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FORSYTH CUMMING

Mountain Education gives high schoolers options

Program offers small, accessible classes and lots of support.

By H.M. Cauley
For the AJC

What began in 1993 as an educational collaboration among three north Georgia counties has taken on a new role to support high school students across the northern part of state.

The Mountain Education program was launched in Fannin, Towns and Union counties to support students who weren't succeeding in traditional classrooms.

"We were formed to look at how to create an option to meet the needs of these communities," said Joe Cash, the program's superintendent. "We spent our first two decades figuring out what it would look like."

One idea was clear from the beginning: Mountain Education was not an alternative school.

"Kids come to us for any reason you can imagine," said Phil Schmidt, the program's co-administrator and principal in Forsyth County. "Some are high achievers who want to work at a faster pace. Maybe their high school just isn't working out. Maybe for financial reasons, they have to work during the day. Some have their own kids and are dealing with childcare issues."

The program gradually expanded until 2012, when it changed significantly as Georgia established a charter schools



Instructor Andra Cruse works with students Sergio Vergas and Ella Kitchen on math concepts. Mountain Education has about 235 students in Forsyth, and most classes are led by teachers who work for that county's school system. Classes are held in the evenings. COURTESY

commission.

"With a charter, we had access to state funding that we used to expand into other counties," said Cash. "As of this summer, we're now in 18 counties."

This summer also marked the change from a charter school to a new state designation called a completion special school. Three special school regions were created, including the one in the north served by Mountain Education. Under the new designation, Mountain Education can

enroll any student in its region as well as in any area not served by the other two.

Students younger than 18 must first enroll in their local high school, and the credit they earn is transferred back to that school, even though 100% of their experience can be through Mountain Education. "A student may never set foot in that school, but that's where the credit goes back and where their diploma is from," said Cash.

Students 18 and older can enroll

directly into the program. In both cases, students meet the same educational standards set by the state.

"The academics don't change," said Cash. "But we add value because of the way we approach the academics."

The program provides each student with a mentor and a support system. Students set their own pace bolstered by virtual tutoring sessions and small, in-person classes held from 4:30-8:30 p.m. Monday

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through Thursday. They also have access to social workers who monitor their progress and address any concerns that arise.

"We have graduation coaches and partners, and social workers," said Kim Barnes, the dual enrollment coordinator at the Forsyth County campus. "We saturate students with a lot of adult support and encouragement."

Mountain Education has about 235 students in Forsyth, and most classes are led by teachers who work for that county's school system.

"They teach all day then come over here in the evenings," said Barnes. And that won't change with the new designation. "We'll be doing what we've always done: feeding students dinner, finding out what crises are going on in their lives, building positive relationships and offering opportunities for counseling. We'll still be in their faces a lot."

Information about Mountain Education is online at mymec.org.