The Mtaya Miracle School
by Carolyn Kulisheck

In September 2004, Carolyn Kulisheck visited Zambia for the purpose of donating money she had collected from her friends to several orphanages that care for the orphans of AIDS. Toward the end of her trip, her Zambian friends took her to visit an animal park in the eastern province. On the way, they stopped by the small village of Mtaya. This is where a truly miraculous series of events began to take place.

A twenty-year-old young man named Connet Mwanza had gathered together the village’s youngest orphans of AIDS and begun to teach them. These small orphans presented a short program, reciting poems about being orphans of AIDS, singing songs, and reciting the alphabet. Connet had achieved all this with no school and no school supplies.

These small children were enchanting but also disturbing. They coughed incessantly, large patches of hair were missing, white blotches appeared on their black skin. Their clothes were ragged; they were barefoot. The young man and his orphans captured Carolyn’s heart. With her remaining $800, she asked AFRI-CARE to build him a school. Within a week, the village had formed a committee and started work on the one room, red brick school.

In June 2006, Carolyn returned to Zambia to attend the official dedication of the school and to take donations provided by her church and friends. These donated funds paid for window panes, a wooden door, and thirty desks for the one room school.

Upon arriving in the village, Carolyn was greeted by the children who came running, calling out, “She has come.” The village women greeted her with songs and dances. They sang, “We will never go back. We will only go forward.” Connet told her that they were at the hand of death and she brought them back to life. He was referring to the previous year’s drought and famine, during which one of the children had died. Because of the existence of the school as the center of the village, the U.N.’s World Food Program came in and started a feeding station next to the school. Carolyn observed that, this time, the children were much healthier. They were not coughing as much, the patches of missing hair had grown back, and their skin was smooth and dark.

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A Few Words on Progress

Over the past several years adult education programs have seen increasing numbers of out of school youths (OSYs) enrolling across the state. This trend has led to a wide array of challenges that adult educators have had to meet with flexibility and creativity. While recognizing the obvious advantages of helping young adults to get a GED® certificate, or in some cases a CRC, adult educators have had to make adjustments and modifications in their programs to accommodate this larger youth enrollment.

In this issue of Progress, four adult educators discuss, in roundtable fashion, how they are meeting the needs of younger students, including using online instruction. In another article, Marie Davis, Coordinator of Winchester’s Out of School Youth Workforce Program, describes how she and her staff recruit, serve, and retain OSYs. An article by Jason Guard, VALRC GED Specialist and former ISAEP teacher, provides suggestions for modifying traditional adult education programs to address the youth population. In addition, an article on mentoring focuses on its importance in the effective education of at-risk youth.

To put the topic in global perspective, Carolyn Kulisheck, an ESOL Specialist with Fairfax Adult Education, tells of her rewarding experiences building and supporting a school in Zambia with the help of friends and colleagues. A review of Three Cups of Tea, a bestselling memoir by Greg Mortenson, summarizes the trials and joys surrounding the author’s building of more than 60 schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Like Kulisheck, Mortenson started with nothing more or less than the passion and commitment to make a difference in a part of the world where so little can change so much.

Although Zambia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan seem worlds away from Virginia, the needs of young adults to get an education that can take them beyond the village or the neighborhood are just as great. We may have fine schools and well trained teachers, but if we cannot engage our youth in education that makes a difference for them, they are just as isolated and deprived as those in the far reaches of a third-world nation. The global economy that makes it necessary for third-world children to get an education is the same economy that makes it imperative that American youth get an education. We must rise to the challenge at home and abroad if we are to have a world in which we all can live and prosper.
According to Virginia’s National Reporting System data, about thirty percent of our adult learners are 16 to 24 years old. In 2006-2007, seven percent of our adult learners were 16 to 18 years of age, and 23 percent were 19 to 24 years of age. In the Office of Adult Education and Literacy (OAEL), we continuously hear issues being raised about the impact on our adult education programs of these young learners, especially the 16- to 18-year-old age group. With this in mind, I would like to address two relevant areas.

First of all, we must be cognizant of the legal and regulatory framework, our point of reference in determining whom we should be serving among the youth population. Because Virginia’s compulsory attendance age is 18, local programs are not at liberty to provide adult education services to 16- and 17-year-old out of school youths unless they have been legitimately and officially released from compulsory attendance by their local school boards based upon specific reasons stated in the Code of Virginia. On the other hand, in-school youths 16 and older may prepare for the GED Tests while enrolled in career and technical education instruction through the Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) program if those youths qualify. Qualifications include a minimum reading level and a minimum score on the Official GED Practice Test. We must recognize that the only approved in-school GED preparation program is ISAEP.

The other area of focus is effective recruitment and instruction for this younger population. Outreach strategies that work with individuals in their 30s and 40s may not be appropriate when recruiting young adults. Moreover, instruction may need to be delivered in nontraditional ways through distance learning or a combination of face-to-face and distance learning classes. Generally, members of this younger age group are comfortable with technology because they have played, learned, and otherwise lived their whole lives in a culture where communication is largely sent and received via computers, the Internet, cell phones that text message, and other high tech tools.

Recognizing the need for alternative methods of instruction, the OAEL is funding eLearn Virginia, the online learning portal administered by the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center (VALRC). This instructional option, which provides access to the guidance of trained online mentors who prepare an individualized learning plan for each student, is growing in use and can be particularly effective for motivated young adults who may prefer online learning rather than the traditional classroom. Richard Sebastian, project manager for eLearn Virginia, and Jason Guard, specialist, are available to provide information and assistance if you wish to pursue this resource for your learners.

