



# SUCCESS STORY

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## At-Risk Teens Have Hope for a Better Future

Some people have preconceived notions of teenagers who are incarcerated. Unfortunately, these teens are sometimes prejudged to be students who could not possibly be transformed into productive citizens in society. However, during our visit to Camp Sweeney at the Alameda Youth Detention Center in Hayward, California, we found this to be far from the truth. When a teenager or child is brought to the detention center, they're first booked in Juvenile Hall, where they spend anywhere from one month to their entire sentence, based on the seriousness of their crime. The next step for teenagers is to move to "Intake," where they are assessed academically and behaviorally. The students who are assessed positively are then transferred to the "Transition" program, where they'll stay for four to six weeks studying for their GED exam. However, students who need further development stay in Juvenile Hall, where they follow a traditional classroom curriculum that includes among other things, English and Mathematics.

Many of the teenagers we met during our visit, are from underserved populations in the Bay Area, where access to computers are limited. Most students we talked to have no computer skills - many of them have never touched a computer before.

Kids at this detention center have to earn privileges that many of us take for granted. For example, the instructors told us the kids have to earn the privilege of taking their GED exam, then students have to earn the privilege of enrolling in the Cisco Networking Academy Program. The Cisco Networking Academy Program is the "reward" for students who pass the GED exam and demonstrate willingness and proper behavior at Camp Sweeney. The students who make it to the Networking Academy program are the brightest teenagers at the Camp, where there has been widespread interest in the Networking Academy by instructors, parents and students at Camp Sweeney, since its inception in September 1999.

Tony Aweeka, the Networking Academy instructor at Camp Sweeney, is impressed with the tremendous interest his students have in the program. According to Aweeka, "the Cisco Networking Academy Program is a favorite among the students, so much that some teens were threatening to break the law again, just to stay in the program!" As a result, officials at Camp Sweeney now permit Networking Academy students to come back after being discharged to complete the program and take the Cisco Certified Networking Associate (CCNA) exam. This certification is a ticket to a better life for most of these kids.

Aweeka is a brilliant man who takes his Networking Academy students one step further. A former CAD Science teacher and Carpenter contractor, Aweeka uses all his capabilities to educate his students in building networks in the real world.



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Aweeka's competencies are the foundation of the success of the students in the Networking Academy program at Camp Sweeney. Aweeka uses his knowledge of construction and CAD to teach students where and how to put a wire through a wall and how to read building diagrams. Students in this program are not just learning about building and maintaining networks, they're learning how to read building blueprints and actually put the wires inside a wall, which is how it happens in the real world. Aweeka's first lesson for his students is to have them disassemble, then reassemble a computer, "this gives the students hands-on training with equipment and gets them comfortable using a computer, plus it builds their confidence that they can do the work" he said. Aweeka says his greatest challenge of the Networking Academy program is staying ahead of his students learning. "Students are so eager to participate in the program that they're going through it two to three times faster than we've anticipated," Aweeka said.

The students we interviewed in the Networking Academy program were equally as enthused. "Devin," a focused and articulate 17-year old resident of Hayward, has been in the program three months and has only one more week to complete his first of the four-semester Networking Academy program.

Devin says the ability to work at his own pace using computer-based learning is a big benefit of the Networking Academy program. Devin has the characteristics of a young man on the verge of something big. His enthusiasm about the program has him moving along quickly through the curriculum. Since taking the Cisco Networking Academy Program, he now has a plan for his future.

Before enrolling in the program, Devin did not have a clear vision for his future. He thought about pursuing a career in Financial Accounting and at one point became phlebotomy certified. "I didn't know what I wanted to do (with my future), but now I'm in this program and I want to complete it," Devin said. "I wanted stability in my career and know I'll have that stability in the information technology field," he continued. Devin plans on going back to Camp Sweeney, but only as a student to finish the Networking Academy program and take his certification exam there. Upon certification, he hopes to secure a good-paying job in the field of high technology. Although he has no plans for higher education at this point, he says he'll take whatever follow-up training is necessary to keep current on new and emerging technologies.

New students to the Cisco Networking Academy Program are just beginning to plan their future careers in information technology. "Diamond" is a calm and intelligent 18-year old who grew up in Oakland, California. Diamond is one of the 18 students who have been selected to enroll in the Networking Academy program at Camp Sweeney. With three weeks into the program, Diamond already realizes the benefits. "I like that I have a chance to learn something new. I never thought about working on computers until I enrolled in the Networking Academy program. This program has changed my future plans a whole lot," Diamond said. Like so many other students we talked to, Diamond is determined to return to Camp Sweeney upon his release to complete his certification. His future plans include attending Cal Poly to continue his education in Computer Science, then getting a job at a technology company.

The benefits of personalized learning are key to the success of the students enrolled in the Cisco Networking Academy Program. "Jason" is 18 years old and has grown up in the Alameda area. He has always had a great love for learning but felt traditional school environments were boring and non-motivating. The



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Cisco Networking Academy changed this. Although he has been in the Alameda Youth Detention Facility for six months, he has turned a negative situation into a productive and life changing experience. While in the facility, Jason has progressed to the second semester of the program. Even though he is scheduled to be released in the near future, by his own motivation, he plans on returning to the camp in order to complete the program. His future goals include taking the Cisco Certified Networking Associate exam, then continuing on to complete the Cisco Certified Network Professional exam. One day he would like to start his own business using the skills he has learned in these programs.

Jason feels the strongest part of the program is the computer-based learning. "I didn't do well in high school, not because I wasn't smart enough, but because I was too smart. Classes were boring and moved too slow. But with this learning style, I learn at my own pace and can still ask questions of my teacher when I need help," he says.

The Cisco Networking Academy has given Jason new confidence while the hands-on lab has fostered team building skills he can take with him in all aspects of life. Jason feels he is worth more than minimum wage and this program has not only shown him a better avenue, but a promising future far from where he began his journey.

Cisco is in the business of changing the way people work, live, play and learn. Before the Networking Academy program at Camp Sweeney, education basically stopped once students earned their GED. With nothing to do, most teens stayed inside their dorms all day - a big waste of time for the students, leaving them without skills to be competitive in today's workforce. The Networking Academy program has given these students hope for a better future. Student learn how to build and maintain communication networks, and as a byproduct students learn problem solving and project management skills as well as how to work in a collaborative environment.

Students at Camp Sweeney who are enrolled in the Cisco Networking Academy Program feel privileged to have a chance to learn marketable skills that will qualify them for higher education and for jobs in the field of information technology. Instructor Aweeka said "the students like the Networking Academy so much, that I sometimes have to kick them out of the classroom at the end of the day."

