



## ***NEWS RELEASE***

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### **REGION 7 WIB FUNDS ALTERNATE ROUTE TO COLLEGE OPPORTUNITY**

In the hurly-burly bustle of the Information Age, when knowledge and skill pave the only sure path to opportunity, one might expect American youth to seek as deep and rich a learning life as possible. One might be surprised.

“Young people have never been anywhere near so connected to each other, and to the planet, as they are today,” noted Bob MacPhail, a Potomac Highlands educator. “And yet, here we are at the beginning of the 21st century, in the United States of America, the wealthiest country in the world, and one of every three high school students is dropping out.”

MacPhail’s surprise at that statistic, and his chagrin, moved him to explore ways to do something about it with the Region Seven Workforce Investment Board (WIB). He knew that through its Youth Council, WIB recognizes a special concern for 14 to 21 year-olds, and that it supports activities designed to improve the job prospects, job skills and earnings of its clients.

“Zero job prospects, in other words unemployment, occurs among high school drop-outs in the United States almost twice as often as among high school graduates,” MacPhail explained, pointing to last month’s United Nations World Youth Report 2007.

“And when dropouts do find jobs, the work often won’t pay a living wage. So just to make ends meet, they frequently turn to crime.” Small wonder, MacPhail reasoned, that 80-percent of people in prison never finished high school.

#### **Alternate Route**

“We wanted to catch these young folks before they’d fallen completely through the cracks,” he said, “and provide them with an alternate route to the high school diploma, a college degree, and productive careers.”

MacPhail formed a non-profit corporation (C.O.A.T.E.S.—Comprehensive Occupational Assessment Testing & Educational Services) to offer counseling, testing, adult mentoring, tutoring and study skills training to youth, along with workplace experience—both paid and unpaid—in the form of internships, occupational learning and job shadowing. WIB admired the plan’s scope and purpose, and gave him a contract to provide services to youth who may be struggling in high school or who have dropped out entirely; or who are working on their GED; or who have finished high school and find themselves adrift without positive direction; or who lack the economic resources to secure a place in college.

“WIB calls these clients ‘at-risk’ youth,” MacPhail mused, “but I prefer to think of them as mavericks. For whatever reason, many of them just don’t take to the brand of schooling that seems to serve the majority of our young people just fine.” Partnering with the Workforce Education department at Eastern WV Community and Technical College, MacPhail put together an assortment of classes that combine practicality with social responsibility, and survival with technology.

At Eastern, the C.O.A.T.E.S. youth take two classes in OSHA workplace safety certification, and then a series of seven computer-related classes. “If they complete both OSHA classes and achieve the certification, we reward them with a \$50 gift certificate at Wal-Mart,” MacPhail said. By successfully completing each of the seven computer classes, they can earn additional gift certificates worth up to 400 dollars total.

#### **New Opportunities**

But MacPhail emphasized that the gift certificates are just teasers. “The real prize comes later, because those computer classes cover the exact same content as Eastern’s college credit classes. So if the C.O.A.T.E.S. students will register for just one additional course at the college,” he explained, “Eastern will retroactively authorize full college credit for all seven computer classes. And that’s the real payoff for these young folks.

“They can start a college transcript even if they’re still working on their GED,” he said, “and they can convert all this learning to transcript credit at zero tuition cost.”

The large majority of these learners are excelling in the computer classes, according to Seyed Mirkhani, Eastern’s Academic Program Manager for Business Technologies. “We’re very pleased that through Eastern these young people have made a connection to college learning that they find meaningful. And they’re discovering their own motivations to continue with their education.” By harnessing the energies of their own independent spirits, Mirkhani pointed out, these learners are creating new opportunities for themselves.

“Society may define them as ‘at-risk,’” MacPhail noted, “because they seem in danger of falling off the career radar screen—of not acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to make a decent living, support a family, and enjoy life. At C.O.A.T.E.S., we offer them a vision of success across a bridge they can build between their maverick status and a college degree.

“So if they want it to work, we’re here to provide the services, tutoring and guidance,” he said. “And then only they themselves can build the bridge.”

For more information about the C.O.A.T.E.S. program, contact Mel Nines, at 304-813-7109; or Y. Cheryl Stonebraker at 304-813-7221; or Bob MacPhail, CEO, at 304-813-7220, or by email: [bob.macphail@gmail.com](mailto:bob.macphail@gmail.com).

Serving the residents of Grant, Hampshire, Hardy, Mineral, Pendleton and Tucker counties, Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College is a comprehensive and equal opportunity community and technical college bringing the resources and assets of Education That Works to the families, communities and employers of the Potomac Highlands.