We will continue to face challenges in serving out of school youths, whose instructional needs may fall into any of these areas: Adult Basic Education, GED instruction, high school diploma classes, or English for Speakers of Other Languages classes. My hope is that the adult education community will meet these challenges by seeking all the resources and options that are available for out of school youths.
What do a 16-year-old mother of two, 17-year-old restaurant trainer, and 18-year-old homeless youth all have in common? They are all enrolled in the Out of School Youth Workforce Program at Winchester, Virginia’s Youth Development Center (YDC). While all come from very different backgrounds, they are all classified as “at risk” youths based upon specific economic and educational barriers. These “barriers” have prevented these students from succeeding in the past, but the Out of School Youth Workforce Program promises future educational and occupational success through one-on-one personal and professional development counseling and mentoring.

These students learn from day one of the program that, while their educational goals may not have been reached in a traditional classroom setting, there are plenty of resources and programs available to them through the OSY Workforce Program to assist them in reaching their goals. It is my responsibility as the coordinator, mentor, and counselor to identify the goals, provide resources, and execute plans to ensure success one step and one student at a time.

Step #1: Recruiting Out of School Youths

Since “at-risk youths” do not belong to a special club or organization or take a specific course load in high school, there is no easy way to target this population of young adults. Yes, they should be in school, but for some reason these students have given up attending or have been released from school, either permanently or for a long term suspension. If these students should be in school, but are not attending, the question is:

“How and where do I find them?”

To recruit students for the program, I seek out the expertise, guidance and support of those professionals within the community who counsel, employ, interact with, and even discipline the youth in our community. My goal is to make sure that, if I cannot find these youths on my own, I can educate others in the community who do work with them – creating mini ambassadors or representatives who can endorse the workforce program to the right audience.

There is not a fool-proof strategy for recruiting these youths. At every initial intake I ask how the potential applicant heard about the program, and so far the responses have varied; flyer in the gas station, teacher at the middle school, friend of the family, brochures in juvenile court are just a few of the replies. It goes to show that even the smallest recruitment efforts can uncover a potential applicant for the program!

Step #2: Enrolling Out of School Youths

With the numerous outreach initiatives, I receive calls from students, parents, and counselors on a daily basis. While my initial reaction is to accept all interested candidates, meeting eligibility requirements is the number one priority before enrolling a student. This process takes time, patience, and follow-through for all parties involved. I will need a release from compulsory education from all students; however, students and their parents often will not pursue a release until the student has been determined eligible for the Workforce Program based upon initial information provided by the family.

When speaking with students and their parents during our initial meeting, it is encouraging to see their eyes light up when I talk about the one-on-one services that allow students to earn their GED certificate while also seeking part-time or full-time employment. From past experiences, I know that it’s not always beneficial to give too much information about the program because I have had to decline so many candidates based upon eligibility.

The hardest and most critical step in determining eligibility is income verification, since all household family members must provide documentation of income earned over the past six months. This is usually the make or break factor in accepting a student for the program. For instance, a youth working full time making $8/hour actually exceeds the eligibility requirements. This also holds true for a single parent making the same $8 for herself and her child.

To overcome the income barriers, the state does allow any student with documentation, such as an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), of a disability to claim himself or herself as independent and exclude additional family income. This has helped in qualifying many students to meet the income requirements.

Eligibility is not always clear during the first meeting, since there are so many specific family situations and income calculations that need to be reviewed and verified. At this time, the process relies on the information provided by others, and it is sometimes out of the hands of either the students or the Workforce Counselor. Partnering with high school counselors, case workers, and family members expedites the enrollment process by having all stakeholders play a role in the documentation and verification process. My goal is to provide a seamless transition from the initial interview through enrollment in order to get to the core objective of the program – providing student services.
Step #3: Serving Out of School Youths

I call this the “all about youth” stage: it’s all about giving the youths the services and resources necessary to help them become successful, contributing members to the community. The most difficult part in providing services to youth is figuring out what best meets their individual needs, since they have so many different backgrounds, expectations, and needs in pursuing their goals.

The first step in providing services is creating a schedule. Every student has external obligations to family and work and therefore rarely has the ability to put this program above all else. While my goal is to make their education and employment a priority, I have to understand each situation and offer flexibility and alternatives as to how, where, and who helps them along the way.

There is never a “typical” day in the life of an out of school youth since these students are not your typical students – if they were, they would be sitting in the classroom! I cannot guarantee when and where youth may study for their GED certificate or apply for a position; however, I can determine and monitor HOW these students prepare and strategize to obtain their GED certificate and/or employment. Students plan their own schedule; create a timeline to complete their goals or tasks; and determine the best days, times, and avenues to get their work done here at the office. My role is to follow up with and monitor, encourage and guide these students along the way, as well as provide them with needed tools and resources.

For instance, 16-year-old “Mary” had been coming to the office once a month to pick up new GED learning materials and talk about her current position at the local drugstore. She was excited that her boss was giving her more and more responsibility, and she was hoping to move into a management trainee position upon obtaining her GED credential. In the beginning, she would call every week and study at home while taking care of her child and preparing for her second to be born. As her due date got closer, she quit her job and came into the office to register for eLearn Virginia. Her husband supported her efforts 100% and actually installed Internet service in their apartment to help her study on their computer from home! My role is to make sure she stays on course to obtain her credential.

On the other hand, “John” is a student who needs structure and a schedule to study for the GED Tests. He began the program coming into the YDC twice a week to study with workbooks. He immediately registered for eLearn Virginia and took advantage of the computers here in the office. Our weekly meetings focused on his two priorities: work and obtaining a GED certificate. Work was going great; however, the more he worked, the less he came to the office. After a few phone calls to both him and his mom, we are now back on track with his GED program. He is now coming into the office once per week but also has used money saved from work to purchase a computer to study at home. He is now working 30-40 hours per week, from 4 p.m. until closing, and therefore studies for the GED Tests at home since he is a night owl. By giving so much time and effort at work, he has reached the trainee level and accomplished one of his strategies in reaching a management role while at the same time still focusing on his GED preparation.

