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A successful endeavor Murdock Academy becomes viable alternative in Winchendon

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WINCHENDON — The name Murdock Academy for Success pretty much says it all.

The academy is designed, says director Kris Provost, "to provide an alternative learning environment in order to meet the needs of students who may require a nontraditional school setting."

"Most have academic challenges," he says, "but much of that can be chalked up to questions some are forced to ask themselves, like 'what am I going to eat tonight,' 'where am I going to sleep,' 'do I have to watch out for my brothers and sisters after school,' 'are mom and dad going to be high tonight,' 'how do I get to school today?'

These are questions they ask themselves on an almost daily basis.

This can also lead to behavioral challenges.

So, we try to come up with a game plan; try to give them more control."

"The biggest challenge for me, for the staff, is getting the kids to understand 'why school?'

They need to understand they're in control of their own destinies.

We try to get them to recognize their own possibilities.

The academy is a great safety net; a way to address the needs they have.

There's hope here."

Provost says each student is unique and each gets individual attention.

Some, however – those with similar challenges – meet together in small groups.

To meet those challenges, the academy has created groups for reading and writing, math and biology.

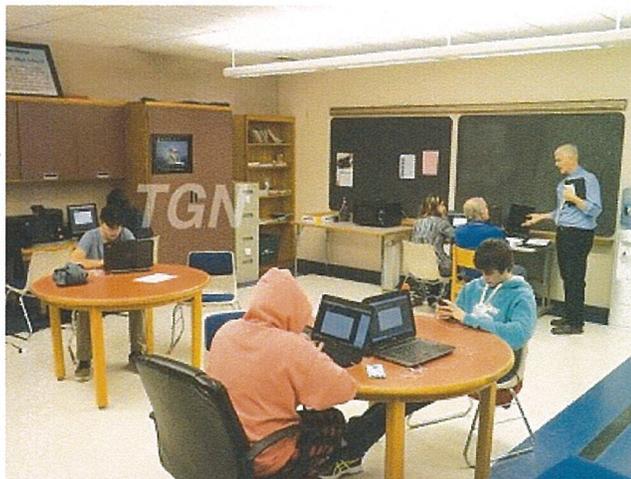
All of the students in the academy are in high school, freshmen through seniors.

"They all have to take and pass the MCAS," Provost explained, "but taking part in a group gets them into the practice of doing work and of respectfully sharing opinions.

It's a nice change of pace.

It gives them the chance to get to know each other and the teachers."

The Murdock Academy for Success was developed three years ago to meet the needs of at-risk students; those who were in danger



News staff photo by Greg Vine Students study their core subjects in a classroom at the Murdock Academy for

Success.

of dropping out or who had, in some cases, already dropped out.

It was also designed to give students who might be having difficulty fitting into the social milieu of a traditional high school setting, with its penchant for cliques and popularity contests.

"We've been able to recapture a number of students," says Provost.

"Right now, we're talking to two dropouts, trying to get them back.

But they've been working and like having a little income.

We're trying to show them they can work and go to school, as well as driving home the point their chances for advancement are pretty slim without a high school diploma."

There are currently 30 students in the academy, and not all are from Winchendon.

"We have a freshman from Gardner whose parents were desperately seeking an alternative school setting," says Provost.

"It seemed the alternatives in Gardner were oriented more toward behavior.

We address both behavior and academics.

He tried it over summer and really liked it, and he's done very, very well."

After seeing the success of this first student from the Chair City, the mother of another Gardner teen decided to enroll her son in the academy.

The program also has a student from the Ashburnham-Westminster Regional School District.

"Other districts are inquiring about the academy," Provost says.

"Some are interested in sending students here, some are interested in trying to duplicate the program."

Provost served as assistant director for two years under Director Steve Haddad, ascending to the director's position this year after Haddad was promoted to superintendent.

In addition to Provost, the staff includes four teachers, two paraprofessionals and two half-time tutors.

"The academy truly does give these students hope," concludes Provost.

"To see the rekindling of hope in their lives tells me they'll do the work they need to achieve their goals."

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