

## Transforming Lives with Vision, and Heart/Consistency, at Unified School District #2 Virtual Academy



As another school year begins, Unified School District #2 educator Michael MacDonald, a July Employee of the Month, is transforming lives. As the Team Leader for the Virtual Academy Unit, he is doing so one credit, one connection, and one student at a time.

The district's Virtual Academy is a vital credit recovery program that supports secondary youth in care who are over-age or under-credited. The Virtual Academy provides flexible online courses that complement students' full-time school programs, helping them recover credits, gain academic skills and graduate without disrupting their regular school day.

*Michael posing with his Employee of the Month certificate alongside Comr. Hill-Lilly.*

"We try to offer additional levels of support and academic mobility within the constraints of the school day," Michael says.

"The goal is to create flexible learning plans [...] some students work during school hours, others after school or at home. We adapt to each student's situation."

To date, the Virtual Academy has celebrated over 200 student graduates, a milestone that speaks volumes about the effectiveness of the program and the dedication of educators like Michael. He takes a personalized approach to education which revolves heavily around strong communication and building relationships from day-one.

"I text students two to three times a week, visit them in their placements, celebrate their progress. Building relationships early on helps them stay engaged and return to school in a better place."

During the 2023–2024 school year, DCF's Juvenile Justice Education Unit was integrated into USD #2. Michael became a linchpin in building bridges. He emphasized that successful collaboration leads to better student outcomes.

In his day-to-day, he works closely with public school educators, support staff, and community partners to ensure a smooth and supportive academic transition for students returning to their home districts. Taken together, this system of support ensures students involved with the juvenile justice system receive the same level of academic rigor and emotional support as their peers.

Michael explained that one of the program's greatest strengths, in fact, is this partnership model, or teamwork approach, which allows them to tailor an academic experience that meets a student's unique needs.

Michael said he starts working with students in detention centers and follows them through all their placements until they return to their full-time school district or alternative program.

This continuity ensures students receive consistent academic support during often turbulent transitions.



Michael's secret? He meets students where they are, helping establish structure, encouraging personal accountability, and fostering a sense of ownership in their educational journey.

*“I provide a constant point person for students across placements and districts. Many families we serve are transient, but no matter where their stop is, I provide a consistent person focused on their education to help keep students on track despite life’s upheavals.”*

These efforts around consistency and engagement have paid off: in just two years, student participation in the Virtual Academy among Juvenile Justice youth increased to 70 percent.

Given Michael's own certification in special education, social studies, and school administration, he can connect with students on multiple levels, sparking interest even in subjects they might not have loved before.



His supervisor, USD #2 Superintendent Matt Folan said, “Michael doesn't just teach content—he empowers kids to believe in their ability to succeed. That belief is often the spark that turns academic challenges into success stories.”

Michael recounts several success stories, including students who managed to keep up academically despite hospitalizations or disciplinary challenges.

However, Michael added that, “Every student we help earn credit and graduate is a success story. For students who buy in and work with me—texting, logging on, doing the work—success follows.”

Whether meeting students in their placements, refining instructional strategies with his peers, or ensuring that each student has a path to academic recovery, Folan said Michael brings a level of consistency, care, and professionalism that sets a high standard across USD#2.

“Michael’s work ethic and ability to build meaningful relationships have created a ripple effect—one that improves not only individual student outcomes, but also strengthens the entire Virtual Academy.”



*Brien McMahon school counselor, Elaine Gratrix, poses with "B" who graduated with help from Michael and the flexibility afforded by the Virtual Academy.*

Elaine Gratrix, a school counselor for Norwalk Public Schools, agrees. She recounts the experience one recent student, "B", had graduating with the help of the Virtual Academy.

"The Virtual Academy was a godsend for her! It literally made graduation possible. B came into her Senior year needing more credits than we could fit into her school schedule, so we knew she would need to have a perfect year and then attend Summer School in order to graduate."

"I was worried that she might not be able to maintain her focus for this long a stretch. Then, when B's family became displaced in December, her chances of graduating took a nosedive. Due to a lack of transportation, she was out of school for long periods

of time. Our classes don't have an online option, so she struggled to keep up," Gratrix explained.

"However, during her extended absences, B was very productive online and earned a number of credits. If it weren't for Virtual Academy, she definitely would not have been able to graduate this summer and likely not returned to high school this year."

Through it all, Gratrix said Michael was always very understanding, supportive, and encouraging. He made himself available to B and promptly provided assistance with her progress. Being able to see that steady, consistent progression helped to keep B's morale up and stay motivated until she graduated.

As the 2025–2026 school year gets underway, Michael’s work serves as a reminder of what is possible when educators are empowered to lead, collaborate, and innovate. The success of the Virtual Academy speaks volumes—not just in numbers, but in lives changed.