I continuously seek out additional support from programs already in existence that can help my students achieve their educational and employment goals, and I am fortunate to partner with and learn from key professionals who provide services to the youths in our community. Some organizations that continuously provide support for the OSY Workforce Program include the Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education Center, Lord Fairfax Community College, and the Department of Rehabilitative Services.

As mentioned in both of the case scenarios, eLearn Virginia (www.elearn-va.com) is a valuable resource for every student in providing online tutoring and mentoring to each youth enrolled in the OSY program. eLearn Virginia has been well received by parents, students, and counselors as students pursue their GED credential, and it offers a terrific alternative to studying for the credential in a classroom setting.

The service stage of the OSY Workforce Program never really ends. Throughout the process, students are asked to evaluate their plans, research new employment opportunities, and seek out new educational experiences. At this stage, my role of recruiter and coordinator becomes that of a true mentor and counselor – supporting the needs and goals of my students while they continue to explore job industries, choose career paths, or decide what college to attend. The most difficult part of assisting youths, aside from finding them, is keeping track of them. I struggle with this on a daily basis, since these students are always seeking new opportunities to better their lives, leaving them little time or energy to work with the program.

Serving as the coordinator of the Out of School Youth Workforce Program provides a unique outlook – challenging, rewarding, enlightening, and disheartening. For those students enrolled in the program, there are many unanswered questions, untapped opportunities, and educational experiences yet to be explored. The greatest reward is answering their questions, finding new experiences, and uncovering opportunities one step and one student at a time.

Marie Davis is Coordinator for the Out of School Youth Workforce Program at Winchester’s Youth Development Center.
Young adult learners pose a challenge for ABE programs, but they also represent opportunities. Out of School Youths (OSYs), have a reputation for being disruptive in classes where more mature learners are the majority. Sporadic attendance and lack of follow-through are particularly common among minors who are exhibiting a fresh pattern of dropping out and rejecting educational opportunities. While teaching in GED programs for 16- to 17-year-old students, I quickly learned that the task of teaching teenagers requires a unique set of skills, flexibility, and the will to put the learners’ needs ahead of our own. Whatever approach we adopt, we cannot turn our backs on the growing number of OSYs in need of educational credentials.

Learners of all ages can come across as less than serious and prove to be difficult to serve. Denying young learners the opportunity to better themselves only postpones the inevitable: Virginians without educational credentials will eventually need to continue their education in order to reach their career goals and earn a decent living. With high school dropout rates rising, the population requiring GED and ABE services is growing by leaps and bounds. Because Virginia test takers aged 16 to 18 years have the highest GED pass-rate of any age group (73% compared to 65% for all other ages), there is no better chance to help testers make a passing score than when they are young.

Program Options for Young Adult Learners

Welcome young learners as you would adults. If youths have difficulty finding services in adult education or encounter undue suspicion, the negative experience may hardwire them for years to come, and they may avoid future opportunities to better themselves. Young adult learners may not always come to us with the right attitude, but if we can be tolerant and flexible, we can help them find the path of continuing education.

In the intake and counseling process, find out what OSYs’ goals are and let them know that you may not be able to provide instant gratification, but you will help them get closer to their goals. Restate their goals in the context of your prescribed pathway to achieve them. If high school dropouts are going to be successful in an adult education program, it may be necessary to address past experiences. Contrast their new future against their recent negative experiences with education. If they didn’t get enough help, emphasize your program’s numerous supports, and if they didn’t take to the rules and authority, point out the independent nature of self-directed learning.

Make graduation possible: Many OSYs who have recently withdrawn from school would still like to walk across the stage at graduation. Investigate the possibility of participation in their own schools’ graduations, or find a ceremony where they would be welcomed. The anticipation of this achievement will help carry them toward their goal of passing the GED Tests.

The question of whether to integrate youths into adult education classes or to teach them separately is a programmatic decision made at the local level. Incorporating youths into classrooms with older adults may help get youths engaged and talking with adults about the hardships of life without a high school diploma or equivalent. On their own in an adult class, young adult learners may find fewer opportunities to socialize or distract from class and may conform to the orderly behavior of their more mature classmates. Programs might consider keeping the youth contingent in the classroom low, less than half of the class population, or isolating OSYs by including only one or two per class.

Where classes of exclusively young students are enrolled, it may be worthwhile to recruit relatively young teachers to spearhead the instruction. OSYs may be more motivated to attend class if they view their teacher as a peer. A young teacher models successful behaviors and can help demystify the transition into adulthood and self-sufficiency. Regardless of age, however, if a teacher can draw upon topics of interest to young learners, that teacher will have a better chance at commanding the focus of a population often in a state of perpetual partial attention.

Techniques for Teaching Teens

To connect with the younger generation of learners, the instructor should employ cross cultural skills rather than reflexive stereotypes or prejudices. Set realistic short-term goals. Teens can be temperamental, with short attention spans, and they may not follow through on long-term projects. Be prepared to laugh. A good sense of humor can diffuse conflicts and smooth over inevitable misunderstandings. Be prepared to accept frequent failures, and try and try again, because teens will test you. Be flexible and employ a trial-and-error approach. Understanding that the teacher and the student can learn from one another is essential.

Mix it up. Young learners typically have short attention spans and will need a variety of activities to keep them focused on learning. Use multi-media presentations, including TV shows (broken up into short segments), computer- or Internet-based lessons, open class discussions, and only brief lecture-style instruction as needed to clarify concepts. Adolescents are typically creative thinkers. If they’ve found a better way to solve a problem, have them come up to the front and explain it to the class.

