

# Come Back Kids

**This program seeks out dropouts who had no plans to re-enroll and offers them a flexible, personalized educational environment that leads to a diploma and a plan for the future.**

**W**hen asked why she dropped out of high school her senior year, Areli Soto rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “Just dumb. I think I was just lazy.” Within a short time, Areli had tried to re-enroll in school, asking to transfer to her district’s continuation high school.

“My counselor told me it was too late. But he told me about this program, and now I’m going to finish.” With concrete plans to go on to college to pursue a career, possibly in criminal justice, she says, “Here at Come Back Kids, they treat you like in real life. It’s flexible, for our jobs. If your hours interfere, all you have to do is give the teacher a call.”

Thirty credits short for graduation when she arrived, Areli is halfway to completion in one month. Although she works part-time at the local mall, Areli routinely chooses to bring work home so that she can finish school faster. “It’s all at your own pace.”

Now beginning its second year of operation, Come Back Kids – a program offered by the Riverside County Office of Education – might best be described as an alterna-

tive to alternative education programs. The available seats in continuation high schools in most districts are limited. The schools often have waiting lists to enroll, and many do not accommodate fifth-year seniors after their fall semester, if at all.

## **Students can get re-coded as graduates**

By recruiting students who have disenrolled from high schools throughout the county, CBK specifically seeks out those the home districts have lost track of, or do not plan to pursue to re-enroll. Then, when students have completed their diplomas or GED, the districts are notified, and are able to re-code them as graduates or completers, thus reducing their dropout rates.

Come Back Kids is the brainchild of Riverside County Superintendent of Schools Kenneth Young, who conceived of the idea through conversations with a number of high school principals and superintendents from the county’s 23 school districts. With

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*By Terry Wilhelm*

greater accountability to report and improve graduation and dropout rates under NCLB, “I kept hearing that the districts don’t have the resources to thoroughly track kids who withdraw. Many of them aren’t re-enrolling anywhere.”

Young also talked with students on the campuses of comprehensive high schools, and had numerous conversations with students in a class he was volunteer-teaching in the evenings at an adult school campus. Many of them were struggling to juggle jobs, schooling, and sometimes babies or young children. He says, “They needed a different educational environment, and a different kind of classroom structure. Come Back Kids is designed to be more engaging, but rigorous.”

With a passion for improving the lives of young people, Superintendent Young cites statistics showing that most dropouts are doomed to a lifetime of severely limited earnings, have children that tend to repeat the cycle of poverty, and that dropouts are more prone to turn to drugs and criminal activity.

Less than half of the county offices of education in California offer WASC-accredited high school programs. RCOE High School became accredited in 2006, and CBK is among the RCOEHS programs that offer a diploma. CBK also provides support for students who have completed all high school requirements in their home districts or RCOEHS, but still need to pass the California High School Exit Exam.

In a number of cases, CBK students had already dropped out twice – once from their comprehensive high school, then from another alternative education program. RCOE Coordinator-Principal Debra Sacks says, “When the kids come to orientation, we tell them, ‘We’re your new extended family.’ If they start missing class, we call them. We adjust the schedule so it works for them. Each student has an Individual Learning Plan, and we spend time up front developing the ILP with each one. We are all about what happens after they finish, not just finishing.”

The ILP includes numerous options for long-term goal-setting, including a diploma from RCOE High School, completion of a

GED – pinning down the anticipated date and location – obtaining a full- or part-time job, enrollment in a two-year or four-year post-secondary academic program, or job certification or a job training program. The ILP also includes a detailed, 90-day plan that is regularly reviewed with the student

but it turned out not to be accredited. Now I’m going to go to Riverside Community College, and then from there, get my B.A.”

After one month at CBK, Jonathan’s goal is to finish in just one more month. He says, “I will either go into criminal justice, or get my bachelor’s in business so I can be a bet-



**Graduates of the 2009 class of Come Back Kids found the program to be engaging, but rigorous.**

by CBK staff, as well as areas of “transition preparation” – such as SAT or ACT exams, work experience, job shadowing, interview preparation, and/or completion of college applications and financial aid forms.

#### **Success leads to program expansion**

Currently in nine locations throughout Riverside County, CBK will expand in 2009-10 to at least three more sites. CBK launched as a pilot at the Mt. San Jacinto Regional Learning Center in November 2008, offering an easy transition to the Mt. San Jacinto Community College, including the potential for concurrent enrollment. Superintendent Young says, “The other Centers wanted it immediately.”

Each student is clearly on a personal mission. Jonathan Campos smiles as he says, “If you want to come here, be sure you really want to concentrate on your work. I was 16 or 17 when I left high school. I was always in trouble at school. I just wanted money, so I was working two jobs. I decided to go back to school, so I enrolled in a private college,

ter manager than the ones I’ve had!” Age 20, Jonathan says that he pictured the CBK program like his memories of high school. “I didn’t know if I wanted to be around a bunch of little kids. But it’s nothing like that.”

