

Special Schools Network Newsletter

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Featuring John Dewey Academy

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The John Dewey Academy: A Specialized Therapeutic Program for Self-Destructive Gifted Students

The John Dewey Academy is a college preparatory, therapeutic boarding school for gifted adolescents who need a more structured setting to help them reach their full potential. JDA is voluntary: in order to enroll and to remain at JDA, students must make a commitment to change their lives. Past academic performance or the results of standardized testing play a minor role in their acceptance, given that many students were underachieving due to learning and/or emotional difficulties. JDA has existed in its current form for 25 years. During that time, the creative and constructive methods employed there have been honed, and the school serves as a working model to demonstrate to mental health specialists and educators alike how best to approach the treatment of dysfunctional but intact, gifted adolescents. In today's society, such a model is more important than ever.

Mission: JDA has the dual mission of providing a superior secondary school education in concert with an intensive psychotherapeutic experience. Bratter, Bratter, and Radda (1986) delineated the goals as follows:

- To develop a positive concept of self and a proactive philosophy of life.
- To assume responsibility for one's behavior and to recognize that constructive change is possible.
- To formulate intermediate and long-term goals.
- To be aware of meaningful rewards for productive behavior and tangible consequences for irresponsible acts.
- To learn how to use, rather than continue to abuse, personal potential.
- To understand one's role in society and to contribute



constructively to its betterment.

- To love and be loved, to trust and be trusted, to respect and be respected, and to help and be helped.

Academics: JDA is unique in its strong emphasis on academic excellence in the midst of an intense (and intensely ambitious) therapeutic program. Thus, adolescents who attend the school are held to very high standards in their schoolwork. These standards enable the students to catch up with their peers, fulfill their academic potential, attend colleges of quality, and succeed at those colleges as well as in later life. JDA provides an above average academic setting, maintaining a favorable teacher to student ratio, highly qualified and experienced teachers, rigorous standards of achievement on par with any other preparatory school, ample time for serious study, special opportunities both on and off campus for specialized study, and meaningful testing and grading, all in a 12 month school year, divided into trimesters. JDA strives to place its graduates in quality colleges or universities, prepared *and* motivated to meet the academic and social challenges of such an environment.

Therapeutics: Because of the failure of these students to thrive in the traditional setting, students live on-campus full time. This limits their exposure to distracting and destructive influences, and allows them to focus on changing their behavioral patterns to ones more conducive to a healthy, productive and rewarding life style. Each student chooses a qualified Primary Therapist, with whom he/she has regular discussions and exchanges. However, the core method of intervention at JDA is that of the *Caring Community*. This "positive peer pressure" is in large part responsible for convincing the students to modify their behavior, and to pursue alternate strategies for personal fulfillment. Another key component of the therapeutic strategy at JDA is that of ongoing work with the student's family (both parents and siblings). In order to graduate, in addition to completion of the academic course of study, students must have demonstrated their ability to sustain their newfound accomplishments in the world. Over a period of twenty years, less than ten percent of JDA graduates have reverted to their previous self destructive behaviors.

Moral Development: In a time of widespread use of psychotropic medications to treat symptoms of depression and other perceived disorders, and of de-emphasis of personal responsibility for behavior, JDA embraces a philosophy of personal responsibility, and seeks to treat the underlying causes of much depression and destructive behavior in adolescents. Central to this effort is the restoration of self respect, which occurs when students develop positive concepts of self and proactive philosophies of life; learn to reciprocally love, help and respect others; learn to make reasonable, responsible and realistic decisions; and rediscover their innate altruism.

For more information about The John Dewey Academy, visit our website:

www.jda.org

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