

**Central High Photo Club:
A Creative Outlet That Motivates Students and Helps Them Cope**

**Rebecca Herard
High School English Teacher
Central High School
1250 W 17th Street
Panama City, FL 32405**

850.866.4148 (Sch)

rebecca.herard@baycentralhs.org

baycentralhs.org

Key words: At-risk students, creative outlet, goal setting, real-world skills, involvement, coping skills

Funding Sources:

Due to an initial lack of equipment and funds, the Central High School (CHS) Photo Club formed before we even had cameras! But after a Go Fund Me campaign, numerous student-led fundraisers, money from the Best and Brightest program, and a generous donation from Kiwanis International, we were able to buy cameras and studio supplies.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

Cameras, photography equipment, and accessories are fairly expensive, so we needed a realistic budget which was set at \$1500 and would allow us to start with at least six cameras for approximately a dozen students. Unfortunately, our goal was not met but we were able to raise approximately \$1200 which allowed us to get us started. We found great deals on second-hand cameras at a locally-owned pawn shop (four point-and-shoot cameras and three DSLRs totaling approximately \$950) and we were also able to buy inexpensive, beginner equipment and props from Amazon. Two local photographers generously donated studio supplies such as lights, reflectors, and backdrops which helped us furnish our very own CHS Photo Studio.

Over time, additional school fundraisers helped us add to our backdrop collection and purchase props (our backdrops were less than \$100, and our props were less than \$50).

Project Description:

The Central High School Photo Club was formed because of student request due to widespread interest in photography. Research has shown that cooperative learning experiences allow students to improve interpersonal skills and helps them process information. We recognized the need for our alternative school to offer more traditional opportunities for students to interact with each other and learn skills that appeal to their individual interests. We have found that providing an artistic club such as this one has proven beneficial to the participants in the Photo Club.

The students work hard to learn more about photography and improve their skills. They create portfolios which can later be submitted as part of their college applications or for personal or professional use. **Students are required to pass a minimum number of assignments in order to participate in the club meetings.** This positive reinforcement motivates students to stay on task and further their progress towards their high school diplomas.

Staffing Pattern:

Jeremy Knapp - Principal

Martina Lucas - Assistant Principal

Rebecca Herard - English Teacher and Club Sponsor

Chrissy Ward - Vocational Specialist and Club Sponsor

Though every staff member is able to participate, Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Herard sponsor the club. They organize events and meetings, spearhead yearbook activities, and provide photography instruction during club sessions. Mr. Knapp and Mrs. Lucas provide assistance with fundraising and studio setup.

Population Served:

Central High School specializes in credit recovery, and the majority of our students are considered at risk of dropping out. We serve a small student body and this year we have enrolled

255 students. Currently, 6% of our female students struggle with teen pregnancy and 21% of our student body are dealing with homelessness. In addition, our students struggle with multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), learning disabilities, delinquency, self-esteem issues, and educational gaps. These obstacles make it especially difficult for students to remain goal-oriented and productive. For these reasons, it is necessary for our school to provide an environment conducive to their success.

Project Origination:

Our high school is a credit recovery “work at your own pace” school in Bay County, Florida. We use an online curriculum through Apex Learning, and teachers facilitate, clarify missed or difficult concepts, and provide other supplemental support to the students. Because we are a small and nontraditional school, we do not have class periods and do not offer many electives. The students' focus is primarily on core classes needed for the 18-credit graduation track. Though they have a lot of challenges, both inside and outside of the classroom, CHS relies on each student to do his or her part to remain on task. The challenges they face make it difficult for them to maintain their motivation, so we quickly realized we needed to offer something more.

During CHS’s second year of operation, our staff noticed that several students were interested in photography, even though most of them only had cameras on their smartphones and had never even picked up a professional-style camera (DSLR). They asked to form a club, and through a collaborative effort, the CHS photo club was born in the fall of 2017-2018.

Issues Addressed:

Motivation is almost always a struggle for our at-risk students. Many of them think they are incapable of success. Others were raised in households that did not value education and/or have transient families. Knowledge gaps caused by these experiences often make students feel hopeless and that they have simply fallen too far behind to ever catch up.

