

A fresh start: ASU partnership helps kids in juvenile detention earn college credits

By Carrie Peterson, ASU News
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Inside Maricopa County's juvenile detention center, a college classroom doesn't look like a traditional lecture hall. But for learners working toward a diploma, a GED or a fresh start, the opportunity is just as real.

Through a partnership between Arizona State University and Maricopa County's [Durango Juvenile Detention Center](#), high school learners are earning transferable college credit through [ASU Universal Learner Courses](#), an online program designed to expand access to college-level courses without traditional admissions barriers. Learners decide after completing a course — and if they're satisfied with their grade — whether they want to add it to their transcript.

So far, 60 learners from the Durango Juvenile Detention Center have earned college credit, converting 223 courses for credit. Seven are now eligible for [Earned Admission](#) into ASU, and three more are one course away from completing their requirements.

But the numbers only tell part of the story.

"It's opened up a mindset," said [Kevin Malakowsky](#), juvenile education transition specialist with the [Office of the Maricopa County School Superintendent](#). "Some of the students hadn't previously pictured themselves in college. Now they're thinking about next steps. They're planning goals. You see the maturity."

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Filling the gap after graduation

Before the partnership with ASU, learners who completed their GED or high school diploma inside detention had few options to continue their education.

“We didn’t have anything for them,” Malakowsky said. “We had one student who earned four [OSHA](#) certificates because we didn’t have anything else to offer him. He just wanted to keep learning.”

Without a next step, some learners hit a ceiling. The ASU partnership changed that, allowing students to move directly from high school completion into college-level coursework, without needing transcripts, GPA requirements or a formal admission process.

[Michael Labrecque](#), juvenile education transition specialist with the Office of the Maricopa County School Superintendent, said the earned admission pathway has been especially meaningful for learners whose academic histories may have once limited their options.

“A lot of them come in with a spotty high school record,” Labrecque said. “But once they earn those eight courses, they can apply without having to worry about what happened in the past. It gives them a real pathway.”

He added that the effect reaches beyond those enrolled in the ASU classroom at any given time.

“It’s had an impact beyond just the students in the room,” Labrecque said. “It gives others something to work toward, finishing their GED or diploma, because they see what’s possible next.”

(Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbdLvHmE_Y0)

[Shelli Boggs](#), Maricopa County school superintendent, said the partnership reflects a broader effort to expand educational opportunities for incarcerated juveniles and help them build pathways beyond detention.

“I am deeply grateful for the strong partnerships and collaborative relationships that have come together this past year for students in juvenile detention,” Boggs said. “I remain hopeful that we can continue to expand these opportunities, which empower our students to pursue higher education or career and technical training. By doing so, we equip them with the skills and credentials needed for rewarding employment and long-term success in their communities.”

For learners who have experienced trauma or instability, the impact can be transformative.

[Candis McGovern](#), who works closely with youth in transition for the Office of the Maricopa County School Superintendent as a juvenile education transition specialist, including survivors of trafficking, said the program has reshaped how many young people see themselves.

“For the students I work with, it’s been incredible to watch,” McGovern said. “To see what they’re capable of, as opposed to what they’ve experienced and what they’ve been told they’re capable of. They are still doing it, even in really difficult circumstances, and the confidence factor is massive.”

That confidence, staff say, extends beyond the classroom.

Mark Eastin, juvenile detention operations manager for community and culture at Durango, has worked in the county system for nearly 25 years. He said the introduction of ASU courses has shifted not only individual learners, but the broader environment.

More juveniles are accelerating their progress toward high school completion because they want access to Universal Learning Courses.

“We’ve had a lot more kids graduate with high school diplomas and GEDs recently because they want to participate,” Eastin said. “Whether they did it for a week before they left, they still did it. They started it and can continue it somewhere else.”

For many learners, the ASU name itself signals something larger than detention.

According to Eastin, “having a university come in, and kids knowing that name, that changes things. Everybody wants to get there.”

The program's expansion has also been supported by [ASU EdPlus](#), which has provided \$50,000 in funding to support Durango learners, helping cover course and credit conversion costs. EdPlus, the university's innovation unit focused on expanding access to education through digital teaching and learning, works with programs like Universal Learner Courses to broaden pathways into higher education.

“This program shows what access truly means, not simply opening a door, but creating a pathway,” said [Nancy Cervasio](#), deputy chief operating officer for ASU EdPlus. “By bringing university-level opportunity into juvenile detention, this partnership affirms that every learner deserves the chance to earn college credit and build a future defined by possibility.”

For Eastin and his colleagues, the investment represents more than financial support. It reinforces a message they work to deliver every day: that juvenile detention does not define a young person's potential.

“Kids can learn,” Eastin said. “You just have to give them the opportunity.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Learners work on ASU coursework inside the dedicated classroom at Maricopa County's Durango Juvenile Detention Center. Photo by Aaron Ghena/ASU Learning Enterprise