

PROJECT Partnership for All Student Success

By Steve Arel

U.S. Army Cadet Command

RADCLIFF, Ky. – Junior ROTC, for nearly a century, has taken armies of impressionable high schoolers and pointed them in the right direction.

Boys and girls who lacked focus and drive found discipline and determination on the way to becoming better students and productive citizens.

The regimented program annually translates in results: 96 percent of JROTC Cadets graduate high school, and just as many go on to

college.

National educators, having long recognized the benefits of JROTC, hope the Army program proven to transform young, troubled students into good ones and good students into great ones will have as significant an impact on an even younger group. The U.S. Army launched a landmark program in March to target those in sev-

enth- and eighth-grade, considered the time in a young person's educational development where they start considering the path toward a career or the path toward dropping out.

Known as Project PASS, the program was officially unveiled amid considerable fanfare at North Middle School, one of the first host sites. Against a backdrop of banners featuring students and in front of a crowd of several hundred people, national leaders, including Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, heralded the initiative as a potential life-changer for students in need of structure and motivation.

The program will go a long way in helping students "achieve whatever their dreams may be," Casey said. "America is a lot of things today, but America is still a country of dreams."

The challenges facing students who are part of Project PASS are not unique, Duncan said. The difference for them is the opportunity they have through the initiative.

"There are no good jobs for dropouts," he said. "If we can provide opportunities before it's too late ... I can promise you they're going to be successful going forward."

Hardin County Schools was one of four districts to launch Project PASS. Other ceremonies have been held at school districts in Christian County, Ky., Miami-Dade, Fla., Gwinnett County, Ga., and Garden City, Kan.

Project PASS – short for Partnership for All Student Success – is an umbrella for high schools that feature Junior ROTC and middle schools with a new program called the Junior Leadership Corps. The JLC actually started in January at two northern Hardin County middle schools, North Middle and James T. Alton, and boasts an enrollment of 165 students.

The JLC, an elective course, functions much like the high school program. Its curriculum is patterned after JROTC, students wear uniforms weekly like their JROTC counterparts and JLC students participate in extra-curricular activities and community projects – like JROTC.

A PASS community coordinator will oversee day-to-day operations of the Junior Leadership Corps and work with various organizations and businesses locally to generate support and establish relationships with the program.

Middle schools that feed into high schools with Junior ROTC programs were chosen for PASS. The intent is to introduce students to a program of leader and character development using mili-



Then-Army Chief of Staff George Casey talks to students before the PASS kickoff as Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, looks on.

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ows, N.Y., school had swept the armed and unarmed crowns for four straight years until that run was interrupted in 2010, when the unarmed team – known as Patriot Pride – finished second.

“That pushed us so much to work harder,” Alisa Ho, one of the Patriot Pride’s commanders, said after the competition held at the Prince George’s Sports & Learning Complex. “We’re happy to get the title back.”

Despite being the largest Army JROTC program in the country, Francis Lewis faces constant hurdles. Its school is one of the most overcrowded in New York, forcing Cadets to practice in a low-ceiling cafeteria and away from the winter chill and requiring students to rarely practice together during the week because of split school schedules.

Then, after the teams each won national championships last spring, many key performers graduated.

Patriot Pride barely regained its crown, edging last year’s winner, North Miami Beach Senior High School, by just four points. Teams can earn up to 1,000 points in each of four cat-

egories – color guard, regulation, inspection and exhibition. Francis Lewis received 3,911 to North Miami’s 3,907.

On the armed side, Francis Lewis’s Patriot



James Madison High School JROTC Cadets from San Antonio perform during the Western Regional Drill Competition in Phoenix. The team took second overall in the armed and unarmed divisions.

Photo by John Wayne Liston

Guard extended its region record winning streak with a sixth consecutive overall championship. It had a handier victory, beating out Union High

School 3,742 to 3,674.

Cadet leaders with both Francis Lewis teams admitted they still had weaknesses. But they were encouraged with the progress of their newcomers and younger participants, especially with only a handful of seniors leading the way.

“This year has been the hardest,” said Jeanne Chin, another Patriot Guard commander. “In previous years we never worry. This year, we’re definitely worried. But I’ve never been so proud.”

Roughly 1,000 Cadets from 32 schools in 12 states took part in the annual region competition. The meet features a diverse mix of Cadets, from programs of varying sizes and of different skill levels.

Corey Hagans picked up a number of pointers watching other teams that he hopes his Blythewood High School teammates will incorporate into its routines. The senior described the region meet, win or lose, as a tune-up for the national competition.