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Mentoring Out of (Traditional) School Youths

by Catherine Norrell and Jason Guard

Of the many reasons high school students enter alternative education programs, one is simply a failure to thrive within the mainstream educational system. Educational research has found that, in the successful student, several components work in combination to fuel that success. When developing a curriculum for youths with the dual components of academic theory and practical application in mind, researchers suggest that youth educators include a third: mentorship.

Why mentorship? What is it about the inclusion of non-academic relationships in education that boosts the success of young learners?

The word “mentor” comes from the Greek for “steadfast” and “enduring.” Mentoring is the one-to-one or group relationship that adults develop with young people to help them thrive and succeed. Its strength is its structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee. Having someone to talk to during times of turmoil can help a learner to remove distractions and focus on his studies. A mentor can help the mentee differentiate the factors in life that can be changed from those that must be accepted.

Mentors are good listeners, people who care, and people who want to help young people bring out strengths that are already there. All children have the potential to succeed in life and contribute to society. However, not all get the support they need to thrive. Even though teachers may be attentive to their students’ needs, there is often little extra time to dedicate to developing a one-on-one listener/confidant relationship. Because instructors are generally oriented to interact with their pupils as learners, an outside mentor who is not associated with the frustrations of the learning process can be helpful in filling a support role.

The Virginia Mentoring Partnership, using the national formula, reports an estimated 10% of school-age children do not have access to responsible and caring adult mentors through family and friendship networks. When that estimate is applied to the 2002 Virginia school census, it suggests that 143,623 young people could benefit from being matched with a mentor. National studies prove that the need and demand for mentors is high. The difference mentorship can make includes:

- improving self-esteem;
- keeping young people in school;
- helping improve academic skills;
- leading young people to resources they might not find on their own;
- providing support for new behaviors, attitudes, and ambitions;
- increasing young people’s ability to seek and keep jobs; and,
- enhancing parenting skills.

The Elements of Effective Practice developed by the National Mentoring Partnership also recommends mentoring as a strategy for helping young people to succeed in life. Mentoring works by giving young people the confidence, resources, and skills they need to reach their potential. A study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Inc., conducted by Public/Private Ventures found that students who regularly met with mentors for about a year were:

- 46% less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs;
- 27% less likely to start drinking;
- 52% less likely to skip a day of school;
- more trusting of their parents or guardians;
- less likely to lie to their parents or guardians; and,
- more supported and less criticized by their peers and friends.

One pilot project that matched college-age mentors with youth in a local adult education program saw an increase in attendance at adult education classes from participating learners, who were eager to continue ongoing discussions with their mentors from week to week.

Mentorship collaborations have also proven to be beneficial for the mentor. When mentors listen without judgment, their mentees are given a chance to instruct and mentors stand to gain invaluable knowledge that can only be obtained from youth. The experiences of young people offer insights into our changing world and developing trends. As heavy consumers of pop culture and innovative technology, young learners can be a fountain of youthful energy and information for adults who are eager to share and learn in an equal exchange.

Reaching out to local partners for volunteer mentors is a great way to share resources and strengthen connections in the local community. Area high schools and colleges may have a surplus of mentors or aspiring teachers who could be plugged into opportunities in adult education. For younger mentors, the recent experience of negotiating similar obstacles to those faced by their young adult mentees puts them in good position to relate to learners while adding a resumé-building leadership experience to their credentials. This ethic of community service is part of the example that all mentors set for their mentees. Whether working with youths outside of the traditional school system or students still enrolled in mainstream education, mentoring is always an effective strategy for helping students thrive and succeed.

Catherine Norrell, a certified mentor with the Virginia Mentoring Partnership, is also a licensed associate minister and director of a nonprofit adult education program. She is a doctoral student in VCU’s School of Education and graduate research assistant at the Resource Center.

Jason Guard is GED Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.
To find out how adult education programs are currently serving Virginia's out of school youths, we asked several educators to answer a series of nine questions relating to OSYs. Program managers Elaine Callahan (Henrico County), Mary Ellen Dreybus (Hampton City), and Danielle Robinson (Middle Peninsula) share what their programs are doing now, their challenges and successes, and plans for the future. Regional Specialist and GED Examiner Carol Coffey shares recent testing data and the perspectives of programs in her area, which includes Charlottesville, Albemarle, Nelson, Greene, Fluvanna, and Louisa.

What does “out of school youths” mean to you and your program?

EC: For our program “out-of-school youths” means students who are under the age of 18 who have dropped out or been expelled and who have been released from compulsory education, or 18-year-old students who do not have a secondary credential who come into our program as they quit school on their 18th birthday or shortly thereafter.

CC: I asked about this at our regional meeting last week. The responses varied: two programs worked closely with their schools’ administration in identifying high risk kids and in trying to catch them quickly once they left school; a couple of programs have access to their high schools’ dropout lists and send letters to dropouts about GED services; two programs did not have access to their schools’ lists due to confidentiality concerns.

MED: We serve 18- to 21-year-old students in both our ISAEP and adult programs. If an ISAEP student continues to attend classes and is making progress, he or she can remain in the in-school program until completion. When an ISAEP student is 18 or older and chooses not to attend classes after repeated contact from our program, we send that student a letter inviting him or her to assess for the adult program. This is sometimes the beginning of a fresh start; if we don’t hear from the student, the name and contact information is entered in our Tracker system for periodic follow up calls.

An 18- to 21-year-old coming to our adult program follows the same assessment procedure as any other adult, except that 18-year-olds must bring a withdrawal slip from their last school attended.

DR: We break them into two categories:
   (a) 16- to 18-year-olds who have been released from compulsory education, expelled, or are seeking alternatives after failed home schooled experience and whose cohorts have not yet graduated from high school.
   (b) 18- to 21-year-old young adults without a high school diploma.

