

Closure of TEEN Program Leaves Unanswered Questions

By Justyna Tomtas / jtomtas@chronline.com | Posted: Friday, April 29, 2016 8:12 pm



Centralia College TEEN Program

Isaac Wulff, instructional tech, works with Leland Rebic, of Chehalis, during independent study time on Wednesday afternoon at the Centralia College TEEN Program.

Rebecca Haseltine-Ripp highly credits her success to the TEEN Program at Centralia College.

After she was kicked out of her home, the 18-year-old student fell behind on credits and was told she wouldn't be able to graduate.

Desperate to complete her goal of becoming the first member of her family to get a high school diploma, Haseltine-Ripp began searching for other options. She looked into several alternative high schools, but none of them met her needs. That's when she found the Teens Entering Education Now program, which serves teens who are seeking an alternative education environment or are pregnant or parenting.

"I would give them a lot (of credit) because at the start of the year, I kind of wanted to throw in the towel, but they sat down with me and they helped me through a lot of things," she said of the TEEN Program.

Now Haseltine-Ripp is set to graduate at the end of the year. She has finished the credits she was lacking and plans to get her business license in business and management.

Unfortunately for many others in similar situations as Haseltine-Ripp, the TEEN Program will no longer be an option, leaving many students with what they say is a lack of opportunity.

"We are greatly saddened by this decision as our population is a special group who fall in between other school options," Kristi Jewell, manager of the TEEN program, told The Chronicle.

Centralia College announced its plans to end the program effective in June after 23 years of operation due to financial constraints. Officials also said school districts are now equipped to serve the population of students, which wasn't the case when the program launched.

The program is funded directly through the 14 participating high schools, but John Martens, vice president of instruction at the college, said funding did not cover other costs.

Due to a lower student-faculty ratio, the cost for each of the students increases when there are fewer students in the class setting, he said.

"We certainly believe we have covered our direct costs, but other costs are associated with providing buildings, building maintenance and other support mechanisms that are not necessarily covered by funding," he said.

Martens said the college still has to formulate a long-term plan to help provide additional services to students who were in the TEEN program, especially the population under the age of 18.

"These students tend to have their own set of specific needs, but nothing is ever off the table," Martens said about the program. "For right now, that's not the primary focus of our future planning."

The TEEN program provides its target population with the chance to obtain a high school diploma instead of a GED. It also offers parenting classes, counseling, and free, healthy meals, along with the unique opportunity of utilizing the daycare facility, especially for infants.

Isaac Wulff, an instructor of the TEEN program for three years, said the program serves a function to the larger community, and not just the students who are involved.

"I felt like the TEEN center was a really important aspect of that," he said. "We're taking the kids that were most likely to be a draw on the rest of our society and giving them the skills to become something more than that."

The closure of the program came as a surprise to many of those involved, and especially the students enrolled.

Jamie Baker, program assistant for the TEEN program, said once news broke of the closure of the program, she was overwhelmed by phone calls from districts and organizations.

Cristi Heitschmidt, dean of child and family studies, said phone calls were made to the districts prior to the decision, but since the college was still in the preliminary discussion of

closing the programs, she said they weren't conclusive.

"I think all of us were blindsided," Shaleene Moir, an instructional tech for the TEEN program, said. "It was completely unexpected. I think a lot of it is the shock of us thinking what's going to happen to our students, because at the end of the day that's what's most important and we want to make sure they have an education and continue to move forward with their lives and be excited about it."

The surprise filtered down to the students, many of whom said they found out on social networking sites such as Facebook during their spring break.

"I was kind of devastated," Austin Rich, 16, of Centralia, said.

After being kicked out of a school district for assault, Rich said he wasn't able to find an alternative, leading him to come to the TEEN program.

He still has two years left to complete, but he is unsure of his next steps with the program now closing.

Rich might move to Ohio where his family can help him with his schooling, or he could try to enroll in Futurus High School in Centralia. One thing he knows for certain is he wants to obtain his high school diploma instead of a GED.

"It's a lot better on a resume for going to college and things like that," he said. "That's why I came here too, because it's a lot easier to get into the college."

Other students shared similar stories.

Jamey Romero, 20, of Rochester, will be graduating from the program at the end of the semester. She has a 9-month-old son, one of the reasons she attended the TEEN program. Her home district said they could not serve her anymore once she became pregnant, she said. From there, she went to two alternative schools, before settling on the program at the college.

"I got a different perspective on learning," Romero said. "I really enjoy being here. I take care of my son every day and he gets to go and develop in daycare and then I get to develop here learning with other people."

The high level of daycare helps the children grow while their young parents better themselves. The system helps break intergenerational poverty, said many of the administrators of the program.

"Their kids, when they are in school with us, they aren't just in some random day care or being cared for by a relative ... They are in a top quality lab school," Wulff said. "So even if the kids we have are, let's say less than enthusiastic about their education, their children are getting

really top quality experience over there and increasing their preparedness for their school. That's something you can't measure over the years."

Savannah Neumeyer, 17, of Onalaska, has seen the benefits of not only the program, but of the day care with her 16-month-old daughter.

The young mother tried online classes through her high school, but she said it didn't work because she had a newborn to take care of.

"People who come here are trying to get their lives together for their kids or for them," she said.

