



Common Ground Learning Center

3606 W. 1st Ave., Denver, Colorado 80219

Director: Becky Valdez

Grades: 6-12

The name Common Ground reminds students to leave their differences at the door and focus on a higher goal. Located at Lowell Blvd. and 1st Avenue in Denver, Hope Online at Common Ground Learning Center is a crossroads where diverse and street-savvy youth come together to help boost one another out of the poverty and violence that have previously defined them. With a crib room for the babies of teen mothers, an elderly volunteer to help with infant care, and students from rival gangs studying side by side, this Learning Center is genuinely uncommon. Still, though, it is a safe haven where the Hope Online model truly offers an educational option to those who, all too often, think that they have none.

Learning Center Director Becky Valdez, a longtime crusader for at risk youth, saw Hope Online as the missing piece of a strategy to intervene in the otherwise gloomy forecast of young people plagued by generations of poor education. Years ago, Mrs. Valdez and her husband Ben, whose troubled youth inspired them both to help young people, established after-school programs offering recreation, basic computer literacy, and youth work projects to keep kids off the streets. Still, they felt that there were more needs to overcome than they could satisfy through their independent efforts. “We saw that the young people needed something more,” explains Mrs. Valdez, “and that, without a solid, formal education, our efforts could only take them so far.” It was then that Mrs. Valdez learned of Hope Online, and Common Ground opened a Learning Center in the fall of 2008.

Hope Online teacher Charaine Lucas, who has taught at every level from pre-k to college, understands the magnitude of change needed to help Common Ground students make a turnaround. “We have lots of work to do here,” she concedes, “but the Hope Online program *can* work. I have seen what it can do, and we are getting there, slowly.” Ms. Lucas continues to establish efficient and systematic procedures with the Common Ground mentors. “Timely follow up with each and every student is crucial, so we put a lot of effort into overseeing the students’ quantity and quality of work. Monitoring academic progress in the midst of instability is much easier with the Hope Online curriculum. Our students can keep progressing, even when their personal or life circumstances spin out of control. They understand the academic structure, and they can resume their work when they are ready.”

Faced with daily challenges to meet their basic needs for food and shelter, the Hope Online students at Common Ground initially perceive the goal of graduation as distant and its benefits difficult to comprehend. Mr. and Mrs. Valdez and their mentors find that one of their greatest struggles is simply keeping the vision of graduation alive. Yet, despite sometimes erratic attendance and chaotic lives, Common Ground is alive with academic activity and hope. Spirit week, royalty day, weekly hair cuts, and the making of a student-directed video to express gratitude for their Learning Center all reflect joy amidst less than ideal circumstances.

Learning Center Administration

Becky Valdez –Director

Becky Valdez has been an advocate for at risk youth all her adult life. As Director of Common Ground Learning Center, Mrs. Valdez uses her experience from after school programs and case management to identify and meet the needs of her students. A Colorado native, Mrs. Valdez studied business at Delta Montrose Area Vocational School. Mrs. Valdez taught computer, English, and citizenship classes for ten years at Youth With A Vision, a nonprofit she founded with her husband, Ben. Youth With A Vision is a past recipient of the Invesco Field Award for Outstanding Volunteer Group. With the support of Hope Online, Mrs. Valdez is determined to help highly at risk students make choices to improve their lives, and the lives of future generations, through the foundation of a good education.

Janet Valdez – Mentor

Janet Valdez mentors high school students at Common Ground Learning Center with passion to have a lasting impact on her at risk students. A former teacher for both adults and young people at Youth With A Vision, Ms. Valdez easily adapts her teaching style to the needs of her students. A competent youth project work supervisor and former teacher's aid, Janet holds an Associates Degree in Criminal Justice and is a Dean's List student at ITT Tech, where she is pursuing her Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice.

Felicia Valdez – Mentor

Felicia Valdez has worked with young people in a variety of environments, including Montessori and early childhood venues. Ms. Valdez likes to guide students as they find their own motivation to succeed, helping them make good decisions in academics and their lives. Ms. Valdez taught at Youth With A Vision for five years. She holds an Associates Degree in Early Childhood Development from the Community College of Denver and is studying online for her Bachelor's Degree in the same field at Kaplan University.

Hope Online Teacher

Ed Gibson – Hope Online Teacher