It’s all too often that conversations originating on social media lead to anger, frustration or discord. But one recent conversation on Facebook led to a great partnership. That’s what happened about a year ago when JB Anderson was talking to his childhood friend — who happens to be the principal at SSD’s program at the St. Louis County Juvenile Detention Center. SSD is responsible for providing academic instruction in core content areas to students while they are at the detention center as well as social skills training.

“It originated from a follow-up conversation from a Facebook post about engagement, schools, parents — typical Facebook banter,” Anderson said.

Anderson is the owner of Gaslight Studios, a local music studio in St. Louis, and he’s partnered with SSD and the Juvenile Detention Center to work with students there on music production. The students create music from scratch, then submit it back to professionals for real-world feedback.

“We wanted it to be an incentive-based opportunity to make beats and create lyrics,” Anderson said. “The thought was that if the students got their other subjects done, then they could make beats, to motivate them to learn more.”

Unlike large band productions, hip-hop beats and lyrics can be produced with nothing more than a computer, microphone and software. Thanks to a generous gift from Heil Audio donating a high-quality microphone, and already having computers at the school, Anderson helped coordinate getting the proper software to put the plan into place.

From there, Anderson set up time to sit down with the students and talked with them about making music — including the lesser known aspects such as licensing, engineering, promoting, booking and publishing.

“Before I started with the music program, I would just listen to the songs and pretty much just pay attention to the lyrics,” said student Anthony T. “Now I pay attention to all the different elements in a song. I also never realized how much work goes into creating just one song.”

“We showed them some videos of what we did,” Anderson said. “And they quickly realized we are legit.”

That might be an understatement, as Anderson has worked with famous producer Carl Nappa — who has collaborated with such musicians as Nelly, David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Missy Elliot and Run DMC.

When the students eventually started producing music, it was an eye-opening experience to know “the guy that works with Nelly is listening to their music,” Anderson said.

Inside the classroom, SSD teacher Eric Thompson has noticed big changes in the students.

“It really sparked an interest in students who might not normally be interested in school,” Thompson said. “To see the guys who really grabbed a hold of it, they were laser-focused on the work that goes into it.”

The program appears to be a success already, as it has proven to be a motivating factor for the students there, as well as a source of pride.

“I always get bored at school, but this helps me keep focused,” said student Michael A. of the program. “I’ve never made music before. I really like making beats.” Continued »
35 Years of Supporting Students Throughout the County

Special Education Foundation was established in 1984 as the first public school foundation in the state of Missouri. The Foundation is celebrating its anniversary with a commemorative booklet that will feature success stories from each of its programs, the 22 St. Louis County partner school districts and Special School District of St. Louis County. In contacting school districts to advertise in the booklet, the Foundation has had one-to-one opportunities to inform district leadership about how its programs enhance the services provided by SSD to students in their schools. After all, it’s about three groups of partners — SSD, St. Louis County school districts and SEF — working together to deliver great educational value to kids with disabilities.

Media that Matters, continued from front cover

“I've always loved music, but working with Logic Pro (software application) has made me feel like a kid in a candy store,” said another student, Shawn P. “I have been able to make my own music — music that I’m proud of.”

One of the byproducts of creating music has been improved writing skills and students opening up more.

“Guys are actually writing, which isn’t something a lot of these guys are too keen on,” Thompson said. “But now they are getting deeper in their writing. Guys are pushing themselves and taking risks with what they are putting on paper.”

One of the standout successes has been the students’ dedication and effort they’ve put into the music program. Administrators noted that it’s great to see a student who previously made bad decisions make positive strides. Further, the lasting effects of getting real-world feedback, and having it reinforced, is something that should only help the students while they are at JDC and into their futures.

Thompson said he sees the program lasting because of the interest and success the students have felt while participating.

Part of the mission at Gaslight Studios is to provide opportunities to individuals that might not have them. “Very few people take a step forward out of their comfort zone to make any micro-changes in society,” Anderson said. “To the people who question it — well, what do you do?”

Note: Some of the names in this story have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

The SSD Parent Advisory Council (PAC) is comprised of families advising and collaborating to improve the education, confidence and social outcomes of each student served by SSD.

