

STUDENTS EARN GED BEHIND BARS

ONLY 20 OUT OF 450 INMATES WHO APPLIED ARE ACCEPTED INTO THE PROGRAM

BY MERARI CALDERON RUIZ

It's difficult to concentrate in class when surrounded by cement walls, wearing a prison uniform and being watched by guards around the corner.

But that's how class is for 20 students working on their GED at the Clackamas County Jail.

The Clackamas County Sheriff's Office has a connec-

tion with Clackamas Community College, which gives an opportunity to people who have been incarcerated to earn their GED.

Since winter of 2000, there has been a contract with CCC and the jail in which students have the chance to take classes towards their GED.

Sergeant Freeman said, "We wanted to open it up to where everyone is eligible to go, it doesn't matter their age or if they're mandated to go."

Potential students go through an application process to become students. A maximum of 20 students are allowed in class, both men and women.

Deputy Norm Johnson is in charge of the selection process.

All the details are critical, from classification to education. Inmates who have already earned their diploma have the opportunity to tutor other students.

"I look through them and I pick 20 students out of about 450 inmates we have here," said Johnson. "Every week we lose people, because they get released, because their time is up or sometimes they get transported to another county. Pretty much we keep 20 inmates in the class and keep it full."

Lauren Zavrel, a CCC instructor, works part time in the skills development department and has been teaching at the jail for two years.

In order to pass, students study math, reading, writing, language arts and social studies. The classroom is unlike anything on campus.

"There is a disproportionate number of students who are incarcerated who have documented and usually undocumented learning disabilities, so you can imagine what it's like if half of your students have ADHD and, on top of that, other learning disabilities, confidence issues, addiction problems," Zavrel said.

"People in jail are very distracted because they are thinking about the past, they are thinking about their future, they're thinking about their families. They're thinking about where they are going to live when they get out, so the environment is very chaotic."

The instructors have a difficult job creating a consistent and conducive learning environment.

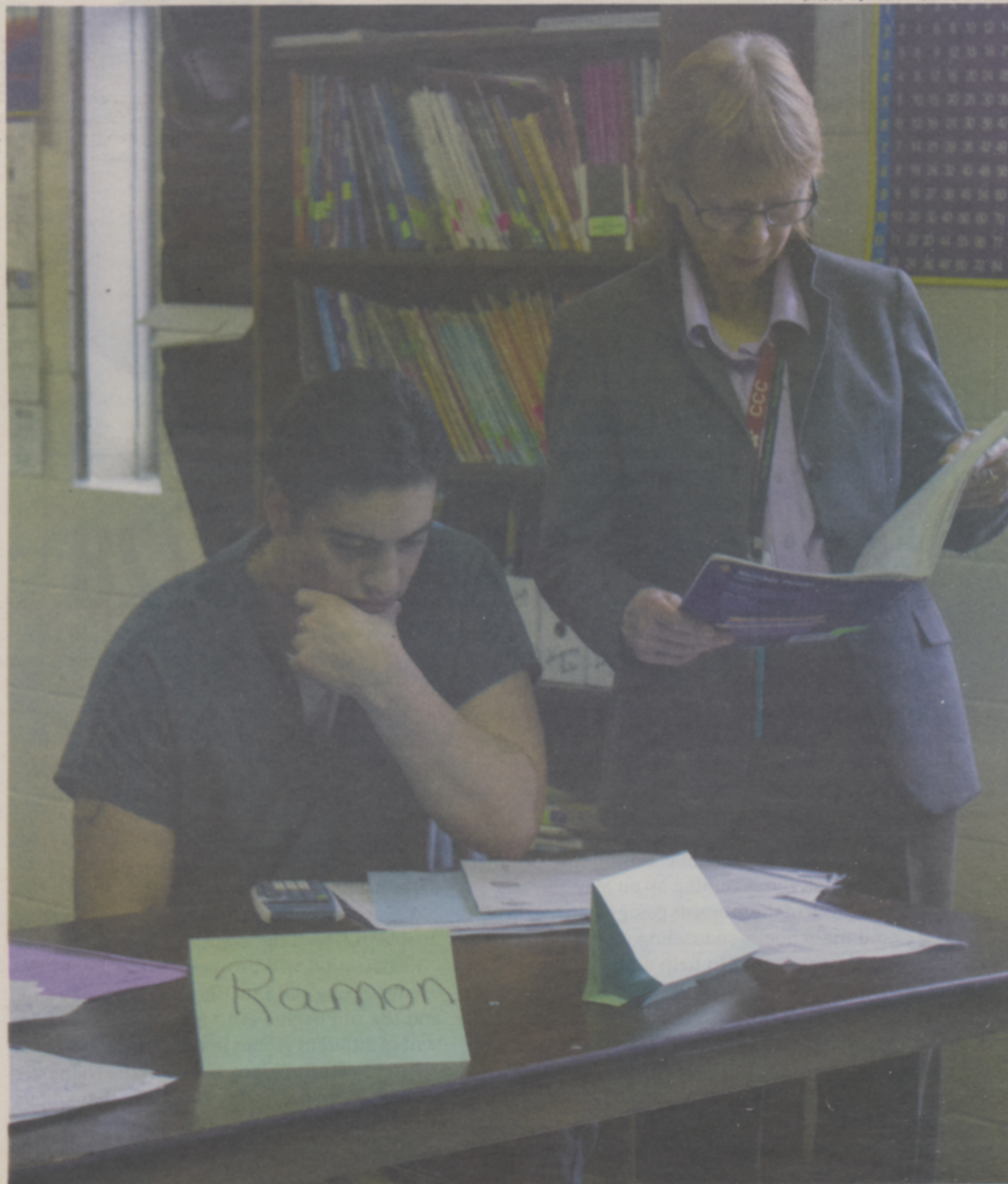
"I'm asking them to learn algebra and a lot of them are just learning how to multiply," Zavrel said.

Even when things get frustrating in the classroom, the teachers are never alone.

"I had a fight once after a class and it wasn't anything really serious, but it just makes you think," said Zavrel. "It reminds you where you are, and that things can happen sometimes that are not within your control. Given what happened last October with Umpqua Community College, I was here that day, and the thought went through my mind that I usually feel safer teaching in jail than I do on campus because it is a controlled environment."

"If you have a problem you press a button, you pick up a phone and people come charging in ready to diffuse the situation, so that I'm completely removed from having to deal with that."

photo by Merari Calderon Ruiz



Assistant teacher Sammy Warner helps inmate Isaiah Wake with his math to prepare for his GED test.