“Nothing compares to nationals,” Hagans said. “There are some great schools we’re competing against here. You want to make sure that you get better.”

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tary-style techniques as early as seventh grade and allow them to continue throughout high school, if they choose.

PASS is a three-year pilot being funded by the National Association of State Boards of Education.

Brenda Welburn, the association’s executive director, helped spearhead the program. PASS is designed in part off her belief in the holistic teaching of children – academically, socially and morally.

And it’s a potential deterrent to quitting school

altogether, a rampant problem with far-reaching effects. In fact, one student in America drops out of school every 22 seconds, she said.

“All students should realize their amazing potential,” Welburn said. “As my friend (Accessions Command commander Lt.) Gen. (Benjamin) Freakley says, ‘We’ve got to get after it.’ And Project PASS aims to do that.”

Before the Hardin County ceremony, Casey and Duncan took time to visit with some of the JLC students inside a North Middle classroom. They said they wanted to observe the class and get some feedback on the course from the people PASS intends to reach.

Students told the two they have garnered more self-esteem and confidence, and that their grades had improved because of an increased focus on their studies.

As the nation’s education secretary, Duncan visits numerous schools throughout the year. He sees some where the outlook is bleak and there are few signs of hope – in the school and in the surrounding community.

But Duncan was encouraged by what he saw at North Middle.

“Because of you,” he told those in attendance, “I’m very hopeful of where this country is going.”

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“It’s tougher than Ranger Challenge because it doesn’t focus on the physical,” said Delaney, captain of the University of Maryland team. “It’s hard to prepare for what you don’t know is coming your way.”

Until their teams had earned invites, many ROTC Cadets were unfamiliar with Sandhurst and its legacy. But they quickly learned about the British and Canadian teams that have dominated the famed competition since they began entering the event almost 20 years ago.

Programs like Maryland knew the chance of winning the overall title would be formidable. So Cadets set what they considered real-

istic goals – top all ROTC teams and finish in the top 10.

“This is an awesome opportunity to put Maryland’s name out there, and set us up for success to come back year after year,” Delaney said. “We did well and had fun. We got a lot accomplished. I chalk that up as success.”

With a team that will return all but two seniors next year, exposure to Sandhurst will go a long way to making the University of Northern Arizona more competitive next year, said Ingerson, one of the seniors.

“Not only will it build those basic skills we hadn’t built, it’ll definitely help us be ahead of the curve,” she said.

How they fared

A look at the overall finish of ROTC teams at the 2011 Sandhurst Military Skills Competition. A total of 50 teams from around the world competed:

- 15. Northern Arizona University
- 24. University of Hawaii
- 27. University of North Dakota
- 32. University of Maryland
- 39. Michigan State University
- 41. Penn State University
- 44. Norwich University
- 48. Florida State University

Project changes children's lives



Middle school Junior Leadership Corps Cadets stand in the bleachers during the PASS kickoff. *Photo by Steve Arel*

Bicari Truitt laughs about it now. But the self-proclaimed former class clown realizes his disruptive humor was no joke.

The funny-man persona hurt him educationally and socially. It landed him in trouble with teachers and school administrators, and no one, including his classmates, took him seriously.

He unintentionally had become what he was good at telling: a joke.

Nowadays, in a Junior Leadership Corps classroom at North Middle School, Truitt still occasionally grabs the spotlight. Only now it's as a class leader, reporting daily attendance and pushing fellow students to stay on top of assignments.

Truitt, an eighth-grader, gets his stand-up these days at the whiteboard, providing input for the daily discussion.

"If I wasn't in here, I'd be playing around," he said. "This class gets you thinking about things. It's easy to get in trouble, but hard to get out of."

Truitt, like 164 other seventh- and eighth-grade students, volunteered to be among the first Junior Leadership Corps Cadets – part of a larger initia-

tive called Project PASS – in programs at North and James T. Alton Middle Schools in nearby Vine Grove. The curriculum and structure are built off that used by Junior ROTC.

The students, many of whose parents are retired or active duty military members, have their reasons for joining. Some want structure. Some want leadership training. Some want discipline.

They all want opportunity.

"This is a chance to surround myself with others who have similar goals," said Andrew Rendon, an eighth-grader at James T. Alton.

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Even early on in JLC's inaugural semester, instructors said they were seeing marked differences in students – in their grades and in their demeanor.

In fact, several teachers approached Neal Gibbs, the JLC teacher at North, and Randy Pitcher, of James T. Alton, touting the turnaround with some children and applauding the instructors' efforts.