What happens when high school students in your area drop out or are expelled? Who (if anyone) is responsible for contacting these individuals?

EC: With expelled students, I receive a copy of the expulsion letter. In the letter, the parent is directed to call me for further guidance on how their son or daughter can obtain a GED credential. If I do not hear from the parent within 60 days, I then contact them to find out if they wish to have their son or daughter pursue the credential.

In the case of dropout students, we do not always know if a student has dropped out unless the school contacts us or the student takes the initiative to contact us. If the school contacts us, then we will contact the student.

MED: We ask for a dropout list each year from Hampton City Schools. This year, we had already made contact with about a third of the students on the list either through our ISAEP program or adult programs. We attempted to contact the remainder by phone but received very little response and reached many wrong numbers.

DR: Category (a) students (16- to 18-year-olds) are formally referred to the adult education program by their local school with a letter of referral as part of the release or expulsion process. The OSY or his parents are responsible for contacting the adult education program with the letter of referral as proof of eligibility.

Do you have specific classes for youths or are they integrated into your regular adult education classes?

EC: If students are under the age of 18, we direct them to online learning through eLearn Virginia. If they are 18 and no longer enrolled in a high school program, we will integrate them into our regular adult education program.

MED: We integrate all students 18 years and older in the adult education classes, although 18-year-olds have the option of enrolling in their area high schools and opting for the ISAEP program if they choose.

DR: Category (b) OSYs are integrated into regular adult education classes. Category (a) OSYs are assessed by our program to determine eligibility.
for distance learning. If they score at the high end of High Intermediate through High Adult Secondary on the TABE, they are enrolled in our in-house distance learning program. (Most classes are at local schools, and expelled students are not allowed on campus. This makes the way we treat them uniform.) The distance learning teacher sets up counseling sessions to make a plan and identify strategies to help them reach their goals and to monitor progress. She also makes sure they are successfully logged into the software program for instruction as new students. She is available for one-on-one sessions two days a week and is available via email to review their work and respond to queries (asynchronously).

If their reading and math scores fall on the low end of High Intermediate and below, they are referred to Jason or Richard at eLearn Virginia. Our staff make contact with eLearn Virginia on their behalf, forward their scores to Jason, and conduct the counseling session to review their goals on-site. After that, unless Jason or Richard contacts us, we do not continue to monitor them.

What are the challenges of working with out of school youths?

EC: We find that maturity and motivation are often factors when 18-year-olds are attending classes with our older adults. Often, we find that our younger students do not attend regularly unless we monitor them very, very closely, and they often have difficulty conforming to the rules of the adult education center – the difficulties they had in high school continue on when attending our program. They are also surprised when they find that we can request that they not return to the program if they are extremely disruptive. My feeling is that they are used to being suspended from high school, allowed to return, and the cycle continues. We have had to release 18-year-olds from our program due to disruptive behavior and the impact it was having on their classes. After they have been released from the program, we will wait a couple of months and then start contacting them to see if they are ready to return.

MED: Some OSYs are ready to take ownership of their education and need the flexibility of our adult program, particularly the night schedule.”

Have you found any specific programs or instructional approaches to be particularly useful in serving OSYs?

EC: There are three things that we have started to put into effect to help make our OSYs more successful when attending our program:

(1) I have a GED counselor who has vast experience working with youths who have had extreme difficulties in the high school setting. She has experience with emotionally disturbed youths, youths being detained in a juvenile detention center, and youths who were habitual offenders in the high school setting. Because of her background, she has a lot of success working with our younger population. She will counsel them one-on-one to deal with issues before they become out of control, and she follows their progress very closely.

(2) I have an early retiree from the school psychology department whom I was able to get assigned to our program for his 20 work days each year (under the early retirement program requirements). He works with students individually and also has an extensive background in working with youths who typically have had difficulties in the school setting.

(3) We are currently working with the Department of Non-Traditional Programming in our school system to develop a “transition” class. This class would be for students transitioning from the GED programs currently in our high schools into adult education at the age of 18. The class would be
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short-term and a requirement before the student attended classes with the other adults in our program. The focus of the class would be to help the student understand the rules and expectations, what skills will be needed to be successful, etc. . . . This is still in the planning stages.

“I do see a good number of bright, mostly creative kids in the 18-21 range who ... are able to pass the test quickly and move on to college right away.”

MED: Our intake process includes having a counselor review each student’s TABE scores to help the student set educational goals. I think this is especially important when working with OSYs in order to set the tone for a fresh start with obtainable goals. Another helpful strategy is to be able to administer partial GED Tests; seeing partial results can be very motivating to the OSY.

DR: We use MHC Interactive from Contemporary for all our distance learners. This approach works well with independent, self-reliant learners. OSYs with these traits enjoy working online and have been successful in the program.

On the whole, how successful do you feel your program has been in dealing with OSYs?

EC: Utilizing the approaches above, I feel we have improved upon how we deal with our younger population. The area that needs to improve is when a student drops out of school and we do not know about that student – better communication between the school to adult ed. would be helpful. If we know that a student has dropped out, we can attempt to make contact and either get them into classes with us or direct them to eLearn Virginia if that is a more appropriate option. We can also hook them into our Department of Non-Traditional Programs, where they would have the option of entering one of the GED programs in our high schools.

MED: I had to take a look at our data to be sure. The 18- to 21-year-olds who qualify for a free GED exam by passing an OPT are passing the exam at the same rate as the total population of testers. But, only 30% of the OSYs who are in our ABE program are showing gain on the NRS tables, whereas our total ABE program is averaging 45% in student gains as of the end of March. Since nearly one fourth of our ABE students are OSYs, that’s a large group to not make progress. My guess is that the problem is lack of attendance hours.

“We have had to release 18-year-olds from our program due to disruptive behaviour.”