Indeed, the students barely look up when a visitor comes into their classroom. Completely immersed in their individual tasks, some are working on math, some on English, others on economics or government. Some are studying for the sections they need to pass on the CAHSEE. Most are working on a diploma; a few are working on a GED.

Amelia Herrera relates, “This is just what I needed – I did too much socializing in high school. But I am totally comfortable with this teacher. You can ask her anything. She would never embarrass you or put you on the spot.”

With her sights set on cosmetology, Amelia needs her diploma. “I dropped out my junior year. I came here with only freshman credits. Right now I’m working on two subjects. I do one here, and the other one at home. The main thing I’d say about this

program to other kids who have dropped out is that if you want to do it, you can.”

Single father Roberto Herrera has an eight-month-old child and a full-time job at a collision repair center. Still, he is able to do a little classwork at home in addition to the time he attends his CBK class, working on U.S. government, economics and mathematics. He has passed the CAHSEE but still needs between 30 and 40 credits.

Although there is no formal break for socializing, he says, “They know you. Everybody gives you a ‘What’s up?’ but there’s no playing games here.” Roberto is completely absorbed in his studies. Asked what his goals are, he quickly replies, “I want to move up in the business.”

Flexibility is a foundational aspect of CBK, to accommodate the needs of students with jobs and children. For example, the official summer classroom hours at the Arlington Learning Center in Riverside are 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Thursday, but students may come earlier or stay later. They may take their books and classwork

home, but homework is not required. Tests are taken in the classroom, with rigor equal to that in a comprehensive high school.

Students are assessed as soon as they enroll, and those who have difficulties with basic math or reading are immediately placed in acceleration programs to close their skill gaps. Sacks says, “It’s much safer here than in a comprehensive high school, where you have to fit in, be cool, and not be noticed [for skills that are lacking].”

### Teachers motivate and encourage kids

The teachers themselves are essential to the success of the program. Sacks recounts the characteristics the CBK design team was seeking when it began the task of recruiting teachers from the ranks of RCOE’s alternative education programs.

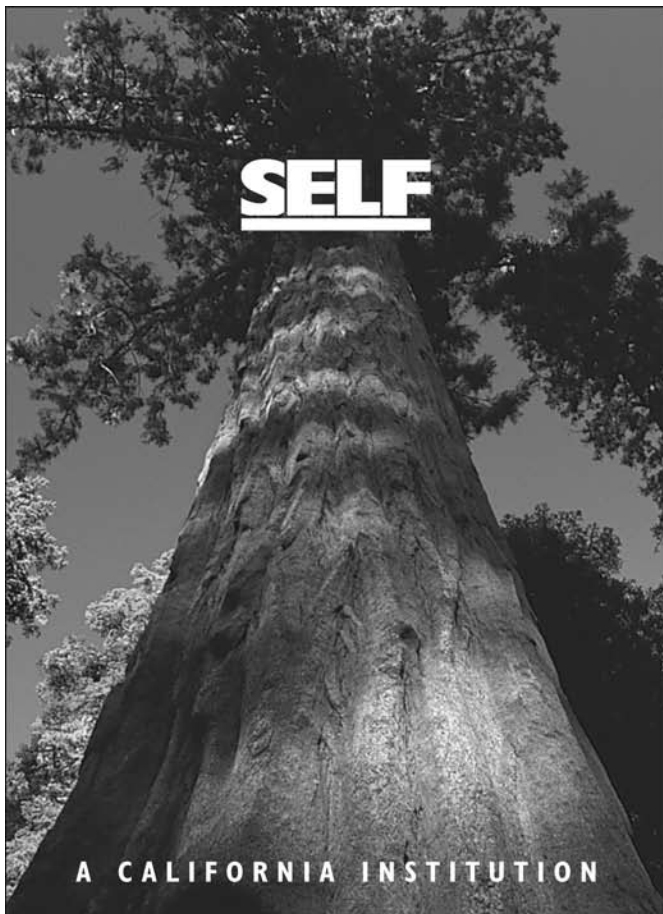
“Some have a focus in special education. All of them have excellent classroom management skills. They are very structured, but they each have the ability to encourage and motivate kids. That is so important, because so many of the kids say they never

connected with anyone in school – it’s why they dropped out,” Sacks said.

“Our teachers are able to empower young people, and guide them in the direction of whatever is next for them, after this. All of us are coaches. We want to ensure that the curriculum is taught, but with creativity. These kids deserve to learn the standards, and be prepared for their next steps. Above all, kids are in charge of themselves and their program.”

Another striking characteristic of CBK teachers is commitment. At the Arlington Learning Center, Coordinator-Principal Art Paz tells of his teacher’s willingness to meet students after normal school hours. “If one of them calls and says, ‘They changed my hours at work this week. I don’t get off until 5 p.m.’ She’ll tell them, ‘I’ll wait here for you until 5:30.’”

Research shows that more than 11 busloads of students drop out daily in California. Shannon Wells of Key Data Systems has conducted extensive data analysis on dropouts. Her analysis shows that approximately



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