



## “We’re working to empower teachers”: An interview with David Domenici



*OYA Director Fariborz Pakseresht welcomes educators to the CEEAS conference in Portland.*

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The [Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings](#) (CEEAS) hosted a meeting the last week in July for juvenile justice educators from seven states. The conference was held in the Portland headquarters of the Multnomah Education Service District (MESD), which operates Three Lakes High School at Oak Creek YCF and Ocean Dunes High School at Camp Florence.

How does CEEAS help Oregon’s at-risk youth? In the words of OYA Education Coordinator Frank Martin, “We have specifically asked them for assistance in areas where we lack expertise. For example, we needed their help addressing education services of youth with special needs. We also network with states that partner with CEEAS to share information on programs, challenges, innovations and technologies to help us achieve positive youth outcomes. We also gain insights into education requirements within youth correctional facilities that help us keep within the law.”

CEEAS also sponsors creative contests for youthful offenders, including “Words Unlocked,” a national poetry competition

[whose winner for the past two years has been a youth held in an OYA facility.](#) (Listen to the National Public Radio [interview with this year's winner](#) from Rogue Valley YCF.)

[CEEAS Executive Director David Domenici](#) led the meeting in Portland. We sat down with him to discuss his views on educating juvenile offenders.

### **Q. What’s the Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings doing in Portland?**

A. We’re sponsoring a technology camp called ["Unjammed -- A Blended Learning Initiative."](#) We’re working with seven states and their juvenile justice agencies and their education partners. We’re working to empower teachers with high quality, highly adaptive technology tools that will help schools become more engaging and to help students improve their skills. We’re also working with agency level administrators and leaders to help them improve their policies so teachers and students can have greater access to appropriate websites and appropriate educational content.

### **Q. Who is represented here?**

A. We have great representation here from across the country. Moving east to west, we have staff from Massachusetts, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Oregon, Los Angeles County and Alaska.

### **Q. Why did you choose to meet in Oregon?**

A. We’ve worked closely with the Oregon Youth Authority over the last 18 months. They’ve made terrific strides and they’ve been real leaders in this field of trying to use technology to empower students and to help them advance their skills. So OYA is an agency that’s involved in the initiative. Portland is a beautiful place to be and the local school district [MESD] also stepped in to let us use their conference space, which is really beautiful.

### **Q. How we educate incarcerated populations seems to be getting more attention lately. What’s the reason?**

A. I think two factors are happening at one time. On one level, a lot of the hard work and reform around juvenile justice over the last 10 years has been around terms of incarceration and around reducing over-incarceration of young people who shouldn’t be there. That’s been incredibly hard work and to some degree

people are starting to see the tide turning a little bit. Most states, including Oregon, have 30 to 50 percent fewer kids locked up now than seven or eight years ago. In most instances, there's a lot less really egregious stuff. We have less violence in our youth facilities, we believe we have fewer sexual assaults in our youth facilities. So I think people are starting to ask, well, what's next? We know keeping young people in facilities a long time isn't good, and now we're starting to ask ourselves, what are we really doing while they're with us, which is to help us fulfill our rehabilitative mission, and that's to help them to be successful after they leave?

**Q. What does the big picture look like in juvenile justice education?**

A. One overarching theme is that all of these young people are eventually going home, and how can we prepare them to make that transition between the facility and the community? Technology can help us a lot. If we know what the local school district is doing and where a kid is going back to, even though it might be 100 miles away in some other part of Oregon, how can we make the education that we're delivering start to tie in with what the education will look like when that young person is released? Using technology appropriately can help you do that, because you can potentially have the exact same curriculum, the exact same materials available and really connected, so as they transition back to the community, things are aligned, regardless of where you are located. So tools like [Education Portal](#) can be accessed inside a facility or when you're out. Those tools start to mitigate that boundary between a facility, a stepped-down program and home.

**Q. How does OYA measure up in terms of educating its youth?**

A. The Oregon Youth Authority and the school districts working with them are doing some pretty amazing stuff. We see a lot of engagement by OYA and its education partners. It's an indication that they have people who work in facilities who want to do engaging, meaningful, relevant work with kids that allow them to start expressing

themselves. Because it's at that moment that kids start to feel comfortable and confident in expressing themselves that you can start working with them in the areas they're challenged in. So I see a lot of buy-in with OYA and its education partners around this notion that you have to find a way to meet kids, engage with kids, help them find a passion. Once you have that, then you can say, what are the things we need to start working on here? Is it substance abuse, is it low academic achievement? OYA is also doing an immense amount with technology, which is really wonderful. [For more on how OYA is using technology to enhance education, read the [story starting on page 6](#) of the October 2013 issue of Inside OYA.]



*OYA Education Coordinator Frank Martin (left) with CEEAS Executive Director David Domenici.*

**Q. How do you measure success in juvenile education?**

A. A lot of alternative schools, including youth in facilities, got taken off the accountability grid. Some of that was done for good reason, because the accountability measures weren't that effective for them, like year-end state tests. But once they got off the grid, there weren't any accountability measures, so they were off doing who knows what. And our position is that we need to develop some new accountability measures for alternative schools, for youth in correctional facilities, that are meaningful. For example, instead of measuring just how many kids get a high school diploma, you should measure those kids who come to you who are diploma eligible. That means they're approximately in 11th grade, they're going to be with you for a year, shouldn't all those kids get their diploma while they're with you? We would like states to develop that kind of measure, not just how many kids got a diploma. Develop better processes to take an agreed-upon assessment at entry, an agreed-upon assessment on exit, and shouldn't they be improving at a rate of at least one grade

level per year while they're in your care? And that should be your measure. You should be using a growth measure of achievement, not a flat measure of attainment.

**Q. Let's say you're involved in juvenile education but you don't happen to be at this conference in Portland. What can you do to stay informed?**

A. One of our goals through this initiative and others is to help reduce isolation and build support networks so that teachers who often work in small, remote places can have a peer network that they can communicate and share with. We use a tool called [www.edmodo.com](http://www.edmodo.com). All the teachers at this tech camp now are part of an Edmodo group. It's sort of like Facebook for teachers. They have their own group, which is all these teachers from around the country, they now know each other, they can communicate with each other, post things for each other, they can respond back, they can share lesson plans, and that works for all the teachers. For the education administrators, it's the same thing. We are trying to support a network for education administrators in this space so they're not feeling isolated. They can come to retreats like this on occasion, and then, using technology, find ways to stay in touch and communicate and support each other.