DR: We do not have the capacity to assess every category (a) OSY, so leaving OSYs with the responsibility to contact us helps to manage the work load. Dealing with their parents is also trying and time-consuming. I think more could be served if the schools would assess them with the TABE or CASAS prior to referral (most have these instruments for ISAEP students) and if a list were forwarded to the regional adult education program. Funding for classroom-based instruction for OSYs would also help. They need more hands-on instruction and a program tailored to their needs. We find that mixing them with the evening class of adult learners is not effective for either group. OSYs who can only be placed in classroom-based instruction are handled on a case-by-case basis and may have to attend class out of their county of residence.

Common wisdom holds that youths are generally more successful in passing the GED Tests than older adults. Have you found this to be true in your program?

EC: Yes and no ... We probably have a 50/50 split. We will have youths who enter our program directly from the high school setting and are extremely successful in passing the GED Tests and then others who will not do well at all. We are currently running a pilot program in partnership with our ISAEP programs. The ISAEP program falls under the Department of Non-Traditional Programming. The GED classes are held in all but two of the high schools in our county. When a student progresses into the ISAEP program and is determined eligible for testing, the school system pays for the test fee; we provide the GED test examiner and booklets and test those students. The pilot began in January 2008 and ended in May 08. As of this writing, the pass rate of the tested students is only 65%. If I had predicted the pass rate at the beginning of the pilot, I would have predicted 80%. All of that said, the students who are sent to us from the school board for release from compulsory attendance almost always pass.

CC: I can tell you that after a quick run of my testing data (7/1/07 - 4/29/08), 50% of my test takers have been ages 16-21 and, of that 50%, 71% have passed all sections of the GED Tests. Almost all of my test takers under the age of 18 have been in ISAEP programs, so I have only dealt with a small number of
“out of school” youths aged 18 and under, most of whom were home schooled or court ordered to test.

I do see a good number of bright, mostly creative kids in the 18-21 range who didn’t complete high school for various reasons and who are able to come and pass the test quickly and move on to college right away.

DR: The few retained do well. Retention rate is extremely low; the format we have in place is not the best for OSYs.

What would your ideal program for targeting OSYs look like?

EC: The ideal program for targeting OSYs would probably be two-fold. We want them to stay in school if possible, so we are working with the Department of Non-Traditional Programming to align the GED programs within the high schools to mirror our adult ed. program.

“OSYs ... need more hands-on instruction and a program tailored to their needs.”

MED: We’ve never looked at the capacity of program to monitor student accountability, tie-in to work placement, and staff who are aware that OSYs are still underage and of the responsibilities that come with that.

Do you predict that serving OSYs will play a growing role in your program’s future?

EC: Yes . . . that is why we are trying to take a proactive approach and start now, working with the Department of Non-Traditional Programming at the high school level to see if we can work together to keep students in the regular school setting so they can earn their GED certificate if that is appropriate for them and not drop out before that occurs. If the student does drop out, we want to have the communication in place so that we can pick that student up on our end and transition them into our program.

CC: I have recently joined our local WIB’s Youth Council to better understand this market and how we can better serve them. So far, I have linked with various local agencies who serve this population and attended job and career fairs targeting this group.

MED: We’ve never looked at the change in demographics based on hard data, but teachers who have been with our program for years have commented that there are younger students. Just completing this questionnaire has raised some questions for our program. OSYs might be a group to target for more attention from counselors and teachers. Perhaps a survey of this age group as they exit our program would be effective.

DR: Yes, each year we try to manage our budget so we can better respond to their needs. We have made several presentations to the local School Boards and the Board of Supervisors to address the issue of resources and effective strategies to meet OSYs’ needs. We are making progress. Long term, a CTE center is planned for the area and, short term, localities have committed to transferring some in-kind matching funds for real money to support overall program development.
Approaching Young Adult Education (continued from page 6)

other good tool is any curriculum that features drill and practice opportunities that allow learners to commit their skills to memory. Although leaving OSYs to complete worksheets during class is not such a good idea, unofficial practice tests will come in handy as teens frequently want to prove how much they know.

We can’t hold young adults to the same standards as mature adults. They don’t have the same depth of experience to draw upon. Don’t assume that they are aware of the services and supports that are available to them (inside and outside of your program). Often, what appears to be youthful arrogance is actually a symptom of their fears, turmoil, and uncertainty. You can help them negotiate some crucial transitions by creating opportunities that help them discover and develop their talents.

Consider bringing in speakers who are looking for interns or youth board members or who are hiring for entry-level positions. Help youths articulate what they want from their community. Include space for positive and negative assessments of the world. Base writing assignments on topics related to community engagement and include civic participation activities in the classroom. Even if a young person does not continue the practice of engaging the public sector, he or she will reflect on the experience in the future. Exposure to some of the services and supports that are available to them (inside and outside of your program). Often, what appears to be youthful arrogance is actually a symptom of their fears, turmoil, and uncertainty. You can help them negotiate some crucial transitions by creating opportunities that help them discover and develop their talents.

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Developmentally, teens are moving from concrete to abstract thinking and need to develop skills in deductive reasoning, problem solving, and generalizing.

Retention Strategies

Programs are right to be concerned about the possibility that OSYs will deter mature adults from enrolling in ABE/GED classes. Purposeful strategies can increase credentials from young adult learners and decrease any potentially negative effects.

Often, teens want to keep authority figures at arm’s length. Give them opportunities for independent study. They believe that they can do it by themselves. Let them do so, by referring them to distance learning programs (either in-house or through eLearn Virginia), but ask them to agree to a contingency plan if they don’t wind up being successful distance learners.

Take an interest in youth culture. You don’t have to be fluent in the latest clothing styles, car accessories, or hairstyles. But you can facilitate discussions around these topics and parlay that potential energy into teachable moments that reinforce the skills needed to pass the GED Tests. Empower your students to develop their own spaces (blogs, wikis, zines, or webcasts). Writing and communication lessons can easily weave in these online media.

