

Kennedy Continued from A1

in a national education system that ranks students by tests scores and pays schools a dollar amount per head. In Cottage Grove, it's \$143 per student, per day.

The start

There are 81 alternative high schools in the state of Oregon. Kennedy joined their ranks after Al Kennedy saw his former students playing a knife game outside a class they were supposed to be in. The kids had been part of the Cottage Grove High School's forestry program, led by Kennedy, before it was cut from the curriculum. "... All of the redneck kids in Cottage Grove took forestry," Kennedy, a teacher of 45 years, said. "So, I had the badass boys and then they canceled forestry and I watched my badass boys go into traditional programs and stink them up and disrupt them because they were confrontational and ornery," he said. Kennedy approached the administration. He was given a classroom and all of the "bad" kids. Since then, Kennedy has seen the program grow from a classroom of students, to being recognized as a school and to now having their own campus. "I drove the model-T and they are in a Cadillac," he says of the transformation.

"In alternative school the rule is: you pursue your passion and I'll turn it into math, science and social studies... Like a kid comes up and says, I'm into tattooing. I said, that's great. I want a report on the history of tattooing next week," he said. "At a traditional school it is more like being in the marching band and you've

got to stay in step and play your instrument at the same time. At alternative school it's not like being in a band, it's like taking private music lessons," he said. While ideologies and teaching methods between Kennedy and the traditional Cottage Grove High School are easily compared, the significance of statistics on student performance is more difficult to pin down. Kennedy's four-year graduation rate for the 2015-2016 school year was 16.67 percent. Cottage Grove High School's was 93.62 percent—second in the state of Oregon.

"When I look at these statistics, I compare them to other alternative high schools," said South Lane Superintendent Krista Parent. "We're having kids finish. Many of them dropped out and we got them back by offering Kennedy. If it had not been for Kennedy, they would have been high school drop outs with an eighth or ninth grade education," she said. Parent also noted the nature of Kennedy, stating that students often arrive there with large educational gaps. The school's five-year graduation rate for the same time period in 2015-2016 was 26.87 percent; more than a 10 percentage point jump.

"When you look at the Cottage Grove High School graduation rate for the last three years, it's been in the top three in the state. But, if not for Kennedy, those kids would have dropped out and counted as drop outs for Cottage Grove High School's drop-out rate," Parent said. The 2015-2016 drop-out rate for Cottage Grove High School is less than one percent. Kennedy's was 19.8 percent.

Ketcher acknowledges that the goal is to send kids to college, but that may not be feasible for every Kennedy student. They face poverty, (25 percent of the students attending Kennedy are considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act and one-third of the district's homeless population attends the school), teen pregnancy, unstable home lives and learning disabilities but Kennedy has become more than a statistic. The reasons students find themselves there are varied and weighted by each individual student's passions, progress and personal struggles.

One of them

And there is no teacher or administrator more familiar with what the students are going through than Ketcher. One of four kids, Ketcher grew up on a farm in Minnesota with a family that did not have money and did not put an emphasis on education. Her mom dropped out of school the first week of freshman year in high school and her dad, in the first week of his sophomore year. And so, when Ketcher walked into kindergarten on the first day she did not know any of the letters in the alphabet. She didn't begin reading until she was in the third grade.

"I was in Special Ed not because I had a learning disability but because I was a product of poverty," she said. But in fifth grade when a teacher spent extra time working with her, her outlook changed. "I had a teacher that stayed after school with me every day and read with me and cheered me up. And when

I would cry she would be like, 'I'm not going to take that, you're going to wipe those tears away and we're going to read this book and we're going to do it right now,'" she said. It was then that Ketcher decided she was going to be a teacher. With her family living paycheck to paycheck, Ketcher earned straight A's in high school, was on the cheer team, worked 30 hours a week and was excited and ready to go to college. "My mom thought that going to college was the dumbest thing I could ever do. She thought, why would you pay money to go to school. I would have paid money to get out of school," she said. Ketcher got her degree at Arizona State and on graduation day, was offered a teaching job. Of her 23 cousins, she is the only one to go to college but then, and now, Ketcher believes in the power of education. She believes that it offers students a way forward and that it can provide a path to success. And it is why she chose Kennedy. "This is what took me out of the loop of poverty and so I hope that kids will grasp onto that," said Ketcher. "These kids are me."

And they know that. On a sunny day in September, a student walked into Kennedy's main office—a modular on the back half of campus manned by Jolie Presley with an office for Ketcher that has a separate entrance, often utilized by students, slipping by Presley—with a problem. He needed to log into a computer program and was hoping for some guidance from Ketcher. He got it. Like an older sister who gives a shove, a laugh and soothes the sting with a pat on the back, she told him to hurry along in his work. He was too close to graduation to drag his feet. "He has like, three projects left that he can easily finish," she said later. A handful of projects between a student and graduation is a cause for celebration for alternative school instructors but for students, it's often more daunting. "They like it here, it's comfortable and graduation means leaving," she said, noting that the future isn't always mapped out for students by the time they are closing in on the end of their high school career.

Cottage Grove's economy revolves largely around the school district itself. It's the largest employer in town with Weyerhaeuser—the local lumber mill, coming in a close second. Salaried jobs are few and far between while hourly positions in the retail and service industry are mostly occupied—often by individuals a decade or more removed from high school. The closest city, Eugene, offers more opportunity but is 20 minutes north on the highway and is home to the University of Oregon which churns out interns, willing entry-level workers and comes with a \$3,224 per term price tag.

How it Works

When each student first gets to Kennedy, they meet with Ketcher to talk about why they are there and to figure out what program they should be placed in. The 94 students at Kennedy are divided into three distinct programs: Odysseyware, the cohorts and the General Education Development (GED) program.

Odysseyware is where students will likely first end up. The five day a week, half-day program has 15 students in the morning and 15 students in the afternoon. It is a computer-based classroom that has students who are credit-deficient, start work on their own as they begin the process of catching up to where they need to be in school.

"Odysseyware is a perfect opportunity for kiddos who have anxiety," said Ketcher. "However, Odysseyware isn't a program where you earn a ton of credit so it is not a long-term solution. It's just temporary until they feel comfortable to move into the cohort."

The cohort model most closely resembles the traditional high school model. There are three cohorts with about 15 students each, primarily made up of juniors

and seniors, that go to their three core classes of math, science and English for an hour and a half four days a week for the entirety of the year.

Cohort students also participate in Spark programs — which resemble electives and are an hour each day — throughout each term. The Spark programs cover a range of topics that students are interested in and they get to help shape the curriculum for the coming weeks. The Sparks that are currently being taught are focused on storytelling, music, martial arts, green living and arts and crafts. Additionally, on rotating



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