She's been with the program for almost two years and is unsure of her next steps.

"I'm terrified," she said.

Baker, who has been with the program since the beginning, said the hardest part was listening to the uncertainty of the students.

Teachers for the program said it served as a feeder into Centralia College.

"Purely from a selfish standpoint there is a college impact that is going to be immediate," Wulff said. "There has to be a significant chunk of people that went to Centralia College because of the TEEN center and if it wasn't there, they wouldn't have gone to any college, let alone Centralia College — they just would have dropped out of the system all together."

Students said the program's location on the college campus made them feel more comfortable with the possibility of attending the community college in the future.

"There are people who have benefited the campus because they graduated from the program," Neumeyer said. "They work here on campus ... I mean Centralia College benefits from us too, it's not just us."

Jewell, the leader of the program, said there is no unified transitional plan for the exit of the students, because each situation is different.

"Each circumstance is so unique that much thought is needed to find the right fit," she said. "For those with children, we'd like to give them some resources to find quality care within close proximity of their academic programs."

The college's Child Family Studies Division was recently awarded a Parents as Teachers grant. The money will help the college create a circle of support for teen parents.

Martens said the grant allows the college to coordinate through the school districts to serve teen parenting populations.

“We wouldn’t be necessarily bringing them here, but would be working with school districts to provide services in that area,” he said.

Many of the students interviewed said they would not want to return to their home districts. There are options available to them, though.

Martens said any student who enters into an associate’s degree program at the college can simultaneously earn their high school diploma.

The college offers the HS 21+ program geared toward students who are 21 or older and who have earned high school credits but did not get a diploma. Also available is a high school equivalency certificate, or GED.

As for neighboring districts, former students of Centralia School District could re-enroll into the high school. Students also have the opportunity to attend Futurus High School — a school that serves the junior, senior and beyond population.

Futurus offers many resources for students, James Bowers, principal of the school, said. It has flexible scheduling, giving students the opportunity to attend morning or afternoon sessions. Day care opportunities are available as long as there is space in the Early Childhood Education program and a teen parenting program is also offered.

“It’s a different way of doing things and it offers more opportunities than it has in the past to students, as well as support,” Bowers said.

The problem is space. Currently, Futurus serves about 70 students, not all of whom are full-time. That’s pretty much capacity for the program.

Bowers said the school is on track to graduate 13 students this year.

That frees up room for the 13 students from the Centralia School District who are currently enrolled in the TEEN program at the college, but it leaves little wiggle room if more students want to join.

“Could I have an influx of another 13 kids on top of the 13 that want to come to me? Well yeah; I like the idea but I have to find a place for them,” he said.

Bowers said there was a proposal at the district office to enlarge the current space Futurus utilizes. If that happens, the school would likely be able to add an additional two classrooms. The school already serves several pregnant girls, as well as a young dad.

Futurus offers a smaller environment for students and allows them to focus on one subject at a time rather than attending six classes a day.

"As far as the TEEN program itself closing, it's a sad situation," Bowers said. "For the community, I think it's a loss, but for the students there's still an option and that exists through Futurus and Centralia High School. They can come back here if they want to."

As for Chehalis School District, it also offers an alternative program, but Superintendent Ed Rothlin said he is unsure if the program fits the needs of the students at the TEEN program.

"We may have to make some adjustments but again, this is all new to us," he said. "We know we need to pay attention and do what we can and at the same time, we don't know what that looks like yet."

The alternative program right now is full. Fifteen students are enrolled in the afternoon and morning sessions, for a total of 30 students.

Rothlin said the district recently hired additional staff and there are plans to run a late afternoon session to open up more spots for kids.

The alternative school does not offer day care or parental education as of now.

The district is in its initial phases of creating a plan. Rothlin said the district will contact the students in the TEEN program to get a sense of what they need and how many are thinking of attending the program. As of now, Rothlin said he is unaware of what options those students are considering.

According to numbers provided by the TEEN program, there are currently eight W.F. West students enrolled. The program has served up to 20 Chehalis students at one given time.

"The program was a good program and it provided these students with an opportunity to graduate from high school and even go beyond," Rothlin said. "That void needs to be filled now and we have a responsibility to see what we can do to do that."

Along with the 13 Centralia students and eight Chehalis students, the TEEN program currently serves seven from Rochester, three from Winlock, two from Napavine and one from Onalaska.

Fourteen of those students are on track to graduate at the end of the year. Many of the students who were not scheduled to graduate have "dropped out like flies," Jewell said.

"We've had several that have already dropped out ... even though we encourage them to finish strong, and finish all the credits they can," she said. "They're already coming from challenging situations so this was one more of those."

Districts with a smaller population of students may have a harder time providing the resources the teens had in the program at the college.

"It's easy to absorb again, but the district has referred them to us for a reason and that's been kind of a painful process for us," Jewell said. "We haven't gone out to ask for students, the district has called us."

Those involved in the program hope to see it continue, even if it's at a new location. Jewell said two churches have offered to create a new infant care program, and others have shared ideas to include more support.

"Individuals from our community are rising up to help us create a new support system so that none of our students fall through the cracks again," she said. "Youth are from such a widespread geographic area which is complicated by lack of transportation and shortage of infant care; two key education barriers."