Affirmation is your best tool for providing feedback. In general, beware of negative reinforcement. Competition between teacher/student is not an equal playing field: protect your learners’ fragile egos, and try to deal with misbehavior by diffusing conflict using nonverbal communication, such as self-explanatory facial expressions.

Mix it up. Young learners typically have short attention spans.

Set clear boundaries and enforce them. Rules may not always be welcomed, but they will convey an image of fairness that will help you establish trust. Because attendance is especially a problem with recent high school dropouts, set a standard for mandatory removal from the program after a certain number of missed classes. Those who are court ordered to attend class may need extra counseling to understand their responsibilities to themselves as well as the legal system.

Sometimes young people prefer interactions with peers rather than adults. Try group activities, or bring in outside mentors from a local college to conduct tutoring sessions. College students are often looking for community-based service learning opportunities.

Credentialing Out of School Youths

Minors need permission from their local Superintendent of Schools to take the GED Tests. Because many young people “just wanna take the test,” it is a good idea to have copies of their written permissions in order and filed away should you decide they are ready to take

Continued on page 14...
Plan to attend one of this summer’s Virginia Institutes for Lifelong Learning. These highly-attended conferences provide Virginia’s adult education and ESOL teachers, volunteers, tutors, and administrators with valuable professional development opportunities. Professionals from across Virginia will gather to network, share ideas, and get the most up-to-date information as well as practical teaching techniques that they will be able to take back to their classrooms.

For both conferences, a $30.00 registration fee and advanced registration are required. VAILL is supported by federal leadership funds from the Workforce Investment Act, Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, administered by the Virginia Department of Education, Office of Adult Education and Literacy, and Radford University.

How to Eat an Elephant! - Southwest VAILL

July 30 - August 1
Radford University
Radford, Virginia

T his year’s institute will focus on implementing content standards. In the course of three days, participants will choose from a variety of workshops, preview adult education texts and materials at publisher exhibits, and meet and network with their peers from diverse education programs in Virginia. There will be workshops for program managers, instructors, aides, and tutors.

The $30.00 registration fee includes sessions, exhibits, meals, and lodging. For more information, contact Jane Swing, jswing@radford.edu or (540) 831-6207.

Integration: The Immigrant Experience - VAIIIL-ESOL

F airfax Adult ESOL Program is pleased to present the Virginia Institute for Lifelong Learning English to Speakers of Other Languages conference, which will take place at George Mason University. In the course of two days, participants will choose from more than 30 workshops, preview adult ESOL texts and materials at publisher exhibits, and gather information about community organizations that serve the immigrant population in Northern Virginia.

This year’s theme is Integration: the Immigrant Experience. The conference will open with a keynote address from Mr. Noureddine Erradi, who is the Interculturalisation Coordinator for an adult education program in the Netherlands. In addition to his work in adult education, Mr. Erradi is also a documentary filmmaker. In his film Newcomers in Morocco, European educators, coordinators, and policy makers gain firsthand knowledge of what it is like to be newcomers in a non-European country. His films, which have won numerous awards throughout Europe, promote cross-cultural awareness and a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience.

On Tuesday, August 5th, the discussion of integration will continue with a panel of presenters who will share their experiences of immigrating to this country, the challenges they faced both in coming to the United States and adapting to American society, how they coped with these challenges, and the factors that have contributed to their successful integration into American culture and society.

The $30.00 registration fee includes sessions, exhibits, lunch both days, snacks, and parking.
The Mtaya Miracle School (continued from front cover)

Carolyn spent several days doing art projects with the children with the assistance of Connet. She spent the afternoons talking to the people of the village about their hopes and dreams for the future. On June 7, 2006, the dedication ceremony took place, which was attended by visiting dignitaries. The children performed and the women danced. The entire village came out to celebrate the miracle of the little school of Mtaya.

Carolyn returned to Mtaya in February and November of 2007 to check on the children’s progress in the school and also to talk to the community’s women, committees, and leaders about ways in which the village can become self-sufficient, healthy, and educated. They now have started several small businesses, including a sewing group, piggery, and community nutrition garden, which they hope will help the village become more self-sufficient.

Carolyn works with the Fairfax County Public Schools Adult ESOL program. Before her third trip to Mtaya, she showed a short video of the Mtaya project to several of the ESOL classes and then suggested that the students write letters to the villagers. The students often included photos of themselves and their families, artwork of their children, or even a page of stickers. They wrote about their countries, why they came to the United States, their jobs, and their dreams for the future. Upon being given the letters, the villagers were thrilled to receive communication from the world outside of their remote village. As soon as Carolyn handed out the letters, the villagers became completely absorbed in reading them. The villagers speak, read, and write English, so there was no problem in understanding the letters’ meaning. These letters, which expressed messages of hope, love, and encouragement, were cherished as prized possessions. Every so often during Carolyn’s visit, a villager would approach her and announce, “Madam, I didn’t get a letter.” For the next few days, people in the village were busy writing their return letters. When Carolyn was getting ready to leave, the villagers came running to her, pressing their letters to the ESOL students into her hands. This exchange of letters has been made three times and is now eagerly anticipated by the villagers and ESOL students alike.

Carolyn will be returning to Mtaya in the middle of June. During this visit, she hopes to arrange for the sewing group to make uniforms for the children to wear to school. They also want to start a soybean project and sell the soybeans to a church. It will be winter in Zambia, and many families do not have blankets. Carolyn hopes to get blankets for the village. She will be checking on the existing projects to make sure they are sustainable. And, finally, she will be spending time with the children and making plans for the future with the villagers.