Gibbs and Pitcher, both retired Soldiers, said it's just the beginning.

They admit they face considerable challenges. Much of it stems from the hurdles of starting a program from scratch, such as lining up uniforms, learning the curriculum, prepping lesson plans and setting up their classrooms. But they've also worked to dispel misconceptions that the JLC is a military recruiting tool and to sell prospective students on the value of being part of an atypical class.

Perhaps their greatest hurdle is trying to shape a diverse mix of students. Among them are students who stand out academically, athletically and socially and are looking for tutelage to hone their skills even more. There are average students who need reinforcement. Then there are students with disruptive pasts who are considered the JLC primary targets.

The combination demands flexibility from Gibbs and Pitcher to be part-teachers, part-counselors but constant motivators.

"If I can help one kid, I think I did my job," Gibbs said. "I'm trying to help as many as I can. It's tough, because it's easy for kids to get off the right road."

JLC is unlike other classes. There is no textbook – at least, not yet. For now, lessons are conducted through handouts, PowerPoint slides, interactive remote control modules and discussions.

And that's just how the instructors like it. Though they have a structured curriculum, the absence of a textbook is one less potential turnoff to a student. They use what's available to engage their pupils, enlisting ingenuity and savvy to make lessons relevant to the students.

The classes involve considerable dialogue and little lecturing.

In teaching about leadership recently, Gibbs highlighted the value of recognizing and capitalizing on diversity. He held up different ob-

jects and asked students to point out similarities and differences between the two. Even when those traits were not so obvious, Gibbs encouraged the class to think and go beyond the superficial.

"The material is easier to pitch in that fashion," Pitcher said.

Thus far, instruction has focused on several topics, including leadership, note-taking and

weeks, her report card improved from one filled with C's and D's to A's and B's and recognition on the honor roll.

"It used to be hard to talk to her; she would draw in," Hutchingson said. "Now you can't get her to shut up. It's all about the JLC."

Without the JLC program, Hutchingson figures her daughter might have faced one of two realities: drugs or suicide.

"It's changed her life," Hutchingson said. "I don't see that little girl anymore. This program has turned her around and given her something to look forward to."

Katie Mineo looks forward to somebody running her own shop selling Japanese animation known as anime. What the James T. Alton eighth-grader doesn't know is how to go about organizing the effort to start a business and lead her dream to fruition.

That's why she signed up and plans to continue on in the Junior ROTC pro-

gram at North Hardin High School.

"I felt this would be a good start," Mineo said. "I think a lot of people who say it's a lame class would enjoy it if they actually paid attention."

Part of the vision of the Junior Leadership Corps is to keep students involved inside and outside the classroom. North and James T. Alton have created drill teams and are taking part in various community projects.

Gibbs and Pitcher, with their backgrounds and proven leadership skills, see themselves as natural fits for their positions. They love being in the classroom. They love teaching.

Most of all, they love kids.

Their intent is to position their students to set lifelong goals and to work diligently to achieve them. To the instructors, whether a student chooses to one day serve in the military as they did or to pursue a career in another field is irrelevant.

They simply want a bright future for America's future.

"Life is about consequences," Pitcher said. "It's not about games and horse-play. If you can't apply what we're teaching now, you're going to struggle in whatever you do. This is a foundation time now to learn these things so you can be successful later in life."



Brianna Dawson, a seventh-grader with the Junior Leadership Corps program at James T. Alton Middle School in Vine Grove, Ky., recites the JLC Creed with classmates for the national launch ceremony of Project PASS in March. Photo by Steve Arel

goal-setting. Teachings also are peppered with the instructors' experiences and life lessons.

The JLC isn't only about enhancing book smarts. The program aims to push students to focus more on their futures. It's at this stage of their lives, PASS organizers say, that students veer a certain direction. Some take the path toward high school success, pursuit of a college degree and a career. Others, who are no fans of school, are beginning to consider dropping out.

Or worse.

As recently as December, Amanda Hutchingson found it a chore getting her daughter to attend school regularly. She would complain of being ill, or devise some reason why she couldn't be in class.

Hutchingson said her daughter, a seventh-grader at North Middle, lacked direction. She was depressed, and Hutchingson, fearing what her daughter's mental state might lead to, enrolled her in counseling.

So when word spread of the JLC program starting in January, counselors recommended that Hutchingson's daughter enroll. Almost from the outset, her daughter responded positively.

She connected with her classmates, joined the drill team and wants to learn. In her first nine