

## **NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report**

### **Lee Arrendale State Prison Project**

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## **Lee Arrendale State Prison Project**

### **Funding Sources**

Mountain Education Charter System (MEC) Annual Budget and Lee Arrendale State Prison, Georgia Department of Corrections budget (See Appendix A).

### **Project Cost and Budget Narrative**

The Georgia Department of Corrections furnished the equipment, computers, and classrooms. Mountain Education supplied the classroom materials, online Gradpoint license used for computer academic programs, and administrator, teacher, and counselor salaries. The total cost to Mountain Education Charter System was \$97,017.45. (See attached.)

### **Scope and Setting**

Female prisoners between the ages of 15 and 21 who have not attained a high school diploma were interviewed and selected to participate in the program. The maximum number for the program was forty inmates; forty were selected. The project was set in Lee Arrendale State Prison of the Georgia Department of Corrections, a women's prison that houses approximately 1500 inmates both adult and juvenile.

### **Staffing Pattern**

Teachers were selected by their experience and expertise within the Mountain Education Charter High School system. One of the primary goals of the MEC system is to work with and support "at risk" students who have not been successful in the traditional education setting. Staff was selected based on their ability to create a supportive environment and to work with this population of students.

Two teachers per subject area were selected, as well as one special education teacher and a counselor. A business education teacher worked on an as-needed basis depending students' academic need.

All teachers worked at other MEC sites throughout the week and worked an additional night(s) at the prison location.

### **Population Served**

Students were selected between the ages of 15 and 21 who have not achieved a high school diploma. There were 100 inmates who were chosen to go through an interview process to assess their motivation and seriousness to attain a diploma. Other criteria included their release dates and their behavior record; such as, number of lockdowns, interactions with other inmates, etc. The inmates were also cross-referenced with their gang affiliations so as not to allow personal conflicts to interfere with their learning. Ultimately, 40 inmates were selected.

### **Project Origination**

The vision statement of the Georgia Department of Corrections has two objectives: 1) to protect citizens from convicted offenders and 2) provide effective opportunities for the offender to achieve positive change.

Dr. L.C. “Buster” Evans, who had been an employee of Mountain Education Charter High School in Forsyth County, now works as Assistant Commissioner of Education in Georgia Department of Corrections. One of the educational initiatives of the Department of Corrections is to help develop academic skills and aid in the achievement of a high school diploma. Seven out of ten inmates lack a high school diploma and therefore are ill-equipped to find employment upon their release. Dr. Evans contacted Mountain Education with a proposal to pilot a learning site in one of the correctional institutions whereby inmates could obtain their high school diploma. Lee Arrendale Correctional Institution was chosen as the site after much discussion between Mountain Education Charter High School officials and the Commission of Education in Georgia Department of Corrections.

### **Issues Addressed**

Georgia currently has 2900 female inmates; 1200 do not have a GED or high school diploma. The need to help inmates achieve this academic goal and break the lack-of-education cycle is imperative if they are to improve their lives and achieve their goals in the future. However, inmates have more to overcome in their lives than a lack of a diploma. Many come from poverty, experience rocky social and personal lives, addictions, violent situations and other systemic issues that have contributed to their current situation. Having a high school diploma is one personal achievement that can make their lives better and provide a stepping stone for employment or further education upon their release. Additional personal needs of the inmates should also be addressed to make an even bigger impact in their lives.

### **Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives**

Forty students were selected to be participants in the pilot program. The initial program was for one semester. Nineteen achieved their high school diplomas and graduated after one semester. Two students were told they could no longer be a part of the program due to disciplinary issues that continued into the learning area. 19 students did not finish the program by graduation but remained in the program.

### **Strategies and/or Interventions**

- a. Initial interview process to discern interest and motivation of students.
- b. Staff selection to ensure a caring, supportive atmosphere and competent teaching strategies.
- c. Low teacher to student ratio (1:10 at most)
- d. Students were grouped strategically, keeping in mind gang affiliations, personal conflicts, and the students' preferred learning styles.
- e. Staff kept daily notes on the progress and behavior of each student.
- f. A support system was put in place for the students that included Title 1 math tutors, instructional aides, and an academic counselor.
- g. Mental health issues, as determined by prison guidelines, were immediately reported to prison authorities.