Carolyn Kulisheck is an ESOL Specialist in Fairfax County Public Schools’ Adult and Community Education Program.

Approaching Young Adult Education (continued from page 12)

the GED Tests sooner than later. This may be the biggest motivation for your program to serve young learners. If you hold them to their intention to move through your program quickly, you can expect a high number of credentials with relatively short turn-over time in class.

Suggest that your learners take one GED section at a time. The learning experience of a single section will educate OSYs on the realities of the testing environment and format, and they won’t be disillusioned by the frustration of five long sections that they’re not prepared to pass.

Counsel your learners to stay for the entire allotted time during the GED test session. Young test takers often race through the questions and finish ahead of schedule. Not only is this a poor test-taking tactic, it’s also very disruptive to the other test takers. Points are awarded for corrected mistakes, so get students in the habit of revision and focusing on details.

Help OSYs transition into other programs that will continue their academic or workplace education. For some learners, information about job training programs may not take root immediately, but it is important to leave the door open for an eventual return to continuing education. Serious young learners will appreciate these referrals. If attending a four-year college is the next step for your learners, help them find out about the admissions requirements. Most universities require GED scores far exceeding the 2250 passing score. Advising your learners to score as high as possible on the GED Tests is always a good idea. Because young test-takers tend to make the highest scores, their best chance to make exceptional scores is now. Additionally, the achievement will raise their sense of self-worth and could come in handy during a future application process.

Conclusion

Adult education programs are a gateway to opportunity for people of all ages. Every learner who walks through our doors may not arrive with the ideal attitude or scholastic skill set for successful learning. However, adult educators are well-equipped to implement dynamic approaches and bring a wide variety of resources to bear to help our learners improve themselves. With strategic facilitation, the challenges OSYs present can be turned into strengths. What young learners lack in discipline, they make up for in potential. The choice is ours to help OSYs to earn their educational credential now. There is no time like the present to invest in the future.

Jason Guard is the GED Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

Spring 2008 .:PROGRESS
Three Cups of Tea

by Greg Mortenson / reviewed by Marcia Phillips

For many years, Greg Mortenson gave his profession on his passport as climber. As an athlete, he thrived on the excitement and the challenge of mountain climbing and spent several months each year conquering the great peaks. After an unsuccessful attempt at K-2 in September 1993 left him seriously ill and disoriented, he stumbled into the small Pakistani village of Korphe, where his recovery took several weeks. He was amazed at the open generosity of people living at the subsistence level and, having watched the village children holding impromptu classes outside, scratching in the dirt to write out math problems or Koran verses, he vowed to return the following year to build them a school.

Mortenson did have some idea of what he was embarking on. He had grown up in Africa, where his parents, originally teachers, built and staffed a hospital in Tanzania, so he understood the process: raising money, organizing materials, recognizing different cultures. Back in the States, he began to plan. His first attempts at fundraising – 580 letters – yielded exactly one check for $100. And free computer classes and access to a PC from a Pakistani emigrant who was eager to help. Mortenson lived cheaply, worked evenings and weekends as an emergency room nurse, and used his mountaineering connections to make presentations and publish articles to promote his mission. Jean Hoerni, one of the pioneers of the semiconductor/integrated circuit field, founder of Tel-edyne and Intel among other companies and, incidentally, a notable climber himself, heard of his project and presented Mortenson with the money ($12,000) he said he needed to build the school. Mortenson was set to go.

Except that he had to build a bridge before they could get the construction materials into Korphe. That took the first year; and, back in the States, his continuing fundraising led as much to frustration as it did to the occasional check. Mortenson was fortunate in his connection with Hoerni, who subsequently left him an endowment to start the Central Asia Institute. That first school led to others – at this point they have built more than 60 – all in the mountainous region of Afghanistan and Pakistan better known to Americans as the hiding area of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Not the safest place in the world for an American male, a Christian, and one who wishes to educate boys and girls.

Mortenson was well served by several of the village elders from Korphe and was astute enough to learn over the years from the Pakistanis with whom he came into contact. Support for the schools grew from village to village and strengthened by working carefully through the local tribal power structures. Mortenson sought out and won over many of the religious leaders in the area, getting their necessary approval, and made sure that the village and regional people were involved in the planning, building, and continuous functioning of the schools.

As the Foundation grew, Mortenson, in his new occupation as foundation director, and his colleagues suffered from some organizational and growing pains. Additionally, of course, the war in Afghanistan and the rise, fall, and rise again of the Taliban create concerns. But Mortenson knows that educating the young is the only way to break the cycle of violence and extremism.

The book is a little uneven in presentation; there are some shifts in voice that are a little startling. The story shows clearly how the United States fails in its diplomacy efforts by ignoring the need to educate the people to build democracy. As such, it offers an interesting sequel to Charlie Wilson’s War.

For those of us who understand the importance of an educated populace, who work through organizational difficulties to get the job done, and who enjoy seeing how one man can beat the odds, Three Cups of Tea is a good read.
I just didn't like school. It seemed like all I could do was get in trouble. I left school when I was a senior, just months before graduation. I decided to take the GED. Tests with the encouragement of family and friends. I passed the tests and graduated with honors. I realized that nothing is too far out of reach.

Garry Lee Deskins (right) of Honaker, Virginia, tells a story similar to the experiences of many of Virginia’s out of school youths. After a court order, Garry was enrolled in his local ISAEP program and earned his GED certificate. After this success, Garry encouraged his mother to take the tests. Jennifer Deskins had studied for the GED Tests in the past but failed to pass the math and science sections. On June 5, 2007, both Garry and Jennifer Deskins walked in their GED graduation ceremony; both are featured in Southwest Regional Adult Education’s Race to GED “Life Stories” promotional campaign. Garry hopes to attend SVCC and study to be a diesel mechanic.