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News

JEdI aimed at students

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In 2005, over 8,100 Arkansas students received instruction while “locked up” in one of the state’s juvenile detention facilities.

A sobering statistic, especially for the educators who must deal with the growing population of students who, handicapped by sometimes horrendous home situations and learning disabilities, fail to make the grade.

“We have a huge population of students who are behind, typically three to five years from where they should be,” said Jacque Reese, JEdI director for the Arkansas Department of Education, Special Education Unit. “The state department recognized that we needed to give these students a boost, and that is what our program is designed to do.”

That program is the JEdI (Juvenile Education Initiative), a remedial education project for incarcerated and “at risk” youth. Historically, detention education across the country has been under-funded and operated no distinct instruction model. As they were ran under the supervision of county officials, Arkansas’ 15 juvenile detention centers all worked with different curriculums, according to Reese, who said the need for a single curriculum and supportive approach was evident.

The JEdI began in 2001 as a Web-based, remedial math and reading program, called SkillsTutor, piloted by the Special Education Unit in Sebastian County. The use of SkillsTutor proved so effective that the state implemented the program in all of its then 15 detention centers. Reese said one of the most important aspects of the program is the student’s ability to work with the same program when they return to school.

“We are trying to create change with students. Some of our kids come from horrendous family lives. If we place them back into that situation with no support, they aren’t going to do so well,” she said. “One of the long term things we try to do, is try to provide support for re-entry.”

The JEdI program is now used outside of the detention center setting as a remedial tool for special needs and “at-risk” youth. The program is currently in 135 schools across the state.

“Arkansas is a model program for short-term resident facilities,” Reese said. “With the emergence of No Child Left Behind, everything is becoming data driven. You have to show you are successful. We show a 15 to 20 percent improvement from pre- to post-test.”

A group of special educators and JEdI trainers are currently wrapping up a three-day training seminar at the Timber Ridge Lodge in Charlotte. The seminar, was led by Reese and Dr. Patty Kohler, assistant professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education at the University of Central Arkansas. Teachers from juvenile facilities, special education supervisors and correction administrators from across the state attended the seminar where they were not only taught about the history of special education and the JEdI, but also how to cope with the special challenges incarcerated and “at-risk” students present.

Reese said Batesville’s JEdI program is one of the most successful in the state, adding this was the second time the group had trained in or near Batesville.

“We love the lodge (Timber Ridge Lodge at Charlotte) because it is a wonderful setting, and it offers very little in the way of distractions,” she said.

For more information on the JEdI program or special education, call the Special Education Unit at (501) 682-4221.