Our school provides a unique opportunity for students to catch up quickly, and for some, it even enables them to graduate on time with their cohort. However, because we have two 4.5 hour sessions per day, students are encouraged to work hard at their desks for the entirety of their session. This leads to a great deal of independent work and screen time. Many students start to feel antsy and need to have social, active, and creative outlets to let their energy out and give their brains the time to process what they’ve learned. The Central High School Photo Club addresses all of these issues. The club allows them time to interact with each other in a low-stakes and casual environment, which helps them “decompress” after hours of online learning. The club participants often take guided walkabouts around campus with cameras in hand to practice taking photos with proper equipment. Students are encouraged to compete in photography challenges that help them think creatively about composition and apply what they’ve learned in the workshops. Winners of these challenges are awarded items from the school store or donated prizes. The students are motivated to grow their personal portfolios so they will be able to use them if they ever want to apply to art school or pursue photography professionally.

Having an academic goal of five assignments per session over a consistent, set time period of five days helps many students stay focused in order to achieve a short-term goal they can build upon. It is a realistic and attainable goal that is reasonable for most of the students who attend

CHS. Reminding students of this club requirement gives teachers another classroom management tool to use in order to redirect students who are off task.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

The sponsors of the photo club have the following three main goals:

- help students learn an artistic craft with real-world applications
- inspire students to perform well academically, and
- encourage positive social interactions.

The success of the club in these respects can be measured through the improvement chronicled in the student photography portfolios. It is common to see the photos in their portfolios evolve from cell phone snapshots to polished, artistic photographs taken from a DSLR with improved technique and composition. Dozens of students participate in the club activities with some degree of regularity, and an improvement in their academic output has been noticed. In addition, the core members (those who attend almost every workshop and event) have earned credits more quickly due to their regular attention to academics.

Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:

In order to participate, our students have to earn a passing grade on an average of five assignments per day and have no behavioral disruptions over their last five days of attendance. The two sponsors check the Apex Learning progress reports of each student interested in attending any given club meeting before the meeting starts. The club meets no less than twice a month, and additional activities and events are frequently added to the schedule. These 45-minute meetings include lessons in composition and mechanics, time to practice with cameras, fundraiser planning, and yearbook responsibilities. The students are able to learn and practice together, building bonds with other students whom they would not ordinarily associate. Photography portfolios are a requirement for regular members, so students are encouraged to give meaningful and constructive critiques so each participant can improve. Student photographers not only assist in taking and editing yearbook portraits, but they also assist with senior portraits, photo-documenting graduation ceremonies (two per year), and occasional photo shoot opportunities such as maternity and infant shoots requested by our young mothers.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

On average, students who regularly attend club meetings pass more assignments than they did before the club formed. Since the club is open to anyone interested, even students who do not attend regularly work hard to attend individual how-to classes, speaking events, club activities, and club trips. The inclusiveness and variety of the club, the reach and energy of the participating students, and the creation of our own in-school photography studio have enabled us to help students invest in their education by keeping them motivated to complete assignments to earn credits towards their diplomas. Giving students short-term goals has been a vital part of our success as a school. Having academic and behavioral requirements in order to participate in this popular club has improved their diligence, grades, and interactions. Many of them have become more social and more confident. Student photographers enjoy participating in the cap and gown shoots and senior portrait shoots which helps them visualize their own graduation.

Project Timeline:

2016-2017 - Central High School was still in its infancy, having only existed for one year. However, students continually expressed interest and casually asked for guidance and constructive feedback on their photography during session breaks and before and after school. Students, teachers, and administration bounced ideas off each other frequently to find a way to make a photography club something that would work well in what was then our two-room school building.

2017-2018 - Central High School relocated to a larger school building with plenty of space to operate and grow. Space was set aside by the school administration for a photography studio large enough to house equipment and a learning area for workshops. Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Herard volunteered to sponsor the club, which was formed in August of 2017, and student interest was widespread. The workshops were casual and informative, and the sponsors invited speakers and organized senior shoots. Bit by bit, the studio was stocked with cameras, equipment, and props. CHS's first yearbook was created by the photo club that spring.

