen-year-old Xavier has set his sights on dreams beyond the fence. But he has learned that the community of people he trusted outside the fence is not good for his goals of success.

“I don’t hang with the negative people no more. I left that crowd alone,” said Xavier, who has spent more than a year inside the DJJ fence. “If I would have stayed on the street and never got incarcerated, I probably would have been either dead or in jail for something way worse than I’m in for now.

“This ain’t the life I want to live. I want to grow up and be successful. I want to have a family.”

Success is a choice he had to make for himself, he said, and the environment at Birchwood helped him see he wanted it.

“It don’t come overnight,” Xavier said. “You’ve got to wake up every day with the mindset. You set a goal for yourself. I wake up and set that goal for myself. It brought me a long way.”

His time at Birchwood is giving him the chance to earn a GED so he can pursue a business degree and realtors license one day outside the fence, he said.

“You just can’t say all the time this is a bad place, because some people take this place to do something in life,” Xavier said.

Very Respectfully,

Patrick Montgomery

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