

Keeping kids in school issue • Boys of color, boys at risk

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Preventing dropouts,
creating
graduates



Digital school keeps



Newark Digital Academy Director John Lutz presents an overview of the school to prospective students and their parents during an open house at the academy. Founded in 2003, the online dropout prevention credit recovery school is sponsored by Newark City Schools.

Newark academy focuses on graduation for all

As director of a dropout prevention credit recovery school, **John Lutz** knows a thing or two about hard knocks — and so do his students.

For Lutz, those knocks take the form of funding challenges, enrollment caps and what he calls “data shaming.”

For some of his students, the challenges are even more daunting: homelessness, family strife, pregnancy and serious health issues.

Lutz leads Newark Digital Academy (NDA), a public online conversion community school sponsored by **Newark City Schools**. The innovative e-school opened in 2003 in a

renovated multipurpose room that had been added onto a now-demolished elementary school in 1954. Lutz, who spent 13 years as a classroom special education teacher and six years overseeing numerous programs at **Licking County ESC**, came on board as NDA director in 2008.

The academy rented the building from the school district before buying it in 2009. Since then, extensive renovations have modernized the facility and nearly doubled its size to more than 11,000 square feet. And it needs that space because, although NDA is primarily an online school, it offers its students many on-site services. That, Lutz said, is what makes it different from what he calls “the big boys,” the multi-state, for-profit online schools.

kids on course

Gary Motz,
managing editor

"We have our own teachers here, so if someone is working at home on a math lesson and gets stuck, that student can come in and get some help," Lutz said. "They meet with the same teacher who's grading their online work, get their issue fixed and go back home and get to work. So, what we've evolved into is a bit of a different spin than what the bigger online schools are doing."

Lutz said students also have access to a science lab, fine arts tutor and current events class led by a social studies teacher. Another offering is a videoconference course with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland. The school maintains regular tutoring hours during which students can drop in for help during the school year and by appointment over the summer. Students who live in the Newark City School District also are eligible to take part in the school system's athletic programs and other extracurriculars.

Serving many needs

The academy is designed to serve children from kindergarten through 12th grade; however, most of its enrollees are high school students, Lutz said. Enrollment at the end of last school year was 372.

The 34-person staff includes 12 full-time teachers, along with counselors, tutors, graduation coaches, intervention specialists, computer technicians and a learning coach, social worker and truant officer. The school is governed by a five-member board made up of two educators, a former Newark City school board member, a parent and the director of Licking County Job and Family Services.

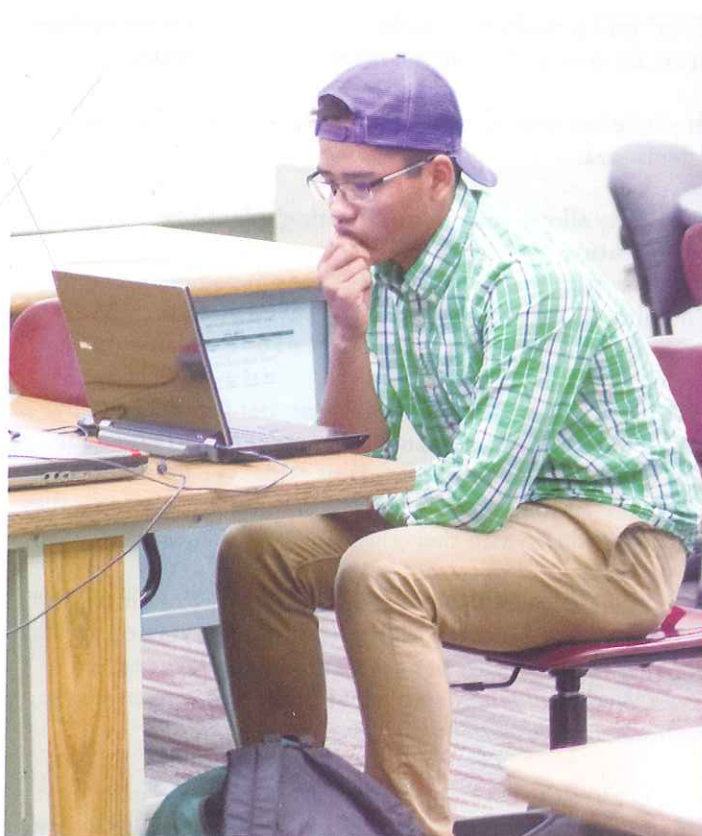
"I always stress the fact that we are a public school, not a private school," Lutz said. "All of our teachers are highly qualified and licensed in the areas that they teach. They have the same credentials as those who teach at Newark High School or Licking Valley High School or Heath High School. Our curriculum is aligned with Ohio's Learning Standards, the same as traditional schools."