2018-2019 - Central High School Photo Club enjoyed regular workshops, club meetings off campus, and school-related photo shoot opportunities. Hurricane Michael struck on October 10th, 2018, and the school sustained heavy damages. The entire photo studio and its contents were lost. The rest of the year, the resilient photo club was able to rebound, replacing much the contents of the studio with insurance reimbursement funds. Despite the setbacks, the club was able to create its second yearbook.

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

We have seen fairly consistent increases in attendance, number of completed assignments, and earned credits from the students who are active in the photo club. Some students transferred to our school specifically for the photo club, one of whom will graduate this June. Several seniors, two of whom are also graduating this June, have indicated that the Central High Photo Club has helped them cope with the hurricane and its aftermath and remain focused on their schooling as well as their photography throughout the chaos of the repairs. Furthermore, about 20% of our graduates this year have been active participants in the club.

Special Conditions, Expertise, and/or Skills Required to Carry Out Project:

The two sponsors, Mrs. Herard and Mrs. Ward, are freelance photographers who have training and experience in photography. They are able to guide students and help them sharpen their skills as well as point them in the direction of local studios, classes, and opportunities that could help them take their photography even further.

Current Status of Project:

The Central High School Photo Club has replaced and rebuilt at least half of its studio after a total loss due to Hurricane Michael and looks forward to the upcoming 2019-2020 school year.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

Since I started teaching at Central High School, I have been keenly interested in finding ways to inspire and encourage my students to stick with school long enough to earn their diplomas. My constant goals are to help them see the value of a high school education, teach them as much as I can, and urge them to learn real-world skills they can use after graduation. The enthusiasm

students and staff have shown in this club has been refreshing. Our administration has been supportive, and I am proud to be one of the club sponsors.

Lessons Learned:

Organization is key if the club is to run smoothly. Students can easily get distracted and social during club time, so it is vital to have brief, informative workshops that still allow students time to apply what they have learned. Variety is also important because each person has his or her own artistic vision, goals, and portfolio. As club sponsors, we are sure to include opportunities to learn about and practice portraiture, landscapes, and various artistic techniques such as macro photography, long exposure, photojournalism, etc. each semester.

I also learned a lot about our students. The club participants really pulled together to help us meet the yearbook deadlines in spite of the delays caused by Hurricane Michael. They provided touching and impressive photos of the damage and perseverance of our school and of Bay County. Many of these photos were included in the yearbook and shared in our community. I always knew to some degree that art helps people cope with trauma. Witnessing the photo club share their photos and personal stories of the hurricane and explain how photography helped them through it, however, was a special and moving experience. I have never been so overwhelmed with pride as I am of the students of Bay County schools this year -- especially the students of Central High School, who already have struggled with so many ACES and other hardships in their lives.

See photos included below taken by the photo club. They include photos from students' and sponsors' portfolios as well as photos taken after Hurricane Michael.



Photo Credit: R. Herard
Hurricane Michael Damage



Photo Credit: Austin Hall, Student
Hurricane Michael Damage



Photo Credit:
Katherine Rivera, Student
Hurricane Michael Damage



Photo Credit:
Katherine Rivera, Student
Hurricane Michael Damage



School lobby before and after repairs



Photo Credit:
Chrissy Ward, Sponsor

Photo Credit:
Rebecca Herard, Sponsor



Photo Credit:
Samuel Goosey-Gibson, Student



Photo Credit: Austin Hall, Student

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

I would advise photo club sponsors to have lesson plans for the workshops that are concise but offer enough information that students are able to learn and apply something new each meeting. I recommend allowing time for them to move around and bond with each other and offering a variety of different challenges to keep them excited about their art. In some cases, we have had to limit the number of participants to 15 per workshop, which encourages the students to work extra hard to “make the cut.” My final recommendation would be to enjoy your students’ art! They might be even more talented, impressive, and eager to share than you expect!