## **Project Timeline**

The planning process began in October 2014 and continued to the launching of the project in January 2015. The pilot project lasted for one semester culminating in a graduation ceremony in July 2015.

## **Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project**

a) Staff was hand-selected and had to go through Mountain Education Charter High School's compliance training modules as well as those set forth by the Georgia Department of Corrections. Topics included Ethics, PREA (Prison Rape Elimination Act), Security Familiarization, Supervision of Inmates, Right to Know, Emergency Situations/Fire Safety, Infectious Diseases and Non-Security Use of Force.

b. Teachers were all certified by the Georgia Department of Education.

c. Teachers were paid during their training and meals were catered as they could not work at their regular jobs during their training.

## **Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates**

Students completed 162 credits over one semester. Credit completions ranged from one to 17 credits by an individual student. Nineteen out of 40 participants completed their high school graduation requirements and graduated.

## **Current Status of Project**

On August 15 the program at Lee Arrendale Correctional Facility was turned over to Foothills Charter Education High School which has continued to offer the program. Dr. Evans has also said the success of the women's program has encouraged the Commission of Education to create a similar program in the future for men in Burrus Correctional Training Center, a prison in Macon County.

## **Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant**

Mountain Education used many of its personnel resources to implement the Lee Arrendale program. MEC staff is trained and accustomed to working with at-risk student populations and offered their expertise and experience in the planning and development of the pilot.

## **Lessons Learned**

a. The complexity of working with government agencies added another dimension to the program. It was important that everyone involved was in compliance with federal regulations and completed MEC's compliance modules.

b. MEC's approach to student achievement relies on support and encouragement. Students lacking in self-esteem tend to get discouraged and unmotivated. The MEC staff uses positive feedback and reinforcement while engaging students in their education. In the prison system, the approach is less positive and based more on discipline and consequences. This sometimes caused tension between the prison staff and the academic staff of MEC.

c. MEC had to work with students who had low self-esteem and poor motivation. They had many students who were in prison with a long sentence and approached school with a “What’s the point?” attitude. At the same time, there were many students who were highly engaged, asking for homework and more school work. They saw this as one aspect of their lives they were able to improve.

d. Working within the prison system had challenges. MEC staff had to work around the prison schedule, find locations to meet with students, and find creative ways to motivate students.

i. The highlight of the project was graduation. MEC held a graduation ceremony within the prison walls and was allowed to bring in food “from the outside”. Families were included. Students received school rings and had caps and gowns for the occasion. A photographer was also engaged to take pictures during the event. It was gratifying for all those involved to see students achieve their goals.

### **Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project**

More effort should be made to establish a better working relationship between the MEC staff and the Georgia Department of Corrections staff. For example, coordination between the mental health professionals at the prison and the MEC counselor would have allowed for a more effective and united approach toward some of the students.

Understanding the “politics” and subtle undercurrents of the prison environment was a learning curve for the MEC staff.

Transitional support to help students who graduate should be established to help them with the next step in their educational progress. Other programs such as Move On When Ready (MOWR) would work well in this setting.

**Appendix A**

**Mountain Education Charter High School  
Lee Arrendale State Prison Project**

	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>
<b>Instruction</b>		
Teacher Salary	\$65,982.72	\$65,982.72
Salaries	\$8,630.25	\$8,630.25
FICA	\$5,707.90	\$5,707.90
Travel	\$686.56	\$686.56
Supplies	\$1,548.94	\$1,548.94
Textbooks	\$297.28	\$297.28
<b>Pupil Services</b>		
Counselor Salary	\$12,086.65	\$12,086.65
FICA	\$924.65	\$924.65
<b>School Administration</b>	\$1,152.50	\$1,152.50
	\$97,017.45	\$97,017.45