Students are drawn to NDA for a variety of reasons, said **Amanda Adams**, the school's social worker. One of the primary motives is credit recovery for those who have fallen behind. Some students want to graduate early and choose the online option so they can work at an accelerated pace. Others

attend because they struggled in a traditional school setting due to behavioral and mental health issues, bullying, trouble focusing in a classroom, chronic illness and poor attendance.

"Problems we see our students and families struggling with include transportation, food, clothing and shelter," Adams said. "Some of our older students are working to help pay the bills or they're on their own and providing for themselves. From 55% to 70% of our students would qualify for free or reduced lunch."

Pregnancy and parenthood also pose challenges. Adams said that most years, 20 to 30 NDA students are either pregnant or already a parent. There also are students who are caught up in the juvenile justice system, either in detention or on probation.



Eleventh-grader Sam Foell works on an oceanography project at Newark Digital Academy. Although an online school, the academy also offers students on-site tutoring and classes.



Academy Director John Lutz leads parents and potential students on a tour of the school.

The school works hard to keep those students on track in the face of those considerable challenges.

"I deal with a lot of the extra services we provide to help students overcome these barriers," Adams said. "For example, we offer elective credit for teen parents to take parenting classes in the community, and have online and in-person support groups. We have online classes teaching the skills needed for transitioning to adulthood, coping with stress, money management and applying to college. I also keep in contact with probation officers."

The academy is an official site for the Ohio Benefit Bank, Adams said. Students and families can apply to the bank for food assistance, health services, help with utility bills, college financial aid and more. In addition, NDA maintains a "clothing closet" that provides free clothes for students and their families. Items are donated by staff members and their families.

"If you're our student, your whole family is basically ours," Adams said.

Flexibility allows year-round learning, planning for the future

Students must master 36 online lessons to complete a credit, a number that corresponds to a 36-week school year. Many work through the summer to get ahead or make up lost time.

"We work on a traditional school year, but we're essentially a 12-month program, because we're not going to turn your account off in the summer," Adams said. "We have students who work all summer long and get back on track because they want to graduate with their class."

Sam Foell is one of those students. On OSBA's visit to the academy in late June, the 11th-grader was working on an oceanography research project with social studies teacher **Ryan Walker**. Foell transferred to the academy from a large high school that wasn't a very good fit for him.

"I didn't like the classroom setting," Foell said. "I learn differently and do better one-on-one and independently, not in a big class. It's a lot easier to learn here, there's a lot more tutoring and hands-on things, and the teachers want to work with you and your schedule. I usually come into the building

once or twice a week.

"If I was at my old school, I'd still be struggling through and trying to get caught up. Here, I'm thinking about graduating early, maybe by next fall. That's part of the reason I'm working on school through the summer."

Foell, who plays drums, said he hopes to attend a music college after he graduates.

Walker, who was working on-site over the summer, said that despite being mainly online, NDA is a very personal school. He strives to build a rapport with his students and show them how different aspects of social studies are relevant to their lives.

"We are very focused on the individual," Walker said. "Our motto is 'learning individually, achieving together.' This allows students to be self-advocates and take control of their learning. I feel we are offering a service that previously was unavailable to students."

"I have a lot of students who feel comfortable with me and ask questions beyond social studies. They also talk to me about what's going on in their lives. If they are not moving along in their courses, we contact them at home and encourage them to get help."

Interaction with parents is a key component of NDA's approach. This includes parent-teacher conferences, phone calls and emails. Walker said one of the rewards of his job is hearing from parents about how much the academy is helping their children succeed.