The PAC consists of five parents or guardians — one member and four alternates — from each of the 22 St. Louis County school districts and from each of the five SSD special education schools. The parents or guardians of students receiving special education services in that district or school elect SSD PAC members.

The PAC typically meets at 7 p.m. on the second Wednesday of each month at SSD Central Office, 12110 Clayton Road in Town & Country. Meetings for the 2019-2020 school year are scheduled for Nov. 13, Dec. 11, Jan. 8, Feb. 12, April 8 and May 13.

For more information, visit the PAC’s website at https://tinyurl.com/SSDPAC or email pac@ssdmo.org.

Application Deadlines

• Dana Brown Teacher Mini-Grant applications for 2020-2021 school year grants are due Dec. 19.

• John Cary Scholarship applications and teacher input are due Jan. 17.

• Fred Saigh Leadership Program nominations and applications are due Jan. 28.

Visit sef-stl.org/programs to see criteria and apply.
Students at SSD’s two technical high schools have an inside track on opportunities available in their programs of study thanks to Career and Technical Education (CTE) Advisory Committees.

More than 25 CTE programs are offered at North Technical and South Technical high schools. Each program has its own advisory committee, which includes members who work in related businesses, post-secondary education, relevant non-profit and community organizations, as well as current students and their parents.

Advisory committee members meet with instructors and give guidance. “We gather and give ideas to the teachers on what material to focus on,” said Andrius Stevenson, an Automotive Technology alumni and advisory committee member who works at Bommarito Ford. “We also discuss what types of paths exist in the field today.”

Jennifer Irvin is the school-community health education partner at BJC School Outreach and Youth Development, in addition to being a long-term advisory board member for the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program at North Tech and South Tech.

“Students at the tech schools benefit from the advisory committees as they are among the first to learn about opportunities such as evacuation drills and volunteer opportunities,” said Irvin.

Mike Paganini, a service manager at Mid-America Peterbilt, is a proud alumni of North Tech and on the advisory board for the Diesel Program.

“It was very important to me to get involved as an alumnus,” said Paganini. “I know the benefits the tech schools offer and how the program helped me.

“We help provide tools and parts, and we assist with decisions about the curriculum,” added Paganini. “We see every day what is going on in the field as advisory board members, and that perspective can be very influential.”

Paganini said students come to his workplace for field trips. “This is a huge opportunity for students to cultivate the desire to work in this field and see real-world trucks torn apart. They can see the guys who are doing the work. Hopefully those students who have dreams of working on trucks will pursue higher education and potentially one day apply for a job with us.”

Stevenson said the partnerships between the schools and those in the industries benefit both staff and students by providing information on what is going on now and what will be happening in the near future.

“It gives an idea of what employers are looking for, and it provides the opportunity to build connections with employers, which gives students direct access to job openings,” said Stevenson.

Irvin said that it’s a win-win situation. “We are working on our pipeline of future employees,” she said. “Through the consistent partnership with SSD, we have been able to see students join our organization as employees.”

The staff at BJC is always eager to visit the schools and provide career presentations according to Irvin. She said they enjoy having students visit their departments.

Paganini said he enjoys meeting the students and he can see a little bit of himself in each one of them. “They’re hungry for knowledge and are very eager to work,” he said.

“For me, the most rewarding part of being involved with the advisory committee is that I get to give back to my high school and help provide the opportunity for any student to succeed,” said Stevenson.
MISSION: In collaboration with partner districts, we provide technical education and a wide variety of individualized educational and support services designed for each student’s successful contribution to our community.

VISION: Partners for each student’s success

VALUES: student success • collaboration • integrity • stewardship • continuous improvement • equity • accountability

Let’s Talk — Tell Us What’s on Your Mind

Let’s Talk is an online tool that allows you to submit feedback at your convenience directly to the SSD staff member who can help. Just visit the SSD website at www.ssdmo.org and look for the Let’s Talk button on the homepage.

Once you click on the Let’s Talk link, you’ll be able to choose an interest area related to the message that you want to submit. Let us know what’s going well, offer suggestions, submit a concern or make a general comment.

Continuous improvement is a core value of the District, and we look forward to talking with you about what we’re doing well and how we can improve.