"I can tell that a lot of parents feel like a weight has been lifted off their shoulders," he said. "Some parents have mixed feelings, because to them, online education is still very new. But once they get a real-world feel of what we do and see how we interact with their children, it makes them feel more comfortable."

Some students are doing postsecondary work at Ohio State University at Newark and Central Ohio Technical College while enrolled at NDA. Attending college while taking online courses gives them more flexibility with their postsecondary choices, since they can do their academy work at any time.

The school also offers postsecondary counseling. Dean of Students **Brett Montgomery** oversees those efforts.

"We work individually with students to provide them a personalized path to their postsecondary careers," Montgomery said. "With College Credit Plus, we direct students to their school of choice with information on what they will need to know going into their first year. With career counseling, we use the OhioMeansJobs program to steer them

to a desired career path.

"We also talk with each student about future goals, be it career training, the military, two-year tech programs or a four-year college. Then we start applying those goals toward the courses they are currently taking."

Dealing with special challenges

Among the challenges NDA faces — like any other school — is funding, most of which is derived from per-student state foundation funds. Complicating that is an e-school enrollment cap enacted last year. Schools are free to enroll students beyond the cap, but they won't receive additional funding for them. This hits NDA particularly hard since the school has expanded staff and its facilities to serve more students.

"Because of the cap, we've had to turn people away and turn them over to these big online groups that may not have as good a stewardship of public funds as we do," Lutz said. "They cannot serve our students here as well as we do locally ... My philosophy is if kids are going to go to school online and they live in Newark, they need to be going to Newark Digital Academy."

Another challenge is unfavorable comparisons of NDA's graduation rates, test scores and other data with traditional school districts.

"Here's where I'm lucky to have a supportive board, because in a data-driven environment, we've had to weather a lot of data shaming," Lutz said. "We have a 45% four-year graduation rate, but that doesn't tell you a lot, because maybe some of our students were only in school part of that time. What we want to do is convince people to stay the course and earn their high school diploma."

"Two years ago, we had 85 graduates and 99 last year. If you combine our four- five- six- and seven-year graduation rate, we're at about 74%."

"We also deal with small data pools with a lot of special education students for high-stakes testing. One eighth-grade testing pool had 11 students, and six of them were special education. But nobody cares about that; they just care about that number that shows up in the newspaper."

State report cards for dropout prevention credit recovery schools have three ratings — exceeds standards, meets standards and does not meet standards. Schools are measured on high school test passage, gap closing and graduation rate.

On NDA's most recent report card, the school exceeded standards in every category. Its four-year graduation rate was nearly double other dropout credit recovery schools. More than 70% of its students passed all the state tests, with 84% passing reading and 77% passing math.

"When it came to the four-year graduation rate, I felt we needed to draw a line in the sand," Lutz said. "Data shaming or not, what really matters is that you put together services to allow a student to earn a high school diploma, even if you have to be the scapegoat. Because, what's going to benefit the city of Newark and the Licking County community more, being a slave to the graduation rate and letting people slip through the cracks or helping kids work toward a diploma who otherwise couldn't?"



Social worker Amanda Adams explains some of the many support services she oversees at the academy.

Staying the course

Despite the hard knocks, NDA is committed to giving every student the chance to succeed. And many have been grateful for that opportunity.

Lutz has a folder of letters from past graduates thanking the school for giving them the push they needed. Expressions like these run throughout the notes: "Thank you for not letting me give in when circumstances were less than ideal." "Thank you for recognizing my true potential when I couldn't see it for myself and never giving up on me." "Thank you for the plan of action at the last possible moment after a year of almost no progress."

Another student, whose mother was terminally ill, was allowed to graduate early. The school conducted an impromptu graduation ceremony — complete with cap and gown — at the mother's bedside while "Pomp and Circumstance" played on a cellphone. The ceremony made news around the world after *The Newark Advocate* shared it with *The Associated Press*.

The school helped another student, who was in juvenile detention, stay on path toward graduation by delivering her work to her. She received her diploma after her release.

"I don't know if this is taking ourselves too seriously," Lutz said, "but I consider us to be somewhat social architects. Because, if we aren't doing the work we're doing, who is?"

"The answer is, 'nobody.'" ■